Alice and the Wolf:
Exploring Dennis Danvers’ Wilderness

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Dennis Danvers’ Wilderness,¹ published in 1991, is a work of popular North American fiction that centres upon a reworking of the traditional Western idea of the ‘werewolf’. In this novel Danvers transports the werewolf from the conventional role of villain to heroine, and draws attention to ecological issues intrinsically implicated with this mythological figure. More than simply a romantic fantasy and thriller, Wilderness is a novel that explores the dynamism of the human-nature relationship and challenges certain anthropocentric assumptions that continue to dominate contemporary Western thought. In this paper I will be engaging with Danvers’ Wilderness in order to investigate the ecological issues raised in this work and, more specifically, interrogate the construction of the human/nature binary.

In Western culture the werewolf or lycanthrope has customarily been considered a horrific creature, a nightmarish ‘monster’ of enormous supernatural power and hellish malevolence. Described by the early twentieth century occult expert Montague Summers as a human being “who either voluntarily or involuntarily changes or is metamorphosed into the apparent shape of a wolf,”² the lycanthrope has often been associated in Western folklore with demonic magic and witchcraft. Demonologists writing in the era of the European witch-hunts, for example, believed that werewolves were witches who transformed themselves into wolves “because of their in-
nate greed, cruelty, lust for human flesh, thirst for human blood, and a desire to execute their heinous works without being identified." Seen as the unholy offspring of human intelligence with what Summers describes as "the foul appetites, ferocity, cunning, the brute strength, and swiftness of that animal [the wolf]," the werewolf still abides in popular Western culture as an iconic figure in the world of literary and film ‘horror’. Looming alongside such giants of the gothic imagination as Dracula and Frankenstein’s monster, it is clear that little has altered our popular culture perception of the werewolf.

When examined from an ecocritical perspective it is evident that the traditional werewolf archetype reflects deeply entrenched Western values that posit ‘humanity’ as intrinsically separate from, and superior to, ‘nature’, and which privilege ‘reason’, ‘intelligence’ and ‘mind’ over and above ‘emotion’, ‘instinct’ and ‘matter’. In sharp contrast with those shamanic cultures that consider the ability to metamorphose into non-human form the endowment of a healer, the Western tradition has typically portrayed the lycanthropic condition as the endowment of someone accursed. That the werewolf has been regarded as ‘monstrous’ can be read as implicitly related to the fact that it encompasses both the ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ orders, embodying a transgression that is considered in Western thought to be abhorrent and unacceptable. As ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood points out, it is essential for the absolute division between the ‘dominant’ and ‘marginalised’ to be maintained in order for an oppressive ideology, such as anthropocentrism, to properly function. She observes:

Denial or minimisation of continuity is important in eliminating identification and sympathy between members of the dominating class and the dominated, and in eliminating possible confusion between powerful and powerless. It also helps to establish separate ‘natures’ which explain and justify widely differing privileges and fates. A major aim of dualistic construction is polarisation, to maximise distance or separation between the dualised spheres and to prevent their being seen as continuous or contiguous. Separation may be established by denying or minimising overlap qualities and activities, and by the erection of rigid barriers to prevent contact.

That the werewolf archetype destabilizes the basic structural integrity of the human/nature dualism is self-evident. What could be a more vivid portrayal of continuity between the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ than the physical metamorphosis of a human being into a wolf? The werewolf embodies ‘confusion between powerful and powerless’, and thereby directly compromises the ideological status of ‘humanity’ as a wholly separate order of ‘na-
ture’. Given the importance that a secure and superior notion of ‘human’ identity has had in Western thought and culture, such ‘confusion’ has traditionally been deemed unacceptable. The depiction of the werewolf as ‘monstrous’ has only served to reaffirm the dominant Western anthropocentric ideology, securing the human/nature binary as the incontestable and abiding ‘order of things’ by portraying any transgression of this oppressive ideology as ‘unnatural’ and even ‘demonic’.

In Wilderness Danvers makes an interesting departure from the traditional depiction of the werewolf as ‘monstrous’. Danvers’ heroine, Alice White, is an intelligent and attractive young woman living in modern day America. She works as a travel agent and regularly takes courses at a local university. She is also a werewolf, transforming into a wolf every full moon, as she has done since reaching puberty at the age of thirteen. Living in constant fear of anyone discovering her condition, she lives a solitary existence empty of human intimacy. In order to satiate her sexual desires she engages in anonymous sex with men she meets in hotels. The only person with whom she shares her secret is psychiatrist, Dr. Luther Adams, who believes Alice to be suffering from severe delusions. Like Alice, the wolf is also a desperately lonely animal. She endures her periods of nocturnal manifestation locked in Alice’s basement, eating dog food and yearning to run free. She does not endeavour to escape her captivity, knowing that Alice has made the basement entirely secure. She marks the corners of the room even though the only scent she can smell is her own. Alice and the wolf are both prisoners of their shared nature, forced to live ‘double’ and ‘half-lives’ devoid of emotional fulfilment.

That Alice White is a fictional werewolf does not detract from the poignancy of her predicament. She is, all things considered, simply a person who suffers in near-unbearable isolation for fear of unkind and unforgiving social judgments; a situation with which countless individuals living in the world today can intimately relate. In Jungian terms, she has merely undertaken the all too common act of psychologically dislocating herself from her socially unacceptable ‘shadow’ side, thereby causing herself enormous psychological discordance and unrest. Although Alice’s experience of internal division is played out in a strikingly physical and supernatural manner, her plight is resonant with all those who unsuccessfully endeavour to rid themselves of their own ‘unwanted’ aspects and, in so doing, condemn themselves to a lonely and unhappy existence. That Alice’s ‘unwanted’ aspect is literally a non-human animal only further contributes to the relevance of her story. As ecophilosopher Freya Mathews points out:

[P]syche is, at a certain level, an internalisation of world and that world accordingly affords a reflection of psyche. Let us furthermore
suppose that intuitively ... we are perennially aware of this relation between psyche and world. Then it would follow that whatever we repress in ourselves we shall also seek to repress in the world. What we repress in ourselves is of course Nature, our corporeal aspects. So it is Nature we seek to repress in the world ... Through repression we seek to replace Nature within with a self that we have effectively created ourselves, in accordance with cultural norms: the ego. In parallel fashion we replace outer Nature with a world that we create ourselves, in accordance with cultural norms: civilization.7

Accordingly, Alice’s problematic relationship with the wolf can be read as exemplifying both the problem of psychological repression in individuals, and also the problematic relationship that contemporary Western society has with the non-human world at large. Just as Alice endeavours to do in shutting the wolf away in a basement and keeping its existence a secret, Western society has sought to capture and contain the non-human world within secure boundaries and to deny any connection with it. The internal and external disharmony that arises when Alice’s ‘supernatural’ connection with her non-human counterpart is resisted, rejected and denied is an intimate expression of the disharmony that arises when the human-nonhuman connection is disavowed and ‘nature’ is forbidden to transgress the boundaries that have been artificially fortified against it. Exemplified in Alice’s attempts to radically dichotomise the relationship between ‘woman’ and ‘wolf’, is Western society’s endeavours to dominate the non-human world at the greater detriment of both the human and the non-human alike. As ecophilosopher David Abram observes:

with thousands of acres of nonregenerating forest disappearing every hour, and hundred of our fellow species becoming extinct each month as a result of our civilization’s excesses, we can hardly be surprised by the amount of epidemic illness in our culture, from increasingly severe immune dysfunctions and cancers, to widespread psychological distress, depression, and ever more frequent suicides and ever more frequent suicides, to the accelerating number of household killings and mass murders committed for no apparent reason by otherwise coherent individuals.8

Just as in Alice’s story, it would seem that Western society’s efforts to keep the non-human locked away and underfoot have proved ultimately advantageous to no one.

Alice’s life changes forever when she falls in love with zoologist Dr. Erik Summers. Erik is a university lecturer who has become Alice’s next-
door neighbour after separating from his wife Debra. As their relationship deepens, Alice begins to entertain hopes that in Erik she might have found a lover with whom she could share her true nature. Countering this hope is Alice’s overwhelming fear that Erik might think her insane or a ‘monster’ if the truth were to be revealed to him. Alice herself believes that she is a ‘monster’ and is haunted by adolescent memories of an experience of sudden transformation in which the wolf had killed a young man who had attempted to rape her. Paralysed by fear, yet overwhelmed by the desire to break free from her unhappy isolation, she chooses to tell Erik that she is a werewolf.

Like her psychiatrist, Erik does not believe Alice’s claims. Despite showing Erik all the physical evidence of the wolf’s existence in her basement, the paw prints and marks on the wall, and in spite of his love for her, Alice cannot convince Erik that she is a werewolf. Desperately wishing to reclaim some sense of control over her life, Alice has Dr Adams teach her a method of self-hypnosis by which she might gain command of her transformations and thereby fulfil her wish to “be one or the other, the woman or the wolf.” Alice believes that in order to be happy she must deny her relationship with the turning of the lunar cycles, and embrace a life devoid of either her human or non-human counterpart. As is held in traditional Western thought, Alice is convinced that the human and the non-human can never happily co-exist; one must ultimately dominate the other.

However, in spite of learning to take control of her metamorphoses, Alice’s life continues to spiral out of control. Worried for Alice, Erik contacts Dr Adams in order to determine his best course of action. Because of Dr Adams’ own emotional involvement with Alice, he scares Erik into believing that Alice is ‘sick’ and ‘dangerous’. A frightened and confused Erik tells Debra Alice’s secret and has sex with his ex-wife. The narrative escalates into a frenzied showdown between Alice and Debra in which Debra tells Alice that Erik should not have to “play nursemaid to some crazy bitch who howls at the moon and eats dog food.” An infuriated Alice decides to transform into the wolf, hoping that the wolf will hurt or possibly kill Debra. Alice is successful in becoming the wolf, thoroughly terrifying Debra and causing her to pass out. However, the wolf does not kill or even attempt to hurt Debra:

The wolf smells the man has mated with this woman. This place is his place, filled with his smell. Filled with her own woman’s smell. She follows the scent, marking his path and hers.

Her woman had also mated with the man. Her woman’s anger pushes at her chest. She whimpers, breathing in the man all around her. She comes back to the sleeping woman, pushes at her face
with her snout, still whimpering. She tilts back her head, and the sadness howls through her in a long, aching bellow.

The sleeping woman’s eyes come open and meet hers. Her woman had wanted to kill this woman lying helpless, her throat bare. This is not her way.  

This is a pivotal juncture in Alice’s journey. Alice’s choice to transform into the wolf is fuelled by a murderous rage and Alice incorrectly predicts that drawing the wolf into Debra’s presence will have dire, if not fatal consequences for Debra. Later, when Debra recalls the incident to Erik, she clearly states that the wolf, unlike Alice, had meant her no harm:

Before she [Alice] changed, she was furious with me. I think she would have killed me if she could. I’d been awful to her. But after she changed into a wolf, all that anger seemed to go away. I was terrified of what I’d seen, but I knew she wouldn’t hurt me. I don’t know how, but I was sure of that. I don’t think she means anyone any harm.

This moment of stark contrast between Alice’s violent fury and the wolf’s refusal to harm Debra deeply disrupts certain traditional Western assumptions concerning the nature of women and wolves. According to certain dominant Western stereotypes, we would expect Alice to behave in a ‘civilized’ and physically non-aggressive manner as befitting a human female and the wolf to behave in a violent and reckless manner as befitting a ‘beast’. In confronting Debra both woman and wolf fail to conform to these stereotypes, illustrating the existence of kindness and danger in places unaccounted for within the narrow dictates of the human/beast binary. In this moment of unexpected gentleness and restraint, the wolf demonstrates the ignorance upon which Alice had founded her fear of the wolf and the reality that the non-human aspect of the werewolf is by no means the aspect always to be most feared. As it turns out, the ‘wilderness’ within Alice is sometimes better suited to the role of guardian than to the role of that which must be guarded against.

After their encounter with Debra, Alice and the wolf flee their old life, unable to bare the sadness and loneliness that had plagued them any longer. Despite his best attempt to resume a ‘normal’ life with Debra, Erik cannot forget Alice and sets out to find her. He eventually tracks down Alice’s great-Aunt Ann Rawson, who lives on a country estate in Canada. Erik discovers that Ann is also a werewolf. Ann tells Erik that Alice is now living as a wolf and that she promised Alice not to disclose her whereabouts. Erik tells Ann that he loves Alice and wants her to live as both woman and wolf. When Ann asks why, he replies: “I think it’s because I know it’s a part of her, that she wouldn’t be the same, even as a woman,
Ann invites Erik to remain on the estate for as long as he desires. She tells him of her own plan to leave her human life and to remain as a wolf until she dies. Ann leaves Erik behind, unable to tell him whether he will ever see Alice again.

Unrelenting in his determination, Erik continues in his quest, spending the proceeding days trekking the countryside around the Rawson estate. Eventually he is successful in discovering Alice and has the opportunity to make amends. Although she is angry with him at first, Alice realizes that she still loves Erik and the couple reconcile. Alice and Erik move into the Rawson estate together, this new home providing Alice with an ideal environment for her to co-exist as woman and wolf. The story concludes with Alice spending one or two days of each week transformed, roaming with her pack. Erik acts as a nature guide on the estate and plans to write a book about wolves. Erik, Alice and the wolf live happily ever after.

In concluding with a rather trite fairytale ending, in conforming to the romantic convention that the union of lovers can right all wrongs, Danvers unfortunately retreats from grappling with the full complexities of the issues raised in his novel. Certainly, Alice and the wolf find peace, but this peace is only made possible through a self-imposed exile from human society. In focusing upon the joys of Alice's fringe-dwelling life as part-time wolf and lover to Erik, Danvers diverts attention away from the sad fact that Alice's transgressive nature can only be fully enjoyed in a place so isolated from the general human population that it is visited by 'eco-tourists'. In dwelling upon the unexpected happiness of his heroine, Danvers fails to do the important work of illustrating the essentially bittersweet quality of Alice's fate and remind us that, in spite of the union of lovers, all wrongs are far from being righted.

Nevertheless, *Wilderness* is still a valuable ecological work that challenges the integrity of the human/nature binary and provides us with a modern day myth rich with lessons for our modern minds. As an ecological allegory, Alice's fantastical journey of conciliation with her non-human counterpart exemplifies the journey of self-discovery and understanding that we human beings are now being called upon to undertake in order to heal the relationship of humanity with the more-than-human world. Just as Alice comes to realize the futility of denying the connectedness between 'woman' and 'wolf', so too must we realize the senselessness of denying the interconnectedness of humanity with non-human life. Just as Alice discovers that in order for either woman or wolf to live happily they must both be provided space and freedom in which to flourish, so too must we rediscover the ancient wisdom that in order for us to exist happily on this planet we must respectfully and compassionately co-exist with our non-human
brethren. And just as Alice learns to accept, allow and embrace the ‘wilderness’ which lives and breathes within her, so too must we human beings awaken to our own situation as indelibly part of nature, and to accept this situation in all its complexity and depth.

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NOTES

6 Plumwood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, p. 49.
9 Danvers, Wilderness, p. 109.
10 Danvers, Wilderness, p. 212.
11 Danvers, Wilderness, p. 213.
12 Danvers, Wilderness, p. 214.
13 Danvers, Wilderness, p. 213.
14 Danvers, Wilderness, p. 245.
15 Danvers, Wilderness, p. 291.