Crossing an Almost Unimaginable Border

Eva Hornung


Inspired by the case of Ivan Mishukov, a boy who lived with a pack of stray dogs in Moscow for two years in the 1990s, Eva Hornung’s novel _Dog Boy_ begins with the same premise: like Mishukov, Hornung’s protagonist is a four-year-old boy who finds himself on the streets of a disintegrating postperestroika Moscow, along with legions of other homeless children and adults. This boy’s name is Romochka, the Russian diminutive for Roman—an allusion to Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome, who was suckled by a wolf. As this mythic reference suggests, the novel’s vision goes far beyond a retelling of Mishukov’s experience, convincingly and imaginatively exploring the liminal space between the worlds of human and nonhuman.

As the story begins, Romochka’s mother and “Uncle” have disappeared, leaving him alone in an abandoned, unheated apartment building. Once he ventures outside, he is drawn to a large, yellow dog who seems less threatening than the human strangers he sees. The dog turns out to be a nursing mother who, unlike her purely feral offspring, “knew humans and bore the scars left by both affection and brutality” (p. 20); when Romochka is menaced by her two adult children, she takes a protective interest in him and accepts him into the pack by licking his face. He follows the dogs to their den in an abandoned church basement on the outskirts of the city, in the process unknowingly crossing a border that the narrator tells us “is, usually, impassable—not even imaginable” (p. 15).

That border is, of course, the boundary between the world of humans and the world of the dogs. Hornung brings the latter to life masterfully, using a third-person narrator who gives us Romochka’s point of view as he metamorphoses into a dogboy. Joining the other puppies in the den and suckling from the yellow dog (whom he calls Mamochka) throughout the bitterly cold winter, he finds his eyes useless during the long, pitch-black nights. Instead, he learns to depend on his senses of smell, taste, and touch to negotiate his new reality: “the rich smelly darkness and . . . the rub of hair, claws and teeth” (p. 24). The difference between human and dog worlds in this novel is more a matter
of perception than of hard geographical boundaries, and Romochka emerges from the den the following spring with a decidedly doglike perspective.

Hornung’s novel is remarkable for the extent to which it avoids romanticizing Romochka’s life with the dogs. The utter filth of their den is vividly rendered, and the shocking stench that Romochka develops becomes a recurring motif, with other humans sometimes gasping when they encounter him. The novel also spares no nauseating details regarding what the dogs and Romochka eat: not just scraps begged or stolen from humans, but also barely dead rats and even the frozen remains of dead wolves that Romochka must urinate on in order to thaw them for consumption. Hornung’s lyrical prose serves not to gloss over the gritty reality of their lives but rather to bring its vitality to the surface. The dogs themselves are anthromorphized as little as possible, given the inevitable limitations of human language. Each member of the feral clan emerges as a fully realized character with whom Romochka develops and negotiates a complex relationship: a rivalry with the difficult Black Sister, a deep bond with White Sister, an apprenticeship to the older Black Dog, who takes him out to mark their territory. The absorbing world Hornung builds is as powerful a feat of imagination as that of any successful fantasy or science fiction novel.

In fact, Romochka’s life with the dogs is rendered so vitally—stench and all—that many readers will be disappointed when the novel brings in a new perspective about two-thirds of the way through. Shortly before Romochka’s third winter with the dogs, Mamochka brings home a human infant whom Romochka calls Puppy. The following spring, Puppy ventures outside and quickly disappears; Romochka eventually finds him at a children’s center, where he is receiving medical care and being studied by “leading scientists” Dmitry Pastushenko and Natalya Ivanovna. We periodically share their thoughts from that point on, and the shift is profound. Romochka’s life is precarious, shadowed by threats of starvation and aggression from other dogs, wolves, and humans, but it is also rich with sensory impressions, the adventures that constitute everyday living, and—perhaps more than anything else—the powerful sense of belonging to the clan that motivates both the dogs and Romochka. By contrast, the two scientists live in a sterile, mostly intellectual world of individual isolation, where even their attempts to help abandoned children, including Romochka, can be interpreted as selfishly motivated. Their busy thoughts, dissecting every occurrence and emotion, seem excessive after the focus and simplicity of Romochka’s life with the dogs.

One of Dmitry’s objectives in studying Puppy is to learn more about the innate differences between humans and other animals—in other words, which uniquely human characteristics develop without the influence of human nurturing. He typifies Western thinking about feral children when he assumes that
“[a]nimal was the basis, the hidden foundations; but human—that was the building, the amazing sculptured artefact of personality” (p. 194). However, Romochka’s struggle with his own identity ultimately deconstructs this neat architectural metaphor. He becomes a dog in many ways, both in terms of behavior and identity. His first winter in the dark underground den functions as a gestation in which “the good beasts rubbed against him in the dark until he became beast, too” (p. 21).

However, his transformation is ongoing, and his identity is always in flux. Though impressively strong and comfortable moving on all fours, physically he remains a boy, acutely conscious and ashamed of the fact that his sense of smell and hunting skills are inferior to those of the rest of his clan. He has longings the dogs don’t share, collecting souvenirs of important events and responding powerfully to human singing and music. Some of his human differences even confer advantages on his clan: he lugs a bucket of water into the den, collects and carries scraps back to the group, and fashions weapons out of pieces of wood, nails, and spikes. Eventually, the dogs look to him as a leader because of these abilities, but he is still deeply troubled when confronted with his species difference, as when Golden Bitch takes a submissive posture that tells him “he was not a dog to her” (p. 40) or when he sees himself in a mirror while raiding an apartment for clothes for the growing Puppy.

Despite Romochka’s lingering humanity, his successful coexistence with the dogs demonstrates the vast extent of physical, emotional, and psychological characteristics that they share. In the end, as all good literature should, the novel leaves us with more questions than answers—in this case, about where the line can be drawn between dog and boy. As the poignant final scene emphasizes, the two may always be intermingled in Romochka’s case.

Romochka’s sense of self is not only complex and shifting, but also to some degree performative: he learns that “passing” as a boy can be useful, allowing him to beg for food and money and, most crucially, to visit Puppy once he has been taken away. Romochka is relatively safe when wearing his “boy mask”; it is his hybridity that humans seem to find intolerable: while temporarily captured by the militzia who patrol the better neighborhoods of Moscow, he is displayed as an object of curiosity, and a cruel gang of bored teenagers who torture him reveal their motivation when they carve “собака” (dog) into his chest. The dogs, by contrast, accept his hybridity, whether it benefits them (like his begging) or puzzles them (as when he takes them along on exploratory trips on the subway).

At one point, Natalya says that Romochka “was better off living with dogs than humans” (p. 276), a judgment supported when, for example, Romochka finds two children dead from inhaling glue or a frozen baby wrapped in...
newspaper beside a dumpster. But, as horrific as humans can be to each other in this novel, it does not take the simple route of condemning them as less noble than the dogs; instead, it leads readers to see that these people are not so different from dogs in their struggle for subsistence, their clannishness, and their ferocity toward those outside the group. Some people, like the restaurant cook who befriends and feeds Romochka and the dogs, are even kind. And Hornung makes clear that most of these people are desperate themselves, all caught up in a massive social breakdown.

When first faced with Puppy, who is snarling and baring his teeth, Dmitry thinks, “You dog-lovers, with your sentimental anthropomorphic fantasies—you should see this” (p. 197). Hornung’s careful, compelling portrayal of Romochka flings this same challenge at her readers, but not for the same reasons. Dmitry believes that the qualities humans share with other animals are lower, primitive ones, while the novel as a whole complicates the relationship between human and animal, suggesting that they are inextricably intermingled and each equally worthy of attention.

Karla Armbruster
Webster University