



FIGURING ANIMALS: ESSAYS
ON ANIMAL IMAGES IN ART,
LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY,
AND POPULAR CULTURE

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First published in 2005 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 1-4039-6512-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Figuring animals : essays on animal images in art, literature, philosophy, and popular culture. / edited by Mary S. Pollock and Catherine Rainwater.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 1-4039-6512-9 (hc : alk. paper)

1. Human-animal relationships. 2. Animals in art. 3. Animals in literature.
4. Animals (Philosophy) I. Pollock, Mary Sanders, 1948- II. Rainwater, Catherine, 1953-

QL85.F54 2004

590—dc22

2004040562

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: January 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

CHAPTER 7

BURNING OUT THE ANIMAL: THE FAILURE OF ENLIGHTENMENT PURIFICATION IN H. G. WELLS'S *THE ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU*

Carrie Robman

Jacques Derrida's recent and recurring interest in the problem of the animal signals the critical recognition in cultural theory of a non-human "other" that is crucial to our modernity and to our Western philosophical heritage. Derrida traces a certain recalcitrant humanism in Western metaphysical thought—especially in the work of such cardinal thinkers as Aristotle, Freud, Heidegger, and Levinas—which "continues to link subjectivity with man" and withhold it from the animal. In broad theoretical terms, Derrida characterizes the sacrificial structure of Western subjectivity as one that maintains the status of the "human" by a violent abjection, destruction, and disavowal of the "animal." In other words, the sanctity of humanity depends upon our difference from animals, our repression of animality, and the material reinstatement of that exclusion through various practices such as meat-eating, hunting, and medical experimentation.

While Derrida outlines a kind of trans-historical Western "carnophallogocentrism,"² Slavoj Žižek helps us understand the specific construction of the Enlightenment subject in its distancing from animality, or its "desubstantialization."³ According to Žižek, the "'official' image of the Enlightenment—the ideology of universal Reason and the progress of humanity, etc."⁴ is rooted in the Kantian version of subjectivization:

the subject "is" only insofar as the Thing (the Kantian Thing in itself as well as the Freudian impossible-incestuous object, *das Ding*) is sacrificed, "primordially repressed" . . . This "primordial repression" introduces a fundamental imbalance in the universe: the symbolically structured universe we live in is organized around a void, an impossibility (the inaccessibility of the thing in itself).⁵

The "official" Enlightenment subject is one that represses its own animality or Thing-ness, and, because of this repression, circulates around a void.

This purified notion of the human subject is profoundly threatened by Darwin's evolutionary theory, which emerges in the late nineteenth century. While various theories of evolution linking humans to other animals had developed prior to Darwin's, his work served as the apex of these philosophical and scientific investigations. With the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, the human being could be understood as a highly evolved animal. Darwin's insistence that differences between humans and other animals are differences of degree rather than kind radically problematized the traditional humanist abjection of animality, particularly in its purified Enlightenment form.

Darwin's positing of the fundamental inter-ontology of human and animal lays the groundwork for a crisis in humanism vis-à-vis the animal at the turn of the twentieth century. H.G. Wells is among the first modernist writers to thematize clearly this post-Darwinian uncertainty about the stability of the humanist subject in terms of its species status.⁶ The humanized animals in Wells' 1896 novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, embody a Darwinian nightmare of the evolutionary continuum, in which animals become human and—more horrifically—humans become animals. While seemingly invested in the improvement of animal behavior, Dr. Moreau's project is in fact targeted at the constitutive imbalance in the human subject identified by Žižek as the problem of the palpitating "Thing," which must be repressed for the subject to become human. Moreau's intense desire to make animals reasonable represents an excessive instantiation of Enlightenment rationalization in its drive to purify the human subject of all connection to the irrational, the bodily, the animal. But the novel ultimately confirms the impossibility of such purification and stages an insistent collocation of human and animal being.

Anxieties about humankind's participation in animality are recurrently coded in figures of ingestion and cannibalism in the literature of modernism.⁷ *The Island of Dr. Moreau* further corroborates this insight. The reader meets Edward Prendick, the novel's protagonist, and two other sailors shipwrecked from the "Lady Vain," as they float helplessly without provisions and without promise of rescue. Prendick describes this initial crisis in terms of hunger and thirst: "We drifted famishing, and, after our water had come to an end, tormented by an intolerable thirst, for eight days altogether."⁸ Prendick and his companions find themselves bereft of the basic comforts of human society and physical sustenance. They are confronted with mere physical survival, the need to eat and drink. Their predicament immediately compromises humanity's claim to the transcendence of animal instincts as the three men agree to draw lots and determine who will be the cannibals among them and who will be the victim. Though Prendick's companions struggle with one another and roll overboard before anyone is eaten, human nature is already marked in the novel as fundamentally physical, instinctual, and even aggressive. Peter Kemp describes this perspective as one that marks Wells' larger body of work, particularly his later work, in which the human being is understood more

in relation to its animal contingencies and appetites than to its imagined transcendence of them.⁹

Cyndy Hendershot points out that Prendick, as the novel's "representative of masculine British civilization,"¹⁰ is set apart from the other men in the raft because he resists the initial proposal of cannibalism, but the text immediately undercuts Prendick's status as nonprimitive when he is picked up by Moreau and company. Moreau's assistant Montgomery gives Prendick some "scarlet stuff, iced" (5), and Prendick notes, "It tasted like blood, and made me feel stronger" (6). Here Prendick's basic physical need to eat and drink is realigned with cannibalism and therefore animalized. A few lines later, Montgomery assures the weakened protagonist that some mutton is boiling and will soon be ready to eat. When the mutton is brought in, Prendick is "so excited by the appetising smell of it" that he is no longer disquieted by a puma's incessant growls from the deck (7). Wells' emphasis on the olfactory in this description further underscores Prendick's animal needs. Cary Wolfe and Jonathan Elmer have noted that Freud, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, associates the acquisition of humanity with a decreased reliance on smell and an increased sense of sight.¹¹ When "man" learns to walk upright, he removes himself from the organicism he once experienced on the ground: "Freud's fantasy of origins tells us, then, that the human animal becomes the one who essentially *sees* rather than *smells*." Therefore Wells' characterization of Prendick is one of regression to an animal state in which the olfactory rather than the specular dominates his relations to the objective world. Prendick has drunk blood and now smells the flesh being prepared for him to eat.

Derrida has argued that the Western subject, just as it is identified with phallic privilege and with the metaphysics of presence, is also organized around carnivorous virility. The acquisition of full humanity in the West, he contends, is predicated upon eating animal flesh. This valorizing function of meat-eating has been explained in a different register by Nick Fiddes in his book *Meat*, which is premised upon the idea that "the most important feature of meat . . . is that it tangibly represents human control of the natural world. Consuming the muscle flesh of other highly evolved animals is a potent statement of our supreme power."¹² For humans, as opposed to nonhuman animals, eating meat enacts the cultural work of creating and maintaining a subjectivity that is imagined to exceed the natural. This putative transcendence over nature thus posits the nonanimality of the human carnivore, and, as George Bataille's *Theory of Religion* suggests, works to remove man from the realm of the thing. Eating cooked meat defines the animal as always-having-been a thing, and conversely, it defines man as never-having-been a thing. But Wells' text troubles the distinction between eating the flesh of animals and eating the flesh of people through its alignment of the carnivorous and the cannibalistic. Prendick's consumption of flesh and blood indicates the coincidence of human civilization and instinctual animality. Wells' foregrounding of the bloody and smelly in Prendick's eating habits realigns him with the

cannibal/animal. The text takes pains to emphasize the bloody realities of British cuisine by emphasizing Prendick's animal response to animal flesh. In this way, the text reveals the inherent contradiction of "carnivorous civilization." Within the first few pages of the novel, then, Wells codes the eating of flesh as an animal practice. Prendick's "civilized" status is undercut by his desire to feed on other animals, a desire that becomes one among several primary markers of animality in the novel.

This early troubling of Prendick's status as human is promptly mirrored in the appearance of M'Ling, Moreau's most beloved Beast Person whom Prendick perceives as a misshapen black man moving with "animal swiftness" (9). As Hendershot points out, M'Ling serves as an obvious point of conflation between imperialist racism and Darwinian theories of evolutionary superiority. Not yet realizing that M'Ling is one of Moreau's animals-made-human, Prendick experiences this creature within a psychomythological register:

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 features and gestures that now amazed me. Afterwards it occurred to me that probably I had seen him as I was lifted aboard, and yet that scarcely satisfied my suspicion of a previous acquaintance. (10)

Prendick seems to recollect M'Ling's disquieting face through an unconscious source that is chronologically anterior. In Jungian terms, M'Ling triggers Prendick's collective unconscious. Jung maintains that "archetypes" or "primordial images" recur in dream symbolism because the mind, like the physical body, represents a "museum" with "a long evolutionary history behind it . . . I am referring to the biological, prehistoric, and unconscious development of the mind in archaic man, whose psyche was still close to that of the animal."¹³ Prendick's vague recognition of M'Ling, like most recognitions in the novel, says more about him than about the Beast Man because it indicates his own evolutionary kinship with animality.

This recognition is mythologized in a subtle yet instructive reference to biblical tradition when Prendick turns to view the schooner's deck. He is astonished to see, in addition to staghounds and a huge puma "cramped" in a small cage, "some big hutches containing a number of rabbits, and a solitary llama . . . squeezed in a mere box of a cage forward. The dogs were muzzled by leather straps. The only human being on deck was a gaunt and silent sailor at the wheel" (11). In this parable of Noah's Ark, humans and animals are equalized by the wrath of God infused into nature and find themselves literally in the same boat. The parable implicitly deconstructs the superiority of man over animal by insisting upon their mutual corporeal needs. The Ark is an apt allusion for the beginning of Wells' tale, which, according to Anne Simpson, calls for humankind's "deep investigations of the nature of self-awareness."¹⁴

M'Ling functions as the ironic precursor to Prendick's lesson on Noble's Island, which undoes humanism's fundamental species tenet that humans are ontologically distinct from nonhuman animals. Prendick's confusion over the status of M'Ling's humanity sets the stage for his own immanent tutelage. Looking toward M'Ling through the darkness, Prendick is astonished when "it" looks back with shining green eyes. "The thing came to me," notes Prendick, "as a stark inhumanity. That black figure, with its eyes of fire, struck down through all my adult thoughts and feelings, and for a moment the forgotten horrors of childhood came back to my mind" (18). For Jung, the childhood mind is more connected to the "deeper instinctive strata of the human psyche,"¹⁵ which adults have learned to control and repress. This narrative moment of terror also recalls Freudian theory, which implicitly claims that the repression of one's animality must be learned because, as children, we are not repulsed by our own physicality.¹⁶ Ultimately, then, Prendick is poised to *unlearn* one of the basic lessons of human subjectivization: to be a person, one must not be an animal.

Moreau's apology for his experimental vivisections comes late in the novel, after Prendick has misunderstood the Beast People as humans who have been scientifically devolved into proto-animals. Of course, this misrecognition underscores the text's deep implications for human identity: Moreau's vivisections, which humanize animals, vividly register the inverse fear that humans already have animal qualities. This textual dialectic mirrors the double-edged nature of evolutionary theory as it was received in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That is, while much emphasis was placed on the progressive capacities of evolution for human cultures at that time, our shared heritage with other animals resulted in anxieties about regression and atavistic "leftovers" in the human person. Moreau's response to such threats is a grandiose humanizing project that aims ultimately to eradicate animality from the sentient world. And while Moreau remains captivated by his own romance, Prendick learns by the novel's end that this kind of purification is impossibly fantastic.

The deeply disturbing nature of this eventual collapse of humanist subjectivity is foreshadowed in the ninth chapter, subtitled "The Thing in the Forest." In order to escape from the shrieks of the puma being vivisected in Moreau's enclosure, Prendick ventures out to explore his island home. He is surprised to discover an unidentifiable figure that "bowed its head to the water and began to drink. Then [Prendick] saw it was a man, going on all-fours like a beast!" (42). This "animal-man" (50), this "grotesque half-bestial creature" (42), will be identified later in the text as the Leopard Man, but in this scene, Prendick cannot decipher its nature and struggles to comprehend the creature's trans-species appearance. His anxieties are heightened when he stumbles upon a dead rabbit with its head torn off, the most recent victim of the "man" who goes on all fours. The rabbit is covered with flies, with its blood scattered about, and therefore serves as an excessive depiction of predation, consumption, and what

Zizek would term the “life substance.”¹⁷ In light of Zizek’s work, Wells’ terminology is perhaps most notable in this section. Prendick narrates the terrifying and various ways in which “the Thing” (46) pursued him. The creature easily coincides with the Kantian Thing, which Zizek reads as that which must be primordially repressed in order to produce the split subject of Lacanian discourse.¹⁸ Prendick’s flight from “the Thing” in Wells’ text metaphorizes the Subject’s haunt by *das Ding*, by a repressed and abjected animality that always returns. This reading is especially compelling because Prendick vacillates between the certain knowledge that the “other” is following him and the suspicion that his fears issue from within, from his own anxious imagination:

I was tormented by a faint rustling upon my right hand. I thought at first it was fancy, for whenever I stopped there was a silence save for the evening breeze in the tree-tops. Then when I went on again there was an echo to my footsteps (47–48).

This “Thing in the Forest” serves as the animal-without who ignites anxiety about the animal-within, and though this chapter ends with Prendick’s narrow escape from the creature, the novel will demonstrate that such an escape is ultimately impossible because the animal cannot be extracted from the human subject. As Zizek maintains in reference to the subject’s attempt to escape the Thing, “The problem, of course, is that this endeavor [to master the Thing] is ultimately doomed to fail since the imbalance is constitutive.”¹⁹

While ostensibly aimed at the transformation of animals, Moreau’s project is in fact directed squarely at this constitutive imbalance in the human subject. The doctor’s strident and repeated attempts to make animals reasonable represent an extreme legacy of the Enlightenment project of rationalization: to purify the human subject—and even the animal subject—of all connections to the irrational, the bodily, the supernatural. In other words, Moreau’s science is desperate to exterminate animality by creating and policing the boundaries of rationalist humanism. Moreau reveals this fundamental motivation to Prendick when he admits, “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” (89; emphasis added). Wells’ portrait of Moreau emphasizes the constructedness of the Enlightenment subject by suggesting that the transcendence achieved by the rational human requires a certain intense and artificial technology, a burning out of the animal within human nature. The process, of course, is displaced here onto Moreau’s unsuspecting subjects, who are animals.

This fictional program of purification depends upon the newly articulated theories of mutation and natural selection. Moreau informs Prendick, “These creatures you have seen are animals carven and wrought into new shapes. To that—to the study of the plasticity of living forms—my life has

been devoted" (81). The mutability of species was precisely what compromised humanity's claim to sovereignty over other animals once evolution was considered scientifically sound. And Moreau implicitly confirms this dethroning of the human when he tells Prendick, "A pig may be educated. The mental structure is even less determinate than the bodily . . . Very much indeed of what we call moral education is such an artificial modification and perversion of instinct; pugnacity is trained into courageous self-sacrifice, and suppressed sexuality into religious emotion" (82). Wells appears to draw directly from Nietzschean philosophy in this passage that explains morality as a repression of instinct. Nietzsche outlines a similar theory in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where he discusses the process of internalization, in which "all those instincts of wild, free, prowling man turned backward *against man himself*."²⁰

The notion that a pig may be educated reveals the ideological kernel of Moreau's "benevolent" Enlightenment fantasy—that all creatures can be elevated beyond their animality, that all creatures can be finally humanized. Horkheimer and Adorno critique this sort of deeply totalizing gesture when they elaborate the repressive forces of Enlightenment reason and its connection to Fascism: "Enlightenment is totalitarian," they explain.²¹ The "official" narrative of the Enlightenment proposes that matter will be mastered by scientism, systematism, and rationalist empiricism. The animal represents the human subject's internal resistance to rationality and symbolic law, so Moreau, as a perverse Enlightenment "father," wants to make all creatures reasonable.

Despite Moreau's impassioned lecture on species transformation and the plasticity of forms, Prendick objects to the suffering Moreau inflicts upon his victims. At this objection, Moreau launches into a long discussion of physical pain and the need for rational man to transcend it. "So long as visible or audible pain turns you sick," he maintains, "so long as your own pains drive you . . . I tell you, *you are an animal*, thinking a little less obscurely what an animal feels" (83; emphasis added). Here the scientist emphasizes the corporeal bottom line, the moment of pain in which materiality triumphs and the mind is conquered by the flesh. This is the moment in which humanity's embodiment cannot be denied, yet denial is precisely what Moreau recommends. Moreau refuses to see that his own violent experimentation is akin to the very "animal" drives he works against. As Horkheimer and Adorno say of the animal experiments: "It shows that because he does injury to animals, he and he alone in all creation voluntarily functions as mechanically, as blindly and automatically as the twitching limbs of the victim which the specialist knows how to turn to account."²² Moreau continues his argument by drawing a knife and carefully inserting it into his own leg. His indifference to the blade is meant to demonstrate his transcendence of animal sensitivity to pain, which he argues can be "ground out of existence" by evolution (84). Again, Moreau aspires to epitomize the rationalist subject in his utter indifference to *matters* of the flesh: "This store men and women set on pleasure and

pain, Prendick, is the mark of the beast upon them, the mark of the beast from which they came. Pain! Pain and pleasure—they are for us, only so long as we wriggle in the dust” (84–85).

At the end of Moreau’s explanation, Prendick remains, to a certain degree, horrified by the humanizing experiments. He shivers at his newfound understanding of Moreau and finds himself in a “stagnant” mood. Prendick’s ambivalence reflects his persistent inability to rationalize the cruel means and questionable ends of the vivisections. Throughout the text, Wells emphasizes Moreau’s extreme violence to and thereby provides a rare fictional representation of animal suffering in medical experimentation. Moreau’s rationale reinforces the text’s suggestion that actual violence against animals is a displaced violence that vainly attempts to exorcise animality from the human psyche. What’s more, the text also intimates, through its description of animal suffering, that attempts to deanimalize humanity are fundamentally violent. Before Prendick knows of Moreau’s procedures, he is driven from the compound by the puma’s “exquisite expression of suffering,” which sounds “as if all the pain in the world had found a voice” (40). Obliquely, then, the text bears witness to the inherent violence of the humanizing process that creates Lacan’s split subject, a process that forces the individual to renounce its animal nature, its connection to the natural world, and its instinctual desires, and to reinforce this disavowal through violence against nonhumans. As Žižek explains, Lacan’s subject “can never fully ‘become himself;’ he can never fully realize himself, he only ex-sists as the void of a distance from the Thing.”²³ The violence of this “compromise formation” (22), in which the subject becoming human must disavow its animality, is literalized in the text by the screams of the puma as Moreau forces its renunciation of animal being in order to shape its “humanity.”

If Moreau’s experiments characterize the attempted renunciation and purification of animality, his creations also catalogue the inevitable failure of these processes. Moreau is motivated to eliminate the perpetual regression of his Beast People to an animal state. He admits to Prendick that his creatures are unable to maintain their human-like repression of animal instincts, so he works harder to perfect his craft: “I have been doing better; but somehow the things drift back again, the stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again” (87). Hendershot reads the “beast flesh” as Wells’ codification of sexual perversion, which was often attributed to non-European natives in imperialist narratives.²⁴ But a close reading of Moreau’s continued description suggests that the “beast flesh” cannot be reduced to sexuality alone. Rather, it stands for a multifaceted human participation in animality. At this point, Moreau’s description is a thinly veiled denunciation of human behavior:

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 suddenly and

inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear As soon as my hand is taken from them the beast begins to creep back, begins to assert itself again. (88–89)

As Prendick discovers, the repressed beast flesh can return in many ways and requires powerful symbolic containment.

Moreau, who coincides with and *embodies* the Freudian Father, or as Lacan understands it, the retroactively projected Name-of-the-Father, writes the Law for his Beast Folk. His prohibitive symbolic economy parodies the Ten Commandments as it identifies specific bestial acts that the humanized creatures must forego. The Beast Folk chant their moral code, “Not to go on all-Fours; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men? Not to eat Flesh of Fish; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?” (65). In addition, they are not to claw trees or chase other men, and Prendick notes how they swear the prohibition of “the maddest, most impossible and most indecent things one could well imagine” (65). These unmentionables register humanism’s projected self-loathing or shame at organicism, while simultaneously acknowledging the profound unknowability of animal consciousness. The Beast Folk’s interrogative coda “Are we not Men?” insists upon the *instability* of human subjectivity and the concomitant need to establish and reestablish the boundaries of the human. Indeed, the Beast Folk provide a conspicuous instance of the “productive reiteration” of hegemonic norms that Judith Butler theorizes.²⁵ The creatures habitually gather to repeat the Law in their desperate attempt to remain human. They must constantly remind themselves of their putative humanity. Butler’s work on the iterability and cultural resignification of sexed identity can be applied here to the discourse of species as it operates in Wells’ text. In Butler’s terms, The Beast Folk speak the necessary recitation, the repeated assumption, of their identity position, “whereby ‘assumption’ is not a singular act or event, but, rather, an iterable practice.”²⁶ They speak and respeak their identity; they literally rearticulate their humanity in order to maintain its integrity.

Wells continues to lay bare the precarious nature of human identity vis-à-vis the animal through Prendick’s gradual demystification of the humanist version of the subject. After several months on the island, he reports becoming “habituated” to the Beast People (96). This habituation results from an uncanny resemblance between the behavior of the Beast People and Prendick’s memories of human behavior. He can no longer distinguish the carriage of Moreau’s bovine creature who works the launch from “some really human yokel trudging home from his mechanical labours,” or the Fox-Bear Woman’s “shifty face” from the faces of prostitutes he once saw in “some city by-way” (96). Wells’ mutual deployment of gender and species discourses clearly emerges here as he adds that the female creatures had an “instinctive sense of their own repulsive clumsiness” and therefore readily adopted a human regard for decorum (96).

Victorian critics have analyzed “the animal within” as a figure aligned with sexuality, especially feminine sexuality, in nineteenth century

literature.²⁷ But those analyses tend to read out animality *as such* when they treat it as primarily symbolic of human behaviors and anxieties. While animality is occasionally gendered as feminine in the text, and while masculine imperialism is clearly at issue in Moreau's attempts to create and control the "other," the novel remains irreducibly interested in the ontological boundary between human and animal. Therefore, the text's commentary on "primitive" female sexuality cannot contain its broader concern with human animality. Prendick's habituation to the Beast People signals an erosion of the symbolic abjection of animality that constitutes human identity. If humans are socialized to regard animals as fundamentally other, then Prendick's socialization is wearing thin as the Beasts appear uncannily human. There appears to be a two-way trafficking of identity-deconstruction here, as Moreau's animals become partially human while Moreau and the other men seem increasingly animal. This double destabilization unmasks the unmain-tainability of the species boundary. The cultural edicts of speciesism dissolve on Dr. Moreau's self-contained island, which functions as an alternative space to the *fin-de-siècle* British socius.

Prendick's habituation to Moreau's creatures serves as a precursor to his more radical moment of deconstructive clarity involving the Leopard Man. Formerly known as the Thing in the forest, the amorphous Leopard Man hunted Prendick earlier in the novel. He proves to be Moreau's most wayward creature when he is exposed as a killer and consumer of flesh. The Leopard Man has disregarded Moreau's Law and resumed his instinctual modes of behavior; he serves as a testimonial to the impossibility of Moreau's Enlightenment fantasy of producing a purely rational human specimen. When Prendick and Montgomery discover a second slain rabbit in the woods, they suspect that the Beast People are on the verge of regression and revolt. Moreau calls the Folk together and confronts the carnivorous transgression, at which time the guilty Leopard Man leaps at Moreau. A frantic chase ensues, and the Beast People readily join the hunt for one of their own, a betrayer of the Law. In fact, the hunt allows them to indulge their "killer" instincts; the Swine-Folk squeal with excitement and the Wolf-Folk, seeing the Leopard Man run on all fours, howl with delight (106). The frenzied pursuit further unravels Moreau's humanizing project because it disregards the fifth Law: Not to chase other Men. In Freudian terms, the chase corresponds to a return of the repressed animality in the Beast People and ultimately to a similar return in the human psyche. The narrative insists upon the Leopard Man's inter-species identity at this point: "The thing was still clothed, and, at a distance, its face still seemed human, but the carriage of its four limbs was feline, and the furtive droop of its shoulder was distinctly that of a hunted animal" (106). For Prendick, the pursuit of the fugitive Leopard Man frames the novel's most pivotal recognition. Coming upon the crouched figure, who stares over its shoulder at Prendick, the latter admits:

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. (107–108; emphasis added)

This epiphanic moment produces a surprising inversion of the traditional humanist subject position, which abjects and represses animality. In profound contrast to that abjection, Prendick's vision privileges animality as an *a priori*, necessary, and constitutive element of the human. Prendick's vision insists that the Leopard Man's animality is actually his most human quality.

Indeed, it is the Leopard Man's terror and capacity for suffering that reveal his humanity for Prendick in this scene. Moreau's Law punishes transgressors by returning them to his "House of Pain" (104) for further rationalization. When Prendick realizes that within seconds the animal-man will be "overpowered and captured, to experience once more the horrible tortures of the enclosure," he abruptly opts for a mercy killing and shoots the creature "between his terror-struck eyes" (108). This act of mercy grows out of Prendick's awareness of the creature's terror at its imminent suffering. His identification with the Leopard Man also suggests that experiencing fear of bodily harm and awareness of one's mortality are supremely human characteristics. In other words, being embodied, experiencing pain, having instincts and fears—these qualities mark one's humanity as profoundly as any other qualities.

The broader implications of Prendick's privileged epiphany about the Leopard Man are almost immediately rendered in the text. The Beast People gather together after the fugitive's body is dragged away, and Prendick continues to analyze the products of Moreau's bizarre undertaking: "A strange persuasion came upon me that, save for the grossness of the line, the grotesqueness of the forms, I had here before me the whole balance of human life in miniature, the whole interplay of instinct, reason, and fate, in its simplest form" (109). Philosophical pronouncements like this one, that trouble the sanctity of humanism, characterize the remainder of the novel.

Jill Milling's analysis of science fiction narratives involving beast-men confirms that the scientist/protagonist "who makes discoveries about the relations between humans and other animals . . . records a sense of wonder, displacement, and ambivalence resulting from these revelations."²⁸ Prendick's vision of humanity is permanently altered by his experience on the island. When he laments the Beast People's lost innocence at Moreau's hands, he implicitly laments humanity's denaturalization as evolved, subjectivated, rational beings. Moreau's beasts *had* been "adapted to their surroundings, and happy as living things may be. Now they stumbled in the shackles of humanity, lived in fear that never died, fretted by a law they could not understand" (109). Humanity is metaphorized as the antithesis of freedom, as a blind adherence to authority, to the Law, to the symbolic order. The human creature has lost its immanence. In these rare moments, one detects in Wells traces of a nostalgic longing to return to some originary, animal moment in history before the human emerged as fully other

from its fellow creatures, before man became the “thinking animal.” But for most of the novel, humanity’s residual animality stalks the human and threatens its locatability.

Moreau’s death at the claws of his Leopard Man confirms the futility of his project and sounds a warning to rationalist humanism that attempts to purify humanity of its animal tendencies are doomed to fail. Prendick’s unsuccessful return to “civilization” echoes this defeat. Rather than feeling restored by English society, Prendick reports a “strange enhancement of the uncertainty and dread” he confronted on Moreau’s island (154). His detailed explanation of this “delusion” warrants a sizable quotation:

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 see faces keen and bright, others dull or dangerous, others unsteady, insincere; none that have the calm authority of a reasonable soul. I feel as though the animal was surging up through them . . . [In London] I would go out into the streets to fight with my delusion, and prowling women would mew after me, furtive craving men glance jealously at me, weary pale workers go coughing by me, with tired eyes and eager paces like wounded deer dripping blood . . . (154–155)

At the novel’s end, then, Prendick cannot reengage the basic humanist disavowal of animality. He recognizes the undecidability of the species boundary, and there is a certain horror in that recognition. Ultimately, Prendick places himself in a liminal species category that seems more animal than human; “And it even 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” (156). Perhaps Prendick obliquely acknowledges the unreasonableness of Enlightenment reason here, a strange disorder in the human brain. The novel’s final chapter informs us that Prendick must live as a recluse in order to maintain his sanity. He finds “hope” in an abstract sense of protection he gained from his astronomical studies, in the “eternal laws of matter” (156). Clearly, Prendick’s gesture toward stability fails to recontain the anxiety released by the novel. Indeed, Wells’ text not only stages a confrontation between the Enlightenment subject and its Darwinian roots, but in doing so it also fundamentally unsettles the traditional notion of the “human” as ontologically nonanimal.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or The Calculation of the Subject: Interview with Jacques Derrida,” by Jean-Luc Nancy, in Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds., *Who Comes After the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 105.

2. Derrida, "Eating Well," 113. Derrida adds the prefix "carno" to indicate his further delineation of the Western subject he had already identified as "phallogocentric." The more recent term includes carnivorous sacrifice as a primary activity that produces and recites humanist subjectivity.
3. Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 136.
4. Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 180.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Wells' relationship to science and to Darwinism in particular has been noted by a number of scholars in light of his tutelage under T. H. Huxley. R. D. Haynes has written "Evolutionary theory then seemed to Wells, and may still be regarded as, the nearest approach to a unifying factor in contemporary thought." Roslynn D. Haynes, *H. G. Wells: Discoverer of the Future* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 16.
7. To name only a few, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1921), and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) all explore the problem of animality and human identity through various economies of consumption and incorporation.
8. H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (New York: Bantam, 1994), 2. Henceforth, references to this novel will be cited by page numbers and enclosed in parentheses.
9. See especially Kemp's introduction to *H. G. Wells and the Culminating Ape* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).
10. Cyndy Hendershot, "The Animal Without: Masculinity and Imperialism in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and 'The Adventure of the Speckled Band,'" *Nineteenth Century Studies* 10 (1996), 7.
11. Cary Wolfe and Jonathan Elmer, "Subject to Sacrifice: Ideology, Psychoanalysis, and the Discourse of Species in Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*," *Boundary* 222, no. 3 (1995), 141-170.
12. Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2.
13. Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), 57.
14. Anne Simpson, "The 'Tangible Antagonist': H. G. Wells and the Discourse of Otherness," *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1990), 135.
15. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 36.
16. Freud writes, "Children show no trace of the arrogance which urges adult civilized men to draw a hard-and-fast line between their own nature and that of other animals. Children have no scruples over allowing animals to rank as their full equals. Uninhibited as they are in the avowal of their bodily needs, they no doubt feel themselves more akin to animals than to their elders, who may well be a puzzle to them." Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (New York: Norton, 1950), 157.
17. Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 22.
18. *Ibid.*, 181.
19. *Ibid.*, 183.
20. Friedrich Nietzsche, in Walter Kaufmann, trans., *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 85.
21. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1944), 6.
22. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 245.
23. Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 22.

24. Hendershot, "The Animal Without," in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, 5.
25. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 107.
26. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 108.
27. Cyndy Hendershot (see note 10 above) discusses the Victorian equation of feminine sexuality and the animal.
28. Jill Milling, in "The Ambiguous Animal: Evolution of the Beast-Man in Scientific Creation Myths," in *The Shape of the Fantastic* (New York: Greenwood, 1990), 108.