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Christian Lawrence

Western Washington University, christian.lawrence@wwu.edu

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Between: Place & Sovereign

Christian Lawrence
Western Washington University
Preface

This essay comes from reading and studying works and authors of the literary tradition called “continental philosophy,” a school of critical thought as artistic as it is academic. Never limiting itself to a particular body of writing, continental philosophy allows the thinker to liberally address issues of morality, sociology, psychology, and ontology across texts, from literary fiction to political theory. The mythology and philosophy of the West’s antiquity, studies of the Bible, and early modern human analyses (anthropology, psychoanalysis, etc.) are of particular interest to this school. The purpose of this interdisciplinary and often baffling pursuit: to question what we think and how we think. In this mode of thought, questioning what we believe to be true is always more important than positing some new claim to truth.

Like much of philosophy, the continental school spends as much effort revisiting and critiquing itself and its own thinkers as it does developing new branches of thought. Critique is a way of expanding a thought and taking it in new directions, introducing new themes and possibilities to test against and make trial of the old. This form of argument can be a disagreement between one author or idea and another, but often critique is more an academic attempt to expand an idea beyond where it has been taken thus far—to create new meanings and questions. Critique makes philosophical thought inexhaustible, always refining and exploring.

Jacques Derrida is the subject of the present essay’s critique. He is a French thinker prominent in what is called Deconstruction, a sub-school that refines ideas by taking apart the use, choice, and meaning of language used to express them (Lévinas was Derrida’s contemporary, and both French Jews). The essay reflexively adopts some of his style. It is further influenced by the Italian philologist Giorgio Agamben, who observes the historical issues of politics, philosophy, and theology. Both are already concerned with the political theorists Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Carl Schmitt, whose thought on power and legality played a role in the philosophy of the Nazi party. Ovid, the Roman poet and cataloguer of so many stories that have informed Western thought, and Herman Melville are also common interests in critical theory, but I have taken the liberty of introducing Mr. Stewart and Dr. Anthony whose honest observations and academic research, respectively, of the ancient
cultures of the old world easily find their place in this question human identity and power.

Topically, this essay is about exploring human power by questioning some of its underlying human mechanisms, thus calling into question non-human (animal) elements, all while having a little fun. Key in the opening of this discourse is the French bête, which means “animal” and “stupid,” from the Latin brutus, whose English sister is the word “brutal” or “brute.” The scope of the project leaves out so many considerations, which is why it is limited to an experimental critique of a particular passage posed by Derrida. In spirit, however, this text is a kind of game at language and ideas that, nevertheless, should be taken a bit seriously.

§1 Loomings

David Attenborough selects a hauntingly violent series of stock footage to include in his special documentary on wolves, depicting their slaughter in the wild. A pair of hunters looms by helicopter over one animal trailing through a thin wood (fig. 1). When the marksman makes his shot, the wolf turns instinctively to confront its backbiter, and finding nothing there, instead flails and howls in the snow, gnawing its own leg in its death throes (fig. 2). The rifleman, several hundred feet in the air, unseen, untouched, barely heard, looms omnipresently and terrifyingly in such a way Derrida might call á pas de loup, stealthily. ‘Walking like the wolf’ is, to Derrida, proper to the sovereign who causes great anxiety—we never know what/who it is, how many there are, and where it lies. Spreading open the language of á pas de loup (that, with minute shifts in wording, can suddenly take on drastic new meanings), we begin to see the fundamentals of sovereignty with which Derrida sets up his explorations in The Beast & The Sovereign. Really, “there is no wolf [pas de loup] yet where things are looming á pas de loup, the wolf is not there yet [le loup n’y est pas]... there is only a word... a fable, a fable-wolf, a fabulous animal” (5). Just how real can we allow this fabulous animal-sovereign to be? Derrida
places the sovereign, and in doing so also characterizes it, saying:

Like God, the sovereign is above the law and above humanity, above everything, and he looks a bit stupid [bête], he looks like the beast, and even like the death he carries with him, that death that Lévinas says is not nothingness, nonbeing, but nonresponse. (57)

Looming over us, hovering above law, Derrida’s sovereign is derived from Carl Schmitt’s “decisive entity, [that] is sovereign in the sense that the decision about the critical situation, even if it is the exception, must always necessarily reside there [i.e. in sovereignty alone]” (Schmitt, 38), but it is also always a wolf, a werewolf. At some point, we realize that we must discover where this fabular monster came from and we must know if Derrida’s sovereign or if something else entirely is what is really looming in a position of power over man. All the while, we will be haunted by the fact that this wolf may in fact be no wolf, or, more precisely, it is “the insensible wolf” (Derrida, 6). Insensibility is ‘without sense’ but also is ‘not sensed:’ not being seen and not being heard (stealthy). When we call for it or name it, it does not respond, and its silence is what looms and gives it mystical properties. The nonresponse, to eyes or ears, engenders fear and fable. We must ask why the sovereign is response-less and what it means in not responding. To critique this sovereign is to open up its nonresponsivity, to find out why it is so stupid (brutal, cruel, and mute), to track it back to where it originates, and to discover if the exceptional position Derrida has assigned sovereignty seems proper to the sovereign and acceptable to the humanity over which it has authority.

§2 A Historical Dignity

History is the study of signs or traces by which a hunter can follow a trail (or genealogy) back to the origins of his subject’s purpose or nature. Tracking this stealthy wolf, Derrida invents the genelycology “to know how to deal with the wolf,” to appropriately address and trace
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(or outline) these wolf-men and wolf-sovereigns that lurk in his “book of wolves” (64). Derrida’s anthropolyology, of men and wolves, is like Carl Schmitt’s very anthropological real politik, a political theory preoccupied with the history of man, his original evil, and how his politics must be defined by his sinful propensity (Derrida 44). Derrida is preoccupied with the history of man and his original wolfishness. Perhaps, since Hobbes (to whose tradition Schmitt belongs) and Rousseau (who vigorously and critically responds to Hobbes’s Leviathan with The Social Contract) alike have defined the sovereign as the corporate body politic of men made by men, our historicity of the sovereign should be concerned with how man fundamentally defines himself. Setting aside the origins of sin and its extensive body of Christian theology, let us concern ourselves with this original wolfishness and how the animal involves itself in man’s self-identity, his own body, and his political body.

Taxonomy is always a genealogical system of classification that wants to trace connections and give names to otherwise mysterious subjects in an effort to make them understandable and, necessarily, demystified. Such an effort is always dubious. A tradition of understanding by the violence of designation, dissecting, and removing environmental contexts can only make its subject known by the language (name, genus, kingdom, type, etc.) that the observer forces upon it. Whether or not this institutionalization and categorization is a true revealing or making known of the subject’s nature (if this is even possible), and whether or not these taxonomically fabricated creatures with names are real is always debatable. Exploring early developments in this accounting and science of origins, Giorgio Agamben plies into the problem that the human taxonomic designation, Homo sapiens, is the ape without specific identification. Traditionally, man is the animal with the sole characteristic that he is man only when he recognizes himself as such [nosce te ipsum], and Agamben calls this self-identifying formula ‘the anthropological machine’ in The Open: Man and Animal. Beginning §8, titled ‘Without Rank,’ he says,

The anthropological machine of humanism is an ironic apparatus that verifies the absence of a nature proper to Homo, holding him suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature, between animal and human—and, thus, his being always less and more than himself. (29; my emphasis)

Suspending the terms “human” and “inhuman” in the anthropological
man seeks to define himself by a separating of man and animal, perhaps in fear of the possibility of a werewolf, the monster that is both. Agamben addresses, here in this discourse on proper to, the matter of dignity, "which [he says] simply means 'rank,' and could not in any case refer to man." This man without rank, who has no rank to fall into, is a man without place whose betweenness leaves him stranded in the Animal Kingdom, yet stricken by God's image. Perhaps 'dignity' refers to this unranked betweenness between men, and, more importantly, the authority that facilitates it. The Latin dignus, i.e. "worth, worthy, proper, fitting," might suggest such an authority. The word originates in the Proto-Indo-European root *dek- "to take, [and] to accept" (Harper). At the foundation of this facilitation of the authority that betweenness carries will be the facilitation of taking and accepting, which does not refer to men, but what is between them.

Borges reminds us in his bestiary that Siddhartha Gautama was prophesied by a mystical white elephant to either save men as the greatest of souls, or rule men as the greatest of lords. The Buddha chose the former, and by fasting and eschewing earthliness did he transcend. The temptation of Christ may not have had such similar results had this diabolic debate on self-identity not taken place in the emptiness of a desert between places, or, more importantly, while he was neither taking nor accepting food. These saviors of men, in their emptiness, neither take nor accept.

§3 The Orality of Fear

Derrida horribly imagines, "it is as though, through the maw of the untamable beast, a figure of the sovereign were to appear" (18), as he begins to approach, in The Beast & the Sovereign, the issues of both roguishness and orality. The oral, for Derrida, is a colossal subject of love, words, breath, and spirit or animus. Politically, the mouth is the organ of the body's passage that can open to speak, a sending forth; or to devour, a taking in. Orality is the feral jaws of a starving wolf and it is the source of sovereign pronouncement and policy. The lips can be open in gesticulation, or sealed in non-response. The sovereign that is silent but wolfish will always find its nature in orality: how it rules and where it comes from. The issue is as deep as the abyssal gut into which it leads. Greeks imagined the time before order, vast and empty, as chaos or khaino, the yawn (Harper). This is the unknown and irrational region from which Derrida's sovereign springs, and with his own mouth irresponsibly gluts himself like some swine or wolf or other animal. Conceptualize a
king that has, through his lips, drank too much—he is blind-drunk and less responsible in his stupor. His actions will be random and potentially terrible. His subjects might prefer him dead, yet he must still be obeyed for the void of his absence will bring upheaval and disorder. An oral sovereign is, in Derrida’s book of wolves, animalistic and wild, who knows that:

One must show oneself to be blind, make it known that one can be blind and stupid [bête] in the choice of targets, just so as to be frightening and have the enemy believe that one is acting at random, that one goes crazy when vital interests are affected. (89)

The not-knowing of the sovereign’s intentions is just as frightening as not knowing his shape or his location (or if he is actually there). This particular passage arises in Derrida’s commentary on U.S. foreign policy. Every possibility looms in and preoccupies the minds of the enemies and the subjects of the sovereign, and anxiety ensues. Derrida believes that the intelligence of US Strategic Command (Stratcom) is the directive to prevent the sovereignty that it represents from ever seeming too rational to its enemies, to make an “image of an adversary”, he says, “who always might do just anything” (89).

‘Loomings’ is also Melville’s title for the first chapter of his Moby-Dick. It is always the whale, “withholding from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wrenched hideousness of his jaw” (409), that preoccupies the whale hunters—Ahab most of all. Thousands of words can be said of jaws and of sovereignty in this leviathanic tome (e.g. sailors must pass through a pair of whale’s jaws to reach the barroom in New Bedford to get their first shoreside drink), but it is clear that the colossal mouth of the whale, like the bared fangs of a wolf, is an item of the concealed, of the insatiable, of the greatest fear. Subjects of this orality of fear never know when they will be eaten nor when some impossible edict will be uttered. Like the outlaw or rogue that, outside the law, takes what he pleases, like the brutal wolf that thieves the shepherd’s flock, Derrida’s sovereign is excluded from civil society because he is cruel and hungry, and is cruel and hungry because he is outside of the city. This sovereign transgresses the laws (those political boundaries) and, disregarding them, crosses, as a wolf crosses fences. Doing so, according to Schmitt, the sovereign creates a sovereign law. This is an exclusive sovereign that takes without accepting (as a gift) by means
of its powerful anxiety.

Protego ergo obligo [protection therefore obedience] is at the foundation Schmitt’s state that is served so as to protect. It “is the cogito ergo sum [I think, therefore I am] of the state” (Schmitt, 52). The constituent’s obligation to his body politic (the state) is at once a reflexive gratitude for being protected, but more importantly a fear of being vulnerable. For Derrida, fear of no-state and fear of state is the doubled fear of this obligation. The subjects cannot imagine how to protect themselves without the state or from the state itself. The horrific Leviathan of the Hobbes-Schmitt-Derridian legacy is the man-made and sovereign “Artificial Soul... giving life and motion to the body [politic]” (Derrida, 28). The very spirit or animus [animal] of that artificial soul is this: “Sovereignty causes fear, and fear makes the sovereign” (40). At first, this appears remarkably similar to Rousseau’s persona ficta (a fiction of or formulation by the collective or “general” will of the subjects of the state) that demands “an obligation to something of which one is a member” (62). Indeed, the sovereign “General Will” within his Social Contract has the right to grant life and death to members of the assemblage: “Whoever wishes to preserve his own life at the expense of others must give his life for them when it is necessary” (78). However, Rousseau’s sovereign requires an additional identification in that it is an entity that “can act only when the people are assembled” (136). Only in an assembly of men can this sovereign be readily and repeatedly re-affirmed. In between each who has gathered is an argument or an agreement, and out of this a state is conjured and made real.

This sovereign that springs from the orality of the collective agreement, between each mouth, that Rousseau initiates for us seems so fragile without that bestial authority that Derrida relies upon so heavily. Yet, its strength lies in reciprocal obligation instead of a doubled fear. Unlike the sovereign that springs from the orality of fear, this sovereignty obliges its subjects to its protection, but it is obliged to its subjects for substantiation and reality, and in this relation the persona ficta facilitates the responsibility of one speaker to another, proposing and agreeing, calling and responding, even in its own nonresponse. The persona ficta facilitates the authority of the betweenness found among the men who make it. If that authority is not found in the bestial exclusion that it seems to oppose, it must be found and related to the dignity of taking and accepting.
§4 Lycaon

By exception, by bestiality, by being exceptional, becoming-animal, becoming-exceptional, the exceptional sovereign is like the outlaw and like the wolf as it looms outside the law and is above the law (and thus, Schmitt would assert, is making law). Like God, like the wolf, it does not speak our language and will respond to us neither when we inquire after it (“what are you? where are you? how many of you are there?”) nor when we wish to enter into covenant with it, i.e. hold it accountable. As such, it can make decisions and be ‘the Decider’ for itself and its subjects with impunity, even if illegally, only because it has no capacity for an exchange. “If one cannot make a convention with the beast,” Derrida submits,

any more than with God, it is for a reason of language. The beast does not understand our language, and God cannot respond to us, that is cannot make known to us, and so we cannot know in turn if our convention is or is not accepted by him. (55)

This irresponsibility is, according to Derrida, the direct consequence of the inability of the theo-therianthropic [god-beast-person-like] sovereign to communicate between subject and sovereign, to take in and send out, to both call and respond. The exceptional sovereign cannot respond, and this form of responselessness does not allow for responsibility between subjects.

Melville, perplexed and consumed by this beast-sovereign, attempted to divest it, reveal it and strip it of its mystery in his own ‘book of whales.’ Moby-Dick is more cetological (the study of whales) commentary than narrative. It is a treatise on the slaughter and dissection of the whale: man’s attempt at attaining mastery over the leviathan. Like genelycology, like anthropopolyology, cetology is a dubious historical tracking back—historical in its taxonomic tradition and its attempt to disconceal origins, and dubious in that these tracings are always inferred, if not simply fables. [Agamben provides us with an interesting moment in nautical taxonomy: “A serious scientific work such as Peter Artedi’s Ichthiologica (1738) still listed sirens next to seals and lions, and Linnaeus himself, in his Pan Europaeus, classifies sirens—which the Danish anatomist Caspar Bartholin called Homo marinus—together with man and apes” (Agamben, 24)]. In modern archaeology, whales and wolves even have common origins in an ancestor called therosphalian,
‘beast-head.’ Melville’s most rigorous (though inept) attack on the leviathan that looms over him was the development of the cetological library of Chapter 32. Here, folios and octavos become analogues for whales and their cousins—little clinical articles to flip through—and their terror is shown to be nothing but a common human irrationality, easily diagnosed and set aside in the stack.

To Melville, merely showing is a revealing that can dispel that fear of the jaws, the orality of fear. The Beast & the Sovereign begins with the assurance “we’re shortly going to show it,” which is the epigraph that begins La Fontaine’s poem, The Wolf & the Lamb. This poem predicates Derrida’s ‘book of wolves’ (and Derrida’s Rogues as well, for which the entire poem itself serves as an epigraph), and really does show the origins of this wolfish sovereignty. This epigraph within an epigraph on showing will serve as our taxonomy for Derrida’s wolf, both as a matter of the wolf’s nature and how we see it (if we can see it, if it can be revealed).

The hungry wolf comes to the river to drink and finds a lamb taking his space. The wolf accuses the lamb of drinking his water, of hating him, and of being protected by the dogs and shepherds that try to kill him. The lamb’s gentle and adroit reproaches to the wolf’s fury do not spare the child from being consumed.

La Fontaine’s wolf is always a respectful ‘Your Majesty’ to the lamb. The “cruel beast... attracted by hunger” is completely insensitive to the lamb’s innocence—both its new-born purity, and its guiltlessness in each accusation that leads to its devourment—and to the rationality of the lamb’s own defense, its logical argument. Derrida’s preferred English translation concludes: “Deep into the wood, the wolf dragged his midday snack. So trial and judgment stood.” Another translation (Eli Siegel’s) provides a textually different conclusion that is exactly the same: “Into the woods, the wolf carries the lamb, and then eats him without any other why or wherefore.” The absence of logic is the juridical law appropriate to the wolf. La Fontaine thus finds his parable successful in its epigraphic purpose: “The reason of those best able to have their way is always the best [The strong are always best at proving they’re right]: We now show how this is true [As we’re shortly going to show].” But the wolf must always retreat into the woods, back into its wilderness of exception and exile, to carry out its judgment that provides no reason and no responsibility. This is where Derrida’s sovereign belongs. Above the company of men, outside the city walls (those boundaries of law and ordinance), the exceptional sovereign originates from where it acquires its strength, suspended between beast and God.
The genealogical process of showing origins doubles in importance for Derrida when he proclaims the “very definition, vocation, or essential claim of sovereignty. [That is:] the sovereign always says or implies: even if I am not the first to do or say so, I am the first or only one to know and to recognize who will have been the first” (92). To afford the sovereign a mastered position by exclusion, the sovereign declares its preemptive originality, a first above firsts. Not doing, not saying, and never responding, the sovereign we are reaching for via the taxonomic, genealogical method (that we attempt to name and show to gain power over) is consistently elusive. Though we know where it is, or at least to where it must retreat, what do we know about this looming fable? Perhaps we need take only one step further to the poet who informed the West of origins and transformations, Ovid, and his first wolf: King Lycaon.

Before Jove/Jupiter/Zeus even begins to groaningly recount “the wicked revels of Lycaon’s table” (Ovid, 8) and the guilt for which the Father of the Gods has held his host accountable, Lycaon-turned-wolf has already “fled in terror, reaching the silent fields” (10). Zeus is the god of hospitality and must test that quality in men always, coming to their doors in disguise and then revealing himself after that moment of either welcome or hostility (that moment Derrida calls ‘hostipitality’). Upon receiving the divine guest, King Lycaon decides upon hostility, and it is never clear why (‘without any other why or wherefore’). Even after Jove reveals himself, his royal host attacks and abuses his divine guest, mirroring that test of hostipitality by fruitlessly testing the mortality of Jove. Enraged, the Thunderer transforms King Lycaon’s arms into legs, and robes into fur, “yet he is still Lycaon, the same grayness, the same fierce face... a picture of bestial savagery” (10; emphasis mine). Lycaon’s metamorphosis reveals what will always be consistent: the sovereignty that befits the man and the wolf, with the same face and thus the same mouth (he does not forget to slaughter some sheep before his departure into the field!). Lycaon’s primary affront to Jove is the meal he is served: a hostage of Lycaon’s, boiled alive. This feeding a guest to a guest, this slaughter of a political hostage, who should always be protected by his host, is what really reveals our first wolf. The sovereign that is indistinguishable from the wolf has its strength in exception, but it will always fail the divinely-necessitated duty of hospitality in its insensibility. We have tracked him down and it seems that without dignity (taking-in and accepting guests), unworthy of God’s respect or ours, and always going
back to that place of wolves, those woods, this first-wolf-king is the original sovereign of just that: wolves, not men. Wolves make as terrible hosts as they seem to do guests.

§5 The Feast-Gift

Jove’s test of hospitality, which Lycaon failed, calls into question the acceptability and divinity of the exceptional sovereign. It follows that the constitution of acceptability may be found in those who pass the test. Keep in mind that Jove, the patron of hospitality, was also the deity of law, public places (fountains), and sanctuary. Outlaws who invoked the name of Jove could afford protection under the law. In one of his most memorable tests of hospitality, Ovid tells us in Book 8 of the Metamorphoses, Jove disguises himself as a wayward mortal and approaches the doors of home after mortal home. With him he takes his son, Hermes. The Winged God is both the shepherd and the thief of herds, and notably the deity of reports, messages, lies, orators, and boundaries. Father and son find welcome only in the home of Baucis and Philemon, the poorest and final destination of these vagrant deities. The aged husband and wife feed their veiled guests (having possibly already recognized their divinity) their last and only goose. Their reward of shared eternal life as trees intertwined makes their story one of the most touching and rhetorical fables of hospitality in classical literature.

Abrahamic and Medieval Christianity is also concerned with any possible arrival of visitors who could be divine (e.g. Abraham’s visitation in Genesis 18, or Flaubert’s The Legend of St. Julian the Hospitator). “Love thy neighbor” should prepare the host to receive Christ at any moment, no matter his shape. Looming here is another kind of orality that has to do with reports, the meal (Christ, who is eaten of each week, is a real Host), and boundaries. Perhaps we may find here the sovereign that is acceptable to us, one that allows for both taking and giving in an orality of hospitality. Even in nonresponse, what kind of sovereign can facilitate a responsibility in men that provides hospitality between them?

Genealogy (genelycology), tracking back, tracing back, and finding origins was crucial to placing Derrida’s exceptional sovereign, so it is proper to take a similar historical route in the search of this acceptable sovereign. Archaeologist David W. Anthony specializes in the postulated Proto-Indo-European culture of the Caucuses which he reveals and defends in his work The Horse, Wheel, and Language. This is the culture that mothered our language and all of its cousins and siblings, to which
the West believes it is indebted for its cultural origins and teleologies (read: 'Caucasian'). Using archaeological rigor and this reconstructed maternal language, thousands of years older than ours, Anthony emphasizes the importance of the haunting root "ghos-ti-", the doubled guest-host, in that culture. He says:

Guest-host relationships would have been very useful for a mobile herding economy, as a way of separating people who were moving through your territory with your assent from those who were unwelcome, unregulated, and therefore unprotected. (303)

Humanity in grasslands and deserts requires hospitality both for survival and to define borders. Over and over, Anthony repeats the significance of the guest-host and also the gift. Gifts were not only signs of acceptance and a display of wealth—they were obligations of the host/lord. With the invention of significant mobile property (i.e. herded livestock) came "new rituals and a new kind of leadership, one that threw big feasts and shared food when the deferred investment paid off" (155). Those with the most food or property represented the institution of chiefdom, and it was always their role to feast. Unless they gave in their taking, their subjects would not accept them. Without the feast-meal, there was no sovereign lord. Soon, feasting became a ritual of establishing authority, and may have, in later times, turned from a feasting of the people into a feasting on the people and their resources.

Teleologies: A final cause, ultimate design, or overriding value. E.g. The idea that happiness should be maximized

§6 Betweenness

Not far southeast of the Caucuses lies Afghanistan. A Scotsman named Rory Stewart walked the West-East breadth of that country in 2002, going from village to snowy village and quietly crossing ethnic and political boundaries. In desert-like Afghanistan’s winter, Stewart found himself so often alone in great between-places: between civilization (Herat to Kabul), between one village and the next, between life and death, and between one encounter with men and another. Surviving on
the hospitality of villagers and warlords he found that walking forward was always a matter of relating what is behind.

Everyone had memorized a chant of names [of hosts, usually warlords] and villages along footpaths in every direction... I recited and followed this song-of-the-places-in-between as a map. I chanted it even after I had left the villages, using the list as a credential. Almost everyone recognized the names, even from a hundred kilometers away. Being able to chant them made me half-belong—reassuring hosts who were not sure whether to take me in, and suggesting to anyone who thought of attacking me that I was linked to powerful names. (190)

Without recalling, remembering, and reaffirming that which is behind him with names, chants, and letters of vouching, Stewart would not have made the journey. This betweenness is power and protection in the oral society, the society of the orality of hospitality. From wherever Stewart had been came the authority he brought with his arrival, an authority recognized by and between those who spoke it, originating not out of a sovereignty of fear but one of obligation. Fear was not without place in this place-between-places, but when Stewart found welcome he was, of course, fed. Then he was out of danger. Stewart shared gifts and accepted shelter. At times, Stewart must invoke Muslim law to persuade those he encountered not to attack him, or to aid him—in doing so he obliquely reminded them of God's edict of hospitality. The 'powerful names' that loomed over could be said to loom à pas de loup ("there is no wolf... only a word"), held in suspension until sprung or spoken to the next prospective host; however, the names were not sources of original authority. He never names a king, only peers—fellow hosts who are also fellow warlords. The naming of names invokes a cultural authority, a sovereignty between men who are between places (in the desert) and who seem beholden to nothing except what is between them, and to God, the arbiter of hospitality.

To returning to the right of life and death possessed by Rousseau’s persona ficta, the subject becomes bound to the sovereign not because of fear but “because his life is no longer the bounty of nature but a gift he has received conditionally from the state” (79). In a sense, the sovereign of the Social Contract takes life and can give it again because it is given life by a constant reaffirmation by its corporate
constituents, and they accept what they fabricate because it arises from between them. The artificial leviathan ceases being the mysticetus, the whale that terrifyingly haunts with gaping mouth just beneath dark waves, and becomes a body that feeds itself ["In the days of the Messiah the righteous... will feast on the meat of Leviathan and Behemoth" (Agamben, 1)]. Between each of these people who meet and assemble to speak and share meals and report of what is behind and what is to come is a betweenness that has sovereignty. Said sovereign is not a fellow citizen, but is between-fellows.

Taxonomically, the anthropological machine serves as a mode for differentiating man from wolf, subject from sovereign, human from inhuman. The exclusive sovereign relies on this differentiation for power. To function, Agamben says, the machine must suspend two terms to be formulated: human and inhuman. In doing so, it differentiates and separates. Agamben's intention is to grind the "ironic apparatus" to a halt by bringing that suspension into suspension. The result is an undifferentiated relation that carries with it power, or mastery:

In the reciprocal suspension of these two terms [human & inhuman], something for which we perhaps have no name and which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity and holds itself in the mastered relation. (83)

Most importantly for us, Agamben has, in this issue of what is human and what is inhuman (not our subject, though closely related in the overlapping issues of power and taxonomic identification), revealed that, "what is decisive here is only the 'between,' the interval, or we might say, the play between the two terms" (83). For Derrida, the sovereign is the first of firsts, and thus it holds a mastered position. But Agamben informs us how betweenness is the mastered relation which it is between and undifferentiates man and animal, God and man, or man and man. A bestial sovereign is suspended and fails when the terms of it being-beast versus being-man or being-God are, themselves, suspended. This sovereign of betweenness does not need a position from which to exercise power because it's "where" is always wherever its power is relevant, when there is a relationship of terms or subjects.

§7 Acceptable

Held in suspension, in betweenness, the acceptable sovereign

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looms because it is an insensible sovereign, but not quite “the insensible wolf.” We have tracked it back to its place and it is not the woods outside the city but it is a no-place, a place-in-between, like an agreement between two people. It is before and after, around and within, it is very concerned with borders and boundaries because it must always be relative to those delineations. Derrida’s wolf passes over borders, wantonly ignoring in its illicit movements. The acceptable sovereign crosses borders but in doing so generates energy across them, like the semi-permeable cell membrane over which ions and charges exchange. This is the sovereign to which dignity refers, absolutely silent in its nonresponse (not even a grunt, not even a sign). Taking and accepting are proper to it because it bestows that exchange upon its subjects over whom it has authority.

Derrida’s sovereign, with a wolfish head, cannot respond to us. The acceptable sovereign simply is without a response, especially to such inquiries as: ‘What are you?’ ‘Where are you?’ ‘How many of you are there?’ Making betweens is the business of this sovereign—setting up borders of propriety and of law through an orality of collective agreement. Not in mediating with God or sleeping with wolves, but in mediating between men and gods and wolves and mastering their relativity does it have power over them and under them.

The savior, as we have seen, neither takes nor accepts, and in so doing transcends. The exceptional sovereign takes and accepts, but accepts only for itself—taking and accepting-as-taking. This is a one-way relationship, removing the sovereign from being relative to others: excluding it and rendering it without a between to go to, so it can only flee to the woods and fields. The acceptable sovereign takes and accepts by virtue of allowing its subjects the opportunity for hospitable exchange. A proper host treats and feasts his hostages well. Worthy of men by making men worthy, this sovereign falls into rank between ranks and as such is still unranked but among the ranks (place that is no-place). Looming because it is always there and not there and cannot be shown, it is without proper origin.

Maybe our first acceptable sovereign would be Gilgamesh, the king who goes between life and death and returns to his city to accept his place with some hard-learned dignity and some pride. Impossibly one-third divine, of cow and man, once wild and sexual but conclusively a sovereign of men who is everywhere: “he [simultaneously] leads the way in the vanguard, / [and] he marches at the rear, defender of his
comrades" (4). He built the walls of Uruk, that place between Uruk and not-Uruk, which he shows to Ur-Shanabi with satisfaction upon his return from the world between death and life.

As Derrida says, let's not forget the wolves, that "there is no wolf [pas de loup] yet where things are looming à pas de loup." It may appear as though the sovereign were a wolf because its shadow may be misconstrued as four-legged, and some fabulous bugbear is invented. But really, we never see nor hear what is truly stealthy. Like the lack of echo in the desert, there is absolutely no response. The critique is that the sovereign is only misconceived to be above the law and humanity. Instead it is between law and humanity, between laws and between men. This betweenness is where the absolute sovereignty originates without origin, and where it can be found though it is entirely insensible. The purpose of its nonresponse is to facilitate the necessary, and divinely ordained, hospitality between its subjects.

Fig. 3: "Day seven, from right: Abdul Haq, the author, Mullah Mustafa (commandant of Obey) shortly after he shot at us and just before Abdul Haq's departure." (Stewart)
Between: Place & Sovereign

Fig. 4: Places in between: Rory Stewart & host Aziz. (Stewart)

Works Cited


