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The Craft or Sullen Art of a Mouse and a Bat

“Poetry, *again!* Why do we have to waste our time with this dumb stuff?” As a teacher of literature in a university, I hear such comments dismayingly often. Too many of my students dislike poetry; some of them even distrust it. In *Rose, Where Did You Get that Red?* Kenneth Koch suggests that they may have learned their attitudes from the poems they were asked to read as children: “there is a condescension toward children’s minds and abilities in regard to poetry in almost every elementary text I’ve seen. . . . The usual criteria for choosing poems to teach children are mistaken, if one wants poetry to be more than a singsong sort of Muzak in the background of their elementary education” (1973, p. 7, 9).

Koch may be right in suggesting that the way poetry is presented to children makes it seem irrelevant to them; but it

is unfair to blame the compilers of textbooks and the teachers who use them for merely accepting what are, in fact, commonly held attitudes toward poetry. Unfortunately, these attitudes, which determine the criteria usually used in choosing poems, demand that poets and their work be admired for qualities that are not really admirable. I suspect that children realize that, and too many of them grow up with the distaste for poetry my students feel.

Two fantasies about animal-poets show how we provide children with attitudes toward poetry. According to the accolade from *The Saturday Review* found on the back cover of the Pinwheel edition (1973), Leo Lionni’s *Frederick* “sings a hymn of praise to poets.” That it does; the mouse Frederick has all the theoretically admirable qualities commonly attributed to poets, and he ends

up seeming rather distasteful. While much less is claimed for the hero of Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet* (1964), it is a more convincing, and much more pleasing, description of the life and work of a poet.

For Lionni, *Frederick* is a polemical tract, part of what he once told an interviewer was "my own battle against the mechanical minds." His mouse-hero clearly represents Lionni's belief that "after all, as an artist, you're really justified enough" (Agree 1976, p. 26). In fact, the theme of *Frederick* is that the mere possession of a creative imagination should give one privileges over less gifted beings.

Frederick seems to be modelled on Aesop's fable of the grasshopper and the ant. But while Aesop's grasshopper excused himself from the drudgery of gathering food because he did not realize winter was coming, Frederick is not so ignorant of the laws of nature. When the other mice ask him why he does not gather food like everybody else, he says, "I *do* work. . . . I gather sun rays for the cold dark winter days." He knows what he is doing, and feels he is "justified enough" to let the other mice do his food gathering for him.

Rather astonishingly, Lionni lets him get away with it. Despite their "mechanical minds," the other mice generously forgive Frederick his obvious laziness, share their food with him when winter comes, and respond to the harvest of his imagination with unstinting admiration. None of them is perceptive enough to mention the real danger in which Frederick's refusal to do his share of the food gathering has placed the community. All of the mice may starve; but since the result is poetry, none of them minds at all. "You are a poet!" they tell Frederick, after he stands on a rock high above them reciting his poems, like a prophet

revealing truths to those less gifted than himself. And Frederick complacently replies, "I know it." He feels no doubt about his genius.

The obvious question is, what makes Frederick so special? What is it that Lionni is asking children to admire? The answer is that Frederick's poetic gifts allow him to distract the other mice from their problems. (That Frederick created the problems in the first place is conveniently forgotten.) From his snowy pinnacle, Frederick says, "Now I send you the rays of the sun. Do you feel how their golden glow. . . ." And, Lionni tells us, "As Frederick spoke of the sun the four little mice began to feel warmer." His talent is to notice and remember what the others did not even bother to see.

Even though Frederick's evocation of the sun does warm the other mice, his ability to communicate his perceptions seems quite secondary to the perceptions themselves. Frederick speaks of "The blue periwinkles, the red poppies in the yellow wheat, and the green leaves of the berry bush." But *how* he speaks of them is not reported. Since the specific words he uses do not seem to matter, the obvious conclusion is that Frederick's "poetry" is essentially his unusual way of seeing. His perceptions transcend the ordinary ones of the other mice; it may not be accidental that the flower he holds in one illustration looks suspiciously like a poppy.

Not surprisingly, he does not communicate his perceptions very exactly. The shapeless blobs of color that represent the pictures Frederick evokes in the minds of the other mice are all different from each other. But that does not seem to matter—the mere fact that Frederick sees and stores up these images is what counts. In fact, Lionni makes a strange distinction between

Frederick's perceptions and his actual poetry. Frederick comforts the others when he speaks so vaguely of pleasant memories; then and only then does he recite something he identifies as a poem. It is a highly abstract poem, and it uses none of the specific images he evoked earlier.

In fact, the poem is quite dreadful. Frederick uses weak adjectives like "nice" and "little," and tritely rhymes "June" with "moon." Even more important, he fails to make the statement he wished to make. He has tried to show how the seasons of the year are

Four little field mice who live in the sky.
Four little field mice . . . like you and I.

But he can not manage the metaphor any better than he manages the grammar. While the "little cold feet" of Winter may be mouse-like, the Spring-mouse who "turns on the showers" and the Summer "who paints in the flowers" are not engaged in the activities of ordinary mice "like you and I."

In any case, Frederick's self-satisfied mousomorphism is unconvincing. Like the pre-Copernican cosmologists who placed mankind at the center of existence, Frederick has made the functions of nature into extensions of mousekind. While that may be both gratifying and comforting to mice, it studiously ignores the facts. Frederick says,

Aren't we lucky the seasons are four?
Think of a year with one less . . . or one more!

But as the cold and the food shortage imply, the world was not necessarily made for the comfort of mousekind. Frederick's blithe avoidance of reality follows logically from the assumption that the poet's special way of seeing transcends ordinary perceptions. In fact, the virtue of his work is that it offers an escape from ordinary reality; Frederick

never gets closer to the real situation than his bland pleasure in the "little cold feet" of Winter, and in order for him to work his magic he must first tell the other mice to close their eyes. They must blind themselves to reality before they can experience the real benefits of poetry.

For Liotti, then, poetry is a special way of seeing that offers escape from reality. Even though *Frederick* depicts the poet's life, not as it is, but as Liotti thinks it ought to be, the attitudes the book expresses both towards poets and poetry are surprisingly familiar. They are the ones we frequently ask children to accept.

The deficiencies of these attitudes are obvious. In making poets so special, we turn them into untrustworthy eccentrics, weirdly impractical creatures who are cut off from the rest of mankind and from the real problems and pleasures of existence. In making poems so different from and theoretically superior to anything else we say about our lives, we make them seem irrelevant. And in making poetry a special way of seeing and downplaying the significance of the poet's skill with language, we imply that, unlike other forms of communication, the understanding of poetry is more an act of intuition than of comprehension. For children who do not immediately intuit a poet's intentions, poetry must seem too incomprehensible to bother with; for those who see through the stupefying simplicity of inadequate poems like Frederick's and require more intellectual stimulation, poetry does indeed become "a singsong sort of Muzak."

Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet* presents a much different idea about poets and their work—one that inextricably involves them with the other important concerns of living. Like Frederick, the bat-poet

discovers that he is different from everyone else; unlike Frederick, he never believes that being different is a matter of being better.

In fact, his consciousness of being different makes him uncomfortable, and that leads him to the making of poetry in the first place. He is not different because he is a poet; he becomes a poet because he knows he is different. Having eccentrically refused to accompany the other bats to their new home in the barn, Jarrell's protagonist is forced to think about what his unwillingness to follow the crowd has brought upon him. Knowing that he can be different from everybody else, in fact, has chosen to be so, he begins to realize that everything is different from everything else. He opens his eyes and sees for the first time what he never noticed before. And being intrigued by what he sees, he feels the need of communicating it.

Significantly, his first poem is about how "the world awakens and forgets the night," just as he himself has awakened and left the darkness the other bats live in. The implication is that poems are indeed about the real world as it is, not about that world transformed by a special kind of vision into something mysteriously different and better.

But the other bats insist, as many children do about the poems they read, that what the bat wants to tell them is "just not real." In fact, poems seem unreal only because most bats (and people) do not look at the real world as carefully as poets do. "Poetic" vision is really only a matter of paying attention to things as they are. The bat's poems are not vague celebrations of "red poppies in the yellow wheat," but specific descriptions of one owl, one mockingbird, one chipmunk. He says of the chipmunk, "What a beautiful color he is! Why, the fur back by his tail's rosy, almost. And those

lovely black and white stripes on his back!" And he tries to find the right words to communicate what he sees so accurately.

The chipmunk, the only creature who appreciates the bat's poems, likes them particularly because they make him conscious of the distinctiveness of things. Having heard the bat's mockingbird poem, he realizes that the mockingbird "thinks he's different from everything else . . . and he is," and he admires the bat's poem about bats because "I forgot it was a poem. I just kept thinking about how queer it must be to be a bat." The chipmunk has understood what the bat wanted to express.

Sometimes, and like all real poets, the bat cannot express anything. "I can't make up a poem about the cardinal. . . . I watch him and he's just beautiful, he'd made a beautiful poem; but I can't think of anything." Unlike Frederick, the bat learns that poetry is not simply a matter of seeing things poetically; it depends on the hard work of finding the right words. Jarrell does not confuse poetry with the impulse that engendered the words; poetry is the words themselves.

Because that is true, poems must be judged and appreciated on the basis of how accurately they capture experience. We like to believe that because poetry offers a mysterious vision beyond normal understanding, "each child comes to the poet's image with his own color filter and thus creates something that is his alone . . . a poet can only hint at images and ideas" (Larrick 1968, p. xxiii). Apparently the variety of different blobs that the other mice saw in Frederick's descriptions of colors was inevitable. Or was it? Jarrell implies that a vague poem is a bad one, and that a poem which allows those who hear it to remake it into something theirs alone is not doing its job. The bat's poems are good, not just

because they describe their subjects so persuasively, but also because the bat's perceptions are exact and subtle. His poems can be appreciated only if close attention is paid to them.

His poem about the owl is a good example. Jarrell has understood what a bat might find interesting about an owl, particularly an owl who would "have caught him if the bat hadn't flown into a hole." The bat's fear of sudden attack makes him see the owl as a malevolent "shadow," darker than night; he transforms the owl into a symbol of extinction. "The ear that listens to the owl believes/In death," for the owl has become Death itself.

The bat then enlarges his metaphor by showing how everything in the owl's environment becomes an extension of it. Not only do the creatures who hear the owl's deathlike screech become "still as death" themselves; they do so because the screech sets up resonances that inevitably involve them. The bat transforms a literal truth into an emotional one; in response to the screech, "the air swells and heaves/And washes up and down like water," until "the owl's air washes them like water." The owl's screech has put him in control of everything; the air has become *his* air. Furthermore, the waves of fearful emotion set up by his call threaten to extinguish the creatures who hear it; the suggestion is that they might drown in its wash, and even "the night holds its breath," apparently submerged in the fearful emotion.

By a subtle use of metaphoric language, the bat has unified three unlike things—fear of extinction, the cry that causes the fear, and the stillness of those who fear—into one unified idea. And while the idea is not particularly easy to understand, the attempt to understand it is rewarding. It tells us exactly how an

owl sounds. It also reveals how carefully chosen words can evoke, not only the sound, but also the ideas and feelings it arouses.

The bat's poem about the mockingbird sums up the attitudes toward poetry suggested by the book as a whole. The mockingbird is not as humble as the bat, but they are both poets. And "a mockingbird can sound like anything./ He imitates the world he drove away." The poet removes himself from the world in order to see it properly, and then recreates it with his own voice, "so well, that for a minute, in the moonlight,/ Which one's the mockingbird? Which one's the world?" The mockingbird's song is only an imitation of reality. But it sounds like the real thing, and that is why it interests us; it replaces reality only with an accurate evocation of reality.

But if that is true, why bother with poetry at all? Reality is not always delightful, so good poems do not always describe pleasant things. As the chipmunk says about the owl poem, "It makes me shiver. Why do I like it if it makes me shiver?"

The answer to that can be found in the strange behavior of the mockingbird. He tells the bat that he does not even like the creatures he imitates: "they get on my nerves. You just don't understand how much they get on my nerves. Sometimes I think if I can't get rid of them I'll go crazy." So he drives them from the yard, and then imitates them. In this way, he triumphs over the world without escaping from it. As the bat says in his poem, the mockingbird is "fighting hard/ To make the world his own." That is exactly what poetry can accomplish, both for those who make it and those who read it. To recreate something which causes discomfort is to have power over it, and to respond to such

recreations is to have knowledge of that power. Words have captured the source of anxiety, imprisoned it in the order of patterned language, and allowed the solace of understanding.

But a poem that possesses such power must do more than evoke vague emotional responses; significantly, the bat's poems do not necessarily delight his listeners, or even allow them to bathe in pleasant emotions. The other bats, true possessors of the "mechanical minds" Lionni so dislikes, are too imprisoned in their own limited perceptions to listen, and the mockingbird bypasses a sincere response by devoting his attention to technical matters. As the bat says, "The trouble isn't making poems, the trouble's finding somebody that will listen to them." Paradoxically, his desire to communicate makes communication difficult. Like Dylan Thomas, he writes for those "who pay no praise or wages,/ Nor heed my craft or art" (1971, p. 196).

Even those who do "heed" do not always respond positively. The bat's poems make his listeners "shiver" when they recognize some truth about themselves or the world they live in, and unlike Frederick's friends, they do not always like what they hear.

But they do want to talk about it. Deeply disturbed by the poem about himself, the mockingbird angrily defends the behavior the bat has so accurately described. The chipmunk responds to the same poem with intellectual fascination; it has made him *think*: "you wouldn't think he'd drive you away *and* imitate you. You wouldn't think he could." The poem has made the chipmunk realize something he has always known but never considered; it has made him see and understand the world he lives in better.

But while the poet can use his power with words to make us feel and think, he

is otherwise ordinary. The bat may make poems, but that does not give him the special privileges over others of his kind that Frederick enjoyed. He likes being like other bats: "It's wonderful to fly all night. And when you sleep all day with the others it feels wonderful." And when winter approaches he does not store up just impressions: "for weeks he had been eating and eating and eating." Eventually he falls asleep, in the middle of a poem; his imagination does not excuse him from the instinctive urge to hibernate.

The Bat-Poet is a challenging answer to the damaging attitudes toward poetry expressed in *Frederick* and accepted without consideration by many teachers. It shows that poets are set off, not by an abnormal ability to see what others cannot see, but only by their need to understand and express what others merely take for granted. It shows that poetry is different from other human utterances, not because it expresses a vision beyond normal perception, but because its careful evocation of normal perception requires close attention. Above all, it shows how very much poetry must be treated with respect. In *Poetry and the Age*, Jarrell insisted that adults "read good poetry with an attitude that is a mixture of sharp intelligence and of willing emotional empathy, at once penetrating and generous" (1953 p. 11). He obviously expected as much penetration, and as much generosity, from children. The poems he gives the bat are remarkably subtle ones, and he presents both the problems the bat confronts and the delight he takes in being a poet with remarkable honesty. As a result, poetry comes to seem like a respectable human activity—not just Muzak in the background, but something that demands deep involvement and offers rich rewards.

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perspective necessary for living in a multicultural society. As Baker, et al. state:

Children from the majority culture need to see representations of other cultures in the materials they use. This helps provide them with images and information that will aid the development of positive attitudes toward ethnic groups. (1976, p. 152)

For the interracial child, validation of his/her family and life style should be provided in children's literature. According to Cross, et al.:

The differences that characterize individuals and groups should be cherished for their worth and cultivated for the benefits they bring to all people. (1976, p. 14)

Children's books must continue to respond to the challenge of change in a pluralistic society.

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