

WILD AT HEART

Interview Guillaume Delannoy
Portrait Pierre Antoine Dhonte

Nature has power. When it is put into words, it can be a mighty force capable of revolutionising thinking and changing lives. As our modern view of the world nears its end, a new blueprint for civilisation is gradually emerging from writers such as Rachel Carson and John Baird Callicott, who have spent their lives looking for change by engaging with nature. Nature lover and fan of Henry David Thoreau, Lanaspèze, 34, echoed these alternative voices by setting up his own publishing company, Editions Wildproject, in 2008, having studied at the Sorbonne and taught at Bard College, New York. What, he asks, if the solution to our problems was simply to reconnect with nature?

SUBLIME: BAPTISTE LANASPÈZE, CAN YOU TELL US HOW WILDPROJECT BEGAN?

BAPTISTE LANASPÈZE: In 2002 while I was studying in New York, I discovered a group of nature writers and environmental philosophers. I was already a reader of the likes of Jim Harrison and Rick Bass, and I threw myself into these new finds with a passion. But the books had not been translated into French and were almost unknown in my home country.

Back in France and working as an editor at a publishing house, I longed to create a new list and to translate all of these great authors. But the powers that be didn't think the subject was popular enough for the list to become a literary success.

The starting point for me was first to promote this huge cultural and social groundswell which was redefining the humanity-nature relationship, but without linking it to scientific ecology, Greenpeace or Green politics. Rather, it is an unprecedented, independent movement in the history of ideas with a scientific basis. What sealed my enthusiasm was my discovery of environmental ethics, a philosophy which some very isolated thinkers had been working on, in relative anonymity, for thirty years.

S: WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS?

BL: It's a stream of philosophy that began in the mid-1970s in the US, and is represented by a number of university professors and doctorate teachers. Its proponents consider that the environmental crisis we face is the result of the quest over the last few centuries for modernity, a quest whose aim is for humankind to overcome nature.

The way we see the world today is deeply marked by the concept of modernity. All of our production, consumption and education methods arise out of modernity, and it would be difficult for us to see things any differently. What the environmental philosophers say is that we now have the opportunity to start thinking in a new way, and to make philosophy essential, meaningful, open and harmonious. They maintain that environmental ethics is the philosophy that will enable us to question our current view of civilisation and to develop another way forward, based on nature.

S: IN YOUR OPINION, WHY DOES ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS 'REMAIN SOMETHING OF A PARIAH IN THE MAINSTREAM ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHICAL COMMUNITY', TO PARAPHRASE THE TEXAN PHILOSOPHER AND AUTHOR JOHN BAIRD CALLICOTT?

BL: I used to think the pariah status of environmental ethics was specific to France and was linked to its anti-naturalistic heritage, the distinction between the right of the soil against the right of blood. France is a Republic, and the Republic is an idea. We are very constructivist.

The truth is that environmental ethics is not only unpopular in France, but everywhere. Callicott explains it pretty well stating the fact that universities are institutional and help to maintain the establishment, indeed are part of it. Whereas environmental ethics completely undermines the views of contemporary occidental society. It flies in the face of everything that has shaped our civilisation, and doesn't make sense to the establishment.

FRENCH PHILOSOPHER-PUBLISHER BAPTISTE LANASPÈZE IS ONE OF LIFE'S GREAT LOVERS OF BOOKS. HE HAS ALSO DEDICATED HIS LIFE TO DEMOCRATISING THE PHILOSOPHY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN HIS HOME COUNTRY, AND TO BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN PEOPLE AND NATURE

'THE PROPONENTS OF THE PHILOSOPHY CONSIDER THAT THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS WE FACE IS THE RESULT OF THE QUEST OVER THE LAST FEW CENTURIES FOR MODERNITY ... WHOSE AIM IS FOR HUMANKIND TO OVERCOME NATURE'

It's a revolution, a peaceful revolution for the mind that asks challenging questions. In history, Socrates' views were disturbing for ancient Athens, as were Descartes' for the Sorbonne of the 17th century. We separate the human sciences and natural sciences, whereas for environmental ethics, the human being is at one with nature.

S: HOW DID ECOLOGY BECOME A PASSION FOR YOU?

BL: Coming upon all of these authors really inspired me, in that it boosted my intellectual life. It came as a real eye-opener. I've read and written more since that moment of discovery than in all ten years of my studies. I'm not surprised at that: there are some people around me who share the same passion, such as Catherine Larrère, one of the few French environmental philosophers. When you find these ideas, they inspire your life.

I've always had two great passions in life: philosophy and walking in nature. Fifteen years ago I wrote my thesis on 'The place of nature in Kant's philosophy'. I was interested in overcoming the eternal boundary between nature and culture. I felt a bit isolated at the beginning, but my American adventure warmed my heart as I found a few 'mindmates'. I drew energy from that time, that led to the setting up of Wildproject. Now that I am a philosopher-entrepreneur, I'm glad to be able to promote people I like such as Callicott or Gary Snyder, and make them better known in France. It's a real emotional commitment.

S: IT'S HARD NOT TO THINK OF LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI, POET AND FOUNDER OF CITY LIGHTS IN SAN FRANCISCO, AND TO SEE A NOD TO THE BEAT GENERATION AUTHORS HE PUBLISHED SUCH AS KEROUAC AND GINSBERG ...

BL: Ferlinghetti, City Lights, the Beatniks ... all these ancestors of the American counterculture really fascinated me as a teenager.

Then suddenly, I experienced at first hand an amazing movement that's almost unknown in France. I was in my 30s and tired of being a bit exploited. I thought to myself: 'Go for it. Here's a great opportunity to support a cause that's close to your heart'. It's inspiring when you

find ideas that give you wings. You want to share them with people. The realities of business are something else. We're selling between 1,000 and 2,000 copies of each title, which is fantastic, but it's not easy to convert the try, to transform an academic passion into a successful business. Ideas enter the public domain at a very slow pace sometimes, and it might take five to ten years before they're being taught in university faculties. For the record, it took 55 years for Newton's theory of gravity to cross the Channel and be published in French.

S: BUT NOW THAT WE'RE IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET, DON'T YOU THINK IDEAS TRAVEL FASTER? WOULD YOU LIKE TO CREATE A PLATFORM ON THE WEB PROMOTING THOSE IDEAS, LIKE YOU HAVE WITH YOUR ONLINE MAGAZINE, REVUE WILDPROJECT?

BL: The Internet has its good and bad points. It enables us to publish instantly and worldwide at very low cost. At work, I'm constantly facing demanding publishing schedules. That's why an online magazine can be a real antidote. It's faster. You send it, and a few minutes later friends in San Francisco are calling you saying it's great. But the big challenge here is to find the funds to make it sustainable. A sponsorship would be fantastic, but what corporation would promote such revolutionary ideas?

S: LET'S GO BACK TO THE US. DO YOU THINK AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHERS ARE MORE RELEVANT IN THEIR ANALYSIS BECAUSE THEY EXPERIENCE DAILY THE MORE EXTREME ASPECTS OF WESTERN CONSUMERIST CIVILISATION?

BL: You're right when you say that the US is damaged by a lack of thinking ecologically and the stupidity of the productionist mainstream, but there are lots of activists living there. A great example of activism is the return to traditional farming that's been happening in lots of places.

America is full of surprises and paradoxes. The best zen masters in the world live on the West Coast! Surprising, isn't it? The reason why environmental ethics wasn't born in France but in the US is probably because intellectual life there has become richer and more innovative than in Europe – a pretty cruel thing to say, I know. It's the same for literature. There's a kind of vitality in the US that dares you to think,

'LIVING BEINGS HAVE DIGNITY, AND I LOVE THAT IDEA. WESTERN PHILOSOPHY DENIES THE IDEA OF THE DIGNITY OF NATURE. I DON'T AGREE WITH THAT'

to cross the red line, to hope, to roll up your sleeves and found a new philosophy. Who does that in Europe?

S: LET'S TALK ABOUT HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WHOSE BIOGRAPHY YOU PUBLISH NEXT YEAR. PERSONALLY I THINK HE WAS AN INCREDIBLE VISIONARY, AS FAR AS OUR ERA IS CONCERNED. HE DESCRIBED PRECISELY WHAT WAS GOING TO COME NEXT, PARTICULARLY IN REGARD TO TRANSPORT. HOW DO YOU THINK THE IDEAS OF THE PAST, SUCH AS THOREAU'S, COULD BE RELEVANT TODAY?

BL: Philosophers such as Plato and Socrates have been relevant in many areas of life. Thoreau is not so 'yesteryear'. But living as he did in Concord, Massachusetts, he witnessed the Industrial Revolution, the most significant event in human history since the development of agriculture. Ecology is directly connected to the industrial transformation of the world.

Thoreau was a kind of shaman. He had vast knowledge, was interested in the latest social trends, spoke several languages and had an unwavering faith in life and in nature. I'm a total fan of Thoreau. American literature was born when he began writing, and with other writers such as his friends Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. What is fascinating about Thoreau is that, rather than love, the human soul or feelings, for him it is the action of walking that is strongly linked to literature. But I agree with you that he guessed a lot of things before they happened, and he is closely connected to us.

Thoreau said: 'In the wilderness is the preservation of the world'. That's one of the reasons we're called Wildproject.

S: AS WALKING IN NATURE IS ONE OF YOUR FAVOURITE LEISURE ACTIVITIES, CAN YOU TALK TO US ABOUT GR 2013?

BL: As a publisher and philosopher, I love books, but I love life too! I live in Marseille, which is my 'daydreaming and wandering lab'. I love Marseille because it has a fuzzy side where the line between nature and the urban environment is blurred. In 2013, Marseille will be the European Capital of Culture, and I've offered to create, in collaboration with artists, a new long-distance footpath based on our Grande Randonnée (GR) in order to bring culture and nature together.

My take on it is that you don't necessarily need to go to Chile to walk for two weeks in the Andes: our cities are surrounded by nature, places we're not even aware of, sometimes. People generally think nature is where there are no people, which is wrong. GR 2013 is an on-the-ground implementation of Wildproject's ideas and a great opportunity to start to build a sustainable city.

S: YOU HAVE A TASTE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST. YOU'VE SPENT TIME IN EGYPT, YEMEN AND NORTH AFRICA, AS WELL AS THE US. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THOSE TWO VERY DIFFERENT WORLDS? WHAT PLACE IS GIVEN TO NATURE IN THE ARAB WORLD?

BL: As I'm Mediterranean, those questions are at the very core of my identity. When I moved from Marseille to Paris, I started to learn Arabic just to keep something for myself from the Mediterranean.

'WHAT IS FASCINATING ABOUT THOREAU IS THAT, RATHER THAN LOVE, THE HUMAN SOUL OR FEELINGS, FOR HIM IT IS THE ACTION OF WALKING THAT IS STRONGLY LINKED TO LITERATURE'

Learning such a rich language has been another amazing eye-opener for me. It's always a great experience in life to discover the non-Western world, especially when you're from 'the other side'. For years I've been trying to find intellectuals in the Arab world who are interested in ecology because then I could bring together another two of my passions. But the search continues.

S: WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON THAT?

BL: I'm not sure. Off the top of my head, it could be that because the presence of God is so palpable in public life in the Middle East, life itself becomes all about waiting for heaven. So they don't care about leftover plastic bags, open dumping, and so on. There's a kind of permanent mess there that is evidence of the low value given to this world compared to the transcendent world. Meanwhile, Middle Eastern spirituality makes social and personal relationships intense, and people are very generous and kind. But as far as I can see, there's no place in their world for nature.

S: DO YOU THINK WE CAN CONSIDER NATURE AS SOMETHING 'SACRED'?

BL: Maybe, maybe not. That's going to be the topic of a conference we're organising at the Sorbonne in Paris in April 2012. I prefer the environmental ethics definition, which considers that nature has a value in and of itself. It has its own religion. That means that trees or pigs have the right to dignity. It doesn't mean it's bad to eat pork. I like pork! But living beings have dignity, and I love that idea. Western philosophy denies the idea of the dignity of nature. I don't agree with that. And I love that word: dignity. It's a noble word.

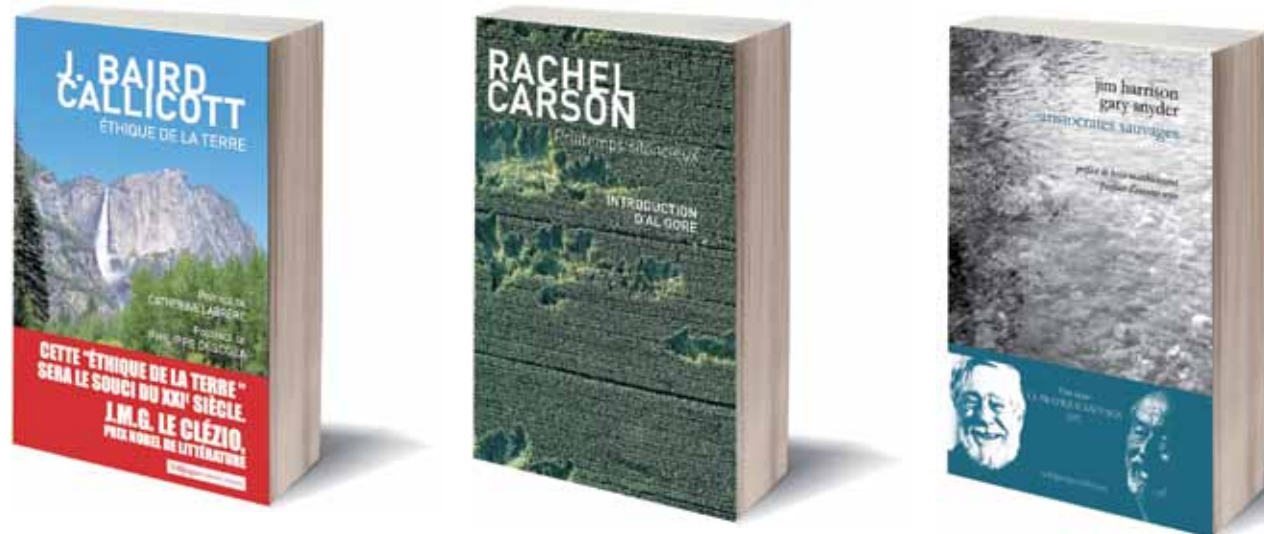
S: WE FIND OURSELVES AT THE THRESHOLD OF MAJOR UPHEAVALS, BOTH ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL. ARE YOU AN OPTIMIST? DO YOU THINK RADICAL, SUSTAINABLE MEASURES COULD BE TAKEN ON A GLOBAL SCALE TO GIVE NATURE A BIGGER PLACE, AND REALLY PROTECT IT?

BL: I believe that the refounding of modern society, and especially the relationship between people and nature, will be the main issue of this century. Two hundred years ago, society was reinvented on the basis of the idea of equality between people. In the Western world – including India – there are already many activists and thinkers who are concerned with nature. More than crimes against humanity, I think ecology will, by 2050, necessitate a change to a new system, to a global governance rooted in environmental ethics.

S: WHAT WILL 'BEING AUTHENTIC' MEAN FOR YOU IN 2012?

BL: That's a big question! It makes me think of Nicolas Hulot, who is a kind of French David Attenborough and who stood as a candidate in the general elections in France. He didn't want to compromise himself and his convictions with any of the major French political parties. He has a powerful and lucid take on the world and on climate change. A lot of people think the problem is too big, and that they can't change anything. But they're wrong. For me, to be authentic is all about having the courage of your convictions and respecting and serving them with sincerity. ■

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