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LAUGHING WEASELS.

ANIMAL VOICES FROM MYTH TO NATURAL HISTORY

As I have shown in my book *Nascere*, ancient beliefs and stories about the weasel represent the weasel's nature (its physical appearance, habits, and so on) more truly than might have been expected. Even the most fantastic and bizarre claims about the weasel often contain a fragment of truth, and many of the weasel's characteristic traits, including the most particular and those known today only to a small group of scientists, found a place in representations of the weasel in the past. In this paper, I will deal in particular with the weasel's voice. But before approaching this subject, I will recount what happened to Alcmena when her son, Heracles, was about to be born. This version of the myth comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, narrated by Alcmena herself many years after the fact¹:

I had completed nine months of pregnancy, and my belly was burdened by its weight, so heavy that by the weight alone you could know what I was bearing inside me had been fathered by Jupiter. I was no longer able to endure the labor pains, and even now, as I speak of them to you, a chill of horror runs through my veins and the memory itself is part of the pain. I was tormented for seven nights and seven days, exhausted by my agony I raised my hands up to the sky, calling loudly upon the twin Nixi di and the goddess Lucina. Lucina came but was held back by Juno, and she was willing to hand me over to that immoral goddess. As soon as she had heard my cries, she came and sat down right there upon the altar, near the door, and she crossed her legs and entwined the fingers of her hands so that in this way she prevented me from giving birth. Silently she recited incantations, and the incantations held back the delivery that had already begun. I press and madly make frenzied complaints to Jupiter, I want to die, and my shouts of grief would have moved even a heart of stone. The women of Thebes stand by me, making vows and trying to ease my pain. One of the helpers (*una ministrarum*) came to me, a woman from the common folk, Galanthis, with fair hair, prompt in carrying out orders and whose services were much appreciated. She realized that this was happening because of immortal Juno, going frequently in and out of the room she saw the goddess seated on the altar, with her crossed fingers upon her knees. "Whoever you are", she said to the goddess, "rejoice with my mistress! Alcmena of Argos has given birth and can now fulfill the vow she made as an expectant mother". Lucina, the goddess of the womb, then leaped to her feet and, shocked, she opened the hands which she had been holding clasped together; meanwhile, my bonds were

¹ Ov. *Met.* 9. 281-323.

loosened, and I was freed of my burden. They say Galanthis started to laugh since she had deceived one of the gods. But the cruel goddess grabbed her by the hair as she was still laughing, and pulled her down and then kept her from getting back up again: her arms turned into paws. She still has her former zeal, and her color has not changed, but her shape is different from before: And because she used her deceitful mouth to help a woman give birth to a child, she gives birth through the mouth, and she continues to inhabit our houses, just like before.

There is some sense of setting in this version of the story – Ovid’s Alcmena tells us that there was an altar where Lucina sat with her legs crossed, and a door through which Galanthis went «in and out» of the house. More significantly, Ovid’s version is especially rich in details that are important to understand the plot of the story. For example, we are explicitly told how Hera was able to prevent Alcmena from giving birth: it was enough to cross her legs, to clasp her hands, and to place those clasped hands over the knee that was not already blocked, to condemn Alcmena to the agony of a seemingly endless labor, «tormented for seven nights and for seven days». Galanthis is finally able to find an ingenious way to make Lucina release her hands and knees, simultaneously untying the bonds that trapped little Heracles inside his mother’s womb.

Lucina is acting here like a witch, making gestures that ‘bind’ the woman in labor and pronouncing incantations that prevent the completion of the birth. Like any good midwife, this goddess of childbirth reveals herself to be an expert in the power of magic formulas and spells. It is simply a matter of whether that power is turned to good or bad ends.

What about Galanthis, Lucina’s rival in Ovid’s story? Who is this young woman exactly? The text calls her *una ministrarum*, which is usually translated as «one of the servants»². As I showed in my book, however, Galanthis is more properly a birth attendant. As such, the young *ministra* is able to thwart Lucina’s witchcraft, and afterwards she bursts out laughing at her own success. Galanthis laughs when she manages to trick the goddess, even though she herself is mortal, and she keeps on laughing even after the goddess has thrown her body down flat against the ground and turns her arms into the paws of an animal. The metamorphosis has begun.

Ovid does not explicitly tell us what animal we are dealing with, instead playing with the reader as if posing a riddle to which we must supply the answer: «since you assisted a woman in labor by means of your lying mouth, you will give birth through your mouth and, as before, you will frequent our houses». Ovid was clearly counting on the fact that his audience was aware of the

² «Une des mes servantes» in LAFAYE 1904, p. 103; BÖMER 1977, p. 361 notes that Galanthis’s hairstyle is not that of a slave but of a freeborn woman, but he does not say anything specifically about the reason for Galanthis’s presence at Alcmena’s house.

bizarre legend about the weasel giving birth through the mouth³, so that this one clue would be enough to allow them to guess which animal the goddess has in mind. Moreover, Ovid's heroine is not named Historis (as she is in Pausanias's version of the story) but rather Gal-anthis, which readily brings to mind the Greek word for weasel, *galê*. There are other clues too, of course: the color of the animal's fur is *fulvus*, just like the color of Galanthis's unbound hair, and it is said to «frequent our houses», which is in fact true of Greek and Roman weasels, who were household animals⁴. Finally, the weasel shares with Galanthis the quality of being *strenua*, industrious, diligent, rushing «in and out of the house». But at the same time, Galanthis is the only one of the *matres* of Thebes attending Alcmena who notices the goddess seated upon the altar and her odd behavior. This young woman is sharp and canny, as the weasel is described in ancient fables and folklore. Ovid thus brings to life before our eyes a little weasel, swift and sure of itself, going in and out of 'our' houses (although that 'our' makes clear the cultural distance that divides us from Ovid), a creature who, oddly enough, supposedly gives birth through the mouth.

Perhaps most striking of all is the laughter of the weasel / Galanthis, who laughs as she tricks the bewildered goddess, and continues to laugh as the goddess drags her across the ground by her blond hair. The story thus receives an *aural* dimension as the sound of 'voices' is woven into the narrative web. Ovid was a master at exploiting the details of a metamorphosis, exploring the analogies 'before' and 'after' a transformation, constructing all sorts of possible links between the preceding human condition and the form that follows the inexorable mutation. The shape of a human limb can anticipate the branch of a tree, or someone's complexion can predict the color of the resulting flower. In this case, the resemblances between the woman and the animal that she becomes do not depend only on visual characteristics (the color of her hair, the rapidity of her movements, and so on), but also on a characteristic *sound*. Galanthis, the merry prankster, laughs when she has her human form, and keeps on laughing when she is turned into a weasel. The laughing of the weasel-woman is rather intriguing. Is Ovid 'echoing' some real vocal traits of the animal, as he was imitating the visual marks of its body? Better, the question is: can 'real' weasels produce sounds similar to laughing?

Before we try to answer to this question, let us examine some more evidence about the voice of Roman weasels. Believe it or not, we are unusually well informed about the vocal displays of this small animal according to Latin language. First of all, we possess the designations given to the *vox mustelae*, preserved in a lexicographical fragment by Suetonius and a poem collected in the *Anthologia Latina*. According to the manuscript tradition of both texts, the terms used to indicate the voice of the

³ For the weasel giving birth through the mouth, see BETTINI 1998, pp. 52-58, 162-168, 198-201, 212-215, 264-271.

⁴ On the weasel as a household animal, see BETTINI 1998, pp. 54, 58, 153-157, 184-185, 198, 254.

weasel were the following: *drindrare*, *drindare*, *derindare* or *didindrare*. Clearly enough, these words are variants of the same sound pattern, based on the principle of syllabic iteration: *drindrare*, *drin-dare*, *de-rin-dare*, *di-din-drare*. As phoneticists teach us, the iteration of the same syllable is a resource frequently exploited by onomatopoeic formations, in order to suggest the iterated or protracted character of the imitated sound (e.g., Grammont)⁵. To confirm the onomatopoeic character of the various *de-rin-dare* or *di-din-drare* of the weasel, we can mention the fact that such terms immediately recall those used in Latin to designate the sound of the bell: *tin-tinnare* or *tin-tin-nire*. Even more interesting, from our point of view, is the fact that similar sound patterns are also used to create the onomatopoeic formations by which the Romans designated the various voices of the birds, such as: *zin-zi-tare* (the blackbird), *cac-ca-bare* (the partridge) *te-trinnire* (the pigeon) *tin-ni-pere* (the bird called *parrus*) and so on. The similarities between these terms and the formations used to designate the *vox mustelae* are immediately apparent. The conclusion that we draw from this short analysis is quite surprising: the Romans felt and recorded the *vox mustelae* as similar either to the ringing / trilling of a bell or to the chirping / twittering of a bird. If above we asked «can ‘real’ weasels produce sounds similar to laughing?», we now have to append another: can ‘real’ weasels produce sounds similar to trilling or twittering?

Let us now turn to the *Epistles* of Horace, the famous fable of the fox and the weasel in Book One. By crawling in through a small hole, the fox has gotten into a grain storage chest, but has eaten so much that it is impossible for him to get out the same way. The weasel says to the fox: *si vis...effugere istinc / macra cavum repetes artum, quem macra subisti* («if you want to get out from there, you cannot use that narrow way again until you are as thin as you were when you went in»)⁶. Impressed by Horace’s artistry, as any decent ancient commentator should be, Acro remarks: *mire imitatus est stridorem mustelae* («the poet has wonderfully imitated the *stridor*, the creaking of the weasel»)⁷. Apparently Acro was referring to the sequence of ‘i’ and ‘s’ sounds in the phrase *si vis...istinc*, which sounded to him like a *stridor*. It is clear that, according to Acro, the weasel did not produce any trilling sound, but a kind of screech or creak. The commentator transmits some precious information, the recording of one more voice of the weasel, assimilated by him to the creaking of a door or the screeching of the wheels of a wagon. As everybody knows, the history of western literary tradition

⁵ See BETTINI 2008, pp. 77 ss.

⁶ Hor. *Ep.* 1. 7. 29-34. See the version in Babrius 86 and *Aesopica* 23 (Perry) in which the story is told about two foxes. See also Dio Chrys. *Or.* 47.20. There are actually many attestations of this fable. In St. Jerome, *Letters* 79. 3 the fox is replaced by a mouse; in Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* 4. 9 there is a snake who was crawling inside a bottle of wine and cannot get back out again, whereupon he is rebuked by the owner of the wine. The fox and the weasel return again Cyril’s *Speculum Sapientiae* 11 (Grässe 85-86); other versions are cited in E. Cosquin, *Contes populaires de Lorraine* (2. 156-163). In La Fontaine, *Fables* 3. 17 it is the weasel who has eaten too much, whereupon it is rebuked by a mouse. On the ancient sources for this story, there are some notes in Hauthal’s critical apparatus for *Acronis et Porphyrius commentarii in Q. Horatium Flaccum*, ad *Epistulas* 1. 7. 32 (Hauthal 2. 411).

⁷ *Acronis et Porphyrius commentarii in Q. Horatium Flaccum* (Hauthal 2. 411).

contains many funny stories – and the recording of animal sounds is no exception. Over time this observation of the scholiast was misconstrued, so that we read the following entry in a medieval Latin glossary: *istinz est vox mustele teste Horatio* («according to Horace, the weasel makes the sound ‘istinz’»)⁸. Horace said no such thing, of course, but at the same time it is true that *istinz* is a sound that resembles a *stridor*, the noise produced by the weasel according to Acro. To the two preceding questions – can ‘real’ weasels produce sounds similar to laughing? and can ‘real’ weasels produce sounds similar to trilling or twittering? – we now have to add a third: can ‘real’ weasels produce sounds similar to creaking or screeching? Time has come to turn these questions over to the scientists.

Carolyn King, a contemporary naturalist who spent many years of her life working on weasels, distinguishes three different patterns of vocal display among these animals⁹. An agitated weasel emits a «low hissing sound», and, in the face of more threatening danger, the weasel utters «a series of sharp, explosive barks or chirps». On the positive side, the weasel also makes «a low-intensity trilling sound» when calling its young, having sex, or playing with an especially trusted human companion. What then are we to make of ancient accounts of the weasel’s voice in the light of this new information?

To go back to the starting point of our analysis, when Ovid wrote that the weasel «laughed», he was presumably referring to the «series of sharp, explosive barks or chirps» that weasels utter in case of danger. We must not forget that for Ovid the weasel was a household animal, and so the cry of a frightened weasel that we find described in scientific writing was something that Ovid would have been familiar with, just as we recognize the distinctive *meow* of a frightened cat. Ovid links this natural observation metaphorically to a characteristically human sound: in his poem, the cry of the weasel becomes derisive laughter. This takes us beyond simple naturalistic observation; the animal world is not only an object that we know and observe, but a cultural configuration that we ourselves construct. Ovid’s metaphorical use of the weasel’s cry is but one of many cultural configurations that we find associated with the weasel in antiquity.

As for the *drindrare*, *drindare*, *derindare* or *didindrare* recorded by our sources as the *vox mustelae* – formations that evoked the *tintinnire* of a bell or the various onomatopoeic *voces* attributed to the birds – these designations are presumably meant to suggest the positive sound made by the weasel: the «low-intensity trilling sound» that it makes when calling its young, having sex, or – we should not forget – playing with an especially trusted human companion. Again, we must remember that the weasel was a domestic animal for the ancient Romans. Just as we know that when a cat is happy it purrs, the Romans knew that when a weasel is enjoying itself it *drindrât*, *drindat*, *derindat* or *didindrit*, that is, makes a trilling noise.

⁸ Aynardus, *Excerpta ex glossis, Corpus glossariorum latinorum* 5. 620. See also *Novum glossarium mediae latinitatis* (Blatt), s.v. *mustela*.

⁹ KING 1989, p. 23.

And what about the *stridor* that Acro derived from the words pronounced by the weasel in the fable of Horace? The commentator, in interpreting his text, may have been somehow inspired by some living experience of the voice of the animal. There is no denying that the «low hissing sound» emitted by an agitated weasel, according to the researches of Carolyn King, could properly be defined in terms of a *stridor*, a creaking or screeching. I would not dare to say that Acro was right – in other words, that Horace, with his *si vis effugere istinc*, really intended to evoke phonically the voice of a weasel: but who knows? The sound world surrounding Roman literary tradition – voices of animals and human beings woven into the poetic web – is still largely to be explored.

Before ending, I would like to raise a more general question: how did it come about that the «series of sharp, explosive barks or chirps» produced by a weasel was turned by Ovid into a burst of laughter? In other words, what is the metaphorical process that led to constructing the weasel as a laughing character? In order to answer this question, I will make a short detour through the principles of the «ecological psychology» proposed by Gibson and Reed¹⁰.

According to Gibson and Reed, human perception focuses on the possibilities that surrounding objects offer to meet our various needs. The possibilities or ‘affordances’ manifested in these objects correspond to the properties of that object. In terms of ecological psychology, then, our definition of an object corresponds to the possibilities that it presents to our awareness, or to the recognition of the features which render it suitable for our purposes. Among the qualities of a stone, for example, there is its ‘affordance’ as an object that can be thrown or, alternatively, as an object that can be used to squash something. Importantly, we as human beings can share these properties or affordances of objects, places, and events – their suitability for a particular project – with other individuals¹¹. And this process of sharing transforms raw characteristics into elements of culture.

As I have argued in *Nascere*, Gibson’s and Reed’s theory of affordances can also be applied to cultural behavior and practices, including the use of animal metaphors. In other words, it seems that the notion of affordances developed in the ecological psychology may be relevant to the general problem of symbolism, that is, why certain animals or certain plants – certain parts or aspects of animals and plants – are especially suited to serving as meaningful symbolic expressions. Affordances may help us to understand the perceived possibilities or opportunities that an object (such as an animal) offers in relation to a human project of a symbolic and intellectual nature.

Let us consider the weasel. With its particular physical characteristics and behaviors, the weasel offers affordances that make it especially suitable as a symbolic expression for pregnancy

¹⁰ GIBSON 1979; REED 1994.

¹¹ INGOLD 1994b, p. 13.

and childbirth: the fact that the weasel is long and flexible, that it slips in and out of tight spaces, that it is affectionate towards its young, and so on. Even the legend that the weasel gives birth through its mouth can be understood in terms of the affordances this animal offers. The facts that it gives birth to undeveloped pups and that the mother carefully moves the tiny pups from place to place, holding them in her mouth, create a group of affordances that facilitate the creation of a fantastic legend about the weasel giving birth through the mouth.

Of course, this notion of metaphorical affordances presupposes that we as humans engage in a metaphorical project that depends on turning animals into symbols, basing specific beliefs on the animals' affordances¹². In other words, among the various projects that humankind has devised in which animals are involved – including the use of animals as food, domestication of animals, the hunting of animals for pleasure, keeping animals as pets, and so on – there is a project in which animals are used as symbolic representations of various cultural models. There is certainly nothing surprising about this. All human cultural history is characterized by the metaphorical exploitation of animals as sources of symbols and intellectual categories. Human beings seek out animals that are 'good to think' in much the same way that they seek out nearby animals that are 'good to eat'. Like meat hunters, symbol hunters are able to identify the metaphorical affordances that a certain animal can supply, ignoring unsuitable animals and concentrating on those creatures that have the most to offer to the specific project at hand.

What I am arguing is that the *voices* of the animals may also offer special affordances to the symbolic projects of human beings: a «series of sharp, explosive barks or chirps» produced by a stressed weasel 'affords' the mythological creation of a laughing girl / weasel; the «low hissing sound» produced by an agitated weasel 'affords' a *stridor* or an *istinz* and «a low-intensity trilling sound» produced by a playing weasel 'affords' the creation of the onomatopoeic names of the animal's voice. But the list of vocal affordances offered by the animal voices is obviously much longer: from the dog's voice, 'affording' symbols of rage and reproach (the famous *natura latrat* by Lucretius or the *-r-* sound designated as *littera canina* by grammarians) to the song of the Greek nightingale, 'affording' symbols of sorrow and nostalgic despair – even the creation of a whole mythological story, telling of love, murder and disgrace. As I said before, the sound world surrounding ancient cultural tradition – voices of animals and human beings woven into the poetic or folkloric web – is still largely to be explored.

¹² I have in mind here the distinction between «croyances intuitives» and «croyances réflexives» developed by SPERBER 1996, p. 123. The «croyances intuitives» are the sort of beliefs «en ceci qu'elles sont typiquement le produit des processus perceptuels et inférentiels spontanés et inconscients», while the «croyances réflexives» are «des interprétations de représentations, enchâssées dans le contexte validant d'une croyance intuitive». The first type of «croyances» is obviously much more stable, even in cultures that are quite different from one another, while the second type offers a much wider range of possibilities. On the problem of 'cognitive constraints' in the production of cultural representations (a problem much debated by cognitive scientists, anthropologists, and psychologists, among others) see GOODY 1997, pp. 238-260.

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A weasel /wɪˈzəl/ is a mammal of the genus *Mustela* of the family Mustelidae. The genus *Mustela* includes the least weasels, polecats, stoats, ferrets and mink. Members of this genus are small, active predators, with long and slender bodies and short legs. The family Mustelidae (which also includes badgers, otters, and wolverines) is often referred to as the "weasel family". In the UK, the term "weasel" usually refers to the smallest species, the least weasel (*M. nivalis*).