Talking Animals: address to alumni at the Harvard Club of New York.

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Address to alumni at the Harvard Club of New York.

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I wish to thank all of you for coming tonight. I am accustomed to having well-attended lectures, but since those lectures are in a Core course I have to recognize that most of the audience is there to satisfy graduation requirements or (to put it in beastly terms) to earn a piece of sheepskin. But tonight is different. Although everyone in this room looks as if they could still be undergraduates, I know that that is not the case.

But am I really better off here than in front of one of my classes? Perhaps I would be safer speaking to Harvard undergraduates than to Harvard alums. After all, I have seen what Harvard undergraduates can do to professors. I have read the ConfiGuide, where colleagues are described as being human Quaaludes—and worse. I shudder to think what those undergraduates can do once they have left Harvard and reached their full powers.

To earn the good will of this dangerous audience I hereby announce that I am not going to talk to you about the theory of the Core curriculum in general, which seems to have the same bracing effect on people as repeating “Your eyelids feel heavy and you are growing sleepy” while swinging a pocket watch before their eyes. Instead, I will offer you (and that includes any early-action students in the room) a taste of the action in one part of the Core.

I hope that no one will feel too deceived by the talk. I considered entitling it “Teaching Animals,” to create a fourfold ambiguity. In the first place it would refer to teaching a course nicknamed “Beasts” or “Animals.” In the second it would allude to my profession, for what are professors if not teaching animals? Thirdly it would indicate students who are sometimes—but mercifully not often!—animals. And finally it would indicate actually teaching real animals, as in obedience training for dogs. I hope to say something about the first three of these topics, but I am not the one to speak about the fourth since I can’t even convince my three children to obey me.

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The fall of 1981 was my first term of teaching at Harvard. Half of my load was in Classics, half in Comparative Literature. For Comparative Literature I put together a course entitled “Talking Animals from Aesop to Orwell.” After taking this trial run I later reorganized the course and shifted it into the Literature and Arts division of the Core. I have taught Lit and Arts A-31 “Beast Literature” five times to a total of roughly fifteen hundred students. In the coming minutes (not sixty of them, I promise you!) I will describe the philosophy behind the course and I will offer explanations for its success.
Because the title “Beast Literature” strikes many people as odd, I am often asked how the idea for the course came to me. Occasionally I respond flippantly, by describing childhood experiences with animals that left lasting impressions—sometimes bite marks—upon me. For instance, when I was a child my family made an annual pilgrimage to a farm in the South—even further South than New York—where my grandparents and uncle lived. As a toddler I would hop out of our car and run to look at the farm animals, first the three pigs and then the cows. One year, when I was five or six years old, I jumped out and noticed that both the pig sty and the three pigs had disappeared. When I asked my uncle, a laconic man, what had happened, he took me by the hand, led me inside, and opened the door to the freezer, which was filled with packages of meat. This wordless communication doubtless introduced me to the problematic tension between reality and folktale, between the three little pigs and bringing home the bacon.

Alternatively, I tell of the pets that my brother and I had. Two were newts named Napoleon I and II. (The choice of name was pure coincidence, since at that stage neither of us had encountered the Stalin-like pig with this name in Orwell’s Animal Farm.) After the two Napoleons escaped we bought a hamster, which was not named Napoleon but which also managed to liberate itself. Four months after the hamster disappeared I went down to a rarely visited corner of the basement and found it stiff from rigor mortis inside a deep washing-basin. Without question the tragic death of this rodent prepared me for Kafka’s brooding and morbid short stories about animals.

But let me be serious for a minute. However real and memorable the experiences with the pigs, newts, and hamster were for me, I do not honestly believe that special affection for animals played a large role in the genesis of my course. Instead, the major cause was serendipity—the chance series of events that led to my dissertation topic.

Before proceeding I should come out of the closet and admit that I am a medieval Latinist: I study Latin literature written during the Middle Ages. While in graduate school I became particularly interested in an eleventh-century poem that relates two stories: first, the story of a calf (who is a monk) who runs away from his monastery and falls into the clutches of a wolf (who is also a monk), and second, the story of a wolf who attempts to arrange the death of a fox but ends up being outfoxed and executed himself.

What drew me to the poem initially was not its animals, but its overall complexity. Yet gradually I realized that to understand the poem I had to set it in context by looking at other writings in which animals were the protagonists. The Cambridge University dissertation that emerged was entitled “Medieval Latin Beast Poetry: The Development from 750-1150.” Like
most scholarship on medieval Latin topics, it was a real blockbuster, and I imagine that fully a half-dozen people have read it.

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But I have said more than enough about my dissertation and specialization to put you into a gentle post-dinner snooze or (should I say) catnap. Now it’s high time to get to the course itself.

Upon being hired at Harvard I was informed that I had only two weeks to put together ideas for courses to be listed in the catalogue. I wanted to devise one course that would enable me to build upon my dissertation, but that would also broaden my horizons after several years in which I had narrowed my sights to Latin and the Middle Ages. Following this impulse I jotted down a long list of books and stories in which animals, usually talking animals, were key figures. As my alpha and omega I took Aesop and Orwell. Crossing off entries that seemed obscure, I tried to include between these two chronological boundaries as many great books or “classics” as I could find.

After repeating this exercise over more cups of cappuccino than I would care to admit to a dietitian, I felt increasingly confident of the merit to studying a group of texts in which the heroes are animals. At that point I began to mention the idea to friends and colleagues, and I was heartened at the interest they showed.

To make a long story short, I gathered my courage and wrote a rough-hewn version of the present course description: “An analysis of literature, both oral and written, in which animals figure prominently. Studies continuity and change in the use of talking animals in stories, from fables and mock epics of the classical period through modern novels. Considers how shifts in philosophical views toward animals alter the fiction written about them. Examines the limitations and freedoms that the loquacious beast brings to writers.”

The first offering of the course was a wild and woolly experience. One difficulty was that I had absolutely no course upon which to model my own. I had heard of courses on fable, but not of courses that brought together highlights from all sorts of literature about animals.

The biggest problem was the size of the course. Infallible as always, the departmental secretary had warned me that the course would draw a large crowd. Nonetheless, until the first meeting I continued naively to expect that I would have only fifteen or twenty students. To my surprise “Talking Animals” attracted nearly ninety. This number gave me the same mixed feelings as one of my students expressed on an evaluation form for my elementary Latin class that term. Under “major strength of the course” he wrote “makes me dream in Latin”; under “major weakness” he scrawled “the dreams are nightmares.”
Rather than relive for you my nightmare, I will say simply that I was unprepared for the degree and type of preparation required to deal with talking animals. To this day I continue to be amazed at the numbers who attend the course: the enrollment has leapt each time, to the point where four hundred thirty students took it during the fall.

After recovering for a few months from the trials and tribulations of “Talking Animals” I forgot (or repressed) everything except the exhilaration—the exhilaration of making my field come alive to a mixed audience and the exhilaration of having a chance to proselytize for literature. Flushed by excitement, I decided to shift the course into the newly founded Core Curriculum.

Since proposing the course to the Core my philosophy has not changed greatly. In my view, animals—and above all talking animals—appear in many kinds of literature throughout the world and time. Although the animals reveal marked differences caused in part by divergent attitudes toward real animals and in part by the varying natures of the genres in which they occur, the animals of any one place and period share many features with those of another.

The course takes a bird’s eye view of beast literature from ancient records through World War II. In two preliminary weeks it introduces students to animals in folktales, first in coyote stories and then in the Uncle Remus stories. In these two bodies of literature students have an opportunity to see etiological stories about animals—that is, stories that explain why the possum plays possum and why the rabbit and bear have short tails. More important, they read tales about animal tricksters, and learn to distinguish such tales from other types of folktales. In addition, the students are exposed to the changes that occur when folktales told aloud for one audience are reworked in writing for a different group with different esthetics and social concerns.

Whether or not my lectures and interpretations hold the interest of the students during these weeks I cannot say; but I am certain that the tales engage them. In Uncle Remus they get something quite serious: a dialect that is new to most of them and social issues that they have often not dealt with in literature previously. Above all, they come in contact with the theme of the underdog, one that will be with us much of the term.

The Coyote stories are a horse of a different color. There the students encounter a steamily sexual environment in which an animal dismembers and reassembles himself, has arguments with his genitalia, swaps them with another animal, and sends them on search-and-destroy missions. No wonder that Coyote has been described as an animal equivalent of a televangelist: “a greedy, unscrupulous erotomaniac.” For better or for worse, I believe that the
Coyote stories are what led one Radcliffe source to characterize Lit and Arts A-31 as “the Harvard course about Harvard men.”

If folktales are the basic element in beast literature, beast fable is the simplest compound. Accordingly, I devote the third week to ancient beast fable. I have three main emphases: distinguishing between beast fable and animal folktale, defining beast fable, and detecting the social implications of classical beast fables. In defining fable I discuss the assorted associations of fable in modern European languages: the idea of talking implicit in our word confab or in the Spanish hablar, the idea of lying in fib and cock & bull, and the idea of fiction and fantasy in the adjective fabulous.

The most amusing moments are when we examine stories that are not fables but that somehow wormed their way into the ancient collections. There are etiological interlopers, such as an elaborate myth about an embassy to Jupiter that explains why dogs sniff each other. There are coarse little jokes such as one entitled “Mercury and the Two Women,” which reads as follows: “Once two women entertained Mercury in a mean and shabby fashion. One of them had a little son in the cradle, the other was a prostitute. Accordingly, to make a suitable return for their services, Mercury said: ‘I am a god, and I will give each of you whatever she wishes.’ The mother asks that she may see her son with a beard as soon as possible. The prostitute [asks] that whatever she touches should follow her. Mercury flies away and the women return indoors. The mother finds her baby with a beard and bawling. While the prostitute was enjoying a hearty laugh at this it happened that her nasal passages got clogged with mucus, as will happen. Intending, therefore, to blow her nose, she took hold of it with her hand and pulled it out longer and longer, clear to the floor. Thus, while laughing at another she herself became an object of laughter.” That pseudo-fable is only the start of a trend to include scatological and erotic tales in fable collections.

In the fourth week the course turns to two unrelated genres of literature in which animals have figured prominently. First we look at a mock epic based on the Iliad, in which frogs play the Trojans and mice the Greeks. In examining this poem I concentrate upon the use of anthropomorphism and parody, to which anyone who has seen cartoons can relate. There is great humor in taking a culture’s sacred story—whether it be the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid, or Conan the Barbarian—and transposing it into animal terms.

After mock epic we move to a seriocomic philosophical dialogue based on a situation in the Odyssey. In this dialogue Odysseus tries to persuade one of his men, who has been turned into a pig by the witch Circe, that he should unmake a pig of himself and return to human form. But
the pig refuses to be convinced that human beings are superior to animals, and we see the craftiest of Greeks is outwitted by a grunt.

This clever piece not only allows me to continue examining the topics of anthropomorphism and parody, but in addition is the first text in the course in which a fiction about animals provides the vehicle for discussing philosophies about animals. The dialogue adopts a Cynic form (the seriocomic dialogue) to promote such views as primitivism and theriophily (or animalitarianism) while at the same time it rebuts the Stoic view that only human beings are endowed with reason.

With a third of the course completed, we have studied animal folktales, beast fable, animal epic, and philosophical dialogues with animals. In the fifth week we pursue the issue of metamorphosis from human to animal state in a novel-length work of fiction: Apuleius’ The Golden Ass. By juxtaposing The Golden Ass to a shorter story entitled “Lucius, or the Ass” we see how elementary forms of beast literature can be combined and expanded imaginatively, and how moral meaning may be attained in a long work of beast fiction. In addition to these general observations, we also look into the particular advantages of the ass, especially because of its oversized ears and phallus, to the development of Apuleius’ principle themes, curiosity and lust.

Comparing the climaxes of the two works is both entertaining and enlightening. In “Lucius, or the Ass” (much the shallower work of literature) the concluding scene is like the rest of the story: it is simply bawdy entertainment. Quite accidentally the ass-man finds an occasion to eat roses (the magic remedy for his asinine condition) and is changed back to human form. His reaction is to go back and dine with the woman who had enjoyed his special features while he was a donkey. At the end of a romantic evening, he gets up and strips naked, imagining that he will please her still more in human form. Instead, and I quote, “when she saw that every part of [him] was human, she spat at” him and had him thrown out naked. In The Golden Ass the transformation is a mystical religious experience quite far removed from sexuality.

Usually the students find the two stories edifying as well as entertaining, but one of my few unhappy experiences in teaching Beast Lit occurred when a student came to me after these lectures and told me that “It will be on your soul if anyone from this class goes out and does anything with a cat…or a dog…or a chicken.” I felt almost sheepish, but I have not stricken the texts from my reading list.

From the strongly religious ending of The Golden Ass we move to the beast literature of the Middle Ages, where animals are often used to convey fundamental Christian beliefs. I was prepared for discussing such beliefs by my own solidly ecumenical Polish upbringing, which
stressed not just the things that everyone knows about Santa Claus, Hannukah, and Christmas, but also the fine points of medieval beast lore—about how on Easter Christ pushed aside the rock at the mouth of the cave and stepped out, alive once more, before going back into the cave after seeing his shadow.

That joke is strangely close to some medieval beast literature and lore. At any rate, the first medieval week is concerned with peculiarly medieval attitudes toward animals, for instance rhymes that were recited to kill or evict rats. Religious literature and Christian animal symbolism are represented by selections from the Physiologus, which was the granddaddy of later bestiaries, and by a ninth-century mock epic by a very witty Irishman. Legal literature is supplied in excerpts from excommunications, trial proceedings, and other materials connected with the prosecution of animals, especially trials that were conducted to punish pigs that defaced or disfigured babies who had been left unattended.

After this background the course proceeds to medieval works that exemplify the three categories examined in ancient literature: fable, dialogue, and epic. To convey the nature of medieval fable I have used modern English translations of four different fabulists: one French, one Hebrew, one Latin, and one Scottish. In each case I have encouraged the students to appreciate both how much extraneous material infiltrated the collections and how the morals of fable were changed to justify feudal society and bring home basic tenets of Christian doctrine.

As an example of medieval dialogue I have regularly assigned The Owl and the Nightingale, which has many points of contact with medieval fables and with beast lore seen in earlier readings. And how could I resist a piece that contains the earliest evidence for the use of the expression “dirt ball” as an insult?

To represent medieval epic I have resorted in recent years to a sprightly translation of French stories about Renard the fox. Pointing out the resemblances between a few of the fox stories and a few of the later Uncle Remus stories, I consider the connection between the Renard stories and folktales of animal tricksters. Then I contrast the medieval fox stories to Uncle Remus in their use of literary parody, cultural commentary, and anthropomorphism.

Once again, the text is one that compels attention because it deals graphically with sensitive issues: the central scene in the cycle is when Renard the Fox first seduces Hersent the wolf, then urinates upon her cubs and insults their father, and later rapes her. When he is finally given the lenient sentence of going on pilgrimage to make amends, he responds by defecating, wiping himself with his cloth cross, and hurling it in the face of the king. Such scenes quickly
dispel people’s preconceptions about the staidly religious Middle Ages and lend a historical perspective to the recent furor over Serrano’s photograph entitled “Christ in Piss.”

In the final weeks of the course we leave the Middle Ages and move into the Renaissance and beyond, at a pace of roughly a century a week. In so doing, I continue to pay attention to fable, epic, and philosophical dialogue, but I place increasing weight on the political and psychological preoccupations of the writers.

Cervantes’s “The Dogs’ Colloquy” provides a hinge to the modern period, since it joins the concern with religious issues and institutions that typified medieval beast literature with signs of a familiarity with the ancient beast literature that exercised little or no influence during the Middle Ages. It also revives the issue of man-to-beast transformation.

From Cervantes’s possible knowledge of ancient beast dialogues I proceed to appraise the role of animals in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy. Philosophers split into two groups, one viewing animals as somehow spiritual and rational, the other as clockworks. The former group is represented by Montaigne (1533-1592) and his followers, the latter by Descartes (1596-1650) and the Cartesians. Whether or not the students remember my analysis of *Cogito ergo sum* for its relevance to questions of animal reason and animal soul, they never forget the ironic circumstances of Descartes’ death. In 1650 Descartes was at a party in downtown Paris, when his hostess came over and asked, “Would you care for another glass of wine?” Rather thoughtlessly, Descartes responded” I think not” and disappeared.

After considering the influence of the philosophical debate on fables of La Fontaine (1621-1695) and on the fourth part of Swift’s (1667-1745) *Gulliver’s Travels* (“A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms”), it is natural to proceed to the humane movement in the eighteenth century, one result of which was a consensus to educate children to be kind toward animals. Although I refer to many well-known works of children’s literature, the sole example of this genre that we read is Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books*. We approach this collection from four perspectives: its relation to the movement of animal-lovers, its place in children’s literature, its expression of social messages about colonialism, and its proponency of civic and private moral virtues.

In the following week we inspect *The Call of the Wild* for signs of Jack London’s beliefs about the nature of animals, in particular about the influence of heredity and conditioning. This inspection entails brief attention to London’s understanding of Darwinism (animal behavior, “kill or be killed,” and the will of the individual). We look especially long and hard at London’s attempts to present a dogmatic view of the world. For instance, there is unintentional humor in London’s first sentence of the novel “Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known
that trouble was brewing” and in the second, where he tells that dogs were taken north to help men find “yellow metal.” Although London’s goals are laudable, his success is debatable. I submit that a dog no more knows the words yellow or metal than the word gold, and that if a dog could think in terms of yellow metal, he would think not of gold, but of a fire hydrant or signpost.

London’s ambivalence toward law and society prepares for Kafka’s similar ambivalence, which is evident in a few of his short stories about animals. I must confess to an ambivalence of my own about The Call of the Wild, not just because the macho world it presents sometimes seems preposterous to me (Buck is described as being “one hundred and fifty pounds of grit and virility”—a kind of canine Clint Eastwood), but mainly because I have read three or four dozen too many final papers in which students compare the behavior of Buck with that of their own mutts. And yet the book has had a great effect on many students. To take the most extreme example, one woman was so enthralled by London’s novel that she went off and became a dog handler on Howling Dog Farm in Willow, Alaska! I treasure the two long letters that she sent me during her time in the Northland.

The course closes with George Orwell’s Animal Farm. Despite being roughly comparable in his background to Kipling, Orwell was fiercely anti-imperial and anti-totalitarian. Although in form Animal Farm is not a fable, it resembles a fable in its economy of style and in its use of animals to express harsh criticism of a group that could not be attacked openly; for in 1944 there was no glasnost about the Soviets among the Allies. With the help of Orwell’s “Preface to the Ukrainian Edition,” the book can be read as an anti-fairy tale of Russian Communism between the revolution of 1917 and the Teheran Conference of 1943.

By the end of the course I hope that the students perceive many features unifying a group of texts that probably seemed hopelessly disparate to them in the beginning. At the same time, I expect that they notice a number of subtle differences that they had not remarked before. In terms of method, they should have learned basic principles of literary history and comparative literature.

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Apart from attending lectures and completing readings, the students must satisfy a half-dozen other requirements. They attend weekly discussion sections. They are quizzed on fable and asked to write a bona fide beast fable. They have a mid-term examination, two papers, and a final exam. To accommodate these requirements to the overall philosophy of the course I have produced a sourcebook that includes many assigned readings and much other information:
outlines of all the lectures, topics to be discussed in the weekly sections, outlines and summaries of several readings, formats and topics for the two papers, and samples of past examinations.

The efforts that I have put into coordinating the lectures and requirements with the sourcebook have encouraged the growth of the course, because they have made “Beast Literature” more approachable—more humane—than it would otherwise have been. Among the other factors that have been involved are—I am almost ashamed to admit—the puns on animal nouns and verbs in my lectures. Although a vocal minority dislikes the puns (some tear-stained evaluations plead with me to “clam up”), most of the students complain at my intermittent attempts to drop them (their evaluations call upon me to “beef up” lectures with more “sick animal puns”).

Rather than risk nauseating you with my own examples of puns, I will instead read an anonymous letter that was once thrust under my door:

Deer Professor Ziolkowski [Dear is spelled D-E-E-R],

Hip-hippo-ray for such a great Beast Lit course. We all appreciated the way you panda’d to our taste for puns. You really hoofed through the course while keeping those jokes in rein, although I’m sure we bridled at them sometimes and maybe cried “Neigh.” A few were real dogs and set our teeth on edge, and sometimes we felt you were barking up the wrong tree. But there’s no ducking the question: Where did you get all those animal puns? It must have been aard vark. But we guess you’ve been bitten by the punning bug and can’t stop. Really, we are grateful for the gnu [G-N-U] jokes every class. Iguana go on, but that will be all.

But of course it was not just a lemming-like attraction to wretched puns that caused the course to grow. One piece of good luck in establishing “Beast Literature” was timing: I took the course into Harvard’s Core Curriculum early, just as colleges and universities throughout the United States were considering shifting to similar programs. As a result, the course has benefited from the mixed blessing of media attention. In these days of doubt about the future of the humanities, the canon, and the undergraduate curriculum, thematic courses such as “Beast Literature” continue to be viewed with both intense curiosity and distrust. And yet the students continue to vote with their feet, or with their registration cards.

Ultimately the most powerful attraction of Literature and ArtsA-31 to the students has always been—and should always be—the material itself. The reading list comprises a nearly
unbroken string of classics or texts that would be classics if they were better known. The many “greats” appeal to the majority, those students who could be called centripetal. They are reassured by the familiar titles, by the knowledge that they have already read a few of the books, and by the comforting (albeit misleading) association of a few titles with children’s literature. But the reading list also attracts the minority, those students who could be considered centrifugal. They see in a glance that, however many of the required readings, the course is not mainstream. It offers something different and, for me and them, that is a virtue. If there is a place for rare birds—and rare beasts—it is Harvard. Thank you.