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Reviving the Nuanced Concept of Mother Earth in an Era of Non-Sustainability: A Serresian Reading of Marcel Pagnol's *L'eau des collines*

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Abstract – This essay examines the efforts of the writer Marcel Pagnol and the philosopher Michel Serres to revive the nuanced Amerindian metaphor of “Mother Earth” in the Anthropocene epoch. Given that faulty anthropocentric logic and the unfounded doctrine of human exceptionalism concretize the nexus of the current era of non-sustainability, Pagnol and Serres attempt to breathe life back into this often misunderstood, multifaceted concept in an effort to (re-)envision a healthier relationship with the cosmic whole that sustains the existence of all sentient and non-sentient beings. As this study highlights, this rich Amerindian metaphor opens up into philosophical, spiritual, and scientific dimensions. Moreover, this investigation of the common threads that exist between Pagnol’s prose and Serres’s interdisciplinary, unconventional philosophy reveals the deep symbolism of the Amerindian metaphor of “Mother Earth”. This ecocentric concept could represent an invaluable point of departure for articulating the radical paradigm shift in our homocentric thinking that is paramount in order to avert the impending, anthropogenic ecological crisis that threatens to destroy all abundant life on this planet. Pagnol’s prose and Serres’s philosophy promote a different way of being in the world in a human-centered universe that is increasingly defined by an environmental calamity of epic proportions.

Keywords – Marcel Pagnol; Michel Serres; metaphor of Mother Earth; biocentrism; cosmic spirituality.

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Reviving the Nuanced Concept of Mother Earth in an Era of Non-Sustainability: A Serresian Reading of Marcel Pagnol's *L'eau des collines*

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1. Introduction

This essay explores how the prose of Marcel Pagnol and the interdisciplinary philosophy of Michel Serres revive the nuanced concept of 'Mother Earth' in an era of non-sustainability. As this investigation will highlight, this often misunderstood and oversimplified Amerindian metaphor opens up into philosophical, spiritual, and scientific dimensions. Based upon their astute observations of the universe and our minute place in it, Pagnol and Serres express their disquieting anxiety related to the gravity of the ecological calamity that threatens the continued existence of every sentient and non-sentient being in an interconnected and interdependent biosphere. Pagnol died in 1974 before it was fashionable to address environmental issues, yet the parallels between his so-called 'nature writing' and the science-based theories of Serres are quite striking.

Although Pagnol never had any formal training in the hard sciences in comparison to Serres, the author of *L'eau des collines* possesses many of the same cosmic sensibilities and scientific predilections as the unorthodox philosopher of science. These deep affinities are evident in both volumes of *L'eau des collines*. Similar to Serres, Pagnol's fascination with the inner workings of the planet, or the myriad of delicate threads that link us to the greater chain of being, leads him to embrace an ecocentric worldview. In the face of stern warnings from the scientific community concerning the nefarious effects of human-induced climate change, perhaps it is time for literary scholars to reengage with the ideas of a relatively forgotten author, at least in academic circles, who has been relegated to the status of a 'regional' author. A close reading of *L'eau des collines* reveals that Pagnol often underscores the universal ecological laws which govern the existence of every life form on this planet including human beings. For this reason, although *L'eau des collines* might evoke picturesque images of the Provence countryside, the environmental degradation and myopic behavior decried by Pagnol in this novel should be understood in a more global context. The fears articulated by Pagnol in *L'eau des collines* are firmly anchored in rudimentary material realities from which there is no escape. Like Serres, this study will clearly demonstrate that Pagnol understood the dire necessity of responsible stewardship in a universe where each organism is inextricably linked to a larger entity ('Mother Earth') from which no separation is possible. Given that the environmental crisis is undoubtedly the most pressing social issue of our time that warrants immediate attention, human civilization is in desperate need of a radical paradigm shift that could deviate us from our current ecocidal path. The complex philosophy of Serres and the lyrical prose of Pagnol both represent an invaluable theoretical tool for comprehending the ramifications of contemporary scientific erudition and reexamining our potentially lethal relationship with the remainder of the planet.

2. Contextualization of *L'eau des collines*

First, it should be noted that Pagnol's *L'eau des collines* is a "two-part novel [...] inspired by his own films *Manon des sources* and *Ugolin* [...] released ten years before" (Arey-Binet 201). Several critics have also studied Claude Berri's cinematic adaptations of *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des sources* in the eighties which briefly propelled the writer, filmmaker, and playwright back into the spotlight. However, Frederick Hale explains that most researchers have chosen to investigate these recent films as opposed to examining the literary texts that inspired them. As Hale asserts, "Quoique les films *Jean de Florette* et *Manon des sources* (1986) fussent très applaudis par la critique, *L'eau des collines*, le roman en deux tomes, sur lequel les films sont basés, a attiré très peu d'attention" (31). Given the dearth of research related to this seminal text, this essay also seeks to encourage other scholars to contribute to the conversation.

Summarizing the deceptively simple premise of the novel, Robert Rabel explains, "Jean, a young hunchback comes to the French village of Les Bastides Blanches with wife and child in tow in order to take up residence in a farm he has inherited at the death of his mother [...] César and Ugolin covet the farm in question as an ideal place for growing carnations, an especially lucrative crop" (68). It soon becomes apparent that César and Ugolin are willing to resort to just about anything to acquire this precious land. Specifically, they intentionally conceal the presence of a spring on Jean Cadoret's property in order to purchase this rare commodity for almost nothing at a later time in a very arid region of southern France.

Jean de Florette, or Jean Cadoret, is unable to provide for his family due to the indifference of a hostile terrain where life is difficult for every living creature. The stark realities of living in a barren landscape are clearly exacerbated by César and Ugolin's carefully orchestrated "ciment de l'ACCIDENT" (*Jean de Florette* 81). This calculated plan eventually results in the untimely demise of both Jean de Florette and Ugolin. In the final pages of *Manon des sources*, le Papet (César) discovers that Jean de Florette was his biological son. Realizing that he has essentially murdered his own child for purely narcissistic reasons, César will soon succumb to death after learning the truth. Hidden behind the backdrop of this timeless tale of greed, a strong subplot compels the reader to respect "La Mère Nature" (*Jean de Florette* 199). In this vein, Marie-Jo Arey-Binet affirms that "Nature is the main character in the 700 page long novel" (199). As Arey-Binet underscores, Pagnol's denunciation of Western society's mistreatment and mismanagement of nature might actually be the most important overarching theme that pervades the entire novel. Not only does *L'eau des collines* clearly delve into the deleterious social consequences of human avarice, but this rather complicated text is also a cautionary narrative that urges the alienated modern subject to venerate and protect a 'Mother Earth' that is more vulnerable than we would like to admit.

3. Brief Overview of Serres's Philosophy

Similar to how Pagnol's complex prose is now for the most part neglected by many specialists of twentieth-century French literature, numerous critics such as William Paulson, Steve Brown, and Ian Tucker maintain that Serres has yet to receive the credit that he deserves inside of academia. Serres's philosophical *œuvre* which seamlessly blends philosophy, literature, science, religion, theology, and mythology is often poorly understood by "his better-known French contemporaries" who strictly adhere to the traditional theoretical approaches of their specific discipline (Pierpaolo 166). Throughout his considerable body of work, "Serres moves between science, philosophy, and literature freely-taking in culture, myth, and religion to boot" (Brown "Natural Writing" 185). Given his profound philosophical conviction that knowledge cannot

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be entirely compartmentalized into neat little boxes that are in complete isolation from each other, Serres fervently rejects academic insularity. Instead of remaining within the narrow confines of traditional philosophy, Serres incessantly searches for the inherent connections between all of the various fields of study. The philosopher posits that the only way that we can have a more complete picture of the world in which we live and die is to valorize all forms of knowledge and to endeavor to understand how divergent disciplines complement and influence each other. In short, Serres is an atypical epistemologist whose thirst for knowledge knows no bounds.

Although Serres's extremely varied base of knowledge often leads him in many different directions depending on the exact work in question, environmental concerns have always been at the forefront of his thought. As evidenced in *Le Contrat Naturel* (1990), *La Guerre mondiale* (2008), *Le Mal propre* (2008), and *Biogée* (2010), Serres articulates his apprehension related to the devastating ecological effects of a heavy human footprint. Like Pagnol in *L'eau des collines*, the philosopher condemns the (re)-appropriation of the earth's limited natural resources for the exclusive benefit of the integrated financial and political elite. Moreover, Serres also warns the reader that life as we know it will cease to exist if too many links are removed from the greater chain of being, or "notre mère la Terre," to which everything belongs (*Biogée* 34). Serres's ambitious philosophical project could be described as an attempt to recount the universal story of existence that began approximately four and half billion years ago and which will ultimately culminate with a big crunch. Furthermore, based on contemporary scientific theories such as the first law of ecology, the laws of thermodynamics, the principles of evolution, and chaos theory, Serres highlights that the indifferent cosmic cycles which conceived and sustain all life are fragile. Similar to Pagnol, the philosopher affirms that rapacious human desires are capable of altering the ecological equilibrium upon which the existence of every organism depends.

4. Lauding Mother Nature, 'la femme nourricière'

In Serres's philosophy and in Pagnol's prose, these philosophical reflections related to the fragility, complexity, and beauty of the strands that connect us to the rest of the universe are often accompanied by an intense elemental euphoria. Serresian narrators and Pagnol's protagonists are happy to be alive and to be a small part of the planetary mystery that surrounds them. They often directly express their immense gratitude to the arbitrary cosmic forces that gradually thrust their species into being over a period of billions of years. This understanding of the gratuitous nature of existence in addition to a rudimentary comprehension of ecological interdependence triggers profound sentiments of *carpe diem*. Given that the Serresian narrator and Pagnol's protagonists are aware that their existence in this specific ontological shell is ephemeral, they want to take advantage of every intoxicating moment that life has to afford before 'Mother Earth' recycles their energy into another material shape. Realizing that *homo sapiens* are merely one component of the balance that preserves the entire biotic community into which the human saga has also been woven, the Serresian narrator and Pagnol's protagonists venerate the cosmic whole as a sacred entity that must be protected at all costs.

In *L'eau des collines*, Jean Cadoret teaches his daughter Manon that it defies common sense to bite the proverbial hand that feeds without thinking about the repercussions of one's actions. In Amerindian philosophy and spirituality, Mother Earth is such a crucial concept because it concretizes the undeniable reality that the biosphere literally provides sustenance to all of its human and non-human inhabitants. There are no exceptions to this universal rule.

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For this reason, many indigenous civilizations consider the parasitic¹ relationship that Western society has with the universe to be irresponsible and even sacrilegious (Le Clézio 268).² In Amerindian thought, the act of exploiting the cosmos for purely personal gain represents a crime against existence itself which is emblematic of a lack of respect for life in all of its divergent forms. Since the common ontological fate of each material being is bound to the health of the ecosphere, widespread environmental destruction is synonymous with the utter annihilation of life itself.

In *L'eau des collines*, Pagnol pays homage to the Amerindian notion of Mother Earth and everything that it entails in a rather explicit fashion. Reminding Manon where food comes from, her father declares, “La Mère Nature [...] nourrit toujours ses enfants: je n’ai jamais eu autant de plaisir à manger” (*Jean de Florette* 199). In this passage, it becomes evident that having a direct, primordial connection to the larger cosmic whole which sustains all of its ‘children’ actuates a type of material ecstasy for many of Pagnol’s protagonists. This “joie de vivre” is fueled by an intimate relationship with the other material particles from which all life originally surged and which still render human existence possible (Arey-Binet 197).

A rather comical scene from *L'eau des collines* also reinforces the ecological values that “le bossu” tries to instill in his daughter. Upon their arrival in Les Bastides Blanches, the Cadorets immediately pique Ugolin’s interest because of what he deems to be odd behavior. In addition to plugging the spring so the hunchback’s family would never uncover its presence, Ugolin intentionally uproots useful plants and trees on the Cadoret property replacing them with things that he knows will make this dry region even more unforgiving. Following le Papet’s suggestions, Ugolin is determined to do everything in his power in order to hasten the departure of this new family in order to procure this lucrative plot for his aspiring carnation enterprise. However, as opposed to being disappointed with the seemingly desolate parcel of land that they have inherited, the Cadorets express their admiration for this rugged landscape. As the narrator reveals, “Aimée! Viens voir ces chardons! Elle accourut, puis s’arrêta près de lui, émerveillée, avec des gémissements d’admiration” (*Jean de Florette* 99). Watching this episode transpire from a safe distance, Ugolin is dumfounded that the thistles which he planted earlier are the origin of such pleasure. Ugolin describes this peculiar family from the neighboring rival village of Crespin like aliens that have just landed on a spaceship from another planet.

Despite the obvious humor in this scene designed to make the reader laugh, it quickly becomes apparent that the hunchback’s relationship with the earth is a serious matter. Affirming his desire to make a thistle bouquet for his wife, Jean laments, “Ah! Il me sera pénible de les sacrifier, mais avant d’y toucher, j’en ferai des photographies” (*Jean de Florette* 100). In the Amerindian spirit, Jean recognizes the invaluable contributions of each organism that he takes from the earth. This ecocentric mentality, predicated upon a basic understanding of ecological interdependence, explains why “le bossu” hesitates to make this ‘sacrifice’ as a loving gesture to his wife.

Later in the novel, the hunchback will give thanks to wild shrubs that he must remove from the earth to farm the land. Respecting their intrinsic right to exist and deploring the fact that he has to shorten their lives in their current ontological form to feed his family, Jean articulates strong feelings of sadness. As the narrator affirms, “Avant d’attaquer le premier arbuste sauvage, il lui fit [...] un petit discours, en invoquant la nécessité où il se trouvait de nourrir sa

¹ The Serresian concept of a parasite will be discussed later in the context of both Serres’s philosophy and Pagnol’s prose.

² J.M.G. Le Clézio is not only a prolific author who recently received the coveted Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008, but he is also a respected scholar with a vast array of knowledge related to divergent Amerindian societies. It should also be noted that the reclusive writer lived with the Embreras and the Waunanas in the Darien region of Panama from 1970-1974. In addition to his extensive research related to Native American cultures, Le Clézio’s theories have also been influenced by his personal experiences.

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famille; puis, pour toutes ces plantes qu'il allait tuer, il joua un petit air d'harmonica, noble et triste, pendant que le jour se levait" (*Jean de Florette* 155). The sensibilities expressed by the protagonist echo the respect that Amerindian civilizations have for Mother Earth as a collective entity. Although existence necessitates inflicting a certain amount of violence upon the universe to survive, Pagnol implies that this unfortunate reality should not be taken lightly. In the fabric of life, every organism exists for a reason whether we fully understand its connection to the larger 'world of things' or not. Given that the disappearance of a link in the greater chain of being always causes a ripple effect on everything around it, Le Clézio elucidates in *Le Rêve Mexicain* that "Pour les Aztèques, même couper un arbre était un acte grave" (269). It is in this context in which Jean's sincere apology to the bushes that he must unearth should be understood. Moreover, these cosmic affinities also shed light on the enigmatic euphoria that the protagonist feels when he communes with Mother Earth.³ As Arey-Binet outlines, this unbridled joy is a "celebration" of life itself and all of the diverse threads that connect us to the biosphere (197).

Numerous scholars have also noted that the pursuit of happiness in Serres's philosophy and fiction⁴ is inseparable from an awareness of the specific place of humanity in the larger biotic community of life. As Brian O'Keeffe underscores, "There is an ecstasy to being in relation, a joy to be had in contemplating the magic of relations" (28). Explaining that the profound elemental inebriation experienced by the Serresian narrator in many of his works from 1968 to the present is the result of an epistemological quest, Niran Abbas asserts that Serres's non-anthropocentric philosophy focuses on "knowing who and what we are in relation to the world" (2). For Serres, the realization that homo sapiens are part of something larger which transcends the needs and desires of our species induces powerful instants of pure elation. The nexus of this *quête de soi* is exploring the interlinkages that constitute the web of life. Serres posits that this philosophical contemplation fosters a greater appreciation and valorization of our absurd existence in this fleeting form.

As in *L'eau des collines*, the ecstasy described by the Serresian narrator leads him to espouse the basic tenets of biotic egalitarianism. During these moments of cosmic bliss, the narrator becomes cognizant that pervasive homocentric ideology founded upon the shaky edifice of scientifically erroneous dualities is the root of the problem that has created an environmental crisis of epic proportions. Applying the principles of modern science to philosophy, Serres attempts to give the final *coup de grâce* to Cartesian philosophy. Serres often mocks Descartes because he somehow delineated a sharp ontological distinction between man *and* nature in spite of evident material realities which do not respect existential hierarchies that are merely the product of wishful thinking. This passionate anti-Cartesian thread in Serres's *œuvre*, which derives its force from scientific discoveries, is visible throughout *Les cinq sens*, especially in the passages written "Contre Descartes encore" (17).

Serres's deconstruction of Cartesian binary logic in *Les cinq sens* and other works helps us to understand both the pleasure and melancholy expressed by Jean Cadoret in *L'eau des collines*. First, Pagnol and Serres contend that only by understanding life for what it truly is (i.e. a free gift extended to us by impersonal cosmic forces) can we fully take advantage of it and find a genuine state of happiness. As an admirer of nature, Jean intuitively realizes that the thistles and wild bushes that he must uproot from the earth have also been randomly tossed into the chaos of existence. Additionally, just as his species represents one link in the chain of being, Jean is aware that 'la Mère Nature' conceived thistles for a reason. As this Amerindian metaphor illustrates, only necessity truly justifies taking the life of any organism. Even though

³ A later section of this essay will probe the spiritual significance of the metaphor of Mother Earth.

⁴ Although Serres mostly writes philosophy, albeit a very different type of philosophy that unapologetically refuses to respect traditional genres, he has also published works of fiction including *Nouvelles du monde* (1997).

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the hunchback's elemental joy and sadness might have appeared to be ludicrous to Ugolin, these strong sentiments are grounded in universal ecological laws.

"Le bossu" is ecstatic to be alive, but he is aware that his actions can negatively impact a planet that he cherishes. The fragile splendor that Jean loves must be conserved for his daughter and other future generations.

If removed from its philosophical context, the cosmic jubilation described by the Serresian narrator of *Biogée* might also seem to be whimsical or even outlandish. Yet, the stark realism of certain passages from this recent text related to the devastating effects of climate change cast little doubt upon the philosopher's motivations for endeavoring to resuscitate the concept of Mother Earth. In Serres's philosophy, this Amerindian notion is presented as a healthier ideological alternative to homocentric thought systems which ignore the concrete realities of living in an interdependent and interconnected biosphere. Furthermore, this particular aspect of Amerindian philosophy and spirituality is much more in line with modern science than the aforementioned dualities that define the relationship between humanity and rest of the ecosphere in Western society.

In *Biogée*, Serres implicitly reminds the reader that the Amerindian notion of Mother Earth was often an erotically-charged metaphor that compelled the subject to establish a sensual connection to the planet. In contrast to warning religious devotees to be "wary of the flesh," the concept of Mother Earth lauds our material body itself which links us to the universe which spawned and sustains our very existence. The sensual elements of this concept explain why Serres employs the terms lover, uterus, vagina, mouth, and Mother Earth interchangeably in *Biogée*. In an aptly named section entitled "Terre-mère bée," Serres specifies that the words "le vagin, le sexe féminin [...] l'utérus ou la matrice" all refer to the cosmic whole (45). He concludes that the notion of Mother Earth is "un mot génital, tout justement" (45). The final sentence of *Biogée* is extremely important as well because it directly associates happiness with having an intimate, sensorial connection with the biosphere. As the narrator states, "Joie: matière dont est faite la Biogée" (170). For Jean Cadoret in *L'eau des collines*, to be happy is to touch, taste, see, smell, and hear every pulsating material particle around him. This celebration of life itself is at the heart of the Mother Earth metaphor in addition to Pagnol's prose and Serres's philosophy. According to Pagnol and Serres, our time on this planet in this precise ontological shape is limited, but life can be both beautiful and meaningful due to the sensorial ecstasy that allows us to catch a small glimpse of the cosmic divine to which we belong.

5. Mother Earth, a Lethal, Indifferent Entity

Nonetheless, Pagnol and Serres are careful to not over-romanticize the Amerindian notion of Mother Earth in their respective works. Upon their arrival in the 'new world,' the European conquistadors often scoffed at the spiritual convictions of the indigenous population treating them like naïve nature worshippers. Convinced of their moral and intellectual superiority in addition to being blinded by avarice, the ethnocentric Europeans failed to realize that the concept of Mother Earth is much more nuanced than they assumed. Even though many autochthonous societies do indeed revere everything that comprises the delicate and intricate web of life from which the universal story of existence emerged, they also recognize that the indifferent forces which threw them into being through evolutionary processes that predate humankind can indiscriminately take life away in a fraction of a second. As Le Clézio affirms in *Le Rêve mexicain*, "Le symbole d'une terre-mère à la fois nourricière et mortelle est au centre de la philosophie amérindienne" (266). Le Clézio correctly remarks that the idea of nature as a benevolent force that generously provides nourishment for all of its inhabitants is counterpointed by the equally poignant realization that the fury of the elements spares nothing in their path in Amerindian cultures.

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Given that he is a “realist by temperament” and a “true observer” of the universe, Pagnol also depicts the duality of Mother Earth in *L'eau des collines* (Koëlla 404, 408). In *L'eau des collines*, the rending passages in which the author highlights the cold hard fact that “En Provence la réussite des cultures dépend de la présence de l'eau” immediately strike the reader (Mugnier 75). The first lines of the novel underscore the all-encompassing daily struggle for survival that is indicative of living in this inhospitable terrain. Revealing how challenging it is to reside in a region prone to periods of extreme drought, the narrator offers the following description of Les Bastides Blanches:

Les Bastides Blanches, c'était une paroisse de cent cinquante habitants [...] Une cinquantaine de bâtisses mitoyennes, dont la blancheur n'était restée que dans leur nom, bordait cinq ou six rues sans trottoir ni bitume; rues étroites à cause du soleil, tortueuses à cause du mistral [...] Toute la journée, on voyait sous le jet de l'eau des cruches ou des jarres, et des commères qui tout en surveillant leur musique montante, échangeaient les nouvelles du jour (*Jean de Florette* 7-8).

This rather unflattering portrait of Provence coexists with poetic representations of the grandeur of the countryside in *L'Eau des collines*. The juxtaposition between this harsh realism and lyricism is best explained by the multifaceted Amerindian metaphor of Mother Earth. Despite the deep respect that Jean has for *la Mère Nature* or the greater cosmic whole to which he is linked, he is aware that this entity is not always a very welcoming place.

In *L'eau des collines*, Jean discovers that the Provencal countryside is part of an impersonal force that does not take pity on anyone or anything. Even though the hunchback perhaps valorizes the greater chain of being more than everyone else in Les Bastides Blanches, Mother Earth does not come to his rescue during his time of need. Highlighting the complete indifference of this hostile landscape to his despondent plight, “le bossu” directs his attention toward the sky exclaiming “Je suis BOSSU! Vous ne le savez pas, que JE SUIS BOSSU? Vous croyez que c'est facile [...] IL N'Y A PERSONNE LA-HAUT?” (*Jean de Florette* 239). In this poignant passage, Pagnol underscores the cruelty of the earth and all of the suffering that existence entails. The author's message that there will never be any divine intervention for Jean or anyone else in a self-regulating universe that arbitrarily recycles energy and matter resonates with the reader. Moreover, this realistic representation of the biosphere corresponds to the duality of the Mother Earth metaphor in many divergent Amerindian civilizations outlined by Le Clézio in *Le Rêve mexicain*.

After her father's death caused by a combination of chimerical dreams and limitless greed, Manon will develop the same type of cosmic awareness as her father. In the context of the concept of Mother Earth, one scene from the beginning of *Manon des sources* is quite revealing. In an effort to maintain a close connection to her late father, Manon continues to visit a rowan-tree that they used to admire together on a regular basis. Jean describes this old tree, which found a way to survive in spite of being “mutilé par la foudre” with “une bosse énorme” as a “confrère que le Ciel n'a pas épargné: mais il n'a pas perdu courage, et sa dernière branche verdoie vaillamment” (*Manon des sources* 22). Furthermore, as she is reading the notes left by her father in the margins of his former books near the rowan-tree, Manon “regardait au loin la crête féroce du Saint-Esprit, le récif éventreur de nuages, qui l'avait ruiné” (22). During these moments of contemplation in harmony with the remainder of the natural world, Manon realizes that the divine entity that she celebrates does not make any meaningful distinctions between its “children.” Her father's physical limitations do not entitle him to any sort of special treatment whatsoever from the universe. Likewise, the *sorbier's* deformities serve as a reminder that *la Mère Nature* gives and takes away according to nondiscriminatory cycles.

Given that his ecocentric philosophy espouses a “purely materialistic point of view” which explores “the initial absurdity of fate that has thrown us into a given spot on earth,” Serres

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also re-appropriates the Amerindian metaphor of Mother Earth in a similar fashion as Pagnol (Assad 219; Hénaf 181). Throughout Serres's oeuvre, the philosopher dismisses unfounded homocentric logic which implies that human beings are the center of the universe, or the great miracle of existence. As in *L'eau des collines*, the elemental intoxication experienced by the Serresian narrator often coexists with intense anguish related to the utter indifference of the universe. In *Les cinq sens*, Serres probes the impersonal, lethal nature of the cosmic forces to which everything belongs including our race. Deconstructing anthropocentric paradigms that run contrary to the principles of modern science, Serres muses, "il existe un monde indépendant des hommes. Cette affirmation qu'on peut, si l'on veut, appeler réaliste" (*Les cinq sens* 108-09). Building upon basic scientific logic, which has been unequivocally confirmed by contemporary scientists, Serres exposes human exceptionalism as a dangerous illusion.

The nearly irrefutable fact from a scientific standpoint that ontological delusions of grandeur are a product of the fragmented human imagination explains why Mother Earth does not intervene to save Jean Cadoret's life in *L'eau des collines*. Although the hunchback reveres the earth because of its life-giving properties and tries to understand his connection to everything around him during the aforementioned moments of ecstasy, there is no *Deus ex machina*. The biosphere that he loves like a mother does not care whether he lives or dies. This indifference, which is at the core of the Amerindian metaphor of Mother Earth, was overlooked by the European conquistadors. Instead of being emblematic of pantheistic *naïveté*, this metaphor is more like a faithful representation of scientific reality. As Le Clézio reveals in *Le Rêve mexicain*, the scientific erudition of many Amerindian societies far surpassed that of their European counterpart in fields such as astronomy and astrology (27). This explains why Chief Seattle's famous speech "Toutes choses sont liées," translated into French by the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature, reads like an explanation of the ramifications of the first law of ecology. The ecological principles of interdependency and interconnectedness are part of the cohesive worldview of many indigenous civilizations. Nonetheless, this veneration of the forces that sustain life recognizes that our common "mother" is sometimes vicious.

In Serres's collection of short stories entitled *Nouvelles du monde*, which has been ignored by the academic community, the philosopher employs the metaphor of Mother Earth throughout this volume in this same vein. Perhaps, the best example is in the narrative "Jungle dans la ville."⁵ "Jungle dans la ville" recounts the story of a deadly earthquake that measured 7.2 on the Richter scale. The "mère" to which the narrator refers does not save his friend Y...⁶ who becomes one of the many human and non-human casualties of this natural disaster (74). In *Nouvelles du monde* and in his more philosophical works, Serres offers earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, tropical storms, and hurricanes as concrete examples which thoroughly debunk anthropocentric ideology. Serres notes that natural disasters indiscriminately destroy everything in their path. They do not stop to recognize the alleged ontological sovereignty of homo sapiens. In "Jungle dans la ville," Y... suffers the same fate as Jean Cadoret in *L'eau des collines*. In essence, their life is abruptly ended by the same "mother."

6. Mother Earth, a Fragile Entity

In addition to Mother Earth's paradoxical generosity and indifference, Pagnol and Serres also assert that this collective entity is fragile. Specifically, both authors decry the nefarious effects of narcissism and greed which have reduced all other life forms to their purely instrumental value. As Frederick Hale highlights, "Ugolin's participation in the ruining of Jean and the acquisition of Les Romarins is essentially a matter of greed" (38). This insatiable avarice pushes

⁵ Another example is the story "Avaler sur trois torrents." For instance, see page 227.

⁶ This is the enigmatic character's name.

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Ugolin and le Papet to annihilate anyone or anything that stands in their way. Not only are Ugolin and le Papet ultimately responsible for the death of Jean Cadoret, but they are also equally to blame for altering the delicate balance that preserves the ecosystem of this landscape.

In *L'eau des collines*, Pagnol develops the metaphor of sterility to condemn the appropriation of environmental resources for the sole benefit of the individual. Ugolin's sadistic project is so "successful" that a place which was once teeming with life because of the presence of a spring is now synonymous with death. As the narrator states, "En quelques minutes, l'eau disparut. Alors, il boucha les trous à coups de talon, et recouvrit le sol mouillé de feuilles mortes" (*Jean de Florette* 85). In addition to the powerful metonymical image of the dead leaves that start to wilt immediately after the spring is plugged, the omniscient narrator uses the expression "la tombe de la source" to describe what is left after Ugolin has completed his mission (*Jean de Florette* 86).

A few pages later in the novel, the narrator informs the reader that the process of destroying this once vibrant space is finished. As the narrator explains, "Il continuait ses visites aux Romarins, mais il ne trouvait plus rien à détruire, et ne pouvait plus rien ajouter" (93). The narrator reiterates, "Il y remonta cependant un dimanche matin, le fusil à l'épaule, espérant quelque merle, ou peut-être un lapin... Mais, pensif, il ne vit rien" (95). Although what Ugolin does to the Cadorets is deplorable and he will be appropriately punished for it in the second portion of the novel, his greatest moral transgression is his lack of respect for the chain of being to which everything is connected. In *L'eau des collines*, Pagnol appears to advocate in favor of a land ethic similar to Aldo Leopold in *Sand County Almanac*. In particular, the title of Pagnol's most famous novel reminds us that water is essential for abundant life. Not only does the absence of water lead to the demise of the hunchback, but it also demonstrates how short-sighted human desires can adversely affect the ecological equilibrium that renders all life possible. In *L'eau des collines*, Pagnol clearly articulates that the biosphere is vulnerable and must be protected.

A passage from the second part of the work reinforces this environmental ethic. The havoc wreaked by Ugolin on a micro level makes this space unlivable for every organism that used to call it home. This behavior reflects a larger anthropocentric *weltanschauung* that threatens to alter the planetary landscape on a global scale. When Manon realizes that the entire village knew about the spring which could have saved her father's life but refused to get involved because of the "première règle de la morale bastidienne,"⁷ Jean's daughter exacts her revenge by ensuring that all of the wells and fountains would dry up due to a ruse of her own (*Jean de Florette* 9). The desperate villagers appeal to outsiders for their help. However, a team of specialists including engineers is unable to solve the problem which has crippled this community.

Before Manon decides to take the moral high ground and fix the quandary that she intentionally created, an exchange between Ugolin and one of the engineers captures the reader's attention. In this passage, it is apparent that Pagnol wonders if the notion of "progress" in Western society needs to be redefined in order to take into account the fragility of Mother Earth. Trying to open Ugolin's eyes and force him to accept an ideal of environmental responsibility that transcends the narcissistic desires of the individual, the engineer proclaims, "Ceux qui discutent le progrès n'ont pas toujours raison" (*Manon des sources* 177). Ugolin retorts, "Moi, si le progrès me remet l'eau, moi, le progrès, je l'embrasse! En tout cas, dès que ma source coule, il y a cent francs pour le progrès! Oui, cent francs! Les voilà!" (177). The repetition of the word progress is not gratuitous whatsoever in this heated conversation. Pagnol appears to voice his concerns related to how the concept itself of progress is conceived in Western civilization. The aforementioned seeds of destruction sewn

⁷ "On ne s'occupe pas des affaires des autres" (*Jean de Florette* 9).

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by Ugoletti purely for the sake of greed beckon the modern subject to revisit the notion of progress through the lens of sustainability. For Pagnol, it is rather obvious in *L'eau des collines* that a realistic definition of this concept is inseparable from the physical laws that bind us to the earth that generated and maintain our existence. Incessantly decimating the “Mother” that nourishes all of its “children” is indicative of a mortal form of regression as opposed to progress. This Amerindian sensibility, symbolized in the metaphor of Mother Earth, permeates *L'eau des collines*. This conviction, supported by modern science, finds its manifestation in the somber tone of the passages in which the narrator describes the appalling carnage induced by Ugoletti. As it is narrowly and simplistically defined in Western society, Pagnol argues that “progress” is the harbinger of death.

Additionally, the negative depiction of rapidly expanding cities in *L'eau des collines* and throughout Pagnol's prose adds another nuance to this discussion. “Pagnol's vision of an industrial dystopia” reflects the author's fears about the ecological impact of excessive urbanization (Bowles 135). It should be noted that “Until the 1950's, France remained a predominately rural country in which over half of the population lived and one quarter of the workforce was employed in the countryside” (Butler 219). It is perhaps these sweeping social changes that compelled Pagnol to write *L'eau des collines* near the end of his career. This well-documented rural exodus was an evident source of anxiety for the author. Many scholars have interpreted Pagnol's harsh critiques of urbanization as a type of idealistic nostalgia associated with the beauty of the Provencal countryside. Yet, when these unsettling passages are placed in the context of environmental stewardship, this urban malaise experienced by both Jean Cadoret and his daughter Manon (*Jean de Florette* 142-43; *Manon des sources* 23-24) might not be as “romantic” as it initially appears to be at first glance. Pagnol seems to have anticipated that excessive urbanization would continue to aggravate the environmental crisis that was already starting to take shape when he wrote *L'eau des collines*. Hence, the ugliness of these dystopian urban spaces vividly outlined by Pagnol should be reexamined as a literary representation of a rudimentary comprehension of the physical laws that undergird the ecosphere. Given that many scientists are concerned that urbanization in its current form is indeed spiraling out of control, it is possible that the previously mentioned elemental joy has been mislabeled by numerous critics. Moreover, Pagnol deconstructs the pervasive, automatic correlation between “progress” and “urbanization.” In addition to being skeptical that city dwellers are living more fulfilling lives than people who live in the country, the author ponders if this way of life will continue to erode the very fabric of life itself.

Like Pagnol, Serres evokes the Mother Earth metaphor to (re)-envision both “progress” and its relationship (or lack thereof) with urbanization. In fact, Serres is even more direct than Pagnol when he takes aim at Western conceptions of progress. The philosopher hypothesizes that progress and regression are not binary opposites, but instead they influence each other as part of a continuum. As the philosopher asserts in an interview with Denis Lafay, “Evaluer le progrès supposerait du temps qu'il soit linéaire. Or il est disparate, il est comme un paysage, très varié, où se croisent des vallées fleuries - le progrès - et d'autres désertiques - la régression” (n.p.). According to Serres, social progress always entails a certain amount of regression and vice versa. Using the metaphor of a landscape, Serres theorizes that progress, especially technological advances, often leads to regression in other areas. By erroneously conceiving progress as a straight line, Serres posits that we fail to realize that something is always lost when various strides are made. For instance, the philosopher undoubtedly embraces what technology has to offer, as evidenced by speeches like “Les nouvelles technologies: révolution culturelle et cognitive” and philosophical works such as *Petite Poucette* (2012). Nevertheless, Serres is cognizant that everything comes with a price. This realization explains why this unconventional philosopher denounces the misuse of modern inventions to master every last parcel of the earth. By reimagining progress as a landscape as opposed to a linear path, Serres

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contends that we can reestablish a less exploitative relationship with Mother Earth before it is too late. By factoring in the potential impact of regression as a direct result of a certain form of progress, Serres speculates that losses can be minimized. Providing an example of how to avoid unnecessary regression related to cosmic disconnection when living in the modern world, Serres offers the following advice: “Et si vous avez perdu le corps [...] il faut marcher deux heures par jour” (Zimmerman n.p.).

Like Pagnol in *L'eau des collines*, Serres highlights the fragility of the “terre-mère bée” in an effort to encourage the reader to reject ubiquitous notions of progress that have remained unchallenged in the midst of an unprecedented environmental crisis (*Biogée* 45). In *Biogée*, Serres convincingly asserts that the current amount of regression caused by our unhealthy parasitic relationship with the planet is no longer a viable option. The philosopher invites us to imagine a time in the near future “quand il n’y aura plus que des hommes sur la Terre [...] quand nous aurons détruit toutes les autres espèces vivantes, à l’allure que prend ce désastre aujourd’hui, qui bouffera quoi? Je vous le demande, à bord de notre planète fantôme” (*Biogée* 88). Similar to Jean Cadoret’s aforementioned lesson to his daughter about where food comes from, Serres cautions us that the integrity of the web of life is being compromised at an alarming rate in the name of progress.

Serres’s reconceptualization of what progress encompasses in an interdependent, interconnected, and fragile cosmos is linked to his (re)-appropriation of the word parasite. For Serres, every sentient and non-sentient being is a parasite given that each organism must take from its host (Mother Earth) in order to survive. Given that “Parasitism is just a fact of symbiotic-life,” Serres promotes what could be labeled “healthy” or “sustainable” parasitism (O’Keeffe 10). A responsible parasite knows how to control its voracious appetite for consumption before it destroys itself in the process as the philosopher highlights in an interview with Raoul Mortley (57). The philosopher affirms that global society will make progress from an environmental perspective when we adopt “a modality that will not turn deadly” inside of “the parasitic chain” (Yates 205).⁸

Serres’s theory of the parasite provides a useful framework for understanding one particular scene from *L'eau des collines*. When his daughter Manon refuses to eat birds because of her admiration for these creatures, her father declares, “On s’attendrit toujours sur les malheurs des petits oiseaux, parce qu’ils volent et qu’ils font cui-cui. Mais dis-toi bien que ce sont des animaux féroces qui massacrent, pour les manger, de minuscules créatures vivantes” (*Jean de Florette* 199). Similar to Serres, Pagnol appears to assert that existence is a violent act that forces each of its “children” to take life away from someone or something for sustenance. In *L'eau des collines*, Manon learns that there are no exceptions to this universal law. This parasitic reality, which is one of the many nuances of the Amerindian concept of Mother Earth, explains why autochthonous societies thank each organism for its contributions to the larger chain of being before eating it. Additionally, the Mother Earth metaphor implores the subject to waste nothing in order to leave as light of an ecological footprint as possible in a world full of parasites. Centuries before the Europeans arrived on their continent, Amerindian peoples understood the importance of protecting their delicate host.

Like Pagnol, Serres also vehemently criticizes the commonly accepted assumption that unfettered urbanization equates to progress. In many of Serres’s works, researchers such as William Paulson, Philipp Schweighauser, and Marcel Hénaff note that the philosopher paints a very bleak portrait of the urban space. Since the vast majority of the earth’s human population now resides in metropolitan areas, Serres wonders whether cities will soon be all that is left. As Marcel Hénaff underscores in his analysis of “Michel Serres and the Global city,” “The inhabited space is now dominated by urban megalopolises, increasingly, the human

⁸ Steve Brown notes that Serres’s theory of the parasite actually has three different meanings depending on the precise context in which it is used.

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species seems to be concentrated in cities [...] The planet becomes a city” (170). Serres remains unconvinced that this drastic historical shift, which he has seen transpire in front of his eyes from the period of his childhood in the 1930’s to the present, represents a sustainable model in the long term. Even if most humans adapt well to urban environments, which is debatable for Serres in the first place, the philosopher worries that disproportionate urbanization could adversely impact biodiversity. If other organisms upon which our existence depends fail to thrive in a completely urban landscape, then how much longer will it be until the last homo sapiens disappear as well?

In a somber chapter of *Biogée* entitled “Hymne au chêne et au tilleul,” Serres mourns the rapid effacement of the few privileged spaces that have yet to be radically transformed into concrete, steel, or asphalt. As the philosopher states, “le ruisseau de mon adolescence devient un V bétonné où passe une buse [...] ensuite aplanir la terre au bulldozer, transformèrent deux fois le jardin de France. Quels barbares ont fait un enfer, unitaire et plat, de mon vieil Eden rural, composite? Où se trouve la porte par où y revenir” (106). Despite the lyrical nature of this passage which pulls at the reader’s heart strings evoking images of the Garden of Eden, Serres’s anxiety itself is well-justified. Moreover, the powerful metaphor of a bird of prey (“une buse”) that is removing the last remnants of life from this sterile wasteland destabilizes the reader. In *Biogée*, Serres directly associates limitless urbanization with death and utter oblivion. Furthermore, it is not by chance that the philosopher laments the disappearance of trees given their role in emitting oxygen and absorbing carbon dioxide. Deforestation is a serious problem that is intertwined with excessive urbanization. Serres illustrates this grim reality to make us think more critically about the concept of progress and urban non-sustainability. In Amerindian terms, our “Mother” can only take so much before the web of life is irreparably torn to shreds.

7. Mother Earth, a Spiritual Force

In addition to the scientific and philosophical elements of the Mother Earth metaphor outlined above, this Amerindian concept is emblematic of a form of cosmic spirituality. Whereas dominant monotheistic religions profess that salvation is to be found in the promise of a hypothetical, eternal life that supposedly exists outside of this physical plane after our death, the spiritual convictions of most Amerindian peoples are more pantheistic in nature. Redemption from the absurdity of the human condition is possible by having an intimate connection with the larger divine shell (Mother Earth) to which everything belongs. To be more precise, the path to spirituality for many Amerindian civilizations involves reducing the distance that separates us from other material forms to the greatest extent possible. This *quête de soi* leads to an increased sense of self-actualization that allows the subject to project meaning upon his ephemeral existence in the human form. However, Amerindian societies are cognizant of the inherent limitations of this spiritual exercise. As Le Clézio notes, only in death is a complete “fusion” or reintegration into the cosmic whole possible (244). Nevertheless, the Mother Earth metaphor emphasizes the significance of communing with the remainder of the universe in an attempt to understand our minute place in the sacred biosphere more fully.

In *L'eau des collines*, Pagnol juxtaposes the “superficiality” of the religious beliefs of most inhabitants of Les Bastides Blanches to Jean Cadoret’s profound elemental spirituality (Hale 33). When Ugolin and le Papet mock one of the most sacred pillars of Christianity (baptism) at the end of *Jean de Florette*, it becomes evident that their real religion is money. In contrast to this hypocritical and cynical behavior, the hunchback sincerely venerates Mother Earth and tries to live accordingly. After a long day of toiling the soil, Jean raises his glass of wine to the indifferent cosmic forces that sustain all life. As the narrator reveals, “Je bois à la Mère Nature, aux collines odorantes, je bois aux cigales, à la pinède, à la brise, aux roches millénaires, je bois

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à l'azur" (*Jean de Florette* 108). In comparison to Ugolin and le Papet's faith, the reader has no reason to doubt the authenticity of Jean's elemental communion.

These two episodes from *L'eau des collines* are also significant because they demonstrate how Pagnol deforms Christian rituals to express pantheistic sensibilities. Ugolin's "baptism" is cast in a very negative light because they are celebrating an act of greed that resulted in the death of an innocent human and much of the non-human population as well. Moreover, Jean's toast to Mother Nature is part of a narrative strategy deliberately designed to conjure images of the Eucharist. In *L'eau des collines*, Pagnol mingles Christian elements with indigenous spiritual beliefs to provide an effective metaphor with which most readers are familiar. The hunchback strives to have a more perfect union with the cosmic whole that he in essence worships.

Although Frederick Hale investigates the "Christian dimensions" of *L'eau des collines*, researchers have for the most part neglected the pantheistic elements (32). This oversight is astonishing given the plethora of explicit references to Mother Earth in addition to rather transparent allusions to the divinity Pan. Two additional passages from *L'eau des collines* allow us to place Jean's cosmic Eucharist in its appropriate context. When he becomes too destitute to purchase new shoes, the hunchback puts a positive spin on this situation. As the narrator explains, "je veux être l'homme de la nature [...] Il y a un grand plaisir à marcher pieds nus, et il me semble que les courants souterrains de notre Mère la Terre pénètrent mieux mon corps, pour le vivifier et le rajeunir" (*Jean de Florette* 265). Jean's predilections reflect a form of mystical pantheism which is based upon a keen awareness of ecological cycles. For a pantheist, removing barriers that prevent the subject from having a sensorial connection to the earth facilitates a more profound communion with the divine. Given that he is no longer wearing shoes, nothing separates him from establishing a direct correspondence with the rest of the sacred biosphere.

What transpires in the natural world immediately after the hunchback's death reinforces the intimate rapport that the protagonist had with the universe. Demonstrating the extent to which the protagonist was connected to the entire biotic community of life, an owl begins to sing in the forest. In traditional Amerindian spirituality, owls are associated with wisdom, intuition, death, and transition. The "chant des chouettes" could be interpreted as a reverent gesture which not only announces the hunchback's death, but which also confirms his complete reintegration into Mother Earth (*Jean de Florette* 287). Jean has returned home or to the forces that breathed life into everything. His material essence and energy will soon appear elsewhere. From a spiritual perspective, the process of fusion has now come full circle.

In the second half of the novel, Pagnol alludes to pantheism in an extremely overt fashion. The narrator represents Manon as the incarnation of Pan himself. Given that the "trickster" deity Pan was half goat, Manon's connection to this animal is noteworthy. Furthermore, the narrator depicts this female protagonist as a dancing goddess surrounded by goats living in harmony with nature. As the narrator informs the reader, "cette dansante fille, encore fraîche de l'eau lustrale de la pluie, était la divinité des collines, de la pinède et du printemps" (*Manon des sources* 62). This passage is important because it becomes clear that Jean and Manon's veneration of Mother Earth is a reflection of a pantheistic worldview. Although Pagnol mixes various religious metaphors from several different spiritual traditions including Christianity, the ancient Greek cult of Pan, and the Amerindian notion of Mother Earth in *L'eau des collines*, the most striking forms of spirituality in this novel are always elemental in nature. These cosmic nuptials encourage the reader to have a primordial relationship with our collective "Mother."

In *Les cinq sens*, Serres also (re)-appropriates the sacrament of the Eucharist to describe a type of cosmic matrimony with the rest of the planet. Like Jean Cadoret, the Serresian narrator lifts up his wine glass to Mother Earth. Summoning the alienated modern subject to reinvigorate his or her dulled senses by eliminating obstacles that separate him or her from the universe, the narrator muses, "Prenez ce vin: buvez et goûtez [...] voici le jour de la deuxième

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communion [...] Prenez et buvez. Faites ceci en mémoire de moi” (168; 183). The philosopher specifies that the communion to which he is referring is a “mélange et la fusion d’un corps dans un autre” (*Les cinq sens* 182). For Serres, salvation from the poverty of the human condition is also linked to an elemental Eucharist.

Even though Serres’s admiration for the Christian mystic St. Francis of Assisi⁹ is evident in numerous texts and public interviews, the main type of spirituality that pervades his entire *œuvre* is existential pantheism. As the Serresian narrator of *La Légende des anges* contends, “Or si Dieu existe, il est la vie, le vent, le feu...l’essence de la vie, le créateur, le commencement, l’apex, le sommet, l’excellence et l’amour de la vie” (187). In *La Légende des anges* and in many other works, Serres unequivocally equates God with the universe. Serres also proposes the same ontological remedy (i.e. fusion) for existential anguish as Pagnol in *L’eau des collines*. The spiritual aspects of Serres’s philosophy have also been largely ignored by researchers with a few notable exceptions including Brian O’Keeffe.

Similar to Pagnol, Serres explores several different spiritual traditions to articulate his pantheistic tendencies. In *Le Parasite*, Serres combines the aforementioned cult of Pan with the Amerindian concept of Mother Earth. Pan is often associated with a mother goddess, yet this pagan deity is unquestionably a male entity. Given that this son of Hermes is not a woman, the description of Pan as the “mère de toutes choses” shows the influence of Amerindian thought in Serres’s philosophy (*Le Parasite* 25). When read alongside *Biogée* and other works, this passage also illustrates that Serres employs metaphors about Pan and Mother Earth in order to highlight the same material realities. Whether he is discussing Pan or Mother Earth in a certain text is actually a moot point, since the philosopher is taking advantage of these concepts to extend a summons to the reader. The philosopher might incorporate elements of numerous religions in his philosophy, but the message remains the same. The earth to which we belong is a source of profound ecstasy that allows us to valorize our brief existence in this precise ontological shape through intense moments of elemental communion, yet the biosphere is a fragile “deity” that is being imperiled by human actions.

In *Le Parasite*, instead of bleeding our common host or “Mother” dry thereby erasing humanity in the process, Serres compels us to express our gratitude for the “free gift” that has been bestowed upon us by indifferent cosmic forces. As the philosopher asserts, “Jamais plus, jamais plus je ne pourrai dire merci. Jamais je ne dirai assez merci. Merci pour les hasards, merci pour ce miracle, pour la mer turbulente et l’horizon flou, merci pour les nuages [...]” (*Le Parasite* 122). This act of giving thanks to the planet is part and parcel of a form of mystical, pantheistic communion between the subject and the larger object to which all beings are linked. Like Jean Cadoret in *L’eau des collines*, Serres recognizes his true cosmic origins and the organic cycles that brought everything into existence. This deep respect for life itself is the heart of Amerindian spirituality and the Mother Earth metaphor.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Pagnol and Serres endeavor to breathe life back into the nuanced Amerindian notion of Mother Earth. A careful reading of *L’eau des collines* and Serres’s philosophy demonstrates that the often misunderstood concept of *la terre-mère* is emblematic of a coherent worldview which stresses both the indifferent fury of the cosmos and its generosity. Centuries before modern science confirmed the ecological principles of interconnectedness and interdependency which lie at the core of the Mother Earth metaphor, Amerindian civilizations realized that this “female” giver of all life was vulnerable to human exploitation. Regardless of

⁹ In *Musique*, Serres calls St. Francis his “seul maître vénéré” (58). Moreover, Serres even named all of his four sons “François” as an homage to this seminal Christian thinker.

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the label (i.e. Mother Earth, Pan, Nature, etc.) that we use to represent the natural world and our connection to it, the collective entity which sustains all life needs our help.

Time has venerated Amerindian conservationist voices like that of Chief Seattle who warned that removing too many links from the greater chain of being would hasten our demise and that of everything around us. Why have writers like Pagnol and Serres recently rediscovered Amerindian thought in the wake of the environmental crisis? The answer to this question is quite simple given that Western society still clings to outdated anthropocentric thought systems which are woefully inadequate for articulating the sustainable worldview that is vital for self-preservation. Scientifically erroneous abstractions like man *and* nature, which have been disproven by contemporary scientists, have little to offer the modern world in an era epitomized by non-sustainability. Pagnol and Serres revive the metaphor of Mother Earth because the struggle to save the planet is an ideological battle as well. As long as bad ideas such as the outmoded notion that human beings are the center of the universe reign supreme in Western civilization, then we will continue to pillage the biosphere incessantly until nothing remains. As seen through Pagnol's prose and Serres's philosophy, the concept of Mother Earth might be the appropriate theoretical tool for (re)-envisioning a healthy parasitic relationship with the ecosphere that saves us all.

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