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The House of Pain: *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and Post/Trans/Humanism Today

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Abstract

H. G. Wells' novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) is a bleak critique of the Victorian notion that evolution can provide ethical or social guidance to humanity. This essay reads the novel in the context of the contemporary debate between posthumanism and transhumanism. By applying theoretical models derived from Braidotti, Agamben, Wolfe and others, the essay argues that Wells' evolutionary antihumanism provides a corrective to both critical posthumanism's attempts to articulate a non-anthropocentric ethics, and to transhumanism's dreams of transcending humanity. The essay considers the chronotope of an island polity in the context of evolutionary antihumanism by comparing Wells' novel with the contemporary biotech thriller *Island 731* (2013) by Jeremy Robinson.

Keywords: *Antihumanism; evolutionary ethics; Victorian culture; H. G. Wells; science fiction; pain*

Posthumanism, transhumanism... antihumanism?

Of all H. G. Wells' canonical science fiction (SF) novels, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) is the least popular. In terms of its impact on SF, it has not fared as well as the *War of the World* or *The Time Machine*.² In terms of its relevance to the Anthropocene debates about humanity's relationship with nature, however, it is startlingly contemporary. Indeed, I will argue that *The Island* provides a rebuttal to the two trends which have emerged to redefine the role of humanity in the age of biotechnology and climate change: posthumanism and transhumanism. Perhaps the reason for its limited appeal in popular culture is precisely that it articulates lessons of Darwinism that were unpalatable to the Victorians and are still unpalatable today (see Krumm).

Posthumanism and transhumanism are often conflated but in fact, they are quite different. In my discussion, I will be using *posthumanism* to refer to the critical attempts to decenter anthropocentrism and to elaborate a more "inclusive" form of ethics. Epitomized by such works as Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) and Cary Wolfe's *What Is Posthumanism* (2010), this discourse attempts to promote "new lines of empathy, affinity and respect between different forms of life, both human and nonhuman" (Wolfe, 2010, 25).

It seems hard to object to empathy and respect, but a careful reading of Wells' novel in its historical and scientific context would show that the conceptual underpinnings of posthumanism are rooted in a misinterpretation of evolutionary theory. While my goal here is to focus on the (im)possibility

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² While *The War of the Worlds* has seen innumerable screen adaptations (two in the last year alone), *The Island* has been adapted only three times, and none of the movies based on it was commercially successful.



of an evolutionary ethics rather than on the general problematic of empathy, it is worth pointing out that some philosophers have critiqued empathy as “a poor moral guide” that can lead to “irrational and unfair political decisions” (Bloom 2016, 3). Empathy as a neurological capacity in primates is a product of evolutionary history and serves specific ends of kin selection and survival. It is neither universal nor infallible. In fact, as some have argued, empathy can facilitate violence: “conflicts may emerge not despite but because of empathy”, which is partly what happens in Wells’ novel as Prendick’s seemingly altruistic behavior results in chaos and violence (Breithaupt 2019, 5). What *The Island* demonstrates, with unflinching clarity, is that empathy with animals in pain may generate more pain and cruelty as it leads to the collapse of a fragile polity based on the eponymous character Moreau’s Law.

Transhumanism, on the other hand, is an attempt to transcend the human condition through the use of biotechnology and AI, familiar from such figures as Ray Kurzweil, the author of *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (2005).³ Posthumanist philosophers are often intensely critical of transhumanism, arguing, as Wolfe does, that it is an extreme form of humanism rather than its negation. Yet, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* offers critique of *both* posthumanist ethics and transhumanist aspirations by articulating the hard truths of Darwinism, derived from, and informed by, T. H. Huxley’s bleak analysis in “Evolution and Ethics” (1894).

The novel explores the reasons why neither return to nature nor mastery of it are possible routes of escape from the human condition. On the one hand, the depiction of Dr. Moreau’s atrocious experimentation seems to echo the main ethical insight common between critical posthumanism and animal studies: that exploiting nature and nonhuman animals is wrong. This insight is so taken for granted that its validity is seldom even argued: “most of us would probably agree that cruelty toward animals is a bad thing or that people with disabilities should be treated with dignity” (Wolfe, 2010, 12).

The problem, of course, is that while “most of us” may agree with these propositions, evolution does not. Pain, as Wells shows, is the one constant of the evolutionary process, ruthlessly winnowing out the unfit. So, if humanity is part of nature, why should we embrace an unnatural ethics of “empathy, affinity, and respect”?

On the other hand, Moreau’s self-deification and search for sublimity resemble transhumanism which promises transcendence through technology. But Moreau’s failure, more complex than the failure of Frankenstein, reveals that the strictures of biology cannot be simply discarded. Frankenstein fails because he refuses to take responsibility for his creature. Moreau fails because he refuses to take responsibility for himself. He is his own scientific project, creator and creature at once; just as Frankenstein cannot control the monster, Moreau cannot control his own recalcitrant flesh, subject to the same conditions of mortality and materiality as the Beast Folk he is experimenting upon.

Neither post- nor trans-humanist, the novel’s attitude can best be summed as anti-humanist, rejecting an anthropocentric ethics but offering no alternative. This antihumanism is rooted in the late 19th-century realization of the incompatibility of evolution and ethics.⁴ The novel’s

³ I am, of course, aware that there are many more varieties of posthumanism and transhumanism, both as a social praxis and as a philosophical and/or ideological position. However, for purposes of this essay, I will only refer to the two indicated above as they hinge on a specific (mis)reading of evolutionary theory that Wells’ novel argues against.

⁴ On the history of antihumanism, see Miernowski (2016). The next section of this essay expands on the history of antihumanism in relation to Darwinism.



representation of half-human, half-animal Beast Folk centers on the issue of pain and suffering as inescapable byproducts of our evolutionary heritage.

Moreau's laboratory is called "the House of Pain" in the novel. In what follows, I will tease out multiple meanings of this name and will argue that the relationship between evolution and suffering problematizes all forms of ethics without offering any reassuring alternative. Wells' "House of Pain" is where neither critical posthumanism nor triumphalist transhumanism is ready to go.

Evolution by torture

In 1860 Charles Darwin wrote to Asa Gray:

I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. (Darwin *et al*, 1993; 124)

In this brief paragraph, Darwin upends the mainstay of Victorian philosophy of biology: natural theology. The shock of *The Origin of Species* (1859) whose repercussions we are still feeling today did not lie merely in the assertion of the commonality between human and animals. It lays in suggesting that theirs is the commonality of pain.

William Paley's celebrated *Natural Theology* (1802) amassed examples of beneficent adaptations in the natural world to prove the benevolence and care of the Creator. Pre-Darwin, evolutionary theorizing by Erasmus Darwin, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, and Robert Chambers did not undermine the main tenet of *Natural Theology*: that nature kind, harmonious and benevolent; and that the development of species had an in-built progressive directionality. But after *The Origin of Species* (1859), this vision of nature becomes impossible to sustain.

A reluctant revolutionary, Darwin was influenced by natural theology in his youth. But by the time *The Origin of Species* was completed, his attitude had radically shifted. He still attempted to interpret nature in terms of purpose and design. But the inescapable conclusion of his own theory seemed to be that the only discernable purpose of evolution is infliction of pain. Natural selection is contingent, not progressive. It follows no predetermined path. And it works by discarding millions of lives in order to achieve even a minor adaptation. This winnowing out of the unfit is accompanied by relentless suffering. Paley's famous metaphor for the beautifully designed, harmonious natural order was a watch.⁵ In the post-Darwinian world, a torture device appears to be a better symbol. Darwin wrote in 1856 to Joseph Hooker: "What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel works of nature!" (Darwin, 1990, 178). And a "horribly cruel" torture is precisely what Moreau inflicts upon his creatures.

In 1894, T. H. Huxley, H. G. Wells' teacher at the Normal School of Science, assessed natural theology's "evidences of benevolence" and ironically asked: "But if so, why is it not equally proper to say of the equally numerous arrangements, the no less necessary result of which is the production of pain, that they are evidences of malevolence?" (Huxley, 1894, 196).

⁵ Paley wrote in *Natural Theology*: "The watch must have a maker. Just as the watch has such complex means to an end, so does nature to a much greater extent. Just look at the complexity of the human eye. Thus, we must conclude that nature has a maker too".

Other biologists concurred, verging upon a sort of biological Gnosticism in their vision of God as purposefully malevolent. George Romanes wrote:

Most of the instances of special design which are relied upon by the natural theologian to prove the intelligent nature of the First Cause, have as their end or object the infliction of painful death or the escape from remorseless enemies; and in so far as the argument in favour of the intelligent nature of the First Cause is an argument against its morality... (Romanes, 1895, 76)

In subsequent developments of Darwinism, this bleak evocation of evolution as the machinery of pain underwent two modifications that cushioned its philosophical impact, while generating ideological disasters of their own. On the one hand, various theories of “evolution by design” attempted to soften the horror of natural selection by insisting the process was not random but had a progressive directionality somehow inbuilt within its mechanism (see Bowler 2009). On the other hand, Social Darwinism and eventually Nazism appropriated the ruthlessness of nature as a justification for their own “sacred violence” (see Gomel 2000). This latter trajectory is similar to the direction Wells’ own political development took, as he eventually abandoned socialism and democracy and embraced the totalitarian vision of utopian violence and eugenicist purification in such late works as *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933). Some critics argue that Wells’ biological understanding of human beings as an individualistic species which needs to be forced into exercising “self-control and self-transcendence” by a totalitarian elite led to his political transformation (Jonsson, 2013, 298). Yet *The Island of Dr Moreau* suggests that Wells’ concept of evolution was rooted in Darwinian concepts and did acknowledge a role for cooperation; only it appears that he came to believe that cooperation or empathy was not sufficient to outweigh the pain.

A trained biologist, Wells never abandoned his scientific understanding of natural selection by embracing some version of biological progressivism. Rather, both the antihumanism of *The Island* and the totalitarian utopianism of *The Shape of Things to Come* stem from Wells’ vision of the biology of the human condition as a product of the blind, atrocious, and amoral workings of natural selection.

The evolutionary god

When Prendick, the narrator of *The Island*, confronts Moreau about his vivisection, the latter does not, as so many mad scientists in bad movies released since have done, respond with some sort of self-aggrandizing statement about pursuit of knowledge or power. Instead, he turns the tables on Prendick by declaring himself a model of religious piety:

Then I am a religious man, Prendick, as every sane man must be. It may be, I fancy, I have seen more of the ways of the world’s Maker than you—for I have sought His laws, in my way, all my life, while you, I understand, have been collecting butterflies. (Wells, 1934, 133)

Contemporary reviewers of the novel did not know what to make of this statement. Is Moreau mocking Prendick? Is he insane? One review of the book construed Wells’ object as “parody[ing] the work of the Creator of the human race” (quoted in Parrinder, 1972, 56). Wells himself, in his 1933 Preface to a collected edition of his scientific romances, described *The Island of Dr. Moreau* as an exercise in “youthful blasphemy” and the “most painful” of his novels, an expression of his “vision of the aimless torture in creation.”⁶ This later Wells who flirts with Mussolini, Lenin, and

⁶ <https://hbflyte.com/2017/01/14/preface-to-the-scientific-romances-of-h-g-wells/>



Stalin has rejected the concept of “aimless torture” in favor of a torture that is all-too purposeful. In a sense, he has now become like Moreau: the creator identifying with his character.

The question for Darwin, Huxley, and Wells was: if nature is morally evil, how can humans be ethical? For Moreau, the answer is simple. If the God of evolution uses pain to create human intelligence, his human imitators are supposed to do the same. Moreau does not see his project as blasphemous, evil, or unethical; he regards it in the quasi-theological sense of *imitatio Dei*. Pain and suffering are therefore not an incidental by-product of Moreau’s project to “uplift” various mammalian species to human-level intelligence: they are central to it. An interesting and seldom-noticed aspect of the novel is the fact that anesthesia already exists; and yet Moreau never uses it when performing surgery on animals to remake them into humans.

Prendick queries this in his pivotal conversation with Moreau:

‘But,’ said I, ‘I still do not understand. What is your justification for inflicting all this pain? The only thing that could excuse vivisection to me would be some application...’

‘Precisely,’ said he. ‘But you see, I am differently constituted. We are on different platforms. You are a materialist.’

‘I am not a materialist,’ I began hotly.

‘In my view – in my view. For it is just this question of pain that parts us. So long as visible or audible pain turns you sick, so long as your own pains drive you, so long as pain underlies your proposition about sin, so long, I tell you, you are an animal, thinking a little less obscurely what an animal feels...’ (Wells, 1934, 132)

Moreau here positions himself in the same relation to the Beast Folk (and the animals they are made of) as of God in His relation to humanity. After he discards his half-made creatures he imposes upon them the Law, which is both a parody of the Biblical Ten Commandments and an attempt to modify their natural behavior according to the moral precepts of civilization: “Not to go on all-Fours; that is the Law. Are we not Men?”, “Not to eat Flesh or Fish; that is the Law. Are we not Men?”, “Not to chase other Men; that is the Law. Are we not Men?” (Wells, 1934, 121)

I will return to the substance of these prohibitions later on; here I want to remark on what Christensen calls the “imaginary suture of the rupture of the real”, an underlying rhetoric of difference meant to stabilize the fluid entanglement of human and animal (Christensen, 2004, 577). While Moreau’s surgery rests on the evolutionary continuity between the two (or his surgeries would be impossible), the Law is meant to break this continuity into a simple dichotomous hierarchy, by “suturing” the wound opened by pain. Language subsequently becomes the lie that disguises the truth of human-animal hybridity.

This hybridity undercuts not just the order of species but also that of race, especially in the light of Victorian polygenism that regarded different races as different species. Moreau’s island is often likened to another island – that of Prospero in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* – as an imaginary locale for reconfiguring colonial hierarchies. Timothy Christensen argues that the novel’s representation of the originating moment of society and culture relies “upon the application of racial hierarchy”, in which the difference of species becomes an allegorical sign of racial difference (Christensen, 2004, 576). Yet racial and species hierarchy relies upon the assumption that evolution has an inbuilt progressive tendency, which makes it possible to assign specific positions on the “ladder” of

progress to different biological entities. Moreau's self-deification makes sense in the context of such a progressivist view of evolution that was increasingly displacing strict Darwinism at the time.

However, Wells, a trained biologist and a student of T. H. Huxley whose "Evolution and Ethics" is a sustained polemic against the notion of progress, knows very well that Moreau is wrong – not just ethically but scientifically. One cannot climb to the pinnacle of evolution because it does not exist. There is no hierarchy, only fluid continuity.

When Prendick first encounters one of the Beast Folk onboard, the schooner taking him to Moreau's island, the description of the creature is filled with derogatory racial clichés: "black face", "repulsive and extraordinary", "singularly deformed" (Wells, 1934, 84). However, this racial "othering" is countered by the sense of recognition Prendick experiences as he confronts the Monkey Man:

I had never beheld such a repulsive and extraordinary face before, and yet – if the contradiction is credible – I experienced at the same time an odd feeling that in some way I had already encountered exactly the same features and gestures that now amazed me. (Wells, 1934, 84)

Prendick's subsequent interactions with the Beast Folk replicate this initial moment of ambiguity: rejection and acceptance; disavowal and embrace; horror and recognition. The entire action of the novel unfolds in an epistemological space in which the difference between human and animal is not simply problematized but discarded. In this space, the black-and-white distinctions of racial discourse become meaningless precisely because any line separating human and non-human, self and Other, white and black, is arbitrary. The Beast Folk's descent into animality after Moreau's death is paralleled by Prendick's own degradation; and at no point can it be said that an ontological divide has been crossed:

The change was slow and inevitable. For them and for me it came without any definite shock. I still went among them in safety, because no jolt in the downward slide had released the increasing change of explosive animalism that ousted the human day by day...Of course, these creatures did not decline into such beasts as the reader has seen in zoological gardens...the dwindling shreds of the humanity still startled me now and then...I, too, must have undergone strange changes..." (Wells, 1934, 175-176)

Moreau's inglorious death at the hands of The Puma woman, and the devolution of his subjects suggest that his attempt to master the "horribly cruel works of nature" is futile (Darwin 1990, 178). He tells Prendick that he is constantly frustrated by a recalcitrant "something" in the Beast Folk, something mocking his knowledge, evading his skills, undermining his certainties (Wells, 1934, 131). At the end, there is no divine purpose in evolution, no goal or endpoint. There is only pain.⁷

Mother nature?

So where did Moreau go wrong? Can we interpret his defeat as the defeat of anthropocentrism? His careless vivisection of animals is rooted in his conviction that humanity alone has moral standing, and once his subjects have attained some semblance of humanity, he does not kill or torture them

⁷ Some critics have suggested that pain should be read allegorically, as some sort of existential anguish. This, however, is contradicted by the very clear statements in the novel that pain is physical, equally experienced by all biological entities regardless of their degree of self-consciousness or rationality. In the two chapters called "The Crying of the Puma" and "The Crying of the Man", the transition from animal to human makes no difference whatsoever in the subject's reaction to pain, or in Prendick's appalled realization that he may be subjected to the same torment as Moreau's vivisected creation.



anymore, even though he could continue to. Taking him at his word that he is neither an immoral sadist nor a hardened nihilist, we can perhaps see him, in contemporary terms, as subscribing to some form of ethical anthropocentrism: the approach that regards “humans as the sole possessors of intrinsic value” (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012, 145).

Rosi Braidotti describes anthropocentrism as deification of “Man”:

At the start of all, there is He: the classical ideal of ‘Man’...a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values. Together they uphold a specific view of what is ‘human’ about humanity. Moreover, they assert with unshakeable certainty the almost boundless capacity for humans to pursue their individual and collective perfectibility. (Braidotti, 2013, 12)

Initially, Moreau is admirably portrayed by Prendick as a towering figure of “serenity, [with] the touch almost of beauty that resulted from his set tranquility” (Wells, 1934, 137). He is clearly “the Man” in the kingdom of half-formed ugly “brutes” who alone pursues “individual and collective perfectibility”: collective, in the sense of trying to create a law-abiding community of Beast Folk out of the raw material of their animality; individual, in the sense of his own self-fashioning, as I will discuss below.

Prendick soon becomes disillusioned with Moreau, inviting the reader to see “the Man” of the island not as the master of his domain but a victim of “a blind fate, a vast pitiless mechanism, [that] seemed to cut and shape the fabric of existence” (Wells, 1934, 152), on the same level as his drunken assistant Montgomery, Prendick himself, and the Beast Folk. All of them equally are “worn and crushed, ruthlessly, inevitably, amid the infinite complexity of its incessant wheels” (Wells, 1934, 152). This “vast, pitiless mechanism” is the evolutionary process; and it crushes Moreau’s ambitions with the same indifference with which it crushes the Beast Folk’s attempts to survive as intelligent and social beings. In contemporary ecocriticism, nature is often granted agency by metaphorically assimilating it to the silenced victims of patriarchy and ethnocentrism: “nature tends to be regarded as silent, just as the voices of women, minorities, and children have been. In other words, nature tends to be viewed as the Other, silent and inferior to humans.” (Manes, 1996, 15).

From here, it is easy to slide into the old symbolism of “Mother-Nature”, a benevolent and protective deity, and to imagine a posthuman utopia of “generosity and reciprocal altruism” and “radical relationality” (Braidotti, 2013, 25-27). Wells’ vision of nature, however, differs vastly. The “vast, pitiless mechanism” is neither a goddess nor a victim but precisely what the phrase says: a mechanism, with no agency, no altruism, and no relationality. The only thing it has is irresistible power.

The Beast Folk’s return to a state of nature is far from utopian. Once the quasi-religious “Law” that Moreau imposes upon them to stabilize their precarious humanity is lifted, what follows is their devolution back to dismal animality. The novel is often seen in the context of the late-Victorian fears of degeneration, but this critical perspective disregards its subtlety. The Beast Folk do not simply revert back to their original status. Rather, the originating moment of the violence of the Law is replicated in the multiplying acts of natural violence, and prohibition and predation subsequently become mirror images of each other.

Moreau’s Law imposes vegetarianism upon his creatures: “Not to eat Flesh or Fish: that is the Law. Are we not Men?” (Wells, 1934, 121).

Presumably, he modifies their physiology to make it possible for erstwhile Leopards and Pumas to eat plants. Predators in nature must kill in order to survive; and nobody who has ever witnessed a

lion's hunt or a ferret's killing of a rabbit could imagine this process to be anything but incredibly painful to the prey. The Beast Folk can choose not to kill by following the precepts of Moreau-given Law, but this Law is founded on violence. If agency implies choice, then the Beast Folk are indeed ethical agents, although they can only choose between two equally terrible alternatives.

The chapter titled "How the Beast Folk Tasted Blood" depicts in graphic details the aftermath of a natural predator's kill: a "rabbit with its head wrenched off" and its body torn to pieces. Montgomery is philosophical: "it's just the way with carnivores... It's the taste of blood, you know" (Wells, 1934, 144). Realizing that the "taste of blood" is nevertheless going to wreak havoc on the precarious civilization of the island, he and Moreau, armed with guns, organize a hunt for the culprit which results in both of them being killed. Violence can only be contained by violence, which breeds more violence. Moreau's prohibition on inflicting pain is upheld by inflicting pain.

Many eco-critics and critical posthumanists argue that the notion of nature as 'red in tooth and claw' is one-sided, and point to the neurological basis for empathy in the mirror neurons that enable humans and other social species to feel another's pain. But this empathetic view of nature, while corrective, is equally one-sided. Empathy is not biologically universal, even among primates. Among humans, it can be easily overridden by ideology, belief, or rhetoric, as our recorded history of wars and genocides amply demonstrates. Moreover, empathy cannot change the unyielding calculus of predation. To live, animals have to kill.

Wells' antihumanism is far more radical than the posthumanist critique of anthropocentrism that covertly relies on the utopian vision of humanity's harmonious co-existence with nature. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* condemns both the violence of nature and the violence of civilization. The only escape from what Winwood Reade called "the cruel, profligate, and abandoned waste" of evolution seems to be into more cruelty, profligacy, and wastefulness (Reade 1872, 56).

Or is there another way?

The singularity is over

Ray Kurzweil's transhumanist manifesto *The Singularity is Near* (2005) proposes that the escape from a state of nature lies in harnessing the power of technology: "Indeed I've seen this epoch as an increasingly intimate collaboration between our biological heritage and a future that transcends biology" (Kurzweil, 2005, 6).

What the scalpel was for Moreau, Kurzweil proposes, AI will be for transhumanism.

While the tortured bodies of the Beast Folk represent the price paid for this transcendence, it is important to stress that they are *not* transhumanist subjects. They can be regarded as "cyborgs" in Haraway's sense of the word – fluid entities that combine different ontologies in one corporeal form. But Moreau is not vivisectioning them in order to create some sort of human-animal superhero. Indeed, Prendick wonders what the point of the entire enterprise is:

It was the wantonness that stirred me. Had Moreau had any intelligible object I could have sympathized at least a little with him. I am not so squeamish about pain at that. I could have forgiven him a little even had his motive been hate. But he was so irresponsible, so utterly careless. (Wells, 1934, 152)

Moreau keeps vivisectioning more and more animals, imposing his human shapes on such clearly unsuitable subjects as llamas and pumas, discarding each new monster and going on to do the same



over and over again. There is no increasing level of success or growing technical challenge. Nevertheless, it eventually becomes clear that the real object of Moreau's experimentation is Moreau himself. His project is a technology of subjectivity, or self-fashioning, in which the Beast Folk are just props to be used and discarded, whilst Moreau is transforming himself into an eidolon of Nature's God.

The ideological continuity between Dr. Moreau and Dr. Mengele, the infamous medical torturer of Auschwitz, represented the mutation of late-Victorian eugenics into Nazi science (Gomel 2000). Through the harnessing of the murderous sublime, both Moreau and Mengele attempted to recreate themselves as sublime subjects, the quasi-Nietzschean supermen who identified with nature's cruelty in order to transcend the "human, all too human" condition of lesser beings. Despite the frequent misreading of the novel in terms of the "mad scientist's" revolt against nature, Moreau's project is precisely imitation of nature or rather, an imitation of what he sees as the sacred principle of nature: transcendence through pain. Here I want to extend this argument into the present, and to consider how Moreau stands in relation to present-day transhumanism. While transhumanism does not, of course, embrace the ethics of torture, its goal to remake humanity by eradicating what Moreau called "the mark of the Beast" (Wells, 1934, 133) remains the same. I will argue that Moreau's failure to fashion himself into a sublime subject foreshadows an unresolvable contradiction at the heart of transhumanism.

In his *imitatio Dei*, Moreau strives to fashion himself into an image of Nature's deity: "The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature" (Wells, 1934, 134). This is a rather different idea of nature than the one espoused by the contemporary growing trend of eco-spirituality: "the quest to experience spirituality in nature" (Grim & Tucker, 2014, 30). Nevertheless, the impulse is the same: transcending the painful divisions of the human condition by harnessing natural forces, be it through technological applications or some sort of eco-meditation. Like transhumanists, Moreau tries to escape the evolutionary dictates of pain and mortality by using tools of evolution: "Pain! Pain and pleasure-they are for us only as long as we wriggle in the dust" (Wells, 1934, 135). And to prove to Prendick that he has indeed transcended humanity, Moreau unflinchingly sticks a penknife into his own thigh. This masochistic gesture both draws attention to his own corporeality and at the same time disavows it. He is a body, true, but a body invulnerable to pain, impervious to agony, perfect and immortal: "Then with men, the more intelligent they become the more intelligently they will see after their own welfare, and the less they will need the goad [of pain] to keep them out of danger" (Wells, 1934, 153).

In *The Singularity is Near*, Kurzweil describes the superior person who has fashioned themselves into a techno-utopian "New Man" as a "singularitarian". Transhumanism is often caricatured as the province of techno-geeks, cooking CRISP recipes in their garage, but in fact Kurzweil insists that the most important technology he has in mind is a mental and even spiritual transformation: a Foucauldian "technology of the self". A singularitarian is one who "understand the Singularity and who has reflected on its implications for his or her own life" (Kurzweil, 2005, 25). Moreau does not need to turn his scalpel onto himself in order to become superhuman; it is enough that he understands evolution and has "reflected on its implications".

The problem, of course, is that Prendick has a much clearer view of evolution as "a blind fate, a vast pitiless mechanism" (Wells, 1934, 152) that cares nothing for Moreau's understanding of it. Darwinian evolution is non-progressive, and hence, the whole notion of "transcending" humanity is meaningless in a universe in which there is no "up" or "down". After Moreau's death, Prendick mourns his missed chance for divinity: "... I might have grasped the vacant spectre of Moreau, and

ruled over the Beast People. As it was, I lost the opportunity, and sank to the position of a mere leader among my fellows” (Wells, 1934, 150).

The irony is that Moreau’s death exposes his “divinity” as sham. Killed by the Puma, he is reduced to the same bloody carrion as his unfortunate subjects.

Like Moreau’s project, transhumanism finds itself bogged down in the aporia of the natural world in which the nonhuman is indifferent to humanity. SF is filled with scenarios in which AIs either exterminate humanity or “uplift” it to their own semi-divine level. Neither SF nor Kurzweil’s manifesto, however, consider what will happen if AIs are simply not interested in us.

The issue of the ethical status of the nonhuman becomes of central importance in relation to climate change. Timothy Morton writes that: “All humans...are now aware that they have entered a new phase of history in which nonhumans are no longer excluded or merely decorative features of their social, psychic and philosophical space” (Morton, 2013, 467).

But it is rather arrogant to argue that the Victorians were not aware of the power of the nonhuman or of the importance of “deep” geological time in relation to human history.⁸ Even before Darwin, Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) introduced the idea of a continuity between geological and human history.

Wells’ entire early oeuvre, from *The Time Machine* to *The War of the Worlds* and *The First Men in the Moon*, is an exploration of the relationship between humanity and the nonhuman, whether envisioned as the power of time, the depth of space, or the opacity of an alien intelligence. Even the present ecological crisis, which is the result of human technological, social, and economic actions, is prefigured in *The Time Machine*, in which the devolution of humanity into the separate species of the Eloi and the Morlocks is the unintended product of class divisions.

The Island suggests Wells saw clearly that recognizing the power of the nonhuman grants us no special dispensation in our relation to it. We may, or may not, be able to stop or reverse climate change, but whatever happens, eco-ethics is only relevant to ourselves. Evolution will continue unheeded after the sixth mass extinction, just as it had gone on after the previous five. Whether humans will be around to witness it is a different matter altogether.

If we consider *The Island of Dr. Moreau* as the ultimate expression of late-Victorian evolutionary philosophy, its lessons remain profoundly relevant to our own struggles today. Rejecting the cloying sweetness of natural theology, the novel shows that the evolutionary continuity between humans and animals cannot be the foundation for ethics because evolution is at best amoral, at worst, atrocious. On the other hand, Wells’ novel evidences that attempting to transcend the human condition through the use of (bio)technology is equally futile because we cannot escape our evolutionary heritage.

This is not an uplifting conclusion, and insofar as if was shared by many others in the late Victorian Age, it is perhaps not surprising that utopian ideologies of the New Man – socialism, fascism, and Nazism – began to emerge and gain strength at the turn of the century. Wells’ own ideological evolution which led to him rejecting democracy and embracing totalitarianism may be seen as emblematic of the crisis he diagnosed but could not resolve. In the ultimate historical irony, the creator of Dr. Moreau fell under the spell of his own creation.

⁸ In fact, in the 1850s, the unjustly forgotten American female scientist Eunice Foote discovered what we today call the greenhouse effect. Another Victorian scientist John Tyndall showed that carbon dioxide can absorb heat in 1859.



The lessons of Dr. Moreau's House of Pain are deeply uncomfortable both ethically and spiritually, but they are even more uncomfortable politically. The afterlife of Dr. Moreau in contemporary SF strongly indicates that the politics of evolutionary antihumanism cannot be assimilated to either the collectivist utopia of posthumanism or the liberal individualism of transhumanism. The only appropriate template for them is the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics.

Islands of history

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben describes how “the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction” (Agamben, 1998, 12). This “zone of indistinction” perfectly describes Moreau's island, in which the traditional hierarchies of human and animal, power and powerlessness, predator and prey, are dissolved by the acid of evolutionary flux. But equally, the island is a political entity, albeit a failed one, established on the foundation of Moreau's tyrannical Law. More than a hundred years after the novel's publication, what politics can we envision that are congruent with the House of Pain?

The obvious answer seems to be the politics of the concentration camp, and indeed, the multiple echoes between *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and Nazism are reflected in many later SF texts that derive their inspiration from Wells' novel. Lucius Shepard's short story “Mengele” (1985), Brian Aldiss' *Moreau's Other Island* (1980) and Ira Levin's *Boys from Brazil* (1978), all reference Moreau, either implicitly or explicitly, in the context of settling scores with the defeated Nazi enemy. But as Agamben also points out, Nazism and democracy are mutually imbricated in their reverence for “bare life”; and this “inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism” cannot be simply discarded on the grounds of their diverging histories (Agamben, 1998, 13). Rather, Foucauldian biopolitics make it “possible both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust” (Agamben, 1998, 10).

The notion that fascism and democracy are just different favors of the same political brew is, for obvious reasons, not very popular. But surprisingly, a recent “pulp fiction” pastiche of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* takes this theme up with unsettling gusto. *Island 731* (2013) by Jeremy Robinson is a Kaiju monster extravaganza with few literary pretensions and massive sales. Precisely because of that, it can be seen as a cultural symptom of the gradual convergence between antihumanism and global democracy as biopolitics continues to be the mainstay of global stagecraft. Neither ethical posthumanism nor technocentric transhumanism can cope with the challenges of climate change and the accelerated evolutionary processes of extinction and speciation that inevitably involve humanity. In the Anthropocene, the heirs of Dr. Moreau can finally come into their own.

The plot of Robinson's novel concerns the crew of the eco-exploratory ship *Magellan* becoming stranded on an unknown island in the Pacific. The island is populated by a menagerie of weird and dangerous human-animal chimeras, whose baroque shapes rival Wells' vivid descriptions of the Beast Folk. In the narrative, it turns out that the island was initially the base for the infamous Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army in World War 2 and that the creation of chimeras has continued unabated throughout the subsequent years, under the aegis of a secret program in the US military. Most of the crew are killed, but a few survive and carry on quickly propagating chimeras onto the mainland.

Despite the novel's SFnal overtones, Unit 731 is not a science-fictional creation, and its horrifying biological experiments rival the better-known experiments of Mengele. The creatures on Robinson's island are biological chimeras, defined as a patchwork of genetically different human and animal tissues in a single body. Just as they are a mosaic of evolutionary timelines, they are a mosaic of opposing political histories: "created from knowledge garnered from Japan's World War Two atrocities, and seventy years of continued barbarism under the control of a fringe DARPA program" (Robinson 2013, 298). Their bodies are the corporeal space where the "inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism" is manifested (Agamben, 1998, 13).

Throughout the 300-or-so pages of carnage in the novel's narrative, the ethical and ontological status of the chimeras is debated, in a manner similar to how the ethical and ontological status of the Beast Folk is debated in Wells' novel. Are they human or not; ethical subjects or not? The conclusion is the same in both cases: it does not matter. Simultaneously pitiful and dangerous, the chimeras kill with no compunctions and are killed with no remorse. Perpetrators and victims of violence, the chimeras are "subjugated killing machine[s]" (Robinson, 2013, 298).

The distinction between human and animal in Robinson's novel is further undercut when it turns out that some *Magellan* crewmembers are, in fact, chimeras. Saving his chimera "sister", one of them takes her off the island and unleashes a plague of genetic hybridization upon humanity. Instead of an ontological status, personhood becomes an arbitrary label, bestowed by the fluid permutations of political power and struggle for survival. As opposed to Wells' novel, there is not a single omnipotent leader presiding over the struggle for dominance among the island's heterogeneous zoo of more-or-less humanlike chimeras. Power is decentered and democratically distributed among competing biological entities. As one of the characters points out, "flesh and blood is flesh and blood" (Robinson 2013, 37).

Island 731 begins where *The Island of Dr. Moreau* ends: with the anarchic slaughter of the state of nature. It ends with the emergence of a precarious equilibrium in which power depends on a compromise among several competing factions, all deploying violence in order to contain violence. In this post-totalitarian state, biopolitics is the only game.

Islands have been traditionally used as locations for utopian and/or dystopian projections (Mir). But neither *The Island of Dr. Moreau* nor *Island 731* are utopian or dystopian in the conventional sense of these terms. Rather, both are images of the new articulation of the political realm in which bios and zoe become indistinguishable. Islands likewise have a special role in Darwinism as primary locales of the evolutionary process. Darwin's studies of finches in the Galapagos, alongside recent theories of speciation that emphasize geographical isolation, all deploy islands as foci of evolutionary change and natural selection. Islands are places where, as Morton puts it, "nonhumans make decisive contact with humans" (Morton, 2013, 86). And it turns out that this contact generates a new, chimeric, body politic in which neither expanding the scope of humanity nor abandoning it altogether leads to escape from pain.

Lessons of despair

It is easy to read *The Island of Dr. Moreau* as a critique of transhumanism given its technocentric aspirations. As this essay has demonstrated, however, it is equally a critique of posthumanism which attempts to create a new inclusive community of zoe. Neither philosophy can counter the bleak insight of Darwin: "*There seems to me too much misery in the world.*" The "bare life" of both humans and other animals is full of suffering. We are all prisoners in the House of Pain, and there is no way out.



A recent mini-renaissance in sequels and pastiches of Wells' novel seems to indicate that it speaks to the Age of the Anthropocene more than it did to the Age of Extremes — Eric Hobsbawm's label for the century of totalitarian ideologies (Hobsbawm 1987). At least four SF novels published since *Robinson's* are direct intertexts with *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.⁹ But in all these novels, the same paradox is left unresolved: it is not possible to create an ethical system rooted in nature, and yet it is equally impossible to shake off humanity's evolutionary heritage. Wells' antihumanism seems to lead straight to nihilism.

However, I would argue that by highlighting the flaws and insufficiencies of both posthumanism and transhumanism, antihumanism plays a salutary role of critiquing their utopian aspirations. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now see how political attempts to escape the House of Pain through a radical transformation of human nature and society led to catastrophes. Wells himself, in his subsequent ideological drift toward various shades of totalitarianism, exemplifies the dangers of all-encompassing solutions to humanity's predicament. Acknowledging that neither empathy nor transcendence are capable of solving all our problems opens up a space in which biopolitics can be harnessed for specific ends, generating not grandiose utopian schemes, but rather localized gestures of solidarity and kindness.

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⁹ Andrew Swann, *The Moreau Quartet* (2015), J. S. Barnes, *The City of Dr Moreau* (2021), Sylvia Moreno-Garcia, *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* (2022), Daryl Gregory, *The Album of Dr. Moreau* (2022).

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