

**Of Black Sheep and Other Humans: Augusto Monterroso,
David Sedaris, and the New Animal Fable**

Melanie Nicholson

Bard College

When the Guatemalan satirist Augusto Monterroso published *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* in 1969, Carlos Fuentes offered this droll comment: “Imagine el fantástico bestiario de Borges tomando el té con Alicia. Imagine a Jonathan Swift y James Thurber intercambiando notas. Imagine a una rana del condado de Calaveras que hubiera leído realmente a Mark Twain: he aquí Monterroso” (cover endorsement). Four decades later, in 2010, the American writer and humorist David Sedaris published *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary*, which is not in fact a bestiary but—like *La oveja negra y demás fábulas*—a collection of beast tales. In the spirit of Fuentes’s cross-cultural and inter-species tea party, the present essay places the texts of Monterroso and Sedaris in conversation with each other. I am interested in exploring how these South and North American masters of what has been called the *nueva fábula* bring together talking beasts and shocking plot twists, fantasy and social commentary, mordant wit and pathos—revealing in the process certain uneasy tensions in the modern literary representation of animals.

Born in Honduras in 1921, Monterroso grew up in Guatemala, leaving school at age eleven to pursue on his own the study of Greek, Latin, and Spanish classics. In 1944 he was exiled to Mexico for his role in the revolt against the Guatemalan dictator Jorge Ubico. Monterroso’s first collection of short fiction, *Obras completas y otros cuentos*, saw the light in 1959, but it was the 1969 publication of *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* that

cemented his fame as a satirist and storyteller. Monterroso died in Mexico City in 2003, having gained a reputation as one of the great masters of Spanish-language short fiction.

The contemporary North American humorist, radio commentator, and best-selling author David Sedaris, born on another continent almost four decades after Monterroso, has likely never read the work of his Guatemalan counterpart. For a writer-performer whose subject matter is typically grounded in current Anglo-American life, working with a literary mode with ancient roots in oral tradition was an unfamiliar experience. Sedaris comments in an interview with Jon Stewart that the idea for the book came to him as he listened on audiotape to a collection of South African folk tales about anthropomorphic animals. “I can do better than this!” he recounts with a note of ironic hubris—and so began to write the tales of *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*. This book, the eighth of more than a dozen books published to date, stands out as Sedaris’s only collection of purely fictional tales and the only one to explore human foibles through animal characters.

Both Monterroso and Sedaris complicate the trope of animals in the guise of humans by subverting conventional character types like the brave lion, the timorous rabbit, or the wise owl. Monterroso modernizes the beast fable by placing his animal characters at cocktail parties or, in metanarrative gesture, at the very desk of the satirical writer. Sedaris takes the strategy a step further by introducing the ancient genre into common, even banal, contemporary social spaces: the beauty parlor, the rat lab, the suburban living room. Both use humor to satirize human behavior, but while Monterroso’s humor is largely intellectualized and emotionally distanced, Sedaris’s jokes can take a darker, more immediate, and even violent turn. Similarly, while Monterroso’s omniscient narrator maintains an ironic stance, Sedaris’s animal speakers (whether in dialogue or as first-person narrators) plunge the reader into an uncomfortable sense of identification. Monterroso finds an ideal form for the beast fable in the *mini-cuento* with compressed, sometimes ambiguous, highly suggestive narrative language. For Sedaris, in contrast, extended monologues or dialogues spoken by storks, toads, turtles, and bears in the colloquial idiom of modern life serve best to amuse or shock the reader. Perhaps most importantly, while both writers eschew the traditional moralizing function of the classical beast fable, they find innovative ways of holding the mirror up to the unsuspecting modern reader. Taken together, Monterroso and Sedaris offer the anthropomorphic gesture in fiction as a powerful way to make serious fun of the human animal.

The Story Behind the Stories

Deriving from the Latin verb *fabular*—meaning to converse familiarly or to invent a tale—the word *fable* points to popular storytelling traditions that predate the written text. The classical fable was first established in ancient Greece by Aesop, to whom more than six hundred texts are attributed; it was revived and popularized across Europe in the Neoclassical era by Jean de la Fontaine and Gotthold Lessing. These and other Enlightenment writers fixed the didactic character of the tale, which was often encapsulated in an explicit moralizing tag. In Spain, the emphasis on the *moraleja* was reinforced by two eighteenth-century fabulists, Félix María de Samaniego and Tomás de Iriarte, both of whom exerted a major influence on later peninsular and Latin American writers, shaping popular reading tastes. Even before Samaniego and Iriarte, the Western fable tradition had entered the Spanish American literary canon as early as the mid-sixteenth century, when Bernardino de Sahagún ordered several of Aesop’s fables translated into Náhuatl for the edification of the indigenous Mexican population. As they carried out this task, the translators substituted native flora and fauna for their European counterparts: the wolf, for instance, became the coyote (Camurati 1978, 25). Mostly eschewing this embrace of autochthonous elements, Monterroso’s fables tend to employ European types and terminology. Like Jorge Luis Borges and Juan José Arreola, who give a modern or postmodern turn to the classical bestiary, Monterroso refashions the traditional Western fable to reflect—if obliquely—the political and social scenes of his day, alongside the more timeless portrayals of human folly.

Considered broadly as a literary mode, the fable resists easy classification. In most beast fables, the allegorical function is patent: the animal characters speak and act in the guise of humans to call attention to the foibles of *homo sapiens* . As with other types of didactic literature, the story is not an end in itself, but rather an illustration of some broadly accepted truth. The popular, oral origin of the fable is reflected in its often humorous or ironic character; in fact, in ancient Greek fables, humor may have served to mask critiques of those in power in tyrannical regimes. (Aesop himself is said to have been a slave, with ample motivation to criticize his masters covertly.) The literary or aesthetic element of the fable—that is, the pleasure the listener or reader might take in the language itself, quite apart from any moralizing function—can be an equally important element. Because of their narrative simplicity and didactic character, fables have a long history of illustration with drawings, etchings, woodcuts, lithographs, or paintings.

While exhibiting many of these traditional characteristics, the new fable—whose techniques have been studied by scholars such as Ben Edwin Perry, Wilfredo Corral, Mireya Camurati, Anne Karine Kleveland, and Francisca Nogueroles Jiménez—questions, subverts, and parodies the Aesopian and neoclassical models. Grounded in a profound sense of skepticism toward totalizing notions of truth, the new fable shares certain qualities with postmodern literature as a whole (Kleveland 2003, 162). According to Nogueroles Jiménez, these qualities include “carnivalizing tradition” by means of irony, satire, and straightforward humor; textual fragmentation and structural open-endedness; and meta-literary elements such as intertextual allusions (1996, 51). In this spirit, the parameters of the fable were expanded by many canonical twentieth-century Anglo-American and European authors, including Franz Kafka, George Orwell, Ambrose Bierce, James Thurber, Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel), Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Arnold Lobel. In Latin America, where the genre has gained considerable popularity, Juan José Arreola and Monterroso himself are the undisputed masters of the genre.¹

Arguably the most important factor in the configuration of the modern fable is the absence or parody of direct moralizing. The *nueva fábula* reflects a shift toward a view of truth as relative, subjective, and unstable, and of literature as a source of questions rather than answers, of jokes rather than dictums. This is why, in a brief essay called “Cómo acercarse a una fábula”, Monterroso once quipped, “Con precaución, como a cualquier cosa pequeña. Pero sin miedo. Finalmente se descubrirá que ninguna fábula es dañina, excepto cuando alcanza a verse en ella alguna enseñanza. Esto es malo... Así, lo mejor es acercarse a las fábulas buscando de qué reír” (1983, 69). Here, in a humorous meta-literary twist, Monterroso illustrates a point about the beast fable by metaphorizing the fable itself as a little beast.

Although modern versions of the fable lack an explicit moralizing character, it is crucial to note that they still present some problem or situation that deserves scrutiny. In this sense, the new fable retains its ancient rhetorical character as a narrative meant to persuade. This is why David Wallace, considering what he calls the “indirection” of Sedaris’s rhetorical strategies, remarks that, “In a sense, Sedaris engages in a rhetoric of stealth, of getting issues on the table in entertaining stories that do not take themselves

¹ A short list of other Latin American authors who have explored the modern beast fable would include Francisco Monterde, Manuel Fernández Perera, and Rafael Junquera (Mexico); Max Araujo (Guatemala); Eduardo Gudiño Kieffer, Carlos Loprete, and Julio César Silvain (Argentina); and more recently, the brothers Juan and Víctor Ataurcuri García, whose *Fábulas peruanas* (2003) draws from Andean myth and folklore.

too seriously but may still do serious work” (2011, 187). Arguably, the very act of putting wise or incisive words in the mouths of animals can serve to unsettle an anthropocentric worldview, and in doing so can maximize the writer’s ability to “do serious work” by commentary that does not resort to a facile moralizing stance. Like his Guatemalan predecessor Monterroso, Sedaris does not eschew the rhetoric of persuasion, but “simply plays a different game, and in doing so he not only breaks traditional genre boundaries, but he also reverses values” (Wallace 2011, 176).

Even when alluding to political or social concerns, the contemporary fabulist works with satire and ambiguity, rather than with the language of sincere conviction. According to the Mexican essayist Jorge von Ziegler, the key to Monterroso’s primary authorial stance is *el desinterés*: “La literatura, para Monterroso, no existe para remediar la pobreza, los vicios o la injusticia del mundo, sino para alimentar la imaginación” (von Ziegler 1992, 10). In this vein Monterroso once commented, with his characteristic dry humor, that moralizing is useless, since “Nadie ha cambiado su modo de ser por haber leído los consejos de Esopo, La Fontaine o Iriarte. Que estos fabulistas perduren se debe a sus valores literarios, no a lo que aconsejaban que la gente hiciera. A la gente le encanta dar consejos, e incluso recibirlos, pero le gusta más no hacerles caso” (1983, 76).

Unraveling the Allegory, Masking the Moral

Detachment from large redemptive schemes is in fact the theme of one of Monterroso’s most characteristic fables, “El búho que quería salvar a la humanidad” (Monterroso 2001, 33-34).² This owl, who has the misfortune to develop a concern for others, broods over the conduct of various species that live “en lo más intrincado de la Selva” (33). Blurring the lines between animal and human realms, the owl judges the misbehavior of his jungle neighbors as “los defectos que hacían desgraciada a la Humanidad” (33). Here Monterroso begins to unravel the very technique of animal allegory: his beasts are not mere simulacra of human beings, as in the traditional bestiary or fable; they are in fact “Humanity.” This blurring is reinforced in the next sentence, which informs us that the owl “adquirió la costumbre de desvelarse y de salir a la calle a observar cómo se conducía la gente” (33). These “people” (who are in fact, on the story level, animals) act in such predictable ways that the owl eventually “sabía a ciencia

² All citations from *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* are taken from this edition, indicated only by page number.

cierta cuándo el León iba a rugir y cuándo la Hiena se iba a reír, y lo que iba a hacer el Ratón del campo cuando visitara la ciudad, y lo que haría el Perro que traía una torta en la boca cuando viera reflejado en el agua el rostro de un Perro que traía una torta en la boca, y el Cuervo cuando le decían que qué bonito cantaba” (34). The intertextual quality of Monterroso’s fable is evident in this passage, as it alludes directly to recognizable scenes from the Aesopian tradition. Yet an interesting confusion arises. While the Country Mouse in Aesop’s fable is a mouse acting and talking like a human, in Monterroso’s fable he is *simultaneously* a mouse and one of the “gente” residing on the owl’s street. The conventionally double aspect of allegory (animals meant to be read as humans) collapses into a singular animal-human identity. This identity does not, however, suggest the sort of hybridity apparent in many characters of myth and popular culture. Monterroso asks his readers to imagine as a natural phenomenon a mouse that is fully a rodent and simultaneously fully human.

The end of Monterroso’s fable, however, restores the double nature of allegorical representation. After much observation, the owl determines that his neighbors would all live in peace, “Si el León no hiciera lo que hace sino lo que hace el Caballo, y el Caballo no hiciera lo que hace sino lo que hace el León ... y así hasta el infinito” (34). The “wise” owl, in other words, foresees salvation for each species only if it ceases to be what it intrinsically *is*. Needless to say, there is little wisdom and no practicality in this determination. The owl’s scheme for saving humanity, buttressed by much so-called psychological knowledge and scientific research, is after all a fool’s errand. It is no wonder that the other animals, after dismissing the owl as a *tonto*, “seguían comiéndose unos a otros” (34), a cannibalistic outcome that presumably implicates the human species. In the end, “El búho que quería salvar a la humanidad” becomes a meta-textual satire on the satirist’s own craft: Monterroso writes a moral tale whose implicit message is that writers should not try to reform their fellow beings by writing moral tales.

Cocktail Parties in the Jungle

The satirical allusion to cannibalism that concludes “El búho que quería salvar a la humanidad” echoes the opening salvo of *Oveja negra*, an epigraph citing a certain K’nyo Mobutu, which reads: “Los animales se parecen tanto al hombre que a veces es imposible distinguirlos de éste” (11). To the reader caught unawares, this “K’nyo Mobutu” would appear to be a little-known African writer or thinker, whose observation about the similarity between animals and humans may sound rather banal.

It is only when we see an entry for Mobutu in the index that the joke reveals itself: “K’nyo Mobutu, antropófago” (102). In other words, the presumed authority whose words stand at the threshold of this volume is a cannibal, and his likening of animals to man may well be more gastronomical than philosophical in nature.

But apart from this superb joke, what might the epigraph and its fictitious author suggest? The structure of the analogy is important to note: Mobutu claims that it is animals that resemble man and not (as is conventionally assumed) man who resembles animals. And yet if we are cannibals, what basis can there be for assuming a superior position on the evolutionary scale? If after the wise owl’s defeat in his attempt to redeem “Humanity,” his fellow animal-humans “seguían comiéndose unos a otros,” where do we even draw the line between “higher” and “lower” species? Significantly, as Lía Ogno observes, the Mobutu epigraph undermines the very presumption of human reason: “El antropófago [K’nyo Mobuto] clausura los valores clásicos de la fábula, según los cuales el mejoramiento social o humano viene siempre de la mano de la *ratio* occidental. La ‘razón’ del antropófago es lo otro que la *ratio*, es la negación misma de esa *ratio*” (1993, 36). The ironic moral of the story is that the place of *homo sapiens* on the evolutionary scale is only a matter of perspective, and Mobutu’s epigraph suggests that we begin reading the collection with this in mind.

Many contemporary fables have more in common with the aphorism, the anecdote, the joke, the riddle, or the proverb, than with the traditional narrative fable (Kleveland 2003, 172). Characterized by brevity and by pithy but ironic wisdom, several of the texts included in *Oveja negra* fall into this broad category of anecdote or riddle. Brevity is in fact the predominant trait of Monterroso’s fiction as a whole, forming the juncture between the fable and the *mini-cuento* or *micro-cuento*. Monterroso is widely considered to be the master of Latin American brief fiction, having achieved what many consider to be the paragon of the genre with his seven-word story “El dinosaurio”, which reads: “Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí” (2001, 42). Entire volumes have been written about this story, whose radical brevity and open-endedness have not ceased to intrigue readers.

A prime example of the *micro-cuento* that shares important elements with the beast fable is the eponymous story “La oveja negra”, which I cite here in its entirety:

En un lejano país existió hace muchos años una Oveja negra.
Fue fusilada.

Un siglo después, el rebaño arrepentido le levantó una estatua ecuestre que quedó muy bien en el parque.

Así, en lo sucesivo, cada vez que aparecían ovejas negras eran rápidamente pasadas por las armas para que las futuras generaciones de ovejas comunes y corrientes pudieran ejercitarse también en la escultura. (25)

Violeta Rojo notes that the *mini-cuento* depends not only on brevity, but also on precise language, intertextuality (which is usually parodic), conventional or stereotyped situations and characters, suggestiveness, and open-endedness (1994, 566-68). It is not difficult to see these qualities at work in “La oveja negra”, a tale composed of a mere sixty-three words contained in four single-sentence paragraphs, a structure that creates a sense of compression and rapid narrative movement from start to finish. The second sentence—“Fue fusilada”—strikes with extreme brevity, much as the sound of the gunshot itself.

The incisive force of this piece is also due to the spatial-temporal dimensions it suggests. The fable begins in the traditional distancing mode of oral storytelling (“hace muchos años”), but quickly shifts into historical time with the relatively precise phrase “Un siglo después”. In a parallel move, the geographically vague suggestion of “un lejano país” is brought into focus with the image of an equestrian statue in a park: we are now clearly in the territory of modern urban culture. But the temporal dimension shifts again in the final sentence, pointing to an indeterminate but repetitious and barbaric future (“Así, en lo sucesivo...”). These spatial-temporal shifts are one of the ways Monterroso achieves remarkable economy in this piece, saying little by suggesting much.

The narrative is meant to be absorbed quickly and with a degree of shock. The character of the protagonist—“una Oveja negra”—needs no development, since the reader supplies the necessary associations of the “black sheep” metaphor. But Monterroso’s fable does not simply retell the tale of the ostracized member of a group. Rather, he begins with this cliché, then takes the narrative in unexpected directions. A violent deed (murder) is followed by the memorialization of the victim, which is followed in turn by the social ritualization of that act—the raising of an equestrian statue. (The image of a statue of a horse that is in reality a sheep is comically absurd.) As a final *coup de grace*, the fabulist tells us that the act of murdering unique animals to create more democratic opportunities for art (sculpture) is repeated *ad infinitum* for generations to come. The killing of black sheep continues to be justified, in other words, as a premise for art. Building on the metaphorical meaning of “oveja negra”, we can take the possible lesson here a step further. The fable suggests that the outsider, the oddball, the truly creative being is sacrificed as a matter of course so that “common,

ordinary” beings can “indulge” in vacuous artistic exercises. By extending the frame for this *mini-cuento* from a remote past to unnamed future generations, Monterroso suggests that this absurdly democratic situation is both timeless and frighteningly current.

Another important technique in Monterroso’s re-visioning of the classical fable is his *sui generis* portrayal of certain conventional animals. “El conejo y el león”, which is strategically placed as the first tale in *Oveja negra*, presents “un célebre Psicoanalista” who finds himself lost in the jungle (13). From his vantage point high in a tree, the man observes two animals behaving in typical ways: the lion roars and the rabbit skitters away. Returning to the city, the researcher publishes a treatise that is received *cum laude*, “en que demuestra que el León es el animal más infantil y cobarde de la Selva, y el Conejo el más valiente y maduro” (13-14). Such conclusions cannot be based on the psychoanalyst’s direct observation, which has demonstrated precisely the opposite. The psychoanalyst, as intellectuals are wont to do, *interprets*—and does so badly. In his view, “el León ruge y hace gestos y amenaza al universo movido por el miedo; el Conejo advierte esto, conoce su propia fuerza, y se retira antes de perder la paciencia y acabar con aquel ser extravagante y fuera de sí, al que comprende y que después de todo no le ha hecho nada” (14). As a well-trained student of human behavior, the psychoanalyst watches from a lofty distance—indeed, as a kind of voyeur—taking care not to mix with his subjects. There is a striking parallel here with Monterroso’s own mention in the “Acknowledgements” section *Oveja negra* of the time he spent at the Chapultepec Zoo, where he found himself more interested in observing the animals’ interactions than in any role played by humans (9).

And yet the parallel is illusory, since the denouement of “The Rabbit and the Lion” features an entirely human rewriting of the actual behavior that took place in the jungle—a rewriting that parodies psychoanalytic practice. There is some wisdom but also a great deal of absurdity in the psychoanalyst’s interpretation. The lion who roars and claws the air may indeed be responding more to a frightening world than to any perception of himself as King of the Jungle; the rabbit, likewise, may be aware of “su propia fuerza” in a profound, instinctual way, rather than perceiving himself to be cowardly. In providing these alternative characterizations of two animals whose behavior has become fossilized in our collective imagination, Monterroso shakes us out of our readerly molds. But accompanying this potential wisdom is a ludicrous conclusion that is difficult to overlook: the rabbit justifies his escape by thinking he might “perder la paciencia y acabar con aquel ser extravagante”. What the psychoanalyst offers is less a sober appreciation of animal consciousness than an act of self-deluded

imagination. No matter how we try to rethink “lionness” and “rabbitness,” we cannot believe a rabbit to capable of destroying a lion, or of refraining from doing so out of an act of simple forbearance.

To complicate matters further, this conflicting exposition on rabbit-lion interactions is presented to Monterroso’s reader through the lens of the psychoanalyst, a contradictory figure in his own right. If the rabbit deludes himself, using exaggerated gestures to hide his weakness—a commonplace in beast narratives—what are we to think of the “célebre Psicoanalista” and his “famoso tratado”? Keeping in mind the overlap between animal and human realms that forms the basis of Monterroso’s fables, we can project the rabbit’s delusions of grandeur onto his human observer. The narrator tells us at the outset that the psychoanalyst, finding himself lost in the jungle, managed to climb a tall tree “Con la fuerza que dan el instinto y el afán de investigación” (13). This presumably civilized human being, in other words, acts purely on instinct, climbing a tree to escape danger as would many animals. But from that point forward he resumes his human pose, sitting comfortably and observing, “no solo la lenta puesta del sol sino además la vida y las costumbres de algunos animales, que comparó una y otra vez con las de los humanos” (13). Monterroso’s own instinct for satire is at its height here, as he sketches the ridiculous figure cut by a psychoanalyst perched in a tree, completely out of his element and possibly in grave danger, yet hubristically carried away by his “researcher’s zeal.”

As we watch and wait for the psychoanalyst to fall from his tree, we should not miss the meta-literary element of this initial fable—that is, the implied analogy between the psychoanalyst and the writer. As an intrepid observer of the “la vida y costumbres de algunos animales”, the psychoanalyst prefigures animal characters in *Oveja negra* like “El Búho que quería salvar a la humanidad” and “El Mono que quiso ser escritor satírico”. Gloria González Zenteno argues, in fact, that the entire collection can be read as a meditation on the craft of the writer, in particular the satirist. In this view, the psychoanalyst’s antics suggest “la existencia atribulada del *escritor* como creador de complejos estéticos de lenguaje y de mundos ficticios cuya originalidad y valor son cuestionables” (1998, 512). Set against the backdrop of the traditional moralizing fable, Monterroso’s tale reveals a process of demythification of the fable mode itself. If there is a moral here, it is only that the writer-storyteller cannot save, or change, or even comprehend humanity. He can only encourage us to smile (with compassion) on those who believe they can.

Romantic Rodents and Grieving Owls

Augusto Monterroso, who claimed that the best way to approach a modern fable is not looking for a lesson, but for a laugh, would have found more than enough to laugh at in David Sedaris's 2010 *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary*. In contrast to Monterroso's intellectualized humor, the comical element in Sedaris is grittier, more likely to produce a laugh-out-loud reaction from the reader—although this reaction is often offset by a sense of poignancy or discomfort. The tension between the risible and the dreadful is a characteristic of Sedaris's work both before and after *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*, but his use of partially anthropomorphized animal characters provides a singularly effective means of commenting satirically on human life.

Like other modern fables, the tales that make up this volume assiduously avoid any direct moralizing; they do, however, hold up a mirror to the reader—or, as Monterroso might have quipped, to the reader's neighbors. The Guatemalan writer once observed that since the fabulist draws on the experience of more than two thousand years, his originality lies in “mantener vivo y con decoro precisamente lo que ya ha sido dicho antes” (1992, 96). Monterroso reveals here a firm grounding in and respect for the tradition of animal fables. And although he reconfigures the form, putting his own sharply satirical stamp on it, he does not enter the territory of gleeful irreverence that Sedaris so comfortably inhabits.

Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk is a collection of sixteen tales whose titles, following a longstanding fable convention, simply name their animal protagonists, such as “The Crow and the Lamb” or “The Toad, the Turtle, and the Duck.” Although they are not the pithily compact micro-stories perfected by Monterroso, these are brief narratives, each easily readable within in a span of minutes. Whereas Monterroso is a master of the open-ended or ambiguous story, Sedaris ties his plots up neatly, often with a sudden climax and denouement that can leave the reader in a mild state of shock. Despite their relative brevity, certain stories such as “The Motherless Bear” and “The Grieving Owl” are surprisingly complex. While Monterroso often begins his tales with a nod to the ancient and the universal, using phrases such as “Había una vez”, Sedaris prefers to create settings that are identifiably Western and modern: a middle-class home, a VFW Hall, an organic farm, a pet grooming salon—and, of course, a zoo. The unwitting reader is thus drawn into a familiar human world that is immediately defamiliarized by its animal inhabitants and by the absurdity of their circumstances.

All but two of the fables in *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk* are told by a third-person narrator whose perspective shifts to accommodate that of various animal characters.

Especially in those tales featuring animals in conflict with other species, or with individuals of their own species, the shifting perspective means that the narrator—and therefore the reader—is never on very solid interpretive ground. The result can be darkly humorous, as when a crow, observing a ewe that has recently given birth, “looked from the lamb to its mother, marveling that something so cute could grow to be so shapeless and ugly” (81). In other cases, the narrator adopts an objective tone that helps the reader absorb the shock of violence or tragedy. “The Vigilant Rabbit,” for example, opens with a straightforward, almost journalistic description: “A white-tailed doe was discovered one morning disemboweled on the banks of the stream, and the residents of the forests went crazy with fear—‘freaked out’ was how the sparrow put it. A few days later, a skunk was found, no more than a gnawed-upon skull attached to a short leash of spine” (101). The flat tone corresponding to the passive voice (“was discovered,” “was found”) offsets the graphic descriptions of the animal carcasses, as well as the suggestion of intense emotion on the part of the witnesses (“freaked out”). The reader, like someone casually observing the photographs of a grisly crime scene, is suspended somewhere between intrigue and horror.

The two fables in which a first-person narrator tells his own story, “The Faithful Setter” and “The Grieving Owl,” are also the longest of the collection. In both cases, the first-person point of view allows Sedaris to develop the animal narrator as a somewhat complex character. Since both the setter and the owl present themselves as trustworthy and likeable, the reader naturally sympathizes with them and is led to view the other animal characters with a degree of distrust or disdain. The setter, for instance, opens his story by lamenting the propensity of his mixed-breed “wife” to use vulgarities. “I attribute my wife’s language to the fact that she’s one-quarter spaniel,” he tells us. “She says she’s only an eighth, but come on, the ears say it all. That and her mouth. Still, though, I can’t help but love her—forgave her even after she cheated” (62). In this short monologue we are led to believe that the female of the pair is foul-mouthed, smug, and unfaithful, while the male with whom we sympathize is long-suffering and generous of spirit.

Over the course of the story, however, our sympathies are brought into question as the “faithful” dog-husband recounts an extramarital tryst, which he justifies by the fact that he is “sent to service a female,” clarifying that “The act itself—it’s hard to think of it as sex—lasted no more than a minute” (68). After mentioning the fourth spontaneous mating with this anonymous but attractive female, the narrator once again justifies his motives: “Some might define this as cheating but I just call it being

thorough” (70). Taking into consideration various narrators in the mixed-genre books preceding *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*, Kevin Kopelson remarks that “Whereas Sedaris, in the nonfiction, ridicules himself on purpose, all such narrators in the fiction do so by accident” (2007, 33). The character of the not-so-faithful setter is a perfect example, then, of the ironic strategy by which the narrative voice remains unaware of his impulses even as he reveals them to the reader. Beyond the laughs occasioned by this “accidental” self-revelation, the dog’s confession demonstrates how Sedaris’s experiments with first-person animal voices can move his characters well beyond the stock types that populate the traditional beast fable. At the same time, they challenge reader expectations, leaving us laughing at our own preconceptions—as we learn, for instance, that the lovable setter is a bit of a manipulative rogue.

Although the first- or third-person narrators establish the comical tone of *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*, it is direct dialogue that generates the greatest degree of humor. Whereas Monterroso limits dialogue to maximize the open-ended nature of his fables, Sedaris allows the dialogue to flow, reveling in the unpredictability that often characterizes human conversation. The initial story of the collection, for instance, features a cat who visits a baboon for professional grooming before attending a party. The conversation that ensues eerily evokes one that might be overheard at any beauty salon, as the baboon gossips about her other creature-clients:

“... Take this wedding I went to—last Saturday I think it was. Couple of marsh rabbits got married—you probably heard about it.”

The cat nodded.

“Now, I like a church service, but this was one of those write-your-own vows sorts of things. Neither of them had ever picked up a pen in their life, but all of a sudden they’re poets, right, like that’s all it takes—being in love.”

“My husband and I wrote our own vows,” the cat said defensively.

“Sure you did,” countered the baboon, “but you probably had something to say, not like these marsh rabbits, carrying on that their love was like a tender sapling or some damn thing. And all the while they had this squirrel off to the side, plucking at a harp, I think it was.”

“I had a harp player at my wedding,” the cat said, “and it was lovely.”

“I bet it was, but you probably hired a professional, someone who could really play. This squirrel, I don’t think she’d taken a lesson in her life. Just clawed at those strings, almost like she was mad at them.”

“Well, I’m sure she tried her best,” the cat said.

The baboon nodded and smiled, the way one must in the service industry. (4-5)

Scarcely interrupted by the narrator, this conversation takes on a life of its own, gradually revealing the interlocutors’ respective personalities and concerns. More than

a conversation it is a dance, or a game with offensive and defensive strategies, and as such reminds the reader of similar real-world verbal exchanges. No matter what social situation he sketches with his animal characters, Sedaris achieves dynamism through fast-moving dialogue that is simultaneously straightforward and full of innuendo.

The human attitudes or behaviors satirized in this collection through narrative voice and dialogue are more narrowly focused than those of either the traditional beast fable or the tales of Monterroso's *Oveja negra* tales. While the seven deadly sins might underlie the stories told, we also witness very contemporary human foibles and outright iniquities, ones that the reader is likely to confront—or exhibit—in everyday life. Among the less serious peccadillos that are comically treated in these tales are gossip-mongering, fat-shaming, theatrical self-pity, sophomoric attitudes, inane answers to children's difficult questions, and the propensity of pet owners to attribute human emotions to their pets. On the heavier end of the ethical scale, Sedaris's animal characters can also express sadism, racism, homophobia, and the arbitrary exercise of power. They are equally capable of violence and of disturbingly naïve responses to violence.

This last concern is the focal point of "The Migrating Warblers," a story that satirizes those well-heeled seasonal U.S. travelers known as *snowbirds*. The joke that frames the story is the metaphor itself: the "snowbirds" of the story are literally birds that migrate, but the birds display attitudes and behaviors associated with this class of seasonally migrating humans. The female warbler who narrates this story, after complaining to her Northern friends that she experiences severe indigestion every time she flies south over the Texas border, expresses indignation that none of "those Spanish-speaking birds have bothered learning English" (10). It is the culturally arrogant narrative voice that captures our attention from this point forward. "The Migrating Warblers" is a story about telling stories, particularly those that tourists tell about their visits to poor countries—in this case, notably, Monterroso's own native Guatemala.

At the heart of the tale is a misunderstanding that begins with the warbler's attempt at formulating a question in Spanish:

"Like one time I asked this little Guatemalan bird, I said, '*Don day est tass las gran days mose cass de cab eyza?*'" Receiving admiring looks from her listeners for her linguistic prowess, she then goes on to explain: "I thought I'd asked where all the big horseflies were. A reasonable question, only instead of *cob ayo*, which is 'horse', I said *cab eyza*. So what I really asked was 'Where are all the big *head flies?*'" (10-11)

Readers who find themselves smiling at this mistake, perhaps recognizing in it some of our own second-language blunders, are hardly prepared for what comes next: “So the Guatemalan bird makes a motion for me to follow him through the thicket. I do, and there in this field are, like three hundred heads rotting in the afternoon sun” (11). What follows is a graphic description of the decapitated human heads, after which the bird launches into another amusing anecdote. Rather than registering anything like the horror the reader feels at the description of a wall of rotting heads, the overall narrator remarks that, “The listeners would crack up, and the warblers, husband and wife, would enjoy the sensation of having an audience right where they wanted them. This was the reward for spending three months in an inferior country” (12).

I have considered this particular story at some length because it reflects, perhaps more than any other, the contemporary nature of the critiques represented by Sedaris’s animal allegories, as well the powerful effects he achieves through the deft manipulation of colloquial dialogue. In “The Migrating Warblers,” the gap between the visual horror of the scene recounted and the jocular tone of the story-within-a-story leaves the reader with an acute sense of unease. Furthermore, the birds’ failure to perceive their own cultural biases creates in us a jolt of self-recognition. The tale ends with the principal narrator commenting that, “The warblers would then explain that despite the incompetence, despite the language barriers and the severed heads, Central America was, in its own way, beautiful. ‘And cheap,’ they would add. ‘Cheap, cheap, cheap’” (13). At this point, Sedaris has his own audience, like the warbler wife, “right where [he] wanted them” (12). We acknowledge the parallels, we chuckle, and we squirm.

Earlier in this essay I considered how Monterroso alters the technique of conventional allegory by blurring the boundaries between the animal and human realms. Sedaris employs the same technique in *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*: his animals are anthropomorphized, but they simultaneously occupy a sphere appropriate to their species. Stated differently, instead of animals speaking as humans, in both writers the characters are animals speaking as animals that also, uncannily, speak and experience life as humans. Neither Monterroso nor Sedaris attempts to explain the irrationality inherent in the narrative situation that ensues. The hippopotamus of Sedaris’s story “The Grieving Owl,” for instance, relates to the curious owl how she was unsuccessfully bred in the zoo: “For a while last year they brought in a male, trucked him over from some wildlife center in the hopes we’d get it on and have a baby, but the pregnancy didn’t happen, which was fine by me. It’s not that I don’t want kids, I just don’t want

them *now*, if you get what I'm saying" (148). This is a caged animal whose reproductive life is controlled by zoo administrators, and yet her final comment corresponds exclusively to a human female faced with a choice about pregnancy and child rearing. Are we listening, then, to a caged hippopotamus or to a woman? What effect does this lack of differentiation have on our sense of the story?

One unique way in which Sedaris explores these complexities is by imagining how animals—*as animals*—might regard human life, a consideration found neither in the traditional animal fable nor in Monterroso. Rather than the psychoanalyst taking notes on the jungle animals from his treetop perch, Sedaris creates animal characters that look with curiosity, disdain, or even disgust on human behavior. This technique creates a comical distance that calls human values into question, placing the mirror at an odd angle before us. Perhaps the most striking example of this technique occurs at the end of the previously mentioned "The Faithful Setter," a story that also demonstrates Sedaris's gift for dark humor. Heading home after his siring task is accomplished, the setter accompanies his owner when they stop to watch a large house burning to the ground. Bystanders look on as the homeowner caresses and kisses her dachshund. The dog finally breaks free of the woman's grasp and runs over to talk with the setter, confessing to his fellow-dog that

he was the single thing this woman had reached for when she smelled the smoke and realized that her house was on fire. "Which is nice and everything," the dachshund said, "but she's got a teenage son in there." He gestured toward a second-floor window with black smoke pouring out of it. "He and his mother were constantly at each other's throats, but he was always nice to me, poor kid." (72)

The dachshund's sympathetic but offhanded comment about a boy who is burning to death because of his mother's negligence—indeed, because of her preference for the dog—may momentarily divert the reader's attention from the horror of the event. And yet, as in the breezy anecdote about the rotting heads in a Guatemalan field, we find ourselves more profoundly disturbed because the reality of the scene strikes us indirectly, in an *Aha!* moment for which the story has not prepared us. Ironically, the "nice and everything" framing of the dogs' conversation only serves to intensify the disquiet we feel.

Although Sedaris often satirizes the bourgeois tendency to care excessively for pets, as in the story just cited, he uses the fable mode even more effectively to reflect on the suffering of animals at the hands of humans. There is no better example of this than "The Motherless Bear," which develops a protracted satire on those afflicted with

self-pity. In this tale a newly orphaned bear recounts the story of her mother's death to anyone who will listen, conjuring tears whenever possible. But with time the expression of grief proves more and more difficult, "and so she took to covering her face with her paws and doing a jerky thing with her shoulders" (30). Wandering in search of new listeners for her sad tale, the bear comes to the outskirts of a village:

Peering through a gap in a thick hedge, she saw a crowd of humans standing with their backs to her. They seemed to be regarding something that stood in a clearing, and when one of them shifted position, she saw that it was a bear, a male, though it took a moment to realize it, as he was wearing a skirt and a tall, cone-shaped hat topped with a satin scarf. The male bear's mouth was muzzled with leather straps and connected to a leash, which was alternately held and yanked by a man in a dirty cape. (34)

Three important things happen here. First, the reader's amusement at the melodramatic female bear is suddenly cut short as the focus shifts to a different bear, one with an authentically tragic story. Second, the cause of grief (hers or ours) shifts from the mother bear's natural death to another animal's cruel treatment by a human being. Third, the narrative perspective is altered with a sort of "zoom-out" technique. Instead of simply watching the histrionic orphaned bear, the reader is now watching this bear watch the "crowd of humans" who watch the circus bear. Our superficial engagement in a story that satirizes the act of performing grief intensifies as we witness a living creature being mistreated at the hands of a man, while other men, women, and children look on in amusement. All at once, the very act of looking on in amusement (theirs and ours) becomes suspect.

The narrative lingers on the idea of *spectacle* involving animal abuse. A boy helping the man in the dirty cape plays a drum as the male bear stands on his hind legs and dances. "Faster' called a soldier at the front of the crowd, and the boy quickened his beat. The male bear struggled to keep up, and when he tripped over the hem of his skirt, the man pulled out a stick and beat him across the face until his nose bled. This made the people laugh, and a few of them threw coins, which the drummer collected before moving on to his next song" (35). The narrator informs us almost impassively of the sadistic reactions of the viewers ("This made the people laugh") as the bear is forced to perform an utterly unnatural and uncomfortable act. The universalized setting of this scene—in a forest clearing, devoid of any specific temporal or spatial markers—invites us to associate this particular performance with the vast history of animals being exploited for human entertainment. As the action advances, the female bear learns that the dancing bear wears a muzzle only to make him appear dangerous, since the man

had previously hammered out his teeth with a rock. This visual and tactile detail, like that of the skirt and cone-shaped hat, reinforces the fact that the male bear has been removed from his natural state only to serve the purposes of human spectacle.

What happens to traditional animal allegory here? In a story such as “The Motherless Bear,” Sedaris utterly radicalizes the conventions of the beast fable. While there are animals that act and speak as humans, it is not these animals but the human characters in their role *as humans* that form the moral crux of the story. In this case, the theatrical self-pity of the motherless bear pales in comparison with the abuse by the showman. Furthermore, the relatively simple plot is layered with complexity as the motif of spectacle is introduced. If as readers we find the female bear’s behavior laughable, where do we stand in relation to the crowd that applauded the dancing bear and then “went home to their suppers” (35)? Watching those watchers of the cruel spectacle, do we become complicit in the scene? As Wallace remarks, Sedaris’s writing “puts both himself as author and his readers into a relationship of responsibility that can be usefully examined in the service of deconstructing the usual conceptions of Truth and morality” (2011, 163).

Beyond the thematics concerning captive animals, Sedaris’s tales may even prompt us to ask if there is a connection between the literary representation of animals for the purpose of satirizing human behavior—which is the basic function of the beast fable—and the use of animals for other human purposes. In other words, when the writer creates animal characters solely as a means to examine the human condition, might this already point to a compromised concern with animals-as-such?

Conclusion: Why Animals?

The beasts in both *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* and *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk* are undoubtedly anthropomorphized: they speak and act as if they were humans, highlighting the principal feature of the animal fable. The anthropomorphic convention implies a coded reading by which the reader assumes that the textual animals are merely clever and memorable *faux*-people, performing particular human traits. However, to recall one of Monterroso’s favorite phrases, “*las cosas no son tan simples*” (2007, 59). One of the primary rhetorical strategies of both authors, as we have seen, is to dissolve the apparent boundaries between animal and human, so that the codes become confused. Monterroso’s reformist owl and his monkey with writerly ambitions, Sedaris’s unfaithful setter and seasonal tourist warblers: these and numerous other animal characters reflect a seamless overlap with the human world. By introducing this

fundamental ambiguity, both writers invite skepticism regarding any totalizing norms of truth or moral right. They suggest that the allegorical representation of animals cannot teach us much about ourselves, except that virtue and vice, beastliness and humanity, are not clearly distinguishable categories.

In addition to dismantling conventional allegorical structures, both Monterroso and Sedaris expand and complicate the workings of the beast fable in ways that can be meaningful for the contemporary reader. We have seen how the stories of *Oveja negra* work to fracture readers' ossified conceptions of the animals they encounter in literature or in daily life. The thinking animals that speak to us from these pages encourage the reader to be suspicious of received knowledge—about animals and about the world we share with them. From this initial premise emerges the conviction that not only animals as a general category, but also the relationships among animals, and between animals and humans, are always subject to imaginative rethinking. Dispensing with the direct moralizing approach, the satirical and ludic nature of Monterroso's fables provides a particularly effective vehicle for this rethinking.

Whereas Monterroso's play with the fable form is intellectualized, detached in attitude, and minimalist in form, Sedaris's tends to be more visceral, graphic, and expansive. Monterroso's third-person narrator speaks from a dispassionate but ironic point of view, while Sedaris relies on disquieting dialogue and first-person narrative. Both authors develop their anthropomorphized characters well beyond (or aslant from) the stock types provided by the classical fable. But whereas Monterroso works mostly with abstracted or ideal types, Sedaris uses blunt colloquial discourse to create characters that are quirky to the point of absurdity. In both cases, animals are cast as figures in which readers may recognize themselves both with laughter and with a significant degree of unease. The modern beast fable, in the hands of these two writers from the American continents, constitutes a complex anthropomorphic gesture in which animals are humans who are animals who are pompous and self-deluded, confused and sometimes cruel, and always profoundly recognizable.

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