

When wolves cry: wolf-children, storytelling, and the state of nature

Sam George

Stories of human children suckled by wolves have fascinated us down the centuries. The role literature plays in mythologising such children reveals much about shifting ideas of animality and humanity, and of narrative itself. In this chapter, I focus on eighteenth-century encounters with wild children, their representation in the poetry of the Romantic period, and the legacy of this in accounts of the twentieth century (particularly following the discovery of the wolf girls Amala and Kamala in 1920) and the present day. I interrogate the representation of wolf-children in relation to John Locke's *tabula rasa* theory and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the 'state of nature', together with debates that emerged around these concerning native innocence and the Christian doctrine of original sin. Wolf-children in historical accounts rarely acquire language (or are limited to a few words); I demonstrate how literature grants them a voice. It constructs a history for these children through repeated storytelling.

The sound of wolves howling is commonly associated with unsettling, uncanny or sublime moments in literature and film.¹ By contrast, Ted Hughes's poem 'Life After Death' recalls the consoling nature of the wolves cry during a moment of absolute grief for the poet.² Hughes is remembering the suicide of his then wife Sylvia Plath. Consumed by sorrow, Hughes and his young children are 'comforted by wolves' (31), howling nearby from London Zoo.³ Wild nature is benevolent: 'in spite of the city / Wolves consoled us' (34-35).

As the raw emotion is unleashed, we discover that the wolves are singing for the poet's two motherless children. The wolf voices become humanised, embracing the human, apparently in empathy:

The wolves lifted us in their long voices.

They wound us and enmeshed us

In their wailing for you, their mourning for us,

They wove us into their voices. (41-44)

Yet there is a certain collapse of humanity, as the poet's individuality merges 'into the folk-tale', in the very act of voicing grief, becoming mythical and perhaps even becoming wolf:

As my body sank into the folk-tale

Where the wolves are singing in the forest.

For two babes, who have turned, in their sleep,

Into orphans

Beside the corpse of their mother. (46-50)

Animal-parented children are common in folktales and Hughes seeks solace in the narrative tradition of wolves and other animals becoming surrogate parents to orphaned human children.⁴

Against the grain of the familiar image of the wolf as savage marauder, the wolf here protects and nurtures. The wolves' howling voices are not, as conventionally, an ominous threat but a sympathetic presence allied to human sensibilities.

Wolf-children

The mythical history of wild beasts as the nurses of abandoned human children is attested to in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1609-11):⁵

Come on, poor babe

Some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens

To be thy nurses! Wolves and Bears, they say,
 Casting their savageness aside, have done
 Like offices of pity.⁶

[INSERT Fig 2.1]

Myths and narratives of benevolently parental wolves are legion. Most famously, the civilisation of Rome mythically owes its origins in the story of Romulus and Remus, the twin brothers of Rome's foundation story who were suckled by a she-wolf until a shepherd and his wife fostered them to manhood (Fig 2.2).⁷

[INSERT Fig. 2.2.]

But there are many accounts of wolf-children in the modern era which claim to be truthful, though these too become seeds of fictional narrative.⁸ 'Wolf-children' has become a catch-all phrase for all wild or feral children, fictional or otherwise.⁹ An interesting reversal takes place in such accounts: the she-wolf is increasingly humanised, whereas the human 'wolf' child is likened to the animal. Thus what is striking is the way the wolf is redeemed, yet this newly humanised wolf co-exists with the image of the animal as cunning and cruel.¹⁰ Garry Marvin and Barry Lopez have identified a history of 'lupophobia', and 'lupocide' as evidence of humankind's fear and persecution of the wolf.¹¹ The naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon, author of the 36 volumes of the *Histoire naturelle* (1749–1788), is typical of the modern era. His observations on the wolf were translated and republished in the *Edinburgh Journal* in 1832. Here the wolf is 'in every way offensive, a savage aspect, a frightful howl, an insupportable odour, a perverse disposition . . . he is hateful while living, and useless when dead'.¹² Against such preconceptions, where the slaughter and eventual extinction (in Britain) of wolves evoked little sympathy, nineteenth-century theses on wolf-children suggest an alternative

perspective. W. H Sleeman's *An Account of Wolves Nurturing Children in Their Dens* (1852) and Robert Sterndale's *Natural History of the Mammalia of India and Ceylon* (1884) humanise and dignify the wolf.¹³ These texts are important in being a major influence on Kipling.¹⁴

Sterndale's writing is unusual in that he seeks to make it known that 'stories have been related of wolves sparing and suckling young infants, which, if properly authenticated, will bring the history of Romulus and Remus within the bounds of probability' (p. 233). Inspired by such accounts of the wolves and other mammals of India nurturing children in their dens, Rudyard Kipling first recreated this tradition as fiction in a modern novelistic form in *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895). Kipling's orphaned protagonist Mowgli is a 'man cub' adopted by a Wolf Mother (Fig. 2.3).

[INSERT Fig 2.3]

He grows up with the pack, hunting with his brother wolves, and learning the law of the jungle. This is given in verse and is recited in a sort of sing-song by Baloo, the bear:

Now this is the Law of the Jungle – as old and as true as the sky;

And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it
must die.

As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk the Law runneth forward and back

For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the
pack (Fig. 2.4).¹⁵

[INSERT Fig 2.4]

An ennobling of the wolf is seen in the writings of the Rev. Singh, the missionary, who bore witness to the discovery of the wolf-children Amala and Kamala in India in 1920. In Singh's account, the wolves' benevolence is, in fact, more than human:

It struck me with wonder. I was simply amazed to think that an animal had such a noble feeling, even surpassing even that of mankind – the highest form of creation – to bestow all the love and affection of a fond and ideal mother on these peculiar beings . . . to permit them to live and to be nurtured . . . in this fashion is divine.¹⁶

But while Singh elevates the wolf, her adopted human offspring are demonised by their would-be rescuers and identified as *Manush-Bagha*, or monstrous ‘man ghosts’.¹⁷ Even Singh’s description takes on this ambiguity, hesitating before confirming that the creature he sees is human:

Close after the cubs came the ghost – a hideous looking being – hand, foot and body like a human being; but the head was a big ball of something covering the shoulders and the upper portion of the bust, leaving only a sharp contour of the face visible, and it was human. (5)

Then, this certainty collapses on observing the girls’ eyes: ‘Close at its heels there came another awful creature exactly like the first, but smaller in size. Their eyes were bright and piercing, unlike human eyes’ (5). Yet Singh immediately reaffirms their humanity: ‘I at once came to the conclusion that these were human beings’ (5). But his associates ascribe a supernatural quality to the children:

Both of them ran on all fours. My friends . . . would have killed them if they had not been dissuaded by me . . . I told them that I was sure that these ghosts were human children . . . all present . . . agreed with me except Chunarem. He still maintained that they were not human beings, but *Manush-Baghas* (6).

The children are removed from the ant mound they had shared with the wolves and placed in a

wooden cage, but when the Rev Singh returns the villagers have abandoned the children. The wolf girls are revived and taken to a nearby orphanage, where they are accepted simply as neglected children. The description of the wolf-children in the Rev. Singh's journal in subsequent years resulted in Amala and Kamala becoming 'the two best known cases of zoanthropy' in the twentieth century; a type of madness involving the delusion of being an animal, with correspondingly altered behaviour.¹⁸ The children walked about on all fours, had a taste for carrion, panted and bared their teeth, suffered from day blindness and spent their days crouched in the shade, or standing motionless with their faces turned to the wall. They livened up at night, howling and groaning and hoping to escape. They lapped up liquids and took their food in a crouching position. The diaries reveal that Singh viewed them through a zoomorphic lens, now employing animal imagery to describe their behaviour: 'They had a powerful instinct and could smell meat or anything from a great distance like animals'. They sleep 'like little pigs or dog pups, overlapping one another' (see Fig 2.5); 'They never slept after midnight and used to love to prowl at night fearlessly, unlike human children of that age' (31). Yet this classification as animal is undermined and falls into uncertainty: With a ferocious look she tried to grab it, her eyes rolling, jaws moving from side to side, and teeth chattering where she made a fearful growling sound, *neither human or animal* (23-24; my italics).

[INSERT Fig 2.5]

Despite his fascination with their animality, Singh kept the history of Amala and Kamala hidden until they were near death, when it became necessary to explain something of their early life to the doctor who was treating them.¹⁹ Sadly, Amala died on 21 September 1921 and Kamala eight years later on 14 November 1929. Singh's nine-year observation of the children (1920-1929), was eventually completed in manuscript in 1933 and published in *Wolf Children and*

Feral Man (1942). By this time the story of the girl's history as wolf-children had already broken in the world's press. Singh remained something of an unwilling author who died in 1941, one year before the diaries were released.²⁰ There were attempts to authenticate the diaries in the publication that followed. An affidavit by the District Judge of Midnapore appears on the title page, to which he has affixed his seal and asserted that 'Singh's truthfulness is absolutely to be relied upon'; the prefatory material claims it is a factual record in regard to 'these authentic feral children' (xxii).²¹ But this empiricism is already being displaced by an interest in narrative for its own pleasures. A year earlier, the clinical psychologist Arnold Gesnell compiled his own narrative interpretation of the life history of Kamala, based on his reading of Singh's manuscript. *Wolf Child and Human Child* (1941) is something of a fictionalised biography which attempts to show a trajectory of Kamala's transition from 'wolf ways' to 'human ways'.²² Gesnell does not waver from his belief in wolf-children: 'there can be no doubt whatever that Amala and Kamala early on in life were adopted by a nursing wolf' (xvii). However, Gesnell's preface informs readers that 'it will be our task to reconstruct the whole story of Kamala from the evidence in hand. To do this we shall have to summon imagination and even invent a few conjectures to fill the gaps of actual knowledge. But our objective is truth rather than fiction' (2). In just over a decade, following her death, the history of Kamala had been transformed by storytelling and myth. Generous quotations from the *Jungle Book* appear as chapter headings in this book, linking Kamala to the fictional wolf-child, Mowgli: "'Come soon" said Mother Wolf . . . listen, child of man, I loved thee more than ever I loved my cubs"²³ The girls later become known as 'the two Mowglis', the fictionalisation of their history seemingly complete.²⁴

Feral children of Enlightenment and Romanticism

Crucially, the scholarly forewords to Singh's diary forge connections to earlier accounts of wild children: the history of 'wild Peter' (1726), Itard's reports on Victor of Aveyron (1801, 1806), and Feuerbach's account of Kasper Hauser (1833).²⁵ It is these histories to which I now turn, examining how these too became transformed into fiction and poetry. Peter of Hanover (Peter the Wild Boy), a child of around eleven years old, was found living wild in forests in Germany, and Victor of Aveyron, known as 'the savage of Aveyron', was found living naked in the woods of central France in 1800.

Eighteenth-century scholars seized on feral children, hoping to find clues to problems around education, psychological development, language acquisition, sociability and civilisation. The overlapping, often nascent disciplines of natural philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, medicine, were spurred by encounters with wolf-children. Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that humanity's lost 'state of nature' is to be found 'midway between the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civilised man'.²⁶ Wild children were the living embodiment of this threshold between ignorance and knowledge, animal and human, innocence and experience. They could demonstrate what had been lost in the civilising process and provide a link back to the past, to our ancestors. Earlier, John Locke had imagined the mind at birth as blank, claiming that all knowledge comes to us through experience: 'Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas . . . Whence has it all the materials of reason and Knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *Experience*.'²⁷ This developmental view holds that a child is born a *tabula rasa* or blank slate, awaiting inscription by experience in order to become a rational, knowing subject. It opposed the innatist position that the child's character is predetermined at conception, gifted with certain pre-existent notions and powers. Wild children could be used to test out these theories. What ideas, if any, would they possess

having grown up without human contact? The question of Original Sin also surfaces in these debates. Are wild children innocent or full of sin? The orthodox Christian view (the most dominant) held that the child is originally sinful and must therefore be ruthlessly subordinated to authority. This is challenged by the view exemplified in Rousseau that the child is born innocent and is corrupted only through contact with society and its institutions. Rousseau is unwavering in his assertion that 'there is no original sin in the human heart'.²⁸

Peter the wild boy

Peter of Hamelin was one of the first wild children to capture the eighteenth-century imagination. The details surrounding Peter's capture in a forest near Hamelin, Germany in 1724 vary enormously but his wild origins are constant. One account from 1726 indicates that Peter was aged between eleven and fifteen; was quadrupedal at the time of capture, running about on all fours; and that he must have been raised by wolves, pigs or bears.²⁹ Another, published in the year of his death, 1785, maintains that he was wearing the remains of a shirt and subsisting on acorns, berries, and tree bark.³⁰ He could be restrained only by force; he was eventually persuaded to wear clothes but rather than accept the food he was offered preferred to suck the sap from raw wood.³¹

Remarkably, he was sent to London as a guest of the Royal House of Hanover. The court doctor tried and failed to teach him to speak. Each day courtiers would wrestle him into a green velvet suit and each evening they would try to persuade him into bed but he preferred to curl up alone on the floor in a corner of his room.³² He never learned to speak more than a few words but could imitate animal sounds; he developed some sensitivity to music. His portrait by William Kent still hangs in Kensington Palace. He is pictured in the green velvet suit that was made for

him and is shown clutching acorns and oak leaves, symbolic of his wildness. His cupid bow lips and wild unruly hair are characteristic of descriptions in the written accounts and some fingers on his left hand are fused 'like a duck's foot'.³³ This animalistic characteristic is noted with some excitement.³⁴ Peter used to stray and so was forced to wear a leather collar with a brass plate bearing the inscription 'Peter the Wild Man of Hanover. Whoever will bring him to Mr Fenn at Berkhamsted shall be paid for their trouble' (Fig 2.6).³⁵

[INSERT Fig. 2.6]

Though the collar was meant to prevent him coming to any harm it also suggests that he was regarded as nothing more than a human pet. Those who encountered him often questioned his humanity: 'by his behaviour and want of speech, he seems to be more of the Ouran Outang species than of the human'.³⁶ This classification was reinforced by natural historians of the day; Peter appears under 'feral man' in the tenth edition of Linnaeus's *Systema naturae* (1758).³⁷ As a sub-species, he is given his own taxonomical name *juvenis Hannoveranus*.³⁸

He was entrusted to Dr John Arbuthnot, the satirist and physician. Arbuthnot abandoned his instruction after only two months and, with interest waning in the boy, Peter was placed with one of the Queen's chamber-women, and later with a yeoman farmer named James Fenn in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire where he lived out his existence on a royal pension as a kind of very old child. He died in 1785, aged 72, and is buried in St Mary's Churchyard in Northchurch (Fig. 2.7).

[INSERT Fig 2.7]

After witnessing Peter's long-term failure to become socialised, many writers represented the boy as an archetypal primitive. In *The Spirit of the Laws* (1734), Montesquieu mentions the boy as an example of natural man's innate timidity and ignorance.³⁹ Rousseau uses wolf-children

to illustrate how humans learn through imitation. Thus, having been raised by wolves, such children were necessarily (but not innately) quadrupedal; Peter is used as an example.⁴⁰

In *Mere Nature Delineated* (1726), Daniel Defoe rejects the claims that Peter has been nourished by a she-wolf.⁴¹ He asks instead the question of whether he has a soul: ‘his soul is naked; he is but the appearance or shadow of a rational creature, a kind of spectre or apparition’ (28). Despite his hesitation over whether Peter is properly human, he argues against those ‘who tell us he is nothing but an *idiot*, or what we call a *Natural* . . . though he may have some degrees of *idiotism* upon him, yet he seems still to have with it some apparent capacities of being restored or improved’ (25).

The Rousseauvian educationalists Maria and Richard Edgeworth in their educational treatise, *Practical Education* (1798) recount their psychological observations of Peter and how they were disappointed by his lack of development. Having for several years observed the wild boy, they reported that:

[Peter] had all his senses in remarkable perfection . . . he could articulate imperfectly a few words, in particular, ‘King George’, which words he always accompanied with an imitation of the bells, which rang at the coronation of George the Second; he could in a rude manner imitate two or three common tunes, but without words.⁴²

Defoe thought that Peter was educable, despite ‘degrees of *idiotism*’; others saw him primarily as an ‘idiot’.⁴³ As the Edgeworths contended: ‘Though his head . . . resembled that of Socrates, he was an idiot’ (I, 63).

Johnny the Idiot Boy

Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy' from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) might be read as a poetic dramatisation of these themes of wildness and idiocy that had become attached to Peter; a poem about childhood, innocence, idiocy, and the state of nature.⁴⁴ Locke had used idiocy critically as a crucial example against theories of innate ideas.⁴⁵ Wordsworth sees 'idiots' as sacred and mystical, proclaiming that 'their life is hidden with God'.⁴⁶ Shielded from corruption or sin, they are locked into a pure childlike state forever. In Wordsworth's poem idiocy takes on a new meaning, being sympathetically aligned to nature and to animal experience.

The eponymous 'Idiot Boy', Johnny, is another version of the Rousseauvian child of nature, yet one frozen in a state of innocence and inwardness, and incapable of understanding even the simplest instructions. In the poem Johnny is sent out on his pony to fetch the doctor, but he completely forgets his task, losing his way in the forest after becoming absorbed in his adventure and the moonlit night. His journey can be seen as an education according to nature, after Rousseau.⁴⁷ He carries a holly bough instead of a whip, an emblem of his wildness, reminiscent of the depictions of Peter clutching acorns and oak leaves. His intellect is unfavourably compared with that of the pony: 'but then he is a horse that thinks'.⁴⁸ He has a kind of language, a burring that merges with bird calls: 'The owlets hoot, the owlets curr / And Johnny's lips they burr, burr, burr' (114-15), but he cannot communicate any facts. At the end of the poem Johnny is asked where he has been and what he has been doing. His language is figurative and shows him to exist in a timeless space where owls and moon are made one with their daytime equivalents: 'The Cocks did crow to-woo, to-woo/ and the Sun did shine so cold' (460-61). His dialogue is impressionistic and imitative of animal sounds, reminiscent of Peter. He confuses cocks with owls, the sun with the moon, hot with cold and night with day. His mother's anxious questioning at the end of the poem seems to parody the intellectuals who

conversed with Peter the wild boy, seeking answers to questions about native innocence, the state of nature and animal/human development.⁴⁹

“Tell us Johnny do,
Where all this long night you have been,
What you have heard, what you have seen:
And, Johnny, mind you tell us true” (438-41)

Johnny’s confused response is like that of an abandoned wolf-child, and he denies us an answer. Wordsworth puts forth his alternative to the mother’s failed instruction, a process that works through nature and isolation in the woods and one that requires a sensory responsiveness, apparent in the highly figurative character of Johnny’s language.

Unlike such wolf-children as Amala and Kamala, who rarely experienced a moment’s joy, the boy is in a happy state of nature. In this idealised version of events he does have some language; is this still idiocy? In Wordsworth’s account Johnny is an innocent, apparently without original sin, suffused with simple contentment. It is useful to compare Peter the wild boy and Wordsworth’s Johnny to another wolf-child, Victor of Aveyron.⁵⁰

Victor of Aveyron (or the little savage)

Victor is the dark ‘other’ of the carefree Romantic child; the representation in poetry of him which I examine is a critique rather than a celebration of the ‘state of nature’. Victor was found running about on all fours in the rugged forest region of France, and was first captured in 1798. He escaped back into the forest but was forcibly recaptured by hunters fifteen months later. In 1800, he was taken to a hospice in Aveyron (hence his name) and examined by the French zoologist Pierre Joseph Bonnaterre. Bonnaterre brought him to Paris and placed him in an

institute for deaf mutes (he was not in fact deaf, merely unresponsive to the human voice). He disliked sleeping in a bed. His body was covered in scars (noticeably knife wounds to his throat).⁵¹ It was reported in the *Morning Post* that the boy

lived on potatoes, chestnuts and acorns . . . his features are regular but without expression, every part of his body is covered with scars; these scars attest the cruelty of persons by whom, it is presumed, he has been abandoned; or perhaps they are attributable only to the dangers of a solitary existence at a tender age, and in a rude tract of country.⁵²

He was later entrusted to Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, a French doctor who published a two-part treatise on the wild boy.⁵³ Itard despaired of the boy's backwardness; as others do in other accounts, he resorts to zoomorphism:

He seemed not to hear music or the sound of the human voice, though he recognised at once the sound of the chestnut being shelled. . . . He was more helpless than a chimpanzee and could neither open a door by himself nor climb onto a chair to reach what he wanted. He was as incapable of speech as an animal and uttered only a single, formless sound . . . his expressions would change rapidly from a sullen scowl to a curious sneer, a muscular contortion meant to be a smile.⁵⁴

He was taught the elements of table manners and a few words and was later cared for by a nurse, Mme Guerin. He died in 1828.

Wild children like Victor did not respond to touch or the human voice. Itard claimed that Victor was dominated by the bodily, by his appetite for food in particular (and would urinate on the spot); 'his whole existence was a life purely animal'.⁵⁵ He never sought anything beyond his

basic needs, lacked intellectual curiosity, and could not acquire language. The true history of such children, lacking narrative capacity of their own, is mysterious, promoting speculation over whether their lack of development was brought about by trauma or through isolation in the woods, or both. Victor of Aveyron seems to fit this theory because he was found with scars on his throat as if an attempt had been made on his life. Gesell's account reminds us that wolf-children undergo a multiple trauma through their oscillation between animal and human existence:

[Kamala] was thrice bereft. She was bereft of human care, when she was carried to a wolf's den; she was bereft of the securities of her wolf life when she was rescued . . . she was pathetically bereft of the security of reminiscent kinship when her younger 'sister' Amala died. (xvii)

And yet she survived, but despite her resilience, she was never far from trauma: 'if she were left alone she would retire to the darkest corner, crouch down and remain with her face to the wall'.⁵⁶ Such trauma would also find literary representation in Romantic poetry.

Romanticism's alienated wolf-child

As with Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy', Victor too was depicted in Romantic poetry, but in a manner that dramatised the traumatic alienation of the wolf-child noted above. Mary Robinson's poem 'The Savage of Aveyron' appeared in *Lyrical Tales* (1800), a direct response to Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798.⁵⁷ Robinson was inspired by the reports of the 'wild boy of Aveyron' in October of that year in *The Morning Post*.⁵⁸ Her memoir shows that she had been contemplating the history of Victor, 'the little savage'.

⁵⁹ Robinson had earned the nickname 'Perdita' (or 'lost one') for her role in Shakespeare's *The*

Winter's Tale in 1779; she clearly had an affinity with narratives of abandoned children.⁶⁰ The play itself is preoccupied with themes of storytelling alongside those of nature, nursing and culture. Using Victor, Robinson was able to construct a story of the most extreme expression of such abandonment. In her poem the boy has been left to fend for himself in the forest after his mother is murdered by ruffians. In fact, we know nothing about Victor's mother (or any of these wild children's parents). Victor's scars suggest his parents may not have been entirely benevolent (but we do not know). In Robinson's fictional representation of him, he is clearly the victim of appalling violence, still in a state of misery, and wounded even by nature – a creature far from the innocent simplicity and tranquillity of Wordsworth's wild child:

Chequer'd with scars his breast was seen,
Wounds streaming fresh with anguish keen,
And marks where other wounds had been
Torn by the brambles rude. (104-07)

The poem contains much Romantic dramatisation of solitary states (the boy is cast as 'The tenant of that solitude' (109)), ambiguously exploring themes of solitude versus sociability. These are topics that are explored with sensibility in 'All Alone' and 'The Alien Boy' elsewhere in the collection. As with Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy', Robinson adopts a narrative form but, again like Wordsworth, one that can only tentatively recover the wild protagonist's story. Johnny cannot wield language in a functional, prosaic way and confuses factual particulars; Robinson's 'savage' can only gesture and utter the single word 'alone'. The narrator essentially constructs a story out of their own solitary state and their imaginative sympathy with the child they find in the forest. But their Romantic sense of and yearning for solitude is shown to amount to nothing and when compared to the boy's entire lifetime of isolation. Thus, proclaiming 'I thought myself

alone . . . weary of the world', they hear the voice of the child. But it is musical rather than articulate, 'a song — / Of nature's melody' (66-67), expressing pure emotion in its variations from 'a melancholy tone' (3), through 'loud and sad' (16), 'dulcet' (17) to 'a tone of frantic woe' (18). At this point, the narrator wishes for solitude: 'O! wilds of dreary solitude! / Amid your thorny alleys rude / I wish'd myself — a traveller alone' (25-27). Variants of the last line close each stanza as a refrain while the imagined tale of the wild child slowly unfolds. From his sign language and tonal vocalisations, the narrator infers that great harm has been done to him by other human beings. As Robinson's poem develops, it attempts to construct a history for the lost wild boy. The poem suggests that the boy's mother has been murdered by 'three barbarous ruffians' and her bones are buried under a blasted oak. From his last human interaction, with his dying mother, he acquires his sole token of linguistic competence: 'From HER the WILD BOY learn'd "ALONE"' (160). This word repeats throughout the poem. The boy is now truly isolated in a way that belittles the narrator's conventional dwelling on solitude. Abandoned to nature, he takes on animalistic characteristics, as observed in other wild child narratives above. His appearance lacks humanity or rationality and he is associated with an asocial, even malignant nature:

Yet dark and sunken was his eye,
 Like a lorn maniac's, wild and shy,
 And scowling, like a winter sky,
 Without one beaming ray! (28-31)

The wild boy tries to tell his story to the traveller, using the word 'alone' and a kind of sign language, leading her to the oak where his mother is buried, pointing at three notches on the trunk of the tree (representing the three ruffians) and upwards towards heaven. Robinson

conflates two different accounts of wolf-children in the poem, those of Peter of Hanover and Victor of Aveyron. The boy's body is 'chequer'd with scars' (104), as in real life accounts of Victor, but he is found wearing the remains of a garment (as in accounts of Peter of Hanover). The 'Lady's vest' (124) he is found wrapped in is evidence of the loss of his mother. Robinson's poem imagines a loving nurturing mother killed by 'barb'rous ruffians' (134) from the outside of society, in place of a narrative of familial cruelty in which the parents are the perpetrators of the scars on the boy's body and the cause of his abandonment and isolation in the woods. Thus the wild child's origin may be somewhat sentimentalised, yet Robinson's representation of the wild boy debunks the notion of the 'noble savage' and challenges Romantic concepts of the child of nature. The boy is 'fancy-fraught' (173) as opposed to fancy-free, inhuman and wretched, a forlorn 'maniac' (29) wrenched from companionship and sociability. The poem is a critique rather than a celebration of 'the state of nature' but it is another manifestation of Romanticism's interest in primitive states and wild or feral children. There is nothing here of the idealised or utopian longing found elsewhere in this tragic incarnation of the wild child. Robinson's picture of Victor is closer to that of Phillipe Pinel: the foremost physician of the day, he saw an abandoned, mentally defective creature, not the Rousseauvian 'child of nature' that his contemporaries in Paris so eagerly conjured up.⁶¹ Yet Robinson renders this outcast with deep sympathy:

And could a wretch more wretched be,
 More wild, or fancy-fraught than he,
 Whose melancholy tale would pierce AN HEART
 OF STONE (73-6)

Victor and Peter never acquired language and so could not tell their stories (their memory

loss possibly the result of trauma). Kamala would repeat the odd word when prompted, but she never used language in a spontaneous way.⁶² Literature has given the wolf-children a voice, a folk history.⁶³ The state of nature from which we have become expelled and where wolf-children appeared to dwell has eluded us. Since the eighteenth-century, that sense of loss has been recompensed by storytelling. This returns us to Hughes's consoling voices where I began; romanticised myths of children raised by wolves reappear as fictions and in poetry, establishing a place:

Where the wolves are singing in the forest
 For two babes, who have turned, in their sleep,
 Into orphans
 Beside the corpse of their mother.⁶⁴

Here abandonment can be seen as a blessing, the child inhabits an animal world, a gap is bridged, something lost is restored. Narratives of wild children reveal what wolves have taught us about human frailty; they animalise the human, but that is not all: wolf children are significant because they have the power to redeem the wolf as nurturer and source of cultivation.

Notes

1 See Stacey Abbott in this collection.

2 Ted Hughes repeatedly used the symbol of the wolf in his poetry, most notably in *Lupercal* (1960), named after the cave where the wolf-children Romulus and Remus were suckled, and *Wolfwatching* (1989). The howling of wolves at Regent's Park could be heard from the flat in Fitzroy Road, Primrose Hill, where, following her separation from Hughes, Sylvia Plath ended her life in 1963. Hughes drew on the image of the wolf in the poem 'The Howling of Wolves' (eventually published in *Wodwo* (1967)); this was one of only two poems he wrote in the three

years following Sylvia's death. For Hughes's wolf imagery, see Ann Skea, 'Wolf-Masks: From *Hawk to Wolfwatching*' <<http://ann.skea.com/Wolves.htm>> [accessed 2 December 2018].

3 Ted Hughes, 'Life After Death', *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), pp. 182-83.

4 Hughes initially studied English at Pembroke College, Cambridge, but in his third year he transferred to anthropology and archaeology, both of which informed his poetry. His poetry shows his fascination with myth, language and folklore and his debt to Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (a cult anthropological text he devoured at Cambridge). For a recent appraisal of Hughes and myth, see Robert McCrum's memorial lecture on Hughes reprinted as 'To Hell and Back', *The Guardian*, 27 October 2018, pp. 32-34.

5 The most famous of these are the bear boys of Lithuania (found 1661, 1694). The Lithuanian woods were full of bears and Bernard Connor, an English doctor, recounts the story of a boy of about ten years old who walked on all fours and had been brought to the court, having been raised by bears (*History of Poland* (London: 1698), vol. 8, part 1, pp. 388-96); see Fig 2.2. The bear boy also features in Linnaeus and Blumenbach. For a detailed history of the bear boy, see Robert M. Zingg, 'Feral Man and Cases of Extreme Isolation of Individuals', in J. A. L. Singh and Robert M. Zingg, *Wolf-Children and Feral Man* (1942; Hamden, CT, Archon Books, 1966), pp. 131-365 (pp. 204-32). Peter the Wild Boy (found 1724) was linked to both wolves and bears. There is much speculation in the accounts as to which animal raised him. One principal source claims that he could have been adopted by a she-wolf or a sow but that it is most likely to have been a 'She-bear' (*An Enquiry How The Wild Youth Lately Taken in the Woods Near Hanover (and now brought over to England) Could Be Left, and By What Creature He Could Be Suckled* (London: H. Parker, 1726), p. 3).

6 William Shakespeare, *A Winter's Tale*, ed. by Ernest Schanzer (1609; London: Penguin, 1986), II.3.222-26, p. 190.

7 Sources for Romulus and Remus include the histories of Livy, Plutarch, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Tacitus as well as the work of Virgil and Ovid. For a comparative study of sources, see J. N. Bremmer, 'Romulus and Remus and the foundation of Rome', Roman Myth and Mythography special issue, *Institute of Classical Studies Bulletin*, 52 (July 1987), 45-98.

8 See Lucien Malson's table of recorded cases of children with animal parents in *Wolf Children and the Problem of Human Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), pp. 80-82. A critical field has grown up which is broad and interdisciplinary. Seminal studies include, in addition to Malson, and Singh and Zingg: Douglas Keith Candland, *Feral Children and Clever Animals: Reflections on Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Newton, *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002); Julia V. Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl: Natural Man and the Monster, Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Adriana S Benzaquén, *Encounters With Wild Children: Temptation and Disappointment in the Study of Human Nature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2006).

9 In that wolf is the animal most conjured up; 'bear-children' does not have the same resonance.

10 Fairy tale narratives have a part to play in developing the image of 'the big bad wolf' alongside fables and negative biblical images of wolves. Charles Perrault published his version of Little Red Riding Hood, 'Le Petit Chaperon Rouge', in *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé. Avec Moralités* (Paris: Barbin, 1697). The first English translation is reputed to be Robert Samber, *Histories, or Tales of Past Times. By M. Perrault* (1729). Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published their version of the tale in *Kinder und Hausmächen* (Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung,

1812). The tale was translated into English by Edgar Taylor in *German Popular Stories* (1824-6).

11 See Garry Marvin, 'Lupophobia' and 'Lupicide', in *Wolf* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), pp. 35-80; pp. 81-118 and Barry Lopez, 'The Beast of Waste and Desolation', in *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Scribner, 2004), pp. 137-67.

12 Oliver Goldsmith, *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, 446 (July, 1852), 33-36.

13 W. H. Sleeman, 'An Account of Wolves Nurturing Children in their Dens' (Plymouth, 1852); repr. *Zoologist*, 12, 3rd series (1888), 87-98; R. A. Sterndale, *Natural History of the Mammalia of India and Ceylon* (Thacker Spink: Calcutta, 1884).

14 Daniel Karlin, 'The Jungle Books: Introduction', *The Kipling Society*

<http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/rg_jungle_intro.htm> [accessed 10 November 2018]. For

Sleeman, see W. W. Robson, Introduction, Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book*, ed. by W. W.

Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. xii-xxxiv (p. xv).

15 'The Law of the Jungle', Kipling, *The Jungle Book*, p. 165.

16 J. A. L. Singh, 'October 17, 1920', 'The Diary of the Wolf Children of Midnapore (India)', in Singh and Zingg, *Wolf-Children*, pp. 3-126 (p. 7). All further references are to this edition of the journals and are given in parentheses in the text.

17 The Manush-Bagha are what Chunarem, the aboriginal tribesman in Godamuri, on the border between Midnapore and Morbhanja, first called the children. This is a man/ghost or man/beast, 'like a man in his limbs with a hideous head of a ghost' (3).

18 Malson, *Wolf Children*, p. 68.

19 Singh, Introduction, p. xxxiii.

20 Professor Robert M. Zingg, the co-editor of the journal, claimed that the manuscript had gathered dust and that Singh had no commercial interest in the project. The Rev. Singh sets out his own reasons for delaying publication in the introduction to the journal. These include, the difficulty of settling the girls into marriage should their history became known, and the fear of endless visits and enquiries at the orphanage. See Zingg, Introduction, p. xxxv; and Singh, Introduction, pp. xxxii-xxxiii, Singh and Zingg, *Wolf-Children*.

21 There are three forewords to the book: by Professor Arnold Gesell, Director of the Clinic of Child Development, School of Medicine, Yale University; by Kingsley Davis, Professor of Sociology, Pennsylvania State College; and by Bishop H. Pakenham-Walsh (pp. xvii-xviii, xix-xx, xxv-xxvii).

22 'Wolf Ways' is Chapter 5 (1920-22) and 'Human ways' Chapter 7 (1926-29) (Arnold Gesell, *Wolf Child and Human Child* (London: Scientific Book Club, 1942), pp. 30-37, 49-55).

23 Epigraph to Chapter 3, 'With the Wolves, 1912-1920', p. 12

24 Malson, for example, uses this phrase when recounting the story of the wolf girls' capture (*Wolf Children*, p. 68).

25 Anselm Von Feuerbach, *Casper Hause. An Account of an individual kept in a dungeon, separated from all communication with the world, from early childhood to about the age of seventeen* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1833). Wild Peter is described in the *Enquiry of 1726*. Victor of Aveyron is documented in *An Historical Account of the Discovery and Education of a Savage Man: Or, the First Developments, Physical and Moral, of the Young Savage Caught in the Woods Near Aveyron in the Year 1798* (London: Richard Phillips, 1802).

26 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. by Franklin Phillip, ed. by Patrick Coleman (1755; Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 61.

27 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Roger Woolhouse (1689; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. 109.

28 ‘Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva, to Christophe de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris’, in *Rousseau on Philosophy, Morality, and Religion*, ed. by Christopher Kelly (Hanover and London: Dartmouth College Press, 2007), pp. 162-226 (p. 170). I am of the opinion that Rousseau, with his theory of the natural goodness of human beings, rejected the doctrine of original sin. For him all derivations from virtue derive from environment and from the mistaken direction of parents and teachers. This is an on-going debate, however. For a more ambivalent view, see Jeremiah, L. Ahlberg, ‘Rousseau and the Original sin’, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 57 (2001), 773-790.

29 *An Enquiry*, p. 2.

30 ‘A Particular Account of Peter the Wild Boy Extracted from the Parish Register at North Church, in the County of Hertford’, *The Annual Register . . . 1784 and 1785* (London: J. Dodsley, 1787), pp. 43-45 (p. 43).

31 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

32 These facts are made a lot of in satirical accounts that delight in the wild boy’s lack of etiquette and knowledge of the laws of propriety regarding the King. See for example, [Jonathan Swift], *The Most Wonderful Wonder That Ever Appeared to the Wonder of the British Nation* (London: A. More, 1726). For a full list of pamphlets including [John Arbuthnot], *It Cannot Rain But it Pours* (London: J. Roberts, 1726) and *The Manifesto of Lord Peter* (1726), see Newton who notes that these works ‘mock human beings at the expense of the nobility of animals’, *Savage Girls*, p. 35.

33 *An Enquiry*, p. 3. New analysis of the portrait suggests Peter had a rare genetic condition known as Pitt-Hopkins Syndrome. This is only speculation, however, and is suggestive of the present-day medicalisation of such deviancy as wild children. See Meghan Lane, 'Who was Peter the Wild Boy', *BBC News Magazine*, 8 August, 2011 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14215171>> [accessed 1 August 2015].

34 *An Enquiry*, p. 3.

35 On one occasion he travelled as far as Norwich where he was arrested on a charge of spying and as he did not speak it was assumed he was a Spanish subversive. He was delivered from jail by one of the courtiers and from that day wore the leather collar with a brass plate around his neck. Peter's adventures are documented in a pamphlet produced by the church in which he is buried, 'Peter the Wild Boy' (Northchurch: St Mary's, 2012).

36 *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1785 (p. 522), cited in Newton, *Savage Girls*, p. 51.

37 Carl von Linné, *Systema Naturae*, 10th edn (Stockholm, 1758), Book 1, p. 20. Seven feral cases are listed.

38 For a discussion of this taxonomical name, see Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl*, p. 15

39 Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, 4 vols (1748; London: T. Evans, 1777), I, p. 5.

40 *Discourse*, p. 87.

41 'That he was drop'd in the woods by some unnatural mother and left to the mercy of beasts; that providence directed some female brute to nourish him, perhaps a She-Wolf, as Romulus and Remus are famed to be nourished . . . I do not believe a word of' (Defoe, *Mere Nature Delienated, or a body without a soul* (London: T. Warner, 1726), p. 15)). All further references are to this edition.

42 Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (T. B. Wait & Sons, 1815), II, p. 61.

43 ‘Chiefly *Law* and *Psychiatry*. A person so profoundly disabled in mental function or intellect as to be incapable of ordinary acts of reasoning or rational conduct’ (*OED*).

44 I am indebted to Alan J. Bewell for bringing together theories of wild children and idiots in his study of Wordsworth in 1983. Bewell analyses ‘The Idiot Boy’ in relation to the representation of language and memory in *The Recluse* and ‘Peter Bell’. However, Bewell associates ‘Peter Bell’ rather than ‘The Idiot Boy’ with Peter: ‘It is likely that Peter, the aging ‘wild boy’ of Hanover, was in Wordsworth’s mind when he described the British counterpart who shares his name, the wild and woodland rover Peter Bell’ (‘Wordsworth’s Primal Scene: Retrospective Tales of Idiots, Wild Children, and Savages’, *ELH*, 50:2 (1983), 321-46 (p. 331)). Coleridge mentions that Victor would have made a welcome addition to Wordsworth’s *The Recluse* (*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1804-1818*, vol. 3, ed. by Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge, 1973), note 3538, [n. pag.]).

45 ‘All children and Idiots . . . have not the least apprehension or thought’ (Locke, *Essay*, I, p. 27).

46 From Wordsworth’s 1802 letter to John Wilson. Wilson had written in May 1802 to convey his ‘inexpressible disgust’ at the subject matter of the poem and Wordsworth responded with a defence of idiocy and an appeal for compassion. Both letters are supplied as appendices in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 310-21.

47 This is the premise of Rousseau’s influential novel-treatise on education, *Emile* (1762).

48 Wordsworth, 'The Idiot Boy', in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 66-79, line 122. All further references are to this edition are given in parenthesis in the text.

49 Bewell argues that in this scene 'an illegitimate mother's urgent questioning of her idiotic son, an age of interrogations of idiocy aimed at recovering the 'truth' of human nature would seem to come to its parodic end' (p. 35).

50 Contemporary accounts and representations of Victor include Itard, *Mémoire sur les premiers développements de Victor de l'Aveyron* (Paris, 1801); *Rapport sur les nouveaux développements de Victor de l'Aveyron* (Paris, 1806); *An Historical Account of the Discovery and Education of a Savage Man: Or, the First Developments, Physical and Moral, of the Young Savage Caught in the Woods Near Aveyron in the Year 1798* (London: Richard Phillips, 1802). He was also the subject of a melodrama by Pixérécourt, *Victor or the Forest's Child* (1797).

51 This is noted by Bonnaterre and others. For a useful discussion of the significance of Victor's scars, see Newton, *Savage Girls*, p. 99.

52 *Morning Post*, 3rd October 1800.

53 Itard's accounts of the wild boy were first published in English in 1802. Itard was supposedly ambivalent to the teachings of Rousseau, preferring the work of the Lockeian Etienne Bonnot de Condillac. Critical responses to Itard's teaching of Victor include Roger Shattuck, *The Forbidden Experiment: The Story of the Wild Boy of Aveyron* (London: Quartet Books, 1980); Lucien Malson, *Wolf Children and the Problem of Human Nature*; Harlan Lane, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). In 1969, Francois Truffaut directed *L'Enfant Sauvage*, a French new wave film on the life of Victor and the attempts to educate him. Truffaut cast himself in the role of Itard the educator. See Roger Shattuck, 'The Wild Boy in Film', *The Forbidden Experiment*, pp. 208-14; and Michael Brodski, 'The Cinematic

Representation of the Wild Child: Considering Trouffaut's *L'Enfant Sauvage*, *Gothic Studies*, 21.1 (Spring 2019).

54 Itard, in Malson, p. 73

55 Itard, in Malson, p. 98.

56 Bishop H. Pakenham-Walsh, Preface, *Wolf-Children*, p. xxvi.

57 Mary Robinson, 'The Savage of Aveyron', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Judith Pascoe (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2000), pp. 332-38. All further references are to this edition. When Robinson submitted her *Lyrical Tales* to publishers she acknowledged her debt to Wordsworth in a postscript, where she declared that 'the volume will consist of tales, serious and gay on a variety of subjects in the manner of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads' (Mary Robinson, Letter to an unknown publisher, 17 June 1800, cited in Pascoe, Introduction, Mary Robinson, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Pascoe, note 73, p. 54). For further discussions regarding the overall project and context of the *Lyrical Tales*, see Stuart Curran, 'Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* in context, in *Revisioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 17-35.

58 Robinson was the poetry editor of *The Morning Post* in 1799.

59 *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson written by herself*, ed. by Miss Mary Elizabeth Robinson 8 vols. (London: Richard Phillips 1803), III, pp. 173-74.

60 Anne Milne goes as far as identifying Robinson herself as feral in 'At The Precipice of Community: Feral Openness and the Work of Mary Robinson', *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*, 2:1 (March 2012), DOI: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.2.1.2>> [accessed 1 December 2018].

61 Phillipe Pinel's diagnosis was direct and final. To him the boy was an idiot. As he was deprived of that faculty of reason that distinguished humankind from beasts, Pinel classified him alongside lunatics and fools. Pinel's *A Treatise on Insanity* (Sheffield: Caddell and Davis, 1806) is discussed briefly in relation to Victor in Newton, *Savage Girls*, pp. 101-03.

62 Pakenham-Walsh in Singh and Zingg, *Wolf-Children*, p. xxvi.

63 Some present-day narratives that reincarnate the voices of wolf-children are: Jill Dawson, *Victor, Wild Boy* (London: Hodder, 2003); Mordicai Gerstein's novel *Victor: A Novel Based on the Life of the Savage of Aveyron* (New York: Farrar, Streus & Giroux, 1998); Mary Losure's children's book *Wild Boy: The Real Life of the Savage of Aveyron* (Somerville, MA, Candlewick Press, 2013). T. C. Boyle, *Wild Child and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011) includes Victor and others whilst C. M. Tennant has written *Peter the Wild Boy* (London: James Clarke & Co, 1939). Fictional representations of Amala and Kamala include Jane Yolan, *Children of the Wolf* (New York: Viking, 1984); Marcus Sedgwick's novel *The Dark Horse* (London: Orion, 2002) is loosely based on their story.

64 Hughes, 'Life after Death', lines 47-50.