

An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered landscape. The snow is a uniform light blue-grey color. Several tracks are visible, appearing as shallow depressions in the snow. One track in the upper left is a single, elongated depression. A second track in the center is a series of five overlapping, roughly circular depressions. A third track on the right side consists of several smaller, more irregular depressions. The tracks are scattered across the frame, suggesting animal movement. The overall scene is quiet and desolate.

Baptiste Morizot On the Animal Trail

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On the Animal Trail

Baptiste Morizot

Translated by Andrew Brown

polity

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Preface

'Where are we going tomorrow?'

Where are you going tomorrow, or the day after, or maybe next week, once you've reached the last pages of this book? Perhaps you'll be one of those readers who will have the wonderful experience of being touched, contaminated, infected by the impulses that animate it. I could have written: 'by the adventure that impels it', but I'm a little wary of the epic exoticism or predictable storyline which the word 'adventure' can convey. I could probably more accurately describe what Baptiste Morizot is proposing by the evocative term 'initiation'. Being (or becoming) initiated involves the idea of getting to know something or, more precisely, getting to know the art which makes this knowledge possible; and this idea itself takes us back through the centuries to the experience of participating in the Mysteries as practised in ancient paganism.

Thus, this book proposes to initiate us into a very particular art, which could briefly be defined as *the art of doing geopolitics by tracking down the invisible*. Certainly, put like that, it might seem scary - and you might well wonder if it is really sensible to ask someone to write this preface who hesitates at the word 'adventure' but has no qualms about combining 'geopolitics' with 'the invisible'.

'Forms of invisibility: 'You cannot exist without leaving traces'

However, nothing could be more concrete, closer to the soil and to life itself than Baptiste Morizot's project. It is, quite

literally, the most down-to-earth proposition that you could imagine, a proposition which requires putting on a good pair of shoes and walking, but which mainly impels you to learn again how to stare at the ground, to look at the earth, to read the copses, the trodden grasses and the dark thickets, to scrutinize the mud where marks and pawprints leave their trace and the rocks where they don't, to inspect tree trunks with bits of hair sticking to them, to scrutinize paths where droppings are plentiful in one place but not another. For this is how those we call animals, and who are mostly invisible to us, manifest their presence. Deliberately sometimes, or even without paying attention. Tracking things down, in other words, means learning to detect visible traces of the invisible or, to put it another way, it means transforming the invisible into presences.

As Jean-Christophe Bailly has remarked how, for a large number of animals, their innate way of inhabiting their territory, their 'home', consists in concealing themselves from sight - 'for every animal, living means crossing through the visible while hiding within it.'¹ Many of us have experienced this: we can walk in the forest for hours on end and not sense the presence of animals, or even remain completely unaware of their existence. We can imagine that this world is uninhabited, believing ourselves alone. Yes - so long as we don't pay any attention to the signs. But if we change the way we walk through different spaces, pay due attention to them and learn the rules that govern the traces, then we are on the trail of the invisible, we become readers of signs. Each trace testifies to a presence, to the sense that 'someone has been here before' - someone we can now get to know, without necessarily encountering them.

Geopolitics: 'Tracking is the art of investigating the art of inhabiting practised by other living beings'

And yet an encounter does take place. But the term 'to encounter' here assumes a somewhat different meaning from the one that immediately comes to mind; it undergoes a shift and, as a verb, takes on an inchoative meaning,² like those verbal forms that indicate an action that has only just begun - grammarians say of these particular verbs that they indicate *the passage from nothing to something*. So the type of encounter that Morizot describes falls into the realm of beginnings: tracking always has to do with the time before an encounter, a time which, in principle, will continually be played over again (as the time before *is* the very time of encounter); and it only ever addresses what is already slipping away (the *something* of the grammarians could just as easily return to *nothing*).

What the practice of tracking also makes palpable is that to follow is to *walk with*. Walking becomes an act of mediation. Neither side by side, nor at the same time: in the footsteps of another who follows his own path and whose traces are so many signs that map his desires - including the desire to escape his tracker if he has become aware of the latter's presence. 'Walking with', without simultaneity and without reciprocity, relates to those experiences in which we allow ourselves to be instructed by another being, as when we let ourselves be guided, learn to feel and to think like another (who is, perhaps - like the wolf sensing that he is being followed - trying to think like whoever is following in his footsteps, as we shall see). We then abandon our own logic and learn another logic, we let ourselves be flooded by desires that are not ours. And above all, when we imagine and think on the basis of the

signs left by the animal, where its intentions and habits lead it, so as not to lose its track – above all, not to lose track of it: for what we learn from the art of tracking is not to lose what we do not possess.

We can therefore ‘encounter’ in the sense of starting to know, without necessarily being in the same place at the same time – getting to know each other. ‘Walking with’, at a later time and at a certain distance, in order to be better instructed. Summoning the imagination in order to stay connected to a fragile reality. This is what the American philosopher Donna Haraway beautifully defined as ‘intimacy without proximity.’³

To encounter an animal by means of intervening signs then means drawing up an inventory of habits which gradually shape a way of living, a way of being, a way of thinking, of desiring, of being affected.

The form of investigation proposed by Morizot points, first and foremost, to a profound change in our relations with non-human beings. More and more of us want to find a different way of living with animals, to dream of renewing old relationships, of catching up with them, as the saying goes. But how? What do we need to do? What should we learn? How can we live with other beings who are, for the most part, totally foreign to us? In this regard, Morizot has noted, with a touch of humour, that ever since the 1960s ‘we have been seeking intelligent life in the universe, while it exists in prodigious forms on Earth, among us, before our very eyes, but discreet in its muteness.’⁴ We send probes and even messages to the four corners of the universe, and we walk through the forest as noisy as a troop of baboons on the razzle, which can only confirm our strange conviction that we are alone in this world. It’s time to come back down to earth.⁵

That's where this investigation comes in. As a geopolitical inquiry, it attempts to find answers to the question of how to live together with non-human beings, no longer as a rather abstract dream of returning to nature, but concretely and practically. Of course – and Morizot does not forget this – tracking reconnects us with the oldest practices of hunters. Nor does he neglect the ethology which is itself inspired by those practices, an ethology which he can now draw on for his project. These practices are arts of attention. However, unlike tracking, they do not involve knowing as a prelude to appropriating; and unlike ethology, they do not involve knowing for the sake of knowing, but 'knowing in order to live together in shared territories'. By tracking, we attempt to rekindle the possibility of forging social relationships with non-human beings.

'We can change metaphysics only by changing practices'

Tracking, therefore, is an art of seeing the invisible so as to frame an authentic geopolitics. As we have mentioned, there is nothing supernatural in these invisible things even if each discovery involves a certain magic, that of tracking 'which flushes signs'. There is nothing natural about them, either: there can be no serious geopolitics based on Nature. For the term 'Nature', even when used in such trivial circumstances as those which make us say 'we're going out for a walk to get a bit of nature', isn't innocent. As Morizot writes, with reference to Philippe Descola, this term is 'the marker of a civilization' (not a very likeable one, he adds) 'devoted to exploiting territories on a massive scale as if they were just inert matter.' And even if we decided to move away from this 'heritage' dimension and asserted our desire to protect nature, for example, we would not escape

the tacit implications of this term – that there is, in front of us or around us, a passive nature, in short, an object of action – or, even worse, a leisure spot or place for spiritual renewal.

So Morizot's project asks us to dispense with a metaphysics that has caused definite and palpable damage and that we cannot hope to patch up with a few good intentions. The first thing that needs to be revised is the old idea that we humans are the only political animals. (Indeed, we should be concerned about the fact that when we declare ourselves to be animals, this is often a way of laying claim to a quality that simply confirms our exceptionalism.) But wolves are political animals too: they know all about rules, the boundaries of territories, ways of organizing themselves in space, codes of conduct and precedence. And the same applies to many social animals. Morizot takes up, and extends to other living beings – for example, to the worms in the worm composter, whose habits are similar to our own – the idea that what we need to relearn are truly social relationships with them. Tracking, as a geopolitical practice, then becomes the art of asking everyday questions. The answers to those questions will form habits, prepare alliances or anticipate possible conflicts, in an attempt to find a more civilized, more diplomatic solution: 'Who *inhabits* this place? And how do they live? How do they establish their territory in this world? At what points does their action impact on my life, and vice versa? What are our points of friction, our possible alliances and the rules of cohabitation to be invented in order to live in harmony?'

'A possible detour to get us back home'

I have just referred, as does Morizot, to the worm composter and its worms as a site for social exchange. A site that also requires a detailed knowledge of habits, attention, alliances and compromises. This example is important because it tells us that becoming a 'tracker', 'becoming a diplomat' with animals, actually involves a transformation in ways of thinking, of reading signs and of attuning (recognizing and creating harmony between) habits and intentions. Tracking *may* involve travelling great distances or through forests, but it doesn't always require it.

After all, as Morizot says, tracking is above all 'an art of finding our way back home'. Or rather, he implies, it is an art of *finding ourselves at home*: but this 'at home' is not the same as before, just as the 'self' which finally finds itself at home has itself become different.

Tracking means learning to rediscover a habitable and more hospitable world where feeling 'at home' no longer makes us stingy and jealous little proprietors (the 'masters and possessors of nature', as seemed so obvious to Descartes), but cohabitants marvelling at the quality of life in the presence of other beings.

Tracking means enriching our habits. It is a form of becoming, of self-metamorphosis: 'activating in oneself the powers of a different body', as the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro writes. It means finding in ourselves the crow's leaping curiosity, the worm's way of being alive - perhaps even, like the worm, feeling ourselves breathing through our skins - the bear's desiring patience, or the panther's replete patience, or the very different patience of the wolf parents of a turbulent pup. It means gaining access, as Morizot says, 'to the prompts specific to another body'.

But 'all this,' he adds, 'is very difficult to formulate, we have to circle round it.'

In the wonderful book in which he recounts his long friendship with a bitch called Mélodie, the Japanese writer Akira Mizubayashi discusses the difficulties that his adopted language imposes on his way of describing the relationship between him and his animal companion. He writes:

The French language, which I have embraced and made my own over a long apprenticeship, stems from the age of Descartes. It carries with it, in one sense, the trace of this fundamental break that means it becomes possible to classify non-human living beings as machines to be exploited. It is sad to note that the language of the time since Descartes somewhat obscures my sight when I contemplate the animal world, so abundant, so generous, so benevolent, described by Montaigne.⁶

We inherit, then, a language which in certain respects accentuates the tendency to de-animate the world around us - as evidenced by the simple fact (to take just one example as highlighted by Bruno Latour) that we only have at our disposal the grammatical categories of passivity and activity.

To narrate the activity of tracking, as Morizot does, to narrate the effects of this 'finding our way back home', involved learning to get rid of certain words, playing tricks with syntax so as to account for presences or, more precisely, effects of presence, so as to evoke affects that flood through the body (joy, desire, surprise, uncertainty, patience, fear sometimes), to use the writing of the investigation in order to touch on what goes *beyond* this writing, as Morizot himself was touched while writing. He had to twist the language of philosophy, to defamiliarize

himself from it, to poetically force the grammar, sometimes forge terms or divert their meaning (what he has elsewhere called *a semantic wilding*),⁷ because none of the terms we have inherited could express the event of the encounter or the grace of awaiting it. To create, in other words, a poetics of inhabiting, an experimental poetics, out in the open air, with plural bodies.

Beyond all that this book teaches us about what animals can do, as well as the humans who go out to encounter them, beyond the concrete and highly innovative political proposals for another way of inhabiting the earth with others, Morizot invites us to explore not only the close confines of our world, but the very limits of our language. To express the event of life.

Where are you going tomorrow? Actually, from the very first words, you will already be on your way.

Vinciane Despret

Notes

1. Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le Parti pris des animaux* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2013).
2. The idea of thinking about the relationships with living things in an inchoate sense is formulated by Baptiste Morizot in an interview with Pierre Charbonnier and Bruno Latour: 'Redécouvrir la terre', *Tracés. Revue de sciences sociales* [online], 33, 2017, posted on 19 September 2017, accessed 14 December 2017. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/traces/7071>; DOI: 10.4000/traces.7071.
3. A very good example of this intimacy without proximity can be found in Jacob Metcalf's article on human-grizzly encounters: 'Intimacy without Proximity: Encountering

Grizzlies as a Companion Species,' *Environmental Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 2, autumn 2008.

- [4.](#) See Morizot, 'Redécouvrir la terre'.
- [5.](#) My own work is to some extent a response, at once speculative and pragmatic, to the richly suggestive remarks made in Bruno Latour, *Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique* (Paris: La Découverte, 'Cahiers Libres', 2017).
- [6.](#) Akira Mizubayashi, *Mélodie, chronique d'une passion* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Folio', 2013).
- [7.](#) Baptiste Morizot, *Les Diplomates. Cohabiter avec les loups sur une autre carte du vivant* (Marseille: Wildproject, 2016), p. 149.

Preamble

Enforesting oneself

'Where are we going tomorrow?'

'Into *nature*.'¹

Among our group of friends, for a long time the answer was obvious, with no risks and no problems, unquestioned. And then the anthropologist Philippe Descola came along with his book *Beyond Nature and Culture*,² and taught us that the idea of nature was a strange belief of Westerners, a fetish of the very same civilization which has a problematic, conflictual and destructive relation with the living world they call 'nature'.

So we could no longer say to each other, when organizing our outings: 'Tomorrow, we're going into nature.' We were speechless, mute, unable to formulate the simplest things. The banal problem of formulating 'where are we going tomorrow?' with other people has become a philosophical stutter: What formula can we use to express another way of going outside? How can we name where we are going, on the days when we head off with friends, family, or alone, 'into nature'?

The word 'nature' is not innocent: it is the marker of a civilization devoted to exploiting territories on a massive scale as if they were just inert matter, and to sanctifying small spaces dedicated to recreation, sporting activities or spiritual replenishment - all more impoverished attitudes towards the living world than one would have liked.

Naturalism, in Descola's view, is our conception of the world: a Western cosmology which postulates that there

are on the one side human beings living in a closed society, facing an objective nature made up of matter on the other side, a mere passive backdrop for human activities. This cosmology takes it for granted that nature 'exists'; it's everything that's out there, it's that place that we exploit or that we tramp through as hikers, but it's not where we *live*, that's for sure, because it only appears 'out there' in distinction with the human world *inside*.

With Descola, we realize that to speak of 'nature', to use the word, to activate the fetish, is already strangely a form of violence towards those living territories which are the basis of our subsistence, those thousands of forms of life which inhabit the Earth with us, and which we would like to treat as something other than just resources, pests, indifferent entities, or pretty specimens that we scrutinize with binoculars. It is quite telling that Descola refers to naturalism as the 'least likeable' cosmology.³ It is exhausting, in the long run, for an individual as for a civilization, to live in the least likeable cosmology.

In his book *Histoire des coureurs de bois (The History of the Coureurs des Bois)*, Gilles Havard writes that the Amerindian Algonquin people spontaneously maintain 'social relationships with the forest'.⁴ It's a strange idea, one that might shock us, and yet this is the direction this book wants to take: it's a matter of following this lead. In a roundabout way, it is through accounts of philosophical tracking, accounts of practices involving the adoption of other dispositions towards the living world, that we will seek to advance towards this idea. Why not try to piece together a more likeable cosmology, through *practices*: by weaving together practices, sensibilities and ideas (because ideas alone do not change life so easily)?

But before setting this course on our compass, we first need to find another word for expressing 'where we are