Satura Resartus: Living in the Woods with Bears

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Abstract. *In this article, the author shows how satire destabilizes the distinction between human and animal. He identifies two tendencies in satire, the horatian and the juvenalian, and links these to two genres, the mock-heroic and the travesty, which are illustrated with various examples from Swift, Carlyle, and others. The human is best understood as a dynamic category continually redefined by its relations to animality, relations which are played out in an exemplary way in satire.*

Humor is human. Why? Well, because The Philosopher, Aristotle, says so. In *On the Parts of the Animals* he writes, "no animal laughs save Man."[1] This quotation echoes down the centuries from Galen and Porphyry, through Rabelais, to Hazlitt and Bergson. Now, if laughter is proper to the human being, then the human being who does not laugh invites the charge of inhumanity, or at least makes us somewhat suspicious. Apparently Pythagoras and Anaxagoras never laughed, neither did the Virgin Mary, and Socrates laughed rarely. If laughter is essentially human, then the question of whether Jesus laughed assumes rather obvious theological pertinence to the doctrine of incarnation. One of Beckett's more monstrous antiheroes, Moran, debates the point with one Father Ambrose:

> Like Job haha, he said. I too said haha. What a joy it is to laugh, from time to time, he said. Is it not? I said. It is peculiar to man, he said. So I have noticed, I said. A brief silence ensued (. . .) Animals never laugh, he said. It takes us to find that funny, I said. What? he said. It takes us to find that funny, I said loudly. He mused. Christ never laughed either, he said, so far as we know. He looked at me. Can you wonder? I said.[2]

Law & Literature, Vol. 17, Issue 3, pp. 433–441. ISSN 1535-685X, electronic ISSN 1541-2601.

As M.A. Screech shows in impressive detail, the theological importance of showing Christ's humanity and, therefore, his sense of humor, led many medieval scholars to trawl the Evangelists for evidence of levity.[3] Some support for the case can be found in the first of Christ's recorded miracles, the marriage at Cana (John 2:1–11). Discovering that the wine has run out, the distraught host somehow alerts Mary, who orders her son to do something about the problem, presumably knowing that he can. This is in itself interesting, as there is no evidence heretofore that Mary was aware that her Son could perform such impressive party tricks. She says to him, "They have no more wine"; to which Jesus replies somewhat coldly, from his full messianic height, "Woman, my time has not yet come." However, like the good Jewish mother who knows what's best for her-Son-the-Messiah, Mary turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you." At which point, the water is miraculously turned into wine and the party continues. This is an odd moment, bearing a family resemblance to a scene from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, where Brian's mother insists, "He's not the Messiah, he's just a very naughty boy."[4] Although the joke is on Jesus to some extent insofar as he is made to look slightly foolish by his mother, the marriage at Cana might nonetheless be seen as evidence of humorous humanity on Christ's part. It might indeed appear curious that Jesus' ministry begins with an encouragement to imbibe. However, to the perfervid imagination of medieval Christendom, this first miracle was seen analogically as a New Testament response and recompense for the Old Testament tale of the drunkenness of Noah (Genesis 9: 20–29). Noah was, of course, the first human being to cultivate the vine and sample its fruits, "and he drank of the wine, and was drunken." Noah's son, Ham, looked on his inebriated father "uncovered within his tent" and told his two brothers, who then walked in backward and covered his nakedness with a garment. A presumably rather hung-over Noah was none too pleased with Ham and lay an awful curse of servitude on him and all of his Canaanite progeny. Hence, the Old and New Testament stories are connected both by theme (wine) and location (Cana). Now, was Ham's sin that of laughter? The Bible does not say.

Any philosophical and theological assurance that laughter is unique to the human being becomes somewhat unsure when one turns to the anthropological literature. One need only observe the behavior of chimpanzees and dogs to see that animals certainly *play*, and they do get frisky, but the question is, do they laugh? In her 1971 paper "Do Dogs Laugh?" Mary Douglas sets out to trouble the assumption that we can divide human from animal along the faultline

of laughter.[5] She cites Konrad Lorenz's *Man Meets Dog* and Thomas Mann's "A Man and His Dog" to show how the panting, slightly opened jaws of man's best friend look "like a human smile" and can give "a stronger impression of laughing." However, the evidence is anecdotal and, to my mind, not particularly convincing. The interpretation of the dog's laughter seems rather anthropomorphic and evidence of a crude learnt response on the dog's part, particularly when Lorenz admits that the same facial expression of the dog that denotes "laughter" also indicates the beginning of erotic excitement, or getting frisky in another way.

We are not going to be able to decide the issue here, and animals are full of surprises. So while we cannot say with any certainty whether dogs laugh or not, we can, I think, grant that humor is an anthropological constant, is universal, and is common to all cultures. There has been no society thus far discovered that did not have humor, not even the Germans—whether it is expressed as convulsive, bodily gaiety, or with a laconic smile. Thus, humor is a key element in the distinction of the human from the animal. It is a consequence of culture, and indeed of civilization as Cicero's Latin word for humor, *urbanitas*, would suggest. If, as ethologists report, laughter originated in the animal function of the aggressive baring of teeth, then the transformation of the social meaning of this physiological act is one testament to the distance of human culture from animal life.

As Helmuth Plessner puts it, laughter confirms the eccentric (*exzentrisch*) position of the human being in the world of nature. Plessner's thesis is that the life of animals is *zentrisch*; it is centered. This means that the animal simply lives and experiences (*lebt und erlebt*). By contrast, the human being not only lives and experiences, but experiences those experiences (*er erlebt sein Erleben*). That is, the human being has a reflective attitude toward experiences and toward the itself. This is why humans are eccentric; because they live beyond the limits set for them by nature by taking up a distance from their immediate experience. In living outside themselves, the reflective activity of human beings achieves a break with nature. Indeed, Plessner goes further and claims that the human *is* this break, this hiatus, this gap between the physical and the psychical. The working out of the consequences of the eccentric position of the human is the main task of a philosophical anthropology, which is why laughter has such an absolutely central role in Plessner's work.[6]

Plessner's thesis is rather convincing, but is it true to say that animals always exist in sheer immediacy? Do they, even the cleverest of them, always

fail to take up an eccentric position with regard to their life, even when they seem to *know* that they are going to die? In sum, are all animals incapable of reflection? I simply do not know and, as Wittgenstein says, "if a lion could talk then we could not understand him."[7] I simply do not know how Plessner can *know* what he seems so sure of, namely, that animals are incapable of reflection.

If humor is human, then it also, curiously, marks the limit of the human; or better, humor explores what it means to be human by moving back and forth across the frontier separating humanity from animality, thereby making it unstable and troubling the hiatus of which Plessner speaks. Humor is precisely the exploration of the break between nature and culture, which reveals the human to be not so much a category by itself as a negotiation between categories. We might even define the human as a *dynamic* process produced by a series of identifications and misidentifications with animality.[8] Thus, what makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human. This brings me to satire.

The two effects produced by such humor, here, might be considered in terms of the distinction between the benign mockery or *urbanitas* of Horatian satire and the brooding, black misanthropy of Juvenalian satire. In the eighteenth century, of course, this is the distinction between the satires of Pope and Swift and the accompanying genres of mock-heroism and travesty: the epic elevation of the insignificant and the deflationary belittling of the sublime. On the one hand, we find the comic urbanity of the animal, where the humor is generated by the sudden and incongruous humanity of the animal. A wonderful example of this is given in the following joke, with which Peter Goodrich is utterly obsessed for reasons that are his own, but which I invite you to ponder. It goes like this:

> A bear is charging this hunter in the woods. The hunter fires, and misses. The bear breaks his rifle in two, sodomizes the hunter, then walks away. The hunter is furious. The next day he is back in the woods, with a new rifle. Again the bear charges, again the hunter misses, again he is sodomized. The hunter is now beside himself. He is going to get that bear, if it's the last thing he does. He gets himself an AK-47 assault rifle, goes back into the woods. Again the bear charges and, believe it or not, again the hunter misses. The bear breaks the assault rifle, gently puts his paws around the hunter and says, "OK, come clean now. This isn't really about hunting, is it?"[9]

Therefore, if, on the one hand, Horatian satire is the sudden comic urbanity of the animal, on the other hand, the Juvenalian reduction of the human to the

animal does not so much produce mirth as a comic disgust with the species. Whether we think of Yahoos shitting from trees, Gregor Samsa wriggling on his back, or Orwell's further twisting of the animal–human coupling by presenting the tyrant Napoleon finally upright on two legs, the history of satire is replete with Juvenalian echoes. In his oddly eighteenth century novel, *Great Apes*, British novelist Will Self writes,

> Sarah sat at the bar of the Sealink Club being propositioned by men. Some men propositioned her with their eyes, some with their mouths, some with their heads, some with their hair. Some men propositioned her with nuance, exquisite subtlety; others propositioned her with chutzpah, their suit as obvious as a schlong slammed down on the zinc counter. Some men's propositioning was so slight as to be peripheral, a seductive play of the minor parts, an invitation to touch cuticles, rub corns, hang nails. Other men's propositioning was a Bayreuth production, complete with mechanical effects, great flats descending, garishly depicting their Taste, their Intellect, their Status. The men were like apes—she thought—attempting to impress her by waving and kicking things about in a display of mock potency.[10]

When the animal becomes human, the effect is pleasingly benign and we laugh out loud, "OK, come clean now. This isn't really about hunting, is it?" But when the human becomes animal, the effect is disgusting, and if we laugh at all, then it is what Beckett calls "the mirthless laugh," which laughs at that which is unhappy. The quotation from Beckett that I have in mind is from *Watt*.

> The bitter, the hollow and—haw! haw!—the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well, well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout—haw!—so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy.[11]

What interests me most is the *risus purus*, the laugh that laughs at the laugh, the mirthless laugh that laughs at that which is unhappy. As Beckett notes elsewhere, nothing is funnier than unhappiness.

Humor is human. But what makes us laugh is the inversion of the animal–human coupling, whether it is Horatian urbanity or Juvenalian disgust. If being

human means being humorous, then being humorous often seems to mean becoming an animal. But, paradoxically, what becoming an animal confirms is the fact that humans are *incapable* of becoming animals; for the sad truth is that in humor humans show themselves to be useless animals: hopeless, incompetent, outlandish animals, shitting from trees and grunting like great apes. There is something charming about an animal become human, but when the human becomes animal, then the effect is disgusting. All of which confirms the human being's eccentric position in the world of nature. The human being is a sick animal, a crap animal.

Consider the following remark from Wittgenstein:

> Two people are laughing together, say at a joke. One of them has used certain somewhat unusual words and now they both break out into a sort of bleating. This might appear *very* extraordinary to a visitor coming from quite a different environment. Whereas we find it quite *reasonable*.[9]
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> (I recently witnessed this scene on a bus and was able to think myself into the position of someone to whom this would be unfamiliar. From that point of view, it struck me as quite irrational, like the responses from an outlandish *animal*).[12]

There is something rather surreal about visualizing Wittgenstein on a double-decker bus thinking that thought while watching two people imitating sheep, but that is not the point. Satire works in precisely the way he describes: namely, we are asked to look at ourselves as if we were visitors from an alien environment, to examine terrestrial existence from a Martian point of view. When we do this, then we begin to look like outlandish animals, and reasonableness crumbles into irrationality. This can be linked to an idea dear to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, what he calls "deterritorialization," and which he interestingly chooses to translate into English as "outlandish."[13] The critical task of the writer is to write from the place of the animal, to look at human affairs with a dog's or beetle's eye, as in Kafka's stories.

Satire transforms us into outlandish animals, and the natural history of humanity is the vast research archive of the satirist. By criss-crossing the frontier between the human and the animal, writers such as Swift or Kafka produce a kind of shock effect that shakes us up and effects a critical change of perspective. Satire stands resolutely against the self-images of the age. Adorno famously writes that the only thing that is true in psychoanalysis is the exaggerations. But this would seem to be even more true of satire. In book 4 of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift was not persuaded of the existence of talking horses. Rather, his

critical point is that there is nothing to prevent this possibility once we begin to conceive of ourselves as rational animals. The truth of satire is obviously not to be assessed in terms of literal verifiability, but rather to warn us against a danger implicit in our self-conception. To have an effect, the warning signals have to be deafening.

We have been pursuing an interesting paradox. On the one hand, humor is what picks us out as human; it is what is proper to the human being, situated as we are between beasts and angels. Humor confirms the human being's eccentric position in nature as improper within it, as reflectively alienated from the physical realm of the body and external nature. Yet, on the other hand, what takes place in humor, particularly in satire, is the constant overstepping of the limit between the human and the animal, demonstrating their uneasy neighborhood. Bringing together both sides of this paradox, we might say that the studied incongruities of humor show the eccentric position of the human in nature by recalling the benign humanity of the animal and the disturbing animality of the human. The human being is amphibious, like a boat drawn up on the shore, half in the water, half out of it. We are a paradox.

Let me elaborate a little. Let us assume, classically enough, that the animal *is* its body. I simply don't know whether this is true. (If a lion could speak then we could not understand him, but when a parrot does speak then we assume that he does not understand himself. But who knows?) The claim here is that the eccentric position of the human being in nature is confirmed by the fact that not only *are* we our bodies, we also *have* our bodies. That is, the human being can subjectively distance the self from the body, and assume some sort of critical position with respect to the self. This is most obviously the case in the experience of illness, where one might say that in pain we all try and turn ourselves into Cartesian mind/body dualists. In pain, I attempt to take a distance from my body, externalize the discomfort and insulate myself in thought, something which occurs to us all most obviously when we lie anxiously prone in the dentist's chair. But more generally, there is a whole range of experiences, most disturbingly in anorexia, where the body that I *am* becomes the body that I *have*, the body-*subject* becomes an *object* for me, which confirms both the possibility of taking up a critical position, and also underlines my *alienation* from the world and nature.

The curious thing about such experiences is that if I can distance myself from my body, where being becomes having and subject becomes object, then can I ever overcome that distance? If the moment that reflection begins I

become a stranger to myself, a foreign land, then can I simply return home to unreflective familiarity? Might one not conjecture that human beings, as eccentric animals, are defined by this continual failure to coincide with themselves? Does not our identity precisely consist in a lack of self-identity, in the fact that identity is always a question for us, a quest, indeed, that we might vigorously pursue, but not something I actually possess? As Plessner says, "ich bin, aber ich habe mich nicht." I most certainly *am*, but yet I do not *have* myself.

Which brings me by a *commodius vicus* of recirculation (Joyce, opening of the *Wake*) to Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*[14] and to a promise made to Peter, who encouraged me to read this book carefully last year, which I dutifully did. I started writing a paper, or rather a literary conceit, based on Carlyle, called "Descendentalism—The Division of the Subject in Satire According to Professor Teufelsdröckh" by Michel Nemo. Sadly, it is not yet ready for public consumption, but I can discuss the thesis. Allow me a word about Carlyle's book.

Sartor Resartus is an account by an English narrator of the life and opinions of Professor Teufelsdröckh of Weissnichtwo, in particular the latter's philosophy of clothes (the title means "the tailor retailored"). I won't go into any detail here, save to say that it is very funny: what is the human being but a garment, and what is the world but the living garment of God? One can learn much from pondering the meaning of clothes.

Sartor Resartus is Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* written from the perspective of German idealism, which I know doesn't sound funny, but it is. Trust me, I'm a doctor. What interests me in this satire—which is a philosophical satire in a complex way, written against English utilitarianism on the one hand, and not without deep love for the German idealism and romanticism that it ridicules—is the division of the subject that is at its heart. My thesis is that satire does two things: it engages in a strategy of bathos or philosophical descendentalism (the latter word Carlyle's) as opposed to transcendentalism. Satire deflates the pompous and ridicules the seemingly august and noble. Second, satire exhibits the subject as essentially divided against itself. This is most obviously the case in *Sartor Resartus*, with the division of the subject between the pseudonaïveté of the English narrator and huge chunks of Teufelsdröckh's abstruse prose. We can also see this at work in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* and the division of the subject between "I" and "He," in Rousseau's *Jean-Jacques juge de Rousseau*, and in a series of successor texts such as Kierkegaard's pseudonymous

texts, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, and the rabid tragic-comic division of the subject one finds in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* where what you certainly do not behold is the man, one and unique, but a satirically split subject whose chronic self-division is accentuated through chapter titles such as, "Why I write such excellent books," "Why I am so clever," and "Why I am a destiny."

Satire is the comic expression of the division of the subject. This is a conceit that I am trying to follow in something else that I am trying to write. As Rimbaud said, "*Je est un autre*"; but why is it that one can only present one's own ideas in the guise of another, or many others? Why is direct speech either impossible or simply dull? What is the necessity for linguistic indirection?

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1. Aristotle, *On the Parts of the Animals*, chapter 10, 29.
2. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, in *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), 93.
3. See M.A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1997). The author thanks Peter Howarth for his correspondence on this question.
4. *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, Terry Jones, dir. (1979).
5. Mary Douglas, "Do Dogs Laugh?" in *Implicit Meanings* 83–89 (London: Macmillan, 1969).
6. See Helmuth Plessner, "Autobiographische Einführung" and "Der Mensch als Lebewesen," in *Mit anderen Augen. Aspekte einer philosophische Anthropologie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982).
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 221.
8. I owe this formulation to Sue Wiseman.
9. Cited in Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995), 55.
10. Will Self, *Great Apes* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 15.
11. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Calder, 1962), x.
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 78.
13. See the first of the television programs that Deleuze recorded for the Franco-German channel *Arte* in the last years of his life: Gilles Deleuze, "A comme Animal," in *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (Paris: Vidéo Editions Montparnasse, 1997).
14. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).