

Where “Beasts’ Sprints Wail” Rosenberg, Sassoon, and the Emergence of Animal Philosophy

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Abstract:

Drawing on Derrida, Levinas, and others, critics such as Christina Gerhardt and Karalyn Kendall-Morwick have pointed out that Modernism witnessed a breakdown in the traditional animal-human divide. Yet few critics have asked what role the Great War itself played in unsettling that divide. I argue that the dehumanizing conditions of the war, coupled with its unprecedented levels of animal and human conscription and slaughter, produced a basic questioning among combatants in Great Britain of what it means to be distinct from other animals and how humans should relate to them. This questioning comes about most acutely in the writings of Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon, two important trench poets, and helps shed light on their particular notions of the pastoral, along with the war’s broader role in recasting the identities of humans. Although neither poet explicitly endorses a vision of what we would later call “animal rights,” their sense of a primordial linkage between beings and shared sense of suffering with them would presage later currents in animal philosophy, including the “face-to-face” ethics of Levinas.

Keywords: animal studies; trench poetry; Modernism; Rosenberg; Sassoon

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Eleven months before he was killed in fighting near Arras, Isaac Rosenberg, the Bristol-born poet, drafted a play called “The Unicorn.” The play was unfinished, and only three early holographs survive. In a letter of August 3rd, 1917, however, he explains that it is about “a decaying race who have never seen a woman; animals take the place of women, but they yearn for continuity” (2012, 342). In another letter, he adds: “It is to be a play of terror—terror of hidden things and the fear of the supernatural” (2012, 344). Indeed, lines from the play – “spectres wail,/ Stricken trunks’ and beasts’ spirits wail across to mine” (“The Unicorn” 2012, 182) – make it sound like a shell-shocked version of Blake.

While the play is set in some fabled and mythical universe, there is no doubt that Rosenberg, witnessing the carnage around him, transposed the imagery of the trenches into his literary vision. More peculiar still is the collapsing of human and animal into some amorphous composite, or what he calls “bestial man shapes that ride dark impulses” and “[cry] through the forest” (“The Unicorn” 2012, 187). The image would sound even stranger if it did not directly parallel Rupert Brooke’s pre-war description, in “The Song of the Beasts,” of those “crawling on hands and feet”

who “are men no longer, but less and more/ beast and God” (2010, 17),¹ or what Siegfried Sassoon, writing, like Rosenberg, in the trenches and describing a pain-wracked body in “The Death Bed,” called “a prowling beast” that “gripped and tore” (1949, 35).

Critics like Christina Gerhardt (2006, 159-178) and Karalyn Kendall-Morwick (2013, 100-119), among others, have pointed out that Modernism entailed, among other facets, a basic questioning of what it means to be human, or distinct from other animals.² Some, such as Roger Fouts trace this questioning all the way back to Darwin (Fouts and McKenna 2011, 21).³ Others, such as Keith Tester, point to 1894, the year of Henry Salt’s groundbreaking *Animals’ Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress*, as the “epistemological break” and the point at which humans seriously began to reconsider their roles and relations to other animals (Tester 1991, 156). Regardless of exactly when this new conception came about though, it is worth asking what prompted it: what specific forces, such as those of capitalism, industrialization, or atomization, as Marx might have it, forced humans to reconsider their place in the spectrum of creation, especially in the Modernist age? One answer, and one that becomes increasingly clear in looking at the writings of Rosenberg and Sassoon, along with other “trench poets,” is the Great War itself, where over nine million human combatants were killed.⁴ Alongside them, an unprecedented eight million animals served and died—mainly

¹ Despite the apparent overlap in their imagery, there is no evidence that Rosenberg had read Brooke’s pre-war “The Song of the Beasts,” much less derived “The Unicorn” from it. In fact, while Rosenberg admired Brooke’s “Town and Country,” he explains in a letter of 1916 that he does not care for the rest of Brooke’s work (Rosenberg 2012, 309).

² Others who attribute to Modernism a breakdown in the traditional animal-human distinction include: Rohman, *Stalking* 2008, 12; Ellmann, 2010, 11; Armstrong, 2008, 142; Lippit, 2000, 23. Also see Haraway 2013 [1989], Haraway 2008, 9, 304.

³ Note that the article contains McKenna’s summary of Fouts’s lecture, in which he points out that “since Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, this question [of human exceptionalism] has been a central one for many humans.” Fouts explains that “Darwin challenged... Cartesian delusions and suggested a horizontal continuum [among species] with no big gaps or radical breaks” (21).

⁴ The Great War’s casualty estimates are a subject of continual debate and depend largely on which causes of death are included (e.g., disease) and which wars are included (e.g., the Russian Civil War).

horses, mules, oxen, and dogs.⁵ Is it a coincidence that writers like Rosenberg and Sassoon paid newfound attention to the animality of the human spirit? Did this attention come from serving alongside the very “beasts” they decried?

What a close look at several of these “trench poems” suggests is the degree to which the Great War itself prompted a fundamental rethinking of the animal-human dichotomy, which had certainly been in flux since Darwin, if not earlier, but took on new urgency in an era of mass human and animal conscription and slaughter. Approaching the poems from this standpoint is helpful, not only for reinterpreting their meanings, but also for gauging their particular conceptions of the pastoral—or the “anti-pastoral,” as Paul Fussell (2000, 231) and Sandra Gilbert (1999, 185) term it—as well as the war’s broader role in recasting the identity of humans, or, as Wilfred Owen aptly calls them in his “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” “those who die as cattle” (1983, 99).

From a critical standpoint, Sassoon and Rosenberg, along with Brooke and Owen, have come to occupy what Stacy Gillis has called “the center” of “literary accounts of the First World War” (2007, 102). This is not to say that their work is in any way the best, nor even the most typical, of the trench poets. In fact, both were deemed perennial outsiders while serving—Sassoon on account of his aristocratic birth and mixed-religious background, Rosenberg by virtue of his Jewish ethnicity, as well as his artistic leanings. Yet their poems remain among the most discussed and thus form a good basis for comparison. They also work as thematic counterpoints, with Rosenberg’s poems generally embodying a more mystical vision, and Sassoon’s, like Owen’s, tending towards the earthly and bodily.

It should be said that animals figure widely and richly in the writings of many of the trench poets—Edmund Blunden, Edward Thomas, and Ivor Gurney, especially—and thus an account of this sort is invariably limited. Moreover, a fuller

⁵ Estimates of total animal deaths in the war vary considerably. Jilly Cooper, for instance, maintains in her popular history that at least eight million horses alone died in the Great War, a figure that Kata Fowler also cites in her report. Cooper, 2010, 12; Fowler, 2010, 8.

treatment of the depiction of animals in WWI and their subsequent impacts on human self-conceptions in Britain requires a close look at earlier works of war writing, as well as broader transformations in the history of human-animal identities, both of which I explore elsewhere (Bernstein 2014).

As a point of clarification, the question of how humans *treat* animals is different from the question of whether humans *are* animals. The first pertains to ethics, the second to ontology, or cosmology. As many have pointed out, however, particularly Henry Salt, and more recently Rhoda Wilkie, the two questions are related and should be treated together in so far as the Judeo-Christian conception, according to which humankind is created in the image of God and is granted “dominion” over animals (Genesis 1:27-8), has historically offered humankind a warrant for dominating animals and seeing itself as ontologically distinct.⁶ Indeed, it is precisely this “old anthropocentric superstition,” as Salt terms it (1980, 13), that finds its gravest challenge in the trenches, where soldiers, as Sassoon puts it in “Remorse,” “flounder” and die “like pigs” (1949, 91).

Long before the first guns erupted in France, Nietzsche was forecasting a cataclysmic war that would “say yes to the barbarian, even to the wild animal within us” (Hobsbawm 1989, 303) and Westerners, particularly in Victorian Britain, were beginning to rethink their ontology. Clearly, Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871) also played major roles in questioning human exceptionalism. Of course, Darwin was not without precedent in this regard, as many, including Count de Buffon, Lamarck, Alfred Russell Wallace, and even Malthus, questioned humans’ susceptibility to environmental forces, and writers as diverse as Thackeray and Dickens were routinely comparing their protagonists to animals, often to great comedic effect.⁷ Nevertheless, it is hard to overstate the

⁶ Citing this passage in Genesis, for example, Wilkie points out that “longstanding Judeo-Christian teachings and philosophical perspectives also played a key part in reinforcing the subordinate and thing-like status of animals.” (Wilkie 2017, 281).

⁷ Thackeray, for instance, delights in comparing Becky Sharp to a “viper” (226) and Joseph Sedley to an “elephant” (Notes 945) in *Vanity Fair* (1848), remarking on the irony of their courtship: “A

impact of Darwin’s assertion that the “difference in mind between man and the higher animals...is one of degree and not of kind” (1872, 101). As Richard Sorabji explains, *Descent* reframed the debate over origins, since “no trait,” according to Darwin, is “unique to man, not emotion, curiosity, imitation, attention, memory” (Sorabji 1995, 131). Donald Worster, the ecological historian, adds that *Origin’s* effect was also shattering, since “the real issue was whether man could admit that he was fully a part of nature or not” (1994, 182-3). Worster actually credits Darwin with having engendered two contradictory impulses: a “Victorian ethic of domination over nature, and an emerging biocentric attitude that was rooted in arcadian and Romantic values” (Worster 1994, 114). That conflict also resonates across the writings of World War I.

Moreover, this question of human animality becomes crucial in appraising the shock that the Great War posed, particularly to Edwardian Britain. As early as May of 1915, for example, the British Bryce Commission, charged with reporting on alleged German atrocities in Belgium, described “the more savage and brutal natures, of whom there are some in every large army,” and explained how they are “liable to run to wild excess” (Bryce Report 1915). Certainly, the report reflects a lingering Victorian concern with regulating human temperaments, particularly in the context of unbridled violence. But the description is almost Nietzschean in acknowledging the “savage” element within human nature. Indeed, the report underscores the assessment of Michael Lundblad that “what is new at the turn of the [twentieth] century can be broadly characterized as a shift toward thinking about

woman with fair opportunities, and without an absolute hump, may marry WHOM SHE LIKES. Only let us be thankful that the darlings are like the beasts of the field, and don’t know their own power. They would overcome us entirely if they did” (Thackeray 1999, 34). Dickens sounds an equally acerbic and cautionary note when, in *Dombey and Son* (1848), he explains, “Mrs. Pipchin hovered behind the victim, with her sable plumage and her hooked beak, like a bird of ill-omen” (Dickens 2002, 164). Nearly all of *Dombey’s* characters have animal names—Cuttle, Chick, Gills, MacStinger, Nipper, the Game Chicken—and animalesque descriptions pepper the novel, much as they do the bulk of his satirical works.

the human being as just another animal” (2009, 498).⁸

Paul Fussell, whose *Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) remains perhaps the defining critical account of WWI, surmised that it “took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meaning of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable” (21). He is referring to a world where words like “honor” and “sacrifice” were used without irony to rally the masses (and they do show up repeatedly in publications like the Bryce Report).⁹ But what that perceived stability overlooks is the degree to which humankind, as Lundblad, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and many more have pointed out,¹⁰ was already at war with itself, *over* itself, long before the shells started firing in France.

Sassoon composed “The Rear-Guard,” one of his most-discussed poems, while serving on the Hindenburg Line in 1917. Like Owen’s “Strange Meeting,” which it may have helped to inspire, “The Rear-Guard” envisions a meeting between the speaker and a deceased soldier. Unlike in Owen’s account, however, there is no intimacy in the ensuing encounter, as the victim, whose “fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound,” is already ten months dead (“The Rear Guard,” Sassoon 1949, 15). To the extent there is a realization, it is one of sheer “horror” and a pondering of the rigor mortis state of the dead. Equally notable are the bestial descriptions of the protagonist – “savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap” (Sassoon 1949, 14) – and those he confronts in this semi-mythic “hell”: “the dazed,

⁸ Lundblad’s remark comes within the context of Jack London and turn-of-the century America, although there is little reason to think that his argument about “shifting constructions of the animal” could not apply to Great Britain, if not the Anglosphere generally, given the importance he ascribes to Social Darwinism and “post-Freudian frameworks” (Lundblad 2009, 498).

⁹ The Bryce Report itself makes no mention of “sacrifice,” but most official British reports of the period, such as Sir John French’s 1st Despatch of 7-14 September 1914, do.

¹⁰ Agamben’s *The Open* explores in fuller detail how humans’ uncertainty over their metaphysical status leads them to violence, among other acts, culminating in what he calls “the animalization of man” (Agamben 2003, 77). Derrida makes a similar claim in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, although he finds the problems of animality more grounded in language than metaphysics, arguing, for example, that “a certain wrong or evil...derives from” the word “animal” itself (Derrida 2008, 32).

muttering creatures underground/ Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound” (Sassoon 1949, 15).

From an historical standpoint, Sassoon would have been no stranger to these “creatures”—human and animal alike—stationed along the front. By the end of the war, an estimated sixteen million horses had served (Roberts and Tucker 2005, 103), with roughly half of them having been killed by artillery, gunfire, starvation, hypothermia, and diseases like ringworm (Fowler 2010, 8). Sassoon encapsulates their slaughter in, among other works, his 1918 poem “The Road” where “stretched big-bellied horses with stiff legs,/ And dead men, bloody-fingered from the fight/ Stare up at caverned darkness winking white” (1949, 32). In *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), Sherston, his semi-fictional protagonist, dwells on such slaughter, admitting: “for I disliked the idea of good horses being killed and wounded, and I had always been soft-hearted about horses,” a sentiment that was not atypical for the time, particularly among the officer class (Sassoon 1930, 135). Indeed, Robert Graves says much the same thing in *In Goodbye to All That* (1929), reflecting on the carnage of the Somme: “The number of dead horses and mules shocked me; human corpses were all very well, but it seemed wrong for horses to be dragged into the war like this” (1958, 209).

Outside of horses, an estimated 200,000 mules, 47,000 camels, and 11,000 oxen served, primarily, though no less fatally, in transport (Kean 1998, 167). Carrier pigeons were also routinely deployed and shot down. Finally, dogs were used widely as messengers, mascots, and even pack animals for carrying litters and guns. Estimates of the numbers of dogs that served range from 50,000 to a million, but all agree very few lived. As Henry Salt put it, “more suffering was caused to animals in a day of war than in a year of peace” (Kean 1998, 168-9), a fact of which Sassoon was undoubtedly aware.

Indeed, later poems like Sassoon’s “Man and Dog” would highlight this affinity for dogs and the value they would come to embody for him in an otherwise

degenerating world. As Jean Moorcraft Wilson explains in her biography of Sassoon, by the end of 1942, with the toll of the Second World War mounting, “his old Dandie Dinmont seemed one of the few ‘decent things’ left to him” (2003, 335), prompting him to write:

What share we most—we two together?
Smells, and awareness of the weather.
What is it makes us more than dust?
My trust in him; in me his trust.

Here’s anyhow one decent thing
That life to man and dog can bring;
One decent thing, remultiplied
Till earth’s last dog and man have died. (“Man and Dog,” Sassoon 1949, 268)

Although Sassoon’s account is by no means a vindication of animal rights or liberation – the poem’s likely reference point, to be sure, is hunting – his verse emphasizes animal cognition and sensation, along with the blurring boundaries between human and animal, much as he does in “The Rear-Guard” in describing the “dazed, muttering creatures underground/ Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound” (Sassoon 1949, 15). The sensations he “[shares]” with his terrier in “Man and Dog” (Sassoon 1949, 268) also go a way in debunking the myth of human exceptionalism, or what later critics like Carol Gigliotti would call “the idea that humans are radically different and distinct from or better than the rest of nature and other animals” (Gigliotti 2017, 192). In fact, these “[shared]” “smells” and “awareness of the weather” (“Man and Dog,” Sassoon 1949, 268) anticipate a passage, that Gigliotti cites, by Barbara Noske, the Dutch anthropologist, in her groundbreaking work, *Beyond Boundaries* (1997): “Animals see smell, feel, taste, or hear the world against the background of their own frame of reference; they like us distinguish and select among sense impressions distinctions which we do not even know are there” (Gigliotti 2017, 192). Where Noske stresses the unknowability of animal sensations, however, Sassoon stresses their perceived overlap with humans and the shared bond of “trust” that is engendered between the

species, especially in the face of what he increasingly comes to see as their common mortality (“Man and Dog,” Sassoon 1949, 268).

As Simon Featherstone remarks, one of the critical debates over the trench poets has been the extent to which their poems should be seen as “mythologizing” (Featherstone 1995, 21), with Bergonzi claiming in *Heroes’ Twilight* (1965) that a more grounded and anti-propagandist reality was what the poems sought to convey, and Fussell, in contrast, arguing in *Modern Memory* (2000) that the effort was largely performative, and that the classical, mythical tradition gave the poets a more graspable mode of expression, or a language in which they could speak. As Fussell explains, pace Bergonzi, “the movement was towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant. In short, towards fiction” (Fussell 2000, 131) Bergonzi, however, later altered his claims in the revised, 1996 version of *Heroes’ Twilight*.¹¹ Even the original, 1965 version cites Borges’s dictum that “all literature begins in myth, and ends there,” a sentiment very much in the vein of Fussell’s critique (Bergonzi 1965, 212).

Much of this debate might also depend on how “mythical” itself is defined and the extent to which the poets were merely revisiting classical sources or actually conjuring up worlds of their own. Sassoon does both, and in the case of “The Rear-Guard,” the mode of mythology is what, among other factors, allows humans to shift between forms—from animal to human and living to dead. In fact, it is this very transmutability that helps to convey the dehumanizing essence of what many soldiers—and civilians, as we will see—experienced as a result of the war.

In Sassoon’s case, he could as easily be “running tireless, floating, leaping/ Down your web-hung woods and valleys” (“A Letter Home,” Sassoon 1949, 41) as he could be “[standing]” with “the shapes of the slain in their crumpled disgrace” (“I Stood With the Dead,” Sassoon 1949, 103)). Indeed, in a verse letter to Robert

¹¹ Douglas Kerr first called this revision to my notice (Kerr 1997, 85).

Graves, he describes the ghostly reappearance of their dead friend, David Culbert Thomas, a fellow-officer killed at Fricourt:

We've been sad because we missed
One whose yellow head was kissed
By the gods, who thought about him
Till they couldn't do without him.
Now he's here again; I've seen
Soldier David dressed in green,
Standing in a wood that swings
To the madrigal he sings. (Sassoon 1949, 42)

Ironically, the poem recalls the “dryads,” or woodland nymphs that Sassoon depicted in his earlier poem of that title, written six years before the war erupted (“Dryads,” Sassoon 1949, 54). While Avi Matalon notes that “the once timidly Georgian poet became more and more ferocious as the war progressed and casualties piled up” (Matalon 2002, 31), the truth is that Sassoon also underwent a strange return to pastoralism—a term I will explore shortly—in his verse, especially around 1917, and probably because of the trauma he endured at Mametz. In “When I'm a Blaze of Lights,” for example, he admits, “Sometimes I think of garden nights/
And elm trees nodding at the stars” (Sassoon 1949, 14). And in “The Hawthorn Tree,” he ponders his removal from the war, observing that “there's been a shower of rain/
And hedge-birds whistle gay” (Sassoon 1949, 80). Of course, Matalon is also right in that some of Sassoon's most bitter, direct, and anti-pastoral poems come out of this period, most famously “The General,” where he describes the staff officers as “incompetent swine,” and “Does It Matter?” where he sarcastically remarks that being blinded or crippled will not hinder a soldier, since “people will always be kind” (Sassoon 1949, 75, 76).

Certainly, the pastoral itself varies widely across periods and genres, and, as Raymond Williams pointed out, is extremely hard to define (Williams 1975, 14).¹² More recently, Ken Hiltner, among others, has come to see the pastoral in

¹² William Empson famously characterized the pastoral as “putting the complex into the simple” (Empson 1974, 22) and others, like Frank Kermode and Williams, ascribed an anti-urbanism to it

primarily ecological—although not specifically animal-based—terms. Looking at Renaissance writings in particular, he reads the pastoral as embodying an emerging “environmental consciousness.” As far back as the Early Modern period in England, “nature,” he explains, became something “worth fiercely fighting to preserve,” even if it would be “as free as possible of human habitation” (Hiltner 2011, 6, 132). Although Hiltner's *What Else is Pastoral?* does not cite the Georgians or Modernists, his ecological approach goes a way in explaining what a poet like Sassoon might find so appealing in the “bird-sung joy/ Of grass-green thickets,” as he calls it in “Prelude: The Troops” (Sassoon 1949, 67).

In “Prelude,” Sassoon recounts how the soldiers “march from safety, and the bird-sung joy/ Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all/ Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky” (Sassoon 1949, 67). Certainly the pastoral elegy has been long been conceived as a form of mournful reminiscence, with Milton's *Uncouth Swain*, for example, mourning his lost friend in “*Lycidas*,” a prototype for the mode. In Sassoon's case, it is questionable whether the thickets or birds ever existed, or instead operate as ideals of a peaceful and severed past, or what Jon Silkin, looking at Sassoon's poem, calls a “pre-lapsarian pastoralism” (Silkin 1998, 155). Where Milton claims a present interaction with the natural world—“I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude/ And with forc'd fingers rude/ Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year” (Milton 1957, 120)—Sassoon's departing soldiers can only reflect on the current irony: that the sky is blossoming (presumably with shrapnel) and the land is devoid of any life. In fact, the central irony of “Prelude: The Troops” might well be that it represents an elegiac pastoral for soldiers who are still alive, raising the question of who is speaking, when, and under what

(Kermode, 1952, 17; Williams 1975, 69). Paul Alpers, for his part, saw the representation as more literal and focusing exclusively on the “anecdote” of shepherds (Alpers, 1997, 15). Within the sphere of Romantic poetry, particularly that of Wordsworth, Jonathan Bate reads the pastoral as possessing an “evergreen language” (Bate 1991, 18). Within the elegiac pastoral tradition, Jahan Ramazani finds the Pathetic Fallacy to be the mode's “central trope,” although he is quick to point out that Owen and other Modernists inject a strong element of irony into it (Ramazani, 1994, 71).

circumstances.

Sassoon's grim vision of the pastoral, or the "anti-pastoral," as Fussell and Gilbert call it, frequently aligns humans with animals in their states of degradation. Sassoon's soldiers are "gnawed by rats" in "Dreamers"; die like "[flapping] fish" in "The Effect"; and fall down dead among the "big-bellied horses" in "The Road," all of which would suggest a kind of moral parity, if not conterminousness, with animals as a result of the war's senseless slaughter (Sassoon 1949, 72, 73, 32). Indeed, the fact that Sassoon never entirely abandoned the pastoral, despite his increasingly anti-war sentiments, also explains his lingering sense of human animality. It emerges strikingly in "Prelude: The Troops," where he addresses a group of dying soldiers: "O my brave brown companions, when your souls/Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead/Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge" (Sassoon 1949, 67). The word "flock" could connote birds, a common metaphor for souls, in this case en route to Valhalla, and paralleling the "bird-sung joy" of the second stanza. Alternately, "flock" could connote sheep, highlighting the Arcadian resonance, if not the more common refrain of soldiers-as-herded-animals.¹³ Certainly, the latter reading echoes Owen's question in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" of "what passing-bells for those who die as cattle?" (Owen 1983, 99)

It also worth asking whether Sassoon's depiction of his "companions" as animals does not correspond with a broader change unfolding across Great Britain. In a remarkable chapter on the history of animal rights, Hilda Kean details the role of the Great War in fomenting compassion for animals. Highlighting how animals were perceived as fellow "sufferers" on the front, she documents—and perhaps overstates—how much enlisted men valued dogs, and officers horses, as well as how much pity the sight of wounded animals could evoke from those on the home-

¹³ David Jones's epic poem, *In Parenthesis* (1937), for example, portrays the soldiers as "[hunted animals]," "lambs of the flock," men who slept in "horse-stalls," and figures "entrained in cattle trucks" (Jones 2003 [1937], 2, 6, 8, 9). As Paul Fussell remarks, their "world is now assuredly animal" (Fussell 2000, 147).

front. She lists a variety of efforts, ranging from animal field hospitals to the establishment of Blue Cross charities, that attempted to relieve animal suffering in war, in ironic contrast to the conditions of the soldiers. In fact, by 1917, operations had been performed on over 1,600 dogs at field clinics, and veterinary medicine was becoming increasingly prevalent at home (Kean 1998, 169). Above all, Kean describes the emotional appeal of the animals, which, she claims, “proved to be companions and ciphers of sanity in an insane world” (Kean 1998, 165). She also mentions a *Times* article from 1917 describing the conditions at the Front: “It is the dogs who enlist the sympathies more than anything else. Like frightened children they join the ranks, nestling down by the side of the men for warmth and protection” (Kean 1998, 173).

In the case of Sassoon, whom Kean herself cites (though without mentioning the question of his mental sanity, as he saw it), the suffering of horses comes to emblemize the war’s cruelty, personified most trenchantly, perhaps, by the ending of *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man* (1928), where one gets violently snagged on barbed wire. It is also interesting to compare Sassoon’s description of the dying and wounded in “Prelude: The Troops” with Owen’s decidedly unromantic and non-Arcadian portrayal of the same. “Who are these?” Owen asks in “Mental Cases.” “Why sit they here in twilight/ Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,/ Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish” (Owen 1965, 35), a canine image that can hardly be described as comforting. It should be said, however, that while Owen tends towards the earthly in these depictions, several of his poems from the period do strike mystical notes. In “Spring Offensive,” for instance, he describes “the sky’s mysterious glass,” and in “Apologia pro poemate meo,” he writes, “I, too, saw God through mud,” although the latter is qualified with the description of “heaven” as nothing but “the highway for a shell” (Owen 1965, 52, 39-40). Even “Strange Meeting” itself notably takes place in the afterlife. Nevertheless, if Owen, circa 1918, is primarily earthly in his portraits, with

humankind ranging from a poet who “[pours]” his “spirit” (“Strange Meeting,” Owen 1965, 35) to a blood-seeking “brute” (“A Terre,” Owen 1983, 178), Sassoon runs the gamut of creation, from pastoral nymphs to the slobbering hounds of hell.

Even more extreme is Rosenberg, whose war poems virtually exclude humans in favor of beasts and gods. “The Unicorn” apotheosizes that exclusion in so far as “animals take the place of women,” as Rosenberg explains (Rosenberg 2012, 342), and the unicorn serves as the sole sexual outlet for Tel, a towering black chieftain of mythic proportion. Tel probably stems from the “Nubian” character of an earlier play, “The Amulet,” which Rosenberg evidently scrapped. To the extent that the unfinished “Unicorn” has a message, it might be the question Saul poses: “Is the beast the figure of man's mateless soul?” Lilith, the Jewish mythical demon, offers one answer, responding, “Beauty is music's secret soul/ Creeping about man's senses./ He cannot hold it or know it ever/ But yearns and yearns to hold it once” (Rosenberg 2012, 186). Like Owen, Rosenberg presents his soldiers as vacillating between artist and killer. Like Sassoon, however, he also remains doubtful, at least in “The Unicorn,” of humankind's capacity to “hold” real art.¹⁴ Indeed, in his last letter, which was posted the day after he was shot and was addressed to Edward Marsh, the editor of the period-defining *Georgian Poetry* anthologies, Rosenberg doubted the strength of his own poems: “I've seen no poetry for ages now so you mustn't be too critical—My vocabulary small enough before is impoverished and bare” (Rosenberg 2012, 364).

In fact, ambivalence about art's redemptive capacity underlies Rosenberg's most famous poem, “Break of Day in the Trenches.” In it, Rosenberg berates a rat, which flits between sides, for its “cosmopolitan sympathies.” He then asks it directly, “What do you see in our eyes/ At the shrieking iron and flame/ Hurlled

¹⁴ By parsing together several versions of the play, John Silkin reads “The Unicorn” as indicating that “beauty civilizes,” but that it needs to be “rightly responded to,” rather than “[raped]” or “seized” (Silkin, 1998, 313). What Silkin does not say, however, is whether, according to the play's logic, humans are capable of responding “rightly” to beauty.

through still heaven? What quaver—what heart aghast?” The speaker, seizing a poppy from the field of the dead, sticks the flower behind his ear and muses that its “roots are in man’s veins” (Rosenberg 2012, 106). The image is particularly haunting in light of Rosenberg's eventual death on such a field. Where a Romantic like Wordsworth might have found something uplifting in humankind's organic bond with the elements and other fruits of creation,¹⁵ Rosenberg sees it as the prime piece of irony, remarking that this “queer, sardonic” rat is more “chanced” for life than some “haughty athletes” (Rosenberg 2012, 106).

What is equally illuminating about the encounter Rosenberg depicts between the speaker and rat is that it parallels another wartime image that would become somewhat pivotal in the history of animal philosophy. In “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights” (1975), Emmanuel Levinas recounts a dog named “Bobby” who roamed into the Nazi prisoner of war camp in which he and other soldiers were confined during WWII. Recounting the subjugation that he and other prisoners faced, Levinas explains that the gaze of other humans “stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes.” Yet, he recalls how Bobby would show up “at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men” (Levinas 1997, 151-3).

As Christina Gerhardt explains, the precise meaning of Levinas’ account is uncertain and continues to be debated. In her interpretation,

...Levinas turns Kantian ethics on its head, by arguing that the possibility of acting ethically is rooted in a condition of passivity, in which I am compelled to respond to a command from an other with whom I find myself in a “face-to-face” relationship. This condition of responsibility in the face-to-face is something that Levinas regards as prior to any act of cognition, to any conscious act of which I

¹⁵ In “Tintern Abbey,” for example, Wordsworth arguably presents a vision of organicism, describing “a motion and a spirit, that impels/ All thinking things, all objects of all thought,/ And rolls through all things” (Wordsworth 1992, ll.100-102). Thus, if M. H. Abrams is correct in maintaining that the poet sees himself as an “integral part of an organically, inter-related universe” (Abrams, 1971, 104), then it would be fair to say that Rosenberg turns this organic vision on its head by ironically depicting the interconnectedness of field poppies and human remains.

could be the author. (Gerhardt 2006, 175)

Others, most famously Jacques Derrida, would explore Levinas's conception, especially in terms of rethinking human subjectivity and the historical human-animal divide (Derrida 2008, 113-4). Karalyn Kendall-Morwick, for her part, traces Levinas' account through other works of Modernist literature, especially Beckett's, to explore "animal alterity in the aftermath of World War II" (Kendall-Morwick 2013, 103). Interestingly, dogs, in the accounts of both Levinas and Beckett, Kendall-Morwick argues, "are co-implicated in the subjugation and sacrifice of other animals, complicating the ethical quandary in which Western humanism finds itself vis-à-vis the animal" (Kendall-Morwick 2013, 103). That subjugation of other animals would seem especially pertinent to Sassoon's account in "Man and Dog," where the "trust" that is engendered between the two species presumably comes at the expense of other, hunted animals (Sassoon 1949, 268).

What Rosenberg's poem reveals, however, is the extent to which he too anticipates Levinas' thinking about human-animal connections, especially the "face-to-face" relationships unearthed during war. Indeed, when Rosenberg's speaker asks of the rat in "Break of Day in the Trenches," "What do you see in our eyes/ At the shrieking iron and flame/ Hurlled through still heavens?" he is underscoring the complexity of this human-animal interchange (Rosenberg 2012, 106). Like Levinas in his discussion of "Bobby," Rosenberg is also asserting a kind of *a priori* connection between the two species, one that does not depend on logical appeal or human reason. This is crucial in Rosenberg, because the war itself, personified by the "shrieking iron and flame" in "Break of Day in the Trenches," is fundamentally illogical to the speaker (Rosenberg 2012, 106). In a world in which "athletes" are "bonds to the whims of murder" or "sprawled in the bowels of the earth," any kind of humanism, much less an anthropocentric morality, is as absurd as the poppies that "[root]" in "man's veins" ("Break of Day in the Trenches," Rosenberg 2012, 106). Although Rosenberg, like Sassoon, does not explicitly spell

out a view of animal rights as such, his vision ascribes a radically deanthropocentric connection between humans and animals and one that is personified, as in Levinas's account, by a peculiar, wartime gaze.

Of course, while Levinas argues in "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights" that we might "want to limit" the violence we perpetuate against animals in trying to appease our appetites (Levinas 1997, 151), he also emphasizes the moral "primacy" of humans, as Kendall-Morwick puts it (Kendall-Morwick 2013, 112). Ralph R. Acampora echoes this reading, arguing that for Levinas, "it was typically human(oid) faces only that figured in self-constitution" (Acampora 2017, 157). Others, such as Peter Atterton, interpret Levinas's account as more favorable to animal ethics. Atterton argues that Levinas's "philosophy in general displaces the Cartesian and Kantian definition of man as a rational being when ethics is posed. It is not reason that makes humans human, according to Levinas, but the relationship with the Other" (Atterton 2012, 54). Thus, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights" has been and will likely remain subject to a variety of interpretations. Yet it is fair to say that its central concern is probably more with the paradox of human conceptions of animals than with outlining any detailed ethical formulation or method by which humans should treat them.

Like Levinas, Rosenberg's attitude towards this encounter with the animal is also heavily ironic, especially in so far as the rat is perceived to be more "chanced" to survive than the speaking soldier. Fussell, for his part, aptly notes "the irony in the transposition of human and animal roles that the trench scene has brought about" (Fussell 2000, 250). Where Sassoon, in "Prelude: The Troops," becomes elegiac, and even melancholic, over that inversion, Rosenberg takes bitter delight, placing a poppy behind his ear and, in that sense, mimicking the rat's "sardonic" behavior ("Break of Day in the Trenches," Rosenberg 2012, 106). Furthermore, whereas the dog in Sassoon's "Man and Dog" is limited in its agency to "[smelling]" and sensing the world around it (Sassoon 1949, 268), and where

Levinas's "Bobby" can only "[jump] up and down" and "[bark] in delight" at the prisoners (Levinas 1997, 151-3), Rosenberg's rat in "Break of Day in the Trenches" actively mocks its human viewer, employing a "queer, sardonic grin" as it passes (Rosenberg 2012, 106) and suggesting, at least from the standpoint of these three poems, a more involved and intelligent role for non-humans. Indeed, one wonders whether the rat is already conscious—in a way that the humans in Rosenberg's poem, especially "the haughty athletes," are not—of humans' false sense of superiority and ontological uniqueness.

Certainly, the flower that the speaker in "Break of Day" wears marks him as an aesthete, rather than one of the "athletes" whom he is among. Yet it also relays his basic desperation as an artist trying to make sense of the world. In this respect, Rosenberg begins to answer the Darwinian paradox, as Donald Worster would have it, about how humans could dominate a world of which they were invariably part. The answer seems to be through art, or some sort of aesthetic transcendence, albeit one that Rosenberg, and in contrast to the later, High Modernists, found impossible to attain.

Fussell and Robert Hemmings have ascribed much importance to the use of poppies in World War I poetry, particularly in Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches." Fussell relates them to a long English literary tradition, beginning with Chaucer and culminating in the pastoral elegy (Fussell 2000, 247, 250). Hemmings sees the flowers as "[invoking] another kind of symbolic reading, [that of] the unconscious, through the image of the roots reaching downwards into what is buried, into the traumatic memories of alarming encounters with death" (Hemmings 2008, 745). The first reading is essentially historic, the second psychological, and both are apt. Yet neither acknowledges the more immediate meaning, which, for Rosenberg, entailed questioning his relationship with Earth's elements: why he has been consigned to join them, and perhaps the mystery inherent in his having lived apart from them before the war. One could couch the dilemma in philosophical

terms like metaphysics, cosmology, emanationism, as well as theories about history and trauma, but at bottom, the issue is much simpler. He is asking what he is doing here, and, like Levinas, questioning his affinity to other beings, human and nonhuman alike.

The original version of "Break of Day" ended differently. Here the description of an exploding shell is followed by a question: "what rootless poppies dropping?" (Rosenberg 1979, 104). This version is even more bitter and avowedly antiwar in so far as it literally equates the scattered dead with the thrown flowers and the rat. (And "rootless," in this case, takes on a dual connotation, meaning "cosmopolitan" and "clipped").¹⁶ Regardless, the juxtaposition of the rat and the human dead (who are "less chanced than you for life") ("Break of Day in the Trenches," Rosenberg 2012, 106) illustrates just how commingled Rosenberg thought humans and "beasts" really were ("The Unicorn," Rosenberg, 2012, 182), particularly during war. Equally pressing is the question of what faith, if any, he has left in humankind, be it as an artist, or something much baser.

Rosenberg's writings, the bulk of which were unfinished, never definitively resolve the question. In "Moses," even his heroes, depicted variously as "animal[s]" and "half beasts snorting into the light," remain "constrained to the stables of the flesh" (Rosenberg 2012, 162). In "In War," however, he describes "how human art won/ The dark soul" (Rosenberg 2012, 162) thus suggesting an opposing and more elevated view of human nature. To some extent, Rosenberg echoes John Stuart Mill, who, as Christine Korsgaard explains, regards humans as animals but sees humans as having "access to 'higher pleasures,'" as Mill calls them. For Mill, "only human beings are familiar with the pleasures of music and poetry and art and literature," among other pleasures, Korsgaard adds (Korsgaard 2018, 68). In another letter to

¹⁶ Given the rat's own "cosmopolitan sympathies," it is worth asking whether Rosenberg was aware of the phrase "rootless cosmopolitan" in 1917. The phrase would also take on special significance in the 1940s, when it became associated with Jewish intellectuals like him and, indeed, became grounds for persecution during Stalin's purges.

Edward Marsh, written eleven months before his death, Rosenberg underscores the relevance of poetry for him and the sole consolation it provides: “I fancy poetry is not much bothering you or anybody just now...Yet out here, though often a troublesome consolation, poetry is a great one to me” (Rosenberg 2012, 333). Even more than Sassoon, Rosenberg was consumed with this question of human degradation, and what role, if any, art could play in forestalling it. It is not clear that he ever arrived at an answer. What is clear, however, is that he, particularly by the war’s end, and like Sassoon in “The Rear-Guard,” grappled with this question of human-as-artist versus human-as-beast.

To that end, the works of both poets mirror the broader transformation unfolding across Great Britain, wherein animals, hardly just chattel, began to be perceived as “companions” and fellow “sufferers,” as Hilda Kean notes (1998, 169). Nineteen-nineteen, the year the war ended, even saw the near-passage in Parliament of the Dogs (Protection) Bill, the first wide-scale legislative effort in Britain to ban the use of dogs in vivisection. The effort failed, but it is notable because it occurred in the midst of what were otherwise unprecedented levels of animal testing. It was also largely the work of one Frances Power Cobbe, a tireless suffragette and reformer. More broadly, it is worth asking whether millions of returning veterans, many of whom had been experimented on themselves in the Great Western theater, did not find some affinity with dogs, or at least come to recognize the “drooping tongues from jaws” that Owen described (“Mental Cases,” Owen 1965, 35). While the animal rights movement itself is traditionally ascribed in Great Britain to the Oxford Group of the late-1960’s (Singer, Ryder, Regan, et. al), what one begins to see in trench writings, especially those of Rosenberg, Sassoon, and Owen, is an important and foundational link, particularly in conveying sympathy for nonhumans and in recognizing their shared pain. Of course, this is not to say that any of these poets espoused a vocal advocacy on behalf of animals, much less what we would later come to call “animal rights.” But in asking what we

“share” with animals, as Sassoon does (“Man and Dog,” Sassoon 1949, 268), and in recognizing our “bestial” impulses, as Rosenberg repeatedly does (“The Unicorn,” Rosenberg 2012, 187), their poems presage later currents in animal philosophy, particularly the “face-to-face” ethics of Levinas, as well as the “transcendence of anthropocentrism,” as Acampora calls it (Acampora 2017, 162).

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