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D O G



Dogs, Domestication, and the Ego

Gary Shapiro

Fondly, for three bitches: Blacky, Amber, and Annie

In *Zarathustra's* "On the Vision and the Riddle," three animals—a spider, a snake, and a dog—make significant appearances, as do three human or quasi-human figures—Zarathustra himself, the dwarf known as the Spirit of Gravity, and the shepherd who must bite off the head of the snake. Of these animals, it is the dog who receives the most extended attention. Here, in the passage that along with "The Convalescent" (with its eagle and serpent) is usually and rightly taken to be Nietzsche's most articulate and yet highly veiled approach to explaining the teaching of eternal recurrence, the riddling vision involves animals. This is scarcely the only passage in Nietzsche to deal with the figure of the dog, although it is the one in which the dog has the most active role; frequently the name of the animal appears only in figurative speech. Here, even if the entire passage is a figure for the meaning of recurrence, the dog is as lively and noisy within the text as any of the other protagonists. Unfolding the vision and the riddle, or perhaps at least discovering what questions it asks, requires a confrontation with the figures of the animals and that howling dog. The parallel passage in *The Gay Science* (341) includes a demon rather than a dwarf and a spider spinning in the

moonlight but no dog and no shepherd choked by a snake. Let us note, before proceeding further, that of all these animals, it is only the dog who is domesticated in the "real world." Eagles and serpents may speak in fairy tales (or at the beginning of Genesis), but they are fundamentally without language, although we suspect that the style of a dog's whining and whimpering and perhaps its howling may have something to do with its domestication. The need for a more subtle exploration of the role of the animal in the presentation of the thought of recurrence emerges when we realize that nowhere in Nietzsche's published writings is the teaching ever articulately affirmed by a human voice; yet in the two chapters of *Zarathustra* just mentioned, its dramatic presentation is staged with diverse animals.¹ The discussion of recurrence in "On the Vision and the Riddle" reaches a turning point when the Märchen-like dwarf has just "murmured contemptuously 'All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle.'" Zarathustra's reply to this reductionistic oversimplification is to pose a series of questions with very little in the way of affirmation, his last question being "must we not eternally return?" But he tells his audience—the searchers, researchers, and guessers of riddles—that with such questions his voice became increasingly soft, for he was afraid of his own thoughts and the thoughts behind them.

It is with this cessation of the voice that

suddenly I heard a dog howl nearby. Had I ever heard a dog howl like this? My thoughts raced back. Yes, when I was a child, in the most distant moment of childhood: then I heard a dog howl like this. And I saw him too, bristling, his head up, trembling, in the stillest moonlight, when even dogs believe in ghosts—and I took pity: for just then the full moon, silent as death, passed over the house; just then it stood still, a round glow—still on the flat roof, as if on another's property—that was why the dog was terrified, for dogs believe in thieves and ghosts. And when I heard such howling again I took pity again.

On one level this records an experience of *déjà vu*. Zarathustra sees and hears a dog howling just as he did when he was a small child. It does not seem to be an identical repetition of the same experience, for the dog of childhood memory howled as the moon rose over a house; here there is no house and the moon had already risen, for the spider was spinning its web in the moonshine (although since we are dealing with the comparison of a vision and an early childhood memory recollected within that vision, we must be cautious when speaking of identity and comparison). So far the dog is just a marker of such an experience, an experience that might indicate the possibility of a

stricter form of recurrence, one that might require great courage and resolution to comprehend and internalize. But what is a dog, this domesticated animal, that whimpers, whines, and howls, believes in ghosts and thieves, bristles and trembles?² Does the dog tell us something about the human ego, its breeding and training? In a note for *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes: “And wherever I climb, my dog follows me everywhere; he is called ‘ego’” (KSA 10:4[188]). We imagine ourselves as sovereign individuals who train the lesser animals. In fact when we “train” dogs, we ourselves are being trained to be dog trainers and owners (as anybody who has been to obedience school with their pet can testify). The ego too is something that has been bred, appearing first in the herd. *Zarathustra* is quite clear, by the way, about seeing early humans as herd animals rather than pack animals such as dogs:

The delight in the herd is more ancient than the delight in the ego [Ich]; and as long as the good conscience is identified with the herd, only the bad conscience says: I [Ich]. . . . Verily, the clever ego, the loveless ego that desires its own profit in the profit of the many—that is not the origin of the herd but its going under. (Z:1 “On the Thousand and One Goals”)

Dogs were once wolves, beasts of prey; now they are domesticated, like too many human beings. Indeed, our experience of domesticating and training dogs has served as an implicit model for training humans. There is no doubt about the baneful aspects of the process: “Virtue is what makes modest and tame: with it they make the wolf into a dog and man himself into man’s best domestic animal” (Z:3 “Of the Virtue That Makes Small”). However, it is just the domestication of humans that leads to such astonishing results as an animal that is capable of making promises and that is therefore pregnant with a future beyond the alternatives of domestication, the herd, or the pack (GM II:1).

Part of life’s difficulty for most people most of the time is that they fail to see the ego as a dog. Aphorism 312 of *Gay Science* reads: “My dog.—I have given a name to my pain and call it ‘dog.’ It is just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog—and I can scold it and vent my bad mood on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives.” How liberating it would be if we could see our “pain”—the sum of our resentments and frustrations, for example—as a dog that frequently amuses us but needs to be kept in its place and can serve as an outlet for our bad temper. This would be far superior to seeing ourselves as identical with the pain, and the same holds true for our relation to the ego, which follows us about like a dog.³

The dog is rather consistently a figure of slavish obedience, as contrasted with other animals. A note from the first half of 1883 praises the superior strength and fitness of beasts of prey (*Raubtiere*) and explains that cats and dogs are both degenerate (*entartete*) versions of such beasts (KSA 10:7[42]). Yet Nietzsche admires the playfulness and cunning of the cat, while having some reservations about its dishonesty.⁴ One might say that the dog does not have enough imagination for the feline style of dishonesty. In the epilogue to *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, as the light is failing the Wanderer takes leave of the Shadow, who has been dogging his steps and thoughts for a whole long day. Rejecting the Shadow's tentative offer to be his slave, the Wanderer replies:

[T]he sight of one unfree would embitter me for all my joy; I would find even the best things repulsive if someone *had* to share them with me—I want no slaves around me. That is why I will not have even a dog, that lazy tail-wagging parasite who has become “doglike” only through being the slave of man and who is even commended for loyalty to his master and willingness to follow him like his—

“Like his shadow,” his fading companion completes the sentence and goes on to compare himself with a dog lying at his master's feet and then with the “philosophical ‘dog’” Diogenes, the Cynic, or canine, who asked Alexander the Great to step out of his light. The Cynics can be taken to be doglike not only in their espousal of a “back to nature” lifestyle and their contempt for culture but also in their retention and exaggeration of the “I,” that individuality that they seek to preserve by doing without, living in tubs, and expressing their disdain for a society that has taught them to be the dogs that they are.⁵

From the beginning of *Zarathustra*, the shepherd, always associated with his dog, has been an object of suspicion. After Zarathustra has carried away and buried the tightrope walker—who is mockingly called a “dead dog” by one of the townsfolk—he codifies his new insight: “[L]et Zarathustra speak not to the people but to companions [*Gefährten*]. Zarathustra shall not become the shepherd and dog of a herd [*einer Heerde Hirt und Hund*]” (Z:P 9). In the notes for *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes, “If you want to take life easy, always stay with the herd. Forget yourself in the herd! Love the shepherd and respect his dog's bite!” (KSA 10:4[38]). Yet if the trained dog is not the ideal companion, the way of liberation does not involve setting the wild dogs loose from their imprisonment in their cellars. This is what Zarathustra teaches the pale youth in “On the Tree on the Mountainside,” whose imagi-

nation of freeing his imprisoned instincts still reflects a prison mentality. From the post-human perspective of the *Übermensch*, the human ego will appear as a result of training and breeding not dissimilar to that of the training and breeding of dogs. We may imagine that our discipline is directed toward others, but it is directed just as much toward ourselves. Michel Foucault helps to show this, following Nietzsche, in *Discipline and Punish*; in *The History of Sexuality*, he argues that what we conventionally take to be liberatory, the discourse of sexuality in modern therapeutic theory and practice, is in fact a disciplining of individuals and part of a biopower directed toward certain populations.⁶

There is nothing wrong with the herd as such. It is simply the condition of the animal. The problem arises when the individual claims to be an independent “I” or ego but continues to think, feel, and live, unbeknownst to herself, as a member of the herd. So it becomes possible to speak of “the herd of independent minds.” In their domesticated state, dogs frequently live as solitary pets. Their owners find them charmingly individual and human, thus confirming their sense of their own individuality. But what if that vaunted individuality were something into which they had been domesticated and trained, as obedience school teaches them to be good dog owners? In a liberal, democratic, consumer society one expresses one’s individuality in one’s style of consumption, one’s vote at the polls, one’s choice of entertainment—the content may vary from person to person, but not the general matrix within which choices, conscious or unconscious, are made. Another note of Nietzsche’s puts the point succinctly: “Once the ego [*das Ich*] was hidden in the herd: and now the herd is still hidden in the ego” (KSA 10:5[1] 273). Dogs over the years have been bred to be amenable to certain forms of training; this is the herd that lies hidden in the family pet. Humans over the years have also been bred to be amenable to certain kinds of training, and this is the herd that lies hidden in what we call education and freedom. So when Nietzsche notoriously speaks of the desirability of “breeding” human beings of a certain sort, he does so at a certain point in a long history in which breeding has proceeded in a happenstance and unreflective fashion.

“Dogs believe in thieves and ghosts.” Both are intruders who do not belong, even if one is “real” and the other not. It is a philosophical joke of Plato’s, in the *Republic* (376a), that the dog is the most philosophical animal because it distinguishes friend and foe on the basis of knowledge. These are the friends and enemies of the house, the *domus*, and this knowledge of the watchdog is a domesticated knowledge. In the episode of “The Leech” in *Z*, we hear that it is a matter of accident whether a particular man and a partic-

ular dog become friends or enemies. Nietzsche never tires of pointing out how we (and all animals) require simplified schemas of recognition in order to get on with the business of life. These schemas are both necessary and problematic; they provide quick and easy means of sorting things out, while they channel attention in predetermined ways and so hinder fresher, more spontaneous responses. The ghost is the intruder par excellence, the reification and fetishization of whatever is other and incomprehensible.

Having focused on the howling dog and the childhood memory it evokes, Zarathustra realizes that the dwarf, the spider, and the gateway have all disappeared—but not the dog, whose howling indicates the plight of the shepherd choking on a snake: “*But there lay a man. And there—the dog, jumping, bristling, whining—now he saw me coming; then he howled again, he cried. Had I ever heard a dog cry like this for help? And verily, what I saw—I had never seen the like.*” The watchdog, probably the shepherd’s dog, his loyal and faithful ego, knows that something is terribly wrong. He seems to recognize Zarathustra as a possible friend or helper. Many commentators on this passage assert without argument that the shepherd is Zarathustra’s double, who dramatizes the difficulty of acknowledging and confronting the thought of recurrence. If this is so, then we could think of the dog as his own ego, appalled and confused by those thoughts that had led to his falling silent in the colloquy with the dwarf. Why should the thought of recurrence make the ego cry desperately for help? In a note from August 1881, just a few days after the first jottings in Nietzsche’s notebooks on the thought of recurrence, he writes of a series of errors, schemas of recognition and conceptualization, including that of individuality:

The species is the cruder error, the individual the more refined error, it comes *later*. The individual struggles for its existence, for its new taste, for its relatively *unique* position among all things—it considers these as better than the universal taste and despises the latter. It wants to *rule*. But then it discovers that it itself is something changing and has a taste that changes, with its subtlety it sees into the secret that there is no individual, that in the smallest twinkling of the eye [*im kleinsten Augenblick*] it is something other than it is in the next and that its conditions of existence are those of no end of individuals: *der unendlich kleine Augenblick* is the higher reality and truth, a lightning image [*Blitzbild*] out of the eternal flow [*Fluss*]. So the individual learns: how all *satisfying* knowledge rests on the crude error of the species, the subtler error of the individual and the subtlest error of the creative *Augenblick*. (KSA 9:11[156])

We are constrained to think in terms of species: humans, dogs, elephants, leeches, and so on. But as both Darwinian biology and the Nietzschean

ontology of differential will to power imply, the species is simply a convenient fiction. In the light of such a realization, we may come to give pride of ontological and ethical place to the individual, the "I." But to think recurrence, as the shepherd and Zarathustra struggle to do, takes us beyond the individual, beyond the dog we call "ego." To affirm recurrence is to give equal weight to all my experiences, both before and after thinking the thought. It leads to no coherent narrative of my own life but suggests that I am immersed in the stream of becoming. If "the innocence of becoming" frees me from guilt, it also radically transforms the very terms of "I" and "me" with which I began to pose such questions—the thoughts and hinter-thoughts that were interrupted by the howling dog. In the conversation with the dwarf, it was suggested that the passing moment or twinkling of the eye (*Augenblick*) is that which eternally recurs. Perhaps that too was a necessary oversimplification; the closest approximation to the real that escapes conceptualization. Once the shepherd bites off and spews out the head of the snake we hear no more of the noisy dog. If this biting and spewing involves acknowledging the anti-individualistic thrust of the teaching of recurrence, the role of the domesticated ego necessarily falls away. And the shepherd, in his superhuman laughter, becomes something other than a shepherd. He will no longer be either domesticated or domesticator, for reflection on the canine condition reveals that these are two sides of the same coin.

Notes

1. I have made this point in *Alcyone: Nietzsche on Gifts, Noise, and Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 94–96.

2. Compare "the dog howls, the wind: is not the wind a dog? It whines, it yelps, it howls" (Z:4 "The Drunken Song" 8).

3. For some perceptive thoughts on *Gay Science* 312, see Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Comic Relief: Nietzsche's Gay Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 167–172. Consider two additional passages from the earliest and latest of Nietzsche's books dealing with canines as dogged followers. (1) In his reflections on Albrecht Dürer's *Knight, Death, and the Devil* he notes that the knight, who he identifies with Schopenhauer, is "alone with his horse and his dog" (*Birth of Tragedy* 20). As is quite clear in the woodcut, the knight rides the horse and is accompanied by his dog, which has an air of attention and devotion. Might this faithful companion be Schopenhauer's ego? (2) In *Ecce Homo* ("Why I Am So Clever" 1), Nietzsche describes his nutrition, an issue that he says is more important than all of theology for the salvation of humanity; indeed, he refers to his eating and drinking practices as "my morality." There he writes of his rejection of alcohol but notes "I prefer towns in which opportunities abound for dipping from

running wells (Nizza, Turin, Sils); a small glass accompanies me like a dog" (*ein kleines Glas läuft mir nach wie ein Hund*—literally “a small glass runs after me like a dog”). Nietzsche embraces his animal self, scouting out his territory in terms of fresh running water; he enjoys the habit of the glass but keeps it in the subordinate position of the helpful and amusing animal companion.

4. See Martha Kendal Woodruff’s chapter in this volume.

5. The “Epilogue” should also be read in relation to the last aphorism of the book, which immediately precedes it (WS 350), in which Nietzsche writes of the need to free human beings from the chains of morality, religion, and metaphysics: “Only when this sickness from one’s chains has also been overcome will the first great goal have been attained: the peeling off [*Abtrennung*] of man from the animals.” This suggests not that humans will be freed from all aspects of their animal nature but that once they are no longer chained, they will no longer have the melancholy and resentment of chained animals; they will be able to pursue distinctive possibilities of the species that are not open to the other animals.

6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), especially Part 3, “Discipline”; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), especially Part 5, “Right of Death and Power Over Life.” In the early 1970s, when Foucault was intensely involved both with the study of prisons and with the politics of the prison system, he wrote an essay on a series of paintings of dogs by the contemporary French artist Paul Rebeyrolle. Foucault reads the series “*Chiens*,” each of which shows a dog in a different state of being caged, suffering, and attempting escape, as an allegory of the contemporary prison system. See Foucault, “*La force de fuir*,” in *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), II:401–405. I discuss the essay and translate some excerpts in *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), section 67, “The Prison of the Gallery and the Force of Flight.” For a further exploration of the question of bio-power that is indebted to Foucault, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998). Agamben argues, in effect, that contemporary society is rapidly adopting the principle that all life, human and animal, is a subject of political power. His perspective might be enlarged if he were to consider the intertwined history of the human domestication of animals and the normalization of human behavior.