THE ANIMAL SIDE

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Two

Speaking of animals. I have become aware, stratagems and efforts notwithstanding, that declarations of intense feeling on the subject of animals quite often not only fall flat but give rise to a sort of embarrassment, rather as though one had inadvertently crossed a line and gotten mixed up in something untoward, or even obscene. Nothing is more painful, then, than the choice one has to make: pull back discreetly or forge ahead obstinately and speak out. The truth is that a point of solitude is always reached in one's relations with animals. When this point extends into a line and the line extends into an arch, a shelter takes shape, the very place where that solitude responds freely to its counterpart: a beloved animal. But as soon as we go outside the line and reveal our love (that solitude and that bond), those to whom we have taken the risk of speaking almost always pull back, in a move resembling the one we ourselves might have made upon encountering a similar admission by someone else. There is a very murky zone of affects here, involving in the first place our relationships with so-called companion animals, pets, but a zone that nevertheless extends far beyond the merely private sphere: visits to a zoo or a game reserve, the positions we hold or adopt toward hunting or eating meat ("s'il est loisible de manger chair [if we are entitled to eat flesh]," as Amyot, translating Plutarch, put it so aptly[1]); it is our entire relation to the animal world, or rather worlds, that is traversed by affect and that is troubled and troubling.

Against this affective power, thought, especially Western thought, has seen fit to arm itself, less by erecting self-enclosing walls than by confining animals in vast concept-spaces from which they are not supposed to be able to exit, while human

beings are to be defined precisely—if only it were that simple—by the fact that they have managed to get themselves out of these enclosures, leaving behind *bestiality*—condemned as disgraceful—and *animality*, deeply feared, as if these were stages in a journey and bad (though haunting) memories. Whether they have been recognized as fellow creatures, but of lower rank, or viewed as complex machines, but lacking any access to thought, animals have found themselves assigned to specific places and urged to stay there. But whatever purchase—on behavior as well as on knowledge—this hierarchical structuring of existences may have had, what we have seen, without interruption, is that animals have never been able to stay in their places, neither in their own right nor in human thoughts and dreams; the fact is that, on their own and without trying, animals have never ceased to make the border-boundary between humans and beasts an unsettled one.

This vacillation is found at the point of contact, before affect comes into play. The contact is always unsettled, for the encounter relates and even stipulates difference: difference is there, it is there like an abyss, and the abyss cannot be crossed. As Descartes, the theoretician par excellence of animals as machines, acknowledged in a letter, referring to "living brutes": "the human mind cannot penetrate their hearts."[2] *But there are those hearts,* those existences; there is the whirlwind of all those lives and the beating of each and every heart . . . What I would like to talk about is not a transgression in either direction (something that would cross the abyss from humans to animals or from animals to humans) but contact, the close contact, always singular and always consisting of touch, that is the ordinary mode of the bond between them and us—something scarcely formed, always nascent.

Three

"The gods are there": Ulrich von Wilamowitz sought to characterize the particular consistency of the divine in the ancient Greek world with this formula,[1] and we may be tempted to apply it to the presence of animals in nature, at least in lands where they are still abundant enough to give us the impression that they are at home, in their overlapping territories. A presence that is like an immanence: it does not need to show itself in order to exist; on the contrary, it manifests itself all the better to the extent that it hides, retreats—or turns up unexpectedly. But whether that presence is abundant, at once massive and diffuse, as in the game reserves of equatorial Africa, or scattered and rare, as in the French countryside (although night often turns the tables and restores the power of that presence, especially by way of sounds), for us there will always be something remote about it—not only something missing but something that eludes us, holds itself back. The "gods" found there turn away; they do not want us among them, or near them; they do not want to have anything to do with us. Some remain motionless, or pass by without fleeing, impassive, indifferent (only the largest and strongest can afford to do this), but most of them leave, escape, scurry or fly away.

Contact between humans and wild animals is above all this complex system of avoidance and tension in space, an immense entanglement of uneasy, self-concealing networks in which, once in a while, we have the privilege of pulling a thread. It is not just that animals, like nature according to Heraclitus, "love to hide"; it is also that they have to hide, and that since the dawn of time, over and above their own conflicts, they have identified man not only as a predator but also as a strange, unpredictable, lawless being. No matter how peaceful we may want to proclaim ourselves, no matter how eagerly we may seek a slow, gentle approach, in our presence they flee and hide.

And I come back to the flight of the deer that was my starting point or opening feature. The strangeness did not lie in the fact that the deer burst forth or that it fled (deer are fairly numerous in these woods: on another night on that same road, one of them had crossed in a single bound perhaps a meter in front of me); the strangeness lay in the opportunity I was given to follow the animal for a while: that is, at bottom, the chance to accompany it in spite of itself, thus prolonging a contact that as a general rule is much briefer. In a way, I found myself back in the position of pursuer, a dog in a pack, or a hunter, so much so that what comes back to me like an image from a film, like a pure sequence, converges in the realm of the imaginary, like a fragment that might have been dislodged from the whole, from Paolo Uccello's extraordinary *Hunt in the Forest*, a wide canvas on which, in dark green undergrowth gilded by late-afternoon sunlight, the very flight of the prey (doe of some sort) organizes among the vertical tree trunks the vanishing point, the perspective of *fuite*, as if each animal is producing a link in the very optical network from which it is seeking to escape. If this painting is so beautiful, it is not only on account of the legendary material it evokes so spontaneously but also because it shows, right in the field of vision (the forest), by way of the animals that have come from there and are trying to return, the full power of what lies outside the field: the forest, still, but as a world beyond, a *selva oscura* that, even more than the prey, attracts hunters and heightens the pack's sense of smell, because the forest is the animals' rightful place, the place where they have shelter and where they are, properly speaking, at home.

Six

"And yet, sometimes a silent animal looks up at us and silently looks through us."[1] The eighth of the *Duino Elegies*, a poem fully contiguous with a meditation on the mode of being of animals, returns us with these words to the theme of openness with which it abruptly began: "All eyes, the creatures of the World look out into the open"—Rilke makes this observation at the outset.[2] But with this variation, which has the effect of a light oar stroke in the course of the poem, what is designated is the movement through which, although without coming to us, the animal sometimes turns toward us: it is the experience of a threshold. Rilke says "a silent *animal*": he does not say that dog, that horse, that sheep, he is not recounting an episode but defining a recurring moment, an experience available to everyone at some point.

The world of gazes is the world of *signifiance*,[3] that is, of a possible, open, still indeterminate meaning. For the percussive impact of difference that is produced by discourse, the gaze substitutes a sort of dispersal: the unformulated is its element, its watery origin. The gaze gazes, and the unformulated is, in it, the pathway of thought, or at least of a thinking that is not uttered, not articulated, but that takes place and sees itself, holds itself in this purely strange and strangely limitless place which is the surface of the eye.

Thus it is even among humans, who compensate, however, through discourse for this lack of determinacy and of articulation. But among animals, the absence of language means there is no compensation for the lack, and this is why their gaze is so disarming when it settles on us, which happens, as Rilke's line says, sweetly and soberly. In the face of that which is and can only be

for us neither question nor response, we experience the feeling of being in the presence of an unknown force, at once supplicating and calm, that in effect traverses us. This force may not need to be named, but where it is exercised it is as though we were in the presence of a different form of thought, a thought that could only have ahead of it, and overwhelmingly, the *pensive* path.

This pensivity on the part of animals, in which some have been willing to see only stupor, is in any case made manifest in a thousand different ways, according to species, individuals, and circumstances. It seems to me that certain people have seen this, have approached it, and that others, who may have glimpsed it, have turned away at once. There are important and serious divisions here.

My concern is not that we should credit animals with access to thought; it is that we should move beyond human exclusivity, that we should let go of the eternally renewed credo according to which our species is the pinnacle of creation and has a unique future. The pensivity of animals, or at least what I am trying to designate and grasp with this term, is neither a diversion nor a curiosity; what it establishes is that the world in which we live is gazed upon by other beings, that the visible is shared among creatures, and that a politics could be invented on this basis, if it is not too late.[4]

Seven

Animals are spectators in the world. We are spectators in the world alongside them and simultaneously. This community of the sense of sight makes us alike and relates us; it posits between us the possibility of a threshold, the threshold-experience of which Rilke speaks. What is at stake is not beauty but an intensity that can be restored to us: the most magnificent pine forest, the most beautiful mountain, resists us and is inexhaustible; no discourse (as Francis Ponge demonstrated), no image (as Cézanne verified) can come to terms with it fully. But neither the mountain nor the pine forest, no object and no plant, can do what any animal can do: see us, and make us understand that we are seen. No solidarity follows, probably, but there is nevertheless this objective link among living creatures that see one another and are afraid of one another. The act of looking up, the movement Rilke describes, is also a matter of escaping from fear, an attempt at something other than indifference or greed. Something else. Like a new curiosity, new with every repetition.

"To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return." This is the definition—one of the most famous, one of the most astonishing—that Benjamin gives of the aura.[1] At the heart of the study in which this definition figures, it is prepared by a reflection on returning, sending back: "There is no gaze that does not expect a response from the being to which it is addressed," Benjamin says, making the aura precisely what comes to fulfill that expectation.[2] That is why the "ability to look" stands in for such a response. In this way Benjamin, who is speaking of a "transference," lends to the inanimate world, to certain glimmers of that world, the ability to send back: not in

the vague form of an enigmatic force, but in the form of a power normally given only to animate beings, a power that most humans acknowledge only in themselves: not sight or the gaze as such, but the particular accent which is the power to look, that is, the very movement that Rilke's line identifies. Of course, what is at issue is an image; at no time does Benjamin suggest that the thing endowed with an aura pulls away from the inanimate world and comes to life; at no time does he locate himself in the space of a response to Lamartine's gentle question about the "soul" of objects.[3] But this image has value in itself, and it strikes us, as it were, all by itself: what is pinpointed in this way is the radiation of a thing, the entry of things into the regime of signifiance.

But to animals, the power to look is not granted by humans; they have this power on their own. This is to say that, on their own initiative and as living beings, they inaugurate the regime of meaning that is at once, if we maintain the equation between Rilke and Benjamin, a regime of signifiance and a regime of auras. Here is how it works: each gaze—and this is manifest in every portrait—is invested with an overwhelming meaning, a surpassing of all limits within a single point of opening. "The unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close it may be," which is the other great Benjaminian definition of the aura,[4] could also be a definition of the gaze, of what is raised in any gaze that is raised up toward us.

NOTES

One

1. A reference to a passage in Hölderlin's "The Rhine": "Ein Rätsel ist Reinentsprungenes [A mystery are those of pure origin]," in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 411.

2. George du Maurier, *Peter Ibbetson* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1992).

Two

1. "S'il est loisible de manger chair," in Plutarch, *Trois traités pour les animaux*, ed. Élisabeth de Fontenay, trans. Clément Amyot (Paris: P.O.L., 1992), 103–21 (in English as "On the Eating of Flesh," in Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Harold Cherniss and William C. Helmbold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 12: 535–79.

2. René Descartes, letter to Henry More, "Replies to Objections (5 February 1649)," in René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 296. Élisabeth de Fontenay cites this passage in *Le silence des bêtes: La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 279. Fontenay's book, an invaluable summary of the philosophical view of animals, has accompanied me in memory throughout these pages.

Three

1. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, "Die Götter sind da," in *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (Basel: Schwabe, 1959), 1: 17.

Four

1. Bataille speaks of "the vague sphere of lost intimacy" in *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 50.

Five

1. Hegel, "Preface," *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967 [1952]), 13.

2. See esp.: Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmidt Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, ed. Dominique Séglard, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2003); Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

Six

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Stephen Cohn (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 67.

2. Ibid., 65.

3. The term *signifiance* refers to the semiotic modalities and processes of making and conveying meanings.

4. It seems to me that the project announced by Jacques Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* is the project of such a politics. Crucially, it is on the basis of an act of gazing—his cat contemplating him naked in the bathroom—that Derrida unfurls the entire reflection through which he displaces and reconsiders the "abyssal limit" (30) between humans and animals.

Seven

1. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 148.

2. Ibid., 147.

3. In Alphonse de Lamartine, "Milly ou le pays natal": "Objets inanimés, avez-vous donc une ame/Qui s'attache à notre ame et la force d'aimer? [Inanimate objects, do you thus have a soul/That attaches itself to our soul and forces it to love?]," *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, Book 3 of Alphonse de Lamartine, *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. Marius-Francois Guyard (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 392.

4. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 285.

Eight

1. Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 65.

2. Heidegger, *Parmenides*, 157.

3. Ibid., 155. On these points, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004). Agamben identifies all the elements involved and arranges them into an analytics of difference between humans and animals.

Nine

1. Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, p. 67.

Ten

1. The modernity and absence of affectation of Moritz's text made a powerful impression on Gilles Deleuze, as can be seen in the text he published with Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans., with a Foreword, by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 240.

2. Karl Philipp Moritz, *Anton Reiser: A Psychological Novel*, trans. John R. Russell (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1997), 144.

3. Ibid.

4. Friedrich Hölderlin, "Anmerkungen zur Antigonae," in *Die Trauerspiele des Sophokles*, trans. Friedrich Hölderlin (Frankfurt am Main: Friedrich Wilmans, 1804), 1: 94.

eleven

1. Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds," in Jakob von Uexküll, *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. and trans. Claire H. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1957), 5–80.

2. The experience of the prolonged gaze related in Julio Cortazar's short story "The Axolotl," while it is the starting point of a strange metamorphosis, is not at all fantastic in itself. Anyone can repeat the experiment with this little animal. In Julio Cortazar, *End of the Game, and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 3–9.

Twelve

1. The notion of reiteration is fundamental in the vegetable universe, especially for trees. On this point, see Francis Hallé, *Plaidoyer pour l'arbre* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2005).

Fifteen

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, bk. 7, 795–865; in *Metamorphoses V–VIII*, 100–103.