DANDELION
postgraduate arts journal & research network

Steven Connor is Professor of Mdoern Literature and Theory at Birkbeck College, University of London, where he has taught since 1979. He is also the College Orator. He is Academic Director of the London Consortium Graduate Programme in Humanities and Cultural Studies.

Email: s.connor@bbk.ac.uk

Article

Tell It Slant

Steven Connor, Birkbeck College, University of London

Perhaps it would be appropriate for us to come at the question of angles from a geometrical direction. The thematics of the angle is insistent in the work of Michel Serres, who has extensively praised the arts and acts of deviation and bifurcation. He is fond of reminding us that everywhere, everything leans, nothing is wholly upright, foursquare, or direct. There is even a squint, he will have us know, in the word 'direct', which derives from the word for right. So going straight means veering off to the right, walking with a rightward slant. He reminds us that bias, lateralization, and partiality are everywhere in nature — not just in animals, but also in molecules, that come in right-handed and left-handed varieties.[1] The myth of beginning that the Latin poet Lucretius gives us asks us to imagine a world in which atoms simply rained down through empty space. In such a condition of what is called laminar flow, in which separate streams of atoms flow in non-interfering parallel lines, there would be no collisions, nor yet collusions, no alterations of any kind. There would be no time, but simply relations of equality: A=A=A=A. Adopting the equals sign in his *Whetstone of Witte* in 1557, Robert Recorde explained that he had chosen two parallel lines 'bicause noe .2. thynges, can be moare equalle'.[2] In order for there to have been anything at all, says Lucretius, there would have to be at least one atom that, arbitrarily and entirely unpredictably, swerved from its course — *tantum quod momen mutatum dicere possis* ('just so much that you can call

it a change of direction') — the famous Lucretian *clinamen*, the turn or swerve.[3] Without this, there is only necessity, endlessly repeating itself. This absolutely non-necessary waver, this minimal departure from self-identity, is necessary for everything in our universe to be. Everything comes from this inaugurating fissure, this chink of incipience, this 'atom of angle'.[4] But by now, in our world, the arborescent integral of millions of deviations, it is the laminar that is the unheard-of exotic, not the deviant.

If there is a certain measure of agon, of striving or straining in diagonality, there is also the beauty of rhythm, for the diagonal is time, and speed, and desire — what we call 'inclination'. There is an excitement and an incitement in a slope that there isn't in a wall or a floor, precisely because we can be carried away with a slope.

One sees nothing at noon, in its bleak incandescence. There is only blinding glare. If God's eye were to pulse back to itself without residue, without loss, it would surely consume itself. There must be delay, phasing, diagonality. In Emily Dickinson's poem: 'Too bright for our infirm Delight | The Truth's superb surprise […] The Truth must dazzle gradually | Or every man be blind.'[5] To look directly down on something is to reduce its three dimensions to two, scouring away every hint and intimation about its height and volume. It is to reduce things to diagrams, outlines. It is to make oneself monocular, blind. The view from directly above, favoured by bombs, smart and dumb, is already a devastation, a razing. At the imaginary centre of my own point of view, I too vanish from view, my profile shaved down into pure, vertical equivalence — the orthogonal gnomon *I*. As I lean sideways, or the sun begins to tilt away from me, I start to cast a shadow, and I come back into view. Two eyes are necessary for parallax.

The glancing impetus of the Lucretian angle of incidence has appeared at intervals throughout Michel Serres's work. His book *Rameaux* (2004) argues that all thinking moves in cycles of redundancy followed or relieved by branching spurts of innovation and invention. The book is written in favour and salute of these branchings or polygonal buddings.

We are presently experiencing in the humanities, and in the world of knowledge and education more generally, a period of very high redundancy indeed. Redundancy is used here not in its everyday sense of uselessness or unnecessariness, but in the sense employed by information theorists, who indicate with it a certain quota of excessiveness or repetitiousness. The redundancy of a message is the amount of information required to transmit the message minus the amount of information needed for the message itself. Every utterance involves elements that are not necessary to the specific utterance, elements that simply indicate the structure of the language, or register or confirm the fact of the utterance taking place. The word redundancy derives from *redondare*, to flow back, from *re+undare*, to flow back, to come back, in waves. It can also mean echoing or resounding, which

aptly suggests the role of redundancy in turning messages back on themselves, the channel checking that there is contact, which is to say, that there is, that it is, a channel, saying yes, this is a message, are you on the line, are you receiving me? In a sense, redundancy can be identified with the channel or form of the message, which must involve recognizable, repeatable elements. Without this apparent excess, no message can in fact be transmitted. But, equally, when redundancy inundates, no message can get through. Information is threatened at one end by noise, but it is also mortified at the other by redundancy, which can itself become a kind of noise, an overload of intelligibility.

This is the situation of the humanities today. We are well on the way to maximizing the communication between disciplines by making all disciplines commensurable — there are no barriers to comprehension between historians, literary critics, art theorists, cultural studies analysts, and social scientists, who aim to have in common more and more a lingua franca of concepts, preoccupations, authorities, and argumentative styles.

So what, then, might be the royal road to angled thinking and writing? How are we to take a beeline, or crow's flight, to obliquity? (In fact, the idea of such a royal road, famously used by Freud to talk about the unconscious and dreams, is itself entangled with the history of geometry. Euclid is said to have been tutor to Ptolemy, who found his *Elements* too hard to understand, and asked if there were no short cut to mastering it, to which Euclid replied, 'Sire, there is no royal road to geometry'. Euclid was referring to the Persian road built by Darius, which allowed mounted messengers to travel the 1500 miles from Persia to Istanbul in a week.)

It is a good idea not to go straight ahead but to turn aside — to tell all the truth, in Emily Dickinson's words, but tell it slant. One can rely on angular momentum rather than perpendicular structure. The tangent borrows the energy of what it departs from. Critique, by contrast, is antagonistic (literally, at an opposing angle) to invention. Critique secures the domination of the same, namely the game of mastery in which the victor steps into the place of the loser. Critique is opposition, squaring up to one's opponent, whom one in the process attempts to face down. Critique always aims to stand in the king-of-the-castle place of the rascal it evicts. In toppling the occupant, critique always secures the place of the place, the thesis, the stasis. How to maintain the integrity of the swerve, the slant, the tack, the slice? Maybe in part by not trying to occupy it, as a thesis, by seeking instead the serene assurance of the cyclist or the sailor, off-kilter, but in mobile equipoise.

For the work of intellectual invention it may be advisable to cultivate, or habituate to, a certain exposure or unaccommodatedness: to think and write with, and as, exodus rather than method.

The most important part of intellectual invention is the invention of new objects. This may seem an absurdity. How do you invent an object? Objects are just there, given, before us. Objects have a reputation of

simply being there, obdurate, obstructive, oppugnant. The humanities regard themselves, rightly, as inhabiting by contrast the sphere of the subject, attuned to the flickers and fluctuations of feeling, and the work of what we are pleased to call cultural construction rather then the sphere of the objective, or the merely given.

I would ask you to set aside almost everything you think you know about objects. For Michel Serres, human being and human beings exist in the mode of opening and departure: 'Our species *goes out*, that is its destiny without destination, its goalless project, its journey, no its errancy, the *-escence* of its hominescence.'[6]ri Objects are what open us up, what we open on to. The stone in the middle of the stream creates swirls and eddies, unpredictable, semi-serendipitous incipiences. For Serres, the subject comes into being with the apprehension of that which exceeds it. That which occupies and concerns it by causing it to absent itself from itself. Where I think, there I exist not, as Serres has put it. Objects are not givens, not fixatives, despite their reputation: they are apertures, opportunities, vectors, vehicles, relays, amplifiers, illuminators.

I say we should try to invent objects in order to prise ourselves loose from the fascination of concepts, which actually rigidify our thought, objectify our thought, by increasing the ratio of redundancy, by affirming the channel, the format, that *with which* we think and write, over the message, that *about which* we think and write. We must invent objects, because objects are those things for which modes of attention themselves require to be invented. An object is something for which you have to invent a way of paying attention. Much of the work of innovation has already been accomplished once one has averted one's gaze from the big, brazen bully-words that carve up and confine the domain of thinking and writing. Let us do without certifying and pre-recognized concepts, like identity, sexuality, power, the unconscious, the aesthetic, affect, memory, trauma, biopolitics, the city, culture, and so on. Or rather, let us begin with them, but not aim to round back on them, to redound to ourselves through them. Let's give ourselves a break (an off-break, or leg break).

One of the tricks one can use to effect this oblique demurring is to move from substantives, reassuring nouns, to gerunds and adjectival nouns. So: instead of Sentimentality, try to imagine the way to write about sobbing. Instead of analysing Capitalism, wonder about owing and owning. If you must write about Skin, don't forget about itchiness and tickling. Whispering or lisping are much more promising topics than Voice. We've had enough histories of Space: what might a history of room be like? Little more is to be wrung from the topic of Voyeurism and the Gaze, but we might be well served by a reflection or two on glancing. I began my seminar on research methods this year as I usually do, by handing out at random a series of cards with a single word on them, for which students had a week to compile a working bibliography. This year

the topics included anger, embarrassment, panic, vertigo, disgrace, blur, elastic, spots, and knots.

Let us live poorer in concept and method, and richer in objects. We would do better than we think with a radical and naive empiricism, that aims to do no more (and no less) than to find a way to think about things, not knowing yet what thinking is, nor yet what kind of thing a thing might be when it is at home. For this reason, we would also be well advised to gorge and hoard useless knowledge. It is better to learn a hard new thing — a mathematical proof, a new declension, a tricky recipe, or arpeggio — than to assimilate another theory. Read everything you can.

It would be nice if all this could provide you with some kind of short cut, or way of economizing on time and effort. But no, it would not be nice, because the point is not to find a way to get where you want to as expeditiously as possible, but rather to find a way to occupy yourself more advantageously on the way. Which is just as well, because even if some of this qualifies as a reasonable description of the ways in which new things can come to mind, and come into the world, it will not be nearly as much use as a prescription as we might think. We tell ourselves that unless we know in advance what it is that we need to know, we will have no way of recognizing it, or understanding it. Nothing that has not already happened can happen.

We should know by now that it helps much less than we would like to believe to know what there is to know. Accordingly I am resigned to have set out here not a plan, but intimated an inclination or two.

Birkbeck College, University of London

Notes

Editors' note: This is a version of a prepared text edited with reference to its recorded delivery.

[1] Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 14.

[2] Robert Recorde, *The Whetstone of Witte Whiche is the Seconde Parte of Arithmetike* (London: John Kyngston, 1557), sig. Ff1r.

[3] Lucretius [Titus Lucretius Carus], *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. by R. E. Latham, ed. by John Godwin (London: Penguin, 1994), 2.220, p. 43.

[4] Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, trans. by Jack Hawkes (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), p. 11.

[5] Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 506–07.

[6] Serres, *Rameaux* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2007), p. 148.

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