7 Dead Dog Talking

Posthumous, Preposthumous, and Preposterous Canine Narration in Charles Siebert's *Angus*

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Talking, and narrating, dogs run more or less cynically through Western literature, from Lucian via Miguel de Cervantes to Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Pynchon. The talking canine forms a veritable literary tradition, thus familiarizing the seeming strangeness of this wildly unnatural phenomenon by making it a nearly domesticated literary trope. There is, however, a more extreme subset in the long line of loquacious canines: the supernatural case of the talking dead dog. This chapter probes the narrational peculiarities of posthumous canines' tales by reading Charles Siebert's novel *Angus* (2000). A talking dead dog doubly violates the usual state of affairs; unlike actual humans, dogs never really possess the ability to speak or narrate, and unlike human characters, dead dogs rarely make posthumous (ghostly or zombie) appearances in literature. In Siebert, the situation is even more preposterous, for Angus – the narrating dog – occupies, like the proverbial Schrödinger's cat, an ambiguous space between life and death.[1]

If we are to believe our ears, dogs do talk. A YouTube search on "talking dogs" yields some 9,590,000 videos featuring loquacious or at least noisy man's best friends engaging in what is commonly regarded as a distinctively human ability. If we doubt our ears or the auditory reliability of pet lovers' cute footage, we can turn to the abundant literature on the spoken or linguistic skills of dogs, ranging from zoosemiotics to popular pet guides, to assure faith in canid communication. Titles such as *Tail Talk: Understanding the Secret Language of Dogs* (2007), *Dog Language* (1997), *If Dogs Could Talk: Exploring the Canine Mind* (2005), *The Rosetta Bone: The Key to Communication between Humans and Canines* (2004), and *Tales from the Dog Listener* (2006) are by no means uncommon on the market.[2]

As most of these titles indicate, dog talk and talking dogs hinge on the metaphor of human speech or, more generally, on the anthropomorphization of speechless animals. But dogs are by no means silent, as any

insomniac will testify. Spectrographic evidence shows that canids have eight basic sound types (Fox and Cohen 1977). The vocal apparatus of a canine can produce "whines (including shorter yips and yelps, and longer, softer whimpers), screams, barks, growls, coos, howls, mews, and grunts" (Fox and Cohen 1977, 735), but communication also happens "by means of more 'mechanical' sounds such as clicking and tooth-snapping" (Fox and Cohen 1977, 738). The capability of producing these sounds, of course, does not imply an ability to speak, but it does make anthropomorphization easier than is the case in famously reticent fish, snakes, or pet spiders, not to mention insects.

We may never know the truth about dogs' actual mental or linguistic abilities, unless it lies in the very anthropomorphism. Friedrich Nietzsche's famous 1873 dictum on that trope states: "What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms [...]" (Nietzsche 1989, 250).[3] It is perhaps in keeping with Nietzsche's point that we could easily imagine this statement emitting from a schnauzer's snout, especially if we bear in mind the similar looks of the philosopher and the dog in question. The Nietzsche quotation derives from "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense" (1873), which speculates, among other things, what it would be like to be a gnat, a century before Thomas Nagel posed the same question about a bat.[4] Nietzsche writes:

> if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that it too swims through the air with this same pathos and feels within itself the flying center of this world. Nothing in nature is so contemptible and insignificant that it would not immediately be swollen up like a balloon by the slightest touch of that power of knowledge [...].
>
> (Nietzsche 1989, 246)[5]

How does Nietzsche know the thoughts and feelings of a speechless insect? Probably he does not, but projects his personal views to the external world and to its creatures. Although Nietzsche states, in the next sentence, that "the philosopher [...] believes he sees the eyes of the universe focused telescopically from all directions upon his actions and thoughts", it could rather be that he presumes, or imagines, the universe to act or, more precisely, exist according to his conception of it.

The human and nonhuman mingle in Nietzsche's rhetoric in telling ways. His answer to the question about the truth, for instance, vacillates between the two realms. The German *Heer* means both "army" and "herd" or "host" (a group of animals, for instance, or cloud of gnats or other insects). Although the movable army is the most felicitous translation in this connection, the nonhuman option naggingly resonates there as well.

Speaking Animals and the Posthuman

As Margo DeMello states, the long-standing tradition of "animal speaking and writing" surfaces on different levels of oral and literary culture, and ranges from everyday pet talk and myths to poetry and written narratives (DeMello 2013, 1). The human/nonhuman animal communication of this kind can be conceived of as ventriloquism (people voicing nonhuman animal minds) or mediation (nonhuman animals used as relays between human minds) (DeMello 2013, 1, 4; Morstad 2013, 200). In Karla Armbruster's view, talking animal stories, and their readers, almost invariably show a longing for a genuine understanding of the otherness of nonhuman animals (Armbruster 2013, 19). She asks how the literary criticism tapping from combinations of animal studies and literary/cultural studies could sustain that longing or desire, especially in connection with the literary representations of nonhuman animal voices and minds (Armbruster 2013, 19). Armbruster is the only literary critic to have published a scholarly article on *Angus* to date and is therefore an important dialogist in my reading, both theoretically and interpretatively.[6] She takes cue of Cary Wolfe's 2009 notion that the introduction of posthumanism to animal studies has often resulted in applications that still cling to the humanist subject and, consequently, anthropocentrism. Wolfe problematizes, following the tracks of Jacques Derrida, the first-person plural as simultaneously including and excluding:

> "we" are always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being – not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, which we share, as animals, with animals, but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicality of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a radically a human precondition for our subjectivity, for what makes us human.
>
> (Wolfe 2009, 571)

What could this reconfiguration of the human/nonhuman divide mean to literary criticism? Quite devastating changes, if Susan McHugh's notion of literary studies is correct: "a systematic approach to reading animals involves coming to terms with a discipline that in many ways appears organized by the studied avoidance of just such questioning" (McHugh 2009, 487). The re-examination of disciplinary practices as prompted by the new configuration would radically reframe literature's place "in a larger universe of communication, response, and exchange, which now includes manifold other species" (Wolfe 2009, 571). Armbruster locates the listening to "the animal voices in literature" as a beginning of that reframing (Armbruster 2013, 20). I would like to add another mode of reception to this posthuman constellation: the

reading of *human noises* in nonhuman animal discourses as well. In my reading of Siebert's *Angus*, I will trace not only the presumed voicing of a dog's cognition, as Armbruster does, but also the human, cultural interferences in it.

Narratives of Speaking Dogs

Literary imagination, especially in the form of narrative fiction, does testify to the speaking abilities of dogs. There is indeed a long tradition of talking, philosophizing, and narrating dogs in Western literature. One might initially think of such loquacious canines as the one in Kafka's late story "Investigations of a Dog" (1922). Kafka's deeply troubled animal attempts to tackle a series of metaphysical questions, starting from the ultimate one about the source and origin of (dog) food. However, the tradition of loquacious dogs runs quite a bit further than the first decades of the twentieth century, in fact to antiquity and hence the beginning of Western philosophy and literature.[7]

Dogs in literature are conventionally eager to talk to one another, but Kafka's canine is alienated from his community and has no one of his species to talk to. Still, we, as readers, witness his soliloquy or investigative monologue. This puts us in the position of the "grazed witness who understands – or thinks that s/he understands – the language of the dog" (Ziolkowski 1983, 114). This is what happens also in *Angus*, but with an extra twist of interpretive challenge: we are to believe that we understand the language of a canine who is dead or on the verge of dying.

What constitutes language, speech, and reading in connection with dogs mobilizes a Nietzschean army, host, or herd of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms. Language is to be acquired from the dog herself, but not solely from her mouth. Not only a nonhuman animal's body language but also her whole lived and experienced reality, inner sensibility included, forms what can be labeled as "language" (Kate Soper as quoted in Armbruster 2013, 24).

The thriving of nonhuman narrators in fiction has, predictably, caught narratologists' attention. In their useful analysis of the phenomenon of nonhuman storytelling, Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck note "the paradoxical idea that readers are invited to reflect upon aspects of human life when reading the fictional life stories of nonhuman narrators" and that "these narratives highlight or even challenge our conception of the human" (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 68–69). Previous literary critical and narratological accounts of nonhuman narration have had recourse to concepts such as estrangement, defamiliarization, and the unnatural (Shklovsky 1965; Richardson 2006; Alber et al. 2010). Bernaerts and his co-writers, however, understand this phenomenon as "the result of a *double dialectic* of empathy and defamiliarization, human

and nonhuman experientiality" (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 69; emphasis in original). This means that

> [n]on-human narrators project human experience onto creature 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 nonhuman narrators, who may question (defamiliarize) some of the readers' assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness.
>
> (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 69)

Literature is capable of creating an illusion of an experience from a nonhuman animal's or a dead being's perspective (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 76–77). What this means for human readers is, according to the writers, that they may recognize the simultaneous similarity and otherness of nonhumans (dogness and humanness of dogs, as well as dogness and other nonhuman animalness of humans), and consequently, anthropocentric ideologies can be destabilized (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 74). These ideologies are perhaps shaken or tilted but not seriously reorganized in the very theory of nonhuman narrators as presented by Bernaerts and his group. While it is true that the last sentence in their article boldly states that "[h]uman and nonhuman experientiality are always caught up in a dialectic, so that their boundaries are constantly renegotiated as a result of complex historical and cultural dynamics" (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 89), the penultimate sentence shows definite human bias and thus reduces the destabilizing potential of nonhuman narration:

> nonhuman narration may push back the limits of human experientiality – the audience's repertoire of beliefs and values – by inviting them to engage with characters and experiences that they construe as strange and "unnatural", but which are in fact the products of the human creativity of their authors – and of readers' own imaginings and interpretations.
>
> (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 89)

Angus's Language and Literary Lineage

Siebert's *Angus* is a first-person memoir of a Jack Russell terrier, narrated not on his deathbed but out in the woods where he is awaiting death after having been attacked by a coyote. He eloquently spins his tale for 150 pages, while he feels his body and mind disintegrating. Although in pain, he manages to narrate his life story, starting from his puppy months and ending in the present of his final hours. Like Kafka's investigating dog, Angus is cut off from his canine community, but he does have an

outstanding command of the English language. He knows the English names for the constellations in the sky and the British and American typonyms, and he proficiently uses such words and expressions as "atom", "absorbing disquiet", and "disassemblage" placed in ornate syntax:

> And then I went into the unfurnished, the room's forgotten, quadrants, the spaces orphaned by your designs, sniffing out wraiths, absorbing disquiet, knowing no hierarchy of air, no best place in the room to be; knowing in my bones that nothing is what it appears, that objects, too, ache, the way that all atom-arrangements do, for disassemblage.
>
> (Siebert 2000, 51)

He also provides etymological explanations of terrier (of *terra*, "of the earth") (ibid., 38), and quotes a long passage from a book on the origins of his own breed, Jack Russell terrier (ibid., 54–55). His syntax and style vary dynamically, with the linguistic register ranging from the sophisticated to the cuddly. For instance, perhaps for sentimental reasons, he uses pet names for his guardians, Huge-Head and Sweet-Voice. His narration is aimed at a human narratee, Sweet-Voice, not at another dog as is customary in the classic cases of talking dogs.

Angus is not, hence, a dead dog talking in the literal sense of the expression. Rather, he is like a dead man walking – in the idiomatic, metaphorical sense of the phrase. A dead man walking is an inmate on death row awaiting his execution; he is still alive but certain to be killed and therefore seen as already dead. In the sense of inevitable mortality, the expression applies to all living persons, who will eventually die and, analogously, to all talking dogs, who will become (talking) dead dogs. Hence, the awkward or preposterous term *preposthumous*.[8]

Besides being between life and death, Angus is also, at least nominally, another kind of hybrid. He is a Jack Russell. The breed carries the name of its 1819 pedigree developer, the Reverend Jack Russell; the canine is, thus, the namesake of a long-dead human being (ibid., 54). His first name, Angus, points to two directions. First, he can be interpreted as being a dog in the anagrammatic disguise of a Latin sheep (*agnus*), or perhaps a strange amalgamation of the two. Second, his guardians jokingly dub him an angel (ibid., 75), an intermediary being between humans and gods, earth and heaven, and, significantly, between the living and the deceased. Christopher Merrill even connects Angus's angelic aspects to the elegiacally mystical spheres of Rainer Maria Rilke:

> Angus is a sort of Rilkean angel, wiser than humankind deserves; and although he inhabited our "sphere of worry" for only a short while, he left behind a profound meditation of last things – a sharp-toothed message from the edge of the field in which, sooner or later, we all find ourselves.
>
> (Merrill 2000, [2])

Merrill's reading is permeated with other literary heredity as well:

> What if *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* had been written from a dog's point of view? In *Angus*, Leo Tolstoy meets Jack London, and the result is a contemporary call of the wild, which is by turns heart-breaking and hilarious.
>
> (Merrill 2000, [2])

If Josef K., in the end of *The Trial*, dies "like a dog" (Kafka 1999, 229), Angus passes away over the course of his narrative, like a man or, more particularly, a man of letters.

There is certainly more to the literary pedigree of Siebert's little novel and its protagonist. The third chapter of miniature-sized *Angus* starts with a line reminiscent of the veritable whale of an American novel, *Moby-Dick*: "Angus. They call me Angus" (Siebert 2000, 19). Just as Ishmael's true name and identity remain secrets, so are Angus's actual designation (if there is such a nominal system among dogs) and self undisclosed. Both *Moby-Dick* and *Angus* are about calling, language's attempt to name, describe, control, or hide the world and the entities in it. He asks himself: "What is Angus? What am I without that two-beat tug on my heart?" (Ibid., 52). And then he urges himself, curiously with the second-person address: "Go back now, Angus, toward your own namelessness, to the time before they arrived [...] and brought you here [...]" (ibid., 52). Name seems to be of utmost importance for Angus, even when the period before it was given to him is being recollected.

The Adamic project of naming the objects of the storyworld is given an animal twist in Angus's first-person narration. He is aware of the imposed, arbitrary, and conventional quality of name-giving, even to the degree that he chooses to disobey language's functional power when he pleases: "I go by and, when it suits me, come to, Angus" (ibid., 19). He was given that name at the age of two months, nine months prior to his fatal accident, but that nameless period of his life is by no means devoid of language. The name came along with the puppy's new owner couple, "they", and with it the supposedly submissive position in the pack of two humans and a canine.

A first-person autodiegetic narrator, Angus is free to articulate what and how he senses, but remains firmly tied to the flexible leash of the English language. In the narrative universe of his own making, Angus executes his self-imposed right of naming. He does not call his male and female guardians by their human names but systematically dubs them Huge-Head and Sweet-Voice, respectively (28 and onward). This is clearly a marking strategy. The misnaming does not derive from a lack of knowledge or understanding because he invariably provides place names in their accurate forms: for instance, "a few drinks at the Star Inn, in St. Just, the little Cornish village at the far western tip of England where we lived last fall and winter before flying home to this side of the earth

[…]" (ibid., 29). The difference between the canine and human naming seems to relate to emotions, to "puppy love" for his guardians, which is articulated with nicknames of endearment, whereas the neutral names are given in their standard forms.

Angus's idiolect features some mild deviations from standard English, as if to give an impression of a nonhuman language and, with it, of a nonhuman worldview. Karla Armbruster acutely notices Angus's unconventional use of language, including sensory images for fundamental memories and the term "tug" for a dog's name (implying the bond tugging the animal toward the caller) (Armbruster 2013, 28). The tug also functions as a metalinguistic concept for the morphological structure of name. Thus, Angus is a "[t]wo- beat tug" (Siebert 2000, 57), and he also tears, in true terrier style, a number of other dog names into syllables (ibid., 58, 104). There are also other, more striking idiosyncrasies in Angus's parlance. He seems to treat pronoun and verb forms liberally, but there is a cynomorphic logic guiding the infelicities. For Angus, "me" signifies dog as a species. Hence, dog in the plural is "me's" (ibid., 25, 104, 123). By extension, "me" sometimes includes Huge-Head and Sweet-Voice, the humans he bonds with: "He is here. Is me. I am Angus" (ibid., 57).

On the basis of his whole narration, Angus's language skills seem exceptionally developed. He clearly understands the language spoken in the human world around him, as well as reports characters' speech and gives place names accurately. During his first months of existence, however, human speech sounds cartoon-like in his puppy ears: "Blab, blab, blab" (ibid., 28, 71, 76). In his retrospective autobiographical narrative, different layers of time and development are simultaneously present and therefore make his linguistic abilities seem oddly asymmetrical or selective. For instance, the last "blab, blab" section (ibid., 76) surfaces in the linguistic universe of Sweet-Voice listening to the radio and commenting on its science interview, with each of the three voices correctly reported by Angus – or perhaps not quite. If the "blab, blab" layer represents Angus the pup's limited understanding of human language, returning to that scene with an adult dog's mind does not rescue the signification of the spoken utterances. The linguistic reconstruction of the incident is therefore a fictional dramatization or re-enactment rather than an actual account of what really was said. What Angus crystallizes at the end of the scene and chapter, applies to him as well: "So many layers and tones it has, your world" (ibid., 77).

The radio interview that Sweet-Voice happens to listen to deals with the possibility of building a machine capable of translating barks into words.[9] When the inventor is about to demonstrate his miraculous apparatus, the broadcast technology fails, leaving the listeners in a quandary about what dogs really want: "a deep, warbly, metallic voice sounded: 'I want to…,' then broke into shards of static" (ibid., 77). This is reminiscent of science fiction movies in which translation devices customarily

turn alien voices into tinny but comprehensible American English. At the beginning of the following three chapters, the dying Angus returns to the possibility of a translation machine and the question of dog's needs (ibid., 79, 81, 91) as well as elsewhere in the novel (ibid., 129). The translatability or, more generally, communicability of animal and human sensibilities and minds seems to be a pivotal question in the whole novel.

Interspecies communication or mindreading does not require a machine or software to function. Angus's Theory of Mind is of the second degree when he momentarily feels that Sweet-Voice knows what he is thinking, although "she is too impatient to hunt for the words" to express it (ibid., 105). Mindreading thus runs both ways. I suggest that this two-way traffic in *Angus* also applies to the realm which is, to continue and emulate Angus's metaphor, the veritable hunting ground or pasture of words: literature.

Angus's lineage is literary. The Reverend Jack Russell, who discovered and named the terrier breed in the May of 1819, did not walk empty-handed around Magdalen Meadow toward Marston, Oxfordshire. He had, according to a lengthy quotation from a dog book, "Horace in hand" – and literature of antiquity in his mind, as the similes describing the encounter with the Ur-terrier Trump suggest:

> [the Reverend Russell] halted, as Acton might have done when he caught sight of Diana desporting in her bath; but unlike that ill-fated hunter, he never budged from the spot till he had won the prize and secured it for his own. She was called Trump, and became the progenitress of that famous race of terriers […].
>
> (Ibid., 54–55)[10]

As a partly negated allusion to the transformation of Acteon into a stag in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the scene nevertheless describes the encounter in terms of hunting. Acteon, the hunter, became prey; Russell, the nonchalant stroller, became a hunter who caught a canid alive. Not surprisingly, Angus's guardians feel a need to purchase books about Jack Russells "in order to learn how best to handle the likes of [that] storied breed" (ibid., 46). Those terriers are both multilayered and consist of many narratives, as the breed's premodifier suggests.

Angus's metaphoric language, too, bears traces of Jack Russells' literary lineage. Referring to dogs' sensibilities, Angus states: "Every day is an open book of devotion to a me" (ibid., 92). In the novel's epilogue, the book metaphor is picked up by the writer of Cabin Journal in connection with the atomic "matter of existence": "It's something like words before they're set down on a page. It's the blankness of the page, inspiration without expression, pure urge […]" (ibid., 172).

As a whole, *Angus* shows that fiction itself is a translation machine of sorts. It is capable of conveying meanings across species or at least

of giving an illusion of such an ability. As in actual translation, some nuances are lost in the process and some meanings even become unintelligible. What is always conveyed is, however, the effort itself, complete with the semantic and cognitive friction, hiatuses, and overall static involved in the very phenomenon of translation. It should be remembered, however, that language is just "one among many different mediated relationships with reality that structure life, both human and nonhuman, at all levels" (Calarco 2014, 621). For Angus, there is no radical difference between verbal and body language: pause for effect equals paws for effect, so to speak.

A hybrid of human and nonhuman spheres of communication and knowledge, Angus is an outlandish creature. He is domesticated but wildly unfamiliar, easily recognizable but utterly strange. The same can be said of *Angus* the novel, and the effects that its narration brings about.

The Strange and Familiar World of Human Animals

Angus's superb command of the English language, complete with its Latinate lexical stratum and other foreign words, and his astonishing knowledge of physics make him a curious canine. However, his well-educated human-like understanding of the world around him is not quite systematic, which allows for the emergence of some typical fable motifs and stock features, such as defamiliarization or estrangement. In *Angus*, encounters with technology particularly tend to trigger instances of making the familiar strange via a dog's eyes and mind.

Angus gives the following account of Huge-Head's and Sweet-Voice's mysterious activities:

> each of them working in their own rooms, sitting upright, motionless, only their hands clacking in front of lit glass boxes where rows of tiny black birds keep alighting and flying off and then settling back down again.
>
> (Siebert 2000, 53)

This tinkering obviously refers to writing on laptops. Nevertheless, the estranged or defamiliarized depiction of writerly activity is in itself a peculiar mixture of different realms of knowledge. Angus does not fully describe the scene in natural or animal terms, but conceives of it as (human) "work" done with non-natural tools ("glass boxes"). The letters on the screen, however, are apprehended as an extended avian metaphor. Angus's dog-minded view of the human world around him is not simply reducible to systematic defamiliarization. The inconsistencies or slips in the system of understanding his surroundings could justifiably be read as lapses in the representation of an animal mind. I would rather interpret the cognitive infidelities as poetic decisions. Angus acts like a creative

writer, first setting a realistic frame of reference and then transposing the familiar scenario to a metaphoric sphere.

Another extended description of the incomprehensible takes place in a building, "in a section of town I think they call Soho":

> First, a glass door opened from the street, letting us into what seemed a very nice room as rooms go, but my masters seemed to know right off that it wasn't ours. This room gave away to a tiny one, not much bigger than a feed trough, the door to which slid open and closed by itself, and the whole of which – I know I didn't dream this – moved.
> (Siebert 2000, 94)

This elevator ride is a nicely executed defamiliarization of an everyday urban activity as understood from a puppy's viewpoint. However, the frame of reference changes radically when the ride is over, and when Angus and his "masters" or guardians start walking down the corridor of their floor, navigating toward their new apartment. Angus produces the following simile as they are proceeding: "It was like we were peeling away the layers of the wild onions I used to dig up around Pollard's Combe, trying to get, at last, to the juicy core" (ibid., 94). This is a curious turn from the customarily canine to the popularly literary. Dogs, Jack Russell terriers included, are not usually known to have a craving for onions, which are in fact lethal for canids, even in small amounts. Here, Angus (or, rather, the author Siebert ventriloquizing him) is mapping the literary and canid domains a bit too forcedly, perhaps producing an unintentionally bland blend. In the human context, the metaphor of peeling an onion, which derives from antiquity but is probably best known from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, commonly refers to the layers of mind, personality, memory, truth, or such, with the core being the ultimate goal to be discovered after shedding the surrounding strata. Finding the right room after discarding false options may fit in this constellation, albeit not without some stylistic uneasiness, not to mention the unlikely idea of a dog participating in peeling tightly structured vegetables. This case of defamiliarization thus tends, not as much toward a maverick mongrel of styles, as toward bad human writing.

Other objects of built environment – such as cars, rooms, farms, dog crates, and airplanes – are also delivered in the form of more or less canid-human hybrid expressions. This utterance manages to both defamiliarize and refamiliarize footwear within the course of one sentence: "I learned to chew to pieces those thick, stinky shadows of traitorous human feet known as shoes" (ibid., 73). The airplane cargo hold is dubbed "the belly of the metal bird" (ibid., 95), and the airplane "the metal bird" (ibid., 53, 118, 119), reminiscent perhaps of the tribal naming of Western aircraft or, more specifically, of the so-called cargo cults. Linguistically, the underdog or pidginized position is shared by canids

and natives alike in the portrayal of unfamiliar, human-made artifacts. Both could be interpreted as being seen from a subaltern viewpoint, yet rendered from a condescending position, which makes the lack of understanding of the real state of affairs cute and charming, as if mimicking the perspective of a human toddler.

Sniffing Backward and Sideways: Reversed and Counterfactual Narration

Dog's short-term memory span is notoriously brief, ranging from around thirty seconds to a few minutes. The long-term or associative memory of dogs can last for years, even for life. Instead of images and memories per se, dogs have imprints of occurrences, positive or negative associations attached to happenings of the past (Horowitz 2010, 223–228). A dog's sense of smell is, by contrast, famously accurate, and the canine mainly relies on it when interpreting the surrounding world (Horowitz 2010, 67–85). Angus's narration goes back and forth in his eleven-month life. The narrative structure and logic of the novel is at least partly motivated by the dog's limited capacity to remember and its well-developed olfactory ability.

In the novel's second chapter, Angus is laying in the woods after the deadly coyote attack and, although he has "never been one to look back" (Siebert 2000, 15), now reports:

> I'm beginning to see everything now, but backward, in recollection, as though my last flash forwards into this forest is illuminating a final flashback: the things that I wasn't thinking when I charged out tonight; the steady train of events, from my life's very beginning, that lead, inevitably, here, to these dark woods […].
>
> (Ibid., 17)

At the near end of his existence, Angus perceives his life-story in a reversed order. Although the retention of "the steady train of events" resembles more human than canine both in its depiction of mind's working and its use of a transportation metaphor, the logic of returning to the past backward is believably dog-like. Contrary to dog's dominant sense of smell, the passage is permeated with visual perception (*see*, *illuminating*, *dark*), metaphoric or literal. I interpret the human traits of memory and perception in this and many other passages of *Angus* as products of dog/human translation. What is lost in translation is the surface layer of expression, the idiomatic articulation of discourse, and what remains stable is the basic structure of narrative.

Angus's going back in story time (and place) in a reversed order does not follow the train but the trail of events, starting from the most recent one, and he surveys the track with his nose down, sniffing. What is an

unusual or unnatural form of human discourse (Richardson 2002, 49), could be imagined to be the most natural one in canine narration. Narrating backward follows the principle of tracking the chronology of odor traces. Angus does not engage in sustained backward narration, which entails consistent reversal of each event, but in the episodic variant in which the episodes follow in a reverse order but the "events of each episode move forward" as in simple flashbacks (Chatman 2009, 33). Episodic flashback narration is not systematic in *Angus*, but telling tends to oscillate between the past events and the present time of the dying narrator. Nevertheless, the trail of odor traces forms the narrative line along which Angus, in his mind, moves to and fro.

Angus's oscillating movement also connects separate and even extreme events along the narrative line or trail. There is an olfactory bloodline between birth and death, Angus notices, when recalling the perinatal and the near-death moment of his life:

> Do you recall, did you ever really know it, the full, drowning scent, like wet, rusted iron, of your own birth's blood?
>
> (Siebert 2000, 21)

> the trail of my own leaking blood, escaping life now on the very same rusty scent that I followed into it.
>
> (Ibid., 22)

The collection of scents in Angus's memory forms a veritable potpourri or rather a historical fragrance, which he describes with the eloquence of a perfumer:

> My life was an ever-shifting sea of scents […]. There were endless air-etched rivulets of scent to travel down: earthworm-moist and butterfly-dust; hoof-hollow, paw-pads, and seagull swill; and all of these trails subsumed in the end by that wider, base-note scent of my life at the Combe: teat, tummy, and straw, lightly baked by a day-long, drowsy sun.
>
> (Ibid., 38–39)

Angus's canine narration is not limited to past events. The trail of scents also leads, in his snout, to future, possible, and nonexistent spheres. The vicinity of death prompts counterfactual storylines in Angus: "a possible future that doesn't at all resemble any one day […] – hope, in other words […]" (ibid., 15–16). The novel's first words are conditionally counterfactual: "If I could lift myself and run again" (ibid., 11). In addition, there is the predictable speculation on the trail not taken, of not going after the coyotes (ibid., 26). The smell of death also forms a "trail of scent that leads nowhere" (ibid., 41); it is a "scent both primordial and

new" (ibid., 42). Death opens up a posthumous scenario as well. Angus, on the verge of drawing his last breath, prophesizes how his guardians will recall a recent moment of happiness:

> Later, when I'm back among them, they'll remember how I went up to her earlier this afternoon here in the north field, how she had to pull me away from her. […] I hopped up onto her lap, knocked off her book, went right into those needy hands, and then farther and on. I put my head on her shoulder.
>
> (Siebert 2000, 155)

The Epilogue can be interpreted as continuing the sniffing strategy of Angus's narration, although the concluding chapter of the book dramatically opens with the statement "Angus is dead" (ibid., 157). The narrator of the Epilogue, the dead dog's guardian who turns out to be very much like Charles Siebert himself, speculates with his wife about what happened to Angus, as if tracking the trail of his fatal incidents, suggesting a fox, bear, and bobcat as the attacker (ibid., 168).

Dog Gone: The Passing of a Nonhuman Animal

The canine narration of *Angus* is posthumous, preposthumous, and even preposterous. Once the dog is dead and passed to discursive silence at the end of the book, what is left of the tale thus voiced? Alice A. Kuzniar sums up her appreciation of the novel:

> Siebert does not so much anthropomorphize [Angus], imputing canine similarity with the human mind, as he probes the gaps between the two that lie at the foundation of the profoundly melancholic desire of one species for another. In so doing, he does not have the dog serve merely as the blithe narrator of external events but tries to imagine or track the dog's own form of consciousness.
>
> (Kuzniar 2006, 61)

In Karla Armbruster's reception,

> the novel conveys a sense of a posthuman world, in which voices come from all sorts of beings (including not just dogs but atoms) [and] the human voice is demoted from its conventional position of authority and control to one among many.
>
> (Armbruster 2013, 31)

These qualities of *Angus* offer "the readers an opportunity to radically re-envision their relationship with other animals (and indeed, with the entire nonhuman world and material reality in general)" (Armbruster

2013, 31). I would like to emphasize some more specific and even problematic narrational points to counterbalance these rather generalizing interpretations.

Performatively, the posthumous canine narration of *Angus* dramatizes the vacillating boundaries between the human and the nonhuman (dead or alive), and how they can be figured in narrative. The oscillation of Angus and his guardians' capabilities, cognition, and experientiality generate curious effects. Angus is a very human nonhuman animal, and his guardians verge on being nonhuman human animals. Especially the counterfactual and backward narration by both Angus and his guardians points to the dogness of humans, not only to the humanness of canids. Instead of multiple voices, I would call this intertwinement of characteristics and porousness of articulations and capabilities with the term "noise", with or without the attribute "cultural". That noise can awaken the reader, who might be comfortably accustomed to the metaphysical notion of discrete species and their separate minds, from her dogmatic – or should I say dog-matic? – slumber. As David Herman states, "fiction provides a domain for staging the dissolution and reconstruction of self-narratives, and for exploring the ontologies in the context of which selves are recognized as such" (Herman 2014, 141).[11] The transspecies relationships imagined and performed in *Angus* are as ambiguous and problematic as in "real life" – but with a literary twist, further complicating the ecology of agents.

Purely formally, there seems to be two ways of interpreting Angus's eloquent monologue or soliloquy. Either it uncynically tends toward sentimentality or, in a more dog-like vein, duplicitously parodies extended death scenes in sentimental narratives (cf. Stewart 1984). In the posthuman context, neither alternative is accurate. Angus reads, not quite an allegorical or a fable-like figure, but more like a quasi-human character, and the styles and reference points of Angus and Siebert merge to a degree of undifferentiability. This hybrid produces, depending on the reader's point of emphasis, either uncontrolled and uneven writing or a serious attempt to account for the reconfiguring of the nonhuman.

In memoriam Foxwarren Sally (1993–2002)

Notes

1 *The Art of Racing in the Dark* (2008) by Garth Stein is also narrated by a dying dog capable of speaking (albeit in a manner poorly understood by humans). Mikhail Bulgakov's novella *A Dog's Heart* (1925) is a more remotely analogous case. The body of Bulgakov's mongrel, Sharik, hosts implanted glands from a dead criminal, and the dog himself virtually dies during the operation. What all this seems to point to is that Bulgakov's dog unequivocally speaks posthumously only. When he is alive in the beginning of the novella, his speech may be merely metaphorical. When he virtually dies

during the operation, he is blessed with the ability to talk. Sharik's voice emits from a hybrid which, in effect, is constituted of two dead bodies, the dog's and the criminal's (for the dog ceases to exist as a dog, when its vital organs are replaced).

2 By Sophie Collins; Roger Abrantes, Alice Rasmussen & Sarah Whitehead; Vilmos Csanyi & Richard E. Quandt; Cheryl S. Smith; and Jan Fennell & Monty Roberts respectively.

3 "Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen […]" (Nietzsche 2009).

4 Unlike the boldly speculating philosopher of the insect world, Nagel chose "bats instead of wasps or flounders because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all" (Nagel 1974, 438).

5 "Könnten wir uns aber mit der Mücke verständigen, so würden wir vernehmen, dass auch sie mit diesem Pathos durch die Luft schwimmt und in sich das fliegende Centrum dieser Welt fühlt. Es ist nichts so verwerflich und gering in der Natur, was nicht durch einen kleinen Anhauch jener Kraft des Erkennens sofort wie ein Schlauch aufgeschwellt würde […]" (Nietzsche 2009).

6 Alice A. Kuzniar provides a brief reading of *Angus* in her *Melancholia's Dog: Reflections on Our Animal Kinship* (2006, 57–61).

7 I will not go into the literary history of talking canines in detail here. For those interested in this tradition, I recommend Theodore Ziolkowski's standard work on the subject, "Talking Dogs: The Caninization of Literature", in his *Varieties of Literary Thematics* (1983). It is unfortunate that the articles on talking dogs in *Speaking for Animals* (2013) do not recognize Ziolkowski's seminal study. See also the two lengthy chapters on talking dogs in Ross Chambers's *Loiterature* (1999, 157–211).

8 Or should I say antemortem? Perimortem? My point is that this state precedes the condition that comes after the moment of death. On the other hand, Angus's tale *is* told after his death, ventriloquized by his guardian, as is apparent on the basis on the Epilogue (see also Armbruster 2013, 28).

9 Perhaps not surprisingly, there actually exists software capable of classifying dog barks and the emotions related to them (see Molnár et al. 2008).

10 This unattributed quotation derives from *A Memoir of the Rev. John Russell and His Out-Of-Door Life* by E. W. Davies (1878); (see Davies 1902, 52).

11 In Caracciolo's wording, the

> confrontation with animal consciousness [is] constrained by the boundaries of the human imagination and that in literary texts such boundaries are renegotiated according to a cultural logic that is inherently and irreducibly anthropocentric. What fiction can do is to call attention to these limitations and stage the impossibility of transcending them in ways that are highly productive for literary interpretation and may sensitize readers to the puzzles of consciousness (both human and animal).
>
> (Caracciolo 2014, 488)

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