

**ily cere-
cahier**

**the ecological crisis
as a crisis of sensibility
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Ways of Being Alive

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polity

Introduction

The ecological crisis as a crisis of sensibility

The world depends on so many different species, each a nutty experiment.

Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

We're on the Col de la Bataille, it's the end of summer, it's cold, the strong northerly winds are crashing into the southerly winds. It's a desolate pass, still in the Palaeolithic era, crossed by a small asphalt road that's often closed. But it's not a desert: it's a hub of winged life. Indeed, this is where many birds, countless species of them, pass through on their long migratory journey to Africa. It's a mythical doorway opening up to the other side of the world. We're here to count the birds. Equipped with a handheld counter, the sort used to count the people entering nightclubs and theatres, we click away frantically in a kind of joyful trance for every swallow that passes; and there are thousands of them, and tens of thousands. My companion counts 3,547 in three hours: barn swallows, house martins, crag martins. They arrive from the north, in clusters, in swarms, and hunker down in the beech forest under the pass, waiting for signs that we cannot interpret. They assess the wind, the weather, how many of them there are, all sorts of other things, and they replenish their tiny reserves of fat during their halt; at one precise moment, for reasons that elude us, an entire swoop of swallows plunges into a breach in time, so they can get across the pass at just the right moment. The sky is dotted with birds. Once they've passed the wall of wind that picks them up from the south, they're on the other

side, they've made it, they've got through one door; there will be others. Lower down, glued to the ground, the creeping migration of sparrows takes place: they flit from tree to tree, imperceptibly, as if they were walking, but as they go from tree to tree they're going to the end of the world. Some blue tits need to pass under the wave of wind; they cross the road over the pass on foot, it takes them a minute of stubborn effort to travel the asphalt, without doubting their ability but without hurrying either, on a journey that will take them to North Africa. How can a whole continent of courage be contained in eleven grams of life? The birds of prey are there too, the osprey, the secret king of the rivers, who has inventively transformed his talons into powerful paws like those of a fishing bear, and is now transformed into the pure embodiment of action: a pair of wings plunging down from the sky, grafted onto a pair of inexhaustible hands. Kestrels and hobbies pass through the swarm, predators in the company of prey, just as lions travel with gazelles. This is just one threshold in the long procession from one end of the terrestrial globe to the other: the migration of all that's left of the dinosaurs, still full of life even though some people naively think they're extinct when they've simply transformed into sparrows. The procession includes pipits, wagtails, hedge sparrows, giant vultures and microscopic canaries, wrens, various finches, wallcreepers and royal kites, like Gallic tribes flaunting their colours, each with its customs, its language, its pride without ego and without mirror – each with its own demands. And each of these life forms has its own unique perspective on this shared world, and has mastered the art of reading signs that nobody else can understand.

Swallows, for example, must feed throughout their flight; they have an expert grasp of the climates and the times of day when

swarms of insects will cross their path, so they can feed on the wing, without changing course, without stopping, without slowing down.

Suddenly, the noise of an engine distracts our attention. Below, on the road, a single file of vintage cars is climbing up the pass. It's one of those meetings for car collectors who come out on Sundays to show off their pimped up old jalopies on the mountain roads. They stop at the pass. They get out of their cars for a minute or two to take some acrobatic selfies, trying to cram bonnet, smile and landscape into their screen. They're endearing, and happy to be here. And then they leave. My companion, standing next to me, comes up with an image that paralyses us in the terrible wind: 'They didn't notice', she says. 'They didn't notice that they were standing in the middle of something like the liveliest, most cosmopolitan, most colourful port in the Mediterranean, where countless peoples are bound for Africa'. Peoples battling against the elements, weaving in and out of the streams of energy, exulting in the sunlight, coasting along on the force of the wind.

And indeed, we humans are social primates obsessed with our fellows (something we're very good at), so all that those vintage-car enthusiasts saw was a desolate pass, an empty setting, a silent landscape, a bit of wallpaper for their computer screens. But I feel no recrimination towards them as I realize this. They're neither better nor worse than ourselves. How many times have we seen nothing of the lively interweavings happening in a certain place? Probably every day. It's our cultural heritage, our socialization that has made us this way; there are causes behind it. But that's no reason not to fight against it. I do not reproach this blindness, but I feel a certain sadness over it, its extent and its innocent violence. It's a major challenge for us as a society to learn again how to see the world as populated by

entities that are *far more* marvellous than car collections and museum galleries. And to recognize that they require a transformation in our ways of living and cohabiting.

A crisis of sensibility

From this experience, we can draw an idea. The ecological crisis we are going through is indeed a crisis for human societies: it endangers future generations, the very bases of our subsistence, and the quality of our existence in polluted environments. It's also a crisis for living beings, in the form of the sixth extinction of species, the destruction of wildlife, and the weakening of ecological dynamics as well as of the evolutionary potential of the biosphere, due to climate change. But it is also a crisis for something else, more discreet, and perhaps more fundamental. This blind spot – for such is my hypothesis – is that the current ecological crisis, more than a crisis in human societies *on the one hand*, or in living beings *on the other*, is a crisis in our *relations* with living beings.

First and foremost, it's a spectacular crisis in our productive relations with living environments, visible in the extractivist and financialized frenzy of the dominant political economy. But it's also a crisis in our collective and existential relations, in our connections and affiliations with living beings, forcing on us the question of their *importance*, the way they are of our world, or *outside* of our perceptual, affective, and political world.

This crisis is difficult to name and understand. However, each of us has a precise sense of what underlies it: we must alter our *relationships with living beings*.

The contemporary enthusiasm aroused by political experiments with new ways of inhabiting and entering into relationships with

living beings, the rise of alternative forms of collective life, the taste for agroecologies and subversive sciences which re-describe living nature in another way, rich in communications and meanings – these are all indistinct and yet powerful signals of this turning point in the present conjuncture.

One aspect of this crisis is noticed less often, however, due to the discreet and subdued hum of its political dimension, of its possibilities of politicization. This involves thinking of it as a crisis of sensibility.

The crisis in our relationships with living beings is a crisis of sensibility because the relationships we have grown accustomed to maintaining with living beings are relationships with ‘nature’. As the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro explains, we are the heirs of Western modernity, and so we think that we maintain relationships of a ‘natural’ type with the whole world of non-human living beings, because any other relationship with them is impossible. There are two types of potential relations in the modern cosmos: either natural, or socio-political, and the socio-political relations are reserved exclusively for humans. Consequently, this implies that we consider living beings primarily as a backdrop, as a reserve of resources available for production, as a place of healing, or as a prop for emotional and symbolic projection. To be merely a backdrop and a prop for projection is to have lost one’s own ontological consistency. Something loses its ontological consistency when we lose the faculty of paying attention to it as a full being, as something which *counts* in collective life. When the living world falls outside the field of collective and political attention, outside the field of what is deemed important, then a crisis of sensibility is triggered.

By ‘crisis of sensibility’ I mean an impoverishment of what we can feel, perceive, and understand of living beings, and the relations we can weave with them – a reduction in the range of affects, percepts, concepts and practices connecting us to them. We have a multitude of words, types of relationships and types of affects to describe relationships between humans, between collectives and between institutions, with technical objects or with works of art, but far fewer words for our relations to living beings. This impoverishment of the scope of our sensibility towards living beings, of the forms of attention and of the qualities of openness towards them, is both an effect and one of the causes of the ecological crisis we face.

A first symptom of this crisis of sensibility, perhaps the most spectacular, is expressed in the notion of the ‘extinction of the experience of nature’² proposed by the writer and lepidopterist Robert Pyle: the disappearance of the daily relationships we can experience with living beings. One recent study shows that a North American child aged between four and ten years old is able to recognize and distinguish more than a thousand brand logos at a glance, but cannot identify the leaves of ten plants from his or her region.³ The ability to distinguish between the different forms and styles of existence of other living beings is overwhelmingly being redirected towards manufactured products, and this problem is compounded by a very low sensitivity to the beings that inhabit the Earth with us. **To react to the extinction of experience, to the crisis of sensibility, is to enrich the range of what we can feel and understand of the multiplicity of living beings, and the relations we can weave with them.**

There is a discreet but deep connection between the enormous contemporary disappearance of field birds, documented by scientific

studies, and the ability of a human ear to make sense of urban bird song. When a Koyukon Native American hears the cry of a crow in Alaska, the sound works its way into him and, through the cluster of memories, simultaneously brings back to his mind the identity of the bird, the myths that tell of its customs, the common filiations between bird and human and their immemorial alliances in mythical time.⁴ There are crows everywhere in our cities, their calls reach our ears every day, and yet we hear nothing, because they have been turned into beasts in our imaginations: into 'nature'. There is something sad about the fact that the ten different bird songs that we hear every day do not reach our brains other than as *white noise*, or at best evoke a bird's name, empty of meaning – it's like those ancient languages that no one speaks any more, and whose treasures are invisible.

The violence of our belief in 'Nature' is manifested in the fact that the songs of birds, crickets and locusts, songs in which we are immersed every summer as soon as we move away from the city centre, are experienced in the mythology of modern people as a *restful silence*. But, for whoever seeks to translate them, to release them from being just white noise, they comprise myriads of geopolitical messages, territorial negotiations, serenades of intimidation, games, collective pleasures, challenges laid down, wordless negotiations. The smallest flowery meadow is a caravanserai – cosmopolitan, multilingual, multispecies, and buzzing with activity. It's a spaceship on the edge of the universe, where hundreds of different life forms meet and establish a *modus vivendi*, communicating through sound. On spring nights, we hear the laser songs of nightingales echoing through this spaceship, fighting without violence, competing in beauty to attract their female companions who have followed them in their migration

and wander at night through the woods in search of their males; we are surprised by the barking of the deer, the guttural rumbling of intergalactic beasts, howling the despair of desire.

What we call the ‘countryside’ on a summer evening is the noisiest, most colourful souk, populated by many species, stirring with industrious energy; it’s a non-human Times Square on a Monday morning – and the moderns are crazy enough, their metaphysics is complacent enough, to see in it a resourceful silence, a cosmic solitude, a peaceful space. A place empty of real presences, and silent.

Leaving the city, then, does not mean moving away from noise and nuisance into a pastoral idyll; it isn’t a matter of going to live in the countryside, it’s about going to live *in a minority*. As soon as nature is denaturalized – no longer a continuous flat area, a one-room stage setting, a background against which human tribulations are played out – and as soon as living beings are translated back into *beings* and no longer seen as *things*, then the cosmopolitanism of many species becomes overwhelming, almost unbreathable, overwhelming for the mind: human beings have become a minority. This is healthy for the moderns, who have adopted the bad habit of transforming all their ‘others’ into minorities.

From a certain point of view, it is true that we have lost a certain sensibility: massive urbanization, i.e. the fact of not living on a daily basis in contact with many different life forms, has deprived us of the powers of tracking – and I mean tracking in a philosophically enriched sense, as sensibility and openness to the signs of other life forms. This art of reading has been lost: we ‘can’t see a thing’, and the challenge lies in reconstructing paths of sensibility, in order to start learning to see again. If we do not see anything in ‘nature’, it is not only because of our lack of ecological, ethological and evolution-

ary knowledge, but because we live in a cosmology in which there is supposedly nothing to see, in other words nothing to *translate*: no meaning to interpret.⁵ The whole philosophical issue ultimately lies in making it clear and obvious that there is indeed something to see, and rich meanings to translate, in the living environments that surround us. But we need merely take this one step further for the whole landscape to be recomposed. Hence the first text in this collection, which takes the reader on an expedition tracking a pack of wolves through the snows of the Vercors – something between an ethological thriller and an account of a first contact with alien life forms.

The idea of a ‘loss’ of sensibility is, however, ambiguous in its very formulation. The misunderstanding in this idea amounts to the fact that it seems to harbour something like a nostalgic primitivism, which is irrelevant in this case. Things weren’t necessarily better before, and it’s not about going back to ways of living naked in the woods. The point is to *invent* these ways of life.

Animals as intercessors

Another symptom of the crisis of sensibility, now almost invisible as we have so fully naturalized it, is evident in the category to which we confine animals. Apart from the question of the way we treat cattle (which are not the whole animal realm, nor even typical of it), the great invisible violence of our civilization towards animals is to have made them into figures for children: to be interested in animals isn’t serious, it’s sentimentality. It’s for ‘animal lovers’. It’s regressive. Our relationships with the nature of animals and the animal kingdom are infantilized, primitivized. It’s insulting to animals, and it’s insulting to children.

Our range of sensibility towards animals is reduced to something elastic and amorphous – an abstract and vague beauty, or an infantile figure, or an object of moral compassion. The ethnography of the relationship between humans and living beings among the Tuvans of the Far North, as described by Charles Stépanoff, or the Runa of the Amazon Basin as discussed by Eduardo Kohn, displays an infinitely richer, more plural, nuanced and intense multiplicity: in these environments, animals inhabit the dreams, imaginations, practices and philosophical systems of the natives.'

Our imagination for life forms has shrunk. Our dreams are poor in living beings; they are not populated by wolves acting as guides or bears acting as mentors, nor by nourishing forests, insects, or the pre-human ancestors who have carried us this far. **Opening up a space** to imagine new places for them in our imaginations – for example in the form of rituals without mysticism – is the purpose of the second text in this collection. Animals are not worthy simply of childish or moral attention: they are cohabitants of the Earth, with whom we share an ascent, the enigma of being alive, and the responsibility for living decent lives together. The mystery of being a body, a body that interprets and lives its life, is shared by all living beings: it's the universal vital condition, and it is this which should summon up the most powerful sense of belonging. The animal is thus a privileged intercessor with the original enigma, that of our way of being alive: it displays an irreducible otherness, and at the same time it is close enough to us for countless parallels and convergences to make their presence felt, with mammals, birds and octopuses, and even insects. These are the creatures who make it possible to reconstruct paths of sensibility to living beings in general, precisely because of their borderline position, their intimate otherness towards us. They allow us to sense, in small steps, our affiliations to plants and bacteria, which lie further back in

our common genealogy: relatives so foreign that it is less easy to feel alive in the same way as they do. It requires the equivalent of ferrymen or smugglers: animals are intercessors with this kind of power.

And yet we inherit a conception of the world that has downgraded the animal; this is clearly visible in our language, which crystallizes our mental reflexes. All those expressions – ‘to treat someone like an animal’, ‘they behaved like mere animals’ – the whole ladder of contempt, the whole vertical metaphor of the overcoming of an inferior animal nature within us, can be found even in the most everyday corners of our ethics, of our self-representation. It’s incredible. And yet these expressions rest on a metaphysical misunderstanding. Hence the third text in this collection, which tracks our inner animal nature through the history of a Western morality that enjoins us to tame our wild impulses.

These complicated relationships with animal life partly originate in the stranglehold of a dualist philosophical anthropology, which runs from Judeo-Christianity to Freudianism. This Western conception thinks of animal nature as an interior bestiality that humans must overcome in order to ‘civilize’ themselves or, on the contrary, as a purer primal nature from which they replenish themselves, thereby finding a more authentic wildness, freed from social norms. These two imaginaries seem opposed, while nothing could be less true: the latter is merely the reverse of the former, constructed as a symmetrical and opposite reaction. However, we know that reactive creations simply perpetuate the *Weltanschauung* of the enemy that is forcing us to react: in this case, the hierarchical dualism that contrasts humans with animals.

Such dualisms always claim to map the totality of the possible, whereas they are never more than the obverse and the reverse of

the *same* coin, and everything outside that coin is obscured, denied, forbidden to thought itself.

What this demands of us is quite mind-blowing. The outside of each term of a dualism is never its opposite term; it is the outside of the dualism itself. Leaving behind all that is Civilized is not to throw oneself into the Wild, any more than leaving Progress implies giving in to Collapse: it means leaving the opposition *between* the two. It means breaking open the world thought of as their binary and undivided reign. It means entering a world that is not organized, structured, rendered fully intelligible on the basis of these categories. The challenge is to cut like the blade of a sword between the two blocks of dualisms, to emerge *on the other side* of the world they claim to enclose, and see what lies behind. It's an art of dodging: we have to fly like a butterfly to avoid being captured by the twin monoliths of Nature and Culture, falling from the Charybdis that is Man with a capital M into the Scylla of the Homogenized Animal, the cult of wild nature as opposed to the cult of the necessary improvement of nature when it needs repair work. We must dance between the ropes, dodging the dualism of animal nature as both inferior bestiality *and* as superior purity. We must open up a hitherto unexplored space: that of worlds to be invented once we have passed to the other side. We must glimpse them, show them: take a deep breath of fresh air.

In my opinion, then, these two formulations of the problem of the relationship between human and animal nature are false and toxic: animals are not more bestial than us, nor are they freer. They do not embody unbridled and ferocious wildness (this is the animal tamers' myth), nor do they embody some purer innocence (this is its reactive reverse side). They are not superior to human beings in authenticity

or inferior in elevation: what they mainly embody is *other ways of being alive*.

It is the 'other' that is essential. It expresses a whole quiet logic of difference against a background of common ascent. It's a quiet grammatical revolution that's happening – the revolution that sees the addition of one little word flourishing in all those everyday sentences: 'human beings and animals', 'the difference from animals', 'what an animal does not have' . . .

The one little word is 'other'. 'The differences between humans and *other* animals.' 'What that *other* animal doesn't have.' 'What humans have in common with *other* animals.'

Imagine all the possible sentences and add the word *other*. A very small adjective, so elegant in its cartographic reconfiguration of the world: it alone reframes both *a logic of difference* and *a common belonging*. It traces bridges and open borders between the beings encountered in experience. Nobody will lose anything in the process. It certainly does not allow us to make any in-depth progress when it comes to similarities and differences. It simply makes it possible to naturalize an adequate logic, to avoid a gross error in biological taxonomy, to incorporate (as a civilization) a mental map with far-reaching political repercussions, and to internalize (as individuals) one more quiet truth, one that will join the roundness of the Earth, heliocentrism, evolutionism, the toxicity of neoliberalism, and the idea that democracy is the worst political model . . . except for all the *others*.

If we extend this argument, we can in my opinion defend the idea that there is a political effect in the transformation of our relationship with the animal nature of human beings. Our relationship with the

animal within us is correlated with our relationship with the living world outside of us. Changing one changes the other. Perhaps this is a psychosocial key to Western modernity, this inability to feel alive, to love ourselves as living beings. If we can accept our identity as living beings, reconnect with our animal nature conceived neither as a primality to be overcome, nor as a purer form of wildness, but as a rich heritage to be welcomed and modulated, we can accept our common destiny with the rest of living beings. If we can accept that humans are not driven by the need for spiritual domination over their animal nature, but by being able to live intelligently with the forces of the living beings within us, we can change our fundamental relationship with the forces of the living world outside of us. This would entail, for example, no longer postulating that 'Nature' is deficient and needs to be improved through rational organization, but regaining *confidence in the dynamics of living beings* – confidence in those ecological and evolutionary dynamics with which we must negotiate different forms of *modus vivendi*, in part to influence them, and sometimes to modulate them for our needs, but within the horizon of a cohabitation attentive to the 'adjusted consideration' we need to show towards the other life forms that inhabit the Earth with us.

The point is to see the countless forms of animal nature and our countless relationships to them on cultural and political levels as an adult topic. Animal nature is a big question: the enigma of being a human grows clearer, more liveable, and more alive, in the light of the countless animal life forms that face us as enigmas. And the quintessential political enigma of living together in a world of otherness finds other implications, and other resources, in those life forms.

The ecological crisis as a crisis of political attention

But it is clear that openness and sensibility towards living beings, these arts of attention in their own right, are often relegated to the status of bourgeois, aesthetic, or conservative issues by those who campaign for other possible worlds. They are in fact powerfully political matters.

These arts of attention are political, for the discreet and pre-institutional essence of the political sphere is played out in the shifting thresholds that dictate what deserves our attention. The question of feminism has highlighted these shifts in recent decades, and the issue of gender difference has suddenly become a political landmark attracting considerable attention. The question of alienated labour, the question of the condition of all those who do not have the means of production but sell their labour power, is a question that was naturalized in early capitalism, and became – with Marx and after him – an object of the most searching collective attention. The tectonic shifts in the art of the attention of a human collective are highlighted by one eloquent symptom: this is the feeling of the *tolerable* and the *intolerable*.

A king by divine right is no longer tolerable today: the unconscious device of the tolerable and the intolerable is a delicate machine, incorporated in each of us, shaped by social and cultural flows. The point is that our current relationships with living beings are becoming intolerable. The idea of the disappearance of field birds, European insects, and more broadly the life forms around us, through inaction, eco-fragmentation and extractivism (the obsessive stage of the extractive industry which considers everything as a mere resource), must become as intolerable as the divine right of kings. We need to

pave the way for encounters that will bring living beings into the political space of what deserves attention, *i.e. calls for us to be attentive and considerate to it*. Affiliations provide access to an expanded form of self. I remember a passenger on a train looking out anxiously at a rainy spring sky. When he revealed the reason for his concern, I was dumbstruck: he wasn't concerned that the bad weather would ruin his vacation. He announced to me as if he were talking about a relative of his: 'I don't like rainy springs, they're bad for bats. There are a lot less insects. Mothers can't feed their young any more.' An expanded self that other living beings can move into means a few more worries, admittedly, but it is also strangely emancipatory. It is only in this way that the basic value system is transformed, and not because everyone has been made to feel guilty and terrified by the announcement of apocalypses affecting beings who do not exist in *their cosmos as beings*.

The arts of political attention will have changed once we experience the plunder of ocean life, or the pollinator crisis, as being every bit as intolerable as the divine right of kings. The contempt of a sector of industrial agriculture for soil fauna should be as intolerable as a ban on abortion.

We could thus defend the idea that, to a certain extent, in democratic societies crisscrossed by massive flows of information, politics comes after culture, in the sense of representations of desirable life, of the thresholds of the tolerable and the intolerable. Consequently, if we are to change politics, we cannot be content merely with becoming activists, struggling, organizing things differently, raising the alarm, leveraging as much as possible those who are closest to power, and inventing other ways of living; we must also transform the attention we pay to what matters. Hence the fourth text in this collection,

an investigation carried out in the open air in contact with wolves, sheep, shepherds, night skies and meadows, which attempts to sketch the outlines of a policy of interdependence. It's a long-term job, but it deserves to be done, because we still have a few millennia to live together on this planet with its cosmopolitan life.

In what direction should we open up this field of our collective political attention? The problem of our systemic ecological crisis, if it is to be understood in its most structural dimension, is a problem of habitat. It is our way of living that is in crisis. And the main reason is its constitutive blindness to the fact that to inhabit is always to cohabit, to live among other life forms; the habitat of a living being is entirely made up from the interweaving of other living beings. The fact is that one of the major causes of the current extinction of biodiversity is eco-fragmentation. This is the invisible fragmentation of the habitats of other living beings, a process which destroys them without our realizing it; we have made our roads, our cities, our industries out of the discreet and familiar paths that ensure their existence, their lasting prosperity as populations.

The significance of eco-fragmentation in extinction has philosophical implications that are not always noted: this fragmentation does not directly originate from productivist and extractivist greed (although this is the contemporary and many-faceted aspect of the destruction of habitats, one which requires us to engage in the bitterest struggles against it). It originates first of all from our blindness to the fact that other living beings *inhabit*: the crisis in our way of inhabiting amounts to denying others the status of inhabitants. So we need to *repopulate*, in the philosophical sense of making visible the fact that the myriad life forms that constitute our nurturing environment have always been, not a backdrop for our human tribulations,

but fully-fledged inhabitants of the world. And this is because they *make* that world by their presence. The microfauna of soils literally make the forests and fields. The forests and the plant life of the oceans create the breathable atmosphere that nurtures us. Pollinators literally make what we innocently call 'spring' as if it were a gift from the universe, or the sun: no, it is *their* humming, invisible and planetary, which each year, at the end of winter, summons into the world the flowers, the fruits, the gifts of the earth, and their immemorial return. Pollinators, bees, birds, are not placed like furniture on the natural and unchanging scenery of the seasons: they make spring *live*. Without them, we might have snow melts when the sunshine increases around March, but they would take place in a desert: we would not have the cherry blossoms, nor any other blossom, nor any effect from the cross-fertilization which forms the basis of the life cycle of angiosperms (all the flowering plants on the planet, which form more than nine tenths of earth's plant biodiversity). We would have only an endless winter. A type of being that *makes* spring 'with its own hands', so to speak, isn't just part of the decor, a mere resource. It is an inhabitant, one that enters the political field of the powers with which we will have to negotiate the forms of our common life.

Lack of political attention to living beings

Part of what modernity calls 'progress' describes four centuries of devices that relieve us from having to pay attention to alterities, to other life forms, or to ecosystems.

The conceptual character we are targeting here is someone we could call the 'average modern' (we all are to a certain extent this kind of person in the cultural area which claims to be modern).

Let's observe a typical colonial phenomenon, since this is often where the strangeness of your 'average modern' is best revealed. For a Western colonist, when he arrives in the jungles of Africa or the monsoon rice fields of Asia, civilizing the area where he settles traditionally means making it possible to live there in complete ignorance of its non-human cohabitants. It means suppressing, controlling and channelling the wild animals, insects, rains and floods. Being at home is being able to live without paying attention. However, for the natives, it's the complete opposite: being at home implies a vibratory vigilance, an attention to the interweaving of other life forms which enrich existence, even if it is necessary to compose with them – which is often demanding, sometimes complicated. Coming to an agreement is a costly business in diplomacy between humans, and it is the same with other living beings.

Many of the techniques and representations of the modern world serve this purpose, and that is their function: to dispense with attention, that is to say to be able to operate everywhere, in any place, despite one's ignorance, quite carelessly, i.e. without knowing a place and its inhabitants. It's a disconnection from what in the living world around us calls for a generous openness, an interweaving with pollinators, plants, ecological dynamics and climates. It's a practical metaphysics, whose secret but powerful function is interchangeability: everything must be interchangeable, all places, all techniques, all practices, all skills, all beings, honey bees, apple varieties and wheat strains. It's a matter of being at home everywhere, homogenizing the conditions of existence so you don't need to know the ethology of others and the ecology of a place, in other words the habits and customs of the peoples of living beings who inhabit and constitute it. In this way, the 'average modern' can devote himself to what is

‘essential’ in his own eyes: the relationships between fellow human beings – relationships of power, accumulation, prestige, love and family, against the backdrop of an inanimate setting made up of the ten million other species which just happen to be our relatives.

This is a highly ambiguous phenomenon, because on certain points it has produced comfortable and beneficial effects. We can’t dumbly and radically preach the opposite, in order to move from triumphant modernity to contrite anti-modernity. But we need to draw the right distinctions: there are beings to whom we must learn to pay attention anew. For currently, the comfort of modernity is being reversed: by dint of no longer paying attention to the living world, to other species, to environments, to the ecological dynamics that weave everyone together, we are creating from scratch a mute and absurd cosmos which is very uncomfortable to live in, on an existential, individual and collective scale. Above all, however, we are generating global warming and a biodiversity crisis that concretely threaten the Earth’s capacity to provide human beings with habitable conditions.

The paradox, therefore, is that to a certain degree there is a perceptible comfort in the modern art of freeing ourselves from the attention demanded by the environment and those who inhabit it, but as soon as it exceeds a certain threshold or **takes a certain form**, it becomes worse than uncomfortable: it makes the world uninhabitable. The problem then becomes: what is this threshold and what are these forms, precisely, seriously speaking? How can we intelligently inherit modernity, drawing the right distinctions in our historical legacies between the emancipations to be cherished and protected, and toxic missteps? This is one of the great questions of our century. It is our compass for navigating a firm course through the swell between two

Manichean positions: on the one hand, anti-modern outbursts that condemn all ‘modernity’ en bloc, as an idea that has gone wrong, while we still enjoy its products; on the other, hypermodern attitudes that want us to accelerate down the same path of progress, which, as we now know, means heading straight towards the worst of outcomes by defending an odious doctrine of TINA (‘There Is No Alternative’), making it possible *not* to reflect on, campaign against, or question what is toxic in our heritage.

Finding a way out

One species has transformed into a material backdrop for its human tribulations the ten million other species that constitute its extended family, its giving environment, its daily cohabitants. More exactly, it is one specific small population of this species that has done so, the bearer of a merely historical and local culture. Making all other living beings invisible is a provincial and late phenomenon, not the product of mankind as a whole. Imagine a people approaching a land populated by myriads of other related peoples, and declaring that they don’t really exist, not as much as *they* do, that they are the stage and not the actors (ah yes, it’s not a fiction which requires a lot of imagination, it also comprises huge swathes of our history). How did we accomplish this miracle of blindness towards the peoples of the living world? We could hazard here, to exacerbate the strangeness of our heritage, a rapid history of the relations between our civilization and other species, a history which leads to the modern condition: once living beings were debased ontologically, that is to say considered as endowed with a second-order existence, of lesser value and lesser consistency, and thus transformed into ‘things’, human beings discovered that they alone truly existed in the universe.

It simply took Judeo-Christianity to expel God from 'Nature' (this is the hypothesis of the Egyptologist Jan Assmann), to make Nature profane, then the scientific and industrial revolution to transform the nature that remained (the scholastic *phusis*) into a matter devoid of intelligences or of invisible influences, available to extractivism, for human beings to find themselves as solitary travellers in the cosmos, surrounded by dumb, evil matter. The last act involved killing off the last affiliation: alone in the face of matter, human beings nevertheless remained in vertical contact with God, who sanctified it as his Creation (natural theology). The death of God entails a terrible and perfect loneliness, which we might call the anthropo-narcissistic prison.⁸

This false lucidity about our cosmic solitude put the final seal on the serene exclusion of all non-human beings from the field of the ontologically relevant. It explains the 'prison house' of the philosophy and literature cultivated in the great European and Anglo-American capitals. My choice of this expression is not arbitrary: it is now a prison house or 'closed room' in the sense of Sartre's play⁹ – but the prison house is the world itself, the universe, which is populated only by us and the pathological relationships with our fellow humans entailed by the disappearance of our plural, affective and active affiliations with other living beings, animals and environments.

This ubiquitous theme in twentieth-century literature and philosophy, which foregrounds the cosmic solitude of human beings, a solitude elevated to grandeur by existentialism, is intriguingly violent. Under cover of the heroism of Camus's absurdity,¹⁰ under cover of having the courage to face the truth, this violence is a form of blindness that refuses to learn how to see the forms of existence

of others, negating their status as cohabitants, postulating that in fact they have no communication skills, no 'native senses', no creative point of view, no aptitudes for finding a *modus vivendi*, no political promptings. And this is the great cunning, and therefore the hidden violence of Western naturalism, which in fact aims to justify exploiting all of nature as a raw material lying to hand for our project of civilization – it means treating others as matter ruled by biological laws, refusing to see their geopolitical promptings, their vital alliances, and all the ways in which we share with living beings a great diplomatic community in which we can learn anew how to live.

The human subject alone in an absurd universe, surrounded by pure matter lying to hand as a stock of resources, or a sanctuary for humans to recharge their batteries spiritually, is a phantasmal invention of modernity. From this point of view, those great thinkers of emancipation, Sartre and Camus, who have probably infused their ideas deeply into the French tradition, are the objective allies of extractivism and the ecological crisis. It is intriguing to reinterpret these discourses of emancipation as vectors of great violence. Yet it was they who transformed into a basic belief of late humanism the myth that we alone are free subjects in a world of inert and absurd objects, doomed to giving meaning through our consciousness to a living world devoid of it. This myth took away from that world something it had always possessed. The shamanists and animists described by Viveiros de Castro and Descola know very well what this lost state had involved, namely complex social relations of reciprocity, exchange and predation which are not peace-loving or pacific, and do not follow Isaiah's prophecy, but are political in a still enigmatic sense, and call for forms of pacification and conciliation, of mutualist and considerate cohabitation. Hence the epilogue to this collection.

After all, there are meanings everywhere in the living world: they do not need to be projected, but to be found, with the means at our disposal: translation and interpretation. It's all about diplomacy. We need interpreters, intermediaries, in-betweens, to do the job of starting to speak again with living beings, to overcome what we might call Lévi-Strauss's curse: the impossibility of communicating with the other species we share the Earth with. 'For despite the ink spilled by **the Judeo-Christian tradition to conceal it**, no situation seems more tragic, more offensive to heart and mind, than that of a humanity coexisting and sharing the joys of a planet with other living species yet being unable to communicate with them.'

But this impossibility is a fiction of the moderns, it helps to justify reducing living beings to commodities in order to sustain world economic exchanges. Communication is possible, it has always taken place; it is surrounded by mystery, by inexhaustible enigmas, by untranslatable aspects too, but ultimately by creative misunderstandings. It doesn't have the fluidity of a café conversation, but it is **nonetheless rich in meaning**.

As an enigma among other enigmas, the human way of being alive only makes sense if it is woven into the countless other ways of being alive that the animals, plants, bacteria and ecosystems all around us demand.

The ever-intact enigma of being a human is richer and more poignant when we share it with other life forms in our great family, when we pay attention to them, when we do justice to their otherness. This interplay of kinship and otherness with other living beings, the common causes they foster in the politics of life, are part of what makes the 'mystery of living', of being a human being, so **inexhaustible**.

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notes:

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