

Carter's Parrot (and Other People's Animals)

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Paul Carter's *Parrot* ends with a selection of parrot jokes (rather good ones). Humans recruit many other animals into their joking, perhaps in unconscious celebration of their alleged distinction as the only animals who laugh. There are jokes about horses ('why the long face?'), dogs, lions, bears and flies. But it is hard to think of any creature for which the joke is so indispensable a part of its representation in human culture as the parrot. Carter suggests that, far from a sense of humour being confined to humans, the opposite may in fact be true – 'parrots, I think, *only joke*' (Carter 2006, 101). Probably, a parrot is a joke, at its ontological heart.

Those animals who have histories, which is to say those animals who have had importance in human history, are perhaps all a little like Ted Hughes's Black Rhino, in that they have 'blundered somehow into man's phantasmagoria and cannot get out'. One reviewer of *Wolfwatching*, the collection in which this poem first appeared, thought that its grotesqueness turned 'tragedy into music hall' (Logan 1991). But, with the parrot, the tragedy consists precisely in this inseparability of the parrot from comedy. Parrots, or the plumage taken from them, are often said to be gaudy. The word itself is of uncertain etymology, though the Latin 'gaudere' to rejoice, make merry, certainly seems to have exerted an influence on it. A 'gaud' is a bauble, a gewgaw or ornament, but also plaything, a trick, jest or idle vanity. In *The Parson's Tale*, Chaucer refers to the way in which people laugh 'at the gawdes of An Ape'. 'Gaud' was frequently rhymed with 'bawd' and 'fraud'. As such, gaudiness was taken up into the centuries-long antagonism between Protestantism and Catholicism. Samuel Harsnett snarled fanatically in 1603 against the 'apish indecent slovenly Gawdes' of Catholic rituals (Harsnett 1603, 32). Gaudiness also signifies pretence. Because a parrot, like an ape, is characterised by its powers of mumming or mimicry, it becomes a figure for that which has no being of its own, is constituted as pure (so impure, really) play, performance, or trumpery. Hence Walter Raleigh's sneer at '*Poppinjays* that value themselves by their out sides, and by their Players coats' (Raleigh 1667, 41). Heinrich von Kleist (1989) tells the story of an unbeatable fencing bear, on whom feints and bluffs would

never work because it lacked the self-consciousness, and the capacity to mistake appearance for reality, that would render it vulnerable to them. But in human conceptions, the parrot is self-consciousness, and vain appearance through and through. And yet, of course, the fraudulence or factitiousness of parrots is not of their own making. The frauds allegedly practised by parrots are in fact practised by human beings on themselves by means of parrots.

Sometimes the parrot is an accessory to a joke that is on others: Carter describes a cartoon by Gary Larson, the great genius of the animal joke, in which two incompetent criminals are discussing their new hideout ('455 Elm Street... Let's all say it together about a hundred times so there'll be no screw-ups'), while behind them three caged parrots stare silently into space (Carter 2006, 104). Larson has another parrot cartoon, not referred to by Carter, which again relies upon the depiction of nontalking parrots: 'Parakeets in the Wild' shows a tree hung with cages, each occupied, in a kind of glum snugness, by a single parrot. Ominously, in Larson's world of loquacious animals, none has a word to say for itself.

But have any parrots ever had any words for themselves?

The European philosophical tradition stakes a great deal on animals' allegedly self-evident inability to talk. Few modern philosophers are inclined to overturn this judgement, though they may be somewhat less inclined to draw from it comfortable lessons about human superiority. For Derrida, the very word 'animal' is a way for human beings to celebrate their exclusive donation to themselves of the gift of speech:

Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give. These humans are found giving it to themselves, this word, but as if they had received it as an inheritance. They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: "the Animal," they say. And they have given themselves this word, at the same time according themselves, reserving for them, for humans, the right to the word, the name, the verb, the attribute, to a language of words, in short to the very thing that the others in question would be deprived of, of those that are corralled within the grand territory of the beasts: the Animal. (Derrida 2004, 124-5)

In other words, in the enunciation of the word 'animal', language seems to name itself and its powers, making clear the privilege of those on this side of

the fence they themselves erect between language and muteness to designate those on the other. Language is that which makes man no longer able to be an animal even as he names himself the reasoning animal. But perhaps animals do not lack the power of speech so much as the power to gain our attention. J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* represents the dwindling of animals to the condition of object as a loss of voice, or a loss of the capacity to vociferate:

In the olden days the voice of man, raised in reason, was confronted by the roar of the lion, the bellow of the bull. Man went to war with the lion and the bull, and after many generations won that war definitively. Today these creatures have no more power. Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us. Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us. (Coetzee 1999, 25)

But what would be the place of the parrot in this ordering of things? In one sense, it would seem to constitute an anomaly, a stowaway who has managed to sneak across the border and into the realm of speech. Parrots have in fact been handed a fatal gift, assigned a poisonous privilege. Far from us paying no attention to their vociferations, parrots are subject to obsessive attentiveness, an attentiveness that aims at instilling language in them. Where other animals are dumbed down, parrots are talked up – talked into the condition of ‘parrot’.

Children take a long time to learn about the restriction on animal speech which is, of course, conspicuously absent throughout fairy tales; perhaps it is only when children have restricted their own vocalisation to the use of articulate language that they truly come to believe the animals have nothing to say and no means of saying it if they did. It is odd then, says Carter, that parrots are kept in a state of permanent infantilism, children who are never allowed to grow up to use anything other than babytalk (the very name ‘parrot’ probably derives simply from versions of the diminutive ‘little Peter’). Training parrots to talk ‘is not expression as such but our desire to cultivate a kind of talk-talk answering to our own straitened idea of communication’ (Carter 2006, 115). Carter repeats a couple of times the suggestion that only parrots in captivity talk. This means more than that parrots will only mimic things that they encounter in their environment. It involves the suggestion that even mimicry is a product of captivity – that parrots may not even be ‘natural mimics’. It is certainly hard to see what particular use such highly-developed powers of mimicry might have for parrots in the wild. Perhaps it means that only the conditions of captivity will force parrots into the recognition that talk-mimicry will get them the kinds

of attention that would ordinarily be provided by their place in the flock. Even if, as parrot experts constantly assure us, only contented, confident, well-adjusted birds can be trained to talk with any success, it seems odd that parrot-talk should seem to be so characterised by melancholy or bitterness. As some of Paul Carter's jokes make abundantly clear, parrots are always likely to abuse the privilege of speech through swearing and profanity. While we forgive the toddler who innocently uses speech the meaning of which they cannot understand, we cannot bring ourselves to afford the same licence to parrots, whom we suspect of not being completely ignorant of the import of what they say. In one joke, an aeroplane passenger prevented from getting a drink by a parrot in the next seat squawking abusively at the air hostess resorts to the same tactic. They are both tipped out of the aeroplane door, and the parrot observes to the passenger in free fall 'Jeez, for someone who can't fly, you're a lippy fucking bastard'. Like Caliban, another curmudgeonly ventriloquist's dummy, parrots have been given language, and their profit on't is, they know how to curse.

Carter both opens to view and occupies the space between natural histories of the parrot, which tend to ignore the role that parrots play in the human imagination, and cultural histories, which, when they treat animals at all, treat them merely as 'representations', taking no account of the real, and often devastating consequences of the work of human imagination. In large part, *Parrot* is a furious denunciation of the human greed, vanity and sentimental stupidity that are the ways in which we 'love the parrot to death' (Carter 2006, 171). It is hard not to believe that the best way to combat this appropriation would be to find a way to tell the story of the parrot baldly and on its own terms, stripping away all aspects of its penitential involvement in human history. Coming to know the parrot's evolution, habitat, diet, and mating habits might lift the latch on the cage of concepts and fantasies in which the parrot has been enclosed. It is indeed part of the purpose of Paul Carter's *Parrot* to engineer escape routes for this creature from the cage of human conceptions. Thus, we are reminded that the captured parrot 'inducted into isolation' (Carter 2006, 115) is in the wild highly gregarious; that its feet are designed, not for walking, and not even for perching, but for shinning up the sides of trees. Reflecting on the almost universal tendency of parrots to make their nests in hollows, Carter speculates that parrots may feel most at home in a

humid, densely folded country invested with a giant, liana-festooned flora, characterized by narrow streaks of sky, flashes of dark water, and distances heard rather than seen – in which

hollows, instead of being rare occurrences, formed in the joins between different surfaces (Carter 2006, 39-40).

Ecologists and conservationists stake much on the work of tabulation and taxonomy, in order to keep the dwindling populations of parrots securely in view. But the manumission of the parrot might require us also to remit its intense visibility, along with its conspicuous audibility. The captive parrot is fiercely and gorgeously visible, its very plumage a kind of chromatic cacophony. And yet its spectacular and sumptuous visibility is the manifestation of a blindness on our part. As Carter observes, parrots are displayed to and by the gaze of naturalists and illustrators like anatomical specimens, with camouflaging background deleted, and often with wings spread wide to show as much of its surface as possible, like a Mercator projection. What we see is not the parrot but the exposure of the parrot to and for our gaze. What we do not see is the hiddenness of the parrot in its environment. The parrot is hyper-visible, flagrant, inflammatory, as though to forestall any effort at merging into its surroundings. Hence the solitariness of the parrot, which is always shown on its own, centre-stage, in agoraphobic visibility, though '[o]utside the pages of books and the stultifying lens of the camera, they are usually seen glancingly, captured peripherally, or embedded in the chiaroscuro labyrinth of foliage' (Carter 2006, 170). The second edition of Oxford English Dictionary gives, as its first definition of the noun *parrot*, 'any of numerous fruit- and seed-eating birds of the order Psittaciformes of the tropics and southern hemisphere' and then, immediately, as its second, 'A representation of a parrot, esp. one used as a target for shooting'. It is as though the very definition of a parrot put it in the firing line.

We are so good at getting a fix on parrots that it comes as a surprise to reflect that the arrangement of the parrot's eyes means that they themselves are unlikely ever to experience the same thing. They will never have the formative revelation – which Carter characterises as 'crushing laterality into a perspectival cage' (Carter 2006, 157) – of the Lacanian mirror-stage: 'unlike us, parrots have no unified image of themselves formed by stereoscopic synthesis' (Carter 2006, 156). Carter speculates that this may extend outwards to the parrot's perception of its environment, which is both more inclusive and less perspectival than our own, involving 'an effortless assimilation of continuously heterogeneous prospects into a view without centre or edge' (Carter 2006, 157). There is a grotesque rhyme between the way in which parrots are displayed in naturalist illustration and this suggestion about the parrot's own inclusive, but non-unifying field of perception.

Carter does not simply or continuously denounce the incarceration of the parrot in the prison-house of language, nor does he hold out any realistic prospect of a return to alalic Arcadia for it. If it is denatured by language, then the parrot has a unique ability, even a vocation, to denature the language that keeps it hostage. So Carter cannot be content with affirming the 'otherness' of the parrot, since comfy otherness of that kind is a kind of evasion of responsibility, a denial of the hold and claim that parrots may have on us. Our attitude towards the parrot must be, like the creature itself, bifocal, not monocular. One thinks of Carter's reading of the parrot's characteristic uneasiness on its perch, unsure of its posture and position, a reading that itself hovers uneasily between identification with the parrot and appropriation of it: 'it may not cry out, but it communicates its unease by bobbing to left and right. Insisting on the asymmetrical leftness and rightness of his existence, he is still weighing up where he belongs' (Carter 2006, 159).

In a sense, the mixed condition of the parrot resembles the fate of nature itself. 'Nature' too has been so taken up into human desire, fantasy and purpose, that it may seem that there is no nature any more, no concept of 'nature' or the 'natural' that it is not in fact human, all too human, in the work it is made to do and the meanings it is made to bear. And yet, that very objection depends upon an assumed distinction between the realm of the human and non-human, upon the possibility of there being something, some state of nature which human beings illegitimately appropriate. What, after all, is the natural state of a parrot, or at least, of the mixed, particoloured entity the human calls 'Parrot'? A parrot in a state of nature would in fact be a parrot denatured, deprived of that supplementary power that constitutes its nature. It is the nature of parrots, like human beings, to be unnatural.

Carter tries to develop a language that can itself render these complex implications and responsibilities. It is a necessarily parodic language, one, in other words, that hires, borrows or mentions its terms rather than straightforwardly putting them to use (that is to say, it 'parrots' or parodies them). In fact, one might say that the whole text is engined and engineered by a particular kind of joke, the play on words that is uniquely identified with parrots. The aim of the book is to develop what can be called a 'parrot discourse', which is to say, not merely a discourse on the parrot, but a discourse on the discourse of the parrot, a discourse on the way in which discourse constitutes the parrot in the way it runs between parrots and users of human language (Carter is fond of recalling the origin of 'discourse' in the Latin *discurrere*, meaning to run between or back and forth). His is a kind of 'paraphasia', the substitution of improper words for the words one means to

use. He operates in the semantic field opened by the Greek prefix *para-*, the primary meaning of which is beside, next to, or alongside, but which gathers senses such as ‘to one side, aside, amiss, faulty, irregular, disordered, improper, wrong’ (beside the point). He refers frequently through the book to conversations he has had with people about the book he was writing about parrots; he was often misheard, we learn, and thought to be writing a book about ‘*parents, Paris, pirates, even parody* (Carter 2006, 10) – all of which topics find their way into the book in one way or another. Rather than simply denying the fantasies of parrot discourse, Carter will subject them to parody – a writing that is literally ‘next to the work’. And so the mode of parody will be what he calls a ‘parrotics’.

This means that Carter must take, and even court, the risk of pathetic fallacy, in claiming that parrots might have a voice to which it might be possible to cock a suitably attuned ear. Allowing ourselves the autistic fiction that parrots only ever play back what we have recorded on them, we make ‘the fatal but convenient mistake of filtering out as “noise” the original, non-redundant information parrot has for us, which is that “society”, and these days the “media”, have a “voice”, and do not simply parrot back what we feed into them’ (Carter 2006, 135). We thus lose the possibility of making out some communication in what parrots say. Parrots are often the conveyers of desire and facilitators of sexual liaisons as well as information. Analysing the *Novas del papagai (Tale of the Parrot)* by the thirteenth-century troubadour Arnaut de Carcassé, in which a parrot brings about a relationship between a married lady at court and the king’s son, Carter concludes that

Parrot isn’t simply a go-between. He creates the communication he pretends to report: without his amorous casuistry neither party would be engaged. It is not the desire of lady or prince that precipitates their affair, but Eros, whose sole aim in life is to create connections. (Carter 2006, 87)

As Carter shows, parrots are a currency, the bearers of messages that they may convey or deliver, but never themselves originate. Parrots become something like Michel Serres’s Hermes, a go-between, or parasite: they function ‘like synapses’ (Carter 2006, 151). Parrots, who for hundreds of years have been traded across oceans and borders, mirroring the movements of slaves and forced labour, become symbols of exchangeability itself: ‘parrots are not only traded, they steer trade. Reflecting back to us our desire of exchange, they show us that communication always exceeds what is exchanged’ (Carter 2006, 151).

Parrots are well-equipped to embody this condition of media, because ‘parrot talk is constitutionally excessive, its social utility residing in the fact that (in terms of information transfer) it is useless, its chatter purely ornamental or erotic’ (Carter 2006, 174). We are accustomed to assume that the difference between human and animal communication is that we are capable of meaning what we say. But meaning is not just a matter of what we put into our utterances, it is also a matter of what we are able to assume others have put into theirs. What I mean to say is conditioned by what I assume you have meant to say, or may mean to say in response to me. This is one of the many ways in which it is necessary for language, or any other symbolic system, to have the quality of what Derrida has called ‘iterability’, the quality of being able to be transferred into different contexts of utterance, and to mean, or to be taken to mean, the same thing on every occasion. There must, in other words, be something mechanical about language; I can only mean to say something in language if language is meaningful, that is to say, not private. I can mean to say ‘I love you’ with an unintelligible string of vocables, but they cannot be said to have that meaning unless they can be decoded, which is to say unless there is an invariable code, or an invariable algorithm for producing code-variation which lies between the transmitters and receivers of language. Yet it is this very iterability, this ability to mimic itself, that also allows meaning to be exceeded and allows for the meaning of excess.

As Freud observed, the machinery of jokes often depends upon the ways in which they play upon the workings of language, generating yields of pleasure from the economic interference of the free and the formulaic (Freud 1981, 188-90). Parrot jokes nearly always rely upon the spanner that the parrot inserts into the works of the meaning-machine. Parrots either turn out not to be merely machine-like, but to know perfectly well what they mean, or to point up what is parrot-like or mechanical in our use of language. It is in this sense that parrots enter into relation with media. As Carter shows, parrots were thought of as phonographic devices long before the appearance of phonographs and gramophones – and when they did appear, parrots were quickly assimilated to them. When Joyce has Leopold Bloom imagine the preservation of the voice after death by means of the gramophone, his internal dramatisation of the scene seems to suggest that a parrot has somehow infiltrated the device:

Have a gramophone in every grave or keep it in the house. After
dinner on a Sunday. Put on poor old greatgrandfather.
Kraahraark! Hellohellohello amawfullyglad kraark
awfullygladaseegain hellohellohello amawf krpthsth. (Joyce 1986,
93)

Carter reproduces a postcard of a 1930 advertisement for a French gramophone which shows, instead of HMV's Nipper the dog, a row of parrots on a perch, either to demonstrate the perfection of the apparatus, or perhaps to hint at their outdoing by it.

The parallel between parrots and media goes further than this. Late in his book, Carter ventures a parallel between parrots themselves, and the contemporary forms of information organisation, that 'cosmos of inscrutable hearsay, anecdote, opinion – with nothing else in common than its susceptibility to recovery via the talismanic name "parrot"' (Carter 2006, 175). Parrot dissolves, or is amplified into this polychromatic noise of 'parroterialia'. Parrot teaches the lesson that communication is never intraspecific, that our systems of signification arise outside ourselves. Everything communicates, everything exchanges information, from a cloud to a computer: but nothing communicates wholly or solely with that with which it has things 'in common'. So no creature has a wholly closed or totalisable relation to its own environment, for it must always undergo relay through and across the noise of other creatures and their significations. Just as our physical needs are dependent upon the networks of physical relation and codependence in the organic and inorganic environment, so too our discourses find 'a larger echo in the signifying sensory cosmos of the natural world' (Carter 2006, 136; see, too Connor 2006). Carter's work joins with much of the thinking currently being undertaken in biosemiotics, and the fields arising from it (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1992; Wheeler 2006). This is why an ecology of media is an echology of media: just as ecology deals with the interchanges and overlappings of worlds, so media arise at the junctions of these worlds, where they echo and interlock with each other.

Carter's parrot, or at least Carter's *Parrot*, joins a menagerie of creatures who have been adopted by contemporary philosophers: Derrida's cat, Hélène Cixous's birds, Raymond Gaita's dog (Cixous 2004; Gaita 2003). But, despite appearances, and despite its resonances with much that has been written about the question of the animal in recent years, Carter's *Parrot* is not really an addition to 'animal philosophy' for the simple reason that it declines to permit the parrot simply to represent 'the animal' as such. Derrida begins his discourse with 'the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble'. That easy, arbitrary glide from 'an animal' to 'the eyes of a cat', will clear the way for Derrida within a page to begin offering propositions about 'the animal', for example, the fact that, 'Because it *is* naked without *existing* in nakedness, the animal neither feels nor sees itself naked' (Derrida 2004, 113, 114). One might say that this is the sign in Derrida's text of the very epistemological corraling which he will evoke later in

his essay – in which the salient feature of any animal will be what it has in common with any and all other animals, namely their exceptionless nonpossession of the qualities that are said to make humans so wholly exceptional – speaking, weeping, laughing, using tools and so on.

One might of course say that a philosopher cannot ignore the historical fact of this quarantining of animals together under the concept of the ‘the animal’ if he is to be able to engage with the philosophical tradition that grows out of that. Derrida is out to show, among other things, that the self-evidence of the concept of ‘the human’ is compromised and interrupted through its relay through the concept of the animal. But his argument does depend upon a certain credulity regarding the notion of ‘the animal’, a willingness to let the category be. Heidegger’s definition of Dasein – that mode of being which has a relation to its world which is opposed to the being of animals who, being locked into particular relations which constitute their world, are on that account, poor in world (‘weltarm’) – depends upon the same absolute distinction (Heidegger 1995, 177. Following Heidegger, Giorgio Agamben has shown how often human beings have been regarded as absolutely distinct from all other animals, not because of any particular quality they may have, but because of their lack of givenness. Man is thus *‘the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human... Homo sapiens*, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human’ (Agamben 2004, 26). Michel Serres follows the tradition explicated (and to a large extent acceded to) by Agamben, emphasising the ‘incandescence’ of human beings, compared with animals. Since man’s nature is to have no nature, to be born prematurely, it is his nature to give birth to himself – in a ‘hominescence’ which is specifically an awakening from the condition of ‘the animal’ (Serres 2001). If what characterises all other species is the ways in which they are specific – the niches they inhabit, the specific ranges and functions of their bodies and sensory apparatus - then man’s speciality is to have no speciality, to be able to inhabit all habitats, to borrow or synthesise the entire range of animal powers and sensitivities. Where evolution produces differentiation, man is a despecialised creature. Where all other creatures have their place in the spectrum of hues constituted by nature, man alone has the capacity to represent the spectrum as such, inhabiting ‘a habitat which is indefinite, open and white, the undefined world of our being-in-the-world’ (Serres 2003, 112; my translation). And yet, this generalisation of ‘the animal’ is itself an historical production, which has been a long and laborious time in the making. If part of the purpose of the philosophy of the animal is to reduce the privilege of the human, we would do well to remember that the unifying concept ‘animal’ belongs to that self-privileging.

Carter's parrot, by contrast, is never the easy exemplar of 'the animal'. The creature, the particoloured flock of different creatures that Carter calls 'Parrot', remains stubbornly, perversely, proliferatingly itself in its wholly singular, utterly duplicitous way of being-beside-itself. It retains this ungeneralisable singularity, even as it never quite rounds off or rises to the condition of *one* creature. Animal philosophy has focussed closely on how either to bridge or set aside the gulf of language that separates humans and animals, and how to imagine some other mode of communication in which it would be possible to establish relationship and responsibility other than through discourse. Carter would like us to be able to find a way to parley with an animal that has already thoroughly entered into our discourse, that has, from the beginning, helped to form the language - or at least the idea of language - that we use to set ourselves so grandiosely and gloomily apart from animals. He says

Neither outside us (for there is no place where parrot can live without our interference), nor inside us (for there is a polysemous indifference to identity that renders the parrot 'public' even in private), parrot could mediate a new deeply human covenant with the global environment. (Carter 2006, 176)

This is far from the Dr Dolittle dream of being able to talk to the animals, but it might nevertheless be a sustainable apprehension that, rather than merely being the means whereby we give language back to ourselves, Parrot provides many of the ways in which we can be given to language.

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