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## ***King: A Street Story and the Ethics of Attention.***

Jean-Michel Ganteau

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### **Biographical note**

**Jean-Michel Ganteau** is Professor of Contemporary British Literature at the University Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 (France) and a member of the Academia Europaea. He is the editor of the journal *Études britanniques contemporaines*. He is the author of four monographs: *David Lodge: le choix de l'éloquence* (2001), *Peter Ackroyd et la musique du passé* (2008) *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Literature* (2015), and *The Poetics and Ethics of Attention in Contemporary British Narrative* (Routledge 2023). He is also the editor, with Christine Reynier, of several volumes of essays (*Impersonality and Emotion, Autonomy and Commitment*). He has also co-edited with Susana Onega several volumes on trauma, vulnerability, transmodernity and grievability (*The Poetics and Ethics of (Un-)Grievability in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*, 2022). He has published extensively on contemporary British fiction, with a special interest in the ethics of affects trauma, the ethics of vulnerability, and the ethics of attention.

### **Abstract**

Even if it uses the *topos* of animal narration, John Berger's *King: A Street Story* (1999), unlike the it-narratives and circulation narratives that celebrated the rise of the novel and of capitalism in the 18th century, certainly pays no homage to contemporary liberalism. On the contrary, like Wajdi Mouawad's *Anima* (1012)—which it may well have inspired—, the non-human narrator's unique perspective (as distinct from *Anima*'s multiple narrators) aims at lending visibility to invisible beings and audibility to inaudible stories. In so doing, it attends to the submerged and the excluded from the official narratives of history.

King, Berger's four-legged narrator, is a figure of attention. He and his narrative attend to the invisible elements of the relegated characters' ordinary lives that are generally invisible to the common readers or that are too visible for them to notice. The novel thereby performs a defamiliarisation that engages with the readers' perceptions, making them realise that perception is not a natural category but an ethical and political capacity that has to be educated and re-armed (Le Blanc). On top of being a figure of attention, the narrative is also an operator of consideration (Macé, Pelluchon) in that the dog's humble position, in his proximity to the ground, allows for the emergence of a humble perspective, far away from the bird's eye view, as King never looks down upon anybody or anything. Such an apparatus allows in turn for an ethics of the ordinary that helps determine what matters (as distinct from what is good or bad) without moralising or judging. By attending to singular, ordinary situations, the narrative makes for a particularist ethics (Cavell, Diamond, Laugier) through which it is the narrator's and the reader's responsibility to determine what matters. Lastly, the dog-narrator figure reminds us

that attention is the first component of care, he whose function is to look after and protect his vulnerable owners and friends.

## Résumé

Même s'il utilise le *topos* de la narration animale, *King: A Street Story* (1999) de John Berger, contrairement aux *it-narratives* et aux *circulation narratives* qui ont accompagné l'essor du roman et du capitalisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, ne rend certainement pas hommage au libéralisme contemporain. Au contraire, comme dans *Anima* (1012) de Wajdi Mouawad, le point de vue unique du narrateur non humain (à la différence des multiples narrateurs d'*Anima*) vise à rendre visibles des êtres invisibles et audibles des histoires inaudibles. Ce faisant, il s'occupe des personnes submergées et exclues des récits officiels de l'histoire.

King, le narrateur à quatre pattes de Berger, est une figure d'attention. Son récit s'intéresse aux éléments invisibles de la vie ordinaire des personnages relégués, qui sont généralement invisibles pour les lecteurs ordinaires ou qui sont trop visibles pour qu'ils ne les remarquent. Le roman opère ainsi une défamiliarisation qui s'attaque aux perceptions des lecteurs, leur faisant prendre conscience que la perception n'est pas une catégorie naturelle, mais une capacité éthique et politique qui doit être éduquée et réarmée (Le Blanc). En plus d'être une figure de l'attention, le récit est aussi un opérateur de considération (Macé, Pelluchon) dans la mesure où l'humble position du chien, dans sa proximité avec le sol, permet l'émergence d'une perspective au ras du sol, car King ne regarde jamais rien ni personne de haut. Un tel dispositif permet à son tour une éthique de l'ordinaire qui aide à déterminer ce qui compte (par opposition à ce qui est bon ou mauvais) sans moraliser ni juger. En s'intéressant à des situations singulières et ordinaires, le récit déploie une éthique particulariste (Cavell, Diamond, Laugier) à travers laquelle il revient au narrateur et au lecteur de déterminer ce qui importe. Enfin, la figure du chien-narrateur nous rappelle que l'attention est la première composante du *care*, lui dont la fonction est de veiller et de protéger ses maîtres et amis vulnérables.

## Keywords

John Berger, *King*, attention, care, considération, éthique, importance, ordinaire, perception, particularisme

## Mots clés

John Berger, *King*, attention, care, consideration, ethics, importance, ordinary, perception, particularism

In interview with Nikos Papastergiadis, John Berger allowed himself to wax aphoristic and declared: 'the self is always collective' (1993, 9). The content of the statement will come as no

surprise to his readers, even if they are used to a less assertive mode of formulation on his part. *King*, his seventh novel, addresses the issue of the collective and goes on making ethical and political headway by focusing on what it means to be excluded and by reconfiguring the common through a special type of solidarity. It takes the readers beyond the imperceptible barriers that separate the visible lives of the official, productive, citizens from those who are deprived of a lifestyle, or at least whose lifestyle is not perceptible, as explained by Guillaume Le Blanc. By 'lifestyle,' Le Blanc refers to

the set of ways of acting in which people engage in order to hold firm onto their lives. It would be a mistake to identify this lifestyle with an art of living which would deploy an aesthetic of existence reserved for those who finally and fatally have the power to subjectivise themselves. In order to understand style, we must rather analyse the ways in which someone, caught in a set of norms, turns away from them, either to follow them in his or her own way or to contest them. The style of a life then refers to each person's ordinary capacity to move within a set of norms in order to exist in their own way. The style is then, strictly speaking, the way of living, the creation of a certain figuration of oneself in space and time. (2021, n.p.)

*King* is a circadian novel that chronicles one day in the life of a couple of mature homeless people (or at least people who have a shack to live in but no official address), Vico and Vica, and their eponymous dog. It takes us from the encampment where they subsist with a community of outcasts to the centre of the neighbouring city and its commercial streets, along which the trio spend hours sitting on the pavement, selling roasted chestnuts or failing to sell bunches of radishes. The other locales that *King*, the canine narrator, takes us to are at times non-places, like the hard shoulder of the motorway that runs next to the encampment, or else the wasteland, not far from either the city or the motorway, 'a zone where no people stop unless

obliged. Not because it's dangerous but because it has been forgotten' (Berger 2000, 5). It is an area, the narrator tells us, that escapes description, even though he does evoke it metonymically, by referring to the bits and pieces of discarded objects that accumulate here: 'There are no words for what makes up the wasteland because everything on it is smashed and has been thrown away, and for most fragments there are no proper names.' (6) The protagonists' home is invisible and forgotten: words fail to account for it, which raises the issues of inaudibility as much as invisibility. In the same way as their living space is an unofficial, invisible one, their lease on time is characterised by its precariousness, as indicated by Vico: 'Yes, the next hour. It takes the place of the past. . . . And me, I know already I'm not going to do in the next hour what has to be done. I have to put an end to that hour. . . . I'm left with nothing. Absolutely nothing.' (91–92) In *King*, the self is always collective and this collective is of a special type: it is that of the dispossessed, who haunt unchartered, invisible spaces and spend their days killing time, confronted with its emptiness. Under these circumstances, it becomes difficult for the Vicos—as the narrator calls them—to benefit from a lifestyle, i.e., 'the ways in which someone, caught in a set of norms, turns away from them, either to follow them in his or her own way or to contest them.' (Le Blanc 2021, n.p.) A lifestyle implies a certain degree of agency that the dispossessed couple seem to be in great part deprived of.

In the following pages, I address the way in which the novel uses the convention of the non-human narrator to fuel a reflection on what it is to attend, and draw attention to the modalities and objects of . . . attention, precisely. I take attention as an ethical category, in so far as it is instrumental in taking exteriority and alterity into account and I define it as a capacity that can be trained and developed, which implies recognising the existence of frames of perception and possibly shifting them. The first part concentrates on perceiving. In the second part, I move on to the ethical category of consideration. I end up by envisaging the practical modalities of attention by turning to care.

## 1. Perceiving

Attention to invisibilities and inaudibilities looms large in Berger's novel. In his *L'Invisibilité sociale*, Guillaume Le Blanc considers three types of invisibility, as a socially constructed phenomenon. The first one is predicated on appropriation, as is the case with slavery; the second one relies on various types of instrumentalisation; the third one is based on an absence of perception (Le Blanc 2009, 13). Le Blanc does not consider perception as a natural quality but more as 'a social activity that makes some elements in the perceiving subject's environment appear as relevant and others as irrelevant' (2009, 13; translation mine). Like attention, of which it constitutes some sort of a *basso continuo*, perception relies on selection, hence on the willingness or refusal to look at or listen to. This is what is suggested in the *incipit* of the novel, with the description of the wasteland as 'forgotten zone' (Berger 2000, 5), and later of the encampment as cut off from official and 'consecrated spaces,' which corresponds to the definition of social relegation (Le Blanc 2009, 14). This is vociferously expressed by Vico as the bulldozers are razing his hut and his neighbours' makeshift shelters in the concluding chapter: 'We are being wiped off the earth, not the face of the earth, the face we lost long ago, the arse of the earth, *il culo*. We are their mistake, King . . . ' (Berger 2000, 173). The violence of the eviction as erasure confirms the agency of the military guards and officers with their FAMAS submachine guns, who vaporise the encampment into invisibility, allegedly because living on the spot entails a health risk (157). The cynical irony of this argument buttresses the social and, here, official construction of invisibility through dispossession, in Athanasiou and Butler's first acceptance of the term (ix), which reminds us that all subjects are always already caught in norms of perception that define the conditions of their being perceived. In *King*, such norms are manufactured with bulldozers and FAMAS guns.

Such a situation is not reserved for the encampment, which the dog narrator describes as ‘the Coat,’ with homely connotations of protection against the harsh world. Being erased from people’s consciousnesses or simply not being registered is an experience that King and the Vicos are confronted with elsewhere, as indicated in the following scene from ordinary life: ‘The Sidewalk is wild and many people pass. At the moment, about twenty people are passing a minute. That’s to say about nineteen times a minute Vico and I are rubbed out, not seen.’ (Berger 2000, 87) Besides, at times Vico is asked to contribute to his own erasure, when interpellated in unambiguous terms: ‘Just stop blocking the view, will you?’ (22) The intimation is that the view matters more than the man and the transfer of value from subject to scenery is one that, we are regularly reminded, is an indication that the less rebellious characters, like Vico, have come to accept, a norm that they have internalised. This is made all the clearer in the sentence following the already quoted sidewalk passage: ‘If it was otherwise, it would be intolerable.’ (87) The dog narrator, who is affected with a higher coefficient of ‘normalcy’ or at least acceptability—he is not wearing the wrong clothes or haircut or holding he same cans of beer as those favoured by his human companions—, assumes the protective function traditionally attributed to his species. The dog’s ethical position is multiple here, as he puts himself both in the passers-by’s shoes and has access to their feelings of fear and/or disgust, and essentially of rejection, and in Vico’s shoes, he who has learnt to accept that not being seen is better than being gratified with a glance expressing fear, disgust, rejection, or possibly pity. Not seeing and refusing to see are two modalities of passive and active denial, that polar opposite of attention, which, like attention, involves selection oriented towards what might be considered as a negative phenomenology. One step further, the narrative shows how all selves are ‘always collective’ (Berger 1993, 9), the invisible ones and the visible ones alike, caught as they are in the social activity of perception and/or denial. Admittedly, this is meant to get the readers to situate themselves in relation to such a scene, as suggested by Georg Zipp who

indicates that ‘choosing to look elsewhere’ is tantamount to ‘participat[ing] in the mistake’ (182), the mistake being the one alluded to by Vico as he rages against his own and his friends’ being ‘wiped up off the earth,’ in the already quoted passage, i.e., the cause of their exclusion but also the fabricated reason of their exclusion in which they are somehow led to participate, through the insidious and powerful presence of norms.

Similar norms apply to the logics of audibility and its contrary. This is indicated in the first words, the narrative starting with ‘*I am mad to try*’ (Berger 2000, 5; original italics), suggesting the programmed failure of the narrator’s attempt at putting together a fictional testimony of what it is to experience relegation. Of course, there are ‘no words’ to describe the wasteland (Berger 2000, 6), and Luc, one of the inhabitants of the Coat, with his distorted mouth slurring his speech, who ends up taking his own life (14, 17), provides a literal image of how not being listened to—let alone being heard—precipitates social death. Once again, the suicidal gesture testifies to the extent to which norms are internalised by the excluded, and this raises the issue of a shared agency and of a circulation of responsibility that, instead of blurring the narrative’s ethical drive, stabilises it by exposing it: the homeless are made to take responsibility for a system that produces their exclusion. The pressure of inaudibility is also paradoxically incarnated by the narrator who, for all his poetic glibness, is prone to telepathic exchange with his master:

I’ve never heard anybody talk like you do, I tell him.

Of course not, I’m not talking.

Not talking?

You are listening. Nothing else is happening. Nothing else at all. Look at my lips, they are not moving, are they? (Berger 2000, 101)

In this passage, the words on the page refer to a paradoxically silent communication, both beyond and inside words, precisely. The external signs of oral communication are suppressed, as if King and Vico, both relegated and solidary in their exclusion, were reduced to a complicity imposed by external norms relying on both indifference and decorum. In such a discussion that is shared with the readers in a special moment of joint attention—the metatextual references may give the impression that the narrator and readers are conscious of attending to the same object, i.e., language—, what emerges is the catachretic experience of unheard words, of a silent conversation, of a suppressed testimony, which clinches the characters' inaudibility.

Being the Vicos' 'sentry' who looks over them while they are asleep, King is 'an expert on their faces' (Berger 2020, 88), and a picture of both faithfulness and attention, a defining trait of the wake. He is also, in Zipp's terms, a 'teichoscopic device' (179), i.e., as in classical literature, he allows the readers to look at what happens on the battlefield, beyond the walls of the city. More especially, here, he allows us to peer at the wasteland and the pavements, and have access to all situations from which the readers would otherwise be barred. As indicated in the first paragraph, King is 'mad to try to lead [us] to where [they] live' (Berger 2000, 5), but does it all the same, rejecting impossibilities and constraints. In other terms, his insider knowledge allows him to make an inventory of the excluded protagonists' ordinary lives, so as to describe them,<sup>i</sup> therefore taking part in some form of 'moral expressivity' (Laugier 218). King is a witness of what the ordinary lives of the inhabitants of the Coat are made up of and he delivers a testimony so that those deprived of visibility and speech are taken into account. This means that he does what is necessary for us to attend to a sphere of experience that is affected with a high coefficient of alterity and exteriority. King's role is an essentially ethical one, not only because its purpose is to get the readers to pay attention to the relegated, but also because, as established by Isabelle Fumat-Gros, he does this by 'speaking for them' and certainly not by 'substituting himself to them or putting himself in their place, which would

contribute to erasing them' (36; translation mine). In great part, this is done through the narrator's very specific language, made up of simple syntax and of unassuming, concrete words, as underlined by most reviewers: the novel is 'precarious in both form and content,' Zipp comments (167) and makes us hear a singular testimonial voice that clearly 'challenges the readers' way of seeing' (Korte and Zipp 69)—and of hearing, I would add. The use of a dog narrator is certainly no gimmick and it assumes a testimonial function whose ethical specificity and power cannot be overlooked. Through this specific voice, it refuses invisibility and inaudibility and allows for 'a different, non identificatory perception to be created' (Fumat-Gros 20; translation mine). It is an efficient device to fight against denial and promote attention.

## **2. Considering**

Twice the reader is given access to some form of delegated focalisation, when the dog imagines the homeless seen from the perspective of the passers-by. A first occurrence is to be found in the fifth section, when the Vicos are seen as 'plague victims' (Berger 2000, 115). The intimation is that the ordinary citizens (ordinary in the sense that they lead a productive life within the walls of the city) might catch the plague, which is an apt reminder that social precariousness is by essence sticky and may affect everybody. The second occurrence refrains from using metaphor and keeps to the literal meaning of an unblinkingly concrete observation, as the passers-by cast a glance at Vica, Vico and their dog engaged in a silent conversation: 'They don't hear us talking. They merely see a large woman in blue jeans with a dog who has his head on her lap and behind the pair of them an old man asleep.' (131) Even if the latter occurrence triggers off an act of charity and solidarity that acknowledges the presence and reality of the outcasts' lives, the two moments startle the readers into recognising situations that they may experience on a regular basis, as they navigate contemporary metropolises. As we are immersed into the lives of the homeless through King's mediation, such moments bring in the

jarring experience of defamiliarisation, in that they thematise perception and get both characters and readers to stop and attend to what is generally taken for granted, i.e., precisely, attention, in its arresting, opening capacities.

Such observations break the flow of more familiar perceptions that the narrative has taught us to expect, i.e., the dog narrator's, as he sits on the pavement with the couple. It is generally the feet and ankles of the passers-by that he observes, as they walk to and from work. Interestingly, such an observer's position is associated with complete invisibility: 'The two of us watch the feet passing along Sallust Street. Every street has a black hole you can fall down, and all the holes in the streets of the world join in the same blackness, where there is everything and it seems like nothing.' (Berger 2000, 99–100) Such a global vision of precariousness reminds us of Berger's axiom—'the self is always collective'—while radicalising it and insisting on the inescapability of such a condition, or at least on the loss of agency that affects the excluded. What it also does is get us close to an experiential knowledge of what it is to sit on a pavement, deprived of hope and agency. More precisely, this is effected through the dog's focalisation that, in such passages, assumes one of its main functions in considering the excluded other at ground level, from the very point to which the observers have fallen and are being maintained. In such passages, the readers are confronted with a modality of attention that has been described in terms of consideration. In fact, the canine narrator observes while being situated at the same level as the objects of observation. Watching the feet of the working citizens makes the readers automatically espouse the point of view of those who are sprawling on the ground, momentarily putting us into their shoes and getting us to share their humble situation. French philosopher Corine Pelluchon reminds us of the origins of the term 'humility,' which lies in the latin name *humus*, referring to the earth, and she associates consideration with an effort of attention that starts from a humble position and may be directed at humble situations (31–32). She goes on defining consideration as 'the attentive and benevolent gaze that

consideration's subject casts on the world and other beings [and that] does not proceed from an overhanging perspective' (32; translation mine). Precisely, King's benevolent, attentive eyes put us on a level with the relegated even while making us espouse their perspective: in such passages, the narrative reaches a high degree of respect for the excluded other by refusing to cast him/her into a direct object of attention. The readers are denied access to any scene that could be consumed as a spectacle. From this point of view Berger offers an immersion into a situation altogether different from that described in his essay 'Why Look at Animals?' in which he describes the contemporary exclusion and marginalisation of animals and provides an analysis of the scopic economy that prevails in the zoo. To him,

[a] zoo is a place where as many species and varieties of animal as possible are collected in order that they can be seen, observed, studied. In principle, each cage is a frame around the animal inside it. Visitors visit the zoo to look at animals. They proceed from cage to cage, not unlike visitors in an art gallery who stop in front of one painting, and then move on to the next and the one after next. Yet in the zoo the view is always wrong. Like an image out of focus. (1980, 21)

King, as focaliser, is the contrary of an object of observation. From this point of view, he is the contrary of a pet (Berger 1980, 12). In this reality may originate the choice of non-human narration, as the novel turns the tables on the idea that 'animals are always the observed' (14). Such an original option gives ethical leverage to the narrative, since the dog narrator observes *for* the excluded characters in the same way as he *speaks for* them. In so doing, he paradoxically and efficiently uses humility to show how 'it links the individual to all other human beings, making him/her equal to the others and linking him/her, through his incarnation, to the other human beings' (Pelluchon 33; translation mine). In other terms, the consideration that the dog narrator allows the readers to experience is a means to pay attention to a common vulnerability

shared by the relegated and the passers-by, which is tantamount to presenting the democratic potential of consideration. This involves in turn an opening to the other's situation in its singularity, based on refusing any vantage point. At the heart of the ethics of consideration therefore lies the effort to attend and to open oneself to the object of perception. Such a determination evokes one of the characteristics of attention, i.e., its unclosing powers, observed by many commentators like Nathalie Depraz, a phenomenologist following in Husserl's wake and showcasing his conception of attention as *epochē* or 'unclosing of the self' (64; translation mine), which Marielle Macé reads, in Claude Lefort's wake, in the same terms, i.e. *déclure* or unclosing (64). Beyond renewing perception, consideration opens up and maintains a state of openness, helping 'refocus . . . the reader's attention' (Zipp 172) and situating him/her in relation to a singular reality.

Doing so depends on perceiving the other's presence in the concreteness and specificity of his/her incarnation. In many passages, the narrator's dogness is underscored through allusions to his senses and physical abilities. This is the case when Vico, who names himself after Giambattista Vico, tells King that

[t]here was a Latin word *humanitas*, which meant the disposition of men to help one another. My ancestor, King, believed the word *humanitas* came from the verb *humare*, to bury. The burying of the dead is what he meant. Man's humanity, according to him, began with a respect for the dead. Yet you—you King—bury bones too, don't you? (Berger 2000, 85)<sup>ii</sup>

The common denominator between human and dog, here, relies on the proximity to the ground and on a radical humility that is also a becoming-dead, as suggested in the final section when Vico and Vica, expelled from the Coat by the soldiers, are reported to lie 'face down on the earth, two hundred metres apart' (177). In such moments, the dog voices his despair, and

indignation takes hold of the narrative, as the homeless are cynically expelled, in a scene from which all sense of solidarity and justice seems to have absconded. I would argue that this represents another modality of consideration, which can be compounded of anger against the inattentive, as specified by Macé (32–33), and which goes along with the ethical duty to be attentive to what lies ignored and possibly downtrodden. This is given even more strength and relief by the fact that the down-to-earth consideration of the relegated is necessarily mediated in a very concrete way, through the dog's perceptions, which are necessarily dog-specific. In fact, King's smell is solicited very regularly, in passages that poetically evoke the powers of olfaction, as in the opening lines when the smell of petrol is compared to that of diamonds (Berger 2000, 6) or in the following quotation that underlines the narrator's perception of specific situations as he is confronted with suffering alterity: 'Men who have just been abandoned have a special smell, quite distinct from those who live alone. A smell not different from sour milk.' (20) Thanks to such embodied observations, the reader is allowed to capture the singularity of a situation in its concreteness and materiality. And herein lies the power of attention that, as we are reminded by Depraz, is a gesture implying a corporeal experience that affects the subject deeply by 'mobilising him/her kinesthetically and rhythmically' (108; translation mine), which is what happens to both narrator and readers. This echoes the maxim of 'corporeal presence' that Swiss philosopher and cultural theorist Yves Citton considers as one of the *sine qua non* conditions of attention. Reading *King*, we get the impression that 'presential interaction directly uniting resonant bodies can optimise' perception, consideration and attention (Citton 133), and help the readers determine what matters.

### **3. Caring**

Deciding on what matters often entails determining *who* matters. This is done by making an effort of perception and consideration directed at those who are least visible, or who are so

visible that we no longer manage to see them. In the case of Berger's novel, these correspond to the relegated that are kept off the official frames of perception, as indicated above. Clearly, the protagonists and the other dwellers of the Coat are characterised by their social, physical and ontological vulnerability: they are exposed to the hardships of the winter months, to various other causes of physical discomfort, and are generally stigmatised. The protagonists, despite their moments of resistance and, at times, resilience, are presented as icons of vulnerability at several points, as when they are lying with their faces on the ground, or when Vico, 'holding a tumbler in both hands and sniffing the whiskey left in it with his head lowered . . . look[s] as if he [is] on the point of lapping up with his tongue—like an animal without hands does' (Berger 2000, 169), or else when Vica, confronted with the destruction of the Coat, collapses, as indicated by King: 'I listened to her heart breaking. Take the letter V and snap both sticks. This is what happened to her.' (172) A pictogram is inserted on the page, providing a concrete image of the dismantled V that irrupts into the text and, far from providing a distancing effect, generates an additional visual realisation of the character's dismemberment, thereby contributing to the experiential knowledge of the situation. In all such instances, the readers' attention and sympathy are strikingly solicited.

Such soliciting is intrinsic in the canine narrator's positive affects, as underlined by various reviewers, among whom Thomas Laqueur who declares that 'he is a narrator who is immediately in touch with feeling' (14). Indeed, choosing a non-human narrator implies a displacement away from rationalism and abstraction, and possibly towards more sensations and feelings. In conformity with such expectations, King is constantly and consistently attuned to his charges' needs and states of mind, as if instinctively, which makes him a very competent practitioner of both involuntary and voluntary attention. This is what he expresses in his own concrete terms, when commenting on his relationship with the pain of others, that always regards him: 'Where I'm not human at all is that I'm possessive about pain. I mean the pain of

others. . . . I take over the one who is suffering, and I growl if anybody approaches. It is something I learnt from my mother, and now it is stronger than me.’ (Berger 2000, 15) Such a statement clearly contributes to displacing anthropocentrism, but perhaps with the purpose not so much of promoting a form of anti-speciesism as providing a satire of human nature in its most greedy and indifferent aspects. Many episodes show King in the process of taking care of his masters as he refuses to wake Vico up so as to protect him and Vica from fighting after they have had one beer too many (132), or as he wakes Vica up with infinite precautions: ‘I’ll pick up her hand in my mouth and go along her arm dropping and catching it in my mouth without ever a tooth grazing her until I reach the armpit’ (141). In such descriptions, when attention to the other goes along with respect for the other, we are confronted with the emergence of a tenderness<sup>iii</sup> that only a watchdog, with his spontaneous, sustained turning towards the other whose self-appointed mission it is to protect, can express in such a radical way.

Throughout, and thanks to the canine perspective, attention is presented as a disposition, an inherent capacity that King does not have to make efforts to maintain and sustain. Such a situation is a neat illustration of what Depraz considers as the ‘proto-ethical’ (11) dimension of attention that allows for an opening towards the other going along with a measure of unselfing. This is necessary to the development of this brand of attention that Depraz calls ‘vigilance’ and which is based on a sustained openness to the other that makes the subject take the risk of entering in a precarious (in the ontological meaning of the term) relation to the other (320). One step further, one should remember that attention is the first capacity and moment in the process of care as defined by Joan Tronto: ‘caring about,’ that is followed by ‘taking care of,’ ‘care giving’ and ‘care receiving’ (127). Before being able to plunge into the heart of the practice of care, i.e., ‘taking care of’ and ‘care giving’—which King does when he looks after Vico and Vica, waking them up by biting them tenderly, without using his teeth—, he has to attend, which comes spontaneously to him. From this point of view, not only does he ‘connect . . . the

squatters . . . , making lifelines between them' (Searle 101) but he also protects them through his stories, even while getting the readers to pay attention to their invisibility. The soothing power of stories is regularly thematised, as when King draws 'a small curtain' around Vica to divert the reader's gaze as she is relieving herself in conditions where privacy is in scant availability (Berger 2000, 29), or when he entertains Vico with the description of the singularity of stones so that the man will feel more comfortable: 'If I tell him about these stones well enough, he won't feel the iron of the fucking door-bar sticking into his back.' (Berger 2000, 86) More generally, telling stories to the homeless couple allows King to divert their attention away from the fact that there is nothing for them to expect from the coming days and years, as indicated in one of the rare aphoristic passages: 'There is little to talk about when there is no future, and subjects are welcome.' (62) In such moments, the narrator's and the characters' attention is trained on the power of words and stories, both parties consciously attending to the fact that they are being attentive to the same narrative content. This is characteristic of the situation defined as joint attention, in which the reader is meant to participate. Interestingly, according to Citton, '[t]he essence of care is rooted in joint attention' (152), a consideration that specifies Tronto's observations and invites us to look into the specific dynamics of caring attention.

In fact, what the canine narrator reminds us of is that attention is not only an ethical disposition but also an ethical gesture that takes into account particular situations and beings considered in their singularities. This is apparent in his way of favouring his masters' preferences for being waken up, for instance, or in his way of choosing which story to tell to divert them from their miseries, or which moment as the timelier one for his interventions. In other terms, King emblematises what a *sustained practice* of attention based on the consideration of *particular* situations and *singularities* should or at least could be. Through his instinctive capacity for protection and protective gestures, he shows how the ethics of care and

of attention alike are based not on the respect of abstract rules and decalogues but on attentiveness to singular needs inherent in specific situations and respecting idiosyncracies. This is what Citton indicates, when he avers that ‘[w]e are always attentive in a *particular* situation’ (115; emphasis added). This is confirmed by Sandra Laugier when she insists that ‘[i]mportance lies in details, and this *particularism* of attention to detail is another obvious feature of [Ordinary Language Philosophy] that is also central to the ethics of care.’ (222; emphasis added)

Ultimately, what *King* presents the readers with and perform is an ethics of the particularist type that, by training their perceptions, exploring the ways of consideration and thereby promoting the practice of care, gets us to assume individual responsibility to determine where importance lies: what matters. In other terms, Berger’s novel both represents and performs an ethics of attention that relies on specific poetic devices, foremost among them non-human narration and a specific type of internal focalisation that favours a humble, engaged, sustained relation to the subjects observed by the narrator, thereby renewing the conditions and scope of fictional testimony. In fact, what *King* allows us to experience is that attending is not only concerned with ‘caring about’ but also with ‘taking care of,’ as King, the narrator, witness and keeper, takes care of the human protagonists but also of the readers, as beautifully demonstrated by Fumat-Gros (84, 262). What emerges from Berger’s continuing interest in the powers and failures of the collective is an ethical invitation to stand for the values—and possibly virtues—of care and attention, as he indicated in his interview with Papastergiadis, as he insists that what matters is ‘weighing one thing against another and then *listening*’ (1993, 11).

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<sup>i</sup> I am using the terminology favoured by the exponents of Ordinary Language Philosophy, here, as expounded for instance by LAUGIER in her 'The Ethics of Care as Politics of the Ordinary.'

<sup>ii</sup> Such passages are evocative of Berger's criticism of dualism, that he sees as originating in Descartes' work (a consideration taken up by many upholders of new-materialism) and as culminating in the process of marginalisation that he inveighs against in his essay on the perception and status of animals in contemporary late capitalistic societies (BERGER 1980, 9).

<sup>iii</sup> On the issue of tenderness, see FUMAT-GROS 96–97.