

ROMANTICISM AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

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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 Plumtre, 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), Plumtre 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 Plumtre suggest that they were in advance of their hearers. But when Plumtre 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

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.

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 redescriptions 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

have called forth extremes of sentimental redescription. 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

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

point, and I describe it in a later chapter. Barbauld raises this question, and, as I read her poem, she leaves the answer open, and also leaves ambiguous whether even humans are immortal.

Or, if this transient gleam of day
Be *all* of life we share,
Let pity plead within thy breast
That little *all* to spare.

(lines 37–40)

This may suggest that humans and mice share mortal life but only humans live hereafter, or, less probably, that for both species there is only “this transient gleam of day.” In Burns’s “To a Mouse,” to assume that the “earth-born,” “fellow-mortal” ploughman feels himself destined, like the mouse, only to earthly life makes a more radical, provocative, and pathetic poem.

Is the speaker a democrat? The question arises not simply because other lyrics by Burns were assertively democratic for their time: “The rank is but the guinea’s stamp, / The Man’s the gowd for a’ that” (“Song – For a’ that and a’ that,” II, 762, lines 7–8). In the relations of animals and humans, the latter obviously exercise dominance, whether as hunters, farmers, drivers, or keepers of pets. This might be denied in poems that described dangerous, wild, or free animals, such as Blake’s tiger, Shelley’s skylark, or Mary Anne Browne’s “The Wild Horse,” and the power of such poems lies partly in the reversal of hierarchy. But the general dominance of man meant, as I noted, that poets could use animals to represent subordinated persons in the human social structure.

Hence a contemporary might well have seen in “To a Mouse” a benevolent attitude of the upper toward the lower, the rich toward the poor – a model of how dominion should be. Like most pleas of the age for reform through compassion, such a poem is addressed, obviously, to comparatively well-off readers, helps them to feel complacent, and poses no revolutionary threat. If the mouse figures the human poor, the power relations between the ploughman and the small, frail, pitiful animal are completely reassuring. The poem insists on the poverty of the mouse in its “housie” (line 19); the “wee-bit,” “silly” nest with its rudimentary structure (“heap”) and materials (“leaves an’ stibble”) figures the hapless creature as a wretched cottager. When the ploughman says the mouse is “turn’d out” from its house, he uses the verb that applied frequently in this age of enclosures to human tenants.³⁷ Like Goody Blake in Wordsworth’s “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” the mouse is driven by necessity to steal (a nice touch in the poem

rhymes “thieve” with “live”), and unlike Wordsworth’s wealthy farmer, Harry Gill, Burns’s sensitive ploughman understands and forbears. Not only will he never miss, he says, the small takings of the mouse, but he will “get a blessin wi’ the lave (remainder)” (line 17), for if you give to the poor, you receive a blessing. Even when the ploughman affirms that he too is poor and a fellow-mortal, the statement implies hierarchy. For it is compassionate and reassuring only if said by a superior to an inferior. If said by the low to the high, it would be radically democratic, leveling. However poor the ploughman may be, he is obviously better off than the mouse, and thus can kindly afford to grant the mouse his “daimen-icker.”

The final stanza of the poem has lately evoked contrasting responses. For Carol McGuirk the “conclusion contradicts the spirit of the poem,” is illogical and self-pitying.³⁸ For Seamus Heaney it enacts a reversal, a sudden emergence to consciousness of the feeling of vulnerability. The mouse, says Heaney, “gradually becomes a sibylline rather than a sentimental element in the poem.”³⁹ Identifying with the mouse, I wish that Burns had not written the stanza. In it the superior claims to be worse off than the inferior. He distances himself from the mouse by repeating a scientific commonplace of his time: humans, it was often said, are motivated by memory and foresight, while animals live only in the present – “The present only toucheth thee” (line 44).⁴⁰ In various writers this distinction served, somewhat inconsistently, to ground claims that animals are happier than humans and also that humans are superior to animals. In Burns the mock-enviuous turn contradicts lines 25–28 and also undermines the phrase “Mice and Men,” in which it was asserted that both mice and men make “schemes” (line 39) for the future. As McGuirk asks, “if the ‘present only’ touches the field mouse, how can she have been said to have ‘schemes.’”⁴¹

The phrase “mice and men” comes with such effect partly because it brings to mind and summarizes the parallels between these species as the poem has depicted them. In a formalist analysis, the phrase is one of several doublings (“grief an’ pain,” “snell an’ keen,” etc.) in the poem at lines 5, 24, 25, 31, 34, 35–36, 41, 48. In the structure of such phrases, the second term is either a repetition of the first (“house or hald” [dwelling]) or an intensifier (“guess an’ fear”), and in either case the effect is to prolong and weight the adversity that the phrase names. Such spreading or intensifying of adversity reaches its climax in “mice and men,” formally because of the alliteration, and thematically because the doubling joins kinds that are usually kept distinct, so that adverse vicissitude is seen as a universal fate.

Just this universalizing power has made Burns's lines proverbial:

The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
Gang aft agley.

If the statement were only that human schemes go wrong, it would be banal. The inclusion of the alliterative mice converts mischance into something to which all existence is exposed, and thus raises broody, sublime emotions about the tragic way of things. And just this drains away the social/political implications raised earlier in the poem. If "fellow-mortal" means a fellowship in mortality, even the rich can be called "poor" in an existential sense. Thus in the career of Burns's poem, compassion for the mouse becomes pity for the poor, then pity for all existence, and finally is withdrawn from the mouse in order to be bestowed on the self.

III

Though age-old, the suffering of animals at the hands of humans gradually became visible, so to speak, in the course of the eighteenth century. Just why is a question that gradually this book tries to answer. We may notice at the start two recent suggestions. In an interesting essay, Norbert Elias interprets the effort to check violence to animals as a psychological extension of the same effort between human beings. "That the sensitivity with regard to violence came to affect animals was characteristic of the irradiation of feeling beyond the initial target which is a general feature of conscience-formation." The mitigating of violence between humans, Elias says, took place in connection with "the growth, or with the growing effectiveness of, the monopolization of physical force by the representatives of [the] country's central institutions." To limit violence in the struggles for political power was also desired, and was possible because in England the same social class formed the rival parties, which thus shared a basic consensus.⁴² In an even broader speculation James Turner thinks that the developing ethos of kindness to animals is explainable, at least in part, by "the stresses of modernization" and particularly by the industrial revolution. This brought people from the agricultural world into cities, where they were less dependent on animals for their bread. It also fostered a greater sensitivity to suffering in general by creating new forms and occasions of it. These were felt as the old forms of suffering under the ancien régime had not been, for the latter had been accepted as natural.⁴³

Once it began to be seen, the torment of animals was a constant, intimate, pervading fact that strongly motivated because it appalled. "The

imagination of a man of much sensibility,” as John Lawrence put it, “is perpetually haunted with horrid ideas” of the torments inflicted on animals.⁴⁴ I do not want to be gruesome, but the reader must have some sense of this suffering. The simple fact that people depended on animals for transport of themselves and their goods opens an immense vista of animal woe. John Gay’s *Trivia* (1716) describes a common scene in the London streets throughout the eighteenth century and later:

Here laden Carts with thundring Waggon meet,
Wheels clash with Wheels, and bar the narrow Street;
The lashing Whip resounds, the Horses strain,
And Blood in Anguish bursts the swelling Vein.⁴⁵

The American Quaker, John Woolman, refused to use stagecoaches when he was traveling in England. He had learned from other Friends that their fearful journeys often killed or blinded the horses. For the same reason he would not use the public mails.⁴⁶ In 1809 Lord Erskine, speaking in Parliament, alluded to the common sight of post “horses panting – what do I say! Literally dying under the scourge.”⁴⁷

I quote a few contemporary reports of what went on. These were not exceptional occurrences. Neither were they relatively hidden from most eyes, as now are hog cities and hen batteries, habitat loss and environmental pollution. Instead, they were routine happenings, familiar to everyone, possibly your own acts. The *Every-Day Book*, a journal, recalled in 1835 “a common practice” between 1790 and 1800. Selling fruit, fish, and the like through city streets, a costermonger drove a cart with a horse or, more probably, a donkey. In order to drive it more easily,

the costermonger was accustomed to make wounds for the express purpose of producing torture . . . On each side of the back bone, at the lower end, just above the tail, he made an incision of two or three inches in length through the skin, and beat into these incisions with his stick till they became open wounds, and so remained, while the ass lived to be driven to and from market, or through the streets of the metropolis.⁴⁸

Scientific experiments on animals had long been common and had led to important discoveries. When these involved vivisection, they might be denounced in the strongest terms. Though a pleader for animal rights, John Lawrence, to quote him again, allowed most human uses of animals so long as the procedures were as kindly as possible. But vivisection, he thought, was different. Granted that the “experimental tortures” are for “the furtherance and improvement of science.” They are morally intolerable.⁴⁹ If we consider that the work merely of butchers was thought to foster in them a brutal, socially dangerous state of mind, we can easily understand

that vivisectionists might be figures of horror – a doctor “more dreadful,” said Samuel Johnson, “than the gout or stone.”⁵⁰ The experiments were incomparably more painful than they now usually are because there was as yet no anesthesia. In the opinion of the *Monthly Review*, Albrecht von Haller had “produced more misery, by his experiments to distinguish irritability and sensibility, than all the tyrants that have existed from the creation of the world.” Those who “busy themselves, for years together, in pouring aquafortis upon the brains of living animals, . . . should consider that misery is an evil in proportion to its degree, and not in proportion to the rank which the suffering animal is supposed to hold in the scale of beings.”⁵¹ There were no legal controls, and any amateur or crackpot could perform any experiment he liked so long as the victim was his property.⁵² A common parlor demonstration of amateur scientists was to put a small animal under a bell jar and gradually exhaust the air with a vacuum pump.

For a hunting scene, one cannot do better than quote the famous wood-engraver, Thomas Bewick, who recollects the first time he felt a twinge of regret. The year would have been 1775, when Bewick was twelve years old, and

Caught the Hare in my Arms, while surrounded by the Dogs & the Hunters, when the poor terrified creature screamed out so pitously, like a child, that I would have given any thing to save its life; in this however I was prevented, for a Farmer, well known to me, who stood close by, pressed upon me & desired I would give her to him, & from his being better able (as I thought) to save its life, I complied with his wishes; this was no sooner done than he proposed, to those about him to have a ‘bit more sport with her’ and this was to be done by his first breaking one of its legs, and then again setting the poor Animal off, a little before the Dogs.⁵³

In fox hunting it was important that foxhounds not turn aside to pursue a hare. Peter Beckford, in his celebrated *Thoughts Upon Hunting* (1781), which was used as an instruction manual, tells that to train the dogs a hare should be thrown into their pen and the dogs whipped as they approach it.⁵⁴ It was also necessary to teach dogs not to pursue sheep, and William Somerville, in *The Chase* (1735), a poem much praised by Beckford, explains that this might be done by tying a puppy to a ram. After this “horned companion” has butted the puppy for a while and dragged it “trembling o’er the rugged ground,”

Then spare not thou
The twining whip, but ply his bleeding sides
Lash after lash, and with thy threatening voice,
Harsh-echoing from the hills, inculcate loud
His vile offence.⁵⁵

The torments of the slaughterhouse and the kitchen may be represented by a passage from John Lamb, brother of Charles, on the preparation of eels for the table. It comes from a pamphlet John Lamb wrote to answer a celebrated speech in Parliament by William Windham, who, as I discuss below, opposed Lord Erskine's 1809 bill for the prevention of cruelty to animals.

If an eel [were] ignorant of man's usual practice, he would conclude that the cook would so far use her reason as to cut off his head first [so that he would feel no pain] . . . but if the woman were immediately to stick a fork into his eye, skin him alive, coil him up in a skewer, head and all, so that in the extremest agony he could not move, and forthwith broil him to death . . . with what fearful indignation might he inveigh against the unfeeling metaphysician that . . . [opposed] the Cruelty Prevention Bill.⁵⁶

The woes of every animal were similarly dwelt on, from the stags, foxes, hares, otters, and pheasants that were hunted; the wild birds whose nests were plundered or who themselves were trapped, caged, and often blinded to improve their singing; the horses, oxen, and donkeys that were overloaded, over ridden, over driven, whipped, goaded, and starved; the bulls, badgers, otters, and occasionally more exotic animals that were baited, and the dogs that were mauled in the process; the pigs, calves, lambs, turkeys, geese, and other animals that were slaughtered in ways that disregarded pain and sometimes with particular torments to improve their culinary appeal; and the animals in vivisection, in air pumps, and in other scientific experiments.⁵⁷

IV

Until 1822, when Parliament passed a bill to "Prevent the Cruel Treatment of Cattle," there was almost no legal protection of animals, and even after this bill, there was uncertainty and legal controversy as to what animals were covered. In a shocking instance of wanton cruelty to a cow, in 1784, the judge had declared himself unable to interfere because, as Arthur Moss summarizes the case, "animals had no rights that the law could protect."⁵⁸ According to John Trusler, "in the year 1790, a fellow was convicted of lacerating and tearing out the tongue of a horse, but there being no evidence of his . . . doing it with a view to injuring [the owner], this diabolical wretch, not having violated any then existing statute, was discharged without punishment."⁵⁹ Abuse of animals could be punished under the common law, "usually as a common nuisance," Robert W. Malcolmson explains, but

in the absence of a statute, prosecutions were rare.⁶⁰ Although struggles in Parliament and in the courts of law are not the subject of this study, I briefly summarize early debates in Parliament because they were a prominent part of the context of literary pleas for animal rights.

The first bill to be brought in Parliament was introduced by Sir William Pulteney in 1800 to end bullbaiting. In this “sport” a bull was chained to an iron ring and dogs were set upon it. Incidentally, the “bulldog” quality formerly claimed for the English character refers to the canines bred and trained for this sport. Once the dog had fixed its teeth in the bull, it held on until “either the Dog tears out the Piece he has laid Hold on, and falls, or else remains fix’d to him, with an Obstinacy that would never end, if they did not pull him off.”⁶¹ The baiting might continue, sometimes for days, until the bull died. In other instances the same bull would be baited in one town after another, with much profit to its owner, for you were proud of your dog, and would pay a fee to exercise it. You might even place a bet on it. Though in earlier centuries bullbaitings had entertained persons of all social ranks, by 1800 respectable persons were less likely to attend them. As I remarked in the Preface, they had long been criticized as occasions of drinking, gambling, and idleness. Sir William Pulteney appealed to this reprobation in introducing his bill: the “cruel and inhuman” practice “drew together idle and disorderly persons; it drew from their occupations many who ought to be earning subsistence for themselves and families. It created many disorderly and mischievous proceedings and furnished scenes of profligacy and cruelty.”⁶² But bullbaitings were age old, could be thought a traditional right, like fairs and other gatherings for pleasure of the common people, and were very much enjoyed by them in towns and villages. William Howitt reports that in 1800, after Parliament rejected the petitions to end bullbaiting, “nothing was so common as to see the bulls led through the villages adorned with ribbons, and bearing on their necks large placards of – ‘SANCTIONED BY WYNDHAM AND PARLIAMENT.’”⁶³

For Sir William Pulteney’s bill had been formidably opposed in Parliament by William Windham and George Canning, two notables in Pitt’s government. With the exception of Sheridan, Windham was “the ablest speaker in the House of Commons,” according to William Hazlitt; his opinions, Hazlitt added, were predictably the opposite of common ones. “If a thing had been thought cruel, he would prove that it was humane; if barbarous, manly.”⁶⁴ Both statesmen argued against interfering in the ancient customs of the people. The bill, they said, was an insult to the English character, for “cruelty, or the thirst of blood, is not in the nature nor in the habits of Englishmen.”⁶⁵ Bullbaiting, they said, was not crueller than other

practices, such as overdriving oxen, which it was not proposed to outlaw. In this connection they fell on hunting, the diversion of the rich, on which Sir William Pulteney's bill was silent. (For otherwise, its chances with the Parliamentary squires would have been nil.) If, said Canning, members were so protective of their own sports, why would they wish to outlaw the sports of the poor? Bullbaiting, he added, "inspired courage, and produced a nobleness of sentiment and elevation of mind."⁶⁶ The bill was defeated by two votes, even though, as George Nicholson remarks, "petitions in favour of it were signed by long lists of the most respectable names of the nobility, gentry, clergy, freeholders, and manufacturers, as well as magistrates."⁶⁷

In a next try, in 1809, the "British Cicero," Lord Thomas Erskine, a Scottish lawyer, a supporter of the campaign against slavery, and a former Lord Chancellor, introduced a bill for the Prevention of Cruelties to Animals. There are several anecdotes from this time in which respectable persons check, reprimand, punish, or themselves beat a coachman or carter who was beating a horse. One such story, which may stand for all, is told of Lord Erskine, who saw, on a day when he was enjoying Hampstead Heath, "a ruffian beating a wretched horse, he promptly remonstrated and was met with the reply, 'Can't I do what I like with my own?' 'Yes,' was the prompt answer. 'And so can I; this stick is my own,' and, ignoring his judicial position and status at the bar, he thereupon gave the scoundrel a good thrashing."⁶⁸

I believe these stories are mostly apocryphal, but the mere telling of them testifies to feelings that horses should not be beaten and that the hero intervenes. The rescuer in these anecdotes is always of higher social rank than the beater. That the beater can safely be beaten illustrates the awful power of class at this time. I return later to the idea, which was frequently stated, that the genteel and respectable were pure of cruelty while the lower orders were imbued with it. Moral and political zeal might be energized on behalf of animals by this idea, but it allowed opponents of animal rights to present themselves as champions of the people.

Lord Erskine's bill provided that "any person who shall maliciously wound or with wanton cruelty beat or otherwise abuse any horse, mare, ass or ox shall be deemed to be guilty of a misdemeanour."⁶⁹ Penalties under the bill would have fallen chiefly on coachmen, carmen, grooms, and agricultural laborers, on persons who managed work animals, and William Windham, again opposing the bill, was able to say that it "should be entitled, A Bill for harrassing and oppressing certain classes among the lower orders of the people." Windham argued that though cruelty to animals was deplorable, it was not a fit subject of legislation. The offense was not exactly

definable. "You inflict pains and penalties, upon conditions which no man is able previously to ascertain." Windham again satirized the exclusion of hunting, by which the House of Commons "in its wild career of humanity" must exhibit itself "as the most hardened and unblushing hypocrites that ever shocked the feelings of mankind." Reform, he concluded, must be left to morality and social opprobrium.⁷⁰ The bill was defeated by ten votes.

When in 1822 Parliament passed a bill to prevent cruelty to cattle, Richard Martin, its introducer, could say that "there was not a pulpit in London that had not spoken in a pronounced manner in approbation" of the bill.⁷¹ Martin, a colorful Parliamentarian from Ireland, tried again unsuccessfully to end bullbaiting and dogfights in 1823, tried but failed to protect dogs and cats in 1824, and tried unsuccessfully on behalf of horses in knacker's yards, though all these and other measures were passed in the course of the nineteenth century.⁷² The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824, and became the Royal Society under Victoria's patronage in 1840.