[ESSAY]

THERAPISTS WITH FUR

PETS, GERMAINE GREER ONCE ARGUED, ARE CONCUBINES FOR THE EMOTIONALLY INADEQUATE. PSYCHOLOGIST DORIS MCILWAIN TAKES A MORE POSITIVE VIEW OF THEIR THERAPEUTIC ROLE.

AFTER a recent Leo Bersani seminar on the subject of 'cruising' and the new ways it has opened up for relating to others, I was chatting to one of the organisers. He suggested that cats were the ultimate cruisers: they didn't expect things to last, nor seek to bring all that they were into a relationship, but remained independent and contained. Dogs, on the other hand, were monogamists in love, and people turned to dogs when human relationships were not working so well. I responded by saying that dogs were not merely substitutes, but had unique things to offer: Lacan, famously, was fond of his dog because 'he takes me for no-one else'.

Unable to resist what psychologists call 'transference', we might project our failings onto dogs—but it's unlikely they do the same in reverse. Transference is there whenever old, often unspoken patterns or templates of viewing others and getting close to others (or not) script even the newest encounters we have with other people. Before you know it you are reminding someone of someone else, while you encounter in them difficulties or impasses in developing relationships that have been with you for decades. The hardest thing about transference is that all this repetition doesn't mean you are more likely to see these patterns, give them a good shake and reappraise them. They are what Christopher Bollas calls

part of 'the unthought known'. It's all done with smoke and mirrors. With people, transference is two-way. At least with dogs, there is a built-in freshness and there's no risk with them of 'counter-transference'. They don't put up defences against unpleasant realisations about themselves in the way we do. That inclination in us is part of what makes it so complicated for us to love each other—a complication that doesn't exist in our loving dogs.

What's most therapeutic about what animals have to offer is a uniqueness of affection, sought and given, the what-you-see-is-what-you-get honesty of emotion that is nowhere to be found in the laboratory-style accounts of animals, of their capacities, theories of mind, or capacity for Machiavellian intelligence and emotional feigning. Jeffrey Masson, notorious dissident against the Freudian establishment, entitled one of his books *Dogs Never Lie about Love* (1998).

Animal therapy, like any therapy, hinges on the formation of unique bonds between two participants. This entails each participant finding out unique and often unspoken (sometimes emotional) things about the other and about themselves. In fact it is the unique bond that is the medium of therapy, one vital means of gaining insight into our functioning and our being-with-another. For an exploration of the unique bonds between humans and animals, laboratory studies are hardly sufficient. Instead we turn to mavericks such as Jeffrey Masson. Or phenomenologists such as Scott Churchill in his work with bonobos (bonobos seem remarkably human in that they will apparently trade food for sex). Or philosophers such as Raimond Gaita, ethnologists such as Jane Goodall, writers such as Gerald Durrell and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas.

Gaita's writing is without parallel. From the moment *The Philosopher's Dog* (2002) opens, and we find ourselves watching a young boy cycling to school with an idiosyncratic cockatoo called Jack, we are in another world. Here there is no yielding to the generalising tendency that scientism has fostered in our thought processes, and to which we are often unwitting victims. It is to the uniqueness of creatures that we are introduced, their marvellous specificity. The problem of 'other minds' is common in philosophy and now in psychology's fascination with theory of mind, whereby we explore how we attribute certain psychological states to others and reason about those states. However, we sometimes theorise as though all of our language about inner states were devised in a world without animals and then applied to them. As Gaita notes:

> There is no reason to think that we form the concept of intention, for example, first in relation to human behaviour and that we then apply it to animals when, for

> example, we see a dog running after a cat. That is what is assumed when people speak of anthropomorphism—that we illegitimately apply to animals concepts of conscious states that we have legitimately developed in relation to human beings. But such concepts, I have suggested, are formed in responses to animals and to human beings together. (p. 60)

Masson sets up his animal household in a way that reminds me of participant-observation research. He chooses dogs from the pound. He brings them home, observes them with care, and tells us of their attributes in the manner of a personality profile. There is a distance to the writing that is not present in Gaita's accounts. It is not that Gaita loves the animals more unreservedly, but that he is more intimate. Gaita feels he has the jump on science, so his pre-emptive critique of notions of anthropomorphism is more compelling and liberating than those we find in Masson's writing. Masson seems more trapped by a desire to accord the status of evidence to the sound and well-substantiated anecdotes he describes. Gaita sidesteps charges of anthropomorphism and is prepared to concede the possibility that his concepts might be irrelevant in the face of the sheer otherness of some species. Talking of squirting a spider down a urinal, and of perhaps trying to teach one's children not to do this, Gaita notes:

> one would be wise to resist the temptation to say, 'Just imagine how the spider feels'. The reason for that is not that the spider must feel terrible in some way or another, but that we could never imagine in what way.

Gaita also lucidly scents the traces of the complex phenomenon of what he calls 'scientism' that are in Masson's account. While Masson is free of the assumption that quantification is required for science, he shares a deep assumption, according to Gaita: 'that justification for the claims we make about "animal consciousness" are a function of the kind of evidence we bring to bear, individually through our experiences and collectively through the generations' (p. 110). He adds: 'Many of our perplexities about animals are not a function of our uncertainty about the evidence, but of our uncertainty about how to describe the evidence and how it bears on our willingness to apply key concepts' (p. 111).

Masson's storytelling evoked for me a Bridget-Jones-style diary of the animal world. We find out that Yossie may have to go, there has been a turn for the worse in his behaviour. We find that Miki may move next door, and that while Masson

may be 'shocked and hurt' were this to happen he would be 'not entirely surprised'. These are stories written about friends who happen to have fur.

THERE are key stories in our culture that are powerful reflections on our relation to animals and the meanings they hold for us in coming to know ourselves. The composite beast, the Sphinx from the myth of Oedipus, is a remarkable example. She poses a question of Oedipus he can only answer if he can clear his mind of the fear of her, her animal otherness and the power of life and death she holds over him at that moment. The question she asks, about feet and walking, requires Oedipus to have gained insight into the very wounding he received at the hands of his family—left on his mother's orders to die, with a stake driven through his feet, and surviving only because he was found and shown compassion by a shepherd. The question the Sphinx asks is the one asked of everyone who enters psychoanalysis, as Bruno Bettelheim has observed in his book *Freud and Man's Soul* (1983). Can you have insight into the wounding that you received at the hands of your family, a wounding that has often powerfully shaped the landscape of your desires and actions? For Oedipus, it was all about feet and walking because of an oracle saying he would slay his father and marry his mother and his mother's fear that this may be so—best get rid of the boy. Could he become consciously aware of this wounding and its legacy? The Sphinx is a complex beast, as we are ourselves. Her attributes are made more accessible and concrete by being symbolised in the composite features of various animals. It is as though those most able to pose the questions central to our humanity are those outside humanity.

It is because our psychological complexity (our defences and damage) often takes a bodily form that animals can perceive or sense it about us. It is there, in our actions, written on the body for the keenest observers to see. And animals are the keenest observers of our feelings.

Animals might have other codes of being than the compassion and civic-mindedness required in us for community life, but they rarely descend to the levels of immorality that we are able to reach perhaps because of what the superego can inspire in our perception of those we deem to be different. Much of the violence of our morality is the effect of our projecting outwards onto others aspects of ourselves that we cannot confront and consciously assimilate. In seeking animals—which we commonly position as less than humans—as our companions, we seek to transcend the very limitations that our humanness has imposed on us. We treasure their immediacy and spontaneity, their lack of feigned social display and fake courtesy. Animals don't lie (especially not about emotion) and they can represent the best in us. And many species have a bounty

of love that can be bought—provided there is also concern and care, and what famous animal-companion trainer Vicki Hearne calls 'the relational work of training'.

Pertinent to their role as live-in therapists, animals such as cats and dogs have a remarkable relation to time. Freud's golden chow (bred for him as a gift from Marie Bonaparte) was ever present in the therapy room. The dog lifted his head at ten minutes to the analytic hour, in expectation of the analysand's departure. But I don't just mean such a sense of the span of the analytic hour when I refer to what they can teach us about time. I remember watching a band in the rain in Amsterdam. The band, the Fabulous Poodles (really), were strutting their stuff with mirror guitars in Vondel Park despite the rain. The crowd was timid and subdued in the cold. A huge dog came galloping through the crowd and leapt with delight into a huge muddy pond with joyous abandon and evident pleasure. And I thought, that's what's wonderful about dogs—their abandon in the moment. Perhaps that comes from a preference for the concrete. I'm reminded of a poignant conclusion to one of Susan Perabo's short stories called 'Explaining Death to the Dog' (from the book of the same title, published in 1999). A baby has died, and the dog, Stu, keeps looking for her, 'sniffing out the emptiness':

> Everything was quiet, and I thought of saying to Stu that that was it, that was death, the quiet. But Stu was still sniffing around the room, trying to pick up the scent of the baby, and I realized he would never understand death. All he would come to understand was that the baby was not coming back.

They don't make you wait. They don't go on holidays. They will see you clearly without putting their own stuff out there onto you and then trying to control you. They are likely to sense your emotions before you do, and respond with compassion rather than Machiavellian exploitation. They are sufficiently other that you can project wildly onto them many of your own failings and unconscious tendencies. A friend of mine laughingly told me one of his Jack Russells is narcissistic, and added that he feared that the dog was housing his own unconscious. You can choose a cat or a dog therapist depending on your own orientations towards either cruising or loyalty. You can have more than one. You can share an intersubjective space that is never muddied by the inadequacies of language and self-report. You can probably find love in their eyes. And they raise their paws, not their fees.