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Between Human and Animal

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Abstract. The traditional way of representing animals was either by a metaphor or by anthropomorphization. In parallel with the slowly growing ecological sensitivity of our times, in contemporary literature, animals are depicted as specific subjects. The study surveys a selection of representative works from world literature and groups them into thematic, motivic groups, tracking the route of animal motifs from the Antiquity to the present, with special focus on a set of Hungarian literary works that deserve a place in the "animal canon" of world literature. The survey is aimed at providing the background against which two contemporary Hungarian novels, Zsolt Láng's *Bestiarium Transylvaniae IV* and Zsuzsa Selyem's *Moszkvában esik* [*It's Raining in Moscow*] will be discussed. These novels organically grow out of, but also displace, the outlined literary tradition, basing their aesthetics upon the subversive perceptual, narrative potential of the animal subject.

Keywords: human and animal, contemporary Hungarian literature, Animal Turn, hybridization

Introduction. The Example of the Ortolan

Humans are part of the animal kingdom, biological beings who, through their consciousness, actions, and the transforming work of nature, stand out from their environment, yet at the same time have many strains in common with the animal world. The distance between people and animals has been changing from a historical perspective, but the ideology that assumes humans as superior, not responsible for their environment, still defines human cognition to this day. The processes of alienation are counterbalanced by images conveyed by culture, myths, and literature, which illustrate kinship and interdependence in different ways. The animal figure appearing in art and literature alike can represent a metaphor, sometimes a fearsome opponent which shall be overcome, sometimes a fellow companion.

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Christian religion separates the "Human" from the animal kingdom as regards its essence (the "Human" is the only being created in the image of God, which is in this case Jesus, saviour of only the humans according to St Paul's teachings) and its function (God gives power to the people to dominate the nature). This radical separation between the human world and the animal kingdom has been vigorously criticized, corresponding more broadly to the idea of "posthumanism," which was further developed in the social sciences especially by Claude Lévi-Strauss (the source of this concept is Rousseau's philosophy). The animist religions (African, Asian, American, etc.), the Chinese religions (Confucianism, Taoism), and especially the Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism) completely integrate the animals and the humans in the same universe, without a break in the continuity (the difference is one of degree, not one of nature), all creatures being endowed with a soul, with the same vital principle (of the same "will to live", according to philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer). Theories born against the ideology that the human race is superior operate with the concept of animal subject. This is how Zsuzsa Selyem sums up the behaviour of humans towards the animals:

> For centuries, the relationship between humans and animals has been determined by a hierarchical, dominance-seeking, double-standard practising and privilege-yielding power propaganda. According to this propaganda, at the top of the pyramid, there sits the rational, well-off, and free white man, who has the lesser responsibility towards the lower levels, and deep down has the possibility to use things at his pleasure. Animals are things (mostly misled by a supernatural pretext, hiding from one's own insensitive and egocentric point of view). Attitude to this topic hasn't changed much, but technology, logistics, and the earth's population have. As a result, animals marked out as nourishment live their short-lived lives in cages tailored to their physique, deprived of all freedom of movement, hormone-treated and with antibiotic-swollen bodies until they are butchered and processed at will in slaughterhouse complexes.[1] (Selyem 2015, 856)

Preparing the ortolan delicacy is an example of the inhuman behaviour. Eating ortolans belongs to the French cuisine, but it is banned because it is pushing the species to the brink of extinction. In Zsolna Ugron's novel entitled *Úrilányok Erdélyben* [*By the Black River – A Transylvanian (Love) Story*], we find a way to make it:

1 Translations from Hungarian literature and specialist literature were made by Árpád Kémenes throughout the article.

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> so the exclusive way of making a really delightful ortolan delicacy is to walk out into the woods, trap an ortolan (it mustn't be injured), then the dicky shall walk in good health and cheerfully in a dark mini-chamber, where it will be locked away for forty days without light or food, having to drink the best French cognac, after forty days dying because of the brandy, it shall be eaten whole, what remained of it at least. By that time, his feathers are supposed to be lost and his bones soaked to jelly from the cognac. (Ugron 2016, 210)

In her report on this gastronomic tradition, Natalie Parletta (2019) presents the way it is consumed: "Ritualistically, diners eat the bird feet first in one mouthful with napkins over their heads. Some say the napkin captures the steaming aromas to enhance the gastronomic experience; others contend it hides the act from the eyes of God."

The different definitions of animal welfare are centred around the same concern: to preserve the welfare of animals, in other words, to spare them all of unnecessary suffering. The well-being of the animal encompasses its physical and physiological condition, which implies a satisfactory physical health and a sense of well-being. Animal welfare is defined in five freedoms corresponding to the basic needs of the animal: 1. physiological freedom (absence of hunger and thirst); 2. environmental freedom (absence of discomfort); 3. right to health (absence of diseases and injuries); 4. behavioural freedom (right to the expression of normal animal behaviour); 5. psychological freedom (absence of fear and anxiety). The assurance of these conditions is compulsory to the human society.

The traditional way of representing animals was either by a metaphor or by anthropomorphization. In parallel with the slowly growing ecological sensitivity of our times, animals are depicted as specific subjects in contemporary literature. As follows, the study surveys a selection of representative works from world literature and groups them into thematic, motivic groups, tracking the route of animal motifs from the Antiquity to the present, with special focus on a set of Hungarian literary works that deserve a place in the "animal canon" of world literature. The survey is aimed at providing the background against which two contemporary Hungarian novels, Zsolt Láng's *Bestiarium Transylvaniae IV* and Zsuzsa Selyem's *Moszkvában esik* [*It's Raining in Moscow*] will be discussed. These novels organically grow out of, but also displace, the outlined literary tradition, basing their aesthetics upon the subversive perceptual, narrative potential of the animal subject.

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Metamorphoses

Ancient Greek and Roman mythological stories feature elements of a totemistic cult where gods can appear in the shape of animals (Zeus abducts Europa in the form of a bull, kidnaps Ganymede in the shape of an eagle, and seduces Leda in the form of a swan. The constant epithets used for describing Pallas Athena – *the "owl-eyed"* – and Hera – *the "cow-eyed"* – both betray this link to the animal kingdom.).

The zoomorphic figures in Greek mythology – such as satyrs, centaurs, sirens, and the Sphinx – behave like humans; their whole being is endowed with a number of human features. Nevertheless, their hybridity is frightening as they trigger a certain feeling of ontological horror similar to that excited by stories of metamorphosis. The best-known hybrid monster, the Minotaur, requires human sacrifice, and so do the sirens and the Sphinx, who, on their turn, are also embodiments of the menacing aspects of femininity.

In his mythical narrative poem entitled *Metamorphoses*, Ovid often writes about humans transformed into animals, but these transformations always happen at the end of the story, as an outcome of the plot. Arachne, the self-conceited weaver, is defeated by Pallas Athena, who eventually transforms her into a spider, but the story does not tell the reader anything about the life of the woman turned into a spider. The same can be observed in Lycaon's story, where the protagonist is transformed into a wolf: the ruthless, blood-thirsty king, who attacked Jupiter while he was sleeping, keeps his gruesome character even after being transformed into a wolf. This story presents the point of view of people who are afraid of wolves, but it does not reveal any details on Lycaon's life as a wolf.

Franz Kafka's enigmatic short story, *Metamorphosis*, is horrifying because, although Gregor Samsa's transformation into a bug happens right at the beginning of the story when the protagonist wakes up, the reader is not given any explanation on the reason of this absurd event. It is a story of alienation characteristic of the twentieth century, in which this creature is gradually denied by his family. At first, they are still aware of the fact that the young man who used to look after them now lives in another form, but at the end of the story they regard him only as a disgusting creature they have to get rid of, and, relieved, they go out on a trip when Gregor dies.

The Golden Ass by Apuleius is the first novel in ancient literature which provides explanation on the way human subject can be present within an animal's body. Due to a wrongly performed magic spell, the protagonist called Lucius is transformed into an ass, and taken away by robbers. Although he is always aware of the way he can regain his human shape, at first he chooses to remain in his new form out of sheer curiosity, while later he simply does not have the possibility to eat a rose in order to return to his human state. Finally, being invited into the cult

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of Isis, he succeeds in regaining his human form and tells his adventures. As a medium, he also relates on the stories he has overheard as an animal.

In his writing entitled *A Report to an Academy*, Kafka provides a grotesque and ironic interpretation of this story. This time, it is an ape that transforms into a human being, accepting the social rules and conventions that are part of human life. The same grotesque approach can be captured in Bulgakov's "sci-fi" story *The Heart of a Dog*, written in 1925. A stray dog follows a professor back to his flat in Moscow. The professor gives the dog food, and later, as an experiment, he implants the brain of a man killed in a fight into the dog's skull. The dog starts growing, erects on two feet, starts speaking and behaving like the person who the brain formerly belonged to – a brutal, uneducated barfly. The grateful dog turns into an unbearable person, who inherited from his formal animal being only the predilection for chasing cats. He even gets a job with the help of the representatives of the proletarian power: he kills stray cats and ruins the professor's career with his intolerable behaviour. Fed up with this person's affairs, the doctor and his disciple perform another operation on him, giving back his original dog brain, and reinstate the order. Crossing the human–animal boundary, the writer raises the readers' attention to the negative processes that are going on in society; it is a parody of the ruling mob that is overcoming civilization: those who are helped to power by the Bolsheviks are worse than animals. This satire resembles the one written by Jonathan Swift, who, in *Gulliver's Travels*, presents the wild, instinctual, human-shaped yahoos as the frightening antithesis to the wise, horse-shaped creatures, evoking hilarious and creepy ambivalences in the reader.

Detailed descriptions on animal behaviour can be found in the ancient Greek scholars' works, as well. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) wrote ten volumes about animals. The information these volumes comprise is based partly on his own observations and partly on what he heard from others. One can read, for example, about the idea of reincarnation, as well. The transition between the human and animal conditions can take place in both directions within the same piece of literature. Circe, for example, turned Odysseus's crew into swine, and then, due to Odysseus's insistence, she transformed them back into humans.

People from India regard reincarnation as a natural phenomenon where humans and animals can mutually take each other's form, while Christians believe that only humans possess a soul. In the Islamic culture, the tragic consequences of this metamorphosis are illustrated by Caliph Stork's story from the collection of folk tales *One Thousand and One Nights*, retold by Wilhelm Hauff, an outstanding figure of German Romanticism, and since then it has become popular in Europe as an exemplification of the split character of Romanticism. As a punishment for having forgotten the magic word, the caliph is doomed to remain an animal with human consciousness.

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A blend of fantastic and irrational elements intruding reality explain why in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* Behemoth is sometimes described as a cat who is able to speak and walk on two legs, and sometimes he is presented as a man.

Allegories, Metaphors

In ancient literature, Aesop's and Phaedrus's fables – just like folk tales – feature anthropomorphic animals endowed with the ability of speech and human reason, whose role is to illustrate human relationships interpreted through situations typical of animal life, and the morals of these stories are addressed to people. Animals have allegorical roles in Biblical parables, as well, a well-known example of which is the story of the lost sheep. The mediaeval *Roman de Renart*, the Renaissance and classicist fables, Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs*, and Orwell's *Animal Farm* are all allegorical stories that blend typically human features with situations characteristic to animals in order to present and influence human behaviour. It is enough to recall the well-known Orwellian quotation: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

Animal Destiny as a Symbol

The peak of the satire in Jaroslav Hašek's *Švejk* is the episode when police agent Bretschneider is eaten by the dogs he bought from Švejk, wanting this way to observe and incriminate the dog-dealer, but he proves not to be aware of the fact that dogs have to be fed.

In his novel entitled *Zátony* (The Shallow, 1931), Lóránd Daday, a Hungarian writer from Transylvania, features a dog called Wotan as the narrator. It follows its keeper, a landowner who went blind in the First World War and is gradually deprived of his wealth. Choosing an animal narrator makes it possible for the writer not to provide detailed descriptions of the characters' physical features – animals have an instinct for feeling who is good and who is evil, and so they can focus more easily on the essential features of people's characters. This way, the events can also be presented without any interpretation at all. The dog is a medium that does not look for coherence and antecedents, it only transmits what it can see and hear. The dialogues that take place around him reveal the characters' defencelessness and disillusionment. Dog and owner are equally incapable of action, which is an allusion to the total defencelessness of those whom they represent (i.e. the Hungarians from Transylvania left alone after the change of empire). Unlike humans, animals do not have a sense of judgement.

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This is where the trap of narratorial fiction is hidden: although the events of the ten years blend together, they outline a tendency towards unstoppable decline. At the end of the novel, the dog buries himself alive.

In Tibor Déry's autobiographical short story *Niki: The Story of a Dog* (1955), the relationship between nature and society is presented through the life of a dog. The plot is about the abuses of power of the dictatorship which the owner of the dog falls victim to and the opposite of this line: the gentle and benevolent order that governs Niki's world. The faithful animal dies when she is separated from her owner.

The Animal as a Companion

In Longus' novel *Daphnis and Chloe*, the protagonists, after having been exposed at birth, are saved by sheep and goats, animals that will become their companion and who the couple will return to because they feel happy only in nature, among the animals that brought them up. In the legend of Francesco Assissi, the poet of the mediaeval love of life, one can read that "God's Pauper" used to preach for birds, and he also made peace with the wolf in Gubbio, who eventually promised him to give up with his ferocious way of life and, in return, the population of Gubbio started to feed the wolf. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the situation in which Titania finds herself reveals a strong relationship between humans and animals: "My Oberon! What visions have I seen! / Methought I was enamour'd of an ass."

Classical writers of the twentieth century also present animals as equal counterparts to humans, as real companions, for example, in Thomas Mann's *A Man and His Dog* and Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography* (1933), where city life is presented through the eyes of a dog. The novel is, on the one hand, a criticism of anthropomorphism because the stream of consciousness does not convey a human being's point of view. On the other hand, it is also a parable because both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her dog come from a negatively discriminated minority whose members have to fight for their freedom.

Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes is more than science fiction, it is actually a story of a shocking process. Charlie Gordon, a man with a low IQ, undergoes brain surgery as a result of which he becomes a genius, and then he falls back into his initial state. First, the experiment is carried out on a mouse called Algernon, through which Gordon – now with a remarkably high intelligence – realizes that his mental decline is inevitable. In his last message, where he expresses his desire for life and human dignity, he sends flowers for the laboratory mouse because the animal has become his equal companion.

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The Universal Dignity of Creatures

There are writings in the literature of modernity that present animals in their natural habitat together with a number of accurate ethological observations. This is the way the dog's life is presented in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, or, in Hungarian literature, in István Fekete's novels, where the protagonists are animals – the fox in *Vuk*, the swallow in *Csí*, the owl in *Hú*, and the otter in *Lutra*. In these works, there are only indirect allusions to the human world, the animals' sufferings being caused by the destructive activities of humans.

> In the first version of his theory of evolution, Darwin already lays special emphasis on the importance animal behaviour plays in the evolutionary processes, while his last work entitled *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) is the first book on ethology ever written. Darwin's observations are remarkably accurate, yet, at the same time, he is cautious with conclusions. He states that the principle of evolutionary continuity can be applied not only to the morphological but also to the behavioural features of creatures. Without lessening the importance of the differences between humans and animals, he reveals the biological roots, the evolutionary origins of different human feelings such as anger, rage, love, etc. (Csányi 2002)

In *The Day of the Dolphin*, Robert Merle builds ethological observations into his novel, which can be regarded both as science fiction and as a political parable. The destiny of the dolphins that are able to speak provides a picture of nature at the mercy of humans, an insight into armament race and political manipulations. It is, at the same time, mankind's cry for help, who is worried for the future of the planet. It is a book about the relationship between humans and animals, between the researcher and the establishment funding his work. It also seeks answers to questions such as the responsibility of people carrying out experiments with animals and the ethical concerns regarding such activities. The characters that stay closest to one's heart are the dolphins, who, owing to their innocence and sincerity, are degraded to living bomb-carriers by the omnipresent human viciousness.

Nature fallen prey to human destruction is depicted with shockingly realistic colours in the great Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov's novels. The novel entitled *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* continues the tradition in Russian fiction that Mikhail Bakhtin termed "the polyphonic novel," creating a conscious synthesis of the main trends characteristic of the twentieth-century European fiction. The plot, just like in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, unfolds in three intertwining spheres, which, due to the recurring motifs, mutually convey each other's message: the real, the mythical, and the fantastic. The sphere of reality deals

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with the Soviet regime during the period between the end of the Second World War and the 1980s. Parallels can be traced between the events that take place in nature and social life, between the animal world and that of humans. For example, the fox between the rail lines becomes a symbol, and Buranniy Karanar, the untameable camel, can be interpreted as the alter ego of his owner, Buranniy Yedigay. The vixen ambling between the rail lines, the picture of the ignorant animal suffering from the outcomes of humans' lifestyle predicts in a way the set-up of the whole plot:

> The hungry vixen had to be patient as she searched for prey among the dried-out gullies and the bare ravines. Following along the intertwining, giddily wandering tracks of the small burrowing animals – now furiously digging out a marmot's lair, now waiting until a small jerboa which had been hiding in an underground storm channel jumped out into the open where he could be quickly despatched – she moved quietly as a mouse, slowly and purposefully working her way towards the distant railway. (Aitmatov 1988, 5)

People deprived of the memory of their own past, unsure about their identity can easily be turned into perfect slaves. This is the message left onto us by the Kyrgyz myths and legends, by the Ana-Beiit cemetery, which provide the mythical background for a universal perspective that allows the interpretation of the present-day happenings. The sphere of the fantastic level appears in the positive utopia represented by the society of a remote planet. Its negative counterpart is the operation "Obruch," the purpose of which is to isolate the Earth from the positive influence of this remote civilization.

Myths and reality are blended in another work by Aitmatov, *The Scaffold*, as well, where the tragic events the people are involved in are held together by the destiny of the two wolves. Their sufferings are caused by people's destructive activities, which have gained cosmic dimensions. The wolves are not the only ones that die in the novel. Avdeu, the journalist, also loses his life because he rebels against the band that slaughters the antelopes with machine guns. The journalist is crucified and left alone in the wilderness. The former student of theology relives the story of Christ's sufferings. Although the wolves can see him, they can do nothing to help him. In Avdeu's vision, the female wolf appears as Nature, who cannot defend herself against people's greed and viciousness. In the second part of the novel, the wolves manage to escape, but in their new home the evil shepherd steals their kid, and the good shepherd loses everything: instead of shooting the wolf that is stealing its kid, he shoots his own child. In this Soviet reality, everybody is doomed to die: the animals together with those people who are more than the hypocritical, greedy crowd that endangers its own existence by the brainless destruction of nature.

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The Fantastic Creature – Crisis of the Classical Narrative Tradition

The fantastic creatures that appear in mediaeval bestiaries are embodiments of human desires and fears. At the dawn of the postmodern era, Jorge Luis Borges came out with a collection of imaginary beings, while Julio Cortázar's cronopios[2] stories, which are part of the magical realist paradigm, let fantasy fly without limits.

In his novel series entitled *Bestiarium Transylvaniae* (1997, 2008, 2011), Zsolt Láng shows the presence of fantastic animal narrators being just as self-evident as it was obvious for people in the Antiquity that the hero of Apuleius's novel preserved his human consciousness, while experiencing adventures in the form of an ass. At the same time, ancient literature clearly indicated the fundamental difference between humans, able to communicate with words, and animals that are not. Behemoth, the animal-shaped creature, spoke human words only in Bulgakov's novel; this procedure produced a powerful grotesque-fantastic effect. Zsolt Láng plays with the reader when he leaves the transitions between reality and fantasy unexplained. The plot of Borges's and Cortázar's short stories can be completely integrated into the realm of fantasy, while Láng blends with fantasy elements referring to reality, namely the historical experiences of Hungarians living in Romania.

In the first part of *Bestiarium Transylvaniae*, entitled *Birds of the Sky*, Zsolt Láng provides an insight into the world of the seventeenth-century Transylvanian nobility, blending the genre of the historical novel with the world of mediaeval bestiaries. The plot revolves around baron Sapré, who keeps chasing with his love the always disappearing, ethereal Xénia Vidrányi and, at the same time, treats the Prince and the whole country as his own puppet, using worldly and supernatural powers to achieve his goals. Like in mediaeval bestiaries, the text features a number of living and legendary birds, around which the chapters are structured. These creatures – for example, the human-faced parrot able to look into the future, the dust sparrows born from the dust, the serpent bird, the flame bird, the death bird who sings about the impenetrable silence – appear again and again, playing an active role in shaping the plot. As far as the structure of each chapter is concerned, the solutions chosen can be traced back to the different functions played by the animal characters, Márton Szilágyi (1998, 100) observes. By featuring these creatures, the book succeeds in creating a magic space which helps the reader capture the atmosphere of those times better than any description.

In the middle parts of the series, with the title *Animals of Fire and Water*, there appear a number of imaginary animals – firebirds, the bastard fish, the lavis, the silk-weaver tamaril, the fire worm, or the mirror animal –, which have the

2 *Cronopios* and *famas* are fantastic creatures invented by Julio Cortázar.

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function of moving the plot forward. The plot unfolds along two timelines. In the present of the story, Eremie, the protagonist, sets out from a Moldavian monastery on a journey to Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) to find his relatives. He also wants to find the girl whom he saw in the library. In his visions, he meets Vazul, Prince of Moldavia, also known under the name of Despot, who disseminated the ideas of the Renaissance and Reformation in Moldavia, establishing an academy in Cotnari in 1561. The fantastic creatures are the elements that link the divergent timelines and storylines. The singing worms, for example, sing about the joy of encounter when Eremie finds his surrogate sibling. Sometimes Eremie, the actor-narrator himself, appears in the form of an animal, reiterating the magical elements of the text: "(…) a sound came out of me, unexpectedly and unexplainably even for myself. Hearing my cry, Márta came out of the house and gazed inquisitively, is it a banshee screaming, or what? I was also surprised by this sound. A wolf's howl, a bird's screech, a deer's bellow or the squeak of a rabbit on a hook?" (Láng 2008, 210). According to József Imre Balázs, this procedure can be correlated with the phenomenon of fictionalization of the actor-narrator (2015, 198).

In *Bestiarium Transylvaniae IV. The Animals of the Earth*, Láng presents the last days of Ceauşescu's dictatorship, the 1989 regime change, through a peculiar space structure. The setting of the plot is a city that can be identified as Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare). The "monologues" of the animals that find shelter in the city's sewer system add further details to the events happening on the surface from a grotesque bottom view. The plot gravitates around an adolescent girl called Bori and relates both the events that happen at school and the transitions that take place in the girl's personal life such as her initiation into sexual life. With a puzzle-like structure, the text successfully captures the postmodern scatteredness, dealing with relationships fallen into anarchy and deficient interpersonal relations. The world represented in the book "resists the strategy of homogeneous narratability. What become indispensable are heterogeneity and a multi-coloured, multi-levelled perspective" (Bányai 2016, 43).

"Using 'non-canonical' perceptual strategies (animal perspectives, sounds and smells), the novel reveals a textual world that is, without doubt, referential for the reader, but, at the same time, the referential reading is undone by the narrative twists of the plot" – Judit Pieldner observes (2013, 231). The animal characters have a major role in creating the feeling of uncertainty. For example, one can identify the perspective of the frog, the fish, the star, the mosquito, and the worm, too. During a grotesque conversation, which serves as an introduction, the interlocutors – two young people – are swinging a dead fish and a dead rat in their hands.

The plot is moved forward – in a grotesque and ironical way – by the rat living in the sewer system. He steals the listening device purchased from abroad in order to impress the female, who is eventually devoured after the intercourse. The animal's behaviour mirrors the attitude of the ruthless regime towards its citizens, which

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does not show mercy even to its most devoted servants. The human counterpart of the rat is Gigi, the manager of the Party's cafeteria, who was made to work in the canteen due to the brutality he had shown during police interrogations. He also deceives the woman who does the dishwashing with empty promises, then rapes her with brutality and throws the skinned rat into the fridge, ordering that it should be mixed with the food and cooked. Another character of the same type is the editor-in-chief who, abusing of his position, initiates an intercourse with his humiliated employee's wife. Autocratic regimes used underground cellars as torture chambers, and in 1989 the animals living in the sewer network could overhear these interrogations, which are sometimes quite grotesque: "The state's wall. The people's wall. To smear it with shit, what kind of animal are you?" (Láng 2011, 56) – hears the rat. First Lieutenant Ursu,[3] the Securitate officer with a name of an animal listens with excitement to the noises made by animals during sexual intercourses. Human characters are endowed with animal features like in Ádám Bodor's novels: "So, let him be Pondró, a shivering, naked creature, a slug, let him be so. None of the forms ensuring access to life can be refused. His wound is the body of a larva cocooned into the roles it plays", thinks the girl, the protagonist, about Sebe,[4] the boy she is planning her first sexual intercourse with (Láng 2011, 125). After his uncle's death, who was his protector, First Lieutenant Ursu is taken to a psychiatric institution where he spends his time sitting on a branch of a tree together with Doctor Haris.[5] In Bori's way of thinking, there are dialectic links between the notion of human and that of animal, which become relative at the same time:

> If, for instance, rats didn't live in sewer systems but among velvet upholstered furniture in rooms with lustres, and they ate by the table, it would be more difficult to poison them, probably. Or if dogs kept on two-metre-long chains didn't wag their tails for its keeper approaching with the pail, but they ate from clean bowls and slept in dog beds next to their keepers, they could not be kicked so easily. Probably. (Láng 2011, 73)

On the other hand, the blue-furred rat living in the sewer network under the city is presented in an anthropomorphic way: "he dreams, projects pictures for himself, wants to learn to read and write, to express his thoughts in his own language" (Bányai 2016, 46). As a grotesque inversion, "the language above would hardly be suitable for rendering the ideas of a brain living underground" (Láng 2011, 33). The smell of the underprivileged, manipulated crowd waiting for the Party's Prime Secretary penetrates the sewage system where, feeling the smell, the blue-furred rat is dreaming that:

3 *Urs* is the Romanian equivalent for bear.
4 *Seb* is the Hungarian for wound.
5 *Haris* is corn crake in Hungarian.

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> He will keep eating until the fat on his bald head gets folded and the dirt stuck between the folds looks as if it were hair. And the fatter he gets, the more overwhelmed with fear he is; this is why he keeps eating and gets fatter and fatter. […] He will be huge. Then he will shake himself, the pieces of concrete will fall from his back, and he will be standing in front of Mr Gigi, whom he will swallow in one gulp, and he will swallow even Comrade Dulea together with his chair and telephone […] and he will have so much fear in himself that he will just give a snort, and the black tar from his mouth will flood the people and cover the whole city. (Láng 2011, 122–123)

At the end of the novel, during the revolution, Bori hides from the police in the sewage network, where she meets the rat. The rat's vision will not come true. Light will prevail over darkness, and, instead of terror, people will experience the euphoria of freedom.

Besides the episodes inspired by ethological observations, there are also scenes evoking the magical realism of bestiaries. The singing horse that lives under the ground can be interpreted as a complex symbol. It can be regarded as the embodiment of the indescribable diversity: "The world on the surface is the opposite of the one existing underground; it is the link between trees and egos, the proof of the continuity between past and present" (Láng 2011, 171). Bori's dream of the hero of her school composition that comes to life is a symbol of the unconscious, but, at the same time, it is also a memory of the recent past: once a craftsman, the dispossessed grandfather chases away his horse, which comes back home from the co-operative. Past traumas buried into the unconscious burst to the surface through images of animals. The dog that left the family turns out to have been poisoned by the people of the secret police. The fantastic image of flying moles that turn into blood-sucking bats is disclosed at the end of the novel: the secret police spread poison on pigeons, and this is the reason why there appeared black animals floundering on the ground, which sometimes tried to rise into the air and flew into people's faces causing darkness and provoking horror.

Playful and Ironical Anthropomorphism – A Posthuman Perspective

Theories born against the ideology that the human race is superior operate with the concept of the animal subject. Jacques Derrida (2006) clearly places humans among animals, while Gilles Deleuze (1995) proposes a new interpretation of animal existence. In contemporary art, animals are represented as equal beings.

In the puppet-theatre piece *The Battle of Stalingrad* by Rezo Gabriadze, Georgian writer and director, two horses and two ants appear as equal actors

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in addition to the human figures. Besides, there is a poor little ant, desperately trying to protect her young as the madness of battle ravages the landscape. The evening's last word is given to this creature. "Has anybody counted us ants?" – she pointedly asks (Isherwood 2010).

Anthropomorphism, i.e. feelings projected onto non-human creatures, is presented in a grotesque light in Zsuzsa Selyem's novel entitled *Moszkvában esik* [*It's Raining in Moscow*] (2016). The narrative technique is an ironical counterpart of what we can find in Ádám Bodor's writings, where defenceless, loser characters are endowed with animal features. Zsuzsa Selyem does not explain the inclusion of animal narrators either, the question how and to whom animal narrators address their narration remains open. In this respect, the novel reminds of Lóránd Daday's novel mentioned before. On the other hand, the problem of the animal subject, suggested by the text as a whole, is very pronounced.

The sombre atmosphere created by the presentation of dispossessed people deported to forced labour camps is eased by political jokes: "Radio Yerevan is asked: 'Which one was earlier: the chicken or the egg?' 'Earlier there were both chicken and eggs'"[6] (Selyem 2016, 94). The title of the novel is an allusion to a Romanian woman activist who used to carry out without hesitation any orders coming from Moscow ("'Why is Ana Pauker walking with an umbrella in her hand in the streets of Bucharest in full sunshine?' 'Because it's raining in Moscow.'"). Moreover, it is a hint at the author's main line of reasoning: regarded from a different point of view, the painful historical events in which Zsuzsa Selyem's grandparents were involved might seem to be funny in their absurdity. As a result of the multiplication of the narrators, events are presented from an ironic distance. The scandal that broke out following a bank forgery (one of the family legends) appears in the book as follows: "'Whaaat?' asked one of the crickets, who happened to be called Alain, Alain Badiou (isn't the fellow French?), stopping rubbing his fore legs. 'The years do not tally, my little ant? Then don't count it in years, but in words, and it might yield the number 1927'" (Selyem 2016, 41). The most striking episode is the one in which a bedbug on the wall informs the reader on István Beczásy, the grandfather, who is closed in the prison of the secret police. What the animal says is full of cultural clichés, and intertextuality turns into irony:

> I have to admit, the atmosphere is not very jovial in the cell, but if you are really determined to, and you don't think too much, just let the flow take you, you will always find time to relax, and if you accept the downs in life, and you only have blue and yellow colours, with a bit of creativity you can

6 Relying on an unsolvable paradox, the joke refers to the fact that the political slogans of communism promised prosperity, an earthly Paradise, while in reality there was shortage economy, and not even basic food products could be purchased. Neither eggs nor chicken could be bought, just as there was no flour, sugar, or oil either.

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> mix fifty different shades of green because life is a big journey, and it's up to you where you end up. (Selyem 2016, 71)

In Ihab Hassan's view, postmodernism is characterized by a range of radical epistemological and ontological doubts, which are linked to the decentralized view on the world: "decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decentrement, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimization – let alone more technical terms referring to the rhetoric of irony, rupture, silence" (1987). Traditions ironically turned inside out as part of the game express the unnarratability and the illusory character of grand narratives. Moreover, family stories as part of grand history also become relative because of the one-sidedness of the memory perspective. In 1995, István Beczásy published his memoir with the title *Life behind Barbed Wire. Heavily Censored Edition*.

> My grandfather wrote the story of their forced deportation from the single viewpoint that mattered for him: the organization of agriculture. Political circumstances did not bother him the slightest; he got over them by simply stating that the system is sordid […]; the possible psychological trauma of their separated children did not even come to his mind, or he simply did not know the words how to describe it […]. (Selyem 2016, 33–34)

The brutal interrogation that humans regarded as food are subject to is presented through an animal point of view:

> When Beczásy is dragged by the leg into the cell, there is a moment of silence. Then one of the foods approaches him, tries to feel the pulse at his wrist. He stands up and goes back to his place. Then he approaches him again, and puts his hand on his neck. The others are watching him in silence. Then this food tears a shred from his cassock, takes a leak on it, and starts wiping the blood off the eyes, the face. (Selyem 2016, 79)

The motto of the novel, which is a childhood memory of the author's mother about the place where they were deported, explains the reason why animals have a central role in the novel: "Nothing was there except a huge shack full of mice, frogs, rats, snakes, and all kinds of animals you can imagine" (Selyem 2016, 5). The other motto, taken from Wittgenstein, suggests the impossibility of communication: "If a lion could speak, we could not understand him."

The closing chapter entitled *Circus Finale* is about the stunts performed by monkeys on a gingko tree, evoking the world of Büchner's drama *Wojcek* – a grotesque picture of the history of the twentieth century.

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Conclusions

In the writings that appeared at the end of the last century, the presentation of animal destinies has the role of highlighting the traumas the world of humans had gone through. In the twenty-first century, metamorphoses and transubstantiations think further the possibilities of postmodern hybridization. The parallels resemble the allegories that appear in fables, lacking, however, the unambiguity encountered in fables. The animal narrators have the role of introducing the relativity of values, the pluralization of points of view, distancing the plot from the grand narrative regarded as the only true interpretation, from the possibility of having a unified view on the world, questioning thus the possibility of narrativity.

Contemporary works go beyond the allegorical, metaphorical portrayal of earlier eras, and the anthropomorphization of animal characters. Following the viewpoint of biomorphism, we can clearly observe that they attempt to adopt a just and much more ethical approach. The approach of the discussed contemporary Hungarian novels from Romania can be paralleled with current ethical, philosophical, and legal questions concerning animals as well as with the views of ecocriticism. At the same time, there is a strong emphasis on references that refer to the real context of the works, continuing the tradition of Eastern European artists such as Mikhail Bulgakov or Chingiz Aitmatov. Zsolt Láng's novel relativizes the boundary between humans and animals; Zsuzsa Selyem's work also encourages the reader to reflect on the nature of the animal subject.

Translated from Hungarian by Árpád Kémenes

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