

Introduction

This book addresses a problem that is above all one of land usage. How are we to react to the spontaneous return of predators to a region from which they had vanished? Taking the return of wolves to France as our case study, we shall consider the implications of their dispersal throughout a mountainous landscape so depopulated that it has almost reverted to its pre-Roman past. This return developed into a problem without much fanfare. In 1992, a pair of Italian wolves went off exploring. They established their kingdom in the little valley of Mollières, north of Nice in the Southern Alps; they preyed in part on the relatively unprotected flocks of sheep in the Maritime Alps. Conflicts with livestock farmers arose. The wolves scattered and founded new kingdoms. They traveled by night, passed over highways, swam across rivers; they were invisible because they were inconceivable. One day, a wolf was spotted in the Vosges. He had come from the Mercantour. Another day, someone saw him in the Madre mountains, deep in the Pyrenees. He was in Canjuers, in the Bargème valley. He was in the Jura, in the Massif Central. In the Meuse region. One day he was somewhere else, then he was close at hand. “The wolf is here,” foresters and hermits exclaimed from the safety of cafes. The wolf was there. The murmured cry spread and echoed from one hunting blind to the next, from bell tower to bell tower, until it reached the outskirts of big cities. The two wolves present in 1992 had become more than three hundred spread throughout the French countryside in 2015, according to official counts. The populations are hard to localize, hard to quantify, hard to tell apart. For wolves have the peculiar ability to be present and invisible—except to those whose flocks are subjected to repeated attacks. When once-silent shepherds and farmers engage the media, what were once private problems become a political problem.

The Impossibility of Stewardship

The political solution seemed initially to lie in a straightforward zootechnical approach: drawing on ecological knowledge to manage the age-old phenomenon of wild predators, dangerous pests.

And yet a problem has emerged: the two traditional models for ecological stewardship of wildlife have proved inadequate in the face of the wolves' return. The first and oldest model, population control by hunting, is the zootechnical side of a "biopower" that has not deviated from the life-and-death prerogatives claimed by "sovereign power," to use Michel Foucault's language. This approach can lead ultimately to extermination, in the case of predators: this was the fate of wolves in France until the twentieth century. But in legal, moral, and practical terms, the hunting model is now obsolete. Legally, wolves are protected by the 1979 Bern convention, which went into effect in 1982 and was adopted in France in 1990; they are also protected by the European Community's 1992 Habitats directive (wolves were officially classified as a protected species in 1993). Morally, the rise in biocentric, pathocentric, and ecocentric ethics has challenged the traditional anthropocentric reflexes. Given the moral sensibilities of the twenty-first century, it is not easy to see how one could justify the specicide of an admired and respected form of wildlife. In practical terms, finally, it is no longer clear how to hunt wolves, protected as they are by the loss of cynegetic knowledge (knowledge related to hunting behavior: how to train dogs to hunt wolves, what tactics to deploy) that has resulted from the eradication of wolf populations and the emptying out of the countryside.

The second model of ecological stewardship, the creation of wilderness sanctuaries, is defended by a number of associations advocating the protection of natural resources; it consists first of all in instituting nature preserves, regulated by strict rules of conduct, in which the wild world, intact and protected, can in principle live in spaces that have been more or less restored to their "natural" state. (In practical terms, in France, these spaces are identified with the natural and historical patrimony as preserved in national parks.) While this undertaking is necessary from the standpoint of conservation biology, it comes with its own problems: it entails zoning, losing the economic use of the land involved, isolating gene pools too limited to ensure perpetuation of the species, assigning the status of patrimony or museum to natural wilderness areas. The sanctuary model is obsolete in any case for the management of wolves, who categorically refuse to remain within preserves or natural parks. Biologically, they are governed by a law

of dispersal that ensures their future evolution by limiting the chances of extinction; this law consists in centrifugal diffusion through extensive colonization of new territories that are explored and conquered by young wolves known as “dispersers.”¹ Moreover, the principle of keeping the animals at a distance is often connected with sacralization of wildlife.² The sanctuary model cannot hold up in the face of frequent attacks carried out on herds by wolves who, for their part, do not deem us “sacred” enough to refuse all contact. To live up to the sanctuary ideal, we would have to allow these predators to settle in and live among us, without directly interfering in their behavior, concentrating all our efforts instead on the practical need to modify the way pastures are protected. Such reforms are legitimate and necessary, but it is not clear that they would be sufficient. In this paradigm, any approach to stewardship that seeks to change the animals’ behavior is condemned as intrusive, in the name of the purity of wildness.³

Two models, then, both unsuccessful.

It has been suggested that thinking begins where instinct and habit fail.⁴ We have to start thinking when the familiar old techniques for managing reality run up against an obstacle—when they no longer work. When the old ontological maps—the maps that mark out for us the nature of the beings with which our experience brings us into contact and show us how we are to interact with them—lead us astray in practice, leave us in distress. In such cases, it seems necessary to change our survival tactics and our mental maps. If we are to do this, we need to begin with an archaeology of the ontological maps of our relationships with wild animals, maps that have been developed throughout history and naturalized by habit.

Ontological Maps and Paths of Action

The connections between representations (by way of words or concepts) and action, between theory and practice, are generally underrated; and yet every human action is organically articulated with a representation, to such an extent that one can even deduce from a representation the types of action that it implies. For example, if we develop a collective representation of wolves as “harmful,”⁵ or “invasive,”⁶ the resulting action, spontaneously and necessarily, will take the form of regulation and/or extermination. The causal relation can of course be inverted; it is the correlation that matters. The issue is not which comes first, for the relation is one of interdependence. If a collective cartography of the wolf as a sacred wild animal is developed,

if wolves are seen as vestiges of intact, original nature, then the inevitable spontaneous reaction will be to confine them to sanctuaries and museums. Words do not represent things, they change them. They configure our relations toward things, our modes of acting on things.

Each everyday gesture of language that is intended to define something confronts the irreducible responsibility of transforming it and determining a limited field of action with regard to it. Mastering this Adamic gesture (naming a thing, configuring it, orienting action toward it) amounts to defending and practicing a considered use of words that brings about their transmutation into concepts, that is, into rigorous mental models defined precisely in terms of their philosophical foundations and their remote cartographic repercussions. For concepts operate above all as ontological maps⁷—in other words, as transcendental models of experience that build bridges where the old maps indicated breaks. These new maps bring distant features closer, recast the ontological structure of classes of phenomena, and thus “open up paths of action.”⁸

The challenge, then, is to diagnose the toxic effects of the maps in use today, to confirm the inadequacy of the “paths of action” they impose and draw up new maps for the *Canis lupus* phenomenon, maps designed to open up other paths for viable, healthy, and efficient interactions, with the aim of enhancing the political, technical, and ecological management of the wolves’ return.

Taking the long view, we can see that addressing the problem of cohabiting with wolves is a step toward addressing the civilizational problem of the return of wildness. Wildness is coming back into play as an economic reality induced by population decline in rural areas; the extent to which its symbolism is being reevaluated points up a growing tendency to reject the ideology of a civilization that separates the human from the natural.⁹

The Impotence of the Old Maps

The problems raised by cohabitation with wild nature are laden with political stakes: they spontaneously corrode the ideologies defending the transcendent sovereignty of the human order. The wolves’ return highlights the deep *metaphysical* and generally invisible infrastructures of our relation to nature. The wolves’ return brings metaphysical concerns to the attention of even a former motorcycle racing champion such as Christian Estrosi, the mayor of Nice and a conservative member of the French Parliament: in the context of

a 2003 investigation, Estrosi urged the government to apply “the absolute principle of the priority of humans, their activities and their traditions.”¹⁰ Wild animals prod us to reveal our underlying conceptions regarding the relations between humans and nature; one of the extreme polarities of that spectrum consists in a sovereign anthropocentrism.

A similar anthropocentrism is also apparent in various critiques of political laxity with respect to wolves; under the cover of sociopolitical analysis, these critiques spontaneously revert to the lexicon of a certain Judeo-Christian anthropology: “What are the consequences for democracy if . . . NGOs condition the relations between humans and nature to such an extent that humans abandon their preeminence on earth, their power and their sovereignty, to the benefit of the predators?”¹¹ The return of the hated predator is scripted as a civilizational syndrome: our very preeminence on Earth and our total priority over the other species appear to be at stake. This rhetoric goes back to the theme of war against wild nature, a war that we thought we had won through pitched battles in the past, thanks to technological and civilizational progress, but that once again threatens to overtake us with the return of these carnivores.

But what if the very formulation of the problem is askew? The wolves’ return is a philosophical problem, to the extent that it enables us to question our cohabitation with other species—species symbolically encumbered with the ideology of the war against nature. Might it be time to abandon the model of human sovereignty over the other species, not *to the benefit* of the predators (we can hear the traumatic historical echoes of such rhetoric), but in favor of a different paradigm for our relation to life forms, to the biota as a whole, and more specifically, in this instance, to wolves?

This is where policies and procedures take on their full political and philosophical scope, for the current approaches are failing to manage the crisis effectively. Livestock farmers are suffering significantly from the wolves’ predatory behavior, and they are rightfully demanding solutions. Yet we know that eradicating wolves is impossible in France: it is indefensible, and it is illegal. Wolves have been protected since 1993 by the European Union’s Habitats directive. There is solid proof that their return to France was spontaneous; no one reintroduced them. More than three hundred genetic tests have shown that French wolves are indeed descendants of wolves from the Abruzzi region, dispersed into France via the Apennines and then the Alps, according to a logic of territorial exploration that is characteristic of the species and that is not found among reintroduced captive wolves.

In a standoff with livestock farmers, as we have seen, certain ecologists are calling for policies that would preserve wolves in sanctuary spaces. These ecologists often dismiss the challenging situation facing farmers and herders, while at the same time they misunderstand the eco-ethological phenomenon of the wolves' return: humans cannot opt to coexist by occupying separate spaces and maintaining wolves in natural sanctuaries (an approach tried in the United States that has met with failure), for wolves disperse spontaneously to conquer new territories. The population decline in rural France offers them millions of acres of forested and uncultivated lands and an increasing abundance of game.

The only solution, then, is a middle way, consisting in genuine cohabitation. Rather than confining predators to separate zones, this approach calls for sharing the uses of one and the same territory. The zoning approach is based on outdated beliefs about the habitat required by wolves, for these animals are reinventing the way they define their territory. No longer limiting themselves to intact natural spaces, they are moving closer to humans, weaving themselves into the interstices of our carefully mapped-out spaces.

To achieve this middle way today, we shall have to think about wildlife in new ways and update our knowledge of predators. We know very little about wolves. We exterminated them before the development of reliable animal sciences, before population ecology and ethology existed as fields of study. Ethology in particular requires real-time observation of animals in their habitats, an activity that wolves make very difficult owing to their "invisibility." Yet we need to learn to know wolves in order to familiarize ourselves with their ways of being, just as we need to know storms, soils, and rivers if we are to make the natural world inhabitable. The wolves' return raises a problem that is indeed civilizational in scope. But the problem is not how we can best protect our supremacy; the problem is how we can learn to coexist with even the most stigmatized forms of the biodiversity that grounds our own existence. It is the problem of our ability to cohabit with our wild animals.

Our urgent philosophical task is thus to draw an ontological map designed to replace the firmly entrenched old models, both the one that treats wolves as harmful pests and the one that deems them worthy of protection in sanctuaries. These contentious opposites are in fact based, as we shall see, on the same ontological infrastructure, the one in which humans have been extracted from nature. But this extraction can be assigned different values. For some, it is conceived as transcendence; for others, as a curse.

The Failure of Earlier Models: Diplomatic Misunderstandings

As a way of launching this inquiry into political ethology, it will be useful to consider the historical genesis of our relation to wild wolves. Ever since Charlemagne's legal definition of the wolf as a harmful pest, a ruling that has been maintained in mental space-time by Christian pastoral imagery, in which each parishioner is symbolically a sheep to be protected from the "rampaging wolf" (that is, the devil), our relation has been conceived as a war in which an invisible enemy is fantasized and ideologically endowed with all sorts of perversions. This attitude toward wolves was a spur to extermination. Anthropologists have thoroughly analyzed the various phantasmagoric constructions of the figure of the enemy and the way he wages war. American manuals of military psychology produced in the context of the Iraq wars devote whole chapters to the way an individual enemy can be depersonalized and characterized as despicable, thus setting up a psychological disposition that facilitates professional exploits—an outlook that makes it easier, in other words, for soldiers to kill.¹² In the case of wolves, this process works through tales and legends ("Little Red Riding Hood," for instance, or "Peter and the Wolf") and through Christian pastoral metaphors as well as through the abhorrent figure of the werewolf.

This specific interaction (demonization-extermination) can be analyzed on the basis of parameters associated with the ethological nature of wolves, in two ways: the wolf can be understood both as an *invisible* potential predator and as an ecological competitor. The first approach stems from wolves' characteristic mode of appearing. In this respect they are an object of *phanerology*, the science of animals' modes of appearing: this rare discipline at the crossroads between biology and phenomenology has been developed by Adolf Portmann.¹³ In a phanerological framework, wolves are an intriguing phenomenon whose way of appearing is a key to understanding the political problems they raise: a wolf appears as *an invisible presence*. This quite particular mode of presence implies manifest effects without any perceptible access to their *cause*.¹⁴ Wolves are cryptic animals: under natural conditions, they are extraordinarily difficult to observe for any length of time. Their flight distance—the minimal zone of approach beyond which they will flee and vanish—is hard to measure, but it far exceeds the human ability to spot them. A wolf can sense and recognize its prey from a distance of up to two kilometers away; its hearing is so acute that any attempt to approach it is

seriously compromised. Moving toward a wolf on foot in the forest entails dispersing around oneself an expanse of odors and sounds over a diameter of several hundred meters, an expanse whose reach will trigger the animal's flight at the first step taken in its direction.¹⁵ In France, one indication of this state of affairs is the impersonal character of certain grammatical structures that have evolved in rural areas to note the animal's presence: not "There's the wolf" or "a wolf" or "wolves," but "There's wolf."

This phanerological dimension has had three consequences. First, as wolves returned and recolonized particular local areas, French society was slow to react and to come up with appropriate solutions. The proliferation of stories about wolves in the media today, largely focused on attacks, makes it clear that the problem has taken on emotional and ideological proportions that interfere with cool-headed reflection.

A second consequence has deepened the conflict over how to deal with the wolf problem: since wolves are not visible, only a human who has been subjected to their effects is confronted with the reality of their presence—in other words, the livestock farmer or herder, whose solitude in confronting the problem must not be underestimated. These are often the only people who have actually seen a wolf, the only ones to pay the price and to bear the weight of that presence, and these factors intensify their latent conflict with an urban population for which a wolf is only an abstract image with a positive valence, known either through iconography (the handsome alpha male) or through symbolism (the return of wildlife as breathing new life into a state of society that has gone astray in its domination of life forms). These abstract representations are not false, but they can heighten the conflict with the rural world, which bears the burden of wolves all by itself.

Finally, this phanerological modality of invisible presence implies a problematic relation to wolves in the field of representation: an animal that produces effects without being seen, without being trackable, necessarily generates phantasmatic extrapolations and anthropomorphic projections. An absence of perceptual representations (what is a wolf, exactly?) gives way to imaginary content that may well be inaccurate. An age-old mental mechanism for capturing the unknown by way of the known produces the phantasm of a wolf.

From a potential predator whose attacks on herds are rare,¹⁶ the wolf is transformed into a deadly, omnipresent threat and a symbol of evil. In such a situation, the only good wolf is a dead wolf . . . And like the American Indians, who remained invisible to the colonizers, wolves have been identified with every evil—unless they are invested with every grace.

The second aspect of the conflict brings us to the timeless rivalry that characterizes wolf-human interactions. Throughout recorded history, the conflictual site of interaction with these invisible beings has been livestock. These outsiders sometimes eat the livestock we are raising. The phenomenon probably dates back to the Neolithic era. In the Paleolithic, even though wolves and humans hunted the same types of prey, the comparative density of ungulates and predators, along with the potential alliances (one could follow the tracks of a wolf pack to find prey, or feed on a carcass killed by another species), must have given our interactions with wolves a different character, leaving still-perceptible traces in the value attributed to wolves by contemporary hunter-gatherers who live in contact with them. During the Neolithic era, certain sheep-rearing societies, having domesticated the mouflon of the Ural Mountains some six to ten thousand years earlier, must have seen the first wolves approach these animals, which had become docile and gregarious owing to domestication. Since then, during the last six millennia, technological approaches to pasturing have been invented to limit predation: from Navajo Indians through Alpine shepherds to Kirghiz nomads, humans have devised zootechnical solutions intended to make cohabitation between farmers and wolves both *possible* and viable—although this did not necessarily make it peaceful or cordial.

Wolves sometimes direct their hunting behaviors toward livestock, animals that humans raise for milk and wool as well as meat; hence the particularly exacerbated rivalry. This ecological competition for the same resource is quite probably the reason that our conflictual relations with wolves have been perpetuated and radicalized.

Wolves are thus identified as harmful pests owing to interspecies competition with farmers and hunters. We can be assured that this is a quite widespread ecological situation: two species enter into confrontation because they share the same ecological niche. The question comes down to the way the confrontation is interpreted and modeled. What ontological map can we draw of it? Are we looking at a theft in which an owner is plundered by a criminal? But who has established interspecies property rights? Is the confrontation a war between populations fighting over territory? Is it a simple amoral ecological interaction between two superpredators?

From this standpoint, we cannot compare the wolves' return with that of just any predator or wild animal: wolves are *apex predators*, that is, once they reach maturity they themselves are not the prey of any other predator. As superpredators, they are the only animals in European ecosystems that vigorously occupy the same nutritional level as *Homo sapiens*, at

the pinnacle of complex food chains that start with the primary producers (or decomposers), go through the primary and secondary consumers, and end up with the superpredators. Symbolically, wolves share with us the summit of the alimentary pyramid: they are our *equals* from an ecological standpoint. That is, they are our rivals, from the mythological perspective according to which humans are destined to enjoy preeminence and mastery over all the other species on earth. The ecological status of wolves makes them metaphysical operators: their very existence calls into question the foundational Judeo-Christian myth according to which we are the elect and thus take precedence. It is this background myth that the present study sets out to question.

If the task ahead is to propose a model for the way Western humans understand their historic conflict with wolves, we can deduce the type of confrontation that brings together competition for resources and demonization of the enemy. War as a territorial conflict between peoples is the pertinent model here, by analogy, for example, with the conflicts between American colonists and American Indians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Guided by the paradigm of transcendent sovereignty, the colonists enacted a politics of regulation, control, and extermination toward the indigenous peoples (especially the Amerindians of the Great Plains). These peoples were demonized for being invisible and quite simply incomprehensible; they also competed with the colonists for the land and its natural resources (for example, bison).

This analogy does not entail a Romantic identification of wolves with American Indians; it pinpoints a homology between *relationships*, rather than a resemblance between the parties to a relationship. It allows us to reinterpret the recurrent crises in our interactions with wolves according to the political model of ethnological misunderstanding and diplomatic crisis.

The analogy with the conflict between peoples (competition for resources and demonization) supplies us with a hypothesis for a new model, a new map; the next step is to test its relevance by observing its theoretical and practical effects on the problem that concerns us. The model for the conflict, then, is competition for resources with an invisible stranger, competition that provokes a diplomatic crisis. The misunderstanding can be conceived as an inability to interpret an *ethos*, an inability to communicate in a common code or to develop adaptive modes of interaction.

Presented in this light, the only solution we can bring to the problem consists in restarting peace talks and bringing better diplomats to the table. The model for the new mode of interaction with wolves is *diplomacy*. The

mode of interaction, or the path of action, that can be deduced from this approach is that of *negotiation*.

This approach would lead us to set up an apparatus for dialogue at the interface between the human world and the world of wolves. Such an apparatus would be staffed by diplomats trained to “think like wolves,” just as Aldo Leopold advocates “thinking like a mountain.” The challenge is to avoid interpreting the indices we find in human terms, whether we are wolf-haters, with our anthropomorphism and our guns, conceptualizing wolves as harmful predators, or wolf-lovers, with our anthropomorphism and our binoculars, respecting wolves as hidden gods and as pretexts for all sorts of symbols. At both extremes, everyone fails at the outset, by failing to see in wolves a different way of being alive, a different way of seeing and traversing the world.

The challenge, then, is to adopt an experimental attitude that entails *profiling* wolves, in order to communicate on the basis of key points shared between the ambient worlds of wolves and humans. For this task, there is always a need for mixed-bloods, interpreters, hybrids, bastards, werewolves. This means beings that are folded in two.