

## IL TEMPO DEI LUPI \_ RICCARDO RAO

### 1 The return of the wolf

This book is about wolves in the past centuries and yet it's about the present in its own way. As a matter of facts, wolves are coming back. In the last forty years, they increased in number all over Europe. In Italy they increased tenfold, reaching the number of two thousand. In the Iberian Peninsula they are even three thousand.

In the aftermath of Amatrice, on the newspaper "La Stampa" a piece describes «the anguish of the shepherds for the flocks to reach and take care of in far away districts and to protect from wolves voracity that modernity brought to our doors», as an octogenarian interviewee states.

His words are very effective because grasp the meaning of the wolves moving forward to residential areas, almost like the mythical wolf of Gubbio tamed by Saint Francis and, in the end, like some tendencies typical of contemporary landscapes. These dynamics are new and made people gradually withdraw in urban spaces, maybe excessively expanding but leaving the nature occupy all the surroundings. The return of the wolf is closely related to forests advance, the perfect habitat to find a prey. According to the National Forest Inventory of 2015, in the last ten years forests retrieved the 0,6% of Italian territory, occupying areas once inhabited. This is a remarkable percentage, considering the increasing land consumption in many areas, especially in the cities. And not only in Italy. Richard Fuchs recent researches show how in less than a century, after World War II, forests have grown across the Europe: especially in Italy, France and Spain, after the depopulation of mountain regions, and also in Eastern Europe, because of the downfall of many farms after the Soviet Union dissolved, in Scandinavian, where lumber industry thrives, and wherever reforestation plans had been carried out, like in United Kingdom and Holland with effective results.

Nature created her "third landscape" around mountain and scarcely populated areas and also close to many cities where it reigns undisputed. It's an abandoned landscape deserted by men. It seems that

men can face uncultivated land only if black and white: where there's forest, nature has its law and there's no man. Where there's man, with concrete houses, there's no forest. The uncontaminated and natural state of forest is not a throwback, but it's a specific characteristic of the present time. History tells a different version where natural areas were marked by human presence and population tamed forests.

Reflecting upon wolves throughout history, upon their ecological role and therefore upon forests, can lead to rediscover and strengthen our connection with nature: to see ways that make us recover a deep and true bond with land, one of the essential ways to coexist in harmony with the environment and to choose to protect wildlife and a species still threatened by man.

And above all, paying attention to wolf history lead to discover the reason of an ancient fear, that we learned since childhood. There's no fairy tale without a bad wolf (*lupus in fabula*): just think about *Three little pigs* or *Peter and the Wolf*. Even if we look at it from a contemporary point of view, the wolf it's scary for the majority. When a wolf was spotted in 1992 on the Mercantour range, in France, newspapers evoked the return of a season of fear, considering the risk of packs attacking men. The wolf shadow and the *topos* of the wild beast killing whomever go through the country live in the pages of Fred Vargas *Seeking Whom He May Devour*, inspired by the Mercantour case. It's precisely France the european country where anthropophagous beast apparition are a living myth in the folklore culture, still going on across the twentieth century, even if wolves were gone. And this at least started with the famous Gévaudan beast, a wolf that mortally attacked several times the people of Languedoc during the second half of eighteenth century, quickly becoming a legendary animal with magic powers for the collectivity.

The fear of the wolf run wild for us, now connected to nature only by a thin thread. And yet, it's enough to read few pages of the books recently written by who actually lives with wolves - environmental biologist and ethologist- about the return of these animals traditionally considered wild in Europe to see that this fear is unjustified. It's been more than one century since a wolf attacked a man on the mainland. Livestock is more in danger but -even if considered that this is an overall data and it can

change in more pastoral area- is less than 10% of wolves' total food so it's possible to live in peace together with specific precautions.

Why can't we avoid to fear them? Do we have to think that this feeling is been always with us, like a biological part of us, or at least since our hunter ancestors lit the fire in caves? In this case, why wolves have a worse reputation than bears, that do not fear man and are much more dangerous? History is where we have to search the answers and to know these answers is the most great antidote to fear. For years, wolves were only in children fairy tales. Their return push us to reinvent mental pictures to manage nature into our lives.

## **2 Time and means**

Wolf history is threefold. First, is an ecological history because wolf is crucial for our forests ecosystems. Then it's a cultural history because men created an image of the wolf unconnected to reality. And also is a social history, developed through the relationships of man and the environment: to write it means go through a long slaughter, one of the most cruel made by man against an animal species.

We'll come back later on numbers, and for now it's enough to remember that wolves population only in Italy reached at least a few thousand at the beginning of the Middle Age and less than one hundred in the early 1900s. The stories of wolves here reported can also help to better understand human society, as history should do. History doesn't judge, but gives complex answers that can help to draw the difficult but fundamental road of men and wolves coexistence. The respect of the woodlands and wildlife heritage but also its promotion are the key points to a peaceful coexistence.

Surely, we have many records about wolf from the past in archives and libraries. The wolf is so deeply involved in the mainland culture that retracing his last two millennia events means almost to write a little environmental, cultural and social history of Europe. Italy has a great place in this book: here today there's a huge numbers of wolves, the biggest in Western Europe along with the spanish one.

Before we continue, we must say something about time and means used in this book to retrace the wolf history. Let's begin with time. Many wrote

about wolf, but most of researchers did it like wolves were the same over time. Neither researches about real wolf nor those that emphasize wolf negative or positive image in different cultures, have retraced the transformations during centuries, since antiquity to present days. A certain chronology is missing to establish how wolf behavior has changed and, not necessary with the same timing, when man changed the way to see them.

A first way to trace wolf history is to relate it with environmental changes. The first part of middle age (VI-X centuries) is the time of the great European forests and the beginning of a complex ecosystem where wolves, the real ones, can live peacefully enough with man thanks to a big preys availability. Soon enough, with Charlemagne era and even more after the year 1000, forest decreased and it affects also the wolf conditions. Then, in the modern age, between the 15th and the 16th centuries, and even more between the 18th and the 19th centuries, men introduced big environmental changes, hugely enhancing the transhumance pastoralism, in the Mediterranean Europe. At the beginning of the 20th century, wolf is gone with woodlands in most parts of Western Europe. The return of the wolf is quite recent. Now it's time to see the means. Books written in the past ages, with a great charm and clarity that time didn't deteriorate, tell directly with their own words about the wolves and offer the keys needed for a shift in perspective. To what extent we can trust them? Can the past conditions -such as the the bigger number of wolves, the forest decrease and even, in particular times, mainly during wars, the availability of human corpses as food, have changed in a dreadful curse the wolf that ethology studies describe as a shy creature? The answer is complex, but we can already say that, even if wolves attacks against man were true in some centuries, many of these stories are big lies, literary *topos* with no connection with reality.

According to Vladimir Nabokov, alluding to Aesop fable, «literature is born when a boy ran out shouting Wolf!Wolf! and there was no wolves after him». Of course, writers in every age widely tapped into the image created by that fearful shout to tell about wolves with fictional features.

The fear of wolf is also the story of a big common fear based on what

we'd call today *fake news*, with a press term. We must then take antidotes against the illusions made up about wolves by men. The records handed down during centuries that let us know the past are influenced by the culture of who wrote them and tell mostly the filters and ways to see the reality instead to tell the reality itself. Even the way to classify wolves were different in the past compared to contemporary biological classes. It's amazing to read in a description of Alsace made in the 13th century that in this region were "wolves of different kind": the source reveals a remarkable observation capacity of nature at the time and the will to identify wolf typology.

Today is difficult to understand if the different species were real or only different shades of fur colors or maybe even different kind of animal, first of all the lynx. When reading wolves "cervieri" (*old italian for: sharp-sighted, n.d.T*) in late middle age and modern age books, they refer to lynx, clearly completely different from wolf but similar in the common perception. Indeed, when Brunetto Latini, famous Florentine intellectual of the 13th century, tells in his books about wolves and "cervieri" wolves -just before the hyena and the "crocotta" (a crossbreed of hyena and lioness)- we see that the knowledge of these animals is based on superstitions quite far from reality. According to Latini, the actual wolves can make lose one's power to speech, have a love elixir in their tails and, when howling, they put their paws near to their muzzle in order to appear to be many more. Lynxes are sharp-sighted animals, but so absent-minded that they forget the cubs while following the food and then never find them again: above all, they have a magical power and their urine produces gems. Some time an actual record from the observation of the reality springs beside all these invention, such as wolves breed in may.

Except a few new documents, from almost unexplored archives, many records examined are already known. Some are quite famous - such as Dante's *Inferno* or *Little Red Riding Hood*- and so familiar that it seems difficult to add something new at first sight. Very often, when used in publication about wolves, all these records have only been collected without any deep analysis. One of the aim of this book is to rebuild the logic of these records concerning to wolf role, in order to cast a new light on them.

## **25 Raised by wolves: Cormac from Ireland and Mowgli from Germany**

When we think about people raised by wolves, imagination goes immediately to Romulus and Remus, abandoned in a basket on the river and breastfed by a she-wolf come to drink from the Tiber river, close to Lupercal, the cave lately become sacred to Romans. Or we think to Mowgli, the wild boy raised by the wolf Akela in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*.

And yet, even if lesser-known, many boys raised by wolves have been created during middle age. The most famous is maybe the legendary Cormac mac Airt, the greatest king of Ireland, glorified by gaelic poetry and traditional folklore, descendant by mother, according to celtic mythology, of the Olcs, whose name refers to wolves. In most of older books of gaelic poetry, from middle age, he's kidnapped still newborn by a she-wolf that raise him with her cubs. During a hunt, some hunters find him naked in the wood, with only a belt given at his birth with his name on it, King Cormac. Then he is given in the custody of a noble, that raise him calling him Son of the Wolf, a nickname that the young Cormac despises, realizing his different origins. Some sees in this story a quote of Romulus and Remus, even if the she-wolf doesn't have a full positive role because later Cormac seems to hate his past with wolves. The experience is for sure fundamental to infuse the boy with the strength and even more the intellectual sharpness needed to fulfill his destiny as king. For young Cormac, the time spent with wolves assumes the value of a initiation journey that, even if it removes him from human society and leaves him naked in nature, brings him to adulthood.

Even with an original reworking of Romulus and Remus legend, so far we remain in the myth area. An extraordinary news, so big to catch even Linnaeus and Jean-Jacques Rousseau attention, brings Mowgli into history: among many ancient and medieval myths, fables and stories, it seems that this is the first case of a boy flesh and blood raised by

wolves. The text is been preserved in the chronicles of Saint Peter's monastery in Erfurt, written by many authors during the 14th century. It tells in details a true fact occurred in Hesse and gave us to understand how common were household accidents involving wolves and unattended children in the late medieval german countries. According to the chronicle, in 1304 a boy was found <<seized by wolves when he was three years old and wonderfully raised by them. According to what came up later and what he said, the wolves took him to eat him but then ended up feed him, sharing their food with him near a tree>>. They were so careful that <<in winter dug a den with a bed of leaves and grass in for the baby and they surrounded him to protect him from the cold>>. They taught him also to <<move four-legged and to run long distances with them>> so much so the boy learned to move <<very quickly with big jumps>>. Once founded, the boy is reeducated to civilization and forced to learn all the distinctive skills of men that he never had the chance to learn. To force him to walk erect, he had to wear a rudimentary orthopedic corset.

And, of course, he also learn to speak -word and then reason distinguish man from animals- but he admit that, if possible, he would have kept talking with wolves. Indeed the life of Mowgli from Hesse is not happy among men. He can't accustom to society, that treats him like a freak. The poor boy causes such an awe that he's brought to Marburg, at Henry the Hessian Landgrave's court, who died a few years later in 1308.

It already quite difficult to decide what is true or not in this story. Also medieval texts are enigmatic and pose problems without solving them: in a later addiction in the same chronicle another author tells the same

story dating it to 1344. The anonymous writer doesn't accurately report the same details of the 1304 version, but tells a different story. According to that, a few nobles hunting in their preserve near Wetterau, between Frankfurt and Marburg, find out the boy kidnapped from wolves after twelve years of life in the pack in «a big forest called Hart». The boy, at the time about fifteen, lived to be 80.

Beyond the different dates, it seems that, since two different and unrelated sources tell about this story, in Hesse or at least in the Erfurt monastery the record of this so strange event circulated and was held to be true. But truly a boy from Wetterau was kidnapped by wolves, dragged into the forest and here raised for twelve years by the pack and then, after the finding, reeducated to human society? We can't exclude the event truthfulness, that seems quite similar to other *wild children* cases, recently documented. In Siberia, at Kemerovo, in 2010, a boy was found raised by dogs, moving on four paws and barking to speak like the Hessian boy. And also, a little back in time, in 1920, twenty five years later the publication of Kipling *The Jungle Book*, in India two girls raised by wolves was found. And even earlier, in 1798, twelve years old Victor was found in Aveyron, Occitania, while living in the wild: to that famous event Francois Truffaut dedicated a movie in 1970 (*The Wild Child*).

The story that mostly help us to understand what happened in Hesse is Marcos Rodríguez Pantoja's story, from which the movie *Entrelobos*, directed by Gerardo Olivares. Born in 1946, Marcos from seven to nineteen years old lived with wolves in Sierra Morena, in Andalusia, like his medieval equivalent. Sold by his father to a shepherd, the boy wandered the mountains after the man's death and he was adopted by a she-wolf with her litter. In this case, Marcos was painfully reeducated with the same method used for the Erfurt boy: wood board to straighten his back and word training, lost in the meanwhile.

There are more examples, and all the protagonists are always social outcast forced to live in the wild, with re-integration problems as a result



after the experience with wolves: because «the real wolves are men» as Marcos Rodríguez Pantoja still states today.

We can without fall hold to be true that similar events occurred during the middle ages, in Hesse or elsewhere. But at least four points remain uncertain. The first is that many peasants used to frequently visit the forest in the earth of late middle age Europe, even if huge. During the year they attended to many activities in the forest, from the wood picking to pasture, to hunt, to sow temporary cultivations. It seems difficult that nobody in twelve years noticed the odd situation. Maybe the boy lived among the wolves but he was knew by the locals and yet ignored, such as a social outcast. The second point concern the chronology: according to second source, the wolf-man from Hesse died at 80 years of age, but this is not a real age while rather the indication of his old age. Both texts were written many decades after the facts. If the sources are based on the protagonist direct testimony, already old, maybe he embellished with some stories the records of his life with wolves, thanks to the fame he got from. The third point concern a detail, small but interesting: the boy from Hesse, once back with men learned to speak and this diverge from what we know about wild children scientifically observed. Since they missed a significant cognitive moment of their childhood, they never learned to speak again. In conclusion, maybe the boy wasn't so wild and already knew how to speak when abandoned, or the Erfurt chronicles invented this detail, maybe to symbolically prove the predominance of men on the animal world.

There's a last point. At the beginning of the 13th century, the french preacher Jacques de Vitry tells in one of his sermons of a boy kidnapped by a she-wolf and forced to walk on four paw «like a beast». In the same years, Caesarius of Heisterbach, the cistercian monk strongly hostile against heretics that we already saw, records a story about a boy, also kidnapped by a she-wolf, that learned to run on four paw and to howl. In the monastery culture of that time, the boy raised by wolves is already a "topos", and *Little Riding Red Hood* is part of it as we'll see later. This collective imagination was surely well known by Erfurt writers, having probably learned it as boys at monastery or cathedral schools

that used it as *exempla* to explain the value of instruction and word for men. And to describe it, they used the words they already knew.