

———— *Theory of the Quasi-Object* ————

Hoc memorabile est; ego tu sum, tu es
ego; uni animi sumus.

Plautus, *Stichus*, v. 731

What living together is. What is the collective? This question fascinates us now.

The problem with the preceding meditations is that they do not say distinctly enough whether they are a philosophy of being or of relation. Being or relating, that is the whole question. It is undoubtedly not an exclusive one. I still shall not decide whether the parasite is relational or real, whether it is an operator or a monad.

I want to think that this noise I constantly hear at the door is produced by a being whom I would like to know. I can also think that the one who eats my food or who eats with me as my companion, drinking my wine, is only a useful figure for thinking about adulthood, my fatigue at the end of the day, explosions, losses, hidden power, and the degradations or bursts of messages in the networks. This good and bad Hermes is a god, the god who has prepared my old age and who has not been substituted for the one who made my youth joyful, a god like love, the son of fortune and passivity, a god, yes, that is to say: a being or a relation? The true God, in classical theology, is The One in whom relation produces being, in whom love produces the body, in whom the word, the logos, the relation was made flesh.

I have not said enough whether the parasite is being or relation. It is, first of all, the elementary relation.

What then, once again, is living together? What is the collective? I don't know, and I doubt that anyone does. I have never read anything

that taught it to me. I have sometimes lived through certain events that make a little light in this dark. And sometimes, next to a dinner companion. This black category of collective, group, class, caste, whatever, is it a being in turn, or a cluster of relations?

The ferret [*furet*] * smells a bit; it smells like a skunk, with which it is often crossbred. It thus occupies space. We return to property. It is the vampire of the rabbit, following it into its warren; it throws itself on the rabbit, biting its nose or neck, sucking its blood. We have domesticated the ferret and no longer know about the wild variety. We make it run for us, like the buzzard, like the kestrel; we parasite them. We muzzle the ferret before introducing it into the system of the burrow; the crazed rabbit leaves through another hole and is trapped in the net. Once more, a nice diversion of flows in a network.

We have all played the game of hunt-the-slipper or button, button, who's got the button. The one who is caught with the *furet* has to pay a forfeit. The *furet* points him out. One person is marked with the sign of the *furet*. Condemned, he goes to the center; he's "it"; he sees, he looks.

What is the *furet*?

This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. He who is not discovered with the *furet* in his hand is anonymous, part of a monotonous chain where he remains undistinguished. He is not an individual; he is not recognized, discovered, cut; he is of the chain and in the chain. He runs, like the *furet*, in the collective. The thread in his hands is our simple relation, the absence of the *furet*; its path makes our indivision. Who are we? Those who pass the *furet*; those who don't have it. This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual. If he is discovered, he is "it" [*mort*]. Who is the subject, who is an "I," or who am I? The moving *furet* weaves the "we," the collective; if it stops, it marks the "I."

A ball is not an ordinary object, for it is what it is only if a subject holds it. Over there, on the ground, it is nothing; it is stupid; it has no meaning, no function, and no value. Ball isn't played alone. Those who do, those who hog the ball, are bad players and are soon excluded from the game. They are said to be selfish [*personnels*]. The collective

*The *furet* is the animal, the ferret, as well as the marker in a game somewhat like hunt-the-slipper or button, button, who's got the button? —Trans.

game doesn't need persons, people out for themselves. Let us consider the one who holds it. If he makes it move around him, he is awkward, a bad player. The ball isn't there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball; the subject moves around this sun. Skill with the ball is recognized in the player who follows the ball and serves it instead of making it follow him and using it. It is the subject of the body, subject of bodies, and like a subject of subjects. Playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance. The laws are written for it, defined relative to it, and we bend to these laws. Skill with the ball supposes a Ptolemaic revolution of which few theoreticians are capable, since they are accustomed to being subjects in a Copernican world where objects are slaves.

The ball circulates just like the furet. The better the team, the quicker the ball is passed. Sometimes the ball is said to be a hot coal that burns one's fingers so badly that one must get rid of the ball as quickly as possible. Let us appreciate the metaphor, used by Kipling: the red flower scares tigers, and the golden bough is not far. The ball is the subject of circulation; the players are only the stations and relays. The ball can be transformed into the witness of relays. In Greek, the word for "witness" is *martyr*.

In most games, the man with the ball is on offense; the whole defense is organized relative to him and his position. The ball is the center of the referential, for the moving game. With few exceptions—like American football, for example—the only one who can be tackled is the one who has the ball. This quasi-object, designates him. He is marked with the sign of the ball. Let him beware.

The member of the offense, the one carrying the ball, is marked as the victim. He holds the witness, and he is the martyr. Here and now, precisely on him, everything occurs. The sky falls on his head. The set of speeds, forces, angles, shocks, and strategic thoughts is woven here and now. But, suddenly, it is no longer true; what was supposed to be decided isn't; the knot comes undone. History and attention bifurcate. The witness is no longer there; the furet moves and starts chasing another rabbit in the network of passageways; the ball is outside the park; there is no sacrifice—it is deferred until later; the martyr is not this one—it is another, and again another, and why not another one again. Everyone. The game is this vicariance. It is the graph of substitutions. Priests, victims, dressed in blue, red, or green? No. Strictly vicars. Vicars by the mobility of the substitutions and by their speed. Sacrificer now and very soon a victim, soon neutralized, quickly changing by the moving ball, in the playing field, marked off as the temple once was. The sacrificed person can, through skill or strategy, send his neighbor into the shooting gallery instead of him, and the neighbor can do the

same. Thus, with the ball, we are all possible victims; we all expose ourselves to this danger and we escape it; the more the ball is passed, the more the vicariance changes, the more the crowd waits breathlessly. The ball shuttles back and forth like the furet, weaving the collective, virtually putting to death each individual. The reason that the victim appeases the crisis is that uncapturable knowledge that we all bear, under the voice that says "I"; we know that this victim can be "I" as well. The ball is the quasi-object and quasi-subject by which I am a subject, that is to say, sub-mitted. Fallen, put beneath, trampled, tackled, thrown about, subjugated, exposed, then substituted, suddenly, by that vicariance. The list is that of the meanings of *subjicere*, *subjectus*. Philosophy is not always where it is usually foreseen. I learn more on the subject of the subject by playing ball than in Descartes' little room.

While Nausicaa plays ball with her companions on the beach, Ulysses, tossed about by the waves and the undertow, saved from the shipwreck, appears, naked, subject, beneath. Child of the blade, child of the passing of the ball.

This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects. "We": what does that mean? We are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of "I." The "I" in the game is a token exchanged. And this passing, this network of passes, these vicariances of subjects weave the collection. I am I now, a subject, that is to say, exposed to being thrown down, exposed to falling, to being placed beneath the compact mass of the others; then you take the relay, you are substituted for "I" and become it; later on, it is he who gives it to you, his work done, his danger finished, his part of the collective constructed. The "we" is made by the bursts and occultations of the "I." The "we" is made by passing the "I." By exchanging the "I." And by substitution and vicariance of the "I."

That immediately appears easy to think about. Everyone carries his stone, and the wall is built. Everyone carries his "I," and the "we" is built. This addition is idiotic and resembles a political speech. No. Everything happens as if, in a given group, the "I," like the "we," were not divisible. He has the ball, and we don't have it any more. What must be thought about, in order to calculate the "we," is, in fact, the passing of the ball. But it is the abandon of the "I." Can one's own "I" be given? There are objects to do so, quasi-objects, quasi-subjects; we don't know whether they are beings or relations, tatters of beings or end of relations. By them, the principle of individuation can be transmitted or can

get stuck. There is something there, some movement, that resembles the abandon of sovereignty. The "we" is not a sum of "I"'s, but a novelty produced by legacies, concessions, withdrawals, resignations, of the "I." The "we" is less a set of "I"'s than the set of the sets of its transmissions. It appears brutally in drunkenness and ecstasy, both annihilations of the principle of individuation. This ecstasy is easily produced by the quasi-object whose body is slave or object. We remember how it turns around the quasi-object, how the body follows the ball and orients it. We remember the Ptolemaic revolution. It shows that we are capable of ecstasy, of difference from our equilibrium, that we can put our center outside ourselves. The quasi-object is found to have this decentering. From then on, he who holds the quasi-object has the center and governs ecstasy. The speed of passing accelerates him and causes him to exist. Participation is just that and has nothing to do with sharing, at least when it is thought of as a division of parts. Participation is the passing of the "I" by passing. It is the abandon of my individuality or my being in a quasi-object that is there only to be circulated. It is rigorously the transsubstantiation of being into relation. Being is abolished for the relation. Collective ecstasy is the abandon of the "I"'s on the tissue of relations. This moment is an extremely dangerous one. Everyone is on the edge of his or her inexistence. But the "I" as such is not suppressed. It still circulates, in and by the quasi-object. This thing can be forgotten. It is on the ground, and the one who picks it up and keeps it becomes the only subject, the master, the despot, the god.

Once again: on war, struggle, combat, and opposition. Murder is a principle. Crime is a principle. The all-out war of all against all never took place, is not taking place, and will never take place. One-on-one combat, lists, three-on-three struggles, Horatii and Curiatii, are appearance and spectacle, tragedy, comedy, theater. All against one is the eternal law. Three Curatii against one Horace, when appearance is torn like scenery and when the real must be reached. The result is always certain, and the war is asymmetrical. The parasites arrive in a crowd, and they take no risk. Sometimes, miraculously, the situation is reversed, with Horace the winner. It is spoken of then; it is the stuff that history is made of, and that makes us believe in the phenomenology of war. Horace was stronger than each of the other three, fatally wounded. The law never changes.

Here the process is even finer. The game is so deep that we must constantly come back to it. The combat of all against one is deferred by the flight/theft of the ball; vicariance and substitution constantly divert the path to the necessary result. They make our attention wander toward the beautiful combat of a spectacle where glorious uncertainty reigns,

morale is safe, and people speak of nobility. And everyone rushes to the spectacle and bets on who will win and who will lose. It seems to be chance, since it's a game. Though it is only chains of necessity. The decline of sports today into prearranged games shows, as if it were necessary, where the principal attraction is and what it is really a question of. Everything always moves toward a war without risks, toward crime and theft, toward pillaging, looting, strongarming men and things. Use always comes from abuse and returns to it when the derivation disappears and no longer provides a constant change of rival.

Every theory of derivation consists in orienting our attention on rivalry; the word itself tells us so.

The furet, the ball, are tokens in a game, passed from one to another; they are probably jokers. The construction of the collective is done with jokers and an amazing act of building. Anything is built with anything. This logic is highly undetermined and is the most difficult to note.

Let us consider another joker, so undetermined that it is, as we know, a general equivalent. It circulates like a ball, money, a quasi-object. It marks the subject; it marks it effectively: in our societies, Cartesian meditations are soon written; I am rich; therefore I am. Money is integrally my being. The real doubt is poverty. Radical doubt to the extreme is misery. Descartes cheated; he should have gone out, a new Francis of Assisi, and gotten rid of his goods. Descartes cheated; he didn't throw his ducats into the stream. He never lost the world since he kept his money. The true, radical Cartesian is the cynic. Descartes never risked losing his "I," since he never risked his money. He never played his *malin genie* for high stakes—for the shirt off his back. He never was caught in the rain, in the mud, never asked the king passing by to stop blocking his sun. I have always doubted this doubt that does not go to the zero level of possession. A rich fool is rich; a poor fool is a fool. A rich "I" is rich; a poor "I" is an "I." We would then see who this man is.

The construction of the collective has been done with anyone and by means of anything. The furet is nothing, a ring, a button, a thing; the ball is a skin or an air bubble. I pass them or throw them to whom-ever they meet, someone who receives nothing or almost, it doesn't really matter.

The question still remains: what things are between whom? Anyone, you, me, him, that one, the other. And between them, these quasi-objects, maybe jokers. The stations are "they," circulation is done by "it," and we have written only a certain kind of logic.

In the same way, money is not much because it is everything; it is exchanged with the first passer-by, and another steals it from everyone, and another hoards it for no one.

These quasi-objects are blank, and the subjects are transparent. But interest increases with opacity and blackness.

The position of the parasite is to be between. That is why it must be said to be a being or a relation. But the attribute of the parasite, until now not mentioned, is its specificity.

It is not just anything that troubles a passing message. It is not just anyone who is invited to someone's table. A given larva develops only in a certain organism and is carried only by a certain vector.

Orgon must be devout to be parasited by Laurent and Tartuffe. Devout and something else besides for the adaptation to be perfect. The mix-up must marry the channel, must fit on its wavelength, must be easily superposed on the emission. Jean-Francois, Rameau's nephew, would not have had a chance in Mme Pernelle's son's house. I can make as much noise as I like; I shall not prevent my neighbor from seeing the sunrise. Fleas die on pebbles.

How is it that I love you; you, among a hundred thousand, me, and not another? Is it an illusion; is Don Juan's catalogue a wiser way of doing things?

We have reached the limits. Mammalian reproduction is an endoparasitic cycle. We parasite each other to speak, to eat, to organize injustice and legal extortion; for these projects everyone is good. We parasite each other to reproduce and multiply, but for that, these others must be both other and same, and they see each other naked. Not just anyone, not just anything, will do. A quantity of sperm, introduced in a box that is foreign yet adapted to it, thrives in it and is nourished by it; specificity begins. The fetus is a protean parasite, and remains so somewhat after birth. For how long? The evaluations vary. In the end, it is better to say forever. Weaning is only local. Man's child does not live by bread alone, or by milk, air, and heat; it needs language, information, and culture as well to form its environment, a milieu without which it would die. This milieu is human, properly human, produced by the small group: the parents, the family, the tribe, the clan, I don't know. If parasitism in general supposes that the host is a milieu or that the productions of the host constitute the environment, the niche necessary to the survival of the one placed there or who moves around there, we are all parasites of our language(s). It is only today that I understand my mother tongue, and why my tongue is my logical mother. Sometimes those who have no mother throw themselves headlong into language.

Perhaps it is necessary to paint the event of the Pentecost as a group of newborns eagerly sucking the breasts that are the tongues of fire. My language is branched on my tongue. I seem to send and to give around; I receive my words from this niche; to speak is to feed. To speak is to suck the breast of the common logical mother. The word is born of this mother, always a virgin, since she is always intact somewhere, since the language always exceeds my command of it. Here the parasite-noise is identical to the one who dines at the *table d'hôte*. I feed myself endlessly at the buffet of my language; I shall never be able to give it what it gave me. I am the noise of its complicated harmony, or its wail. I would die from not writing; I would die of not taking my feast of words with a few friends, from whom, somehow, I get my language. I shall never be weaned from it.

Not language in general, but my own. Specifically mine, that gives me daylight in the hubbub of foreign languages. I like its chamber music quality, the modesty that is almost deaf and dumb of its tonic accents, its somewhat nobiliary distinction, its secret Hellenicity, and its rare earths.* My mother (tongue), about to die, becomes a virgin once more; no one uses her local words any more; she is used for a thousand everyday uses; they all use her like an old rug or a whore. They try to rape their mother as she lies dying. I want her to be beautiful and alive as she was during the time that he who wanted beauty on earth spoke my mother tongue and fed on its modesty. It succeeded miraculously in being universally chaste.

Between Egypt and Canaan, during the days of famine and thin cows, wheat circulates on the donkeys in the caravans, and in the sacks of wheat, the money that Joseph got from his brothers, that Joseph returned, that circulates both ways and thus has no direction/meaning, and the cup circulates in Benjamin's bag, the cup of Joseph that marks Benjamin, the cup of the youngest brother that marks the youngest brother. Joseph was a victim, and Benjamin, thanks to Joseph, can again be a victim. He is marked with the sign of the cup. The long-sleeved tunic was stained with the goat's blood, and the cup was, at that time, empty of wine. Both of them marked by the absence of their blood and by the absence of their wine.

I shall never be able to be nourished by a language of money, a flat, tasteless language like abigbanknote. No smell, no taste, shiny, viscous-lots of these are found. When language converges on money, it monotonizes its flow; it tends toward the whitest and flattest quasi-object. It

*Obviously, Serres is talking about the French language. —Trans.

extends its empire at the same time as money. It builds temporary, soft collectivities. Its power is parallel to its viscosity.

One does not simply eat the words of a language; one tastes them as well. Those who eat as quickly as possible find that a bit disgusting and repugnant. There are gourmands, however. One speaks as one eats; style and cooking go together—vulgar or refined. Words are exchanged as food is passed either like fast food, so as to move on to something more important, or in an atmosphere of ecstasy. It depends on us for certain quasi-objects to become subjects. Or rather: it is up to us for this transformation to take place.

Words, bread, and wine are between us, beings or relations. We appear to exchange them between us though we are connected at the same table or with the same language. They are breast-fed by the same mother. Parasitic exchange, crossed between the logical and the material, can now be explained. At Pentecost, the new-born apostles, suckle the tongues of fire, divided and coming from a single base; at the Last Supper, everyone is a parasite at the master's table, drinking the wine, eating the bread, sharing and passing it. The mystery of transubstantiation is there; it is clear, luminous, and transparent. Do we ever eat anything else together than the flesh of the word?

Our quasi-objects have increasing specificity. We eat the bread of our mores; we drink the wine of our culture; we speak only the words of our tongue—I am speaking, of course, of unfit people like me. And loVe, I ask you: what about love between two people? Here, then, is the specificity.

We are not individuals. We have already been divided; we are always threatened anew by being. Zeus, unhappy with our insolence, cut us in two; that is easily seen by looking at the navel, where the skin is brought together as if by tight purse-strings. We once had four legs and four arms, a round neck, two faces, four eyes that were strong and quick, and when we ran, we rolled on ourselves, limbs outstretched as eight spokes of a wheel so as to go very quickly. Zeus split us—he can do it again; in that case we would have to hop. Does the real individual have one foot, two feet, or four? Unlike Oedipus, I don't know how many feet a man has. Thus we were of three sorts: male, female, and androgynes, according to what we have—two dissimilar or two similar organs. As soon as the punishment of Zeus took place, the sad, severed halves ran to one another to intertwine, to unite, and to find their plenitude once more. Love is a chimera, the leftovers of the split-up parts. Thus spoke Aristophanes, the comedian, at the table of tragedy.*

Thus spoke comedy, the parasite of tragedy. Today everyone is

*Plato, *Symposium*, 189C-193D. -Trans.

invited by Agathon, the Good, crowned winner in the tragic contest—everyone, including philosophy. Everyone drinks the wine of tragedy. Everyone is the guest of the Good; we are all in the tragic hospitality or the hostility of this morality. We all speak of love to pay our share of the banquet. Love is the discourse of this reimbursement. Wine and bread are transubstantiated in this word, wholly due to tragedy. I speak of love to acquit myself of my debts for the food given by the tragic. If scales exists somewhere, love is in one pan, counterweighing the tragic, seeking equilibrium.

Who are we, according to comedy? We are tesserae, tesserae of hospitality, a quasi-object or rather a demi-quasi-object. A tablet, a cube, or a piece of a bone that friends for bed, that companions for food and drink, in short, that the host and his parasite, share by breaking. They break the tessera and produce a memorial. This is memorable, says Plautus; you shall do this to remember me. The breaking of the tessera is not a clean break; it is somewhat fractal, complicated in any case, so random that it is individual, so serrated and notched that it is unique. The tessera is an individual; it is chance; it is complex; it is a memorial. Who am I? Unique, filled with lots of information, complicated, unexpected, thrown in the whirlpool of the aleatory, my body is a memorial. The hosts and guests have made their farewells; they keep the tessera, each having his fringed half. They travel; they die; they love; perhaps they will never see each other again. They give the tessera to their children, to their friends, to their grandnephews, to those they want, to those they love. Through time and space, the one who has it in his hand will recognize his exact other by this sign, this specific, adapted interconnection. There is no other possible key for such a look, thanks to stereospecificity.

We are tesserae and locks. Beings or recognition, like semaphores. Tokens, be they true or false. The false kind can adapt to everyone, whorish, fitting like an old shoe. My whole body is a memorial of you. If I love you, I remember you.

"E/caaro? obv `rjniov kariv d.udpd>iTOv ovixfiokov ... * The word *tessera* is a Latin word that never really stayed in the French language; the Greek word is mine; every one of us is a symbol of man. Who am I, once again? A symbol, but especially the symbol of the other.

The symbolic is there; it is divided and is not divided. What is the symbol? A stereospecificity?

It is also a quasi-object. The quasi-object itself is a subject. The subject can be a quasi-object.

Sometimes the "we" is the passing, the signing, the drawing up of the "I."

On the Gompiegne road, three blind, pitiful beggars yell to the passers-by. The clerk of the fable gives a bezant; he does not give them this bezant. They have it; they are blind; they don't have it. They feast the whole night through; they eat and drink; they sing. The quasi-object tends toward zero, tends toward absence, in a black collective. What passes among the three blind men can be, quite simply, a word without a referent. Reciprocally: without a referent, we are only blind men. We live only by relations.

Mad, quasi-mad, feigning madness, the host is well enough paid with an exorcism.