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NATHAN BENJULIA, A PROTOTYPE OF DR. MOREAU?

BY

E.D. MACKERNESS

In the Preface to Volume II of the Atlantic edition of his *Works*, H.G. Wells acknowledges the influence of Swift on the conception of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1895). This is evident in many parts of the book; but the affinity with *Gulliver's Travels* is especially noticeable in the final chapter, which describes the difficulties experienced by the narrator, Prendick, when, after his return from the island inhabited by the freakish Beast People, he attempts to adjust to the necessity of having to mix once more with his fellow men ('Particularly nauseous were the blank expressionless faces of people in trains and omnibuses...'). Yet Prendick's personality is very different from that of the Gulliver we meet in Swift's fourth book; mercifully, the visitor to Houyhnhmland never had to contend with a subtle and impetuous character like Dr. Moreau. Swift could conceivably have created an individual endowed with Moreau's intellectual tendencies; but during the eighteenth century, the activities which resulted in his presence on the island were less conspicuously the subject of public comment than in Wells's time. The name of Moreau, Prendick recalls in Chapter VII, has stuck in his mind because of a scandal involving 'a prominent and masterful physiologist, well known in scientific circles for his extraordinary imagination and his brutal directness in discussion'. Moreau, it transpires, has been forced to leave England because his experiments on living animals have been exposed by a journalist posing as a laboratory assistant. This reporter's 'gruesome pamphlet' became notorious, and as a consequence Dr. Moreau's 'valuable work on morbid growths' had to be abandoned when it became necessary for the doctor to flee from the gaze of a prurient public. In this connection Wells could, perhaps, have worked up a notion suggested by some half-forgotten piece of humanitarian propaganda. But he may also have been drawing on a novel published in a previous decade. This is suggested by one sentence in particular. 'On the day of its (the pamphlet's) publication', we are told, 'a wretched dog, flayed and otherwise mutilated, escaped from Moreau's house'. In Chapter LXII of Wilkie Collins's *Heart and Science* (1883), 'a large dog, limping as if one of its legs was injured' is released from a 'laboratory' in not dissimilar circumstances.

Wilkie Collins is not the Victorian novelist one most readily associates with the name of H.G. Wells. A reference to Collins in an article on 'The Novels of Mr. George Gissing' which Wells contributed to the *Contemporary Review* for August 1897 indicates that in respect of plot Wells had carefully compared Collins's technique with

that of Dickens; whether he attempted to emulate the author of *The* is another matter. In *Heart and Science* the purely scientific element is skilfully bound up with a highly complicated set of relationships from which emerge two characters whose preoccupation with 'science' reveals that below the surface they have little in common. On the one hand there is Mrs. Gallilee the amateur devotee of Natural Philosophy as presented in popular accounts addressed to the general reader: on the other we have Dr. Benjulia, a 'specialist' in brain diseases and nervous complaints. Nathan Benjulia, however, is no mere run-of-the-mill practitioner. He 'limits himself to serious cases' and lends expert assistance when less knowledgeable physicians need the help of a consultant. In the cause of research he has 'sacrificed his professional interests to his mania for experiments in chemistry' — 'chemistry' being a convenient euphemism for something less pleasant to contemplate. What Benjulia's experiments consist of no one is allowed to know; a man servant who attempts to satisfy his curiosity by spying on the Doctor's laboratory is instantly dismissed, and the scene of Benjulia's labours is as mysterious as the 'kind of Bluebeard's Chamber' in which Wells's Dr. Moreau spends the best part of his time on the island. At Dr. Moreau's establishment 'the elaborate locking up of the place' strikes Prendick as peculiar; in *Heart and Science* we learn that Nathan Benjulia 'keeps the key of his laboratory about him by day and by night'. Furtiveness seems to be second nature to these particular examples of the scientific temperament. For Dr. Benjulia and Dr. Moreau are experienced vivisectionists; and though Wells does not spend as much time in describing physical appearances as Wilkie Collins does in his twelfth chapter, the two scientists have many points of similarity. Both are unmarried: both remorselessly 'under the overmastering spell of research': and neither has any real concern for the interest of other people. Both men, in fact, adopt a peremptory attitude towards those about them: Benjulia is abrupt and dominating when dealing with the members of his household, Moreau adopts a posture of contemptuous indifference to the subservient creatures on his island, whose original bodily characteristics he has modified into their present form. Unlike Benjulia, however, Dr. Moreau has managed to inure his assistant, Montgomery, to the 'abomination' which is his major life-interest.

Nathan Benjulia's function in the main action of *Heart and Science* is to place in perspective the career of another medical man, Ovid Vere (Mrs. Gallilee's son by a former marriage). Ovid likewise works on disorders of the human brain, and applies to one of his patients a curative treatment he has derived from a physician who has totally proscribed the experimental investigations to which Benjulia is committed. Ovid is able in his own medical work to dispense with 'laboratory' researches. His outstanding success in clinical practice is therefore a blow to Benjulia's professional pride, since the latter is convinced that only by vivisection can medical knowledge be validated. After reading Ovid Vere's published account of the treatment in question he realises that 'the book had forestalled him in the discovery to which he had devoted his life'. His experimental work with animals

is shown up as futile; so in despair he eventually destroys his laboratory, liberating some of his animals in the process — among them the limping dog, which is discovered by a servant — and then commits suicide. The conclusion, as Wilkie Collins expresses it, is perfectly straight-forward: 'Vivisection had been beaten on its own field of discovery'.

There is, of course, something sensational — and slightly implausible — about the later stages of Benjulia's career. But though *Heart and Science* is obviously designed to discredit practices which were the subject of much controversy in the decades following the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876, Collins refrained from suggesting offensive particularities. As he told Frances Power Cobbe in a letter dated 23rd June, 1882, 'I shall be careful to present him (Benjulia) to the reader as a man not infinitely wicked and cruel, and to show the efforts made by his better instincts to resist the inevitable hardening of the heart ... produced by the deliberately merciless occupations of his life' (1). In this he was not wholly successful; but towards the end of the novel it becomes clear that Benjulia is not really the diabolical monster he seems to be about halfway through the story. Intimations of this occur in Chapter XXXII, in which Nathan receives a visit from his brother Lemuel, who knows the full truth about his experiments. Lemuel understands the nature of the fallacies by means of which the vivisectionists attempt to justify their obsessions; his discussion of this matter forces Nathan to adopt a position in which he is obliged to enlarge on the rationale of his pursuits. He does this in a long and impassioned speech which concludes with the phrase 'All for Knowledge! all for Knowledge'. Throughout this harangue, Benjulia tries to argue that pure research is an end in itself which it is incumbent upon the scientist to follow to the bitter end, no matter what may be the means employed. 'Knowledge sanctifies cruelty', he affirms: and in the 'glorious cause' the experimental investigator purposely inhibits his better feelings. But the act of making this pronouncement is too much for Nathan Benjulia: 'The jackal had roused the lion; the mean spirit of mischief in him had not bargained for this'. Lemuel's provocative criticism, in short, has unmanned an otherwise inflexible and obdurate nature.

The parallel to this encounter in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is Chapter XIV. In this ('Doctor Moreau Explains') Moreau discloses the facts about his experimental work. Knowing that Prendick's position *vis-à-vis* his special department of physiological study is directly opposed to his, Moreau represents himself as taking up a new kind of research which involves 'a really scientific knowledge of the laws of growth'. The potentialities of vivisection do not stop at 'a mere physical metamorphosis' but can, Moreau insists, extend to

(1) Frances Power Cobbe, *Life as told by herself* (posthumous edition, 1904), p. 559.

bodily functions involving the nervous system and thus ultimately the instincts which lie at the back of ethical choices. Confronted with the question 'Where is your justification for inflicting all this pain?', Moreau's answer is a good deal more sophisticated than Benjulia's. It is virtually that although pain serves its purpose as part of a warning mechanism in the present state of animal evolution, this does not mean that it will always be a necessary concomitant of men's existence: 'the more intelligent they become the more intelligently they will see after their own welfare, and the less they will need the goad to keep them out of danger'. Thus Moreau rationalises his ambition, already to some extent fulfilled, of producing creatures who do not have 'the mark of the beast upon them' — this mark being signalled by 'this store men and women set on pleasure and pain'. Like Nathan Benjulia, Doctor Moreau is uninhibited by the moral aspects of his situation: 'The study of Nature', he says 'makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature'. But what gives Wells's presentation of his physiologist a greater depth and interest than Wilkie Collins's is the irony that even while enunciating his aspirations to the startled Prendick he is almost half convinced that in the finish his efforts will end in failure. And yet he drives himself to continue, despite the fact that after trying for twenty years to bring forth 'a rational creature of my own', he still falls short of his ideal. Unwilling to contemplate defeat he takes refuge in the submission that time is still young; 'Man has been a hundred thousand (years) in the making' and the occasion may arise when he (or someone after him) may succeed.

Given that Dr. Moreau's physiological theories are credible, the catastrophe which finally destroys him is altogether more convincing than the demise of Nathan Benjulia. It is implied that the latter kills himself after he has been overcome by remorse on realising that society will not sanction the monstrous inhumanity of his investigations. Moreau is in the end brought down by the very creature — a puma — he has used in his attempt to improve on previous efforts; the puma's sufferings are the result of a mad enthusiasm which impels the scientist to evolve a being capable (as he hopes) of overcoming the very instincts which lead to a fatal confrontation. There is no sign of remorse on Moreau's part. After his death it remains for Prendick to point out the criminality of his ways and the evil nature of his legacy to the island; the Beast Folk he has created are, indeed, less than beasts because condemned to a 'mock-human existence' with which they are unfitted to deal. It is Moreau's wantonness and irresponsibility which finally provoke the unhappy Prendick's disgust: 'His curiosity, his mad, aimless investigations, drove him on, and the things were thrown out to live a year or so, to struggle and blunder and suffer; at last to die painfully'. As if this were not a serious enough indictment, there is the additional fact that after this experience on the island, Prendick's own mind is disordered. What he has seen of Dr. Moreau's nefarious labours leaves a permanent impairment in the life of an otherwise normal human being. Prendick in a sense pays the penalty for having witnessed the results of abstract scientific research pushed to a point where only fanatical perversity could take them.

It is hardly possible to prove conclusively that Dr. Moreau is modelled on Nathan Benjulia. If Wells did take up ideas which occurred to him after reading *Heart and Science* he modified them in the light of more advanced scientific knowledge. Benjulia does not dominate Wilkie Collins's novel to the same extent as Dr. Moreau dominates Wells's 'theological grotesque'. But the very strength of his personality and the single-mindedness with which he submits to the influence of his ruling passion makes it possible that Wells could have developed Dr. Moreau out of Collins's earlier and more melodramatic version of the man of science.

EDM/KMJ
15th March, 1974

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9. *Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (New York: Doubleday, 1928), p. 21. Subsequent references to this text will be given parenthetically.
10. "Assessing H. G. Wells", p. 57.
11. *The Way the World is Going* (London: Benn, 1928), pp. 240-41.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
14. There is one fleeting reference to an actual victim of political witchhunts; namely, Charlie Chaplin. In his account of what he found to occupy his time in Rio, Blettsworthy recalls his frequent visits to the cinema: "Those were the days when Charlie Chaplin was shown freely and abundantly without any fuss" (107).
15. *The Way the World is Going*, p. 255.
16. "Assessing H. G. Wells", p. 57.
17. *The Spectator* (September 1, 1928), p. 269.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *The Way the World is Going*, p. 238.
20. J. R. Hammond points out that Wells had just read Gristwood's *The Somme* and had contributed a preface. *The Wellsian*, II, iii (1968), p. 17.
21. *TLS* (September 6, 1928), p. 630.

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7. See 'Human Evolution, an Artificial Process', reprinted in Robert M. Philmus and David Y. Hughes *H.G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction* Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1975).
8. *Ibid.* p. 7.
9. This point was made by Bernard Bergonzi in his seminal study, *The Early H.G. Wells* (Manchester, 1961), pp. 125-6.
10. Hoopdriver works in Putney, not far from where Wells had lived. His holiday ride involves a detour to Midhurst, where he stays with Wells's old landlady and ends a chapter by walking past the chemist's shop where Wells had worked for about a month in his teens.
11. *The Wonderful Visit* (Dent, London, 1895), p. 26.