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Bio-Ethics *Avant la Lettre*: Nineteenth-Century Instances in Post-Darwinian Literature

The attention to people as ontological beings and the necessity to redefine words like “human being”, “identity”, “nature”, has received a new boost after the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859). The semantic reconceptualization was fostered by a shared feeling, amongst intellectuals, that, in Charles Kingsley’s words, “the great fairy Science, who is likely to be queen of all the fairies for many a year to come”,¹ would indeed triumph as a mere rational orientation, a scientism without proper ethical mitigation. Darwin’s work, with its emphasis both on progressive and retrograde evolution, forced to a revision of the canonical view of man as a once and for all created being and of his/her place in the universe. The humanities responded to the new scientific challenges at a symbolical level with a reconfiguration and recovery of the utopian-or-distopian genre in its topical development into science-fiction. Science fiction once embodied, gave vent and processed via transmutation, as it were, the common fears of the people which were the result of the appearance, on the one hand, of the new scientific hypotheses and, on the other hand, of the pseudosciences to which these in due course gave rise.

The necessity for an investigation of the possibilities science could offer to man was deeply fostered by the debate that arose in English scientific circles in connection with the opposing views of two important institutions: *The Ethnological Society* (established in 1843)² and *The Anthropological Society* (founded in 1863) which disputed strongly in the wake of the evolutionary vision proposed by Darwin on opposed standpoints: that of monogenesis

¹ C. Kingsley, *The Water Babies*, ed. R. Kelly (Peterborough, Ont., and New York: Broadview Edition, 2008), see also A. Tennyson who also speaks of “the fairy tales of science, and the long result of Time” in his poem, *Locksley Hall*, v. 12, ed. C. W. Eliot, *English Poetry III: from Tennyson to Whitman* [1909–1914], The Harvard Classics, vol.42 (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 2001).

² Members of the Society, who supported Darwin strongly, were: Thomas Henry Huxley, Augustus Pitt Rivers, Edward Tylor, Henry Christy, John Lubbock, and A. W. Franks.

(single origin of man) and that of polygenesis (multiple origin of man). The difference between the two is not irrelevant in that from the second a new strong case for the classification of the varieties of man based on racial differences and discriminations was drawn by James Hunt, a disciple of Robert Knox (1791–1862), and founder of *The Anthropological Society*. Hunt used the polygenetic theory in order to conjure up the racial standpoint that the white races had to be located in hierarchical evolutionary terms on the top of the *scala naturae*. The monogenist theory was upheld by James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848). The two societies were later united in *The Anthropological Institute* (1871), to be later transformed, in 1907, into *The Royal Anthropological Institute*.³ The poligenists upholding biological differences justified an innate origin of differences between peoples rather than considering them acquired cultural differences and as a result of an adaptation to the cultural environment, deliberately confusing nature with nurture. The two societies, as has been proven, hand in hand, acted by “identifying issues of race and class as questions of heredity and environment”.⁴ This of course has to be linked to the deconstruction of the creationist hypothesis due to Darwin’s revolution, a not secondary consequence of which was the emancipation of ethics from religion, and it is exactly this issue which sets ethics and its themes strongly into the foreground because new secular values had to be discussed in order to safeguard those domains where religion had till then exercised its monopoly. After the Enlightenment this was the strongest affirmation of secularism and its values. It was once more demonstrated that people needed not to be believers to behave according to common ethical principles, and that being an atheist or an agnostic did not necessarily mean that one had no ethical principles of reference. One needed not to be a religious person to behave fairly. Atheists had ethic principles as believers. Morality and ethics were not the private enclosures of religion, they could rather be emancipated from it. Darwin himself hypothesized that the moral faculty was the result of living in groups and in itself a faculty subject to development as all human other faculties and organs:

In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation.⁵

³ See D. Lorimer, “Theoretical Racism in Late-Victorian Anthropology, 1870–1900”, *Victorian Studies* 31. 3 (1988): 405–430.

⁴ Lorimer, “Theoretical Racism in Late-Victorian Anthropology, 1870–1900”, 430.

⁵ Online Variorum of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*: fourth British edition (1866): 576, available at <http://darwin-online.org.uk/Variorum/1866/1866-576-c-1869.html>.

Ethics could thus become an evolutionary issue, a culture-specific problem, as it was for Darwin, strictly and only a cultural matter of a specific environment.

Another strong emphasis that forced to a revision of one's standpoints on personhood, identity, and ethnicities stemmed from that series of pseudo-sciences that came into being in the circles around the two anthropological societies. In particular, in the 1880s, under Francis Galton's patronage of *The Anthropological Society*, the eugenic movement was given a strong hearing and emphasis. Francis Galton, half cousin of Charles Darwin, had been a disciple of Johann Caspar Spurzheim,⁶ in his turn a follower of the phrenologists Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828) and Pieter Camper (1722–89). We must not forget that a hierarchical, physical anthropological typologisation of peoples had already been presented by J. F. Blumenbach's (1752–1840) taxonomical human subdivision. In his reading he insisted on the fact that: "The Caucasian must, on every physiological principle, be considered the primary or intermediate of the[se] five principal Races".⁷ Gall, for his part, devised an *anthropometry* – making use of the tyranny of numbers on which science always relies – a detailed evaluative method that made use of the mathematical measurements of the skull (and of its bumps data) which came of ideological use to polygenists to promote the issue of a biological, i.e. innate, wrongly "natural" rather than a cultural explanation for differences between peoples.⁸ The theory gained popularity just by filtering results through a quantitative and apparently strictly rational and scientific epistemological means, in reality confusing tool with theory. The term "phrenology" (from the Gr. *phrén* = "mind"⁹ + *logos* = "science,

⁶ Johann Caspar Spurzheim published his works, due to a misunderstanding with his master, separately: cfr. *Phrenology, or the Doctrine of the Mind, and of the Relations between Its Manifestations and the Body* [1825], where he says that he uses the term phrenology to define the special faculties of the mind, and his *Phrenology, or the Doctrine of the Mental Phenomena*. See P. S. Noel and E. T. Carlson, "Origini del termine Frenologia" in *Frenologia, Fisiognomica e Psicologia delle Differenze Individuali in Franz Joseph Gall. Antecedenti storici e sviluppi disciplinari*, eds. G. P. Lombardo and M. Duichin (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997), 44–45.

⁷ J. F. Blumenbach, *A Manual of the Elements of Natural History* (London: W. Simpson & R. Marshall, 1825), 37, which I take from J. W. Griffith, *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: Bewildered Traveller* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 79.

⁸ The cultural explanation is present in the work by E. B. Tylor, *Primitive culture: researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871).

⁹ The Greek word *phrén* has always been associated to the mind and its feelings. Translated literally with mind it also defined the heart, the precordium and the diaphragm, all those organs which were usually thought to be the seat of the mind and its spiritual faculties, cfr. P. S. Noel and E. T. Carlson, "Origini del termine Frenologia", 44.

ratio”), with which this pseudoscience is still known today, has to be attributed rigorously to Benjamin Rush, an American psychologist who used the term in his unpublished manuscript *Lectures upon the Mind* (1805) and in his later publication *Sixteen Introductory Lectures*, in 1811,¹⁰ which was finally used by Spurzheim (the actual divulger of this pseudo-science) to define Gall’s cranioscopy. The new anthropometry (the actual reification of people to numbers) was spread in England by Spurzheim and his follower, the Scottish phrenologist George Combe. Galton became one of its champions. Phrenology was by now a popular fashion: Charlotte Brontë had her head read, and refers to the pseudo-science in her novel *Villette*,¹¹ but not only, for also in previous works she often refers to organs and to their supposed characteristics to describe character.

Besides phrenology, another well-known instance of a pseudoscience, craniology, used as a means of a body politics application, is that devised by the Veronese doctor Cesare Lombroso, Max Nordau’s master, who, in his work *La mente criminale*, taxonomises the, according to him, “family characteristics” of criminals by following recurrent somatic and phrenotypical features. The most famous literary instance of a phrenologist doctor appears in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where the Belgian doctor measures Marlowe’s head because he thinks there is madness in “those who want to go out there [Congo]”.¹² Craniology, the comparative study of races based on skulls’ measurement has to be seen as the direct derivation of the invalid innatist theory of character and intelligence as it had been devised by Johann Kasper Lavater’s (1741–1801) in *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775–1778),¹³ in

¹⁰ The term was later used by Thomas Forster who, in 1815, wrote a study on phrenology entitled *Sketch on the New Anatomy and Phisiology of the Brain and Nervous System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim*.

¹¹ As Sally Shuttleworth has demonstrated, “Brontë’s fiction is permeated by the language and assumptions of phrenology”, and she makes use of phrenological elements not only in her major novels. Besides having her own skull examined in 1851, in one of the short stories of the Angria cycle dated July 21, 1838, “The Duke of Zamorna”, Charlotte attributes to her character Jane Moore an hyper-developed secretive organ, which being related to instinct could manifest itself as reservedness, but also shrewdness, dissimulation and hypocrisy: cfr. S. Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996), 64–67.

¹² J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1902](London: Penguin, 1995), 15.

¹³ J. C. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* [1775–1778] (Zürich: Orell Füssli, 1968–1969) first translated into English in 1792 as *Essays on Physiognomy*. Lavater’s work defined features according to “national characteristics” without hesitation attributing small eyes to Italians, light-coloured, wrinkled eyes to Germans, open, steadfast eyes to the English

itself a recovery of the medieval theory of the humours. A contemporary of Gall, Lavater translated in his work body appearances into a semiological code by linking external traits to supposed internal, innate characteristics. Unfortunately, through this work invalid scientific categories came to be strongly tied to apparently neutral aesthetic categories. That is, body features became, in Lavater's study, apparently only "aesthetic" categories, but in reality they were used to back up the supposed superiority and validity of a dictatorial aesthetics of the beautiful, which took the, in itself regional, "Greek" ethnic type as the standard prototype for "universal" beauty. Exactly in the same way, and according to the same premises, in Gall's case, somatic features became racial ones, used to back up the supposed superiority of the white ethnic type, a somatics at that point, as seen, inevitably connected with European (western) aesthetics.

Indeed, Lavater's work provided racists with an imaginary but ideological taxonomy that claimed to read moral worth in external appearance, a pseudo-science widely used in fiction, but with an enormous and telling increase during the nineteenth-century rather than in eighteenth-century fiction.¹⁴ By the characteristics of the nose, mouth, forehead, eyebrows, chin and so forth, one could, it was affirmed, infer character. Skin colour as a difference-marker has an even longer history because of its direct visibility, but in the nineteenth-century other characteristics became relevant and were used as outward signs to highlight character within, i.e. to permit a direct reading of supposed *innate* biological differences. Profiling, stereotyping became a rule. Phrenotypical marks (the set of observable traits of an organism) became a strong discriminating code, made of signs and signifiers.

The fact is that, combined with the Whig interpretation of history, the myth of a continuous teleological progress, that co-opted Darwin's misread thesis of a supposed teleological and progressive myth of evolution, the phrenotypical reading was used to back up a colonial and imperialistic body-

and dull eyes to the Swiss. Treatises on physiognomics are present since antiquity: cfr. R. Giampiera, *Pseudo-Aristotele, Fisiognomica, e Anonimo latino. Il trattato di fisiognomica* (Milano: Rizzoli BUR, 1993) and Polemone di Laodicea, *De Physiognomonia Liber* (II A.D., summarized by Adamanzio il Sofista, *Physiognomica* in the 4th c. A.D.) in Greek, later collected in the Latin work, *De Physiognomonia Liber*, by an anonymous author. See also G. della Porta, *De humana Physiognomia* (1586).

¹⁴ For the relation of physiognomy to the nineteenth-century novel see G. Tytler's study, *Physiognomy in the European Novel. Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton UP, 1982), and my analyses of one of Conan Doyle's short stories and one by Bram Stoker in Yvonne Bezrucka, *Oggetti e collezioni nella letteratura inglese dell'Ottocento* (Trento: A.R.E.S., 2004), 147–164.

politics based on the supposed biological, read “innate”, backwardness of those “other” peoples, who were not interpreted as simply having and using “different” cultural codes, but who were accordingly taxonomized as being “primitive”, “inferior”, “savage” and “barbarian”. Peoples and bodies, in short, who needed to be “civilised”.

These ideological projections found their alleged factual evidence in physiognomy, phrenology, pathognomy which provided the pseudo-scientific contribution to the playing down and “belittlement” of what simply by being “other”, becomes “ugly” and, as in Lavater’s case, how a sign is read as a stigmata of “evil” as happens later in Nordau and Lombroso.¹⁵ Postcolonial literatures have done their best to dismantle such ridiculous aesthetic presumptions through their new “dissenting” body-politics aesthetics.¹⁶ Stevenson, a lover of the Pacific who in *Jekyll and Hide* demonstrates that an outward respectable and normal body does not necessarily correspond to beauty within, did the same. Knowledge became embodied and readable. The difference with former theories of race (based mainly on skin colour) is the application of a taken for granted scientific epistemology: i.e. mathematical measurement applied to an invalid content. A case in which the tool is used to guarantee the validity of the theory.

As an example of the conflation of the aesthetic and the pseudoscientific strand, a popular nineteenth-century work on physiognomy was Henry Frith’s study *How to Read Character in Faces, Features and Forms. A Guide to the General Outlines of Physiognomy*, which appeared in 1891.¹⁷ The work shows a marked preference for the Greek type and the fair complexion that although generally connected with weakness, becomes the main characteristic of the “intellectual” type which shows “mental superiority” so that “the weaker

¹⁵ Physiognomy thus contributed, needless to say, to the climax of the British imperial enterprise which paraded and self-fashioned itself as bringing “light” to those places of the earth where barbarism reigned. If this is scandalizing, let me remind you that Plato, on his side, thought of and promoted beauty as an “implicit” guarantee of goodness. This essentialism, I think, forces us to highlight whenever the old aesthetics of the beautiful, which would render us complicit with the ideology it hides, appears. The discriminatory body politics needs to be deconstructed, over and over again, in all its Prometeo-like historical reappearances.

¹⁶ Cfr. Y. Bezrucka, “Albert Wendt’s ‘Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree’: Contagious Infection and ‘Regional’ Dissenting Bodies”, in ed. A. Righetti, *Theory And Practice Of The Short Story: Australia, New Zealand, The South Pacific* (Verona: Valdonega, 2006), 245–263.

¹⁷ H. Frith, *How to Read Character in Faces, Features and Forms. A Guide to the General Outlines of Physiognomy* (London: Ward, Lock and Co., 1891).

ones in intellect become the servants”¹⁸ concluding, in disquieting social Darwinistic, i.e. teleological terms, that:

the White Man [...] excels all other species [...] fitted for changes of climate, and possessing also intellect, the white races naturally rule. It is Nature’s law. The fittest survive.¹⁹

The ambiguity of a too direct homology between fittest and best defines the distance from Darwinism to Spencerism. The short quote, with its uncomplicated use of a Darwinian discursivity, gives us an idea of the political application of social Darwinism which sets races along an evolutionary and evaluative progressive teleological ladder. The Whig arrow-of-time set provided then to set peoples on a Western hierarchy passing from what the West considers to be primitive to a supposed height of civilization and evolution defined according to occidentalist standards (without taking into any account the western and boasted utilitarian principle of the happiness of “others”).

At that point, in the field of science T. H. Huxley, himself an initial supporter of phrenology, was filled with indignation at the misreading of the Darwinian hypothesis set off by the comparative anatomy of peoples, that imperial England had espoused and applied on a hierarchical basis and politics, and came to reject pseudo-science as a valid method.

Eugenics,²⁰ the term created by Galton, was a sort of direct consequence of these various strands: indeed, the new science could transform “spontaneous” selection – indeed it is better not to use the word “natural” for the difficulty one finds in giving the adjective a qualifying definition – into “artificial” selection. By promoting a policy of guided mating (as in the breeding of animals) which would produce a eu-genic race (derived from the Greek εὖ, “good” or “well”) that is to say a good (better) race, result of selective breeding. The Victorians felt that eugenics’ possibilities were in their hands. Something similar happened to us in February 1997 when the cell of an adult mammal was used to grow another genetically identical clone, which forced

¹⁸ Frith, *How to Read Character in Faces, Features and Forms*, 14.

¹⁹ Frith, *How to Read Character in Faces, Features and Forms*, 15.

²⁰ George Mosse has shown the considerable success with which the “Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie” (*Journal for Racial and Social Biology*), founded in 1904, propagated Galton’s and Pearson’s ideas in D. Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2002), 132. See also G.L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1985, 2nd ed.) and his *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1985).

us to consider that “Dolly” might have been a human being, and that organs could be created only for body replacement, which makes of our bodies a sort of mechanical machine whose obsolete parts can be substituted. For us at the other end of the issue stands also the fact that life can be prolonged beyond the spontaneous human span, because machines can again intervene in lengthening life beyond the body’s organic clock. Bioethics has to discuss how far science can go and law has to enter, in order to make sure that people’s will and the single person’s will is safeguarded.

Important to note is the fact that eugenists did not believe in the influence of the environment for the evolution of species, on the contrary they supposed biological criteria for the fit and the unfit and therefore insisted on a “system of legal restraint over the reproduction of dysgenic strains”, whereas in Darwin species were “not an essentialist entity but a historical population”.²¹ Even for Spencer in reality it had been so; indeed, he, like Darwin, “retained in his biology a strong environmental emphasis, insisting in particular that acquired characters could be inherited” but to “the eugenist [...] this was [...] an old fashioned biology inappropriate to modern genetic science”.²² In particular this view had been strongly emphasized in the work of August Weissman.²³ As a consequence for these people there existed a correlation between pauperism, unemployment and genetic inferiority. Eugenics became soon allied with a certain kind of politics, as R. J. Halliday points out:

As political doctrine, the choices were simple: to limit the birth rate of the “unfit” by means of eugenics, or to dismantle welfare administration and “grandmotherly” legislation in favour of the free labour market and the voluntary beneficence of individuals.²⁴

As such:

Social Darwinism is defined as that discourse arguing for eugenic population control; an argument requiring a complete commitment to an exclusively genetic or hereditary explanation of man’s evolution. In practice, the discourse was carefully aimed at two specific and definable social groups – the native urban proletariat and the alien immigrant. [...] practitioners were characteristically concerned with public morals, temperance, sex-education, medical statistics, and elementary hygiene. They were grouped, in particular, around the Eugenics Education Society,

²¹ See R. J. Halliday, “Social Darwinism: A Definition”, *Victorian Studies*, 14.4 (Indiana University Press, June 1971): 389–405, 399.

²² Halliday, “Social Darwinism: A Definition”, 399.

²³ A. Weissman, *The Germ-Plasm: a Theory of Heredity*, ed. R. Robbins (London: Electronic Scholarly Publishing, 1893). See also his earlier work, “Essays on Heredity and Kindred Biological Problems” (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888).

²⁴ Weissman, *The Germ-Plasm*, 394.

the National Eugenic Laboratory at the University of London, the B.M.A.'s section on Medical Sociology, and the National Council of Public Morals – the forerunner, of course, of the British Board of Film Censors.²⁵

It is a whole body of institutions that, as R. J. Halliday has pointed out, crystallized its work into commissions and laws:

the Immigration Reform Association, the National Birth Rate Commission, the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, the committees on [sweated] labour and Alien Immigration, the Aliens Act itself (1905) [and the Assistance given to German research into race-hygiene]. One might also include, on the recommendation of the practitioners themselves, the Voluntary Sterilization Bill and the Prevention of Crimes Act.²⁶

All this is done “In the name of science”.²⁷ Dan Stone affirms: “In the English literature on eugenics there existed for some forty years before the Holocaust a notion – the ‘lethal chamber’ – which can be differentiated from the Nazi gas chambers ‘only’ in the fact that the English versions never went into operation”.²⁸ All these facts could be read in historical sociological terms in relation to what the population of England probably perceived as a sort of alien invasion when 150,000 people arrived in Britain.

²⁵ Weissman, *The Germ-Plasm*, 401–402.

²⁶ Weissman, *The Germ-Plasm*, 402: in note 19 he pointed out the following: “The Immigration Reform Association was founded in 1903 and continued the investigations of the Sweated Committees into the “evils” of foreign immigration. The Association sponsored an Alien Immigration Bill and pressed for the repatriation of aliens convicted of crimes. The Eugenics Education Society was formed in 1907 and was successful in pressing for a National Birth Rate Commission and for a eugenics section within the British Medical Association”.

²⁷ Cfr. EMBO Reports, 2.10 (2001): 871: “It was scientists who interpreted racial differences as the justification to murder ... It is the responsibility of today’s scientists to prevent this from happening again”. See also Paul Lombardo, “Eugenics Laws Restricting Immigration”, essay in the Eugenics Archive, available online at <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay9text.html>, and his “Eugenic Laws Against Race-Mixing”, <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay7text.html>. See also S. Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981).

²⁸ Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain*, 124. He also writes: “It is true that the Nazi path to the gas chamber was a twisted one, a path which (once the actual murder process started) began with the face-to-face shootings of the Einsatzgruppen (the mobile killing squads which accompanied the Wehrmacht into the Soviet Union), ‘progressed’ through the gas-vans of Serbia and Chelmno, and then into the carbon monoxide gas chambers of the Operation Reinhard death camps (Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka), based on those used in the ‘euthanasia’ programme, before ending with the most technologically sophisticated version in Auschwitz, the zyklon B gas chamber”: 125.

In the 19th century, Tsarist Russia was home to about five million Jews, at the time the largest Jewish community in the world obliged to live in the Pale of Settlement, on the Polish-Russian borders, in conditions of great poverty and, were subjected to religious persecution. About half left, mostly for the United States, but many – went to England. This reached its peak in the late 1890s, with “tens of thousands of Jews [...] mostly poor, semi-skilled and unskilled” settling in the East End of London.²⁹

Due to the restriction that eugenicists were planning, it is therefore no surprise that the decade of the 1880s witnessed an incredible concentration of works on ethics. To mention the main ones: W. E. Lecky, *A History of European Morals* (1869), Herbert Spencer, *Data of Ethics* (1879), Leslie Stephens, *The Science of Ethics* (1882), T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883), Henry Maudsley, *Body and Will* (1883), W. R. Sorley, *The Ethics of Naturalism* (1885), Henry Sedgwick, *Outline of the History of Ethics* (1886), J. G. Romane, *Mental Evolution in Man, the Origin of Human Faculty* (1888), Henry Drummond, *The Ascent of Man* (1894), T. H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics* (1894), and Paul Topinard, *Science and Faith* (1899).

Ethics, which had at that point been fixed on the utilitarian principles of the happiness of the greatest number, and which in its turn was vying with the duty based ethics of Christian and Kantian origin, had to re-elaborate its principles in order to take into account the disenchantment Darwin, once more, had brought about, since the Enlightenment. It was felt that a needed salvage of humanism, which scientism and pseudo sciences were failing to apply, was needed. The safeguard of the principle of life, the bio-essence of the “objects” under consideration, the people, became of extreme relevance. This new bio-orientation took the form of an ethics of care.

In *The Data of Ethics* (1879), Herbert Spencer defined his need to write a work on ethics as the result of a time-specific issue:

Now that moral injunctions are losing the authority given by their supposed sacred origin, the secularization of morals is becoming imperative.³⁰

The fact indeed was that another authority was gaining extreme power: science. Spencer saw Natural Selection in the terms of the Survival of the Fittest (seen as the best) issue, whereas Darwin had been careful to speak of the fittest as the fitter to survive within a given, relative environment which presupposed also, as it happened with the cirripede,³¹ a parasite. Darwin

²⁹ Cfr. <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/20c-evans-gordon.htm>, February 23, 2010.

³⁰ H. Spencer, *The Data of Ethics* [1879], (Preface 3), <http://fair-use.org/herbert-spencer/the-data-of-ethics/preface>, last visit May 4, 2009.

³¹ Cfr. C. Darwin, *The Lepadidae; or, Pedunculated Cirripedes* (London: Palaeontographical Society, 1851).

took pains to study for eight years a possible retrograde development and a loss of one's complexity (exactly what happens to Dr Jekyll when, dreaming of an evolution, he degenerates into the atavistic Hyde). This point is of primary importance, in that it marks the distance of Darwin from Lamarck's theory of heredity (progressive tendency to perfection, the theory espoused by eugenists and initially by Darwin himself³²) and Darwin's consciousness of indefinite developments, of random changes, but always based on effective causes. But for Spencer and the social Darwinists there was an innatistic core that produced the correspondence of the weakest with the worst.

Thomas Henry Huxley responded to eugenists and to Social Darwinists by attacking Spencer in his Romanes Lecture: *Evolution and Ethics* (1893). He denied clearly that the Fittest were necessarily the Best by stating clearly that "what is 'fittest' depends only upon the condition".³³ He also championed and pleaded for an ethics of evolution:

Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process: the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest in respect of the whole of the conditions which they obtain, but of those who are ethically the best. [...] Laws and moral precepts are directed to the end of curbing the cosmic process and reminding the individual of his duty to the community, to the protection and influence of which he owes, if not existence itself, at least the life of something better than a brutal savage [...] Let us understand once and for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the coming process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.³⁴

This only could, according to Huxley: "repudiate[d] the gladiatorial theory of existence".³⁵

Two novels respond to the cultural upheaval Darwinism had created and to the fears that the English people were experiencing at the end of the century. The one novel which sets a direct critique at the nightmares eugenists were proposing is *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.³⁶ The novel presents many Darwinian legacies.

³² Cfr. C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species* [1859] (Oxford: OUP, 1996).

³³ T. H. Huxley, "Evolution and Ethics" in *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History, c. 1880–1900*, eds. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 238.

³⁴ T. H. Huxley, "Evolution and Ethics", 238.

³⁵ T. H. Huxley, "Evolution and Ethics", 238.

³⁶ H. G. Wells, *The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Island of Doctor Moreau* [1896] [EBook #159], October 14, 2004 and first posted in August, 1994, created by Judith Boss, of Omaha, Nebraska, from the Garden City Publishing Company. Minor corrections made by Andrew Sly in October 2004, hereafter quoted parenthetically as DM and line no.

Moreau is a eugenis: in fact he collects embryos with the aim of showing that species have a common origin, and tries his experiments on animals in order to make them into human beings: an implicit artificial quickening of a natural process. He has been driven out of England for the sufferings he has inflicted on animals (he probably infringed England's *Cruelty to Animals Act* (1835³⁷), and therefore he considers himself a victim of his "overmastering spell of research". In trying to civilise animals ("They were animals, humanised animals, – triumphs of vivisection") [DM, 2543], Dr Moreau, a parody of Galton, is just setting into practice what eugenists were advocating. Galton himself in his "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims" (1904) had affirmed that:

We must [...] leave morals as far as possible out of the discussion, not entangling ourselves with the almost hopeless difficulties they raise.³⁸

Once done: "The race as a whole [...] should be better fitted to fulfil our *imperial* opportunities". The program wanted to quicken what eugenists in acceptance of Nature's own finality considered to be the inevitable "improvement of our stock": "What Nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly". That this is far from being a kind process is what, in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, "The Cry of the Puma" testifies, emitting: "sharp, hoarse cry of animal pain" [DM, l. 1242].

Darwin was very careful in his work *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) where he pointed out that the expressions of emotions by man and animals confirmed their common origin and supported "the specific or subspecific unity of the several races".³⁹ Animals are therefore a gradation towards men, but they also confirm Darwin's main thesis that possible retrograde development (degeneration) was possible,⁴⁰ actually it is

³⁷ Founded as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in 1824, it adopted its current name after being granted royal status by Queen Victoria in 1840.

³⁸ F. Galton, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims", *The American Journal of Sociology*, X.1 (June 1904): 1–6.

³⁹ C. Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: John Murray, 1872), 367.

⁴⁰ Cfr. C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 395–96: "the manner in which all organic beings are grouped, shows that the greater number of species of each genus, and all the species of many genera, have left no descendants, but have become utterly extinct. We can so far take a prophetic glance into futurity as to foretell that it will be the common and widely-spread species, belonging to the larger and dominant groups, which will ultimately prevail and procreate new and dominant species". Perfection will, therefore, be measured according to the relative criteria present in

exactly what in moral terms happens to Moreau who still shows human features but reverts and degenerates “morally” into an animal for the brutality he exerts.

If Moreau’s loyalties are clearly Galtonian, Prendrick represents the threat of a correct interpretation of Darwin’s thought, through the attack that Huxley had set to the non-ethic position of the eugenists:

“Montgomery says you are an educated man, Mr. Prendick; says you know something of science. May I ask what that signifies?”

I told him I had spent some years at the Royal College of Science, and had done some researches in biology under Huxley. He raised his eyebrows slightly at that.

“That alters the case a little, Mr. Prendick”, he said, with a trifle more respect in his manner. “As it happens, we are biologists here. This is a biological station – of a sort”. [DM, ll. 949–959]

The last addition makes things clear. Indeed having been trained under Huxley, Prendick speaks of them not as beasts but as the Beast People: Dog-man, Leopard-man, and a Monkey-man, who was: “for ever jabbering at me, jabbering the most arrant nonsense” and whose peculiarity was that “he had a fantastic trick of coining new words”. Not to talk of the silvery-hairy-man (the Sayer of the Law) and of M’ling (man-link), “a satyr-like creature of ape and goat”⁴¹ a sort of “missing link” between animal and man, a creature that Spencer had hypothesized as the intermediate species between animal and man, and which journals like *Punch* were, in the meantime, identifying with the Irish.⁴²

a *habitus*: “And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection”. Indeed, all this being subject to the main laws of variability and selection, it will lead to: “a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms”.

⁴¹ “There were three Swine-men and a Swine-woman, a mare-rhinoceros-creature, and several other females whose sources I did not ascertain. There were several wolf-creatures, a bear-bull, and a Saint-Bernard-man. I have already described the Ape-man, and there was a particularly hateful (and evil-smelling) old woman made of vixen and bear”, H. G. Wells, DM, ll, 3018–3022.

⁴² See *Punch* 1848, where the Irish occupy a position just above the Africans, and *Punch* 1862’s satire: “The Missing Link”: “A gulf certainly, does appear to yawn between the Gorilla and the Negro. The woods and wilds of Africa do not exhibit an example of any intermediate animal. But in this, as in many other cases, philosophers go vainly searching abroad for that which they could readily find if they sought for it at home. A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro is to be met with in some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It comes from Ireland, whence it has contrived to migrate; it be-

The other novel I find relevant in presenting issues that deal with typifications, in which race discourses have been made common, is *Dracula*.⁴³ The novel is a good instance of the literary response to the taboo of miscegenation and hybridization. The imperial gothic novel *Dracula* textualizes eugenicists' fears of being invaded by "alien" immigrants (the "oriental" people from the colonies and "others" in general) representing, in contrast with Stevenson's novel *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the menace from without. The Count, the "reverse colonizer", as both S. Arata⁴⁴ and H. L. Malchow⁴⁵ have shown, represents the fear of the "other" who menaces a "reverse colonization" of the West by the seduction of his "sexual exuberance" on women, thus hybridizing the "purity" of the western race. It is not by chance that Mina's patronymic, Dracula's first victim, is Westenra, a homophone of westerner, typifying her as his victimized antagonist. He is represented as a virus settling itself in the organism of the English community, and is therefore killed by the pack of Westerners, "The Crew of Light", who take revenge on him, and also of the obscurantism (occultism and superstition) that are usually projected, as a counterpart of western rationality, on the East in general.⁴⁶ The fact that the novel is concentrated on blood – the blood of a body representing a political body – makes it clear that we are here dealing with a symbol of race (the blood that Dracula sucks from his victims' bodies and which he infects with his selfsame vampiric need), and earth, a symbol of geopolitics (the native earth Count Dracula has to take with him to England). The novel's racial undertone (in the same terms that will later be used by the Nazi propaganda of *Blut und Boden* ideology) speaks out clearly that the novel fuels a racist behaviour in the mind of those who perceive themselves as being under the siege of an alien invasion.

These two novels then in a paradigmatic way speak of the fears the Victorians were experiencing towards the *fin de siècle* when the intelligentsia felt that science, together with the pseudo-sciences it gave rise to, had failed men

longs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages: the lowest species of Irish Yahoo. When conversing with its kind it talks a sort of gibberish. It is, moreover, a climbing animal, and may sometimes be seen ascending a ladder laden with a hod of bricks", 18.

⁴³ B. Stoker, *Dracula* [1897] (London: Penguin, 1992).

⁴⁴ S. Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

⁴⁵ H. L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996).

⁴⁶ Cfr. E. Said, *Orientalism* [1978] (New York: Penguin, 1995), 5, where it is clearly stated that "such locales, regions, geographical sectors, as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made".

and were threatening a transformation of science into scientism, as the following dialogue from *The Island of Dr. Moreau* confirms:

“You see, I went on with this research just the way it led me. That is the only way I ever heard of true research going. I asked a question, devised some method of obtaining an answer, and got a fresh question. Was this possible or that possible? You cannot imagine what this means to an investigator, what an intellectual passion grows upon him! You cannot imagine the strange, colourless delight of these intellectual desires! 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”.

“But”, said I, “the thing is an abomination –”

“To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter”, he continued. “The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature”. [DM, II, 2709–2724]

Huxley’s *avant la lettre* bio-ethic answers are thus topical of his age, but they are also a reminder of the accountability we have of ours. Law and ethics, as he says, but let us add, provocatively, art also, provide good vehicles of thought to reflect on in order to remain in control of those changes in our culture-specific environments to which we need, as intellectuals, to oppose cultural resistance, to not risk falling into acquiescent adaptation.