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Aesop After Darwin: The Radical Anthropomorphism of "The Far Side"

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Whenever you observe an animal closely you feel as if a human being sitting inside were making fun of you.

Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*

Gary Larson is on sabbatical, taking a fourteen month break from cartooning in order to refuel his creativity. **{Author's note, November 1996: Larson has, of course, now retired.}** But even if he should never draw another cow or another nerd, his daily, one-frame comic strip "The Far Side" has already left its mark on American popular culture. For "The Far Side" has a devout following and, thanks to its frequent display on the office doors of both scientists and humanists, as well as the calendars, greeting cards, and coffee mugs spontaneously generated in its wake, Larson's cartoons have indeed become a prominent part of our cultural landscape. (In 1985 the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco even mounted a full scale exhibit of over four hundred "Far Side" cartoons plus other related props.) Indeed, for many of us his imagination has forever shaped our perception of things: I, for one, will attest that "The Far Side" has fine tuned my own sixth sense of humor.

Though decidedly modern, at the heart of much of Larson's bizarre humor lies an impulse as old as Aesop, to which the former biology major Larson gives a post-Darwinian twist. Co-denizens there with odd looking, virtually interchangeable, offish humans, and the hordes of allusions and long-enduring clichés from literature, media, popular science, and folklore which constitute the air they all breathe, animals are citizens of central importance in "The Far Side's" self-contained humorverse. Larson uses them not as patently anthropomorphic vehicles for preaching ethical truisms and teaching morals, but to create an epistemological mirror in which we may witness, while we eat our breakfast, our own supposedly scientific knowledge, our own fears, stupidity, and lack of instinctual knowledge, our self-consciousness, shared by the creature world, with all the debilitating side-effects, in what might be called "radical anthropomorphism."

From microscopic organisms to the higher primates, "Far Side" animals exhibit human characteristics. As in the traditional animal fable, from Aesop to Fontaine to Pogo, they talk, wear clothing, live in human dwellings, and exhibit human motives and human foibles. But the final effect is not, as in the didacticism of Aesop, the sentimentalism of

Disney, or the very commercial anthropomorphism of Snoopy, Garfield, Opus, et al, to deny the creature world its own reality.

Joseph Agassi, in *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, defines anthropomorphism simply as "an inveterate tendency to project human qualities into natural phenomena--consciously or not." Clearly, Larson's anthropomorphism is hardly "inveterate." With ethologically-grounded, post-Darwinian awareness, "The Far Side" animal cartoons instead parody our tendency to see the human in everything, reminding us at the same time of the separate, secret reality of nature: looking closely at animals, they make fun of us.

"The animal has secrets," art critic John Berger writes in an essay called "Why Look at Animals?", "which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man," for they concern "man and his origin." Animals did not "enter the human imagination as meat or leather or horn," Berger reminds, but "as messengers and promises." Not surprisingly, the first subject for painting was animal. And modern science has not changed this relationship. "Darwin's evolutionary theory," Berger writes, "indelibly stamped as it is with the marks of the European 19th century, nevertheless belongs to a tradition, almost as old as man himself." "The Far Side," too, is in this tradition.

We live in an age dedicated to the eradication of anthropomorphic thinking.

From Descartes' conception of the "beast-machine" in the Seventeenth Century, to the insistence of his followers that shrieks of pain from vivisected animals were merely mechanical--like an alarm going off on a clock, to Thomas Nagel's classic essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (we can never know, the author insists), to current defense of animal experimentation, the modern mind has, for both philosophical and practical reasons, taken precautions to guard against anthropomorphism. From the ancient belief that man is a microcosm of the natural and cosmic world, a world view which made possible and convincing the perception of human qualities in animal, vegetable, and mineral without resorting to movie-era metaphors of projection, we have come instead to assume not only that the macrocosm does not exhibit the human but that man may not either.

As Agassi puts it, summarizing our contemporary understanding, "It is not what we know of human beings, but what we assume to be human that we read into nature. For all we know, the analogy may go the other way: like sticks and stones, human beings may not have souls." The crusade against anthropomorphism has, of course, been lead by modern science's "eradication of mystery" (the term is B.F. Skinner's, his concise definition of science), but even a humanist like the Victorian John Ruskin went out of his way to denounce the "pathetic fallacy"--the literary attribution of human feelings to the natural world.

Today, we can even find stand-up comedians exposing anthropomorphism. In a routine called "Animals All," Robert Klein provides comic insight into our excessive humanizing of

animals.

Our whole view of animals [Klein explains] is entirely human. We see them in our own image. I don't want to shock any one here but there are chimpanzees in Africa that do not smoke cigars and roller skate. They're not named "Jimmy" and "JoJo" and "Simba." They don't ordinarily wear tuxedos and funny hats. Everything is anthropomorphic. We see everything through human terms. On a cockroach spray can it says "Spray underneath the sink. They like moisture." As if they could like and dislike: "They dislike wide open and well-lit places. They're bored by television. They love weddings." First of all, if you spray underneath the sink, they don't go underneath the sink. There up in the cabinet attacking the Lorna Doones.

Later in the same routine, Klein satirizes the anthropomorphism of housebreaking, noting that when a puppy defecates indoors, we rub his nose in his excrement, as if he, like a human being, would find such a punishment disgusting and change his ways, forgetting of course that every dog knows "how to sniff [excrement] in the womb. He does it as part of his signal system. He doesn't do it for perverse human reasons."

Now de-anthropomorphism is sometimes a prominent theme in "The Far Side." In two companion cartoons, for example, Larson pokes fun at our naive assumptions about communication with animals in a manner similar to Klein. Under the title "What we say to dogs," a man lectures his dog: "Okay, Ginger! I've had it! You stay out of the garbage! Understand, Ginger? Stay out of the garbage, or else!" In a second frame, under the title "What they hear," the words coming out of the master's mouth have been reduced to "blah blah GINGER blah blah blah blah blah blah blah GINGER blah blah blah blah blah." While the man naively assumes that his pet understands his lecture, the dog in reality hears only his own name. In a later cartoon, Larson extends this de-anthropomorphism to cats in a similar cartoon, "What we say to cats": this time, however, the balloon in the second panel is completely empty; cats hear nothing we say.

More often than not, however, "The Far Side" remains anthropomorphic--at least on the surface; personification, in fact, would seem to be "The Far Side's" dominant trope. But there is a method to its madness. Its anthropomorphism is "radical" in the literal meaning of the word: it seeks to get to the root of anthropomorphism. Not afraid of compounding mystery rather than eradicating it, Gary Larson uses anthropomorphism to study anthropomorphism. As both human ecologist Paul Shepard and the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss have reminded us, animals have always been for the human mind "things with which to think," and in "The Far Side" they continue to be so--even on the funny pages.

According to David Guss' delightful and illuminating anthology *The Language of the Birds: Tales, Texts, and Poems of Interspecies Communication*, a large number of world cultures over the centuries have actually harbored some version of the belief that animals have a secret life outside of mankind's presence. Animals behave like animals, according to this belief, only to appease us.

It was, and still is in many places, a widely held belief that the part of the animal we see is not the real part but only a disguise, an outfit it wears when it comes to visit our world. Once home again, it removes that costume and changes back into its true form--a form which in most cases is said to be no different than that of the humans. In fact, the animal and even the plant and mineral species are said to live just as we do. They have their own homes and families and only put on their various disguises when they wish to trade or communicate with people of other tribes.

Animated cartoons, of course, have helped keep this belief alive for modern Americans who, at least on Saturday morning, are quite willing to believe that Tweetie Bird, Sylvester, Bugs, Tom, Jerry, etc. do indeed act differently when they have the house to themselves. And in the self-contained world of "The Far Side," such a belief is a given, a tenet of its faith. Again and again we bear witness, through the window of "The Far Side," to the secret life of animals, a life that often bears an uncanny resemblance to our own.

We see a group of cows standing in a field beside a road conversing happily until a cow-sentinel spots an oncoming car. In the second panel, the cows revert to normal behavior, grazing stupidly. Once the car has passed, however, they return to form, the sentinel again alert for any sign of the human.

It is true, of course, that the "Far Side's" famous cows are not always so secretive; sometimes they even make fun of us, as if getting revenge for all those times that passing car passengers--usually children, like the calf in this cowmobile--"mooed" derisively at them when they were behind the fence. But for the most part the secret life of animals remains secret, and seemingly anthropomorphic.

- A dog couple departs from an evening with friends and the henpecking wife expresses her disgust with her husband's bad mannered reversion to pre-domesticated canine behavior. Dogs that own their homes obviously need to be housebroken.
- Sometimes, even in their homes, Farsidians bring with them the lifestyle they had when still captive in the human world. Another couple--this time parakeets--are impressed by the fresh newspapers their host has laid out for their arrival.

But more often than not Farsidians mimic our ways.

- Even at the microscopic level, they attend conventions and wear name tags--as we learn from Larson's depiction of an "amoebae convention."
- Dogs have their own real estate agents (a salesman, showing potential buyers a new house, points out the handy adjoining toilet facilities: a "tree right off the master bedroom").
- Birds send out for pizza and are upset that, due to some mix up, they have gotten the one with anchovies--or at least the bird equivalent: "We didn't order stink bugs

on this thing!" one complains.

- They have their own L. Ron Hubbards: a cow, peddling consciousness-raising door-to-door, passes out brochures on "Cowintology."
- Insects fall in love too early and are as naively convinced as any teenager that they can succeed at the difficult tasks of parenthood.
- Flies go out for a romantic "Evening on a beached whale" and are pleased to be seated by the fountain (that is the blow-hole).
- Bears dream of owning their own automobiles and of a new car culture. "Think about it Murray," one grizzly says to another while ensconced in an abandoned car in the woods), "if we could get this baby runnin', we could run over hikers, pick up females, chase down mule deer--man, we'd be the grizzlies from hell."
- Other animals already have their own cars. Flies put "MAGGOT ON BOARD" signs in the rear window; and cows not only hang manure-scented air "fresheners" on the rear-view mirror but also have their own rush-hour, helicopter-borne traffic reporters, commenting on the movements of the herd.

Farsidians also have very human problems with proper etiquette and moral behavior.

- Dogs must teach their children proper table manners, according to their fashion; a mother dog lectures her son Sparky to eat with his mouth open, while other dogs have not yet learned the proper way to behave in mixed company: an uncouth dog in a cartoon called "Canine social blunders," for example, who, in the midst of pleasant chatter about new collars, cats, and chasing squirrels, drops a conversation-stopping bombshell: "Say, I just found out yesterday I've got worms."
- Salmon must debate the proper place of sex-education (Larson shows us "The committee to decide whether spawning should be taught in school").
- Vicious predators attend "Maneaters Anonymous" meetings, where confession is good for the soul.
- Despite the usual technical difficulties--their pictures of last year's migration are backwards --Farsidian birds even show slides of last year's vacation just as boring as our human ones.
- And they are sick enough to have their own "metamorphosis" strip joints and even species-specific telephone arousal services.

In primitive myths of their secret lives, animals seem completely at home in their dual existence, but the creatures of the "Far Side," it would seem, are often not entirely adapted to either their own or the human world.

In the eighth of the *Duino Elegies*, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes in praise of what he calls "The Open": the unconscious, instinctual realm of nature, in which all animals untouched by human influence dwell apart from "the world": all that has been touched and shaped and ordered by mankind. While men are "spectators always, everywhere,/looking at, never out of, everything!", animals, in Rilke's vision, dwell within, safe, secure, taken care of by nature. Rilke does not mean of course that nature protects each creature; he knows very well that nature is destructive. When he speaks of nature as caring for the creatures of The Open he means that they are not consciously

responsible for their existence. In admiration, almost in jealousy, he speaks lovingly of the "bliss of tiny creatures that remain/for ever in the womb that brought them forth!/Joy of the gnat that can still leap within,/even on its wedding day: for womb is all." (As G. K. Chesterton once noted, attempting to set the record straight, "We talk of wild animals, but man is the only wild animal. It is man that has broken out. All other animals are tame animals; following the rugged respectability of the tribe or type.")

Farsidians, however, do not dwell entirely in the Open. Standing just outside the world of nature, they are troubled by inexplicable fears and panic terrors, the result of their hybrid existence between the instinctual and the cultural.

- A snake safely curled with hundreds of its kind in a den is overcome by a very human-like fear of slithery things: "Hey, I feel something moving! Dang, this place gives me the willies," he confesses.
- A prairie dog develops claustrophobia and a terrible fear that his tunnel is closing in on him.
- A bee in a hive is driven bonkers by an "incessant buzzing sound."
- An ostrich becomes suddenly aware of his species' strange appearance. "For crying out loud, Norm," he confesses to a fellow ostrich, "Look at you . . . I hope I don't look half as gooney when I run."
- The microscopic organisms on a scientist's slide become aware, in a Pascalian reversal, that they are being watched. (From the slide comes horrified screams of "The Eye! The Eye!")
- A steer awakens abruptly, screaming about his nightmare: "The Golden arches got me!"
- And the life of a family of fleas becomes, instead of joy, the stuff of a horror film as they endure the repeated attacks of a monstrous creature from the outer world.

Indeed, the creatures of the "Far Side" actually have their own horror films at which they vicariously experience threats to their existence much more realistic than Jason's ax or Leatherneck's chain saw. In "Horror films of the wild," for example, a movie audience of fright-loving deer shout warnings to one of their kind about to open the proverbial secret closed door. (For the audience is aware, as the on-screen deer is not, of the danger that awaits. For all about hang relics of the occupant's former killings: stuffed and mounted heads of other bucks and does.) And in other cartoons a group of insects gather in a theater to watch the species-specific horror sequel, "Return of the Killer Windshield" and cobras line up for a showing of "The Mongoose Came at Midnight." (Farsidians even attend human horror films--as we know from the pigeon shown rallying his kind to scare a woman in the park with the question, "How many here have ever seen Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*?")

Inexplicably, Larson's creatures even permit the instruments of destruction into their own households. A young slug named Eddie is warned by his mother not to run about the house carrying a salt shaker. In the corner of an ant household stands a magnifying glass. ("You know," one ant protests, "I wish you'd get rid of that hideous thing and I think it's just plain dangerous to have one in the house."). And a family of rats

inexplicably keeps rat poison in the cupboard, "right next to the cereal."

In the world of "The Far Side" instinct often appears to be breaking down. Critics of the theory of instinct like Gregory Bateson have dismissed it as tautological and unscientific and incapable of explaining anything. Instinct, Bateson contends, is in fact only a name--a "black box" concept, as philosophers of science call it--in which we pigeonhole all that we do not understand about the "unconscious" behavior of the animal world. In reality, "instinct" is still a total mystery, and it is no less so for Farsidians.

An elderly, decrepit, couch potato moose, a beer can in hoof, mired in front of a television set, does not know what to make of "the call of the wild" his hair-in-curlers wife has just received on the telephone. And many "Far Side" animals are similarly confounded.

No instinctual ability has perplexed scientists more than the unfathomable achievement of migration, but on the "Far Side" birds seem to have completely lost their bearings. "If we could teach geography to the carrier pigeon," Carl-Gustav Carus once noted, "its unconscious flight, which finds its goal straight-away, would immediately become an impossibility." In the too conscious world, of "The Far Side," a flock of geese finds the mysteries of migration beyond its ken and must resort to a map to regain their sense of direction. Ducks, walking with precision in V-formation, cannot even remember to fly and look on in pedestrian amazement and admiration at aerial migration. Yet another duck, totally domesticated, must rely pitifully on a couple of middle-aged humans to drive him south for the winter.

Migration is hardly the only instinctive ability gone awry in the "Far Side."

- Yet another group of ducks sits attentively in a classroom undergoing instruction in "Beginning Duck," their own animal speech now equally as mysterious as migration, so unnatural, in fact, that they must even submit themselves to the horrors of sentence diagramming in order to acquire their native language and become responsible ducks.
- Salmon need the assistance of "Sam's Spawning Service," lured, no doubt, by his catchy slogan ("When you gotta get upstream in a hurry!")
- A bull--improbably named Larry--must be reminded by his cohorts outside the ring that he is supposed to charge the bullfighter's cape.
- A bird, having forgotten how to fly, must climb down from his high nest on a makeshift ladder of knotted sheets (the cartoon is called "Stupid birds").
- Two ticks can't even find their way around the maze of a typical dog and must resort to a mega-mall-style "You Are Here" directory to chart their path.
- A chameleon needs psychotherapy in order to practice his protective mimicry.
- And dogs, legendarily gifted with the innate ability to detect fear in a human, must resort instead to a "Fear-o-Sensor" to inspect a salesman invading his territory; or rely on the "new ACME Stick-Be-Found" in order to merely play catch (they even endorse the product for television).

A children's nursery rhyme tells of the dilemma of a self-conscious insect:

The centipede was happy, quite,
Until a toad in fun
Said, "Pray, which leg goes after which?"
This worked his mind to such a pitch,
He lay distracted in a ditch,
Considering how to run.

It would seem that this trickster-toad has caused similar afflictions in the residents of the "Far Side," where "in the animal Self-help section," we can find an Iguana reading a book on *How to Avoid Natural Selection*, a porcupine learning how to *Hibernate the Easy Way*, an ant-eater discovering how to *Do It by Instinct*, and other books likewise available on such important topics as how to *Become One With the Herd!* and *Predator-Prey Relationships*. Or perhaps the "Far Side" has caught the contagion of self-help from the neighboring human world, where centipedes now "run" rampant, even if they no longer know how to walk, breathe, eat, play tennis, or have sex without expert instruction.

For other creatures of the "Far Side," however, instinct is simply no longer sufficient. These beings seem about to surmount nature's governance and enter the world of consciousness, though with varying degrees of success.

Sometimes, despite glimmers of self-awareness, these semi-conscious animals appear to be no more than dupes.

- In one cartoon, insects walk with trepidation through a burial ground of their own kind--a collection of pinned and mounted bugs--without any real understanding of the cause of their anxiety. ("Gad, I hate walking through this place at night," one confesses.)
- In another, bug-eyed canines anxiously await yet another monotonous meal as if it were a gourmet original: "Oh boy! . . . It's dog food AGAIN!."
- Sitting at the witness stand, an alligator defends itself against charges of murder by accepting willingly the accusation that the act was "cold-blooded": "I am a reptile," he rationalizes.
- Or, in a strip entitled "Fly whimsy," flies behave as silly and foolishly as ever.
- And a dog, excited but cruelly mistaken, anticipates a trip to the vet: "Ha ha ha, Biff," he gloats to a neighbor dog from the window of a passing car. "Guess what? After we go the drugstore and the post office, I'm going to the vet's to get tutored."

Other adventures in consciousness lead to confusion and disillusionment.

- In hunting season a buck, like a typical Hitchcockian innocent victim, becomes confused about why he has been singled out for extermination by a perfect stranger: "He's trying to kill me, all right," the buck contemplates, hiding behind a

tree. "Do I know this guy? I've got to think!"

- Dinosaurs gather in a lecture hall to listen to an expert, professorial Tyrannosaurus Rex contemplate the future extinction of their kind, and though his insight into their predicament is quite contemporary, his knowledge provides no solution.
- A group of dog scientists works hard but unsuccessfully to solve an enigma which has held them back from a true evolutionary advance--and from getting at a cat outside the window.
- And two cows sitting in a modern living room are perplexed by the constant ringing of a telephone which their lack of a manipulative digit will not permit them to answer. (How they managed to develop the "civilization" which gave them their TV, sofa, and telephone without opposable thumbs, we do not know.)

The new consciousness, the suspension of the old ways, may even lead to extremely sick behavior on the part of former vegetarians, as in a cartoon which shows a cow, chef's hat on his head, cannibalistically grilling steaks on a farmyard grill. "You're sick, Jessy!--Sick, sick, sick!" a commentator proclaims. (Another cow even drives a truck for a meat market.)

Still other creatures, however, poised on the very brink of self-awareness, seem about to make a quantum leap into a new evolutionary level.

- A revolutionary sheep extols his kind not to just be part of the herd.
- A cow awakens from bovine obviousness to discover with disgust the degrading nature of its diet: "Hey, wait a minute!" it exclaims. "This is grass! We've been eating grass!"
- A dog, sick of pleading for under-the-table handouts, decides to take matters into its own hands by drawing a gun on its owners.
- Lions see through an animal tamer's trickery: "He's using blanks--pass it on," one lion explains. (In a similar cartoon, a trained bear discovers that his restraining muzzle can be unfastened: "Well, hey . . . these things just snap right off.")
- And two apes, are appalled at the description of themselves they discover in the notebooks of a Dian Fossey-Jane Goodall-like student of animal behavior.

The increasing consciousness of some animals even seems to include a rudimentary understanding of Darwinian evolution and ethology, the study of animal behavior. In a cartoon entitled "Natural selection at work," for example, wolves carefully determine in advance which members of a flock of sheep should be allowed to survive and which should properly perish.

- A bear seeks to convince a companion that the telling evolutionary evidence of their claws and fangs strongly suggests that their kind should slay and eat some nearby park visitors instead of limiting themselves to honey and berries. Similarly, a hyena expresses its distaste for its given role as a scavenger: "Listen," he confesses, "I'm fed up with this 'weeding out the sick and the old' business . . . I want something in its prime."

- Or two peahens, their feminist consciousness raised, are able to resist the entrapment of a typically male display.
- And dogs attend a lecture where cat machinations--like puffing themselves up when threatened in order to appear more frightening--are exposed (with the use of slides, of course).
- When all is said and done, however, Gary Larson's allegiance would seem to lie with the animal, not the human, world--as two particular cartoons make apparent.

In a prehistoric scene, wolves look on at a former cohort, now under the sway of the human world. From the beginning, "The Far Side" seems to be telling us, the world of nature, the governance of instinct--life in Rilke's *Open* --have probably been preferable to domestication with all its debilitating side effects. To be human, "Far Side" after "Far Side" demonstrates for us, is, quite simply, to be unnatural, sometimes ridiculous. For Gary Larson, anthropomorphism is an insult, and that is why "The Far Side's" animals are funny, embarrassingly funny, mirrors. "Whenever you observe an animal closely. . . ."

And in "The Far Side" there are hints as well that all we take to be human, including our utter domination of the animal world, our beastly treatment of them, may, when the rapture comes, prove in the end to be an illusion. When they finally get out of the doghouse our smug humanism has put them in and return to preeminence, they may get their revenge.

The American poet Robinson Jeffers condemned mankind as innately incestuous. We have no real intercourse with the world, Jeffers insisted; our dealings are only within our own family. Our world is human merely, and we seldom succeed in re-connecting ourselves with the natural world from which we have emerged. Like Gary Larson's pitiful moose, we can no longer fathom the "call of the wild."

The ordinary anthropomorphic mentality is incestuous in Jeffers' sense, making all we know human, all too human. Anything but incestuous, "The Far Side" reminds us of incest's follies.