

## A Walk with Washoe: How Far Can We Go?

Washoe, the first of the chimpanzees to be taught Ameslan, the American Sign Language of the deaf, is not a domestic animal, not one of those animals whose nature or temperament is not only the result of working with human beings but also what makes working with domestic animals possible. She does not have what animal trainers call a working temperament. This book is primarily about animals that do have working temperaments, so Washoe is outside of its subject matter, and one of the reasons I begin outside of my subject is to make a survey of its boundaries, in order to get a better broad view. That is also why I am not so much interested in Washoe in particular as I am in Washoe-for-example. What she is an example of is a relationship between human beings and animals.

A great many people who have been involved even tangentially with the signing chimps have been troubled (as I have been). The chimps are compelling—the rush to the typewriters to report on them (even in cases like that of Chomsky, who never left his study in order to find out what he was reporting on) has been extraordinary. But so has the failure of true and unquarrelsome meditations on the phenomenon they represent.

The rush in the writings of some thinkers suggests that when Washoe signs, "Give Washoe drink," we face an intellectual emergency. It may be that any challenges to our tacit assumptions about where language is to be located are, in this

century, emergencies in the way challenges to explicit or tacit assumptions about the nature and location of the soul used to be; or it may be just that any genuine philosophical problem is an emergency. But the kind of case that Washoe is an example of has sponsored more turmoil than is easily explicable. What in our assumptions about language, or animals, or exchanges, or relationships is threatened? I have come to believe that the question "Why is it upsetting?" is prior to and perhaps contains in its answer some of the answers to the question "Is it language?"

So I am rushing to my own typewriter to report on why a dog trainer is troubled. And I understand myself to be writing about Washoe's *training*. Some readers may find this offensive because the word "training" invokes for them what behaviorists do with levers and electrical shock, or what sadists do with their victims, and they may wish that I would say *teaching*. Others may find the word inappropriate if their experience with dogs and horses tells them that Washoe has not achieved the noble condition that the expression "well trained" implies for an animal trainer. Both objections are worthy. I want to say *training* because I feel that I can push through to a more satisfactory view of what is going on if I read the problem of Washoe, not as a puzzle, but as a training problem.

In the course of working out training problems and understanding them (this may come long after their resolution, if it comes), one sometimes has to solve puzzles. But the problem—the difficulty, that is—comes before the puzzle, even though it is sometimes a puzzle that signals the presence of a hitherto latent training problem.

Yvor Winters, in the introduction to *Forms of Discovery*, said that the most important difference between a chimpanzee and a professor of English is that the professor has a greater command of language. He says that the professor may fancy himself a handsome fellow, but the chimp thinks otherwise and is unarguably the better athlete. He adds that the chimpanzee has no way of understanding the nature of this difference between them. He goes on to remark that the most important difference between a professor of English and a great poet is that the poet

has a greater command of language. He pictures a hierarchy of command, not unlike the spiritual hierarchy in some medieval and Renaissance world views, in which differences in degree of command become at some point differences in kind, differences in kind of command and kind of understanding. Command of language is, in the case of Washoe, what most of the discussion is about.

A dog trainer has different views and different interests; s/he is interested primarily in respect for language. Command of language is something that we understand imperfectly, largely because we understand command and commanding imperfectly. Our imperfect understanding is revealed for some of us by the fact of the signing chimpanzees, and by certain tangles in the discussions of them. That is the emergency. We suddenly feel that we don't know what we're talking about.

The ability to recognize command of language is deeply important in our ordinary lives. If I meet you, a stranger, on a deserted street and discover that you are competent in the forms of exchange familiar to me—the rituals of “Hot enough for you?” and so forth—I am less likely to worry about whether or not you are going to kill me than if you, say, fail to respond to my “Good afternoon,” or respond in a way I don't recognize. If, on the other hand, I should get to know you and discover that you can speak very well indeed—are able to discuss the writings of my favorite moral philosophers with intelligence and wit—I may quite confidently invite you into my home. It is possible to make mistakes about people in this way, but in general speaking well elicits trust. We want our leaders to be able to give good speeches. This is so deep in us that we are bewildered when we discover that the professor may be a murderer, or that the Nazi can discourse beautifully on the music of Mozart. And we have still failed to come to terms with Ezra Pound's fascism.

Command of language is a clue we use with one another, but command of language turns out to be useless without respect for language. If I respect your words that means that I give myself to responding meaningfully to what you say—that I won't suddenly decide in the middle of a lunchtime conversation

to withdraw or to scream you into a terrified silence so that I can grab your wallet. If we converse, it also possibly means that when you discover your wallet is empty, I will be happy to pay for your lunch. Talking entails care and care-taking. That is part of what respecting one another means. Other sorts of linguistic confrontation, such as marital battles and various forms of preaching and opining, are not *talking*. The syntax of them is not the syntax of what we have in mind when we say, “At last, someone to talk to!” If the syntax of our lunchtime conversation changes from talking to arguing or preaching, our relationship has altered, and we have changed position with respect to each other.

With dogs, the situation is similar. The better trained a dog is—which is to say, the greater his “vocabulary”—the more mutual trust there is, the more dog and human can rely on each other to behave responsibly. “Responsible” may seem an odd expression to use in reference to an animal, but it is the only term that makes sense of certain training situations. Lassie and Rin Tin Tin, with all of their unlikely heroics, are successful characters because they provide meaningful emblems of our relationships with dogs. There is a connection, too, between Lassie's cleverness—her ability to fetch slippers and carry messages—and her reliability when the going gets rough. The circus dog who spells things with alphabet blocks is the dog who is able and willing to advance on the villain in the face of gunfire at the climax. The same is true of horse stories—“intelligent” and “bold” are synonyms in discussions of Trigger or Tony the Wonder Horse or Two-Bits, the New York City police horse in Irving Crump's tale, in which, for the human heroes as well, “educated,” “smart” and “courageous” are virtues that seem to entail one another.

In real life, the case of competent police-dog trackers indicates what I have in mind. A good police dog has not only a large vocabulary but also extraordinary social skills. He understands many forms of human culture and has his being within them. He can be taken to the scene of a liquor-store robbery and asked to search, with the handler trusting that he won't molest the customers or other police officers or the clerk behind

the counter. He knows what belongs and what doesn't, sharing our community and our xenophobia as well. He can take down a criminal who is attacking his handler on Monday and on Tuesday play with the patients at the children's hospital. These dogs, then, are glorious, but for anyone familiar with working dogs they are not *surprising*, any more than your pet dog is surprising in his or her ability to distinguish between your friends and strangers.

But someone might say that a dog's courtesy with guests is surprising, or that it ought at least to be remarked on that such profound connections between two species can happen at all. (It should be surprising, perhaps, that we can talk, and, of course, some philosophers have been surprised.)

Consider, for example, what happens when you train a wolf, or what happens at least when I train a wolf.\* The wolf, or coyote, may sit, heel, stay, come when called and so forth. But a wolf doesn't respect our language, and his behavior can be accounted for pretty well with a stimulus-response model, from our point of view if not from the wolf's. The wolf may also become fond of me in some fashion or another, but I can't use him as a guard dog. Not only will he not distinguish particularly between family, criminals and guests, he will not have the courage of a good dog, the courage that springs from the dog's commitments to the forms and significance of our domestic virtues. The wolf's xenophobia remains his own. With other wolves he may, of course, be respectful, noble, courageous and courteous. The wolf has wolfish social skills, but he has no human social skills,<sup>†</sup> which is why we say that a wolf is a wild

\*Here, as elsewhere, when I say "wolf" I mean *Canis lupus*—the wolves of the North Americas. I. Lehr Brisbin has alerted me to the temperaments of Asian wolves, which I don't know firsthand but which I am given to understand "fit" much better into human societies and hearthsides than the North American wolf does. My only hands-on experience is of the latter.

<sup>†</sup>There are, of course, stories, such as Kipling's *Jungle Books*, of humans and wolves learning to live together. There is also the story of Tarzan of the Apes. I suspect that these stories are accurate in their revelations of wolfish or chimpish civilization, and also accurate in that it is always, to my knowledge, the human

animal. And since human beings have for all practical purposes no wolfish social skills, the wolf regards the human being as a wild animal, and the wolf is correct. He doesn't trust us, with perfectly good reason.

The wolf is not alone in his regard for the commitments talking with humans implies. Even Lucy, the chimpanzee whose (true) story is told in *Growing Up Human*, turns out on examination not to have learned from her family, the Temerlins, who brought her up as their "child," as much about not biting and toilet training as the family dog. At the end of the book, the author has discovered that he and his wife want "a more normal life," and while they reject the possibility of zoos and chimp colonies for their "daughter," the book closes with the variously interpretable assurance that "all I can say definitely at the moment is that part of the earnings from this book will be used to establish a trust fund for Lucy, to provide for her care and comfort throughout her life." I do not doubt the love the Temerlins have for Lucy—but it is not generally necessary to pension off the family dog for the sake of the marriage! And no account I know of concerning work with wild animals gives useful advice for dealing with the fact that wolves, lions, tigers, orangutans and chimpanzees remain willing to commit mayhem no matter how large their vocabularies. In order to know more of what this is about, I'd like to take another look at dogs.

First, though, another small reminder about respect. If you and I are talking together at lunch, and you suddenly leap up and run out of the room shouting, "Watch out!" I will, unless I have the impulse to discount you, assume that something has happened—that you are, despite the oddness of your behavior, a reasonable person, and that I ought to find out what I should be watching out for. If I decide that you have gone mad, or are tricking me, then we won't be able to talk about it, though we will be able to argue. Similarly, if a detective suddenly changes his or her behavior in the course of an investigation, his or her partner will, if the working relationship is based on

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who has to learn the foreign language and culture. We probably are the best users of language.

respect, assume that s/he has reason to do so. Otherwise the working relationship breaks down, or even ceases to exist.

I mention these examples to make clear what I mean when I say that it is by the same token that, when a good tracking dog turns left at the corner of Ninth and E streets, the handler will respect his judgment even though witnesses have said that the dotty gentleman who has escaped from the old people's home turned right at that point. The handler will usually continue, respecting the dog's superior knowledge, or had better do so, without worrying a great deal about what "respect" and "superior knowledge" are. It is enough to know when respect breaks down, and to know this is to know a great deal. With horses, respect usually means respecting their *nervousness*, as in tales of retreating armies on horseback traversing minefields, in which the only riders who survive are the ones who gave their horses their heads, or tales of police horses who snort anxiously when a car in a traffic jam turns out to be carrying the thieves who escaped capture six months earlier.

I don't mean that handling dogs or horses seriously means living in a world where respect never breaks down—in that world, as in an exclusively human world, the possibility of discounting is the context within which respect has meaning. Xenophon and every other writer in my ken who places the relationship with dogs in a moral or metaphysical context reports on the irritating, irresponsible tricks dogs play, like the one of deliberately barking on the wrong trail. People who deliberately lead each other astray are considered culpable because it is assumed that they are capable of behaving well. (Chimps are not assumed to be capable of behaving well.) And dogs and horses, like doctors, teachers and judges, don't necessarily get out of it when carelessness or some other lapse in concern is to blame rather than mischievousness or malice.

A trained dog, a dog with a vocabulary, is sane and trustworthy. And training or retraining a crazy dog—one that has had, say, schizophrenic experiences with phony and bizarre distortions of attack training, or one who has taken to biting in a desperate attempt to interfere with a childish or hysterical handler who expects the dog to "want to please"—is a matter

of teaching him to respond coherently and meaningfully to *what is said*. A dog who will respond to talk will stop biting and will not turn on his master even if (especially if, actually) the dog is a German Shepherd or a Doberman Pinscher. Dogs that "turn on their masters" have had relationships with human beings that are in many ways like the relationships some of the mentally ill have with parents who are overtly appalled and secretly delighted with hostile behavior. Such a parent can't teach anyone to talk.\*

The moral transformation of the dog comes about through stories, stories that provide a form of life within which responding to what is said is a significant possibility. Dog trainers like to tell stories about their dogs and other dogs, stories that have a number of functions. One function is to probe—to prove—the relationship between human and dog in a way that reaffirms the personhood of each. The stories, if they are elaborate enough, are frequently about people in confusion who, through the shock that comes from recognizing the reality of the relationship with the dog and then through the development or the restoration of that relationship, are enabled to put their own moral and social world in order. The dog may, through an act of devotion or heroism, compel acknowledgment. Sometimes, in the middle of such stories, the relationship breaks down, and the entire world is thrown into confusion through the handler's or someone else's failure to be true to the integrity of the dog. The structure of such stories, though it varies in completeness and sophistication, is remarkably like the structure of *Our Mutual Friend*, in which, at the very center of the novel, all of London,

\*When this chapter appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, my remarks about human craziness inspired a great deal of angry mail. The most frequent complaint was that it was cruel to the parents of the mentally ill to suggest that they had anything to do with the sufferings of their children; they suffered enough as it was without people talking the way I do. My position in the world remains nonetheless the animal trainer's position. That is to say, while I certainly don't recommend guilt to anyone, as I have never seen guilt do any good, I do believe that it behooves us as humans to be alert to opportunities to change crazy-making grammars, regardless of whether they are something we are to blame for or not. Such opportunities are not always forthcoming, of course.

and thus all of the cosmos, is in doubt and bewilderment when the hero is no longer visible as a moral center. If the dog is not a hero, then he may sometimes be a Shakespearean fool, ignored in the middle of tragic storms.

I'd like to use an example from a "true life" dog story. It concerns Rinnie and his handler, John Judge, who were the pride of the Wichita, Kansas Police Department. Rinnie's nose was foolproof, his heart gallant, brave and dedicated, his mind alert and questioning.

One night Chuck Smith, who had the job of collecting supermarket receipts and placing them in the night deposit at the bank, called the police to report that he had been kidnapped in his own car and robbed. The police asked Smith to take his car back to the point where the kidnapper had gotten out of it, and Rinnie and John Judge were dispatched to track down the villain. Rinnie, on arrival, was asked to search the car. After taking a good sniff, the dog, calmly and without hesitation, walked around the car to where the victim was talking with police officers, and bit him in the seat.

The comedy was lost on John Judge, who was flabbergasted and chagrined. He took Rinnie severely to task, and the dog was disgraced. While Smith was taken to the hospital, John Judge and Rinnie went back to headquarters. The news about Rinnie's mistake spread like wildfire and was featured by all of the news media: "Rinnie's misdeed was a welcome event for the anti-dog faction. Letters were dispatched to the chief and the mayor. A thorough investigation of the incident was requested, and Rinnie was suspended from the force. The Canine Corps was in jeopardy."

It is important to note that the mistake was conceived of as an extraordinarily clumsy one, unworthy of "the most inexperienced police dog." This matters because it indicates the depth of the loss of faith, the darkness of soul, of the moment when John Judge reprimanded Rinnie. When a police dog bites a victim, the perdition of the handler is absolute. The center does not hold, things fall apart. The dog's potential for virtue, and for lapse, is greater than the policeman's for lapsing from human law.

Fortunately the story goes on. A minor character (one of the detectives who is not named in the account I read) delved into Smith's background and had Smith submit to a lie-detection test. The machine, like the dog, said that he was lying, and further investigation revealed that Smith and an accomplice had planned the robbery together. (The significance of the parallel between the machine and the dog, and of the fact that the machine's authority was higher than either John Judge's or Rinnie's, belongs to another discussion.) At the end of the story, John Judge and Rinnie are restored to honor, the criminals are in prison and order is restored to Wichita. Order is restored, that is, by the reaffirmation and acknowledgment, on the part of humanity, of the moral meaningfulness of the dog's actions. To assert this is, of course, to proceed rather blithely past looming philosophical and psycholinguistic questions. This is what the stories do for trainers, enabling them to dissolve problems instead of solving them, so that they can get on with their work with dogs, ignoring for the nonce vast territories of philosophy that began when Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, denied casually and in asides that animals (and women) could participate in what he called the moral life.

There is another, related sort of tale, one as deeply informative, about retrieving. In such stories dogs perform spectacular, even impossible retrieves that amount to a transfiguration of their predatory "instinct" (an odd term for a large collection of abilities, including keen observation and analysis). In a comic version involving betting and brandy, a great retrieving dog, hunting in downtown New York, returns triumphantly to his master with an expertly stuffed pheasant. In more serious versions, retrieving transfigures the world through exaltation, just as in actual training situations formal retrieving transforms predation into an exultant submission to form that is the basis for both joy and commitment, a kind of marriage of the quest and the hearth. The intractable Pointer Hardhead, for example, becomes a field-trial champion, his stubborn and wild ways transformed into glee and impulsion that keep him going harder, faster and more alertly than the competition. Addie May gets her wheelchair, Little Valentine's heart need not be broken and

the entire order of the world is affirmed as that of a world in which life is not only possible but glorious for all concerned.

Such stories are repeated over and over, not only in fiction, but in the lives of the people who tell them. The dog who is brought to Rudd Weatherwax because he's "wild and uncontrollable" becomes the film star Lassie. (My use of the masculine pronoun is not accidental—the "Lassie" in question was a male named Lad.) The dog a desperate owner offers to Bill and Dick Koehler because he "bites everybody" becomes Duke, the spectacularly cooperative star of such films as *The Swiss Family Robinson* and later has the courage and nobility required to take it on himself to run interference between homicidal Brahma bulls and their fallen riders.

The trainers say in one fashion and another, "You've got to talk to your dog." I'd like to go on a bit longer about how talking changes the dog's hunting impulse. A good dog begins life with the "instinct," if you will, to hunt: that is to say, to take possession of the thing he chases, to claim it as his own. This, whether or not the word "instinct" is appropriate, is as primal and visionary a part of the dog as the erotic is for us, or the impulse to ask unanswerable metaphysical questions. But dogs and people, unlike wolves and people, have the impulse to "play fetch" with each other, and the impulse to play fetch is the best predictor of good working dogs. It tells you which of a litter of eight-week-old puppies is most likely to develop the sense of responsibility required of a good Guide Dog. (Wolves may love you, but they won't Fetch, and they are poor guides.)

The impulse to play fetch is also a pretty good predictor of which of a group of eight-year-old human beings is likely to make a dog trainer. Dogs are domesticated to, and into, us, and we are domesticated to, and into, them. The potential dog trainer, obeying both instinct and myth, picks up a stick and throws it for his or her new puppy. The first time, Fido is fairly likely to bring it all the way back. The second time, however, Fido typically says, "Well, this is fun and all, but can I trust her with *my stick?*" So Fido compromises by bringing

the stick to a point just out of reach and dropping it there so that the human, if she wants to play fetch, must accept this modified version and pick up the stick herself. Thus begins a game that can be played until the dog or the owner dies. It is fun, but it will seem to anyone familiar with it that no power on earth will induce the dog to bring the stick the extra three feet or ten feet forward, a move that would amount to a full acknowledgment of the human as an authority.

In formal training, the dog is forced to come those extra three feet, and to present the dumbbell or the bird to the owner. Some dogs take more kindly to this than others, but all of them have their doubts about it, and the most enthusiastic ball-playing dog on the block may put up a surprisingly vigorous fuss in formal retrieving situations. This fuss is, of course, very different from the wolf's response. The wolf simply never sees the point, even if, through stubborn and hard-nosed conditioning, he is brought to go through something resembling the formal actions of retrieving.

The dog is a domestic animal, and the postures appropriate to his life with human beings come to transform him and the action he performs, even if it is done mechanically and reluctantly at first. If training is completed properly, the dog makes an intuitive leap—joins the group, as it were—and may later display degrees of ingenuity and courage in finding lost objects and lost children that astonish the uninitiated. The handler, too, changes through his acceptance of posture and responsibility. He joins the group, too, enters the moral life as well, and learns to talk to Fido. (A failure on the handler's part to submit as fully as the dog is asked to results in a travesty of the training relationship that leads to mostly but not entirely misguided comparisons between obedience work and Nazi Germany. But more of this later. The complexities of that issue are out of place here.) The coherence created by training accounts for why it sometimes happens that the drunk or the juvenile delinquent or the supposedly "autistic" adolescent will "reform" as a consequence of training a good dog. They learn how to talk meaningfully with the dog, and then they learn to talk to the

dog trainer ("He digs holes in Ma's flower bed. What should I do?"). Finally, talking may become possible with almost anybody who is willing.

The story may go like this: The borderline schizophrenic, through luck and because he has read *Lad of Sunnybrook Farm* or *Big Red*, ends up in the class of a competent dog trainer. He plows through, more or less blindly, with a faith born of dimly remembered tales. The going will be quite rough, sweaty and frustrating, and he is likely to give up without remembering dimly the right portions of the tales, the portions about patience and so on, and there will be moments when the trainer will have occasion to say to him or to someone else in the class something restraining such as "Excuse me, sir, but the command is 'Fetch!' 'F-e-t-c-h.' Not 'Son of a bitch!' but 'Fetch!' "

Then one day when he says, "Joe, Fetch!" Joe does a real retrieve, a retrieve that could go through fire. This may be the first time in the handler's life that language has proved—probed—the world and drawn a full, meaningful and serious response from another being. He steps, for the moment at least, out of schizophrenia and into position next to his dog, a whole human being in that moment, though not necessarily from that moment on. He also, incidentally, steps out of the schizophrenia of American myths of the splendors of isolation. Blocked, frustrating, enraging and covertly or openly murderous transactions simply lose interest at this point. And if he happens to be around people who don't have their own schizophrenic interest in blocking language, he will learn to talk to them. He will come to tell his own stories, and he may win trophies, which is fun and which is also a trope of acknowledgment.

Dog and handler, having learned to talk, are now in the presence of and are commanded by love. (This will happen even to people who don't start out as borderline schizophrenics.) The dog's apparent command of human language may be limited, but his respect for language commands him now, with his handler, as deeply as only a few poets are commanded. In this sense, command of and by language and respect for language are one.

But, as I have said, there are deep frustrations in the training

process. These come about because the ability to utter, "Joe, Sit!" creates the illusion that Joe can know thereby exactly who we are, that we can penetrate his otherness, that he can through the phrase alone share our vision of the Sit exercise. It is rather like what we may feel when we ask someone to scratch our back, and it turns out that asking by itself doesn't make it possible for one's friend to scratch one's back in precisely the right manner. Anger results, anger that is the brother or perhaps the father of murder. In the dog story, and in real dog training, language both creates and absolves, placates, that anger.

The poet's condition and the dog's is that through obedience to whatever condition of language happens to lie at hand, they can move for a while through flame, even the frozen flame of despair at the condition of language. Our condition—those of us who have not submitted to despair—is that we have sufficient respect for language, some of the time, to talk and to refrain from murder. What, though, is Washoe's condition? And what are the stories about her and about chimpanzees in general?

In my life there aren't any very good stories about chimpanzees. I do have stories about my dog, an Airedale, who used to lie on the floor resignedly waiting for me to be done with my typing, a coherent waiting born of the logic of the inheritance passed to him by dogs whose masters read Dickens and by the great nineteenth-century breeders in Britain and Europe who had new conceptions of the dog as citizen.

I don't have any tales that would enable me to train a chimp, but there are, of course, tales about wild animals. There is *The Yearling*, at the end of which the deer's maturity and wildness force the humans to return it to "nature," with a shotgun. There is Daniel in the lions' den, a tale of a rendezvous and not of a marriage. There is *The Fox and the Hound* (the book by Dan Mannix, not the pseudo-Disney movie), whose story, despite the fact that the fox is hand-raised, is about enmity between the fox and the man-dog hunting team, an enmity as passionate as enmity between mutually domestic creatures ever gets, which makes it curiously parallel in some ways to tragedy. There is Farley Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf*, in which watching wolves and yearning in some ways after their life leads the

narrator to begin sleeping wolf-fashion, which he says causes his lover to leave him when he brings the habit back to civilization.

There are some very bad movies about chimpanzees living with people and dressing in human clothing, and there are, lately, real-life stories about chimps such as Lucy and Nim Chimsky living with families. The movies use preadolescent chimps and don't confront the issue of what to do with sexually mature ones. The stories about Lucy and Nim Chimsky are stories about the ultimate unworkability of living with chimpanzees. Also, they tend to be clogged with more or less freudian (I don't mean that they sound as though Freud had written them—very little that is "freudian" does) analyses that, for me, make the most sentimental of stories in the tradition of *Lassie Come Home* seem like rooms full of intellectual freedom, light and air. They certainly have nothing of the serious trainer's philosophical toughness about them. There is also *The Talking Ape*, but while I find that Keith Lardlaw is much more grown-up in his descriptions and love of his orangutan than the authors of most of the other stories I've seen, *The Talking Ape* ends with the ape in a zoo, which is not a horrible fate as Lardlaw describes it, but which is still not my notion of a training story.

There are stories, but none is of much use to me, so I had no tales to take to Gentle Jungle, the wild-animal training facility where I found Washoe, together with her adopted son Loulis and another female chimp named Moja. Washoe has not always lived in a cage, but caged she was when I saw her. While I am not automatically moved to pity by the sight of a cage, this nonetheless affects profoundly the possibilities of description and narration available to me, since I have no story, no paradigm, and must resort to anecdotes and journal entries. I am virtually alone in front of Washoe's cage.

It is seven a.m. I am with a friend, on the grass, under a tree in the main compound of Gentle Jungle, an organization that rents trained wild animals to movies, television and so on. The main compound is an area about the size of a football field, ringed round with cages that contain Bengal tigers, Galápagos

tortoises, pumas, baboons, a wolf, spider monkeys, various sorts of bear. These are wild animals. I don't know how to talk to them, and as an animal trainer I feel anxious about this.

My friend is a linguist and a philosopher by inclination. He is here to find out whether or not Washoe "has" language. I have discovered that that question causes a kind of hot fuzziness in my head and have left it aside for the moment. I am hoping to find out what Washoe's story is.

Roger Fouts, who has done much of the significant work with Washoe, arrives and starts signing with her and with Moja. My friend asks me, "Are they talking? Is Washoe talking?"

I reply, "I don't know, I haven't met her." As it turns out, I won't meet her, or at least I won't do what I have in mind when I report that I have "met" a dog or a horse or a human being.

It occurs to me that it is surprising that "I don't know, I haven't met her" is rarely the response given to "Can Washoe talk?" If I ask you whether or not Fred Smith can talk, or can talk well, or how well he can discourse on religion, and if you are feeling reasonable and don't have the impulse to discount someone by saying, "He's a sociologist, of course he can't talk," then you are likely to say, perhaps, "I don't know, I haven't met him." You might add that Dr. Grateoxe, who has met him, reports that he is a delightful conversationalist. Not so with Washoe. If we want to deny or assert that she is talking we tend to *think* about it instead of going to take a look and have a chat, and Roger Fouts, who has met her and says that she is talking, is discounted in a way that Dr. Grateoxe isn't.

Which brings me to a parenthetical issue. Normally, our sense of whether or not someone knows something has partially to do with our sense of their interest in and love for their subject—which is part of intelligence and integrity both. We prefer to have a mechanic who loves cars working on our engines, and a doctor who loves medicine working on our bodies. If the doctor loves people, too, so much the better. We prefer to learn philosophy from someone who loves philosophy. Love is not blind. But the animal trainer may be told that, because s/he hangs around the animals so much, the infection

of sentimentality has set in, with the implication that familiarity and love breed ignorance. This is a difficulty we all face from time to time, and we may in fact invest ourselves in our subjects in ways that can lead to certain sorts of errors. Nonetheless, we trust the CPA who loves figures more than the one who hates them, while the trainer's love is occasion to doubt his or her account of what's going on. The burden of this creates in trainers a particular sort of soul-muddle, which is a kind of insanity. This is not directly my subject at the moment, but it is something anyone interested in this particular corner of the psycholinguistic show should be alert to—anyone, that is, with a sincere and civilized interest in finding out what the people who work with the chimpanzees and other apes in language research actually know.

The conversation with Washoe and Moja is about breakfast: "Do you want an apple?" "Give Moja fruit juice!" and so forth. I can't read Ameslan, or not much of it, but I experience, as do most people who happen on these conversations, a shock of recognition. This is language, I think, or at least what I call language. The pattern and immediacy of response seem unmistakable. I find that trying to have recourse to the "Clever Hans fallacy" as an explanation seems alien to my intuitive reading as a trainer.

But I am appalled and grieved because the chimps are in cages. This offends something. (And my project, which was to see with an ignorant eye, has failed. My opinions intervene, and I am miserable as a consequence.) What is offended is the dog trainer's assumption that language or something like vocabulary gives mutual autonomy and trust. I grieve, but not for Washoe behind her bars. It is language I grieve for.

Later I hear from Ken DeCoo, a linguist turned wild-animal trainer who has worked extensively with Washoe, the story of how Moja came to bite one handler's kneecap seriously. I learn from the account that when something unusual happens, chimpanzees, like people, feel an anxious impulse to *do* something, and that attacking the handler is an option that may readily recommend itself. This is not the sort of story I am accustomed to. Duke and Lassie may start out wild and uncontrollable, but

they end up in the living room as respectable citizens. (This sort of story may offend someone who is moved by *Born Free*.)

Roger Fouts tells me at one point about Washoe's habit, when she was younger and less dangerous, of sitting in a tree in the mornings looking at *Playboy* magazine. (Apparently chimps have such tastes, though I don't know who encourages them; Lucy, in Maurice Temerlin's account, used *Playgirl* to masturbate with. I find this to be the most impressive evidence of all of the complex intelligence of chimps, requiring as it does quite a capacity for responding to approximations and representations.) There was a Famous British Philosopher visiting that year at the university. His route to campus took him past Washoe's tree in the mornings. And, in Roger's story, his philosophy broke down in the face of this compelling cynosure. I can see this easily enough. My own philosophy seems to be in danger of radical revision. But I don't know much about the revised philosopher, exactly how he was revised and whether or not the revision lasted. The stories are generally interrupted and incomplete. And I don't know how Washoe was revised by *Playboy*.

What has my attention is the cage, and the story about the broken kneecap. Stanley Cavell has pointed out that we don't have to talk to everyone about everything, but there are some things we do have to talk to everyone about if we are to talk to them at all. We have to talk to dogs about biting if we are to talk to them at all.

In Washoe's case, I find that I disagree with anyone who wants to say that because we can't talk with her about politics and art, it follows that what she does isn't language. We don't talk with four-year-olds about these things, either, yet we can place what they say in a continuum that includes political discourse. I can't talk with most of my writing students about the issues that face me these days in relationship to writing, and some of them may never have the requisite conceptual apparatus; this is not a reason to deny that they are writing. Nevertheless, we do have to talk to toddlers about attacking their playmates when that comes up, and I must, in order to work with a companion dog, be able to assume that he under-

stands perfectly well the moral significance of peeing on the couch or of biting certain objectionable visitors. That is to say, under most circumstances he ought not to, even though he might want to.

Washoe, like my dog, has been told, and in no uncertain terms, that she ought not to bite even though she might want to. With my dog, the issue was settled long ago, almost without our noticing it, and we are in agreement. If my dog were to bite a visitor, I would be forced to consider the possibility either that the visitor had committed a crime or that my dog had gone crazy. And I would have to work out what had happened before I could again take my dog for a walk. If there was no reason for the bite, nothing that a reasonable person could recognize as a reason, the relationship with the dog would have broken down.

But there's no such agreement with Washoe, and Ken and Roger are, for the moment at least, still in some relationship with her. Ken tells me another story about Washoe attacking him. On this occasion she was charging for him. Ken, instead of defending himself or trying to correct her, signed, "Hug, hug!" Washoe, in Ken's account, hesitated in her charge and then continued forward—but forward into Ken's arms for a hug. I am reminded that Ken knows Washoe, and I don't.

Still, Washoe is behind bars. I don't know the end of the story, only that I am uneasy because it plainly isn't going to end the way *Lassie Come Home* does or *Our Mutual Friend*. But I notice at this point that my interest in Ken DeCroo and Roger Fouts is based in part on our mutual refusal to look to the animal behavior laboratory as it currently exists for enlightenment. Roger tells stories of meaningless horrors and degradations in the labs.

As well he might. I know a story that makes it clear that the animal laboratory is not going to produce tropes of community and communication. At my university there was an attempt to pass campus laws that would allow trained Companion Dogs to accompany their owners to classes, offices and libraries. This was a response to the rising crime rate on campus and to masses of evidence that indicated that dogs tended to

put malefactors in the wrong mood and were thus a means of averting rather than encountering trouble. One of the curious things discovered in this situation was that blind students were not allowed to bring their Guide Dogs into science buildings. Because, shouted a choleric biologist, there are laws stating that any animal that enters a research building may not leave it alive! I don't know about that; what I am interested in is the biologist's astonishing, righteous anger.

There are probably genuine students of animals and communication in the laboratories—but how do you enter into a contract about talking with a being you are going to kill? (In the biologist's rhetoric there were, incidentally, richly elaborated tropes of the particular insanity, wildness and filth of animals—he was talking about Guide Dogs!—and this is, of course, neither my story nor Roger's and Ken's. But it is well to note that it is lively enough in more or less reputable corners of science and the law.)

I come, through listening and watching, to piece together a story about Washoe. It is the story the appalled dog trainer tells. I find parallels in Stanley Cavell's vision of Shakespearean tragedy rather than in cheerful tales about returning animals to the joyous freedom of the wilderness.

The chimpanzee trainer, or teacher, takes up with the young chimp. S/he works intimately with her, nurturing her, playing with her and teaching her to sign. Many wonderful things come of this, including a significant and powerful bond of love. The chimpanzee gets older, becomes sexually mature. If the chimp is Lucy, who lived with a family, then more and more limitations have to be placed on her life and on that of the family, and while limitations are not in and of themselves regrettable, I suspect that fewer and fewer guests are charmed when they are bitten.

The trainer, or teacher, or stepparent, still talks about how much s/he loves the chimp—and s/he does. Dealing with the chimp becomes more troublesome, but in the evening, over a beer, the handler talks about loving chimpanzees, and it is plain that a listener who cares is confronted with something that ought to instruct us all about love, rage and language. Othello,

proclaiming his love for Desdemona, is no more convincing in his nobility, intelligence and love.

At the end of *Othello*, the husband has killed the beloved. At the end of the chimp story, so far as I know it, the chimp is behind bars. I supposed, rather stupidly, that this *was* the end of the story, that the handlers would, perforce, accept and live with the limitations of the relationship as they had thus far and make what they could of it. In part because I wasn't fully taking into account the nature of a mature chimpanzee, I thought this was an inexact analogy to my own case, in which my having a full relationship with my dog entails my living with limitations, including the fact that the dog can't read or drive me to the doctor when I'm ill, generally accepting the fact that the relationship is not an incomplete version of something else. It is a complete dog-human relationship. Accepted as such, it provides us both with what it is supposed to provide us with and has integrity—it is not something I need to do anything about. The dog fits.

But Washoe doesn't fit. Roger Fouts is working on a research project that he hopes will culminate in turning Washoe loose in Africa, with a band of other signing chimps, where they can be studied in a wild situation. The hunch is that having language will enable the band to survive despite their having learned no wild chimpanzee social and survival skills. It may work, and the news will be out: language is adaptive.

I am mystified by this; I want to sputter something like "But I thought you loved her!" (And would therefore want to keep her around.) I feel foolish, as though I were one of the people the Koehlers call the "humaniacs" who weep when they see dogs being worked, and it is clear that I am in the wrong story. Ken DeCroo says to me one day, as we are both standing outside Washoe's cage, "Our commitment to Washoe is over." Washoe, for her part, is signing hopefully on the subject of being taken out of the cage for a walk.

This looks and sounds a lot like marriage and divorce in cases where divorce is a substitute for the murder at the end of a tragedy. Othello kills Desdemona when language fails to give him complete certainty of her fidelity, certainty, that is,

of Othello's safety in the face of the fact that she exists independently of him. Washoe, I find myself believing, is no more ready for this divorce, no more eager for it, than Desdemona was. Of course, there's a difference between the surfaces of the two stories that is not superficial. Desdemona wasn't unfaithful except in the way we are all unfaithful to the exact being of the Other. Washoe, on the other hand, will certainly maim or kill someone if precautions aren't taken.

So Washoe isn't, after all, talking? Not doing what I call talking when I assume that if you'll talk to me you won't kill me? I watch, early one morning, while Ken and Roger take her out of her cage for a walk. This entails the use of leashes, a tiger hook and a cattle prod. I am instructed to watch from a distance and to be very still. Ken and Roger don't take her very far—she remains within sight from my seat on the grass. I'm impressed by the precautions and think about going for a walk with my dog or a friend, and for a moment wish that is what I was doing.

But when the three of them—four, actually, since Washoe's adopted son Loulis accompanies them—are far enough away so that the restraint devices aren't visible if I don't stare very hard, I am struck with how very much the whole procedure looks like going for a walk. And do I have anything else to go on, beyond this small thrill of recognition?

Roger and Washoe squat down together and sign, discussing something they have noticed that I can't see. And I think that if any of my claims that the police-dog tracker is a citizen are to be met with respect, if what I claim is to have any coherence at all, then I must acknowledge that Washoe and Roger are talking—are doing what I call talking. I haven't forgotten the tiger hook, the cattle prod, the broken kneecap and the plan to send Washoe to Africa. But I am back to the conviction that I am looking at some condition of language.

And I am back to the feeling I started with, that the issue of what Washoe is doing, what condition of language we are dealing with, is not an intellectual problem, a puzzle. If I acknowledge that Washoe is talking, then of course I have to notice profoundly that language does not prevent murder. If

language does not prevent murder, and if it may in fact cause murder, then I am at a loss. For I have nothing, really, but talk to go on. If the gestures and interactions of various sorts that I observe really do add up to "going for a walk," and if Washoe is dangerous despite that, then I may be thrown into confusion, may suffer, as Othello did, from skeptical terror, and may want to deny Washoe's personhood and her language rather than acknowledge the limits of language—which can look like a terrifying procedure. In the same way I may want to find a certain kind of relief by saying that rapists or the assassins of Anwar Sadat are religious fanatics or are in some other way inhuman, not of that kind of being in which I participate.

In any event, it is clear that we cannot *prove* that Washoe is talking, any more than Othello could prove that Desdemona was telling the truth when she professed fidelity. Nor, no matter how we riddle, puzzle and tease, can we prove that she isn't talking, so it may be best to leave off devising yet more clever professions of skepticism about the matter, and consider instead what kind of story we are constructing, and what kinds of stories are possible. While we consider, Washoe changes from minute to minute and day to day, as we do. Roger and Ken can't prove, on a given day, that it is safe to take Washoe from her cage, but they can "read" her, using the same criteria that I use when I am deciding how much contact it is safe to make with the man approaching me. If Washoe is doing a lot of signing, is willing to talk, that is some sign of safety—one of the very best, even if it isn't a guarantee. Roger and Ken and other people who work with the big apes live boldly, trusting language, speaking up in the teeth of the evidence of, as it were, her teeth, knowing that such boldness must fail in the face of Washoe's incomplete assent to the terms of the discussion. This is what we all do. This is what the Camp David\* accord was about, speaking in the face of the failure of language to prove—to probe—the humanity, or personhood, of the other.

\*This chapter was originally written some years ago. I wish that there had been since then evidence that major American officials knew more than Washoe does about talking, but there hasn't been, hence my having to resort to somewhat dusty references to full-fledged statesmanship.

Skepticism about whether or not Washoe is talking is not based on reasonable or rational considerations, and it may be that no one has yet discovered what such considerations might be. (How could Sadat have proved, before going to Israel, that Begin could or would talk?) All we can do is take a look, abandoning the "cover story," as Cavell calls it, and hoping instead to come up with a fiction that would make sense of what we try to say, about her and to her, realizing that there may be no such fictions about fully wild animals, except the sort Jane Goodall tells, which are about their territories, not ours. Perhaps we may someday domesticate the chimpanzee as we have the dog, but at the moment we don't have the story that will enable Washoe to spend her old age in a chair by the fire. That doesn't mean she isn't talking.