

1981

George Washington Harris's Newspaper Grotesques

Milton Rickels

University of Southwestern Louisiana

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rickels, Milton (1981) "George Washington Harris's Newspaper Grotesques," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol2/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

**GEORGE WASHINGTON HARRIS'S
NEWSPAPER GROTESQUES**

MILTON RICKELS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHWESTERN LOUISIANA

The Southwestern humorist, George Washington Harris (1814-1869), published only one book, *Sut Lovingood* (1867).¹ Most of his writing was done for New York and Tennessee newspapers. By studying the revisions he made in his newspaper sketches when preparing them for book publication, and, more importantly, by comparing the work in the book with those sketches which appeared only in newspapers, it is possible to make some observations about what these two kinds of publication meant to his creative life.

Broadly speaking, newspapers afforded Harris more freedom of subject matter and technique than he was allowed or allowed himself in his book. And the more local the journal, the greater the freedom. William Trotter Porter and subsequent editors would not reprint in the nationally circulated New York *Spirit of the Times* material obviously political or partisan. Harris's satires on Abraham Lincoln, written for the Nashville *Union and American* in early 1858, did not appear in the *Spirit of the Times*² and naturally enough were excluded from his 1867 book. Harris's post-war anti-Republican Party satires were all printed in Southern newspapers.

Apart from such political functions, Harris exercised other freedoms of subject matter and technique in his newspaper work. Although an apparently avid newspaper reader, and a bookish man (borrowing creatively from Shakespeare, Burns, Dickens, and others), Harris drew much of his subject matter and his esthetic techniques from the culture of folk humor. The esthetics of folk humor is to a degree separable from the esthetics of the high culture in classical Greece, and clearly and elaborately separable in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. By Harris's mid-nineteenth-century time, the esthetic systems of humor in the high culture, the developing popular culture, and the folk cultures are embarrassingly tangled for critics who wish artists would stay neatly in their categories. Although perimeters of these esthetic systems overlap, their centers can be roughly defined. Newspapers were a central force in developing the techniques and value systems of popular American culture, and were often hospitable to literary experiments with the esthetics of folk culture.

One of Harris's sketches, written before his book was published but excluded from it, illustrates dramatically the distance between standard nineteenth-century humorous literary culture and the culture of folk humor. "Sut Lovingood at Bull's Gap" appeared first in the *New York Atlas*, and was quickly reprinted in the *Nashville Union and American*.³ Thus, at least two editors thought their readers would enjoy it, but it seems equally likely to arouse loathing and disgust in both the nineteenth- and twentieth-century reader whose taste is formed on more standard literary fare.

The sketch itself is a plotless account which, improbably, has Sut spending the night in a tavern at Bull's Gap, Tennessee, where nineteenth-century passengers had to leave one train, ride twenty miles on a stage to board another line to go north through Virginia. After the opening description of Bull's Gap as a cold, wreckage-strewn mud hole, the sketch is divided into three sections: the first an impressionistic description of the cursing that erupted from the passengers as they entered the inn, the second an hallucinatory account of a bullfrog's appearance from under the stove at the inn, while the third, the longest section, presents a monstrous Dutchman, pictures his gluttonous eating, his nightmare in a room where Sut sleeps on the floor, his bursting his belly from his gross feeding, and Sut's sewing up his paunch. This plotless narration in Sut's voice does not develop character or conflict, but rather presents three broadly conceived creatures: the cheating, greedy landlord, the fool Sut, and the coarse Dutchman — the latter two engaged in eating, drinking, sleeping, and suffering grotesque discomforts in the disquietingly alien microcosm of the inn. Within the area of literate culture, perhaps only some newspapers of the age would present so estranged a comic world.

As is usual in Harris's better work, meaning lies less in plot or character than in the language, particularly in the system of images. The imagery is drawn not so much from the high literary culture nor from popular culture, as from the culture of folk humor. The main source of these images is the grotesque human body, the animal world, and the world of material objects, ugly, ineffectively serviceable, often broken. This system of images is unlike the images of classical aesthetics, which emphasize the completeness of the human body, often seen as microcosm, so that by extension, the world's harmony, balance, and beauty appear.⁴ Instead, this characteristic set of images in the culture of folk humor works to bring down to the material level, to de-idealize, to degrade, to emphasize a world in process, constantly growing, changing and decaying.

The opening episode of cursing could not be presented directly in the nineteenth century, even in newspapers, but rather is described impressionistically. The shadowy crowd around the ineffective little stove at the inn was, according to the narrator Sut, both united and divided: "sum a cussin hit, sum a cussin tharsefs, sum a cussin Bull's Gap, sum a cussin wun another, sum a cussin the lake they stood in, sum a cussin that are shanty tavrin, sum a cussin fur supper, sum a cussin the strike nine snake whisky, an all a cussin their levil best. One monsous clever little fellow frum Nashville endorsed all the cussin, and then sot in an cussed the world."⁵

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian analyst of folk humor, points out that one of the formal categories of this verbal culture is made up of various genres of billingsgate such as curses, insults, and oaths.⁶ As Sut sees it, cursing is one of the communal human arts in his world,⁷ and he turns to the tavern keeper for praise of the performance: "I axed the tavrinkeeper how he liked that cussin es a specimint ove the gift in perfecshun. Oh, he sed, hit were ornary, not third rate in quality, an wantin powful in quantity; hardly listened tu hit; in fac, hit didn't even warm him up; wouldn't do as a sampil ove the art at all ..." (145). The innkeeper then offers a comparative assessment of cursing which moves to a tall tale fantasy in praise of the previous night's performance to illustrate the shortcoming of the present achievement: "Sed he hed a crowd the nite afore what onderstood the business — sixty-seven ove em; an they wer so well trained that hit sounded like one man only sixty-seven times louder. Sed they cussed him pussonely, till his jackit buttons flew off an the ainds ove his har cotched fire; then they turned in ontu a stage agent an cussed him into a three week's spell ove fits an diarrear, but he hadn't much ove a constitushun no how; an then finished off by cussin wun ove the stage waggins ontill hit run off inter the woods without eny hosses tu hit" (146).

This strange fantasy of the power of curses first to injure, then to animate the inanimate is swiftly followed by the tavern-keeper's account of how he himself was regenerated by the preceding night's powerful cursing: " 'Laigs,' sez he, 'I got the best nites sleep arter they got throu, what I've had in six months; never felt the fust durned bug, an would gin a duller if your crowd could jist cuss half es purfectly. Hits a monsous holesum quietin thing fur a man tu get a tip top cussin jist afore he goes tu bed, perticulerly if the wimmin ove the crowd jines in with that ar "nasty hog," and "aint you shamed ove hersef, you

stinkin brute you!" chorus ove theirn. I tell you, mister, hits all I keeps tavrín fur' "(146). Sut sees the tavern-keeper as a con-man, willing to be cursed for bad food and lodging in order to make money out of his wretched victims. The reader enters a world of diarrhea, bed bugs, nasty hogs, and stinking brutes. The host's fantasy can also be seen, following the analysis of tall tale function in Constance Rourke, as a psychological defense mechanism, to exaggerate threats and danger in order to reduce and ridicule them.⁸ Finally, to move out of the rational and the psychological, one of the ancient religious functions of cursing was to destroy so that a new life could magically replace the old. In this comic inversion, the scapegoat himself is renewed and strengthened. This opening tribute to the power of curses and abusive language, this exalting of the forbidden language of oaths signals us that we have left the official, accepted world for one where men speak freely and with magic power.

The frog of the second episode, a battered iron spoon crosswise in his mouth, paddling Indian fashion across the lake covering the floor of the inn, rises as one of those disquieting, phantasmagoric images, like the animals in fairy tales that leave their categories as animals to undermine our faith in the stability of the world. Fear and flight are Sut's responses. The next day he is told he was drunk and only imagined the rowing, croaking frog, but later he sees its enormous skin and is confirmed in his vision.⁹

The third episode, an account of the Dutchman at dinner, centers on his gluttonous eating and the subsequent bursting of his belly. In Sut's words: "Well, he planted hissef at the tabil forninst a two year old chicken cock biled whole, an a big tin pan ove sourcroun what smelt sorter like a pile ove raw hides in August, an a bullit ladil wer socked inter hit. He jist fotch a snort an socked his fork up tu the hilt in the rump bone ove that misfortunate ole cock an started him down his throat head fust, and then begun tu hump hissef an grunt. Every yerker he gin the chicken went an inch, an he'd crook his neck sorter side-wise like a hen does with a lump ove dough stuck in her throat. When he swallered hit apast the rump, the laigs stuck out at each corner ove his mouf es wide apart as the prongs ove a pitchfork, an then he sot intu ladlin in the crout atween em. At last the toes ove the rooster went outen site, an he sent the ballance ove the crout arter him, now an then pitchin in, lef handed, a chunk ove bull-steak es sorter mile stones tu separate the ladles ove crout. He rubbed his belly an pernounced hit 'tam goot' "(148).

Eating, to the "sensitive" is often seen as bordering on the indelicate; the anorexy of extreme civilization regards eating and all its signs as repellent. In this episode, the "thundering" (i. e., farting) Dutchman, in his great size, in his reptilian swallowing, in his explosive digestive transformations presents play with the concept of the loathesome. Instead of shrinking away from eating and digesting, Harris details the process to image its bestial vigor.

Sut's own eating is equally grotesque. When he fears the disgusting beef he has swallowed whole may rise again, he calls for something to drink: "Then I drunk a bowl ove coffee made outen an ole chopped wool hat, an a stage driver's ole boot laig. The grease, sweat, glue, leather, blackin, an wool in ole hats an boots, makes a fust rate biled drink, when hit am sweetened with a mixtry of Orleans sugar, pissants an cock roaches ..." (152). The items in the series reveal that what Sut takes into his body is even more astonishing than the Dutchman's food: insects, used clothing (hats and boots are traditionally comic food referents), and even human sweat. This, together with the prefixed pun in "pissants," are both forms of scatophagy and both traditionally comic in the ancient culture of folk humor.¹⁰

The set of images, and the ritual act of eating this kind of food, do not belong to standard literature, and even Harris's readers do not much comment on such passages as this. Ordinarily, we dismiss such fictional actions as coarse, grotesque (in the general sense), or, more perceptively, "Rabelaisian."¹¹ And perhaps one function of such passages is to allow the reader to express his dismay and thus to affirm his participation in the civilized world, to declare his cultural identity. But there is more here than an opportunity for self-gratulation. In Sut's world, eating is invested with rich meaning.

Harris's work abounds in images of hunger, threats of starvation. The present episode is interrupted by one of the narrator's characteristic digressions, in which Sut recalls an episode from his childhood. His father once brought home a dog, he says: "a durnd, wuthless, mangy flea-bitten grey old fox houn, good fur nuthin but tu swaller up what orter lined the bowels ove us brats" (149). In competition with the dog for food, Sut revenges (and thus protects) himself by stuffing a pig's bladder with gun powder, getting the dog to swallow it, and blowing the animal to bits.¹² Scarcity of food and precariousness of supply are central conditions of Sut's world. Sut's cruelty, his cowardice, his gluttony all have a rational dimension. In Sut's environment, life itself may depend on indifference to the concept of the loathsome.

But Sut's eating goes beyond the Dutchman's gluttony. Sut's symbolic consumption (we remember he is drinking coffee) of sweat and grease, pissant and cockroaches, is not only satire on innkeepers' food; it is a kind of triumphant dismissal of the significance, the reality, of loathing and disgust. In western culture, Stephen Greenblatt writes: "Since the onset of the early modern period, the archetypal rules, the earliest and most systematic to which the child is exposed and in which he is trained, are those governing the definition and control of filth; it is these rules that determine the experience of disgust and, to a certain extent, the experience of personal identity."¹³ In Sut's world, it may be maintained, the concept of the filthy is not only a traditional comic way of facing reality, but is intensified then dismissed as a response appropriate to those little creatures reduced by civilization to the experience of frequent shrinking away or rejection. Sut is not a mere belated scatophagus as implied by the image of sweat and the two prefixed puns, but a literary creation of mythy grandeur. This system of images is drawn, as Bakhtin says, from the grotesque body created in the culture of folk humor. This body is ever unfinished, always exceeding its limits, being born and dying, being dismembered, copulating, eating, drinking, and defecating. This body devours everything in its world. Again, we remind ourselves, the passage is not material filth, but words. Harris is creating a literature that moves toward unaccustomed symbolic transcendences.

In the concluding episode, Sut asleep (on the floor) in the Dutchman's room, dreams of the beef he has eaten as a living, sick, mutilated bull; but is awakened from this vision by the Dutchman, also asleep, crowing like a cock, then bellowing like a bull, both images of male assertiveness. Sut claps a chamber pot over his head, and the blinded man-animal runs across the room on his all-fours and butts his head into the wall with such violence that he splits his belly open. Sut repairs the wound: "I jist laid him ontu his back, tuck a nife fur a needil, an a ole bridil rein fur a thread, an sowed him up adzactly like ye sows up the mouf ove a par ove saddil bags with the strap, an then tied a knot on bof ainds ove the rein. While I wer makin the holes in the aidges ove the tare, he axed me to look inside fur the spurs of 'tat tam schicken cock an gut tem off,' but all I could see were his paunch, an hit looked adzackly like the flesh side ove a raw hide"(154). Although his rude surgery is, on the surface, a comically incongruous humanitarian act, Sut's report of it is detached and cold. There is no satiric move toward teaching, warning, or arousing compassion. Instead, Sut

simply reports a glimpse into the secret interior of the human body. The scene, to the humanistically trained sensibility, is revolting, impossible, incomprehensible.¹⁴

After he finishes, Sut asks his patient how he feels, and the Dutchman replies, "Tam good"; his only fear is that he will leak lager beer. Later Sut learns that the Dutchman has recovered and, at Bristol, Virginia, has won a bet that he could drink beer faster than a muley cow could eat salted meal slop. He won, implying perhaps, that the Dutchman is leaking, but living with great gusto, unsubdued. Sut's last sentence exults that his bridle rein sewing has held the great indestructible belly together.

The cultural problem is to account for the sketch's relative popularity. It was reprinted half a dozen times in whole or in part, in different regions of the United States. Clearly, of all the print media, newspapers were most hospitable to this material. Here lay the greatest freedom to publish such traditional but sub-literary creations. Its popular appeal, its comic energy, must rest, to some degree, on its incongruous action, its defiance of manners, order, decency, even, as we have suggested, its indifference toward the very concept of the repellent, the loathsome, the filthy. In this it asserts freedom from deep esthetic and cultural concepts. In Sut's microcosm, all is debased, dismembered, rendered carnal, materialized, made familiar so that even the most awful catastrophes of nature and the human body are not endured so much as enjoyed. The tone is triumphant. Out of this filthy food, this muddy world of Bull's Gap, these accidents to the flesh, the curses of others and one's own excesses, the landlord, Sut, and the Dutchman rise enlarged and regenerated.

"Sut Lovingood Reports What Bob Dawson Said, After Marrying a Substitute" may serve as an example of the freedom newspapers offered Harris in creating the erotic grotesque. Published in the Chattanooga, Tennessee *Daily Union* in 1867, late in Harris's career, the attitude toward human sexuality is noticeably different from that expressed in the tales written a decade earlier. While Sut's response to women was always complex, combining fear and desire, the dominant tone of the imagery associated with Harris's earlier creation, Sicily Burns, expresses her vitality, her fleshly beauty, and her overwhelming desirability.

Bob Dawson's experience extends into the repellent. He does not transcend the disgusting in the erotic. On his wedding night Bob Dawson goes first to bed, where he eagerly awaits his bride. When she

appears, he later reported: "She glode into the room like the embodiment of a Haleluigah, or a vision of unspeakable joy"(179). Saying that delicacy has no place between two who are one in marriage, she undresses by candlelight, divesting herself of layers of hoops and starched muslin, of padding for her legs, a false bosom, false teeth, a glass eye, and a wig. In horrified recapitulation, Bob says: " 'False calves, false breasts, false teeth, false eye, false hair,' what next? The most horrible idear that ever burnt an' blazed in the brain of man, was now fast resolving itself into its dreadful shape in mine, an' her remark, 'Don't be impatient, Robert love; I is most through,' flashed it into its fiendish maturity. Without darin' even a glance at her, I was up *out-gone*; I went down them stair steps six at a bounce in my shirt tail through that festive throng in my shirt tail out of that house, out of that lot, out of that town, in my shirt tail"(181).

Now the "horrible idear," which must remain unprinted, is, of course, Dawson's fear that his bride's vagina, too, is false. This implication is not present in Hawthorne's "Mrs. Bullfrog," and surely only certain newspapers in 1867 would have allowed it to be hinted at so openly. It is, however, traditional. In the last decade my own students have collected two versions of it in the oral lore. Gershon Legman prints a version of the false vagina story in his *Rationale of the Dirty Joke* (1: 376), where he argues that the motif is older than his first printed version and probably reached the height of its popularity in the mid-nineteenth century.

The sketch concludes with Sut's returning to his own experience by way of an account of his sister Sal's homemade false breasts, constructed out of dry gourd halves with white oak acorns for nipples. The whole contraption Sut calls "palpitytators" and the wearers "palpitytator toters." This may not be a digression from the central motif. Legman argues that male interest in the female breasts is merely a psychological technique of displacement anyway.

It is possible to read the sketch simply as satire on women's wiles, as protest against cosmetic deceits and affectations in appearance and manners. Thus the story could be seen as a moral and social attack on falsity. But comic misogyny and satire on women is a very old tradition, and what is interesting in Harris is the particular set of images and actions he selects and what special meaning we can find in his esthetic.

However one responds to this type of traditional erotic grotesque, it expresses fear and hatred of the female. The anecdote has nothing to

do with erotic pleasure. Instead, marriage, sexual activity, the female herself are sources of fear and anxiety. The comic function here is very narrow, very specific. Indeed, the whole anecdote is told in response to George's question of why Sut never married. Thus Bob Dawson's experience is exemplary. Sut concludes by connecting the false female with the experience of diminishing sexual desire. He tells George he will never again put his hand into the front of a woman's dress, concluding mournfully: "No, by giminy hoss, *that* appertite's dead, an' the ballance of 'em scept for sperrits ara sinkin fas'...." The female (as in "Sut Lovingood's Chest Story") is feared as the destroyer of male virility. As Vivian Mercier observes of Irish humor, the grotesque esthetic expresses, in this instance, "fear and hatred of sex."¹⁵ The tone of the bedroom scene between Dawson and his bride is very much in the tradition of the Romantic grotesque as defined by Wolfgang Kayser in *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. The microcosm seems alien, the tone gloomy, the woman inhuman, the world has become false. Dawson feels that his body floats between mattress and ceiling, like Mahomet's coffin. This grotesque contrasts significantly with the folk grotesque of "Sut Lovingood at Bull's Gap." The Dawson sketch instills, as Kayser says, "fear of life, rather than fear of death."¹⁶

From such a limited survey as this, it seems clear that some mid-nineteenth century newspapers gave Harris much more freedom than book publishers allowed. Harris used these freedoms to expand significantly his system of images and his themes. Within these broader latitudes he gave expression not to individual neuroses or to an eccentric vision but rather to some traditional cultural responses. Particularly with "Sut Lovingood at Bull's Gap" Harris preserved in print a full traditional esthetic system of grotesque bodily images from the culture of folk humor, presenting responses and celebrating values generally excluded from the values of the high culture.

NOTES

¹ For Harris's place in the history of American humor, see Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America's Humor* (New York, 1978), pp. 213-221; for a recent foreign assessment, see Daniel Royot, *L'humour américain* (Lyon, 1980), pp. 244-245.

² By 1858 William Trotter Porter was no longer making editorial selections for the *Spirit*. Indeed he died 15 August 1858. See Norris W. Yates, *William T. Porter and the SPIRIT OF THE TIMES* (Baton Rouge, 1959), pp. 190-195 and *passim*.

³ Available in book form in George Washington Harris, *High Times and Hard Times*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Nashville, 1967), pp. 144-145. For Inge's comments see pp. 109-111. See also F. DeWolfe Miller, "Sut Lovingood at Bull's Gap," *The Lovingood Papers: 1962*, pp. 36-38; and Hans Bungert, "How Sut Lovegood [sic] Dosed His Dog," *The Lovingood Papers: 1963*, pp. 32-33. For an academic misreading, see Milton Rickels, *George Washington Harris* (New York, 1965), p. 58.

⁴ For a brief history of the idea of Vitruvian man, see Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York, 1956), pp. 15-27.

⁵ *High Times and Hard Times*, p. 145. Subsequent quotations will be from this source, with page references included in the text.

⁶ *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 5, 15-18, 145-196.

⁷ For a well-known nineteenth-century example of the art of abusive language, see Vance Randolph, *Pissing in the Snow and Other Ozark Folktales* (Urbana, 1976), pp. 103-105.

⁸ *American Humor, A Study of the National Character* (New York, 1931), presents illuminating analyses of the large patterns of humor in our culture.

⁹ For analysis of the fantastic, see Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York, 1976), pp. 5-7, 63, 66-67, 75, 143-135; and Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (Cleveland, 1973), pp. 31-33, 35, 109-110, 120, 158-159.

¹⁰ Bakhtin, p. 330.

¹¹ Franklin J. Meine, *Tall Tales of the Southwest* (New York, 1930), p. xxiv.

¹² M. Thomas Inge locates five reprintings of this episode between 1859 and 1869. See his essay on Harris in *High Times and Hard Times*, pp. 110-111, and n. pp. 150-151. For an example of the humor of dismemberment, see Blair and Hill, p. 94. For dismemberment in the culture of folk humor, see Bakhtin, p. 318, and elsewhere.

¹³ "Filthy Rites," *University Publishing*, 9 (1979), 5.

¹⁴ Kayser, p. 35.

¹⁵ *The Irish Comic Spirit* (New York, 1962), p. 48.

¹⁶ Kayser, p. 185. See also Bakhtin, p. 50. It is illuminating to compare these two works with Feodor Dostoyevsky's comic evocations of the "darker" side of human experience in the Marmeladov and the Svidrigailov episodes in *Crime and Punishment*. For variants with other meanings see Randolph, *Pissing in the Snow*, pp. 60-61.