

**‘But by blood no wolf am I’: Language and Agency, Instinct and Essence –
Transcending Antinomies in Maggie Stiefvater’s *Shiver* series**

The sympathetic vampire is now a familiar creature. Stephenie Mayer’s *Twilight* (2005) has made us aware of the attraction of radical otherness, where the mysterious non-humanity of the love object becomes a powerful source of desire rather than terror alone.¹ Other paranormal species have also become somewhat domesticated and are now lovers rather than monstrous Others, resulting in the new hybridised genre of paranormal romance, where Gothic horror couples with romantic fiction.² Each species of monster (whether vampire, shapeshifter, faerie, angel, or zombie) lends itself to different domains of enquiry. The shapeshifter, especially the werewolf, is particularly useful as an instrument for exploring the boundaries of humanity and animality, culture and nature. Werewolves are far more tied to animality and the physiological than the present-day vampire, despite the latter’s often compulsive blood-lust.³ The werewolf, too, is bound to a hierarchical pack society; this group membership necessarily evokes a different perspective on the social than the usually solitary vampire.

Of course, the blurring of the boundary between animal and human recurs throughout literature. Yet wolves in particular have long played a versatile role in exploring these demarcations. Wolves are ambiguously social animals yet savage outsiders, predators on the community, and disruptors of the pastoral (with all the additional allegorical weight that arrives with Christianity). They are also founders and nurturers of culture, raising Romulus and Remus, or fostering into sociality those abandoned feral children that so fascinated Enlightenment thinkers as they probed into the origins of society and language.⁴ However, one must be careful not to take the shapeshifter as some timeless archetype; perspectives on our relationship with nature and animality shift dramatically and readings of werewolf texts must be particularised and placed into context. In the twenty-first century, werewolf fiction is much engaged by questions raised in the Enlightenment and by the counter-currents against that.⁵

This chapter will show how, woven into an emotionally rich and sympathetically rendered coming-of-age narrative of first love and familial problems, Maggie Stiefvater’s *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series performs a far more sophisticated interrogation of the boundaries of animality and humanity than other contemporary

werewolf romances.⁶ I will show how Stiefvater evokes the powerful allure of losing one's human identity and becoming immersed in the 'natural' world (bearing in mind the complexities of this term). Then, I show how her characters traverse such uncertain borders as that between animal and human. The argument moves to Stiefvater's delineation of the distinctively human project made possible through language. From this emerge agency and the possibility of authentic choice which are, however, potentially endangered by the seductions of the wolfish wild. Finally, I suggest how the texts point to a transcendence of such antinomies set out above as those of wolf and man and other dyads.

Nineteenth-century werewolf narratives, according to Chantal du Coudray, revealed various ideological tendencies, including 'anxieties about working-class degeneracy, aristocratic decadence, racial atavism, women's corporeality and sexuality'.⁷ However, for du Coudray, in the more recent female-centred werewolf texts of the 1980s and 1990s, there is a background of 'revaluations of the wolf (and the human relationship to the natural world) [which] have paralleled the feminist reclamation of previously degraded values' (128). Alongside a broad critique from a post-structuralist perspective of the Enlightenment 'in which', du Coudray uncritically claims, 'both femininity and nature are systematically othered' (119), 'narratives of female lycanthropy have thus experimented with the positive revaluation of those "negative" qualities traditionally associated with women (such as nature, embodiment, and intuition)' (128-29). Du Coudray's analysis is too sweeping an approach, and does not elucidate many more recent texts. Maggie Stiefvater's *Shiver* (2009) is one such text; my reading seeks to rescue the particularity of this exceptional novel and its sequels (in *The Wolves of Mercy Falls*, or *Shiver*, series).⁸ It is exceptional both in the quality of the writing and in the manner in which it avoids prevalent approaches to writing the werewolf. That is to say, contra du Coudray, the werewolf experience is not particularly gendered in Stiefvater. And, in Stiefvater, unmediated nature is *not* feminised, nor is it postulated as a superior value; rather, it poses dangers to autonomous subjectivity and to all that is valuable in humanity – love, creativity, society. Embodiment, too, *is* redeemed and celebrated, but not feminised.

Questions of gender are among the acute ideological issues raised by recent werewolf narratives. Many contemporary werewolf romances feature the obligatory

‘post-feminist’ feisty female protagonist, who is present in order that the texts conform to the generic imperative of romance. It may be, too, that these independent heroines fulfil social expectations in present-day Western society of gender equality and so on. Yet contradictions emerge between the notion of the independent woman and of instinctual submission both to pack hierarchy and to the dominant alpha male, to whom the heroine half-willingly acquiesces. These narratives thus resonate with contemporary anti-humanist ideologies of sociobiology and genetic determinism which work to reduce human behaviour to the causal mechanisms of the physical world and reify the autonomous subject. Such accounts inevitably explain aggression and hierarchies both of class and gender in terms of innate biological forces. For Raymond Williams, ‘contemporary bourgeois thought’ has revived Social Darwinism, with ‘emphasis on the inherent force of the aggressive instinct, the territorial imperative, the genetically determined “hunter killer”, the lower “beast” brain, and so on’ as ‘crude evasions of historical and cultural variation’.⁹ This was written in 1978, but the ideology keeps resurfacing in new guises. In its most familiar contemporary form, evolutionary psychology, it is much disseminated in popular media and is a conspicuous background in present-day werewolf fictions.¹⁰

Incorporating the legacies of Romanticism and twenty-first-century concerns about the environment, accompanied by currents of thought that seek to devalue the centrality of the human, werewolf narratives often express a longing for a less antagonistic relationship with nature and utopian aspirations towards the heightened powers (particularly sensory perception) and imagined intensities of animal existence. However, many such fictions adopt an uncritical enthusiasm for the instinctual and a postmodern denigration of agency and subjectivity that can lead to unexpectedly reactionary positions – as when hierarchies become legitimated by an essentialism derived from animal analogies. Generally, werewolves embody determinism more than other paranormal characters, biology inescapably dictating their identity. Kelly Armstrong’s *Bitten* (2003) is exemplary here; Armstrong’s heroine, Elena Michaels, sums up the overall perspective: ‘Nature wins out. It always does’.¹¹

Another case is Keri Arthur’s Riley Jenson in *Full Moon Rising* (2006), who has exuberant and liberating sex, but only at the prompting of uncontrollable, deterministic urges. Riley’s lupine nature justifies and celebrates her promiscuous sexuality and the absence of a puritan morality constraining it but at the expense of

making it instinctual, less than human, and tied in with both subordination to the male and to breeding imperatives, thus diminishing its emancipatory potential. She simply *is* this creature of uncontrollable sexuality – it is her essence and is rooted in her biology; she is ‘genetically programmed to seek out the strongest mate’ and, as full moon approaches, to have wild sex with many partners in the wolf clubs.¹² Riley, though, is something of a loner; her struggle is over control of her fertility rather than between independence and pack loyalty.¹³ More typically, shapeshifter heroines’ dramas revolve around their search for autonomy against the authority and appeal of a pack dominated by alpha males (who are, adding a requisite narrative tension, often the love interest). Armstrong’s Elena and Rachel Vincent’s werecat Faythe Sanders are good examples of this tendency.

A final theme which resonates with contemporary ideological concerns is humanity’s relationship to the environment, which is often represented in a post-Romantic manner through the appeal to what is spontaneous and ‘natural’.¹⁴ This is represented as unproblematically appealing in many of these fictions. Anne Rice’s *The Wolf Gift* (2010) exemplifies this perspective. Rice’s text is complex, and she does value human qualities in certain ways, but the novel displays in general an anti-humanist orientation. Before the ancient werewolf Margon comes to full awareness, he had (he tells us) ‘no sense of an evolutionary continuum’; he saw his wolf nature as ‘depravity, a sinking, a loss of soul, a contamination with a lower and bestial drive’.¹⁵ Adhering to anthropocentric orthodoxy (which the text clearly rejects), he had ‘believed in the uniqueness and superiority of humankind’ and in materialism: ‘I thought this universe was all that there was’.¹⁶ The dominant devaluation of Enlightenment humanism – and, indeed, humanity – is expressed through the celebration of the instinctual and the animal as subversive.

Variations on these positions colour many werewolf romances. However, Young Adult paranormal romance is often more questioning than its adult counterpart, more ambivalent, perhaps more critical; different, less constraining commercial imperatives may be at work, or readers’ expectations less fixed. Pedagogical and socialising functions are also present and may work in tandem with or against these other forces. The preoccupations of adolescence are obviously central and shape-shifters may seem peculiarly suited to dramatise the transition to adulthood because of their own indeterminate status. ‘[A]dolescence is itself a liminal space’,

say Kimberley McMahon-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver; ‘The teen vampire and werewolf genres allow for distinctions between self and other, and life and death, to be framed against distinctions between childhood and adult responsibilities’.¹⁷ But they can do more than this, exploring other antinomies creatively and in ways that embrace more universal concerns than adolescence alone. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology reveals that an examination of adolescent transition itself may lead to insights into a uniquely human embodied consciousness:

When the adolescent suffers through the trauma of coming-of-age, he has at his disposal the grammar of ‘I-you-they’ already implanted in his speech and ready to take on deeper symbolic meaning. ‘I’ now becomes the emblem of a multileveled and ambiguous mode of being in the world. I am the body at one with itself, others, and world when I am engaged in team sports. I am also the other whose face in the mirror is sprouting whiskers and pimples. And I am the self whose significance is simultaneously built up and torn down in the look of peers and parents, guys and girls. I – the grammatical sign, the overdetermined symbol – is now a question.¹⁸

Stiefvater’s *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series explores this ambiguous adolescent body and the ‘I’ that is under question. She shows both the allure of the untamed and the human centrality of language, culture, and agency. Her novels engage with contemporary neo-Romantic ideas of ‘being one with Nature’ but in intelligent and unexpected ways.

McMahon-Coleman and Weaver give a careful exposition of Stiefvater’s narrative in the context of other YA shapeshifter fictions, emphasising the similarity to them through the conventionality and perhaps heteronormativity of the romance plot.¹⁹ This is all valid, but I want to read against the grain, to perform a utopian rather than ideological deciphering and uncover what makes these novels differ from others in the subgenre (and even find some redemptive utopian potential in the romance trope itself, perhaps).²⁰ Its literary qualities – the skilful and often lovely word craft – alone point to the virtues of a more particularised reading.

The books are tantalisingly ambivalent about the appeal of the instinctual and the borderline between an embodied humanity and the animal. This is manifested in the love affair of the teenage protagonists, Sam and Grace, and the trials of the other

young people who have become involved. Grace has long had a mysterious attraction to the wolves that almost killed her as a child. She meets Sam, who turns out to be cursed with the biological necessity of becoming wolf when the temperature falls, and who had saved Grace from the rest of the pack. But Grace had been bitten and her wolf nature lies dormant, emerging in the second novel, *Linger*, after Sam's release at the end of *Shiver*. In *Shiver*, the first-person narrative alternates between Grace and Sam – a technique that yields a unified objective view while also allowing the transitions to wolfhood to be rendered subjectively (in as much as this is mimetically possible or credible). Such a focalisation of the 'sympathetic monster' narrative allows us to witness the wolf/human dialectic as interior experience.

The call of the wild

Isabel is the complex and embittered sister of the vanished Jack (who, it turns out, has been bitten by wolves and transformed into a werewolf). Reading through Sam's notebook, she encounters a significant quotation from the first of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: 'even the most clever of animals see that we are not surely at home in our interpreted world' (L223). This anxiety has, at certain historical moments, inspired the desire to cast off humanity and become, somehow, immersed in nature. The wild calls to us and tempts us in various ways.

There is in *Shiver* the appeal of an aesthetic owing much to Romanticism: a self-effacing wonder at the sublimity of nature, but in an enhanced way that invokes the original meaning of 'aesthetic' (that is, pertaining to the senses).²¹ This includes a concept of the poetic which is seen as opposed to the more 'human' intellectuality and as more 'natural' (this, again, derives from conceptions of Romanticism). This in turn involves ideas of poetic language which I will consider in more detail below. The enhanced senses that a return to animality brings are related to this concept but also involve the erotic. Grace recounts the aesthetic pleasure of being immersed in nature; this is also a prelude to a kiss:

Together we gazed up. The flat black field around us made the sky as big as an ocean. With the wolf inside me and Sam beside me, both of us strange creatures, I felt we were somehow an intrinsic part of this world, this night, this boundless mystery. (F192)

Their strangeness is not just wolfish; it is the strangeness between the sexes, or of the erotic other, which propels most YA fictions of this kind, too. The aesthetic ecstasy inspires the erotic, and Sam kisses her:

Everything inside me felt raw-edged and hungry. [. . .]

When we kissed, it didn't matter that I had been a wolf hours ago, that I had been a wolf again. [. . .] All that mattered was this: our noses touching, the softness of his mouth, the ache inside me.

(F193)

The clichés of romance here take on a freshness when coupled with the Gothic undertones, reinvigorating the genre of romantic fiction; 'raw-edged and hungry' renders the danger and the physicality of the romantic 'softness' and 'ache' both more powerful and more under question by the wolfishness of the desire. Here, for Sam, nature's wonders affirm human love: 'I loved her, and she loved me, and the world was beautiful and awash with pink light around us' (F196). Crucially, the sublimity of the aurora borealis becomes a background to the human couple rather than the solvent of identity wherein the subject is lost.

Along with the enhancement of strength and speed that wolfhood delivers, there are enhancements of the senses. (These glimpses of utopian potential are part of the appeal of the paranormal state in general; longevity is often offered, too.) Contemporary werewolf (and vampire) narratives make much of the heightened sense of smell that animality brings. It is often a key trigger of sexual attraction (often insinuating biological determinism, invoking pheromones) and accompanies the desire for a post- or pre-human enhancement of the senses that features in much paranormal romance.²² For Freud, smell is one of the 'proximity senses' disparaged by civilisation; it is considered a base signifier of animality. Herbert Marcuse performs a radical reworking of Freud's account of this repression of animality. According to Marcuse, in the development of the human species, the senses 'have become the privilege and distinction of man which enabled him to transform the blind necessity of the fulfilment of want into desired gratification.'²³ But there is also a 'surplus-repression' in the service of power, which enforces the isolation of individuals in civilisation:

The vicissitudes of the 'proximity senses' (smell and taste) provide a good example for the interrelation between basic repression and

surplus-repression. [. . .] Smell and taste give, as it were, unsublimated pleasure [. . .]. They relate (and separate) individuals immediately, without the generalized and conventionalized forms of consciousness, morality, aesthetics. Such immediacy is incompatible with the effectiveness of organized *domination*.²⁴

Utopian and potentially transformative forces are suggested here that anticipate an emancipated sexuality and sociality.

Sam draws out the wolf in Grace in a sweet shop, urging her, she says, ‘to explore something I’d left untouched for years. [. . .] something I’d buried alive’ (312). He awakens her sense of smell, heightened by her wolf nature, in a dazzlingly ecstatic rendering of sensuous particularity:

Nuts, buttery, warm, earthy, like Sam. The subtle, mild scent of white chocolate. Oh, God, some sort of mocha, rich and dark and sinful. [. . .] Smells I didn’t even know names for. I groaned. (313)

The sensations escape language, and converge with sexual desire. ‘Pick something’, says Sam; she responds:

I want you. Feeling the grip of his hand in mine, the brush of his skin on mine, seeing the way he moved in front of me, equal parts human and wolf, and remembering his smell – I ached with wanting to kiss him. (214)

Here, the sense of smell enhances the humanity of love in tune with the utopian potential Marcuse discovers. Stiefvater continually emphasises smell both as a trigger to sexual attraction and as an aspect of the pack sociality and sense of belonging of the wolves. Through such devices, she renders concretely the nearness of Grace and Sam to wolfhood while, as in this passage, portraying their distinctly human individuality and mutuality.

However, despite these promises of intensified human existence, the call of the wild also has a dangerous aspect (this, through the attraction to the demon lover, is of course the hallmark of paranormal romance). Violence can take on an aphrodisiac appeal (inherited from the Gothic) in adult paranormal romance, and something of that danger is retained here. Grace is first attracted to Sam as *wolf* (usually, the monstrous nature of the paranormal lover is revealed after a relationship has begun).²⁵ But, in human form, he retains the conventional threat of the dark lover: ‘I had a

flashing thought that Sam might be dangerous – that maybe he normally quieted the wolf inside him far more than he let on’ (226). Yet Sam’s authenticity, inspired by love, will enable him to quell the lupine ferocity.

Thus wolfhood offers the temptations of power: a physical power that is emancipatory but which also is attended by the temptation of *social* power as dominance. This, too, may be eroticised. Being a wolf can bring a comforting sociality; this is paradoxical in a way, since the social could be considered primarily human, but wolves have their own forms of sociality. Shelby wants Sam, he tells us; she

wanted what I stood for. I was the favourite of Beck, the human pack leader, and also of Paul, the wolf pack leader, and the logical successor of both. In our little world, I had a lot of power.

And, oh, Shelby wanted power. (237-38)

In many werewolf paranormal romances, this attractiveness of (male) power, authorised by the pack structure, will be the motivating force of the romance.²⁶ Stiefvater suggests instead a critique of such power structures through endorsing the mutuality of Grace and Sam’s relationship and by characterising Shelby’s submissiveness as bad faith.

One further appeal of wolfhood is that it offers a release from responsibility, from autonomy itself. Stiefvater exposes this, emphasising the value of human free will.²⁷ Sam, in contrast to Shelby, resists the wolf yearning. For him, the pure physicality of the animal voice can never rival the sublimated pulsations that form music or the dexterity of the human hand incarnating that voice:

I didn’t miss standing amongst them, howling. It would never compare to the feel of my fingers on the strings of my guitar. Their poignant song could never be as triumphant as the sound of me saying Grace’s name.²⁸ (L347-48)

The articulation of the loved one’s name, as a token of human individuation (itself made possible, in Merleau-Ponty’s schema, by ‘the grammar of “I-you-they”’), holds more joys than the wild call of the wolves.

And all these desires intertwine. These enticements of nature are often allied in paranormal romance with critiques of the costs of modernity to the individual, to human society and to the world considered as a whole (this last being an ecological

concern). We are inescapably cultural, and, says Terry Eagleton, ‘at the conjuncture of the [. . .] body and symbolic medium; but this is not a place where anyone can feel blissfully at home’.²⁹ Hence the call of the natural, to which characters such as Shelby eagerly, and others fatalistically, succumb. But as Rousseau, from whom much of the discussion over these antinomies originates, makes clear, there is no return to the savage state.³⁰ Likewise, Kristeva claims that the price of a descent into a prelinguistic, presocial realm may be madness and loss of agency (dramatised in this novel as the final and irrevocable descent into wolfhood).³¹

Postcards from the other side

The poet Osip Mandelstam defiantly asserted his humanity against the brutality of Stalinism (significantly, on his exile to the wolf-haunted wilderness of Siberia): ‘But by blood no wolf am I’.³² Sam recalls Mandelstam’s line while remembering his mother’s kindnesses; the mother who had tried ‘to kill the tiny monster I had become’ (L104). He marks the connection to his mother and the social world while recollecting the violent expulsion from them, likewise asserting his humanity by refusing to take on an essence: whether one defined biologically by wolf blood (or DNA, as the narrative rationalises it) or one cemented by past trauma. Yet this separation from animality is unstable.

Thus, while human lover, embedded in culture, Sam is still animal, still even ‘monster’. Grace recalls her memories of the singularity of Sam, even in wolf form: ‘He was beautiful: wild and dark, yellow eyes filled with a complexity I couldn’t begin to fathom. And he gave off a scent the same as the other wolves around me – rich, feral, musky. Even now, as he lay in my room, I could smell the wolf on him’ (83). The attractiveness of wolf and man is confused here. In bed (though they do not have sex at this point), the apprehension and novelty of the first encounter with a lover mingles with the reminders of animality: ‘I could smell the wolf scent better now, and I sighed with a strange contentedness. [. . .] The truth of it struck me then. Here I was with a shape-shifting boy in my bed. [. . .] A weird combination of excitement and nervousness tingled through me.’ (85). Stiefvater draws attention to this ambiguous state by focusing on communication, both verbal and bodily; that of articulated language and of a more instinctive signalling.

Thus Stiefvater's wolves 'speak', but their prelinguistic communication also invokes the confusion of boundaries. When Grace discovers the recently-shifted Sam in his human form for the first time, naked and wounded, his human voice is similar to a wolf's: 'Human words, not a howl, but the timbre was the same' (68). Thus, she perceives both the human symbolic articulation and, beneath that, what Julia Kristeva calls 'the semiotic' – the prosodic, rhythmic, melodic features of language that we emerge out of as we develop subjectivity.³³ Grace lies next to Sam, sleepless, and 'sick with abstract longing', and listens as 'The night chorus rose, missing Sam's plaintive voice but gorgeous nonetheless' (83). Then Sam gives 'a low whimper', which Grace perceives as 'a miserable sound, caught halfway between human and wolf' (84). The wolves communicate 'with images' (102). Sam explains to Grace: 'it's hard to explain as a hu – as me. [. . .] There's no abstract concepts, really. Things like time and names and complicated emotions are all out of the question' (103). Thus temporality, individuation, and romance are each rendered impossible. Sam's wolf speech is limited to 'little images that we can send to each other. Simple images. Postcards from the other side' (162). The postcard, a visual image, but also bearer of inscriptions between people, introduces ambiguity. Sam feels no loss in acquiring human language: 'Why would I need it now? I have words. I can say anything I want to say.' (162).

But, for Grace, '*words aren't enough*' [original italics] (162); this is in part a romance convention on the ineffability of passion, but is also part of the novels' constant destabilising of fixed perspectives. While celebrating linguistic creativity, Stiefvater suggests there remains something non-linguistic that forms a valuable part of human love. Grace's desire at the sight of Sam's body is ambiguously sexual appetite and wolf nature: 'Something gnawed inside me, hungry and waiting' (164). This wolf nature is expressed in prelinguistic vocalisations: 'Sam growled in a soft, wild way that made my gut tense with longing' (165). As Sam enters metamorphosis, he experiences the disintegration of language and a sensory intensification that is overbearing:

trying to focus on her, on being human [. . .] She was saying something; I couldn't understand her. She was too loud. Everything was too loud. It smelled in here. This close, her scent was exploding

in my nostrils. [. . .] her mouth moved, her voice ringing out,
 indecipherable. Sounds meant for someone else's ears. (154-55)

The slippage between wolf and human is depicted as a linguistic transition, as here, too: 'the scream came again. For a second I thought it was a howl, and then the cry resolved itself into words' (43). As Sam emerges from wolfhood, he is 'not a wolf', but not 'Sam yet, either'; in this state of becoming he is 'a leaking womb bulging with the promise of conscious thoughts', where 'The future and the past' are 'both the same', and Grace is 'past present future' (70). This moment of entry into temporality and structured human language recalls Kristeva's womb-like *chora*, an indeterminate position which 'as rupture and articulations (rhythms), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality'.³⁴

The human calling

This wolf language draws our attention to Kristeva's semiotic realm. This bodily aspect of language is rooted in our animal biology and is the supplement (particularly in poetry) to the meaning-bearing function of language, which for Kristeva belongs to the realm of 'the symbolic'.³⁵

Stiefvater evokes this precarious emergence as her young wolf-people fall back into the semiotic in order, however, to reconstruct and reintegrate their sense of identity. Like Kristeva, Stiefvater does not overvalue the semiotic, recognising that without autonomy we can have no meaningful projects. The temporary surrender to the wild semiotic and the dissolution of the ego may facilitate that remaking, overcoming of the past, and plunge into new projects that constitutes human freedom, but it has its dangers. In Kristevan terms, 'identity is necessary but only ever partial' and risks 'the wreck of all identity' or, conversely, 'a self-blinding allegiance to psychic norms'.³⁶ For the protagonists to instantiate an individual agency, untied to rigid norms, the loss of identity and then re-emergence into humanity is crucial. And the dissolution and revitalisation of language in the presentation of the transition between wolf and human mirrors and realises this process.

The novels repeatedly and knowingly refer to language and communication; attention is drawn to the personal name in particular. This recalls the 'I' put into question by phenomenology. Opposed to the lure of nature are the deeper rewards of being human – love, art, cooperative purpose – all founded on language.³⁷ Language

brings with it the subjunctive, futurity, and the possibility of projects and vocations (note the etymology of the latter; I mean here ‘Projects’ in Sartre’s sense of consciously shaping one’s life towards a future). Prelinguistic consciousness, such as that of the wolf, cannot bring new social facts into being. The philosopher John Searle defines five types of illocutionary speech acts. The fifth, Declarations, is the only one which does not correspond to a feature of prelinguistic, animalistic consciousness. Declarations ‘make something the case by declaring it to be the case’.³⁸ Terry Eagleton captures another side of this: ‘It would be unnatural for human beings not to be in excess of themselves, enjoying a superfluity beyond strict material need. [. . .] It is this which distinguishes humans from beasts, whose lives are rigorously determined by their species-needs.’³⁹ It is through declarations in language that human beings create new needs, new aspirations.

Sam’s humanity is centred upon his love of language and text; he reads poetry avidly; he writes songs. The sensuous apprehension of all the details of the bookshop where he works, he tells us, is ‘what I loved, when I was human’ (8). Textuality itself offers ‘possibilities of escape’ that Grace will search for as she scans the shelves (9) – one he and Grace might share. Thus Sam prefers to read Yeats while Shelby urges him to ‘Come listen to the howls I found online’ (191). Incidentally, Stiefvater’s poetic allusions are more than casual: Yeats notably explored the supreme distancing of human artifice from the contingencies of animality and all its ‘mire and blood’, and the shaping of sound into poetry.⁴⁰

When Sam wants to share his love of poetry with Grace he emphasises its semiotic aspects: “‘You have to listen to the patterns of the words, not just what they are saying. Like a song’”, he tells her (197). Human sexuality and their mutual attraction, this suggests, is bound up with the sensuous physicality of language. Sam ‘wondered what Grace saw in me, why I fascinated her. What was I without my wolf skin? A boy stuffed so full of words that they spilled out of me’ (173). Grace is ‘idiotically entranced by the way he said “Grace”. The tone of it. The way his lips formed the vowels. The timbre of his voice stuck in my head like music.’ (310). The significance of the proper name, which is central to the symbolic and crucial to motions of human individuality, appears again but coupled with the pleasure of the semiotic.

As Sam transforms, he recalls his pain at losing humanity as manifested in love and language and self-identity: ‘I felt the agony of the single moment that I lost myself. Lost what made me Sam. The part of me that could remember Grace’s name’ (212). In language, subjectivity coalesces around the proper name. It is language that enables the human calling, a vocation that necessarily involves projects aimed at the future, and free will, with all the anguish of choice which that entails.

Learning wolf things

Sam’s struggle with his lupine nature becomes an existentialist refusal to be defined by nature. He quotes Rilke to himself in *Forever*: ‘This is what Fate means: to be opposite, to be opposite to every thing and nothing else but opposite and always opposite’ (F24).⁴¹ But this is *not* Fate; it is the power of negating, of *resisting* Fate. As in the Sartrean ‘we are what we are not’, our fate is to be always other than what we are; we have to choose.⁴² Others are instead tempted to refuse this power; to learn ‘wolf things’ and surrender their subjectivity. Shelby ‘thinks being a wolf is a gift’ (122) (accidentally anticipating Rice’s *The Wolf Gift*). She ‘had a bad life [. . .] before she came to the pack. She likes being a wolf. She likes belonging’, says Sam (166). Thus, for her, part of the attraction is the paradoxical sociality of wolfhood, which in some ways seems more authentic and immediate than human companionship. It is certainly more secure.

The lure of escaping from all the responsibility that human autonomy grants can be very tempting (especially with the new burdens that adulthood brings, hence the centrality of this theme to much Young Adult fiction). Thus there is the appeal (to which Shelby succumbs) of inauthenticity through escaping responsibility by sloughing off one’s humanity. We may sympathise with the yearning, but this refuge is an act of bad faith; a refusal to take up the responsibilities of being human, including one’s social being. There is a telling exchange between Shelby and Sam. Dismissing his schoolbooks, she says: ‘You’re not going to be a man. You’re going to be a wolf, so you should be learning wolf things’ (192). This is fatalistic despair; it is also Shelby’s active *choice* of the wolf life over humanity. The narrative continues:

“‘You’re not going to be Sam. You’re going to be alpha male.

[. . .] And I'll be your mate. The alpha female." Her face was excited, flushed. Shelby wanted nothing more than to leave her past behind.' (192)

Her flushing is from desire, a desire entwined with power relationships, but it also indicates the excited urge to escape her past. Yet this overcoming of her *human* past is not, as Sam's will be, a free positing of the future, but a yearning for a more fixed essence.

When Sam becomes permanently human, he gains a sense of futurity and new goals: he contemplates 'things I wanted back before I realised what being a wolf meant for my future [. . .] like *Write a novel* and *Find a band* and *Get a degree in obscure poetry in translation*' (L30). For Sam, Grace's birthday gift to him of studio time is the gift of human temporality, 'an acknowledgement that I could move forward. That there was going to be a next week and a next month and a next year for me' (L112). As Sam addresses the nihilistic Cole: "'Being human is an. . ."' I was going to say *extraordinary privilege* but thought it sounded grandiose. "There's no meaning to life as a wolf. [. . .] I mean, how can I defend *humanity*? It's all that matters. Why would you throw that away?'" (L233). Even the hesitancy over the meaning of humanity, a struggle in language to find meaning, reveals that meaning and value lie in the very act of using language. Stiefvater shows how rich human sociality is in comparison to the allure of instinctual or animal life.

Neither wolf nor man

In the wolf house, Sam, expelled from his biological family, can fetch his 'copy of Rilke and walk through the rooms, smelling the memories of kinship' (204). In the bookshop, Grace is aware of 'A wonderful wave of new-book smell' (221). Culture, in its most 'refined' sense, merges with the proximity senses, those closest to 'nature'. For Sam and Grace, the body, still with lupine traces of heightened sensitivity, takes precedence at moments. Thus Sam 'could smell her nervousness [. . .] and could hear the fast beat of her heart carried through the mattress to my ear' (95) – so those moments in romantic fiction where words fail as the body becomes more central take on new significance here, highlighting how much human desire resembles the state of nature. Yet her heartbeat is translated back into language: '*kiss me kiss me kiss me*' [italics in original] (95). And they *do* kiss, and at first it is 'nothing animal'. He warily

performs metasemiotic operations: ‘I deconstructed the kiss: her possible reactions to, her possible interpretations of’ – but she urges him, in effect, to become *more* animal: ‘Is that all you’ve got?’ (97). And in the utopian moment of the perfect kiss of romantic fiction, opposites are transcended. Nature and culture, subjectivity and lack of identity are resolved: ‘I was wild and tame and pulled into shreds and crushed into being all at once’ (98).

Later, the sexual act will effect a similar resolution of opposites. Grace boldly challenges Sam’s reticence when they go to bed: ‘Why are you so careful with me, Sam Roth?’ ‘I’m not an animal’ (326), he replies; he had ‘spent eleven years’, he muses, ‘watching the pack become animals, pushing down my instincts, controlling myself, fighting to stay human, fighting to do the right thing’ (326-27). So this is repression, but not the pathological surplus-repression that Marcuse identifies; it is the willed humanising of the instincts to cultivate civility between the sexes. Sam’s careful discrimination between human drives and lupine instinct is another move towards transcending polarities and recognising human subjectivity as embodied (I mean ‘transcend’ here in the dialectical sense of Hegel’s *aufhebung*, where antinomies are both surpassed and preserved at a higher level). So, too, is Grace’s reassurance over Sam’s concerns over his own motivation; she intuitively reads more subtle processes than wolf telepathy could reveal: ‘As if reading my thoughts, she said, “Can you tell me it’s only the wolf in you that wants to kiss me?”’ (327). In arousal, Grace is ‘all wolf’ (328); in consummation, the polarities are completely sublated: ‘I shrugged off my skin with a growl, giving in, neither wolf nor man, just Sam’ (329).

Conclusion

Nature and our ideas of it are irredeemably historical and cultural; as Raymond Williams says: ‘the idea of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history. What is often being argued [. . .] in the idea of nature is the idea of man; [. . .] the idea of man in society’.⁴³ Stiefvater makes us question received ideas of nature, especially our relationship to animality and, as a consequence, to each other. Thus Stiefvater’s narrative refuses to endorse simplistic oppositions between the animal and the human, recognising and celebrating human embodied consciousness, and aware of the complex affinity of romantic love and instinct. Stiefvater points towards a

transcendence of such antinomies though, ultimately, she asserts the distinctively human powers of language, of individual identity, and goal-oriented agency as her characters find their voice and define their projects. The final verdict is that only the possibility of return to humanity makes animality bearable, just as, for Kristeva, the permanent descent into the semiotic leads to madness.

Romantic fiction is routinely condemned both as trivial and as an oppressive ideology.⁴⁴ But, in the comic mode, the idealised mutuality of the lovers' happy ending (as exemplified in Shakespearean comedy or Jane Austen) can have a utopian value. Grace imagines a bookish companionateness with Sam, 'developing an obnoxiously large vocabulary' (395); this is a vision of intersubjective emancipation rather than enslavement. Love also serves as motive for agency: 'Here, lying next to the girl who had rescued me, my simple humanity felt like a triumph' (87). He invokes the proper name again as the temperature drops, threatening to bring on the change: '*Sam*, I told myself, willing my body to believe. You're Sam' (88). The linguistic triumph over nature spurs further moves towards his eventual autonomy.

The *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series may be ephemeral; however, it has much literary merit and captures broadly the range of responses to the dialectic of humanity and nature that troubles other werewolf narratives, articulating that dialectic expressively and acutely. And its transcendence of the antinomies of this theme is dramatised engagingly and with humanity (if I may use that word). Stiefvater's werewolves are not wolves by blood; however rooted in the natural and the instinctive, and however powerful is the temptation of blood, her characters can negate their animal essence through language. And yet, even this is not conclusive; the blood runs warm within and cool human abstraction can never abolish it by rendering it alien. Jack and Shelby vanish, but wolves never disappear, says Sam – and this is more than literal: 'We wolves did many things: change, hide, sing underneath a pale, lonely moon – but we never disappeared entirely. Humans disappeared. Humans made monsters out of us' (279). Stiefvater represents a humanity uniquely emancipated through language and creates drama out of the Othering of wildness, and yet suggests that our being rests upon that evanescent animality.

Notes

¹ There are important predecessors of the sympathetic, and even romantic, vampire, including Fred Saberhagen's Dracula series, beginning with *The Dracula Tape* (1975); Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *Hôtel Transylvania* (1978) and its sequels; the Marvel comic, Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan's *The Tomb of Dracula* (1972–1979), which shows Dracula in love, married, and smitten by tragedy; Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and Frances Ford Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992).

² Studies of this new genre itself are few at the moment, but see Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Joseph Crawford, *The Twilight of the Gothic: Vampire Fiction and the Rise of the Paranormal Romance*, Gothic Literary Studies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014). Fred Botting opens up an approach that recognises the intermodulation of the two genres in his very title (though he feels the Gothic is compromised by this dalliance with romance): Fred Botting, *Gothic Romanced: Consumption, Gender and Technology in Contemporary Fictions* (Abingdon, Oxon. and New York: Routledge, 2008).

³ The vampire in its eighteenth-century folkloric origins is grossly bestial and is often not clearly distinct from the werewolf. In its literary development it exhibits a range of characteristics, from Polidori's rather insubstantial Lord Ruthven to the monstrous Count Dracula, who again shares features with the werewolf.

⁴ See Julia Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁵ Perhaps Gothic literature has always been concerned with Enlightenment rationalism in various, often conflicting ways. However, in the Gothic mode's present incarnation, there are clear signs of its concern with a contemporary counter-Enlightenment exemplified by Lyotard's and other postmodernists' suspicion of 'grand narratives'; the philosopher John Gray's denunciation of Enlightenment; the widespread scepticism towards ideas of human progress, universalism, science and rationality in popular and high culture and in political discourse.

⁶ There are a great many recent novels featuring the romantic lives of were-creatures; a few that seem to me to be typical out of those I have sampled are: Kelley

Armstrong, *Bitten*, Women of the Underworld, 1 (London: Time Warner, 2001); Keri Arthur, *Full Moon Rising*, Riley Jenson Guardian, 1 (London: Piatkus, 2006); Kresley Cole, *A Hunger Like No Other*, Immortals After Dark, 1 (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Rachel Vincent, *Stray*, Shifters, 1 (London: Mira, 2009); Anne Rice, *The Wolf Gift*, The Wolf Gift Chronicles, 1 (London: Arrow Books, 2010). Werewolves and shape-shifters appear in other paranormal romances, too – Charlene Harris’s Southern Vampire Mysteries series, Laurell K. Hamilton’s Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter series, and, of course, the Twilight series – but the vampire romances are central here (though the contrast between were and vampire is itself of interest).

⁷ Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror and the Beast Within* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 50.

⁸ The series consists of: *Shiver* (2009), *Linger* (2010), *Forever* (2011), and *Sinner* (2014). This last appeared while this chapter was in preparation; in any case, most of my focus is on the first novel. All references are to these editions and are indicated by page numbers in parentheses; quotations from *Linger* and *Forever* have *L* or *S* prefixing the page numbers.

⁹ Raymond Williams, ‘Problems of Materialism’, in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays*, Radical Thinkers, 11 (London and New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 103–22 (p. 112).

¹⁰ My criticism here is directed at Evolutionary Psychology (EP) in its dominant paradigm, that which attracts much uncritical attention in the media and in general discourse (Stephen Pinker’s popularisations are typical), rather than the field of enquiry itself – a distinction made by David J. Buller in his thorough philosophical critique: *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature*, new edn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). The essays in *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments against Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. by Hilary Rose and Steven Rose (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 2000) criticise that paradigm from a variety of perspectives; the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould’s contribution, ‘More Things in Heaven and Earth’ (pp. 85-105), is a lucid and cogent attack on what he argues are mistaken assumptions about biology. Stephen M. Downes’s article is an excellent summary of the philosophical arguments over the topic: ‘Evolutionary Psychology’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta,

Summer 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/evolutionary-psychology/> [accessed 12 July 2015].

¹¹ Armstrong, p. 1. Erin S. Young sees more of a subversive side to Armstrong than I do, in her article ‘Flexible Heroines, Flexible Narratives: The Werewolf Romances of Kelley Armstrong and Carrie Vaughn’, *Extrapolation*, 52 (2011), 204–26.

¹² Armstrong, p. 53.

¹³ She is also part-vampire, though the wolf nature is uppermost.

¹⁴ As always in this area, Raymond Williams is illuminating; see ‘Ideas of Nature’, in *Culture and Materialism*, pp. 67–85; and ‘Culture’, in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rvsd. edn (London: Flamingo, 1983), pp. 87–93 (p. 89); and also Terry Eagleton, ‘Culture and Nature’, in *The Idea of Culture*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 87–111.

¹⁵ Rice, p. 550.

¹⁶ Rice, p. 551. Rice’s own world-view is based on the evolutionary, somewhat pantheistic ideas of Teilhard de Chardin.

¹⁷ Kimberley McMahan-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver, *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture: A Thematic Analysis of Recent Depictions* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), pp. 16, 17.

¹⁸ M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 2nd edn, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 111. This passage obviously favours male experience; fictional counterparts might be found in the dramatisation of female adolescence in Angela Carter’s wolf stories and John Fawcett’s werewolf film, *Ginger Snaps* (2001).

¹⁹ McMahan-Coleman and Weaver, pp. 31–36.

²⁰ After Fredric Jameson’s distinction: ‘Conclusion: The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology’, in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 281–99.

²¹ There are suggestions of pantheism in the work of such writers as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, and hints in Rousseau that have led to characterisations of Romanticism as having inaugurated the desire for a new relationship of exalted oneness with the natural world. See Jonathan Wordsworth, ‘The Romantic Imagination’, in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. by Duncan Wu, Blackwell

Companions to Literature and Culture (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 486–94 (pp. 489–90); and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 296–302. Du Coudray says of a passage in S. P. Somtow's *Moon Dance* (1991): '[it] owes much to the romantic conception of the sublime, in which spiritual enrichment is attained through an immersion in or connection with nature' (Coudray, p. 143); this could be applied to many other passages in these fictions.

²² As here: 'I took a deep breath, inhaling the scents that swirled around me, allowing the atmosphere to soak through my pores, a richness that spoke of pleasure, indulgence, and carnal fantasies' (Arthur, p. 66).

²³ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 38.

²⁴ Marcuse, pp. 38–39.

²⁵ That is, in those narratives where a human meets an attractive stranger in a world where the monster must lie concealed; other variations include stories where both lovers are paranormal (such as Keri Arthur's Riley Jenson series) or worlds where the monster has 'come out' and their difference is immediately known (Charlaine Harris's Southern Vampire novels, for instance). Thus Buffy Summers, in the first episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, forms an alliance with the mysterious Angel, then is shocked by the sudden transformation into vampire when they kiss in Episode 7. Likewise, Bella Swan, in *Twilight*, only begins to suspect that Edward Cullen, the boy who she is attracted to, is a vampire after he has rescued her with superhuman strength and agility and when Jacob Black tells her old legends about the Cullens.

²⁶ Armstrong's *Bitten* and Vincent's *Stray* are exemplary here.

²⁷ The emphasis on autonomy and responsibility may owe in part to pedagogical imperatives in YA fiction and the centrality of these issues for young people seeking to make sense of the world as adult responsibilities dawn upon them.

²⁸ Music plays an important role in troubling the boundaries of the human and the natural in all of Stiefvater's books; see, in particular the ideas of inspiration and creativity explored in her Books of Faerie sequence of dark faery romance, *Lament: The Faerie Queen's Deception* (London: Scholastic, 2008) and *Ballad* (London: Scholastic, 2009). She is herself a gifted performer of Celtic music.

²⁹ Eagleton, p. 97.

³⁰ See, in particular, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. by Franklin Philip, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 100–01.

³¹ 'For Kristeva, to abdicate symbolic norms [. . .] leads to psychosis' (Jacqueline Rose, 'Julia Kristeva – Take Two', in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London and New York: Verso, 1986), pp. 141–64 (p. 146)).

³² Quoted in *Linger*, p. 104.

³³ Julia Kristeva's two dimensions of language; see below.

³⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 89–136 (p. 94).

³⁵ Kristeva, pp. 92–93.

³⁶ Rose, p. 150.

³⁷ For the uniquely cooperative nature of human communication, see Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

³⁸ John R. Searle, 'Language as Biological and Social', in *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 61–89 (p. 69).

³⁹ Eagleton, p. 101.

⁴⁰ W. B. Yeats, 'Byzantium', *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. by Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1992), line 33.

⁴¹ From the eighth *Elegy*.

⁴² 'We have to deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is' (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (1943; London: Methuen, 1958), p. 58).

⁴³ Williams, 'Ideas of Nature', pp. 70–71.

⁴⁴ Pamela Regis summarises and discusses these arguments, responding with her own defence of romance fiction, in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

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