

Lansbury, Carol. *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England*.
Extract from "The New Priesthood".

OLD BROWN DOG

Claude Bernard was not only the foremost physiologist of the nineteenth century but also the founder of a new faith which promised mankind the paradise of perfect health. Faith in Christianity could give the believer everlasting life: Bernard maintained that by means of vivisection the day would come when men would have the power to alter and change the very process of life itself. "It is not given to man to alter the cosmic phenomena of the whole universe nor even those of the earth; but the advances of science enable him to alter the phenomena within his reach. Thus man has already gained a power over mineral nature which is brilliantly revealed in the applications of modern science, still at its dawn. The result of experimental science applied to living bodies must also be to alter vital phenomena, by acting solely on the condition of these phenomena" (p. 114).⁵ Humanity would eventually be raised to the power of divinity, and men would be truly gods. Lewes, like many of his contemporaries, was enthralled by the soaring prophecies which he sensed in Bernard's writings and the promise that man would one day free himself from his evolutionary fate and set about "teaching nature a new lesson."⁶

What exhilarated Lewes and many others appalled some. The de Goncourt brothers recorded in their journal:

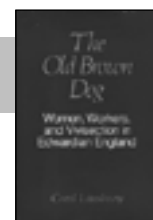
Claude Bernard for his part was reported to have announced that after a hundred years of physiological science, one would be able to make laws for organisms and carry out human creation in competition with the Creator himself.

We made no objection, but we do believe that when science has reached that point, the good Lord with the white beard will arrive on earth with his key-chain and tell mankind, just as they do at the Art Show at five o'clock: "Gentlemen, it is closing time!"⁷

It was not difficult to find a place for God in Darwin's universe, but this was unnecessary in Bernard's world laboratory; all man required was a little more time, and God would be as redundant as the dodo.

Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) established man's place in the animal world, where, like his fellow creatures, he was regulated by an evolutionary process. It was obvious that humanity had fought its way to a place of eminence in the long struggle to survive on earth, but it was still bound by the inescapable laws of natural selection. Bernard's *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1865) did not expound any aspect of evolutionary theory; rather, it seemed as though Bernard had chosen to regard Darwin as an irrelevance. Bernard was convinced that the physiologist now had within his grasp the means to master and modify the animal kingdom, which included his own nature and destiny. Like Dr. Moreau he had only to learn the intricacies of the animal machine to be able to fabricate new and more complex machines from living tissue and become the creator of a second genesis.

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It was Bernard, not Darwin, who provided a new system by which nature should be examined and controlled. The schoolchild cutting up a frog or submitting it to electrical shock in a biology class was expressing Bernard's theory of observational vivisection. In the simplest terms, Darwin changed what men believed, Bernard what they did: but had it not been for the continuing excoriation of the antivivisectionists, Bernard's name and reputation might well have been confined to the society of scientists.

More than any scientific writer of his day, Bernard possessed a dramatic authority which gave his works a lucid and driving energy. Even in translation his language has a grace and excitement which captures the reader emotionally, for Bernard reaches out like a poet for metaphors to carry his meaning. His experiments were all quests for knowledge, but he described them as dramas of the human spirit confronting a brute world selfishly trying to conceal and defend its secrets. The paradox, of course, was that Bernard insisted throughout his life on the vivisector maintaining a calm and dispassionate attitude towards his experiments. When he exposed the nerves of a howling and struggling dog, the animal's cries were no more than the grating of gears in a machine, and it was mawkishly sentimental to place animal pain before the interests of science.

For his part, Bernard always insisted on the primacy of the physiologist in the quest for truth. Astronomers observed, the physiologist experimented, and those experiments would one day lead to perfection. When he described the physiologist in the *Introduction* he was speaking of himself: "The physiologist is no ordinary man: he is a scientist, possessed and absorbed by the scientific idea that he pursues. He does not hear the cries of animals, he does not see their flowing blood, he sees nothing but his idea, and is aware of nothing but an organism that conceals from him the problem he is seeking to resolve"

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Vivisection was the one certain means by which the perfection of knowledge could be attained, because Bernard believed in accord with Descartes that men and animals were machines. Unlike Descartes he denied the human machine a soul and saw men and animals controlled not by God, but by their internal environment, the *milieu intérieur*, and when physiologists "go down into the inner environment of a living machine they find an absolute determinism that must become the real foundation for the science of living bodies" (*Introduction*, p. 108). Once the physiologist had mastered the organic nature of the animal's internal environment, he would then be able to understand and control the infinitely more complex working of man. Bernard would make the clocks self-conscious and pronounce the clockmaker obsolete.

It was a vision he expressed at the beginning of the *Introduction* in a series of extraordinarily sonorous images. The blood and anguish of so many tortured animals was the necessary sacrifice which the new priesthood must make to enable humanity to gain the kingdom of earthly delight, and his description of that goal spoke directly to the aspirations of the age. He begins by relegating the apostates and unbelievers to a limbo of disregard, then calls the reader to his side as he points to the road ahead:

One must be brought up in laboratories and live in them, to appreciate the full importance of all the details of method in investigation, which are so often neglected or despised by spurious men of science who call themselves generalizers. Yet we will only attain really fruitful and illuminating generalizations about vital phenomena by experimentation and, in hospitals, theatres or laboratories stir the foetid or throbbing ground of life. Somewhere it has been said that true science is like a flowering and delectable plateau which can only be attained by climbing craggy slopes and tearing one's legs against branches and brambles. If I were to look for a simile that would express my feelings about the science of life, I should say that it was a superb hall, glittering with light, to which the only entrance is through a long and horrible kitchen. (P. 41)¹⁸