

The Dog Mafia

MacDonald Harris

My discovery that the dogs of the world are able to communicate among themselves arose, in the first place, from particular circumstances in my own life and my relation to canine society. Like many other discoveries in the history of science it did not come suddenly but grew from the gradual and almost imperceptible accumulation of data from various quarters. I have never been a dog owner nor am I what is commonly termed a dog lover. My first personal contact with the world of dogs took place a few years ago when, because of circumstances that are too complicated to explain here and besides not pertinent to the matter under discussion, I found myself in Paris and in a particular and quite special frame of mind or, more precisely, *état d'âme*. But why conceal that my difficulties involved the opposite sex, an interlude in my life which I would prefer to conceal but which will inevitably come to light? Briefly, I was caught in the grip of forces over which I had no control, forces which ended by producing in me a residue of unresolved hostility which I discharged, I am sorry to say, on the dogs I happened to encounter in the street. I would entice them to me through the simple devices traditional in man-dog relations and then, when they were in suitable proximity, I would deal them shrewd kicks in the manner made famous and even, I believe, invented by Charlie Chaplin: to wit, if the dog approaches from the left, the right foot is crossed behind the left calf and a sharp jab dealt using the left calf as interference or a kind of shield, so to speak, out of which the toe darts like the tongue of a serpent and then retreats quickly to its normal position; or, should the approach of the dog occur from the right, the identical technique with coordinates reversed. If this is done properly the process is practically too fast for the eye to follow. The casual observer only a few yards away will fail to perceive the shoe that flashes out from behind the trouser-leg and will notice only that the dog, for some inexplicable reason, has terminated his approach at a range of perhaps eighteen inches and is withdrawing rapidly, and as inconspicuously as possible, from the scene of ac-

tion. You will notice I do not refer to howls, yelps, or audible complaints of any kind. The dogs of Paris, at least the ones I happened to encounter, were much too hardened by their experience of urban life to reveal their emotions in any such obvious way. After a momentary muscular reflex, the kind of contraction made by a sea-anemone when pressed with the finger, they took themselves off rapidly without so much as a glance behind them at the person who had reacted so unexpectedly and treacherously to their overtures. They knew the world and they were pragmatists; they saw no point in empty rhetoric which could do nothing to remedy the injustice which, in any case, they accepted as a normal condition or axiom of their existence.

It is not my purpose to attempt to justify my own moral behavior in these incidents, even if there were any moral grounds on which to make such a defense; and in any case the circumstances, in our universe, often have a way of providing their own solution to a moral imbalance. Let it suffice to say that more recently, after I returned to my own country, I began to perceive the first hints of some causative connection between my own previous behavior vis-à-vis the Paris dogs and the common attitude toward me which I detected in the dogs of the city in which I found myself living. By this time my personal circumstances were greatly changed. In Paris I had been relatively affluent; now I was poor. In Paris I had been full of hostility and violence, now I had reached a condition of inward peace, or at least of the equilibrium of neuroses (unhappinesses). There I had lived in society and experienced violent emotions in my relations with others; here I lived in a vacuum and suffered from loneliness. In short I was another person, or imagined that I was, and in this new guise or identity I began to take an interest in the behavior of the dogs I began to notice in extraordinary numbers in the streets. In this somewhat provincial city (a state capital, but of a rather backward state) the men seemed apathetic and moved about listlessly in what appeared to be a purposeless way, and indeed I myself could hardly see any purpose in transferring one's self to any particular part of this city in preference to any other part. But the dogs seemed to trot along toward unknown destinations with a real sense of purpose. They made their way directly down sidewalks, turned corners at right angles, and unfailingly found alleys, paths, and missing boards in fences according to some hidden plan. This interested me, and since I had nothing else to do anyhow I began observing this behavior more closely. As a start I began following individual dogs across the city, or attempting to. I remember that the first dog I tried to follow was a rather nondescript terrier the color of a felt hat, and he behaved exactly like all the others. For a while he comported himself in a conventional doglike way, trotting along with a glance now and then at interesting objects on one side or the other, a brief pause to water a pole and check for messages, a diagonal crossing of a boulevard with a cautious eye out for trucks. But soon I began to perceive, or sense in some subliminal way, that the dog was not behaving in a normal way, instead that he was aware I was observing him and was behaving in what I as a human being expected and thought of as conventional doglike behavior. And, at the same time, something in his performance suggested that he wished to communicate the

falsehood of this simulacrum to me in some elusive way that I could not overtly charge him with—that there was an irony in his manner that was directed unmistakably toward me even though he had shown no formal awareness of my presence or existence. The climax of the incident left no doubt about the matter. When I went toward him he stood motionlessly and stoically, almost indifferently, between two trash-cans and watched me approach. I knelt, a traditional gesture in man-dog relations signifying symbolically that I wished to put myself on his level. (There is no need to point out the condescension implied in this.) Then I held out my hand and made conciliatory sounds. Come here, boy. Hey. Howsa dog. Hi there, fella. Come on, now. Come here. The result was a startling one, and one I can describe only in anthropomorphic terms. He remained motionless for another moment or two, and then he smiled: I mean the lip rose a little on one side, revealing his teeth. His expression was one of a knowing and ironic contemptuousness. Then he simply turned and walked away. He had not snapped, or growled, or “bared his teeth,” or done anything conventionally doglike. There was no question about it, what I had seen was a totally controlled and ironic smile (I might almost have said a “human” smile except that this adjective was rapidly ceasing to have any meaning), the irony of which was unmistakably directed at me.

Decidedly the situation was more complex than I had imagined. The whole matter demanded a more formal and thorough investigation than it had heretofore been given if I was to get at the bottom of it. In the several weeks that followed it became clear to me that there was something—not “unnatural,” perhaps, but at least curious and hitherto unperceived—in the behavior of the dogs of this city. Their doglike antics, their peeing, chasing after trucks, quarreling and sparring among themselves, biting and shaking inedible objects, was an elaborate hoax intended to cover up their real interests and activities. And their behavior toward me—their dropping of this farcical manner in certain instants of private and intimate confrontation—clearly indicated their own knowledge of my behavior toward the dogs of Paris. The dogs of the world communicated among one another.

It seemed to me that my first step, in investigating the manner and content of this communication, was to examine the general matter of dogs and language. Now everyone knows the folklore of dog-lovers in this respect. Every dog owner repeats, “That dog understands every word I say to him.” And he can even cite evidence to back up his assertion: that the dog when so ordered will run out to the sidewalk and bring back the newspaper, that he comprehends and reacts appropriately to simple terms like “dinner,” “bad dog,” “fetch,” and “How about going for a walk, old fellow?” According to this same folklore, dogs can even formulate sounds crudely paralleling human speech: croons, yelps of agreement, ashamed whimpers. Even for a non-dog-lover it is easy to see that, after a certain degree of prolonged intimacy with a given dog, a human being may establish a kind of communication along these lines which may even be termed “verbal” to some degree. But what I am concerned with is not this sort of interspecies pidgin but another form of language in dogs which I eventually came

to master intuitively even though to this day I am not quite sure of its mechanics. (It is not really a “language,” since this word comes from *lingua*, tongue, and the tongue in dogs is not an organ of communication. Instead it serves as an organ of thermometric stability, the dog opening his mouth and panting across it when he is hot and closing his mouth again when he is cold. In humans this function is assumed by the epidermis, and incidentally one of the characteristics of humans that dogs find most disgusting is this business of perspiration or having tongue all over one’s outside, an affront to the olfactory sense. Dogs do not use their skin in this way, or in fact for anything else except the obvious function of holding their insides together, although I would not exclude the possibility that the skin itself is the organ of speech in dogs. This would be a kind of symmetry in the phylogenetic network; it is known that sharks hear with their skin. As you can see I do not understand very well this thing I am supposed to be explaining. The important thing is that I have been able to master it well enough for practical purposes; and how many humans can explain to you the exact operation of the larynx?)

That dogs can speak is then a piece of accepted folklore. But what the average person—I dare say even the average dog-lover—will be less likely to admit is that dog language is capable of framing and expressing abstract concepts. Obviously “shame” is an abstract concept, and dogs can feel shame, communicate it, and detect it in others. But humans in general have an excessive respect for the sophistication and complexity of their language, a complexity they believe unique in the animal world. And yet my investigations—the first, I venture to say, ever made from a canine point of view and totally without anthropomorphizing—soon led me to the discovery that dog language could deal with any concept expressible in ordinary human speech, even of the most complicated kind. The error that had blocked other investigators was the belief that there is something uniquely human about abstract thought. In reality abstractions are simply thought-clusters assembled from two or more concretions. “Abnegation,” for example, is formed by combining the ideas of “away” and “no.” Every dog-lover would affirm that his dog understands “away” and “no.” But he denies, for some reason, that the dog is capable of grasping “away-no-ness” or abnegation. Thus a dog may say in clear terms comprehensible even to a human, “I abnegate dinner,” i.e. “No, I am angry with you, I will not eat my dinner, take it away.” Likewise “consideration” (together we look at the stars), “companionship” (a thing in which we eat bread together), and “immaculate conception” (a no-dirt way of making puppies). Please note that I don’t say dogs *believe* in immaculate conception, only that they are able to grasp the concept. As a matter of fact when I first explained this term to dogs I was greeted with polite laughter.

In short, there is no point in my describing the techniques through which, in months of painstaking effort, I succeeded in establishing communication with dogs on their own terms, that is, in the framework of their own expressive and conceptualizing system rather than my own. The examples I have given above can offer only a very crude idea of the differences between canine and human

speech and the effort of the intellect necessary to bridge this chasm. Let it suffice to say that in time I achieved this and was accepted by the dogs, at least in a limited respect, as one of themselves. It was a long time before they got over their suspicion of me, and indeed I myself was obliged to recognize that I bore a weight of culpability toward their species that could be removed only through continued evidence of good faith on my part. I will not say that I "won their confidence"—they are too astute to be taken in by efforts to "win their confidence"—or even that I "convinced them of my sincerity." There is no question of sincerity or insincerity in canine language, which unlike human speech is designed to express the thoughts of the speaker rather than conceal them. I simply worked, learned, and at last understood, and when I understood I became *ex causa* and through this itself a practical member of the species.

One of the first things I discovered when I reached this plane of knowledge is that the alleged faithfulness of dogs is an enormous and conspiratorial sham. I had many conversations on this subject with Epworth, a Newfoundland I met in a public park. Dogs simulate fidelity because it serves their own ends. If cats do not, it is not because they have different ends but because they have elected different means to achieve these ends. Epworth—and again this is a discovery which would shock a dog-lover—had more respect for cats than for people. People pretend to love dogs and understand them, but in reality there is an ineradicable basis of condescension in their attitude. ("Condescension" is easily broken down to its concretes: with + descend, you are below me, I come down to be with you.) The proof of this, according to Epworth, is that they have not permitted intermarriage. In fact intercourse between the species is so horrible a crime that it is punished in secret and not even discussed; many dog-lovers will deny its existence. It should be made clear that Epworth himself had no personal desire for intermarriage. He thought it was impractical, and was convinced that everybody concerned would be happier with their own kind. But these incidents do occur, and it would be foolish to deny them. Dogs will occasionally attempt amorosity with a knee or other protruding limb, simply out of a sense of experiment in order to see whether there is anything in the possibility. As everyone knows, such incidents cause embarrassment among humans and are quickly punished. These attempts, as ill-conceived as they may be, are at least candid and public. But Epworth contended that an even greater number of overtures take place in the opposite direction, in short that people lust after dogs far more frequently than dogs lust after people. Such incidents invariably take place in secret, but they are well known to dogs, who discuss them freely. Only very rarely are these aberrations detected, and then they result in an inflexible and terrible punishment. (The punishment proceeds entirely from the human side, it should be clear; whatever dogs may think about interspecies coitus, they are not convinced that the infliction of suffering is any answer to sin.) I explained the name applied by humans to this behavior: bestiality, "behaving like an animal." Epworth hardly even bothered to smile at this.

His point, however, was that in spite of the overwhelming evidence that humans lust after dogs, intermarriage is forbidden, and on grounds that are

entirely irrational. It is no good arguing that such unions would be sterile; some of the greatest relationships in the history of love have remained without issue, from Heloise and Abelard to Bonnie and Clyde. Epworth reminded me that marriage can take place without offspring and offspring without marriage, so there is no point bringing the two into common consideration. (The notion that animals do not understand the relation between coitus and reproduction is one of the myths perpetuated by man to nourish his own superiority.) Besides no one doubts that humans, with their impressive biotechnology, could solve this problem if they put their minds to it for only a few weeks. In short, what it came down to was this. The dog-lover cherishes an image of dog as Man's Best Friend. Yes, but would you want your sister to marry one? Well, they wouldn't be happy, and besides it would be hard to find an apartment, and unfair to the children should there be any. Yes, we know the arguments.

As for old ladies and their lap-dogs, Epworth left this kind of thing to specialists. Let it suffice to say that if the old ladies are protected by their naivete the lap-dogs know perfectly well what it is all about. Why, then, do the lap-dogs generate such an elaborate simulacrum of enjoyment, gratitude, and suchlike emotions in response to the behavior in question? The investigation of this enigma led me far beyond erotic matters and into areas of vastly greater significance. Epworth, for all his intelligence and perspicuity, was a commonsensical fellow in the theory of history or in fundamental questions of any kind. Most of what I learned in these areas came to me from Von Rundstedt, a Weimaraner whom I met through a rather involved set of common friends, both human and canine. (Here I ought to acknowledge especially the assistance of Dorn, who not only showed a keen understanding of, and sympathy with, my somewhat unusual friendships but freely offered me the hospitality of his home, a generosity which made possible contacts of a social nature which would have been out of the question in the somewhat sterile institution where he served as a physician and where I was theoretically supposed to be confined.) Epworth and Von Rundstedt were as different as the average of two human beings you might happen to meet. Where Epworth had been pragmatic, Von Rundstedt was metaphysical in his inclinations and especially acute in the history of ideas. Through him I learned the history of his race—not systematically or in chronological order in the manner of a university lecture, but rather in bits and pieces, illustrations which he offered in support of abstract arguments, chance remarks which he dropped in the course of our conversations on a variety of topics, which only later I pieced together into their proper sequences. This history began not with the origin of the species but with the beginnings of its systematic relations with man. In brief, the dog-race lacked any particular consciousness of its taxonomic identity until this sense arose out of reaction to genus *Homo*. At a certain point in history it became clear to the *Canidae*, or at least to certain of its thinkers and intellectual exponents, that the race of man was in a process of ascendancy that would inevitably lead it to predominance over the animal world. There were those, incidentally, who did not accept this inevitability—in fact at an early stage those who contended that man was destined to predominate were regarded as

defeatists—but subsequent developments, particularly the development of fire and the fabrication of pointed weapons, made it clear to all but the most fanatic chauvinists that man's victory over the animal kingdom was inevitable. At this point, as so often happens in history, there was dissension and uncertainty in the ranks of the defeated. In general there were three opinions as to the action to be taken. A radical and nationalistic faction—the Lupine party, as it later became known—vowed a savage enmity to the race of man, a tactics of ferocity and banding together. A somewhat more moderate element, while equally uncompromising in its hostility to man, argued that open confrontation was impractical in view of the advantage, a temporary one at least, of the enemy. These Vulpines therefore advocated a policy of agility and flight: avoidance of confrontation, petty theft and harassment, guerrilla tactics. The third and most moderate faction (or as they themselves preferred to define it, the most rational and far-sighted) argued for simulated fidelity, compromise, and temporal accommodation. That this last strategy succeeded the best is demonstrated by the fact that this party inherited the title of *Canis* or dog which previously had been shared by all. The wolves, in spite of a number of local and temporary victories which were negligible in their total effect, were soon crushed under the superior technology of the enemy. They were gradually forced into remote and inhospitable regions of the world and are today approaching extinction. The foxes fared little better. At first their tactics of furtiveness seemed to promise somewhat more success than the ferocity of the wolves, but the invention by man of more efficient hunting techniques—including the enlistment of certain tribes of the dogs themselves as reconnaissance and light attack groups against their former cousins—reduced them to a precarious existence of hiding in holes and hollow stumps. It was one of the ignominies of the foxes' fate, that, when their gradual defeat seemed to have brought them to the point of extinction, man was obliged to regulate their slaughter in order for a remnant of the race to survive for his sport. Even the wolves had not been obliged to taste this humiliation.

Meanwhile the Canines, in their policy of simulated surrender, succeeded beyond their wildest expectations. At man's behest they entered into his house, guarded his children and his hearth, ate the food he provided them, and even accommodated their reproductive habits to his whims in the matter of breeding. Even though any individual dog, at this stage in the process, was capable of seizing any individual man by the throat and destroying him, the dogs subdued their reflexes in this matter to the point where a folklore of their fidelity began to grow and propagate itself among mankind. While the wolves shivered in the snow and stole occasional sheep, while the foxes trembled in their holes, the dogs ate man's food and grew strong. Meanwhile they encouraged the notion of their character that man was only too ready to accept: simple and merry-minded slaves, eager to win their masters' approval and anxious above all to amuse. They accepted men's gestures of affection with a tail-wagging and general cringing that the wolves would have regarded as obscene if they had ever witnessed it, but the wolves did not witness it; they were far away freezing on the Carpathian snows. Among themselves men spoke of dog's fidelity, of his simple-minded

affection for them, of how well they understood him, and of how fortunate dogs were to have surrendered their freedom in return for the advantages man was in a position to offer. Among themselves the dogs talked of—but what they talked of I discovered only relatively late in my investigations, when the dogs had ceased to regard me as a threat to the security of their plans, or more precisely had concluded that my situation among my fellow-men was such that they were not likely to believe the improbable fantasies I might contrive out of what would be regarded as a disordered imagination.

That dogs communicated among themselves over long distances, however, I suspected from the beginning, and I received further and unmistakable evidence of this as my investigations continued. Von Rundstedt constantly distinguished between his own opinion and those of his immediate friends—i.e. dogs he knew personally and saw every day—and the opinions of dogs in other lands and of different social circumstances. In the Orient, as he explained, where men were not quite as sentimental in their relations with dogs and regarded them more as a source of food than as companions, dogs had a lower opinion of their masters and hardly even regarded it as necessary to deceive them through tail-wagging and other simulations of cravenness. And in Mohammedan countries, where the whole race of dogs was considered unclean, the dogs scarcely disguised their enmity at all, and even on occasion banded together like wolves to attack men in lonely places where success seemed likely. I suggested to Von Rundstedt that dogs' low opinion of men in these backward countries was connected to the relative crudeness of the civilization in such places, and that if there was a greater respect for man in western countries it was because man's material technology—the original reason for the dogs' policy of simulated surrender and accommodation—had reached its highest development in these areas. To my surprise Von Rundstedt was not very much impressed by the material development of our civilization. It was true that this development, through the invention of weapons for hunting and other warfare, had given man the ascendancy over animals that had determined, out of negative reaction, the whole national philosophy of the Canines. But for this ascendancy a stick pointed and hardened in the fire was sufficient; as soon as the crudest weapon was invented the dogs had been obliged to fall back on a strategy of non-confrontation, and in this regard they were put at no more disadvantage by the most sophisticated of weapons than they were by the sharpened stick. As for the rest of the technology we were so proud of—man's ability to duplicate functions performed by the buzzard, the porpoise, the meteorite, etc.—these seemed to him a kind of mimicry that might amuse the very young but was hardly of interest to mature minds. Like our cleverness in depilating our bodies which then necessitated clothing, clothing which in turn necessitated the invention of the washing machine, and so on. Oddly enough the one technical feat of man that impressed Von Rundstedt was the ability to open cans. It did not seem remarkable to him that man had learned to put food in cans in the first place. It is not very difficult, he pointed out, to hide things so that they become inaccessible. As a matter of fact he could see no necessity for storing food, the proper place to store food was in one's stomach, but he was

ready to let that pass. The fact was that an enormous quantity of food *was* stored in cans, he himself had no precise notion of the quantity and he doubted that men themselves had, but in any case it was surely enough to nourish the whole race of dogs for an unlimited time. The can-opener was a very simple device, but it had been contrived by men to accommodate to their own anatomy and its operation, at least for the present, lay beyond the ability and even the ambition of dogs. It was when he watched a man opening a can, Von Rundstedt confessed, that he felt his cultural inferiority most acutely.

It would be futile to deny that dogs are capable of mastering some aspects of human technology, at least those aspects that interest them. Every pet-lover will tell you that dogs can turn on water-faucets and drink from them. It is true that they seldom turn them off afterwards, but this is probably because they see no point in it. If a little water is wasted it is nothing to them, and besides some man will undoubtedly come along sooner or later and turn it off. There is no more technical difficulty in turning the faucet off than in turning it on, so if the dog does one and not the other it must be basically a matter of motivation. I myself have observed a Great Dane drinking from a fountain in a public park, having discovered, perhaps by accident but perhaps by a process of deduction, the foot-button that actuates the essential valve. No one could have objected to his manners; he was lapping and snapping the jet in midair without touching with any part of his mouth the orifice from which it came. In this respect his manners were better than those of many children. What I have not been able to understand so well is the extent of the dog's grasp of the principle of the water-fountain; that is, his opinion of where the water ultimately comes from, or whether he is able to distinguish in his own mind between natural and artificial sources of water. On this point I have succeeded in obtaining only contradictory and, to tell the truth, somewhat oblique opinions from dogs themselves. When, after striking up a conversation with this particular Great Dane, I suggested to him that a water-fountain was nice but after all not quite the same thing as a stream or a running brook, was it now? he fell into what seemed to me a devious kind of reticence and remarked only that water-fountains were a convenience for everyone concerned. Later I queried Von Rundstedt on this point, and, as nearly as I could tell from his general comments, he could see no very great value in distinguishing between natural and artificial elements in the landscape. The pyramids of Egypt were as much a part of nature as an elm-tree; both proceeded out of natural laws and might be useful to intelligent creatures who studied their design carefully and grasped the principles of their function. I pointed out that the pyramids had actually been made by the creatures he spoke of, whereas the elm-tree had not. He then asked my what my opinion was of a coral reef. I admitted that it had been constructed by insects, but in any case they were not very intelligent creatures, and that made all the difference. Von Rundstedt ended the conversation by remarking, more to the air than to myself, that he saw very little value in this distinction.

In short, the farther I went into this relation between dogs and the human technology in which they lived, the more I encountered a tendency to reticence

and deviousness in the creatures who had been so candid and even friendly when I had first taken an interest in their speech and culture. I will never forget a look that Von Rundstedt and I exchanged on an occasion when I had taken him as my guest into Dorn's house. Dorn and I were in the living-room talking of something or other, and for a while I failed to notice that Von Rundstedt was no longer in the room. When I finally left the room, in fact, it was not in search of him but to go to the kitchen for a drink of water. On the thick carpet my steps were soundless, and so in the kitchen I found Von Rundstedt upright with both paws on the sink. The object that interested him was screwed to the kitchen counter, and he had just discovered, my intuition told me, an important principle about it. The handle that went around and around, the most conspicuous part of its design, was not really the key or fundamental secret of its operation. You might turn the handle all you liked, but the small cutting wheel, unless you did something else, would never descend to cut what it was intended to cut. This something else was involved with an inconspicuous lever on the side of the machine that at first might have passed unnoticed. In order to carry out the operation it was necessary to raise this lever and lower it, thereby fixing the can in the machine directly under the cutting wheel and even forcing the wheel into the metal to make its initial cut, and then and only then was the time to rotate the conspicuous handle. It was really necessary to have three hands or other articulated limbs to perform this operation—one to lift the can into place, one to force down the lever, and the third to begin turning the handle—and as I took in the complexity of the problem I really began to wonder how we men did it. As soon as I passed from the carpet to the linoleum and my footsteps became audible Von Rundstedt lowered himself from the counter and returned to all fours. But in the passing instant as he did so we exchanged a glance: a look profound, mocking, obscurely guilty, an expression in which were mingled a simulated innocence and an elusive but unmistakable quality of complicity. On the surface this glance said nothing; it said, "I put my paws on the sink to see what was up there but I was really doing nothing, and now I am wagging my tail in a doggy way to show you I was doing nothing." But at a deeper level the glance said: we have watched you invent the spear, the campfire, the dog-catcher's truck, the gas-ovens of Auschwitz and the SPCA. Now you have invented enough. It is time for others to select among what you have invented and decide what is superfluous. As for your own superfluity, this will be obvious even to you. Henceforth if we require friends we will remember that blood is thicker than water and look for them in the Carpathians. The vigor we find there will restore our blood and recall us to our heritage. All this in a second, a half or a tenth of a second, and then Von Rundstedt was wagging his tail. I have never told Dorn about this, nor have I told anybody else.