

A Pug's Life



by Theodore Dalrymple

I have never really understood why people like pug dogs. They seem to me ugly, they run to fat, and because of their pushed-in snouts and widely spaced eyes, they are inexpressive. They have difficulty breathing, like a fat man trying to sleep on his back. Between breathing and choking, there is for them but a narrow difference.

It is surely a sign of the perversity of man that he should have selectively bred such creatures precisely for their unattractive features. It is because they (the dogs) inevitably suffer that some countries are considering the prohibition of their breeding, though whether pug dogs would themselves agree that it was better that they had never existed than that they were born with all their disabilities cannot be known.

I write this because our *femme de ménage*, cleaning lady, in France brings her pug dog with her. Both she and the dog have had a hard life. It cannot really be any 60-year-old woman's dream to clean for us, however well we try to treat her; but, widowed, she is obliged to work to help her daughter, who herself was widowed by the early death of her husband, leaving her with a child to raise.

She rescued the dog, a female, from being put down after she, the dog, had served her turn for a breeder of pugs and was therefore no use to him. This purely instrumental attitude to dogs, especially those raised to be pets, horrifies me. I first encountered it on my return from a dog show, the largest in the world. I didn't much like the show, for at best it seemed that the dogs on show were an instrument to inflate the egos of those who showed them, albeit that they were for the most part extremely handsome creatures. (There was a vet present who specialized in toxicology, for these "dog-lovers" did not hesitate to poison their rivals' dogs if they could, thereby, ruin their performance in the show ring, thus increasing the chance of their own dogs winning a prize.)

In the train, I sat opposite a man who was reading a dog magazine. We fell to talking, and I discovered that he was a dog-breeder. "You must love dogs," I said. "For me it's just a business," he replied. Whether he said this just to bring the conversation to a close, I do not know; he resumed reading his magazine. But I felt a chill in my heart.

Our cleaning lady's dog, now quite old for the breed, snuffles a lot and seems easily to choke. She cannot run, she merely waddles from time to time a little faster than she walks. She cannot really wag her coiled tail, at most she waggles her hindquarters a little when pleased. But her face expresses nothing. Nor can she bark, at most making a noise like someone with severe laryngitis.

Nevertheless, she is clearly affectionate to her new mistress

and even quite friendly toward us. She will, with difficulty, rise up and put her front paws on our laps. Perhaps I imagine it, but there seems to be an appeal in her eyes, and she likes to be stroked. I have even come to like her in return. There is something in her ugliness that melts the heart.

It is not, of course, her fault that she is ugly. Perhaps it is this that melts the heart: One pities her. And whenever I see her, I reflect on the part that chance plays in our lives—but also the part that our efforts play. In fact, this is the central mystery of human existence: how we become what we are, for no inventory of our genetic inheritance and environmental circumstances quite accounts for it. Where human beings are concerned, there is always an unbridgeable gap between what is to be explained and the explanation offered, and I hope that there always will be: For total knowledge would lead to total power, and total power to total oppression.

Whenever I look at our cleaning lady's pug, I think of a man in the small town in England in which I live half the time. He is of an age difficult to estimate, so peculiar is his appearance. No doubt a clinical geneticist could identify the syndrome with which he was born, but I cannot. He is sexually undeveloped and has a face that might lead one to suppose that he is mentally retarded, though he is nothing of the kind. His hypogonadism inclines him to fat, and he waddles rather than walks.

He induces in me a feeling of guilt for more than one reason. The first is at my own luck by comparison with his, which I did nothing to deserve. I am not exceptionally good-looking, but I don't think anyone would remark on my odd appearance as I walked down the street. His appearance is so odd that I don't think anyone could look at him without constantly remarking on it. But he is both pleasant and harmless.

This gives rise to the second cause of my guilt: I am not able

myself to put his appearance out of my mind whenever I see him. Occasionally, I have had occasion to speak to him, for sometimes he serves in a charity shop where I buy secondhand books. I feel bad whether I look him in the face or avert my eyes. If the latter, I am obviously avoiding him; if the former, I may appear to be staring at him. In fact, I can find no natural way of facing him or interacting with him; I feel guilty that I am unable to make contact, so to speak, with the man within.

This is my failing, of course. It is precisely the failing that probably makes of him a very lonely man, one who can never be quite at ease or have a normal social life, for I doubt that I am alone in my failing. I feel great pity for him, but I cannot express it because this would only humiliate him further and make any interaction with him even more artificial than it already is.

I realize how fortunate I have been in life, though I make my living by complaint. My misfortunes have always been of my own making—one definition, perhaps, of a free man.

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