

In the beginning of animal rights

On October 18, 1772, church-goers in the parish of Shiplake, in Oxfordshire, were startled to hear a sermon on Proverbs 12. 10: “A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast.” They had not expected their polite and learned vicar, James Granger, to dwell on horses and cows. The sermon “gave almost universal disgust . . . as a prostitution of the dignity of the pulpit.”¹ When Granger published his sermon, it again proved unpopular. By January 1773, only a hundred copies had been sold. However, it was favorably reviewed in the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review* – a “sensible discourse,” said the *Monthly*, a “seasonable and useful sermon,” said the *Critical* – and his publisher, Davies, assured Granger that “every body speaks well of it.”² Granger had wealthy, influential friends and a wide acquaintance among the learned. (He had compiled a *Biographical History of England*, 1769, which had involved much correspondence.) In the trouble with his congregation, his Bishop was induced to visit Shiplake and support him.

What had Granger said: a “righteous man” thinks himself “allied” to animals; the “meanest creature . . . has an equal right with himself to live”; in killing an insect “a man destroys what neither he, nor all the united powers of the world can ever repair”; England is “the Hell of Horses,” and “there is no country upon the face of the whole earth . . . where the beast is so ill treated, as it is in our own.”³ These are the most extreme passages. The sermon is generally a sober discourse.

Granger was hardly the first in this vein. The poetry of his time habitually urged kindly sentiments towards animals. His reasoned arguments can mostly be found in John Hildrop’s 1742 *Free Thoughts Upon the Brute Creation* and in other earlier discourses. Moreover, preachers, moralists, and philosophers as far back as the Schoolmen and as recently as John Locke and his followers had frequently urged kindness to animals, though generally more for the sake of society than for that of the creatures. Two sermons had been published anonymously in 1761 urging *Clemency to Brutes*.⁴ They also

were favorably reviewed in both the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review*, and the latter says that the sermons have had a good effect, though for many readers the subject is “seemingly mean and trivial.”⁵ Not long after Granger’s sermon, Humphry Primatt, a Cambridge graduate and retired clergyman, published his *Duty of Mercy and Sin of Cruelty to Beasts* (1776). Warned, perhaps, by Granger’s experience, Primatt confessed himself “well aware of the obloquy to which every man must expose himself, who presumes to encounter prejudices and long received customs. To make a comparison between a man and a brute, is abominable; to talk of a man’s duty to his horse or his ox, is absurd; to suppose it cruel to chase a stag, or course a hare, is unpolite; to esteem it barbarous to throw at a cock, to bait a bull, to roast a lobster, or to crimp a fish, is ridiculous.”⁶ Nevertheless, the *Critical Review* affirmed that Primatt’s work was “entitled to the warmest approbation”;⁷ it was excerpted and reprinted in the United States in 1802, and has won Primatt favorable mentions ever since.⁸

On May 8, 1796, James Plumptre, vicar of Great Gransden in Huntingdonshire, preached before the University of Cambridge, with Prince William of Gloucester among the hearers, on “The Duties of Man to the Brute Creation.” Since the Sabbath had been ordained for cattle as well as for humans (Exodus 20.8–10; 23.12), Plumptre considered it a “NATIONAL SIN” that horses were used on this day.⁹ Otherwise his sermon was timid, and continually supported itself with biblical texts, yet, even so, it was not well received. “The subject,” he explains, “was then considered by many as trifling, and beneath the dignity of the pulpit, and especially that of the University. It was suggested to the preacher by the repeated perusal of *Cowper’s Task*.” The reactions to Granger and Plumptre suggest that they were in advance of their hearers. But when Plumptre published the work in 1816, he noted in a Foreword that since 1796 much had been done “to interest the minds of the public at large on the subject.”¹⁰

I

A few instances may illustrate the sentiments about animals that Romantic writers could harbor and assert from the 1790s through the 1820s. Samuel Taylor Coleridge remarked in an 1805 notebook that he felt pain “from having *cursed* a gnat that was singing about my head.”¹¹ A few years before he had written poems of pity for a young ass and of supernatural vengeance for the shooting of an albatross. According to Byron’s mistress, Teresa Guiccioli, “the dread of treading on an ant makes him go out of his way.”¹² In a gesture of both affection and misanthropy, to which I return, Byron provided in his

In the beginning of animal rights

3

will of 1811 that he should be buried beside his dog Boatswain. Later, in *Don Juan*, Byron attacked hunting. “If a Sparrow come before my Window,” said John Keats in an 1817 letter, “I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel.”¹³ Percy Bysshe Shelley would purchase crayfish from the street vendors in order to return them to the Thames.¹⁴ In “The Sensitive Plant” (1820), Shelley’s poem about a garden, aphids and worms are picked unharmed off the flowers and carried in a weed-lined basket to the woods.¹⁵ In 1824 Charles Lamb felt intense remorse because he had once “set a dog upon a crab’s leg that was shoved out under a moss of sea weeds, a pretty little feeler. – Oh! Pah! How sick I am of that.”¹⁶ Lamb was among the many town dwellers who boiled with indignation at the cruelty of donkey drivers: “I have often longed to see one of those refiners in discipline himself at the cart’s tail . . . laid bare to the tender mercies of the whipster.”¹⁷

Obviously the cause of animals evoked negative emotions – misanthropy, righteousness – as well as sympathetic ones, and I return to this later on. For the moment, the point is only how great the change in attitude might be, at least among the sentimental elite. Animals for centuries had been viewed as brutes, as bundles of lust, greed, and ferocity, incapable of self-control, without reason. Whatever impulses people feared in themselves could be projected on them, so that a bearbaiting might be unconsciously a scapegoating. Descartes, whose opinion was influential, had taught that animals were mere organic machines; if you whipped them, he said, there was no central consciousness in which the pain could be felt.

But increasingly the creatures were redescribed. By 1775 they might incarnate a pristine innocence, a spontaneous joy in life that adult human beings lacked. They were credited with moral virtues: the dauntless courage of the fighting cock, the fidelity of the dog, candor, integrity, innocence. The parental care of robins was extolled, and the mild peace of the herds. To a radical such as William Blake, appalled by middle-class convention, even animal wildness might be redemptive: “Every Wolfs & Lions howl / Raises from Hell a Human Soul.”¹⁸ In short, people might now project not their *id* but their ideals into animals. Moreover, in poems and in literature for children it became common to present animals as individuals, each with its unique character and life history. In the discourse of the age animals could be said to have rights, much as humans have, to life, to justice, to their natural happiness, though such assertions of course remained highly controversial. God, it was often proved, loves *all* his creatures, and so accordingly must we.

The many humanitarian movements of the eighteenth century mobilized generally similar supporters, arguments, and tactics. Whoever was for

rescuing slaves, prisoners, foundlings, and other human victims was likely to feel a kindred impulse with respect to animals, and many an animal lover also supported other humanitarian causes. But the latter part of this statement requires two qualifications. For many persons, animals offered themselves as a conscience-appeasing surrogate for human sufferers, whose relief they were less ready to champion, perhaps because it might involve or symbolize a riskier alteration of the social order. In terms of practical politics, so to speak, it was clear that the baited, plucked, ridden, hunted creatures could not threaten their masters as humans might and lately had in the French Revolution. If animals had rights, they could not enforce them. The mouse in Burns's famous poem "To a Mouse" is an example, and we shall consider it in a moment.

That the victims were animals introduced a moral or psychological complexity not present in other reform movements. The others affirmed solidarity with mankind. But the cause of animals appealed also to the pathologically shy, to the alienated, to the misanthropic, to those who, for whatever reason, had difficulty in identifying with other human beings. In a circle of reactions, compassion for animals nourished misanthropy. Human beings, "fellow men," were the displacers, abusers, tormentors, and destroyers of the creatures you sympathized with, were the enemy. In fact, you were the enemy merely because you were human, because you existed. This state of mind, in which human beings reject mankind, was and still is intensified by the Romantic idealization of nature, of an ideal nature conceived as opposite to civilized society. The comparison of nature and man might be rueful that we are not natural, but it could also be satiric and openly misanthropic. In his inscription for Boatswain's monument, in the garden of Newstead Abbey, Byron affirmed the moral superiority of dog to human nature. Boatswain, he wrote, "possessed Beauty without Vanity, Strength without Insolence," and "Courage without Ferocity." Humans, by contrast, were "vile":

To mark a Friend's remains these stones arise;
 I never knew but one, – and here he lies.¹⁹

Animals conventionally viewed as repulsive offered particularly challenging tests of sympathy, and writers seized upon them. The best-known example is the water snakes in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." At first they appear slimy to the mariner, a foulness in the rotting sea, but then he sees them as beautiful and happy, and a spring of love for them gushes from his heart.

In the beginning of animal rights

5

Thomson, Cowper, and Blake, among others, addressed compassionate verses to worms and snails. But insects offered writers the largest opportunity for instructive, provocative, prejudice-dispelling displays of sympathy, and an abundant discourse availed of them. Robert Burns's well-known "To a Louse" is partly a poem of this kind. Since most people viewed insects, as they still do, as insignificant, disagreeable, or dangerous, they had no fellow feelings with insects, no affectionate attitudes to them. They are the nearest to aliens that we encounter. Overcoming this distance, poets redescribed insects in human terms. One of the best known examples is Catherine Ann Dorset's poem to the coccinellid beetle:

Oh! Lady-bird, Lady-bird, why dost thou roam
 So far from thy comrades, so distant from home?²⁰

Perhaps the most wonderful of these redescrptions comes in a passage of William Blake's *Milton* (1800–04) that envisions gnats as "Children of Los":

Thou seest the gorgeous clothed Flies that dance & sport in summer
 Upon the sunny brooks & meadows: every one the dance
 Knows in its intricate mazes of delight artful to weave:
 Each one to sound his instruments of music in the dance.²¹

Children were (and are) likely to torment insects. In combating this behavior, one could teach sympathy and possibly more – the conquering of antipathy to the different, foreign, and exotic; the appreciation of God's (or nature's) goodness to all creatures; the beauty of things. I quote Thomas Percival, a Manchester physician who wrote forty books; he included a section on "Cruelty to Insects" in *A Father's Instructions* (1784): the sensations of insects "are at least as exquisite as those of animals of more enlarged dimensions." Witness the millipede that rolls into a ball at the "slightest touch." The implication, of course, is that such creatures are susceptible of pain in a degree proportionate to their extreme sensitivity to touch. It is "inhuman to crush to death a harmless insect, whose only offence is that he eats the food which nature has provided for his sustenance."²²

At about the same time as Percival was writing, Thomas Day, a philanthropic gentleman farmer, was conducting two imaginary youths, Harry Sandford and Thomas Merton, through a course of education somewhat modeled on Rousseau's *Émile*. The young Sandford twirled "a cockchafer round, which he had fastened to a long piece of thread." But "as soon as his father told him that the poor helpless insect felt as much, or more than he would do, were a knife thrust through his hand, he burst into tears and

took the poor insect home, where he fed him during a fortnight upon fresh leaves; and, when perfectly recovered, he turned him out to enjoy liberty and the fresh air.”²³ Some fifty years later William Drummond, a poet, Dissenting minister, and controversialist, advised mothers that “Instead of starting with feigned or real disgust at the sight of a spider, she will call her child to mark its racing speed, its thread most ‘exquisitely fine,’ and ‘its delicate web, which brilliantly glistens with dew.’” Thus repulsion and fear would be lost in wonder.²⁴ The phrase “exquisitely fine” recalled lines of Alexander Pope that were repeatedly cited in writings about insects:

The spider’s touch, how exquisitely fine!
 Feels at each thread, and lives along the line.²⁵

Flies, the most familiar and annoying of England’s insects, evoked astonishing feats of sympathy along with some ordinary ones. I quoted Blake’s verses about the midges; in *Songs of Experience* (1789–94) he addressed a house fly, as I suppose it was:

Am not I
 A fly like thee?
 Or art not thou
 A man like me?²⁶

In *Evenings at Home* (1792), a book for children, John Aikin and Letitia Barbauld briefly suggested a fly-centered view of mankind. When a child asks, “What were flies made for?” her father replies, “Suppose a fly capable of thinking, would he not be equally puzzled to find out what men were good for?”²⁷ Thus sympathy might tend to deprive humans of special importance and status among the creatures. Wordsworth also wrote a poem of sympathy for a fly, and James Thomson reminded his readers to rescue them from spiders’ webs: the shrill buzz “asks the helping hospitable Hand.”²⁸ Uncle Toby’s fly, in Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, was another of the many that were ostentatiously spared or whose death was regretted. With Shandyan paradox, the tender-hearted Toby is a soldier. When he catches a fly, he famously says,

Go – says he, one day at dinner . . . I’ll not hurt thee . . . I’ll not hurt a hair of thy head: – Go, says he, lifting up the sash, and opening his hand as he spoke, to let it escape; – go, poor devil, get thee gone, why should I hurt thee?²⁹

Spiders are notoriously victims of cultural prejudice, are symbols of evil and death in many an ancient and modern writing. But in this period it might not be so, and the repugnance to be overcome seems sometimes to

In the beginning of animal rights

7

have called forth extremes of sentimental re-description. In William Blake's *Vala*, the "blind and age-bent" Enion pities a spider that was eaten by a bird:

His Web is left all desolate, that his little anxious heart
 So careful wove: & spread it out with sighs and weariness.³⁰

In Sarah Trimmer's *Fabulous Histories*, a children's story about a family of robins, the exemplary Mrs. Wilson would not destroy the webs of spiders: "I should not myself like to have the fruits of my industry demolished, nor my little ones taken out of my arms, or from their warm beds, and crushed to death."³¹ Robert Southey wrote an affectionate poem about a spider, which begins,

Spider! thou need'st not run in fear about
 To shun my curious eyes;
 I won't humanely crush thy bowels out,
 Lest thou shouldst eat the flies;
 Nor will I roast thee, with a damned delight
 Thy strange instinctive fortitude to see,
 For there is One who might
 One day roast me.³²

Charles Lamb was "hugely pleased" by this poem: "I love this sort of poems, that open a new intercourse with the most despised of the animal and insect race."³³ Which brings me to Robert Burns's "To a Mouse."

II

No poem of compassion for animals is more widely loved and quoted than this one. Since mice were regarded as vermin, the poem belongs to the kind already mentioned, in which the poet evokes sympathy for a despised species. Of itself the gesture is appealing, for it bespeaks a kind heart and a liberal mind free from prejudice. Moreover, the poem liberates from restrictions of convention and social class and binds into a universal fellowship. Significantly, the fellowship is not with all other human beings but with all living things, this being an easier fellowship to accept.

"To a Mouse" is the first expression of Romantic sympathy for animals that I pause to analyze. There is necessarily an imperfect fit between the generalizations of cultural history and the particular events they cover. Though "To a Mouse" is movingly compassionate, the grounds of its feeling for the mouse are not what would have been expected in Burns's time. Burns does not idealize the animal as nature. He does not rely on usual

arguments then, such as God's love for His creatures. Since the speaker is a poor ploughman, the poem undermines the self-flattering assumption of many readers that the poor were heartless and brutal. Instead, Burns views humans and animals as "fellow mortal[s]" (line 12), alike exposed to accident, loss, old age, and death.³⁴

In the older criticism of Burns, his attitudes to animals have been explained as typical of a small farm in his time and place.³⁵ But as the speaker says in "To a Mouse," most ploughmen would have smashed the small creature "Wi murd'ring pattle" (line 6). This ploughman, being a poet, feels affectionate toward the mouse. Nevertheless, in turning up its nest with the plough, he has done it harm, and Wordsworth, for example, might have opened a misanthropic ecological perspective in which man is intrusive and destructive in the natural world. Since Burns's ploughman feels that man, too, is a vulnerable natural creature, the mouse ultimately becomes a figure of himself. Meanwhile, he talks to the mouse, a poetic device and also a common habit of pet owners. He addresses it with the intimate pronoun and an affectionate diminutive ("Mousie"). He thinks he knows what it feels. He attributes human capabilities (foresight) and emotions to it, and imagines it as quasi-human. For example, it builds a "house." Although in law and grammar one could not "murder" an animal, one could this mouse (line 6), a point that further humanizes it. Humorously the speaker subjects the mouse to the human moral code, by which it fails (it is a thief, line 13), and protectively he apologizes for it, taking its side. This humanizing of the small creature is the usual, universal basis of emotional reactions to animals; we react to what we have attributed.

All his kindness and charm make the speaker quite as sympathetic as he makes the mouse. Moreover, the speaker is attractive as a stock Romantic figure of the poet: intimate with nature, alone, sensitive, melancholy, emotional. The exclamations and interjections in his speech dramatize how strongly he is moved. His dialect supports the illusion of spontaneous talk rather than literature. (As a formal device, the dialect also defamiliarizes his language, some of which would be flat in standard English.) As a ploughman, a rustic, the poet speaker is presumably uneducated, in other words, he could be seen at this time as an untutored product of nature, an original genius. Burns emphasized this on the title page and in the Preface of his 1786 volume that included "To a Mouse." The role of peasant poet made him especially interesting to readers and boosted his sales.

The speaker of Burns's poem was no doubt as much a fictional creation as the mouse who speaks in Letitia Barbauld's "The Mouse's Petition."³⁶

In the beginning of animal rights

9

Composed fourteen years earlier than “To a Mouse,” Barbauld’s poem is similar in some of its themes. Barbauld notes, as Burns does, that the mouse steals very little, only “scattered gleanings” (line 17), or, as Burns puts it, “A daimen-icker in a thrave” (line 15; an occasional grain in the straw), and both poems suggest that a compassionate heart would not deny so small a boon. Barbauld also deploys the famous phrase, “mice and men,” or “men like mice” in her version. It might seem that in inventing a mouse as the speaker, Barbauld chose the more daring strategy, but as the speaker, her mouse cannot plausibly picture itself in much detail. Possibly for this reason Barbauld lacks the ample, realistic description that brings the mouse vividly before the imagination of Burns’s reader, and of course her reasoning mouse cannot create the lyric illusion that was important to Romantic poetry – the illusion of the presence of the speaker and of the reality of the occasion. Barbauld’s mouse is much more an abstraction, the “pensive captive” or “prisoner” who urges the commonplaces of this role, though mindful of a mouse’s special smallness, pitifulness, and insignificance. The humor, force, and paradox of Barbauld’s poem lie in attributing the pleas of a prisoner to a mouse in a cage.

Incidentally, unless we feel that Barbauld, as a woman, especially sympathized with an animal in a cage, the differences between the two poems do not reflect gender differences of the poets. Just what, in the ideology of the age, were thought to be typical differences between the sexes in mental capacities, character, and temperament, is a complicated, controversial question, but by any view then current Barbauld’s poem would have been considered at least as “manly” as Burns’s. Her mouse speaker is an intellectual; it cites ancient philosophy in arguing for the universality of mind and possibly for metempsychosis (lines 29–36), and praises the “philosophic mind” much as Wordsworth, using Barbauld’s phrase, would later in his Immortality Ode. When it appeals to sentiment, it does so in an argumentative, didactic way:

The chearful light, the vital air,
 Are blessings widely given;
 Let nature’s commoners enjoy
 The common gifts of heaven.

The well taught philosophic mind
 To all compassion gives;
 Casts round the world an equal eye,
 And feels for all that lives.

(lines 21–28)

Though a ploughman, Burns's speaker is more personal, impulsive, and emotional.

Neither Barbauld nor Burns intuit divine life immanent within the small creature. Their naturalism differentiates their poems from many of the later, high Romantic poems on animals, though naturalism is not quite the right word for an attitude that mingles objective perception with sentiment and strong sympathy. If pantheistic, divine being is not in animals, one need not assume that they are happy, and one can freely see in them the fates of man. Thus Barbauld's mouse, alluding to the trap, remarks that "men like mice" may fall into "unseen destruction" (line 45), and Burns sighs that "The best laid plans o' Mice and Men, / Gang aft agley" (lines 39–40).

The ground of Burns's sympathy for animals is, to repeat, a feeling of shared existential suffering. The speaker is, he tells the mouse, its "poor, earth-born companion, / An' fellow-mortal" (lines 11–12). Would you call yourself the companion of your dog, or your dog the companion of you? The least that can be said of Burns's reversal of expectation is that it shows, as a gesture, the speaker's strong desire to put himself on the same level as the mouse and thus kindly to reassure it. Though rhyming with "Man's dominion," the word "companion" tends to belie it. Etymologically, the mouse is a companion (*com-panis*) in that it eats the speaker's bread – or grain. It is a companion because it lives in the same place and undergoes similar experiences. The adjective "poor" picks up all the senses in which the mouse is an object of pity – weak, impoverished, vulnerable, frightened, mortal – and carries these senses from the mouse to the speaker, who is no less mortal than the mouse, and is, as the final stanza reveals, full of apprehensions. The last word in the poem is "fear." (I note below that the speaker would also be poor in a material sense, though much less so than the mouse.) "Fellow mortal" is a variant of the usual term, "fellow man," and mobilizes similar connotations of sympathy, equality, and likeness. The word "mortal" in the place of "man" brings out that the likeness is not in kind but in fate.

"Earth-born" tends to close religious perspectives on existence, and they are not opened elsewhere in the poem. But to have denied human immortality would have been unusually defiant in Burns's time and materially unprofitable. Safely orthodox interpretation is not difficult. When Wordsworth spoke of himself, in "Resolution and Independence," as a "Child of earth," like a hare (line 31), and two years later, in "Intimations of Immortality," as "heaven-born" (line 122), he need not have seemed inconsistent, since a human being was both mortal and immortal. So also, in some opinions, were animals. There was a minor controversy over this