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## The Wolf and the Philosopher

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MARK ROWLANDS

THE WOLF AND THE PHILOSOPHER

Some years ago, I wrote a book called *The Philosopher and the Wolf* (Pegasus 2009). It should really have been called *The Wolf and the Philosopher*. The wolf is the star, the philosopher an insignificant extra bumbling around in the background. The book is about many things, but fundamentally, I suppose, it is about growing up. I've recently finished a sequel of sorts. It's called *Running with the Pack* (Pegasus 2013) and it's a book about growing old. There is, I suspect, a natural trilogy to be written here, but I hope I don't have to write the final part for some time yet.

*The Philosopher and the Wolf* is a *memoir*: a book of memories. In this paper, I shall talk about this book, but I shall also talk *with* it. I shall talk not just about the memories the book contains but use these to examine the idea of memory.

*When I was twenty-seven, I did something a really rather stupid...*

Actually, I almost certainly did many stupid things that year—I was, after all, twenty-seven—but this is the only one I remember because it went on to indelibly shape the future course of my life. When I first met Brenin, I was a young assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Alabama, and he was six-week old, a cuddly little teddy bear of a wolf cub. At least, he was sold to me as a wolf, but I think it is very likely that he was wolf-dog mix. Whatever he was, he grew up, and with this came various, let us call them, *idiosyncrasies*. If I left him unattended for more than a few minutes, he would destroy anything he could lay his jaws on—which, given that he grew to be thirty-five inches at the withers, included pretty much everything that wasn't screwed to the ceiling. I don't know if he was easily bored, had separation anxiety, or claustrophobia, or some combination of all of these things. But the result was that Brenin had to go everywhere I did. Any socializing I did—bars, parties, and so on—Brenin had to come too. If I went on a date, he would play the lupine gooseberry. I took him to lectures with me at the University. He would lie down and sleep in the corner of the lecture room: most of the

time anyway—when he didn't things would get interesting. For example, you can probably imagine the circumstances that caused me to append this little cautionary note to my syllabus:

**Note:** Please do not pay any attention to the wolf. He will not hurt you. However, if you do have any food in your bags, please ensure that those bags are securely fastened shut.

I can't be certain of this, of course, but I strongly suspect that this was the first time these three sentences had ever appeared on a philosophy syllabus.

Allied to his destructive proclivities was his boundless energy. When Brenin was a cub, and then a young wolf, he liked to play a game: he would grab a cushion off the sofa or armchair on which I was sitting, and tear off out the garden, with me in hot pursuit. It was a game of chase, and he loved it. But when he started getting big, he decided to modify the game. One day, my reflections were interrupted by a sequence of loud thuds coming from the room that led out to the back yard. Instead of taking a cushion from the armchair and going out the garden, Brenin had decided that it would be far more rewarding to take the rest of armchair too. The thuds were made by the chair, locked firmly in Brenin's jaws, being repeatedly slammed against the doorframe. I think it was at precisely this moment I decided that it would be a *really, really* good thing if Brenin were constantly exhausted. That thud-thud-thud of an armchair against a doorframe marked the beginning of a life of almost daily running.

### *On Our Runs Together ...*

A passage from *The Philosopher and the Wolf* records a memory of running.

I realized something both humbling and profound: I was in the presence of a creature that was, in most important respects, superior to me. My realization was fundamentally an aesthetic one. When we were running, Brenin would glide across the ground with an elegance and economy of movement I have never seen in a dog. When a dog trots, no matter how refined and efficient its gait, there is always a small vertical vector present

in the movement of its feet, and this movement of the feet will transmit itself to the line of its shoulders and back. A wolf uses its ankles and large feet to propel it forwards. As a result there is far less movement in its legs—these remain straight and move forwards and backwards but not up and down. So, when Brenin trotted, his shoulders and back remained flat and level. From a distance, it looked like he was floating an inch or two above the ground. When he was especially happy or pleased with himself, this would be converted into an exaggerated bounce. But his default motion was the glide. Brenin is gone now and when I try to picture him it is difficult to furnish this picture with the details necessary to make it a concrete and living representation. But his essence is still there for me. I can still see it: the ghostly wolf in the early-morning Alabama mist, gliding effortlessly over the ground, silent, fluid and serene.

The contrast with the noisy, puffing and leaden-footed thudding of the ape that ran beside him could not have been more pronounced or depressing. I wanted to be able to lope. I wanted to glide across the ground as if I were floating an inch or two above it. But no matter how good at running I became—and I became very good—this was always going to escape me. If you want to understand the soul of the wolf—the essence of the wolf, what the wolf is all about—then you should look at the way the wolf moves. And the crabbed and graceless bustling of the ape, I came to realize with sadness and regret, is an expression of the crabbed and graceless soul that lies beneath.

*(The Philosopher and the Wolf, 84-6)*

As a result of having to share a life with a rootless and restless philosopher, Brenin became not only a highly educated wolf—the recipient of more free university education than any wolf that ever lived—but also, I suppose, a rather cosmopolitan wolf, moving with me from Alabama to Ireland, on to Wales, England, and finally to France. Here is a memory that is recorded in *Running with the Pack*: the memory of a run that took place a few days before we moved from Alabama to Ireland.

*This is a run of sadness...*

...a run of times that have gone and will never come again. This is a run of fear: a run of times as yet unknown. I will soon, in a few short days, be putting Brenin on a plane to Ireland, and quarantine, but at this moment he floats along beside me as we run through the early morning streets of Tuscaloosa. I was twenty-four when I moved here, fresh out of Oxford, and starting my first real job. I began Oxford-style. I went to work in blazer and flannels. I ended up grunge: t-shirts, shorts, flip-flops and a ponytail. I didn't anticipate my first job turning into a seven-year party, but sometimes things have a funny way of turning out. After seven years, over a hundred rugby games, thousands of tequila shooters, and more 25c longneck beers than I can number, I am ready to leave Alabama. When I arrived here, I was younger than many of my students. So, it was perhaps not particularly surprising that I found my way into the University's student rugby team, and the rather surreal sub-culture that surrounds it. But before I knew it I am thirty-one. I'm too old, and the party has moved on. There is only so long you can turn up at student parties—even student rugby parties—without it getting first a little sad, and after that a little creepy. I suspect I have already transgressed the borders of sad, and want to get the hell out of Dodge before I cross over into creepy. No one comes back from creepy.

It is an early Sunday morning. We had a game the previous day, followed by the inevitable festivities, and so I am running off the party of the night before. My memories of those streets are pallid. In this respect they are not inaccurate, for the streets were also pallid. Once the blinding white porched-and-pillared abodes of respectable southern gentility, this part of town has been taken over by the students of the University of Alabama, and the houses are grey and cracked and peeling from all the young lives that have burned brightly within them. But my memories are

pallid and peeling for another reason. They were made in a time when I had little need for them. Age is not, in fact, the destroyer of memories; that belongs to youth. Age is the preserver of memories, the reverer of memories. The memories I make become stronger as I get older. The memories I made when I was young are sickly children.

*(Running with the Pack, Ch. 4, “American Dreams”)*

*Glance and Gesture, Nameless*

There is a memory I have that sits on my bookshelves, a memory frozen in time in the form of a photograph. It is a memory of Brenin and his dog friend, Nina, charging around the beach at Inchydoney, in County Cork, Ireland. On the back, some forgotten hand tells me that it is February 1998. I love this memory for many reasons. But the most important thing about this memory is not what it contains but what it does not.

A couple of years after Nina—a German Shepherd/malamute mix—had joined us, Brenin unilaterally decided to further augment the pack. An unsanctioned rendezvous with a white German shepherd a few miles away resulted—63 days plus around five weeks later—in the addition of Tess. When the photograph was taken, when this memory was frozen, Tess did not yet exist. And yet there she is. There is an absence—a raggedy absence—that you would see if you could turn your attention to the (missing) top right hand corner. Tracking left, you would see some scratches and indentations. I rescued this photograph from the jaws of Tess. This raggedy absence is Tess, present as absent. It is Tess, Brenin’s daughter, impinging on a time before she was born. It is Tess saying, “I am here too,” even though she was not yet a glint in her wolf-father’s eye.

When she chewed away at this photograph, Tess didn’t ruin it: she augmented it, added immeasurably to it. If the photograph were a memory, frozen in time, when Tess gnawed away at it, and thus encroached onto a time before she was born, she did not do so by altering the *content* of the memory but by altering its *form*. The content of the memory is what the memory is about, what it depicts. And this is till the same: it is still a depiction of two friends, charging around a beach on a rare sunny Irish day. If this

photograph were a memory, Tess would have altered its form—transformed it into a *raggedy* memory. Every memory has not just content but a form. Every memory has a *shape*.

Some people say that it is our memories that make us who we are. Indeed, there is a well-known philosophical theory that says just that: it is my memories that make me the person I am, the same person today as I was yesterday, a different person from anyone else. This is known as the *memory theory*. Perhaps the theory is right—although I suspect not—but it is certainly ambiguous. If my memories make me who I am, is this “I” to be found in the content of my memories or in their form?

The German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, once said something that I think is both profoundly beautiful and profoundly true about memories:

But it is still not enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them, if they are many, and have the great patience to wait for them to come again. For it is not the memories themselves. Only when they become blood in us, glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves, only then can it happen in a very rare hour, the first word of a line arises out of their midst and strides out of them.

(*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Burton Pike, Dalkey Archive Press 2008, 14)

Rilke is talking here of the importance of memory for a poet, the role that memory plays in artistic creation. But I think his insight is true more generally. The most important memories are the ones that come again, and for this they must first be forgotten. When they come again, when they return to us, it is not in their original way. The memories that come again have become part of our blood, “glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves.” Their content has gone, but their form remains. This form shapes us.

*The Prejudice of Content over Form*

Although I wasn't familiar with the work of Rilke at the time, this idea was a continuing theme of *The Philosopher and the Wolf*. There, I argued that when we think of memory, we fall victim to what I called the "prejudice of conscious recall." We might equally call it the "prejudice of content over form." There is, I argued, a deeper way of remembering than the mere recall of content:

But there are different ways of remembering. And when we think of memory, we overlook what is most important in favor of what is most obvious. A bird does not fly by flapping its wings: this is merely what gives it forward propulsion. The real principles of flight are to be found in the shape of the bird's wings, and the resulting differences in air pressure on the upper and lower surfaces. But in our early attempts to fly, we overlooked what is most important in favor of what is most obvious: we built flapping machines. Our understanding of memory is similar. We think of memory as conscious experiences whereby we recall past events. But this is just the flapping of wings. These memories are not particularly reliable at the best of times, and are the first to fade as our brains begin their long, but inexorable, descent into indolence; like the flapping of a bird's wings that gradually fades in the distance.

*(The Philosopher and the Wolf, 45-6)*

The raggedy absence through which Tess announces her presence to a time before she was born is a reminder that there is another way of remembering. Here, again, *The Philosopher and the Wolf*:

But there is another, deeper and more important, way of remembering: a form of memory that no one ever thought to dignify with a name. This is the memory of a past that has written itself on you, in your character and in the life on which you bring this character to bear. You are not aware of these memories: often they are not even the sorts of things of which you can be conscious. But they, more than anything else, make you what you



are. These memories are exhibited in the decisions you make, and the actions you take, and the life that you thereby live.

It is in our lives, and not fundamentally in our conscious experiences, that we find the memories of those who are gone. Our consciousness is fickle, not worthy of the task of remembering. When someone is worth remembering, then being a person they have helped fashion and living a life they have helped forge: these are not only the ways in which we remember them; they are the ways in which we honor them.

(*The Philosopher and the Wolf*, 46)

*Nothing Brightly Embossed on Them ...*

These passages advert to the relative *persistence* of the form of memories over their content. Even when their contents are no longer available to us, memories have a form that continues to guide us, to shape our lives in various ways, for good or for ill. This is what Rilke meant when he wrote of memories becoming part of our blood. There is, however, more to it than merely the persistence of form. There is also an issue of *ownership*. I suspect the form of my memories is *mine* in a way that their content can never be. The form of my memories belongs to me in a way their content never can. This was also a theme of *The Philosopher and the Wolf*.

Often my memories of Brenin are tinged with a strange sort of amazement. It's as if the memories are made up of partially overlapping images: one senses that the images are connected in an important way, but they're too blurred to make out. And then they suddenly converge—snap into focus—like images in an old kaleidoscope. I remember Brenin next to me, striding the touchlines of the rugby pitch in Tuscaloosa. I remember him sitting next to me at the post-match party, when pretty Alabama girls would come up and say: I just love your dog. I remember him running with me through the streets of Tuscaloosa; and when the Tuscaloosa city

streets transformed into lanes of an Irish countryside I remember the pack running next to me, easily matching its stride to mine. I remember Brenin, his daughter Tess and his friend Nina, bouncing like salmon through the seas of barley. I remember Brenin dying in my arms in the back of the Jeep. And when the convergence of images happens, I think: is that really me? Was it really me that did those things? Is that really my life?

This realization sometimes strikes me as a faintly surreal discovery. That I am in these memories at all is not given: sometimes it is a fortuitous bonus that must be discovered.

*(The Philosopher and the Wolf, 242)*

Memories have both form and content. Their content is something I recall. But there is nothing brightly embossed on this content that reads: “Property of Mark Rowlands.” Sometimes, the most I can hope for is that some forgotten hand will have scrawled something on the back.

### *A Wind Blowing Towards the World*

Why would my memories show themselves to me in such a way that my ownership of them should sometimes strike me as a “faintly surreal discovery”? When I remember, I am—so I’m told—aware of the content of my memories—of what my memories depict. And, far from making me what I am, I suspect the content of my memories really is not part of me at all. The French existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, reached a similar conclusion: “All consciousness... is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness that is not a positing of a transcendent object, or if you prefer, that consciousness has no ‘content’” (*Being and Nothingness*, trans Hazel Barnes, Philosophical Library 1956, 11) Consciousness has no content—there is nothing in it. Consciousness is nothing—a little pocket of nothingness that has insinuated itself into the heart of being.

“All consciousness is consciousness of something.” This has a clear, but striking, consequence: nothing I am aware of can be part of my consciousness. Everything I am

aware of is outside my consciousness. At one time, many years ago, I would have been standing on a beach with Brenin and Nina. Obviously, Brenin and Nina are not part of my consciousness. But, if Sartre is correct, neither is my memory of them. When I remember Brenin and Nina on the beach at Inchydoney, does an image flash before my mind, like an old photograph? But the image, in itself, could mean anything at all: it might depict two dogs on a beach. It might depict play. It might depict happiness. In principle, the image might mean any number of things. The image, taken in-itself, has no *intentionality*. In-itself it is not about anything. It can be about something—it can mean or signify something—but only when it is interpreted. And, for Sartre, what provides the interpretation is consciousness.

Consciousness is intrinsically *of* or *about* something. It is, as philosophers call it, *intentional*. But the content of memory is not about anything—not taken in itself. The conclusion, Sartre realized, is that the content of memory is not part of consciousness. And, if I am consciousness, this means the content of my memory is not part of me.

### *The Death Run*

The final memory is really a juxtaposition of two memories, separated by a decade, and recorded in *Running with the Pack*.

Brenin has lymphoma, the vet tells me, and the prognosis is what, in the profession, they call “guarded.” In other words, he is going to die. It is going to be soon, and my primary duty now, the last important thing I can do for my old friend, is to make his death as easy as it can be. As easy as it can be for him, I mean. That probably means making it hard for me. If he could just slip away in the night, painlessly, unaware ... but I suspect that is not the way it is going to be. I am going to have to make a decision, a final judgment. The judgment will be that Brenin’s life is no longer worth living. Not a second less of a life worth living, and not a second more of a life that is not. That is the goal. Then I will have to take him to the vet, and I will have to ask the vet to kill him. I suspect that whatever decision I make will always be riddled with doubt. Years later, I will ask myself:

Was that the right day? Did I get it right? Was it too soon? Or was I too slow, already too late—too weak?

We have just returned from taking Nina and Tess to boarding kennels, for a few days. They are still young, exhausting to be around; and I decided Brenin might benefit from a short rest, a break from their grinding effervescence. Upon our return, I quickly notice a change in Brenin's demeanour. Brighter, more alert, more interested, hungrier than he has been in weeks—I offer him the spaghetti I had made for my lunch and he quickly devours it. Then he does something altogether unexpected. He jumps onto the sofa and howls.

When he was a young wolf, Brenin had a little party piece that he would perform most days. He would run, full tilt, at the settee, jump on to it, and then continue his run up the wall. When he had got as high as his momentum would carry him, which was typically around three-quarters of the way up a standard living room wall, he would spin his back legs up and around—a kind of canine cartwheel—and then run back down the wall. This was his way of letting me know we had been dawdling in the house for far too long, and that it was time for a run. Time had stripped him of this sort of outrageous athleticism—jumping on the settee and howling had become his middle-aged substitute. Still, I know exactly what he is suggesting.

There is a ditch at the end of the garden, and when we get there, Brenin begin to run up and down it, over to the trees on the other side and back again: a display of excitement of the sort I have not seen—not from him anyway—in a number of years. When we left the house, I had envisaged a gentle stroll, an opportunity to sniff a few smells, and mark a little territory. But something in his behaviour, perhaps it was a glint in his almond eye, convinces me that something strange is happening. And so we do something that even now I still cannot quite believe.

I had not been running for the best part of a year. Whenever I tried, Brenin, more than a decade old now, would soon start lagging behind. I think it had been the look of desperation on his face, the desperation that goes with understanding that your body will not do what you want it to anymore that convinced me to stop running. Nina and Tess could still run all day, of course. But I couldn't do this to my old wolf brother, and so my running with the pack had transformed into gentle walks.

So, this is how we begin our last run together. I quickly put on some shorts, dig out my neglected running shoes, and we set off through the woods, along a narrow path that brought us out to the *Canal du Midi*. For the first couple of miles we run in the shadows of the giant sycamores. If this had been July, the trees would have been a blessing. But it wasn't, and they weren't. This was January; we are only a few days into the New Year. The *tramontane*—the mountain wind—tasting of the snows of Lozère and Auvergne, sweeps down between the trees, a sycamore wind tunnel. This is a run as cold as death. Every run has its own heartbeat, and this is the beat of a heart that is cold. The barren, leafless branches of those giant plane trees dance to the wind of snow and mountains. Our feet are soundless; our breath, and the jingle, jingle, jingle of Brenin's chain are lost in the wind. We are not here.

I had expected Brenin to tire quickly. I had expected a quick return to the house. But he does not tire. Not a bit: he drifts, apparently without effort, over the ground beside me, almost like the Brenin of old—almost as if he was floating an inch or two above the earth; almost as if he wasn't dying.

There is a turn off from the Canal, down a little dirt track that runs along the edges of the village's vineyards. I was getting a little worried, because we were approaching the furthestmost point of the run from our house. The cancer has robbed Brenin of a considerable amount of his weight. But, even so, he is still around 120 lbs., and I really do not relish

the prospect of having to carry him three miles home. But he glides on, apparently inconvenienced by the death that grows inside him. After about a mile, the track swings south and brings us to the eastern edge of the *grande maire*.

The sun warms us slightly, now we have left the trees behind. Even the *tramontane* can't quite take that away from a sun that has begun its slow afternoon descent into the sea, and dances fiercely on the wind-worried waters of the *maire*. After a mile or so of tracking the lagoon, we reach the *digue*, the dyke built to stop the storm surges of the winter Mediterranean. We run along here for half a mile or so, and then turn south again, and we soon reach the beach.

It is here that we rest and sit in the dying January sun, watching the waves wash gently onto the golden sands. The sun sinks slowly over the snow-peaked Canigou, nestled in the mountains that wrapped around the coast, south down to Spain.

The empty house is waiting for both of us. But, for a while at least, we sit and watch the sun.

(*Running with the Pack*, Ch. 6, "The Digue")

Ten years later I find myself on that same beach. I have built sandcastles, surrounded by a system of moats that would not have embarrassed Pierre Paul Riquet, the man who built the Canal du Midi. The sole purpose of these sandcastles is to be destroyed at some subsequent time to be determined by my two sons. Running from distance, they perform graceless belly flops on the castles, hitting the sand hard, yipping like hyenas over and over again, aided and abetted by Hugo, the dog of their childhood, who bounds along beside them barking and frothing like a dog in the grip of *la rage*. I might have played this game once. But then I became old and didn't understand it any more.

I suspect children, and the dogs of children, understand what is important in life far better than adults. When I build the sandcastles, it is work. I do it for the enjoyment of my sons. When they destroy those castles, it is play: they do this for no other reason than

to do it. As the castles die the death of a thousand belly flops, I can think of no more emphatic affirmation of the value of play over work. There is a joy that goes with this—the joy of giving yourself over wholly to the activity and not the outcome, the deed and not the goal. Perhaps I can no longer understand the game; but I can see the joy, I can feel it: I can hear it echoing out across the water towards Africa.

And yet: we are not far away. I can see it. We're no more than a few metres away from the place where I once sat with a dying wolf, and watched the cold winter sun set slowly on his life. That this life, this single pathway through space and time should contain both memories: this is what seems so improbable to me. This is what, for me, is a “faintly surreal discovery.”

### *A Raggedy Absence in the Real*

The content of memory is *transient*. There is nothing brightly embossed on it that decisively indicates *ownership*. And when placed side by side, the contents of memories are dubiously *coherent*. If my memories make me who I am, I can only conclude they do not do so in virtue of their content. If I am to be found in my memories at all, it will be in their form. But what is the form of memory?

Here, we are at the limits of language: for the function of language is to express content. And so I can only fall back on metaphor. Form is what shapes content. If I am to be found in the form of my memories, then I am the traces left on the contents of memories. I am the scratches, indentations, and tooth marks left in these contents. The contents of my memories—they could be the contents of anyone's memories. What makes them mine are the marks I have left on them, the marks that shape them. Every mark, every trace: that is me saying, “I am here too!”

Content is what is the case. The world is a totality of content, a totality of facts not things. Shape is always, ultimately, a gap, a lacuna in content. If I am to be found in the form of my memories, then what I am, fundamentally, is a raggedy absence in the real.