

PETER CULLEY

DOGWO RLD

1. DEFINITIONS

*If you were going to get a pet,
what kind of animal would you get?*

—Robert Creeley



Of dogs my father held a low opinion. We were a cat family. Cats had “dignity.” When moving, which as an RCAF family we did every eighteen months or so, cats could be left without conscience “on a farm” or even packed up cageless in the car with us—along with a vast copper thermos of root beer—for the long drive to the new base. They didn’t ask for or require special treatment. Mostly dogs lacked dignity, or in my father’s words, “Anything a dog can do, you can watch.” As I was mindlessly intoning this in a conversation a few years ago (presumably while waiting for an idea of my own to come along), a friend shot back, “Anything a *man* can do you can watch, you mean....” Well, precisely. Weren’t dogs, with their tail-wagging, crotch-sniffing and shameless collegiality, a little bit too much like us at our worst? TMI, as the kids say....

I think the gracefulness and droll detachment of cats represented for my father a kind of aspiration, a part of the vision of tough-but-enlightened gentility he carried from the impoverishment of his East London boyhood: a gentility streetwise but knowledgeable, that surveyed the world from a warm, secure and inaccessible spot. Not the life of a roaming cur, driven by whim, subject to weather and misfortune, anybody’s buddy for the price of a cookie and a head scratch. Perhaps, too, the dogs’ tendency to obsequiousness in human company too forcibly reminded him both of the forelock-tugging class relations he’d left behind in England and the over-easy intimacy of the Canadians he had found himself among.

But his chief objection was—and this is a problem he had in common with almost everyone who has

ever had to think or write about dogs—a categorical one: just what exactly *is* a dog, anyway? With a quick Martian glance, it’s hard to believe that the Siberian husky and the Chihuahua in Paris Hilton’s purse inhabit the same *planet*, let alone the same gene pool. Let’s just say their deviations from a common ancestor are not immediately apparent. If on the other hand, behind every cat—from saber-toothed tiger to Hello Kitty—is a pretty, identifiable, abstraction (a few lines drawn in the dirt with a stick would suffice for both), the possibilities of what is or was or might eventually become a “dog” seem limited only by their own fecundity, human ingenuity and time. For my father, this inexhaustible multiplicity of form disqualified them from serious animal status, as if the species as a whole had failed to display the cat’s “dignified” loyalty to its standardization. And in a distinction to which we shall return, the cat is *tamed*, the dog *domesticated*.

The variety of dogdom was also tainted by its connection with a human desire often perverse and wayward in its requirements: many breeds of dog (like the pugs that can’t breathe properly or the bulldogs who can’t reproduce without outside help) give off an air of decadent overachievement, like orchids or certain kinds of formalist poetry. *The Canadian Kennel Club Book of Dogs* is almost 1,000 pages, most of those devoted to photographs, diagrams and highly detailed breed descriptions: that’s a lot of waiting around to see how the puppies will turn out, a lot of bitches worn out from too much child-rearing, a lot of broken hearts when the markings don’t appear as they should. Eugenic practices discredited among humans with a whiff



of Nazi horror still thrive in the dog world. But whatever the individual result, every dog is partly the product of human will expressed over countless generations; the qualities of its character and appearance are the result of calculations as recent as the latest trends in ear posture or older than recorded history. The needs of the Paleolithic hunter, the frontier settler, the suburban ball-tosser and the weekend exhibitor must often contend within the same animal.

My father's discomfort with the sheer scale of the dog's potential appearances and habits might too have reflected an Englishman's discomfort with the mere fact of polyglot-ness itself—too many kinds of cheese, too many pages in the menu, too much of a good thing. But his difficulty with the inadequacy and imprecision of the term “dog” is as I have said a general one. The mind naturally hesitates a little before such a capacious construction. Even such fearless pillars of lexical precision as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the definitive 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* tend to sniff the air and scratch the earth at the moment of actual definition: The *Britannica* tentatively dips its toe with:

the English generic term for the quadruped *Canis*. (Fr. *chien*.) The etymology of the word is unknown.... [I]t is suggested that the “English *dog*—for this was a regular phrase in continental European countries—represented a special breed”

before basically admitting that there is no real and absolute difference between dog and wolf other than that “the eye of the dog of every country and

species has a circular pupil, but the position or form of the pupil is oblique in the wolf.”

Little enough distinction, perhaps, but this description is the basis for six grandly systematizing pages of text and four pages of handsome rotogravure grids featuring long-vanished Edwardian show winners. The *OED*—never to be outdone in the functional flatness of its impossible-to-misinterpret definitions—has this characteristically bone-dry bit of bet-hedging:

A quadruped of the genus *Canis*, of which wild species or forms are found in various parts of the world, and numerous races or breeds, varying greatly in size, shape, and colour, occur in a domesticated or semi-domesticated state in almost all countries.

Again, no very clear “dog” looks up from this, nothing that would enable our Martian to pick one out of a line-up. But over the next eight pages, the *OED*—whose glory is its barrage of sample sentences carefully plucked from across the English language's written corpus—tracks the word through its every shift, derivative and prefix, so that within a few lines we have a citation from Langland's 1396 *Piers Plowman*, “Thi dog dar not bark,” which contains a recognizable dog in a familiar situation. A few lines later, from Alexander Pope's 1732 *Essay on Man*, “His faithful dog shall bear him company,” and looking up a bit, from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, “If I thought that, Ide beate him like a dogge.” Very quickly the vagueness of the general term is brought up against the specific creatures the sentences evoke,





dogs that leap over history to the mind's eye with the same unconscious particularity of the dogs in the photographs featured here.

As we follow the word over the course of its long and branching career, the disparate entries cohere into a mosaic history, a map of the myriad ways in which language, animal and human experience intersect and transform one another. Such ordinary usages as *dog watch*, *dog days* or *dog tired* speak of a ubiquitous presence within human experience, one as familiar and relied upon as the night sky, the weather or the feeling of exhaustion.

Dogs have been with us everywhere all along, from the High Arctic to the Olduvai Gorge, witnessing crucial turning points of human history. From Sparta to Stalingrad to Abu Ghraib the dogs of

hunting, war, cleanup and guard duty have been working hard on our behalf; serving without complaint, observing with alertness but without apparent judgment. It is impossible to imagine either a riot or a pool party without their eager, smiling participation; neither the *coureurs des bois* nor the Conquistadors could have conquered the continent without the aid of canine loyalty and observational intelligence. And who can doubt that it was a dog who first claimed the Pacific for European hegemony, looking up "with wild surmise" before dipping an eager paw, just as it was the stolid Laika who gave her life that we might glimpse the abyss of orbital space from Sputnik 2? Not to mention the forty percent of the world's population for whom it remains a valued menu item. People have been addressing each other as "dog" for so long in so many ways and for so many good and bad reasons



that there seems little in the human condition that the dog condition can't be made to express or comment on. Again my father's distaste for dogs seems a kind of misanthropy inexpressible by other means: it reveals a discomfort with aspects of his own humanity.

The "faithfulness" of the dog is both cliché and description, and it encompasses not only the dogs loyalty to humans but also its equally reliable connection with their older ways of being. The *OED's* historical mosaic speaks to a connection with dogs that transcends both language and circumstance; in photographs and paintings, the postures and attitudes of the humans can render them barely recognizable in present terms, but the dog is always contemporary.

For those of us who've found ourselves stranded in post-historical circumstances, dogs offer a stability and consistency increasingly rare in contemporary experience: they go on protecting homes as if the bear and the Viking invader were still a factor, go on herding as if the passing mailman were a sheep and greet the homeward returning cubicle drone

with the ceremony appropriate to a bloodstained warrior. The dog's healthy greed and gratitude at the tossed wiener or blackened marshmallow is our infinitely repeatable trip to the hunter-gatherer's fireside. Dogs fetch us the past as readily as sticks. Nostalgia adheres to them like ticks.

The contract between humans and dogs is so ancient that its terms and provisions are lost to us, but no one examining the life of the dog in the West can doubt that we have long been in profound violation of it, that we have presumed far too much on their infinite goodwill. Despite dogs being our frank superiors, if the ability to intuit, relax, smell and defend themselves means anything, we can fool them at will and still do. Enthusiastic but blissfully beyond good and evil, we nevertheless enlist them in our good and evil projects. But while the details of our betrayal offer an endless set of morbid symptoms to be rooted around in, what's more interesting is where our domination falters, where dogs end up revealing aspects of our shared culture while preserving their own integrity; where dogs enter the discourse on their own terms.

