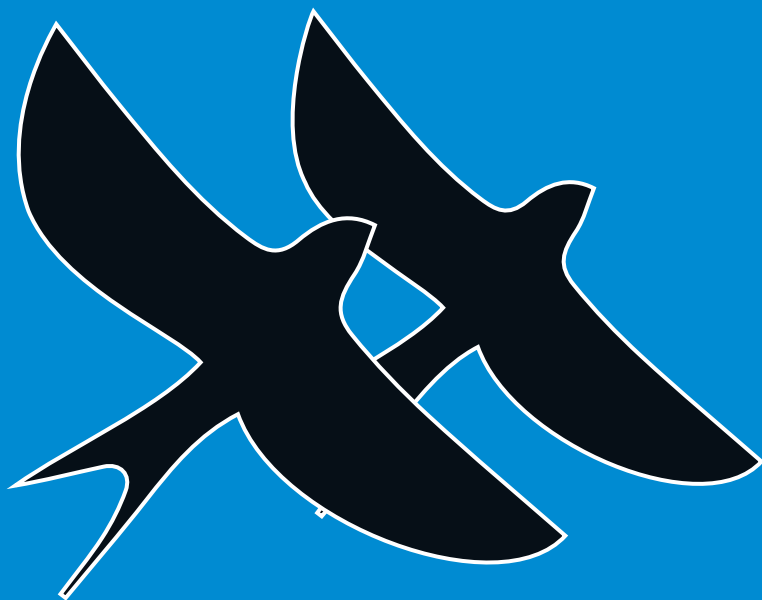


PHILIPPE PIGNARRE



LATOUR-
STENGENERS

AN ENTANGLED
FLIGHT

Latour–Stengers

For François Gèze, who immediately grasped the importance
of the work of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers.

Latour–Stengers

An Entangled Flight

Philippe Pignarre

Translated by Stephen Muecke

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Commentary is never faithful. Either there is repetition, which is not commentary, or there is commentary, which is said *differently*. In other words, there is translation and betrayal.¹

Bruno Latour

Noticing that a situation is entangled calls for disentangling, trying to follow the different threads and separating them . . . whereas entangling means lending it more density, greater depth.²

Isabelle Stengers

¹ Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 (1984), p. 178.

² Isabelle Stengers, *Activer les possibles, dialogue avec Frédérique Dolphijn*, Noville-sur-Méhaigne: Éditions Esperluète, 2018, p. 126.

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In Homage to Bruno Latour

He loved the world so much . . .

If there is one constant in Bruno Latour's work – which his publishers, La Découverte and Polity, have had the privilege of publishing – it is his love for the world taken as a whole. He neglected nothing, abandoned nothing, eradicated nothing. It was in this sense that he was happy to continue the legacy of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead.

He worked his way through what he called “modes of existence” (and he identified fifteen of them), delving into them with extensive fieldwork. He loved science. He loved technology (to the point of speaking in the title of one of his books of “the love of technology”) at a time when it was fashionable to dismiss it. His brother recently explained to me that when he visited the family vineyard in Beaune, he was interested above all in the smallest details of the wine-making process. His great synthetic tome, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, is also a book that teaches us to love these ways of making the world, despite the way that each often falls into the temptation of mastery.

He shows us how some modes are fragile, threatened with disappearance, as is the case for religion or for politics (“poor politics,” as he put it). Both religion and politics are now threatened by something more powerful than themselves: science (but also morality!).

He always wanted to give each mode of existence its dignity, which meant recognizing its own “felicity conditions,” its modesty – which, in the end, is its only grandeur. The worst sin is for the mind to confuse modes of existence by reducing them with the help of grand concepts such as the rational/irrational opposition. To judge one mode of existence with the criteria of another is to desiccate the world, to reduce it, to empty it to the point of being unlivable.

That’s why he liked activists, as those who learn, and distrusted militants, who know already and only want to convince others. He had therefore launched workshops to collectively explore the world “*in* which we live” and the world “*from* which we live,” a way of participating in the environmental movement in its irreducible diversity. To those who reproached him for not appearing to be sufficiently anti-capitalist, he replied that a new class struggle has begun.

Bruno loved “causes,” and made Isabelle Stengers’ formula his own: “Let the causes cause” [*causer*, to cause, but also ‘ramble on’]. The paths of these two philosophers are inseparable. You have to read the one to better understand the other. Nor can we understand Bruno Latour without taking an interest in his other fellow thinkers, those of the Centre de Sociologie de l’École des Mines and in particular Michel Callon and Antoine Hennion, but also Philippe Descola, Bruno Karsenti, Tobie Nathan, Donna Haraway, Nastassja Martin, and Nikolaj Schultz.

I learned something from Isabelle Stengers that was very useful when I was with Bruno: if you say you like something – a book, a film, a work of art – you should not stop there. You have to give your reasons. What effect did it have on you, what did you learn or feel? A demanding, sometimes daunting, exercise. If your appreciation wasn’t up to the mark, was too offhand or superficial, without attachment, both would soon stop listening to you.

Bruno liked to remind us of the importance of what we are *attached* to. When you come from a world where people swear by emancipation, detachment, and criticism, it is a way of questioning our way of thinking about the world and of doing politics. Why be pushed to talk about deconstruction when all you want to do is give a “good” description of how something achieves its existence?

When I entered the world of research – in pharmaceuticals – before becoming a publisher, I was trying to understand the

work of scientists in order to communicate it. At first, I turned to epistemology, but the more I read those philosophers, the less I understood what research work was! That's when Isabelle Stengers urged me to read *Laboratory Life*. Nothing was ever the same again!

Bruno liked the bonds of loyalty. He remained faithful to La Découverte and was one of the reasons why the series “Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond” [Those Who Stop Thought from Turning in Circles] became part of the French publisher's list. He appreciated and always acknowledged the work of Pascale Iltis, Delphine Ribouchon, Caroline Robert (who was careful to produce her books in her own special way), and, of course, François Gèze, who was the first to publish him when he was unknown (and had to be translated from English!). Stéphanie Chevrier, our current manager, was amazed by him.

We saw Bruno enter the last phase of his life, when his country finally recognized him as one of those thinkers “who is the envy of the world” while, with incredible courage, he faced the terrible ordeal of his illness. Our thoughts go out to those who accompanied him throughout, and in particular to his children and his wife, Chantal.

He leaves us with one question: how will we carry on his legacy?

Philippe Pignarre

Introduction: Speech Impediments

I conceived of this book as a kind of patchwork composed of many quotations, which might give the reader a somewhat unstable feeling. But I thought that engineering it in this particular manner was the best way to come to terms with the comings and goings between the works of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, a particular mode of “weaving”¹ which made me adopt as a title Gilles Deleuze’s admirable phrase, quoted by Stengers, “an entangled double flight.”² It will thus run a zigzag course. Citing them both at length meant I chose to dramatize in a certain way because simply summarizing their different texts would not have worked. I wanted the reader to be touched by their actual modes of expression, being as close as possible to them, while my undertaking of an overly pedagogical task of exegesis would deprive us of their brilliant flashes of thoughts often grasped in full flight.

In the first place, I took this work on as an editor who loves the authors he is publishing. After all, what is an editor, in the end, if not the first mouthpiece for the texts he has chosen to uphold? I hope this will generate the desire to delve into the respective works of Latour and Stengers that I hold so dear, and of which I have no hesitation in saying that they have changed in the deepest way my manner of being in the world. I wanted to sharpen your appetite. Reading Latour’s *oeuvre* by regularly confronting it with Stengers’ propositions – was this the right

attitude for plunging into such a witch’s cauldron? Each of you will make up your own mind. Latour and Stengers have descendants in common who know their works well and will put them to good use. But nonetheless I think I was the only one able to sit down to this task and who had the time, “profiting” from the isolations of 2020 and 2021.³

The procedure I follow here is not entirely symmetrical. I have not tried to paint a picture of how Stengers’ thought was built up, from her meeting with Ilya Prigogine to reactivating the work of Alfred North Whitehead, passing by way of the intellectual encounters she had with Léon Chertok or Tobie Nathan. Attempting a parallel task with the *oeuvre* of Bruno Latour would be mission impossible. So I voluntarily chose to concentrate on the latter, privileging as much as possible the points at which it crosses, collides, or aligns itself with Stengers, who quite often quickly seizes on Latour’s propositions but without ever leaving them intact. Rather, she makes them twist in a way that one could call political. I pay particular attention to those moments where Stengers puts in her own words what she has learned (or taken) from Latour and also to the ways in which she emphasizes both their importance and her divergences. As for Latour, when he comes to meet Stengers, it is often through a shift in his arguments – his own ones; so that has to be inscribed in the movement of his ideas without suddenly bursting in. As it happens, in the course of time, the references to Stengers multiply in his writings to the point where he dedicates *Politiques de la nature* to her in 1999.⁴ (Stengers had dedicated *L’Invention des sciences modernes* to him six years earlier, “For Félix Guattari and Bruno Latour, in memory of a meeting that did not take place.”⁵) This is how Stengers speaks of her relation to Latour: “[His] subtle and demanding reading [of the first draft of her book, *Au temps des catastrophes*] is written into the process, which for over twenty years is witness to the fact that agreements among sometimes divergent paths are made thanks to the divergence and not in spite of it.”⁶ There are also notable occasions when one of them says how and why they are borrowing a proposition from the other or how it is to be understood.

If this book follows a chronological path, it is nonetheless replete with references which are often not in that order. It seemed to me useful to put in formulations that were able to

throw light on propositions made earlier, but which one of the authors had fully explained, often with different words, only at a later stage. And again, in that sense, this book is “woven.”

One of the difficulties of this task comes from the differences between their respective styles. Like two magnets, Latour and Stengers are attracted and fascinated by each other’s conceptual propositions, but they are quite distinct in their ways of writing. In order to be convincing, Latour multiplies his pedagogical exercises and is happy to be repetitive, to demonstrate again and again, in order to make them more accessible. He creates characters (like the young anthropologist who questions him in *Cogitamus*, and who turns up again in his *Enquête sur les modes d’existence*).⁷ He multiplies conceptual inventions and even shock formulas (Irreduction, Moderns, Great Divide, black boxes, factishes, Parliament of Things, Double Click, to de-economize . . .), examples, explanations in boxes, diagrams, paintings, drawings, extracts from comics, photos, and theatrical set designs. The disorder in Latour’s multiple interventions and ways of intervening is only apparent. He often says that, because of the irruption of Gaia, one has to use everything in one’s arsenal, for how else can we find forms modified to the representation of this new cosmos that is nonetheless ours?

For her part, Stengers is quick on the uptake as she multiplies her propositions (requirements and obligations, speculative thought in the strong sense, the cosmopolitical, diplomats, slowing down, recalcitrance, modes of abstraction, induction . . .). One should not miss a single sentence in her argumentation because the occasion to catch up later will not occur. One has to understand straightaway, and so be prepared to slow down as one reads, or go back over her text. Reading her books is not a frolic in the woods. You have to read the chapters in order. Her thought is tight, precise, and moves forwards implacably. But do not think that Stengers writes without hesitations. If you have access to the different versions that have emerged successively from her pen, you know that that is far from the case. Latour has turned himself into a sociologist, ethnographer, historian, philosopher, but always a researcher. As for Stengers, she is a philosopher, irremediably a philosopher, including in the two fictional works she has written, the first on Freud and the second on Newton and Leibniz.⁸

Yet there is something they do have in common, something a little obscured, or at least difficult to grasp because it relates to a philosophical question that will turn out to be of prime importance. Anyone who has attended a public occasion on which Stengers is speaking will have been struck by her hesitations, with her sentences interrupted by a “How should I put this?” which may not just be anecdotal. What kind of Latour–Stengerian interpretation could one give of this? One would be mistaken, of course, to imagine the hesitation has any kind of psychological basis when in fact it is a matter of the problem to be solved, with the proposition itself in the process of bursting forth, asserting itself in the murmur of the world, something that is difficult to express with precision. It is indeed the need to “depersonalize the experience of the work-in-process, that is, get rid of anything that gives it a psychological or social narrative.”⁹ Everything that needs to be said is still virtual. This is much more like the hesitation of a mountaineer on a difficult alpine climb, looking for the best grip on a vertical wall. How does one get a grip? Adopting the point of view of the climber is not enough because there is the mountain as well – or the audience, for our case at hand. But it is perhaps the example of the surfer that is the most eloquent:

with each wave, surfers take the risk of catching it or letting it go; they have no illusions of being in control. What is at risk is their possibility of keeping on, of sliding into the wave, at the critical point where only a precise and sensitive insertion of one motion into the other can make them earn the respect of the breaking wave.¹⁰

Didier Debaise will put it like this: “You can’t just decide that you have a soul, an idea, or a feeling: they grab you from the outside.”¹¹

Stengers’ “How should I put this?” is the equivalent of Latour’s paintings, graphics, and diagrams that punctuate his books. He has offered a very nice formulation to describe these instances of “How should I put this?” as *speech impediments* that designate “not speech itself but the difficulties one has in speaking and the devices one needs for the articulation of the common world – to avoid taking *logocentric* words . . . as facile expressions of meanings that would not need any particular mediation to manifest themselves transparently.”¹² He goes on to

elaborate that “the connotations of the word [*articulation*] cover the range of meanings that I am attempting to bring together, meanings that no longer stress the distinction between the world and what is said about it, but rather the ways in which the world *is loaded* into discourse.”¹³ He will open his *Rejoicing* book in the same way.

Rejoicing – or the torments of religious speech: that is what he [Latour] wants to talk about, that is what he can’t actually seem to talk about: it is as though the cat has got his tongue; as though words were impediments; as though it was impossible to articulate; he can’t actually seem to share what, for so long, he has held so dear to his heart . . . he can only stutter . . .¹⁴

As it happens, Stengers also turned “the idea that flees if one tries to make it explicit”¹⁵ into a philosophical question in her *Thinking with Whitehead* book:

The point is neither to describe nor to explain but to produce a set of constraints that impose on thought a regime of reciprocal presupposition. A “leap of the imagination” may respond to these categories, but it is a vertical leap, conferring on words the capacity to evoke, not to designate. It is not that process “transcends” language, but what is appropriate to it is the component of stammering in language, the “Well, what I mean is . . .” or the “How should I say . . .” in which what hesitates is not a set of potential statements but the very wording of the words, together with the “I” who “means” [*veut dire*].¹⁶

This picks up on William James’s “undecidable question: am I touched [*ému*] because the world is touching [*émouvant*] or does the world seem to me to be touching because I am touched?”¹⁷ It happens that *something* emerges as an argument proceeds, wending its way and interrupting “the automatic interpretation that makes me attribute either to an external cause or to a reason of mine the fact that an experience has passed . . .”;¹⁸ it happens that a proposition is difficult to formulate because it does not relate to some solitary cerebral exercise on the part of the speaker but presupposes a *leap of the imagination* in order to be formulated with all the hesitations, the risks of betrayal, that are part of its other engagement, this time with an audience that has to be up to the task of listening, sharing the hesitations, sensing

that this work-in-progress might fail. “Even the wise Plotinus, reaching towards Intellect, must have a discursive practice based on the experience that he has, which is fragmented, problematic, discordant, an approach in which resides the tension towards the unity of creating/producing/discovering, together with the intense awareness that he could be mistaken.”¹⁹ We shall see that here lies one of the many facets of what Latour will quickly come to call the Great Divide, cropping up in all his work.

For Latour, a “musical metaphor” is a good way to come to terms with this situation: one can hear a *melody* that remains inaudible for those not involved – “a melody to which we become better and better attuned.” It is not a question of saying we have a “mind zooming toward a fixed – but inaccessible – target. It is the fact that ‘occurs,’ that emerges, and that, so to speak, offers you a (partially) new mind.”²⁰

Stengers will even propose the term “induction” (in a different sense from the traditional meaning), a word she learned with Chertok, and which refers to the relation between the hypnotizer (or hypnotist) and the hypnotized, to qualify a fairly unique creative situation: when the idea “flees if one tries to make it explicit,” when the “enigma puts the creator to the question,” when the creators are “creatures of their question,”²¹ when propositions “possess individuals far more than individuals possess them,”²² when she speaks of the experience “of those who know that what they seem to be the authors of is in fact what obligates them.”²³

Because “hypnotizers are well aware that they are not the ones who have given the order [for example, asking the hypnotized person to raise their arm]. If they have a role, it is rather that of indicating a path, or authorizing an experience.”²⁴ She will return to this with a more technical account in 2015:

The achievement of saying to oneself “I understand” is not an act of thought. The “understanding”, as much as the “I” who has understood, both owe their existence to a path of instauration, a response appearing in the wake of “something to be understood,” a double and correlative grasp by the form of both the agent of the instauration and the thing instaurated.²⁵

This is also what this book is trying to do by “tracking” Latour and Stengers.²⁶ It attempts what Stengers calls a “speculative

gesture,” rather than a boring pedagogical exercise.²⁷ Making a speculative gesture means deploying the experience in all its dimensions, including with virtual ones that accompany it without becoming apparent.

Stengers herself makes the link between Whitehead and another philosopher, Étienne Souriau, whom we shall see will also be all-important for Latour as the two philosophers contribute, each in his own way, to break the spell cast by “the subject facing the object,” epistemological abstraction. Here is how Stengers is citing Souriau in *Thinking with Whitehead*:

I insist on this idea that as long as the work is in the workshop, the work is in danger. At each moment, each one of the artist’s actions, or rather *from* each of the artist’s actions, it may live or die. The agile choreography of an improviser, noticing and resolving in the same instant the problems raised for him by this hurried advance of the work . . . [or] the works of the composer or the writer at their table . . . all must ceaselessly answer, in a slow or rapid progression, the questions of the sphinx – guess, or you will be devoured. But it is the work that flourishes or disappears, it is it that progresses or is devoured.²⁸

Latour puts it like this:

To say, for example, that a fact is “constructed” is inevitably (and they paid me good money to know this) to designate the knowing subject as the origin of the vector, as in the image of God the potter. But the opposite move, of saying of a work of art that it results from an instauration, is to get oneself ready to see the potter as the one who welcomes, gathers, prepares, explores, and invents the form of the work, just as one discovers or “invents” a treasure.²⁹

I should immediately warn the reader, who may get a surprise, or even be disturbed, when they encounter this somewhat awkward development: it is no minor matter and we shall see it emerge once again in chapter 7 of this book under the heading of the “bifurcation of nature,” when we shall also meet Souriau again, and Whitehead, of course. In a book published in 2020, *Réactiver le sens commun: Lecture de Whitehead en temps de débâcle*, Stengers will introduce the idea of the “middle voice,” contrasting with, on the one hand, the active voice where the syntactic subject designates the entity acting, and the passive