

Dog Day Afternoon

by Theodore Dalrymple (June 2016)



Pyrenean Mountain Puppies

Most days a dog called Alfie walks past our house (with his master, of course), and I have to resist the mad impulse to rush out and play with him: I don't want to appear more foolish than I am. Alfie is all black, apart from the white star on his chest, and he is two years old. He retains that liquid, puppyish movement as if he had no bones in his legs, as if he were a soft toy; he still clearly believes that everyone loves him and everyone in turn is lovable. He has never met evil in the world, which remains for him as it was the day he was born, a Garden of Eden. Alfie has not yet eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and it breaks my heart that he will one day be an old dog, arthritic, poorly-sighted and deaf (which will also describe me by the time he is old).

A friend of mine, an immigrant from India, says that he found two things necessary to integrate into English life in its more affable aspects, namely to go to the pub and to speak to people out walking their dogs (about their dogs, of course). From these two activities all else follows; you are a stranger no longer.

I happened not long ago to pass the exhibition hall in which Crufts, which calls itself the largest dog show on earth, was held; naturally, I bought my ticket and went in. Whether or not there is a larger dog show on earth, it was indeed vast; and if anyone doubted the astonishing ability of the market to call forth an immense variety of goods and services (the majority of them quite unnecessary, of course, to happiness, whether human or canine), Crufts would be a good place to dispel that doubt. There was everything the modern dog could be thought to want, from bones to bling, from booties to baskets. A Peruvian lady was selling balls of alpaca wool. 'Some people,' she said, 'like to knit for their dogs.'

Of course, dogfood was an important item of the show's commerce. There was one large advertisement showing a healthy vigorous retriever at the age of 17, thanks to the product advertised; this struck me as a little like the

advertisements I receive by email from time to time for penny shares, which tempt me by a story of shares that advanced from 10 cents to \$33 in hardly any time at all. But I believe it is true that the life expectancy of dogs has risen of late years, for example by six months from 2002 to 2011. At the same time, however, a new problem has arisen, or at least increased in prevalence: that of dog obesity. Obese dogs, apparently, increased by 30 per cent in the same period, though whether in relative or absolute numbers my source did not say.

However, whichever it might be, relative or absolute, increased obesity in dogs is an interesting social phenomenon. Dogs can only become obese if their masters and mistresses feed them too much. Presumably the owners of fat dogs believe that, by giving in to their dogs' insatiable desire for food, they are being kind to them, though obesity in dogs brings in its train precisely the same kind of health problems as it does for humans: diabetes, arthritis, etc. This suggests the spread of a kind of sentimentality in the population: that acceding to the desires of others is the only way to show that you care for them. This, of course, is the easiest thing to do: it obviates the necessity to make a judgment as to when to grant and when to deny a wish, and it also suggests or implies the desirability of a relaxation of self-control. Why control yourself when you give in to others? I think it likely that fat people have fat dogs.

My own dog, of course, was not fat; but honesty compels me to admit that this was because he was by nature not inclined to eat more than he needed. You could put a large plate of food before him and he would stop eating when he had had enough. He was also highly discriminating: between quality and quantity he would always choose quality. He was something of a gourmet.

But to return to Crufts. The last (and only previous) time I went I discovered that there was a veterinary surgeon present whose job it was to diagnose poisoning in dogs, for some owners were so determined to win that they were willing to poison their rivals' dogs. I realised then that not all people who showed in dog shows were dog-lovers; at best they were greedy, at worst egotistical. On the train home from the show, I happened to sit opposite a breeder who likewise was returning home.

Casting around in my mind for something to say, I came up with a supremely banal question of which I felt ashamed the moment I had uttered it.

'I suppose,' I said, 'you must love dogs?'

Whether from a desire to shock a bore such as I, or from an attachment to truth, he replied:

'No, for me it's just a business.'

If he wanted to shock me, he certainly succeeded. My blood ran cold at the thought of dogs as mere items of commerce. I did not speak to him further. Perhaps that was what he wanted. I suppose I would not have wanted him to talk to me about his medical history; why should he have wanted to talk to me about dogs?

Ever since, however, I have been slightly uneasy about Crufts. I cannot say that my unease was altogether alleviated by this visit. For example, I watched the judge at work in the Pyrenean Mountain dog competition. Now as it happens, these dogs have a special connotation for me. One of them wandered, lost, on to my land in France. He was a very large creamy-white creature who seemed to seek my protection. It was clear that he had come, if not to stay, at least to be rescued (I thought that dogs like him were supposed to rescue me when I was lost, not the other way round). Naturally, the first thing I did was to feed him; he was the kind of dog who would not refuse food however full he was. He ate copiously.

What was I to do with him? It occurred to me that he was probably chipped, and so I decided to take him to the vet, about six or seven miles away. I put him on to the back seat of my car and started to drive. Unfortunately the roads near my house are very twisty, and the dog, although extremely docile, was not a good traveller. The first thing he did was to vomit the food I had given him. To this day, seven years later, I have not been able to eliminate the smell entirely, despite the employment of all the perfumes of Araby and many beside (I am too mean, and fear poverty too much, to waste money on a declining asset such as a new car).

Needless to say, the dog was chipped, the vet called the owner who lived a few miles away and he collected his dog with the briefest of thanks. I did not at that stage know that he (the dog) had permanently damaged my car.

Despite this experience, objectivity requires me to admit that Pyrenean Mountain

dogs are handsome, though they do not seem to me to have the lively personality of terriers (say). But there is something a little creepy about seeing a whole parade of them, very similar if not identical, as if they had been turned out by a factory. One Pyrenean Mountain dog is handsome; twenty are disturbing.

They had already been filtered to potential winners by the time I saw them, as they were walked round the arena by their proud – or was it anxious? – owners. Probably most of them were breeders, and for their dog to win first, second or third place in their category was a matter of great financial importance to them: for the purchasers of puppies are deeply impressed by the fact that a puppy's great-great-grandfather was a champion at Crufts. Crufts is the Harvard of dogs.

The judge in a smart and well-tailored grey suit (but why the brown shoes, I wondered?) examined each dog with the practised eye and delicate palpation of an eminent surgeon. He felt the bone structure and looked at the teeth. The ankles and feet, as well as the tail, seemed of particular importance to him. Then he made the owners parade round the arena again at a trot with their dogs in tow; some of them (the owners) looked distinctly out of condition, and if the whole process wasn't cruel to dogs, it most certainly was to their owners. A lady of about seventy, severely arthritic, looked as if she might need resuscitation after her little trot.

The judge pondered deeply. He made what he considered the finest dogs and their owners trot round the arena again (the old lady was one of them). He pondered deeply again as he surveyed the dogs he had selected, and then made his choice. To someone such as I, whose previous contact with Pyrenean Mountain dogs had been confined to the experience described above, the dogs were largely indistinguishable. They were equally good – or bad.

The joy, not of the winners, but of the winners' owners, was unmistakable. Their joy seemed to me also to partake of relief: as if a heavy investment had paid off. The losers were disappointed, and no doubt attributed their loss as the bias of the judge, but some of them at least were game enough to congratulate the winners. I was very much struck by the good behaviour of the dogs themselves, not only in this contest, but in Crufts as a whole. There must have been thousands of dogs present, but never once in the show did I hear snarling, let alone witness a fight. If only the British behaved as well as British dogs.

The Pyrenean Mountain dogs were only one breed among hundreds: I believe the International Canine Federation recognises 339, though think the Kennel Club of Great Britain recognises only 228. Anyway, it is all a little like the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association*, that is to say a matter of horse-trading (or perhaps I should say dog-trading) rather than of science. Whether a breed is a breed is arbitrary. For example, although ordinary people have long recognised Jack Russell terriers as a separate breed, it is only recently that the Kennel Club of Great Britain has followed suit.

As I watched the judge of the Pyrenean Mountain dogs, I thought 'Nobody – no sensible person, that is – has a dog because the ratio of his ears to his snout, or of his pelvis to his tail, is precisely as laid down by some obsessional authority or other.' One has a dog (assuming it is not a working dog) for its companionship, for what I might almost call its human qualities. My dog was indeed a pedigree, but that was not why I loved him.

There was a public controversy after Crufts was over for another year. The winner of the German shepherd category had been bred for a low sloping rear back that breeders apparently now favour, but that gives the dog all kind of trouble quite early in life and even makes it difficult for them to be fully active. What is the point of such breeding? Is it not cruel? Is this not whimsical to an absurd and inhumane degree?

And yet, would the world not have been impoverished if dogs had never been bred for certain qualities, if all dogs were simply and generically *Canis familiaris*? I was fortunate in my dog: he was pure-bred, but was nevertheless the most handsome and intelligent dog ever, and long-lived into the bargain. Hamlet was wrong: not Man, but my dog was (and will be again, if I have another) the paragon of animals.

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