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## Animals Are Masters of Silence

This talk has been planned for many months but as usual I got to it only belatedly.<sup>1</sup> This was not just because as a rule the feeling of a degree of urgency, even of lateness, helps me settle on the opening, the outline, and the form of what I propose to say, but also, this time, because the subject, the question of animals, so vast per se, is now so frequently raised—so frequented, so to speak—that, just like those it concerns or is supposed to concern, namely animals themselves, one sometimes conceives a desire to flee and find oneself a good hiding-place and never emerge from it. To which, of course, is added the fear of finding oneself too tightly constrained by the necessity to say once more what one has already sought to say, especially considering that one can hardly count more here than anywhere else on a boundless field of expression: just because a problem comes at us from every side—or perhaps indeed precisely for that reason—our angle of attack or approach is not infinitely variable.

As I thought to dispel such doubts, or to proceed despite them, and to arrive at my subject, the first question that arose, of course, was what might have precipitated this flood, this mass of concern with beasts and our relationships with them.

(In the context of our discussion of *animals*, assuming always—and and it is not certain—that the word “beast” is somewhat less generic, a little more precise, more suggestive of cries, smells, and fear, then it is worth reviving the term from time to time.)

The issue of the frequency with which this anxiety about beasts arises today (and the trend is recent, no more than a few years old),

1. Editor's note: This is a translation of the text of a talk delivered in Poitiers on February 4, 2010, for a conference titled “Le sens de l'animal / Pourquoi l'animal?” hosted by La maison des sciences de l'homme of the University of Poitiers.

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specifically anxiety about our past, present, and future relationships with animals, is a question that to my mind can have no other causes than a certain hesitancy and a certain suspicion: hesitancy with respect to human certitudes and the suspicion that a wrong path has been taken, both of them internal responses to what is experienced as a foreshadowing or annunciation of the pure and simple disappearance of animals from the face of the earth. A catastrophic hypothesis, undoubtedly, but sadly a working one, so to speak, a hypothesis that comes to mind as soon as the slightest serious thought is given to the threats hanging today over environments and over most biotopes. It is beneath the shadow cast by this hypothesis (which ranges from negative reverie to the coldest calculation) that the question of animals flourishes, directing its widest possible focus upon the animal world in its entirety and viewing wild animals (and, after all, they were all wild once) not only as survivors but also as witnesses, as demonstrations to humanity, infinitely necessary to man's equilibrium and intelligence, of an effective otherness that is lived day to day.

(Let me recall *en passant* that it is no coincidence that the most ancient traces that humans have left us—whatever their motivations may have been—are pure recordings of that otherness, for the animal pictures of prehistory testify to a primal act of recognition fundamental to the emergence of mankind. The very first people, the furthest from us in time, that we can identify as modern humans, which is to say those from the Aurignacian period, from the era of the Chauvet Cave, are the ones who painted animals almost exclusively, despite all the other things they *could* have painted.)

I tried to evoke the disappearance of animals to which our times expose us—hypothetical of course, but already initiated for several species—in a show entitled *Sur le vif, fable mélancolique sur le déclin des espèces sauvages* ("From Life: A Melancholy Fable on the Decline of Species"). Written and produced with Gilberte Tsai, and put on in 2003, this show, to our great sadness, did not enjoy the success that we had hoped for. I say "sadness" advisedly, fully aware that one should never take success or anything of the sort for granted, that such an attitude is a bad one and almost inevitably leads to disappointment. But in this case our sadness was more than disappointment, for it embodied something more, namely a feeling of injustice: the fact was that with this show, which pleaded the animals' cause, and thus assumed a specific posture, that of being and conceiving of itself as a defense and an illustration, we had the feeling we were

preaching in the wilderness or missing the target completely, and I am well aware that we could easily blame ourselves for that and transform our sadness into self-criticism, but what I am trying to convey by recalling this is something of a different order, namely that animals were in a sense implicated in our sadness, which ultimately resembled, at least as I remember it, the inexpressible aspect of the kind of pain we feel upon the loss of a domestic animal—a sort of enormous woe, specific, distinct, and oppressive, but a woe that is greeted, more than other woes, by incomprehension, and that retreats more than others into itself, so great is its exposure to the prejudice, after all massively shared, according to which a loss of this kind is not too serious and indeed in reality, by the yardstick of human suffering in general, amounts to nothing at all.

The thesis of our show, in fact rather clearly anti-humanist in nature, was precisely that all death is serious, that any erasure of existence confronts us with the gravity of death just as any emergence of existence confronts us with the gravity (or the mystery) of life. This was the conclusion, I believe, to which the show led, and all the more so inasmuch as the whole animal issue was on display in the finale in the shape of a mourning, an adieu. We contrived this by means of masks: on stage for the closing scene were a bear, an ass, a fox, an eagle owl, and a Barbary macaque—members of a kind of committee, come, like delegates on a mission, to bid us farewell, to acknowledge us for the last time, having resolved to leave for elsewhere. Of course this was merely a fable, and within it a reversal, because the animals were granted the ability to choose, and they chose to abandon humans to their own devices, whereas in reality they have barely any other choice vis-à-vis humans than to take flight. Be that as it may, they leave in the fable, and that is the point of the fable, and that is what I want to get to here, for of course they were never really there, all our efforts notwithstanding: behind the masks and the imagery, and first and foremost because they could talk, these were not animals. The aporia of the show is also that of these remarks today, and ultimately of every discussion of beasts, especially where the aim is to evoke and magnify their silence, their detachment with respect to language. Animals do not talk, and it is against this backdrop of silence, from within this silence, punctuated perhaps (not to say certainly) by cries, but fundamentally silent in terms of what we understand as meaning, that they scrutinize us.

The conceit of the fable is to have animals talk, to bestow the gift of the *logos* upon them, not in order to get them into line, but rather to get us out of it, or out, as Francis Ponge used to say, of our groove—but ready to get back into it very quickly, as soon as it becomes apparent that the animals are stand-ins or effectively allegorical representations of the human comedy or *fabula*, albeit characterized by a certain alienation effect: there are certainly moments in La Fontaine when the fox is just a fox, the wolf a wolf, the rat a rat. But this weak if essential breath of animality is as nothing, naturally, alongside what was attempted, much later and at a far remove from any allegorizing instrumentalization, by Kafka, in whose work (I am thinking above all, but not exclusively, of “The Burrow”) the animal habitus seems poured into the mold of human speech in an amazingly discreet and convincing way. Yet there is nothing for it: beyond the fable, beyond its almost *sotto voce* conjoining of what it says and whatever it might embody of non-human feelings, there lies a great gulf, a gulf that language indicates but can never bridge, because in point of fact language itself exemplifies it. My intent in this paper is to inflect things towards a modesty born of astonishment, to help detach what is “properly human” from its canker of pride while at the same time, conversely, declining to correlate the lack of articulated language, as is so often done in an automatic and unthinking manner, with imbecility, or at least with a necessarily subordinate standing. True, it would not get us very far were I to do no more than state and repeat that animals cannot speak, even when we assign speech to them, but we may manage a step forward by asking ourselves, by contrast, in what a world of nameless things might consist, and how in such a world, to which we have had but a furtive access in a distant and unremembered childhood, something resembling meaning—though not our kind of meaning—might emerge and, in some way, inasmuch as we are open to perceiving it, reach us.

What is at stake here is the immediacy of living things to themselves—to the mass of entangled, diverse, and extraordinary actions that constitutes them. Indeed, like a breaking wave, a world without names is a world of actions, actions whereby animals, according to their abilities as species and as individuals, seem to wrap themselves in the world and create it before our eyes, certainly just as we ourselves do, but also in another way, with quite different styles and, it must be said, a gift for envelopment that surpasses ours. What is

thus displayed—and it is directly linked to their silence, in direct harmony with the fact that they do not speak (to us)—are *modi operandi*, practices, avoidances, gratifications, in short everything we are accustomed to place under the heading of behavior, which, as we know, as readily includes the motions of a squid and the bounding of a wild animal as the giraffe's gentle gait or the flapping of a duck's wings as it rises from a pond. All and everything in the animal world—or, in other words, everything that beasts can do, and everything they do.

Of these habitual or experimental courses of action and of the interruptions that punctuate them, of what really happens to animals, we know precious little, and even if we are able to form a vague picture of them, it is only via the filter of our own impressions. So what we need to have at our disposition is a translation of the impression itself, an access route to the modes of existence and duration of animals' impressions and sensations, or otherwise stated the means to picture as though from within the quality and form of the percepts and emotions thanks to which life unfolds for animals. Curiously, verbs, in the infinitive form, would seem to offer something of a doorway to this universe closed to us and without names: being generic, it is as though they dwell in a realm where meaning is fully present, a realm preceding denomination proper; whereas nouns or adjectives stand out as points, infinitives manifest themselves rather as lines, or cause lines to emerge, and we may say of such lines not only that animals draw them but also that we can follow them, and thus read or decipher them. Think of the words *fly*, *swim*, *breathe*, *sleep*, *keep watch*, *flee*, *leap*, *hide*, and so on, ending with *die*. It is clear that thanks to this verbal form something of the life and vivacity of animals is nevertheless captured: very little, no doubt, but just enough so that by virtue of this connection the verb itself is recharged and opened up. Take *fly*, for example, or *sleep*, for another. To fly—something we cannot do and of which at bottom we know practically nothing. To sleep—something, by contrast, of which we have practical experience, but about which we do not know everything.

So let us follow these two lines, these two silent lines stretching before us just as they do before animals. First, flight—truly a line in the strictest sense, a rapid and ephemeral line that is erased no sooner than it appears, erased indeed in its appearing, making the being that draws it, so very light, perhaps no heavier than a few grams, into a projectile launching itself into space: *envoyé en l'air*, or sent up into the air, to use a familiar French vulgarism that has the trivial mean-

ing of “getting off,” but which, taken literally, describes birds, or bats, who are indeed sent up into the air, send themselves and see themselves up in the air, and are perhaps also driven there, but in any case have a kind of knowledge at their disposal that one can of course file away as a mere *savoir-faire* or acquired technique but which seems however to be something quite else, something that can embody, as Rilke suggested, an entrance into the Open, and let me make it clear, for it must be clear, that the open—which I feel should have no initial capital letter so that it too may remain infinitive, and infinite—is by no means a simple metaphor or abstraction, or at least if so, then it is one established in the most concrete manner as a withdrawal or absence of matter, which is to say that to fly is to experience distancing and actually inhabit the in-between, the empty fullness of the interval, and that this experience entails a joy that is visible (and audible), as manifested in the wildest way in the circlings of starling flocks or in streaks of swallows at dusk, or again, and surely no less intensely, in the night-gliding of various owls, barn owls or eagle owls, barely brushing the darkness and leaving traces if anything even slightly more deeply plunged in silence. And should the word “joy” shock, so be it, for here too the issue is the need for a translation capable of bringing the meaning of what we as humans know of joy into conjunction with the miracle of that escape from gravity that birds epitomize in their upward soaring; capable too, perhaps, of precipitating a retroactive effect, with the meaning and sensation of flying, thrust very deep into the imaginary realm, opening space up, as though from within, so that our contemplation is impregnated by it and our thinking flooded by the radiant and dilated sense of what opens up and is nothing but opening up.

Just how far removed we are from all acquaintanceship with flying (it hardly seems necessary to point out that being ensconced in a fuselage has nothing to do with flying) was brought home to me one evening, in tragic fashion, when I saw a man land a few steps away from me and my partner after throwing himself out of a hotel window on Rue de l’Odéon in Paris. The result of this act, the fall, followed by the collision with the ground, was not the worst of it, or at any rate not the most terrifying thing. The man’s body, as disjointed as a rag doll, was in one sense neither more nor less than a body damaged by an accident with respect to which a series of actions needed to be undertaken, but what I really remember is the terrible image of that man, that rag doll, still in the air, arms more or less crossed,

that scarecrow so horribly weighted down by his despair, so powerfully attracted by the ground, and so indisputably incapable of flying (and indeed it was into this indisputability that he had fallen) that it was not only his person but the whole of humanity that seemed fated to crash into the ground with him. This memory, and the use I am making of it here, are certainly not trivial matters, but at least it is possible, by confining them to the objective dimension of the purely negative, to picture, by contrast, the consistency of a world of taking wing, of paths curved or straight, diving, climbing again, voluntary, free, traversing space in every direction while leaving no trace. In other words: the open—but the open as dictated by the birds, sung by the birds, and continually refined by them.

Let me turn now to sleep, where we are on familiar, everyday ground, confronting something whose contours are well known to us and whose depth we intuit, something that is inscribed within us as a long discontinuous line drawn taut every night and loosened every morning. A line that we do not think of most of the time, wanting simply to follow it and plunge into the strange realm of forgetfulness to which it leads, but that brings itself back to mind as soon as we lose track of it, which shows how much our equilibrium depends on the rhythmic recurrence of its return. Rest thus gives us access to the most secret part of ourselves, not only the portion, often so spectacular, that appears with dreams, but also the more distant and almost unknown one that emerges and gains in strength when the agitation caused by dreams has subsided and when, deeply asleep, we find ourselves in a sense curled up, and this less in ourselves than in a space that welcomes us but which is bound to retreat from us eventually; here, and here only, we perhaps reach a zone or an indistinct yet fundamental frontier where a hermetic connection is restored, in all its original violence, to a world of which the only outward sign is our breathing and which constitutes a kind of threshold to which we are delivered as we sleep.

My feeling is that this threshold, at once intimate and far away, to which the night delivers us and where each of us descends alone, is accessible to all sleeping creatures: to observe an animal sleeping and see its body gently or at times feverishly rise and fall is in a way to confirm that it too has been brought to this threshold, this frontier where being seems to retreat into itself and accept itself utterly in its existence, and this in a manner highly generic yet at the same

time distinct, extending to all living beings (humans, animals, and very likely plants) but at the same time actualized in the particularity or singularity of each individual being, in which therefore, to an observer, all of life seems to gather. The reverie that unfolds for sleeping animals is at once ample and melancholy: ample because it has the characteristics, naturally, of a broadening of the consciousness of our existence, and melancholy because this very broadening is based on a shared transience, as decreed for all mortal beings. Postulating a kinship or generalized connectedness of this kind is certainly not meant to revive some notion or other of paradise. Rather, the purpose is merely to admit the existence in its own right of a common foundation, allowing this to come into view and expose in the simplest possible manner the corollary existence (I make no bones about the terms) of a stock of experience common to man and beast, a stock from whence we draw the greater part of our energy but that our activity, as developed over the centuries, has gradually obliterated, so that the signs of it have become almost indecipherable for us.

These are the signs that, when they do reach us, we place in the sole (and, in my view, inappropriate) category of "animality." The fact is that it makes no more sense to go looking for "animal" aspects of humans than to attribute, as we so often do in a sentimental way, something "human" to animals. The common foundation of experience that I am referring to has nothing about it of a vague commonality with ill-defined borders; on the contrary, it is the precise space where each species (and each representative of each species), by nourishing itself there in its own way and at its own specific rate, is able to actualize its form and achieve individuation. Individuation is extreme in every being, as witnessed in each of us, and biodiversity here is a term with only the faintest resonance as a designation for the extraordinary propensity of the multiple to extend and ricochet in a space wide open and hospitable to every kind of finitude. Nothing here, in the context of what is in effect the precondition of existence, is more eloquent than the situation that arises when two individuated forms face each other, and, rather than avoid each other by fleeing, grant themselves a moment of suspense during which to look at each other. What I am referring to, of course, is the always unique experience of eye-to-eye contact. An experience that I have often spoken of, because it is, I believe, the source of my feelings and my distress concerning animals, its first effect being to place before



our eyes, in the shape of a look that is not like ours, that is not "human," nor ever can be, the existence of another gaze, and hence the existence of otherness as such.

Such a shared moment, so long as we take the time to let it operate, the possibility of which certain painters have demonstrated for us—and here what I have in mind is the insistence, so exactly portrayed, in the eye of the ass that looks at us from behind, at the level of the white satin trousers in Watteau's "Gilles" (or "Pierrot")—such a moment, then, whereby we try to grasp what the eyes of the animal looking at us, and at which we are looking, tell us about what in the animal resembles what we for our part call thought, always concerns otherness as such, always implies a "two-sided" relationship which, precisely because it has no resolution, opens the door not to the other or to the secret of the other but rather to the full recognition of that other. Even domestic animals, the house cat, or a puppy, occasionally reveal themselves to us in their otherness by detaching themselves from the husk of protective sentiments in which they are imprisoned. But no matter the animal, the important thing, so impressive and in some cases so unforgettable, is the completeness with which, in the absence of any constraint, existence condenses into the singularity of the being that embodies it and bends it to its own ends; the common foundation is also what creates in us—and in animals—the experience of these extraordinarily diverse ways of embodying and holding fast to existence.

Over and above the exchange itself and its most characteristic property, namely the simultaneous presence of two visions, two gazes, two ways of being, what one is led to conclude is that the world exists and can be looked at in different ways, that the very moment that links us unfolds in a plurality of worlds; for along the line denoted by the verb "to look for," it is not the same world that appears when the line passes through the eyes of a lynx, a sparrowhawk, a steer, a bat, an antelope, a snake, or a human being—just as things are not quite the same from one human being to the next. It goes without saying that within each species there comes into play (indeed as the rule of the game) a community or a certain consistency of behavior and points of reference upon which each member may more or less count, though obviously with great variation from one species to another and depending on the specific forms assumed by individuation and by social life. But it is also a given that, without our being in any sense able to partake of whatever representations animals create of their

world, we can nevertheless attempt to follow their lead and in that way broaden our own apprehension and our own angles of approach, striving to let ourselves be penetrated by a little of what animals are in the world and by what is at their disposal as a world, even if this were to be no more than that poverty which Heidegger disparagingly clad them in and that is at once their destitution or distress and the state whose sway over them they contest as best they can, and this by means of a wealth of skills that it would not be useless, I believe, to enumerate.

I suddenly realize that by proposing that we allow ourselves to be penetrated by animals' worlds and ways of being in the world, I am merely reiterating what has long been expressed, through myths and even more through rites and customs, by populations of hunters, by peoples who may be described, to use the words of Georges Bataille, as peoples of a "lost intimacy," or, to continue with the terms that I have been using here, those who, among humans, have never ceased to rely on a common existential and experiential foundation. How to reconnect here—for the intimacy has indeed been lost—is the real question. This is also the standpoint from which we may surmise that animals are for us silent masters. The truest, the most authentic approach would unquestionably be to go over to the other side and, since it is impossible to endow animals with a faculty of speech that they can never have, introduce them into the open and shadowy space of our thoughts through one of their number, one moreover which has, according to various traditions, been taken as the very incarnation of perspicacity and discernment. I am referring to the lynx.

The fact is that from the moment I began thinking about this paper, the lynx came into my mind. I thought that in one way or another the lynx would, and must be, present, or at the very least pass through, and that it should thus be the lynx, there before us, that would represent the figure of the silent master. But it would be a miracle if a lynx could immediately appear among us, and not only do I lack miracle-making powers but also, among wild animals, and especially among felids, the lynx is one of the hardest even to spot. It was not, however, as a symbol, even as a symbol of inconspicuousness, that I would have wished a lynx with us, among us, beyond my words or prior to them, but rather as an instance, an *exemplum* of an animal, so that through it something of the animal's worlds might be vouchsafed us, not excluding its brutality. Out of disappointment and curiosity, therefore, I set out to inform myself as best I might,

learning along the way that the lynx also bears the name *loup-cervier* [literally: deer-hunting wolf], which makes one wonder whether it is not a lynx that Alfred de Vigny evokes in his poem "La mort du loup"; and that the expression "lynx-eyed" is derived not from the keen sight of the lynx, whose vision is not particularly sharp, but from a deformation of the name of the Argonaut Lynceus, who was, by contrast, according to myth, a kind of seer. But what caught my attention most forcefully, apart from the lynx's head and silhouette, both truly of a flawless beauty, was the very highly developed character of the animal's sensory apparatus, except, apparently, for the sense of smell: its vision, despite my remarks above; its hearing also, thanks notably to the fine tufts of hair on the tips of its ears, which give the lynx an owl-like look among felines and probably serve to capture sounds; and its sense of touch, enhanced not only by the very large cushions under its wide and powerful paws that ensure an extremely silent step, but also by the vibrissae of its whiskers and other appendages that support a sort of hypersensitivity, a feeling of electric, patient, and smooth contact with the universe.

Sadly, as may be very quickly ascertained, nothing in these words of mine or in the information they convey has the concrete value of a single dab or a single scoop of snow from a lynx's paw, so perhaps, after all, we must resort entirely to fables and give substance in this way, a very different and probably very remote way, to our idea of the lynx, just as the Northwestern Indians described by Claude Lévi-Strauss do with theirs, in their imaginary and familiar fashion, through their stories in which animals are endowed with strange powers that intervene in an accidental manner and underpin lineages and kinships for human beings. The idea of the lynx to which I allude, however, is one that arises quite apart from the familiarity upon which myths repose; it reposes, in fact, on nothing, and is indeed perhaps without repose—nothing but a shadow in motion whose passage among us I would truly have loved to see in the shape given to it by the animal: pure intimacy with itself and, for us, an almost pure "extimacy," a passage, in exchange for our silence, of a silent form; a master, a phantom, even a god if you wish—or a beast.

—Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith