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Vulnerability and the Animal Gaze:
The Beast Folk's Rebellion in The Island of Dr. Moreau

Dr. Moreau's Island is structured by the hierarchical dualism of human rationality over animal bodies. Moreau, the rational man, acts upon other creatures but is never acted upon, observes but is never observed. He imports other-than-human animals and vivisects them to 'burn out' their animal natures and make 'a rational creature of [his] own.'[1] Moreau's experiments produce Beast Folk, whose bodies Moreau has tortured into human shapes, who speak, walk on two feet, and wear clothes. But, in Moreau's view, their irrational animality still threatens to 'burst forth' into 'fear' and 'hate.'[2] To prohibit these 'cravings',[3] Moreau creates the Law, which he and his overseer Montgomery violently enforce. Lurking within Moreau's system is a contradiction that becomes its undoing, killing Moreau and Montgomery. This revolutionary threat emerges in the gaze of the Beast Folk: when an other-than-human being looks upon a human and they are vulnerable before each other. Whereas Moreau and Montgomery repel the gaze to enforce their invulnerability, Prendick, the shipwrecked outsider, is caught in the Beast Folk's gaze and is vulnerable before them, revealing that humans are not masters but fellow-creatures.

Moreau's experiments are based in Darwinism's evolutionary ladder. This ladder is hierarchal, because it places humans—the rational western man—at the pinnacle of evolutionary progress, but also levelling, since it places humans within natural history alongside other animals. It is, as John Miller writes, 'an organic continuum between life forms over time that connects as well as segregates.'[4] The rational man orders all other life forms into species and races that can be studied, experimented on, and taxidermized. But these categories are not wholly separate: one can evolve into another. other-than-human species could, over time, become or even surpass humans; likewise, humans could degenerate to become like the species they view as sub-human. 'The Darwinian' Donna Haraway writes, 'put Homo Sapiens firmly in the world of other critters, all trying to make an earthly living and so evolving in relation to one another without the sureties of directional signposts that culminate in Man.'[5] This connection 'wounds' 'the primary narcissism of the self-centered human subject' who 'tries to hold panic at bay with the fantasy of human exceptionalism.'[6] Dr. Moreau's experiments aim to remove rungs from the evolutionary ladder while maintaining its anthropocentric hierarchy. His devotion to

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[1] H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Project Gutenburg [online] (2004, originally 1896), Available from <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/159/pg159-images.html> [Accessed October 2022], ch. XIV.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] John Miller, *Empire and the Animal Body* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), p. 2.
[5] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 11.
[6] Ibid.

'the plasticity of living forms'[7] is based in a 'fantasy of human exceptionalism'[8] by which a primitive 'animal' can be 'burn[ed] out' to create a superior 'rational creature.'[9]

Dr. Moreau's rational human model is rooted in Rene Descartes' concepts of humanity and animality. As Derek Ryan[10] writes, Cartesian philosophy 'divides thinking humans from automated animals,' setting the rational man, 'who [has] access to language and knowledge' against the irrational animal, which is stripped of mind and soul. Descartes' divide between 'human' and 'animal' is tied to a 'split' between the human mind, the source of reason, and body, the source of instincts and automated functions. The human overcomes their animal body through reason, but the animal acts 'solely from the disposition of their organs.'[11] Moreau seeks to overcome this Cartesian boundary by burning out the 'animal' to make a 'rational creature.' Moreau gives the animals speech, transgressing that essential Cartesian separation. He also 'carve[s]' animals' bodies into human shapes 'almost with ease.'[12] But that is not enough for Moreau to consider the 'Beast Folk,' as Prendick calls them, human. Moreau's 'trouble' is with 'the brain':

> The intelligence is often oddly low, with unaccountable blank ends, unexpected gaps. And least satisfactory of all is something that I cannot touch, somewhere—I cannot determine where—in the seat of the emotions. Cravings, instincts, desires that harm humanity, a strange hidden reservoir to burst forth suddenly and inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear. These creatures of mine [...] just after I make them, they seem to be indisputably human beings. It's afterwards, as I observe them, that the persuasion fades. First one animal trait than another creeps to the surface and stares out at me.[13]

Here Moreau maintains a Cartesian split between the mind and the body, with the brain's 'intelligence' being separated from the body's animal 'cravings, instincts, desires.' Even if the Beast People have speech, they don't, in Moreau's view, have reason, because they aren't free of their bodily instincts, their 'stubborn beast flesh.'[14]

Moreau believes that overcoming pain is the key to transcending the animal body and becoming rational. He tells Prendick: 'This store which men and women set on pleasure and pain is the mark of the beast upon them, —the mark of the beast from which they came!' Pain 'is

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[7] Wells, ch. XIV.
[8] Haraway, p. 11.
[9] Wells, ch. XIV.
[10] Derek Ryan, *Animal Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press, 2015), pp. 6-7.
[11] Rene Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, Project Gutenburg [online], translated by John Veitch, (released 1995, updated 2022, originally published 1637), part V.
[12] Wells, ch. XIV.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

simply our intrinsic medical adviser,' he argues, so 'the more intelligent [men] become,' the less they need pain, a point he emphasizes by sticking a knife in his leg. For this reason, Moreau makes 'men' by baptizing animals with pain, declaring: 'Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say, 'This time I will burn out all the animal; this time I will make a rational creature of my own!'[15] If a creature can't 'face torment,' he pronounces them 'no good for man-making.'

Because Moreau, the rational man, is free from his own pain, he is also free from sympathizing with another's pain. When Prendick asks, 'Where is your justification for inflicting all this pain?', Moreau replies: 'So long as visible or audible pain turns you sick [...] I tell you, you are an animal.' Justified by Cartesian logic, Moreau reduces the Beast People into specimens that can be owned and tortured. He tells Prendick:

> The thing before you is no longer an animal, a fellow-creature, but a problem! Sympathetic pain,—all I know of it I remember as a thing I used to suffer from years ago. I wanted—it was the one thing I wanted—to find out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape.'[16]

Moreau's evolutionary connection to the being he experiments on, his 'fellow-creature,' is overridden by his unyielding 'intellectual passion' for the rational man.

Moreau's Cartesian concept of 'the animal' has nothing to do with the natural characteristics of other-than-human animals and everything to do with 'all the human is not.'[17] The term 'anima' is therefore 'a kind of orientalism, labelling the raw material out of which the human is produced.'[18] The animal—along with 'the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen'—is 'reduced to type', 'Other to rational man' and 'essential to his bright constitution.'[19] Put simply, animality exists to prove humanity's exceptionalism by being its opposite. Jacques Derrida calls 'the animal' a 'strict enclosure', like the zoo and the slaughterhouse, in which humans smash together 'all the living things that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors, or his brothers.'[20] Dr. Moreau's laboratory is such an 'enclosure.' He slices and sews dissimilar beings into one human form, including 'a creature made of Hyena and Swine', an 'old woman made of Vixen and Bear', 'a Bear-Bull.'[21] Moreau does not see any uniqueness or personality in the puma, vixen, leopard, or any other being he experiments on; he only sees obstacles to his pursuit of rationality.

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ryan, p. 7.
[18] Sheryl Vint, *Animal Alterity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 112.
[19] Haraway, p. 19.
[20] Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)' in *Critical Inquiry*, trans by David Wills, 28.2 (2002), pp. 369-418 (p. 402). Available from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344276>
[21] Wells, ch. XV.

The concept of 'the rational man' is no more substantive than 'the animal' which is its opposite. Dr. Moreau never describes what humanity is, only what it isn't: animality. The Beast People's 'animal' behavior is policed by the Law, which they were 'ever-repeating' and 'ever breaking'[22]: 'Not to go one all fours, that is the Law. Are we not Men?', 'Not to eat Flesh nor Fish' nor 'suck up Drink,' nor 'claw Bark,' nor 'chase other men.'[23] Moreau blames this Law, which he calls a 'mockery of rational life'[24] on a 'Kanaka missionary'[25] he introduced to the first Beast People, a person he views as evolutionarily primitive and less than a rational man. Prendick, however, attributes the Law to 'certain Fixed Ideas implanted by Moreau in the Beast People's minds,' which 'absolutely bounded their imagination.'[26] The Beast People also identify Moreau as the Law's maker and enforcer: 'His is the House of Pain', 'His is the Hand that makes,' 'wounds,' and 'heals.'[27] Moreau sets himself up as the enforcer of the Law, punishing law-breakers with his whip, revolver, and, most horribly to the Beast People, his scalpel. Moreau's concepts of human and animal are not natural distinctions, but 'strict' constructed 'enclosure[s]'[28] which can only be maintained through violence.

On the underside of this violent binary is Darwinism's levelling possibility: that humans are not exceptional rational men but 'earthly'[29] embodied fellow-creatures in a web of mutual vulnerability. This interdependence surfaces when a other-than-human animal's gaze falls on a human and the human looks back. 'The animal', Derrida writes, 'can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also [...]—it can look at me. It has a point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other...'[30]

Prendick has one important, albeit fleeting, moment of reciprocal gaze during which he recognizes the Beast Folk as fellow-creatures. After the Leopard-man breaks the Law by eating flesh, Dr. Moreau, accompanied by Prendick and Montgomery, assembles the Beast People to punish him publicly. All three are armed.[31] Moreau uses his violent one-directional gaze to dominate the Leopard-man, 'dragging the very soul out of the creature.' But the Leopard-man does not submit. Despite all his 'memory and dread of infinite torment', he 'leap[s] toward his tormenter.' Moreau reels back, the Beast Folk riot, and the Leopard-man flees on all fours, hunted by the crowd. Prendick reaches him first, writing,

He was crouched together into the smallest possible compass, his luminous green

[22] Wells, ch. XV.
[23] Wells, ch. XII.
[24] Wells, ch. XIV.
[25] Kanaka, meaning Native Hawaiians, originating in the Hawaiian word for human being. The term was also used by British colonists to refer to indigenous workers who they forced into labor on the islands.
[26] Wells, ch. XV.
[27] Wells, ch. XII.
[28] Derrida, p. 402.
[29] Haraway, p. 11.
[30] Derrida, p. 380.
[31] Wells, ch. XVI.

> eyes turned over his shoulder regarding me.
>
> It may seem a strange contradiction in me,—I cannot explain the fact,—but now, seeing the creature there in a perfectly animal attitude, with the light gleaming in its eyes and its imperfectly human face distorted with terror, I realised again the fact of its humanity.[32]

Caught in the Leopard-man's 'point of view regarding'[33] him, Prendick's concepts of humanity and animality unravel. He sees the Leopard-man's humanity in his animality; he sees his dignity in his terror. Then Prendick, rather than allow the Leopard-man to be captured and tortured by Moreau again, 'slipped out [his] revolver, aimed between its terror-struck eyes, and fired.'[34]

The reciprocal gaze brings humans into companionship with other creatures in a 'web of interspecies dependencies.'[35] As Donna Haraway writes, 'Looking back in this way takes us to seeing again, to *resperece*, to the act of respect.'[36] As John Berger writes, when a human is 'being seen by the animal', they recognize animal's 'similar/dissimilar' life and 'ascribe' a

'power' to them, 'comparable with human power but never coinciding with it.[37] The human and other-than-human animal form a 'companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange.'[38] This reciprocal gaze happens not in the conceptual realm of 'human' and 'animal', but in particular historical situations with real beings. When describing the animal gaze, Derrida, for instance, makes clear that he is 'speaking about a real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat. It isn't the figure of a cat.'[39] This particular cat has agency. This particular cat looks back. Here, in the gaze shared by two embodied beings, 'sticky with all their muddled histories,'[40] the possibility of companionship opens.

Companionship happens when humans 'look back.' But humans can also repel[41] the animal gaze by clinging to their exceptionalism. Their rejection makes it possible to kill, experiment on, or otherwise reduce the other-than-human animal. By repelling the gaze, Berger argues, humans make animals their machines, specimens, and property. By the late Victorian era, when *The Island of Dr. Moreau* was written, human and other-than-human animal worlds were almost totally separate and asymmetrical. Industrialism reduced animals to machines that

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Derrida, p. 380.
[34] Wells, ch. XVI.
[35] Haraway, p. 11.
[36] Haraway, p. 19.
[37] Ibid, p. 5. Berger's emphasis.
[38] Ibid, p. 6. My emphasis.
[39] Derrida, p. 374.
[40] Haraway, 42.
[41] Theodor Adorno, 'Selections from Minima Moralia' in Can One Live After Auschwitz? (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 56.

produce value for capital, both materially and theoretically. This was followed by the reduction of humans to 'isolated productive and consuming units', and animals to 'raw material.'[42] In consumer societies, living animals disappeared from human life altogether except as spectacles, pets, and specimens. In these conditions, animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are.[43]

This negative feedback loop defines Moreau's relationship with the puma and other other-than-human animals he experiments on. Pursuing 'intellectual passion', Moreau reduces the puma to 'a problem' he can take apart and reassemble.[44] She is 'always the observed', an 'object' of his increasing knowledge and power. He has 'rendered' her 'absolutely marginal,'[45] reduced her to his property, his product: 'this puma of mine.'[46] Because of Moreau's increasing power, his experiments repeatedly fail to make a other-than-human animal human. As Berger writes, 'the more' he knows, 'the further away they are.'[47]

Even when a human violently repels a other-than-human animal's gaze, they remain, albeit asymmetrically, vulnerable to the animal. Writing in a very different context, Judith Butler argues that vulnerability is an unavoidable condition of our interdependence:

> we are from the start given over to the other [...] we are vulnerable to violence; but also vulnerable to another range of touch, a range that includes the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support for our lives at the other...[48]

Being 'given over' to the other means that we can be breastfed, nuzzled, resuscitated, and that we can be killed. This is a condition with 'which we cannot argue.'[49] If we consider the non human other a total victim, we cling to our fantasy of invulnerability at the expense of their agency. The Other is reduced to 'the disempowered, passive side, of an imperial either/or',[50] 'the Other across the gulf from the One,'[51] who is ours to rescue or ours to kill. Even murder demonstrates mutual vulnerability: the murderer attempts to 'repudiat[e] vulnerability' by 'becoming violent' themself.[52] Whips and Laws and revolvers cannot make us impermeable—

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[42] Berger, p. 13.
[43] Ibid, p. 16.
[44] Wells, ch. XIV.
[45] Berger, p. 24.
[46] Wells, ch. XIV.
[47] Berger, p. 24.
[48] Judith Butler, 'Violence, Mourning, Politics' in *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004), pp. 19-49 (p. 31).
[49] Ibid.
[50] Miller, p. 17.
[51] Haraway, p. 72.
[52] Butler, p. 42.

we are always in some way 'laid bare.'[53]

Moreau, Montgomery, and Prendick try to 'repudiate' their vulnerability before the Beast Folk with their whips, but they remain constantly afraid. They interpret the threat as the Beast People's animality: 'the ever-rebellious cravings of their animal natures,'[54] that 'hidden reservoir' of animal 'hate.'[55] In their minds, any rebellion among the Beast People is irrational animal instinct. They deny the Beast Folk's any agency or reason.

Prendick, before being subdued by Moreau's logic, recognizes the real threat: that the Beast People can act upon their masters. Prendick hears the puma's 'dim broken sounds' become, to his ears, the cry of 'a human being in torment',[56] and is filled with fear of Moreau, who he now believes vivisects humans. If the puma is not 'a brute' but 'a human', then Prendick himself is in danger of vivisection; he is vulnerable in the same way the Beast Folk are vulnerable. He lashes out and flees Moreau's enclosure, believing himself to be hunted, until he collapses, 'hopeless' with 'no way of getting anything to eat.'[57] He realizes his earthliness. All his rational education will not save his life. Then, the ape-man finds him. He looks at Prendick and sees a fellow-creature, saying 'It is a man... a man like me.'[58] Prendick asks him for food, and the ape-man brings him to the Beast Folk's huts. The Beast Folk look at Prendick, they 'have a point of view regarding'[59] him, and they respond to his vulnerability. They take him into their community, feed him, and teach him their Law. But then Moreau shows up, commanding 'Hold Him!' and their meeting erupts into violence. Prendick lashes out against the folk who took him in and runs away until he is backed into the sea. There, over the nervous shouts of Montgomery and Moreau, he gives this speech to the 'staring' Beast Folk:

> "You who listen! Do you not see these men still fear you, go in dread of you? Why, then, do you fear them? You are many—" [...]
>
> I went on shouting, I scarcely remember what,—that Moreau and Montgomery could be killed, that they were not to be feared: that was the burden of what I put into the heads of the Beast People. I saw the green-eyed man in the dark rags, who had met me on the evening of my arrival, come out from among the trees, and others followed him, to hear me better.[60]

In this moment of terror and vulnerability, Prendick identifies the real threat to Moreau's rule: not the irrational animality of the Beast Folk, but their capacity to act and their master's capacity

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[53] Ibid, p. 24.
[54] Wells, ch. XV.
[55] ch. XIV.
[56] ch. X.
[57] ch. XI.
[58] ch. XII.
[59] Derrida, 380.
[60] Wells, XIII.

to be killed. Moreau talks Prendick down, assuring him that the Beast folk are not vivisected humans but vivisected beasts and offering him a revolver, that powerful tool of repudiating vulnerability. Prendick takes the revolver, reinstating himself as a Master instead of a fellow creature. He returns to the enclosure, where Moreau persuades him the Beast People are 'bestial monsters, mere grotesque travesties of men.'[61] The moment passes.

But the dreaded overthrowal cannot be repressed forever. The puma, that being Moreau reduced to his specimen, acts upon him. The puma kills Moreau, then dies. In death, they become equal, a pile of mangled animal bodies. With the killing of the invulnerable Master, the hierarchy falls apart. Montgomery, who never considered 'Moreau could die', chooses to self-destruct rather than live with the Beast Folk as a companion instead of overseer. He asks Prendick, 'We can't massacre the lot—can we? I suppose that's what your humanity would suggest? But they'll change.'[62] After destroying the boats (Prendick's only way off the island), Montgomery dies in a drunken riot with his loyal servant M-Ling and three other Beast Folk, smashed bottles in their hands and claw marks on their throats. Rushing to help Montgomery, Prendick knocks over a lamp and the whole enclosure catches fire. Moreau's Island is no more. The Beast folk proclaim, 'The Master is dead. The Other with the Whip is dead. That Other who walked in the Sea is as we are. We have no Master, no Whips, no House of Pain, any more.'[63]

Prendick lives on to narrate this story, not as a new Master, but as 'a mere leader among [his] fellows.'[64] Despite his attempts to make them 'salute' and 'bow,' the Beast People view him not as Master but one of their own, because he had been vulnerable before them, 'bled and wept'[65] and 'walked in the Sea.' Prendick, who has a broken arm, is dependent on them for his earthly needs, and they take him in:

"I want food," said I, almost apologetically, and drawing near.

"There is food in the huts," said an Ox-boar-man, drowsily, and looking away from me.[66]

Prendick becomes one of the Beast Folk. They divide into factions, Prendick with the Dog-man and sloth-creature as friends and Hyena-man as his enemy. They follow the Law for a time, and then begin to embrace their particular animal bodies, walking on all fours, abandoning clothing, and speaking less and less. They make 'lairs according to their taste' and begin to act like the diverse other-than-human animals they were created from. As they become less human, Prendick becomes ashamed that he had been their fellow-creature. But he also becomes like them: he 'builds a den,' hides from the beasts who hunt, and adopts their practices of earthly

[61] ch. XV.
[62] ch. XXI.
[63] ch. XXI.
[64] ch. XX.
[65] ch. XVI.
[66] ch. XX.

survival. Prendick becomes a vulnerable human animal, ‘trying to make an earthly living’ alongside other worldly creatures.

Eventually a boat comes, and Prendick returns to the human world. But he does not happily rejoin human society. Other humans view him as animalistic, with ‘natural wildness’ like a ‘half-tamed lion cub.’[67] Likewise, Prendick is convinced they are Beast People: ‘animals half wrought into the outward image of human souls.’ Prendick clings to human exceptionalism to suppress the vulnerability he was confronted with on Moreau’s Island. He retreats from society, isolating himself from other creatures, to live with ‘wise books’: ‘the shining souls of men.’

But back on the island, the Beast Folk are free.

[67] ch. XXI.

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