

LECTURE ON “THE DOG VILLAGE”¹ READ BY NILLA PIZZI

Giorgio de Chirico

The protection of animals is first and foremost an expression of civilisation. The more civilised a country is, the more it spontaneously and naturally manifests man's sense of duty – civilised man that is – to protect and defend the weak. Animals notably come under the category of the weak, since they are beings dependent solely on the will of man. This should not be forgotten. Protection of the weak is not only a sign of kindness but, even more, a sign of moral education. One might even say that it is the ABC of moral education.

Considering the protection of animals under this aspect, which is the true aspect of the problem, one grasps that civilisation, in the true meaning of the word, will not have been achieved until the laws defending animals against the cruelty and indifference of man are truly effective and conscientiously applied. I wanted to clarify these facts before coming to the specific theme we'll be dealing with today. The specific theme is dogs, and the various questions that arise in connection with them. We'll be speaking about the protection of abandoned dogs, about the taxes on dogs and about the dog village we're building. We feel that this village will be very useful during the period of the Olympics, since foreigners often travel with their dogs which, however, are not always accepted by hotels. So in Rome the need is felt for a good dog hotel, like the ones in London, Paris, in Holland and Switzerland and in the major cities of the United States: dog hotels where the weariest of owners may tranquilly leave even the most delicate dog. In Holland I have seen dog hotels so welcoming and comfortable that I still recall them with pleasure. I am sure that the Tourist Board has not yet thought about these “four-legged tourists”. Let us not forget that the dog, especially in foreign countries, is an important being, closely linked to the life of its friend and owner, and is treated as such. Now, let us say something more about defence of the dog, with special reference to abandoned dogs which of course become strays. These animals, so intelligent and faithful, often find themselves in the distressing situation of abandonment, obliged to wander, starving and frightened and predestined, if no charitable person intervenes to adopt them, predestined as I say, to end up in the municipal dog pound where they will be put down after a few days.

Why do we have so many abandoned dogs here in Italy? The main reason is the tax on dogs. Now, it needs to be said that the greatest number of dogs belong to humble and also poor people.

¹ Signed “Isabella Far”, 1960 ca., the four-page typescript is held in the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives, Rome. Published in the original Italian in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico” n. 17/18, 2018, pp. 375-377.

The taxes on dogs are subdivided into categories: taxes for guard dogs, taxes for hunting dogs and taxes for luxury or pet dogs. The tax on guard dogs is the lowest, even though the owner of a guard dog is nearly always a property owner, since if you have to watch over something then you must begin by having something. Then hunting dogs, with a slightly higher tax because hunters, as we know, already have to pay a tax for their hunting licence. Lastly, the luxury or pet category, for which the highest tax is paid.²

It is precisely this last-named tax which the poorest people usually have to pay, who are neither property owners nor hunters. A poor person must therefore pay a dog tax that runs from nine to twelve thousand liras, a sum they often do not possess, and thus begins the drama of the seizure of miserable items of furniture and other equally painful vicissitudes.

Those who are not members of the “Dogs Defence League” are unaware of just how many old people, left alone in life and with a dog as their only friend, live in terror of losing it and tremble at the idea of seeing it carried off to the municipal dog pound. And there, at the pound, one sometimes witnesses sights that are far from edifying: elderly women and men distressfully counting the few coins in their pockets, fearful of not having enough to redeem their dog. Why a small mongrel owned by a poor person should be seen by the Taxman as a luxury item is a mystery I cannot unravel. It is therefore evident that the question of the dog tax should be re-examined to eliminate senseless cruelties and upsetting situations that could be easily avoided.

Unfortunately, those involved in animal protection in Italy today still find themselves in the role of pioneers. I ask myself why there should be such an enormous difference between the way animals are treated in England and the northern countries in general, and the way they are treated in Italy. In fact with us it often happens that when the subject of animal protection comes up there are some who smile ironically and even some who speak of “pietism” and “old maids’ mentality”. But to tell the truth, we may be cheered by the fact that the situation in Italy has improved in recent years. The number of people interested in the protection of animals is constantly growing.

Furthermore, the press often reports endearing episodes, particularly with regard to dogs.

We of the national league for the defence of dogs, which now has thousands of members throughout Italy, look with satisfaction on the progress we have made. In the beginning our League was almost derided, and great courage and strength of will were called for to go on operating under such unfavourable conditions. Currently, with the public’s increased awareness of the problem of defending dogs, we are now hoping for help from the citizens of Rome so that the situation may shortly become even more satisfactory.

In Rome the Executive Committee of the “Dogs Defence League” recently received from the Inland Revenue a concession for public land situated twelve kilometres from Via del Mare. We express our gratitude and extend heartfelt thanks to Inland Revenue Administrator Mr. Barile who

² The position taken by de Chirico as protector of animals was remembered in the February 2012 Italian edition of National Geographic which published a photo of Isabella and Giorgio surrounded by their dogs, with a brief comment on the possible imposition of a tax on animals. See image at the end of this text.

so kindly took an interest in what we are doing, justly considering it *a civilising endeavour*. With all our heart we also thank the Engineers and Functionaries of the Revenue Office and the Office of Public Works who generously helped us in our task.

With possession of this land, the Roman Section of the Dogs Defence League can now establish a "dog village" where, firstly, the new shelter will be built in accordance with rational criteria, and where abandoned dogs will be kept and looked after, while we seek new owners for them. Anyone who loves dogs and wishes to own one can come to the shelter and choose the dog they like best. Of course it will also be our task to check how these dogs are treated once they have been entrusted to their new owners. For some years now our League has possessed two shelters, but unfortunately very primitive, which will be moved and included in the new shelter. These old shelters, we must point out, have been useful in carrying out positive activities and saving hundreds of dogs. To give an example, in the past two months we were able to place seventy-two dogs with new owners. Some of the dogs had been found, others taken out of the municipal dog pound where without our intervention they would certainly have perished. Since the land we have obtained is large enough to include various installations for accommodation and care, there will be a hospital – none exists in Rome – and a dog hotel where people obliged to temporary separation from their dog may leave it in safe hands. And let us remember once more the need, which will be particularly felt during the Olympics, for a place providing hospitality for dogs. On this matter we shall be contacting the Tourist Board in order to seek the best solution. The creation of the Dog Village is an institution as highly useful for dogs as for people who care about them and their fate. We hope that this Village will ensure that it is no longer said abroad that we treat animals in a scarcely civilised manner.

(Lecture written by Isabella Far)³

Translated by David Smith

³ De Chirico wrote many texts under his wife's name.

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Cuori di cane Durante i giorni più duri della crisi finanziaria, è bastato che qualche anonimo diffondesse la voce che il governo intendeva tassare gli animali domestici come beni di lusso per scatenare quella che i giornali definiscono “rivolta sul Web”: migliaia di messaggi Twitter o Facebook per dire no alla fantomatica patrimoniale canina. Nelle famiglie italiane vivono circa sette milioni di cani: delle schiere dei cinofili facevano parte anche il pittore Giorgio De Chirico e sua moglie Isabella, come mostra questa foto del 1961.

FOTO: DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY/ALINARI

fig. 1 Isabella and Giorgio de Chirico with their dogs, Rome 1961, photograph published in “National Geographic” (February 2012) with a brief caption: “For the Love of Dogs. During the hardest days of the financial crisis, it sufficed that someone anonymous spread the news that the government intended to tax domestic animals as luxury items to trigger what the newspapers are calling a ‘Web revolt’ thousands of Twitter and Facebook messages to say no to the incredible dog tax. About seven million dogs live in Italian families: among the multitude of dog lovers we find Giorgio de Chirico and his wife Isabella, as seen in this photograph of 1961.”