

Second Language Learning and Teaching

Issues in Literature and Culture

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Personal Narratives, Peripheral Theatres: Essays on the Great War (1914–18)

 Springer

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A Bestiary of War: *Humanimalities* in the Trenches

Márcia Seabra Neves

Abstract Collectively perceived as the vastest and bloodiest human carnage of the contemporary age, World War I was also stage to the mobilization and termination of hundreds of thousands of animals, brutally dragged into a conflict. Always present in the daily lives of soldiers and on all combat fronts, animals were direct actors in this war zone, performing various roles, from communication agents to informants, from transport, scouting, surveillance and first aid missions to simple companionship and affection. However, and despite the abundant literary corpus that pays testimony to the post-war period, celebrating the scale of animal beligerence, the contribution of the non-human soldier seems to have been forgotten or relegated to the background of this apocalyptic scenario, where man holds centre-stage. Thus, the main goal of this study is to remember the actions of these silent and outcast heroes who shared with their human companions the agonies of war and the horrors of catastrophe. We will focus our attention on the relationships (be they companionship, friendship, mutual support or repulsion) established between human and non-human combatants throughout the four years of shared existence in the hell of the trenches, where the limits between humanity and animality quickly dissolved. These reflections will rest, as far as possible, upon testimonies of war from soldiers of the CEP (Portuguese Expeditionary Corps), thus revisiting memories of the Portuguese presence in World War I.

World War I brought about not only the death of millions of soldiers, but also the mobilization and termination of hundreds of thousands of animals. It is estimated that, in the course of the four years of the conflict, 11 million equines (mules and horses), 100,000 dogs, and 200 to 250,000 carrier-pigeons, among many other animals, had been brutally dragged into the European war.¹ From Portugal alone,

¹Éric Baratay, *Bêtes des tranchées: des vécus oubliés* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2013), 8–9.

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together with the PEC—the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps—11,721 equines left for France, not to mention the carrier-pigeons that joined the ranks of the Engineering and Communications Corps.²

Anachronistic and dissonant as it may seem, in the context of a conflict that has been imprinted upon the collective memory due to the annihilating effectiveness of its sophisticated war technology (machine guns, chemical weapons, planes, tanks, etc.), the truth is that animals have been key actors in the spectacle of war. If cavalry charges were quickly replaced by the advances of tanks and heavy artillery, images of long lines of motor vehicles together with carts pulled by mules and horses were pervasive until the end of the war, and the same can be said of messages carried by dogs and pigeons whenever the telegraph or the telephone was not operational. In reality, the Great War could never really have forgone the presence of animals.

However, even though, in the aftermath of the tragedy, the extent of animal belligerent intervention has been repeatedly acknowledged by combatants in their memoirs, it remains that, especially from the 30s onwards, the contribution of non-human soldiers seems to have been overlooked, fading into the background of this apocalyptic picture. Man has been claiming the chief role in the spectacle of war up to the last decades of the 20th century, when a revolution in Western thinking pertaining to animals and their relationship with humans was set in motion. In this context, the growing interest—both philosophical and critical—in animal conditions and in their ethical and scientific reassessment, together with the publication of novels such as *War Horse*, a children's book by Michael Morpurgo which appeared in 1982 and was adapted for cinema by Steven Spielberg in 2011, have opened up new perspectives, challenging the dominant species-based or anthropocentric view of the military importance of these recessive heroes and their relationship with the human actors, with whom they shared the harsh reality of the war-front.

1 Bestiary of War: The Animal as Soldier

In August 1914, at the onset of war in central Europe, general mobilization was enforced in the countries involved in the conflict, affecting both men and animals. During the recruiting process, enlisted animals were incorporated into a regiment and given military licence plates and registration papers, as if they were actual soldiers. Horses, dogs and carrier-pigeons were by far the most valued animals in the conflict, owing to the types of mission they could carry out in assisting human soldiers.

Ubiquitous throughout the conflict, the horse unquestionably played the leading role in war, as far as animal intervention is concerned. In 1914, the war horse was

²Afonso Aniceto and Carlos de Matos Gomes, *Portugal e a Grande guerra. 1914-1918* (Lisboa: Quid Novi, 2010), 274.

an indispensable presence in any military strategy or operation, and cavalry represented an essential part of every army constituting one of its chief offensive elements. However, the modernization of artillery and heavy weaponry, as well as the stagnation of the war in the trenches, made cavalry attacks obsolete and many squads, such as the PEC, were eventually dissolved and turned into companies of bicycle infantry.

The cavalry section being progressively phased out brought about changes in the military functions of the horse, but which would never imply its redundancy. In fact, horses would become increasingly indispensable throughout the conflict and would be required to perform several strenuous tasks. In spite of the development of motor vehicles and the railway network, the horse, and equines in general, were the army's real power source. The capacity they had to move on ground inaccessible to motor vehicles made the movement of troops more efficient and made catering in the trenches feasible.

The machine thus complemented, but never fully replaced, the animal. In 1918, according to Éric Baratay, on the whole of the Western front, 80% of campaign artillery and 70% of heavy artillery were still animal-driven.³ Horses were widely used for the transportation of heavy goods. Either alone or pulling vehicles, horses were mainly used to transport all kinds of food supplies, weapons and ammunition, heavy artillery and even the wounded and the dead (both human and non-human), helping to connect up the rear and the front lines. More resilient and smaller than horses, donkeys and mules were increasingly common along transport lines and particularly in the trenches, where they could move more easily, and were less open to the enemy's line of sight, allowing for food supplies successfully to reach the soldiers.

Having been exploited to the limit of their strength, war was particularly dreadful for equines. The ordeal started right from the moment of transportation to the warzone, especially for animals coming from the Americas. To meet the growing demand for horses and donkeys, the allied countries had to import animals from the United States and Argentina, subjecting them to an exhausting crossing of the Atlantic. Penned in a confined space, forced to remain immobile during the 15 to 20 days which the journey lasted, anxious and undernourished, exposed to all sorts of contagious diseases and deprived of all health and hygiene care, many horses succumbed before they could even reach Europe. For those who survived, suffering would increase significantly in the conflict zone where living and working conditions were even more appalling.

The war of movement (August–November 1914) was undeniably the deadliest for horses, exhausted by endless displacements, hunger and thirst, the intense heat, the bad condition of horseshoes and the wounds caused by the unrelenting use of saddle and harness. The following words uttered by a French soldier on the death of

³Éric Baratay, *Le point de vue animal: une autre version de l'histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012), 37.

his mare, which didn't survive exhaustion on the last day of the battle of Marne, are particularly eloquent:

If the word martyr could fittingly apply to animals, it would be the one we should employ. Our mounts have given us all their endurance, right until the last step, right until the last breath. Not having the force of thought to keep them going, they endured passively, with no complaints, the most horrible wounds, on their backs in particular, the exhaustion caused by ridings that were at times over one hundred kilometres, the compression of rider and saddle, the latter resting for almost forty hours on their shoulders, the hunger, the thirst when the needs of combat would not let us stop.⁴

The animals that were in no condition to continue the journey were left behind to a lonely and agonizing death. Many didn't reach the battlefield, but most who did fell under the hail of fire from machine-guns.

With the stabilizing of the Western Front, in December 1914, men and animals burrowed into the trenches and the slaughter of horses decreased. Though the War of Position appears to have been less deadly than the War of Movement, it was not any less cruel. In the trenches, just like men and other animals, horses fell victim to two lethal weapons: mortars, which opened craters that 'dug up the dead and buried the living',⁵ and asphyxiating gas, responsible for the horrific death of human and non-human soldiers. When they weren't slaughtered by the enemy, horses were shot down by their own human companions, in an attempt to release them from the agony of war wounds, as German soldier Erich Maria Remarque states in his famous novel *All Quiet On The Western Front* (1929):

I had never heard horses screaming and I can hardly believe it. It's utter agony. It's the martyred creature, it's a savage and terrible pain that cries thus. We become pale. Detering stands up: "In the name of God! Finish them off." (...) The cries of animals become more and more distinct. (...) they propagate immensely everywhere, between heaven and earth. (...) We notice a dark group of nurses with many big dark masses that are stirring. They are the wounded horses. (...) Some keep galloping, they fall and return to running. One of them has his belly open, from where his gut is coming out. He gets tangled on it and falls onto the ground, but manages to stand up, still. (...) We sit and cover our ears, but despite this, these complaints, these screams of anguish, these horrible cries, they penetrate our ears, they penetrate everything.⁶

Horses infected with diseases, such as scabies or the glanders disease (the most frequent) were also put down in order to avoid propagating them. The Veterinary Service of the French army listed over 60,000 cases of horses with glanders during the four years of the war, some of which were assignable to natural or endemic causes while others were of malicious origin.

⁴Apud Jean-Michel Derex, *Héros oubliés: les animaux dans la grande guerre* (Paris: Éditions Pierre de Taillac et Ministère de la Défense, 2014), 38. My translation.

⁵Bento esteves Roma, *Os portugueses nas trincheiras da Grande Guerra* (Lisboa: Cruzada das Mulheres Portuguesas, 1921), 18. My translation.

⁶Erich Maria Remarque, *A oeste nada de novo*, trad. Mário C. Pires (Lisboa: Publicações Europa-América, 1971), 49–50. My translation.

Recent research has demonstrated that a significant part of these epidemics could have been triggered by biological or bacteriological warfare secretly carried out by the Germans against their enemies. This was done by inoculating infectious diseases in the equines and bovines of the allied troops, with the intent to undermine their strength, their ability to attack and their resistance. In the book *La France espione le monde [France spies on the world]*, French journalist and historian Jean-Claude Delhez analyses German messages, which were intercepted and decoded by French Intelligence at the time, and sheds some light on the intricacies of this *biological world war*, of which Portugal may also have been a victim, as a form of retaliation for joining the war on the side of the allies. On February 1st 1917, Major Kalle, a German military attaché in Madrid, sent the German Secret Services the following message:

The glanders epidemic in Portugal has become so extensive among the horses of the troops and the mules that sending new troops may be unnecessary. We have apparently succeeded at disembarking 1800 animals and 30 men, to be followed by death or disease.⁷

In short, more than one million horses died during the war and those who survived were later shot due to old age or disease, sold to butchers or simply forgotten.

Another leading actor in the tragic theatre of the Great War, albeit less important than the horse, was the war dog. Dogs had to be 1 to 8 years old, their shoulder width had to measure between 45 and 60 centimetres, and they should preferably have a dark coat. After they were selected, they were taken to training camps and submitted to a rigorous drill, after which they were assigned different tasks and missions according to their skills.⁸

Search and rescue dogs, identified with a red cross on their backs, left for the battlefield in search of wounded soldiers, warning stretcher-bearers of their presence and pointing out their location. During search and rescue missions, dogs were also used to transport stretchers with the wounded. Even if the efficiency of search and rescue dogs was not acknowledged by all armies (the French army terminated this service in September 1915), the same cannot be said of supplier-dogs, which were more and more sought after throughout the war. Exposed to enemy fire and equipped with special saddles or riding small sleigh-like vehicles with load capacities of 15 to 18 kg, supplier-dogs shuttled the trenches inconspicuously, providing soldiers on the frontline with food and ammunition.

So-called messenger-dogs carried messages and maintained communication between soldiers, replacing the telephone and the telegraph. This service comprised delivery dogs, which ensured unilateral transmission between any advanced post and a fixed command centre, and liaison dogs that made return trips between two contact points.

⁷Apud Jean-Claude Delhez, *La France espione le monde—1914–1919* (Paris: Ed. Economica, 2014), 313. My translation.

⁸Saint-Bastien, Jean-François, *Les animaux dans la grande guerre* (Tours: Éditions Sutton, 2014), 47–48.

Patrol dogs or watch dogs remained on the frontline. They had particularly sharp noses, enabling them to detect enemy presences at a distance and to recognize different war noises. These dogs could remain focused and immobile for hours, observing the enemy and give warning in case they got too close. The success of this type of mission depended directly on the complicity and efficiency of communication between the dog and its human partner.

It was also in the front-line trenches that the gas-detecting dogs could be found. With their sharp noses, they could give warning of the proximity of danger in time to allow soldiers to slip gas masks on themselves and their animals (dogs and horses), thus preventing many deaths by asphyxiation.

Finally, in the rear lines, there were the carrier-dogs, which, because they were smaller and faster than horses, went around pulling small vehicles of canine traction, assisting and sometimes replacing equines in carrying weaponry, ammunition and food, especially in higher areas.

Horses and dogs coexisted in the warzone with military pigeons. These were part of the Engineer Corps, more precisely of the telegraphic services, and they played an essential role during the war. Discreet, but extremely fast and able to reach any destination, however far, under the harshest of conditions, the carrier-pigeon soon became the most efficient means of communication in times of war and was frequently used by intelligence services. All the countries involved on the Western front used them intensively, including the PEC, whose telegraphic service had a section of military pigeons from February 1917.⁹

When phone lines were destroyed, messenger-dogs killed and light signals were concealed by fog, dust and smoke from bombardments, only carrier-pigeons could help tackle the breakdown of modern communications technology and ensure that messages between the front lines, the artillery and the command posts were delivered. The method was simple: pigeons were strategically undernourished, kept in poor conditions, whether permanent or mobile,¹⁰ and apart from the opposite sex, that is, in a situation of deprivation that made them want to fly home. On the front line, for instance, a soldier would take the pigeon out of its basket, tie a message to its leg and release it so it would go back to base.¹¹

It was also standard procedure for pilots to scout enemy territory and send information via carrier-pigeons, without having to land.¹² The same occurred with war boats and ships. In fact, carrier-pigeons were a common resource in all branches of the military, be it on land, sea or air. Another mission entrusted to carrier-pigeons was espionage. The French used them to communicate with German-occupied territory, despatching them to those areas to the care of reliable agents who then sent them back to France with vital information. As for German

⁹Afonso Aniceto and Carlos de Matos Gomes, *Portugal e a Grande guerra. 1914–1918*, 290.

¹⁰Jean-Michel Derex, *Héros oubliés: les animaux dans la grande guerre*, 84.

¹¹Jean-François Saint-Bastien, *Les animaux dans la grande guerre*, 80.

¹²*Ibid.*, 82.

pigeons, it has been claimed they flew over enemy territory with miniature photographic devices taking fairly clear images of the lines.

Horses, dogs and pigeons were not, however, the only animals included in the Great War bestiary. If these provided valuable military assistance, others were unanimously regarded as enemies to be reckoned with by both conflicting parties. Trenches were ravaged by plagues of mice, rats, flies, lice, fleas, and other parasites. PEC soldiers used to call them *the trenches cleaning crew*: 'Rats of every size and I believe of all races and there was also a great variety of parasites.'¹³ Mice and lice were the worst enemies of combatants, who had no choice but to stoically co-habit with them.

In his memoirs of the Great War, Portuguese railroad sapper Pedro Freitas describes the battlefield as an immense and scary necropolis, where 'bodies of soldiers, mules, horses and more macabre fragments are abundant and truly rotting.'¹⁴ Rats are obviously the first beneficiaries of this squalid scenario of death and filth, voraciously feasting on rotten remnants. Erich Maria Remarque describes them in vivid words: 'Rats here are particularly repugnant because of their chunkiness. They are of the species called rats of the dead. They have abominable heads, evil and furless, and we feel disgusted just looking at their long bare tails.'¹⁵

Rats came from *No Man's Land* and plagued the trenches and shelters, devouring all they could find and making the daily routine of soldiers indescribably unbearable. Captain Menezes Ferreira alludes, in a tone of comedy, to the exodus of rodents to the trenches of the PEC:

Not wanting to defend the Right and Freedom of the Peoples or to exalt the supremacy of a tyrant or a caste, rats take advantage, as certain neutrals do, of everything combatants from both sides leave behind in the trenches, and they do it in such a fashion that, to *John Doe's* misfortune, predicting the scarcity of enemy lines, they desert in a true exodus to the three defensive lines of the PEC.¹⁶

In order to eradicate this plague, several measures were taken. The most effective included the use of toxic products or the assistance of dogs trained to kill mice and protect military rations (dogs are, once again, inseparable allies of men). There were mice-hunting contests where the best hunter was awarded a prize. If toxic products exterminated an average of 370 rats a day, dogs could kill around 80.

Other measures were taken individually by soldiers. The French invented the cage-bed (*lit-cage*), covered with netting which protected soldiers from mice and allowed them a better sleep. Several strategies destined to avoid the nocturnal offensives of these rodent enemies were designed by the PEC soldiers, as evoked by Lieutenant João Pina de Morais:

¹³Bento esteves Roma, *Os portugueses nas trincheiras da Grande Guerra*, 14. My translation.

¹⁴Pedro de Freitas, *As minhas recordações da grande guerra*, 51. My translation.

¹⁵Erich Maria Remarque, *A oeste nada de novo*, 76. My translation.

¹⁶Ferreira, Menezes, *João Ninguém: soldado da grande Guerra* (Lisboa: Livraria Portugal-Brasil, 1921), 46. My translation.

A huge rat of cylindrical body and greyish colour, passed by the shelter several times, starving. It's looking for food. When there is nothing else, they chew on the greasy cloth used to clean the weapons or the stains on our clothes. If one needs to keep a snack that stains in our pocket, one gets an hour's sleep. A rat will eat without disturbing us the bit of greasy fabric.¹⁷

Humour and poetry were, nevertheless, the weapons that most effectively tempered the ravaging action of rodents. Given the impossibility of defeating them, combatants trapped mice in jesting poems and songs, such as the "Fado of the bullets and the mice", written by Américo Mendes de Vasconcelos, "O Palhaes", from which the following refrain was taken:

Above our trenches
bullets fly by, singing
inside our shelters
rats walk by, squeaking.¹⁸

It is also with considerable bonhomie that soldiers face the daily struggle against another parasite archenemy, even more devastating than the mouse: the louse. Cohabitation with these small but obstinate invaders is frequently evoked in war memoirs, such as the ones written by combatants of the PEC:

The blokes in the group lie down to sleep; and at some point, accompanying our stomach's comfort, our mate the louse, also in search of greener pastures, starts its aggravating activity —and then, even in the soul-lifting state we are in, depending on the stings of the many-legged mate, so our interventions will be quick but merely destined to scare it off, because (...) killing it? That would not be worth it (...)¹⁹

In fact, the lack of individual and collective hygiene in the trenches, where combatants did not wash, shave or undress, rarely took their shoes off and slept on straw, was an inevitable aid to the proliferation of lice, resisting any human counter-attack. From insecticides to clothing disinfecting and mandatory bathing, all extermination measures proved ineffective. Picking out head lice and killing them by hand was, then, a daily and compulsory ritual and a hobby for soldiers of the PEC, who metaphorically referred to this activity as *the reading of the newspaper*. Pedro Freitas described it as follows:

'Reading the newspaper' was said of any soldier who, every night, sitting on his bunk bed or hut, took off his shirt, leggings or torn socks and searched the several layers of hair on his body to kill the lice that infested his body and clothing by the thousands, thus entertaining himself for hours. This hobby and cleaning act was conducted with a certain degree of fuss.²⁰

¹⁷João Pina de Morais, *O soldado-saudade na grande guerra* (Porto: Renascença Portuguesa, 1919), 56. My translation.

¹⁸Rogério Marques de Almeida Russo, *Arquivo Poético da Grande Guerra* (Porto: Companhia Portuguesa Editora, 1924), 141. My translation.

¹⁹Pedro de Freitas, *As minhas recordações da grande guerra* (Lisboa: L.C.G.G., 1935), 88. My translation.

²⁰Ibid., 279. My translation.

As with mice, soldiers incapable of defeating lice preferred to surrender to them through humour and irony. The French called them, tenderly, "les totos" and liked a good joke, poem or funny image inspired by them.

At the PEC, the louse was the main character in many poems and songs, such as "The soldier's louse", a burlesque panegyric where the presence and war performance of this friendly companion was celebrated and its cohabitation *with*, or better *on* the soldiers, was wittily narrated.

The louse is a friend
Which in peace or in danger
Sticks together with the soldier
When it bites, we feel
That he happily bites
To be fed
Out there in the battlefield
Between the fury of battle
The louse is a discovery
Within the seams of the shirt
In a line going
From neck to bottom.²¹

This already vast bestiary of war should be further expanded to include other animals used to feed the troops: farm animals lost between combat lines, stray dogs and cats, roaming through No Man's Land or taken in by soldiers, animals adopted as mascots for the regiments, among many others which, from the front to the rear lines of battle, shared with the soldiers the pains of war and the horrors of the apocalypse to which they were involuntary witnesses.

2 *Humanimalities*—The Relationship Between Man and Animal in the Trenches

Due to its tactical specificity, the First World War forced upon man and animal an almost permanent cohabitation. The first consequence of this proximity and togetherness between human and non-human combatants was the inevitable companionship that emerged between them. To the military animals and the *cleaning crew* of the trenches, one should add the pets and mascots. The former were generally lost or abandoned animals, mainly cats and dogs that sought shelter in the trenches, thereby bonding with the soldiers. The latter made up a true *Noah's Ark* of

²¹Rogério Marques de Almeida Russo, *Arquivo Poético da Grande Guerra*, 243. My translation.

the trenches,²² including animals from many species, ranging from the most ordinary to the most exotic (dogs, goats, wild boars, monkeys, bears, lions, elephants), adopted as iconic symbols of a regiment and whose job was essentially to raise the troops' moral.²³

While sharing the same physical discomfort and psychological horror, as well as the same existential fate as their human partners, animals became true companions to the soldiers, filling the affective void which naturally increased as more time was passed away from civilian life.

Testimonies of war depict recurrent demonstrations of affection from soldiers towards their pets. In a poignant letter written in the trenches and addressed to his young son, Captain Augusto Casimiro from the PEC describes with candid realism the conditions of animals in the war zone and their relationship with humans. Soldiers willingly provided comfort and protection in exchange for a presence which gave them hope and consolation, establishing a mutual bond based on cooperation, friendship and emotional communication.

Before the war, here, there were many houses, many waterfronts, with gardens and beautiful trees, with grandparents, daddies, mommies, children, Assunções, crazy Carloses, rabbits, chickens, dogs, cats and even the grandparents of these rats of today (...) But the war came, the German came, the cannons and the bullets (...) Everything vanished. The houses fell down, the trees were terrified, the chickens and rabbits let themselves be eaten (...) Only a female cat stayed (...) From the house where she lived, the only remains are a corner where the stove used to be (...) On combat days, angry and meowing, she walked through the trees, the ditches, she escaped from all manner of deaths (...) Then came the trenches, the shelters that looked like houses and she moved into one of them (...) —she lives in my shelter on the Reserve, where I have been for a few days (...) And she's been showing a bigger belly now (...) This afternoon, she cuddled up under my cape. I was writing these lines (...) And when I finished I went to see her and found a cat and three skinny kittens under my cape, (...) Born at 5 pm today, in the shelter of Reserve Coy, Belfast Street (...) Beautiful (...) Kittens and mommy are doing well. They are in the Maternity of the 1st Sergeant's lair (...) And one of them will be called Gurka, another Balutchi and the third will be named as you wish and I will keep (...)²⁴

In this unyielding search for fellowship at the edge of extinction, even animals normally considered *repugnant* become partners in misery. In a conference that took place in May 1920, at the Military School, on a theme of the 'Portuguese Village' in Flanders, Major Bento Esteves Roma, Company Commander at the PEC, describes his comradeship with the rats in the trenches, an odd experience of togetherness with this singular animal:

²²Jean-Michel Derex, *Héros oubliés: les animaux dans la grande guerre*, 118.

²³Jean-François Saint-Bastien, *Les animaux dans la grande guerre*, 95–104.

²⁴Augusto Casimiro, *Nas trincheiras da Flandres* (Porto: Edição da Renascença Portuguesa), 126–127. My translation.

When, after the change of sentinel in the morning, I wrapped myself in my blanket and let my body fall down, exhausted by a night of constant alertness, it was interesting to see what happened. With the lights out, I started to hear a noise coming closer and closer. Then, somebody came close to me, softly, with friendly steps not to wake me. And this visitor would soon gain unlimited confidence, allowing itself to walk over me, even rubbing my face with its velvety skin. It would retire and not long afterwards, having passed on the results of the exploration, more came, many more, and then they talked, chatted, with a squeaking that only rats can make.²⁵

In *L'animal que donc je suis* [The animal that therefore I am], Jacques Derrida argues that the true encounter with animal otherness is possible only when man and animal exchange glances—not the animal perceived from an anthropocentric point of view, but the real animal, that other which exists in front of us and that looks back at us.²⁶ It is precisely this reciprocity of an interrogating gaze exchanged between this soldier and his companions that is surprising, given that, although they *chatted* and *talked* like people, they do not appear deprived of an ontology of their own, squeaking like only those belonging to their species can. In addition, even though the transgression of the boundaries separating the human from the animals was triggered by the rats, the approximation between them and the soldier only became effective when both actually looked at each other. In other words, it is only when the soldier felt observed by the rats—in an interesting parallel with a situation that Derrida recalls involving his own cat—that he was able truly to penetrate their eyes.

At first I turned on the light and they went away, fled; but not long after, they appeared in the distance, between two sacks of earth, with very shiny tiny eyes, gazing upon me with an expression of one who asks permission to resume the interrupted party. And, because I was so tired, I fell asleep. I would wake up with the light still on and, when I opened my eyes, I would see my *partners* and *friends* were having as much fun as if the lights were off, fleeing only when I moved. Within a few days, we lived in honest good harmony and I never again turned on the light.²⁷

In sum, soldiers and animals become brothers inhabiting a common space of emotional sharing. If, on the one hand, we can recognize a kind of humanization of the animal, which becomes a friend, a partner, a family member, or a substitute for a human being, it nevertheless keeps its own ontology.

This is precisely what Éric Baratay, who has studied the relationships between animals and humans, argues in his latest book called *Bêtes des tranchées: des vécus oubliés* [*Beasts of the trenches: the forgotten living*]. Drawing on historical and ethological data, he examines the presence and function of animals in the Great War, relegating man to the background and ascribing to the animal the leading *point of view*. Baratay suggests that the bond established between soldiers and animals in

²⁵Bento Esteves Roma, *Os portugueses nas trincheiras da Grande Guerra*, 15. My translation.

²⁶Jacques Derrida, 'L'animal que donc je suis (à suivre)'. In *L'animal autobiographique*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet, 251–301 (Paris: Galilée, 1999), 253–265.

²⁷Bento Esteves Roma, *Os portugueses nas trincheiras da Grande Guerra*, 15–16. My translation.

the trenches is not solely founded on a simple anthropological projection of man over animal, but on a phenomenon of reciprocal union between two active subjects.²⁸ He therefore deconstructs the species-based and anthropocentric assumptions of Judaic-Christian tradition and of Western philosophy that imposed a radical severance and a hierarchical division between man and animal, claiming that animals are not mere objects or passive agents or secondary poles of a one-way relationship (man—animal), but actors who act and react and create with men true interactions and true communities.²⁹

It is therefore indispensable to abandon that *juvenile anthropomorphism*, responsible for the reductive binary system which opposes human species and animal species and relegates non-human living creatures to the base of the pyramid, and also to overcome the *conclusion anthropomorphism*, which, inversely, projects onto animals our human qualities, leading to a blurring of the species.

Baratay proposes a questioning anthropomorphism instead, i.e., one implying an attitude of questioning if such a faculty present in man could not be similarly present, albeit differently, in other species.³⁰ In other words, assuming that man is not radically different from the animal, sharing with it obvious similarities, Baratay argues for an anthropomorphism that draws on the possibility that a given human faculty may also exist in animals. What Baratay suggests, in short, is an *animal relationship with the animal*. To achieve this, man should put himself in the animal's position, incorporating its vision of the world. During the long waiting hours in the trenches, soldiers had plenty of time to observe their animals and, prompted by their behaviour and attitudes, reflect upon their own essence. In the words of Baratay,

Most of the time, these animals draw the eye, spark the interest, fill the time of the soldiers, make them talk and write a lot (...). Because this evolving fauna inside their daily hell incites men to think of life, of their condition as soldiers, of their destiny, of death. This meditation is not simple sensitive projections of animals as pretexts, hardly observed or heard (...) but the result of observations of these animals, of considerations, of comparisons and crossings between situations and attitudes of animals and men.³¹

An animal presence in the war therefore confronts combatants with the limits of their own humanity and the unutterable absurdity of man transformed into a dog of war. Thus, the assistance that animals provide to soldiers was not strictly military or tactical, but rather ontological, since they helped them to know themselves and to reassess their place in the world. In a place and time in which exploitation of all the dimensions of man was taken to unimaginable extremes, soldiers eventually lost their human identity, in a sometimes irreversible process of bestialization.

Indeed, incarcerated in muddy ditches, crawling over the remains of shattered bodies, confronted with the horrific spectacle of exposed entrails and the piercing

²⁸Éric Baratay, *Bêtes des tranchées: des vécus oubliés*, 111–112.

²⁹Ibid., 11.

³⁰Ibid., 16.

³¹Ibid., 129. My translation.

cries of the wounded who lay in No Man's Land, the soldiers of the front lived as if they were animals, in a scenario where human dignity had been radically debased. Major Bento Esteves Roma provides a vivid description of this macabre landscape:

In spite of there being cemeteries, many, many bodies were buried in the trenches. A mortar falling and blowing up would open a crater, leaving those rotten remains in plain sight; at the same time, it hid the hapless that were near the spot where it fell under earth thrown up by the explosion. Very often, just as occurred with my battalion, days passed by with nothing noticeable happening and, on the dawn of the surrender, there would come a mortar which made five or more casualties. Afterwards, we searched and collected dispersed and bloodied limbs which not long before were still alive. And even then, so many times the bodies of these hapless were buried incomplete!³²

In these deadly labyrinths called trenches, man is gradually dispossessed of his humanity, reverting to a zero-sum of his own nature. In the words of the modernist Almada Negreiros, after a visit to the battlefields in northern France, 'The trench is the reminiscence of the troglodyte'—'Humanity was outraged.'³³

It is not uncommon for soldiers to provide a first-hand account of this feeling of living like animals, consciously turning them more and more animal. In his celebrated novel, *All Quiet On The Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque reveals the barbarity that led to this outrage of the human condition:

We have become dangerous animals; we do not fight, we defend ourselves against destruction. (...) The madness that inflames us is unwise. We are not coiled, powerless on the scaffold, but instead we can destroy and kill to save ourselves (...). Bending like cats, we run flooded by this wave that drags us, that makes us cruel, that turns us into bandits, murderers and, if you wish, demons – this wave that multiplies our strength amidst distress, the anger and the will to live, that seeks to rescue us and really achieves it. If your father would present himself there as your enemy, you would not hesitate in throwing a grenade at him, right at his chest.³⁴

Thus, living only for the moment, driven by fear and, above all, by their animal survival instinct, soldiers eventually adopt a behaviour that is even more animal-like than that of animals themselves. From the PEC, Quirino Monteiro and Melo Vieira testify to this dramatic obliteration of human values:

There is no time to think or help the comrades that fall. Combat fever makes men selfish and indifferent. All sensibility is annulled. A life is worth nothing; a torn-up body is just an incident; cries are just sounds that join the hellish noise made up of all the other cries. All the trenches are ablaze.³⁵

Human bestiality is made manifest not only in the confrontation between soldiers on both sides, but also, and more expressively, in animals that, having been dragged into a war that was not even theirs, often fell victims to the most cruel torture. Among many episodes of gratuitous violence of man on beast, Baratay

³²Bento Esteves Roma, *Os portugueses nas trincheiras da Grande Guerra*, 18–19. My translation.

³³Apud Pedro de Freitas, *As minhas recordações da grande guerra*, 52. My translation.

³⁴Erich Maria Remarque, *A oeste nada de novo*, 85. My translation.

³⁵Quirino Monteiro and Melo Vieira, *Gambúsios—Soldados da Grande Guerra* (Lisboa: Portugalíia Editora, 1919), 37–38. My translation.

points out the bloodthirsty violence of soldiers who, in the distress of their waiting moments, would deliberately shoot any animal that was in their rifle sights.³⁶

Saint-Bastien narrates another revealing episode of the bestialization of man and his indifference towards animal suffering: the rigged dog. German soldiers were known to capture French rescue dogs and, under the flag of the Red Cross, would hide sacks full of grenades, releasing them afterwards, so that they would return and blow up in their own trenches.³⁷

The retreat from human to animal is indeed so radical that some soldiers eventually acquired physical features that gave away that change or fusion into the non-human and were sometimes given nicknames based on this similarity with animal morphology or behaviour. Such is the case of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps, metaphorically referred to as the “Portuguese Export Sheep” or “Portuguese Lambs exported for slaughter”, nicknames that alluded to the ludicrous lambskin overcoats which kept PEC soldiers warm,³⁸ and also showed how unprepared Portuguese troops were for their hazardous intervention on the Western Front. This we can deduce from what João Chagas wrote in his war journal:

Maybe a doctor, maybe a wise man will be fighting, and I think of the hardships, the pains, the horrors that these elite men will know, torn one day from their spiritual professions, their delicate habits, their comfortable homes, and pushed like cattle into 3rd class wagons that will unload them in a few hours at the slaughter house.³⁹

This grim depiction of troops as flocks of sheep or herds of cattle sent forcibly to the slaughter became recurrent in all armies and metaphors describing the animal-like condition of soldiers proliferated. Collecting several animal metaphors designating man, drawn from different authors, Baratay revealingly sketches a physical and psychological portrait of the First World War soldier:

Men taken to the front are flocks of sheep, fattened piglets, scared calves, fresh meat replacing the rotten meat of the wounded and the dead, skinned oxen themselves, beheaded beasts, trapped animals, game frightened by hierarchies, those butchers.⁴⁰

As either communication agents or informants, carrying out missions of transport, scouting, first aid, simple companionship or affective exchange, the presence and the importance of animals on all combat fronts are undeniable. Paradoxically oscillating between defensive aggression and empathetic affection, relationships between man and animal in the trenches need to be understood within a framework of ontological exchange and transformation that ultimately made identity borders problematic, particularly if one considers the correlational phenomenon of the humanization of animals and the bestialization of men.

³⁶Éric Baratay, *Bêtes des tranchées: des vécus oubliés*, 119–120.

³⁷Jean-François Saint-Bastien, *Les animaux dans la grande guerre*, 75.

³⁸Isabel Pestana Marques, *Das trincheiras, com saudade: a vida quotidiana dos militares portugueses na primeira guerra mundial* (Lisboa: A Esfera dos Livros, 2008), 150–151.

³⁹João Chagas, *Diário I—1914* (Lisboa: Livraria Editora, 1929), 126–127. My translation.

⁴⁰Éric Baratay, *Bêtes des tranchées: des vécus oubliés*, 162. My translation.

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