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Fabulous Fox (Agamben in the Henhouse)

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Derrida 2021 - Biopolitique et déconstruction

In the antepenultimate scene of Wes Anderson's stop-motion animation *Fantastic Mr. Fox* , the eponymous character, fleeing the scene of his bold triumph over the farmers with Kylie Opossum and the two young foxes in the sidecar, suddenly screeches to a halt as they spot a wolf in the distance, shown only in dark silhouette against the icy backdrop. Shocked and seemingly in awe, Mr Fox attempts to address the mysterious unclothed creature in multiple languages, including making introductions using their respective Latin binomial classifications, all to no avail, before confessing his phobia of wolves (his lycophobia has been something of a recurring joke throughout the film). Finally, he ventures a raised fist, which finds a mirroring response. Mr Fox urges the boys to bid him "good luck out there" and the wolf darts off, though not without first pausing to give them a final stare with his piercing eyes. The final minutes of the film return the foxes to the human world of news reporters and supermarkets, but this wistful conjuring of wildness – a rare lyrical moment in a film of high jinks and quickfire wit – attracted its share of critical and popular attention.

Several critics commented on how the scene staged Mr Fox's confrontation with his own wildness, to which he relates with a mix of profound ambivalence, existentialist angst, and repression. As such, the scene marks the climax of a story that revolves around the tricky business of identifying the beastliness of the animal and distinguishing it from the human. Mr Fox walks on his hind legs, wears natty suits (out of which his bushy tail

protrudes until it is shot off during one of his escapades), and is a self-confessed "newspaper man" with anxieties about his social position. He is seen scanning the property pages in the newspaper for which he writes a column when all of a sudden his wild-animal nature breaks through as he devours his toast with inhuman gusto. Even while the community of animals among which the Foxes reside is anthropomorphized, they are consistently exposed as uncivilized and beastly by their bad table manners. It is the dogmatic and oversimplified opposition between animal voracity and human vociferation that Derrida will have in his sights and hunt down in the first year of *La bête et le souverain* (Derrida, 2008, p. 100/65). To read *Fantastic Mr. Fox* Derrida's terms, "la bouche, la gueule, les dents, le gosier, la glotte et la langue [the mouth, maw, teeth, throat, glottis, and tongue]" of the voracious animals are "aussi les lieux du cri et de la parole [also the sites of cry and speech, of language]" (2008, p. 46/23). The animals are depicted as speaking beings; they have *logos* and no longer mere *phonē*. More precisely, perhaps, the animals are only capable of being *bête* precisely insofar as they have already been anthropomorphized for it is only man who is capable of *bestialité* and of *bêtise* (p. 104/68). If the animal maw has "la violente précipitation à mordre [violent rush to bite]" this "puissance de dévoration [power of devourment]" is also a power of interiorization, of what Derrida in the third year of the seminar on *Politiques de l'amitié* (1990-91) had described in terms of cannibalization. And it is this capacity of voracity to take the other inside itself that marks the affinity and ultimately the impossibility of distinguishing cleanly between the beast and the sovereign. Derrida ponders:

> La souveraineté serait-elle dévoratrice ? Sa force, son pouvoir, sa plus grande force, sa puissance absolue serait-elle, par essence et toujours en dernière instance, puissance de dévoration (la bouche, les dents, la langue, la violente précipitation à mordre, à engloutir, à avaler l'autre, à le prendre au-dedans de soi, aussi, pour le tuer ou en faire son deuil) ?
>
> Might sovereignty be devouring? Might its force, its power, its greatest force, its absolute potency be, in essence and always in the last instance, a power of devourment (mouth, teeth, tongue, violent rush to bite, engulf, swallow the other, to take the other into oneself too, to kill it or mourn it)? (2008, p. 46/23)

But the fox is not any beast, its *bêtise* premised on a certain humanizing fabulation and repression of its wild, lupine savagery. At one point in the film, Mr Fox muses “Who am I? Why a fox? Why not a horse, a beetle, or a bald eagle?” He continues: “And how can a fox ever be happy without – you’ll forgive the expression – a chicken in its teeth?” The dilemma he faces is how a fox can remain a fox while transcending not only his devouring but also the lawless, criminal impulses that distinguish him from humans on the one hand and from other animals on the other. *Fantastic Mr. Fox* in this way continues in the footsteps of *Le Roman de Renard* via Ladislas and Irène Starevitch’s 1930 stop-motion film version and Woolie Reitherman’s 1973 Disney *Robin Hood* that portrays the titular outlaw as a fox. Anderson’s film plays up the frontier aspect of the story by drawing heavily on the imaginary of the Western with a series of Sergio Leone spoofs and Ennio Morricone imitations in the soundtrack to invoke that genre’s defining trope of a negotiation between nature and civilization.

The fox occupies a specific place in this topography of human and animal, sovereign and beast, civility and lawlessness. At one point in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* when he attempts to rally the animals who have been driven underground by the farmer’s militaristic bombardment and siege, he lists each of their professional accomplishments and skills in anthropomorphizing terms. He then goes on to declare that “we’re all wild animals” with our “true natures,” each with their own strengths and weaknesses. He then proceeds to name each according to their Latin genus and species, as if to make sense of one’s true beastliness required recognition by a classification system invented by humans to assure themselves of their mastery of the natural world.

What, then, is the distinctive nature, the *supposed* skill and psychology of the fox? (And Derrida for his part stresses this “supposed” precisely because of the fictional or fabulous character of the animal figurations and hallucinatory apparitions [2008, p. 121/81] to which political philosophy is compelled, but more than on that in a moment…) Upbraided by Mrs Fox for going off the rails and returning to his clandestine heists, Mr Fox excuses himself: “Foxes traditionally like to court danger, hunt prey, and outsmart predators – and that’s what I’m good at. I think at the end of the day I’m just…” His wife interjects: “a wild animal.” Echoing the fox’s typical presentation in the annals of political philosophy, Mr Fox is depicted above all as cunning, scheming, always with a master plan up his dapper sleeve. The farmers against whom he pulls off a three-pronged heist bemoan that

“he’s too sneaky.” “He’s very clever, isn’t he?” By contrast, it is the farmers who resort to sheer brute force, deploying industrial-scale diggers, guns, and explosives in a bid to smoke out the wily fox.

It is the distinction between fact and right, force and law – and the attendant claim with which La Fontaine’s *Le loup et l’agneau* opens that “la raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure [the reason of the strongest is always the best]” – it is this distinction that will locate the fox in relation to the wolf, the lion, and to the human. The fable’s proposition finds its more rigorous political-philosophical treatment in Machiavelli whom Derrida tracks in the third session of the first year of the seminar. (And *track* here is the decisive word, for Derrida will follow Machiavelli with patient stealth, *à pas de loup*, in part to chase him away, in part to pursue the possibility of *covering one’s tracks*. We’ll circle back to these animal tracks, to the pursuit of one animal-philosopher by another, to the hunting down of political theory.) Machiavelli, then, at his most Machiavellian or rather *passing for* “l’un des plus machiavéliques et non seulement machiavéliens de Machiavel [one of the most Machiavellian]” (Derrida, 2008, p. 122/83), confesses the *fact* that a prince *by right* ought to keep his word but that *in fact* he will rarely do so because, however laudable, the strongest princes win out over those who keep their word by their use of cunning. As Derrida extrapolates later in the eighth session, whether or not he be right (*il ait ou non raison*), if the stronger prince exercises the reason he has and acts as if he has reason to judge his reason legitimate and just because he has the force to make right, he will prevail over others (*a raison des autres*) (p. 279-80/109). Machiavelli argues that political reason must take account of this fact that there are two ways to fight and that the prince must avail himself of both to prevail: on the one hand with laws, with right, justice, and fidelity, and, on the other, with force, with betrayal, lies, perjury, or simply brute force, that is, with the reason of the strongest (*la raison du plus fort*).

From here Derrida’s splicing and fantastical grafting begins. In a first cut, fighting with law and right is said to be proper to man and worthy of his dignity, while the reason of the strongest is of the beast. Neither alone is sufficient, thus the prince must “[se] conduit[re] *et* en homme *et* en bête [behave *both* as man *and* as beast]” (2008, p. 124/84). This is the first graft and first fiction by analogy: Even if he does not in fact have this double nature, this human-animal hybridity, “le prince humain doit se conduire *comme s’il était une bête* [the human prince must behave *as though he were a beast*]”

(p. 125/85). The animal fabulation of this “as if” preoccupies Derrida throughout the seminar, motivating his prefatory ruminations of the genre of the fable in the very first session by way of introduction to La Fontaine. In fact, the choice of this fable is no coincidence, for Derrida will seek to show that this reason is strongest – this force of reason that he associates with the wolf or with the hybrid wolf-man, the werewolf, the sovereign as outlaw – precisely for being *fabulous*. “What wolf?” asks Mr Fox in an early scene, almost jumping out of his skin, underscoring that the terrorizing power of the wolf, the fear of the wolf, is all the more powerful so long as it remains off-screen. The wolf’s appearance towards the end of the film, lifting the repression, eases Mr Fox’s phobia. If we have been listening closely, of course, this appearance has been coming all along – every time he cries wolf it has been looming. But it has been coming *à pas de loup*, first, as Derrida describes it in the first session, in the sense of “marcher sans bruit, arriver sans prévenir, procéder discrètement, de façon silencieuse, invisible, presque inaudible et imperceptible, comme pour surprendre une proie, comme pour prendre en surprenant ce qui est en vue mais qui ne voit pas venir ce qui déjà le voit, l’autre qui s’apprête à le prendre par surprise, à le comprendre par surprise [to walk without making a noise, to arrive without warning, to proceed discreetly, silently, invisibly, almost inaudibly and imperceptibly, as though to surprise a prey, to take it by surprising what is in sight but does not see coming the one that is already seeing it, already getting ready to take it by surprise, to grasp it by surprise]” (2008, p. 21/2). Second, it does so in the sense that there is *no* wolf, pas *de loup*, with the adverbial negation that silently, stealthily haunts the noun *pas*:

> Cela pour dire que là où les choses s’annoncent « à pas de loup », il n’y a pas encore le loup, pas de loup réel, pas de loup dit naturel, pas de loup littéral. Il n’y a pas encore de loup là où les choses s’annoncent « à pas de loup ». Il y a seulement un mot, une parole, une fable, un loup de fable, un animal fabuleux, voire un fantasme (*phantasma* au sens du revenant, en grec ; ou phantasme au sens énigmatique de la psychanalyse, au sens par exemple où un *totem* correspond à un phantasme) ; il y a seulement un autre « loup » qui figure autre chose – autre chose ou quelqu’un d’autre, l’autre que la figure fabuleuse du loup viendrait, comme un substitut ou un suppléant métonymique, à la fois annoncer et dissimuler, manifester et masquer.

> Which is to say that where things are looming *à pas de loup*, the wolf is not there yet, no real wolf, no so-called natural wolf, no literal wolf. There is no wolf yet when things are looming *à pas de loup*. There is only a word, a spoken word, a fable, a fable-wolf, a fabulous animal, or even a fantasy (*fantasma* in the sense of a revenant, in Greek; or fantasy in the enigmatic sense of psychoanalysis, in the sense, for example, that a totem corresponds to a fantasy); there is only another "wolf" that figures something else – something or somebody else, the other that the fabulous figure of the wolf, like a metonymic substitute or supplement, would come both to announce and conceal, to manifest and mask. (Derrida, 2008, p. 24/5-6)

Precisely because it is not present does the wolf strike fear into hearts. The reason of the strongest is stronger for being stealthy:

> Le loup est d'autant plus fort, la signification de son pouvoir est d'autant plus terrorisante, armée, menaçante, virtuellement prédatrice que dans ces appellations, dans ces locutions, le loup n'apparaît pas encore en personne mais seulement dans le *persona* théâtrale d'un masque, d'un simulacre ou d'une parole, c'est-à-dire d'une fable ou d'un fantasme. La force du loup est d'autant plus forte, voire souveraine, elle a d'autant plus raison de tout que le loup n'est pas là, qu'il n'y a pas le loup lui-même [...]. Je dirais qu'alors cette force du loup insensible (insensible parce qu'on ne le voit ni ne l'entend venir, insensible parce que invisible et inaudible, donc non sensible, mais aussi insensible parce que d'autant plus cruel, impassible, indifférent à la souffrance de ses victimes virtuelles), je dis qu'alors la force de cette bête insensible semble avoir raison de tout parce qu'à travers cette autre singulière locution idiomatique (avoir raison de, donc l'emporter sur, être le plus fort), la question de la raison s'annonce, celle de la raison zoologique, de la raison politique, de la rationalité en général.
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> The wolf is all the stronger, the meaning of its power is all the more terrorizing, armed, threatening, virtually predatory for the fact that in these appellations, these turns of phrase, these sayings, the wolf does not yet

> appear in person but only in the theatrical persona of a mask, a simulacrum or a piece of language, i.e. a fable or a fantasy. The strength of the wolf is all the stronger, sovereign even, is all the more all- conquering [*a raison de tout*] for the fact that the wolf is not there, that there is not the wolf itself.... I would say that this force of the *insensible* wolf (*insensible* because one neither sees nor hears it coming, because it is invisible and inaudible, and therefore nonsensible, but also insensible because it is all the crueler for this, impassive, indifferent to the suffering of its virtual victims)—that the force of this insensible beast seems then to overcome [*avoir raison de*] everything because through that other untranslatable idiomatic expression (*avoir raison de*, to overcome, to win out over, to be the strongest), the question of reason comes up, the question of zoological reason, political reason, rationality in general. (Derrida, 2008, p. 25-26/6-7)

But the power of the sovereign is not merely a question of absence, of forgetting, of neglect, and not even of the force it gains by its repression, but also specifically of cunning, of a ruse or stratagem, or as will unfold in the third session, something like a stratagem of neglect, of forgetting the wolves.

It is, however, not the wolf but the *fox* who figures cunning for Machiavelli and other political thinkers. Now let us resume tracking the third session. Machiavelli, when he says that the prince must behave as if he were both man and animal, like a centaur or another half-man-half-beast, goes on to divide that bestiality itself, stressing the necessity “pour cette part animale d’être *elle-même* hybride, composite, le mixte ou le greffe de deux animaux, le lion et le renard [for this animal part to be *itself* hybrid, composite, a mix or graft of two animals, the lion and the fox]” (Derrida, 2008, p. 129/88). Sovereign power thus derives its force from a double animal fabulation, from an alliance of lion and fox against the wolves, for, Machiavelli (1985, p. 69) asserts,

> if he is only lion, he will not defend himself from snares; if he is only fox, he will not defend himself from wolves; so he needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten the wolves. Those who stay simply with the lion are very unskillful.[1]

The fox is set apart from the lion by those characteristics that lie closer to the human for being more rational, more intelligent, less *bête*: that is, know-how and specifically "savoir-tromper, savoir-mentir, savoir-parjurer ou savoir-dissimuler, le savoir-ne-pas-faire-savoir du renard [knowing how-to-trick, knowing-how-to-lie, knowing-how-to-perjure or knowing-how-to-dissimulate, the knowing-how-not-to-make-known of the fox]" (Derrida, 2008, p. 129/88). In the first instance, lying is on the side of the beast, of force rather than law (as mentioned, when Mrs Fox scolds her husband for his thieving ways, she chalks his propensity to lie up the fact that he is a wild animal). But then in the second moment, knowing how to lie marks a greater affinity with the human than the brute force of the lion. (At the end of the film, when Mr Fox feigns not to know that the ladder and door lead to a supermarket, she chides him, "You're a terrible actor, Foxy!" and moments earlier the camera briefly shows his latest newspaper column in which he admits "I'm not the fox I used to be." We are left to wonder if this has something to do with his encounter with his repressed inner wolf in the previous scene or if he has reined himself into the sphere of human law or perhaps is feigning to have done so and yet not feigning very well.)

In short, for Machiavelli, it is the fox's capacity for dissimulation, for fabulation, for metamorphic analogy even, that gives him an edge over the lion and makes him stronger than physical strength:

> Non, la force du prince en tant qu'homme devenu renard, c'est, au-delà de la force naturelle ou de la force de vie simple, au-delà même de son phénomène visible et de ce qui peut, par l'image de la force naturelle, impressionner et faire peur, intimider, comme le simple spectacle d'un lion peu frapper l'imagination avant de frapper tout court, la force du prince rusé comme un renard, sa force au-delà de la force, c'est la science ou la conscience, le savoir, le savoir-faire, le savoir-faire rusé, le savoir-faire sans faire-savoir ce qu'on sait faire […].
>
> The force of the prince qua man become fox is, beyond natural force or simple life force, beyond even his visible phenomenon and what can, through the image of natural force, strike with awe and fear, intimidate, as the simple

> spectacle of a lion can strike the imagination before the lion strikes, the force of the prince cunning like a fox, his force beyond force, is science or consciousness, knowledge, know-how, cunning know-how, know-how without making-known what one knows how to do. (Derrida 2008, p. 131-32/90).

Crucially, it is this last skill that defines princely power, not simply cunning but the ability to disguise that cunning, what Derrida will call “la ruse de la ruse [cunning of cunning],” a cunning to the second power that can pretend to be what it is not, that can dissimulate its fox-being and thereby cover its tracks – a domain in which Mr Fox is apparently found wanting and hence all too *bête*. At various points during the first year of *La bête et le souverain* Derrida considers how political power passes via the power of fiction, the fable, the figuration of the human via animal fabulation and is thus shown to be an effect of and to draw all its potency from a performative that is itself fabulous (2008, p. 291/217-18; 386-87/289). Sovereignty, then, has the structure of an *as if* – *as if* it were man and beast, *as if* it were a fox, *as if* it were not the fox that it is, *as if* the seminar were a fable, *as if* it were making something (to be) known even or especially when there is no knowing worthy of the name. Not simply the power of speech to put living beings, animals or humans, on stage, the fabular is furthermore designed to be instructive, educative, an edifying story. Fables have morals, their fabulations affabulations. They make (up) something in order to make something known, and there is an art, a know-how, a *savoir-faire* to this *faire savoir* (p. 62-63/34-35). Insofar as this knowing is fictive, it is a making *like* knowledge, giving the effect or simulacrum of knowledge, pretending to know, *as* if one knows where one does not know. What Derrida gestures towards with the syntagma *digne de ce nom*, though, is that this infidelity, this perjury, is not some belated corruption of knowledge but is its irreducible condition. There is no knowledge, no seminar, no *conférence* worthy of the name that is not somewhat foxy – and that is the moral of this tale!

In the fourth session of the seminar, Derrida will pick up this thread of cunning fabulation now in the footsteps of Lacan, for whom the power to cover one’s tracks, to feign feinting, is reserved to the human, a threshold of dissimulation that the animal cannot cross. At the start of the session, Derrida has been looking at how, for Lacan, cruelty and criminality distinguish man from the animal, which may be ferocious and violent but which lacks the responsibility and peccability to do evil, and similarly how the animal can

only react rather than respond. Having put some pressure on the possibility of sustaining the purity and indivisibility of those lines – especially on the presupposition of human fraternity that underpins Lacan's ethics – Derrida comes to the question of whether the animal can lie. If, for Lacan, the animal cannot accede to language and to the unconscious, it is to no small degree because the animal is incapable of pretence. But whereas Lacan distinguishes between on the one hand mere feint, as in combat or sexual display, and on the other trickery, of feigning to a second degree, of feigning the feint, Derrida recalls his discussion of Machiavelli's fantastic fox in the previous session:

> Je ne suis pas un renard, peut dire en somme le prince qui n'est pas un renard en vérité mais qui agit en renard, qui sait feindre d'être renard tout en feignant de ne pas feindre et donc de n'être pas le renard qu'au fond il est dans ce qu'il dit ou fait.
>
> I am not a fox, the prince can say, basically, the prince who is not really a fox but who is acting like a fox, who knows how to feign being a fox all the while feigning not to feign and therefore not to be the fox that he basically is in what he says or does. (2008, p. 171/121).

From a Lacanian perspective, only a man can do this, not a fox. Or once a fox begins to lie, to mislead, to make the other believe something that is not true, he will already have become a human being. (This threshold is repeatedly played out in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* when his wife Felicity keeps catching him out in his lies, such as when he goes to the elaborate effort to dress up the stolen chickens with fake price tags and wax paper as if they came from the butchers before putting them in the larder so as to deflect his wife's suspicions and yet she observes wryly that the chicken still has a Boggis Farm tag around its leg. "Huh! Must have escaped from there before I bought it," he volunteers before walking away whistling with feigned nonchalance. "Ohh," she murmurs.) Lacan, argues Derrida, holds the animal captive in the Imaginary or alleges that the animal imprisons itself there.

> Surtout, il maintient « l'animal » dans le premier degré de la feinte (feinte sans feinte de feinte) ou, ce qui revient ici au même, au premier degré de la

> trace : pouvoir de tracer, de pister, de dépister, mais non de dé-pister le dé-pistage et d'*effacer* sa trace.
>
> Above all, he holds the animal down to the first degree of feigning (feigning without feigning feigning) or, what comes to the same thing here, to the first degree of the trace: ability to trace, track, track down, but not to throw the tracking off track and to *efface* its track. (Derrida, 2008, p. 172/122)

But Derrida will quickly undermine this distinction on both empirical and conceptual grounds. Upping the ante for the third time in the session, Derrida observes in a note:

> La différence supposée assurée entre *pister* et *dé-pister*, ou plutôt, entre *dépister* (tracer ou suivre une piste) et *dé-pister* (effacer une piste et égarer volontairement le suiveur), rassemble et cautionne toute la distinction entre l'homme et l'animal selon Lacan. Il suffit que cette distinction tremble pour que toute l'axiomatique s'en trouve ruinée, dans son principe même. C'est ce que nous allons devoir préciser.
>
> The supposedly established difference between *pister* and *dépister*, or rather between *dépister* (to trace or follow a trail) and *dépister* (to erase a trail or voluntarily lead the follower astray), gathers and guarantees the whole distinction between human and animal according to Lacan. This distinction only has to tremble for the whole axiomatic to be ruined, in its very principle. This is what we are going to have to clarify. (Derrida, 2008, p. 173n2/123n43)

If Lacan's claim is that the animal is incapable of being a subject of the signifier, Derrida will proceed by relying on Lacan's insistence on the dominance and sovereignty of the signifier – in other words on the subjection in subjectivation – to argue that what the animal lacks is this lack of mastery. As such the subject of the signifier necessarily feigns its mastery but is, moreover, able to posit its performative power to efface the trace and thereby cover the tracks of its feint. Only on condition that he is a man-fox can the subject pretend to be the master that he is not and also mask his foxy charade. For Lacan, it is the place of the Other that gives rise to the passage from the feint to the

order of the signifier – in taking the other into account one passes from imaginary to symbolic, animal to human. But as Derrida will show, there is no pure and simple feint that would not always already be irreducibly iterable and thus feigned, just as there is no trace that would not always already be effacing itself. The distinction between simple feint and feigned feint is precarious. It is always possible that one turns out to be the other and vice versa because the simple feint, as sexual display or mock charge for example, already presupposes the other: “Cette supplémentarité est à l’œuvre dès la première feinte [this supplementarity is at work from the first feint]” (Derrida, 2008, p. 180/129). Lacan for his part can only sustain his dogmatic distinction between man and beast by diagnosing any animal relation to the other as pathology, as neurosis (Mr Fox arguably is rather neurotic!).

The distinction between making and effacing tracks likewise turns out to be fragile. On the one hand, Lacan claims that the animal cannot efface its tracks because that would mean that it had already become the subject of the signifier. On the other hand, he concedes that, when tracked, the animal is capable of throwing its predator *off track* by feigning to go off in another direction (Derrida, 2008, p. 173/123), even while the animal will never be the “prey of language” (p. 161/113). Insofar as the structure of the trace is iterable, presupposing another trace and the substitution of one trace for another, it is impossible to distinguish between inscription and effacement. It is not simply a question of refusing to the animal this capacity to efface its tracks but, moreover, of whether man is anymore capable of doing so when “il appartient à une trace de toujours *s*’effacer et de toujours pouvoir *s*’effacer [it is in the nature of a trace that it always effaces *itself* and is always able to efface *itself*]” (p. 182/131). And yet, Derrida cautions, one cannot draw the conclusion from this that the trace can be effaced.

> Mais qu’elle *s*’efface, qu’elle puisse toujours s’effacer, et dès premier instant de son inscription, à travers et par-delà le refoulement, cela ne signifie pas que quiconque, Dieu, homme ou bête, en soit le sujet maître ou souverain et puisse disposer du pouvoir de l’effacer. Au contraire. À cet égard l’homme n’a pas plus le *pouvoir* souverain d’effacer ses traces que ledit « animal ». D’effacer *radicalement* ses traces, c’est-à-dire aussi bien de *radicalement* détruire, nier, mettre à mort, voire se mettre à mort.

> But that it efface *itself*, that it can always efface *itself*, from the first moment of its inscription, through and beyond repression, does not mean that anybody, God, man, or beast, is its master or sovereign subject and can have the power to efface *it* at its disposal. On the contrary. In this respect, man has no more sovereign *power* to efface his traces than the so-called "animal." To efface his traces *radically*, hence just as *radically* to destroy, deny, put to death, even put himself to death. (Derrida, 2008, p. 182/131)

Holding onto this thought of the power to destroy, to put to death, I want to return to the detour at the end of the third session between the analyses of Machiavellian cunning earlier in that session and of Lacanian trickery in the next – a detour via Agamben which at first blush throws us off track but at the same time gets us back on track, back to the wolves ("Où sont passés les loups? [Where have the wolves gone?]") whose neglect and repression, not unlike Mr Fox's phobia, returns likes a recurring refrain throughout the third session: "N'oublions pas les loups [let's not forget the wolves]." These wolves quite possibly have "grandes queues *comme* (*comme*, toujours l'analogie !) des renards et des oreilles dressées *comme* (*comme* !) des chiens [big tails *like* (*like*, always the analogy!) foxes and ears pricked *like* (*like*!) dogs]," that is, like the foxes that Derrida has warned lie in wait in that day's session but which are already morphing into guard dogs (Derrida, 2008, p. 99/64). But this is no diversion, no feint, or if it is, it feigns feigning because it pursues and hunts down Agamben and his stratagem of neglect with singular purpose albeit *à pas de loup*. At first Derrida feigns a certain admiration, warmly commending *Homo Sacer* to his students for the precious reflections on sovereignty they will find there, but Derrida is as terrible an actor as Mr Fox and it is not long before he bares his teeth and then goes for the jugular.

Derrida mocks Agamben for wanting to be the first to know and point out who will have been first, thereby performing the very irrepressible gesture of sovereignty supposedly under critique.

> Et j'ajouterai : le souverain, s'il y en a, c'est celui qui arrive à le faire croire, au moins pour quelque temps, qu'il est le premier ou le premier à avoir su qui sera venu en premier, là où il y a toutes les chances pour que ce soit

> presque toujours faux, même si, dans certains cas, on ne s'en doute jamais. Le premier, donc, c'est, comme son nom l'indique, le prince : homme, renard et lion, du moins quand ça marche bien pour lui.
>
> And I'll add: the sovereign, if there is such a thing, is the one who manages to *get people to believe*, at least for a while, that he is the first to know who came first, when there is every chance that it is almost always false, even if, in certain cases, no one ever suspects so. The first then, the premier, as its name indicates, is the prince: man, fox, and lion, at least when things are going well for him. (Derrida, 2008, p. 135/92; my emphasis)

It is, then, not only a matter of being the first to know who came first but, moreover – and here I want to pay close attention to a detail mentioned only in passing – getting others to believe that one is the first or first to know even where one does not or is not the first to know – in short, of passing for the first to know. In other words, the art of sovereignty, of principality, is a feigned feint, the art of misleading, of trickery, of fabulation and affabulation, but it is also specifically a ruse of neglect: Agamben covers his own tracks, feigning to know where he does not know and getting others to believe that he does, and at the same time effaces the traces in the history of political philosophy so that he can appear to be the first or whomever he recognizes as the first will appear to have been the first. Symptomatic of this ruse of negligence are the literal forgettings of wolves who did in face come *first* before Hobbes or Rousseau, for example.

This brings Derrida back to the question of neglect with which he opened the session, his sights no doubt already squarely set on Agamben. As my Warwick colleague Quassim Cassam has recently observed (2021), vice-charging is hazardous not least because it is itself liable to be epistemically vicious and to rebound on the accuser, and Derrida himself concedes:

> […] le concept de négligence est des plus surchargés, multiple dans ses différents logiques, nécessairement obscur et dogmatique quand il est manié comme une accusation […]. On est toujours *a priori* négligent, plus ou moins négligent, c'est-à-dire toujours trop négligent, en particulier dans l'accusation de négligence […]. « Négliger » est d'ailleurs un mot abyssal qu'il ne faudrait

> pas utiliser de façon négligée ou négligente et qu'il ne faudrait pas négliger d'analyser sans fin, comme nous avions commencé à le faire mais devrons inévitablement négliger de le faire de façon absolument adéquate dans ce séminaire.
>
> the concept of negligence is among the most highly charged, multiple in its different logics, necessarily obscure and dogmatic when it is wielded as an accusation.... One is always a priori negligent, more or less negligent, and so always too negligent, in particular in the accusation of negligence.... "Neglect" is, moreover, an abyssal word that one should not use in a neglected or negligent way or that one should not neglect to analyze interminably, as we began to do but must inevitably neglect to do absolutely adequately in this seminar. (Derrida, 2008, p. 137-38/94-95)

When Derrida charges Agamben with negligence – and later in the twelfth session he will charge him with neglecting to refer to Heidegger and other texts he evidently knows well but knows he is not the first to read – one might be left thinking: Who exactly is so keen to hand out lessons and award himself accolades for doing so? Who is the fox here and who the lion? Who is the wolf to be hunted down and chased away? By the end of the seminar one has the impression that it would be perilous to leave Agamben in charge of the history of political philosophy. In a marginal annotation on the typescript at the point where he is talking about Montaigne letting the wolf into the (sheep)fold, Derrida scrawls "*Le loup dans la bergerie*," which Geoffrey Bennington translates as "to set the fox to mind the geese" (Derrida, 2009, p. 60n29), though we might also say "to set the fox among the chickens" or "to put the fox in charge of the henhouse." I seek, then, to conjure and leave you with the image of Agamben in the henhouse, stupidly left to guard it. Yet, following the logic of animal metamorphosis that takes place in Bennington's translation and now substituting the animal that is kept and guarded by the one that keeps guard, Agamben, we might say, is at the same time *in the doghouse* (recall what was said a moment ago about foxes metamorphizing into dogs, poachers, in other words, turned gamekeepers). So with all these beasts substituting one for another – a prosthetic *bestialité*, *bestialité comme*, as, prosthesis – we might not be so sure which philosopher plays which animal, who is chasing or hunting on preying on whom, and who is following

in whose tracks while trying to cover that up.

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1 Trans. modified following Geoffrey Bennington’s translation of Derrida 2008 to accord with the French version used by Derrida.