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“You Are a Mysterious Animal, You Know”

Eco-philosophy in Sonya Hartnett’s *The Midnight Zoo*

*Abstract: In non-realist children’s literature, animals tend to be employed as a means of representing human issues to the extent that the animal qualities of the animal can become invisible. Despite this trend, literary animals can also inform readers about animal issues along with the metaphoric message they supposedly carry. In Sonya Hartnett’s *The Midnight Zoo*, the role of animals is twofold: firstly, animals metaphorically represent human relationships – more specifically the bigotry towards the Roma as ‘other’ – and, secondly, the animals directly stand for the actual animals who are mistreated according to the same principle: for their ‘otherness’ to humans. This article adopts an eco-philosophical perspective to examine how *The Midnight Zoo* effectively intertwines human intolerance of other humans (the Roma) with human actions towards animals to suggest that humans treat the (natural) world as the Nazis treated the Roma during World War II.*

Keywords: Sonya Hartnett, eco-philosophy, magic realism, animals, Roma Holocaust, WWII, posthumanism

Introduction

In non-realist children’s fiction, magical talking animals often represent *human-human* relationships to the extent that the actual animal becomes invisible. Animal invisibility is widely discussed in children’s literature scholarship. For instance, Maria Lassén-Seger reads animal metamorphosis as an illustration of animal symbolism and suggests that child-animal metamorphs represent the child’s temporary “liberation through animal transformation” (42). Alison

Waller discusses how animal mutation can symbolically represent teenagers' physical changes and maturation (51), and Lydia Kokkola explores the representation of adolescent sexuality and carnal desire through the motif of animal transformation ("Metamorphosis" 56; "Fictions" 137). All three critics focus exclusively on how animals merely represent human issues; the animal is invisible. In *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*, Zoe Jaques discusses how children's literature addresses the complexities of interspecies relationships. She argues that animal representation in children's literature and Disney films demonstrate that fantastical creatures are not solely humanized animals; they also draw attention to their animality and its relationship to humanity (49). In her discussion of animals in the *Alice* books and *Gulliver's Travels*, Jaques suggests the animals "encourage readers, both child and adult, to recognize the inherent likeness between life forms, but not without underscoring a specific animal difference that is not hierarchically subordinate" (66). Jaques's posthumanist reading of animals in children's literature resonates to the spirit of eco-philosophy: Arne Naess's philosophy of ecological harmony and commitment to the inherent value of the lives of *all* living beings (95). Naess regards humans as an integral part of nature rather than creatures who are separate from, and who have the right to control the natural world. Naess's ideas predate and underpin critical post-humanism which, according to Pramod Nayar, "sees the human as a congeries, whose origins are multispecies and whose very survival is founded on symbiotic relations with numerous forms of life on earth [...] thus favours evolution, symbiosis, feedback and responses as determining conditions" (9). By emphasizing the importance of sharing the world with diverse cultures and living beings, eco-philosophy makes animals visible.

In this article, I use eco-philosophy to examine the magic realist elements in Sonya Hartnett's *The Midnight Zoo* (2010). My goal is to uncover the complex animal-human relationships in a manner that allows us to see the animal characters not only as representations of humans, but also as representing real animal issues. In my discussion of the parallels the novel draws between the experiences and lives of the animals and the children, I adopt Naess's eco-philosophical lens which enables me to examine how Hartnett goes beyond metaphorical animal imagery to challenge speciesist animal-human hierarchies. Hartnett's novel primarily takes place in a magical setting and thus could be categorized as a fable, fantasy or even allegory. However, the dominant narrative mode is realism and by focus-

ing on its magic realist elements it is possible to highlight the power balance at play in Hartnett's human-animal relationships.

This illustrated story is about two Roma brothers, Andrej and Tomas, and their infant sister Wilma, whom they carry whilst walking through a war-torn landscape. Although Hartnett does not clarify the geographical location, from the children's names and the language of the zoo signs they encounter, it becomes apparent they are in Czechoslovakia during World War II: "[...] ribbony blue letters woven between the flowers announced ZOOLOGICKÁ ZAHRA-DA.¹ Tomas couldn't read, so Andrej read it for him: 'It says *Zoo-logical garden*. It's a zoo.'" (20, capitals and italics original); "Andrej sounded the sign out to himself before trying it aloud. '*Klokan*.'"² (41, italics original). Furthermore, Hartnett is at pains to ensure that the historical reality of the extermination of the Roma is reflected in her novel: rather than being sent to camps, they are caught and murdered as a family group (see Bársony and Daróczy 2008 for further discussion of the treatment of the Roma during the Holocaust). The setting is depicted realistically: Hartnett describes an eerily deserted landscape as well as the mass extermination of the Roma. The main events take place in an abandoned zoo where the children inadvertently arrive after walking through a deserted town. At night, the children realize that the zoo animals can talk. The animals' ability to speak is the only magical aspect in this otherwise realistic novel, thus I consider the novel as belonging to the genre of magic realism.

Anne Hegerfeldt suggests that magic realism has become a new form of mimesis since reality itself has become more unrealistic, for her literature recreates the abnormal as a norm (321). When both characters and readers accept that Hartnett's talking animals are normal, the hierarchical human-animal order is challenged: animals are granted the same status as humans. Kimberley Sasser explains how this 'new form of mimesis' works in practice:

Magical realism's dual threads of the real and the supra-real allow narratives filtered through this form to represent belonging, for instance, in a broad spectrum of experience unavailable to unidimensional narratives. Realist narratives, for example, stay closed off to the transcendent, while, at the other extreme, fantasy remains once removed from the real, as it depicts a world other than the reader's. In contrast, magical realism brings the transcendent and the real together in a hybrid co-presence and is thereby able to illustrate a range of ways belonging and being in the world are experienced by people. (211)

In other words, by focusing on the magic realist elements in a novel it is possible to gain new vantage points where seemingly disparate perspectives can coalesce. In Hartnett's world, the inhabitants of the real war world (the children) and the magical zoo world (the animals) exist in a hybrid co-presence where they transcend the limits of ordinary human-animal interaction which presupposes the power-based model. This transcendence allows the animals and the humans to overcome the hierarchies and thus to experience otherwise uncommon ways of being.

Animal-Human Parallels

Hartnett's magical talking animals do not merely stand for humans; on the contrary, they represent themselves and her humans also represent animal issues. By generating a series of parallels between the Roma Holocaust and the captivity of animals in an eco-philosophical manner, Hartnett refuses to engage with the mistreatment of either humans or animals without seeing parity between the two. Just as Jaques argues "that animals cannot be occluded from the discussion" because even when they are representing humans, their stories are "equally entangled" in representing the animals' own story (78), Hartnett overturns established animal-human hierarchies to place animals and humans on the same footing, thereby revealing a dual perspective.

The surreal war setting is designed to make the animals' magical ability to talk less amazing; neither the war nor animals speaking makes 'sense' as both are based on speciesist assumptions. "When humans are speciesist and treat non-human life forms as expendable, then some species of humans are also - as history shows in the form of genocides, racism and slavery - excluded from the category of the human to be then expendable" (Nayar, 4). Hartnett's eco-philosophy is expressed through the parallels between animal and Roma genocides she draws. She illustrates how destructive speciesism is not only for the treatment of animals but also for the (mis-)treatment of *people*. Nayar links speciesism to racism, drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, to show how certain types of people are rendered non-human: "The Jew is the non-man produced within man, the comatose person is the animal separated from within the human body itself" (Agamben in Nayar, 98). Nayar rightly suggests that empathy is a key element in an attempt to break the boundaries between species. Hartnett encourages readers to empathize with both the Roma children and the zoo animals and, as a result, transgress the species' boundaries and acquire an eco-philosophical standpoint.

Both animals and humans in the novel are the representatives of marginalized groups: humans are represented by the Roma children persecuted in Czechoslovakia during the Roma Holocaust and the animals (bear, wolf, lioness, chamois, kangaroo, eagle, boar, seal and llama) are literally marginalized behind the zoo bars. By placing them all together in the zoo where the children and the animals share the space, eat the same food, talk the same language, Hartnett not only highlights the global extent of displacement of people and animals, but also undermines the separation of the human and the animal and challenges the established animal/human role models. For instance, as one being the persecutor of the 'other': in this novel, humans are also the victims of other humans, animals suffer from the human violence, but are fed by the human children. From the conversation between the two it becomes apparent for the reader that animals openly blame humans for their inhumane treatment of animals. So, humans are represented as being both humane and inhumane at the same time. By presenting humans in this ambiguous manner, Hartnett rejects a single view of humanism; the plurality of this type of perspective is discussed by Cary Wolfe in his *What Is Posthumanism?*:

[O]ne of the hallmarks of humanism— and even more specifically that kind of humanism called liberalism—is its penchant for that kind of pluralism, in which the sphere of attention and consideration (intellectual or ethical) is broadened and extended to previously marginalized groups, but without in the least destabilizing or throwing into radical question the schema of the human who undertakes such pluralization. (99)

Hartnett draws the reader's equal attention to the plights of both humans and animals who are victimized, but without questioning the "schema of the human" who persecutes them. Nor does she question whether the children – who try to feed and release the animals – belong to humankind. Despite their shared victimization and the shared physical setting, the children and the animals remain divided in the common space of the zoo. Where reading this novel through trauma theory would focus on their shared suffering, using an eco-philosophical lens we see how Hartnett stimulates the reader's intellectual and ethical consideration of the Roma children and the animals by undermining speciesism, but without questioning the responsibility of *human* for the abuse all the characters underwent.

There is a distinct division between the animals and the children as they are physically separated by the zoo bars. In *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, Amy Ratelle suggests that "literature

geared towards child audience reflects and contributes to the cultural tensions created by oscillation between upholding and undermining the divisions between the human and the animal" (4). From an eco-philosophical standpoint, the separating by the zoo bars can be read as a metaphor for the rights of children as well as animals to independently occupy their own space: a space that should not be penetrated. Eco-philosophical co-existence, however, presupposes the ability to share a common space which is not dominated by humans. In *The Midnight Zoo*, opening the cages becomes an actual and symbolical salvation for both. As Ratelle rightly suggests, children's literature typically presents "the boundary between humans and animals as, at best, permeable and in a state of continual flux" (4). Acknowledging that *The Midnight Zoo* illustrates the complexity of permeating such a boundary, I suggest that the animals in this novel cannot be read in a single way and I propose to take a plural perspective on the animals in this novel:

- 1) the animals are symbolic (there are clear parallels between humans' experience in concentration camps and animals' in the zoo);
- 2) the animals are natural (their magical ability to talk makes them stand out and speak for themselves);
- 3) the animals are eco-philosophical (by sharing suffering from the common enemy Nazi, the border between animals and humans is being erased).

Hartnett's pluralism, to use Wolfe's term (99), resonates to readers' expectations that the animals will reflect human issues but, at the same time, encourages readers to reflect on animal issues before considering the most radical element in this novel: humans representing animal issues.

Symbolic Animals: Zoos as Concentration Camps

Commenting on the frequency with which animals tend to refer metaphorically to human life in magic realist fiction, Tanja Schwalm observes:

Literary animals, in magical realism and elsewhere, are conventionally regarded as cyphers, symbols or props [...] Through their transformation into figures of speech, nonhuman animals themselves, who form the basis of such symbolic representations, have been virtually erased from the consciousness of readers and literary critics alike. (11)

Hartnett harnesses our familiarity with the use of animals as symbols to provide insight into the rarely discussed Roma Holocaust. The role of the talking animals in this novel is twofold: the magical animal characters rework the history of the Roma Holocaust and at the same time – by linking it with the contemporary issues of animal genocide – function as a work of ecological criticism. The former is evident in the similarities between how the Roma and animals are treated: both are deemed ‘other’, deprived of their freedom (the animals imprisoned in the zoo; the Roma in the concentration camps), and so both are victims of the war. This parity between animal and human genocides constitutes Hartnett’s eco-philosophical thinking within *The Midnight Zoo*: the imprisonment and killing of animals as serious a crime as the imprisonment and killing of humans.

Acknowledging that drawing analogies between human and animal genocides is problematic, especially within the context of the Holocaust where Jews and Roma were humiliated by abusive comparisons to animals, we cannot deny that animal genocide takes roots in speciesism which foregrounds racism. According to Timothy Clark “racism’s first move is usually to dissociate its object from the respect normally accorded other people, with the use of animal names as insults (‘pig’, ‘rat’, ‘dog’)” (184–185). The insulting imagery of pigs, mice, dogs and cats forms the cornerstone for Art Spiegelman’s graphic novels *Maus* (1986) and *Maus II* (1991) in which Spiegelman effectively uses animal metaphors to represent the Jewish Holocaust. His choice of mice for Jews is grounded on the Nazis’ description of the Jews as ‘vermin’:

“Vermin” is a socially constructed term, not a scientific one. It is applied to any animal humans have no use for, or worse yet, against whom humans must compete for resources. Labeling animals as vermin is the first step in justifying their eradication. Spiegelman’s visual mouse metaphor serves to expose the lie behind the artificial genetic hierarchy that Aryan anti-Semitism sought to establish within the human race. (De Angelis 231)

Importantly, focusing on the problem of the Jewish genocide, the reader of *Maus* is supposed to take for granted that mice are despised, disliked animals. “[A] response that objects ‘these people are not rats’ and so on, does not undo the force of hatred at work in the animal terms themselves” (Clark 185). A point similar to Clark’s is offered by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin:

The use of animals as a basis for human social division; and, above all perhaps, the metaphorisation and deployment of 'animal' as a derogatory term in genocidal and marginalizing discourses [...] it is acceptable to treat animals cruelly, but not to treat people as if they were animals. (135)

The social acceptability of cruelty towards animals to which Clark as well as Huggan and Tiffin are responding is challenged in *The Midnight Zoo*. The way animals are presented challenges the speciesism on which racism and categories such as 'vermin' are based. Animals in *The Midnight Zoo* are intelligent, reasoning, compassionate, albeit also displaced and caged. The comparison between Roma and the zoo animals differs markedly from Spiegelman's vermin imagery in *Maus*. The Roma also display intelligence and compassion in their treatment of each other and the animals. The Roma are not 'other' because they are vermin (as Nazi ideology suggests), but rather Hartnett values them for their similarities to animals. The 'otherness' of both the zoo animals and the Roma is particularly evident in their magical abilities to communicate with one another. This analogy encourages readers to adopt an eco-philosophical approach as Hartnett guides them to question not only the act of treating the Roma (and Jews) as animals, but also the habit of treating animals as humans.

Jacques Derrida draws attention to analogies between animal mistreatment and Nazi genocide by highlighting the inherent speciesism in both, and connecting this with intensive farming:

[T]he annihilation of certain species is indeed in process [...], animals [are] exterminated by means of their continued existence or even their overpopulation. As if, for example, instead of throwing people into ovens or gas chambers (let's say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals. (394–395)

Zoos are places where the production and generation of certain animals are controlled. Similarly, by drawing parallels between people held in concentration camps and animals in the zoo, Hartnett sheds new light on the interdependence of attitudes towards animals and humans that allows genocides to occur. In *The Midnight Zoo*, parallels between animal characters and human characters are underlined by the similarity of their experiences. For instance, the forced separation of the cubs from the lioness parallels the forced separation of the children from their parents: they each describe the scene of the attack on their family. When the soldiers encounter the Roma's campsite in the

middle of the Feast Day of Black Sarah, they kill several people, including the boys' uncle, and abduct the rest. The children manage to escape capture by hiding in the woods, while the rest of the Roma, including the boys' parents, are taken by the soldiers. As the dialogue unfolds, the animals, in turn, share their life stories, particularly, the terrible mistreatment they underwent, each in their own way, before they were finally left unattended in the zoo after the town had been bombed. This is when the novel becomes eco-philosophical.

This shared space of victimization encourages us to look at *The Midnight Zoo* from an eco-philosophical perspective introduced by Arne Naess as a "value axiom" that all forms of life "have equal right to live" (96). Such a perspective allows us to look at the animal characters behind the zoo bars not only as a metaphoric illustration of Roma people in concentration camps, read in Schwalm's terms "beyond animal symbolism, or rather, back to actual animals" (3). What is more, the Nazi genocide of the Roma is used to symbolize the brutality of humans towards 'other' living beings in more general terms. The Nazi persecution of 'otherness' is especially vivid in *The Midnight Zoo* as, according to David Rudd, both animals and children are linked by being treated as 'other': "the persistence of the link seems to arise from the fact that those at the top of the human ladder wish to see themselves as most distant from animals, as civilized, with 'lesser' beings automatically coded as closer to nature" (242). Besides, in *The Midnight Zoo* the proximity of the children to nature (the zoo animals) is directly represented through their magical communication. Empowered by the ability to speak, Hartnett's animals cease to be mere objects as they become speaking subjects who can speak for the rights of animals.

Magical Creatures: Animals as Animals

Reading animals as animals in *The Midnight Zoo* is complicated by the fact they are *talking* animals in an otherwise realistic setting. The peculiarity of magic realist reading is discussed by Joe Langdon, who suggests that "the deliberately ambiguous nature of magical realist texts means that they can often be read in a multitude of ways, often causing the reader to 'lose the plot' and feel or experience, rather than objectively observe or understand, occurring events" (22). This experience allows freedom from grasping all the implications of animal metaphor to empathize with victims of genocides, both human and non-human, but nevertheless guides the reader to think about animal-human relationships and the abuse of both in more general

terms. The magic realist elements within *The Midnight Zoo* help to rework the history of the Roma Holocaust and – by linking it with the contemporary issues of animal genocide – function as a work of eco-philosophy.

Not until the children arrive at the zoo does the presence of the fantastic become evident. Magic enters the novel during the first night spent in the zoo when the boys suddenly hear voices and, to their amazement, discover that the animals in the zoo can talk. This is when the novel enters the mode of magic realism. The characters must overcome their prejudices against the fantastic, and in doing so encourage readers to reconsider their own prejudices. As both readers and characters accept animals' power of speech, the possibility of accepting other similarities between animals and humans is improved.

The brothers, amazed, looked first to one animal and then to another, their hearts jumping like skimmed stones. Andrej remembered something Uncle Marin once said: *Animals know things you can't imagine. And they know how to keep a secret.* Talking must be one of the things that animals knew, but kept secret. (Hartnett 53)

The novel suggests that animals' ability to talk is not unbelievable; talking is the animals' hidden ability. After their momentary surprise, the children accept the talking animals as natural animals allowing the novel to be read as magic realist, not least because war for Tomas seems more magical than talking animals: "Lately the world was providing utterly topsy-turvy to how he'd believed it to be" (Hartnett 54). Thus, the magical zoo world is taken for granted, whereas the mad world of the war seems unreal. The 'madness' of the war takes on a fresh perspective which results in estrangement from human reality and, conversely, familiarity with the zoo reality and empathy with the magic animal characters. The effect of estrangement from humans makes the animal characters stand out: they are no longer secondary metaphoric creatures, but independent beings existing in their own right. However, humans deprive them of their independence by placing them in the zoo. Each animal in turn tells the children about their appearance in the zoo.

The children hear the heartbreaking story of the seal from the bear: the fisherman killed the seal's mother and took the baby seal to make money out of him by showing him at the ports and charging people for petting him. When the seal grew up and was no longer sweet and furry, the fisherman no longer wanted to keep him and so sold him

to the zoo. Andrej, watching how terribly the seal suffers in a small pool, asks the bear about the seal's memory of the ocean:

"Do you think it remembers the ocean?"

It would hurt less if it had forgotten, but the bear replied, "Of course it remembers. Its mind is filled with the crashing of waves [...] It remembers the ocean because its blood and bones cannot forget it." (Hartnett 102)

This episode evokes sympathy towards the seal beyond any metaphor related to human victims. The reader is positioned to share the sympathetic perspective of the child character (Andrej) and in this way the animal is perceived as an actual animal (a seal), not as a representation of a human. The fact that both the boy and the bear refer to the seal with the impersonal pronoun "it" suggests that both are aware of the seal's belonging to 'animalkind' where the seal represents nothing more but itself. Consequently, this awareness is acquired by readers who empathize with the seal as the suffering animal. Neither Andrej nor the reader are offered direct insight into the seal's perspective, both learn through the bear's perspective. Positioning the bear as the witness of the seal's suffering challenges the assumption that the animal can only be "seen". In *The Midnight Zoo* the animals can be both the seeing and the seen.

Derrida distinguishes between "the seeing animal" and "the seen animal" (383) to suggest that the seeing animal not only has the point of view of a human, but the point of view of the absolute 'other'. Derrida's point is concretized in Hartnett's novel where humans are seen as 'others' by the zoo animals: readers not only see the animals from the perspective of the sympathetic Roma characters, they also see humans from the animals' perspective.

"I wish I was a wolf," said Tomas.

The wolf looked at him with distaste. (59)

The wolf's distaste for the idea that Andrej could become one of his kind suggests that the animals consider humans to be an inferior species. This conversation questions the nature of humanity: How natural is it to be human if nature (here represented through the animals) is resistant to accepting them? The magic realist qualities of Hartnett's animals suggest that 'human' can mean 'unnatural', which creates "the effect of defamiliarization" (Hegerfeldt 203). The wolf is particularly articulate in his rejection of identification with

humans. He explains to Tomas: "None of us know why your war is happening. Your squabbles aren't something we care about. When a wolf clan battles another, it's usually over territory. Probably this is the reason for your warring, but who knows? People aren't wolves." (Hartnett 59)

The wolf uses the trivializing term "squabbles" to describe World War II to stress the absurdity of the war and, at the same time, to undermine the importance and superiority of humankind. The more Tomas hears, the more distant he becomes from humans whose actions seem unnatural to him and evoke feelings of revulsion that resemble the wolf's 'distaste'. Hartnett's focalization through Tomas positions the implied child-reader to adopt a similar disgust for humans and to empathize with the animals. According to Lesley Hawkes, "From the animal perspective, the human world offers no sense. It destroys for no other reason than momentary pleasure" (73). Given that the question of (ir)rationality is of pivotal importance in magic realism, it seems crucial to note that magic realism presents reality simultaneously from the "rational" and the "magical" point of view (Spindler 78), as each has equal significance. However, the interaction of these points can be different. Teya Rosenberg suggests that "fantasy - and particularly magical realism - endeavours to communicate the essence of the experience, the overwhelming sense of two incompatible worlds being yoked together, in terms more general than does realism" (81). Hartnett, however, questions the incompatibility of the world of animals being "yoked" to the human world. The parallels she draws incorporate humans into the same order: humans are merely another species of animal.

Mysterious Animals: Humans as Animals

Hartnett's positioning of the reader encourages an eco-philosophical stance; in *The Midnight Zoo* all forms of life "have equal right to live" and the "master-slave" formula is undermined (Naess 96). The human treatment of animals can be metaphorically read as the Nazi treatment of the Roma and, conversely, the Nazi genocide reveals the inhumanity of humans towards 'other' living beings both animals and people. This parity of the representation of genocide relies on inverting animal-human imagery.

The main human characters in *The Midnight Zoo* are the Roma children who are characterized through similes which connect them to the animal world, such as: "Tomas remained rabbit" (21) or "Tomas' birdie face twisted" (43). When the lioness approaches Wilma,

the baby's smell reminds her of her cubs: "They smell the same, the lioness murmured. My cubs smelled as she does. Like pollen" (175). Even the simple action of the baby's cry is portrayed to emphasize how many animalistic features children have: "Wilma arched her spine and screamed. Her mouth was a furious butterfly, with pink open wings. Her tongue wagged like a fish tail between naked gums" (22). Besides their physical resemblance with animals, the Roma children are also depicted as hunted prey who must forage for food. They share a common enemy with the animals: the Nazis. Nazi soldiers removed the children's parents and the animals' zoo keepers. Even though the animals initially seem hostile towards the children, through the sharing of their histories, the border between child and animal is erased. This is first symbolized by the sharing of food and then by the opening of the cages. Both are victims of the war, lost, hungry, helpless, unprotected, and isolated from their natural environment, they are uncertain how to survive in the realistically war-torn European landscape. As Greg Garrard suggests, "the boundary between human and animal is arbitrary and, moreover, irrelevant, since we share with animals a capacity for suffering" (147). The psychological complexity of these relationships is that, despite being united by the shared suffering, they remain disparate in both direct (metal bars) and indirect (children are humans) ways.

The children and the animals speak the same language and this becomes a unifying feature. The animals' ability to speak discredits the assumption that humans are superior. Furthermore, this magic realist capacity enables the animals to pass judgment on humans. Bruce Shaw discusses humans' fear of admitting animals' intellectual abilities and points out the factor "frequently found in intelligent animal genre, and present in *The Heart of a Dog*, is that of eavesdropping: the unsettling thought that our companion animals are observing us with human and, therefore, judgmental and enquiring minds" (129). The animals in *The Midnight Zoo* not only observe humans with their judgmental minds, they also discuss humans from their non-human perspective. Catherine Elick is right to acknowledge that "to ascribe language to animals is to grant them subject status" (466). As long as the animal characters receive such status, they become capable of making judgments about what they see, moving from a passive plane into active.

The issue of animals and language is discussed by Derrida in terms of animals' disempowerment due to their inability to respond to the fact that they are defined as animals:

Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give. These humans are found giving it to themselves, this word, but as if they had received it as an inheritance. [...] [T]he animal is without language [...] without the right and power to “respond” and hence without many other things that would be the property of man. (400)

Hartnett’s animals are not without language, they have the power to respond. Moreover, in the word “animal” they choose to refer to humans, they demand parity between the species: the bear states: “The owner is not a wicked man [...] He is just a man, with the peculiar ways of man. You are a mysterious *animal*, you know” (113; emphasis added). With this statement the bear overturns the very philosophical concept of the human, suggesting the displacement of hierarchies and a reconsideration of the value of humanity. This statement suggests that the roles of animals and humans are reversed. Humans are portrayed as mysterious, peculiar *animals*.

Moreover, the Roma in the novel compare themselves favorably with animals. Tomas recollects his Uncle Marin stating “We Rom are closer to the animals than to people like that. It was something to be proud of, the state of being free [...]. It was something animals had that humans envied and respected” (Hartnett 108). This passage suggests that the Roma are superior to other humans because they resemble animals. The Roma have more freedom than other humans: “There are wildcats who live in forests, cats who can never be tamed. We are wildcat people, Andrej” (Hartnett 15). Uncle Marin’s statement is complicated by the fact that it is the Roma themselves – and not the Nazis – who associate themselves with animals. Therefore, humans are represented in this novel as animals from both animal’s and human’s points of view, but in a decidedly different analogy from the one in Spiegelman’s *Maus*, where the animal imagery bears negative connotations. In *The Midnight Zoo*, to be like a wildcat is to be superior; “wild” here loses its meaning of “uncivilized”, but instead becomes the synonym for “free”. Freedom is not the only trait the Roma boys share with the animals; their status as ‘other’ and the consequent threat of extermination is also shared. Andrej says “I always feel hunted” (157), a statement which locates the Roma as prey, in an analogous situation to animals. Like the Roma, the animals in *The Midnight Zoo* are not only the victims of the war, they are also victims in peacetime: the Roma because they are forced to move, the zoo animals because they are prevented from doing so.

Somewhat paradoxically, indirect descriptions of horrors seem more effective tools for inviting readers to engage with the subject. It is easier to engage with the human Holocaust through animal imagery and, conversely, the abuse of animals through human imagery.

For this reason, “storytellers may need magic to battle death camps and totalitarian regimes” (Zamora and Faris 164). In magic realism the real and the fantastic are intermingled and inverted in a manner resembling Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque (10). “It becomes apparent that there is a close relationship between the concepts because carnivalesque is ‘a world of topsy-turvy [...] where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled’” (Bowers 71). Carnival is perhaps the integral element of magic realism in the relationship between the magic and the real. However, unlike the ritual and carnival which lasts for fixed period only, there is no end point for the war from the children’s and animals’ point of view. The way the zoo animals in the novel see humans leads to Andrej’s gradual recognition of the unspeakable humans’ brutality towards animals and humans. As with carnival, the magical realist novel breaks down the borders between the performer and the audience. This narrative strategy positions the implied reader to accept Andrej’s (eco-philosophical) perspective.

Reading Eco-philosophical Animals

The conception of antinomy, paradox or binary categories commonly found in magic realism, appeal to new ways of understanding history in the post-Holocaust world. Eco-philosophy in *The Midnight Zoo* undermines the binary categories by equating animal and human concerns. “We can more or less understand the world before the war, but since that cataclysm [the Holocaust], as a result of the preponderance of horrific information embracing that virtually all-encompassing experience” (Danow 81).

Speaking in Danow’s terms, the experience of the zoo animals and Andrej and Tomas stands for the ‘all-encompassing experience’ of animals and children in the war. It has become apparent that there are more zoos like this, more homeless children who have lost their parents in the war. Through the simultaneous empathy with these animals and children, Hartnett positions the reader to project their particular experience onto a wider scale. This effect is most effective in the episode where the bear tells Andrej about the invisible holes left all over around us:

“[S]omewhere out there, there’s a gap in the water, a place which is hollow because the seal isn’t there.”

Andrej thought about it – the notion that the world was riddled with holes where certain *people and animals* were meant to be, but weren’t. (102; emphasis added)

This narrative strategy positions the implied reader to construct the overwhelming hollowness that humans continue to create in their mass extermination of “certain people and animals”. By my emphasis I want to stress how Hartnett’s parallel proposes that killing people and animals are equally serious crimes.

What is more, the eco-philosophical perspective encourages reexamination of the concept of humanity according to Naess’s *principles of diversity and of symbiosis*:

Ecologically inspired attitudes therefore favour diversity of human ways of life, of cultures, of occupations, of economies. They support the fight against economic and cultural, as much as military, invasion and domination, and they are opposed to the annihilation of seals and whales as much as to that of human tribes or cultures. (96)

The impossibility of the children being reunited with their family as well as the parallel impossibility of the animals being returned to their natural environments raise the fundamental ecological point that nature can no longer right itself after human intervention: “We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence *is* its meaning” (McKibben in Garrard 78). By confining the animals in the zoo, humans altered their nature: they became dependent and, consequently, unnatural. The llama starts to panic when she thinks that the cages will be opened: “If we leave the zoo, who’ll take care of us? Who’ll bring food and water? Who will change the straw? Where will I sleep? What will I do when it rains? What if I get lonely – who will I talk to? What if something bad happens – what if I fall down a hill?” (Hartnett 183). The llama, who once knew how to cope independently, no longer knows how to eat, drink, sleep or even spend her time without human help. Similarly, the boys who, at their young age, would normally be cared for by their parents, become responsible for themselves, each other, their baby sister and a whole zoo of starving animals. As a result, the lives of the boys are similarly denaturalized.

The Midnight Zoo addresses the principles of eco-philosophy and facilitates their understanding without direct, didactic instruction. “Paradoxically, the un-real of these [magic realist] texts simulates the sense or experience of something real” (Langdon 3). The implied reader is positioned to take Andrej’s perspective that the thousands of holes, which surround us, are invisible but real, and they are the evidence of thousands of (animal and human) destroyed lives. Magic realism in this novel suggests that there is no one way to experience reality, but various ways chosen by the reader. In the magical ani-

mals' narratives the engagement of the reader's imagination is stimulated by gaps which the reader is encouraged to fill in. Kokkola's definition of silence best illustrates how *The Midnight Zoo* informs about the horrors of the Holocaust: "A book that contains silence - informational gaps can be more informative on an emotional level than a book which attempts to provide all relevant background" ("Representing" 25). The importance of such language is also noted by Eugene Arva: "The language of silence is the language of trauma - the language that writes silence, gives it meaning, and converts it into history" (6). Magic realism in *The Midnight Zoo* functions according to the definitions by Kokkola and Arva: the holes in *The Midnight Zoo* speak the language of silence. The reader instead is positioned to convert the indirect image into the real fact: the innumerate victims (both animals and humans) of the genocide are as invisible as these holes.

This ability to engage in the imaginative 'play' with magical meaning positions the implied reader to become more emotionally involved but not less informed. Magic realism in *The Midnight Zoo* appeals to emotions, not rationality, simulating the 'felt' experience of trauma (Langdon 20). The magic realism of Hartnett's narration is not overtly didactic, although it guides readers interpret and reflect in an eco-philosophical manner. As a result of this narrative strategy, young readers of *The Midnight Zoo* are encouraged to engage with the human and animal characters' shared suffering on an emotional level. In doing so, they are positioned to recognize the link between the real and the magic elements (such as holes) with further reconsideration of its relevance to the present. "Magic is the indispensable element by which the traumatic imagination rearranges, reconstructs and re-presents reality when mimetic reality-testing hits the wall of an unassimilated - and inassimilable - event" (Arva 5). In *The Midnight Zoo*, magic realism becomes an effective tool to represent the unassimilated scale of the Roma Holocaust and the mass extermination of certain animal species demonstrated by the range of habitats from which the animals must have come, ranging from the Australian desert (kangaroo) to the African savannah (lioness) or the Andes (llama). Hartnett's intertwining of these genocides encourages child-readers to adopt an eco-philosophical standpoint.

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Notes

1 Zahrada (from Slovakian): zoo.

2 Klokan (from Slovakian): kangaroo.