

# *The Corn Wolf*

## *Writing Apotropaic Texts*

Oct 19, 2009

“Truth can be suppressed in many ways and must be expressed in many ways.”

Brecht, “The Essays of Georg Lukacs”

### ***Act One:***

Anthropology graduate student finishes two years of field work and returns home with a computer full of notes and a trunk full of notebooks. Job now is to convert that into a 300 page piece of writing. No one has told her or him (a) how to do fieldwork or (b) that writing is usually the hardest part of the deal. Could these omissions be linked?

I mean—what a state of affairs! Here we have what are arguably the two most important aspects of anthropology and social science and they are both rich, ripe, secrets—secret society type shenanigans. Why so? Could it be that both are based on impossible to define talents, intuitions, tricks, and fears?

All the more reason to talk about them, you say.

But is there something else going on here as well, something connecting fieldwork to writingwork, something they have in common? For instance fieldwork involves participant observation with people and events, being inside and outside, while writingwork involves magical projections through words into people and events. Can we say therefore that writingwork is a type of fieldwork, and vice versa?

### ***Act Two:***

In a commentary on Wittgenstein’s thoughts critical of Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, Rush Rhees cites him: “And when I read Frazer I keep wanting to say: “All these processes, these changes of meaning—we have them here still in our word-language.””

Wittgenstein continues: “If what is hidden in the last sheaf is called the Corn-wolf, but also the last sheaf itself and also the man who binds it, we recognize in this a movement of language with which we are perfectly familiar.”

What is Wittgenstein getting at? It is not altogether clear. He refers us to a movement or slithering and shaking that occurs in figures of speech, tricks you might say,

that can occur with terms of reference that slip over into allied terms of reference such that cause becomes effect and insides outsides. Something like that.

The Corn-wolf is:

- That which is hidden in the last sheaf of corn harvested
- The last sheaf itself
- The man who binds the last sheaf

When Wittgenstein says we are perfectly familiar with Corn-wolfing in the moves our language makes, is he de-magicalizing Frazer or, to the contrary, is he raising awareness about the magic in language, meaning the familiar moves it makes?

And there is another movement, as well, although we don't necessarily pick this up from what I have said so far or from what Wittgenstein says in his commentary and this is the notion of sacrificing a human being or animal standing in for the corn spirit. The person who binds the last sheaf is something more than a man or a woman with a sickle or scythe doing an honest day's labor. You can find intimations of this in late 19<sup>th</sup> c and early 20<sup>th</sup> c Europe up to the time when Frazer published *The Golden Bough* and according to Frazer you find it in many other times and places elsewhere—ancient Egypt, for example, think of Osiris, ancient Greece, think of Dionysus. It is a momentous theme and Frazer spends two volumes on it. In an age of agribusiness and global warming, of environmental revenge following attempts to master nature, it is worth thinking about the disappearance of the vegetable god and its sacrifice. In the supermarket there is no last sheaf.

### ***Act Three:***

“A whole mythology is deposited in our language.”

This quotation from Wittgenstein is what intrigued me in Rush Rhees' commentary before I got side-tracked by the Corn-wolf. I have recalled this again and again over many years. “A whole mythology is deposited in our language.” It sticks in my memory. It has become part of my mythology. For this to me is the anthropological project: becoming aware of that presence and finding a form of writing that sets it free, like William Burroughs insists with his “cut out” method. “Words are like animals. Cut open the cages and let the animals free.”

Always but always I find this Corn-wolf tugging at my elbow. I find it when I look around me and I find it when I write. I am writing a five page piece on Obscenity for a conference in Iowa and I cannot resist my tongue in cheek title before I have written a word, “Obscenity in Iowa.” It carries me away into the heartland on account of the contradictions this word “obscurity” contains. So I write a Hayden White annal, four

days in my life watching out for the obscene, all the time aware as to the heave and shine of Wittgenstein's "mythology."

Or else I am writing about liposuction and cosmetic surgery as I hear ever wilder stories about these procedures in Colombia among poor young women. I am enthralled by the desperation of this search for beauty and the elimination of nature by artifice. There is so much to tell, so much to consider—but what stands out most is the fairytale resonance of this endeavor, same as the stories of the devil-contracts that I heard in the canefields almost forty years before.

Or else I am thinking of the desperate need for cocaine, the mythologies this rests upon and creates, cocaine that has now made Colombia into a drug colony instead of what it was for four hundred years, a gold colony, and if you don't know or can't feel the mythic power of gold and the fairytales it has spawned circling around God and the devil, then there is no hope for you.

How much of a difference is there between Wittgenstein's mythology in our language and the mythic realities of these things—obscenity, beauty, fat, gold and cocaine?

Does not one imply the other?

They are exotic, you say. Not at all typical, you say.

But aren't they examples of life itself, of the lust for life and death, of the value and beauty that makes the world go 'round?

And nothing is as exotic in this regard as Agribusiness writing itself.

Yet what chance is there for my anthropological project given the prevailing agribusiness approach to language and writing which wipes out the Corn-wolf?

Or so it seems.

#### ***Act Four:***

Agribusiness writing is what we commonly find in social science including anthropology and, I suspect, in history writing too. It is a mode that assumes writing as information to be set clearly aside from rhetoric and the art of the storyteller. It assumes writing to be a communicative means, not a source of experience for reader and writer alike. And it assumes explanation when what is at issue in all our talk and writing is the very nature of explanation as in *What is an explanation and How do you do one, and How weird is that?*

Recall old wolf Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* choked up because in explaining, he claims, we generally reduce the unknown to the known because of our fear of the unknown. Even worse is that this procedure conceals how strange is the known.

Agribusiness performs this in spades. It cannot estrange the known, that with which it works, its itselfness.

Agribusiness writing wants to drain the wetlands. Swamps they used to be called, dank places where bugs multiply. As if by magic the disorder of the world will be straightened out. Rarely if ever with such writing do we get the sense of chaos moving not to order but to another form of chaos.

This law n' order approach accords with mainstream anthropological studies of ritual as the transformation of disorder into order. This applies especially to healing ritual in non-Western cultures. Where contradiction and meaningless reigned, now harmony will prevail instead. Agribusiness writing is the same as this version of a "primitive" healing ritual.

I recall that callow youth in the Archaeology Department of the University of Michigan telling me long ago that shamanism in the Andean Montana had been "pretty much nailed down," meaning "explained." Other times I think of a hot iron smoothing out a wrinkled shirt, or a machine stuffing sardines into a tiny tin along with yellowish oil as lubricant.

But isn't agribusiness writing resolutely rooted in science as anything but ritual?

Or could agribusiness writing itself be magical, disguised as anything but?

### ***Act Five:***

What turned me around, it was in 1983, was when I picked up *Call Me Ishmael*, by Charles Olson. What was this writing? Yes! it seemed histrionic and chest-beating at times. But that voice? Was it poetry, was it prophecy, was it literary criticism, or Marxism? Even. Or all of that and thus something more. Always but always suggestive, making you want to go that extra mile in your own imagination as the layers peeled away. There was a annactuation of fact, as in FACT

Do the gact thing and then the whaling machine, pa 17-18

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Hardly a sentimental traditionalist or antiquarian, in fact outrageously Modern, Wittgenstein provides my anthropological self with a sense of Nervous System writing as magic—of writing as the Corn-wolf—of writing that agribusiness renders moot, cutting

down the field in which there is now no last sheaf never, all sheafs the same, just corn, we might say. Say dollars. Might as well.

Or so it seems.

Nervous System writing, what is that? It is writing that finds itself implicated in the play of institutionalized power as a play of feints and bluffs and as-ifs taken as real in which you are expected to play by the rules only to find there are none and then, like a fish dangling on the hook, you are jerked into a spine-breaking recognition that yes! after all, there are rules. And so it goes. Not a system but a Nervous System, a nervously nervous Nervous System, impressed upon me negotiating military roadblocks in the Putumayo area of rural Colombia in the 1980s as the counter guerrilla war heated up and reality was—how shall we put this—“elastic” and multiple, “montaged,” Brecht would say, a fact that had been strongly impressed upon me by the spasmodic flows of sorcery and its curing by shamans singing with the hallucinogens drunk in small groups, myself included. Think of a cubist drawing with its intersecting planes and disorganization of cherished Renaissance perspective. Think of a person changing into a jaguar, at least from the waist up. Or yourself outside of yourself looking at yourself. “The silence fell heavy and blue in mountain villages,” wrote William Burroughs, no doubt thinking back to his time in the Putumayo, with that “pulsing mineral silence as word dust falls from demagnetized patterns.” As I listened harder to my friends in agribusiness slum towns far from that sort of war and those hallucinations and that sorcery, I sensed how multiply real were their views of the world, too.

And what about me and my practice of writing? Wasn't I meant to straighten this mess out? A year or so later in my hometown of Sydney, for me one of the world's centers of order and stability anchoring the order/disorder paradigm we cherish—we have order, the Other doesn't—I saw the graffiti on a ferry stop in the harbor—*Nervous System*—it said, ominous in its enigmatic might. A sign from the Gods? A system on the verge of a nervous breakdown? What sort of contradiction and Corn-wolfing play of words was this? At that time I was reading the British House of Commons' Blue Books of 1912 with their testimony concerning the atrocities in the rubber boom in the Putumayo, Colombia, like those in Leopold's Congo—over there, back then. British Consul Roger Casement up the Putumayo River reporting to Foreign Secretary, Sir Edmund Grey. The violence was too much to read, my mind shuts off, has to be exaggerated, but now it's not violent enough, woa! where am I going with this? Only stories after all—stories Casement got from other people telling stories, and worst of all none of the motives made sense, leaving just violence, a nervous system there on the frontier, so many hearts of darkness and the ultimate violence was giving the Nervous System its fix, it's craving for order which it would then spin around, laughing at your naivete because the more order you found, the more you jacked up the disorder.

Could it be that the stories themselves were the aether in which violence operated, the real reality? What then would be an effective critical response? Check the archive to go beyond Casement's stories to prove. . .well, prove what? What sort of calculus of utilitarian logic could prove that rubber, like oil today, was the root cause? At once too

easy and too crazy. Or could it be that violence became an end in itself aligned with demons and magics expelled by contemporary psychology but ever present in the Genealogy of Morals or Bataille's visions of excess, the sacred pay-off that comes from breaking the taboo? In which case my question becomes what sort of story can cut across and deflect those violence-stories, this being every bit as much a question of art and of ritual as it is of social science? The writer looks the history in the face at the receiving end of a chain of storytellers and has for a brief moment this one chance, the one permanently before the last, to make this intervention in the state of emergency, before this story is swallowed up by the response it causes.

That is what I call Nervous System writing.

Roland Barthes said codes cannot be destroyed, only "played off."

But "only" is quite enough. More than enough.

Hidden inside the last sheaf, the Corn-wolf knows this well—imagine the scene there in the corner of the field. Think Breughel. Think Thomas Hardy. And the Corn-wolf is also the sacrificed—that never to be understood activity, sacrifice, like the Nervous System itself.

Nervous System writing aims at being one jump ahead of the rules of rulelessness but knows at the same time this is a doomed pursuit. If it is true that there is a mythology deposited in our language, NS writing aims not at exposing that mythology but at conniving with it.

### ***Act Six:***

I have long felt that agribusiness writing is more magical than magic ever could be and that what is required is to counter the purported realism of agribusiness writing with apotropaic writing as counter-magic, *apotropaic* from the ancient Greek meaning the use of magic to protect one from harmful magic. This is prefigured in the wolfing moves alluded to by Wittgenstein, moves that counter the Other, as in a Chinese martial art that imitates so as to deflect.

Wolfing moves include the following.

1. Refusing to give the Nervous System its fix, its fix of order
2. Demystification—fine—so long as it implies and involves reenchantment. Glossing Benjamin, Adorno talks of trying to have "everything metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things." Note the word "spell."
3. That while it is hazardous to entertain a mimetic theory of language and writing, it is no less hazardous not to have such a theory. We live with both things going on simultaneously. This absurd state of affairs is where the Corn-wolf roams. Try to imagine

what would happen if we didn't in daily practice conspire to actively forget what Saussure called the arbitrariness of the sign. Or try the opposite experiment. Try to imagine living in a world whose signs were "natural."

4. We destroy only as creators says Nietzsche. What he means is that by analysis we build and rebuild, in ever so particular a manner, culture itself. And nowhere will this be more pertinent than with anthropology—the study of culture. But what is also meant is the blurring of fiction and non-fiction, beginning with the recognition and appraisal that this distinction is itself fictional and necessary. That too is a Nervous System, the endorsement of the real as really made up. The ultimate wolfing move.

*Act Seven:*

But are we capable of wolfing the wolf? For we are the last sheaf—are we not? And who will bind us? Is self-sacrifice the way out? After all, Hubert and Mauss say that the god sacrificing itself is the origin of all sacrifice. Truly the mythology is one jump ahead. For as the world heats up, thanks to agribusiness, is it possible that subjects will become objects and a new—which is to say "old"—constellation of mind to matter, body and soul, will snap into place in which writing will be neither one nor the other but both, in the Corn-wolfing way I have described in the previous act?

The End