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Common Knowledge, Volume 8, Issue 1, Winter 2002, pp. 102-107 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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COMING TO TERMS

The Matter of the Irish Bull Terrier

Vicki Hearne

Daisy is my darling. In America, the name Daisy is in a tradition as long as tradition can get here, and is a noble name for a noble individual of a noble race of dogs. Her kin are traditionally named Missy, Rosie, Annie. I usually call the group of breeds or races (to use a term from Darwin) in question “bull pups,” after the first mention of them in American literature in my ken, Mark Twain’s “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” He there mocked the disorganized religions through which the knowledge of the dogs is partially passed on, but tenderly enough, and I greatly prefer “bull pup” to the various committee names that have arisen here and in the United Kingdom. These include American (Pit) Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, and also, to the best of my knowledge, breed names from which the word *bull* has been entirely dropped (the Boston Terrier used to be called the Boston Bull Terrier). There are other breeds, such as the Airedale Terrier, that have a combat history, largely with raccoons, cougar, bear, and coyote, in my experience—but their breed name has somehow escaped infamy. The Airedale is known as a rough-coated, underground, black-and-tan, leggy bull pup who can do the soft shoe.

The bull pups are not the only ones whose names and histories have been distorted or simply fabricated in order that one nation or village or another might

lay claim to them, or else repudiate them. The dog we know in America as the German Shepherd was for decades known in England as the Alsatian Shepherd, and in France as the *chien de berger d'Alsace*, though Alsace-Lorraine has little if anything to do with the foundations and concepts of this kind of dog. Because the dogs were wonderful but everything German had of course to be purged, the dogs were kept but not the literary traditions by means of which they are rendered legible.

It is not only words and electrons that have histories and so cannot be defined.

It is not always the case that meaning is use. At the moment there is scarcely anyone in North America or Europe who is not familiar with the term “pit bull” or some other designation for the breed, such as American Staffordshire Terrier. There is also scarcely anyone who has a clue as to what those designations might mean. They have been used to refer to imaginary animals—dogs with locking jaws, dogs with double or triple jaws, or just “those kinds of dogs,” meaning whatever collection of pathological fantasies the speaker has learned from the press and from murder mysteries and thrillers whose writers are informed by the same source. That is, the word, in those mouths, has no true meaning. It is the flagship word of a kind of collective schizophrenia sponsored by some very bad thinkers and by some crooks.

The expressions still have meaning in the mouths of people who really know the dogs.

Similarly with the word *poetry*. It is nowadays treated as a kind of mood music, and judged as a kind of mood music, decor for the soap-opera scenes of emotional life. (As opposed to the life of authentic feeling.) The numbers of people who know what poetry is are about the same as the numbers of people who know what the bull pups are. In most mouths, though, *poetry* means nothing. Nonetheless, the word has a life in the hands of people who know what poetry is, a life carried out where executives would never want to tamper.

The same is the case with the word *Jew*. Also the word *Arab*.

At the moment, in the case of all dogs, draconian laws and policies throughout the West have rendered most of the most exact and expressive terms for dogs unavailable in public and official discourse. And the targeting of dogs means the targeting of people, for to seize and kill someone's dog is to do violent damage to the owner's heart and mind. Some people break under the pressure; there are suicides and many many who simply, quietly or with trumpets, go mad. So. There are big lies being told.

My Daisy is registered with the American Kennel Club as an American Staffordshire Terrier. However, if the question of respecting origins is at issue, Bull Terrier is probably the soundest name. It came about at one point that—with a combination of great good luck, the help of many people of impeccable

integrity, and access to old records that simply end with indications such as “Irish dog” or “Jones’ Irish bitch”—I learned that Daisy is (as is, probably, every American Staffordshire Terrier alive) traceable to the dogs’ old man Colby, a merchant who resided in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and brought them from Ireland with other goods on Yankee clipper ships.

“Yankee terrier,” one of the names proposed before 1898, when the hideous committee name was settled on, would not be ignoble, nor would sundry other competitors that reflected regional divisiveness. Myself, I sympathize with those who urged the name “Rebel terrier.” The Civil War is still on, and in 1898 no one south of the Mason-Dixon line was ready to sit still for any of this indelicate “Yankee” talk. “Them free-staters would just as soon bulldoze you and your bull pup both,” averred an acquaintance passionately, not so many months ago.

(Daisy is Irish because I am.)

In the various countries and regions held together, in most cases by main force of arms, under the name United [*sic*] Kingdom—this is the same “unity” we have in the United States, also held together by main force of arms—there is practiced an entrancing continuation of the breeding of small terriers without benefit of clergy, without reference to any kennel club. Mrs. Peabody’s terriers, for example, or my own little Rags. I call mine “McIan Terriers” because their breeder inherits the right to wear the Glenn plaid through the warrior McIan tribe, and so he dubbed his dogs. This sort of name, and names like Border Terrier, which means, if honest, the kind of terrier they breed in the border country, are indicative simply of the type of dog (terrier) and its founding location or breeder. The results of this happy terrier bouillabaisse are mixed, and it is true that jealousy and ill blood can ensue from disputes about who “really” has the real “cabbage terriers,” and so on. (These last, I assume, would be specialists in keeping bunnies out of the crops or the kitchen garden, and so the terrier instinct to dig would be bred out of them; dispute would arise as to whether they were true terriers at all, etc.)

These sorts of local dispute, however, are only of the kind that precede agriculture and luxury. Organized war to exterminate or claim for one’s own a type of dog, together with its literary tradition, is another matter. Such wars are ancient. Instances include King Canute’s law declaring it to be a capital offense for a commoner (a “mean” person) to own a greyhound, and the Spanish Inquisition’s persecution of a twelfth-century French peasant cult that worshiped St. Guinnefort, who was a greyhound. British Forest Laws requiring that lurchers (the greyhounds of the peasants) have several toes cut off (or smashed) hobbled both the dogs and their owners, as do the twentieth-century dog purges of one sort and another. Listed punishments have included *skinning* the owners.

Dog purges are always people purges.

Since the 1970s I have insisted on correcting every misnaming of a dog, out of a doomed desire that my speech, at least, should not be mangled. However, when 99 percent of your readers and listeners have no ideas beyond what some (so far as a poet is concerned) criminally minded (and worse) planners of PR programs have taught the press to say, the proper terms become unavailable. You have to do something if you want to be able to think even privately about, say, what the “green line” in Israel marks, or about your own sweet Daisy’s charms and virtues, without being drafted into several clashing armies at once. And you have to keep doing things, new things and different ones; it is a very tiring affair. It has been for me, in any event. There are nobler figures than I am who have cheerfully kept at clarity in this matter since before I was born.

I have taken to referring to my Daisy as an Irish Bull Terrier because, for one thing, it isn’t a lie, and until I set the term down here it would have taken forever for it to be mangled into the soupy poison of error. There is an Irish SPCA now, which has at its disposal all of the tools of error and terror that the RSPCA, and thousands of other powerful forces in what is bizarrely called “the humane movement,” possess. Once the matter of Daisy’s breed name comes to their attention, things will follow their usual course, but for now: if I am careful, I can use the expression in speech and writing with the same sweet sensation that comes from drinking good water after physical work, or laying down a line of poetry that is just right. (Unless this issue of *Common Knowledge* falls into the wrong hands, of course.) (Which it will, already has, by the laws of gardens and mountains and stars.)

There have been through these purges other comforts, such as my thought that the violent humaniacs can’t win because they do not have the good dogs to keep their hearts sound enough for war, but this comfort wore thin, as does everything; in the Yom Kippur War, Israel had significant mental casualties for the first time. Such thoughts also divide things into what is good and evil, and so are a way of feeding the black flames.

Realizing that the breed (or species or racial) designation Irish Bull Terrier is honorable has given me some peace, in the form of respite in my personal life from the relentless sound of war around me, but that can’t last forever either.

Further, saying, as I now have, in a public forum that my Daisy, my darlin’, is an Irish Bull Terrier is an act of war itself. Not because of my intentions. I have no wish to commit an act of war. It is the logic of the particular world in its rocky cradle of words into which I speak that makes it so.

Nonetheless, the gatherings at which food is taken and texts and ideas are recited and discussion in a happy hullabaloo of interpretation flourishes are still secret, not by way of closed doors, firewalls for my computer, and safe telephones on which meetings are arranged, but because in war what we have to say cannot

be understood by any enemy. We can be killed, but our secrets cannot be revealed, no matter how hard we work to make the matter plain.

Postscript: What Daisy Is Like

She is very typical of her line, an energetic and intensely loyal dog. She is not large, except in her heart. When I got her as a wee thing of seven weeks, she set herself immediately to determining whose dog she was and, shortly after that to taking care of me. At that time some health problems of mine were just escalating into occasional difficulty in maintaining balance. (These have disappeared, thank heavens.) At the age of ten weeks, when she saw me start to wobble on the cement steps coming into the house, she would, quick as a flash, whip her small self around so that my outstretched hand landed on her shoulders. If I did fall, she was squished between me and the cement, which did not stop her from trying to save me the next time. Therefore, I took to being less careless about taking my high-tech cane with me, and before venturing onto the steps would leash her so that she couldn't hurt herself. (She was, on the journey to and from the wonderful meadow and wood, always at my left, and learned to sit the first day out, so the leashing was easy to do.)

She is highly protective without being aggressive. By the age of ten months, she would, when someone approached with possibly ill intent, look at them carefully as if to say, "May I help you?" or, sometimes, "That's far enough." This look was given without a growl, raised lip or hackle; this is protectiveness in its pure form. She is a lady worthy of the highest and most unstable diplomatic assignments.

I do not mean that she is at war. On the contrary, she is a potential spoil of war. She is a potential corpse for a politician or a goon from an unregulated "humane" organization to bear aloft, proving his or her devotion to—well, to animals, of course, as well as people. By the same inverse negative glide that creates an active force, hostile to life as understood from any image given to us to study and cherish, such as a dog loping innocently down the road, or a child, or a man steadfastly loyal to an idea or a person, her gallantry becomes an evil, evidence of horrendous cruelty to animals and people.

One can be killed for keeping the knowledge of the Irish Bull Terrier changing and vital, but the enemy is blocked from understanding this knowledge.

And one further note: people on both, or all, "sides" of these wars believe and tell lies. Lying is an option many have refused, even though refusing seems to make life more dangerous. In addition, there are almost as many dupes of lies from all quarters who love the bull pups as there are dupes of sundry enemies' lies.

Peace consists first in freedom of speech, of religion, and of interest—intellectual and imaginative interest, that is. Call it freedom of heart. No freedom is

possible without freedom of thought, which is itself impossible with a populace that is being spoon-fed lies.

Peace is not peace unless it is active, vital, full of risk, and, like learning, out of our control.

Knowledge and the intelligence must be set free. Without them, the word cannot be set free.