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INSIGHTS FROM THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE:
PROVERBIAL LANGUAGE AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN
GARY LARSON'S *THE FAR SIDE*

Abstract: This paper examines proverbs in the work of the popular cartoonist Gary Larson, creator of the daily panel *The Far Side*. It looks particularly at Larson's use of the literalized metaphor as a way to suggest reversed hierarchies and thus open the way for social criticism. In this way, it suggests a connection between Larson's work and the centuries-old tradition of World Upside-Down art, which also featured literalized proverbs. It recognizes, however, that such cartoons frequently inhabit the border between sense and nonsense, making outright social criticism less likely than a general lampooning of social norms and ideals. Through close analysis of many *Far Side* cartoons, it reveals many of Larson's intertextual strategies, and concludes that Larson is arguably one of the greatest proverb illustrators of all time. An index of proverbs and proverbial phrases in *The Far Side* is included.

Keywords: Animals, art, cartoons, iconography, intertextuality, language play, literalized proverbs, metaphor, nonsense, world upside-down.

As I have tried to show in previous papers, popular culture genres such as the film (Winick 2013) and the advertisement (Winick 2011) exploit the proverb's inherent potential for manipulating intertextual gaps. Now, let us turn our attention to a cartoonist who is a master at playing with these gaps: Gary Larson, creator of the popular and unusual daily cartoon panel *The Far Side*.[1] Like the advertisements and films I've discussed before, Larson's cartoons exploit the inevitable ambiguities that arise when proverbs are spoken. More than this, he uses these ambiguities to create a complex mix of nonsense and social commentary.

Larson differs from film and ad writers in several important respects. One is his concentration above all on one specific ambiguity, one specific semantic gap, to create most of his proverb

cartoons: he relies on the literalization of metaphor. Larson's typical proverbial cartoon is a more-or-less "straight" picture of the proverb as a literal event occurring in the world. Examples of this type of cartoon in the *Far Side* oeuvre include the following comedic riffs on proverbs:

> Time is money (Larson 1986:33): Einstein proves that, mathematically and physically, time and money are the same. [Figure 1]

> Shoot first, ask questions later (Larson 1986:13): a gunslinger, after killing his opponent, begins interrogating him with trivia questions.

> The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing (Larson 1993:138): while Stuart's left hand juggles innocently, his right hand composes a memo vowing to destroy it.

> Laughter is the best medicine (Larson 1986:174): a group of doctors gather around a patient, pointing at him and laughing. They are attempting to cure him by the application of laughter.

> Damned if you do, damned if you don't (Larson 1986: 152): the Devil offers an inmate of hell a choice of two doors. One is marked "Damned if you do," the other "damned if you don't."

> When the cat's away, the mice will play (Larson 1986:183): a group of mice are hard at work on various projects, until one of them points out that the cat is away.

> Every dog has his day (Larson 1986:44): a ticker-tape parade is thrown for Rex.

Larson also offers similar takes on many proverbial phrases:

> To be only half-baked (Larson 1986:73): God takes the Earth out of his oven, but decides it is "only half-baked."

> To have a brush with death (Larson 1986:130): On a crowded corner, Irwin is accidentally jostled by the Grim Reaper.

Einstein discovers that time is actually money.

Figure 1

Not to know which way is up (Larson 1986:162): A professor attempts to explain the concepts of "top" and "bottom" to his class.

Another mouth to feed (Larson 1988:23): The speaker is distressed to find that he has grown a second mouth, and will now have to feed it.

To go to hell and back (Larson 1984:174): a couple's vacation slides include Helen posing with the Devil.

Cartoons like these are part of a long-standing tradition going back to medieval times of artists doing relatively simple literal illustrations of proverbs. Wolfgang Mieder (1987:119-126) has documented this tradition extensively, and shows it to span five centuries of art, from simple drawings and woodcuts, to Pieter Bruegel's magnificent painting *The Netherlandish Proverbs,* and beyond to many modern cartoonists and illustrators (Mieder and Sobieski 1999; Mieder 2004). Interestingly, the early examples of this genre were often included under the rubric of "De Ver-keerde Wereld," "Le Monde à l'Envers" or "The World Upside-Down," although David Kunzle (1978:71) believes proverb illustrations to be essentially a separate genre. Later in this chapter I will suggest some reasons why the literalized proverb might be included in the World Upside-Down type along with more obviously subversive drawings. In contrast to the scholarly attitude toward World Upside-Down, however, most proverb scholars treat humorous literal proverb illustrations like Larson's as a somewhat obvious, uninteresting, or meaningless use of the proverb. For example, in studying innovative proverb cartoons, Mieder has written:

Often, the cartoonist simply draws a humorous sketch of the literally interpreted expression.... But the images and captions of more serious cartoons depict in a satirical tone the wide range of problems of modern life (Mieder 1987:124).

Although in this passage Mieder implies that the simple act of literalizing the proverb is a less radical move than what occurs in other cartoons, he certainly realizes that these literal proverb illustrations can range from the funny to the satirical and even the

downright grotesque; making a proverb literal may be the first step in making it strange, in truly innovating in the use of a proverb. This in turn can be the first step toward a new critical interpretation of the proverb that does touch on the problems of life.

Proverbial Ambiguity, Metaphor and Nonsense

As many writers have pointed out, there are various forms of ambiguity, or "denotative indefiniteness," that are inherent in many proverbs, and clever writers can exploit these to great effect. Proverbs that contain pronouns are always ambiguous; it is always theoretically possible that the pronoun is replacing something totally unexpected.[2] In a previous paper (Winick 2011) I discussed ads that used "when it rains, it pours" and "use it or lose it," for example, which both took advantage of the ambiguity of "it." Proverbs can also be ambiguous because they contain individually ambiguous nouns, verbs or adjectives; "leave not the mark of the pot upon the ashes" suggests very different meanings depending on whether "pot" refers to a cooking vessel or to marijuana!

These types of ambiguity also affect many sentences that are not proverbs; since all words are echoes of previous utterances, and contain an accretion of multiple meanings, all discourse is ambiguous to some degree. However, proverbs are particularly likely to be ambiguous because they so often use analogy or metaphor to achieve the generality necessary to apply to a wide range of concrete situations. This type of ambiguity, labeled "analogic ambiguity," has been studied at length by Michael Lieber (1984). Lieber is mainly concerned to show that, since the proverb is an inherently ambiguous genre, the proverb's ability to disambiguate situations constitutes a paradox. But there are other consequences, even other paradoxes, arising from analogic ambiguity. One paradox in particular is important for our purposes: in many cultures proverbial statements are seen as the embodiment of pure common sense, but as metaphorical tropes, proverbs and proverbial expressions always teeter on the edge of pure nonsense. For example, when I say "the pot calls the kettle black," I use the rhetorical trope of personification, asserting that cooking vessels can speak. This is clearly a nonsensical suggestion, but paradoxically I can say this proverb in a way that makes such perfect sense it seems self-evidently true.

This dynamic between sense and nonsense is part and parcel of the proverb's metaphorical and rhetorical nature. The essence of metaphor is a comparison between things that do not seem alike at first, but the operation of metaphor frequently obfuscates the fact that an analogic comparison is even taking place; as Walker Percy (1958:81) points out, a metaphor baldly "asserts of one thing that it is something else." For example, "Barry's a real workhorse" doesn't tell us that Barry is *like* a workhorse, which would make the sentence clearly comparative. It rather tells us that he *is* one, in much the same way it might tell us that he is a carpenter. Thus, this traditional metaphor *seems* to assert that the two unlike entities (Barry and a horse) are actually the same, resulting in the kind of nonsense that Rudolf Carnap (1955:47) calls "conceptually absurd." One useful explanation of this process is offered by Dorothy Mack. She posits an underlying "deep structure" of comparison from which items are "deleted" to form the surface structure of metaphor. Hence, the statements "Sarah is as fast as a gazelle," "Sarah is like a gazelle" and "Sarah's a real gazelle" may all have the same deep structure of arguments and predicates, namely:
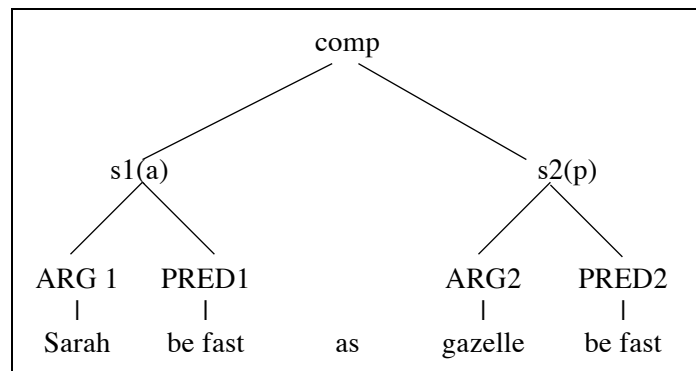
Comparative Structure of Metaphor (cf. Mack 1975:241)

In the first instance, only one term (the second "be fast") is deleted from the surface structure, and this is only due to everyday grammar making it implied when not stated. In the second in-

stance, the term "be fast" is deleted altogether, while in the third, the term "be fast" and the comparative marker are deleted.

The important thing, as regards both analogic ambiguity and the potential for nonsense, is that the deep structure is not entirely recoverable from the surface structure. As Mack (1975:241) puts it, "deleted compared Predicates or Manner items create ... a multiplicity of possible meanings." "She's a real gazelle" is a possible surface structure for any number of complex analogies from which the other terms have been deleted. Thus to say someone is a "gazelle" can mean that she is fast, delicate, nervous, that she eats grass, etc. (see Mack, 1975:241-242 for examples). This is the essence of analogic ambiguity.[3]

Obviously, the inherent ambiguity of metaphorical language can affect proverbial utterances that employ metaphors. Theoretically, the utterance "my aunt Jenny is a mother hen" can mean anything from "my aunt Jenny acts toward people the way a mother hen acts toward her chicks" (the conventional, proverbial meaning) to "my aunt Jenny is actually a chicken," with no change at all in surface structure. A perfectly sensible proverbial phrase and a perfectly nonsensical utterance have the exact same surface structure and are indistinguishable as isolated utterances.

This explains how proverbs come so close to being nonsense; as metaphors, they always flirt with the edge of sense. How, then, do they come to embody common sense? For most of us in most situations, some manner of context allows us to resolve the analogic ambiguity and interpret the metaphor properly. As Susan Stewart has written:

> Metaphor is rescued from nonsense by contextualization. Thus in everyday life and the fictions of realism, which share a certain set of interpretive procedures directed towards situational contexts, a metaphorical expression like 'he thought that the sun rose and set on her' makes perfect common sense.... Metaphors make "common sense" so long as they are taken as metaphors and contextualized as such. (Stewart 1980:35)

In the same way, it is the context—either the direct situational context or, more often, the general cultural context—that allows us to decode common proverbs and proverbial phrases. We know what qualities of a "mother hen" somebody possesses because

the culture around us has pre-selected certain possible meanings of a metaphor as traditional. In the case of old, canonical proverbs, each metaphor has one or more traditional proverbial meanings; what we have referred to as the "standard" or "social" meanings. These contextualized meanings serve to resolve analogic ambiguity through intertextuality, by suggesting what the proverb has meant in the past.[4]

The importance of intertextuality to metaphorical folk speech goes beyond this, however. For Kristeva, intertextuality is a dialogic interaction not between subjects but between texts (Kristeva 1980:66) or sign systems (Kristeva 1974:59-60). Susan Stewart (1980:15) uses intertextuality to mean an interaction between different "universes of discourse," which would seem to be quite similar to Kristeva's "sign systems." It will be seen, then, that proverbial metaphor is itself a kind of intertextuality, in which two different universes of discourse are brought together in comparison. One of the most complete theories of metaphor that has been elaborated in the context of proverb studies is Seitel's formulation, whose distilled essence is that "metaphor in the most general sense is the relationship which obtains between entities of separate domains by virtue of the relationships each has with entities in its own domain" (Seitel 1972:29). Seitel believes that all proverbs are metaphorical, and that non-metaphorical statements like "where there's a will, there's a way" are aphorisms or apothegms, not proverbs. Under this system of proverbiality, making the proverb literal threatens its very nature as a proverb.[5]

Seitel argues that proverb utterances manifest a complex semiotic structure and entail the co-presence of three different "situations." The "proverb situation" is the situation verbally described in the proverb—someone counting chickens before they are hatched or looking before leaping. The "context situation" is the situation to which the proverb refers, i.e., James hiring a contractor before his home improvement loan comes through or Martha deciding on a business venture without first examining her finances. The "interaction situation" is the concrete situation of human interaction in which the proverb is used, i.e. Stan warning James about the potential danger of his actions, or Mike telling Alan about Martha's foolishness.

The way proverbs work, in Seitel's theory, is by drawing an analogy between the proverb situation and the context situation; this is the proverb's metaphor. Thus, doing something without first thinking of the consequences is like leaping without looking, and making plans based on future events is like counting chickens before they are hatched. Note that Seitel sees as central to proverbial metaphor the idea of comparison, essentially agreeing with Mack and other "metaphor as simile" (Basso 1976:96) theorists. Indeed, Seitel argues that, in the "average" or "normative" proverb utterance, "the speaker asserts that the relationship between things in the proverb situation is analogous to the relationship between things in the context situation" (Seitel 1972:147).

The main problem with Seitel's theory of the proverb is that it does not take into account the fact that proverbs can have general metaphorical meanings that are socially shared and independent of context. This is consistent with his position as a proponent of the ethnography of speaking, which would tend to foreground the meaning of the proverb in specific interactional situations. However, Seitel does recognize elsewhere that proverbs embody core meanings, particularly when he quotes Kenneth Burke (1957:296-297) to the effect that "proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations. Insofar as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them." Given that he recognizes that the proverb contains an analogic meaning independent of a given context situation—pertaining instead to the level of "recurrent, typical" situations, or abstractions of real-life events—it is problematic that this is not represented in his analogic model.

This problem was solved by another proverb theory based on analogy, this one advanced by Pierre Crépeau. For Crépeau (1975:288), the first analogy obtains between what he calls the "denotative and connotative planes" of the proverb's meaning. The denotative plane is the plane of what the proverb literally says, while the connotative plane is the plane of the socially shared meaning of the proverb. Thus, for the proverb "where there's smoke, there's fire" the denotative plane is the plane of smoke and fire, the connotative plane is the plane of rumor and basis in fact, and the analogy can be expressed as:

smoke:fire::rumor:basis in fact

where the "analogic key" is one of dependence of the second term on the first. Out of this "double articulation" (i.e. denotative and connotative), Crépeau argues, comes a "general idea" of the proverb, which is an abstraction of the proverb's meaning. This "general idea" is then applied to various real-life situations, by the application of another analogic leap. "All of the art of the proverb is here," he writes. "Proverbial creativity manifests itself above all in the perception of new situational contexts adapted to the utterance" (Crépeau 1975:297; my translation). In Crépeau's theory, then, the proverb situation and the context situation are related by a double leap of analogy; the proverb's traditional analogy and the extension of that analogy to include a given real-life situation.[6] Crépeau's way of explaining the proverb is more felicitous in this regard. Obviously, proverbs often do have one or more cores of traditional meaning, or Crépeau could not articulate the meaning of "where there's smoke, there's fire" without reference to a specific context situation. Indeed, the fact that proverbs "name recurrent situations," which has been noted by many proverb scholars, implies that they really name recurrent *abstract* situations (since no concrete situation is ever recurrent, at least not in linear time), and thus manifest a "general idea," which is exactly what Crépeau claims.

What Crépeau's model makes clear is that the process of interpreting a proverb is a complex one, more complex even than Seitel's model suggests; the reader is called upon to make several interpretive leaps. The speaker must see a situation in the real world, recognize it as a special case of a recurrent abstract situation, and call to mind (or invent) the cultural name for that situation, its proverb. The hearer must understand the proverb to be metaphorical, must be familiar with the recurrent abstract situation to which it refers, and must recognize how the situation being commented upon can profitably be viewed as a specific instance of that general situation. For this reason, proverbs are particularly demanding as a dialogic and intertextual activity.

Gary Larson is quite aware of this complexity and the potential for error inherent in moments of proverbial performance. In "Simmons has lost his marbles" (Larson 1993:142), Larson takes a quirkily analytical perspective, showing what can happen when

an utterance that is meant metaphorically gets taken literally. In this cartoon, Mr. Wagner, the boss at Ace Marbles, Inc., bursts from the office when he hears the cry, "Simmons has lost his marbles!" Obviously, Mr. Wagner means to admonish Simmons for losing company property. Instead he is shot, because the cry was metaphorical; Simmons has gone insane ("'lost his marbles"), and is standing in the hallway with a rifle picking off his fellow employees. Unfortunately for Mr. Wagner, the general cultural context, in which "marbles" is a metaphor for "mind," was overshadowed by his occupational context, in which "marbles" were a commodity handled by employees. This cartoon demonstrates the potential for both silly and serious consequences of the kinds of miscommunication that traditional metaphors make at least theoretically possible.

Since the process of creating and interpreting proverbial utterances is so complex, Larson's cartoons, and others that "literalize" metaphors or concentrate on their material strata, have a strong effect on readers; they collapse the entire structure of analogy and comparison that readers expect to undergo, pulling the proverbial rug out from under them. In a cartoon where chickens are counted before they are hatched (Larson 1986:176), or one in which someone shoots his opponent and then asks him questions (Larson 1986:13), the proverb situation and the context situation are shown to be identical. It is therefore unnecessary to refer to any general idea or to interpret the proverb in light of a complex analogy drawn among the three situations. However, the reader is still left with the cultural reflex of that interpretation, and the humor results in the conflict between what should be strongly metaphorical but is in fact merely referential.

Indeed, the tendency toward an intertextual interpretation of the proverb is not eliminated by making the proverb literal; it is intensified. The hearer must recognize what the usual course of interpretation would be—she must recognize the proverb as being a metaphor and understand what that metaphor means. At the same time, she must recognize that that course of interpretation is inapplicable to this specific situation. This causes a collision of different processes of intertextual interpretation. As Stewart (1980:37) has noted:

> The "literalizing" of metaphor in nonsense ... can be seen as the clash of two levels of abstraction, as an intertextual contradiction. Much humor derives from such intertextual contradictions, from the collision of two or more universes of discourse, and the humor of nonsense often comes from the contradictions that arise when the abstract and systematic nature of discourse is brought to the fore.

Like Stewart, Seitel employs the concept of "foregrounding" in discussing metaphor. Seitel in turn takes the concept from Bohuslav Hravanek, who defined foregrounding as "the use of the devices of a language in such a way that this use itself is perceived as uncommon ... such as a live poetic metaphor" (Hravanek 1955; quoted in Seitel 1978:49). It is interesting that Hravanek singles out the "live" metaphor as an example of foregrounding. Canonical proverbs and proverbial expressions, by reason of their familiarity, are for the most part dead metaphors. In other words, they are familiar enough that they do not call to mind a vivid image. When I say that something is "quick as a wink" or "straight as an arrow" or call someone a "mother hen" or a "workhorse," or admonish someone to "look before you leap," I do not call up a vivid image for most speakers of English. For this reason, the proverb will often not be understood as "uncommon." Thus, it is incorrect to say (as Seitel, incidentally, says) that the metaphors embodied in proverbial speech are producing a strong foregrounding effect in most situations.

Dorothy Mack has also pointed this out, in different terms. In her analysis, dead metaphors, including proverbs and proverbial phrases, constitute "shortcuts," in that they function to convey information in a pre-formulated way. *"dead as a doornail* is *really dead,"* she writes, "and if a hearer gets distracted into thinking about *doornails*, the speaker has failed in his intentions" (Mack 1975:244). Similarly, we might add that "curiosity killed the cat" is a shortcut, and if the hearer feels sad about the death of the cat, then communication has probably gone awry. Mack contrasts these shortcuts with what she calls "freshcuts," which are new metaphors. A freshcut provides a vivid image, and "forces the hearer to become involved in active interpretation, to find meanings, and to accept or reject [them]" (Mack 1975:245).

In what we think of as its normative contexts, the tried and true proverb or proverbial phrase is a shortcut. Literalization in a cartoon, however, transforms it into a freshcut. What would ordinarily be a quick figure of speech is in this context a visual image that encourages the reader to look for meanings. Literalization breathes new life into the proverb's metaphor and gives it a new, unusual meaning. Literalization enhances the proverb's ability to foreground, rescuing the metaphor and making it vivid again. For this reason, literalized proverbs in cartoons can color our interpretation of the proverbs involved for years to come.

Intertextuality, Meaning, and **The Far Side***'s Proverb Cartoons*

Although in some senses the cartoons I described near the start of this paper are simple, they do involve the reader in a number of different layers of intertextual interpretation, which allows them to develop complex nuances of meaning. For example, most of Larson's cartoons contain a picture and a caption, neither of which would make much sense without the other; the relationship of caption to drawing must be negotiated by the reader. This relationship becomes especially important to Larson's proverb cartoons when the proverb, or some version of it, is the caption. In these cases, the drawing is a "context" in which the proverb might humorously be employed.

In "Hanging by a Thread," (Larson 1986:67) a woman has fallen out the 49th floor window of a sewing supply company and is literally hanging by a single sewing thread while her co-worker calls for help. "You better hurry," the colleague explains, "she's hanging by a thread!" In "Curiosity Killed these Cats," (Larson 1986:167) police are investigating a grisly scene in which dead cats lie strewn around a laboratory, having apparently died while in the midst of complex investigations into the nature of the universe. "Notice all the computations, theoretical scribblings, and lab equipment, Norm," the hardboiled detective says. "Yes, curiosity killed these cats." [Figure 2]

In both of these cartoons, and many more like them, Larson writes the proverb or proverbial phrase into the caption and illustrates it in literal terms. In other words, the proverb is shown in an environment where the proverb situation and the context situation are identical.[7] As I explained above, the humor derives

"Notice all the computations, theoretical scribblings, and lab equipment, Norm. ... Yes, curiosity killed these cats."
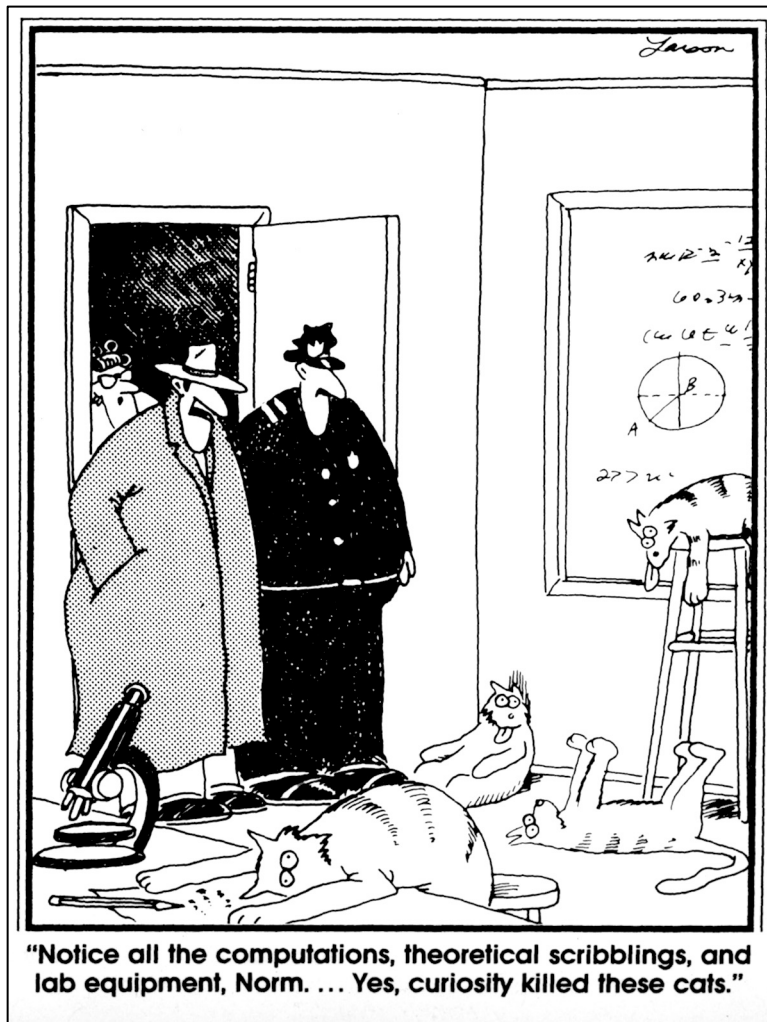
Figure 2

from the reader's negotiation of two levels of meaning: the metaphorical meaning that the proverb usually evokes, and the new, strange literal meaning.

The new meanings taken on by literalized proverbs are funny, but they also have an effect on our understandings of the proverbs they illustrate. As I said above, literalization shows us the proverb's image in a fresh and vivid way to which we are entirely unaccustomed, and this can have a lasting effect. The cartoon on "laughter is the best medicine," for example, points out ways in which laughter and medicine are *not* alike: the former must come from within, while the latter is administered from without. After seeing the spectacle of the doctors laughing at the poor sick patient, the reader is not likely to see the proverb's comparison as apt anymore. [Figure 3]

Besides decoding the relationship between the caption and the drawing, the reader of Larson's proverbial cartoons must make other contributions to meaning as well. Sometimes, not all of the words of the proverb are located in the caption; signs, letters, maps, speech balloons, books, and other writings often appear in Larson's cartoons and supply missing words. Much of the meaning of a given *Far Side* cartoon can thus come from words located outside the caption, and the reader must often contribute to putting the proverb together.

A mistake that Larson noted in his *Prehistory* of *the Far Side* makes this particularly clear. In one drawing, there is a large sign at the top identifying the building as "Acme HAYWIRE and supplies. " When an old man on the phone complains of the factory running amok and says that things are, "you know ... " he is obviously hinting at the proverbial phrase "to be (or go) haywire." However, in cropping the cartoon to fit its comics pages, Larson's hometown newspaper left out the all-important sign and made the cartoon unintelligible (Larson 1989:133). Without all the ingredients, the reader's task of text-building is sometimes impossible.

On the other hand, the proverb is sometimes left incomplete on purpose; some part of it appears, and the rest must be inferred. The reader must then draw on his or her outside knowledge of proverbs to complete the utterance and understand the cartoon. This kind of incompleteness is a normal part of proverbial usage in oral contexts. As Mieder (1993:8) has pointed out,

Figure 3

"If we want to remind someone that 'the early Bird Catches the Worm,' we might choose simply to state something like 'you know "the early bird,"' or 'Don't forget about "the early bird."'" This common behavior in oral contexts is one of the ways in which proverbs are routinely transformed into new utterances. It highlights the role of intertextuality and dialogic meaning in daily life, for, as Volosinov would point out, the listener has to make a considerable contribution to the meaning of the utterance.[8]

Larson's work combines this tradition of partial proverbs with the tradition of literalized proverbs for a host of interesting illustrations. In his cartoon on the proverb "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink," (Larson 1984:23) Larson pictures two men in a saloon, one of whom has a horse with him. His companion comments, "sure, but can you make him drink?" In this cartoon, the last part of the proverb, "you can't make him drink" has been altered into a challenge and the first part omitted, although it is suggested by the drawing. The result is that the reader has to draw on previous proverbial competence to reconstruct the proverb and get the joke. Similarly, Larson's cartoon about "Two wrongs don't make a right" (Larson 1993:107) captures a moment in time just after someone has used the proverb; "I know that," one scientist exclaims. By proving that "four wrongs squared, minus two wrongs to the fourth power, divided by this formula, *do* make a right," the scientist reveals indirectly what the proverbial utterance of his colleague must have been, but only to those of us who know the proverb. At the same time, he literalizes in reversed form the central idea of the proverb, namely that "wrongs" and "rights" do not stand in a mathematical relationship to one another, that one cannot be substituted for the other.

In some cases, piecing together the proverb and interpreting its meaning can even reveal deep and hidden truths about the proverb and the whole sign system in which it is embedded. One of Larson's most interesting creations in this regard uses one proverbial expression in the caption to comment on another that the reader must piece together from texts within the drawing. In the cartoon, a couple is driving. While her husband drives, the woman is consulting a map, across the top of which is written,

"NOWHERE." Through the windshield, we see a sign that reads "ENTERING THE MIDDLE." The woman's comment is, "well, this is just going from bad to worse" (Larson 1993: 12). [Figure 4]

As with many of his other proverb cartoons, Larson does not quote one of the proverbial phrases directly; "in the middle of nowhere" is left unsaid. Instead, Larson shows us the words "NOWHERE" and "THE MIDDLE," and the objects map and roadside sign, and the situation of a car trip, and encourages us as readers to construct the phrase from the picture. Like so many of Larson's proverb cartoons, this one is a collaborative effort; the audience has to contribute directly to its meaning, even to its existence as text.

This cartoon is most interesting, however, for the light it sheds on the phrase's meaning, and thus on the common-sense world of discourse. Normally, "in the middle of nowhere" is a proverbial phrase that simply means "isolated." Here, however, "nowhere" is taken to be a place, and "the middle" is taken to be a particular part of that place. The incongruity that creates the humor, of course, is that "nowhere" is not a place. Even more than that, "nowhere" is the *negation* of place—in logical terms, it is place's "proper not." To actually have a map of nowhere, or to be physically located in the middle of it, is by definition impossible, because anything that can be mapped and that has a middle is automatically not nowhere.

Thus Larson's cartoon, in presenting the expression in literal terms, makes the proverb strange. It makes the shortcut "in the middle of nowhere" into a freshcut by pointing out a paradox lurking at the heart of the phrase. Interestingly, the paradox is always present in the expression; "the middle of nowhere" is always a logical impossibility. However, the nonsensical nature of this expression usually remains unnoticed when it is used metaphorically, precisely because the expression is canonical, and therefore a shortcut.

Larson intensifies the paradox of "the middle of nowhere" by adding the caption "well, this is just going from bad to worse." Like "the middle of nowhere, "going from bad to worse" is a proverbial expression that includes a spatial metaphor—in this case one of travel. This is quite appropriate to the picture, which is also
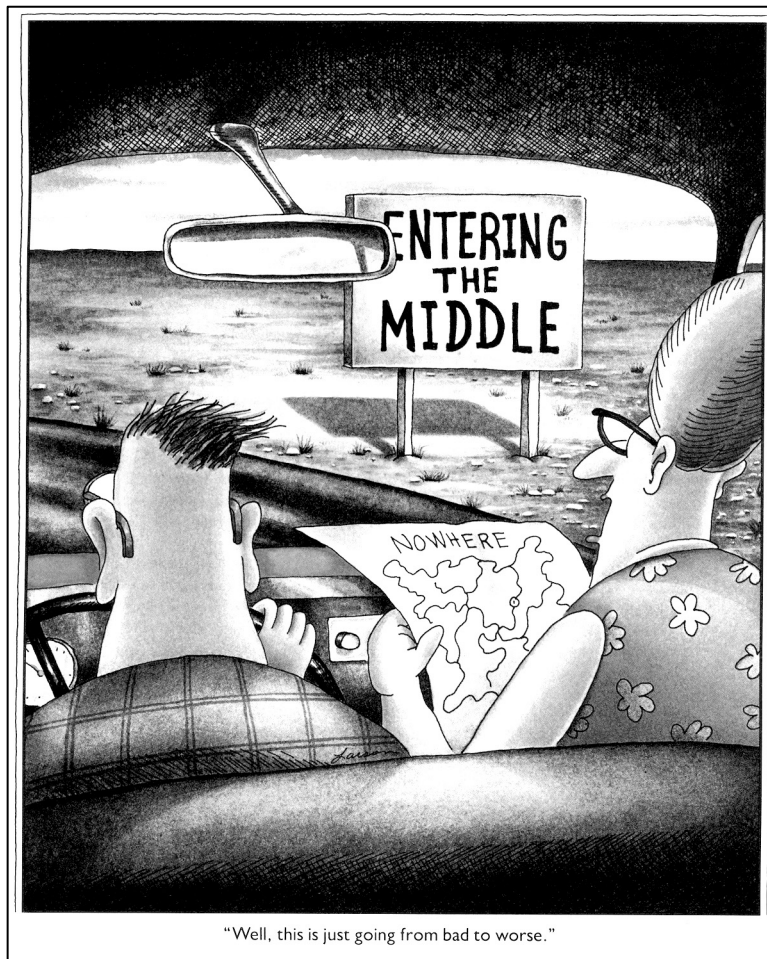
"Well, this is just going from bad to worse."

Figure 4

about travel, about going from point a to point b. The couple is "going from bad to worse," while they enter the "middle" of "nowhere," clearly suggesting that being nowhere is bad, but that being in the middle of nowhere is even worse. This makes the paradox starker by dwelling further on the idea of "Nowhere" as somewhere.

I mentioned above the idea of getting from point a to point b, and Larson (1995:30) has given us a cartoon that deals with this expression as well. In that cartoon, as in "the middle of nowhere," the proverbial expression itself, "getting from point A to point B" is never mentioned. Instead the cartoon shows a long, winding road with two road signs, one of which says "Point A" and the other of which says "Point B." A family driving a car near the "Point B" sign have just asked directions of an old farmer. The farmer's reply, which forms the caption of the cartoon, reads "Well, lemme think ... you've stumped me, son. Most folks only wanna know how to go the other way."

Like the "middle of nowhere" cartoon, this one comments on the absurdities of the statement itself; its satire is directed at the saying. What it points out is the arbitrary nature of the expression: why doesn't anyone ever want to go from point B to point A? In this way, the element of foregrounding is reintroduced to the proverbial phrase. In ordinary usage, "going from point A to point B" is not at all "unusual," precisely because, as the old man would point out, most folks want to do it. But in the cartoon, in which most people are really going from a place called "Point A" to a place called "Point B" the proverb's unusual, metaphorical and therefore foregrounded essence is revealed.

"Point A to point B" also manages to call into question such common sense ideas as alphabetical order, which is shown to have little validity in the real, spatial world of travel, where order is always reversible. In this way, its satire is not directed entirely at the saying, but also at aspects of the wider sign system in which the saying is embedded. Like the best of nonsense, the "Point A to Point B" cartoon thus makes the commonsense world of discourse seem strange and new by pointing out the partial nature of its reality. As Stewart has written:

> Common sense, which throughout everyday life is as-
> sumed to be something natural, given and universal and

thereby characteristic of a pervasive world view, becomes, when juxtaposed through nonsense with alternative conceptions of order, an only partial reality, an ideology (Stewart 1980:49).

"The middle of nowhere" and "Point A to point B" both use words primarily outside of the caption to suggest their proverbial phrases. Two other cartoons use a similar technique, but bring the verbal allusion to the proverbial phrase down to its lowest level. In one, two bulls are shopping in a store that sells china. One store clerk says to another, ''I got a bad feeling about this, Harriet." (Larson 1984:40) Clearly, the proverbial expression "a bull in a china shop" is being referred to, but with almost no recourse at all to words—only the single word, "china," which appears twice in the cartoon, serves to remind us of the phrase. In a very similar case, one of Larson's cartoons features a fly working at the Acme Ointment co. His boss says, "I have a bad feeling about this new guy!" (Larson 1993:124) Once again, the reference is to a well-known proverbial phrase (a fly in the ointment), with only one word ("ointment," featured in the Acme ointment company's logo) making direct reference to the proverb.

Finally, in at least one cartoon, there is no verbal reference to the proverb at all—the picture does all the work. This is a drawing based on the ancient proverb "Big fish eat little fish" (Larson 1984:147). As Mieder (1987 178-228) has shown, this proverb might well go back all the way to the ancient Sanskrit and be a traditional statement common to all Indo-European peoples. It also has analogues in Turkish, Chinese, and some African languages. Perhaps because of its great familiarity among Europeans in general, the proverb has become a very common source for works of visual art, starting in the twelfth century. Hieronymous Bosch, Pieter Breughel, and other renowned artists have contributed to the considerable number of "big fish eat little fish" woodcuts, paintings and cartoons.

In Larson's cartoon version, the proverb is present in a literalized form; big fish are eating little fish, as in the classic iconographic rendering of this proverb. But Larson also makes a social point by showing a group of smaller fish ganging up on the biggest one. Like other of Larson's proverb cartoons, this argues

for "the little guy" and demonstrates his general tendency to re-
verse commonsense social hierarchies, which I will discuss fur-
ther below.[9]

So far we have dealt with Larson's literalized proverbs and
proverbial expressions, the main part of his proverbial *oeuvre*.
But Larson has other types of proverbial cartoons that deserve
mention as well. In a tiny minority of cases, a proverbial expres-
sion is used normally—that is to say, with its normal metaphori-
cal meaning. One cartoon combines a literalized proverbial ex-
pression with a properly metaphorical one; a rat is in jail talking
to his cellmate, and says "I would have gotten away Scot free if I
had just gotten rid of the evidence. But shoot—I'm a packrat"
(Larson 1995:118). Here we see that the rat is perfectly capable
of using metaphors like "Scot free" correctly, but that he is also
prone to using metaphorical speech literally, when he describes
himself as a packrat.

Like Larson's literal proverb cartoons, some of the meta-
phorical ones indicate by intertextual means the arbitrariness and
absurdity of accepted discourse. In one of Larson's several
"Lewis and Clark" cartoons, for example, Clark's mother warns
him that he'd better get journalists to stop mentioning Lewis's
name first, or "you'll be playin' second fiddle in the hist'ry
books!" (Larson 1995:113). This cartoon, like "point A to Point
B" emphasizes the absurdity of non-reversible discourse in a re-
versible world; Americans refer to "Lewis and Clark," but why
not "Clark and Lewis?" Why does Clark "play second fiddle?"

In another cartoon, a caveman buying a club doesn't like the
one with spikes on it because it has "too many bells and whis-
tles" (Larson 1995:115). This one draws its absurdity from an
anachronism—obviously, bells and whistles had not been in-
vented yet when the club was a standard accessory for the well-
dressed caveman.[10] It does the opposite of what "Lewis and
Clark" does: it points to a system that in the real world is not
reversible (time) and shows that in the world of discourse it can
be reversed—in a cartoon, a caveman can talk about bells and
whistles.[11] Aside from these rare cases of proverbial speech used
metaphorically, Larson has a few other common approaches to
proverbs and proverbial expressions. The most frequent of these
involves changing one or more terms in the proverb or proverbial
phrase to fit a new speaker or an unusual situation. Thus, while

young humans taunt their playmates who wear glasses with the epithet "four-eyes," three-eyed space aliens who wear glasses are cruelly referred to as "six-eyes ... (Larson 1986: 117) Tarzan complains that Jane's perfume smells like a "French primate house," (Larson 1988:35) and a dog speaks of a "you-scratch-me-behind-my-ears-I'll-scratch-you- behind-yours" arrangement. (Larson 1988:115) A single-celled organism accuses another of pulling his flagellum (Larson 1988:49), and Bedouins on camels are plagued by "back-hump drivers" (Larson 1988:174). A buffalo reporter in a "Herd Report" helicopter calls the traffic "noses-to-derrieres" (Larson 1988:139), while an amoeba is accused of being "thick-membraned" (Larson 1988:119).

As in the case of the literalized proverb, these variants of proverbial phrases (again similar in some ways to "perverted proverbs" or "anti-proverbs") require a complex intertextual decoding on the part of the reader. Without knowing the proverb "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" and the expressions "to smell like a French cathouse," "to pull someone's leg," "backseat drivers," "bumper-to-bumper traffic," and "thick-skulled," a reader can have no hope of understanding the cartoons. More importantly, the technique of changing one or more words or terms in the proverb has an effect similar to literalizing it. On the most obvious level, the proverb is frequently literal within its own illustrated context; the protozoan version of "there's other fish in the sea" becomes "there's other protozoa in the lower intestine" (Larson 1993:105). Since the speakers are protozoa, the statement is literal, while the human version speaks metaphorically of fish.

This variant form of literalization is fairly common in Larson's cartoons; one features two Native Americans who have buried a white man up to his neck. One of the Natives is squatting nearby, staring directly at the white man's head. His companion admonishes: "a watched head never gets eaten by ants" (Larson 1995:67). In another cartoon, two South Pacific islanders, wearing grass skirts, feathers and bones through their noses, are arguing. Around them are placed a few small houses, made of grass. A spear protrudes from the wall of one of the houses. .. That does it!" one native exclaims. "Those who live in grass houses shouldn't throw spears" (Larson 1993:42). In these cases, the new proverbs are literal, while both of their models, "a

watched pot never boils" and "those who live in glass houses should not throw stones" are generally applied metaphorically.

Similarly, Larson's cartoon about "life on cloud eight" (Larson 1986:106) depicts a couple living on a cloud, hearing the sounds of revelry from their upstairs neighbors. The neighbors, of course, are "on cloud nine." While this cartoon does use a substituted word ("eight'' for "nine"), the cartoon image encourages the reader to mentally reconstruct the proverbial phrase. In the context of the cartoon, that phrase is literal; people are actually living on a series of sequentially numbered clouds.

Just as the literalized proverb cartoon rescues the metaphor by bringing the image back in a very direct way, the proverb with changed terms makes us reflect on the image of the proverb by showing us that different images are possible—that the traditional image is just one of many possible choices, none of which makes more logical sense than any other. Thus, these altered proverbs, like literalized proverbs, demonstrate Stewart's point that nonsense renders common sense vulnerable to interpretation. After reading the cartoons, it becomes apparent that a "backseat driver" or a "cathouse" is an ethnocentric notion, and that "pulling one's leg" "four-eyes" and "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" are inevitably tied up with the physical properties of our particular species. None of these "common sense" ideas is independent of the specific material conditions of our existence; none is applicable outside one limited cultural or biological context.

Finally, Larson draws a few cartoons in which he exploits the more banal ambiguities I mentioned early in this paper: double meanings within the words of a given proverb. In "Let Sleeping Dogs Lie" (Larson 1995:85), a man is about to wake his dog from a dream when he is admonished by a friend, who uses the proverb. But the dog is not just sleeping, he is also talking, letting out a stream of bravado about his abilities: he can outrun a greyhound, drive his master's car, bark in seven languages...in short, he is lying. In another cartoon, a woman walks through the forest with an upright vacuum cleaner. The caption explains that "the woods were dark and foreboding, and Alice sensed that sinister eyes were watching her every step. Worst of all, she knew that Nature abhorred a vacuum" (Larson 1995:26). In the first of these cartoons, the word "lie," can mean both "lie down" and "tell a lie." In the normal sense of the proverb, the former mean-

ing is intended, but Larson shows us a situation in which the second is appropriate, producing a humorous situation and also a fresh approach to the metaphor. In the second, both "vacuum," which in physics refers to the total absence of matter, and "nature," which means the universe in general, are shown to have double meanings. "Nature" is how we often refer to unspoiled wilderness areas like the forest; we "get back to nature" by going, paradoxically, "into the outdoors." "Vacuum of course, is shorthand for "vacuum cleaner."

The effect of finding a double meaning, like that of literalizing a metaphor, is often to highlight the metaphorical nature of the original proverb and increase its ability to "foreground," that is, to appear fresh. Indeed, both of the proverb cartoons mentioned above create a strong intertextual foregrounding effect, making us reconsider the image of the original proverb by showing that it can be interpreted in more than one way.

This is an even clearer effect when a phrase that has not typically been considered metaphorical is altered in this way. In "Thag Anderson becomes the first fatality as a result of falling asleep at the wheel" (Larson 1993:61), we see a caveman who has fallen asleep while carving out what we may presume to be the first wheel. A saber-toothed tiger approaches from the foreground. We do not usually think of "falling asleep at the wheel" as a proverbial statement, partly because we don't think of "at the wheel" as a metaphorical notion. But in the context of the phrase, "at the wheel" really means "while driving." If I were to pull off the road and take a nap in the driver's seat, I would still be ''at the wheel," but I would not be considered a person who "fell asleep at the wheel.'' Moreover, the steering wheel is only one possible meaning of the word "wheel." This cartoon shows quite clearly that the phrase "to fall asleep at the wheel" has many possible meanings, based on both the multiple meanings of the word "wheel," and the analogic application of the term ''at the wheel." In doing so, it opens the phrase up to interpretation and points out its metaphorical nature. As a result, we recognize that a phrase that most have not considered "proverbial" or "metaphorical" fits most recognized definitions of these terms.

When "the Word Comes to Swallow the World": The Reversal of Hierarchies, World Upside-Down, and The Far Side

The fact that literalized proverbs and their analogues (proverbs altered to fit new situations and proverbs illustrated based on a secondary meaning of one or more words) create nonsensical worlds that require complex intertextual interpretations connects them to the tradition of World Upside-Down woodcuts, prints, drawings and paintings from the late middle ages and after. While many scholars of this genre of art have recognized that literalized proverbs are sometimes examples of reversed hierarchies, however, few elucidate the logical connection between literalized metaphors on the one hand and reversed social hierarchies on the other.[12] Indeed, David Kunzle, after surveying a century of scholarship, goes so far as to deny such a logical connection. Like many scholars before him, Kunzle (1978:53) notes that some proverb illustrations are examples of World Upside-Down proper, mentioning such motifs as the blind leading the sighted and the lame carrying the healthy. To these we might add such proverbial notions as the cart leading the horse or the oxen, and the ass being master to the man. Even the tail wagging the dog, if it were to be illustrated, would satisfy Kunzle's notions of World Upside-Down. But Kunzle rejects most literalized proverbs as examples of what he calls "WUD" because they do not explicitly contain within their imagery the notion of role reversal. He calls the application of the name "World Upside-Down" (and its various translations) to proverb prints and woodcuts a "misnomer," and points out that the only image they share, besides the few isolated cases of proverbs that contain hierarchical reversals, is the inverted globe, which appeared in both WUD and proverb prints (Kunzle 1978:72).

It must be said, however, that the inverted globe is in fact the central image, the world upside-down itself, and it seems odd to treat it as though it were an unimportant detail. It is, apparently, an indication that the creators of medieval illustrations of literalized proverbs did consider them to be examples of the World Upside-Down. Why, then, should they make this connection? Looking at Larson's cartoons as well as at early modern examples of literalized proverb art, it is obvious that these works are "topsy-turvy" in a certain way: what was metaphorical has become literal, with absurd results. Alan Dundes and Claudia Stib-

be (1981:167) have noted this connection, writing of Breughel's proverb painting that "the literalization of metaphor can constitute a ritual reversal and in this sense, the entire painting represents a scene of countless reversals."

What sort of reversals do we find in World Upside-Down art, and how are they related to the literalization of metaphor? The role reversals that Kunzle (1978:41) isolates in WUD prints are human-human, human-animal, animal-animal, animal-element, animal-object, object-object, and human-object. But, to expand on Dundes's observation, another type of role reversal occurs when proverbs are literalized: word-world. In word-world reversals, conventions of speech become actual events in the material world; the word becomes the world. It is important to realize, as some creators of World Upside- Down prints did, that this is as serious, as absurd and as topsy-turvy as any of the other kinds of inversion.[13]

Indeed, it can be argued that word-world inversion, and its extension, the art-world inversion, are at the root of all nonsense, including the true role-reversals that Kunzle sees as the *sine qua non* of World Upside-Down art. It is only in words and in art that an ox can butcher a man, or a mouse can eat a cat, or a tail can wag a dog, not in the real world. Moreover, it is through language that these situations can most easily be constructed and imagined. Before these role reversals can be put into images, then, the word-world reversal usually takes place, and it is for this reason that the literalized proverb and the reversed hierarchies of World Upside-Down are so closely related. As Stewart writes, "the beginning of nonsense [is] language lifted out of context, language turning on itself, language as infinite regression...." This occurs, she tells us, when "the word comes to swallow the world" (Stewart 1980:3).

And That's the Hand That Fed Me...

Both literalized proverbs and reversed hierarchies, the two hallmarks of World Upside-Down, are central to *The Far Side*. One of Larson's funniest proverb cartoons features both these subversive moves. In it, a dog is showing his dog friend a wall of mounted, stuffed trophies. The trophies include heads of chickens and cats. Also included is a human hand, stuffed and mounted on a plaque like the other trophies. The dog is gesturing toward the

hand, telling his friend, "...and that's the hand that fed me." (Larson 1988:47; color version in Larson 1989:225) [Figure 5]

This cartoon is particularly fascinating in light of Larson's whole *oeuvre*. It takes the proverbial phrase "to bite the hand that feeds you," and literalizes it, with a new twist: the dog not only bites the hand, but also severs and mounts it. In presenting this literalized and extended metaphor, the cartoon also resonates with many other metaphorical possibilities with which Larson has played in the past. As is only appropriate for a cartoonist whose work is so intertextually rich, Larson has given us a cartoon that can only be fully interpreted in light of other Gary Larson cartoons. In particular, Larson's practices of representing animals engaging in human behavior ("animals as people"), animals attacking or revolting against people (animals vs. people) and people acting cruelly towards animals (people vs. animals) all inform this cartoon and transform its meaning. Let us look in turn at each of these tropes.
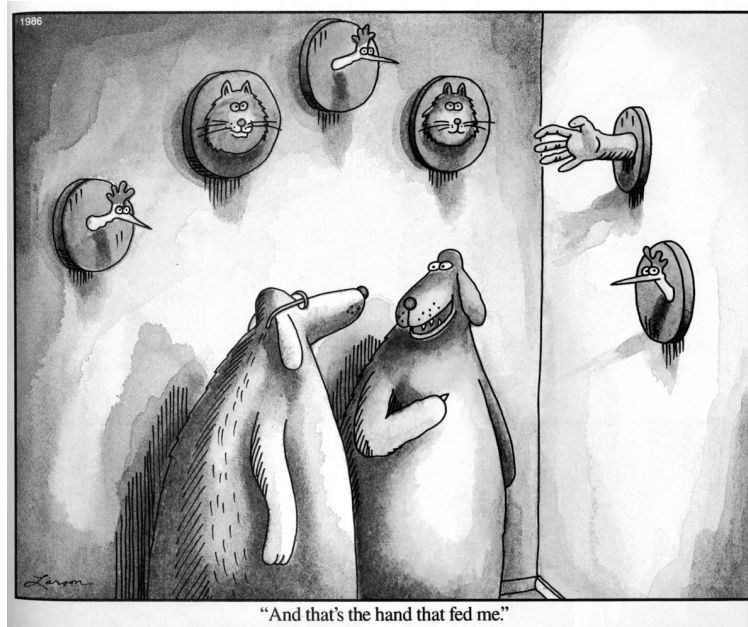

"And that's the hand that fed me."

Figure 5

Dogs Playing Poker and Tethercat: Animals as People

Larson's cartoons frequently anthropomorphize animals. In a sense, this is inevitable. All cartoon animals who speak and interact with humans are given language and other exclusively human behaviors. But Larson's animals are more subversive than many cartoon animals; like the animals in fables, in medieval World Upside-Down prints, and indeed in proverbs, Larson's animals are frequently used to show the silliness, or even the cruelty, of human behavior.

The animals Larson most frequently portrays as human-like—dogs, cows and chickens spring to mind most readily—are all domesticated animals, familiar to homes and farms. In a sense, these animals are already "intertextual" in that they inhabit the interstices between the human and the animal worlds. Everything about them, down to their genetic codes, has been altered and constructed by humans toward fulfilling certain purposes. They are, in this way, perfect representatives of the junction between nature and culture.

Larson clearly recognizes the dog as one of the traditionally anthropomorphized animals: in one cartoon he portrays a starving artist trying to sell his paintings of giraffes, elephants, and other animals playing poker. It is not until he thinks of the idea of "dogs playing poker" that his success is guaranteed (Larson 1995:79). In many other cartoons, Dogs are shown engaging in a mix of human and dog behavior. In one example, dogs in business suits are gathered at a meeting, but "Mr. Sparky" appears more interested in cleaning himself (Larson 1995:121). In another, a dog excuses himself to "go to the neighbor's yard," and then calls back asking "We got any magazines?" (Larson 1986:71).

One of Larson's cartoons mixing human and dog behavior, "Tethercat" (Larson 1989:158), is particularly telling in light of public response. "Tethercat" shows a pair of dogs toying with an unfortunate cat in a way that mixes dog and human behaviors. The public response to "Tethercat" shows that it is precisely the mix of human behavior with animal behavior that is at the root of the cartoon's seriousness and its humor.

Clearly, the behavior of the dogs in "Tethercat" is not pure dog behavior. While the cartoon draws on the traditional hatred between dogs and cats, even this "natural" behavior is more a

product of human "common sense" than of the "natural" world; we all know cats and dogs who get along fine. More importantly, the cartoon shows the dogs torturing the cat in a very undoglike way: they tie it up and make a tetherball game out of it. This is clearly humanlike, not doglike, behavior, and it was this aspect of the behavior, the human aspect, that bothered many readers.

When Larson published the cartoon "Tethercat" he received a lot of mail questioning his morality and his mental health, demanding that he refrain from such cruel and inhumane cartoons in the future. Some examples of these letters were published in *The Prehistory of The Far Side*:

> "This is sick, sick humor! As a teacher, I know what TV has done to children's behavior and cartoons like this are in bad taste."

> "With so many sick people in the world today, it doesn't take much to give them ideas."
> "No doubt some stupid mixed-up weirdo will see the cartoon and get some poor cat and try to emulate this cartoon."

<div align="right">(Larson 1989:159)</div>

Larson (1989:160) calls this style of letter "the familiar 'the-children-will-be-corrupted-doctrine.'" Interestingly, though, it is not only children, but also "sick people" and "stupid mixed-up weirdos" that readers fear; precisely the kinds of marginal people for whom Susan Stewart (1980:5) points out that "nonsense becomes appropriate...to...everyday discourse": "those on the peripheries of everyday life: the infant, the child, the mad and the senile, the chronically foolish and playful."

What this shows us is that Larson's dog behavior in "Tethercat" is not disturbing as dog behavior, it is disturbing as human behavior. It is not that dogs hate cats and sometimes attack them that bothers people, and it is not in its purely ludic state that the cartoon offends. It is rather the unsavory suggestion made by the cartoon that people might do such a thing in the real world. The fact that some sick people actually do torture animals in this way, of course, adds to the seriousness of this cartoon.

The power of intertextuality is particularly salient here. The argument being made by Larson's outraged readers is that the

cartoon actually changes the world through the possibility of an ostensive intertextual reference. The true danger of nonsense, that it might overflow its boundaries and invade the world, that the topsy-turvy dog-as-human world might no longer be confined to a ludic sphere of paper and ink, is here at the forefront of people's concerns. What is important for us in Larson's animal-as-human trope is essentially the same thing: by depicting animal behavior in a nonsense world, it points out the absurdities or shortcomings of *human* behavior in the *real* world, and thereby suggests criticisms of humans and the world we have made.

"I Never Met a Man I Didn't Bite": Animals vs. People

Even when they are not highlighting human cruelty, Larson's animals-versus-people cartoons reveal a basic antagonism between humans and animals. Some of these use proverbs and proverbial phrases to make their points. A shark in a tuxedo saying "I'm dressed to kill" (Larson 1986:17) calls to mind other Larson cartoons, in which sharks are always seen eating or trying to eat people, not fish or seals (cf. Larson 1984:136, 1986:41, 1986:51, 1986:77, 1986:112, 1986:115, 1986:137, 1988:66, 1988: 134, 1988:184, 1995:108). An alligator on trial says "well, of course I did it in cold blood, you idiot! I'm a reptile!" (Larson 1984:166). Since he is being tried in a human court, it is safe to assume that the animal is on trial for killing a human, not a chicken. Both of these use literalizations of their proverbial phrase's root metaphor to create nonsense; both also suggest that humans and animals are enemies, and reverse the usual hierarchy of "common sense" culture, which places humans at the top of the animal kingdom and of the food chain.

A very telling cartoon remained unpublished in Larson's sketchbook until *The Prehistory of the Far Side*. It shows four different animals, each with one of its favorite sayings. The "sayings" are all adaptations of proverbs. The snake says "slither softly but carry a lot of venom," clearly derived from "Speak softly and carry a big stick." The dog adapts the famous phrase of Will Rogers, who never met a man he didn't like, by saying "I never met a man I didn't bite." The bee states "sting first, ask questions later," and the shark says "a swimmer in the water is worth two on the beach," derived from "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" (Larson 1989:107).

It is interesting that the animals' proverbs show a basic hostility toward people regardless of the intention of the human proverbs from which they are derived. Hence, while the bee keeps close to the sense of the original, emphasizing an antagonistic relationship between himself and humans, the dog completely reverses Rogers's friendly sentiment to arrive at his proverb. The shark's saying is another form of reversal. The original proverb on which he draws has people using animals (birds) as food. The reversed proverb has animals using humans as food, a reversal of the proverb and of what we perceive to be the natural order of things. Like "dressed to kill" and "in cold blood," these proverb adaptations clearly suggest an antagonism between people and the rest of the animal kingdom. To heighten the sense of antagonism, Larson has drawn many cartoons in which domestic animals revolt against people. Most of these cartoons suggest to some extent that the animals have been mistreated. As an example, consider another cartoon containing a literalized proverbial expression. It shows a mob of angry chickens carrying pitchforks and baseball bats toward the door of the farmer. One of them is addressing the others, saying: "Again? Why is it that the revolution always gets this far and then everyone just chickens out?" (Larson 1993:71). The fact that the chickens refer to their struggle as a revolution suggests (albeit barely) that they are being oppressed by the farmer; it makes explicit, however, that there is a social hierarchy, and it suggests that that hierarchy can be reversed.

The other animals that are shown revolting against humans are cows; indeed, many of Larson's cartoons suggest that a bovine insurrection is inevitable. In one, a few cows are plotting some nefarious attack on farmer Bob while gathered around a chalkboard on which their maneuver is displayed in a diagram (Larson 1986:103). In another, one cow informs a herd that the "revolution" has been postponed (Larson 1984:36), while in a third two cows discuss the great Chicago fire, claiming that "Agent 6373 has accomplished her mission" (Larson 1984:41).[14]

Two of Larson's cow cartoons make the cruelty of humans—from the animals' point of view, at least—more explicit. One shows a group of cows (or steer) gathered around a picture of the farmer, dividing it up into "cuts" the way a butcher will someday divide up the cows (Larson 1986:54). Another shows

cows approaching the Farmer's house with an automatic milking machine, bent on revenge (Larson 1995:98). A similar cartoon involving a chicken was never published in the newspapers; it shows a giant chicken eating a plate of scrambled babies (Larson 1989:174). These cartoons all suggest that, from the animal's point of view, the human is a cruel predator that feeds on the misfortune of innocent animals; the use of the milking machine as a torture device and the emphasis on the similarity between a human eating scrambled eggs and a chicken eating scrambled babies are particularly effective at making humans seem vicious, even grotesque, in their consumption of animals' bodies.

The reversal of the food chain shown in these cartoons is part of the topsy-turvy world of nonsense. It has been a common motif in art since ancient Egyptian times (Wright 1875: 6),[15] and is thus one of the very earliest recorded forms of nonsense art. Interestingly, it was also a prominent part of World Upside-Down art; indeed, a far more graphic and bloody version of Larson's "cattle butchering their master" cartoon was common throughout Europe in the Renaissance and after. Kunzle (1978:44, 46, 54) gives three different versions from Italy, the Netherlands and Russia; Coupe (1967: plate 126) gives one from Germany; Odenius (1954:157) gives one from Sweden; and Ashton (1996/1882:270) one from England.

Chartier and Julia (1976:50), writing of the French *Monde Renversé* tradition, point out "one of the most obsessive motifs, in which the man is decapitated, carved up, roasted, or turned on a spit by his usual victims." They give an example that pictures pigs butchering a man and hares spit-roasting a man. Similarly, Helen Grant (1973:123) points out:

> All those gruesome fish catching men; hares hunting and shooting men; oxen butchering men and selling their flesh ... is a distant reflection of a very ancient theme, especially popular in the middle ages but constantly revived in different forms in writing and paint: the hunter hunted, or the revenge of the animals, and the 'underdog.'

Grant also provides a Catalan woodcut (Grant 1973: plate 4) that contains several different animals butchering their masters.[16] As I will argue below, these *Far Side* cartoons, like the World Up-

side-Down art from which they draw themes, may well be suggesting something serious about the social order.

Contempt for the Rights of Wildlife": People vs. Animals

One of the most obvious features of "and that's the hand that fed me" is the presence of trophies, mounted and stuffed body parts from hunting's unwitting victims. Once again, *The Far Side* as a whole offers a backdrop against which to view this facet of the cartoon. When hunting is portrayed in *The Far Side* (and it is portrayed surprisingly frequently), it often uses anthropomorphized animals whose human qualities make the hunters appear to be murderers.

In one such cartoon, a deer attempts to understand why the hunter is pursuing him. "He's trying to kill me, all right," the deer says. "Do I know this guy? I've got to think!" Commenting on this cartoon, Larson writes that "the deer ... is any one of us caught in the situation where some maniac, having entered our home, is trying to hunt us down and kill us" (Larson 1989:52). The leveling of the common sense hierarchy that places humans above other animals is salient here, and Larson's precise wording is fascinating. The deer, Larson says, is "...one of us." The hunter, on the other hand, becomes a "maniac," a dangerous other trying to hunt down and kill an innocent victim with whom we identify.

Another *Far Side* cartoon explores this theme further, with the animals being even further humanized. A policeman checks a hunter's license after the hunter has apparently barged into a deer's home and shot him with a rifle. The deer's widow is addressed by the policeman, who is checking the hunter's license: "I'm sorry ma'am, but his license does check out, and after all your husband was in season..." (Larson 1988:180). The deer in this cartoon live in a house with furniture, watch TV, and have an altogether human lifestyle. While the nonsense flags clearly go up, making this cartoon "just a joke," it nonetheless retains its serious subtext: the hunter appears as a ruthless murderer, as "cold-blooded" as any reptile. A very similar cartoon features a duck in his own household (also a normal, suburban, human-style dwelling), walking innocently across the floor, while a hunter prepares to shoot him from a duck blind set up unobtrusively in the corner (Larson 1993:113). In addition to these, Lar-

son provides a cartoon in which a group of deer take a hunter hostage and swap him for a deer being held by the hunters (Larson 1989:223); one in which deer watch a horror movie that includes mounted deer heads, mutely staring while an unwitting deer enters the killer's house (Larson 1989:239); and even one in which a woman is dating a deer and worries that her father, who has three deer heads prominently displayed on his wall, will kill her boyfriend (Larson 1989:188). All of these foreground an unusual equality between human and deer, a leveling of hierarchical roles that is at once ludic and potentially critical of established hierarchies. At the same time, they portray humans wantonly killing the humanized animals.

A similar tactic is employed by the *Far Side* cartoon that shows a space ship hurtling through space with two aliens inside. A car is tied to the top of the spaceship. Inside the car are the skeletons of two men dressed as deer hunters. A deer skeleton is tied to the top of the car (Larson 1995:148). While this cartoon does not directly reverse or level the man/animal hierarchy, it does effect a reversal: man, who is at the top of the earthly hierarchy, is shown to also be at the bottom of another hierarchy. Instead of an inversion, we have boundary play in which the hierarchy is shown to extend up far beyond the merely human. Similarly, the cartoon with the caption: "abducted by an alien circus company, Professor Doyle is forced to write calculus equations in center ring" (Larson 1995:74), is clearly a critique of humans' treatment of animals; the alien "tamer" threatens Doyle with a whip in much the same way that a lion tamer threatens a lion. Although no animals are present in the cartoon, it is clearly a metaphor for human treatment of animals. Both cartoons, in fact, emphasize the point that, from an extraterrestrial perspective, humans *are* animals—which indeed we are.[17]

If *The Far Side's* portrayal of hunters is less than flattering, its portrayal of those who hunt for trophies is even worse. Several cartoons besides "and that's the hand that fed me" are specifically about stuffed and mounted animals. In one four-frame cartoon, a bear is peacefully drinking water out of a mountain lake, with a look of blissful and childlike innocence on its face. In the second frame a hunter shoots the bear from a hiding place in the bushes. The hunter shoots the bear from behind, and the animal's expression turns to one of shock, horror and pain. In the third

frame, the bear dies, its tongue lolling pathetically from its mouth. The fourth frame shows the bear mounted and stuffed. It is standing on its hind legs, its paws raised to attack. Its eyes are open wide in fierce anger, and its mouth shows rows of long, pointed teeth (Larson 1989:60). The cartoon emphasizes the innocence of the bear through its facial expressions while it was alive. It also emphasizes the cowardice and duplicity of the hunter, who shoots the bear from behind but who later makes it look like the bear had been attacking him.

In another cartoon, a man and woman walk into a room filled with unusual animal trophies; they are all well-known cartoon animals like Rocky and Bullwinkle, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. The woman has a look of horror on her face, but the man is not bothered. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Miss Carlisle," he says, "They're only cartoon animals!" (Larson 1989:71) This cartoon is another example of boundary play, or frame-breaking; the people in it are cartoon people, yet they recognize the existence of "cartoon animals." The exact ontological status of the "cartoons-within-a-cartoon" is hard to establish given the conflicting messages we receive about them. From the perspective of the man in the cartoon, those cartoons are on a different level of reality, they are "only cartoon animals." They are, however, real enough to kill, stuff and mount. For Miss Carlisle, too, they are real enough—she is upset. Furthermore, from the perspective of the reader, from a higher level of abstraction, they are all cartoons, the people and the animals. A cartoon person saying "they're only cartoon animals" is like a real person saying "they're only animals." From this point of view, the man is acting callously toward the animals, not to mention poor Miss Carlisle.

Some *Far Side* cartoons about trophies omit people altogether—the only actors are animals. These cartoons continue to suggest the cruelty of the practice of trophy mounting by humanizing the animals. In one rather horrifying example of this type, two bears look in through the windows of a house and see the mounted, stuffed head of a third bear. "It's Vince, all right," one of them says, "It's his nose, his mouth, his fur ... but his eyes—there's something not quite right about his eyes" (Larson 1993:120). As Jane Goodall (1995:7) has pointed out, the very fact that these animals have names—this bear is called Vince—

changes the nature of the cartoon. Vince is not any bear, he is a bear with a life, with friends who recognize and worry about him, and the hunter who kills him, although absent from the cartoon, seems to us like a murderer.

A final *Far Side* about trophy hunting was unaccountably rejected for publication in some newspapers, but later included in several of Larson's books. It brings us back to the comic role-reversal of humanized animals, showing an elephant standing erect like a person, but using a crutch because one of his legs is missing. He is standing on a grassy plain with zebras in the background, in a phone booth, talking on the phone with an unseen party, and clearly upset. He is saying "What? They turned it into a *wastebasket?"* (Larson 1989:183).

Larson's commentary on the cartoon shows that he believes human practices of trophy hunting are cruel. It also shows that he feels as we do the conflict between *The Far Side*'s openly nonsensical outlook and its potential for serious criticism. He writes:

> I've always found it appalling that the demand for ivory has caused these magnificent animals to be continuously poached—but the ultimate act of contempt for the rights of wildlife has got to be represented by the elephant's-foot wastebasket. And that's the point I was striving for in this cartoon-not that I was hoping to make a profound comment of any sort (the cartoon is really pretty inane, I think), but just who *wouldn't* be upset to find out something like this had been done to a former part of their anatomy? (Larson 1989:183)

Interestingly, in the middle of a sentence, he switches from telling us the profound comment he was "striving for" to denying that he ever was trying to make such a comment, and using the cartoon's silliness as a shield. Clearly, the cartoon is silly, and its humor is largely derived from the representation of the elephant as humanized. Only humans walk on crutches and use the phone—and, of course, a real elephant whose leg has been poached is dead, not hobbling around on a crutch. This cartoon would not have been funny without the human-animal role reversal. But that does not mean that this reversal is without "serious" implications.

The Hand That Fed Me Revisited

The reversal of hierarchies, the placement of animals with or above people, is at the heart of the animals-as-people, the animals-versus-people, and the people-versus-animals tropes of the *Far Side* universe. Their genealogy stretches far into the past, and includes the iconography of the World Upside-Down and comic utopia, as well as the topsy-turvy time out of time experienced during carnival. They are, indeed, examples of the carnivalesque, for as Bakhtin (1968:251) writes, "in the world of Carnival all hierarchies are canceled. All castes and ages are equal."

Bakhtin's example of the cancellation of hierarchies in the Carnival, which derives from Goethe's description of Carnival in Rome, is particularly interesting: "During the fire festival a young boy blows out his father's candle, crying out ..... Death to you, sir father!'" (Bakhtin 1968:251). Although Bakhtin felt this interjection needed no further comment, it would not be amiss to note two things. First, that the boy uses the term "signor padre," "sir father," signaling the existence of the hierarchy in the same moment that he cancels it. Second, that the boy, by wishing his father dead, is calling for a reversal of the hierarchy, symbolically pushing his father down; the hierarchy, then, is not merely leveled, it is at once established, leveled and reversed. Many of Larson's cartoons achieve the same effect. "Big Fish Eat Little Fish," mentioned above, shows both the common scene of big fish eating little ones and the less common though well-established role reversal of small fish attacking bigger ones. In much the same way, "And that's the hand that fed me" indicates the former relationship of master to pet, levels it by showing the pet engaged in human behavior, and reverses it by showing the master's comeuppance. Many scholars, including Bakhtin, Kristeva and Stewart, point out that such hierarchical reversals can embody real criticism of the hierarchies being reversed. Showing the animals on top at least implies that the common-sense world of people on top, or the lawful world of intact social hierarchy, is in fact only one of many possible worlds. By showing an alternative to the common-sense world, *The Far Side* automatically opens it for debate by highlighting its ideological nature. This, in fact, was part of the social function of nonsense art in past societies, especially the World Upside-Down art that *The Far Side* often so closely resembles; Kunzle and Scribner have both

shown that the World Upside-Down motifs became prominent in Germany largely because of the Lutheran Reformation movement and the subsequent peasant revolts, and Grant suggests that the motif may well have become popular in Italy after the 1524 Peasants' Revolt; In other words, serious criticism of social hierarchies seems to have been encoded into the ludic, nonsensical and carnivalesque images.[18]

While the World Upside-Down art of the late middle ages through the eighteenth century was based on disaffection with the established hierarchy of human over human, Larson's carnivalesque drawings and proverb cartoons often seem directed at the hierarchy of human over animal.[19] This is not surprising considering Larson's history: he began his career as a quirky nature cartoonist, and *The Far Side's* original title was *Nature's Way*. His constant focus in *The Far Side* on animal issues and animal research has won him admirers like the primatologist Jane Goodall, the zoologist and paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, and the entomologist Dale Clayton. He is, in other words, notoriously pro-animal. Larson's leveled hierarchy, in which humans and animals compete on equal terms, shows that humans and other animals are, after all, just animals; a biological truth that nonetheless violates cultural common sense. It shows that humans' appropriation of animals' bodies and habitats is not a natural order, but a cultural one, not the only possible reality, but an ideology. The cartoon in which bears wearing hard hats erect a sophisticated pipeline to dump their waste in a person's living room (Larson 1993:80) is a clear use of nonsense and role-reversal to make this point.

Many scholars have commented on the subversive potential of carnivalesque reversal. Bakhtin is particularly clear on this point, writing that "for thousands of years the people have used these festive comic images to express their criticism, their deep distrust of official truth, and their highest hopes and aspirations" (Bakhtin 1968:269). Similarly, Larson's cartoons clearly have the potential to make us think that the natural order, as we have been conditioned to accept it, may be wrong. As Goodall (1995:7) has written, "Gary [Larson] starts us thinking, and then gets us to go on thinking, 'hey, there are other critters out there too. They have names and feelings. They matter too.'"

Revisiting the proverb cartoon, "and that's the hand that fed me," let us look at the cartoon again in light of this potential for social criticism. What is being criticized in the cartoon? The animals-versus people, animals-as-people and people-versus-animals tropes are almost always used by Larson to criticize human behavior. The obviously recognizable human behavior in this cartoon is that of hunting and trophy mounting, a human behavior that he has lampooned in other cartoons and even written about directly. "The hand that fed me," like the three-legged elephant cartoon, can be seen as a comment upon this activity. Hunting for trophies, the cartoon seems to be saying, is "biting the hand that feeds us," an act of spiteful malice carried out against the natural world, on which we depend for sustenance.

In the end, "and that's the hand that fed me" is an example of how a literalized metaphor can nudge a reader toward a new critical interpretation—even a metaphorical one. Ordinarily, we do not think twice about "short cuts" like this, but in this case, the literal nature of the proverb—there is really "hand that fed me" present—makes us re-examine and re-evaluate the proverb. In doing so, we note that "the hand that fed me" is severed and mounted like the heads of the other animals, and that there is therefore a strong association being drawn between this particular type of behavior and the proverb. And here, the metaphorical nature of the proverb reemerges in our interpretation; killing for sport is metaphorically "biting the hand that feeds us," just as the dog's activity was literally harming that hand.

Literalizing a proverb, then, is hardly an insignificant or minor adaptation. It focuses attention on the material stratum of the proverb and away from the proverb's "common sense," "general" or "social" meaning. In so doing, it revitalizes the metaphor by giving it a direct sensory realism it otherwise lacks, and enhances the metaphor's ability to foreground certain facets of a situation. By effecting a kind of ritual reversal, literalization opens the way for social criticism. More generally, by clearing away the established and often banal metaphorical meanings of a proverb, literalization makes possible a re-interpretation, a fresh approach to the proverb in its particular context of use. Gary Larson's ability to do all these things with his proverb cartoons makes him one of the greatest proverb artists of the twentieth century, and arguably one of the greatest of all time.

***Index of Proverbs in* The Far Side**

Note: For easy reference, the phrases below were sought in some of our most useful dictionaries of proverbial speech. If they were not found, their connection to the proverb tradition was established using online full text databases or by common sense.

Citations below are by page number, except where the dictionaries use an indexing system, in which case the dictionary's number is used.

The dictionaries used were:

Mieder et al: *A Dictionary of American Proverbs*
Partridge: *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases* (Cp)
Partridge: *A Dictionary of Cliches* (Cl)
Rees: *Dictionary of Catchphrases*
Simpson: *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*
Spears: *NTC's American Idioms Dictionary*
Stevenson: *The Macmillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases*
Titelman: *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings*
Whiting: *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*
Wilkinson: *Thesaurus of Traditional English Metaphors*

Please see the bibliography for full citations.

Remember the **Alamo** (Larson 1988:134) Partridge CP 182
You scratch my **back,** I'll scratch yours (Larson 1988:115) Whiting B22
Backseat driver (Larson 1988:174) Wilkinson E5D
To go from **bad** to worse (Larson 1993:12) Whiting B29
Off the **beaten** path (Larson 1989:57), (Larson 1993:105) Wilkinson G10a
Busy as a **beaver** (Larson 1988:65) Whiting B130
None of your **bee's** wax (Larson 1988:91) Wilkinson E30j
Beginner's luck (Larson 1986:62) Whiting B168
Bells and whistles (Larson 1995:115), Wilkinson 187a
To eat (drink) like **a bird** (Larson 1995:92) Whiting B245
The early **bird** catches the worm (Larson 1986:26), (Larson 1995:64), (Larson 1988:66) Whiting 8236
A **bird** in the hand is worth two in the bush (Larson 1989:107) Whiting B229

To take one's **blinders** off (Larson 1995:143) Wilkinson
E16k [Wilkinson uses the word blinkers, which is syn-
onymous with blinders.]

The **bluebird** of happiness (Larson 1988:29)

Brain-storming (Larson 1995:141) Wilkinson D5

To be bigger than a **breadbox** (Larson 1995:40)

To have **a brush** with death (Larson 1986:130) cf Spears
161: have a brush with something.

To kick the **bucket** (Larson 1995:116) Whiting B444

Bull in a china shop (Larson 1984:40) Whiting B462

Bumper to bumper (Larson 1988:139)

To push someone's **buttons** (Larson 1995:37)

To open a **can** of worms (Larson 1988:140) Whiting C22

When the **cat's** away, the mice will play (Larson 1986:183)
Whiting Cl15

To **chicken** out (Larson 1993:71) Wilkinson E28c

Don't count your **chickens** until they're hatched (Larson
1986:176) Whiting C166

To get up with the **chickens** (Larson 1988:23) cf. Whiting
8242, C168, L43

Too many **chiefs,** not enough Indians cf. Whiting C171; see:
Too many scientists, not enough hunchbacks

City slickers (Larson 1986:141)

Too **close** for comfort (Larson 1986:189) Spears 371

To be on **cloud** nine (Larson 1986:106) Whiting C258

It's a free **country** (Larson 1995:107) Whiting C355

Curiosity killed the cat (Larson 1986:167) (Larson
1988:103:2) Whiting C449

Damned if you do, damned if you don't (Larson 1986:152)
Stevenson 537

To raise the **dead** (var. of wake the dead) (Larson 1993:59)
Wilkinson J66A

Dear john letter (Larson 1988:34) Whiting D82

At **death's** door (or knocking on death's door) (Larson
1988:175) Whiting D102

Vive la **difference!** (Larson 1984:22) Partridge CP 232

You can't teach an old **dog** new tricks (Larson 1995:65)
(Larson 1995:140) Whiting D251

(A **dog** is) man's best friend (Larson 1989:110) Whiting
D218

To be **dog** tired (Larson 1988:189) Whiting D209

Every **dog** has his day (Larson 1986:45) Whiting D222

To put on the **dog** (Larson 1995:65) Whiting D248

Let sleeping **dogs** lie (Larson 1995:85) Whiting D228

The **dogs** of war (Larson 1988:59) Partridge Cl 131

Dressed to kill (Larson 1986:17) Whiting K17

To get the **drop** on someone (Larson 1984:160) Wilkinson
    C10b

Dumb bunny (Larson 1995:21)

To eat **dust** (Larson 1993:124)

To keep one **eye** on something (Larson 1993:91) Spears 165

To be just **a face** in the crowd (Larson 1995:50)

To **fall** for a trick (Larson 1993:141) Wilkinson K44

To buy the **farm** (Larson 1995:116) Wilkinson E7a

To play second **fiddle** (Larson 1995:113) Whiting F84

Fish or cut bait (Larson 1988:51) Whiting F154

Big **fish** eat little fish (Larson 1984:147) Simpson 21

There are more **fish** in the sea (Larson 1993:105) Whiting
    F146

To sleep with the **fishes** (Larson 1995:119)

To **flirt** with death (Larson 1989:105)

A fly in the ointment (Larson 1993:124) Whiting F200

To be a **fly** on the wall (Larson 1993:154) Wilkinson G37a

Four eyes (Larson 1986:117)

To **freeze** up (Larson 1993:94) Cf. Wilkinson G16c

Forbidden **fruit** is the sweetest (Larson 1993:166) Mieder et
    al 242

Give someone the heebies, the creeps, the willies, the jitters
    (Larson 1986:22)

People who live in **glass** houses should not throw stones
    (Larson 1993:42) Mieder et al 252

The **grass** is greener on the other side (Larson 1993:162)
    Whiting G173

To be only **half-baked,** (Larson 1986:73) Wilkinson I62b

To bite the **hand** that feeds you (Larson 1988:47) Whiting
    H51

Left **hand** doesn't know what the right hand is doing (Lar-
    son 1993:138) Whiting H46

To go **haywire** (Larson 1993:62) Wilkinson E32e

To have a good **head** on one's shoulders (Larson 1995:122)
    Spears 162

Go to **hell** (Larson 1988:85)

To be **hell** on wheels (Larson 1986:112) Whiting H179

To be left **high** and dry (Larson 1995:116) Whiting H207

Not to know what **hit** you (Larson 1995:16)

To be in **hog** heaven (Larson 1988:18)

A **hole** in the wall (Larson 1993:51) Whiting H247

To have **a hole** in one's head (do I look like I got a hole in
    my head?) (Larson 1995:52) Wilkinson I35e

Angry as a **hornet** (Larson 1993:116) Whiting H301

Horse sense (Larson 1993:154) Whiting H336

You can lead **a horse** to water, but you can't make him drink
    (Larson 1984:23) Whiting H316

Wild **horses** couldn't drag me away (Larson 1993:134)
    Whiting H334

To add **insult** to injury (Larson 1995:64) Whiting 141

To **kill** in cold blood (Larson 1984:166) Wilkinson I26c

To **laugh** at death (Larson 1995:17)

Laughter is the best medicine (Larson 1986:174) Mieder et
    al 362

To come out of **left field** (Larson 1995:96)

To pull someone's **leg** (Larson 1988:49) Whiting LID3

Give me **liberty** or give me death (Larson 1993:73) Mieder
    et al 370

I never met a **man** I didn't like (Larson 1989:107)

No **man** is an island (Larson 1988:113) Titelman 251

To lose one's **marbles** (Larson 1993:142) Whiting MB8

The real **McCoy** (Larson 1993:47) Whiting M115

To be in the **middle** of nowhere (Larson 1993:12) Spears
    196.

Mountain must come to Mohammed (Larson 1995:91)
    Whiting M276

Another **mouth** to feed (Larson 1988:23)

Nature abhors a vacuum (Larson 1995:26) Whiting N22

To look for **a needle** in a haystack (Larson 1995:11) Whiting
    N50

Never say never (Larson 1995:73) Mieder et al 428

To be a **packrat** (Larson 1995:118) Wilkinson C17h

To get (go, etc.) from **point a** to point b (Larson 1995:30)

A watched **pot** never boils (Larson 1995:67) Whiting P303

To look like a drowned **rat** (Larson 1988:37) Whiting R50

To **rattle** someone's cage (Larson 1995:78) Wilkinson C17i

Not to be **a rocket** scientist [to be no rocket scientist] (Larson 1995:57)

Say it, don't spray it (Larson 1989:76), (Larson 1995:73) Rees CP 168.

The whole **schmeer** (Larson 1984:14)

Too many **scientists,** not enough hunchbacks (Larson 1988:70) [cf. too many chiefs, not enough Indians Whiting C171]

To get away **Scot** free (Larson 1995:118) Wilkinson C21e

Ships that pass in the night (Larson 1995:130) Wilkinson J24

Shoot first, ask questions later (Larson 1986:13) (Larson 1989:107:1) Rees CP 172

To **sleep** with the fishes (Larson 1993:34)

Smart ass (Larson 1995:21)

To **smell** like a French cathouse (Larson 1988:35)

I've heard that **song** before (Larson 1988:68) [cf. I've heard that one before Partridge CP 128]

To barely **squeak** by (Larson 1986:185) Spears 335

Walk (speak) softly, but carry a big **stick** (Larson 1989:107) Mieder et al 556

To be a lucky **stiff** (Larson 1993:91)

To be a **stranger** in these parts (Larson 1988:53)

To **string** someone up (Larson 1984:131)

To stick something where the **sun** don't (doesn't, does not) shine (Larson 1986:171)

To be **thick-skulled** (Larson 1988:119) Wilkinson I21c

Hanging by a **thread** (Larson 1986:67) Wilkinson J3a

To know what makes 'er **tick** (Larson 1995:115) Wilkinson ASC

Time is money (Larson 1986:33) Whiting T145

Today is the first day of the rest of your life (Larson 1984:147)

The oldest **trick** in the book (Larson 1993:141)

To have an itchy **trigger-finger** (Larson 1993:84) [cf. Wilkinson I18f]

Water off a duck's back, like (Larson 1986:44) Whiting
      W38

There's more than one **way** to skin a cat (Larson 1989:91)
      Whiting W74

Not to know which **way** is up (Larson 1986:162) Whiting
      W81

To be **wet** behind the ears (Larson 1995:53) Wilkinson I2g

To fall asleep at the **wheel** (Larson 1993:61)

Wolf in Sheep's clothing (Larson 1986:95), (Larson
      1986:123), (Larson 1989:109) Whiting W253

To cry wolf/boy who cried **wolf** (Larson 1986:104) Whiting
      W254

It's a **wrap** [filmmaker's slang for lIit's over, II based on the
      phrase lito wrap something Upll] (Larson 1988:49) cf.
      Wilkinson I87a

Two **wrongs** don't make a right (Larson 1993:107) Whiting
      W347

To catch some **Z's** (Larson 1995:105)

Notes

[1]There have been several studies of the use of proverbs in cartoons, most nota-
bly by Wolfgang Mieder (1987:119-134; 1989:277-293; 1993 58-71; 2004:219-
229). Few, if any, have concentrated on proverbial rhetoric and images in the work
of a single cartoonist. While studies of proverbs in novels, short stories, poetry and
even paintings often focus on a single creative artist, cartoons as a genre of art
and/or literature are still regarded as too marginal for such treatment. This is a pity,
because the juxtaposition of words and pictures found in a cartoon allows the artist
to play with proverbs in ways that the purely verbal or purely visual artist cannot.

[2]Kapchan (1993:316) provides a wonderful example of pronoun play in pro-
verbial speech. She recounts the use of a traditional rhetorical question, "aren't we
all Muslims?" by a woman vendor in a Moroccan marketplace. Because the "we" in
this proverbial question does not usually include women, its use by a woman
changed the boundaries of the pronoun and added a hint of subversive novelty to the
proverb.

[3]The idea that metaphors are comparisons disguised as non-comparative sen-
tences is not original to Mack; on the contrary, it is one quite standard explanation
of metaphor. Likewise, the idea that metaphor causes multiple meanings is widely
accepted. Basso (1976:96-98) provides a discussion of "metaphor as simile" theo-
ries, including those of Richards (1938, 1948), Urban (1939), Black (1962) and
Brown (1958), all of whom have discussed these features of metaphor.

[4]Social meanings are in fact the results of intertextual reference. We under-
stand the meanings that our culture has selected for a metaphor not because of a set
of explicit rules that were taught to us, nor because of instinct, but because we have

heard the metaphor used before, and have been able to learn the meanings from these interpretive experiences; as Abrahams and Babcock pointed out, a "carryover" of meaning occurs from a multiplicity of previous speech acts.

[5]The question of metaphor has been connected to proverb theory at least since Aristotle's *Poetics*. There has therefore been much discussion of metaphor and its importance for interpreting proverbs. One important and wide-ranging discussion is to be found in Honeck 1997:44- 85. Honeck looks at metaphor from the points of view of psychology, linguistics and rhetoric. He connects it to other tropes such as simile and metonymy, and gives a good introduction to the problems involved in theorizing metaphor. However, he does not provide a strong model of his own on the question of how either traditional or new metaphors contribute to proverb meaning; he is rather concerned with proverb cognition, leaving aside dialogic meaning for a more individual, psychological argument.

[6]The double analogy inherent in Crépeau's model—and its superiority to the direct proverb-context analogy propounded by Seitel—was first recognized by Peter Grybzek (1987). Grybzek also achieved an interesting synthesis of Crépeau's and Seitel's models.

[7]The production of cartoons like this would seem to follow a clear pattern, related to the one that Raymond Doctor (1995) observed for the shaggy dog story's "perverted proverbs"; in both shaggy dog stories and proverb cartoons, the creator starts with the proverb and thinks up the context, reversing the usual order of affairs. In the case of perverted proverb, some phonological change in a canonical proverb results in a new statement which requires a situation—thus a story contextualizing "people who live in grass houses should not stow thrones" or "if the foo shits, wear it." Similarly, the proverb drawing changes the proverb by making it literal, and the drawing is the imaginary context, which often proves to be bizarre.

[8]Neal Norrick (1985:45) has termed the smallest recognizable unit of a proverb the "kernel," and has stated that uttering the kernel is sufficient to invoke the proverb. In cases where the kernel has been omitted (e.g. the "haywire" example above), text-building is impossible. In the "early bird" example, on the other hand, "early bird" is itself the kernel, and so the proverb can be reconstructed. This is a useful addition to proverb theory, but it is a little strong to say that each proverb has one "kernel"; while Norrick identifies as "kernels" such phrases as "early bird," "rolling stone" and "stitch in time," the proverbs can be evoked without uttering these exact phrases: "you'd better get up early if you want to catch the worm," "keep on rolling and you'll gather no moss" or "one word in time can save you nine" are all imaginable and recognizable invocations of these proverbs. The field of proverb innovation, as we have seen, is wide open to creative manipulation, and difficult to describe using hard and fast rules.

[9]Mieder (1983:267 n141) mentions a cartoon, which Alan Dundes saw in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1980, and which sounds very similar to this one. Since the *Chronicle* was the first paper to carry *The Far Side,* and since *The Far Side* started in 1980, and since this is a very early *Far Side* cartoon, it seems likely that this is the cartoon in question. Larson and *The Far Side* were not at all famous at the time, and it is therefore not surprising that Dundes did not remember the author or the title of the cartoon.

[10]The discovery in recent decades of Neanderthal flutes, horns and perhaps even bagpipes makes the idea of a caveman whistle less absurd than one might

think. Nonetheless, the bell, and of course the phrase "bells and whistles" are profoundly anachronistic in the caveman context.

[11]Notice that the issue of reversibility is being applied to different aspects of the expressions at hand: like "Lewis and Clark," "bells and whistles" is not reversible in itself; the caveman couldn't say "whistles and bells," or at least, if he did, the meaning of the joke would change.

[12]The literature on World Upside-Down imagery and literalized proverb drawings is vast and international. The best summary in English is Malcolm Jones's 1989 article. Röhrich's 1959 survey article (in German) is very useful, and Mieder's 1977 review article (also in German) is even more detailed and specific (see now also the 378 annotated bibliographical entries in Mieder and Sobieski 1999). Other important treatments of World Upside-Down include Odenius 1954, Deruelle 1958, Cocchiara 1963, Kenner 1970, Cherchi 1971, Grant 1973, Chartier and Julia 1976, Kunzle 1978, Scribner 1978. Literalized proverbs in visual art are given general treatments by, among others, Bolte 1915, Frank and Miner 1937, Lebeer 1939-1940, de Meyer 1962 & 1969, Coupe 1966 [vol. 1:189-204], Brednich 1975. There is also extensive scholarship on Breughel, Bosch, Goya, and other famous artists who illustrated proverbs. Several scholars have noted that inverted hierarchies and literalized metaphors are both examples of the absurd, and practically all recognize that some proverbs explicitly exemplify reversed social hierarchies. However, few have connected the literalized proverb and the reversed hierarchy in any more general logical terms.

[13]The traditional connections between word-world reversals and hierarchical reversals go beyond World Upside-Down prints and paintings, and beyond *The Far Side;* they often emerge in depictions of comic utopia in folklore and popular culture. Hal Rammel (1990) has pointed this out in various ways. One of his examples, in fact, connects the idea of leveled or reversed hierarchies directly with images shared by two of Larson's proverb cartoons; this is the song "That's What I Like About Nowhere" by Red Ingle, which provides both the starting point and the ending point of Rammel's excursion.

Ingle's entire song is a protracted riff on the idea of "Nowhere" as a place. Furthermore, Ingle says that "when you're livin' there, you're on cloud eight." In Ingle's song, these two word-world inversions (later to reappear in *The Far Side's* "Middle of Nowhere" and "Life on Cloud Eight" cartoons) are placed within a locale where hierarchy doesn't matter, where the narrator can with equal ease call up "the President, the King of Norway, and a little guy called Max," where taxes and "mother-in-laws" and the subjugation of ordinary people to their jobs and their bosses (as symbolized by the need for money and alarm clocks) are entirely absent. In this song, as in World Upside-Down and *The Far Side,* word-world inversion and the reversal of hierarchies coexist as equally nonsensical, topsy-turvy ideas that seem somehow to depend on one another.

Larson understands the deep connection between the utopian and the absurd. In his frequent allusions to the song "Home on the Range," one of our least absurd utopian songs, Larson uses both literalization and inversion to reveal hidden silliness. In one cartoon, a herd of buffalo show up at someone's house to "just sort of roam around for a while" (Larson 1986:69); this shows how ridiculous it is to wish for "a home where the buffalo roam." In another cartoon, which appeared both as a *Nature's Way* (Larson 1989:32) and as a *Far Side* (Larson 1986:145), the danger

inherent in that wish is revealed when a cowboy singing the song is on the verge of being trampled by a herd of buffalo. Still another reverses one of the song's images, and provides a picture of deer and antelope carrying picks and pushing wheelbarrows, with the caption "where the deer and the antelope work" (Larson 1995:42). Finally, another cartoon depicts an irate cowboy telling his friends that "Simmons here just uttered a discouraging word!" (Larson 1993:60) All of these cartoons serve to undercut the song's idyllic imagery, showing it to be a little silly and even potentially absurd.

[14]This alludes, of course, to the historical theory that the fire was begun by Mrs. O'Leary's cow.

[15]It is fascinating the extent to which Larson's animals-as-people and animals-versus-people tropes can be seen to descend directly from some of the earliest surviving human art. Thomas Wright is worth quoting on this point. In discussing ancient Egyptian caricatures, he writes:

> The practice having been once introduced of representing men under the character of animals, was soon developed into other applications of the same idea—such as that of figuring animals employed in the various occupations of mankind, and that of reversing the position of man and the inferior animals, and representing the latter as treating their human tyrant in the same manner as they are usually treated by him (Wright 1875:6-7).

[16]The panel I have interpreted as an ox butchering a man appears as number 32 in the Catalan woodcut given by Grant; however, the animal is quite hairy and may possibly be a sheep. Panel number 36 appears to show two sheep butchering a man, while number 35 shows a sheep spit-roasting a man. Number 31 shows what appear to be two pigs butchering and sticking a man. In a uniquely Iberian touch, number 23 depicts a bullfight in which the bull carries the flag and the sword!

[17]Hunting, too, was satirized in medieval World Upside-Down prints, but in a more direct and shocking way. Just as the cattle who butcher the man were popular figures, so were the rabbits who boil the hounds and roast the hunter. The Flemish folklorist Maurits de Meyer (1962:425) called this "the oldest and best-loved World Turned Upside-Down Motif." The closest Larson comes to this direct hunter-animal reversal is the hostage-swap cartoon mentioned above, in which the deer capture but do not kill the hunter, and of course "the hand that fed me." Also interesting is one of Larson's early *Nature's Way* cartoons, in which a rabbit wears a human foot around his neck "for good luck" (Larson 1989:28).

[18]Drawing on a long international chain of scholarship on festival behavior and World Upside-Down, Natalie Zeman Davis (1975:97) and Peter Burke (1978:202) both point out that the traditional view of the serious criticism embodied in such carnival imagery is that it acts as a social "safety valve," venting the hostilities that build up during the non-festive year, thus aiding in the preservation of the status quo. However, both go on to show that this safety-valve theory is only partly adequate, and that at times the festive reversal inherent in carnival and World Upside-Down leads to the opposite; to riots, destabilization, and ultimately social change.

[19]It is generally accepted that the World Upside-Down art of earlier centuries comments on human hierarchies. Helen Grant (1973:123-124), however, has sug-

gested that "perhaps there lies a genuine feeling for animals exploited by humans behind those endless cuts." Whether this was true before the eighteenth century is hard to say, but Larson certainly feels for the animals in his cartoons.

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