

At the Edge of the Wild

Harriet Ritvo

The analogy between artificial selection and natural selection powerfully introduces Darwin's argument in *On the Origin of Species*. The parallel between wild species and domesticated breeds is far from complete, however, and the combination of similarity and difference that made Darwin's juxtaposition of wild and domesticated animals both effective and ambiguous still persists. Indeed, as human impact on the environment has become increasingly pervasive, the reciprocal resonance of these categories has intensified; the animal wild becomes more appealing as it becomes less available. And as the valence of wildness has altered, the stakes around its definition have increased, with implications for such varied enterprises as livestock breeding and environmental conservation. Focusing on shifting understandings of wildness in animals and the practices that these understandings have inspired and shaped, my project explores the evolution of this binary in the Anglophone world over the past three centuries. It will examine shifts in societal values that have important consequences for animals, for people, and for the environments that we all inhabit.

Of course neither wildness nor domestication was new in the eighteenth century. But during that period several trends emerged whose (somewhat contradictory) influence still persists. One was a movement to define wildness, or to clarify the distinction between wild animals and their domesticated relatives. At the same time, in a development long recognized as part of the Romantic movement in literature and the visual arts, the valence of wildness shifted significantly. Fierce wild animals as well as foreboding landscapes began to inspire more admiration than dread. At present, both the tendencies that emerged in the eighteenth century remain influential, even if they appear contradictory. Wildness, as embodied in animals, has become increasingly valued as it has become increasingly threatened, but efforts to preserve it have also made it increasingly difficult to distinguish from various forms of domestication. Ironically, but not uniquely, the strength of desire has worked to diminish its object.