



Traits

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In the chapter of *Facing Gaia* titled “How Not to (De-)Animate Nature,” Bruno Latour writes, “If it is the world that interests us—and no longer ‘nature’—then we must learn to inhabit what could be called a *metamorphic zone*, borrowing a metaphor from geology, to capture in a single word all the ‘morphisms’ that we are going to have to register in order to follow these transactions.”¹ The morphisms of which Latour speaks are the transformations, bifurcations, exchanges of forms of action through the transactions between agencies of multiple origins and forms²: all the beings involved take their very form—the forms of their ways of being and of their modes of action—as so many effects of these connections with other ways of being and of acting. The metamorphic zones are thus the witch’s cauldrons where agencies exchange their properties: everything—proteins, rivers, enzymes, rocks, humans, animals, plants—is affected and transformed, and influences others’ courses of action, in short, manifests as much as earns their agency. For it is always afterward, through a secondary operation, that these beings will be redistributed into different regimes of action, that is to say into separate ontological zones: the world of humans and that of nature.

What is at stake in Latour’s proposition is first of all to break with this secondary operation that institutes the distinction between humans and nonhumans, this post hoc maneuver that arbitrarily distributes on one side beings endowed with all the traits of consciousness and intentionality, and on the other beings if not inert, then at least lacking in goals and intentions.³ This proposition sends an important signal to those

1. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 58.

2. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 58. The term *puissance d’agir* actually turns out to be Latour’s translation of the English term *agency*, which knows no real French equivalent (and is perhaps no coincidence).

3. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 58.

who engage in the environmental humanities—can we in fact still speak of environment in this context? Is it not situated precisely within this secondary operation? We will have to be attentive. But more important still, I believe, what the careful monitoring of morphic transactions makes perceptible, in this metamorphic zone—and what this proposition requires us to be attentive to—is the *surprising kinship* of ways of affecting, of influencing, of coming to bear on the behaviour of others: stars, rocks, bacteria, humans, animals use the same language.

Latour takes up from Michel Serres this beautiful passage from *The Natural Contract*: “What language do the things of the world speak, that we might come to an understanding with them, contractually? . . . To be sure, we don’t know the world’s language, or rather we know only the various animistic, religious, or mathematical versions of it. . . . In fact, the Earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, and that’s enough to make a contract.”⁴ What Serres proposes is not a contract between two parties, humanity and nature (or, as we would say, the environment and us), but the taking into account of the fact that since forever, beings and things have exchanged the various traits that define their agency.⁵ This is the kinship, the common language of the things of the world. But Serres, Latour emphasizes, uses a particular French term, that of *trait*. It is firstly a technical term borrowed from the law: the term *contract*, Serres also reminds us, originally means the *trait* that tightens and pulls, in the same way as the ropes that hold mountain climbers: “a set of cords assures, without language, the subtle system of constraints and freedoms through which each linked element receives information about every other and about the system.”⁶

But this term *trait* is also familiar in geopolitics (treaties, for example), in science (one thinks, for example, in biology, of the characteristic traits of species), in architecture or in geometry (in French, one would speak of the design *trait* of the architect or of the geometric figure). Latour quotes Serres again: “Moreover the word *trait* . . . means both the material bond and the basic stroke of writing: dot and long mark, a binary alphabet. A written contract obligates and ties those who write their name, or an X, below its clauses. . . . Now the first great scientific system, Newton’s, is linked together by attraction: there’s the *same word again, the same trait, the same notion. The great planetary bodies grasp or comprehend one another and are bound by a law, to be sure, but a law that is the spitting image of a contract, in the primary meaning of a set of cords.*”⁷ In a later book, Serres will take up this idea again, this time inscribing it more precisely into writing. Reading, he says, is not limited to the codes of writing as we usually understand them, as is known by good hunters able to read, in the traces left by the boar, its age, sex, weight, height, and a thousand other details. Writing is the *trait* of all beings, living and nonliving, who all write “on things and between them, the things of the world one on the

4. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 64; Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 39.

5. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 64.

6. Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 103.

7. Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 108. Cited by Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 64–65 (Latour’s italics).

other.” In conclusion, Serres says again, “If history begins with the invention of writing, then it rightly begins with the Big Bang.”⁸ This language of the world that articulates multiple agencies can thus be described in terms of traits: traits that trace various writings of things and living beings upon one another, traits of attachments and attractions that attest to that fact that the things of the world comprehend⁹ one another, as Serres says, traits of the contracts that the laws of nature are.

The traits of which biologists speak could themselves be made the subject of this analysis. If I consider traits as inheritors of a long history in this perspective, the metamorphoses that beings have experienced while living with others are so many *material-semiotic traces*: thus the shape of the orchid flower, thus the stripes of the zebras. The orchid has comprehended the male bee and carries the traits of what the flower imagines a female bee to be; the zebra has comprehended the persecuting fly and carries the traits that discourage it. The trait is a trace actively written by other living or nonliving beings in the course of the long history of evolution, in the body or in the being. But the trait must then also be considered as active and creative writing. This other dimension appeared to me recently, and in a quite surprising way, while reading the de-extinction program proposed by Beth Shapiro, a specialist in ancient DNA research.¹⁰ For Shapiro, the appeal of de-extinction techniques is not in bringing back particular extinct species—dodo, mammoth, passenger pigeon. We will never bring them back, and they will never be identical to those who will become their ancestors, neither physiologically nor behaviorally nor even genetically. But what these beings can bring back are traits. In speaking of de-extinction, Shapiro says, we should not ask ourselves what form of life we would want to bring back, but which ecological interactions, which natural contracts, do we want to restore? If some of the traits of an extinct animal enabled others to escape extinction, its de-extinction could foster a resurrection of ecological interactions, that is to say the flourishing of new communities of plants and animals.

I have very serious reservations about this type of program, but this ambition of reweaving milieus at least has the merit of making perceptible a prodigiously interesting possibility: that of conceiving traits as endowing those who carry them with creative powers, and of reading creation as immanent and continuous, where certain traits create the possibility for other beings to come into existence—a metamorphic zone, once again, whose “making be” would be the key and the mode of morphisms. Jakob von Uexküll’s idea that the animal is the creator of worlds then takes on a whole new meaning: traits, as creators of existence, shift the problem of a relationship guided only by perceptions and meanings—each of the worlds of the *Umwelt* ultimately exists only subjectively—to situate this relationship within the ontological and aesthetic regime of the creative powers.

8. Serres, *Darwin, Bonaparte et le samaritain*, 18.

9. Serres uses the French word *comprendre*, which means both to understand and to include, to take with.

10. Shapiro, *How to Clone a Mammoth*.

VINCIANE DESPRET has long been working on how scientists observe and interrogate animals. Some of her work has been translated into English: *Our Emotional Makeup* (2004; translated by Marjolijn de Jager); *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (2016; translated by Brett Buchanan); and with Isabelle Stengers, *Women Who Make a Fuss: The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf* (2014; translated by April Knutson).

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