

To Be Recognized by the Dog

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To Be Recognized by the Dog

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It is one of my joys, not to be a house-owner," wrote Nietzsche as early as *The Gay Science*. To this should be added: ethics today means not being at home in one's house. (§ 18)

Odysseus finally arrives home dressed by Athena as an old beggar. On the threshold of his house waited his dog, Argos. At the time of his departure, Argos was a cub. Now, old and flea-ridden, he doesn't even have the strength to stand upright, yet when Odysseus appears, Argos has no doubts. He recognizes him and stands up, unable to even run towards his master. The tears flow when Odysseus sees him old and weakened. The dog then "goes into the darkness of death", as Homer says, a bit like someone who was just waiting for a re-encounter.

The dog recognizes Odysseus, but his wife does not. Even after having regained his composure after the battle with the suitors who had taken over her house, Penelope isn't certain that it is, in fact, Odysseus standing by her side, the husband she'd been waiting for. In fact, Penelope needs proof, and therefore tests the memory of he who claims to be her husband. It is through memory that the moment of recognition will transpire, deciding what is certain and what is uncertain. Odysseus will have to show that he knows what his bed is made of. He will have to recount, once more, the promises of rooting that had constituted the bed he shared with his wife. Recognition appears here as an acknowledgment that is supported by the capacity of recall.

But to the dog, Odysseus needs to show no such thing. Beyond appearances, Argos is the only one capable of recognizing something like the "brute being" of Odysseus. Here's a detail to which we ought not to be indifferent. For it poses the following question: Is there something in us that is only recognized by the eyes of what is not human? If not even the love of the woman who had always waited was true, if only the dog was certain, then we might wonder where such certainty comes from? For, perhaps, he found his certainty in the trace of the animality that exists in us, that is, in what for the Greeks is inhuman, in what does not bear the image of man.

It is ironic to think that, after returning home after many years of exile, it is this inhuman quality that first indicates the return to the "*nostos*". Odysseus finds his singular belonging in being recognized by an animal, that is, by a creature that is, in a certain way, "below man." Here, singularity is linked to precisely not being an attribute of *humanitas*.

It is vital to remember this point because we are so caught up in the search for recognition from other subjects, we so need the assent provided by other subjects that we forget how often what comforts us, what really tells us we are at home, is to be recognized by an animal, to be recognized by something that, after all, is not self-consciousness. Animals perceive the animality that remains within us, they remind us of the trace of the non-identical from which we have never been able to completely distance ourselves.

Perhaps this is why we human beings have never been able to completely

distance ourselves from other animals. Even when domesticated, other animals remind us of something that was left behind, though not completely, in the rationalization process. This trace of otherness is terrifying. For Odysseus would certainly feel the worst of men if the dog forgot him. It would be an unbearable deterritorialization not to be recognized even by the dog. Perhaps it is for no other reason that Freud, sick and broken at the end of his life, realized that his time was up when, due to the repulsive smell that came from his jaw, even his dog withdrew from him. When this happened, his reason for living was gone. It was precisely at the moment of his dog's withdrawal that Freud died.

Biography

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