Notes on Laszlo Krasznahorkai, *The Last Wolf*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

A Lack of Ambition

"The Last Wolf" is a novella, 76 pages in translation, written in what is usually described as one of Krasznahorkai’s characteristic long sentences. Technically, that isn’t right, because the novella is actually a string of run-on sentences, with ordinary sentences embedded in them. Grammatically correct long sentences are rare in fiction. (See the remarks on Enard’s "The Zone.") This form is looser and, I think, less interesting than a single long sentence (as in Raymond Roussel’s "New Impressions of Africa") or a genuine analocuthon (as in late Thomas Bernhard).

In the novella, a philosopher sits at a bar and recounts a trip he made to Extremadura, Spain, and to Alburquerque, the near-namesake of the city in New Mexico. The philosopher was invited to Spain in order to write about anything he might choose, and he ends up investigating the shootings of the last eight wolves in the region, in the 1980s and 1990s. He is given an unlimited budget and a translator, and he’s driven around so he can interview people. All along he keeps saying, to the bartender, that he has said everything he can, that his thinking life is over, that even accepting the invitation was a sham, that he cannot write anything. In the end the killings of the last two wolves coincide with the end of his story, and -- as a reader will have surmised from the first couple of pages -- he ends up back in the bar, without having written anything.

It’s all a common literary conceit: the unwritten text, the unspoken account, actually told, but not to an attentive hearer, or one who will retell the story, or write it down. (The bartender is represented, implausibly, as sometimes falling asleep.) The last of the wolves is the last of his thoughts; his wandering in Extremadura is his meandering mind made real, and so forth.

The story is simply not ambitious enough. If Krasznahorkai had more energy or commitment, he would have explained why it isn’t a paradox that the philosopher actually has told a story, and in fact it’s the story we’re reading. The philosopher didn’t write it down, but the author did. How, in the logic of the novella, does a person supposedly at the end of this thinking life manage to write -- really, to toss off -- a seventy-page novella? Of course there are thoughts in his head: we know, because we read them page after page. To make this more ambitious, more consistent, and more challenging, Krasznahorkai could have written out the philosopher’s incapacity on the page, showing us what it was like for the to be unable to think.

The philosopher chooses to investigate the killing of the wolves because he remembers reading something about it, and in fact he made a note of it. That is interesting, but it isn’t explained: but in a deeper version of this story, we could be told that he is perplexed by his choice of that article, and curious about his own interests and motives in finding it. That could be a sign of his ongoing inability to sort out his own motivations and thoughts. And while he is on the pursuit, he could do more than simply record what he sees and hears: he could wonder if he is being coherent in his intentions, or faithful to whatever remnants of intentions he may have.

By his own account, after all he can no longer think philosophically: but we’re never told what that
means, exactly, and what could it mean other than an incapacity for rational thought? And how could such an incapacity not vex or even torture the person who thinks he suffers from it? And how could he not wonder, at every moment, what he is understanding and what he isn't?

"The Last Wolf" is unambitious because it makes a very big claim about its narrator's incapacity: a claim that should not just exhaust him, as it does, but either perplex him -- given his apparent ability to continue to think and reason -- or paralyze him with doubt and fear -- given the apparently irrational nature of his investigation. A better model is Beckett's "Ill Seen Ill Said," where there's a claim about the narrator's incapacity, and it corrodes and infects the entire fabric of representation. Here it's just a claim, and the narrator goes on reasonably happily with his life, "incapacitated" only by an unaccountable inability to notice that by telling the bartender everything he has, in fact, written the story he claims he couldn't write.