Between the Species

REACHING THE GENERAL PUBLIC THROUGH POETRY

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Since the days of Homer, poetry has been a major means of communication. It reaches for the truth, speaks the language of the heart and tells a story.

Though its popularity with the general public has fluctuated, poetry has probably

COMMENT

Jim Harter, *Animals*: 4419
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had more of a cultural-political-legislative influence than is generally realized---especially in the cause of animal protection.

The first animal protective legislation in early 19th century England was a direct outgrowth of public consciousness-raising by poets such as William Blake, Alexander Pope, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, William Cowper, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Can we forget Blake's:

"A Robin Redbreast in a cage
Puts all Heaven in a rage"
or Coleridge's
"He prayeth well who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast."?

Passionate, crusading Shelley, a vegetarian, wrote in 1821, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." The next year, 1822, (after a long struggle) Parliament passed its first anti-cruelty law. In 1824, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded.

The "humane movement" was on its way. But after the outrage expressed by the 18th---early 19th century poets, poetic voices---with notable exceptions---were not so effective. But the momentum was there, and in the late 19th century in the U.S.A., virtually all of the State anti-cruelty laws were enacted. Poetry in behalf of animals in those days, was typically Victorian---bathos mixed with pathos. Early 20th century poets reacted against this sentimentalism. For years, any substantive

mention of animals was missing from their verses. Anthropocentric, involved with new verse forms and their own Freudian problems, they had little concern about what happened on the trap-line, in the laboratory or in the slaughter house.

Now, in the last part of the 20th century after much Federal animal legislation has been passed and the animal rights movement has been launched, more poets are coming forward. Primarily, their poems are printed in animal-oriented journals, because "establishment" poetry editors and critics continue to be man-centered. As I see it, the "animal" poet must find a way to move into the mainstream---getting into poetry journals (seemingly thousands!), general magazines, book stores, poetry readings before college, church and book-club groups. Animal-minded non-poetry writing friends have an obligation in this by calling the poet's work to the attention of non-animal groups.

Poets have obligations, too. They must

show through their poetry that they care about people. And since their story is often unpalatable: laboratories, factory farming, guard dogs, rodeo animals, slaughter houses, they must, therefore, avoid wordiness, sentimentality and verbal handwringing. Let only the readers' tears smear the page, not theirs! In short, home the thoughts and distill love and anger into sparse imagery. Take a look at Blake, Pope and the others and see how they did it. Japanese poetry forms also offer a chance to capture truth's essence in imagery.

Those are the self-imposed guidelines, followed to a degree in my No Room, Save in the Heart. I am including on the overleaf short poems (the thoughts distilled) on subjects I have dealt with at length as a journalist. Can we reach more people in the general public with 50 words rather than 500 or 5,000? I rather think the answer might be "Yes".

In summary, when poets reach the general public, they can move mountains. Look at the mountains Burns, Shelley, Coleridge and Blake moved. Without them, millions of animals would have continued to suffer. There's a long, long way to go, however. Today's poets can help to finish the job.

(A Washington journalist, Ann Contrell Free, is also author-editor of Animals, Nature and Albert Schweitzer and a new book of poetry, No Room, Save in the Heart.)

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Jim Harter, *Animals*: 1919
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