

The Island of Doctor Moreau: A Swiftian Parable

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Throughout his life Wells did not depart from the view that the novel was an instrument for the discussion of conduct, for the examination of human problems. The novel as he saw it was to be a vehicle for "the criticism of laws and institutions and social dogmas and ideas."¹ It is sometimes argued that this was a characteristic of the later Wells - the Wells who was writing after 1914 - and that the early Wells possesses no such didactic element. In fact the didactic intention was there from the outset, as may be seen from a study of any of the early writings from *The Time Machine* (1895) to *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). It is difficult for an adult to read any of these early novels or short stories without being aware that they contain layer upon layer of allegorical and symbolic meanings - literary, religious, philosophical, social - which makes the reading of them such a rewarding and illuminating experience.

The Island of Doctor Moreau was written early in 1895, when Wells was a rising young author of twenty-eight. He had completed work on his first novel, *The Time Machine*, and was simultaneously making a name for himself as a writer of short stories and essays on scientific themes. He had turned to authorship after abandoning a teaching career on grounds of ill-health and from the outset his work had attracted attention for its originality and austere scientific vision. As a student of biology under T. H. Huxley, he had absorbed an evolutionary approach to life and history, a vision of the universe as a single biological process, which dominated his beliefs and writings throughout his career. In his first full-length work, *Text Book of Biology* (1893), he acknowledged the central importance of this concept.

In the book of nature there are written, for instance, the triumphs of survival, the tragedy of death and extinction, the tragi-comedy of degradation and inheritance, the gruesome lesson

of parasitism, and the political satire of colonial organisms. Zoology is, indeed, a philosophy and a literature to those who can read its symbols.²

Nowhere is his preoccupation with "the tragi-comedy of degradation and inheritance" more evident than in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, a story which was rejected by the first publishers to whom it was offered and which aroused more hostile reviews than any of his other early writings. The book is the first-person narrative of an English gentleman, Edward Prendick, who finds himself an uninvited guest on a lonely Pacific island. There he encounters Moreau, a vivisectionist who has fled from England in disgrace, and his assistant Montgomery. The island is inhabited by a race of strangely deformed creatures, half man and half animal, whom Prendick at first supposes to be vivisected human beings. It is not until mid-way through the narrative, after many horrifying and bewildering experiences, that he learns the truth: that the creatures are animals wrought by Moreau into human shape. "The creatures I had seen were not men, had never been men. They were animals - humanised animals - triumphs of vivisection."³ Moreau is eventually killed by one of his own creations, a vivisected puma, and Montgomery also dies after a drunken quarrel with some of the Beast People. After Moreau's death the Beast People slowly revert to their former animality and, alone, Prendick finds the island unendurable. He succeeds in escaping to civilisation and brings his narrative to an end on a note of "hope and solitude", confiding to the reader that he has withdrawn from human companionship and spends his days in reading and the study of chemistry and astronomy.

Bernard Bergonzi has drawn attention to the fact that the narrative "is composed of extremely literary materials,"⁴ and that consciously or unconsciously Wells derived some of the details of the island and certain of the incidents from *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island* and Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Some of the machinery seems to derive from earlier romances including Mary Shelley's

Frankenstein and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

The indebtedness to Swift, especially the final book of *Gulliver's Travels*, is clear. As a boy Wells had read an unexpurgated edition of *Gulliver's Travels* and he had a lifelong admiration for Swift's satirical genius. He openly acknowledged this influence on his work and in a preface to the definitive edition of his own writings confessed that "a cleansing course of Swift and Sterne intervened"⁵ between his early attempts to write a novel and his first published journalism. The influence of Swift is particularly evident in the satire on man's animality:

In spite of their increased intelligence, and the tendency of their animal instincts to reawaken, they had certain Fixed Ideas implanted by Moreau in their minds, which absolutely bounded their imaginations. [Ch. 15]

I would see one of the clumsy bovine creatures who worked the launch treading heavily through the undergrowth, and find myself asking, trying hard to recall, how he differed from some really human yokel trudging home from his mechanical labours; or I would meet the Fox-Bear Woman's vulpine, shifty face, strangely human in its speculative cunning, and even imagine I had met it before in some city by-way. [Ch. 15]

My trouble took the strangest form. I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls, and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark and then that I know this is an illusion, that these seeming men and women about me are indeed men and women, perfectly reasonable creatures, full of human desires and tender

solicitude, emancipated from instinct, and the slaves of no fantastic Law - beings altogether different from the Beast Folk. [Ch. 22]

In such passages as these Wells is implicitly questioning the complacent assumption that evolution inevitably leads to progress. He is reminding the reader of man's bestial origins, of the veneer of civilisation masking his inherent animality. This is repeatedly underlined in the satirical contrast between the alleged rationality of human beings and the savagery of the islanders. "My one idea was to get away from these horrible caricatures of my Maker's image, back to the sweet and wholesome intercourse of men."⁶ Apart from Moreau, the only humans Prendick has encountered since the commencement of his adventure are a drunken and bullying captain, John Davis, the brutish sailors aboard the *Ipecacuanha*, and the ineffectual and maudlin Montgomery. The latter disintegrates after Moreau's death till in his drunken stupidity he is indistinguishable from the Beast People (the point is made explicit when Prendick observes, "You've made a beast of yourself. To the beasts you may go.") Far from being "sweet and wholesome", then, the human beings he encounters both before and after his experiences are selfish and violent, imbued with animal traits of greed and cruelty. His faith in the reasonableness and decency of his kind is an illusion.

This insistence that "humanity is but animal roughhewn to a reasonable shape and in perpetual internal conflict between instinct and injunction"⁷ was unusual for a work published at the climax of the Victorian age but wholly characteristic of Wells and consistent with his training and beliefs. Its implicit pessimism was in marked contrast to the facile optimism of the period. Herbert Spencer's *Man versus the State* had been published in 1884, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* in 1888 and William

Morris's *News from Nowhere* in 1891. In place of the assumption that moral progress was implicit in evolutionary development, Wells posited a very different thesis: the notion that man is and remains inherently animal and that his instinctive nature would continually reassert itself despite a facade of law and decorum. "Cravings, instincts, desires that harm humanity, a strange hidden reservoir to burst suddenly and inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear."³

In a crucial passage Wells draws attention to the artificiality of the civilising process:

Before, they had been beasts, their instincts fitly adapted to their surroundings, and happy as living things may be. Now they stumbled in the shackles of humanity, lived in a fear that never died, fretted by a law they could not understand; their mock-human existence began in an agony, was one long internal struggle, one long dread of Moreau - and for what? It was the wantonness that stirred me.⁸

The conception of man as a fundamentally unstable creature, living in fear and driven by compulsions and pressures beyond his understanding is implicit in *Moreau* and in much of Wells's early journalism. In his essay 'Human Evolution, An Artificial Process'⁹ he argues convincingly that "natural man is still what he was in the stage of unpolished flint instruments" and that civilisation is a perpetual conflict between man's animality, "the culminating ape," and the acquisition of reasoned thought. It is this insistence on man's innate bestiality and the unrelieved pessimism of Wells's metaphor which led many reviewers to condemn the book as a mere exercise in horror. It is only in comparatively recent times that *The Island of Doctor Moreau* has begun to receive serious critical attention as a fable rich in theological and philosophical imagery.¹⁰

In one of the few perceptive reviews the book received, the *Guardian* critic summed up the reaction of many readers when he commented:

Sometimes one is inclined to think the intention of the author has been to satirise and rebuke the presumption of science; at other times his object seems to be to parody the work of the Creator of the human race, and cast contempt upon the dealings of God with His creatures.¹¹

Certainly a strong element of religious imagery is interwoven in the narrative and Wells himself described the story as a "theological grotesque."⁷ There is, for example, the satire on the Ten Commandments (the Litany of the Law), the priesthood (the Sayer of the Law), theological speculation (Big Thinks) and punishment in Hell (the House of Pain). The bitterness of his satire on emotional religiosity is unmistakable:

At that the others began to gibber in unison, also rising to their feet, spreading their hands, and swaying their bodies in rhythm with their chant All three began slowly to circle round, raising and stamping their feet and waving their arms; a kind of tune crept into their rhythmic recitation, and a refrain - "Aloola" or "Baloola" [Hallelujah] it sounded like. Their eyes began to sparkle and their ugly faces to brighten with an expression of strange pleasure.¹²

Wells's formative years had been lived against a background of fundamentalist Christianity. His mother had been a devout churchgoer and had done her utmost to instil in him the belief that Hell was the punishment for wrongdoing. At home in Bromley and at Holt, North Wales (where he taught for a time at a private school) he had encountered religious beliefs and attitudes of an extremely emotional kind. Implicit in these beliefs was the idea that man had been created by an unseen, all-powerful God, that man was a miserable sinner, that the punishment for sin was everlasting torment and that our whole existence must be one of subservience to the creator's will. The whole of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* can be seen as a fantasia on these themes, as a parody of the intensely emotional, Calvinistic view of the universe Wells had imbibed in his adolescence. From the

moment when Prendick is saved from starvation by Montgomery administering a drink which "tasted like blood" (the incident corresponds to the belief held by many Christians that one is "saved" by a belief in the blood of Christ) religious imagery forms one of the main strands of the narrative.

Moreau himself displays many God-like qualities: he alone is the creator, he determines the law, he prescribes the punishments for transgressors, on his island he reigns supreme for the Beast People go in fear of him. His rule is maintained by the threat of further pain: "Who breaks the Law goes back to the House of Pain." It is significant that with his death (and the consequent ending of the House of Pain) the moral order disintegrates and the Beast People revert to their animal origins. Their respect for Moreau and his Law disappears and even Prendick declines into a state bordering on savagery. Moreau's attempt to impose an order, a code of behaviour, on his fear-driven creations is seen to be a failure; the conclusion, Wells seems to suggest, is that the view of the universe implicit in orthodox Christianity is unacceptable and that a creed which relies upon the threat of punishment for obedience to its teachings is doomed to collapse.

Interwoven with the religious symbolism are strands of imagery on the theme of dominion and subservience. Moreau is described as "a massive white-haired man" with "white dexterous-looking fingers"; his attendant M'ling is a "black-faced cripple." When the Beast People are confronted by men they grovel on all fours flinging "white dust" in their faces; they are ordered to salute and bow down. The interplay between black and white is an important subsidiary theme in the novel and it is not too fanciful to see in this a presage of the end of empire. Moreau's island is a microcosm of white domination, and the collapse of his rule is an interesting anticipation of the decline of imperialism. When Prendick speculates at the end of the story that presently he may see "the degradation of the Islanders played over again on a larger scale" he is foreseeing the end of the white man's domination of subject peoples: a remarkably prescient theme for a writer to adopt two years before Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee,

the year widely regarded as the apogee of British imperialism. The theme is reinforced by the interesting use of aristocratic language: the name of Prendick's ship is the *Lady Vain*, the island is called Noble's Isle, Prendick regrets that he "might have grasped the vacant sceptre of Moreau, and ruled over the Beast People." Ladyship, nobility, sceptre, rule: the language reiterates the idea of aristocracy, of Moreau as the white ruler presiding over his regime with a stern and theocratic moral order.

It should be noted in passing that the imagery is reinforced through Wells's deliberate use of symbolic surnames. Frequently in his novels Wells employs surnames possessing literary or symbolic allusions and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is no exception. "Moreau" is clearly derived from "morrow": the disintegration of society depicted in the novel is a foreshadowing of a wider dissolution implicit in man's animal nature. More immediately the end of white dominion, Wells suggests, is already on the horizon. "Prendick" seems to derive from *predicate* (Latin *praedicare*, to proclaim) = to preach, to affirm, to assert. The meaning is appropriate not only in the light of Prendick's role as an affirmer of the truth - as seen, for example, in his attempt to remonstrate with Captain Davis, his arguments with Montgomery and his attempts to convince the Beast People that Moreau has survived death - but in his role as the fulcrum of Wells's fable. This, he asserts, is the truth of the human condition; recognise man for what he is - a beast thinly disguised as a rational creature. Prendick, like Gulliver before him, is the solitary preacher asserting the reality of man's nature. "Montgomery" is a direct reference to the central character of *The Wide, Wide World*, a sentimental novel much loved by Wells's mother, Mrs Sarah Wells. The contrast between the emotional piety of the heroine and the dissolute weakness of Moreau's assistant could not be more marked and is the kind of literary pun which would have appealed irresistably to Wells. His choice of the name is a further indication that he intended the story to be a satirical fantasia on religious and moral themes. "M'ling" is clearly a

pun on "malign", a reinforcement of his central assertion that man contains within his nature a powerful strand of evil which can be tempered but not eradicated by a process of civilisation. The names Wells chooses for his characters, then, serve to underpin his design and strengthen the web of didactic and allegorical elements which are so characteristic of his early work.

In another sense the story is a variant on the "desert island myth" which has haunted English literature since the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. The island can be seen as a perverted paradise, as a microcosm of an Eden destroyed. Moreau emphasises the island's virginal quality, its unspoilt peace: "I remember the green stillness of the island and the empty ocean about us as though it was yesterday. The place seemed waiting for me."³ The theme of an inverted paradise is reinforced by the biblical language used by the Beast People, a language strongly reminiscent of that of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Moreau enters this unspoilt Eden as an intruder, destroying the natural order with his wanton experiments and despotic regime. It is only with his death that the island returns to its natural state and Prendick feels impelled to leave it forever, terrified of "the increasing charge of explosive animalism that ousted the human day by day." An island is by definition a self-contained world, a landscape in miniature. Wells's choice of an island as a setting for his satiric fable permits a concentration on his selected themes without the distraction of extraneous considerations. Poe employed a similar device in his description of the island of Tsalal in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and Wells himself returned to the idea in *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (1928).

The island, in common with its literary forebears, is remarkably English in its nature and topography: "The beach was of dull grey sand, and sloped steeply up to a ridge, perhaps sixty or seventy feet above the sea-level, and irregularly set with trees and undergrowth."¹³ In this microcosm of a familiar environment (at one point there is an explicit

comparison of a ditch with "the ha-ha of an English park") Moreau recreates an orderly and civilised menage. His house has a thatched roof, he possesses editions of Latin and Greek classics, his servant brings him meals on a tray; he recreates, in fact, a cultivated and urbane environment amidst the greenery of the island. The familiarity of the setting throws into sharper contrast the strangeness of Prendick's experiences: his pursuit by the Leopard Man, his encounters with the Beast People and the Sayer of the Law, his long sojourn with the reverting animals, his eventual escape from the island. Continually he is trying to read the riddle and reflect on the meaning of all he has undergone.

The Island of Doctor Moreau displays many familiar features of the novel of discovery. It is literally a novel of exploration in these sense that when Prendick first arrives on the island it is an unknown land to him. The process is not simply one of exploring the island's topography but of learning its laws, of familiarising himself with the codes and conventions which govern behaviour. The process corresponds to man exploring his world and follows the heuristic pattern characteristic of novels of the genre. It is a gradual transition from ignorance to enlightenment, from a naive acceptance of the world as it is (initially Prendick concedes that "I should be a fool to take offence at any want of confidence") to total disillusionment. Very characteristic is his posing of rhetorical questions - "What could it mean? A locked enclosure on a lonely island, a notorious vivisector, and these crippled and distorted men?"¹⁴ - his naive misreading of the meaning of the riddle, his innocence in believing that the Beast People are potential allies. In the process Prendick himself becomes a changed man.

Not only is the island itself very English in its topography but Prendick is a quintessential Englishman. In his insistence on fairness and decency, his cultured background (a small but significant touch is that while the puma is being vivisected Prendick is reading Horace) and his upholding of civilised standards of behaviour, he is the embodiment of an English gentleman; he is a

liberal humanitarian confronted with values and attitudes totally alien to his experience. The collision between Prendick as a surrogate of 'civilisation' and the values represented by his interlocutors - the brutish Captain Davis, the spineless Montgomery, the inhuman but masterful Moreau - forms an interesting subsidiary theme within the novel's overall pattern. He emerges from his sojourn a chastened man - disillusioned, solitary, nervous, afraid. In the final chapter, 'The Man Alone,' he reviews his experiences, reflecting that

... unnatural as it seems, with my return to mankind came, instead of that confidence and sympathy I had expected, a strange enhancement of the uncertainty and dread I had experienced during my stay upon the island ... And even it seemed that I, too, was not a reasonable creature, but only an animal tormented with some strange disorder in its brain, that sent it to wander alone, like a sheep stricken with the gid.

Disillusioned with human society, he withdraws from "the confusion of cities and multitudes" and leads a solitary existence among his books and chemical experiments, his outlook and imagination permanently scarred by his traumatic adventures.

The novel is not only an extremely interesting anticipation of themes discussed in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), but a literary model which has been emulated by many twentieth century writers. Moreover, by challenging the assumptions of evolutionary doctrine it raises a series of disturbing questions that lie at the heart of the modern predicament. Is man truly *homo sapiens* or is he fundamentally an animal concealing beneath a veneer of civilisation traits and impulses which will ultimately prove his downfall? Is he a coherent, balanced creature in harmony with himself or in reality a deeply divided being, torn between rational and brutish desires? Can he hope to achieve a more advanced order of civilisation or are all his aspirations foredoomed to failure? It is these questions, with their profound implications for human psychology, which underlie Wells's allegorical tale.

Notes

- 1 'The Contemporary Novel' (1911), reprinted in *An Englishman Looks at the World* (Cassell, 1914).
- 2 *Text-Book of Biology* (University Tutorial Press, 1893)p. 131.
- 3 *The Island of Doctor Moreau* Ch. 14
- 4 *The Early H. G. Wells* (Manchester University Press, 1961) p. 100. One literary source not noted by Bergonzi is Stevenson's novella *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), which has a number of similarities to Wells's story including a description of a lonely island inhabited by a God-like Englishman.
- 5 Preface to Vol. I *The Works of H. G. Wells: Atlantic Edition* (Unwin, 1924).
- 6 *Moreau* Ch. 17.
- 7 Preface to Vol. II *Atlantic Edition* (Unwin, 1924).
- 8 *Moreau*. Ch. 16
- 9 *Fortnightly Review* (October 1896); reprinted in Philmus & Hughes eds. *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction* (University of California Press, 1975).
- 10 See, for example, Robert M. Philmus 'The Satiric Ambivalence of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*' *Science-Fiction Studies* (March 1981) pp. 2-11.
- 11 *The Guardian* (3 June 1896) p. 871.
- 12 *Moreau* Ch. 9.
- 13 *Ibid.* Ch. 6.
- 14 *Ibid* Ch. 7.