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The Ambiguous Identity of a Dog as a Mongrelized Storyteller in John Berger's King (1999)

The dog named King, the central character and narrator of John Berger's "King" published in 1999, is the offshoot of many apparently incongruent genre conventions as well as the offspring of the ambivalent prejudice and praise of the species encoded in the English idioms. This presentation aims to overview the contributing elements which gave rise to the Bergerian shift in character-narrator shaping and to discuss the function of such perspective for the novelistic format adopted. The discussion points out the central role of the ambiguity of King as a dog, demonstrating the post-fantastic nature of his characterisation rooted in the conventions of magic realism. The patterns used to shape King, the dog, as one of the community and at the same time the Other are discussed. He is a befriended dog who becomes almost a family member for the beggars and, at the same time, he is the other, different species. He is both one of the homeless and at the same time the independent one, the stranger who sees more because of the distance inscribed into his nature of a rambling dog. Such is also the function of the fantastic in his shaping, as it is sometimes not quite clear that he is just a talking dog, derived from the tradition of animal fable. He might as well be taken as a mentally challenged human being who lost his identity. The merging of perspectives on all levels of the novel contributes to the dialogic quality of the narration in the Bakhtinian sense, to which the central ambiguities inscribed in the shaping of the quasi-fantastic dog add the quality of uncertainty and polyvalence.

key words: John Berger, point of view, dog as narrator, genre conventions, English dog idioms, post-fantastic characterisation, magic realism, ambiguity of character

In his multiple experimental writings John Berger (1926-) is invariably interested in devising novel ways of seeing and ways of telling that distance the cognitive act of perception into noticing the underlying metaphysical fabric of commonly overlooked social phenomena and processes. The fantastic talking dog named King, the central character and first-person narrator of his turn-of-the-millennium novel *King: A Street Story* published in 1999, is one of many adult fiction postmodern narrators conceived as the non-human voices for storytelling. The convention, traditionally used for children's bedtime stories and flourishing in the nineteenth-century golden age of English children's literature, is nowadays undergoing a renaissance on the European literary scene. This includes the popular end of the market, as exemplified by *Buster's Diary* by Roy Hattersley (1932-), a politician of British Labour Party and a writer, published in the same year as *King*[1]. Another example, also published in 1999, is the short novel *Timbuktu* by the American writer Paul Auster (1947-), which takes up serious existential themes to explore the topos of identity. Using the conventional *naiveté* of children's fiction for thoughtful exploration of such topics, Berger's King is the offshoot of many apparently incongruent genre conventions.

[1] See also discussion of various examples from European literature, Bernaerts et al. 68-69.

Moreover, this dog storyteller is a figure imbued with cultural overtones of legendary and mythical depictions of the dog, as well as the offspring of the ambivalent species prejudice and praise encoded in the English idioms. This essay aims to overview the contributing elements which permeate the Bergerian choice of the character-narrator and to discuss the function of such a dominant animal perspective for the paradigm shift in the adopted novelistic format. In this essay I shall point out the central role of the ambiguity of King as a dog, demonstrating the postmodern dichotomous nature of his voice, and his point of view and characterization rooted in the conventions of naturalist novel, epic, beast fable, magic realism, and some other genres.

The novel is conceived within the scheme of a talking dog's diary, detailing his routine ramblings linked to the life of a limited group of homeless protagonists, who live in the forgotten area of the dumpsite on the outskirts of an unnamed north European town. What begins as an ordinary morning of a day in life of the homeless community changes into the grand story of heroic feats of survival, which end in the apocalyptic demise of the slum's inhabitants because of their forced eviction from the place by the town authorities. The subtitle "A Street Story" situates the novel within the tradition of oral storytelling, rooted in the epic tradition. The features it takes over from this ancient genre (such as detailing the process of wasteland colonization, nation-like group formation by foreign settlers, enforcement of laws, expeditions out of the land, and the like) are made to function on a tensional genre plane through being transposed by the overriding naturalist slum novel tradition. The features of the Zolaesque novel are the theme of alienation, exile and solitude played out as human drama on the scene of sordid reality of trying to survive against the abandonment and domination inflicted by the well-to-do society. *King* deploys the conventional naturalist array of motifs in his portrait of the metropolis as a site of "vice and malady" (Rodríguez-Díaz 379), which are modified by pictures of post-pastoral, apocalyptic and trivial fragments of disintegrating life such as the sweeping of the ever-dirty yard or doing the washing of the rags.

Considerable focus is directed by the talking dog to scarcity and the substitute nature of the people's material possessions collated as they seek house comforts amidst the steady worsening of their situation. King the narrator is, however, deliberately freed from judging this deterioration, accepting his master and mistress with the love and devotion of a pet dog acting in the capacity of their child. This is a dialogic kind of relationship on the level of systemic patterns which imbues the implied reception with a dual attitude of diminished and increased distance to the story told. Such a double attitude engaging the implied reader into asking questions about his position in relation to the story told is present in the novel from the very beginning to the very end.

The opening words of the story "*I am mad to try*" (Berger 2) make the opening *in medias res* disturbing, as the sentence is left without an object, it speaks of madness, the speaker is not defined (except for it being the voice of a first-person character of unknown identity), and the nature of trying is left open to speculation. The very next sentence which follows does not explain who the speaker of the first sentence is. It is by implication the dreaming self of the undefined first-person narrator as he confesses "I hear these words in my sleep and when I hear them I coo like a pigeon somewhere at the back of my throat, where the gullet joins the nose. The part that goes dry when you are frightened" (2). The magic-realism poetics of a dream is thus tentatively introduced, fitting his ruminations and his voice into a kind of hybrid reality of the fictional world strung between consciousness and the oneiric subconscious. The speaker's identity has not been explained yet, the only indication being the word "King" in the title, while this passage dubiously questions the meta-fictional indication of this title label by introducing a

pigeon in the simile and an undefined animal implied through the anatomic description of the throat. The post-epic use of extended similes which do not inform the descriptions with clarity, but rather disturb the introduced lines of thinking in the postmodern poetics of broken associations is to be something typical of this text.

The third sentence introduces a delicate indication of the apocalyptic genre which will inform the novel's system of interwoven plot orchestration, although it is only tentatively present here in the emotion of fear and the sensory perception of dryness, while the sentence which completes the first paragraph is a repetition of the opening sentence with the object provocatively provided: "I am mad to try to lead you where we live" (2). The disturbance of this sentence is in the use of the ambiguous second person (singular or plural) as the object which instantly makes the opening dialogic (in the reformulated way, as the initial impression of the opening was that of a somnambulist monologue) and engaging the implied reader in the textual reality on the rights of the character-narrator's companion on top of his or her role of the addressee. This fits into the complex communicative strategies inscribed into the very convention of non-human narration:

> Non-human narrators prompt readers to project human experience onto creatures and objects that are not conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective (in other words, readers "empathize" and "naturalize"); at the same time, readers have to acknowledge the otherness of non-human narrators, who may question (defamiliarize) some of readers' assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness. (Bernaerts et al. 68-69)

In Berger's novel all this enters into a kind of dialogic relationship with the epic tradition that is constantly transcended, while it is also constantly revoked, being encoded in the royal grandeur of the dog's name and the chronicler-type grand scale of the telling. In his descriptions of his everyday paths and patterns of acting, he constantly goes back to the colonisation of Saint Valéry by the motley group of homeless settlers, and engaging in retrospect of their former lives, he gives detailed accounts of their laws, alliances and fights. This is interspersed with the memories of his own childhood and the youthful carefree life of Vico and Vica, a couple and King's owners. The descriptive plane of the text is dually strung between matter-of-fact topographical and naturalist detail and poetic overtones of the telling, noticeable in reading it aloud, but also perceptible in print.

Such complex genre overtones of an apparently sub-working class tale suggested by the subtitle "A Street Story" make the text itself ambiguous, especially that the conventions of the novel are by definition suited for recounting middle-class arrangements of social comfort and advancement. This is the novel of manners with ramshackle decorations. The dog acts here as a kind of epic squire or tinker figure, whose transgressive movements round the places of the shanty town lead him ultimately to invade the socially restricted space of the town proper.

However, his figure, always presented as moving through space and humbly following his owners, a loving afflicted couple, in their trials of life, is also distantly reminiscent of the dog in the *Book of Tobit*, the Biblical book composed within the multi-genre influence of fairy-tale, quest narrative and some others. In this Old Testament tale, the dog is portrayed as a wise and faithful companion of man on the route of hardships. Along with archangel Raphael, the animal accompanies Tobias in his mission to get the money back and save his father's sight, which also means saving Sarah from the power of Asmodeus, the evil spirit (*The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Tob. 6.2, 11.4). The quest undertaken by Vico and Vica and the dog is likewise to earn the money through selling radishes and daffodils so that the suddenly and gravely impoverished family could survive the crisis, but the ultimate objective of the dog's storytelling quest is to heal the sightless eyes of his addressee. These overtones of being blind to reality are,

in *King*, inscribed into the stance of the implied reader, who is assumed to be unaware of the reality which the dog, the guide to dream-vision reality, is bent on showing him or her.

The use of the figure of a dog companion also brings further multiple culturally determined overtones. It is based on Celtic imagery of a dog accompanying hunter deities ("Hunter-god" 113). The topos of a friendly guarding dog is also rooted in the Christian figurative depictions of St Roch, associated with the imagery of *memento mori*. He is usually depicted with a dog, distributing wealth to the poor. This tradition is based on the legend of his being saved from an affliction by a dog which brought him bread and licked his wounds. On the other hand, dog actions also represent human weaknesses and failings in *Proverbs* 26.11: "[a]s a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly." In the New Testament, the dog represents those outside the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God: "[f]or without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie" (Rev. 22.15). The finishing of this sentence suggests deliberate persistence in the choice of evil.

King is also based on the idealized dog from the ancient Greek epic the *Odyssey* by Homer. Berger uses the topos of a watchful and perceptive dog that recognizes his master in the beggar, rooted in the story of Argos unfailingly recognizing the disguised Odysseus upon his return home to Penelope. Another literary influence is undoubtedly the *chansons de geste* of Tristram and Isolde, revived by the French medievalist Joseph Bédier (1864-1938), in *Le roman de Tristan et Iseut* (1900). Tristan's dog is taught not to bark so as not to betray the lovers' hiding place. There are other overtones of the dog as a trickster figure in *King*. It is rooted in an earlier literary tradition. In the first part of the tragedy *Faust* (1828) by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), Mephistopheles is disguised as a poodle. The figure of a dog is associated with treacherous wisdom as the devil later changes himself into a monster and an itinerant scholar.

Such implicit patterns inform the dog's subversive way of presenting the life on the dumpsite through the eyes of a different species, at once part of this reality and, by force of his different perception, estranged from its dreariness. King is an ambiguous character because he acts as a servant or even a carrier of goods in the donkey-like capacity, but he is also the king of the place as the one who is not concerned with human rules. Such a choice of the speaking I, frequently a poetically lyrical first-person voice, serves to shape a distanced, artistically poignant perspective on the capitalist society which produced the slum area, giving indirect voice to Berger's post-Marxist philosophy. The constant departure from conventions is attained by displacement of apparently traditional novelistic techniques related to the shaping of the point of view and voice.

The patterns used to shape King, the dog, as one of the community and at the same time the Other, are much more complex. On the level of plot development, he is introduced as a befriended dog who becomes almost a family member, the son-like figure, for the beggars Vico and Vica. At the same time he is the Other, a different species with different needs and reactions. He is unaffected by the grimness of the reality that he talks about, and, moreover, in his vagabond rambling ways he seems to be satisfied with this style of life. He is both one of the homeless and at the same time the independent one, the typified stranger who sees more because of the distance inscribed into his nature of a rambling dog. His cognitive distance reformulates the way the central characters are seen as typical figures of a master, a friend, a wrongdoer, a beloved lady and the like. This is some way of transposing the beast fable convention of impersonal abstracted characters represented by animals (see Chesterton 17).

Such is also the function of the fantastic element in his shaping, as it is sometimes not quite clear that he is just a talking dog, derived from the tradition of animal fable. He might as well be taken as a mentally handicapped human being who lost his identity, another fellow beggar with destabilized perception of the surroundings and oneself. This is clear in the scene where the dog recalls his moment of meeting Vico. His verbal response "[s]hit! I say. What did you make?" (Berger 25) and then the strange unrelated pastoral phonetic associations he has when hearing of the products of Vico's own clothes factory from the bygone days testifies to his possible loss of sanity and misperception of himself: "[e]very name sounds like a flower and the butterfly's wings flutter in his voice as he pronounces them" (Berger 25).

The merging of systemic and semiotic perspectives on all levels of the novel is derived from the split between the implied author's voice and the ambiguous character-narrator's voice and it contributes to the dialogic quality of narration in the Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin, "Discourse Typology" 176-78; see also: *Dialogic Imagination* 275-76, 278), to which the central ambiguities inscribed in the shaping of the quasi-fantastic dog add the quality of uncertainty and polyvalence. The orchestration of the semantic plane of the novel is thus attained, which induces a shift in the paradigm of the naturalist fiction used as the underlying genre structure to that of transposed grand epic adjusted in scale to the slum life.

The choice of an animal perspective offers a deliberately displaced, emotionless and withheld insight into the disintegrating human world. In Berger's experimental novel, the human voice as well as the human stance are foregrounded just as they are marginalized by the multi-layered strategy of dispossession. Just as the characters are defined as the cast-offs of city life who are about to lose the ramshackle district they inhabit because of the Olympic stadium plans, they are also represented as partly de-voiced by the poetics of embedded narration. Prominent is the voice of their pet, with the prominence ironically reinforced by his name King. He is at the same time a homeless scoundrel vagabond and the animal redeemer of the dignity of the in-human story.

A central issue in the story is the question of the dog's uncertain status which goes with his indeterminate identity. It is not just his characterization trait. The human characters of the story do not have real names but names given to them or assumed as a temporary resource in the current makeshift life. The narrator of the story is apparently a dog but not conclusively so. He is in lots of ways thoroughly dog-like but he is also in many ways human-like, as he remembers making love to a woman. King is endowed with the gift of human speech and human reactions, which are understandable for his beggar friends, but his perception and expression remain dubious. He talks of people as if he were their equal and at the same time engages in a typically doggish routine of patrolling the off-road trails and unfrequented paths of the neighbourhood, marking the places with his urine. He relies on his sense of smell. This inherently ambiguous dog-man, marked with human-like power of reasoning and dog-like senses, provides a tensional insight into the humans' affairs. Narration is overridden by his understanding of their routines which are often pointless, like celebrating cooking when there is nothing to eat, but these actions are mystified as a sort of celebration by his explanation. The tone of his voice is marked by lack of shock at their most bizarre idiosyncrasies and foibles dictated by the extremities of poverty. On the other hand, it is featured with the conceptual distance from the world of men and women as such, dictated by his dog ways. He knows of human affairs, participates in them and is affected by them, but also looks upon human affairs without human emotions.

Berger clearly also revives here the rich British literary tradition of using a petdog for a prominent literary character. In the Victorian novel *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) by Jerome K.

Jerome (1859-1927), subtitled in a digressive conversational manner *To Say Nothing of the Dog!*, the dog named Montmorency is described as one of the boating party, though at the same time distinguished from them by his animal nature. In contrast to Berger's King, he is also a background character, while the dog of *A Street Novel* is central although by convention he should not be so. The descriptive detail of fox terrier idiosyncrasies is rendered by Jerome in a tone which foregrounds the discrepancy of unruly behaviour through applying the language proper for gentlemanly behaviour. Berger's fantastic technique of giving the animal a voice to engage in conversations follows in the footsteps of Jerome's momentary lapse into an imaginary cultured dialogue between the dog and a cat, which conceals their conflict.

Berger's background is also the pre-modernist tradition of human-like animals which are used to satirically comment on social foibles in a direct manner. In "Tobermory" from *The Cronicles of Clovis* (1911), Henry Hugh Munro (1870-1916), alias Saki, uses the typical turn-of-the-century method of providing quasi-scientific verisimilitude of the expanded natural abilities of animals. The experimental potential of the device is undoubtedly influential as it was also used in the little known avant-garde English novel by Stefan Themerson (1910-1988) entitled *Critics and My Talking Dog* which was written around 1950 and published only in 2001, so it could not have influenced Berger. The animals that acquire an ability to talk or behave like people are invariably used for attaining insight into human ways. The difference is that in Berger there is no quasi-scientific justification for King's unnatural abilities. These devices serve as a vehicle of ironic insight into the idiosyncrasies of a particular isolated stratum of society. In Saki's it is the aristocracy, in Jerome the middle class, in Themerson the intellectual elite, and in Berger the degraded homeless who become the object of close scrutiny through the distanced but understanding animal perspective on humanity.

The device in Berger's text is close to Saki's as the latter author also uses the point of view of a household pet, the tomcat. Having access to all the areas of the house, the cat can comment on Lady Blemley's guests with the fatal consequences of indiscreet revelations of the aristocratic private failures in moral and ethical propriety. The blunt revelations of failing social and sexual conduct are the source of horror for Saki's characters and humour in reception, while some cursory attention is given to the opening plot possibilities of expanding upon the topic of revealed secrets: "[h]e won't turn up tonight. He's probably in the local newspaper office at the present moment, dictating the first instalment of his reminiscences" (Munro 114). Berger uses first-person reminiscences of a dog belonging to de-classed vagabonds to offer perspective on the secret ignominious side of their eviction from societal functioning. The edge of satire is not so much turned towards the homeless as on the society which creates the defunct norms.

One of the dominant techniques used for the fictional world representation in *King: A Street Story* is the subversive device of the understatement of facts accompanied by the ennoblement of the described elements of the fictional world. The destitute human scum are characterized by the rhetoric of euphemism which mitigates the pictures of ugliness and decay. The dog invariably speaks well and kindly of the evils of the life of the destitute. This is textually dictated by his empathy but also his doggish lack of full understanding. Such patterns give the effect of the multiple implication of the grandeur of their position, way of life and circumstances. Presented through the emotionless, faithful and kind-hearted point of view of a dog, the characters gain heroic qualities reinforced by the multiple illustration of their perseverance. For all their personal neglect and vicissitudes of homelessness, Vica and Vico act as a heroine and a hero of the romance. By the principle of positive-negative characterization, they are at the same

time heroic and anti-heroic. Vica is rendered as destitute and derelict but at the same time beautiful in the eyes of the dog, the chief narrator of the story, who is in love with her.

The mimetic quality of the text is likewise undermined and maintained at the same time. King's fantastic speaking ability is placed within the context of a mundane, even naturalistic world. The inhabitants of the shanty-town dumpsite district do not perceive the dog's ability as extraordinary and engage in free conversations with the local pet. Similarly, there is no textual indication of the supernatural quality of the episode of the dog's dining with a dead friend or his ability to talk with underwater creatures. Nobody is shocked by these facts. These recognizable, if scarce, supernatural elements placed in the context of otherwise verisimilar detail act as a recognizable, but not determinate, reminder of the tradition of magic realism.

As it has been demonstrated, there are more conventions which are at play in the story, none of them used in a conclusive and finite way. The issues of voices, the shaping of the addressee, and incomplete but identifiable motifs retrieved from the reservoir of artistic techniques of contemporary and ancient literature and culture are central to the making of *King*. They consist in the choice of Bakhtinian multi-layered dialogic aesthetics in which not only are the narration by the speaking dog and character relations organized by the principle of heteroglossia, but also the work of art engages in a communicative relationship with different genres, literary kinds and various works of art (compare Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 75-77).

The epigraph placed at the beginning of the novel expands the interpretative context of the story into a broader European tradition. It is a passage quoted in the original from a Spanish *romanca* "La Casada Infiel" by Federico Garcia Lorca from the collection *Romancero Gitano* (1928): "un horizonte de perros ladra muy lejos del rio" (qtd. Berger n. p.). It speaks of the background of a romantic albeit incestuous relationship described in the poem. The interpretative horizon of Berger's dog's story is thus informed by Lorca's peripheral dogs barking on the riverside. The poem is written in the genre of folk-style literary ballad, with a prominent narrative element, and it tells of a love-affair with a married woman who is, in the title, associated with lack of fidelity. The *gitano* ballad of Lorca is focused on recording and ennobling the everyday aspects of human life and scenery, just as is attempted by *A Street Novel* by Berger. The association with the poetics of *romanca* enriches the devices used in *King* as this Spanish genre usually tells of some tragic events in the life of heroic figures of folk origin who engage in struggles of various sorts. Both Berger's and Lorca's stories are interlaced with mimetic detail as well as oneiric poetics. Their symbolic and mythical character is something which is operational also in the semantic layer of *King*, by the dialogic relationship they enter through such a choice of the motto, also in the context of evoking the poetics of magic realism. The ballad-like symbolic elements are in Berger's novel the figures of the Madonna in the Italian retrospective story of Vico's youth, the figure of a dog, a crab, a cat and anemones, and the officials who come to evict them from the land they occupied.

The concept of this animal character-narrator is not Berger's innovation in storytelling but it is firmly rooted in the earlier cultural and literary tradition. In a most distant way, it is related to the Celtic myths of shape-shifting human-animal figures (see "Animals," "Shape-changing"). However, Berger's figure of the principal character and first-person narrator, the human-like intelligent talking dog, is also taken from the ancient tradition of beast fable encoded in the collections of Aesop's fables. These texts show dog characters in a conventionalized and ambiguous, both favourable and unfavourable light, which in Berger is the dual constituent of characterizing the human figures. Aesop's dogs are frequently outwitted, as in "The Dog and the Saw" or "The Dog and the Cook." They fall prey to their superficial understanding of the world,

as demonstrated by "The Dog and the Shadow," or they are overpowered by stronger creatures, as in "The Wolves and the Dogs" and "The Hound and the Fox." However, they also act as companions, guardians and saviours as in "The Traveller and his Dog" or "The Dog, the Cock and the Fox." In the fables, such as "The Ass and the Lap-Dog" or "The Blacksmith and His Dog," the dog is shown as privileged in a human household, enjoying the stability of human protection in exchange for mere companionship. The dogs of the fables "The Old Hound" and "The Hare and the Hound" can argue their case against human stance, while the young creature in "The Hound and the Hare" engages in play with another talking animal. All these features are used directly or indirectly in the shaping of some characters in *King*. Berger's dog himself is on the one hand somewhat worn out by the life of snatching things but he also engages in playful sports with a boy and with a crab, which entail making conversations with them.

Adopting the precepts of beast fable in fiction so as to present human affairs in a satirical mirror of animal disguise has been frequently done in the history of English literature. The tradition behind Berger's attempts is provided by the ironic focus on social issues present both in George Orwell (1903-1950) in *Animal Farm* (1945) and Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932) in *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). This tradition dates back to the satires of human foibles shown through the affairs of the poultry yard in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales* (written 1387-1392) of Geoffrey Chaucer. The dog's indeterminate animal-human featuring is the extension of the beast-fable dominant of satirizing the human society. In the shaping of King, Berger follows Chaucer in interspersing consistent rendering of the quasi-human behaviour of the animal with indications of his true nature expressed in his momentary animal bearing. Chaucer's barn yard fowls act as though they were educated and conventionally mannered humans but occasionally lapse into avian behaviour, and are said to produce a characteristic noise. Likewise, King is occasionally shown growling, sniffing around or urinating in a dog-like manner, while in the majority of cases he engages in human-like ruminations on the present and past status of the characters and places. There is an implicit overtone of colonial fiction present in these negotiations of the perception of power and submissiveness through the story told.

The long-forgotten genre of beast fable was revived into the systemic repertoire of Victorian fiction by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) in his prose set in colonial scenery addressed to children such as *The Jungle Book* (1894), *The Second Jungle Book* (1895) and *Just So Stories* (1902). The first two inter-related collections of short stories, or perhaps episodic novels – as it is difficult to determine the boundary here – use the convention later applied by Berger in reverse. Kipling's narrator is somebody who knows both the language of animals and of people, which allows him to engage in telling the stories heard from the witnesses or participants of events – of both people and animals (Kokot 136-37). The talking dog character named the Wild Dog and renamed as the First Friend features prominently in Kipling's penultimate beast-fable short story in the *Just So Stories* collection – "The Cat That Walked by Himself." Berger's King owes something to the making of this guard dog. While Kipling is focused on the story of the wild animals becoming domesticated in the context of the primitive life of the cave, Berger stresses the role of the dog in the existence of the couple living in the makeshift shelter.

Using a dog as the actualized voice of the evicted community is a literal representation of the implied central metaphor of the text of the homeless as dogs. The shanty town inhabitants are themselves compared to dogs of various pedigrees; for example, Danny has "the pointed face of a fell hound" (Berger 11) and Jack the Baron is also called the Great Dane. Through the shaping of his characters Berger also enters a dialogue with the metaphoric representation of a dog figure encoded in the language, in English idiomatic expressions. King, as a character and as a novel of

the same title which gives a portrait of a social group, is rooted in most of them. The Aesop-rooted expression "a dog in the manger" in Berger's context parallels the selfish attitude of the well-to-do social classes who do not share their wealth – represented by the commodities of Pizza Hut or the butcher shop. Cruelty of fighting as an element of this attitude is represented in English by the fixed expression "meaner than a junkyard dog." The dog in English is also associated with sickness or physical affliction, the feature of Saint Valery inhabitants, as visible in the phrases "as sick as a dog," "dog-tired." Another semantic field attributed to the dog figure is that of badly done work in the phrase "dog's breakfast."

Moreover, the dog is associated with trivialized storytelling, as encoded in the expression "a shaggy dog story" as well as with the dangers of discussing or undertaking a difficult topic, as exemplified by "let sleeping dogs lie." Persistence in the approach to some subject of consideration is associated with the idiomatic simile "like a dog with a bone." The dog is used in English as a figurative representation of a lowly or disregarded state, the condition represented by all of Berger's homeless, which is possibly infectious, as in the phrase "dirty dog," or such expression as "go to the dogs" and "if you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas."

Thus the dog figure as shaped by cultural associations stands for people with whom one should not associate, which is demonstrated by *King's* social chasms. Berger also somehow transcribes the meaning of the phrase "like a blind dog in a meat market" through his dog's unruly behaviour at the butcher's. The dressing up for the formal occasion, as in the passage when Vica dresses up for a visit to a petrol station to procure drinking water, is also metaphorically encoded in the simile "done up like a dog's dinner" and "put on the dog." The dependence of people on chance, most relevant in the context of the scavenging and the vagabond living, is another example as in the phrases "lucky dog," "every dog has its day" and their negative version "not have a dog's chance." The dog is also the figure for hardships of life: "it's a dog's life," "shouldn't happen to a dog," or exposure to weather: rain – "raining cats and dogs," or heat – "the dog days of summer." It can likewise stand for evil people or criticism: "throw someone to the dogs." However, the dog in English, and in Berger, stands also for leadership, as in the phrase "the top dog." The idea of the control of the weak element is also depreciated in the "tail wagging the dog." There are also a few phrases with positive connotations, as in "there's life in the old dog yet" which in the context of *King* parallels the remaining energy and hopefulness in the homeless despite their age and life-worn circumstances. There is a phrase denoting persistence: "to work like a dog." All these phrases as a cultural body of semantic associations constitute a background to the shaping of the dog character of *King*.

King's mongrelized identity, attained by cross-breeding literary, cultural and linguistic influences and codes, makes the narrative perspective ambiguous. What is prominent is the dog's idiosyncrasy as a narrator, which justifies his inconsistency as a guide to the unknown land. The way he tells the story through a rambling quality of narration mirrors his roving movement through space. This is obviously the process of figurative reinvigoration of the primary epic conventions of a repetitive, digressive and dialogic mode of telling the central story (compare the features of primary epic in "Epic" 226). His narration alternates between long speeches and half-imaginary dialogues with a whole array of characters from the human to the animal world, such as the sea creatures whom he meets (or dreams of meeting) in his diving routines.

Just as he returns to the same places in the physical area of the district, he repeats and renounces in mid-way the same stories, returns to the same ideas or fragments of thoughts, applies reiterating concepts or words in new surprising contexts. The central and non-central motifs of the story comprise a constantly recycled body of ideas which are applied endlessly in

new roles in the story. The story of the gloves made by Vico's factory revokes and contrasts the image of the worn-out hands of the character.

In his creative method of writing fiction, Berger admits searching for an appropriate voice to be able to narrate a story, which often results in being able to present some myths of humanity from the reversed point of view (Papastergiadis 9, 11). In *King*, these are the myths of the Fall of Man, of the Fisher King, as well as the Scandinavian myths of the dog king which are woven into the semantic layer of the text. The first two myths seem to be Berger's leitmotif, appearing also in "Boris is Buying Horses," a short story from *Once in Europa* (1987), a hybrid, experimental text between a short story collection and a fragmented novel. As in the *Into Their Labours* trilogy of which this collection is the third part, King is focused on the lives of a marginalized and evicted group of people, who are losing their position in the tradition-defined life. The difference is that while in *Into Their Labours* the movement of peasants is from the Alpine countryside to the city, in *King* it is from the city to its dumpsite and then further to nowhere in the ultimate expulsion.[2] *King* also shares the theme of the demise of the individual through malady with *To the Wedding* (1995), although in *A Street Story* it is more of a social malady of indifference which results in the physical affliction of the homeless. In *King*, the tragic fate of the impoverished characters is presented as the story of the downfall of a gallery of modern capitalist protagonists, told in the archetypal surroundings of a capitalist town. The generalization, typifying and abstraction of the storytelling are the features attained by such a polyvalent, semantically, semiotically and systemically loaded shaping of the first-person narrator.

The choice of a canine perspective on human affairs helps Berger to attain in yet another way his staple distancing effect that in this particular case acts as "a double dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization, human and non-human experientiality" (Bernaerts et al. 69). It is nothing surprising in the author, who like his literary masters, Samuel Beckett and James Joyce, chose emigration to different European countries, a life choice shared by Stefan Themerson, for whom the new land was England. In *King*, the emotionally detached and spatially mobile perspective of a roving petdog is used to tell an anti-capitalist story of the dispossessed array of human losers who try to pick up the pieces of their lives together again in a forsaken area in the outskirts of a town. This acts as "a literalized metaphor that emphasizes the degradation that humans endure" (Simmons 179). The choice of the central voice of the story determines not only the way of telling it but also the semantic effect. The ambiguous dog's dialogic voice, infused with genre, cultural and linguistic overtones, interacts with his ambiguity as the crucial perspective and distance-defining constituent of textual narrative relations, the ambiguity which is constructed through his uncertain identity strung between a dog and a deranged poor pauper who is treated like a dog.

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[2] For more detailed discussion of these traits in the Alpine peasant trilogy, see Messmer 199-210.

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