The Wolf Is Not Angry

Few other animals in history have suffered as much from negative portrayals as the wolf. Now that the wolf has returned to the Netherlands, we need different stories.

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November 23, 2022 – published in no. 47

The wolf is a stranger, the stranger is a wolf.
The wolf is a guest, the guest is a wolf.
The wolf is an unknown, the unknown is a wolf.
The wolf is a loner, the loner is a wolf.
The wolf is a refugee, the refugee is a wolf.
The wolf is a fortune seeker, the fortune seeker is a wolf.
The outsider is a wolf.
The creep is a wolf.
The madman is a wolf.
The other is a wolf.
The wolf is a wolf.

"The strongest is always right," writes La Fontaine in the fable of the wolf and the lamb. The lamb drinks from a stream, the wolf will not allow it, and a conversation unfolds in which the wolf unjustly blames the lamb for all sorts of things. In the end, he eats the lamb. Just like that. Perhaps the lamb had a point, but it no longer matters.
"La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure," is La Fontaine's French line. *Raison* means more than being right – it contains reason, reasoning, rationality – another Dutch translation is: "Who is strongest is also strongest in reasoning."

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida often points in his work to the connection between power and the ancient Greek *logos*. *Logos* is another untranslatable word – it means word, language, reason, principle, thought, thinking itself. It is a capacity, *logos*, that in the philosophical tradition is always marked off as human. By humans.

Logos, word, reason, language, *raison*, right: the terrain of the human. La Fontaine's wolf is a human; fables are not about animals, animals represent types of people. Real animals have influenced this – with their actions they partly shape the image humans have of them – but within language certain traits are amplified and others ignored. The image that emerges is repeated until it becomes a stereotype.

The strongest is always right. According to Derrida, "strongest" here means more than forcing one's own correctness. Whoever is in charge makes the norm. That norm serves as the basis for what we all consider true and just, for laws and rules and standards. Whoever deviates is an Other.

A stranger, a wolf.

The wolf has returned to the Netherlands, and people are in turmoil. Is it really a return, and what is a wolf, anyway? – but I'll get to that in a moment. First, I want to talk about language.

Or rather, *logos*. Or rather, the political. For that we have to go further back in time (that's one of the beautiful things about words: they allow you to enter into conversation with the dead). Back to Aristotle, to be precise, and his statements about the political community.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle writes that the human being is the only political animal. Other animals have voices (*phonè*) with which they can express pain and pleasure, but humans are the only animals with *logos*, reason, language, and therefore the only ones capable of distinguishing between good and evil.

In just a few sentences Aristotle says a lot. He draws a boundary between humans on one side and all other animals on the other. Wolves, lambs, bees, cats, crocodiles, toads, herring, and snails are all labelled "animals." At the same time, he also draws a boundary around language. Language is human language. Other animals have only voices. Language turns out to be necessary for political action – other animals are incapable of it – and for forming a political community. Four boundaries, then, like fences around animals: language, political action, and the political community. It all looks neat, those fences. Humans like fences and boundaries; they give a sense of certainty. But, of course, they never keep everything out.

Which brings us to the wolf. More and more wolves are living in the Netherlands. We don't know exactly how many, but at least four families and eleven individuals. They were absent for a long time. Around 1800, wolves still roamed the Netherlands (and Belgium: around Liège in 1830 there were still large packs). At the end of the nineteenth century, one was still seen, and then it went quiet for a while. From 2000 onwards, wolves were occasionally sighted again, their numbers increasing steadily over the past six years, and in 2019, for the first time in centuries, wolf pups were born in our country, in the Veluwe.

Wolves did not disappear from the Netherlands because they could not thrive here. They were exterminated, just as they were in other parts of Europe. After a long period of living side by side – as humans and large predators coexist in many parts of the world – with give and take, and sometimes serious sacrifices on both sides, the wolf gradually became the enemy of humans in the course of the Middle Ages.

Humans had a hard time in those days, partly due to the plague and the Little Ice Age, which caused crop failures. As scarcity increased, wolves became more and more direct competitors, and during that time the stories people told each other about wolves also began to change. Older folktales, as well as Norse mythology and the legend of the founding of Rome, portrayed wolves in a variety of ways. Sometimes they were adversaries or predators, sometimes mothers or protectors, sometimes representatives of nature, of a wild world we held in awe.

In the eleventh century, the wolf began appearing in religious stories. Monks who allowed themselves to be distracted by material concerns were depicted as "wolf monks." Not long after, the *Ysengrimus* was written, a Latin beast epic in which the wolf Isengrim and the fox Reynard (*Reinaert*) played the leading roles. Isengrim symbolised corrupt monks who succumbed to their greed, while Reynard represented the poor. We know its successor better:

Van den vos Reynaerde. The wolf Isengrijn appears there too, as a gluttonous and foolish figure.

From that point on, the wolf's image goes steadily downhill. In fables, wolves are cruel and greedy. In fairy tales, they are mainly cruel – not as cunning as foxes, but threatening and dangerous. They enter the house, as in the story of the Three Little Pigs, and even crawl into grandmother's bed. In Divine Comedy, Dante Alighieri calls the wolf greedy; William Shakespeare uses wolves as metaphors for villains.

Meanwhile, in folktales, the popularity of the werewolf was on the rise. The werewolf was not a new character – he already appears in Metamorphoses from Ovid – but in the Middle Ages the wolf entered Europe's collective consciousness. Especially in France, where wolves, like women and cats, were burned as witches.

Wolves stole sheep and other livestock from humans; they were real opponents, physically or at least economically. But the image of the wolf as an enemy – the image that underpinned the extermination of wolves across much of Europe – arose in and through these stories. Fables and religious narratives that portrayed monks as wolves were not intended to say anything about animals, but the image they created of those animals nevertheless became associated with them in the human imagination. A narrative emerged that legitimised the killing of wolves and even encouraged people to do so.

Scientific literature on the demonisation of the wolf consistently points to the role of the Catholic Church in this movement: the wolf and the werewolf were depicted as agents of the devil, representing heretics. And that association with the devil is deeply ingrained in our culture. Few other animals in history have suffered so much from negative portrayals. (Although rats, mosquitoes, and cockroaches don't exactly have stellar reputations either.)

But is "extermination" even the right word? Or should we call it genocide? Speciecide? Both? Wolves form communities, they have cultures that differ from place to place. They are social, intelligent, they care for one another, they cooperate – for example, while hunting. Ethologist Marc Bekoff and philosopher Jessica Pierce write in *Wild Justice* that wolves have a sense of justice. Yason Badridze, a Georgian wolf researcher who lived with a pack of wolves for several years in the 1970s, writes about their altruism and empathy. They shared their food with him and saved him when he was attacked by a bear. They also cared for an older wolf in the group who was lame and could no longer do much.

Wolves communicate with each other – through sound, touch, scent, eye contact. They do not speak the same language everywhere. Wolf researcher Holly Root-Gutteridge studied differences between the "languages" of American and European wolves. Groups that live near other communities sometimes adopt aspects of those languages. Red wolves in certain areas of United States imitate the howls of coyotes and American wolves. We don't yet fully understand what their howls mean – research on that has only just begun.

That research is still in its infancy for many animal languages. This is partly because animal research tends to reinforce existing prejudices about animals. Researchers, after all, are products of their own environment. For centuries it was assumed that human language was the only language – think of Aristotle, who was, incidentally, quite generous in his assessment of what animals did and could do; it was only later in the philosophical tradition that animals were reduced to machines. Because human language was seen as the only

language, the languages of other animals were not studied – after all, why investigate something that supposedly does not exist?

The Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret studies animal researchers. In her book *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* she discusses wolf research under the heading "Hierarchy." For two reasons: hierarchy was long seen as a central element of wolf culture, and our image of wolf hierarchy has influenced our thinking about human social relations.

According to researchers, a male stands at the centre of a wolf pack: the alpha male. With him is the alpha female, slightly below him in rank. Then come the betas, and so on. This theory, Despret writes, was based on observations in zoos and wildlife parks. Wolves that did not know each other were placed together in groups, often with insufficient food and space – the wolves could not leave. These wolves did their best under the circumstances, as captive animals always do, and arranged themselves, sometimes after conflict, into a certain social order. But this had little to do with any "necessary" hierarchy. This became clear when one of the wolf researchers began studying wild wolves in the 1990s. They too lived together in groups, but those groups were based on family bonds and care rather than conflict.

Researchers, according to Despret, loved this hierarchical model because they also understood human power relations as hierarchical – such as those between men and women. What is deemed "natural" is often used to legitimise how things *ought* to be. But there was little that was "natural" about the relationships among the wolves they had studied. And nature itself is a concept that is constantly being redefined, depending on cultural understandings at a given time.

The idea of male dominance in wolf society turned out to be a myth, one that joined the long list of persistent stories shaping our image of wolves.

Included in those persistent stories is also the idea that wolves and humans cannot live together. The Finnish historian Heta Lähdesmäki wrote an article about the relationship between wolves and humans in Finland. The fate of wolves there is currently hanging by a thread: many voices call for their extermination.

Many Finns see wolf-human relations as a conflict, or even a war. Often, they mention in discussions that non-domesticated wolves near Turku in the nineteenth century killed a child three times. They therefore consider the large-scale killing of wolves at the end of that century justified. Most Finns also think that the wolf disappeared from Finland until 1973; since then, wolves have been better protected, partly under European regulations. But Lähdesmäki's archival research shows that wolves were indeed present. They were simply often unnoticed by the general public.

Lähdesmäki believes that today's problems between wolves and humans are connected to that interpretation of the past. Those who think relations with wolves have always been conflictual, and that exterminating all wolves is possible, have a different attitude toward wolves than those who believe humans and wolves could coexist in the past and that wolves have always been here.

Our cultural memory is selective, writes Lähdesmäki, whether it concerns passive or active forgetting. But there is also a promise in that. Every present provides a new perspective, which can change the meaning we assign to past events. The past is not straightforward, and what has been forgotten can be brought back. In this way, many women and non-white people are now being written back into history.

In the case of wolves and humans in Finland, hope lies in the less frequently told stories of coexistence. About wolves that ignore and avoid humans (which most wolves do), and about people who accept wolves and the losses they bring because they are part of the world, part of things larger than ourselves, like disease, death, and cold. Accepting this does not mean that coexistence is effortless. It actually causes problems. That applies to all relationships — living together with other humans will never be completely harmonious either. But the idea that you can eliminate difficulties is an illusion. It is better to practice living with difficulty. The American philosopher of science and biologist Donna Haraway calls this *staying with the trouble*. Staying with problems or difficulties. A part of this is not placing yourself above the other, but understanding that you are part of the same web.

Staying with difficulties, as in learning to live with wolves, is important in the Netherlands as well as in Finland, not only for the wolves. Many of the great crises of our time — the climate crisis, the coronavirus pandemic, the extinction of species — are connected to human exceptionalism, also called anthropocentrism. In that worldview, humans are not only special animals but also better than other animals. This exceptionalist thinking has allowed us to exploit the Earth and its inhabitants, including humans elsewhere, without limits, for our own gain.

To address the problems caused by this, humans need to understand themselves differently, as part of the whole. As long as the exceptional position remains intact, we will always place ourselves above the rest of the world. And that continues to make the destruction of the natural world possible.

Staying with difficulties and understanding oneself as part of a larger ecological web is not necessarily easy or comfortable. On the contrary. And learning to live with the other — the wolf, the stranger, the unknown — does not mean assimilating the other or making them the same, but learning to approach them as other. Different stories can help with this.

“It’s only a matter of time before the wolf attacks a child,” said Caroline van der Plas of the BBB (a political party in the Netherland) to NOS. “Little Red Riding Hood? It will soon no longer be a fairy tale in the Netherlands.”

In *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* by Angela Carter, three wolf stories are told. “It is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts,” begins *The Werewolf*. Grandma is sick, a mother tells her daughter, and sends her off with a basket of food. She carries her knife because, in that cold country, where wolves are starving, children — even girls — learn to handle a knife.

It does not take long for the wolf to appear, with big red eyes. Every child would die of fright, Carter writes, but not this mountain girl. She chops off the wolf’s left paw in one blow. The wolf cries out in shock and runs away on three legs. The girl folds the paw in her handkerchief and places it in her basket. Grandma is still sick, with a fever. When the girl takes the paw out of her basket, it has turned into a human hand, with a wart and a ring — it

looks like Grandma's hand. The girl calls the neighbors for help. They recognize the hand as that of a witch and stone the old woman without hesitation.

In the next story, *The Company of Wolves*, several werewolves play a role. But these are not wolves — they turn out to be men who abuse, rape, and kill women. The story after that, *Wolf-Alice*, is about a girl raised by wolves. She is an outsider in the human world, but her wolfishness also helps her to become herself, to avoid having to conform to expectations of being a woman.

Three counter-fairy tales: the grandmother is a wolf, the patriarchy is a wolf, the independent woman is a wolf. Or perhaps the wolf is not the problem three times over. The grandmother is a werewolf who attacks her grandchild out of hunger; she has been sick and weak, and moreover allows her paw to be cut off — the girl can handle the wolf. In the second story, the wolves are not wolves; they are men, who deceive women or take by force what they believe belongs to them. In the last story, living differently with wolves is the beginning of a new kind of humanity.

These are three variations on the message of Little Red Riding Hood, which is not that a girl is only in danger in the forest, but that she must guard her virginity. The wolves are not the problem, Carter writes; the system that instills fear and keeps women small is the problem. Stories perpetuate that violence, and that is why we need different ones.

Meanwhile, Dutch children have less to fear from wolves than from politicians like Van der Plas, who do not take the climate crisis and biodiversity loss seriously, thereby putting their future at stake.

The wolf has returned to the Netherlands. Whether it is a "were-wolf," a "still-a-wolf," or an "always-has-been-a-wolf," the real wolves are back, and the Dutch are reasonably debating whether they should be killed. What would we call that again — extermination, murder, genocide, or simply xenophobia? Wolf, go back to your own country. But this is their country. This entire continent belongs to them just as much as it does to us. No, say the farmers, this is our land. These are our animals. But a one-sided contract is not a contract. And power is not the same as justice. La Fontaine had already warned us about that.

Knowing how to relate to wolves begins with understanding how our idea of them was formed. The past plays a role in that, as do the fairy tales we still tell, but new images are constantly being added. The wolf family walking past the webcam in the Veluwe. A young wolf surrounded by photographers, another young wolf chasing a cyclist. A dead pony with large open wounds. Bloodied sheep in a field. These images are part of a larger narrative about nature, in which the wolf is a fierce and dangerous predator. Just like the other concept, nature, that image of the wolf has been shaped by our culture and power relations. Adopting a new attitude requires counter-fairy tales, critical thinking, taking animal languages seriously, sometimes fences, and above all, sharing space differently.

Minister Christianne van der Wal wants a dialogue about the wolf to take place in the Netherlands. She probably means a human dialogue, but wolves should also be able to participate. Just like the sheep, although whether they want to is another question — in 2020, according to Stichting Het Nationale Park De Hoge Veluwe, the wolves killed 295 sheep. But humans killed 685,300 that year, according to Statistics Netherlands.

We are already engaged in dialogue with wolves in various ways — through fences and other interventions in the landscape, during encounters, through our presence. Continuing that dialogue seriously will not be easy. Living with others is not easy, and it never will be. But stay with the problems. Because you yourself can always be the next problem. For wolves, it is also not easy to live with us, with all the highways, deforestation, and guns.

The strongest is not always right. This essay is about words and stories, but they refer to real wolves, who have suffered for centuries under human violence. We should apologize to them for that, as a beginning of a new story.

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