Independent scholar

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Who's afraid of big white wolves?

Abstract:

This paper examines the effect human stories have had on the wolf. In particular it focuses on the Wolf Man's dream of seven white wolves as reported to Freud and considers how we might re-interpret this dream as an example of ecological writing brought about by containing the anxiety inherent in meeting the animal gaze. This anxiety, it is argued, paradoxically both inhibits and enables creative thinking. Containing anxiety and creating an ecological poetics requires consideration of Keats' notion of negative capability.

Biographical note:

Lorraine Shannon is an independent scholar and academic editor. She has a PhD in postcolonial literature from Trinity College, Dublin and a non-traditional PhD in ecology and writing from UTS. She has taught in various universities in Ireland and Australia and published in a range of journals including *The Australian Humanities Review, PAN* and *Island Magazine*. Her edited collection of writings by the environmental philosopher Val Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile,* has been published by ANU ePress and her exploration of edible gardens entitled The Epicurean Backyard is forthcoming. She is co-editor of the *Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism* and a founding member of Kangaloon creative ecologies. She has also won several garden design awards.

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A 1989 'Far Side' cartoon by Gary Larson depicted a wolf in a floral nightgown on a psychiatrist's couch. 'It was supposed to be just a story about a little kid and a wolf,' he says, 'but off and on I've been dressing up as a grandmother ever since'. A simple story has affected this 'patient' to the extent that his identity as a wolf has been overlaid with grandmotherly attributes. The 'patient's' anxiety gestures not only towards the role of wolves in well-known fairy-tales but also to their long and complex history as 'storied' animals. In the west, a heritage of highly ambivalent representations has profoundly affected the lives of wolves as well as bequeathing a difficult, multi-faceted legacy with which to imagine or indeed write about wolves today.[1] And it is here that the significance of Larson's cartoon lies. It represents a human attentively listening to and empathising with a wolf's personal 'problems' brought about by human stories.

Paying attention to the troubles both literal and metaphorical of the storied wolf offers a route by which to reassess the ways we have used wolves to position ourselves in relation to more-than-human nature. These troubles include our stories of powerful menacing wolves whose only apparent wish is to devour us; big, bad wolves that huff and puff to blow our civilisation down; wily wolves who disguise themselves as sheep, or demonic ones that release the 'beast within' evoked in the legend of the werewolf. Occasionally a dream provides a glimpse of a majestic wolf that can never quite be eclipsed by the fear or darkness in the human mind. And then there are motherly wolves, as in the Romulus and Remus legend, who stand for a form of heroic cross-species nurturing that gainsays the menace of the wolf disguised as a grandmother.

Finally there are those famous, enigmatic, white wolves in the dream of Freud's Wolf Man. Appropriately attired, we presume, as neither a grandmother nor a wolf, the Wolf Man lay on Freud's couch and recounted his dream in these words:

> I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying in my bed. (My bed stood with its foot towards the window; in front of the window there was a row of old walnut trees. I know it was winter when I had the dream, and night-time.) Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheepdogs, for they had big tails like foxes, and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they pay attention to something. In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up (Freud 1969).

Clearly our stories have merged together wolves in the actual world and wolves of the imagination so that they trouble each other in complicated ways. We have positioned wolves so they 'blur and transgress that border between not only wild spaces and domestic spaces, wild nature and familiar nature, threat and security, but also "nature" and "self", provoking fear but also wonder' (Buller 2008: 1594).

This does not imply that wolves are passive victims unable to actively participate in this process. Buller continues by stating that wolves also cross over and re-enchant 'like messengers from the external wild … redefining it as a process enacted by humans and nonhumans alike'. However, the emphasis in this paper is on the fact that

whether we like it or not, we *do* use animals to imagine and dream and while our fantasies and stories about animals tell us something about ourselves and about human relationships with the more-than-human other, they can also have real and often detrimental effects on that other. So when we write of wolves today paths of connection may collide with boundaries of otherness and impede rather than enhance enchantment. Dream associations when recalling an encounter with a wild animal may simply revisit and renew all the negative representations of wolves of the imagination.

As an antidote, this paper argues that re-visiting and re-interpreting the Wolf Man's dream offers, from the human perspective, one way to positively re-envision humankind's relations with this animal. It asks us whether we can look the dream animal in the eye and find in that mutual gaze an opening whereby as messengers of a humanimal poetics we too can cross over and re-enchant. In particular, it focuses on the impediments to this crossing-over process by examining the moment of encounter with the animal gaze along with the anxiety, vulnerability and impediment to creative thinking that can accompany it. It recognises that grappling with the emotional experience of this encounter can stimulate creative thinking; that although the animal stare gives rise to anxiety it is also an impetus to thought and imagination. It can be a catalyst for opening-up inter-subjectivity whereby we can move beyond a flight-or-fight response to anxiety and by 'being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats 1817, ctd. in Li 2009: ix) we can rework old stories of and for our animal brethren in the belief that these play an important role in this age of accelerating extinctions and loss of biodiversity.

At present, as Mary-Jane Rust has argued, we are 'between stories' (2008: 159), living in a transitional space of great turbulence. We need to re-write our stories to provide an inspiring vision of transformation in which we live with rather than dominate the other. Unpicking the nature of the anxiety experienced within the gaze between human and non-human may be one way in which we can forego a delusional confrontation with the more-than-human world and also accept that what emerges from the opening-up of inter-subjectivity can take its own form and does not need to have a human-controlled form imposed upon it. We might call the writing that would result from this experience 'wild writing', derived from rewilding the psyche; an ecological writing in which there is an animalising intermingling of natures and wolf natures with humans. It would accept the relationship among all creatures, the fluid boundaries between them and the crossing from raw emotion over an internal boundary of anxiety, shared in common, to productive thought processes. It would, in this sense, articulate human existence through the medium of animal life.

We might, for example, re-imagine the Wolf Man's dream as a story in which these wolves burning bright in the night speak to us of the wolf's necessary yet endangered position as a top predator in complex ecological systems. As dream 'messengers from the wild' they ask us to assess how we will continue to live, dream, think, imagine and write if we fail to bridge the gap between our need to analyse the complex meanings of the animal at psychological levels and the effects these ideas may have on ecosystems. They ask us to rethink the anxiety we experience when subjected to the animal gaze. This anxiety must, however, be distinguished from the recognition that

an encounter with a wolf can be dangerous and fear is an appropriate response. Fear rather than anxiety allows us to acknowledge our position as prey, as meat within the earth's food chain; that we are legitimate targets for hungry wolf packs if we are unwise enough to wander from the path in the woods (although wolves, in fact, rarely kill humans). Such acceptance renders fear of the wild, real, pragmatic and manageable. It also positions us undeniably as creatures of an ecosystem in which wolves expect their prey to lock eyes with them in what Barry Lopez calls the conversation of death (1995: 94).

By rethinking the anxiety inherent in our often irrational responses to the animal gaze we can creatively re-engage with disasters of our own making in which animals have been demonised and humanity shorn of its creatureliness. We can participate in the conversation of life. Aldo Leopold, who during his early career in the United States Forestry Service was an active member of the campaign to eradicate wolves, relates in *A Sand County Almanac* an account of looking into the eyes of a dying wolf. Having with his companions shot the old wolf he writes:

> We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and I have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and the mountain (1966: 138).

Leopold's account records a seminal moment in human/wolf relationships in which discovery or disclosure replaces mastery. It profoundly altered the stories told of wolves. It provided a space in which we could rethink the wolf as having positive connotations of ecological health so that environmentalists came to see the wolf as 'a symbol of ecological reconciliation, a return to wholeness' (Wilson 1997: 436).

The crucial question is how precisely did that gaze of the old wolf initiate such profound change in Leopold? And can this genesis of a new story also be found in the Wolf Man's dream? Unfortunately, unlike Leopold, the young Wolf Man was unable to respond creatively to his encounter with the dream wolves and an opportunity to transform a long history of negative human reactions to the animal gaze was lost. Although we can now recognise that the urgency of these wolves' need has driven them to climb a tree; the intensity of their gaze, their passion for dialogue has forced the window to spring open, the story ends with the young Wolf Man's terror. He could only scream; he remained trapped in overwhelming fear and anxiety. He tells Freud that it seemed the wolves had riveted their whole attention on him.

This human discomfiture before the gaze of other animals has a long history in the west. Pliny describes in his *Natural History* how the 'eyes of night-roaming animals like cats shine and flash in the dark so that one cannot look at them' while those of the wolf 'gleam and shoot out light' (Pliny 1940: 527). The Renaissance natural historian Edward Topsell asserted that the wolf's eyes 'are yellow, black and very bright, sending forth beams like fire and carrying in them apparent tokens of wrath and malice' (ctd. in Taylor and Signal 2011: 179). Barber reports that the wolf's eye is regarded as having a 'noxious influence' and if a 'wolf looks at a man before the man sees the wolf, the man will temporarily be unable to speak' (1997: 59). On the other hand, 'if the wolf thinks that it has been seen first, it loses its wildness and cannot run away' (Barber 1997:179). In other words, when stared at by a wolf, man becomes a

dumb beast but when subjected to the human gaze a wolf is rendered docile or doglike.

Most recently, Derrida described his embarrassment when, naked, he was gazed upon by his cat. Thinking about this confrontation in the bathroom he remarks that we are naked before the regard of an animal and asks what is set in motion in such an encounter. His answer is that ‘Thinking perhaps begins here’ (2002: 29). Yet, he admits that at the moment of encounter with the cat’s gaze he is unable to think; he too is beset by anxiety. Nevertheless, unlike the Wolf Man, he is able to think about the meaning of his encounter.

I believe this moment in which the animal gaze overwhelms the human with a level of anxiety that impedes thinking, yet paradoxically is also the site where thinking may begin, holds the clue to rethinking the gaze as a metaphor for an opening to a fruitful exchange between human and more-than-human subjects. In his attempt to answer these questions Derrida returns to dreaming and makes a plea for dreaming as special form of thinking. He asks that we care about what ‘the dream lets us think about, especially when what it lets us think about is the possibility of the impossible’ (2002: 168). Can we then interpret the Wolf Man’s wolves as asking us to think about the ‘impossibility’ of another story; of making the impossible possible? Answering this question requires a return to Freud and his analysis of the Wolf Man.

Freud’s thinking in response to the Wolf Man’s dream provides essential background to the ‘impossible’ other story the dream wolves wish to impart. Freud was himself anxious to maintain a firm boundary between human and non-human animals. He was adamant that wild and threatening creatures would not do. He stipulated that a country that shows ‘a high degree of civilisation’ would also exhibit the absence of animal threats. In such a country ‘wild and dangerous animals will have been exterminated,’ he writes, while ‘the breeding of tame and domesticated ones prospers’ (1963: 53–4).

Moreover, Freud maintains that the extermination of wild creatures has a parallel in our psyche and that to function as civilised beings we must conform to social demands by restraining the so-called animal within us. Freud wants humanity to march forward by leaving both internal and external wild animals behind us. His analysis of the Wolf Man’s dream directly confronts the supposed threats, both inner and the outer, that animality poses to the well-ordered psyche. The Wolf Man’s wolf, he declared, was a ‘totemistic father-surrogate’ imbued with an ambivalent admixture of love and fear. Freud’s process of interpretation reconfigured the threat of external wolves in terms of the purely human animality of the Oedipus complex.

However, we also discover in his case history that he believed the patient’s fear of ‘being eaten by a wolf’ was not derived from the content of the dream itself, but from his memory of fairytales featuring ravenous wolves. As a child the Wolf Man had been told stories of a wolf who used his tail as fishing bait and thereby broke it off in the ice; then there was a tale told by his grandfather in which a wolf who attacked a tailor had his tail pulled off. Wild wolves in his dream have faded into shadows and a fairytale species which, despite their fictional adventures of tail loss did not actually die, has succeeded in living on, transformed into bushy tailed dream animals. These undead dream wolves in turn became an animal phobia.

Listening to the story the Wolf Man related of his dream wolves, provided Freud with the impetus to formulate his concept of the primal scene. This was powerful new thinking but from his assumed position outside and above animality Freud ignored the specificity of wild wolves and their function in an ecosystem. He was neither concerned with the experience of the seeing animal nor with finding an answer to why we both vilify and venerate wolves. By demonstrating that ‘wolf’ in fact means ‘father’ he ignored any characteristic of wolves, as wolves. In fact, Freud distorted the dream wolves even further when he examined the Wolf Man’s drawing of his dream scene and referred back to the Wolf Man’s description of the wolves’ resemblance to sheep dogs or foxes. Freud concluded that the ‘wolves of the dream were actually sheep dogs and moreover appear as such in the drawing’ (1918: 246).

He also placed these domesticated ‘wolves’ in a passive position in relation to being looked at. The wolves’ challenging stare was transferred to the child Wolf Man. In breaking the eye contact between the child and the wolves of his dream through a reversal of positions and the associative shift onto dogs, Freud fulfilled his desire to eliminate wild animals and envisage a society that included only passive, domesticated species. Wild wolves subjected to the gaze of the human were rendered docile or doglike. The important point here, however, is not that Freud is necessarily wrong in his analysis but rather that the fact that we use animals in this way in our dreams and stories is highly problematic and needs to be unpacked.

As a result of Freud’s analysis the Wolf Man’s fairytale-cum-dream wolves have survived for decades frozen in the walnut tree, their stare unwavering and mysterious in its intensity. All that remains of these powerful, white wolves concealed behind the weight of interpretation is the burden of their truth that continues to make itself felt. It is, however, this very burden which silently implores us to listen. It suggests that despite the phobia, despite the re-configuration as a father figure, despite the domestication into sheep dogs, there exists within the Wolf Man’s dream an opening, a space in which to re-explore or re-interpret these oedipalised wolves.

In contrast to Freud, Jung, in ‘Approaching the Unconscious’, argues that the absence of animal being weakens the humanity of the human world. It is the human world that suffers from the loss of animals, rather than the removal of animals allowing human beings to establish their autonomy. Having removed them, we mourn for the animals that are lost, whose presence is a dark absence. We mourn for the animals that can no longer make themselves heard in the world. The Wolf Man’s dream wolves were a forerunner of this shift from a living voice to silence. Although they were struck dumb by their treatment at Freud’s hands they have endured as the silenced voice of the ‘impossible’ dream, of feral tales that rewild the human psyche. And they can still tell us a good deal if we are prepared to listen, if we are prepared to face the anxiety inherent in being subjected to the animal gaze. How might we go about this?

We can begin with ecopsychology’s counter argument to Freud that non-human animals are essential to human mental development. Paul Shepard, for example, has cogently argued in *Thinking Animals* that human intelligence is profoundly shaped by animals and isolating ourselves from animals jeopardises the processes of cognitive

and psychological development that are essential to human flourishing. This is not to say that animals should not exist and flourish in their own right but that:

> the mind and its organ, the brain, are in reality that part of us most dependent on the survival of animals. We are connected to animals not merely in the convenience of figures of speech … but by sinews that link speech to rationality, insight, intuition, and consciousness. It is not the same as thinking *about* animals. The connection is in the act and nature of thought, the working of the mind (1998: 2).

Implicit in Shepard's argument is the notion that complexity of thought resonates with, and develops out of, the intricacy and prolixity of the natural world. His concepts are aligned with Gaston Bachelard's notion of the 'animalising imagination' as an alternative way in which humans articulate their existence through the medium of animal life. Bachelard argued that the human symbolic and imaginary orders are grounded in the biological; in his writing on the poet Lautréamont, he states 'there is a need to animalize that is at the origins of imagination. The first function of imagination is to create animal forms' (1986: 27). His vision of an animalising imagination is of a psychological outlook that is educated poetically and aesthetically, yet serves to revitalise the biological; that the imagination is co-extensive with an animated world and human evolution and emotional development are not in fact a gradual distancing from animal life but 'a plunging back, deeper, into the body of the world' (Bleakley 2000: xiv).

What is glossed over in this, albeit valuable, formulation is the anxiety experienced by both Derrida and the Wolf Man when confronted by the animal gaze. It is an anxiety that exposes us to the possibility of terror as well as wonder and yet to contain and work with the emotions that arise is the key to not only accepting the animal within and without but also to a poetics of imagining and writing that can tolerate ambiguity, that can cross over and embrace a shared creatureliness.

Surprisingly, Freud, despite his adherence to Enlightenment values, was also able to recognise that 'we shall never completely subdue nature' (1963: 89). Ultimately for Freud the natural world and our inner world are both untameable; by defending ourselves against the anxiety inherent in meeting the animal other we also defend ourselves against the wildness in the depths of our psyches. It is in his definition of dreaming that we find the germ of a solution to this two-way pull of anxiety – he tells us dreaming is another form of remembering and at the end of chapter three of *The Interpretation of Dreams* he adds 'a dream is the fulfilment of a wish' (Freud 1975: 212). And so our search for new ecological stories of the human/wolf relationship leads us back to long-buried memories of humanimal existence, to the submerged wish to write from a loving and compassionate ecological imagination.

In searching for a way by which we might access these neglected memories, psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's (1962a) understanding of dreaming developed from Freud's definition, not only links us back to Derrida's notion of dreaming as a special form of thinking but also accounts for the way we think and thereby cope with anxiety. Bion's basic premise is that the human personality is constitutionally equipped with a potential set of mental operations that perform conscious and unconscious psychological work on emotional experiences. Given a good enough

environment, the result of this work is psychic growth which implies being open to change. Such growth, in other words, is achieved by a form of thinking that views experience simultaneously from the vantage points of the conscious and the unconscious mind. It is, Bion maintains, dreaming that is fundamental to this process. It is through dreaming that we are able to create a generative conversation between preconscious aspects of the mind and disturbing thoughts, feelings and fantasies that are precluded from, yet pressing towards conscious awareness. Psychological growth, then, is achieved through linking elements of experience (stored as memory) to create a dream-thought. It is this work of making unconscious linkages that allows us to unconsciously and consciously think about and make psychological use of experience.

Moreover, Bion understands dreaming as taking place unconsciously during waking life and not simply when asleep. Dreaming occurs continuously day and night although when awake we are only aware of it in reverie. Both forms of dreaming – that done in sleep and in waking unconscious dreaming – generate a living semi-permeable barrier separating and connecting conscious and unconscious life as well as the facilitating the interplay between them.

Dreaming, in this formulation, is the instrument that through interpretative transformation can defuse anxiety. It is through dreaming that we move beyond a thought-preventing anxiety into a realm of thinking where a meeting of human and non-human animals is creatively productive.

Bion was greatly influenced by Keats' idea of negative capability which he understood as a frame of mind that can contain 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats 1817, ctd. in Li 2009: ix). Bion elaborated on Keats' term to illustrate an attitude of openness of mind which he considered of central importance. For Bion, negative capability was the poetic equivalent to the process of creating linkages between conscious and unconscious life via dreaming. It is the ability to tolerate the pain and confusion of not-knowing, rather than imposing ready-made or omnipotent certainties upon an ambiguous or emotional challenge.

If, when meeting the gaze of the dream animal we are able to contain and use emotion we may be able to understand the possible 'impossible' story the dream animal seeks to convey. This requires not only trusting in the 'pulses' of our own experience, tolerating uncertainty, being willing to engage with the mysterious but also having the capacity to link dream thoughts with thinking. The inability to do so was at the heart of the Wolf Man's problem: anxious flight from thought was his only possible option. He was unable to embrace an animalising imagination because he could only experience 'nameless dread' (Bion 1962a: 96).

A rereading of the Wolf Man's psychic state suggests that this internal dread may have been mirrored by an external dread – that his dream wolves may also have entered his psychic bestiary via an animalising interaction with actual wolves. The area of Russia in which the Wolf Man spent his childhood was known to be inhabited by white wolves and the culture of the wolf hunt was very much a part of Russian aristocratic sport. One can imagine the sight of wolves hanging from the trees after a successful hunt and the impression such a sight would have made on the young Wolf

Man. Might such events, long forgotten, also have been making themselves felt in his dream? Perhaps this dream was a remembering of the breaking of an animal/human bond, an accusation of destruction and disenchantment that is far removed from the enchantment found in fairytales.

Unlike Larson's wolf who found a sympathetic ear for his anxious need to acquire grandmotherly attributes, Freud could only provide the Wolf Man with wolves as stand-ins for a father figure. The buried trauma of the severing of the human/animal bond prevented the Wolf Man from being able to embrace the feelings and possibilities of humanimal existence that might emerge. Instead he was unable to move beyond a state haunted by terror and anxiety, bereft of enchantment. And so it remains the task of ecological writing to grapple with the anxiety of confronting the animal gaze and tell a new story in which the Wolf Man's 'unthought-like thoughts' become 'the souls of thought' (Poe 1992: 80).

The story told by this animal soul of thought is one that reverses the dehumanisation we have brought upon ourselves by exterminating, vilifying and deluding ourselves about animals and wolves in particular. In developing such a story we can learn much from Keats' negative capability, of his apprehension of writing as 'Soul-making'. Such writing is consistent with an inherent sense of wonder. It is the requisite state of mind for both the production of symbolic images and their interpretation. It requires a state of mind that can suppress cognition functions sufficiently to allow a dream-like state to develop while maintaining them enough to be able to attribute metaphorical meaning to the dream thoughts that emerge. Keats recognised that in so far as reason led to increased knowledge of the objective world it enhanced rather than limited imagination by widening speculation. A truly complex mind Keats said would be one that is imaginative and at the same time 'careful of its fruits' and would exist 'partly on sensations partly on thought'. While imagination makes possible empathic participation in the existence of others, secondary processes structure the formal properties of literature exacting a control over imaginal content and contextual relations. Negative capability is the necessary state by which emotions and thoughts can create an ecological poetics – a refashioning of the world as it is absorbed into the psyche – writing that creates ecology, ecology that creates writing.

Now that the howls of wolves are beginning to reverberate again throughout parts of Europe and America we can perhaps also consider how we might think, dream, imagine and write stories of our own re-humanisation. It will be a re-humanisation that despite our concrete jungles and brick fortresses understands that we can never be fully extricated from an ecosystem.

It will be a re-humanisation in which we recognise that even within Freud's domesticated, discontented civilisation, there are spaces for the preservation of wildness. In the end, we can return to Freud and his suggestion that fantasies informed by wildness, 'produce a crack in the near-ubiquitous domestication of life' (Genosko 1993: 630). Through this crack we may hear the voices of wolves telling us that without more-than-human voicings we have a civilisation that has abandoned its roots in the living body of the earth that nurtures it; a civilisation that has inscribed itself in a deadly narrative of biospheric proportions. With our ear to the crack we may

recognise that fairytale wolves sacrifice themselves to heal our own inner fears and we may be inspired to write new tales to confront our anxiety about the animal gaze using our own fierce powers, with an animalising imagination that will allow us to sleep 'sweet and sound … in granny's bed between the paws of the tender wolf' (Carter 1979: 118).

Endnotes

1. The focus of this paper is on Western attitudes towards the wolf, but mention should also be made of the many peoples who rather than fearing the wolf, treated it with respect and identified with what they considered to be its admirable qualities such as skill, resilience and cooperation in hunting. There are many such accounts in Indigenous North American cultures as well as among the Ainu people of Japan who had legends of close relationships between people and wolves predicated on a deep reverence for wolves.

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