

Walking the Dog

People always like to talk about their dogs: it is one subject about which they can be frank and unaffected, for no one enters a conversation about dogs who does not love them.

My wife and I were walking the other day in Paris – down the Avenue Gambetta, to be precise – when we saw a man coming towards us who was playing with his dog, a Jack Russell, lively of body and mind. It was jumping up at a stick held out by its master, grabbing it between its teeth so firmly that it could be whirled round. It growled playfully, and it was obvious that it wanted to play until either it or its master was exhausted.

We stopped to talk about the dog. Nobody who walks a dog is too busy to chat about it, and the difficulty is not in starting, but in ending such conversations: for there is no more sincere form of flattery, imitation perhaps excepted, than admiring a man's dog. And, of course, everyone can listen to flattery for hours.

We asked all the usual questions about the dog: age, for example, and whether the owner had had it from a puppy. But every dog is individual, and has its own character. It is then that the conversation grows more serious.

'C'est un chien-professeur,' said the proud master – a teacher-dog.

He himself was a teacher and worked with children 'in difficulty:' that is to say disobedient and delinquent. At the suggestion of the school psychologist five years before, he took the dog to school with him where the dog exerted a very beneficial effect on the behaviour of the children, an effect that was lasting.

This was a phenomenon worth reflecting on. Why did the dog have such an effect? It certainly wasn't because it was fierce, like a pit-bull; quite the reverse.

I think it is probably because the dog displayed and evoked affection, an affection that could be expressed on the human side without fear of disappointment or appearing weak and vulnerable in the eyes of peers. Growing up, as most of them probably did, in a loveless environment in which all relations are those of power and conflict, to be resolved by strength and ruthlessness, the untroubled relationship with a dog gave them what many a teenage mother has said she sought in a baby: someone to love and someone to be loved by. A dog supplies what is missing in a loveless world.

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