Narrative Disruption as Animal Agency in Cormac McCarthy’s The Crossing

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Spurred by a diverse set of commentators including Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Derrida, twenty-first-century cultural theorists have decoupled the subjects and methods taught within the humanities from the anthropocentric perspectives through which they traditionally have been perceived. For these posthumanist scholars, viewing the world through absolute divisions between human subjects and nonhuman objects not only obscures the biotic continuities between animals and humans but also and perhaps more crucially masks the ways that animals express their own agencies as they enter into dynamic networks with other human and nonhuman actors. One central challenge of posthumanism thus revolves around a difficult question: given our status as human beings embedded within a deep tradition of humanism, how can we collect and share information about nonhuman agents from their points of view? Since animals lack an easily identifiable interiority and are, as Martin Heidegger famously argues, "poor in world," how can we, who are "world forming" creatures, think through animals (176)? Or as Derrida, working within the same tradition, asks in his seminal essay "The Animal that Therefore I Am," can human beings ever "think through [the] absolute alterity of the neighbor”—a possibility that he confronts but does not resolve when he "see[s himself] seen naked under the gaze of [his] cat" (380)?
The interdisciplinary breadth of animal studies—a field stretching from the biological sciences on one end to literary studies on the other—means that answers to these questions will vary depending on the assumptions that govern each discipline. In the physical sciences (and, to a lesser extent, in film and new media studies), questions of animal representation matter, if only because they are physically present at the site of their transformation into anthropocentric frameworks. Just as the presence of Derrida’s cat is the occasion for his argument on interspecies-isms, biological and medical experiments on animals self-evidently require the presence of their bodies, which raises the possibility that the physical interaction between scientist and animal might in some way destabilize what Peter Singer calls the "conditioned ethical blindness" that often governs the relationship (71). Likewise, movies and television shows involving animals bear the trace of those creatures because their behaviors do not necessarily correspond to the narrative functions to which they have been put. But if a hypothetical posthuman perspective is in any way attainable within the field of literary study, scholars will have to find it within the disembodied medium of fictional language, in which (with apologies to Karl Marx) animals cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Can the human imagination convey the agency of nonhumans? And if so, how can humans experience and represent the alterity of that agency in the absence of any material trace of the animal itself?

In a recent *PMLA* article, Susan McHugh confronts this challenge directly, arguing that a transition from humanist to posthumanist perspectives on literary animals would have to overcome the gravitational pull of Western literary history, in which animals "emerge as significant figures . . . only in terms of metaphor" (488). Through her analysis of poems such as John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and William Wordsworth's "Nutting," McHugh argues that Western literature typically uses animals as rhetorical vehicles for expressing or clarifying their author’s inevitable tenor: the "essential humanity" that serves as the destination of each animal's representational vector and the tautological site of the humanities. From this conclusion, McHugh dives into the wreck of the English literary tradition and emerges with a sense that any future contribution of literary scholarship to animal studies must engage with the work of other disciplines to "connect the representational forms and material conditions of species life, which entails learning from these failures to explain the agency of literary animals, respecting that they cannot finally be enlisted in the tasks set for them by literary representation" (490). If McHugh is correct, a productive inquiry into the possibility of literary animal agency would require that we study the ways in which animal rep-
resentations fail: we must build a taxonomy of moments in which literary animals disrupt, undermine, or overload the anthropocentric system dictated to them by the terms of that literature.

In the essay that follows, I argue that another prominent post-human discourse—thing theory—provides methods that contribute to this undertaking. Like animal studies, the thing theories of Bill Brown, Ken Alder, and Bruno Latour are concerned with perceiving and modeling nonhuman entities in ways that foreground the limitations of anthropocentric codings and that therefore enable us to consider what a thing might look like when such codings are disturbed. As importantly, thing theory has found a home in the fields of literary study, where it has confronted and to a certain extent addressed the same questions of representation that now preoccupy literary animal studies. Following Martin Heidegger's phenomenological investigations of "das Ding," Bill Brown thinks through literary things by proposing two categories of human–object interactions: "apperceptive" interactions, which "foreclos[e] sensuous experience in order to render the physical world phenomenal," and "the experience of the thing," which "call[s] our attention to brute physicality" through the "interruption of habit" (*A Sense of Things* 76). Brown argues that the latter event, which releases a thing from the structural conditions of its objecthood, often occurs when an object breaks down:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject–object relation. ("Thing Theory" 4)

If we rather crudely applied this idea of object transformation to animal studies, we could suggest that, by analogy, an animal's being or animality can be glimpsed when it "stops working for us," which would occur either when an animal dies or, perhaps more commonly, when the animal's body—its flesh, fur, bone, or tissue—is rendered worthless. This taxon would reproduce some arguments posed by contemporary animal studies, including Kari Weil's contention that "killing animals brings us face to face with the inadequacies of our language or at least with the rational and logical thinking it enables" (122). Analyzing the writings of Temple Grandin and J. M. Coetzee, Weil concludes that "Death . . . is the place where the conceptual and ontological distinctions that language makes possible break down—including the distinctions between human and animal" (122–23).4
But the larger value of this analogy is most apparent when we do not limit ourselves to the case of objects breaking down, which would suggest that the only way for humans to obtain insight into the thingness of the thing (or the animality of the animal) is through historical accident or the destruction of the animal. Brown’s decision to cast the transition from object to thing as a story is telling because it suggests that a thing—both on the page and within the material world—is "less an object" than it is an event, which might be instantiated by a disruption in human thinking brought on by an object's functional failure or by the reverse situation, in which a change in human habit gives way to an altered human–object interaction. To clarify this idea, he examines a short passage from William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890) in which James accesses the thingness of a painting by turning it upside down. Brown interprets the passage as follows: "The difference between the apperceptive constitution of the thing, in what we might call its objecthood, and the experience of the thing, in what we might call its thinghood, emerges in the moment (and no doubt only as a moment) of re-objectification that results from a kind of misuse—turning the picture bottom up, standing on one's head" (*A Sense of Things* 76; emphasis added).

Just as a broken drill becomes a mysterious thing through the suspension of habitual use, the link between a painting and its socially constructed value is temporarily suspended through James's playful actions. In contrast to Brown's earlier model, this latter example suggests that human activity might actively promote thing-making. Brown interprets James's actions as a kind of literary reaction mechanism in which an object must pass through an ephemeral transition state constituted by the thing in order to reach a new objecthood.

If we apply this more flexible model to animal studies, we can hypothesize that, by analogy, an animal might gain a temporary agency and legibility at the moment when it has ceased to function according to its assumed use value—not necessarily by perishing but rather by refusing to participate in productive human work or, in the case of literature, by refusing to advance some anthropocentric plot. In other words, a literary animal’s agency can come into being when its behavior within a narrative temporarily exhausts, confuses, or transforms the use to which it has been put.

Such a possibility would require, at minimum, three different sets of animal states that would form the basis of this animality taxon: First, the animal's use value within a given narrative must at some point be legible as an anthropocentric rhetorical device that sheds light on the worldview of its human characters. Second, the plot of that narrative must lead to a state in which the animal is imbued with a conflicting anthropomorphic value. Third, at the instance of its
changed relationship to the narrative and its human characters, the animal’s use value must be suspended in a language of undecidability, causing the animal’s “brute physicality” (to use Brown’s term) to emerge in the brief moment before, or perhaps during, anthropocentric recoding (A Sense of Things 76). Put slightly differently, any study of this kind of literary animal agency must look for it in the interstices of narratives, in places where human characters can no longer comfortably view the animal through its initial anthropocentric value but also cannot understand it through its subsequent, equally anthropocentric function.

To assess the strengths and weaknesses of such a reading, I turn now to an examination of a narrative that contains many examples of this kind of code-switching: Cormac McCarthy’s opening chapter to the second novel of his Border Trilogy, The Crossing—first published as "The Wolf Trapper" in the July 1993 issue of Esquire. Many critics have noted that Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy depicts midcentury conflicts between the industrial and agricultural monetization of the American Southwest and the natural wildness that such activity displaces. The Crossing frames this conflict through the US Bureau of Biological Survey's campaign to exterminate the Mexican gray wolf during the first four decades of the twentieth century. The narrative begins in 1941 in the newly formed Hidalgo County on the border between Mexico and New Mexico, a site in which the head of the Bureau of Biological Survey’s New Mexico district, J. Stokely Ligon, and the legendary trapper W. C. Echols have recently exterminated the last indigenous wolf. In the opening chapter, a young boy named Billy Parham traps a pregnant wolf that has crossed the border from Mexico and has been mutilating cattle on his father’s ranch. Instead of shooting the animal on site, Billy takes the she-wolf back across the border in an ill-fated attempt to return it to the wild.

As critics such as Dianne Luce have argued, Billy’s decision and subsequent journey serve as symbolic acts of resistance to one kind of anthropocentrism (here aligned with American capitalism) and would thus seem to confirm the value of the thing-animal analogy. For Luce, the she-wolf "comes to represent not only the material world of nature destroyed by man, but the very spirit of wildness and of the eternal world itself, a swift huntress that the world cannot lose," and the marker of such trans-valuation is Billy’s transgressive misuse (168). But if Billy’s decision not to kill the wolf suggests that he views it as a thing that exceeds its economic objecthood, such a stance does not mean that his interactions with the wolf are not soon subject to an alternative form of use value that again deprives the wolf of its agency. As Doug Honnold reminds us in his study of the reintroduction of wolves into the American Southwest during the late
twentieth century, it is difficult to wholeheartedly support "images of wolves captured, wolves darted, wolves translocated, and wolves set 'free' by man . . . . I can't help but wonder," he writes, "whether this is nothing but another variation of the human desire to control nature that led—in an earlier incarnation—to the extirpation of the wolf from the western landscape" (qtd. in Van Horn 222–23). In other words, the same logic of anthropocentrism outlined by McHugh might govern Billy's worldview in The Crossing. The boy never ceases to remind people on his journey that the wolf has been "put in his care" (110), echoing a Christian framework of dominion that Lynne White, Jr. calls "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1205). Indeed, the narrator's descriptions of the wolf make it increasingly clear that the kinship that Billy feels obscures the clear differences in agency between the boy and the animal. These differences contribute to some of the most extreme critiques of the novel, including Wallis Sanborn's contention that Billy is the novel's antihero: "Although noble, Parham's mission to return the captured she-wolf to Mexico is abjectly flawed . . . [it is] nothing more than a man violently controlling a wild animal through the guise of pseudo-nobility" (143).

In place of one rational, economic model of anthropocentrism, we are therefore left with two opposed but stable anthropocentric models of animal agency. For the US Bureau of Biological Survey, the wolf is an agent of economic sabotage and must be destroyed. For Billy, the wolf is a symbol of wildness that he must properly husband in order to fulfill his ritualized ascent to manhood. But as I will argue, this binary system introduces what might be called a posthuman transition state at the site of the wolf's trans-signification: the brief moments between the animal put to one human use and the animal put to another offers an indicator of the wolf's hidden, non-anthropocentric agency. Moreover, the narrative prolongs this thing-making through the disjunction between how Billy perceives the wolf on his march south into Mexico and how the narrator describes the wolf, suggesting that, paradoxically, the animal can only demonstrate its agency in Billy's presence by behaving in ways that defer its transition to its use as a wild thing kept separate from human civilization. In other words, the conflict that generates the wolf's literary agency in the text is visible only when it resists its function as Billy's avatar of wildness.

**The Animal as Wild Thing**

In a rare interview published in the New York Times, McCarthy states: "The ugly fact is books are made out of books. The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written" ("Cormac
McCarthy’s Venomous Prose”). *The Crossing* is a fitting testament to this idea; its depiction of animals updates themes present in some of his earliest short stories including "A Drowning Incident," published while he was still an undergraduate in the University of Tennessee’s literary magazine *The Phoenix*. Like *The Crossing*, "A Drowning Incident" recounts the story of a young boy who takes ownership of a pregnant canine, a stray dog named Suzy. Anticipating the later novel, the boy initially defers to his father when it comes to deciding the animal’s fate, and after Suzy births her pups, the father removes them from the boy's care, telling him that they have "gone to a new home" (3). But while walking along the banks of a river the following week, the boy looks down and discovers the puppies’ actual fate:

>Then with the gentle current drifted from beneath the bridge a small puppy, rolling and bumping along the bottom of the creek, turning weightlessly in the slow water. He watched uncomprehendingly. It spun slowly to stare at him with sightless eyes, turning its white belly to the softly diffused sunlight, its legs stiff and straight in an attitude of perpetual resistance . . . . He sat up quickly, shook his head and stared into the water. (3)

In this moment of delayed decoding, the thingness of the animal emerges from its objecthood through the suspension of habit: the puppy's death-gaze destabilizes the boy's imagined relationships with both his father and the animal world. Earlier in the story, the boy's interactions with animals are characterized by anthropogenic violence: he crushes a cricket, watches "a thick white liquid" ooze from it, feeds the cricket to a black widow, and spits on both creatures when the spider "began a weaving motion over [the cricket] with her legs as if performing some last rite" (3). After he discovers the drowned pup, the anthropocentricism of these encounters (clearly marked by the priestly metaphor) gives way to the experience of animal "resistance," which is visible in the uncanny description of the puppy "star[ing] at him with sightless eyes" (3). This ghostly animal gaze, like the living gaze of Derrida’s cat, renders the boy’s encounter with the animal temporarily incomprehensible not only because of its unexpected presence in the water but also because he has known the animal only as a mediating object in his relationship with his father. Denied this stable encoding, Billy encounters the animal as an agentic and uncontrollable other capable of staring back at the subjectivity that gazes on it. His later discovery of the burlap sack that houses another dead puppy produces a similar effect:
As he stared, a small head appeared through a rent in the bag. It ebbed softly for a moment, then, tugged by a corner of the current, a small black and white figure, curled fetally, emerged. It was like witnessing the underwater birth of some fantastic subaqueous organism. It swayed hesitantly for a moment before turning to slide from sight in the faster water.

He had no tears, only a great hollow feeling which even as he sat there gave way to a slow mounting sense of outrage. (4)

The narrator's language strips the second puppy of even a species designation; it becomes a "fantastic subaqueous organism" that provokes a momentary "great hollow feeling" in the boy as he struggles to identify not only the thing in the water but its relationship to his own life narrative. Like William James's story of the painting turned upside down, McCarthy's story is thus organized around a disruption that renders a nonhuman entity temporarily visible (or newly birthed) as a thing unmoored from its comfortable anthropocentric encoding.

In both instances, this animal agency is available only for a moment before it is reintegrated into anthropocentric world views: the thingness of the animal is quickly replaced with an anthropocentric "sense of outrage" that displaces his indeterminate (and therefore intolerable) relationship with the puppies onto his newly determined relationship with his father (4). This idea is supported by the boy's subsequent actions: he fishes the second dead puppy out of the creek, places it in a paper bag, and takes it to his home. Entering the room of his newborn sibling, he places the animal corpse in a crib next to the sleeping child, an action that "was the culmination of all the schemes half formed not only walking from the creek but from the moment the baby arrived" (4). The story ends with the boy in his room, waiting for his father to return home. Now reintegrated into his narrative, the puppy adopts a second anthropocentric role as a message to the father, whose shortcomings are communicated in the symbolic disjunction between the living child and the dead animal.

While the boy's encounter with the "subaqueous" puppies in "A Drowning Incident" illustrates the ways that an animal's death can temporarily suspend its anthropocentric coding, in The Crossing, the situation is reversed. After days spent tracking the wolf with his father and brother, Billy Parham finally succeeds in capturing it in a trap set beneath the embers of a campfire. Though his father had told him to either shoot the wolf on sight or notify him of its capture, Billy can only look on the animal in a passage that dramatizes the emergence of the animal's unnarratable agency from its paternally encoded use
value. First he "walk[s] around her" and notices the way that the late-morning sun transforms her fur into "a grayish dun with paler tips at the ruff and a black stripe along the back" (52). Though he removes his rifle, he does not kill the creature and instead "squat[s] there for a long time" trying to reconcile the material body before him with his father’s orders. At this moment, the relationship between the external conditions of the world and his inherited thoughts about that world begin to break down:

He was in no way prepared for what he beheld. Among other things he’d not considered simply whether he could ride to the ranch and be back with his father before the vaqueros arrived at noon if they would so arrive. He tried to remember what his father had said. If her leg were broke or she were caught by the paw. He looked at the height of the sun and he looked back out toward the road. When he looked at the wolf again she was lying down but when his eyes fell upon her she stood again. The standing horse tossed its head and the bridlebit clinked but she paid no attention to the horse at all. He rose and walked back and scabbarded the rifle and took up the reins and mounted up and turned the horse and headed out to the road. Half way he stopped again and turned and looked back. The wolf was watching him as before. He sat the horse a long time. The sun warm on his back. The world waiting. Then he rode back to the wolf. (53)

Like Brown’s model of the emergence of a thing from an object when the object breaks down, here, the she-wolf’s capture brings to a halt the animal’s "flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition" ("Thing Theory" 4) that constitute the economic conditions of the Parham cattle ranch. The animal’s capture means that she can no longer serve as an oppositional force within this system, and as a result, she is no longer an object reducible to a use value within Billy’s father’s set of instructions for her slaughter. With this value removed, the boy is astonished by what Brown would call the wolf’s "brute physicality"—her fur, leg, paw, eyes—which, in McCarthy’s paratactic prose, further destabilizes the system that renders the wolf an economic object within Billy’s subjectivity. Finally, in a way that echoes the earlier short story, the wolf meets Billy’s gaze, suggesting that she is evaluating the boy as much as he evaluates her. So profound is this event that it overcomes the sanctioned intersubjective relationships between wolf and horse and between father and son. The wolf pays no attention to Billy’s horse’s erratic behavior, and the boy, with some reluctance, dismisses his father’s order.
The thing theory model of animal agency suggests that this moment cannot last, and Billy, like the boy in "A Drowning Incident," quickly converts the intersubjective relationship back into an anthropocentric one. When he returns to the wolf, he decides to lead it back to freedom in Mexico: "he would take her to the mountains where she would find others of her kind" (105). On the level of plot, the problem with this endeavor is that it is grounded in a set of incredibly naïve assumptions. First, it overlooks the method by which the end is to be achieved. For Billy to free the wolf requires that he first violently enslave it. To prevent it from attacking him, he fashions a muzzle and leash out of rope and the branch of a paloverde tree and drags the wolf south by force: "When he put the horse forward the wolf came up out of the ditch at the end of the rope with the game foot to her chest and swung into the road and went dragging after the horse stifflegged and rigid as a piece of taxidermy" (62). To prevent her from succumbing to her injuries, with the aid of a bemused farmhand, he puts salve on her leg wound and wraps it in cloth. But as he is told by another wolf trapper, Don Arnulfo, such activities destroy the wolf-ness of the wolf:

The wolf is like the . . . snowflake. You catch the snowflake but when you look in your hand you dont have it no more. Maybe you see this dechado. But before you can see it it is gone. If you want to see it you have to see it on its own ground. If you catch it you lose it. And where it goes there is no coming back from. (46)

As the taxidermy and snowflake metaphors suggest, what Billy has trapped quickly becomes a poor "dechado" or simulacra of the wolf and not the wolf itself. By restraining the wolf both physically and conceptually, Billy departs from the shared "ground" of the initial intersubjective encounter and anthropocentric worldviews begin to creep back into the narrative.7

Domesticity as Agency

On the level of theme, the narrative's tension depends on Billy's idea that the wolf retains her absolute alterity despite her capture: he believes that he can dictate the animal's agency for it. One of the more interesting aspects of McCarthy's novel is that its narrator puts such an idea—and by extension the very possibility of a prolonged literary animal agency predicated on wildness—under radical stress. Long before Billy's encounter with the she-wolf, McCarthy's narrator suggests that her behaviors have already been altered by her
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relationships with human beings. Before she crosses the border into the United States, for example, her mate bites her because she will not leave him after he is caught in a trap. As she travels north, she encounters an environment far removed from her earlier experiences with the land:

Her ancestors had hunted camels and primitive toy horses on these grounds. She found little to eat. Most of the game was slaughtered out of the country. Most of the forest cut to feed the boilers of the stampmills at the mines. The wolves in that country had been killing cattle for a long time but the ignorance of the animals was a puzzle to them. The cows bellowing and bleeding and stumbling through the mountain meadows with their shovel feet and their confusion, bawling and floundering through the fences and dragging posts and wires behind. The ranchers said they brutalized the cattle in a way they did not the wild game. As if the cows evoked in them some anger. As if they were offended by some violation of an old order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols. (24–25)

This passage suggests that even Don Arnulfo's ideas are naïve because they presuppose the idea that the wolf operates on "its own ground" independent of human interference. The wolves' puzzlement and vicious slaughter of domesticated animals suggests that their behavior is already inextricably linked to the transformation of the American landscape. Indeed, McCarthy's decision to cast the wolves as an anthropomorphized tribe complete with "ancestors" and "old ceremonies" calls attention to the ways that humans such as Billy and his fellow ranchers ennable these animals at the expense of their animality. By presenting the wolves as a human tribe, the narrative's form contradicts its insistence that wolves are fundamentally distinct from humans, rendering the passage irreducible to any singular reading.

This narrative disruption is amplified by the passage's references to camels and primitive toy horses, which suggest that the recent extermination of the wolf's natural prey repeats previous extinction events brought about by humans. Prehistoric camels (camelops) and horses thrived in North America during the early Pliocene period and persisted until the megafaunal extinction event of the late Pleistocene, which coincided with the appearance of early human hunting cultures. Paul Martin's well-known (and now controversial) prehistoric overkill hypothesis suggests a causal link between these events. In a wry passage typical of his prose, Martin writes: "The thought that prehistoric hunters ten to fifteen thousand years ago . . . exterminated far more large animals than has modern man with
modern weapons and advanced technology is certainly provocative and perhaps even deeply disturbing. With a certain inadmissible pride we may prefer to regard ourselves, not our remote predecessors, as holding uncontested claim to being the arch destroyers of native fauna. But this seems not to be the case" (115). McCarthy's allusions to this geochronological argument suggest that within his story, contemporary wolves can never hold the mythic value that humans impose on them as entities wholly removed from the influence of human behaviors.8

This backdrop of failed signification helps to frame the she-wolf's capture and subsequent journey with Billy back to Mexico. At first, the boy and his father set their traps in accordance with the idea that wolf and man are antithetical beings. They first boil the traps in a solution of lye to rid them of human scent. Then they wax the traps and hang them outside "where the house odors would not infect them" and handle them only with "deerhide gloves" (20). Finally, before they set a trap, they throw down a "calfhide hairside down" on the ground before they dismount from their horses (22). Ironically, when Billy sets the trap that finally captures the wolf, he takes no such precautions. Placing the trap in a human campfire—a location that duplicates the original sites of wolf domestication—he "didnt even bother to put on the deerskin gloves," drawing the wolf to the site because of rather than in spite of his scent (50). By trapping the wolf at the site of the fire, Billy also, perhaps unconsciously, recognizes that the absolute boundaries between human and animal are unsustainable and that any subsequent relationship between the species must follow the "new protocols" recognized and acted on by the wolf (25).

In her reading of this moment, Dianne Luce suggests that after speaking with Don Arnulfo, Billy does not want to trap the wolf and deliberately foregrounds his scent to keep the wolf away (180–81). This reading would provide yet another reason why Billy, after discovering the creature, was "in no way prepared for what he beheld." If this is the case, the wolf's capture could paradoxically suggest some measure of its uncontrollable agency in its failure to correspond to Billy's imaginative projection. As David Holloway writes, "Billy Parham is drawn to the wolf by the radical autonomy from the given world that it appears to him to possess, and with which he seeks to merge" (148). But as Holloway insists, "The dramatic failure [of Billy's journey] may confirm the paralysis of the adversarial act, the absence of transformative oppositional space in McCarthy's fictive . . . world" (147). Whereas Holloway reads this failure negatively, I argue that within the conditions of Billy's romantic narrative, the only way for the wolf to demonstrate her agency is precisely by failing to serve as the boy's conduit to some imagined autonomous world of animals.
This reading lends significance to other moments in Billy's journey in which the wolf behaves in less than wolflike ways. After giving her water, Billy notices that the she-wolf "limp[s] along at the end of the rope," which serves as her leash. "When he stopped she stopped" (63). Later, when he approaches her with his canteen, "she did not bridle or arch her back at him" and even allows him to stroke her back (74). While Billy views this behavior as a measure of his intimacy with the wild creature, the narrator's descriptions suggest that the wolf's instinctual relationship with the world is in the process of transformation. In one moment on the journey, Billy notices a herd of "Antelope . . . grazing on the plain a half mile to the east. He looked back to see if she had taken notice of them but she had not. She limped along behind the horse steadfast and doglike . . . " (74). His project failing, Billy looks back at the wolf to reassure himself that it still retains its predatory awareness of its environment but instead finds an animal in the process of domestication.9

This conflict between the boy's projection of the wolf's wildness and her hidden agentic potential finds its clearest expression after Mexican officials take the wolf from Billy and sell it to a traveling fair catering to "the last free remnants of [Native American tribes, who] lived like shadowfolk of the nation they had been," promising authentic encounters with the wild to disappearing cultures that McCarthy mythically associates with such wildness (104). The fair advertises the wolf as a man-eater, charging a small fee for a glimpse of the chained creature. When Billy enters the tent, he startles a young boy who takes him for a paying customer and therefore begins "to prod the wolf with [a] stick and to hiss at her." The wolf ignores him, but rises "instantly" when Billy calls to her (105).

In this ironic doubling of Billy's quest, the young boy crudely provokes the wolf into what he considers to be wolf-like behavior, but the animal refuses to play at being itself. At the same time, its servile response to Billy suggests that the wolf can no longer operate (if it ever could) on its own ground and is under the control of a boy whose quest depends on rejecting that power relationship. Indeed, when Billy tries to tell it "what was in his heart," the wolf watches him uncomprehendingly, with "no despair but only that same reckonless deep of loneliness that cored the world to its heart" (105). The wolf thus does not correspond to either boy's exaggerated ideal of wolfness; it is neither a man-eater nor a sympathetic partner. But as narrator's prose suggests, if the animal's agency is indeed "reckonless," this unthinkable animal becomes available (if not to Billy then to the reader) as a mysterious absence "core[d]" into the anthropocentric network around it. In a manner akin to Jacques Lacan's notion of the Real, it becomes a thing that exceeds all attempts to contain it
in a medium of language and can be intuited only by the repeated failures of the symbolic order of the narrative.\textsuperscript{10}

His narrative strained to the point of breaking, Billy can maintain his fantasy of the wild wolf only if its physical body is destroyed, and he becomes the agent of its final death at the chapter’s close. After a Mexican constable takes the wolf from the fair and gives it to a local plantation owner, Billy discovers that it has been placed in the hacendado’s cockfighting pit where it confronts a menagerie of dogs that bear the physiological markers of their anthropocentric use values. They include "mostly redbone and bluetick dogs bred in the country to the north but also nondescript animals from new-world bloodlines and dogs that were little more than pitbulls bred to fight" (115). To rescue the wolf, Billy steps into the ring, where he is confronted by the hacendado:

\begin{quote}
We was just passin though, the boy said. We wasn't botherin nobody. Queríamos pasar, no más.

Pasar o traspasar?
\end{quote}

The boy turned and spat into the dirt. He could feel the wolf lean against his leg. He said that the tracks of the wolf had led out of Mexico. He said the wolf knew nothing of boundaries. The young don nodded as if in agreement but what he said was that whatever the wolf knew or did not know was irrelevant and that if the wolf had crossed that boundary it was perhaps so much the worse for the wolf but the boundary stood without regard. (119)

Given the title of the novel, the hacendado's message speaks to the larger theme of transgressive boundary crossings in McCarthy's work: its violent depictions of hybrid border cultures, its volatile fusion of animal and human worldviews, and its uneasy interchange between a world grounded in realism and one imagined in dreams. As marked by his adoption of the plural pronoun, Billy believes that he can freely cross over into the borderless, unrestricted, and undifferentiated world of animals without altering that world. Just as troubling, he associates the unregulated animal world with the geography of Mexico, eliding species difference with cultural difference and assuming that he can impose his romantic conceptions of otherness onto wolf and Mexican citizen alike. Finding he can control neither, he shoots the wolf and barters his gun for its carcass, reducing the animal once again to its status as an economic object of exchange and resolving the tension that both generated a glimpse of the animal’s undisclosed agency and drew the plot to this inevitable conclusion.
The Language of Animality

As he travels back to the United States, Billy pauses before burying the wolf and imagines her "running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her" (127). At this moment, his thoughts fuse with those of the narrator and he seems to finally grasp the animal's potential for autonomous agency by way of its absence:

He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it. (127)

Unlike the metaphors described by Susan McHugh in her essay on animal agency, here, McCarthy's maddeningly self-canceling language does not seem to serve a clear anthropocentric function, and this uncertainty models Billy's more mature perspective on the nature of his encounter. The animal is both held and not held, terrible and beautiful, immobile flower and swift huntress; and this undecidability ensures that its agency can never be fully given over to human use. Indeed, McCarthy's free, indirect discourse stresses that the wolf is a material body made of "blood and bone," but in this final description it becomes a thing that cannot be fashioned into an object to be worshiped (as Billy wishes) or destroyed (as his father wishes). What the narrator leaves us with is an entity recognizable only in its effects on other things—its windlike "power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world."

The passage thus performs in miniature the larger argument I have made in this essay. Here and throughout the opening chapter of The Crossing, the possibility of a literary animal agency comes into being when the limits of anthropocentric discourse are rendered visible. Like the breakdowns in human–object relationships, these conflicts enable readers to pause at the border between humanist and posthumanist perspectives, where we might begin, once again, through an awareness of the limits inherent in literary representation, to think through animals.
Notes

1. As Susan McHugh argues, "Particularly when framed in film and new media, animal acts signal ruptures to identity forms, in relation to anthropomorphizing traditions that empty out the animal content and to other patterns against which writers have struggled to represent animals as nonhuman social agents" (491). Presumably, this is the case because in any non-CGI environment, a nonlinguistic animal agent "acts" on the final product of the work in nontrivial ways.

2. Singer takes the phrase from a former animal experimenter named Roger Ulrich. In his updated second chapter of his classic text, Animal Liberation, Singer offers several examples of scientists like Ulrich who "escaped from [their] conditioning" and stopped experimenting on animals after a particular encounter with an animal body (70). For example, an animal technician at Gillette resigned from her job after witnessing "a bloody discharge from the eye in some rabbits" after exposure to the ink of certain pens (81).

3. Starring Dustin Hoffman and Nick Nolte, HBO's once-promising television show Luck provides a gruesome example of this idea. After three horses died in their roles as racing animals, the company dropped the show in the midst of shooting the second season at the cost of $35 million. According to the company, "while we maintained the highest safety standards possible, accidents unfortunately happened and it was impossible to guarantee they wouldn't in the future" (qtd. in DeMoraes).

4. Ron Broglio offers a similar reading in Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art. In one chapter, Broglio examines Damien Hirst's The Physical Impossibility of Death—a fourteen-foot tiger shark encased in glass—and concludes that the "resistant flesh" of the shark calls attention to the animal's hidden interior at the same time as it prevents the viewer from ever accessing it: "The animal insides are not only the interior of the animal, but they also mark a unique space, a space that we will never know—the space that death has inhabited in this animal" (18).


6. John Cant offers a more charitable interpretation of Billy's failed quest, arguing that in The Crossing, "McCarthy . . . creat[es an] anti-myth. As [Joseph] Campbell suggests the mythic quest involves a journey into an alien place, a descent into the underworld, in order to obtain some boon, some special knowledge that confers maturity and ensures the continuity of life. Billy Parham captures the wolf and attempts to save her. In returning her to Mexico he brings about her death" (202–03).

7. This passage echoes Aldo Leopold's well-known account of the "green fire" of wolves' eyes in A Sand County Almanac. After shooting an old female wolf, he watches "a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. . . . There was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain" (138).
8. This geological approach dovetails with the third epigraph of McCarthy's _Blood Meridian_: "Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped—_The Yuma Daily Sun, June 13, 1982._"

9. McCarthy reinforces this irony throughout the chapter. In another passage, Billy rides through the Mexican desert and "watched the wolf to see if she might betray the proximity of any travelers crouched in hiding by the wayside but she only trotted on behind the horse" (91).

10. Yannis Stavrakakis provides a clear sense of this idea: "The only moment in which we come face to face with the irreducible real beyond representation is when our constructions are dislocated. It is only when Nature, our construction of external reality, meets a stumbling block, something which cannot be symbolically integrated, that we come close to the real of nature" (289).

**Works Cited**


