

SADDENING ENCOUNTERS. CHILDREN AND ANIMALS IN ROMANIAN FICTION AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT. *Saddening Encounters. Children and Animals in Romanian Fiction and Beyond.*² The aim of this essay is to give some impetus to a re-reading of classic Romanian literature by taking an approach inspired by Animal and Childhood Studies to larger questions of ideological currents and social cultural phenomena in the Romanian society. I chose four short texts by Ioan Alexandru Brătescu-Voineşti, Elena Fargo, and Ion Barbu that originate from the beginning of the 20th century and are currently considered as part of the Romanian literary canon. They are, at least partially, addressed to children and they all contain violent human-animal encounters. The fact that this element of violence has not prevented the texts from becoming and continuing to be canonical adds a new dimension to Animal Studies scholarship, which has so far mainly mirrored the increasingly “civilised” human-animal relation in countries with an early developing bourgeois social strata where animals became pets and thus friends and family members. The study also challenges the existing interpretations of Romanian literature: instead of applying aesthetic criteria, a thematic thread is followed with reflections on the social relevance of the recurring topos which seems to store a more deeply anchored cultural experience. A closer look at both the “disempowered and oppressed positions” (Feuerstein) that children

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and animals occupy in both literary texts and real-life society poses the practical question of how greater harmony can be created in the future.

Keywords: *animal studies, childhood studies, human-animal encounters, violence, Romanian literature, Barbu, Brătescu-Voinești, Farago*

REZUMAT. *Întâlniri întristătoare. Copii și animale în proza românească și dincolo de ea.* Scopul eseului de față este acela de a da un impuls unei relecturi a literaturii române clasice extinzând o abordare inspirată de studiile despre animale și copilărie la întrebări mai generale despre curente ideologice și fenomene socio-culturale din societatea românească. Am ales patru texte scurte de Ioan Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești, Elena Farago și Ion Barbu, scrise la începutul secolului 20 și aparținând canonului literar românesc. Ele se adresează, cel puțin în parte, copiilor și conțin toate întâlniri violente între uman și animal. Canonizarea unui asemenea tip de întâlniri violente – indicată și pusă în evidență și de alte texte până în prezent – oferă noi sugestii studiilor despre animale, care au reflectat preponderent istoria occidentală a unei relații între uman și animal tot mai „civilizate” de la secolul 18 încoace. Lucrarea contestă și interpretările existente despre literatura română: în loc să aplice criteriile estetice, ea urmărește un fir tematic cu reflecții despre relevanța socială a topos-ului. O privire mai îndeaproape asupra „pozițiilor lipsite de putere și oprimate” (Feuerstein) pe care le ocupă copiii și animalele în literatură și societate dă naștere întrebării despre cum o mai mare armonie ar putea fi creată în viitor.

Cuvinte-cheie: *studii despre animale, studii despre copilărie, întâlniri între uman și animal, violență, literatură română, Barbu, Brătescu-Voinești, Farago*

Introduction

Children harming animals - a recurring motif in Romanian literature

“Playing with other children, the child does what everyone does: tear off the wings of insects, blow up small birds with a straw until they burst.”³ With these words, a literary critic sketches impressions from the childhood memoirs of Herta Müller (2009), the well-known winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature who originates from Romania. The reviewer Trahms (2009) does not quote directly, but rather follows the tone of an inevitability presented by Müller, who

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The original German reads: “Spielt das Kind mit anderen Kindern, tut es, was alle tun: den Insekten die Flügel ausreißen, kleine Vögel mit einem Strohalm aufblasen, bis sie platzen” (Trahms 2009).

strives in her biographic account to take the children's perspective. But why does "everyone" do that? Why should "everyone" or every child do that? In her short review, the author does not question or explain, nor does she place it in the overall narrative. Is animal abuse a typical component of literary and real-life childhoods?

This article focuses on the intersection between children, animals, and violence in Romanian literature. Following the trail laid by Müller, I searched Romanian poetry and prose of diverse authors from the 19th century to the present for encounters between children and animals, and found many passages where children torture animals. The most influential Romanian literary work about childhood in the countryside in the 19th century is by Ion Creangă. In *Amintiri din copilărie*, published 1881-88 (*Memories of my Boyhood, Stories and Tales*, 1978) the author describes how one of the popular student pranks is to use the large, greasy class book to swat flies that settle there by banging the book together at the crucial moment (Creangă 1978, 15). In the evenings, when the protagonist's father comes from work, he and his siblings "would fetch the cats from their nooks in the stove or under the oven and we would rumple their fur and drill them before him so thoroughly that they had a rough time of it; and they couldn't get away, poor cats, before they had scratched and spat at us as we deserved" (38). And their mother mourns: "no living thing can find a shelter in this house because of you" (38).

Also in very contemporary literature that depicts childhoods in the present, authors weave in child-animal encounters that are anything but harmonious. In her novel *Kinderland* (2013), Moldovan author Liliana Corobca describes everyday life in a village in her home country, which is mainly shaped by the labour migration of the parents' generation: most of the children live with grandparents or are on their own. The harsh everyday life of the village provides numerous child-animal contacts. The village animals, like the children live in a basic survival mode, sometimes herded, sometimes hounded by the villagers; against this backdrop, the 12-year-old protagonist Cristina often reflects on ethical issues in the children's treatment of animals, stating: "Children are bad and cruel."⁴

A few years earlier, the Romanian writer Doina Ruști published the novel *Lizoanca* (2009), based on the real case of a sexually abused village child. The 11-year-old heroine of the novel uses the favour and guilty conscience of very different men to access small luxuries like a chocolate croissant or undisturbed TV time. The main threat comes from her violent father, whom she tries to avoid as much as possible, even spending the night outside with other runaway children. After her case becomes publicised by her syphilis condition and makes it into the press, things become more difficult for her once again, and Ruști chooses an

⁴ "Copiii sunt răi și cruzi" (Corobca 2013, 54).

animal tortured by a gang of children, a salamander pierced with a nail, to illustrate the perception of her own life, when at the end of the novel, in the setting of a children's home, she herself felt "the doorman's gaze pierce her like a silver nail. [...] a cold breeze blew over her tense back."⁵

This outline is necessarily incomplete and is intended to serve as an illustrative sketch of the general dynamic in child-animal encounters that can be identified in Romanian literature. My argument is that it occurs too frequently for these scenes to be understood merely as individually used symbolism with meaning confined to the particular literary text. Rather, the violent, conflict-prone nature of the child-animal relationships in these texts seems to me to be representative of family and social norms or conflicts of a larger kind. Herman (2014) suggests that the task of contemporary narratology is to point out paradigms that are linkable and helpful in the study of a "broader system of values and commitments, taking stock of how stories and traditions for analysing them relate to the norms, institutions, and practices that structure academic and other engagements with today's most pressing concerns" (132). This includes inter-species interactions and environmental issues, but also social concerns, such as the status and care of children. I will focus on four shorter texts – one in prose and three poems – from the beginning of the 20th century and will discuss their previous literary-theoretical and pedagogical readings before proposing a critical reading concerning the human- (and more specifically child-) animal relation.

Animals, children and violence in theoretical terms

While my own research draws inspiration from Childhood and Animal Studies, scholarship focusing on intersections between children and animals is relatively scarce (Feuerstein & Nolte-Odhiambo 2017). Flegel (2017) argues that "both occupy disempowered and oppressed positions in adult, human society, and that each is diminished and lessened by association with the other" (xiv). Studies on children and/or animals in Romania and even Eastern and South-Eastern Europe more generally are rare, whether anthropological, cultural-historical, or literary. Yet literary depictions of children can provide a useful perspective on the society of their time and the position and perspectives attributed to them; and literary animals can provide an insight into humans' dealings with "the other." There are many critical approaches to thinking beyond the human-animal binary. Authors interested in the interface of human children and non-human animals point out that children are ultimately the "animal

⁵ "simțea ochii portarului cum îi intrau în măduvă, ca un cui de argint. [...] Peste spatele înțepenit se lăsase încet un curent rece" (Ruști 2009, 312).

people” who need to be tamed and educated from the point of view of adult caregivers and society (Melson 2001, 35). In doing so, they also remove the human-animal boundary and point to the dependent character of both children and animals on the adult world and social power structures.

Animal and Childhood Studies alike state that the status of children and animals changed in the 19th century, from an economic to a sentimental investment (see Pearson in: Feuerstein 2017, xiv). Judged from literary representations and socio-historical studies, this does not so much seem to be the case for the Romanian cultural sphere. My argument, therefore, is that Childhood and Animal Studies are blind in one eye and have so far (almost) only looked at the trends in what could be described as Western industrialised nations. A conglomerate of industrialisation, declining rural and increasingly urban culture, philosophically enlightened education, rationalisation in thought and action, and at the same time an – almost sentimental – turn to the nuclear family in connection with the spread of bourgeois lifestyles, since the 19th century at the latest, led to the focus on children to be raised and educated in the protection of the family (Ariès 2003, 47-48) and the integration of pets as companions into families’ lives (Flegel 2017, xiv). An agrarian country like Romania obviously facilitates other experiences and other kinds of encounters in the social fabric in general and in the human-animal relationship in particular,⁶ i.e. also between animals and humans and humans and nature in a broader sense than a large-scale industrialised and urbanised society. But I do not find this explanation satisfactory: my assumption is that the conflicted human-animal relationships found in the literary canon can be seen as a symptom of a deeper conflict between striving for modernisation and attachment to tradition that deserves further attention.

Particularly striking is the aspect of violence (or cruelty) that characterises the human-nature and especially the child-animal relationship. I define violence as behaviour on the part of the literary human child that harms literary non-human animals. In doing so, I propose that fundamental questions can be asked about interspecies life, about the relationship of humans as part or even vs. nature; also about the value of categories like healthy/injured/disabled or simply “different” – and in relation to Romania, modernisation and civilisation questions mirrored in this. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the question of power relations as a whole. But it resonates in the background: Who controls nature – or does it control and threaten humans? And what does the explicit topic of violence between children and animals conceal? A silencing of

⁶ See Terian’s analysis (2018) of the 1920 novel *Ion* by Liviu Rebreanu in terms of the phrases comparing human and canine lives and using animal references to delve into the psychological disposition of the characters.

interpersonal and also social violence seems to be at play in the texts I discuss and perhaps we can even go so far as to speak of a reflection of the repeatedly experienced structural and imperial violence that Romanians lived through (cf. Boatcă/Pârvulescu 2020).

However, it is surprising how in some literary texts of the early 20th century the matter-of-factness with which the “torturing of animals” is outlined by Creangă at the end of the 19th century – deplorable but tolerated (by the mother) – is rewritten and human-animal encounters are literarily transformed into more fundamental pedagogical, ethical, and philosophical positions. There is still no mention of pets, who appeared even in cities only sporadically. Animals in these times were a necessary labour force in the countryside; the dog was a guard dog, a sheep dog, or a hunting dog, thus primarily having a functional relationship with its owners and other people around it. But also in cities, working animals predominated (for instance horses pulling carriages or the first trams). It was for these working and farm animals that the first animal welfare societies were founded.⁷ It is therefore relevant that the protagonists by the authors I will present here are not domestic animals or pet cats and dogs, but rather a bird’s family, a stray dog, a beetle, and a snail. The starting point of my analysis is the inter-species *encounter*, which is a fitting concept because it is neutral and allows for an unbiased perspective on the meeting of different subjects in a contact zone (Böhm and Ullrich 2019, 1-2). It even allows for the decentring of human agency as is partly the case in the texts where animal protagonists feature prominently, sometimes more prominently than human ones.

Selection of sources and their previous readings

Before going in more detail into the small selection of source texts chosen for this essay, I will briefly introduce them and also classify them according to the relevance attributed to them in the Romanian literary canon. As I read literature in the sense of an extended hermeneutics, which “aims at a greater understanding of cultural contexts” (Bachmann-Medick 2016, 48), I would like to emphasise that the literary texts I will present in this article can all be described as canonical and are well known in Romania. In this sense, they can be understood as part of the country’s collective memory (Erll 2005, 249-276). Their special character as educational texts – most of the texts I will analyse in

⁷ See for instance the accountability report of the Society for the Protection of Animals for the years 1905-1906 (Societatea pentru protecțiunea animalelor 1906). The historian Adrian Majuru (without specification) mentions on a web page of the Bucharest City Museum that only after the First World War would pets in the narrower sense become more widespread, or animal welfare societies emerge.

this essay belonged, at least until very recently, to the literary school canon and some still do – makes them into “cultural texts” (Assmann 1995) as cultures would describe themselves through their respective literary canons (Erl 2005, 261). The question inevitably arises as to what kind of pattern concerning the human-animal relationship is transmitted in the texts as well as what kind of culture does the kind and character of the literary human (child) and the literary animal reflect.

The first text I will analyse is Ioan Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești's (1868-1946) “Puiul” [The Chick], published in his first prose text volume in 1908. In the story, which the author is said to have written for his own children, a quail cub injured by a hunter is unable to make the journey south for winter and ends up dying abandoned. Next I will look at Elena Farago's (1878-1954) “Cățelușul Șchiop” [The Lamé Dog] and “Gândăcelul” [The Beetle], first published in a volume of poems in 1906. These poems are written in the first person from the animals' perspective and depict the animals being injured (the dog) and killed (the beetle) while addressing the responsible child. The final text I will analyse is “După melci” [After snails] published in 1921, a balladic text written by the poet (and mathematician) Ion Barbu (1895-1961), a very respected Romanian poet of the interwar period. Here, a child gives what can be described as a self-incriminating report about his culpability in the death of a snail.

These texts date from the early 20th century, when contrasts between political factions were playing out, literary journals had become important debating media, and social, political and cultural questions were closely intertwined. The overarching question was and remained that of the nation and the concept of what is “specifically Romanian” (Trencsényi 2013) mixed with discourses of modernisation and “the social” (Cotoi 2020). In this context, peasants and rural locations were important points of reference. Notwithstanding, the living conditions of the peasants, who were by far the majority of the population, were and remained precarious. The same was true for farm animals, but also for the labour force, including in many cases women and children (for a portrait of the social strata supported by statistics, see Hitchins 1994, 155-201). Brătescu-Voinești, the offspring of a family of landowners and a conservative writer, can be assigned to Sămănătorism, a cultural-ideological current that was concerned with imparting culture to the peasants while valuing their traditions and folklore, conceived as part of Romanian values and an essential component of the Romanian nation. As he grew older, the writer, who was politically in favour of the National Liberal Party and professionally active as a judge, became increasingly anti-Semitic and a right-wing supporter of the fascist Iron Guard. Along with other authors of Sămănătorism, the literary scholar Stiehler thus

lists him among the contributors to a “prehistory of the Romanian variant of blood and soil literature.”⁸

In contrast, Elena Farago, who was orphaned in childhood and had to drop out of school, was active in Marxist circles at an early age and published for the first time in the journal *România muncitoare* [Working Romania] (Papastate 1978, 5). The violent peasant uprising in 1907, which was put down violently because the political-intellectual elite completely failed to recognise the social realities despite everything, made a strong impression on her, as is clear from her letters to Nicolae Iorga, in which she – empathising with the peasant women and their children who had become homeless and widowed or orphaned – describes her observations and encounters (Papastate 1978, 9-11). Barbu, whose father was a lawyer, was a mathematician in his “first profession” and remained active as a mathematician in parallel to his writing. Throughout his life, he was relatively apolitical, but in his old age he was also a sympathiser of the Iron Guard. In terms of literary trends, it is still disputed today whether his literature should be classified as modernist or anti-modernist, especially since he himself always expressed contradictory views on the subject (Codreanu 2011, 155).

Literary texts by these three authors became well known and their influence continues to the present day. Brătescu-Voinești and Farago are especially known for their writings addressed to children. “Puiul” was the first of these works by Brătescu Voinești, and Farago’s texts analysed in my article were her earliest contributions to this genre. “După melci” is the most commonly known poem by Barbu. The fact that the texts are often part of the Romanian school canon in Romanian also contributes to this familiarity. “Cățelușul Șchiop” is part of the lessons in grade one or two; “Puiul” was until recently part of the school material for grade four or five; Barbu’s “După melci” is in many cases part of the compulsory material for the upper school.

Remarkable nevertheless is the considerable gap between the high profile of the texts in Romania in general, on the one hand, and the irrelevance attributed to them by Romanian literary critics on the other (with the exception of Barbu’s poem). The little attention paid to the texts of Brătescu-Voinești and Farago by literary critics has to do with their classification as “children’s literature,” which quite obviously does not enjoy a high status within the critical discipline of Romanian literature. In the latest, revised and supplemented edition *Istoria critică a literaturii române* by Nicolae Manolescu, the chapter “Other literary genres” is newly included, of which just half a page is devoted to children’s and young adult literature (Manolescu 2019: 1373). According to Manolescu, from what can be considered children’s literature, Romanian literary criticism is

⁸ “Vorgeschichte der rumänischen Variante der Blut- und Bodendichtung” (Stiehler 2010, 196).

most likely to be interested in fairy tales. Brătescu-Voinești's "Puiul" is mentioned as is Elena Farago, but without any titles of her works. Apart from this, textual aesthetics are fundamentally the focus of Romanian literary criticism. Even though there are critical contributions to the debate on the formation of the canon in Romanian literature, including considerations of interdisciplinary or at least cultural studies opening (Papadima, Damrosch, D'haen 2011), influential literary critics like Mircea Martin (2019) argue against abandoning the aesthetic criterion and fear that a shift towards interdisciplinarity will bring with it a "softening" of critical rigour and the resulting new focus on content and themes will lead to a literary canon resembling a "conglomerate devoid of any rigorous science."⁹

An attempt at a new reading of the classical texts: the literary Animal as indicator of imagined rules of social, creaturely and natural (co-)existence

1 - The animal child as a self-inflicted victim: a pedagogy of obedience (Brătescu-Voinești)

In the story "Puiul" by writer Ioan Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești it is an animal child, the chick of a quail, who becomes a tragic anti-hero. From the first line, the reader, or rather the listener, one could even say the child – because the text is written with oral elements, in which, according to the style, a child is directly addressed – is vividly involved in the events. A quail, "nearly tired to death by fatigue"¹⁰ lands at the edge of a field, where she busily begins to build a nest, hatches her eggs, cares for the hatching chicks, and finally teaches them to fly. The harmony of these processes following the obvious natural plan of nature is finally disturbed by the approach of a hunter, who appears not far away with his hunting dog. As both approach the quail family, the mother instructs her offspring not to move and be quiet. She herself flies up and distracts the dog until she is out of range of the hunter and also knows herself to be safe again. The eldest quail cub, however, does not remain still, but flies up as well, and the hunter wounds it with a bullet before eventually driving off with his cart. "From then on sad days began for the poor chick," because the injured chick, although the mother finds it and brings it back, can no longer learn to fly like the others due to the injury. When the rest of his family starts the flight to the south in autumn, he finally dies abandoned in the cold.

At a first glance, this little tale belongs to the category of those texts that – like many fairy tales – want to frighten children, with the aim of educating

⁹ "Într-un conglomerat lipsit de orice rigoare științifică" (Martin 2019, 10).

¹⁰ The original text can be found online, for example:

https://www.titudorancea.com/z/ioan_al_bratescu_voinesti_puiul.html (06.04.2022).

them at the same time. The text is preceded by the motto: “Sandi, listen to your mother.” The classic version of Little Red Riding Hood also ends with the conclusion that from now on Little Red Riding Hood would always listen to her mother. From the Romanian fairy tale collection, one could mention “The Goat with the Three Little Kids” by Ion Creangă from 1875, in which the children are divided right at the beginning into the two older naughty brothers and the youngest, who is hardworking and well behaved, and thus the necessary consequences are already indicated for the later events, which only the well-behaved youngest child survives. In “Puiul,” an arc of tension is integrated: first, all the chicks are described as “beautiful, well-behaved, obedient.” Then there is an incident “once, around June,” when the eldest chick did not respond quickly enough to the mother’s call, and a young farmer, who was busy mowing, threw his hat at it. But the narrator remains empathetic throughout, leaving it to the mother to comment pedagogically on the event that ended happily, reminding her, “never ignore my word, it can get you worse.” I have already described the third decisive scene and the end of the story earlier.

At a second glance, however, the text remains on a more naturalistic level. Apart from the influx of emotions attributed to the animals, the narrator zooms in as if in a nature film. The industriousness with which the quail builds its nest and finally hatches the eggs is reminiscent of footage of animals one would get in nature documentaries through a film camera. Seasons, country life, nature, animals – the interactions, apart from the fact that quails cannot speak, reflect a natural environment and are close to reality. And the call of the mother quail is also introduced onomatopoeically with “Pitpalac!”. The equilibrium is not disturbed by another, hostile animal involved in the dialogue (cf. above-mentioned fairy tales), but problems arise in the encounter of human and animal, which also corresponds to typical encounters between humans and animals in the countryside.

The particularly emotional atmosphere, which deviates from any documentary character, is created by the empathetic way of narration: When the chick is in danger for the first time, “what fear it went through when it was in the hands of the young lad, ...; his heart beat like the pocket watch in my pocket; but he was lucky.” In addition, there is the direct address to the listener in several places. On the other hand, the quail mother with her great care and responsibility – just like a good mother in the sense of the pedagogical narrative goal – becomes vivid. And the final special thing is that there is no happy ending. Although the two “naughty” little goats in Creangă’s fairy tale are not saved like Little Red Riding Hood and the grandmother, there is still a joyful celebration on the occasion of the wolf killed at the end. But the culprit in this story does not act particularly intentionally; instead, the injured quail chick is more collateral

damage of the encounter with the hunter. The focus is solely on the misbehaviour of the chick, which did not follow the instructions of its mother, and therefore must die in the end. The narrator remains equally empathetic towards him as well as towards the (co-)suffering mother. This intensifies the dramatic effect, and at the same time Brătescu-Voinești remains true to the observation of nature in a Darwinist sense: only the healthy, strong individual survives.

When transferred to Romanian society and socio-political and cultural discourses at the turn of the century – especially since the quail family is quite obviously representative of a human family – the author’s social Darwinist attitude can be deduced from the story. And interestingly, this attitude is perpetuated in the way the story is pedagogically presented to fifth-graders until recently. One textbook asks whether the children approve of the mother leaving the injured child behind, followed by the only positively formulated, and thus ultimately suggestive, questions: “Do you approve it? Why?” (Dumitrescu 1993, 55) The mother’s exuberant love and empathy, which is also to be confirmed in the retelling (“how can you tell...”), already expresses the anticipated system of values that can be associated with the nation idea: Only the healthy brood fulfils the purpose, with all love. Since this love is not up for discussion, the answer as to whether the mother is behaving correctly can ultimately only be answered positively. From this point of view, the narrative gives – like a lot of literature for children and about childhood – “subtle and explicit lessons about whose lives matter” (Nel 2017).

It is a clever interweaving of apparent nature viewing with pedagogical-intentional (“modern”) narrative style that characterises the text; the social Darwinist attitude, which could certainly also be interpreted in racist terms if the story had a slightly different form, is especially reinforced by the end of the story, which, despite all apparent empathy with the chick, does not constitute an exception to the rule of the survival of the fittest (as in the form of a happy ending). On the other hand, this naturalistic approach is infused with a pedagogically conceived component: the chick would have survived if it had more consciously adhered to the rules (of the mother, to be equated with a certain way of life), thus having the possibility of shaping its own life and survival after all.

2 - Animals on the witness stand: the power to speak out (Farago)

Elena Farago takes a completely different perspective. She does not use – as Brătescu-Voinești does – an animal family that illustrates a morality representative of a human family, but engages with the question of the anomaly of being an animal. Just as Montaigne wonders whether he plays with the cat or it plays with him, or Derrida wonders what his cat sees when it sees him naked (Derrida 2002),

she imagines the feelings of a dog or a beetle, respectively, toward a human child who has inflicted injuries on the animals. In relation to the human-animal relationship she wonders, and I use the words of the phenomenologist Cristian Ciocan, who in turn refers to Husserl “how does this relation change if we reverse the perspective? How does this empathetic relation appear starting from the animal side? The question is therefore not only of how humans empathise with animals (the animal understood as an abnormal human), but also how the animals empathise with humans. In this case, the human might be as well—for the animal itself—an ‘abnormal animal’, an abnormality related to its own (animal) normality” (Ciocan 2017, 186). The answer in this case is: the gaze is not an empathetic one, on the contrary: Elena Farago’s animals accuse the human child, their counterpart, of the rudeness and violence with which it denies them a peaceful, healthy co-existence.

The poems, written in eight or nine four-line stanzas, begin to tell their stories from the first-person perspective of the animal, which addresses the child and tells its story, complaining that the child has been so rude and deliberately mean to it. While the text “Cățelușul Șchiop” [The Lame Little Dog] adheres to the first-person perspective throughout, in “Gândăcelul” [The Beetle] in the fifth stanza an omniscient third-person narrator takes over the narrative. This trick is necessary because at this point the child crushes the beetle in his hand: “So cried a cockroach // In the fist that clenched it to break it // And that opened the child afterwards. // What was left of him!”¹¹ While in “Cățelușul Șchiop” the dog himself concludes to have a better heart than the child, here it is the narrator who scolds the child, telling him to report to his parents and to promise to protect any living creature in the future, no matter how small. Interestingly, in both accounts, the children regret their actions: of the child who hurt the little dog so persistently and “out of malice,” it is said: “Now it comes and gives me sugar // and wants to be good.” And in “Gândăcelul” the child is told: “Disgusted by your bad deed // now you cry in vain, child.” So, reference is made to the irreversibility of the action, the consequence that the child must understand – and that in “Gândăcelul” may lead to a change, while in “Cățelușul Șchiop” the conclusion remains that the dog is the morally superior creature.

The pedagogical interpretation seems relatively simple: the reversed perspective – on the injured animal, its suffering and its perspective – is meant as a critical intervention. The fictional child is supposed to experience and learn that other living beings also have a right to exist and to prevent them – by demonstrating that animals are capable of suffering – from torturing and killing

¹¹ The original Romanian texts can be found online at the following sites: <https://www.versuri.ro/versuri/elena-farago-catelusul-schiop/> and <https://www.versuri.ro/versuri/elena-farago-gandacelul-mh17.html> (22.04.2022).

animals. Knowingly or unknowingly, Farago echoes the position of the early advocate of “animal rights,” Jeremy Bentham, and his much-quoted criterion of suffering-capability from the French revolutionary year 1789: “the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” (see Singer [1974] 2022, 28). And she makes this comparative move quite consistently: ultimately, Farago imagines the animal’s perception, ascribing to it feelings, thoughts, and fears as a human would perceive them in the reverse situation. In “Cățelușul Șchiop,” the comparison of playing dogs with playing children – or even cross-species groups playing together – stands out; human and animal are even more similar than in “Gândăcelul” the child and the beetle; the anthropological difference is clearly blurred.

What reinforces Farago’s – today one would say posthumanist – approach is that the animals are given voice here, unlike the human children. In doing so, she takes the opposite approach to “dehumanising” the animal world, but on the contrary, elevates the “sole and sacrosanct dividing line between human and nonhuman—that is, language or, more properly, the logos as meaningful and credible speech” (Seshadri 2012, ix). The animal is given a voice by her to point out its suffering. The theme is not only the indictment of the human child who has so persistently hurt the little dog, but also the description of his disability: “I only have three legs” begins the poem, followed by the nickname by which the dog is teased and the onomatopoeic *top-top* used to illustrate his clumsy movements. The dog describes himself as completely excluded not only from playing with the children, but also from playing with his peers. If one now reverses the perspective and understands the dog as – ultimately – interchangeable, as equal in its suffering to a human child, another possible level of interpretation emerges: the suffering of the one who is physically different, impaired, handicapped, is illustrated and the one to whom this has happened – subordinate to its species – is also given a voice.

Impressive is also the division into good and bad children, and in the case of the latter the deliberate being bad in the sense of violence being exercised “out of malice,” which obviously sets apart the human species from non-human animals. A human being, the text suggests, can be intentionally mean, even malicious, without a special cause. And this view does not exclude the child, who is often innocent in other narrative traditions, on the contrary. To its parents it should vow improvement (“Gândăcelul”). The dog – or more broadly the creature that is hurt – renounces their right to revenge and comes out morally superior (“Cățelușul Șchiop”). So the literary animal as proxy for a real animal or a different species character or simply a hurt creature becomes a moral authority that makes “normal” humans look small.

In relation to German-language literature Alexandra Böhm identifies an “Animal Turn” around 1900 and elaborates how authors around this time try to understand the animal and its soul and, in order to do so, poetically put themselves into the animal as animal (Böhm 2019). The literary animal figure no longer stands metaphorically for humans with certain characteristics, as in a fable, but is empathically explored and becomes a subject in its own right. Farago is not known to have come into contact with corresponding texts. She translated poetry from French symbolists – and even here she refuses a conscious shaping of her poetry according to peculiarities of this current (Papastate 1978, 8). Nevertheless, in her depictions of child-animal encounters, elaborated from the animal’s perspective, the texts presented here are highly critical of what she derives, as Papastate puts it, “from a simple observation of the everyday” (20). However, literary scholars so far, especially with regard to her children’s poems, stick to rather simple readings praising the catchy form, without going deeper into the texts’ content and perspective.

3 - A child feels conflicted: ambiguous results of human self-empowerment (Barbu)

The poem “După melci” [After snails] by Ion Barbu, which dates from 1921, and so slightly later than the literary texts I have already discussed, provides, in a certain sense, the complementary perspective to Farago’s poems. It takes the perspective of the child and traces how the child feels when an animal has lost its life because of him. “După melci” is one of the best-known poems by Dan Barbilian, a mathematician, who in 1919 began a parallel literary career as Ion Barbu, and now ranks among the most important Romanian poets of the interwar period. He is classified as one of the most important representatives of Romanian literary modernism.

The animal with which the encounter takes place in this text is a snail. The animal itself does not speak, but gains character through the repeated rhyming address by the child “Snail, snail, / slimy tail”¹² as well as the twice occurring phrase “Stupid snail, So slow” which are a characteristic of the balladic text. The poem begins with a description of the child world of the protagonist, a childish “I” who situates himself as part of a village crowd of children, and joins a gaggle of girls who go in search of “herbs, flowers, snails.” Not only does

¹² “Melc, melc, // Codobelc”. It is very difficult to translate “codobelc”, since it is an onomatopoeic compound of “without tail” and “snail”, a playful epithet used by children for snails or other mollusks, see dexonline.ro. The proposal for the English translation “slimy tail” comes from Călin Coțoiu, a collaborator of the English editorial staff of Radio Romania International. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations in the following are mine. The original text can be found online: https://www.versuri.ro/versuri/ion-barbu-dupa-melci_db17.html (06.04.2022)

the poem thematise a rural, traditional Romania, where girls wear long braids and traditional aprons; also, the landscape-related vocabulary is markedly sophisticated, with different words for farmland and uncultivated strips of landscape; and finally, familiar spirits of Romanian folklore, such as the *Joimăriță* and *Baba Dochia* appear: uncanny beings imagined by the child in his fears during the fierce snowstorm night that follows the excursion in still innocently beautiful weather during the day. The rural perspective, in which the weather and natural events are perceived more directly and have immediate consequences, also becomes clear from this structuring of the events by seasons, times of day, and weather – from bright, sunny, budding in the morning to twilight and a stormy night.

From the beginning, moreover, the text is constructed in such a way that it is recognizable that the description of the event takes place retrospectively and under a certain moral pressure. In part one, the child presents himself as less good than the other children: “Only I sprouted worse // (more confused, more stupid) [...] I was much dumber then.” In part two, the central event of the poem’s narrative develops: “And then once, ...” the child is again outside with other children and joins a group that wants to look for snails in the woods. Out of the impression of the general hustle and bustle, all at once the protagonist is right in the centre, resting under a hazel tree bush, he too ponders what if there was a snail there on the ground. And he digs out a snail shell from which he tries to lure the snail out. Finally, he removes the house and puts it on the ground. The weather changes and the wind gets cold and the child is seized with fear and runs away. It makes its back to the village alone, where it seeks shelter from the storm and spends the night as an “only guard,” persistently worrying about the snail: “not that a wind breaks the house, ask the wind not to take it away.”

In the third part, the next morning, he goes back the way he came to the place where he left the snail: it is frozen to death. The child talks to the mollusk again: “Snail, snail, what have you done?” and finally concludes with the words: “Clumsy snail, clumsy snail.” The child takes the snail home, and keeps it there in the cellar: “To sing to it now and then / Whether aloud or in thought / Snail, snail, slimy tail.”

The intense inner perspective on the child’s experience makes the poem very modernist, as it reflects the child’s perception, actual and thought dialogues and feelings like a stream of consciousness. The snail serves as a counterpart, silent itself, but as an experimental object to explore the possibilities of contact with a being of a different species, offering the child the opportunity to explore its own powers, limits, and idiosyncrasies. A common interpretation, also found in the preparatory booklets for the Romanian Baccalaureate, is that the child’s rhyming spells, with which he tries to lure the snail, are interpreted as attempts at magic spells (Stoleru 2021, 284). However, since the child is “not a real magician” (285), he is punished and has to bear the consequences: a blizzard

and a thunderstorm that ultimately kill the snail (which brings to mind Goethe's *Sorcerer's Apprentice*). In another pedagogical edition, the words that can develop power – and which Barbu does not leave to the animal like Farago does – also become the guiding interpretation, at least with the hint that they can also cause suffering (Badea 2004, 41), which in turn becomes a primarily human characteristic.

However, the text seems to contradict the word as “logos” and thus the idea of a world that can be shaped rationally. In the Romanian interwar period, avant-garde, symbolism, and modernism overlapped with anti-modernist currents like *Gândirism*, because, as Stiehler (2010) argues, many people were afraid of a modernity that was inscrutable in the civilising sense (184). This led, among other things, to the fact that in Romanian forms of Symbolism the village as a setting is not completely abandoned in favour of the big city, but also that nature does not become an idyllic place of contrast and retreat, but often appears hostile to humans (185-186). In Barbu's poem, it is now a child who experiences self-empowerment on the one hand, and is a victim of greater natural forces on the other (if one disregards the idea that he himself conjured up the forces of nature). In addition, there are mythical figures that can be coupled with the child's great fear, mirroring and reinforcing it. Strong popular beliefs cannot be controlled and rationalised either. The village of Barbu thus corresponds to Lucian Blaga's idea of the village as a place of consciousness that is at the same time the “centre of the world” with mythological extensions.¹³

The feeling of guilt comes to the child unmediated, no educating authority and no moralising narrator interferes in the events.¹⁴ It resonates with an ambivalence that makes the child's abandonment of himself with the question of the “right” morality a theme. What is reasonable for a child? Barbu already refused at the time to see “După melci” as a text addressed to children (Badea 2004, 38) and in its linguistic, creative, and philosophical complexity, the balladic text also differs significantly from the texts discussed so far. Nevertheless, the child protagonist, left to his own devices and completely unguided, gives insight into a relatively lonely kind of childhood that does not correspond to any Western educational ideas of the time, where boundaries and pedagogical instructions were a widespread part of everyday life. In terms of inter-species contact, it is also left to the child to determine the roles and the power dynamic in the human-animal relationship.

¹³ Stiehler quotes Blaga in the original: “satul este situat în centrul lumii și se prelungeste în mit” and offers also a German translation (cf. Stiehler 2010, 199).

¹⁴ The performed interpretation of the actor and singer Tudor Gheorghe illustrates the emotional perception of the child quite exquisitely: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy1UaLd0vmI> (15.02.2022).

... and beyond: empty spots and conclusions

What I have not yet addressed, and what has remained a blind spot in research, is the emotional impact of the stories on their, mostly, young readers. Most Romanians who gave me references to these and other texts and passages in which children and animals meet could not help but comment on the emotional impact when they were first exposed to them as children or young adults. Farago's two poems "made my childhood sad" is one such comment, or, about "Puiul," "it traumatised me as a child." This suggests that the authors, though considered subordinate by the literary establishment, struck an emotional chord across time in their readers that has continued to resonate. It is precisely this that is completely absent from literary criticism; instead, the texts addressed to children are presented, as in a post-89 edition on Brătescu-Voinești's life and work, as extraordinarily popular, especially among children and young people (Gavrila 2004, 161); a website, again popular, providing information to expectant parents and young families, presents Farago's two poems and describes "Cățelușul Șchiop" as one of the most beautiful poems for children (Serea 2020).

This discrepancy between popularisation through active transmission and actual impact seems to me significant and worthy of further study. Only rarely do we find comments that question the literary canon. The literary critic Liviu Papadima, who, in his parody of the Romanian educational system predicts how during a lesson in 2060 the reading of the story "Puiul," will "pull the pupils out of the crushing apathy of the middle of the 21st century" - with a teacher calming the crying children with a stuffed chick: "Children, don't be sad! The chick is among us!" (2011).¹⁵ The authors of a children's book with protagonists from the Bucharest neighbourhood of Ferentari, where many large and socially disadvantaged Roma families live, would also like to see greater diversification among that are intended to be read out loud to children: parents should also look out for newly published books that do not "emotionally squeeze" children with socially oppressive stories or even those "with chicks, deer, wolves and bears who are hit by life like a blow and end up lost and alone" (Țupran 2018).¹⁶

Another aspect that may be of equal interest from the perspective of literary studies and animal studies is the impact of the transmission of "problematic" human-animal relations on the actual relationship between humans and

¹⁵ "Povestea reușește să-i smulgă pe elevi din apatia devastatoare a mijlocului de secol XXI. Elevii plîng. Profesoara se îndreaptă către catedră și, rostind cu o voce tremurată "Copii, nu vă întristați! Puiul e printre noi!" (Papadima 2011).

¹⁶ "și nu să îi stoarcă emoțional [...] sau altele cu pui, căprioare, lupi și urși peste care viața a dat ca un tir, iar ei au rămas pierduți și singuri." As an example of what I have paraphrased as a "socially oppressive story", the author mentions the children's novel *Heart* by Italian author Edmondo De Amicis from 1886 (in Romanian: *Cuore – inima de copil*). (Țupran 2018).

animals, or in this case between children and animals. Is literature a reflection of the actual relationship between species or does it serve in a different way as a symbolic illustration of inner human conflicts that are reflected in it in a more philosophical sense? And if - for whatever reason - a feeling of oppression results from the “bad” treatment of the animal by the child, does this have an impact (and if yes what impact precisely?) on the attitude of those familiar with these texts towards the natural environment? A team of literary scholars and psychologists who have investigated the emotional impact of violent human-animal fictions on text recipients can show that violence toward animals in texts increase the recipient’s empathy and their willingness to protect animals; however, a certain framing of the story is necessary (Małecki et. al. 2019).¹⁷ Based on the individual comments cited above, one could now hypothesise that Romania would have made much progress in this direction, if many of its people have been influenced by such texts when growing up. However, this is certainly not the case in the Romanian society as a whole. For example, animal protection laws based on Western models did not find their way into Romanian legislation until 2004. Furthermore, the idea that children could hurt animals is not only documented in the purpose of one of the first animal protection societies at the beginning of the 20th century, which states: “We want [...] to convince children not to be cruel to animals.”¹⁸ In Bucharest’s Cișmigiu City Park, there is currently a sign with park rules, which includes the request: “Be responsible towards animals and teach your child from an early age to be tolerant towards animals.”¹⁹

At a first glance, the presented child-animal encounters may appear to be a recurring motif, but the brief analyses of the texts by Brătescu-Voinești, Fargo, and Barbu have at the same time shown that they are not only realised in very different aesthetic ways, but are also associated with very different messages. In all texts, humans appear as a disruptive force that disturbs the natural balance, health, and a natural healthy development of the animals and thus weakens their ability to survive. With the presence and through civilisation by humans, problems arise for nature and the animal world. If one follows the possible interpretation of Barbu’s poem that the child even conjures up the storm through “inadequate” knowledge of magic, the humans’ power can be seen as almost infinite in the world invoked by the poem. Conversely, the storm can also be interpreted as nature’s punishment for human intervention: then it

¹⁷ Concerning the special framing see chapter 6: How does it work? From Readerly Pleasure to Animal Cruelty (Małecki 2019, 128-144).

¹⁸ “Să convingem [...] pe copii să nu fie cruzi cu animalele.” (Societatea pentru protecțiunea animalelor 1906, 4)

¹⁹ Translated mine. The Romanian original reads: “Fiți responsabili față de animale și învățați-vă copilul de mic să fie tolerant cu animalele.”

is still very powerful in this ballad and virtually impossible to tame. At a second glance, however, the authors connect very different messages with their texts: Brătescu-Voinești threatens with necessary adaptation to the rules of the collective and, in case of doubt, willingness to sacrifice; Farago criticises the unequal and, from her point of view, correspondingly unjust treatment of human and non-human creaturely suffering; Barbu uses the animal as a projection surface and object of self-exploration that equally demonstrates power and the limits of human power, supplemented by the impressive effect of mirrored fears in mythical figures.

Social and inter-human violence concealed in the texts, is only latently imaginable and can be read out from additional questions to the texts and transmissions into the human world or interpretation of the gaps. In my opinion, this has to do in particular with the form as lyrical texts or short narrative prose. The more detailed and partly autobiographical novels cited in the introduction deal very expressively with social grievances, which are often characterised by violence. What is nevertheless evident in all the texts, whether short or long, is that the child is very much left to his or her own devices. The children are or remain lonely. Educational institutions play a marginal or problematic role. In this sense, the literature discussed here hardly reflects the adult as a pedagogue, meaning-giving authority, or even source of emotional support. The fact that children have become a “sentimental investment,” as I quoted at the beginning of the findings of childhood studies, is hardly reflected at all in Romanian literature – and even the animals are not friendly accomplices.

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