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The Emancipation of the Animal: A Perspective on Animal Studies in Romanian Children's Literature Over the Last Half-Century

Abstract: This paper is part of a broader research project that examines the morphology of specific tropes in Romanian children's literature over the past fifty years and aims to rethink, within a posthuman framework, the role of the anthropomorphized character for young readers. In this endeavor, a brief historical commentary adds to the analysis of the market economics behind the genre's circulation, from the 1960s boom (coinciding with the development of a type of literature that could more easily navigate censorship, but which was also more easily instrumentalized ideologically) to the 2010s boom (driven by Arthur Publishing and the debut of Romanian authors in children literature influenced by the massive volume of translations from the second decade of the 2000s). The paper includes an analysis of the evolution of animal studies in global children's literature.

Keywords: Children's Literature; Animal Studies; World Literature Studies; Geocriticism; Metacriticism; Paraliterature Studies.

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Metacritical Perspectives on Romanian Children's Literature

The present study examines the evolution of certain tropes in Romanian children's literature, as well as the development of animal representation in contexts closely associated with childhood, depending on the ideological and paradigmatic influences shaping the moment of publication. Its aim is to revisit, from a posthuman perspective, a series of lesser-known texts from the last fifty years, through the lens of recent critical approaches in the field, in order to observe whether and how this corpus aligns with the international circulation of such exegetical frameworks, and to identify both the limits and the applicability of animal studies to these works.

The research includes a metacritical approach to the analysis of Romanian children's literature, a brief overview of the editorial context of the last half-century and the consequences of the two major booms in children's literature – the 1960s and the 2010s – as well as an international

theoretical perspective on Critical Animal Studies (CAS) applied to a selection of texts from this period. The corpus consists of works by Nina Stănculescu, Ruxandra Berindei, Gabriela Negreanu, Adina Popescu, and Lavinia Branîște, and focuses on the development of specific tropes in animal stories and the paradigmatic shifts they have undergone in relation to ideology and representations of the animal.

To carry out this critical endeavor, a brief overview of both Romanian and international scholarship on children's literature is required. This field has traditionally been regarded as inferior, which has resulted in the exclusion of many works from the literary canon¹. It is also often perceived as purely educational or pedagogical, lacking genuine literary value, a perception reflected in the existence of separate awards dedicated exclusively to this genre². Children's literature requires broad reception by readers, like any other genre, but also parental validation³. Another internal cause of its stigmatization lies in the fact that writers themselves often feel marginalized, since, based on linguistic criteria or market constraints, they are classified as children's authors⁴ even when they do not fully assume this status⁵. The assumption of a child reader imposes a series of restrictions on perspective, even when the text itself is not conventionally addressed to children. Another major shortcoming of a negative public discourse is the association of children's literature with "women's writing," a genre perceived as more closely aligned with women, based on the idea that "by having a subordinate position in society women writers had nothing to lose"⁶. The present study focuses on works written by women because, once children's literature was academically integrated in the 1960s as a form

of resistance to the western canon, a strong aversion toward female teachers and students emerged, rooted in sexist assumptions that deemed the genre suitable for them⁷. Moreover, children's literature has been considered less serious and rejected on the grounds that it would "alter" the magic and nostalgia of childhood⁸. Women's writing has thus been discredited in an ambivalent manner, both in relation to "high" literature and to this genre, being perceived as a leisure activity⁹ rather than a serious literary endeavor.

Given this marginalization of women writers, the study seeks to bring back into focus – or rather, to shed light on – texts written by female authors that have been overlooked. This approach reveals an insufficiently explored research field and demonstrates how a theoretical perspective that remains underdeveloped in Romania, such as *animal studies* can be applied to texts that do not formally adhere to this theoretical framework. Gabriela Negreanu, in the literary dictionary coordinated by Eugen Simion, is described as a "virile"¹⁰ writer who does not privilege themes considered feminine¹¹. Romanian literary criticism remains heavily masculinized: while Ruxandra Berindei is not mentioned at all, Negreanu is granted recognition based on a binary perception of her writing style. In the case of Nina Stănculescu, whose position as an editor at Meridiane publishing press is explicitly referred to, critical attention focuses more on her contribution as an art critic than on her work as a children's books writer, despite the importance of her texts for understanding children's literature during the socialist realism period and for reassessing it beyond neoliberal condemnations and communist didactic constraints¹². From a critical standpoint, there

is also a biased attitude toward authors such as George Șovu, Mircea Sântimbreanu, or Grigore Băjenaru, whose extensive works address themes more compatible with the ideological propaganda of the system, constructing a myth around the figure of the pupil and the school in communism, while also glorifying the teacher as a source of knowledge – a tendency particularly visible in Băjenaru's work. Furthermore, although writing for children may appear more creative, it is strongly constrained by the editorial context, not only by ideology, as it requires simplified grammar and accessible terminology to reach its target audience¹³.

Scholarly research in this field remains limited even at PhD level, which often leads to an idiosyncratic application of international theoretical frameworks to Romanian children's literature, as the dominant methodologies are frequently thematic and therefore outdated. Hristu Căndroveanu, one of the few scholars to conduct a quantitative study of pre-1989 children's literature, defines the genre – at least within the parameters of his research paradigm – as traditionally encompassing both educational and aesthetic values¹⁴, though it does not always remain accessible to either¹⁵. Writing in communism, he was unable to adopt a critical stance toward the system, and from a contemporary perspective the limits of his approach become evident. For instance, Căndroveanu adopts an elitist position toward illustrated literature¹⁶, criticizing comics and picture books with minimal text as inferior. In contemporary contexts, however, illustration is inseparable from children's literature and has become indispensable. A counterexample can be found in Lavinia Braniște's works. *Anatol și Gregor la aeroport/Anatol and Gregor at*

the Airport has no more than one sentence per page, with the colored illustrations carrying the narrative. Nevertheless, the text offers a depiction of an important trope in contemporary literature, the air travel trope – which internalizes, in a playful yet ironic manner, adult anxieties related to boarding procedures. The role and perception of illustration have shifted within the capitalist market, where illustrations are no longer viewed as childish but as a marketing strategy aimed at reducing production costs while increasing profit margins, ultimately making such books more expensive¹⁷.

Florica Bodiștean, a contemporary researcher, also challenges Căndroveanu's views, considering illustrated books to be functional, as children's literature must be „*incitantă de la copertă și până la cuprins*”¹⁸. She further argues that, unlike the already established fantasy genre, children's literature lacks „*legitimitate teoretică*”¹⁹. However, this legitimacy itself is largely imported and more frequently applied to international works than to Romanian fantasy. Bodiștean's analysis focuses primarily on Romanian interpretations of canonical universal works (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Little Prince*) and on revisiting Romanian canonical children's texts (*Din lumea celor care nu cuvântă/From the world of those who do not speak*, *La Medeleni/At Medeleni*, *Fram, ursul polar/Fram, the Polar Bear*), or on traditional genre analysis (fairy tales, legends, folklore), rather than on contemporary theoretical methodologies. She classifies children's literature into pre-literacy literature, literature of „*dublu etaj*”²⁰, and literature written by professional authors²¹. As in Arbuthnot's classification of animal stories²², this framework has its limitations, as genres inevitably

overlap. Moreover, Bodiștean adopts an elitist stance like Căndroveanu's, this time toward pre-literacy literature. For example, Arthur publishing classifies the *Rostogol* series and *Anatol and Gregor at the Airport* as suitable for ages 0-6, a category in which Braniște has also received an award. In this case, however, certain elements appear that do not typically belong to preschool literature. In *Anatol and Gregor*, Braniște does not adopt a didactic tone aimed at instructing children about airport rules, as the narrative formula might suggest, but rather exposes air travel in capitalism through a subtle communicative tool – illustration. Airport security is criticized in an infantilized manner, irrelevant to preschool children but more accessible to the adult reader. The story is governed by an unnecessary anxiety for typical kindergarten reading, such as the moment when the elephant father forces Gregor into the luggage-size checker to avoid additional fees²³, or when the elephant mother is forced to discard a pair of scissors with strong sentimental value because they were placed in the wrong bag²⁴. While the contribution of professional writers to children's literature is acknowledged – authors whose established status facilitates publication and whose texts often hiding “și alteeva decât mesajul aparent”²⁵ – this distinction remains preferential and elitist, as depth and complexity are not exclusive to consecrated authors.

2. The Editorial Context and the Two Booms of Romanian Children's Literature

Children's literature is closely linked to heteronomy, a characteristic that has enabled it to withstand the test of time²⁶.

However, given its more precarious status, it has always depended on the existence of a broader community context and on collective structures formed around authors²⁷. The integration of children's and young adult authors into school and educational institutions functions as a form of entry test into the market and into public visibility²⁸. During the communist period, ideology was also fundamentalist in nature, which led to a boom in domestic literature following the ideological thaw and the consolidation of nationalism as a form of emancipation from the former Soviet Stalinist model. As far as children's literature is concerned, it has been demonstrated that in former communist states this genre offered writers greater freedom, with certain texts passing censorship more easily²⁹. On these grounds, Iovănel considers communism to have been a golden age for children's literature. Although it was more easily controlled, this literature enjoyed an ambivalent privilege: on the one hand, the capitalist regime was dehumanized in narratives, while on the other hand literary funding was tightly controlled to develop genres favored by the masses, thus perpetuating propaganda³⁰. With the ideological thaw, a boom in children's literature took place, as the literary mechanisms imported from the USSR between 1948 and 1954 merged with a broader narratological range, marked by the development of fantasy literature³¹. Domestic publishing houses dedicated exclusively to this genre emerged (Ion Creangă, Albatros, Cartea Românească)³² also functioning as a refuge for major writers, as children's literature was considered less risky³³.

After the Revolution, a new boom in translations occurred in Romania, serving

as a validation of the state's gradual transition toward "modernity," understood as the shift to a new, "fresh," democratic regime. With globalization and the monopolization of the market by American cultural products, children's literature became increasingly commercialized, more accessible, and consequently more consumerist³⁴. During this period, alongside translations and Romania's gradual adaptation to the global market, publishing houses underwent significant transformations (for instance, Albatros became Nemira, which in the 1990s focused on science fiction and the Paganel collection)³⁵. In the chaotic decade of the 1990s, a decline of former state publishing houses was observed following privatization³⁶, as many failed to cope with the lack of capital, the production-profit imbalance, capital accumulation driven by entrepreneurial enrichment, or poor management³⁷. Humanitas and Polirom were among the few publishing houses that managed to survive and later distinguished themselves through a substantial body of translations in the 2000s.

During the same period, literature developed new narrative formulas, which were gradually implemented in domestic literature and became fully established in the following decade. Just as Soviet literature had been replicated during the communist years, Western literary canons have been replicated in recent decades³⁸. Publishing houses such as Polirom Junior emerged, publishing authors like Veronica D. Niculescu, Dan Lungu, and Flavius Ardelean³⁹. In the field of children's literature, the most significant external development of this period was the establishment of Arthur Publishing House, the children's literature imprint of the Art Editorial Group, a private publisher

founded in 2001. Throughout the 2000s, Arthur focused on an extensive volume of translations and revisions, particularly of classic children's literature, as well as contemporary international bestsellers, most notably the *Harry Potter* series. Beginning in 2010, alongside the growth of the children's book market, the publisher started promoting Romanian authors, initially well-established figures (Florin Bican, Lavinia Braniște, Simona Popescu, among others)⁴⁰, and later lesser-known writers who debuted in this genre. Starting in 2017, Arthur expanded internationally and, despite having exclusively Romanian capital, entered a partnership with the German publishing group Klett⁴¹.

3. An *Animal Studies* Perspective from Global Circulation to the Local Context

This section addresses several key theoretical studies related to *critical animal studies* and ecocriticism, as do elements from *Narratology Beyond the Human* by David Herman, which have also been taken up in other studies in the field, or *Human, All Too Human* by Cary Wolfe, although this research has focused primarily on interdisciplinary journal articles on literature and the environment, as well as journals such as *Comparative Literature and Culture*, *Sociological Perspectives*, or publications exploring new perspectives on pethood and childhood. Romanian literature can be situated within this framework based on several defining elements. What becomes problematic is the fact that theory must be applied symptomatically, given the limited development of this paradigm in the local context. These texts emerged under entirely

different historical conditions and evaluative criteria, yet they can be revisited with the aim of fostering the development of this culturally significant field within Romanian literary studies.

Theoretical research distinguishes between environmental literature and the representation of animals in non-human animals' literature. Researchers such as Rebecca Raglon or Marian Scholtmeijer have observed that the former addresses nature, ecosystems, and animals on a macro level, as collective entities and interconnected networks, while the latter focuses on the animal as an individual character⁴². Environmental literature relies on a more standardized form of reasoning, encouraging sympathy toward the subject matter, as the human-environment relationship is constructed through trophic relations and cause-and-effect processes, with humans themselves being part of the ecosystem. The harm inflicted is perceived primarily as biological or material, without attributing moral guilt to the human species⁴³. By contrast, non-human animals' literature can adopt a more engaged discourse, due to the empathy generated between the authorial voice, the reader, and the animal itself. Personalization creates proximity, yet it also renders the discourse vulnerable to anthropocentric instrumentalization, as animals are not presumed to fully understand their role in the world, at least not in the sense of human consciousness, thereby compromising the authenticity of representation⁴⁴. In this type of literature, anthropomorphism leads to a violation of animal otherness "[it] violate[s] the otherness of animal kind"⁴⁵. Nevertheless, such representations may still prompt humans to consider alternative perspectives⁴⁶. From

this standpoint, the selected case studies may be situated, at least symptomatically, within non-human animals' literature, given the absence of a consistent Romanian theoretical framework in CAS. These texts predominantly construct worlds ruled by animals, featuring individual and seemingly authentic characters whose identities, however, are shaped by socialist or capitalist demands, ideological escapism, or pedagogical imperatives.

In the *Rostogol* series, discourse acquires ecological stakes, particularly in relation to plastic use and ocean pollution; however, as contemporary children's literature, its primary function remains pedagogical. In all cases, animals are anthropomorphized, imitating human behavior within their own universe, a trope conceptualized in theory as *human sameness*⁴⁷, frequently employed in classical animal literature. Stănculescu's characters are most often governors of their own worlds, yet their activities serve communist ideology. In the works of Berindei and Negreanu, the narratives are hybrid, incorporating human, animal, vegetal, and abstract dimensions that are heavily stylized, to the point that animal representation itself dissolves into a method of sustaining an absurd or surreal paradigmatic imaginary. In Braniște's work, animals are not subordinated to humans, yet they live on a farm and almost replace the human realm, displaying behavior that is far from their natural instincts. Also, in the *Rostogol* series, magic acts and performances are carried out by animals for animals, an intriguing representation when considered in relation to the sociological theory of the Frankfurt School (Adorno-Horkheimer), which criticizes the use of animals as entertainment⁴⁸.

While Adorno interprets, on a sociological level, the transition from the objectification of animals (a colonial consequence) in consumer societies to their transformation into performative and profit-generating objects, in the selected literary texts the animals themselves enact this performance – by and for themselves, without human intervention or the depersonalizing mediation of humans. In the piglet's universe, this practice may instead be interpreted as a form of empowerment. When addressing exploitation, Adorno invokes the example of the elephant exploited in the circus⁴⁹. In Braniște's short story *Anatol și Gregor*, the protagonists are elephants who are paradoxically represented without any reference to circus culture or stereotypes on that manner.

Animals are frequently portrayed as individual beings endowed with narrative agency, a form of personhood, and moral worth⁵⁰. In worlds inhabited exclusively by animals, a powerful anthropocentric trope disappears – the projection of humans as saviors of the animal kingdom – thus weakening the legitimacy of anthropocentric hierarchies⁵¹. Such narratives demonstrate that animals need not rely on humans to give them a voice; instead, animals themselves can resist the forces that harm them. In a study dedicated to radical modesty, systemic violence is denounced across the animal ecosystem, raising questions of emotional and psychological violence, not merely physical harm⁵².

Malamud conducts an important investigation into how animals should be constructed in literary texts, analyzing the poetry of Mexican writer José Emilio Pacheco, whom he considers close to the paradigmatic shift envisioned by CAS

scholars. The study focuses on the animal–human relationship and on “*how human culture frames our relation to animals*”⁵³. Malamud argues that animals should not function merely as a means of reflecting on the human condition – a tendency he identifies and critiques in various poets – but rather that attention should be redirected toward animal–human interaction and the positioning of animals as autonomous beings within their own worlds⁵⁴. Human gazing, he contends, disrupts the balance of animal ecosystems, and human presence should therefore be minimized as much as possible so that animals may become the *initiators*⁵⁵. As the previous examples indicate, the selected case studies do not fully reflect this vision, as animals are not granted absolute autonomy; they remain anthropomorphized and linked, in one way or another, to the human universe, even in contemporary works.

The relationship between *childhood* and *pethood* is particularly significant for children's literature and animal narratives. In relation to companion animals, the child occupies a protosocial position that facilitates the observation of transgressive dynamics⁵⁶. Pethood is closely embedded within patriarchy and domesticity⁵⁷, and recent studies aim to demonstrate the dis-possession of animals, which, in line with posthuman progress, should be perceived as more than mere property of the family or the child⁵⁸. The child asserts agency and power by dominating the animal⁵⁹. This dynamic is evident in *Sora lui Colăcel/Colăcel's sister* by Braniște, where Ruxi, a central character, enters a new family structure that disrupts the balance of her former single-parent household, in which she exercised full control as an only child.

She attempts to reclaim power through her relationship with animals: initially retreating into her bond with a rooster (later revealed to be a hen) named Colăcel, then seeking ownership of a neighbor's horse and releasing the neighbor's rabbits in another narrative episode, which leads to conflict. Together with her sister, she fabricates stories about the Luțu horse, simultaneously projecting some sort of agency onto the animal⁶⁰. In contemporary families, animals are often perceived as children themselves, a development that is inherently problematic⁶¹ – “*the immersion of pets into the fabric of family relations as opposed to their instrumental value to specific members of a household*”⁶². In this case, however, Colăcel is not assigned with a domestic or biological role, nor an anthropomorphized one that would position the animal hierarchically within the human sphere.

Regarding anthropomorphism, a series of tropes have circulated diachronically in the international context, which Burke identifies through multiple readings aimed at exploring their cultural reconfiguration⁶³. From the second half of the twentieth century onward, children's literature has featured tropes such as school, family, and interpersonal relationships. These were later joined by progressive tropes addressing animal rights, ecology, ethnic and social conflicts, feminism, and war, followed more recently by themes such as queer rights and drug use⁶⁴. Contemporary Romanian literature appears to engage with this intermediate set of tropes – revolutionary for the genre, yet not fully progressive on a broader social level – which, within international literary circulation, may be considered exhausted or outdated, at least from an exegetical perspective. The work

discussed in Berke's study, *Wolf* by Becky Bloom (1999)⁶⁵, resembles *Rostogol* in narrative structure, although in Braniște's case the “wolf” is in fact a fox that departs from both literary and biological stereotypes. Although the local paradigmatic context did not allow for the early development of the most recent tropes, their interaction with classical communist era motifs confers a distinctive quality worthy of critical analysis.

Markowsky identifies several purposes underlying animal stories for children, the most important being the diversity⁶⁶ enabled by animal representation. Furthermore, an intrinsic function of the work that facilitates the presence of illustrations is precisely this diversity. He also observes that, with the emergence of the post-Darwinian paradigm, animals begin to be represented as possessing their own needs⁶⁷. Arbutnot proposes a classification of animal stories⁶⁸, distinguishing between animals that behave like humans (as in the *Rostogol* series, *Anatol and Gregor*, *The House between portolaci*, or the stories of Adina Popescu), animals that speak but behave like animals (Nina Stănculescu's stories, *Mototol-Rostogol*), and animals represented objectively (*Colăcel's sister*). However, this classification proves overly rigid for the texts analyzed in this study, as each narrative blends elements from multiple categories.

4. Tropes and Re-tropings: Transformations of the Animal's Function and an Animal Studies Perspective

This research aims to investigate the issue of animal representation as analysed within a corpus of texts discussed

in the present study. Although Romanian literature offers numerous narratives of this kind, the construction of such characters remains largely classical. Nevertheless, through paradigmatic framing, contemporary animal literature signals a series of shifts and transformations. This section discusses several tropes specific to animal literature, examined in relation to the ideological discourse of the texts and to current theories in Critical Animal Studies. The key tropes addressed here, which structure representations specific to children's literature, include the school, the family, nature, and the construction of self-identity in relation to the world.

In the case of Nina Stănculescu, several such representations appear in the volume *Găze, flori și mulți copii* (1963)/*Bugs, flowers and lots of children*, published shortly after the 1960s political thaw, capturing specific traits of socialist realism in stories that are not, strictly speaking, aligned with CAS movement. Here, the animal is subjected to communist ideology on thematic, allegorical, and even biological levels. In *Cuibul căneparilor/The Nest of linnets*, a series of events unfolds around the birds' efforts to find and later rebuild their nest. The animals are assisted by other living creatures from the woodland, with a strong emphasis on social cohesion, revealing the architecture of socialist relations. The ecosystem no longer functions organically, and the interactions among animals, as well as the intrusion into the "private life" of the linnets, mirroring the dynamics of neighbours living in a communist apartment block. Alongside this narrative, Stănculescu also includes stories with a mythical function. The author creates a set of personal myths intended to explain certain instincts

or natural behaviours in relation to socialist order. The animal no longer fulfils its biological function but rather serves the needs of the system. In *Albinuța și soarele/The bee and the sun*, the bees send their most industrious representative – recalling the exceptionalism of the exemplary character fabricated by socialist realism – to speak with the sun, asking it to remain longer in the sky so that they may extend their labour. This workers' manifesto explains the cycle of day and night. In *Aripile lui Joloipan/Joloipan's wings*, the transformation of water spiders into weaving spiders, who lose their wings, is explained. Pride, greed, and the desire for enrichment are sanctioned as causes of moral and biological decline⁶⁹. An interesting shift, however, appears in *Pimbarea puiului de prepeliță/The walk of the quail chick*. Unlike *Puiul/The chick* by Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești, where the animal is punished for disobedience as the pedagogical aim is to enforce hierarchy and parental authority, Stănculescu's narrative lacks a moralistic or punitive dimension. The chick is not punished for straying from the nest; on the contrary, it is "rewarded" by being rescued by "pioneer pupils" and later reunited with its family⁷⁰. The text cultivates respect for nature and for education within the system. While wandering across the fields, the chick witnesses the collectivization of agriculture and the transformation of rural space, yet remains unharmed, and the ecosystem is not devastated.

Several decades later, significant changes in narrative formula and animal representation emerge in children's literature of the 1970s and 1980s. While not always overtly subversive, this literature displays a deeply abstracted imaginary, functioning as a form of escapism from

ideologically saturated discourse. In 1976, Ruxandra Berindei published the short story collection *Casa dintre portolaci/The house between portolaci*, whose seventies-inspired reverberations persist through its abstraction and departure from the author's earlier, more classical style. In Romanian communism – particularly during the 1970s and 1980s – linguistic elitism⁷¹ became a major issue, often preventing works from passing editorial validation, as modern, bourgeois language was deemed inaccessible to the masses, effectively blaming the reader⁷². This may explain why Berindei's works were marginalized, as the conversations between gopher Pop and his friends are scarcely accessible to adults, let alone children. Eugen Negrici describes the "oneiric" prose of the 1970s as possessing an „aer bizar[...]cursul oniric al desfășurării faptelor trimit cu gândul la experiențele supraraliste românești[...]diverse întâmplări iraționale sau de o banalitate crispantă”⁷³. Dialogues lack concrete meaning, and certain characters exist absurdly, appearing spontaneously, as in the depiction of Pop's family or the forced insertion of the Delft cows⁷⁴ into the gopher's narrative. Character identity is interchangeable: Pop and his companions behave at times like children, adults, idealistic young philosophers, or elderly pensioners with fixed ideas. Animal representation in this literature is ethereal; animals become shadows or artificial extensions of human identity and morality. This is not a faithful representation of the animal, but a symbolic frame for repressed ideologies during communist regime. While in Stănculescu's work animal biology is subordinated to communist doctrine, here the animal becomes an empty identity shell filled with human concerns. Allegory

is surpassed, as the animal is stripped not only of biological attributes, but also of social, mythical, and cultural ones. Animal identity is assumed as a means of preserving childhood and the status of the child, animals being associated either with childhood or old age. The imaginary unfolds around the domestic space, with the house functioning as a frozen chronotope where animal activities are monotonous, resembling a retirement home or an ideologically unregulated paradise – a smooth, politically neutral space.

A work with similar escapist and abstract traits is Gabriela Negreanu's *Aventurile lui Mototol-Rostogol la prima lui ieșire din ocol/Mototol-Rostogol's adventures at his first courtyard escape*. While aligned with the literary paradigm of the 1980s and partially subversive, it does not fully embrace postmodernism. Although Negreanu promoted eighties literature as an editor at Albatros, her writing remains closer to seventies aesthetics⁷⁵ through its tropes and hermeticism. The text resembles a prose-poem with strong surrealist and oneiric elements⁷⁶. The spaces Mototol explores are entropic, dream-like constructions born of a puppy's desire to escape the yard. The simplistic, occasionally puerile verses reflect fluid character identities⁷⁷. The work aligns with what Negrici terms “primele încercări timide de transfigurare a realului [...] proze realiste cu sensuri simbolice sau cu intruziuni fantastice, mitice și parabolice”⁷⁸ realist prose infused with symbolic, fantastic, mythical, or parabolic elements. Escapism emerges through the oscillating behaviour of the canine protagonist, who reflects on identity and purpose, undergoing moments of rupture that propel him into new adventures⁷⁹. The struggle for

individuality – a difficult or even undesirable achievement⁸⁰ – is characteristic of a censored imaginary, even if the author did not explicitly intend this. As in Berindei's work, the animal functions as a reflector of human states under ideological pressure. However, the need for escape is here aligned with the dog's biologically and socially plausible desire to leave the yard, unlike the purely human behaviours attributed to animals in *Casa dintre portolaci*.

With the post-2000 period, a paradigmatic shift occurs in the construction of anthropomorphic characters, influenced by consumerist and capitalist imaginaries imported through translated children's literature. A relevant transitional volume is Adina Popescu's *Miriapodul hoinar și alte povești/The stray centipede and other stories* (2008). In her animal stories, anthropomorphized creatures display a thematic form of emancipation. One dragon departs from the "heteronormative" definition of monstrosity and seeks a different societal role. He loves sunlight, hates fire baths and treasures, enjoys poetry, and suffers bullying for his inability to breathe fire, fearing he cannot fulfil his "natural" fairy-tale functions⁸¹. Ultimately, his love for people and nature leads him to become a firefighter, saving a community living at the bottom of a volcano⁸². In another story, a narcissistic hybrid deep-sea dinosaur surfaces only to become the pet of an eccentric wealthy woman⁸³; its narcissism is rewarded due to its contemporary "trendy" appeal. *Tristefea unui liliacovampir/Batsyvampire's sadness*⁸⁴ presents a hybrid creature facing an existential crisis, torn between opposing identities⁸⁵. By choosing to live in the school attic and confronting students, the narrative engages in a metacritical reflection on

constructed "nature," similar to the dragon's story⁸⁶. Anthropomorphic fantasy is thus resemanticized in contemporary literature. Like Stănculescu, Popescu creates personal myths of animal origins, adapted to new literary morphologies and capitalist ideology. A similar case appears in *Aventurile lui Muscoplici/The adventures of Muscoplici*, where a fly seeks independence from family and biological role, that also has a social function⁸⁷. Leaving the house and yard she used to live in, she encounters a spider whose work she admires as "useful" to the ecosystem-society⁸⁸. After surviving winter by being frozen outside the window, the fly returns home content with its condition⁸⁹. Here, biological nature is both aligned with and contrasted against capitalist ideology, avoiding the exceptionalism cultivated under both capitalism and socialist realism.

Lavinia Braniște's *Rostogol* series engages similar tropes but deepens their social implications. While Popescu sketches a proto-capitalist framework, Braniște transcends playful morphology and irony, exposing deep trauma in child-adult-animal relations within post-communist capitalist society, including generational rifts. From the outset, *Rostogol* is labelled a "dirty piglet" destined for failure⁹⁰ by the stork that was meant to bring him home, reflecting inherited prejudice. Although at first glance it may seem that Braniște uses the representation of the animal merely for allegorical purposes, in an analogical relation to social prejudices in the human world, one can observe, at least at the level of nuance, a resemanticization of animal biology in relation to the entire narrative system. It is mentioned in the text that the old stork is on the verge of retirement,

which suggests a split in atemporality, indicating that myth has its limits and is no longer idealized in an era subjected to bureaucratic policies. Moreover, she mourns her own condition in relation to the migratory context and demographic aging⁹¹. The fox Socott is also a character whose mindset differs sharply from that of the rest of his species. It is specified that he did not wish to hunt animals or fight other males in order to impress female foxes⁹², thus revealing a generational trauma shaped by a biological code inherited and imposed by his father⁹³. Later, he becomes passionate about entrepreneurship and the aesthetics of the easy life, seeking to obtain things in life as quickly as possible. Within the animal kingdom represented by Branîște, the concept of assuming a biological role is normalized, rather than exercising it as something intrinsic to one's being, an innovative, even revolutionary method in the representation of animals in contemporary Romanian children's literature.

The narrative unfolds under the totalizing chronotope of the animal kingdom, with forms of human existence not even being mentioned. The animals self-govern socially within a hybrid regime, where elements from the human sphere coexist with issues specific to the animal world. In the second volume, a new character is introduced, the puppy Bobus, trained to guard the watermelons brought from the farm and to keep Rostogol captive. He becomes independent once he is entrusted with this task by his mother, who is constantly away at work; it is not mentioned that Bobus has an owner⁹⁴. His biological role thus becomes a form of emancipation in relation to his construction as a character. In relation to the configuration of this universe,

a linguistic code is created through which the animals communicate within the new system, derived from a series of wordplays rooted in the animal semantic field, allowing them to develop a new type of social behavior. Rostogol is held back from „cutting” his brothers in half during the magic act in the fourth volume, recalling the sensitive issue of pig slaughtering, while Socott engages in self-irony when he realizes that no matter what he does, he will always remain, contrary to his species, an honest fox. In a universe dominated solely by animals within a domestic space, a series of collective traumas takes shape, becoming „cultural” within this fiction, and within which animal children are educated to create a respectful form of proximity or projection in relation to both their own identity and that of others. Although the farm and the animals are no longer under human domination, with humanity absent up to this point in the series, traces of belonging to an old regime emerge through language, now framed within a reality that appears post-apocalyptic, but is rather posthuman in this sense. Utopia becomes a literary chronotope open to overinterpretation, as the animals are far from inhabiting or conforming to an ideal reality; however, it is evident that within this configuration, realities and issues from the human world are taken over or rejected by the animals, depending on their degree of emancipation.

The *Rostogol* series is not devoid of the specific consumerist tropes used in this genre of literature, which have become integrated into the paradigm alongside the capitalist imaginary. While in the first two volumes the narrative formula does not seem as „contaminated”, with

the dominant themes being rural exodus, migration, and poverty in disadvantaged environments, these elements become more than evident starting with the third volume. Rostogol participates in that poetry camp, where a treasure hunt is organized and where other characters that were previously unrelated and share nothing in common appear, a formula also found in major franchises such as *Harry Potter* or *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series. In the fourth volume, a charitable magic show is organized, intended to raise funds for the renovation of the village library, a narrative formula frequently encountered in episodic mainstream Western animated series, which is replicated once again in the final volume with the brass band at the Scarecrow Festival. It is also important to note the attempted kidnapping of Rostogol in the first volume by the three crow brothers, with the aim of obtaining a ransom. Braniște employs these clichés in order to construct the narrative discourse and imaginary; however, an ironic stance toward these types of tropes can be felt through the sincerity and authenticity of the characters when confronted with such situations – characters who come from a different cultural space and whose mismatch and discomfort in the face of these circumstances become strongly noticeable.

The narrative *Sora lui Colăcel/Colăcel's sister* undoubtedly represents a significant shift and evolution in the representation of animals in Romanian children's literature, as well as in the family dynamic regarding the notion of *pethood*. The rooster (later, hen) Colăcel becomes a link between two sisters whose single-parent families have merged, without her being integrated into the family as a „new child”, but also not

treated merely as a farmyard bird. When Ruxi tells Adela that she cannot be her sister, but that she can be instead Colăcel's sister⁹⁵, an emotional bond is created between the two, even though the animal is not considered a family member in the strictest sense yet is included in it. Colăcel is neither romanticized nor aestheticized in any way. She is raised as a rooster, as Ruxi's pet, but once it is discovered that she is actually a hen, her role is no longer limited to her biological function, from which the family could benefit in some way. A nest is set up for her eggs in the family garage, allowing her to fulfill her biological needs, without this being her sole purpose within the family. Moreover, throughout the narrative she is treated as an ordinary hen, with no consciousness or agency attributed to her by Ruxi. An interesting moment in this work occurs when the family discovers that the animal is actually a hen and experiences guilt when consuming her eggs⁹⁶. Later, however, they also incorporate the eggs laid by Colăcel into their diet. This is a turning point in the literature representing animals, one that is not fully exploited in this regard and remains limited. Still, in this context, it may have been unrealistic for the author to give such a progressive tone to the narrative, even if theoretically justified. Nevertheless, the idea that there is an awareness of how animal products are instrumentalized in relation to humans, and what they actually represent for the animal – with the family allowing not only a form of empathy but also reflection – touches on an important posthuman component, one that is still poorly explored in our cultural space. Although the mode of representing animals is posthuman at a paradigmatic level, we do not have a clearly

defined theoretical method or ideology behind the narrative, yet this moment creates a connection in that sense.

5. Conclusions

An overview of the editorial history of children's literature was conducted in order to identify the periods that were favorable to the development of this literary field and to examine how these contexts shaped and reformatted texts, particularly in the thematic evolution from the Soviet model onwards. The application of CAS theory to the selected case studies demonstrates a symptomatic reception of its ideas, as the corpus is defined by entirely different paradigmatic systems, while also underscoring the importance of introducing such theoretical frameworks, which are crucial for cultural studies. In the final section, a more detailed analysis of literary shifts and tropes was developed,

considering ideology, paradigm, and narrative formula. The departure from the classical model of animal representation produces a paradigmatic rather than a strictly theoretical effect in this case, while the late development of temporal tropes in Romanian literature has resulted in narrative formulas that are less aligned with contemporary theoretical circulation. These texts therefore warrant a re-evaluation in relation to current research on children's literature and animal representation. This research aims to position itself among the pioneering studies contributing to the development of this theoretical framework in Romanian literature. Rather than proposing definitive solutions, it offers an investigation of a phenomenon worthy of analysis in relation to international theoretical approaches, while also advocating for the import of such theories and their adaptation to local literary shifts and forms of representation.

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