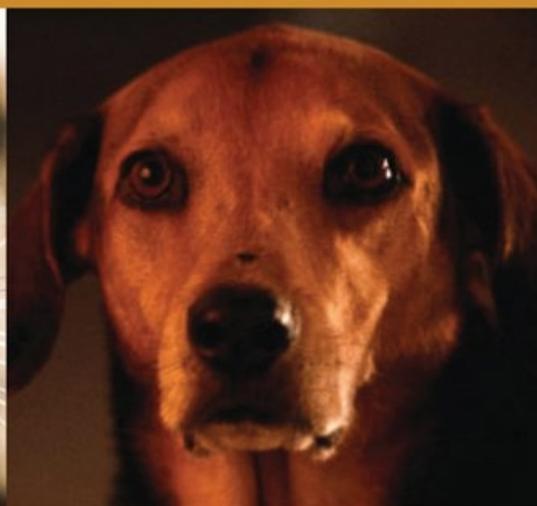
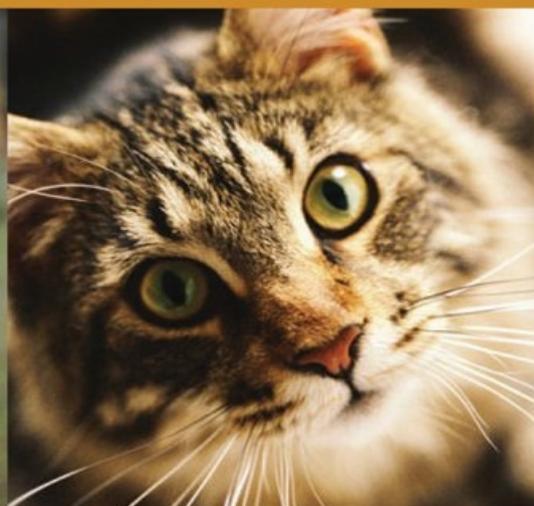


# Adam's Task

CALLING  
ANIMALS  
BY NAME



VICKI HEARNE

Introduction by Donald McCaig

“When Ms. Hearne relates a dog or horse story, the animals become full-fledged characters, as brightly delineated as people created by Dickens or Twain”—*The New York Times*

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*Bandit: Dossier of a Dangerous Dog*

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*Animal Happiness*

*The Parts of Life*

# **Adam's Task**

*Calling Animals By Name*

Vicki Hearne

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Donald McCaig

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FOR DICK KOEHLER  
who taught me how to say “Fetch!”  
and in memory of Bill Koehler

# Table of Contents

ALSO BY VICKI HEARNE

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Epigraph

INTRODUCTION

Preface to the 1994 Edition

1 - By Way of Explanation

2 - A Walk with Washoe: How Far Can We Go?

3 - How to Say "Fetch!"

4 - Tracking Dogs, Sensitive Horses and the Traces of Speech

5 - Crazy Horses

6 - Horses in Partnership with Time

7 - Calling Animals by Name

8 - The Sound of Kindness

9 - Lo the American (Pit) Bull Terrier

10 - What It Is about Cats

11 - Rights, Autism and the Rougher Magics

Afterword

Index

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.*

*Genesis 2:19*

*What will complete the human work is, however, not one other but only all others.*

*STANLEY CAVELL, The Claim of Reason*

# INTRODUCTION

There are many good books; thrilling books are rare. In 1986, when I happened across Vicki Hearne's essay "Crazy Horses" in *The New Yorker*, I felt like some homesick exile startled by a voice singing brilliantly in my native tongue. I read Vicki's essay phrase by phrase, let her phrases flow into her sentences and then, long before Vicki concluded, I returned to the beginning to start reading afresh. This is not because Vicki Hearne is difficult—though she insists that you pay close attention—but because I didn't want her story to ever end. "Crazy Horses" is one chapter in *Adam's Task*, a book which is certainly the finest philosophical animal study of our generation, and I am beginning to think the best of the twentieth century.

Let me backtrack to 1986. I was and am a sheepdog trainer. I believe that training any dog to anything like his full capacity is an intricate, heartfelt, deeply intellectual undertaking which deepens the trainer's soul as surely as it satisfies the dog's. The conversation between trainer and dog is so subtle, dense, and satisfying that I have known great trainers whose ordinary human speech has atrophied. These brilliant linguists cannot explain what they do, and often cannot answer novice's questions because asking that particular question means the questioner can't understand a true answer.

When *Adam's Task* was published, our national dog discourse—apart from the exemplars and anecdotes working trainers tell each other—was dominated by behaviorists whose claims to understand mammalian learning were couched in language so ugly it makes my eyes water; ethnologists asserting that since dogs are descended from wolves, one can best study dogs by studying wolves, although they do wonder why—since the wolf is altogether a better character—anyone would want to study dogs in the first place; Cartesian zoologists with their radical disdain for objects of their study and animal rights pioneers, like Dr. Peter Singer, who, having confessed that he didn't know much about particular animals and wasn't especially fond of them, proceeded to develop complex theories of how we should interact with them.

*Adam's Task* came into this linguistic briar patch with the aplomb of a D-8 Cat. What Vicki did—and this is her great achievement—was translate the conversation great trainers have with great dogs and horses into language all of us can understand. She brought three extreme vocations to *Adam's Task*: philosopher, poet and animal trainer. Elsewhere Vicki has written that she is proudest of the last. That surprising revelation tells us much, I think, about her seriousness.

The first readers to respond strongly to *Adam's Task* were eminent academic philosophers who loved her reasoning and were fascinated by the unusual subject that summoned it and workaday trainers who read the book for the stories of great dogs

and great horses. *Adam's Task* made others mad as hell. Animal rights aficionados couldn't decide whether it would be better to simply denounce Vicki or co-opt her as "an animal rightist herself—if she'd only admit it!" Dog fanciers (dog show people) whose arcane lingo obscures and excludes these sparks found Vicki's pellucid prose "difficult" and her democratic spirit profoundly unsettling.

Years later, the debate roars on. Behaviorist training books still begin with impassioned defenses of the "misunderstood" B.F. Skinner, and dog fanciers natter on. But Vicki's thinking has profoundly and permanently altered the debate. *Adam's Task* is the intellectual foundation of how we are beginning to look at "domestic" animals—a looking which unconceals our mutual involvement, allows them and us our creaturely opacities, acuities and dignities.

I don't know how many times I've read *Adam's Task*. I do know that like all great books it speaks to me afresh and differently at each reading.

As I write this, I'm training two Border Collies for sheepdog trials and starting a three-year-old who has been a difficult family pet because her heart is too great for petdom. I tell her she can no longer employ the silly stratagems that have filled her empty hours, but to replace them I will show her a new coherence, the coherence for which she yearns. She hopes to do right, and her trust that I can help her find that coherence is her most poignant appeal. Without her hopes I could do nothing.

Failing that hope, or betraying it, is every trainer's greatest fear—to fail to bring this dog into coherence is to fail her soul and sully mine. Because dog training is such a peculiarly intellectual, spiritual endeavor, my preparation for a training session might include reading poetry or the psalms. Recently I've been rereading *Adam's Task*—it's a terrific mindset to bring to the training field where a young dog will shortly demand of you all you have. For the sheepdog trainer, at least, theoretical philosophy is a very practical discipline. Someone once asked the great sheepdog trainer, J.M. Wilson, if she should talk to her dogs. "Of course you should talk to your dogs, madam," Wilson replied, somewhat testily. "But you must talk sense."

In *Adam's Task*, Vicki Hearne teaches us how to talk sense.

—DONALD MCCAIG  
YUCATEC FARM  
WILLIAMSVILLE, VIRGINIA

## *Preface to the 1994 Edition*

In 1993 *Time* magazine announced that anthropomorphism is no longer a sin, that it's okay now to say that animals think, hope, are puzzled, have expectations, are disappointed, even, for some, make their own little plans in a time scheme of their own. That has happened since this book came out. Also, there have been a few wonderful books published—McCaig's work on Border Collies, Diana Cooper's *Night After Night* (about the Big Apple Circus), and something that marks a major moment, or discovery, of a possibly grown-up consciousness of animals, John Hollander's anthology, *The Naming and Blaming of Cats*. The idea of relationships between people and animals as a potential goldmine of speculation, indeed, of forms of life, is no longer so disreputable as when I was struggling for the understanding that became this book.

This cheers me. Even time cheers me. It is something, at nearing fifty, to find myself accompanied in what was, when I was groping toward it in the seventies and eighties, an eccentric, crank project—finding a language with which to reveal some of what seemed to me to be so crucial to the fact that good trainers, the ones whose animals are so confident and convincing at their work, are precisely the ones whose ways of talking violate the received precepts of religion and science. (They do this even when they also have the habit, when, as it were, wearing their Sunday best, of dutifully mouthing behaviorist, or, earlier, Catholic strictures.)

Yet there are a couple of things emerging from the eighties that disquiet me. One is, in a way, trivial in this context, because it is merely a fact of history. That is the anti-dog movement, and the policing activities that go with it, which have become ferocious. The most visible aspect of this movement was expressed in the media as countless stories about how “vicious” pit bulls and other breeds are. Less visible is the fact that it is open season on dogs in general, and this phenomenon was sponsored and buttressed by anti-pit bull propaganda *coming from major humane organizations*. Hence, Britain has its Dangerous Dog Act, with the consequence that a lot of people don't celebrate Christmas anymore. As I write this, there is before the Connecticut legislature, and no doubt others, a Dangerous Animal Act that will make some of the mildest critters I know illegal in this state. Why this should be, why the rise of the animal rights movement and an increased interest in “humane” and “not for profit” activities should coincide with, and at times be indistinguishable from, relentless enforcement activities targeting dogs, is a topic for scholarship. All I want to note is that there is an enormous flow of mostly unexamined superstition about animals in this culture, that the twin images of the ferocious beast and the gentle, loving, free, or frolicsome creature are, if anything, more pervasive and influential than they were when I wrote this book.

Disturbing also is the divorce between training and the “new” behaviorists. It’s disturbing in part because it means that there are dogs out there on drugs that needn’t be, that could be dancing instead. It’s mainly disturbing as evidence of the implacable distance that remains between various forms of knowledge. By the “new” behaviorism, I mean that board-certifiable specialty that has appeared in the veterinary profession. A lot of drugs are prescribed; this makes news because the drugs are L-Tryptophan, Librium, Prozac—human drugs. This does not mean that animals are almost human, however, but rather that we are learning new dosages. When drugs are not prescribed, lower “octane” dog foods are, and spaying and neutering.

A friend’s brother-in-law, a veterinarian, welcomes the new movement because he doesn’t like putting healthy animals down for behavior problems (at the owner’s request) and so is glad to be able to give them a pill instead. Since drugs of one sort or another are often a blessing, a momentary reversal of the Fall, this is not necessarily to be deplored, but it seems something of a shame anyhow, that the knowledge of dogs and of training doesn’t—no, can’t—make it over college walls. There is, despite the regular appearance in the *American Kennel Club Gazette* of a column by a “behaviorist,” no genuine exchange between training and the academy. This is in part a function of the fact that trainers and veterinarians are now in competition for the same market, or in some cases think they are, so they fall to quarreling—at least the behaviorists fall to quarreling with some trainers. (Many trainers welcome the behaviorist move out of, I suspect, a willingness to deny the heart of what they are doing with their dogs.)

If you are willing to say that trainers have knowledge (tough for some scientists and philosophers), and that the scientists and even the new behaviorists have some sort of knowledge (that is tough for some trainers to acknowledge), then it looks as though they have knowledge of the “same thing”—that is, the behavior of animals, especially domestic animals. This is not so, no more so than it was when I was writing this book. The philosopher Stanley Cavell says that everyone turns from the world to a world; we are all, then, making reports from the field, and there are different fields. If a very serious dog and a very serious handler are lucky enough to walk into a serious world together, then there is, say, no biting problem. In a different world with a different handler, that’s a different dog, and someone has to haul out either some doggie Prozac or the sodium phenobarbital.

A world. I can no more explain to most sheepdog handlers why I persist in obedience training Airedales, when I own a Border Collie, than I can answer the man at dinner who has never had an animal and wants to know why I train. This most obdurate of facts about human and animal existence, that we all occupy niches, say, is not to be altered by any wind of intellectual fashion: it will continue to take genius to acknowledge, well, not THE world, perhaps, but that there is THE world, which is to say, worlds beyond one’s ken. Skepticism about animal minds is a kind of panic, whether the authority endorses or refutes anthropomorphism on the one hand, mechanomorphism on the other.

A major issue in this book is authority. Where does it come from, besides our chimplike impulses? who has the right to command whom? and so on. Since I wrote,

“We can command, follow, only whom and what we can obey,” meaning only whom and what we can hear, respond to, I have been engaged in some pretty active and sometimes hazardous battles, in court, in the media, and elsewhere, in defense of dogs and people of one description or another. If I were rewriting the chapter “How to Say ‘Fetch!’” that closes with the sentence I here quote about commanding, following, I might add the word “coherently” after “can.” We can coherently command, follow, only whom and what we can coherently obey. This is not to say that force and guile do not produce many grotesque parodies of the relationship of mutual respect and autonomy I am envisaging—only that to the extent that we command what we cannot obey, we are engaged in force and guile, not genuine authority. Such engagements are inevitable, in the related but different ways death and taxes are; to say this is not to gainsay the possibility of coherence, only to say that it is temporal. This book is not about what a good thing authority is, but about the taint in our authority.

On the whole, even though I have learned things in the last ten years, I still believe this book.

# 1

## *By Way of Explanation*

The impulse behind this book is specifically philosophical, which is a way of saying that the circumstances of my life have been such that it mattered enormously to me to find an accurate way of talking about our relationships with domestic animals. It mattered to me as a dog and horse trainer for what I hope are obvious reasons. When you are incoherent in your notions about an animal you are working with, things do not go so well with the animal, and an animal trainer is a person who can't help but be uneasy about such a state of affairs, whether or not s/he has the linguistic wherewithal to articulate the problem and the solution properly.

If I had remained firmly within the worlds of discourse provided by the stable and the kennel, I might have been content, not because there is no philosophy in those worlds, but because there is such a rich and ever-changing web of philosophies when good trainers talk and write. These philosophies remember and speak to their sources in the thought of the past and are, unlike the general run of philosophies, continually tested and either reaffirmed or revised, since the world of the genuinely good dog or horse trainer is one in which reality is quite clearly, as Wallace Stevens had it, "an activity of the most august imagination."

However, my temperament regularly led me away from the kennel and tack room to university libraries and cafeterias, laboratories and classrooms. The result was that for some years I uneasily inhabited at least two completely different worlds of discourse, each using a group of languages that were intertranslatable—dog trainers can talk to horse trainers, and philosophers can talk to linguists and psychologists, but dog trainers and philosophers can't make much sense of each other. (Philosophers and linguists may have sometimes thought that they found each other incomprehensible, but their quarrels were usually about the interior decoration of the house of intellect and not about fundamental structural principles.) Because I had learned to talk, more or less, in both worlds, I was intensely alert to the implications of Wittgenstein's remark, "To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life."

Here is as good a place as any to speak of the example that most clearly indicates the problem I set out to deal with. In Germany there was once a cart horse named Hans, owned by one Herr von Osten. Hans had to back the cart he pulled in a circular drive, and his skill at doing this, the story goes, so impressed von Osten that he decided that horses in general and Hans in particular must be smarter than generally supposed. Von Osten began doing various things with Hans, teaching him to respond to questions either by tapping with a hoof a certain number of times or else by indicating one of a number of blocks on which the alphabet was written.

Hans was a good learner, and in time philosophers, linguists and psychologists from all over came to test his acumen. It turned out that Hans could not answer questions if he could not see the person asking him. It turned out further that if the questioner was in sight, Hans could always find out what the questioner thought was the correct answer, no matter how hard the questioner worked at remaining still and impassive. Hans apparently read minute changes in breathing, angles of the eyebrows, etc., with an accuracy we have trouble imagining.

This led to von Osten's being denounced as a fraud, and he seems to have died an unhappy man, not so much on his own account as on that of the horse in whom he so deeply believed. And there has now come to be a technical term in academic studies of animal psychology, the "Clever Hans fallacy." This is the fallacy of supposing that an animal "really" understands words or symbols when what the animal is doing is "merely" reading body language. In the literature, this notion is used to discredit virtually anyone who disagrees with the writer in question as either a fraud and a charlatan or else as just plain credulous and stupid. There is an unhealthy air of triumph in the rhythms of the prose of the people who do this discrediting, and I have found myself moved to wonder why, if the trainers and thinkers who believe that Hans illustrates something more important are so discountable, they must be so often attacked.

I told a friend of mine, the poet Josephine Miles, the story of Clever Hans. She said, in response to finding out that the humans couldn't conceal from Hans what counted as the correct answer, "But isn't that interesting!" One of the points of this book is to say, "Yes, Jo, that is interesting." She is now dead, so I can't say it to her, but I can say that she would probably want me to explain that, of course, when I here and throughout the book take swipes of one sort and another at academic thinking, they are lover's complaints—if I didn't love the worlds of discourse we call intellectual and academic, I wouldn't care if things went well there or not.

One of the worlds I lived in when I first set out to address this problem was the animal trainer's world—the trainer of domestic animals primarily, although that world is not to be located by the boundaries of kennels, racetracks, horse-show grounds or obedience trials. The other world was the world of the intellectual, especially the academic or full-time intellectual, though it is not strictly bounded by the walls of either university or editorial offices.

What happened was that in the mornings I would get up just before dawn and work my horses. Generally I had finished with most or all of them (it depended on how business was going or whether certain horses were giving me trouble) by noon, so I would shower and go over to the local university. There were a couple of people there I liked to meet and talk with over lunch, and I also liked to prowl around in the library and either take courses in or just hang around courses in philosophy, psychology, zoology and linguistics. I had been bitten in my childhood by a passion for books, especially books that were, as a recent novel has it, "hard to read, books that could devastate and transform your soul, and that had a kick like a mule when you were finished with them." There were as many glittering and lovely creatures in those books and in the conversations of people who cared about them as there were in the kennel

and the stable.

But despite their many beauties, most of the philosophers and their associates in the libraries, and all but two or three of the people at lunch, were profoundly disappointing, not in and of themselves, but in terms of my passion for a language with sufficient philosophical reach to tell me what I wanted to know about the stable and the kennel. And there was a great deal that tended to cause me to lose my temper, such as the enormous amount of time that was spent in “curing” students and others of saying precisely the sort of thing I wanted to say vigorously and significantly about animals.

One thing that preoccupied me was the trainers’ habit of talking in highly anthropomorphic, morally loaded language. That was the language I wanted to understand because it seemed to me after a while that it was part of what enabled the good trainers to do so much more than the academic psychologists could in the way of eliciting interesting behavior from animals. Trainers, for example, have no hesitation in talking about how much a mare loves or worries about her foal, a cat her kittens or a dog or a horse their work. But for philosophers and psychologists to speak of love was to invoke abilities that are, for reasons I am still not clear about, as rigidly restricted to *Homo sapiens* as some religious doctrines have restricted the possession of a soul to members of certain races, cultures and sometimes genders.

In any event, the talk I heard was of no help in enabling me even to figure out what my project was, though I knew a lot after a while about what it wasn’t. It wasn’t behaviorism, it wasn’t ordinary-language philosophy and it wasn’t classical quantificational logic. Nonetheless, I saw many interesting things along the way. A student giving a paper on post-parturition behavior in cats would inadvertently attribute to the mother cat a mental state, such as caring about her kittens. The student would be corrected and would learn in time to deliver solemnly quantified reports on the amount of licking behavior, suckling behavior and so on that was “exhibited” by the queens. I wondered about that word “exhibited.” Exhibited to whom? The researchers? The kittens? I also wondered about the intellectual and spiritual futures of students so carefully instructed in the terrible grammar such ways of talking entailed.

Another habit that students had, curiously, to be cured of was the habit of supposing that one animal might hide from another animal. (I have never known a hunter to be successfully cured of this habit of mind.) I was deeply intrigued by this, for what in the world was the puppy doing under the bed when you returned home to find an unwelcome monument on the broadloom, if not hiding? But it was sternly pointed out to me what a great and anthropomorphic mistake it was to say or think this. In order to be hiding, whether from predators or from the vexed owner of the carpet, a creature would have to have certain logical concepts that animals simply couldn’t have. I remember one careful exposition on the subject of octopuses, who will, in laboratory situations, hide behind glass in plain sight of predators. A number of things struck me about that seminar. One was the way the scientists cheerfully applied interpretations of the behavior of octopuses to the behavior of gazelles and St. Bernard puppies which seemed to me to demonstrate insufficient respect for the individuality of octopuses. Another was the indifference of the researchers to questions about the importance of

vision for octopuses and their predators, and yet another set of considerations had to do with my reflecting that in the same position I would probably do the same thing, either out of mindless habit or because in the tanks in the laboratories there wasn't anything else but the glass to get behind.

But in order to hide, it was carefully explained, one had to have a concept of self. Not only that, one had to have the concept of self given by the ability to speak academic language, or at least a standard human language—a concept of self that depends on the ability to think. And, as one philosopher informed me unequivocally, any sort of thinking requires “first order logical quantification theory.” Since I myself didn't seem, on investigation, to be using FOQ, I couldn't make much of this.

Since those days, certain conceptually laborious and interesting experiments involving gorillas and mirrors have weakened the more rigid of the foundations of some of these cognitive allegories, but there is still little help from science. The work with gorillas seems to establish that gorillas share with human beings a tendency, which Aristotle notes in the opening pages of the *Metaphysics* and which Plato worked into his parable of horse and rider, to rely on vision. Dogs and wolves and other animals, by contrast, distinguish themselves from other individuals, and friends from foes, by scent markers. I don't know why one can't speak, at least tentatively and for the sake of philosophical speculation, of a wolf's territorial markings as being a series of scent mirrors, or, as fiction often has it, signatures, and argue from that to a concept of self. But I learned early on to be cautious about saying this sort of thing, and I said less and less as time went on, except to the two or three friends who were patient with my ramblings. My passion to find a way to write about the language of people who actually work interestingly with animals increased, however.

After trying to talk, I would leave the university in the middle or late afternoons to work with a dog or so and any horses that had been left out of the morning schedule. Here, in the various training arenas, the discourse was radically different. It was, as I have said, anthropomorphic, “morally loaded,” as it has always been in the great training manuals. By this I mean that implicit as well as explicit in the trainers' language is the notion that animals are capable not only of activities requiring “IQ”—a rather arid conception—but also of a complex and delicate (though not infallible) moral understanding that is so inextricably a function of their relationships with human beings that it may well be said to constitute those relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Xenophon speaks of horses “greatly appreciating” certain “courtesies,” and, to the irritation of a more or less scientifically minded translator, of the “cunning” of certain hunting dogs in leading other dogs off the trail of a rabbit by barking or baying falsely. The editor and translator in question appends a footnote in which he indulgently explains and apologizes for Xenophon's naive little slip here in attributing such a degree of intellectual capacity for misdirection to a mere (helplessly sincere) animal. When I showed that passage to a friend of mine who is fond of fox hunting, he remarked rather gloomily, “I believe I know that darned hound!”

Xenophon wrote quite some time ago, but his notions and something like his language continue to echo in modern training, albeit revised, here and there expanded,

here and there muted, as well as from time to time severely reduced. Trainers still speak of whether or not a horse is “mean,” “sneaky,” “kind” or “honest” and vary their approaches to situations accordingly, sometimes saying, “Hey! You’ve got to come down on that dog hard and fast and right now—that’s a real hood.” Or “Relax, there isn’t a tricky bone in that horse’s body; he’ll take care of you.” Or “Don’t worry, he’ll come around okay, he’s no real criminal, just a juvenile delinquent.” Or, in appreciative awe, “Look at that dog work. She knows her job, doesn’t she?” Or, as a general principle of training, “But first and above all, the horse’s *understanding* must be developed.” Or “If you want to know where the track is, *ask your dog!*”

There seems to me to be something terribly important about this language and what it implies, partly of course because it is a language I myself speak, but also, as I began in time to notice in more and more detail, because one can do so much more with the trainers’ language, despite the fact that in the mid to late twentieth century it sounds as it has for some time—at best naive and at worst offensive, somewhat in the way that *Huckleberry Finn* has sounded offensive to some. In the past, attempts to speak in the way I have in mind have been regarded as heretical as well as intellectually unsound. And the agitation expressed by some writers and thinkers in the face of the trainers’ persistence in talking the way they do, as well as the uneasiness some trainers express in response to their awareness of the possibility of that agitation, and the attempts in the introductory portions of some training manuals to placate that agitation, suggest that modern injunctions against anthropomorphism have as much of a heretic-hounding impulse behind them as any of the older ones. When, for example, I gave a portion of the chapter “Tracking Dogs, Sensitive Horses and the Traces of Speech” as a talk at the New York Institute for the Humanities, one person in the audience said that what I was saying sounded a little, well, religious. I patiently worked at finding out what she meant by religious, and it turned out that she meant “anthropomorphic.” I said, “Oh, yes indeed, that’s the whole point of this project!” She wondered aloud if I should be allowed to teach in a university, and at a later talk, when I found myself seated next to her by accident, she asked me to leave the room. The morally loaded language of William Koehler’s stunningly fine training books have led to any number of court cases and to one case of the books having been banned, for a while at least, in Arizona.

In academic opinion, the trainers are, not to put too fine a point on it, intellectually disloyal. This would not in and of itself be worth more than a few paragraphs of social history if having something to say about what animals are like—about the problem of animal consciousness—were not so ubiquitous a way of providing a rhetorical and conceptual frame for investigations of human consciousness in all sorts of areas. Whatever the author in question thinks women are like, or blacks, or philosophers, or Jews, or Republicans, or Americans, or whatever category defines the “we” of a given discussion, it must first be made clear that the “we” is to be distinguished from the animals. It generally takes no more than a paragraph or so to characterize all of animate creation that is not the “we” at hand, or it did until lately. Now there are respectable tomes that attempt to prove that animals feel pain and that this has consequences for human morality. And in response to this literature, usually called animal-rights literature, there are renewed versions of the claim that animals are

absolutely different from the “we” at hand. When this enterprise began, I felt an upsurge of hope; surely a title such as *The Moral Status of Animals* would help me to expand my own project. It didn’t, though, but there began to be, refreshingly, the occasional bit of common sense, as when Tom Regan points out that “if Professor Frey’s dog is a normal dog, he will eat his lunch, and not his master.”<sup>2</sup> This sort of thing was cheering, especially as philosophers like Frey are capable of quite extraordinary performances, such as the following:

Now in the case of my dog, can anything like a ranking of rational desires be achieved? . . . When I put food before him, my dog eats it; when I throw the stick, he fetches it. Both he does unfailingly, unless he is distracted by some stronger impulse, such as, on occasion, sex; and in response to the question whether my dog desires or prefers eating to chasing sticks, I can only say he does both when the situations are to hand and no other impulse interferes. Several times, I have tried putting food before him and throwing a stick at the same time; each time he has sought neither the food nor the stick but stood looking at me.<sup>3</sup>

At first I thought this was some sort of irony, but it wasn’t, it was just plain old lunacy and ignorance. Several of my friends, some of them philosophers and some of them dog trainers, refused to believe me when I told them about this and other passages in that book, and I had to show them the pages to maintain my credibility.

None of this had anything to do with the knowledge of training that I wanted to bring to bear on various questions, and the “new” philosophers of animal consciousness were no more interested in what the trainers had to say than more “traditional” writers had been. They found them just as vulgar and heretical as the logicians and the church fathers had, and they seemed even more aggressively unwilling to distinguish between boar hunting for sport, the greed that builds appalling feedlots for pigs and calves and high school dressage for horses.

The more of this sort of thing I became aware of, the more ill-tempered I got. In my ill temper I began to notice a lot of things that didn’t quite amount to a philosophical ground for honoring the trainers’ anthropomorphic language but that I took as license. I noticed that in obedience and riding classes, people with training in the behavioral sciences hadn’t much chance of succeeding with their animals, and that the higher the degree held by the person, the worse the job of training was likely to be. And one of the reasons I was the audience for so many lectures on the wrongness of the trainers’ way of thinking and talking was that the psychologists and philosophers had to bring their animals to me because they couldn’t housebreak them, induce them to leave off chewing up the children or, in the case of horses, get them to cross the shadow of a pole laid on the ground. The trainers’ dogs and horses, by contrast, would move with courage and determination over difficult tracks and obstacle courses.

The consequence of all of this was my being led to cast my intellectual, literary and moral lot with the trainers, even the sleaziest of them, despite my fondness for the wonderful creatures of philosophy and related disciplines. This didn’t mean that as a

thinker I was free from the intellectual tradition I inherited; like any other trainer of my time, I have been enriched and bruised by what I might call “scientomorphism,” by which I mean Western faith in the beauties of doubt and refutation that is one of our central intellectual virtues. And it is, in its place, a virtue, but like any popular notion, it is rarely in its place and tends to run amok and lead to the curiously superstitious notion that to have no reason to believe a proposition is the same as having a reason to assert that the proposition is false.<sup>4</sup>

I should confess that doubt ran amok in my own case even after I had worn out a number of bridles and leashes, and that for a long time, even as I became cranky with the philosophers, I tended to think of the trainers as skillful perhaps but philosophically naive. I hadn’t noticed that genuine mastery of anything entails sound philosophical thought of one sort or another. When, for example, I read in William Koehler’s book on guard-dog training about the importance of being sure that your prospective protection dog has a well-developed sense of “responsibility,” I tended privately and only semi-consciously to think it was a pity that he didn’t know better than to use such a vocabulary in relationship to animals. I managed to think that even though I already knew him to be one of the greatest animal teachers the world has ever known.<sup>5</sup>

It was not, finally, the trainers who showed me the necessity of believing them, but a dog and, later, a horse. In this my story is a common one. Alois Podhajsky, the famous trainer of the Lipizzaner Stallions at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, calls his autobiographical book *My Horses, My Teachers*, the true title of the autobiography of virtually every horse trainer who ever lived.

The dog who forced me to notice what was going on was an Airedale Terrier named Gunner. I was working him on a scent problem, having him follow a track laid by my seven-year-old daughter Colleen. As I work on tracking, the dog is taught not only to follow a scent but to retrieve objects dropped by the track layer. The track was plainly marked for me, since there was still dew on the ground and Colleen’s footsteps showed clearly. Furthermore, I knew where the track “had” to end, since Colleen had been picked up in a car and driven away after dropping the last glove. I knew that she hadn’t been in the area the track was laid in for a week, so there was no problem about a confusion of trails. Suddenly Gunner abandoned the trail and began bounding to the left, toward some bushes about eighty-five feet away. I decided, as humans tend to, that I knew more than the dog about what was going on. I shouted angrily and tried to halt him with pressure on the harness, but he kept on merrily (he always looked merry), to my intense aggravation, and emerged from the bushes with a stuffed toy Colleen had been for some days mourning the loss of. It took me a decade to figure out how to talk about training in general and tracking in particular in a way that would make it clear why at such a moment my intellectual loyalties shifted, and how to tell other stories, especially a horse story, that would indicate *what the trainers have in mind* when they talk the way they do.<sup>6</sup> But the experience was an epiphany rather than a demonstration for me, the moment when, taking the stuffed toy from the joyous young Airedale, it dawned on me that people like Koehler use terms like “responsible” in relationship to animals because those are the terms that *make sense* of the situation.

I began realizing other things as well, such as that in the trainers' world different kinds of animals exist than the ones that I heard and read about in the university. For the trainer there are hot working Airedales, dutiful and reliable German Shepherds, horses with intense, fiery and competitive temperaments, other horses who are irredeemably dishonest. In the universities, there were more or less Cartesian creatures of uncertain pedigree, revised by uncertain interpreters of Freud and Jung, which may be why in the world of letters in general animals are invoked to mark "primitive" and usually unsavory impulses, while in the trainers' world they are more like characters in James Thurber, who insisted that dogs represent "intelligence and repose" in his work. The trainers' language was, if I could only unfold its story with the full acceptance of what Stanley Cavell has called "the daily burden of discourse," the right language, the philosophically responsible language.

Knowing this was important to me. It enriched my work and conversation as a trainer, but it didn't enable me to tell anyone else much about what I was at last beginning to have a grasp of. There was no philosophical prose rhythm available for me to ring the right sort of changes on. I was able to sketch some of what I had in mind relatively soon in verse, but that was thanks to the virtues of poetry itself, which has wings and is good at dodging, able, to use Stephen Dedalus' phrase, to "fly by the nets" cast by the shadows of dark philosophies, ideologies and bad poems. I was also able to get some expression of the matter into fiction, at least to my own satisfaction, largely, perhaps, because philosophy tends to ignore fiction. But I wanted it to be *philosophy*, or something very like philosophy.

This was a terrific problem for me because argument was at the center of most of the philosophy I knew, and I didn't want to argue with anyone. Then two events occurred quite close together. One was the publication of Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, which not only gave into my keeping certain philosophers and problems more securely than I had ever had them before, but also opened the possibility of a prose that was sufficiently subtle, muscular and accurate for me to ride in quest of the meanings I still needed to catch the meanings that eluded me. (It takes a meaning to catch a meaning, as Robert Tragesser, a splendid philosopher, once remarked.)

The other event was the arrival in Riverside, California, a few months later of Washoe, Moja and Loulis, three signing chimpanzees, and my coming to observe them and to talk with two of the people who worked with them. This happened at a moment when the debates about whether or not what the chimpanzees were doing could be accepted as language were particularly hot, and I suddenly had an occasion to begin writing, after hundreds of false starts.

That is one reason why this book, which is primarily concerned with domestic animals, especially working animals, begins with speculations about a wild animal. Another reason may be that, like the thinkers I have complained about, I needed something against which to define my subject. For me, I suppose, human beings and working animals are the "we," so it was natural enough for me to define my territory against the background of wild animals, whose worlds are far more various than my gestures in their direction indicate. In any event, the book begins at the point where