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Lupine in Cormac McCarthy's The
Crossing***

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What is it we imagine when we imagine a wolf? Although this may seem a beguilingly simple question, wolves, and especially literary wolves, are adept at slipping the noose of classification. Accruing new meanings as swiftly as it sheds old ones, the wolf represents different things to different writers and readers at different times. My reading of Cormac McCarthy's novel The Crossing is therefore only one way of reading the wolf. I want, in particular, to explore The Crossing from the apparently disparate perspectives of Jacques Derrida and the nature and travel writer Barry Lopez. By bringing into play Derrida's notions of the "foreign body" and the "witness" I shall point to the ways in which the imagining of the wolf negotiates that always problematic and tenuous relationship between the text and the world, as well as between human and non-human animals. Lopez, on the other hand, offers a more directly applicable, but nonetheless complementary frame of reference for considering the wolf. In his distinctive hybrid of natural and literary history, Of Wolves And Men, Lopez calls for a new wolf literature that would return to wolves "mystery...and distance and selfhood", and would signal that "man" had "finally quit his preoccupation with himself and begun to contemplate a universe in which he was not central' (249 & 270).

However, before examining, how The Crossing might answer such a call it is worth asking what is so wrong with the old wolf literature; what, in short, has been so amiss in our writing of wolves? As far as Lopez is concerned the particularly virulent strain of theriophobia (fear of the beast) which the wolf excites, and which far exceeds any pastoral anxiety for vulnerable sheep or the

occasional human victim of *canis lupus*, can be traced back to the medieval church's rediscovery of the devil whom, it was thought, needed a bestial alliance on earth. In its most common literary form this manifests itself most obviously in the adaptation of myriad extant werewolf narratives to exhibit not just the savage but the positively satanic side of human nature. However, it is also worth noting that even Jack London's wolf stories, which are widely considered all but hagiographic in their depiction of wolves, depend for their effects on a similar demonization of the wolf, albeit one that is filtered through the social darwinist rubric of "eat or be eaten" (*WF*, 157). Wolves even crop up towards the end of Robinson Crusoe, when Defoe's hero is confronted by a veritable lupine army in the nether reaches of the Pyrenees. The dark corners of the old world were it seems more savage yet than the sunny groves of new world desert islands. Never mind dragons, as far as Defoe was concerned 'Here Be Wolves' would have proved the more meaningful cartographic warning.

For Lopez it is this persistent image of the wolf as ruthless, cunning, wanton, and ultimately *evil* killer - "the beast of waste and desolation", as one American president put it (*OWAM*, 142) - that has predominated over the counter image of the wolf as nurturing mother which we find, for example, in the Romulus and Remus myth and Kipling's The Jungle Books. It is moreover, Lopez argues, an image of the wolf that escapes the boundaries of any given text and infiltrates itself in the interaction of human beings and wolves in what we like to refer to as the real world, thereby raising the following, inescapable question; "when a man cocked a rifle and aimed it at a wolf's head, what was he trying to kill?" (*OWAM*, 138). Whatever it was he was trying to kill the fact is that wolves have been trapped, shot and poisoned out of existence in just about all of western Europe and in all but a few of the United States. Lest anyone is tempted to think that we have left such anti-lupine attitudes way behind us and live now in more enlightened times, consider the following comments made as recently as 1976 by W.M.S Russell and Claire Russell in an essay which, if for nothing else, is admirable at least for its title, "The Social Biology of Werewolves". According to Russell and

Russell, "to propose conserving them [wolves] in the wild...is analogous to suggesting the conservation of desert locusts or malarial mosquitoes"(178). Dismissing any concern for wolves as a "totemic survival", the authors go on to say that the conservation of such a "pest species" can have no place in a "rational ecology" (179). Unfortunately the scope of this essay limits speculation on what Russell and Russell might consider desirable in pursuit of a "rational ecology" (the flattening of mountains or the eradication of certain groups of unproductive human beings perhaps?), but their remarks do at least serve to emphasise the extremes which we are prepared to go to in vilifying the not so distant cousin of the homely dog. These images of the wolf as devil's beast, totemic survival or voracious pest need not, however, represent the final word on the subject for, as Lopez perceptively notes, "in the wolf we have not so much an animal that we have always known as one that we have consistently *imagined*." (*OWAM*, 204). With this in mind let us now turn to the pages of The Crossing:

The wolf had crossed the international boundary line at about the point where it intersected the thirtieth minute of the one hundred and eighth meridian and she had crossed the old Nations road a mile north of the boundary and followed Whitewater Creek west up into the San Luis Mountains and crossed through the gap north to the Animas range and then crossed the Animas Valley and onto the Peloncillos...She wandered the eastern slopes of the Sierra de la Madera for a week...She was carrying her first litter and she had no way to know the trouble she was in. She was moving out of the country not because the game was gone but because the wolves were and she needed them. When she pulled down a veal calf in the snow at the head of Foster Draw in the Peloncillo Mountains of New Mexico she had eaten little but carrion for two weeks and she wore a haunted look and she found no trace of wolves at all...She ate till her belly dragged and she did not go back. She would not return to a kill. She would not cross a road or a rail line in daylight. She would not

cross under a wire fence twice in the same place. These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before. Now they did. (*TC*, 25)

What is immediately striking about McCarthy's wolf is that it has not emerged from some impenetrable recess, either of the primeval forest or the primeval mind. This is a wolf with a history, a wolf that is *in* and *of* the world, that very same world over which we cast an invisible net of lines - whether of text or of longitude and latitude -- through which she passes. Yet this is also the same wolf that must be trapped and killed, because she is a threat to cattle, because she is a parasite, a foreign body. She has strayed into a land where she does not belong, wolves having been exterminated from that part of south-western United States in the years prior to the late 1930s and early 1940s which constitute the novel's historical setting.

But from whose perspective is the wolf the foreign body? This is, after all, the land where her ancestors have hunted since time immemorial, and it is the cattle whose baffled ignorance at the ways of wolves seems, as the novel puts it, to have evoked in wolves "some anger. As if they were offended by some violation of an older order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols" (*TC*, 25). And if the cattle are strangers in a strange land what of the men who ranch them? It is perhaps a characteristic trait of the The Crossing that at the same time that it allows the animals whose presences saturate the novel an autonomy from our human dreaming of them, human beings are, on the other hand, caught up in the dreams of animals, and especially wolves, for whom "man" is that "malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and rout them from their house. A god insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood." (*TC*, 17). Who or what is the foreign body in The Crossing is thus always and inescapably a matter of perspective, of context, and it is as much the traversing of these contexts, as it is the physical/political border between the United States and Mexico, which constitute the crossings which the novel seeks to trace. Exemplary among these contexts is, of course, the foreign body of the wolf, that foreign body which Billy Parham, the rancher's son, will, having trapped,

attempt to return to its "home" in Mexico. But what is it about this particular foreign body that makes Billy Parham commit himself to such an enterprise? What is it, to whittle the point of this essay as finely as possible, about wolves? For as much as McCarthy presents us with a thoroughly historicized and worldly wolf, it is yet a wolf that must be imagined. Indeed the story of Billy Parham's attempts to repatriate the wolf may be considered as nothing more nor less than the effort of imagining the wolf, of imagining the foreignness of the foreign body.

The difficulty, even impossibility, of coming to terms with the wolf is impressed on Billy by an ailing wolf hunter who, in keeping with the logic of his profession, is, like his fast disappearing quarry, among the last of his kind. He tells Billy:

Between their acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them. (*TC*, 46)

The wolf, then, and the world of which it is a part, cannot be reduced to something men name. It resists taxonomy, classification, whose entire project, it might be argued, has all along been inextricably bound up with the urge to draw a line in the ontological sand between human beings and other animals, whether we posit that line as soul, reason, language or culture. Indeed, when the wolf hunter, rather wonderfully, compares a wolf to a snowflake, claiming that "You catch the snowflake but when you look in your hand you don't have it no more...If you catch it you lose it" (*TC*, 46), he appears, implicitly, to be inviting a similar critique of the question "what is a wolf?", to that which Derrida invites of the question "what is literature?" (*TSICL*, 5). To be sure, we have our notions of what wolves are, a feeling for some idea of wolfness, that come to us perhaps as that supplement which Derrida argues "comes *naturally* to put itself in Nature's place" (*TDS*, 89), in the place of the wolf. But where exactly is the place of the wolf? As far as Billy Parham is concerned wolves seem to come from "another world

entire" (*TC*, 4), from a world so suited to their needs it seems "as perfect to their use as if their counsel had been sought in the devising of it." (*TC*, 31).

Between a wolf then and the world, or at least *its* world, there would appear to be no gap, no fissure, no space for "culture" ("that which [men] name and call out to one another") to bridge, and it is this seeing intimacy between a wolf and its world that suggests why the wolf should so quicken the imagination of Billy Parham. As a human subject Billy sees himself as being, in effect, authored by culture; by ties of family, of country, of history. But the wolf seems to embody a radically different narrative of being, a narrative unapprehendable by and owing nothing to culture, which perhaps can be best described not so much as a sense of *unauthoredness*, but of *self-authoredness*. As McCarthy puts it, "the wolf would always be corroborate to herself" (*TC*, 79). Seen in this light, what Billy Parham is seeking, via the wolf, is not some ultimate truth about wolves, some essence of wilderness, but rather an intersecting of narratives, his own with that of the wolf's, for as McCarthy understands things, to lose the wolf from the world is not just a matter of the annihilation of a particular species, but primarily the loss of a narrative, the effacement of a certain kind of history:

He [Billy] wrapped himself in the blanket and watched her [the wolf].

When those eyes and the nation to which they stood witness were gone at last with their dignity back into their origins there would be other fires and other witnesses and other worlds otherwise beheld. But they would not be this one. (*TC*, 74).

However, for all that Billy's self-abandoning love of the wolf reaches out to extinguish the oppositions of nature and culture, to establish a point of intersection, a moment of crossing that is both a traversal and a commingling, he is still, at this point in the novel at least, held by those very oppositions. Indeed, what else is his attempt to return the wolf from the USA to the supposedly still wilder west of Mexico but an attempt to remove the wolf from the deadly foreign ground of history to its home ground of nature? He may, in his own way, be testing these oppositions, wondering, for example, "at the world it [the wolf]

smelled", and whether "the living blood with which it slaked its throat [had] a different taste to the thick iron tincture of his own. Or to the blood of God" (*TC*, 51-52). But for Billy Parham to separate himself, if only a little, from the culture that authors him, and know what the wolf knows, he will need, as the wolf hunter has already warned him, "to see" the wolf "on its own ground" (*TC*, 46). And to see the ground of the wolf will entail the death of the wolf, at Billy's own hand to save it from a yet more torturous end in a fairground dogfight. He will, however, fulfil his promise to return her to the mountains whence she came:

He'd carried the wolf up into the mountains and buried her in a high pass under a cairn of scree. The little wolves in her belly felt the cold draw all about them and they cried out mutely in the dark and he buried them all and plied the rocks over them and led the horse away. (*TC*, 129)

Now Billy can, in part at least, come to know the ground of the wolf. In his exile in Mexico, and in his subsequent crossings between that country and the USA, he too will know what it is to be "homeless, hunted, weary", and now the categories of history and nature, human and animal, can begin to collapse into one another. Mexico is described as that land "where the antique world clung to the stories and the spores of living things" (*TC*, 331), while Billy himself comes to be perceived by other people as:

"Something in off the wild mesas, something out of the past". Ragged, dirty, hungry in eye and belly. Totally unspoken for. In that outlandish figure they beheld what they most envied and what they most reviled. If their hearts went out to him it was yet true that for very small cause they might also have killed him. (*TC*, 170)

The figure of Billy thus appears to represent in exemplary fashion both the predicament of the wolf he attempted to save and all of our own contradictory feelings for wolves. He evokes both envy and revulsion, and if he pulls at the heartstrings he pulls at the trigger finger as well. Billy seems to be wolf in all but name, and with the death of his father and mother, and, later, of his brother, he,

like the wolf whom he has served as both guardian and gravedigger, will come to learn "that same reckless deep of loneliness that cored the world to its heart" (*TC*, 105). And yet this ground of the wolf is somewhere that Billy can never *wholly* know. He still senses the albeit muted insistence of other "protocols", other narratives. He still searches for his father's stolen horses, and is still saddled with his father in the form, no less, of his father's saddle. Thus the place that Billy comes to occupy is not, nor can ever be, *exactly* the same as the wolf's, for, as Derrida reminds us, "at bottom whatever violently takes place is always *something* of a parasite. *Never quite* taking place is thus part of its performance...of its taking place" (*LI*, 90). Billy may be sundered from and rejected by the stories that author him - even to the extent that he is rejected for army service because of a "heartmurmur" (*TC*, 339), a disturbance in other words of his centre - but with the death of the wolf, and with no other object with which his love might involve itself, might *contaminate*, he becomes, in effect, a foreign body without a host. He becomes foreign to himself:

He seemed to himself a person with no prior life. As if he had died in some way years ago and was ever after some other being who had no history, who had no ponderable life to come. (*TC*, 382)

Thus we approach the nub of the novel, and the question of why wolves, or conceivably any other animal should matter, not only on ecological and ethical grounds but on literary ones as well. Consider that small word *host*, and the related senses of that word which have perhaps held too strong and too subtle a sway over our representations of the animal other. I am thinking here of *host* as meaning both "a large number of people or things", "an army", and as meaning "the bread consecrated in the Eucharist". Interestingly enough both these meanings of *host* share related etymological roots; from the Latin *hostis* (stranger, enemy) and *hostia* (victim). Seen in this light, it is worth asking to what extent we represent the animal other as enemy, as threat, only then to sacrifice it, and in expurgation of what unnameable sin? In other words what is it we are trying to kill not just when we aim a rifle at a wolf's head, but when we aim the

imagination at the animal other? Where The Crossing succeeds is not in following the logic of these questions, in searching for *the* answer, but rather in redirecting our attention to that other meaning of *host* as that which receives a guest, which stages the presence of another, and thus to how animals, nature, the world - call it what you will - plays host to our imaginings. In so doing The Crossing also directs our attention to the consequences that may flow if we become unmindful of, and even destructive towards, that host. With the death of the wolf Billy Parham unwittingly pays the price of that general unmindfulness, but in the tragic part he is given to play, in that journeying which "began to take upon itself the shape of a tale" (TC 331), he suggests a relationship to the world, the world as nature *and* as history, that exemplifies a mode by which we might better reconcile ourselves to it. In short, Billy *acts* by *not acting*. Billy Parham, over and above all the roles that the novel ascribes for him, is a *witness*; a witness not only to the wolf and the other animals that inhabit the narrative landscape, but also to those human histories which intersect his own story. Indeed, it is this problematic situation of the witness that The Crossing is at pains to emphasise, for, as one character puts it:

Acts have their being in the witness...In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all...If the world was but a tale who but the witness could give it life? (TC 154)

In this sense of the foreign body, the parasite, as witness, McCarthy suggests a way of relating to the other, to, we might say, the *differently authored*, that takes account of the necessity of imagining the other, while at the same time acknowledging in the other an equivalent integrity of being. As Derrida argues that the work "produces its reader, a reader who doesn't yet exist...a reader who would be 'formed', 'trained', 'instructed by the work" (TSICL 74), so Billy Parham is created by the text of the wolf as its reader, its witness, and by those other texts, those other narratives and landscapes (one might almost say "textscapes") which are traversed by his crossings and which, in their turn, create Billy as their reader, their witness.

The implications of these acts of witnessing are not necessarily a cause for jubilation or ecstasy, especially given that the logic of the foreign body as witness involves a standing *beside*, not a standing *outside*. Indeed to act as witness always entails a certain risk, the possibility of loss, and is haunted, in its paying testimony to what is passing, by a sense of mourning; for what are Billy Parham's crossings if not fugue journeys, travelogues of mourning. Nevertheless, as witness Billy occupies a position which is perhaps of critical importance, one that Derrida describes in "Shibboleth" as being "at once indispensable, *essential*...and finally supplementary, *nonessential*" (392). In this sense what Billy Parham, as witness, as foreign body, guarantees is that which Derrida describes, in terms of the literary text, as an 'excess of intelligibility which the poem can also forego.' (S 392). The world, like the poem, does not need a human subject to realise itself, but in that "excess of intelligibility" which the world gives up, and which the witness guarantees, arises also the opportunity of affirming the human as narrative-making subject, and of affirming that other upon which every narrative depends for its host. This does not mean, as I perhaps suggested at the beginning of this essay, that The Crossing presents us with a new, previously undiscovered species of literary wolf. Indeed, the force of McCarthy's narrative lies perhaps in its refusal to participate in a process of objectification, for the world, like the stories it engenders, is always on the move. If no one image of wolf - and least of all, perhaps, those of devil's beast or wanton killer - survives our attempts to "trap" it in narrative, then it is because the wolf is itself an instance of this idea of movement, of the inexhaustibility of crossing, of that "excess of intelligibility" which the world yields up. We may have many words for that world but, as the novel suggests, "wolf" may in the end to be among our best. As ever, McCarthy puts it rather better:

He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any

wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it.
(*TC*, 127)

Abbreviations

LI: Limited Inc

OWAM: Of Wolves and Men

S: Shibboleth

TDS: "That Dangerous Supplement"

TC: The Crossing

TSBOW: "The Social Biology of Werewolves"

TSICL: "This Strange Institution Called Literature"

WF: White Fang

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First Response

This is an intelligent article, entertaining and highly readable. One thinks immediately of Moby Dick and the American tradition of wilderness writing. Some contextualisation in these terms would be helpful. There are also methodological uncertainties. Does this paper purport to be a discourse on literary representation of the other which uses the wolf as its emblem? Or does it seek to discuss the lupine in all its specificity? What might be the relationship of the lupine and the sublime? Does McCarthy see the wolf as a vehicle of sublime representation in the way that Wordsworth sees a cliff or Melville sees the whale, as instances of awesome otherness? The author does raise this question in asking "why wolves or conceivably any other animal?" However, no sustained answer to this question is forthcoming. Should this article form part of a larger project, then these issues will doubtless be clarified.

As it stands, the paper is thought-provoking but could benefit from a clearer sense of overall trajectory.

