

1-1-1991

## Chapter III. Michel Serres

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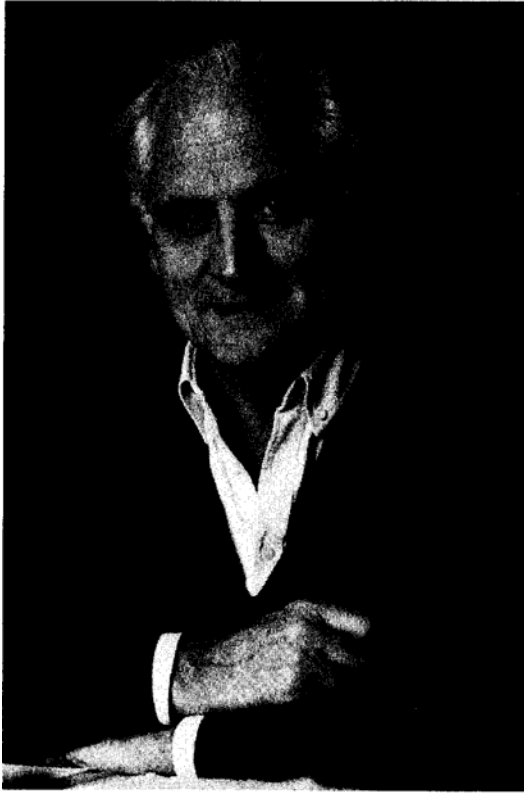
### Recommended Citation

Raoul Mortley. (1991) "Chapter III. Michel Serres" , , .

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## MICHEL SERRES



*Michel Serres was born in France in 1930, and is Professor in History of Science at the Sorbonne (Paris 1). He began his adult life by training for the navy, and a love for the sea and its metaphors is always evident in his work. Originally from the south of France, Michel Serres is keenly interested in rugby. His philosophical work began with the study of Leibniz, but following this he embarked on his own self-expression, which led him to the five-volume Hermes series of books. Some of Leibniz' themes persist throughout his work, particularly those concerned with combination, communication and invention. His method is based on an encyclopaedic approach, and this holism is evident in his writing: all kinds of data are held to contribute to philosophy, and the philosopher must not cut himself off from any form of investigation. His most recent work bridges the gap between philosophy and literature, and it has a wide readership.*

RM: Every year you go to Stanford to teach, in the United States; and what is it you teach there, philosophy, or the history of philosophy?

MS: I'm usually a visiting professor in the Romance Languages department, and, as you know, in America it's generally in French departments, departments of French language and literature, that it has been possible to teach philosophy of French expression. Generally what is taught under the heading of philosophy of the Anglo-Saxon countries is the philosophy of the analytic school, sometimes with a little of the history of continental philosophy, as they say. Contemporary French philosophy gets into the Anglo-Saxon countries through departments of literature.

So I was invited to the United States for this very purpose, to teach what I consider to be philosophy, within a department of literature. This doesn't bother me at all, since in a way it is a French tradition which goes right back to Montaigne, that philosophy and literature should have a productive relationship, and for this reason we don't always find it easy to classify our authors. Should Montaigne be classified as literature or philosophy? Diderot, Voltaire and so on . . . this mixture of literature and philosophy is a valuable thing.

RM: Yes: but some complain that French philosophy is too literary at the present time, that at least part of it is rather too literary in character. What do you think?

MS: Well, you can always complain about your own tongue, but your own tongue remains what it is. It is pointless to complain that Montaigne is difficult to classify, or that Diderot or Voltaire are difficult to classify, that's how it is.

It's our tradition, it's our language.  
 RM: It's wanting to classify at the outset. . .  
 MS: Exactly: that's what I mean. The difference between philosophy and literature is a product of the University: it was with the invention of the University that the wish to separate these things came into being. But if you take away the University judgement on the matter, the classification is absurd. Furthermore, it should *not* be said that in France philosophy is primarily literary: if you take for example the books which I have published, they raise matters of science, and also mathematics. I've done studies of mathematics in antiquity: seventeenth-century mathematics, modern mathematics, nineteenth-century physics, virtually the whole range of the history of science. I've been an historian of science; the history of science, epistemology, is an old French tradition.

The only thing in which France is somewhat behind is the discipline we call logic, and that is simply because of the war, in which the greatest logicians perished; several logicians died in the 1914 war, and others died in the 1939 war. But, apart from that, French philosophy has always had an encyclopaedic scope. The real French tradition which carries on, and which I hope myself to carry on, is that of Descartes, Auguste Comte, Diderot and of Bergson himself, for whom philosophy must have an encyclopaedic base. That is, the philosopher must be a person who knows mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and so on, just as in the approach of August Comte.

RM: By encyclopaedic you don't mean the tendency to collect up all the factual items possible. . .  
 MS: No, no, not at all. . .  
 RM: In order to get a complete picture.  
 MS: This complete picture must be forgotten before philosophy is undertaken, a bit like the Marquise of the eighteenth century who said that the principles of good manners had to be learnt in order to be forgotten as soon as possible. Otherwise, people would in the end be still less polite than they were normally. I think this is an old French tradition, and in this respect I consider that I try to be, and to work, according to this tradition. I've written on mathematics, physics, biology, on the humanities. . .  
 RM: And literature.

MS: Yes, and literature is part of the grounding, you see, and that's what the French tradition is: it's a certain relationship to knowledge which does not hold that philosophy is a specialism such as metaphysics, logic or linguistics. It's a kind of globalization.

RM: Yes: I think that the very word discipline contains this notion of division, of something cut off.

MS: That's right. For example, you yourself discuss the history of religions: I am extremely attentive to developments in that field. I have done a lot of work on people like Dumézil, and other more recent theorists, and for me the history of religion is also part of this philosophical groundwork. I can't imagine philosophy as a discipline. I think that philosophy is a sum, a sum...

RM: A *summa*.  
 MS: In the sense of a *summa*, yes.  
 RM: So you are interested in comparative religion. Are you interested in Eliade, for example?  
 MS: Yes, I have read almost everything he has written: I was trained in history of religions within the triangle Georges Dumézil, Mircea Eliade and René Girard. But of course a philosopher doesn't go into the fine details of the history of religions, but looks at what is happening in the theory which goes with it.

RM: So you're a specialist in the thought of Leibniz. . .  
 MS: I was, I was. . .  
 RM: You're no longer one?  
 MS: No, no. There's a vulgar expression in French, 'I've already given'. When they pass around the plate at church it's what you say when you don't give, because you've already given once: it's a common expression. When I wrote my Leibniz I was an historian of philosophy, a competent specialist in the field, I did my thesis, and, as far as this field is concerned, 'I've already given'. And I wanted passionately to get out of it. I think that you have to be a specialist, but afterwards you have to move away from your specific field. I wrote the book on Leibniz because at the beginning of my career I was a mathematician, and I lived through the great revolution which saw modern mathematics put forward in opposition to classical mathematics. When I was a student, we changed mathematics, and it was a bit like changing

one's language. This revolution was of great interest to me, and it was partly the reason for my becoming a philosopher. In studying the history of philosophy, I saw Leibniz as both a classical mathematician and a modern mathematician: he was classical in the sense that he was a follower of the dynamics school, a theoretician of calculus and so on, but otherwise he had an extraordinarily contemporary concept of algebra, geometry and topology. So I studied Leibniz because I felt that he anticipated this revolution in mathematics - there was a kind of equilibrium between the old form of mathematics and the new one. We moved from a mathematics of function to that of *structure*. In large part, what was called structuralism in France was in my view invalidated because people looked for this idea of structure in linguistics, whereas it was very well-defined in algebra. The extent to which I followed, and even anticipated, the structuralist revolution, lay in the fact that I had myself studied structure in the algebraic sense within modern mathematics. So my work on Leibniz was at once that of a classical historian and that of a 'structuralist', insofar as Leibniz anticipated modern structuralism.

RM: And Leibniz is also interested in Christianity.

MS: Yes, there is a theology in Leibniz. I discuss it several times in my book, but several years later I wrote a preface to a translation of the letters of Leibniz to Father Des Bosses, which belongs to the latter part of Leibniz' life. Here, it seems that Leibniz moved from a traditional theology . . . to a Christian theology . . . and I was very impressed by this translation because I felt that here Leibniz had added, in a sense, to his system a kind of meditation on Christianity.

RM: Can we move now to your *Hermes*, the five books of which a selection has been published in English under the same title. The title is interesting: in antiquity Hermes was associated with hermeneutics, and he was the ambassador of logos, of reason. What did you mean by the title?

MS: It had a very precise meaning. You would know that there were in a way two Hermes. Of course it is true that in many ways Hermes symbolizes the god of hermeneutics, in that he has a bit of an Egyptian background, with Hermes Trismegistus, but it is not entirely that aspect which I had in mind for the title of my books. I was rather thinking of the more classical god, Hermes, of communication, the god

of transport, commerce, of sailors - the god whose statue was placed at the crossroads of various towns. The Hermes which was mutilated, they say, by Alcibiades.

RM: That's the Hermes of classical Greece.

MS: Yes, it is the Hermes of classical Greece who figures in the title of my book. Why? Because, at the end of the war, Marxism held great sway in France, and in Europe. And Marxism taught that the essential, the fundamental infrastructure was the economy and production: I myself thought, from 1955 or 1960 onwards, that production was not important in our society, or that it was becoming much less so, but that what was important was communication, and that we were reaching a culture, or society, in which communication would hold precedence over production.

RM: And what do you understand by 'communication'?

MS: The group of technologies which have now passed into everyday life, which range from telephone communications, for example, to data processing and computers. That technology has in my view meant far more in the modern world than the production of primary materials. And in fact the future quickly showed that I was right, in that coal, steel, and all kinds of industry have more or less disappeared, whereas communication became the very foundation of our society. And I take a little personal pride in the fact that I anticipated in the years 1955 to 1960 the world in which we now live. And at that stage, when I was finishing Leibniz and when I was writing the Hermes series, I was halfway between a structuralism of a mathematical or algebraic kind, and a philosophy of communication, symbolized by Hermes in classical Greece.

I have never been of the linguistic school, or the hermeneutic: I have spent a lot of my life expounding texts, as we do in the university world, but I have never drawn from it a philosophy, as one does within the hermeneutic tradition. My Hermes, my personal one, is the Hermes of communication, of the crossroads. And in a way the reason for my work on Leibniz lay also in the fact that he was the first western philosopher to have established a philosophy which he himself called a philosophy of the communication of substances. He calls monadology a philosophy of the communication of substances. So there was a connection between Leibniz and my Hermes.

RM: Communication in Leibniz' sense means a kind of relation?  
 MS: Yes, exactly. Leibniz is the first to have seen that it was difficult to develop a philosophy of primary particles, or of the atoms, or of the metaphysical atoms, without tracing the paths between the elements, or the relations between the atoms. And he was the first - not the first, because the ancient Stoics had the idea of a universe bound together by series - but he was the metaphysician of the Stoic series.  
 RM: The idea of relation was not very much developed in ancient philosophy.  
 MS: No, not even in the classical period. It was Leibniz who really developed this. But with the Stoics there is a genuine idea of the interrelationships between things. Leibniz made of it an idea which was both metaphysical and mathematical, and in this respect he anticipates modern thinking.  
 RM: In Plato there is practically no notion of relation: there is the same and the other, difference and identity. And difference is a problem: there is nothing to explain the communication between things.  
 MS: Yes. At the stage when I wrote my Leibniz and my Hermes books, the problem of communication, and the problem of algebraic structures, were pretty much my cup of tea.  
 RM: May I turn now to a question which we have already touched on, in relation to the language of philosophy. It sometimes seems, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition, to be the goal of philosophy to develop a single rational language, an apodeictic language. Is the goal of philosophical enquiry, in your view, to develop a kind of clean language, rigorous and universal: a sort of computer language?  
 MS: I don't think that's the goal of philosophy. I am not of the Anglo-American school and I am not a philosopher of language. Consequently, an idea like this has never been central to my concerns, and that for two reasons. Firstly, I was myself a scientist originally: I was a mathematician for many years. And I have often dealt with physics, thermodynamics, questions of biology and so on. For me the language of truth, the language of exactitude and rigour, is the language of science and it has already been found. So why have another language to reach goals which have already been in some sense attained? We already have rigour in mathematics, exactitude in the natural sciences, and so on. Secondly,

I have been very interested in the history of science and I have observed for a long time that there are two mathematical traditions, and not just one. Before the Greeks there was an Egyptian mathematics, or Assyrio-Babylonian, and it's of the algorithmic type. The algorithmic approach is one, and it is this that computer language is rediscovering. It's a very old tradition. And these machine algorithms are of great interest, and they allow a certain type of discovery, of a certain type of truth. But that is one field, and in my view philosophy is entirely different.  
 RM: You've recently brought out a book, *The Five Senses*, which won the *Prix Médicis* in Paris. What was your motivation in writing this book?  
 MS: For fifty years, the only question has been the question of language, whether one belongs to the German school, the Anglo-American school or even the French. All you hear about is the spoken language or writing. And in France, Sartre produces *Words*, Foucault writes *Words and Things*, in which language is the chief issue. Recently, a book has come out called *The Grammar of Objects*. In my day little children were given lessons on naming things: it's as if we can only feel or perceive to the extent that we possess language. My book is a reaction against this theory: it can be put clearly in just a few words. We never say 'the colour of the sky' or 'the colour of blood', or 'the colour of wheat', or 'the colour of plums'. We say 'blue', 'red', 'yellow', or 'violet'. So we have words for colours, and there analytic philosophy is right. It is possible in fact that we cannot perceive a variety of blue for which we do not have a name. But it gets more complicated with the sense of smell, and I've been greatly interested in taste and smell, as a Frenchman who likes wine and who can appreciate good wine. You know that the mouth is an organ which is quite. . . weak. . . whereas the sense of taste is an organ of great wealth. In the book I point out that we never say anything other than 'the smell of a rose', or 'the smell of an apricot', or 'the smell of. . .'. We refer to a thing, but there is no name for the smell. And if what the linguistic analysts said were true, we would have no noses, since we have no names for the sensations provided by the sense of smell. There are no adjectives for it. The sense of smell is entirely without adjectives. If analytic philosophy were right, we would be

condemned to being without this sense. The linguistic school is a school with no sense of smell, and no taste. Now, when referring to humankind, we say *homo sapiens*, as you know. But people who don't know Latin don't know that *sapiens* refers to tasting with the mouth and the tongue - 'sapidity' comes from that. So we say *homo sapiens* to refer to our species, forgetting that this expression refers primarily to tasting with the mouth, with an organ. The origins of the idea are very important.

RM: That's interesting: in antiquity, man was defined as an animal which laughs. But you say. . .

MS: Yes, I remember: no, I don't say that; I say merely that when we say *homo sapiens*, we've forgotten that the origin of the notion of wisdom, or of discourse - because for us man is speaking man - lies in the capacity to taste with the mouth, and with the sense of smell. For most philosophers this wisdom, this sapience, resides in language.

RM: Taking up an earlier remark, what you say on the language of the sense of smell, or the lack of it, explains perhaps the language of wine and of wine appreciation, in the sense that it's a language which is drawn from other areas; it can be practically incomprehensible.

MS: One chapter of my book, which is called 'Table', is devoted to the description of a glass of white wine, a Bordeaux, which is called Château d'Yquem. I give the year, and I go over the type of language which is required if you're going to give a description of this wine. I try to describe the sensation in order to show how defective language is in the case of this sensation.

RM: Which amounts to saying that there is a human capacity which does not have a language.

MS: This is true of the sense of smell, which is an example I don't in fact give in my book, but which I often give to describe my view: we don't always have the vocabulary for our sensations. I chose there the sense of smell, but there's another example: the varieties of pink distinguished by the painter Van Dyck in the hip of Eve - the number of shades defies the vocabulary available. Vocabulary is less rich than the varieties of pink used by Van Dyck. So my book is devoted to a defence of the qualitative, the empirical, to a defence of the non-reducibility of the empirical to the logical. I would

go so far as to say that a form of knowledge has been lost, an empirical form, blotted out by the linguistic and virtually algebraic revolution.

RM: And are there other developments of this idea? Do you limit it to sensation?

MS: Well I called the book 'The Five Senses', and I discuss of course the sixth sense, this sense we have of our own bodies; there's a whole chapter on the sense of body. This is a new book for me since I have in the past been concerned with scientific questions of the sort we were discussing a moment ago, and the book represents an attempt to reconstruct philosophy in another terrain . . . another terrain, not the one we've been using for the last half-century, which is that of language.

RM: I've been wondering if there's a possible metaphysical extension of these ideas: I was thinking of Wittgenstein's unspeakable, for example.

MS: Perhaps, but the extension is in the subtitle. *The Five Senses* also has the title 'Philosophy of Mixed Bodies': it's the first volume, and after this I'll discuss several other problems, but not within the category of the unspeakable. It's a category which is too easy: it's nothing more than the other side of the speakable. I'm going to organize the remainder under the heading of the idea of mixture, which is a notion which was studied by Plato in the *Philebus*, and then by the Stoics.

RM: Could you explain the meaning of the subtitle: 'Philosophy of Mixed Bodies'? It's the idea of mixture, contact. . .

MS: It is the idea of mixture that I'm going to deal with.

What happens when two bodies are so close they cannot be distinguished? I was brought to this question by the question of sensation. I must say, if only for the joke, how amusing it appears to the man in the street that a book on sensation, and there are now dozens of them in English and French, should have to begin by the statement of different algebraic rules. I've never felt the need for algebraic structures, even though this has been my field, to taste a glass of white wine. There's a sort of schizophrenia here, which seems to me to be both laughable and a bit tragic. In the modern world, it must be said, we are indeed losing our senses.

RM: I see a passage on silence in *The Five Senses*. What is the function of silence?

- MS: I mention silence in the common or garden sense, and I argue that in our world it no longer exists. It no longer exists because in the open spaces of the country or the sea, where silence once reigned, motors and the media have filled it with noise. We have to fight against the power of noise, which is immense and frightening.
- RM: But what we sometimes call silence is in fact a set of noises which we find pleasant or comforting, but absolute silence is something different. . .
- MS: I sometimes encountered absolute silence in my youth in the Sahara, or far out to sea with zero wind and a totally calm sea - that is silence in relation to noise. There's another silence which is in relation to language, and again there is a kind of meditation beyond language. In the same manner as the issue of sensation a moment ago, it's self-evident, without having to be argued out, that silence is a precondition of philosophical reflection. Linguistic philosophy overlooks this to the extent that thinking, in this perspective, is the same as speaking. Thinking in my view is first and foremost being silent. It's a necessary condition for the emergence of something else. So it's true that in my books, and in the ones which are to follow, there is much in honour of silence, as opposed to the word.
- RM: Yes, in a sense language is made of silence. There have to be silences between words, between syllables. It's distinction, or difference, which allows for language. But you have also in *The Five Senses* a passage on play; the play is situated in the body, and you seem to suggest that there is no play which is specifically distinct from the body, but that there is a type of continuity .
- MS: Yes: I said before that there were several passages in the book on the sixth sense, the sensation of one's own body, and in fact I thought I'd amuse myself by carrying out a meditation in the manner of Descartes, but outside all language, and without any reference to an abstract soul; it was a virtual recounting of the birth event. I was able to experience, in a rather tragic circumstance, and I attempt to suggest it here, that the body carries within itself a type of centre, which you could call the subject. It's an analysis which has significance for the understanding of the body, I think.
- RM: You're relating the subject to the body: often it's said that Plotinus was the first to formulate the notion of the subject:

- he asks the question 'what is the we?', the *hemeis*, several times.
- MS: I've said a great deal about the 'we' in a book which came out before *The Five Senses* and which deals with Rome. It's called *Rome: The Book of Foundations*, and in it I analyse the first book of Livy, and the manner in which Roman society established itself. I've attempted to deal with this question: what is the multiplicity, what is the fundamental characteristic of this multiplicity which we can call 'we'?
- RM: In the modern world we often make use of the notion of a sole and individual self isolated, cut off from others - in fact the opposite of the experience of antiquity.
- MS: Yes, and in fact it's the opposite of our own experience as well. It's clear as soon as we're in the circle of Hermes that this metaphysical vision of isolated atomic individuals is an abstraction which has nothing to do with reality.
- RM: In your book *The Parasite*, which has appeared in English, I think you raise some of these issues.
- MS: Yes, I was trying to find a link between elements, between individuals, of an almost atomic character. The relationship between two people, the father/son relationship for example, I called the double-arrow relationship because there are two poles. But the parasitic relationship is a simpler one: it's a single arrow which goes in one direction but not the other, because the parasite is a creature which feeds on another, but gives nothing in return. There's no exchange, no balance sheet to be drawn up; there's no reciprocity in the relationship, which is one-dimensional.
- RM: And the parasite grows bigger more quickly than its host.
- MS: Yes, there is a reciprocity which is difficult to grasp: if the parasite eats too much, he'll kill his host, and it'll die by the same token. And the term 'parasite' has three meanings in French, not two as in English. The parasite in French is firstly someone who eats at the table of another, without being invited: that's the parasite of the Latin and Greek comedies. Then there's the sense drawn from parasitology, the parasite which can even be a microbe, from the single cell creature to the insect, and which feeds on a host. The third meaning, which was used in English a bit at the end of the nineteenth century, is that of static on the line, that is, noise within communication. I've tried to find the coherence between the

biological, the sociological and the physical meaning of the parasite.

RM: You really think there's some common thread between the three of them?

MS: Yes, there is one. What I found of interest here was what I call the atom of communication. The simplest link between two things is the parasitic relationship, and this idea provides an analysis which is deeper, more fundamental, than the current analysis of gifts, exchange, and so on, which are always relationships of balance. By contrast, the parasitic relationship is an unbalanced one, particularly in the social sense: when a parasite is your guest in the social sense, there is sometimes some return on the relationship, but the parasite always makes his return in words. One gives him food, but in return he makes fine speeches. There is the beginning of an exchange here, which gives language its correct value: language is the counterfeit money with which food is paid for. This is a very interesting theme in Roman comedy, and it can tell us something about language, and about the philosophy of language *ipso facto*. This was very interesting to me at the time because it was my point of entry into the humanities, coming from the exact sciences, and it was to study the fundamental social relationship, which I consider to be a parasitic one.

RM: And now you occupy a chair of history, is that correct?

MS: History of science: that's my trade; at the outset I was almost exclusively an historian of mathematics. Then I worked on the history of thermodynamics, nineteenth-century physics, and now my field is the history of ideas and history.

RM: And so what do you think of the disciplines, the disciplinary divisions in the university world?

MS: I think that the dividing up of the disciplines into very narrow cells is certainly one of the causes of the effectiveness of science. But from the point of view of truth in general we've lost a lot, and the goal of philosophy should be to try to create a synthesis, where analysis goes off into detail. I've dealt with this at length in two books, in the second volume of *Hermès* which is subtitled 'Interference', and in *Hermès V*, subtitled 'The North-West Passage', and in the latter in particular I examined what is now called interdisciplinary studies.

RM: So philosophy's not a discipline which is set apart, in its own corner.

MS: I called the book 'The North-West Passage' \_ you know the passage between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific, to the north of Canada, which is very difficult and complicated to negotiate - as an image for the passage between the humanities and the exact sciences. I think the job of philosophy is to open up this passage between the exact sciences and the humanities.

RM: To create communication?

MS: Yes: when Socrates was questioned on philosophy in Xenophon's *Symposium*, he replied that it was *mastropeia*; this is a trade of low repute in our society. It is the activity of the person who puts into communication men and women. Philosophy has the job of federating, of bringing things together. So analysis might be valuable, with its clarity, rigour, precision and so on, but philosophy really has the opposite function, a federating and synthesizing function. I think that the foundation of philosophy is the encyclopaedic, and its goal is synthesis.

RM: And does contemporary French philosophy conform to this definition in your view?

MS: Yes, it has always done so, since the eighteenth century. It was encyclopaedic in character then; it endeavoured to bring people together into one *salon*. Experts from all sorts of horizons were brought together into one *salon*. The university functions in the opposite way, in that it divides the experts. I don't know if all French philosophy today conforms to this ideal, but my work does: it doesn't involve a system of thought, but a synthesis.

As I get older I am more and more attracted by ordinary language, a philosophy which does not need terms other than those drawn from everyday language to express itself. I don't think we have to be either grammarians or specialists: I believe in ordinary language. In *The Five Senses* I do not think I've used the word 'transcendental' more than twice. I use technical vocabulary as little as possible now.

RM: Like Plato.

MS: Yes, I think Plato's a leader in that; with him there's an analytic philosopher called Socrates, and a non-analytic philosopher called Plato. There are two of them: Socrates is the grammarian who speaks in short sentences, who analyses, who cuts up into pieces, and who clarifies. He brings clarity,



but Plato speaks at length; he writes the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* and so on. He's the inspired one, and I believe in this coupling of the grammarian and the stylist, the philosopher and the writer, the scientific intelligence and the literary intelligence. I believe in both.

RM: And you think that ordinary language has more value than we realize?

MS: Not only does it have more value, but it is also true Plato was a great philosopher *because* he expressed magnificently the language of the Athenians. And we have that role too: philosophers have to strive continually to bring ordinary language back to life.

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