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Ubi Sunt Dracones?

The Inward Evolution of Monstrosity from
Monstrous Births to Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*

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“if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you”

Friedrich Nietzsche

INTRODUCTION

There is something fascinating about the aesthetics of monstrosity, which is not always understandable but undeniably universal. It is something dark, twisted and daunting which, nevertheless, lures us into its depths. Monsters scare, petrify and make one feel vulnerable and exposed; yet, they never disappear, they can never truly be annihilated. They lurk in the most obscure corners of one's mind, festering, dormant until summoned, and then they emerge from the shadows ready to wreak havoc. They embody terrific possibilities, violation, transgression and liminality: all that is dangerous, yet all that is unavoidable. Monsters are ambivalent creatures insofar as they frighten and marvel, and they represent all which is outrageous in Nature and, yet, arises from its very bosom.

They have stood at the borders of civilisation from the beginning of time, developing in parallel to humanity. Tales of the supernatural have been told since antiquity, and the paradigm of monstrosity has informed some among the most renown legends echoing from one generation to the other since bygone eras, which is why one can easily find proof of the cultural impact of monsters within the most varied artistic fields. It is interesting to observe how in all of the most renown literary works of the world canon monstrous creatures are either mentioned or made central characters, from the Mediterranean to the North Sea. Suffice it to think of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus crosses paths with Cyclops, sirens, nymphs and the colossal Scylla and its neighbour Charybdis; or again *Beowulf* and his fight with a dragon, and the *Divine Comedy*,

which displays the massive, three-headed dog Cerberus as the guardian to the underworld.[1]

Moreover, monsters can be found within the sacred texts of religions both ancient and new, and both polytheistic and monotheistic. If one pictures the pantheon of gods and goddesses populating the cults of ancient Greece and Egypt, for instance, one would see how divinities would either exhibit theriomorphic traits, or they would possess supernatural powers, if not a combination of the two. Either way, they incarnated all which eluded *humanity*, both physically and in essence. Oftentimes the line between divinity and monstrosity is blurred, and although in some of the most widespread religions such as Christianity and Judaism creatures like demons, giants and terrifying man-eating sea creatures serve as embodiment of sin, divine wrath and punishment, one has to consider how monstrosity could be rejected and revered at the same time. Monstrosity is ambiguous, it is morally puzzling, yet sublime inasmuch as it leaves one speechless and in awe when confronted with its otherworldly representations and possibilities.

Monsters are always signifiers for concerns hidden deep under their surface, they embody transgressions and violations of the moral values contingent to the historical period they arise from. Their very nature is hidden in their name, "monster", whose Latin origin *monēre* is translated into "to demonstrate", "to warn". Monsters are, in essence "*demonstrative*. They reveal, portend, show and make evident, often

[1] For further reference to the history of monsters in Western culture, consult: *Monster Theory, Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998)
; Stephen T., Asma, *On Monsters, An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

uncomfortably so."[2] Thus, when discussing monstrosity and the monstrous it is always paramount to consider the sociocultural context surrounding their folklore, since each epoch presents a unique – albeit common to the most varied human cultures – set of preoccupations and anxieties which, evolved into fear and terror, are displaced and projected onto quaint wondrous creatures. Within each monster, then, it is possible to detect the germ of its much human core, and the act of killing the monster becomes cathartic insofar as it allows for the subjective riddance of that it entails. This becomes particularly evident when one observes the historical evolution of monsters, from the Middle Ages to contemporaneity, where although the object of terror and abjection changes, its eventual defeat – be that by the hand of a hero or the law – underlines the collective need for reassurance and salvation.

In ancient times, when one's reality was rooted in his relationship to the natural world and to his ability to tame its wilderness, monsters presented themselves as beast-like, exaggerated in proportion and strength. Usually they were the unnatural combination of two or more animals, as in the case of the manticore[3] or the hippogriff[4], revealing thus that one of the canonical traits of monstrosity is a certain degree of hybridity. Bodily deformation and physical anomalies have always occupied a central position in the discussion about the monstrous, yet their interpretation and reception has evolved in accordance to the established standard of normative body.

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[2] Natalie, Lawrence, 'What is a Monster?', < https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/what-is-a-monster> [accessed November 2020]

[3] The manticore is a monstrous creature belonging to Persian mythology. According to its iconography it was believed to have the head of a human, the body of a lion and the tail of a scorpion or, alternatively, a tail made of venomous spines. It entered Western folklore through the works of Ctesias (*Indica*, fifth century BC) and Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, ca 77 AD).

[4] The hippogriff is a legendary creature, part horse and part eagle, which was invented by Ludovico Ariosto in his *Orlando Furioso* in 1516. Since then, it has made its appearance in numerous fictional works, such as the *Harry Potter* saga.

Within the medieval perception of an all-encompassing divine creation, the belief of medieval and early modern naturalists was that nature was not "uniform or homogeneous over space and time",[5] thus admitting its wondrous eccentricities as part of the order of things. Abnormalities in the appearance of either man or beast were interpreted as divine messages, "an adornment of the universe that can also teach about the dangers of sin",[6] and they arose a feeling of reverential dread, as in the case of monstrous births such as the notorious Monster of Ravenna.[7]

Such incidences here charged with political or spiritual meaning, acting on the anxieties provoked by war or religious incertitude as in the case of the Great Schism of 1504. Naturally, spiritual uncertainty and the excessive power of suggestion exerted by the religious authority, especially in strict and conservative communities whose fear of imminent doom prevailed upon all other matters, gave rise to its own particular set of demonic creatures. These, too, displayed an elevated and unsettling degree of liminality, indicative of moral depravity: neither human nor beast, as in the case of devils and neither human nor demon, as in the case of witches.

The turning point as to the establishing of a direct link between monstrosity and the deformed or hybrid body lay in the beginning of Renaissance Humanism, which glorified aesthetic beauty and perfect proportions, as observable in works of art such as the fifteenth-century *Vitruvian Man* – or *The Canon of Proportions* – by Leonardo da Vinci. The strive to reach physical perfection naturally led to the rejection of all which

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[5]Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), p. 14

[6] Chet, Van Duzer, '*Hic Sunt Dracones*: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. by Asa Simon Mittman, Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), pp. 387-435

[7] The Monster of Ravenna was a monstrous birth which allegedly shook the city of Ravenna in the sixteenth century. Later reference to the Monster will be made in the first chapter of this dissertation, "Monstrous Bodies".

defied the canon of beauty. This coincided with growing interest in the natural sciences and in the systematic classification of Nature's components through detailed analysis and observation. If hybridity had already established itself as one of the major symbols of monstrosity, now it became ever so prominent within the discourse inasmuch as it did not allow for classification. The union of two or more natural elements which ought to remain separate, as in the case of the categories of animal and human and male and female, now arose repulsion and it became associated to moral deviance as well.

Scientific observation of Nature's peculiarities flowed into an unprecedented abundance of medical publications, and into the birth of "a whole new genre of books devoted entirely to the pleasure of reading about natural wonders"[8]. The public interest in monsters grew steadily, until travelling exhibitions of marvels gained immense popularity around the world, especially in England and in the United States of America. Monstrosity became profitable throughout the nineteenth century, however we ought to interrogate ourselves as to what brought such large audiences to the box offices of circuses and *freakshows*. The theory shared by the academic circles with regards to the source of the fascination with monstrosity hinges on the inner urge to define one's identity by means of separation from the feared "other". The self, according to this perspective, finds itself in a position of vulnerability which implies then the need to delineate one's identity by excluding all that is not accepted as part of the normative criteria of self-definition. The strength with which the monstrous is rejected is an indicator of the threat of the perceived familiarity it contains. This would eventually explain why the focus of monster studies has always been on "quasi-human beings, for

[8] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, p. 191

they alone can confirm the normalcy and closure of the centred self"[9], by displaying characteristics which are immediately juxtaposing to those of the human. Hybridity and physical deformity both mark a clear-cut distinction between the subject and the *other*, the "natural and the non-natural, where the primary term confers value"[10].

A noticeable change in the perception of monstrosity occurred during the final decades of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century with the advent of modernity. This was an age of unprecedented flourishing of monsters in literature, among which stand out the *hybris*-born Frankenstein's Creature, Count Dracula and his vampiric literary offspring and the tormenting and atavistic Mr. Hyde. All of these creatures crawled back from the darkest, deepest corners of the human mind, terrifying and haunting with their presence but, most importantly, raising uncomfortable questions as to their creation whose answers were found in the overall analysis of the sociohistorical context from which they arose.

What marks modernity would seem to be a widespread sense of disorientation and uncertainty, namely a feeling of *uncanniness*,[11] due to the revolutionary changes which targeted not only society's structure but also the academic and spiritual milieux. It proved an age of unprecedented introspection and self-scrutiny, devoted simultaneously to progress and to retrospection. The pervasive feeling of anxiety which hovered over the European population problematized the Renaissance idealisation of Man as a unitary and stable microcosm in control of its surroundings, shedding light on

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[9] Margrit, Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster, Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), p. 3

[10] Ibid. p. 11

[11] I am here referring to the Freudian concept of "Unheimlich", which originated in the essay *Das Unheimliche*, published in 1919, and later translated to "uncanny" in English. Freud conceived this term in direct opposition to "Heimlich" ("homely", "familiar") so as to refer to what was once familiar but now presents itself as strange and disquieting, and he applies this formulation to the analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann". Further reference to the subject will be made later in this chapter and in chapter 2, "Monstrous Minds".

a new, troubled and oftentimes disoriented individual. The transformations which unravelled steadily throughout the preceding centuries eventually led to a shift from a religiously-driven context to one hinged on science, technology, atheism and pragmatism, which gave rise to a collective and traumatic existential crisis.

In an attempt to resolve the ontological doubts posed by modernity, the studies conducted by Sigmund Freud, among others, on the intrinsic mechanisms of the human psyche and on the unconscious proved ground-breaking. His publications underlined the importance of the hidden dimension of humanity, of turning one's gaze *inwards* so as to comprehend, perchance, what stood on the outside. According to Freud, what is found underneath the superficial layers of the ego is a latent state which is alien and likely opposite to the idea one has developed of himself, contained in the dark and labyrinthine unconscious: cradle of the censored and the repressed.

It is clear at this point the extent to which the psychological dimension of the individual came to occupy a central position in the quest for a remedy to the oppressing anxiety and angst which haunted modernity. Nevertheless, it is one essay in particular which proved crucial in the defining discourses of the age, namely *The Uncanny*, which described a feeling of dread and terror prompted by the return of something once *Heimlich* – familiar and homely – and now dauntingly estranging and disquieting. To better understand the Freudian *Unheimlich*, one could turn to Lacan, among others. The uncanny, according to Lacan's work[12], could be interpreted as the intrusion of the Real into the Symbolic order, which could eventually imply the very dissolution of the subject. The uncanny, thus, would appear to be "located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and it becomes threatening, provoking horror and

[12] Jacques, Lacan, *Anxiety, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014)

anxiety”[13]. The uncanny, according to J. Kristeva, is abject, loathsome, “on the verge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.”[14] The uncanny is, in other words, monstrous. According to this interpretative approach to reality, it is the locus of the improper and the cast off, of the dismantling unknowable, it simultaneously threatens and reveals, it *moně̆t*.

Each era defines the monstrous according to its interpretative and cultural paradigms, and the shift from the age of dragons and chimaeras to the age of psychopaths and deranged criminals clearly shows the fluidity of monstrosity, in itself a monstrous idea, perhaps, as it too defies clear classification in an endless flow of self-questioning. Nevertheless, what really elevated the eerie aspect of monstrosity from the late nineteenth century, was its shift of placement, from the outside, to the inside.

In the post-Freudian era the self, once perceived as uniform and solid, was being questioned and dissected under the microscope of psychoanalysis and it became ever so pressing to *locate* the monstrous so as to drive it out and to haunt it, to neutralise its unsettling effect on one’s sense of selfhood. The idea that monsters were indeed part of one’s reality, yet that they were hidden in the remotest corners of the Earth, *far* from the threatened individual, exerted its reassuring charm from the beginning of time. The timeline of the geography of monstrosity, by toying with the desired distance interposed between the subject and the monster, displays an intricate “tension between helplessness and control, between surrender and power”[15] by means of the exclusion and seclusion of the monster away from the pure, righteous self.

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[13] Mladen, Dolar,‘”I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding-Night”: Lacan and the Uncanny’, *Autumn*, 58 (1991), p. 7
[14] Julia, Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2
[15] Chet, Van Duzer, *Hic Sunt Dracones*, p. 389

When analysing the work of the most prominent European cartographers referred throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for instance, it is interesting to note that monsters were indeed ubiquitous on maps, yet they were relegated to unexplored, uninhabitable territories, mostly close to the North and South Poles. They were employed as graphic symbols for the unknown and perilous, warning signs for uncharted lands potentially filled with risks, both physical and moral. The 1504 Lenox Globe, now safeguarded in the New York Public Library, and a world map dating back to 1460-70, found within Jean Mansel's *La Fleur des Histoires*, both display the warning lettering "Hic Sunt Dracones"[16] over remote, unfamiliar and inhospitable territories. The reference to dragons is interesting inasmuch as it blatantly shows how monsters have always occupied a central position in the perception of the stance of Man in the world, which implied the necessity of dividing the privileged point of view of the cultured cartographer from the *other* cultures outside of his moral and geographical boundaries, which inevitably morphed into fearsome creatures.

The broader distance separating the threatened self from the threatening monster is, the stronger the feeling of safety becomes. The disturbing sense of vulnerability one perceives facing monsters naturally fades away when separation from them is provided, to the extent that those very dreadful creatures which used to haunt the subject are belittled and defied. Hence, monsters were somewhat naturally segregated to the edges of the Earth, exerting their menacing powers only as distant echoes, allowing for a certain feeling of fascination and possibility to arise when reflecting upon their nature.

[16] The traditional formula, dating back to antiquity and observable in Roman and medieval maps, was "Hic Sunt Leones" ("Here Be Lions"). It was used to indicate unknown territories, where perils were lying in wait. The new interpretation of the key appeared much later, in the sixteenth century (Lenox Globe, 1504). Although there are records of several maps which, prior to the Lenox Globe, display mythical creatures as embellishments, it is worth noticing that the Lenox and the Da Vinci Globe (both 1504) are the only ones which present the formula "Hic Sunt Dracones".

Banishing the monster from the safe areas on the map was tantamount to banning them to the subconscious.

Nevertheless, once a new light was shed on the intricacy of the human mind and it was made evident that the inner world of Man was just as sinuous and in need for exploration as the world drawn on ancient maps, the relationship between the human and the monstrous changed, and so did the mechanism of separation which had proved to be the sole safety barrier against contagion and defeat. Once psychoanalysis had unveiled the seething threat lurking in the darkest corners of every individual's unconscious, *monster* became far too human an idea. The theory of the so-called "beast within" gained immense popularity starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, and its best exemplification would be found in R. L. Stevenson's character Mr Hyde, who incarnated to perfection the idea that even within the most normal- and respectable-looking member of society hides a dreadful and depraved monster. Scaly wings and supernatural powers were nothing now compared to the threat coming from the very core of human nature, and demons, giants and krakens were replaced by the mad and the deranged criminal. Naturally, constant attempts at *foreclosure*[17] of the deviant other were carried out throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as testified by the birth of asylums and by the strengthening of the infliction of punitive justice on those who were deemed threatening to the social order[18].

The dichotomous relationship between the human and the monstrous, the natural and the unnatural and the sane and the ill was slowly deteriorating. As a result, the

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[17] Lacan employs the term "foreclosure" to translate the Freudian concept of "Verwerfung", introduced to analyse the nature of psychosis. It consists in the elimination of a specific signifier from one's symbolic order as a defence mechanism.

[18] For further reference to the social mechanisms of segregation and controlled inclusion and/or exclusion of the ill and the deviant: Michel, Foucault, *Abnormal, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson, trans. by Graham Burchell (London – New York: Verso, 2003)

individual was deprived of the feeling of safety and confidence his self-identification depended on, which derived from the constant awareness of a physical as well as moral separation from the monstrous individual. This clearly problematized the cultural quest of localising the monster: where was it to be found? Now that, at the turn of the century, it became seemingly impossible to confidently point to a distant, desolate land on a map and proclaim "Hic sunt dracones!", the question haunting the modern disoriented individual, charged with a heavy feeling of disquietude and uncanniness was, indeed "*Ubi* sunt dracones?".

CHAPTER 1

MONSTROUS BODIES

1.1 Monstrosity and Deformity from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment

In order for something – or someone – to be described as *monstrous,* the quintessential trait that object would have to possess is a striking difference from what is considered ordinary, in such a way that it would be impossible to overlook it. A child born with two heads or a hermaphrodite would traditionally meet this criterion. Another essential requisite objects and people have always been required to possess to enter the canon of monstrosity is a certain amount of uniqueness, rarity. As to the emotional reception of a combination of both criteria, objects – or people – ascribed to the canon of monstrosity would ultimately be bound to the sparking of a strong interest in the spectators but, more precisely, to the sparking of a multi-layered feeling: a compound of "fear, reverence, pleasure, approbation and bewilderment"[19] which could be summarised as *wonder*. Thus, when speaking of monsters and monstrosity, it would be paramount to notice how these concepts are so very closely interwoven with those of *wonder* and *wonders*[20].

However, it is also true that the objects upon both characteristics – difference from the norm and uniqueness – could be bestowed change continuously, entering and leaving the canon in an evolving flow. It is because of this constant renewal that "the basilisk was debunked, comets were explained, and unicorn horns became too common […]" as the world of sciences shed more and more light on Nature. However, the canon's

[19] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), p.16
[20] Ibid. p. 16

enrichment is just as never-ending as humanity's attraction to the unknown and the unexplainable. Hence, with each century came a new mystery, new peculiar phenomena to be explained and attributed to one plausible cause or another, in accordance with the time's socio-cultural context. The canon continued then to be enriched by bizarre creatures, monstrous births or by women with terrible power and beguiled souls.

Such layered and overlapping significations imply that it is of utmost importance that one takes some time to truly ponder the appropriate vocabulary to employ when speaking of *monstrosity, wonder* and *wonders*, according to several factors: the historical period in analysis, its dominant ideologies and the approach to natural history in force. The error one ought to avoid is to apply to long gone eras – like the Middle Ages – concepts originated much later in time, such as that of *wonder as we mean it nowadays*, which has come to designate "that which is excluded by modern views of the rational, […] products of imagination, the inventions of folklore and fairy tales, fabulous beasts of legend" and the like.

When it comes to the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period, for instance, and to how wonders and monsters were perceived back then, one has to consider that the Latin word in use in substitution of the English "wonder" was *admiratio* – with reference to the emotion – and its objects were "*mirabilia*, *miracula*, or occasionally *ammiranda*"[21]. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the vocabulary in use to identify wonders was more or less uniform throughout the European territories: suffice it to think of the French *merveille*, the Italian *meraviglia* and the English *marvel*[22]. An important observation would be that the word which described the emotion and the word

[21] Ibid. p.16
[22] Ibid. p.16

employed to describe its objects presented clear similarities: from this linguistic phenomenon one could infer the extent to which external representation and subjective experience were intertwined.

Subjective experience was particularly influenced by Christianity, whose exerted power unquestionably contributed to the blurring of the border between what was considered spiritual – miraculous, marvellous – and what was considered secular. Reality for a man living in the Middle Ages was a perfectly orchestrated concoction of these two elements and spirituality and religion were oftentimes far more predominant in one's making of the ways of the world than rationality.

This becomes particularly blatant when it comes to the study of the natural world: one has to take into account the shared inclination of the majority of medieval natural philosophers to overlook details in favour of a more general study of the world's laws and regulations. This macroscopic approach to the study of Nature led them to embrace the awareness that "nature wasn't uniform nor homogeneous over space and time"[23], so peculiarities and irregularities, wonders and monsters, were labelled as accidental, yet part of the Divine Creation nonetheless.

Classification of the natural world according to the two well-defined categories of Natural and Supernatural proved an impossible task, being their essence and identifiable criteria constantly converging and diverging in a bleary and never-ending dance. However, medieval observers were not exempt from the perception of unconventionality and strangeness. To them, "[…] nature aimed at a certain uniform standard, but occasionally, for better or worse, she missed the mark, resulting in an

[23] Ibid. p.14

‘accidental’ production, such as a baby with six fingers.”[24]Although not attributable to the usual ways of the natural world, these rarities and strange occurrences were merely considered to be the products of unprecedented and unusual combinations of those very ways.

Singularities such as bodily deformations, conjoined twins and the like, were then ascribed to the category of the Preternatural[25], which is to be distinguished from the Natural only insofar as frequency is concerned. The occurrences which were classified as preternatural were unusual at best, yet not necessarily implying a suspension of divine providence. They included several “heterogeneous phenomena, built up in layers from several different traditions with no internal coherence except their awkward relationship to *scientia* in the Aristotelian sense”[26]: that is to say, a conception of science as the kind of knowledge which can offer universal and always true propositions propaedeutic to the systematic demonstrations of nature’s causes. Needless to say, this epistemological rigor was in contrast with a world full of contradictions and pervaded by religious feeling such as the medieval one.

The multifaceted feeling of wonder elicited by *mirabilia* of the natural world – including natural substances with mystical properties, optical illusions and the like – became a subject of increasing interest among the philosophers of the time. However, it was received with ambivalence throughout the Middle Ages, as were the very objects from which it arose. Wonder’s potential as key to the spurring of new philosophical inquiry and unprecedented knowledge was parallel to its acceptation as display of ignorance, and several diverging opinions on the matter emerged in the philosophical literature of the time, with regards to both the feeling and its causes.

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[24] Ibid. p. 120

[25] From the expression “praeter naturae ordinem”, found in Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, 1265-73

[26] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, p.126

Roger Bacon, also known as "Doctor Mirabilis", wrote that "[…] whatever lies beyond the workings of nature or of art […] is feigned and filled with deception. For there are those who feign appearances by the quick motion of their hands, or by changing their voice, or by the subtlety of their instruments, or by use of darkness or of consensus; and they set before mortals many things to be marvelled at, *which do not in fact exist*."[27] Bacon belonged to a circle of intellectuals who wished to return the objects of wonder to the realm of the natural, hence debunking the belief that they should necessarily belong to a supernatural dimension. Nicole Oresme, one of the most important natural philosophers of the fourteenth century, could also be ascribable to this intellectual entourage. He suggested in his work *De Causis Mirabilium*, that diversity "was so much the norm in nature that we should marvel not at the exception but the rule."[28]

Starting from the fifteenth century, an attempt at rehabilitation of wonder could be detected in philosophical writing, as the new voyages of exploration of the so called "Age of Discovery" unravelled parts of reality which required a different way of studying the natural world. In other words, all the new wonders explorers brought back home from their exotic adventures – objects, plant specimen and curious creatures which had never been witnessed in the West – required a new approach based on the observation of details, those very particulars which had been neglected up to that point to favour the general. After all, they had been isolated from their context, thus, details were all that remained. These sort of wonders began to be seen as "useful objects of philosophical reflection"[29], recalling the Aristotelian suggestion that the philosopher

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[27] Roger, Bacon, 'Letter on Secret Works of Art and of Nature and on The Invalidity of Magic', trans. by Michael S. Mahoney, <https://www.princeton.edu/~hos/h392/bacon.html> [Accessed November 2020], my italics

[28] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, p.132

[29] Ibid. p.137

could lead his inquiry thanks to the very *feeling* of wonder, by trying to breach the veil of ignorance that caused it. Thus, one might notice how the presence of these wondrous specimen became of increasing interest among the general public, leading to a more intense and in-depth study of their possible origins and meaning within the natural world.

The description of wonders, or monsters, so far has been addressed generally, so as to better focus on the effect they arose and on their reception on behalf of the medieval intellectual élite. However, *what* were monsters, exactly, to the eyes of our ancestors? To answer these questions, one might start from the very etymology of the word *monster*, which origins from the Latin *mōnere*, meaning *to show* but also *to warn*. Monsters were, in other words, "*demonstrative*. They reveal[ed], portend[ed], show[ed] and ma[d]e evident, often uncomfortably so."[30]

If throughout antiquity and for the majority of the High Middle Ages monstrosity was confined predominantly to the animal world defining thus beasts presenting unnatural physical traits – suffice it to think of the *Odyssey* – by the first half of the thirteenth century there was a shift in definition which merged the exemplification of *monster* with that of *disfigured person* and *misshapen being*, as reported by the OED[31]. Hence, one might observe how throughout time monstrosity came to be bound to the (*in*)human body, which with its deformities and aberrant appearance threatened the norm and signified danger, a perilous deviance and, perhaps, an omen sent from the Heavens.

[30] Natalie, Lawrence, 'What is a Monster?', < https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/what-is-a-monster> [accessed November 2020]

[31] 'monster, n., adv., and adj.', *OED Online* (September 2020) <www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/121738> [Accessed November 2020]

Focusing on the most atavistic definition of monster, the one which could be found in the tales of Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) and in *Beowulf* (ca twelfth century), the first examples that come to mind are creatures of abnormal dimensions and appearance, usually displaying a combination of animal and human parts, or of parts of different beasts: the minotaur, the basilisk, the hippogriff, and again the manticore and, of course, dragons. Beastly hybrids as such "generally originate in the myths and legends of poetry an allegory"[32], and they subsequently lay the foundations for the canon of monstrosity which is then enriched by travel stories, treaties on natural history and cautionary tales. Many a time these mythical creatures have appeared on manuscripts, maps, and bestiaries, peopling our legends with their horns, hooves and scaly wings.

However, confining monsters to a literal reading, restricting their nature to their physical representation, would prove superficial, as monsters have always been so much more than "any imaginary creature that is large, ugly and frightening"[33]. In fact, they have always carried a deeper truth on their backs: they reveal and exemplify humanity's worst fears by subtly hiding them in plain sight between the pages of dusty timeworn manuscripts and antique religious and scientific publications. Hence, it becomes easier to understand how their very etymological essence would withstand such innumerable and sometimes conflicting connotations throughout the centuries, since humanity's socio-political context – which determines the fears of people – has always proven frenzied and unstoppable in its race towards change.

It is no coincidence, for instance, that in a time where Man had to learn how to coexist with a Nature that appeared still unknown, savage, untameable and unforgiving, wild

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[32] Stephen T., Asma, *On Monsters, An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.27

[33] 'monster, n., adv., and adj.', *OED Online* (September 2020) <www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/121738> [Accessed November 2020]

beasts which could ridicule one's arrows or swords with one move would be exaggerated in proportions and ferocity in the telling of the events. "Though it may seem a remote possibility to us now, during the formation of the human brain the fear of being grabbed by sharp claws, dragged into a dark hole, and eaten alive was not an abstraction"[34]. Story after story, reptiles turned into dragons and the line between legend and reality blurred, revealing a world inhabited by monsters and, most importantly, by heroes whose sole responsibility was slaying them.

The *Liber Monstrorum de Diversis Generibus*, dating back to the eighth century[35], gathers most of the monstrous creatures, or *mirabilia*, which appeared in the legends and tales of the time, which have reached contemporary audiences as well with their stock of mythical and fantastic attributes. These very creatures are those which started to decorate the facades of Gothic cathedrals and the covers of luxurious manuscripts, and which, by means of allegorical interpretation, started to populate cautionary tales and moral lessons on virtue and vice.

The *Liber Monstrorum* is divided into three parts, each dedicated to a category of beings: quasi humans, animals and serpents. It draws from the monster folklore of the whole world, instead of being circumscribed to a single region, and this is why it presents itself as extremely rich in contents and narrative as well as descriptive details. Its author's aim, rather than assigning a specific moral meaning to the creatures it introduces, as will be the case of Bestiaries, is to assert their veracity as God-created beings. It is in the fourth of the six books which constitute the work that the focus is drawn to Nature's marvels and eccentricities, and one can find mention of mermaids, Cyclops, hermaphrodites, anthropophagi and two-headed beasts. The author employs

[34] Stephen T., Asma, *On Monsters*, p.24
[35] The author of the *Liber Monstrorum* is unknown, although it could be attributed to the scholar Aldhelm, Abbot of Malmesbury Abbey and Bishop of Sherborne.

the epithet *inmania monstra* to refer to the list of marvels mentioned. Moreover, the manuscript entertains a dialogue with other literary samples of monster narrative of the time, first and foremost, *Beowulf*, whose character Hygelac is mentioned in chapter 2: *De Hygelaco Getorum rege.* Throughout the Epilogue the author declares to have fulfilled his purpose to validate, or debunk, the creatures mentioned throughout the six books.

Although within the medieval context this manuscript proves paramount to demonstrate the spread belief in such monsters, it could be seen as but a prototype of the bestiary which, by adopting a more spiritual and symbolic point of view, will prove more revealing with regards to the medieval approach to the natural world.

When it comes to the Middle Ages, speaking of monsters implies considering the influence of religion and scriptures on the development of culture and, consequently, society. Furthermore, one should keep in mind the macroscopic understanding of the natural world as all-encompassing Divine Creation, within which everything was endowed with intrinsic value and purpose. Within this religious vision, the excruciating pain monsters could bring with them was just as part of the order of things as the blessing that came after the endurance of such pain.

Medieval bestiaries, for instance, tried to conjugate the observation of the natural world and its components and the spiritual dimension through a collection of stories whose subjects were either animals or plants, although described and interpreted allegorically. This literary form found its origins in the Greek *Physiologus*, which contained the description of various animals, plants and rocks. Through wonderfully crafted, vibrant illustrations and careful descriptions – albeit “based on misconceptions about the facts

of natural history"[36] – these compendia showed animals whose traits influenced much of the conceptualization of the mythical creatures of the legends. They usually presented animals hierarchically, from those which populated the land up to birds, serpents and marine beasts. The phoenix which is reborn from its own ashes, for instance, or the unicorn, could find their source in bestiaries.

The stories collected helped their readers to understand the world around them, although the creatures listed were not presented as in an encyclopaedia, that is to say, with scientific explanations of the habitat and habits of the animals in question. In fact, the explanations contained in bestiaries were given according to a Christian interpretation of the observed objects: "the animals of the world were interpreted in the bestiary as evidence of God's divine plan for the world, as he placed behaviours and characteristics into the animals at the beginning of time to mirror Biblical truths."[37]The unicorn is a perfect example for this symbolism: attracted by the presence of a virgin in the forest, it comes to rest its head on her lap. This was actually read as an allegory of Incarnation, the moment of the conception of Christ within the womb of Mary. The creature's death, on the other hand, symbolizes the sacrifice of the son of God. Hence, the unicorn was seen as "a natural-world counterpart for Christ".[38]

Some bestiaries portrayed dragons as well. In particular, in one bestiary which was probably crafted by Salisbury scribes, now safeguarded at the British Library[39], it is possible to look at a vibrant illustration of a dragon entangling an elephant, "just so

[36] 'Bestiary', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/bestiary-medieval-literary-genre> [Accessed November 2020]
[37] Elizabeth, Morrison,'Beastly Tales from the Medieval Bestiary', in *British Library* <https://www.bl.uk/medieval-english-french-manuscripts/articles/beastly-tales-from-the-medieval-bestiary#> [Accessed November 2020]
[38] Ibid.
[39] *A Bestiary with Addition from Gerald of Wales's Topographia Hibernica*, late twelfth century-early thirteenth century, Salisbury.

does the devil entangle the foolish and faithless, and strangle them with his lies”[40]. However, the distorted traits of both animals in the picture clearly prove that the author had probably never seen either creature, thus showing once again how most beasts described in these manuscripts were either created out of scratch from the artist’s imagination, or solely useful to the conveying of a religious and moral message. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that many of the animals belonging to the contemporary realization of the world, such as whales or lions, where considered monstrous in the acceptation of foreign to the European artist of the time. Overall, little no to attention was paid to the actual anatomy, or habits, of the animals.

Monsters could even been presented as catalysts of divine providence, albeit ambiguously. It would suffice to think of sacred texts encompassed in the Hebrew Bible, such as Psalms and the *Book of Job*, where the horrifying marine serpent Leviathan is mentioned. Its apparition does not allow for a definite interpretation as to its symbolism, as “in some places, such as Psalm 74 and Job 3, […] is presented as […] a giant sea monster that rises from the depths to cause mayhem […] but in other places, such as Psalm 104 and Job 40 [it] is identified as a part of God’s wonderful creation, a sublime force that reflects God’s overwhelming aspect.”[41]

It is precisely this ambiguity which suggests that the monstrous repertoire introduced by religion signifies much more than an easily interpretable morality play between good and evil forces. The latter, which in a simplistic interpretation could be epitomized by the monstrous creature, are, in fact, not so discernible from the former, since they are all part of God’s perfect and indisputable Creation. Moreover, identifying the monster, Leviathan, as God Himself dims the border separating fear

[40] Elizabeth, Morrison, *Beastly Tales from the Medieval Bestiary*
[41] Stephen T., Asma, *On Monsters*. pp. 65-6

from reverence, thus leaving room for a feeling which would find a name several centuries later thanks to Burke: the Sublime, in itself an appropriate response to the *wonder-monster*.

Each religion has its festering pantheon of monstrosity: Lilith in the Jewish tradition, the Canaanite Beelzebub, Yajuj wa Majuj in the Quran and, when it comes to Christianity, it would be inevitable to think of the horrific medieval representations of Satan and its hellish entourage. Although his appearance is unmentioned in the Bible, in a sixth-century mosaic in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Italy one can find a depiction of the devil which is, perhaps, the most ancient representation of it as imagined by Christians at the time. Satan, in the mosaic, is portrayed as an angelic figure painted with shades of blue. However, this sort of seraphic imagery was soon to be replaced by one demonic and bestial.

Satan's most popular folkloristic representation is, in accordance with the medieval imaging, zoomorphic: he is usually depicted as reptilian-like, wings which from the twelfth century became bat-like, greenish or scarlet red skin and twisted horns. This was indeed useful to medieval artists in order to give immediacy to the corrupting and torturing role of the devil, presented as terrifyingly as possible so as not to leave space to any ambiguity. As observable in works of art such as the mosaic of the Baptistery of Florence (thirteenth century), and *The Devil Presenting St. Augustine with the Book of Vices* by Michael Pacher (fifteenth century), Satan's representation is daunting, gruesome and vulgar as well. "Artists like Giotto and Fra Angelico often depicted the

devil in paintings of the Last Judgment. In them, a ravenous Satan is seated in the centre of hell as he gleefully chomps on the souls of sinners."[42]

This is partly due to his shift in role according to changes in ideology and literary interpretation of the Bible throughout the Middle Ages. If during the early Middle Ages the devil was considered to be an "adversary but not an active enemy", following the Old Testament's preaching, he then evolved into "an aggressive, malignant force set on tormenting as many human souls as possible".[43]

Furthermore, it was not only Satan's gruesome figure to haunt the imagination of medieval peoples, since he was informed by a hellish entourage of demons, witches, and necromancers. Pagan rituals and practices – in this particular case, theurgy[44] – started to have an influence on Christianity. Hence, it is possible to notice how humans began to involve themselves with the very monsters they had always been cautioned against. As a consequence, in 1326 the Super Illius Specula, issued by Pope John XXII, lay the foundations for the many witch hunts that daunted Europe until the late eighteenth century. Witches, in particular, were considered monstrous to the same extent of the demons they were believed to confabulate and breed with. They were more fearsome than the demons they supposedly conjured during Sabbath, and scarier still than zoological monsters. Heretical and apostate to the eyes of the law, if caught, they were doomed to be burnt at the stake, drowned, or tortured so very harshly as to be brought to madness.

[42] Marina, Montesano, 'The Hellish History of the Devil: Satan in the Middle Ages', <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/history-devil-medieval-art-middle-ages> [Accessed November 2020]
[43] Ibid.
[44] Theurgy is the practice of summoning deities or demons so as to make them do one's bidding. It dates back to ancient Greece, where the summoned spirits were named *daimon*.

In order to be defined witches, *malefici* or *maleficae*, people had to practice dark magic through occult powers, and to execute certain specific acts such as killing someone through fetishes or employing obscure substances which could affect both people and the environment.[45] In 1579, for instance, a coven of four witches was executed in Abington, and the accusations were hinged on the belief that they had "transform[ed] themselves into various beasts" and "kill[ed] several townspeople […] by making an effigy pictures of the victims in red wax and sticking pins in their hearts […]".[46]

Although Christianity had always perceived the ensemble of pagan rituals and enchantments as complements of evil forces, witch hunts became ever more frantic throughout the fourteenth century. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries proves particularly obscure for people living in Europe. Not only the Great Papal Schism between the papacies of Rome and Avignon issued a strong sense of anxiety with regards to orthodoxy and heresy, but the population was also heavily impacted by the Black Death and by famine. "The official culture of the day saw itself as beset by schismatics, Turks, apostates, heretics, idolaters and even the Antichrist."[47]

Witches, within this gloomy socio-historical scenario, became scapegoats: the plausible explanation to the paralysing suffering people were facing. Monsters, in this particular case, proved to be contingent to the historical and sociological context: oftentimes they proved to be the product of collective paranoia and of the culture of fear.

It appears quite blatant that one of the most important components of monsters, be them zoomorphic or demonic, is a certain display of hybridity. The devil is neither human nor beast, and witches are neither women nor demons: the shape shifting power

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[45] Brian P., Levack, *La Caccia alle Streghe in Europa agli Inizi dell'Età Moderna* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2008), p. 9
[46] Stephen T., Asma, *On Monsters,* p. 108
[47] Ibid., p. 107

of witches and necromancers and the miscellaneous animal traits displayed by other hellish creatures is another clear exemplification of this. They all stand at the threshold of the identifiable, of the classifiable. They are, in other words, liminal figures which are as part of the natural world as they are strangers to it, "disrupt[ing] the neat categories of taxonomy and pos[ing] irritating anomalies for science"[48]. Perhaps, what made them daunting to the eyes of people was the impossibility of categorization they paraded. Furthermore, one can identify this as one of the topic characteristics of monsters throughout the centuries, suffice it to think of the Gothic *Dracula*, the Creature of *Frankenstein*, and in more recent times the crazy scientist of *The Fly*, to name but a few.

Nature's marvels and eccentricities exerted continuous fascination on the world of science. However, as the movement towards the Enlightenment progressed, "to pile together a bunch of mundane and fantastical creatures, only to point out their Christ-like symbolism"[49] ceased to suffice to the scientific community, and especially towards the eighteenth century began a detectable shift from the allegorical tradition to a more objective method of analysis of the natural world.

Nature started to be observed with the awareness that it was not to a deity that its mechanisms had to be attributed, and its irregularities justified, but rather that it had to be referred to itself and itself alone. Some among the most renown and praised naturalists who contributed to the creation of a new way of conceiving and analysing the natural world, and who strived to assign it new accurate and universal laws were, for instance, Lamarck, Darwin, Cuvier, Linnaeus and Buffon. Each and every one of them proved paramount for the progress of natural sciences, and their contributions lay

[48] Ibid. p. 125
[49] Ibid. 128

the foundation for contemporary science. Much of the myths surrounding nature's mirabilia were slowly debunked, and their spiritual causes were replaced with objective and verifiable ones.

The medical field started to investigate the world of wonders and monsters circa from the sixteenth century, driven by an insatiable thirst for knowledge, following the precept that "to know what properly appertains to one individual is to have before one the classification – or the possibility of classifying – all others."[50] For one, Ambroise Paré (1510-90), a French doctor and surgeon, dedicated much of his research to the aetiology of monstrosity and to its potential meaning within the order of things. In the first chapter of his Des *Monstres et Prodiges*[51], he thoroughly analyses and lists the possible causes behind the origination of monsters. Paré, at the time of writing, was living at the crossroad between the medieval mentality and the new one, governed by reason, of the Enlightenment. Hence, in a moment of intellectual and spiritual agitation where inherited knowledge was being challenged and questioned, the merging between the spiritual and the rational produced a combination of ancestral beliefs, a thought which fused magic and religion and semi-scientific descriptions[52]. Within this context, Paré placed monsters within the extraordinary, where what could not be explained by science could find explanation in the Devil's work, and one only has to read his list of teratological causes to comprehend this aetiological miscellany.

The listing of causes for monstrosity reads as follow:

> La première est la gloire de Dieu.
> La seconde, son ire.

[50] Michel, Foucault, *The Order of Things, An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London – New York: Routledge Classics, 2005)
[51] Published in French in 1573, although originally under the title *Des monstres tant terrestres que marins, avec leurs portraicts. Plus un petit traité des plaies faites aux parties nerveuses*.
[52] Yves, Baille, 'Les Monstres Chez Ambroise Paré : Un Regard Rétrospectif', in *Le « Monstre » Humain*, eds Régis Bertrand, Anne Carol (Aix-en-Provence : Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2017)

> La troisième, la trop grande quantité de semence.
> La quatrième, la trop petite quantité.
> La cinquième, l'imagination.
> La sixième, l'angustie ou petitesse de la matrice.
> La septième, l'assiete indecente de la mère, comme, estant grosse, s'est tenue trop longuement assise les cuisses croisées, ou serrées contre le ventre.
> La huitième, par cheute, ou coups donnés contre le ventre de la mère estant grosse d'enfant.
> La neufième, par maladies hereditaires, ou accidentales.
> La dixième, par pourriture ou corruption de la semence.
> L'onzième, par mixtion, ou meslange de semence.
> La douzième, par l'artifice des meschants belistres de l'ostiere.
> La treizième, par les Demons ou Diables.[53]

Paré's work proved paramount to the development of teratology, and yet again one might observe how his inclusion of both divine and scientific causes behind the formation of monsters was still faithful to the medieval all-embracing conception of Divine Creation, implying that not a single element or creature was excluded from it. His conclusions proved, thus, to be at once "enlightened but also backward and uncritical",[54] and an "attempt at scientific use of very unscientific terminology"[55].

Together with Paré, one of the first intellectuals trained in the medical field who contributed to the refinement of teratology was Antonio Benivieni, whose *De abditis nonnullis ac mirandis morborum et sanationum causis*[56] was published in 1507. Here, more than in other works, are presented numerous – 111 – compelling cases of bodily malformations, such as conjoined twins, a baby born without genitalia or

[53] Ambroise, Paré, 'Des Monstres et Prodiges', in *Oeuvres Complètes d'Ambroise Paré, Revueset Collationnées sur Toutes les Editions* , ed. by Malgaigne, J.-F. (Paris : J.B. Baillière, 1841)
[54] Stephen T., Asma, *On Monsters*, p.146
[55] Sarah, Pipkin, 'Ambroise Paré's Medical 'monsters'', <https://wayback.archive-it.org/16107/20210312170857/http://blog.wellcomelibrary.org/2017/07/ambroise-pares-medical-monsters/> [Accessed November 2020]
[56] *On Some Hidden and Wonderful Causes of Illness and Healing*

hermaphrodites. It is also important to mention the *De medica historia mirabili* by Marcello Donati, published in 1586, and Girolamo Cardano's *De admirandis curationibus et praedictionibus morborum*, published in 1565. Although the content of these compendia of case studies might cause the contemporary reader to smile, it is thanks to them that thinking of monstrosity took a slightly different turn, and more attention started to be paid to the embryological processes which eventually led to the birth of a monster.

With regards to the social and cultural context of these publications, throughout the seventeenth century the scientific community enjoyed enormous progress in chemistry, physics, biology and anatomy. Such progress implied a new understanding of the natural world, within which theology lost some of its power and influence in the explanation of natural mechanisms and principles. The world was now seen as a machine, which men could investigate it in terms of matter, movement, cause and effect[57]. Moreover, the desire of categorization of anomalies, first witnessed in early medical treaties and blatantly displayed in the research of Paré, persisted well into the modern era.

It was also thanks to the new voyages of exploration which, starting from the fifteenth century, gathered wonders never seen before, that the impulse to reform the *materia medica* came forth. Moreover, increasing urbanisation and the diffusion of printing allowed for a more widespread audience, for whom peculiarities and singularities became objects of interest and entertainment. "Spurred on by the efforts of these medical men (apothecaries and surgeons as well as physicians), books of marvels poured off the printing presses of Europe […]. Wonder and wonders commanded

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[57] Stephen T., Asma, *On Monsters*, p.148

attention as objects of philosophical analysis, […] and as a nexus of cultural symbols”[58] in natural philosophy and medicine.

Frightful and horrifying as they could be, it might be of interest to consider how the connection between monsters and wonders never ceased to exist and, perhaps, this would explain why monsters kept eliciting such interest throughout the centuries. In the seventeenth century, David Hume wrote *Of Tragedy*, where he attempted to explain why audiences could at once be delighted and afflicted by the same object and, paradoxical as it may sound, the philosopher theorised how pleasure could derive from painful and distressful states. This hypothesis was later supported by Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* where he too attempted a plausible explanation as to the rise of a feeling at once delightful and disquieting: the sublime. In Part II, Section I, he describes the passion caused by the sublime: “Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect”[59].

Anyway, the objects of monstrosity changed: although animals and natural phenomena continued to exert a strong influence on the collective imaginary regarding monstrosity because of the power of religious tales, legends and folklore, higher attention started to be directed to the human body and to bodily deformations, following the expanding baggage of knowledge of the human organism and its functions acquired through numerous experiments in anatomization and dissection. Malformations, impairment and disabilities, which nowadays are accepted and often ignored, became ever more prominent in specialized publications of the time, becoming tantamount to monstrosity.

[58] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature,* p. 172

[59] Edmund, Burke, ‘A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, 1729-97’, in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004807802.0001.000/1:5.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext> [Accessed October 2020], p. 42

Monsters became “clarifying counter-examples to normal embryological development, and as such played an important role in the eighteenth-century debates between advocates of performationism and epigenesist.”[60]

In an era where justifying and explaining each and every element of Nature was imperative, bodies had to be either normal or abnormal, either natural or monstrous. Thus, people presenting disabilities were merely the carriers of new possible anatomical discoveries and they ceased to be considered as individuals and started to be treated as objects of medical inquiry, as bizarre spectacles. In fact, “there was no conception of the disabled as it would according to modern notions of embodied difference”[61].

In order for a body to be considered *natural*, it had to display conformity to the norm, be that aesthetic or biological. Missing adherence to it entailed inferiority and weakness, which became pretexts to “contain and control within institutional and conceptual structures bodies […] seen as different”[62]. Furthermore, not only monsters violated social and aesthetic standards, but their physical imperfections doomed them to be “regarded as organisms that had failed to achieve their thelos, their perfect final form”[63]. This, with particular regard to the anatomist frame of specialists such as Martin Weinrich and Jean Riolan, who asserted that the fit anatomical composition of the body was the confirmation of adequate physiological functions. Thus, they were

[60] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, ‘Unnatural Conceptions : The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England’, *Past and Present*, 92 (August 1981), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/650748> p. 53

[61] Richard H., Godden, Asa Simon, Mittman, eds, *Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World*, The New Middle Ages Series (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 6

[62] Ibid. p. 40

[63]Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature,* p. 202

exponents of a commonly shared notion of abnormal bodies as “signs of ‘retarded’ development, a lower or inferior aspect of life, diminished possibilities”[64].

The desire to find a place for monsters within the world order explains why monstrous births elicited such intense fascination within the intellectual élite from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Throughout these centuries there was a proliferation of publications about this sort of phenomena, each enriched by extremely grotesque and most likely unrealistic illustrations, such as the ones portrayed in the 1559 *Histoires Prodigeuses* by Pierre Boaistuau, or those within the *Histoire générale et peculière des anomalies de l’organisation chez l’homme et les animaux* by Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

Men with four legs and four arms, an arm growing out of their torso or three eyes were just some of the peculiarities reported in this sort of literature. Monstrous births, such as two-headed babies, were privileged at the expense of other natural wonders, and they drew their force from their individuality and uniqueness. When occurrences of this sort happened, the news spread fast and both the new-borns and the parents were sure to become the talk of the town. Townspeople folklore consistently overlapped the new scientific objectivity and materiality at least until the seventeenth century, thus, if on the one hand monstrous babies were approached with medical curiosity, on the other hand they were welcomed with superstition and religious terror and consequently interpreted as menacing omens.

Although different opinions and assumptions as to the essence of prodigies and marvels circulated freely in a variety of social and professional settings, the emotions they evoked were homogeneous all around Europe: “they were described as *orrendi*, *orrevoli*, *horribili*, *spaventevoli* or *stupendi* in Italian; *espouventables*, *terribles*,

[64] Richard H., Godden, Asa Simon, Mittman, *Monstrosity, Disability and the Posthuman*, p. 60

horribles in French; *erschroekliche*, *grausame*, *grewliche* in German; 'dreadful', 'horrible', ' terrible' in English."[65] They caused, thus, fear and horror, and this is indeed why so much attention was paid to their constitution and meaning. Endowing them of such focused attention was, perhaps, an attempt to apprehend how these monsters could be tamed and their esoteric powers contained; yet, by dwelling on these thoughts one inevitably contributed to their growth and sedimentation within the collective imagination.

Nevertheless, the main line of evolution, from "monsters as prodigies to monsters as examples of medical pathology"[66] is quite discernible throughout the centuries also thanks to the proliferation of mid-sixteenth century publications which sought to discredit the divine character of monstrous births, as could exemplify the De *Subtilitate* by Cardanus, who proved to be "sceptical of the predictive value of monsters"[67], or *D'Un Enfant Monstrueux* by Montaigne.

However, the drive towards a superstitious reading of abnormality was impossible to entirely uproot. This was partly due to the *culture of prodigies*, which had often been interwoven to the religious and political scenario. In fact, even at the dawn of the Enlightenment, the interpretation of monsters as portents or objects of divine horror, foretelling "misfortune – war, the death of famous men, the rise and fall of empires and religions"[68] did not fade, nor disappeared entirely; rather, it kept surfacing in waves, according to socio-political circumstances which elicited anxiety and feeling of instability.

[65] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature,* p. 181
[66] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Unnatural Conceptions,* p. 23
[67] Ibid. p. 40
[68] Ibid. p. 25

In the sixteenth century, for instance, a Florentine apothecary named Luca Landucci wrote some personal notes concerning a monstrous birth in Ravenna: a horned creature, with velvety bat wings, an eye on the knee, two snakes attached to its waistline and hermaphrodite in nature had come to life. Word about this horrific creature spread fast and it was transmogrified into countless illustrations, each and every one of them stressing its repulsive, threatening look. Several posters were hang in Italy, Spain and France, and "at each stop, the image accreted new and more portentous meanings"[69] and it was given new features, or the original ones were exaggerated so as to create several different representations of the same monster.

When monsters happened to be approached with spiritual dread and religious fervour, their configuration became emblematic to the sins of humanity they incarnated and for whom punishment was being bestowed upon Man. Hence, the portrayal of the same creature could undergo modifications from one place to the other according to the allegorical value of the several features which composed it. Johannes Multivallis, for instance, found numerous correspondences between the physical peculiarities of the Monster of Ravenna and its apocalyptic message: the horns would, for one, symbolize pride; the wings, inconsistency, its lack of arms, sloth and hermaphroditism would finally represent sodomy.

The monster of Ravenna was interpreted as a nefarious omen, testifying the wrath of God and foretelling Judgment day according to an English pamphlet entitled *The Doome, warning all men to the Judgement*, in 1581. This tragic foreboding found popular validation since, less than a month after the birth of the creature, the Battle of Ravenna took place, and the Holy League was defeated by the French army and its

[69] William, Eamon, 'The Monster of Ravenna', <https://williameamon.com/?p=707> [Accessed November 2020]

allies. The fight is still considered one of the most bloody and ferocious ones in history, and the city of Ravenna was successively sacked, and left in a state of utter devastation and desolation. The feeling of anxiety due to the perceived crisis of the papal forces in the years between 1494 and 1530 justified the spurring of such a strong superstitious and spiritual outlook on monstrosity behalf of the Italian population, and this was but one of the many examples of monstrosity being assigned a deeper meaning going beyond the objective medical analysis on the anatomical level. In England and France as well fascination with prodigies blossomed, respectively so within the context of the wars of religion and of the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century.

Monstrous births such as the Monster of Ravenna and his fellow creatures were then experiencing a dichotomous reception in the world, due to the socio-historical phenomenon of the "sharpening of social boundaries between city dwellers and peasants, the urban literate élite and unlettered day labourers"[70] which started manifesting in Europe from the seventeenth century. On the one hand, prodigies were feared and condemned by those who were fearful of God and its wrath, although one should consider that this approach dominated mainly popular literary genres; on the other hand, they were welcomed with interest by the scientific milieu, which perused these creatures, eager to ascribe them to determinate categories within the order of the natural world. To the medical field they elicited pleasant curiosity as members of a natural world which was now regularised by incontestable laws ascribable to the ever-growing branches of expertise of science. Natural history began to concern itself solely with the category of the natural, disregarding for the most part the Supernatural and the Preternatural. Hence, monsters, mirabilia and prodigies, "no longer served as a point

[70] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, Katharine, *Unnatural Conceptions*, p. 24

where the natural and supernatural, the natural and artificial, and the little and great traditions met on common ground."[71]

The frequency with which monsters started to be signalled and discussed on around the globe made them less menacing, and yet they were still considered as the occasional price to be paid for making the spectator feel so very *simple* and *normal*. Throughout the Enlightenment they were predominantly perceived as errors, albeit particularly enthralling ones. Medical reports on monstrous dissections circulated relentlessly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in specialised periodicals such as the "*Journal des Sçavants*, the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, the *Histoire et Memoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences* in Paris, and the *Miscellanea Curiosa Medicophysica Academiae Naturae Curiosorum* in Leipzig and other German cities"[72]

1.2 The Abnormal Body in the 18th and 19th Centuries

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it would then be appropriate to assert that marvels were considered to be terrific spectacles, regardless of the sort of emotion they arose in both the lay audience and the one formed by scientific authorities. In fact, it became harder and harder to guess whether spectators looked at monsters with horror, or pleasure. They were, in other words, in vogue, and audiences from all over the world eagerly devoured the plenty of reports of monstrous births which proliferated in the news. The incredible growth of mass-media culture, from the press to museum exhibitions and popular fairs, allowed the newly acquired knowledge of teratology to be captivatingly transmitted to those who did not belong to the academic niche.

[71] Ibid., p. 54
[72] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature,* p. 203

Furthermore, it was already by the seventeenth century that monstrosity was made into a source of profit. Display of bodily mirabilia became licensed, and in 1637 Sir Henry Herbert granted a six-month license to the brothers Lazarus and Baptista, the latter growing out of the former's navel as a parasite of sorts[73], to tour England with their exhibition. The two enjoyed immediate and widespread success, and they were dedicated a ballad (*The Two Inseparable Brothers* by Martin Parker, 1637) and several portraits and woodcuts.

Monsters in England exhibited themselves in pubs or coffee-houses, but they could be seen especially at the Bartholomew Fair in London[74], which circulated from the 1100s up to when it was suppressed in 1855. In this sort of prototypical freak shows "freaks [were] shown in such a way as to offset their non-normative natures and bodies with an appeal to their recognisable everyday or cultured attributes that drew in the spectators at the same time as astounding them"[75]. Lazarus and Baptista's was but one of the many exhibitions which captured the audience's curiosity, and of course "the market for monstrosity motivated the literal creation of monsters"[76], which started to pervade the shelves of the literate through both high literature and broadsides and penny dreadfuls. Prior to the spreading of newspapers, the most popular medium of diffusion for news about notorious monstrous creatures was the broadside ballad, which was sold hastily by the street to the passers-by, who could enjoy fancy rhymes enriched by fascinating sketches.

In any case, Sir Henry Herbert was not the only one to profit from display of the monstrous and deformed. Darwin's voyages of exploration aboard the Beagle, from

[73] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Unnatural Conceptions*, p. 20
[74] Ibid. p. 34
[75] Margrit, Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster, Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), p.24
[76] Natalie, Lawrence, 'What is a Monster?', < https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/what-is-a-monster> [accessed November 2020]

1831 to1836, contributed to enrich the already bountiful collection of exotic mirabilia which reached London, where bizarre and foreign samples of Nature's oddities entertained and intrigued all social strata. What is more, the publication of *Origin of the Species* in 1859 not only brought forth the theory of evolution, but it presented the issue of the missing link between primate and Man, thus proving the perfect breeding ground for the discussion around the possible roles of monsters within natural history. Darwin himself initially believed that monsters could be the hinges of evolution; however, he successively rejected this hypothesis. Nevertheless, his research elicited even more interest in the mystery of wonders among the urban audience and, following the path inaugurated by Sir Henry Herbert, more and more people sought to gain profit from the display of curiosities in their *Wunderkammer* – "wonder room" – or in traveling exhibits commonly known as *freak shows*.

One of the most renowned naturalists who tried to gain fame and money from the exhibitions of taxidermy wonders was Charles Waterton. He is celebrated as one of the fathers of both scientific and artistic taxidermy, for he boasted a large collection of embalmed specimen deriving from his voyages of exploration in South America, all perfectly preserved in his cabinet at Walton Hall. However, some of the species he brought home from his travels could not quite be identified following traditional taxonomic classifications, and one in particular proved utterly unclassifiable. The so called "nondescript" presented itself as an odd monkey which, supposedly, nobody had ever witnessed in nature before. This unprecedented discovery, however, revealed itself to be a hoax. Waterton, thanks to his mastery in treating animal skins and preserving

them, created it from different part of the red howler monkey, and then proceeded to fool “his stuffy professional peers and the gullible lay audience”[77].

Notwithstanding the debunking of such frauds in the press, it was undeniable that people were still so mesmerized by these monsters that they were still willing to pay in order to personally rejoice of their show, as demonstrated by the success gained by the touring circus founded by Phineas Taylor Barnum in the United States of America. His exhibit of the famous Feejee Mermaid in 1842 toured several American cities, but it was yet another horrific hoax created by combining together the bust of a monkey and the tail of a salmon. Mermaids were very much in vogue at the time of traveling cabinets of wonders and word was spread, by sly showmen such as Barnum, that they were hideous creatures, contrarily to what legends in folklore had taught. This allowed for odd animal combinations which did not necessarily have to be beautiful, as audiences had developed a strong taste for the monstrous and the bizarre, rather than for the beautiful. Together with the Feejee Mermaid, Barnum offered other exceptional bodies: “Tom Thumb (Charles Stratton, a midget), the Siamese Twins (Chang and Eng Bunker, conjoined twins from Thailand), and Jo-Jo the Dogfaced Boy (Fedor Jeftichew, a Russian with hypertrichosis, or werewolf syndrome)”[78].

Freak Shows, Cabinets of wonders, touring circuses and the copious amount of publications concerning monsters on the most varied literary platforms, might perhaps be helpful in identifying what monstrosity is actually about: that is, privilege and fear. What they all have in common is an anthropocentric point of view which hinges on shared conceptions of natural and unnatural, human and *other*. When monsters exhibit animal forms, for instance, they are always placed in contrast to humanity as to

[77] Stephen T., Asma, *On Monsters*, p. 134
[78] Ibid. p. 137

underline the dichotomous separation between what is considered to be rightful and just and what embodies all that ought to be uprooted and vanquished. Gigantic and hideous creatures or zoomorphic entities do nothing but parade the very gap between humanity and the nonhuman, what *is* and what threatens its existence[79]. The human form, in this case, is privileged compared to all other components of the natural world. What is more, a distinction between the proper human form and the inadequate one further enhances the acceptation of monstrosity as exclusively human construct so as to exorcise one's fears and disquietudes with regard to the unknown or the unexplainable which threaten one's sense of superiority within the natural world.

Hence, the monstrous "is not just something alien that humanity has to overcome, a limit figure. It is […] something dwelling at the core of human existence."[80] A shift is thus observable, starting from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century, from an idea of monstrosity as confined to the physical dimension to its signifying a general deviance from the norm. This allowed for a paramount enrichment of the monstrous canon, if not for a revolution of the very perception of monstrosity itself, which henceforth will look away from the idea of the monster without, to investigate instead through psychoanalysis and criminology the newly born idea of the monster *within*.

[79] Niall, Scott, ed., *Monsters and the Monstrous, Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, At The Interface: Probing Boundaries Series, 38 (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2007)
[80] *Monstrosity in Literature, Psychoanalysis and Philosophy,* ed. by Gerhard Unterthurner, Erik M. Vogt (Wien – Berlin: Verlag Turia + Kant, 2012)

CHAPTER 2

MONSTROUS MINDS

2.1 Monstrous Anxiety at the Turn of the 20th Century

Several studies conducted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the field of anthropology and psychoanalysis proved how monstrosity, up to that point ascribed to the realm of the physical and the tangible, could be considered in fact a product of one's very own subjective experience of the world. Space, time and individuality underwent a descriptive revolution as modernity progressed, bringing with it a new set of conceptual interpretative tools, and the syllogisms and dogmas which up to the nineteenth century had composed the cornerstone of collective objectivity started to be questioned, dissected and deconstructed.

What is perhaps considered to be the most distinguishable trait of Modernity is the idea of progress. It is undeniable that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the world of science experienced unprecedented blossoming and growth, encompassing more and more inquisitive branches within its dome. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the cradle of medicine, electricity, mechanics and technology, and they birthed ground-breaking inventions such as vaccines, the automobile, the light bulb and the telephone. Moreover, widespread flourishing of curious mechanical inventions the Canard Digérateur created by Jacques de Vaucanson in the eighteenth century, for one, started to anticipate the following centuries' interest in robotics.[81]These innovations

[81] For further reference to the Enlightenment, see: Thomas L., Hankins, *Science and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); *The Enlightenment World*, eds Fitzpatrick, Martin , Jones, Peter and others (London - New York: Routledge, 2004)

and new focuses of interest left a mark on some of the most renowned Gothic literary works of the time, such as *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula*.

Medical investigation deepened and consolidated its interest in the mind's inner and hidden functioning, locating the intangible, inorganic part of the individual as the core of its ontological stance. Naturally, it would be utterly impossible to overlook the predominance of Sigmund Freud's theories in the process of affirmation of psychoanalysis, which became one of the most characteristic and incisive discourses[82] of modernity. The shift from the superstitious and spiritual to the medical and psychoanalytical with regard to the approach to illness and unconventional behaviour implied, first and foremost, a shift in terminology. As Ernst Jung suggested in his Structure and *Dynamics of the Psyche* (1927), one who might have been considered "possessed" would now be categorised as "hysteric". Yet, what contributed to the growing atmosphere of anxiety which heavily characterised modernity is that psychoanalysis itself, being hinged on introspection and self-evaluation, has often been forced to face its own gaps. Contrarily to religion, it could not always provide satisfactory explanations for its findings, but nevertheless it persevered in its exploration of the inner labyrinth of the psyche.

However, it would be worth investigating the sociocultural context within which this new science among all others emerged from the ashes of the preceding centuries with such energetic drive. In order to do so, it is paramount to stress how psychoanalysis not only lay its foundations on a new and stronger curiosity as to what lay within the individual, but it showed, by means of its thorough investigation, how the eclectic era

[82] *Discourse*, here, is used with reference to Foucaultian theory. It is the ensemble of practices and accepted knowledge that inform a specific topic, in contingency with the historical period from which the discourses in question arise. Discourse is created through the convergence of several disciplines, from anthropology to psychology and linguistics.

of progress and discovery emanated an unfathomable sense of ontological anxiety. Studies on what one could *not* perceive within oneself showed how identity and self-assertion of the human in this new, frantic and dissecting world, were being questioned. In other words, the individual was now experiencing a "lack of orientation", and the emerging sense of vulnerability which sprung from this era of cultural and social revolution challenged "the stability and predictability of human existence"[83]. The humanist, solid and unitary idea of the self as "autonomous agent of production, collapses"[84].

It is paramount to notice that one of the most used adjectives to connote the historical period starting from the eighteenth century would be "uncanny", which is a term heavily charged with linguistic, cultural and psychological meaning, rooted in Freud's work. In order to better understand why this term has spread so very quickly and widely, and with particular reference to this age, it is paramount that one has clear in mind the essay *The Uncanny – Das Unheimliche* – published in 1919.

The word *Unheimlich* belongs to that linguistic ensemble of terms which do not allow for immediate and literal translation, being in themselves representative of a meaning which might not find conceptual correspondence in other languages and cultures. Hence, Freud began his essay by linguistically placing *Unheimlich* in opposition to *Heimlich*, the latter being employed to indicate what is perceived as familiar and belonging to the home, to one's safe space, thus bringing forth its meaning by contrast. Being so broad and branched out a concept, in English no word could utterly convey its meaning, therefore it came to designate an umbrella term of sorts, encompassing

[83] Margrit, Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster, Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), p. 17
[84] Ibid. p. 124

adjectives such as *eerie*, *uncomfortable*, *unfamiliar*, *gloomy*, *dismal*, *ghastly*, *repulsive* and, of course, *uncanny*.

Thus, much of its meaning could be grasped insofar as one juxtaposes it to what is familiar and congenial, to what is *Heimlich*. However, the latter also stands for what is concealed, kept from sight which, interestingly enough, would then place the *Unheimlich* in a position of visibility which, one should keep in mind, is not always ideal. Especially when what is brought under one's gaze has the potential of disrupting the very core of one's sense of identity and integrity, like an ontological Pandora's Box. The uncanny, according to Schelling, "applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open"[85]. Furthermore, it arouses dread and horror, insofar as it stands for what has been *repressed* into the unconscious and then manages to crawl back in the form of anxiety. It is the assimilated knowledge of reality made "equivocal, estranged, and treacherous, […] alien."

Throughout modernity what is being classified as uncanny is the cultural deconstruction of the skeleton of human existence, its structural core, up to the very roots of its essence on behalf of the historical context. The previous centuries and their scientific and epistemological revolutions – suffice it to think of the Enlightenment – had already began to question the world's asset. The theories of Newton, Hobbes, Descartes and many other influential thinkers had already spread the germ of skepticism, atheism and had promoted reason as the most valuable and virtuous of the human faculties as opposed to religion and spirituality.

This shaking of the ideological ground which had sustained the individual in the previous centuries had proven, albeit not in a sudden way but rather gradually,

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[85] Sigmund, Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David Mclintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 132

detrimental for the subjective placing of the self within the order of things. It is paramount to observe how this enduring process of re-evalutaion of the world as it was being perceived both *without* and *within* Man was, of course, generally more observable among the intellectual élite. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that the spread of the printing press and the broader circulation of books and specialised publications allowed these shards of modern thought to reach the common people as well. Hence, this was a phenomenon concerning a large part of population, and not just the academic milieu.

The lens through which one could observe the world and shape it, the key to one's *Heimlich*, resulted now distorted, even unreliable to some. Experiencing the uncanny meant experiencing a high degree of uncertainty, or unreliability. When one has been immerged since birth in a particular set of given truths and has adopted ethical, interpersonal and epistemological guidelines to navigate the world, the usual circumstances of one's routine are inevitably taken for granted. Recurring events such as the rising of the sun present themselves as self-evident to the passive, observing individual. However, if one is forced to consider that it is not actually the sun to move, but the Earth, a feeling of destabilising uncertainty is bound to arise in one's heart. This, extended to a larger scale, represents the sort of cultural trauma undermining the modern individual's conception of their surroundings but, most importantly, of one's "identity of the selfsame"[86].

Furthermore, the shift from a predominantly spirituality-driven context to the emphasis on cognition, science, technological progress and pragmatism, brought with it a subtle collective trauma. Starting from the eighteenth century, it was not only the religious

[86] Margrit, Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, p. 25

authority to be questioned, but the political authority as well,. This cluster of ground-breaking benchmarks among the social and epistemological sphere is why claims have been made that "the uncanny is related to the rise of modernity in the eighteenth century"[87]. This referring both to the emergence of the class of revolutionaries whose aim was to overthrow the tyrant-king with his dialectic of privilege and social confinement, and "to the reserve of the sacred and untouchable' that the Enlightenment wish[ed] to erase but le[ft] only displaced and haunting at the margins"[88]. The dimension of the sacred was the solid structure from which power, sovereignty and the dominant hierarchy of accepted values were emanated; nevertheless, with the outburst of the French and bourgeois revolutions that ancient and privileged dimension was no more available, and the uncanny became apparently unplaceable[89]. However, what is essential as to understanding the streak of modernity is that the importance given to the inner core of humanity, which in the preceding centuries was hinged on theology and was referred to as "soul", was now being replaced by the psyche, likewise located within but moved to a different locus. Thus, the uncanny that afflicted Man naturally flowed into something outside the traditional religious and spiritual background, yet belonging to the inner, unseen side of Man's composition.

The *Unheimlich* is strictly linked to the return of the repressed, of what has been "hidden away", and this is particularly important in speaking of modernity. These two age-shaping concepts – the uncanny and the repressed – are the very foundations upon which the discourses on modernity have been shaped and, actually, they are the basis of almost any kind of sociocultural theory ever since they made their first appearance in

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[87] Roger, Luckhurst, 'The Uncanny After Freud: The Contemporary Trauma Subject and the Fiction of Stephen King', in *Uncanny Modernity, Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties,* ed. by Jo Collins, John Jervis (Basingstoke – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 132

[88] Ibid.

[89] Mladen, Dolar, '"I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny', *Autumn*, 58 (1991), p. 7

Freud's work (*The Uncanny*, 1919 and *Repression*, 1915). However, to ask oneself whether it was these psychoanalytical concepts and means of interpretation that shaped the collective subjectivity of the given historical context, or whether it was the other way round, would prove a chicken-and-egg dilemma.

In any case, what undergoes the process of repression, thus what is displaced from the conscious Ego to the unconscious Id, does not go through significant changes during this shift of location. Repression in itself does not imply a distortion in the nature of the repressed, insofar as even when an idea faces negation, it can still be exert its presence in the unconscious. However, what does face a transformation is the cluster of *affects* of which the repressed idea is charged, which are indeed subjective but which are also "recognizable across different cultures and ages, independent of the words used to categorize them"[90]. In fact, "unlike ideas, affects are not merely transferred from one system to another; they are transformed. The result remains the same—discharge of tension—but because the idea to which they are attached is repressed, their tone changes."[91] When it comes to the changes introduced by modernity, it would not be hazardous to assert that this subtle transformation of affect of the repressed – which could be identified as the sense of ontological fragility and precariousness – led to a feeling of collectively perceived sense of anxiety and angst.

In order to better comprehend the idea of the uncanny, Jacques Lacan's proposition concerning the estranging and disturbing effects of a confrontation with what is unseen, concealed yet distressingly existent, prove paramount. The key to the convergence between the uncanny and the concealed is to be individuated within Lacanian theory,

[90] Anneleen, Masschelein, *The Unconcept, The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory*, ed. by Charles Shepherdson, Insinuations: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Literature Series (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 7
[91]Ibid p. 44

that is to say, the division of experience into three registers: the *Imaginary*, the *Symbolic* and the *Real*. The Imaginary, which is the one dimension that results more interwoven to one's cognitive perception of the world, is the closest register to reality *as experienced by the subject*. That is, it is the representation of the world as one knows and imagines it. Naturally, the Imaginary is associated to the ego, to the niche of self-awareness, since it is a psychical construct which allows agency for a life which has little to do with truthful representation and much to do with the drive toward wish-fulfilment instead.

Furthermore, the Imaginary depends on the Symbolic Order, which is the experience the individual is plunged in at birth, according to Lacan. As the name might suggest, it is composed of all the laws, regulations, rituals and conventions – in other words, the symbols – which make up the conventional discourses of a given culture. It is the immersion in the Symbolic which allows the development and growth of the subject, insofar as it is a site in which those who enter it have already been assigned a place prior to existence, and a set of guidelines to follow with regard to both individuality and inter-subjectivity. The Symbolic Order provides the thread Man employs to weave reality.

Nevertheless, the third element of this intricate Lacanian design, the Real, is the one which actually allows for further understanding of the *Unheimlich*. By means of its very essence, it is elusive to definition. It represents what stands outside experience and what lies in the shadow of representation, an "impossibility" facing reality, and truth hidden behind the curtain of the Symbolic, whose revelation could potentially disrupt and traumatise the individual. Slavoj Žižek asserts that "one of the definitions of the Lacanian Real is that it is the flayed body, the palpitation of the raw, skinless red

flesh"[92], and in his reflection upon the matter the uncanny immediately comes forth in association to the gesture of unravelling what lies beneath the surface of the Symbolic: "let us recall the uncanniness, even disgust, we experience when we endeavour to imagine what goes on just under the surface of a beautiful naked body"[93].

Entering the Symbolic implies traumatising the subject by mutilating his drive to wish-fulfilment. Moreover, referring to another instance of Lacanian discourse, the Symbolic (Name-of-the-Father), abruptly interrupts the libidinal drive toward the mother – (m)Other – whose initial separation from the child makes her the signifier of a desire (named "object *a"*) never truly attainable, an impossible-to-penetrate alterity which haunts the one who's been separated from her. This laceration, from which existence pours out, implies that the ordeal all Men who enter the Symbolic carry with them is to access existence as "forever amnesiac" subjects, insofar as they bear within themselves "the wounds, infirmities, and aches of that fight for human life"[94], yet without being allowed access to the exact object of their pain and wanting. In reality the object a proves elusive, impossible to find since "it is nothing at all, just an empty surface" according to Žižek, whose interpretation of Lacanian theory would lead him to the suggestion that, perhaps, the only mean to survival is that "instead of running after the impossible, we must learn to consent to our common lot and to find pleasure in the trivia of our everyday life"[95].

Trauma, thus, is one of the many signifiers of life: "as Lacan's work makes clear, the contingency of existence continually gives rise to events with the potential to inflict

[92] Slavoj, Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Casualty*, (London – New York: Verso, 2005), p. 116
[93] Ibid.
[94] Louis, Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis, Freud and Lacan*, ed. by Olivier Corpet, François Matheron, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 22
[95] Slavoj, Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge – London: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 10

psychic trauma on those individuals exposed to them”[96], and these usually unravel themselves when one experiences a breach in the Real, a peek in the Other. Too long a gaze could eventually signify subjective dissolution and the resurrection of the primordial ontological battlefield: the individual, now adult, would eventually “die from the combat […], old wounds suddenly reopened in a psychotic explosion, in madness, in the ultimate compulsion of a ‘negative therapeutic reaction’”[97]. The *Unheimlich* then, could be better conceived as the irruption of the Real into the *Heimlich*, and in the case of modernity the rise of a phenomenon comparable, although not always blatantly, to a “common traumatic neurosis” could eventually be attributed to “an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli”[98].

According to Lacanian theory, this insistence upon the dramatic consequences of too long a gaze into what would be supposed to remain hidden parallels Freud’s interest in the consequences of scrutinising the unconscious and its secrets, and both these investigations eventually lead to a sense of disturbing uncanniness. It is no coincidence, then, that Lacan was the one who emphasised the most both “the marginality of ‘The Uncanny’”[99] in his *Séminaire X*, several decades after Freud’s publications. Nevertheless, discussing the uncanny implies a multi-layered argumentation, since as a concept it forcibly encompasses a consideration of its effects (*a*ffects): horror and anxiety. Actually, Lacan believed that the uncanny is the very container of anxiety’s essence; it is the indicator of some *thing* inside, lurking: an *extimacy*[100] blurring the

[96] Anneleen, Masschelein, *The Unconcept,* p. 53
[97] Louis, Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, p. 22
[98] Sigmund, Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 12
[99] Anneleen, Masschelein, *The Unconcept,* p. 53
[100] Lacan translated “Unheimlich” with “extimité”, in French, which has been translated to “extimacy” in English.

separation between interiority and exteriority. It stands "on the verge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me"[101].

Although at this point it results clear the extent to which the interest in the inner psychological dimension of the individual is what confirmed the need to investigate the unseen and the unconscious, it is undeniable that the spreading of the employment of the term "uncanny" is what truly reveals a deeper truth about modernity. Nevertheless, if on the one hand its meaning hinges on the effect it provokes, on the other hand one might desire to know what its source could be within reality. In other words, one might feel the need to attribute its springing to certain recognisable phenomena within subjective experience, and might come to the conclusion that such an intense sense of dread, horror and anxiety recalls the very sensations and feelings of impotence and terror which in the preceding centuries were blamed on the monstrous.

Now, monsters are not always identifiable as properly *real*, and while it is true that nobody could actually testify as to the existence of the commonly renown pantheon of mythical creatures endowed with outwardly strength and bloodcurdling appearance, it is also undeniable that a certain class of so-called monsters could be detected within everyone's life experience: the deformed. However, as much as these unusual and marvellous bodies have entertained and horrified their audiences all over the world for centuries from the sixteenth century onwards, they are nothing but scapegoats for a phenomenon whose complexity develops way further than the scientific interest in crooked limbs, or exceeding hair. No dwarf or couple of conjoined twins could justify in themselves the arising of such a characterising and scarring feeling of uncanniness as the one hovering over an entire epoch; nor could mere physical malformation be the

[101] Julia, Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2

sole scapegoat for it. The uncanny implies a link to something conceptual rather than material.

Monsters should rarely be interpreted by limiting one's judgement to their appearance, since they are always signifiers of deeper, unconscious truths and "one could say that the monster's terrible appearance in only a mask, an imaginary cover to provide a frame for his gaze"[102]. They are but shells for humanity's strongest fears and concerns, and it has been observed that the fascination with displays of monstrosity such as the ones which became popular in the nineteenth century, actually "often coincides with historical moments of uncertainty which compromise the stability and security of bodies"[103]. What is more, "the very extent to witness monstrosity first hand, to report in detail every instance, and to circulate a prodigious literature indicates […] an inner anxiety about the relation between the creatures in display and normative form and identity"[104]. Thus, it becomes evident that because of their being tokens of the Other, monsters always reveal more about what is at work within oneself, which is why they are indispensable pawns when it comes to discussing the mechanism which set in motion the anxious feeling of the *Unheimlich*, so pervasive throughout modernity. The uncanny monsters of modernity lurk, destabilise; they are well hidden in the depths of the unconscious and from there challenge the distinction between what is acceptable, bearable, and what is abject and threatening, so very unbearably Real.

Monstrous apparitions in narrative could also be considered as the first indicators of the uncanny, seen how "the sudden emergence of the doubles in the romantic era, the extraordinary obsession with ghosts, vampires undead dead, […] in Gothic fiction and

[102] Mladen, Dolar, '*"I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding-Night"*' , p. 20
[103] Andrew, Hock-soon Ng, *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives, Theory, Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 160
[104] Margrit, Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, p. 23

through the nineteenth century, […] all point to the emergence of the uncanny at a very precise historical moment."[105] The very Gothic genre, although usually confined to the back rows of the literary scene, not only represents Otherness, but which reveals with incredible force the new fascination with the *monster within*.

It is within the Gothic and its range of wonderful, sublime monsters that the uncanny is voiced and "'embodied' […] so that such anxieties can be 'controlled', examined, understood, and subsequently, 'resolved'"[106]. The novels belonging to the genre convey shamelessly, perhaps arrogantly, modernity's fears. Mary Shelley's masterpiece *Frankenstein*, for instance, "articulated fears to do with the power of science, godlessness, social anarchy and privation"[107]. Moreover, *Frankenstein*, if read in accordance to Lacanian theory, actively proposed an attempt to create life ex nihilo, to artificially birth an individual who could also bridge the gap between nature (the Real) and culture (Law-of-the-Father) and who could be plunged directly within the Real, without having to suffer the detachment from the Other. That is to say, an individual who was deprived of the very mirror phase which would bind him to an existence of absence and unconscious deprivation.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* too portrays anxieties connected to the changes which were unravelling in the nineteenth century: xenophobia, atavism, explicit and liberal sexuality and class privilege, and especially "reverse colonisation"[108]. However, it should be no surprise that such a varied and rich range of sources of collective anxiety would be collected within the novel. By turning one's gaze to the historical context

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[105] Mladen, Dolar, '*"I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding-Night"',* p. 16

[106] Andrew,Hock-soon Ng, *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives*, p. 5

[107] Maria, Beville, *Gothic-postmodernism, Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*, Postmodern Studies 43 Series (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2009), p. 23

[108] Stephen D., Arata, 'The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization', *Victorian Studies* (Summer 1990)

which forged *Dracula*, one could immediately notice how the slow decline of the British Empire was affecting the population and, more generally, the socio-political equilibrium of the Continent. The year of the novel's publishing was one impregnated with introspective reflection and a much feebler drive toward gloating, due to the ominous atmosphere originated by "the decay of British global influence, the loss of overseas markets for British goods, […] the increasing unrest in British colonies and possessions" combined with "the growing domestic uneasiness over the morality of imperialism"[109].

Furthermore, some of the tropes belonging to Gothic fiction have been employed by Freud to explain precisely what sort of instances or characters might trigger the *Unheimlich*. In his 1919 essay, he makes specific reference to one particular agent of the uncanny: the double, which has made its appearance in numerous novels worldwide in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Perhaps the two novels which have collected the larger amount of literary and philosophical criticism *apropos* the double are *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), by R. L. Stevenson, and *The Double* (*Dvoynik*) by Fëdor Dostoevskij (1846). As far as Freud is concerned, the characters he employs to explore the theme of the double belong to the narrative universe of Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1815): they are the lawyer Coppelius and the Italian Coppola. Although they are two distinct characters, their identities overlap through a trick of the mind of the young protagonist, Nathaniel, with daunting consequences.

At the beginning of the narration, a childhood recollection, the reader finds little Nathaniel deeply intrigued by the arrival of a guest in the house, the lawyer Coppelius, whom he firmly believes to be the notorious Sandman. The latter, of whom he had

[109] Ibid. p.622

heard many times in his nurse's bedtime stories, would come at night to throw sand in the eyes of the children who refused to sleep, making them blind. Naturally, the little child is terrified by this mysterious and frightful figure; nevertheless, as it is often the case with children, he is also driven by the strong urge to find out who the Sandman actually is. Therefore, he hides in his father's study so as to take a better look at Coppelius, but when he reveals himself while the two men are close to the hearth to ignite the flames, the guest attempts to throw hot coal into the eyes of the child. It is this gesture, as subjectively perceived by Nathaniel, that triggers the convergence of the figure of the lawyer and the much dreaded Sandman.

It is important to stress the connection between the man and the Sandman insofar as it renders Coppelius a character irreversibly associated to trauma and anxiety, which is the reason why, after having identified him with the Italian Coppola many years later, Nathaniel will eventually suffer from a delirious episode and will plunge into madness. Although *Der Sandmann* is highly ambiguous, insofar as Hoffman leaves us in doubt as to whether the depicted instances are real or merely the product of a panicked young man, it is clear that this tragic end is brought about by the *return* of the signifier of Natahaniel's traumatic childhood incident within his present.

Therefore, the double would prove the perfect signifier of the uncanny, since not only it implies a return of the repressed, a breach in one's unconscious, but it also brings with it an excess. The double carries in itself not only the mirrored identity of the subject, but also an additional part which should remain unknown, a small token of the Real. To confront one's double entails facing one's embodiment of his drive toward wish-fulfilment, yet while the other appears to satisfy this primordial drive, it does so at the expense of the primary subject. Yet, by acknowledging the individual's repressed or

unconscious desires "so that he does things he [the subject] would never dare to do or that his conscience wouldn't let him do"[110], the double challenges the limits of one's Super-Ego, and poses a threat to its stability. Moreover, by accomplishing the ego's unspoken wishes it also prevents it from fulfilling them itself, adding thus to the already existing sense of oppression and anxiety. It would suffice to think of Jekyll and Hyde, and to how the very surplus of the hideous double of the estimated doctor proved suffocating and tyrannical to his controlled counterpart, to understand that a clash with one's double would unavoidably end with the attempt of killing his other, his uncanny growth. Nonetheless, in this final confrontation between the two, the subject would come too late to realise that "his only substance and his very being were concentrated in his double"[111] and, thus, killing it would ultimately lead to his own death.

The rising popularity of the theme of the double throughout modernity would seem to exemplify how monstrosity and the uncanny belonged to a dimension that had little to do with materiality and much to do with subjective *representation*. What ought to be considered frightening, uncanny and monstrous, was ultimately as detached from its subject as its reflection in the mirror would be: while it would appear to occupy a space that is *other*, *outer*, it was actually nothing more than the projection of the one who was staring into the looking glass, an "idée fixe […] outside the conscious mind"[112]. The monstrous, at this point, has become somewhat *intimate*. Uncanny figures such as ghosts, the undead or the double signalled "the return of that portion of the self that does not promise completion, but a catastrophic rewriting of the self"[113], within a claustrophobic atmosphere of collectively perceived anxiety.

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[110] Mladen, Dolar, '*"I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding-Night"',* p. 11
[111] Ibid.
[112] Roger, Luckhurst, *The Uncanny After Freud*, p. 133
[113] Ibid. p. 131

2.2 The Monster *Within*

The monster of the nineteenth century, then, is finally “distinguished by a kind of monstrosity that is increasingly faded and diaphanous”[114], differing then from the explicit, superficial one that characterised the preceding centuries. The birth of psychoanalysis and the new interest in the exploration of the inner, unconscious world of the individual provided fertile ground for a renewed conception of monstrosity. It is paramount to consider that, since what ought to be feared was now located within the individual, the latter started to be analysed insofar as his study and observation could help locate exactly the source of the natural deviation which endowed him with the attribute of monstrosity.

Modernity unravelled the uncomfortable truth that the strength that had been employed to reject monsters was, by contrast, the indicator that they were perceived as dangerously familiar and similar to the “normal” subject. In other words, the monstrous had started to look far too human, far too subtle. Individuating monstrosity started to become harder, insofar as the physical dimension to which it had been confined was no longer relevant, and monsters ceased to display clearly discernible anomalous features. Hence, the definite separation between the normative subject and his horrific counterpart was blurred, and it became simply impossible to identify the monstrous as entirely *other*. The reason why the “quasi-human”, liminal figure of the deformed and the abnormal has long been the focus of monstrosity, is that it helped assert the normative, enclosed and centred self. The rejected, monstrous individual proved morally necessary for the self-validation of the judging crowd. This necessary partition became problematic insofar as that which essentially had to be excluded began “to

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[114] Michel, Foucault, *Abnormal, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson, trans. by Graham Burchell (London – New York: Verso, 2003), p.60

resemble those […] who lay claim to the primary term of identity"[115] and to reflect the repressed parts of the individual.

The sudden lack of the traditional criterion of difference for the detection of monstrosity further challenged the humanist conception of Man as fully in control of his existential status, which was actually possible to maintain only with a policy of methodical exclusion of the "other". Prior to the drive toward self-introspection and interrogation which lead to a rethinking of the very constitution of Man, the subject was reassuringly "marked by its excluded other, the absent presence which primary identification must deny, and on which it relie[d]"[116].

Nevertheless, the studies conducted by Cesare Lombroso in the 1870s are one of the many pieces of evidence demonstrating how the search for manifest physical deviancy remained persistent with reference to the individuation of the *other* to be excluded. His work was hinged on a combination of phrenology and physiognomy of the studied patients, "two types of pseudoscience that purported to explain a person's personality and behaviour based on his skull and facial features, respectively"[117]. His work notably hinged on the evolutionary theories which had much upset the academic milieu, and his experiments ultimately led him to the conviction that criminals would display atavistic, primate-like traits, thus he degraded them to lesser humans. This, according to his view, would explain how the criminal, the deranged subject, would unleash his beastly and ferocious instincts, ignoring the moral code and without exercising any kind of control on his depravity whatsoever. Lombroso thus asserted then that criminality was

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[115] Margrit, Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, p. 2
[116] Ibid. p. 5
[117] Becky, Little,'What Type of Criminal Are You? 19th-Century Doctors Claimed to Know by Your Face', <https://www.history.com/news/born-criminal-theory-criminology> [Accessed November 2020]

inscribed within one's genetic composition, and his theoretical propositions were accepted as the foundation of the emerging science of criminology.

If in the period of time leading to the late nineteenth-century monstrosity brought with it the idea of intrinsic criminality, it is interesting to observe how the advent of "pseudosciences" such as psychoanalysis, phrenology, and criminology ultimately provoked a shift, so that by the twentieth century it was criminality to become the signifier of monstrosity. Deviancy was then transferred to the behavioural and psychological sphere of the subject. In other words, the belief that "human beings are rotten at the core, that there is a beast within us which causes us to commit evils that our rational selves blush to think of"[118] gained major consensus and it created a shared feeling of vulnerability. Monstrosity now reduced to small irregularities, almost imperceptible to the eye, finally developed into a question of character and morality.

The monster of the nineteenth century was the *moral monster*, which eventually came to occupy the space previously reserved to those figures which embodied the unnatural fusion of two distinct natural domains: the human and the animal (the bestial, zoomorphic man) and the masculine and the feminine (hermaphrodites). The conception of the latter, for instance, underwent a significant revision in its reception and in the end it was not hermaphroditism per se to be condemned, but the moral corruption that this condition brought with it. Implying, thus, that even when facing physical eccentricities and errors, what had come to occupy a position of primary importance was, in fact, to be found on a much deeper level.

The monstrous *other* became more generally defined as *abnormal*, rather than as utterly distinct from the normative individual. This definition implied the recognition of the

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[118] Joseph, Grixti, *Terrors of Uncertainty: The Cultural Contexts of Horror Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 86

self within the defying monster, the traumatising Lacanian Other, and this uncanny realisation found a reassuring resolution in the many and generalised attempts to isolate and control the deviant. A widespread process of confinement and normalisation was alluring insofar as it carried the promise of the normalisation of the abnormal. According to Foucault, this recalled the attempt to exile and reject the social stratum of "undesirables" such as beggars, libertines and vagabonds throughout the seventeenth century. Furthermore, it could also be compared to the medieval systematic isolation of lepers or of plague victims. All of these categories of individuals were put at a distance from the rest of the population: they were either cast away onto a world well outside the town's walls, or marginalised, confined to general hospitals or incarcerated. In the case of the quick spreading of illnesses, people were divided into the two juxtaposed categories of the healthy and the ill, involving thus a general and oftentimes approximate set of criteria as to determine whether the scrutinised subject conformed to the normative standard of health. The norm, within this socio-political context, "is not simply and not even a principle of intelligibility" but "an element on the basis of which a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimised"[119].

However, the problem which characterised the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was that the deviant, the abnormal, was not as instantly and easily recognisable by means of its very definition. Hence, there emerged an impellent urge to find a reliable way to identify it among a sea of individuals who looked dauntingly alike to one another, at least in appearance. This proved indeed a hard task, since although it was clear that the abnormal would encompass individuals whose behaviour dissociated them from the norm, it was not a straightforward definition. After all, one ought to remember that the study of the psyche found itself at its embryological state, and psychoanalysis and

[119] Michel, Foucault, *Abnormal*, pp. 46-7

criminology were not yet officially recognised as proper sciences. As a matter of fact, this diffidence with regard to these disciplines will never completely be eradicated.

Nevertheless, some of the recently published studies on the power exerted on individual agency by the unconscious, with particular regard to the negative and self-disruptive effects of repression, seem to point precisely to psychoanalysis as potential solution to the problematic issue at stake. One of the factors which ought to be kept into consideration regarding the importance given to the detection and isolation of the monstrous deviant is that, for the legal apparatus, motiveless crimes are actually perceived as shameful. In fact, facing a crime without any apparent motive behind its perpetration implied the impossibility of exerting the necessary punitive measures which could prevent others from following the same path. What was being asked of psychoanalysis, then, was a valid reason to justify this punitive impossibility, to go to the root of the destabilising want of motive on behalf of these moral monsters.

In order to gain respectability and to fulfil its scope at the moment of its advent, psychoanalysis had to accept being considered in the same manner as a "specialised branch of public hygiene"[120], whose objective was to collect as many notions on the symptomatology of moral deviancy as possible. It had to demonstrate that, in quality of medical science, it was capable to detect dim, imperceptible irregularities within the individual and to treat them. In other words, it had to demonstrate that it could *foresee* crime. Eventually, the word *madness* became associated to the sort of criminals who represented a danger to social stability and which impeded the definite separation between themselves and the normative majority. They were defined mad insofar as their actions would prove the consequence of an irregular and unnatural dynamics of

[120] Ibid. p.118

repressed instincts, which, however, were thought to be seething within each and every individual. The clash between voluntary actions and involuntary drives would eventually manifest as outbursts of “hallucinations, acute deliria, mania, mixed ideas, and maniacal desire”[121], all phenomena which were classified as clear symptoms of mental illness satisfied the need for visible, recognisable signs of abnormality. The removal of the mad from society and its enclosing within the controlled space of the mental asylum did have potential for reassurance, albeit eventually it would become clear that this process was but a mimic of the defence mechanism of repression. What had to be repressed was the realisation that the sole difference then between the *normal* and the abnormal *other* lied in the solidity of the psychological barrier which kept these intrinsic violent and aggressive instincts at bay, which naturally unveiled a disquieting sense of precariousness as to one’s standing on the ontological level.

Fictional monsters were, within this perspective, but a contrivance for the cathartic release of the monstrous predisposition each individual was forced to repress. By playing on the wish-fulfilment mechanism, characters such as Count Dracula would act on forbidden sexual drives and desires, and vicariously satisfy them. Moreover, even if the irresistible power of seduction of the vampire would plunge its victims in a world of sin and perversion, they could still pledge their innocence and blame their corruption on forces beyond their control. Manifest repulsion for the creature of horror would make pleasure secure, precisely as the panopticon-like system of surveillance and confinement exerted on the mad and the morally deviant would uphold the castigator’s normalcy. Those cast within the category of the monstrous or the abnormal fulfil the normative subject’s need for vicarious satisfaction of his aggressiveness, which he would otherwise be forced to repress. If, on the one hand, when they cannot be

[121] Ibid. p. 158

defeated or restrained they expose our limits, on the other hand "when the monster is conquered, as when St. George slays the dragon, Theseus kills the Minotaur, Dracula gets staked, or Perseus decapitates Medusa, it symbolically returns our narcissism and reaffirms, albeit temporarily, our […] power"[122].

2.3 A Contemporary Monster: The Serial Killer

Each century puts its very own set of monsters on display, each and every one of them lurking in the shadow of fear and historical anxiety, signifying what ought to remain hidden in the unconscious but that crawls its way back to our consciousness. Monsters are always the signifiers of the unspoken, and as much as they are "separate from the self (Reality is not the real), [they are] nevertheless a part of the self […], an intermediary figure between the self and its collapse into trauma"[123]. The nineteenth and twentieth century, under the influence of new psychoanalytic theories, brought forth the idea of the *monster within*, whose appearance was uncannily unrevealing but whose abnormal behaviour was hinged upon a lack of control of the most atavistic and violent instincts. Hence, while the medieval monster was the physical embodiment of a transgression of the natural order, and the one of the Enlightenment was liminal insofar as it challenged categorisation, modernity displayed a monster which was far too human. The mentally deranged, the criminal and the hysteric woman would all belong to the category of the abnormal, insofar as they did not conform to the normative subject and, thus, they had to be marginalised and subdued.

The monsters of the twenty-first century embrace and consolidate the theory of the beast within, thus welcoming the conceptual heritage of the previous century, yet their

[122] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, p. 191
[123] Andrew, Hock-soon Ng, *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives*, p. 8

reception within a culture dominated by mass-media communication and violence as a form of entertainment has undergone significant changes. The canonical monster of the 2000s would be the serial killer, a figure much debated on in the press of the 70s and 80s, as appalling as it is charismatic and intriguing to the public, conventionally defined as “a person who murders three or more people in a period of over a month, with ‘cooling down’ time between murders”[124]. Among the most renown ones who terrified the world figure John Wayne Gacy, the “Killer Clown”, who gruesomely murdered over thirty young boys after raping and torturing them; Harold Shipman, known as “Dr. Death”, accused of having killed over two hundred of his patients; and again Jeffrey Dahmer, “the Milwaukee Cannibal”, whose name leaves no need for further explanations, and the notorious Ted Bundy.

Ted Bundy was a criminal monster that could be identified with “the waking dream, the nightmare realized”, and a psychopath who would be “simply acting out all the taboo fantasies that the rest of us have learned to control”[125]. The interest of contemporary audiences in the stories of serial killers and deranged criminals has peaked, and in the last few decades it has been possible to find an always increasing amount of material about the subject.

From published autobiographies to Netflix documentaries and films, and again to comics and TV shows, there has been an outstanding increase in the public’s interest toward morbid crimes and bloodcurdling news. Some could easily look at this morbid frenzy as a form of collective hysteria, conveyed perhaps by the ceaseless and oppressive coat of violence and aggression which seems to surround the contemporary

[124] Katya, Podkovyroff Lewis, ‘Killer Looks: The Fascination of Serial Killers in Pop Culture’, <https://awolau.org/3663/print/culture/killer-looks-the-fascination-of-serial-killers-in-pop-culture/> [Accessed January 2021]
[125] Lorraine, Daston, Katharine, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, p. 212

individual. Serial killers gained popularity in the same manner as Hollywood celebrities, thanks to the advent of television and social media. Actually, "for some murderers the media is one of the most important factors in helping to fashion a serial killer identity" insofar as it offered new opportunities for identity construction, thus "whereas in pre-modern societies killing sequentially might have been something that someone did, today a serial killer is something that someone can be"[126].

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that fascination with serial killers began with the present century: in fact, they have mesmerised countless audiences since the nineteenth-century intensive mass-distribution of newspapers. The first commonly known example of serial killer could be found in London in the 1880s, and he was known as Jack the Ripper. Although official documentation regarding the latter is scant and oftentimes unreliable, his figure has frequently been employed to corroborate the idea that a general sense of anxiety and social disquieting was due to the ongoing process of industrialisation, which brought forth a deep feeling of displacement and uncertainty.

Serial killers are dauntingly *normal*, at least at first sight. Some of them, such as Ted Bundy, were even considered charming and attractive: he could boast enormous success with the opposite sex, to the point that he even managed to get engaged to Carol Ann Boone[127] while he was imprisoned. "Women felt that there was something substantive to him that was unspoken. But that this mystique was rooted in killing and

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[126] Kevin D., Haggerty, *Modern Serial Killers* (Alberta: SAGE, 2009)

[127] Carole Ann Boone met Ted Bundy when they were both working at the Department of Emergency Services in Olympia, Washington. She was twice divorced when she met him, yet she did not know his true nature and found herself to be deeply fascinated by Bundy. When the police arrested him in 1975 she kept believing in his innocence, and their relationship grew stronger. She even helped him escape from prison while he was serving a fifteen-year sentence. Bundy proposed to her in court during his third murder trial, after which he got sentenced to death (for the third time). They conceived a child while he was serving time in the death row, yet the woman eventually divorced Bundy three years prior to his death, and allegedly never saw him again.

mental distress, of course, wasn't obvious at the time"[128], and he kept wittingly subduing and manipulating Boone. The latter, confiding in her lover's innocence despite the incriminating proof collected against him, even smuggled some money into the prison where he had been incarcerated, which he then used to attempt his escape. She remained blindingly loyal to the killer, yet it would suffice to watch a few instants of her court apparitions throughout Bundy's trial to notice how hollow, perchance desperate her eyes appeared. She was like a marionette left without a puppeteer.

Thus, not only do these individuals deprive the audience of the possibility of recognizing them through any physical feature that could possibly reveal a token of their criminal drive: they are even capable of blending in to the point of concealment. Their monstrosity, rather than revealing itself through hysterical fits or theatrical gestures, hides behind a covering of cold detachment and lack of empathy. They might look human, yet they are not *humane*. They lure their victims by applying to the rules of the Symbolic which estranges them, and many of them are perfectly capable to keep their instincts under control for years, if necessary, hiding in plain sight. They are, according to Helen Morrison, a psychiatrist who has met and interviewed circa 80 serial killers, "expert role-players, adept at appearing normal"[129], and most of them are successful, good-looking men. Yet the realisation that their allure is but an act invests them of a thick coat of uncanniness. One feels exposed, anxious, perhaps even outsmarted by these deviated subjects whose monstrosity lies precisely in their ability to conform to the norms They show a perfectly designed interplay of horror and

[128] Marco, Margaritoff, 'Meet Carole Ann Boone, The Woman Who Fell In Love With Ted Bundy And Had His Child While He Was On Death Row', <https://allthatsinteresting.com/carole-ann-boone-ted-bundy-wife#:~:text=Carole%20Ann%20Boone%20wasn't,concocted%20an%20impressive%20prison%20escape.> [Accessed January 2021]

[129] Michael, Bond, 'Why Are We Eternally Fascinated by Serial Killers?', <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160331-why-are-we-eternally-fascinated-by-serial-killers> [Accessed January 2021]

humanity, which puts the public in the uncomfortable position of thinking that, potentially, everyone could be hiding their actual monstrous identity, maybe even someone close to them.

Paradoxically, their superficial display of humanity is what allows allows the audience to experience a deep catharsis as they plunge in the media cult of the macabre. They allow one's indulgence in the most horrifying, rotting fantasies, inasmuch as they are kept at a distance and eventually brought to justice. They have the "function of discharging a set of sadistic dispositions which, allegedly, make up an essential component of our genetic makeup, part of a long tradition which describes these kinds of violence and destructiveness as 'natural'"[130]. Furthermore, they present the opportunity to "suffer death from a distance"[131].

Another proof of the strong fascination of the contemporary audience with serial killers is the rise of a market for objects of the macabre – or *murderabilia* as they are often addressed to – which could be sold at exorbitant prices to be then jealously collected by serial killers aficionados. The objects up for sale range from locks of hair to cars and paintings. Anything which could make the mesmerised buyer feel as if the object in their possession could establish a close, intimate connection to its previous psychopathic owner. Owning pieces of murderabilia proves but another way to "experiencing death without falling victim to it, of becoming a witness to death and thus exerting some control over it"[132]. A widespread form of exorcism, ultimately aimed at the control of the uncontrollable, of what ought to be repressed and restrained and yet manages to return to us, haunting us.

[130] Joseph, Grixty, *Terrors of Uncertainty*, p. xv
[131] Michael,Bond, *Why Are We Eternally Fascinated by Serial Killers?*
[132] Ibid.

The display of horrific fetishes could also be found in museums all over the world, as in the Surgeon's Hall Museum of Edinburgh and the Newseum of Washington DC, not to mention the various tourist attractions such as the London Dungeons which entertain the visitor with unpublished documentation about the most deranged criminals from Jack the Ripper to Charles Manson. Serial killers and psychotic individuals have found a wide audience in narrative as well, as the huge success enjoyed by the canonical novel of Breat Easton Ellis: *American Psycho* (1991). The main character of the novel, Bateman, pursues a life modelled on his very own ideology, according to which his sole desire is to "annihilate forms of interiority" within a world where fantasy and reality are indiscernible. He lives in a constructed dimension where "the fantasy world of Body Double becomes translated into his real world, and his murderous inclination is but an element of the hyperreality he experiences"[133]. Plunged into this dimension, the act of killing becomes the manifestation of the unleashing of Bateman's frustration provoked by a fault in the process of wish-fulfilment.

It is interesting to notice how serial killers, albeit apparently manifesting a rejection of the norm and the will to dissect it so as to satisfy their needs and monstrous drives, actually perpetrate their actions with the aim of entering the very Symbolic they contrast through their Imaginary register. In fact, as all the monstrous characters that preceded them, they "reflect back, and act upon, modernity's distinctive valuations"[134]. They are performative monsters, transgressors of the law – moral and judicial – who, ironically, long for a place within Ideology. It should arise little wonder that the murderer of a long succession of prostitutes would feel somehow proud of his work, inasmuch as within his belief system he thinks he actually pays a great service to the

[133] Andrew, Hock-soon Ng, *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives*, p.71
[134] Michael, Bond, *Why Are We Eternally Fascinated by Serial Killers?*

community. Thus, as much as complete detachment from these people would make one feel reassured and safe within his enclosed space of normality, it is impossible to escape the fact that the fascination and the uncanny sense of familiarity they arise in the audience prove that, after all, they are nothing but signifiers of the monster we all have buried within ourselves.

CHAPTER 3

THE MONSTROUS IN IAIN BANKS' *THE WASP FACTORY*

When Iain Banks wrote *The Wasp Factory*, his debut novel, in 1984, the character he had in mind as the narrative's protagonist was a "normality-challenged teenage eccentric with severe violence issues".[135] He did not go as far as defining Frank Cauldhame a *monster*, yet the contemporary readers will eventually and inevitably find themselves challenged by the sadistic cruelty and bloodcurdling depravity exerted by the boy, to the point that they will instinctively identify Frank as a *monstrous* character who indeed problematizes the spontaneous tendency to narrative empathy.

The novel received an uncertain and nervous welcome within the contemporary literary scene which, if on the one hand the readers could not avoid feeling troubled by the disquieting and unsettling plot, on the other hand they had to recognize Bank's talent as a novelist and his morbid originality. *The Wasp Factory* has often been referred to as a Gothic[136] and "grimly cult"[137] classic, a polarising "macabre celebration of violence, horror and death"[138] within the flood of reviews it collected throughout the years since its publication. Everybody would seem to agree upon its upsetting power to mesmerise

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[135] Iain, Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (London: Abacus, 1990), p. x. Hereafter, the page number will be indicated in brackets at the end of all quoted excerpts.

[136] John, Mullan, 'Behind It All, John Mullan on the Use of Explanation as a Device in Iain Banks's The Wasp Factory', <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/28/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview31> [Accessed March 2021]

[137] Patrick, Freyne, 'Iain Banks: 'In the End We'll Be Smiling'', <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/iain-banks-in-the-end-we-ll-be-smiling-1.1350434> [Accessed March 2021]

[138] Berthold, Schoene-Harwood, 'Dams Burst: Devolving Gender in Iain Banks's "The Wasp Factory"', *ARIEL*, 30 (January 1999), pp. 132-48 <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/view/34213>

even the most reluctant reader, despite the harsh approach to delicate and troubling themes it tackles: gender identification, misogyny, murder, animal cruelty, ritualistic spirituality and mental illness.

All the events which unravel throughout the novel are narrated through the eyes of the deranged Francis Leslie Cauldhame, abandoned by his mother at birth and thus raised solely by his father, the doctor Angus Cauldhame, "on a remote Scottish nearly-island" (Banks 1990: x) together with his two brothers, Eric and Paul. Frank's relationship with his father immediately appears to be marked by a subtle power dynamic according to which Angus manipulatively filters and limits the knowledge to which Frank has access:

> [...] when I was younger he used to fool me time after time, answering my honest if naïve questions with utter rubbish. For *years* I believed Pathos was one of the Three Musketeers, Fellatio was a character in *Hamlet*, Vitreous a town in China, and that the Irish peasants had to tread the peat to make Guinness. (Banks 1990: 11)

Angus' controlling influence over his child manifests itself in the constant concealment and distortion of bits and pieces of cultural trivia: he educates him solely on what he deems appropriate, usually distorting the truth and/or substituting useful knowledge with the memorisation of obsessively compiled lists of measurements of all the pieces of furniture in the house. However, Angus' manipulative, quasi-mocking educating strategies, are but the least troubling detail concerning his impact on Frank's life, insofar as he eventually allows him to receive an education, even if a fragmented and skewed one.

Angus, a "doctor of chemistry, or perhaps biochemistry" (Banks 1990: 11) ultimately toys with the child's very identity, first and foremost by depriving him of any sort of

official documentation attesting his existence[139]; but especially by conducting a disturbing biological experiment on Frank's gender identity. Shockingly enough, while Frank lived his whole life with the belief of being a man, albeit castrated by a dog in a childhood accident, he is actually a woman. (S)He is, in fact, not Francis Leslie Cauldhame but Frances Lesley Cauldhame.

Hence Frank's identity is problematized under both the physical and the psychological point of view, inasmuch as he[140] is portrayed as a deranged and sadistic individual whose life decisions are for the most part dependant on his personal mythology, where the Factory – which could be interpreted as a living entity within his divinatory system – occupies a central position. The reader is informed almost immediately that Frank has murdered several family members, but what is really striking is that he does not display any remorse. On the contrary, he considers these disturbing instances merely as part of a temporary phase of his life, recollecting them apathetically and, what is more, with a sense of legitimacy backed by his manic beliefs and perverse perception of morality:

> Two years after I killed Blyth I murdered my young brother Paul, for quite different and more fundamental reasons than I'd disposed of Blyth, and then a year after that I did for my cousin Esmerelda, more or less on a whim. That's my score to date. Three. I haven't killed anybody for years, and don't intend to ever again. It was just a stage I was going through. (Banks 1990: 49)

Frank's psychotic tendencies are not the only ones which reverberate throughout the novel, in fact they are paralleled by the mad brother's manic depressive outbursts that usually culminate in the burning of dogs and other animals, and by Angus' misogyny, obsessive compulsive disorder, and psychopathy eventually culminating in the

[139] "I was never registered. I have no birth certificate, no National Insurance number, nothing to say I'm alive or have ever existed." (Banks 1990: 10)
[140] Further reference to Frank will be made by the employment of masculine pronouns, insofar as he does not openly identify as a woman in the narrative despite his biological nature.

disturbing experiment on gender conditioning conducted on Frank. All in all, *The Wasp Factory* displays a wide and varied amount of disquieting elements which encompass both the physical and the psychological dimension of its main characters, resulting in a work of contemporary fiction which oozes monstrosity and uncanniness.

3.1 Frank's Monstrous Body

It is interesting to observe how the flawed, injured and repugnant body is a recurrent leitmotif throughout the narrative. Angus walks with a limp, Blyth (Frank's cousin) has an artificial leg, Jamie (Frank's best friend) suffers from dwarfism and the author places particular emphasis on the festering flesh of the child Eric tries to feed. Most importantly, Frank's presence is problematized insofar as bodily image and gender are concerned.

The (damaged) body and bodily functions are ubiquitous within the novel, and they are described with abundance of either distasteful or gruesome details, as perfectly exemplified by the description of the festering wound of the child Eric assists at the hospital:

> Flies had got into the ward, presumably when the air-conditioning had been faulty earlier. They had got underneath the stainless steel of the child's skull-cap and deposited their eggs there. What Eric saw when he lifted that plate up […] was a slowly writhing nest of fat maggots, swimming in their combined digestive juices as they consumed the brain of the child. (Banks 1990: 188)

The effect is indeed nauseating and horrifying inasmuch as no repugnant detail is spared, and excerpts such as the one aforementioned are scattered here and there throughout the whole story, forcing the reader to maintain a constant state of alertness. The realm of the carnal would seem to always evoke horrific, repugnant and/or vulgar imagery, oftentimes gratuitously, and it is precisely through this narrative technique

that skin and the body become the first and most evident signs of monstrosity throughout *The Wasp Factory*.

The bodily functions displayed range from Frank's urination on the totemic "Sacrifice Poles" he carefully positioned all around the island,[141] to Angus disturbing interest in farts and burps:

> 'Well, just you be careful, then. I always know how much you've had from your farts.' He snorted, as though imitating one. My father has a theory about the link between mind and bowel being both crucial and very direct. […] he has a manuscript on the subject ('The State of the Fart') […]. (Banks 1990: 67)

Far from being monstrous, these intermissions still feel inappropriate and undoubtedly strengthen the feeling of unease in the audience.

Despite all the main characters described in the novel appear to be grotesque and monstrous to some extent, it is undeniable that the most important site of monstrosity is Frank's body. To Frank, allegedly castrated by a dog in an unfortunate childhood accident, his body appears twisted, wrong, faulty and as a result it is oftentimes referred to as a *disabled* body.[142] It carries unavoidable proof of his dishonour and it is perceived as a negative entity which shelters the outrage which he was forced to suffer. Frank rejects it, insofar as it is nothing but a frustrating exhibit of his severed virility, and eventually turns it into the Kristevan *abject*[143]: an uncomfortable breech in the Symbolic[144] and an uncanny and painful peek into the Real.

[141] "I didn't need a pee because I'd been pissing on the Poles during the day, infecting them with my scent and power." (Banks 1990: 14)
[142] "I hate having to sit down in the toilet all the time. With my unfortunate disability I usually have to […]" (Banks, 14) ; "[…] he had loved me despite my disability" (Banks 1990: 180)
[143] See Julia, Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)
[144] See Jacques, Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis,*eds Jacques-Alain Miller, Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994)

The connection between the body and monstrosity has always existed, especially starting from the Early Modern period where a newly found interest in the human body led to the conviction that the *outside* and the *inside* were indissolubly connected.[145] Monsters, according to this idea, were the best representatives of the dialectic relationship between physicality and interiority, and the work of the physician John Bulwer clearly explains this: "the disfigurement of the outside of the body also disfigures the inside, disrupting, in the process, the resonance between the human and the divine".[146] The Gothic, to which Bank's novel has been associated again and again, is the genre which best emphasises the monstrous body through its many displays of festering, impure, sinfully sensual and wounded flesh. It is a genre which generates excessive and uncanny *otherness*, provoking what is usually considered "normal" and "acceptable", exposing its limits and contradictions.[147]One might define the Gothic as the site of cultural mayhem, which is symbolised through the body of the monster, which "announces itself (de-monstrates) as the place of corruption".[148]Thus, the Gothic brought unprecedented attention to the body and to its power to reflect what lay on the inside, directing particular interest to the deviant, the abnormal and the corrupt individual. The deviant body is usually conceived as the outrageous product of *hybris*, as with *Frankenstein*, or as the decaying symbol of depravity and ungodliness, as exemplified by vampires and revenants. Deviant bodies are "lumpen bodies, bodies pierced together out of the fabric of race, class, gender and sexuality".[149]Accordingly, the deviant body is bound to change through time and it is dependent on the ideological

[145] Stephen, Pender, 'No Monsters at the Resurrection', in *Monster Theory, Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)
[146]Ibid., p. 153
[147] For further reference to the Gothic genre, see: David, Punter, *Storia della Letteratura del Terrore: il "Gotico" dal Settecento ad Oggi* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1997); Michela, Vanon-Alliata, Giorgio, Rimondi, eds, *Dal Gotico al Fantastico* (Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2015)
[148] Judith, Halberstam, *Skin Shows, Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham – London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 2
[149] Ibid. p. 3

revolutions of the cultural and social milieux, hence if sexuality and indecency were worrisome and threatening to the established social order of the Victorian Age, nowadays the focus is placed more and more on the issue of gender and sexual identity. Hence, with regard to the contemporary *The Wasp Factory* it is paramount to note that it is not merely the repulsive, deformed and abject body which ought to be considered for the purposes of the establishment of an association between its narrative and the monstrous, inasmuch as although many of its characters present physical flaws they are not comparable to those of the more canonical monsters which informed British literature. Monstrosity within Banks' novel has then to be analysed in the light of the theme of physical inadequacy to the given standard of manliness, which is brought to the fore by the issue of Frank's sexuality and gender conditioning. His body can be described as "Gothic" only if one employs the term to stress the disquieting effect of the twisted relationship between physical normative standards and gender identification. His own biological nature is disruptive to the Law of the Father and, consequently, uncanny and monstrous.

His castration forces him to live with the idea that he will never, and most importantly *could* never be a full man[150], and this proves a conviction strong enough to make him reject all traces of femininity in his life, ultimately leading to an uncontrollable misogyny and to the incessant need to compensate "for a patriarchally inflicted lack of natural manliness by pursuing an extremist ideal of violent masculine perfection."[151]It is interesting to investigate the psychological effects of Frank's castration on his behaviour, notwithstanding the fact that, as readers, we are revealed the deeper truth about his sexuality at the end of the novel. We know that although his entire life

[150] "I am not a full man, and nothing can ever alter that" (Banks 1990: 142)
[151] Berthold, Shoene-Harwood, *Dams Burst*, p. 133

unravelled under an uncontrollable and frustrating feeling of wronged masculinity due to the grievous accident afore mentioned, he is in fact a woman, secretly biologically toyed with by his father:

> When Old Saul savaged me, my father saw it as an ideal opportunity for a little experiment, and a way of lessening – perhaps removing entirely – the influence of the female around him as I grew up. So he started dosing me with male hormones, and has been ever since. (Banks 1990: 240)

Notwithstanding the fact that this information will be revealed toward the end of the novel, an unresolved castration complex[152] will forever haunt Frank's life and influence his actions, and one could even go as far as considering it the very source of his psychopathic behaviour. It is also important to notice is that, with regard to both his belief of being a castrated man and to the disturbing actuality of his condition, Frank's unjustified hatred for women could eventually be analysed under the lens of Freudian theory as a degeneration of the phenomenon of penis envy[153]. The latter would ultimately twist Frank's perception of the *self* within a web of interpersonal relationships where patriarchal masculinity is seen as the "bedrock of all communal and individual identification".[154]

The model of masculinity encouraged by the Law of the Father within Frank's universe is an impossible ideal to which neither Frank nor anybody else in the novel could ever attain to[155], thus provoking an agonizing feeling of inadequacy aggravated by the lack of male genitals. The unresolved castration complex provokes Frank's over-compensating mechanism which manifests itself through the intensification of some of the typical traits and behaviours of toxic masculinity, such as gratuitous violence,

[152] For further reference, see: Sigmund, Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, ed. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1975)
[153] Ibid.
[154] Berthold, Shoene-Harwood, *Dams Burst,* p. 132
[155] [Frank talking about his father] "The shit. Call himself a man!" (Banks 1990: 223)

remorseless killing, and territorial marking. The patriarchal system informs Frank's life and it is precisely its encouragement to physical and psychological conformism that produces "monstrous deformations rather than […] individual difference".[156]

Hence, Frank's impossibility to conform to the patriarchal ideal ultimately confines him to a condition of marginalisation and liminality: neither man nor woman, neither castrated nor sexless, Frank defies categorisation by eluding binary thinking. If one had to employ the medical terminology in use nowadays to describe Frank's status, one could identify him as "a polymorphous transsexual"[157], slave to his own castration complex which leads him to perceive himself as "unsexed". It is precisely this characteristic of his that most defines him as a monstrous character, insofar as monsters "serve as configurations of the liminal, as the liminal personae who cannot escape the experience of liminality, or marginality".[158] Frank is then "other", placed outside of the understandable because of his nondescriptness, which is "central to his lack of identity"[159].

Frank's liminality is further enhanced by the shocking discovery that he is, in fact, a woman. In chapter eleven, "The Prodigal", Frank can finally sneak into his father's study, a space which prior to that moment he had always been precluded access to. The study is the place where Angus spends most of his time, and is thus crammed with books and tools he employs to conduct his scientific experiments. However, the object Frank is drawn to in his exploration is a jar with fake male genitalia on the inside:

> It was as I turned away from the door that I saw it. A specimen-jar standing on top of the bureau, which was placed just to the side of the

[156] Ibid. p. 145
[157] Jeremy, Miller, 'Deconstructing the Monstrous She-Male: Castration and the Invisible Genitalia in the Liminal Personae', *Articulate*, 9 (2004), p. 28
[158] Ibid. p. 27
[159] Ibid. p. 28

> door and would be hidden from the hall outside the door when it was open. In the jar was clear liquid – alcohol, I assumed. In the alcohol was a tiny, torn set of male genitalia. (Banks 1990: 228)

The discovery of the fake genitalia does indeed upset Frank, who is faced with the object of his desire and the symbol of his inadequacy. Fuelled by anger and shock, he goes through Angus' desk drawers where he finds the ultimate truth about his condition:

> I put my hands into one of the little drawers and took out the blue box of tampons. Shaking fingers brought out the other box from the drawer. It was labelled "Hormones-male". Inside it were smaller boxes, neatly numbered in black biro with dates going about six months into the future". (Banks 1990: 229)

Shockingly enough, Frank is now forced to realise that the most crucial part of his identity is but the product of a sick, Frankenstein-like experiment conducted by his father in an attempt to eradicate "the influence of the female around him" (Banks 1990: 240) by dosing the daughter with male hormones since childhood. "Therefore, the experiment serves both to re-programme Frank and to demonstrate Angus's assumed superiority over women as this power was already questioned by the rebellious behaviour of his second wife— Frank's mother",[160]who abandoned him soon after the birth of the child. Frank's body becomes then the site of perversion of the natural, of sexuality twisted, it mocks him now that it blatantly presents the ultimate proof of its link to the feminine.

Frank, who so far had been associated solely to the masculine, now puzzles the reader and challenges his attempt at labelling, categorising. *Who* is Frank? Who is this character whose body is scarred by the signs of rejected womanhood but whose behaviour and sense of self is indeed so very devoted to the masculine? How should

[160] *Space, Gender, and the Gaze in Literature and Art,* eds Ágnes Zsófia, Kovács, László B., Sári, (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), p. 135

one identify him (*her?*)? What upsets him most is not the fact of being the unaware victim of the delirium of a failed doctor, but the revelation that he is a "normal" female: "Part of me still wants to believe it's just a lie, but really I know it's the truth. I'm a woman. Scarred thighs, outer labia a bit chewed, and I'll never be attractive, but according to Dad a normal female, capable of intercourse and giving birth (*I shiver at the thought of either*)" (Banks 1990: 241) [my italics]. This moment of revelation is also the one where Frank's monstrosity is enhanced and consolidated insofar as not only does he keep rejecting the feminine despite his biology, but he embraces his fragmented and undefined self. He once again mocks the Law of the Father by means of accepting his position of liminality: "But I am still me; I am the same person, with the same memories and the same deeds done, the same (small) achievements, the same (appalling) crimes to my name" (Banks 1990: 242). Frank "still defines him/herself as the uncategorized, inviting us to include him/her into the structure of being; or rather, and more appropriately, to exclude us"[161] and it is precisely because of his identification with the Other and his debasing of the "either/or" system of classification (either man or woman; either natural or unnatural) that he proves to be indeed a dangerous monster to contemporary Western binary thinking, to which "all situations in which two different signs of gender ("male" and "female" desire; male and female clothing and gesture; male and female genitalia) coexist in problematic relation […] undercut the power relations that inform and are informed by gender".[162]

[161] Ibid. p. 27
[162] Stephen, Pender, *"No Monsters at the Resurrection,* p. 187-8

3.2 Frank as a Moral Monster

It is blatant from the very beginning of the novel that Frank's unperturbed – and quite disturbing – display of violent instincts and psychopathic behaviour automatically characterise him as a moral monster:

> 'I hope you weren't out killing God's creatures.' I shrugged at him again. *Of course* I was out killing things. How the hell am I supposed to get heads and bodies for the Poles and the Bunker if I don't kill things? There aren't just enough natural deaths. You can't explain that sort of thing to people, though. (Banks 1990: 9) [my italics]

His flow of thought reveals some of the most important aspects of Frank's monstrous personality, yet what is perhaps the most important one is that he juxtaposes himself to "people". By doing so he unwillingly exhibits first-hand the distinction between "self" and "other" which undoubtedly places him outside of the accepted behavioural standards of the normative model of society to which the reader belongs, thus facilitating his identification with the deviant, abnormal individual: a monster. This ideological distinction between "Frank" and "people", perhaps a self-defense mechanism in the light of his physical trauma, is an essential part of his identity formation process. This is further revealed by his passion for dam building, that actually ought to symbolise his rejection of the "other", which is not merely distrusted but utterly and hotly *hated*. In particular, Frank is pervaded by uncontrollable hatred and disdain of women and water, as he asserts:

> My greatest enemies are Women and the Sea. These things I hate. Women because they are weak and stupid and live in the shadow of men and are nothing compared to them, and the Sea because it has always frustrated me, destroying what I have built, washing away what I have left, wiping clean the marks I have made. (Banks 1990: 50)

The naturalness with which Frank delivers his statement is disturbing, to say the least, insofar as it shows complete lack of self restrain and a seething misogyny which adds

to the several manifestations of his manic and sociopathic behaviour. However, it is interesting to note how water is feared and rejected as well. In particular, it is its power to “wash away” that frustrates Frank: he is resentful of the Sea’s ability to erase his *marks*, that simultaneously signify the visible proofs of his existence – otherwise unrecorded – and the demarcation of his territory.

The “things” Frank admitted to be “out killing” were, most probably, small animals. Animal cruelty is, in fact, a recurrent theme of *The Wasp Factory*, and Frank himself shamelessly admits his habit of “catapult[ing] the tiny beasts across the creek and into the mud on the far side” (Banks 1990: 140). His aim in doing so was to discover the location of Old Saul’s bones – it being the dog which “castrated” him – to appropriate his skull and use it for his rituals. He gives a detailed account of his animal-killing practice:

> I used to buy the shuttlecocks in the town toy and sports shop and cut the rubber end off, then squeeze the protesting guinea-pig (I did use one once, just on principle, but as a rule they were too expensive and a little too big) up through the funnel of plastic until it sat round their waist like a little dress. Thus flighted, I sent them shooting out over the mud and the water towards their suffocating ends […] I kept a log, naturally, and therefore have it recorded that it took no less than thirty-seven of these supposed flight experiments before […] I finally knew where the dog bones were.” (Banks 1990: 141)

As much as the sadistic killing of animals might appear disquieting to the reader, it is nothing compared to the appalling crimes committed by Frank, whose psychopathy reached its climax when he murdered three of his family members, children just like himself.[163] His first victim was his cousin Blyth, an overbearing and provoking ten year-old, whose active way of playing and engaging with Frank repeatedly triggered his violent instincts that, however, he managed to keep at bay:

[163] At the time of the three murders Frank was, respectively, six, eight and nine.

> I hadn't said anything to anybody, even Eric, about what I wanted to do to Blyth. I was wise in my childishness even then, at the tender age of five, when most children are forever telling their parents and friends that they hate them and they wish they were dead. I kept quiet. […] (Banks 1990: 44)

Their relationship aggravated after an unfortunate accident that forced Blyth to wear a prosthetic leg, insofar as he started to unleash on Frank all of the frustration and resentfulness which he had accumulated since the accident:

> […] he was even more unpleasant than before […]. Blyth resented his handicap bitterly […]. He thought it was great fun to throw me about and wrestle with me and punch and kick me. I made a convincing show of joining in all this horse-play and appeared to enjoy it hugely for a week or so while I thought what I could do to our cousin. (Banks 1990: 44)

Blyth's bursts of hyperactivity and restlessness peaked when he set Frank and Eric's rabbits on fire during a weekend stay at the Cauldhames': "The first time I murdered it was because of rabbits meeting a fiery death from the nozzle of a Flame-thrower" (Banks 1990: 42). Infuriated by the incident, but even more by the fact that the death of the animals had made Eric cry, Frank had to fight the impulse of killing Blyth "there and then" (Banks 1990: 43) and started to meticulously plan his revenge, which he could finally fulfil a few days later, when he placed an adder inside Blyth's artificial leg:

> I don't think the snake had fully wakened up when I caught it, and I was careful not to jar it as I ran back to where my brothers and Blyth were laying on the grass. […] I reached for Blyth's artificial leg, lying smooth and pink by the small of his back and in his shadow. I held the leg to the can and took the lid away, sliding the leg over the hole as I did so. […] I took the can carefully away at the last moment. Nothing happened. The snake was still inside the leg, and I couldn't even see it. […] Eric woke first, then I opened my eyes as though sleepily, and we woke little Paul, and our cousin. Blyth saved me the trouble of suggesting a game of football by doing it himself. Eric, Paul and I got the goalposts together while Blyth hurriedly strapped his leg on. (Banks 1990: 45-7)

To this murder followed the one of his younger brother Paul, and that of his little cousin Esmerelda, as anticipated by Frank himself: "Two years after I killed Blyth I

murdered my young brother Paul, for quite different and more fundamental reasons than I'd disposed of Blyth, and then a year after that I did for my cousin Esmerelda, more or less on a whim." (Banks 1990: 49). Each and every one of these crimes results appalling the one which has the most bloodcurdling effect on the reader is the killing of little Paul, a sweet and playful five year-old, for whom Frank reserved a terrible death involving an unexploded bomb found on the shore:

> Its shape became clear, and I could then guess roughly how much of it must still be buried under the sand. It was a bomb, stood on its tail. […] 'See this?' I said. It was a rhetorical question. Paul nodded, big eyes staring. 'This,' I told him, '*is a bell*. Like the one in the church in the town. The noise we hear on a Sunday, you know?' […] ' I know what we'll do; *I'll go up on the dunes and you hit the bell with your bit of wood and we'll see if I can hear it*.' […] The rising tower of debris blossomed and drifted, starting to fall as the shockwave pulsed at me from the dune. […] I watched the distant cloud from the explosion drift away over the firth, dispersing, then I turned and ran as fast as I could for the house. (Banks 1990: 87-9) [my italics]

It is undoubtedly upsetting to think that a child could have planned such grotesque deaths for his victims, especially considering that they were family members; nevertheless, the most disturbing aspects of these events are indeed Frank's motive and reaction. After each and every one of his daunting crimes, in fact, he showed no remorse whatsoever and, what is worse, he openly admitted that the triggering causes of his violent response were not always valid or at least explainable. If, on the one hand, Blyth's murder was the result of a personal revenge, Esmerelda was killed "more or less on a whim" (Banks 1990: 49) by Frank's own admission. The cause which pushed him to kill the little girl is to be found in his obsessive-compulsive drive toward equilibrium and symmetry[164], according to which having already killed two boys, he now needed a girl "to tip the scales back in the other direction." (Banks 1990: 113) and,

[164] "I had to do something to even up the balance. I could feel it in my guts, in my bones; I had to. It was like an itch, something I had no way of resisting, like when I walk along a Pavement in Porteneil and I accidentally scuff one heel on the paving stone. I have to scuff the other foot as well, with as near as possible the same weight, to feel good again. […]It is simply something that must be done" (Banks 1990: 113)

what is more, the way in which she was killed further shows Frank's willingness to eradicate the feminine from the Earth:

> I built a big kite. It was so big it didn't even fit inside the shed. […] I called Esmerelda over. The kite blew into the sky like something wild, hoisting its tail with a noise like tearing cardboard. […] I came up behind Esmerelda and held the lines just behind her little freckled elbows, waiting for the tug. The lines came taunt, and it came. I had to dig my heels in to stay steady. […] Esmerelda looked round one last time at me, giggling, and I laughed back. Then I let the lines go. […] I fell to the ground as Esmerelda left it for ever." (Banks 1990: 117-8)

Such unrepentant display of anti-social tendencies does indeed connect him to the figure of the deranged and psychopathic criminal, thus legitimately ascribing him to the category of contemporary monsters whose deviancy does not lay in physical deformity but rather on a varied spectrum of mental and behavioural disorders.

What ought to be taken into consideration, however, is that Frank's psychopathy is indeed linked to his body, considering that it could be analysed as a reaction to the stress and psychological complexes which arose after the incident which led to his alleged castration. Because of his idealisation of the masculine, Frank's self-induced sense of inferiority and inadequacy ultimately leads to a frantic, neurotic overcorrection, hinged on his own perception of true patriarchal ideals and values. In this light, Frank's violence and cold-bloodedness in facing the tragic outcomes of his evil deeds could be interpreted as his attempt at "masculine self-fashioning" which, albeit exaggerated, is but "the result of a meticulous self-formation in accordance with hegemonic ideals."[165]

Naturally, it is all the more imperative to Frank to distance himself from the feminine which has already contaminated his body, but the inevitable outcome of this inner conflict is bound to produce a psychic split. On the one hand, Frank juxtaposes himself

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[165] Berthold, Shoene-Harwood, *Dams Burst*, p. 137

to "people" identifying then with a superior *Other*, while on the other hand he is being haunted and mocked by his very own feminine Alterity, hatefully embedded in his own body. His feminine counterpart becomes then Frank's haunting *Doppelgänger*, triggering a psychological response which results in madness, anxiety and severe misogyny.

Frank is undoubtedly conscious of his wickedness, albeit he does not consider it a flaw of character but merely a product of the hostile circumstances marking his life experience. Perhaps, it would be more accurate to assert that he is conscious of the negative moral judgement his reactions would receive, rather than being conscious of their gravity, insofar as he lacks the necessary emotional intelligence to truly understand their moral value. He does not find his evil deeds reproachable *per se*, since he has not acquired the capability to discern *good* from *evil* and *right* from *wrong*. His moral judgement is hinged on his own egoistic drive to survival, hence what is *right* and *good* is what allows him to protect his territory and to assert dominance on all other living beings – at least those smaller than him, such as rabbits and wasps; and what is *wrong* and *evil* is the unpredictable: what threatens the delicate equilibrium of his microcosm, like water, his brother's escape from the mental hospital and the discovery of being a woman.

Because of this semi-animalistic perspective, Frank does not consider damaging other people immoral, since his only aim is his personal well-being; yet he is aware of the fact that he cannot tell anybody about the murders he committed, nor about his secret, carcass-filled Bunker. He masters the art of dissimulating proper emotional reactions to loss and grief, demonstrating his ability to deceive everybody with a sentimental *mise-en-scène* after the death of Paul:

> I was distracted with grief this time, torn by guilt, and Eric had to look after me while I acted my part to perfection, though I say it myself. I didn't enjoy deceiving Eric, but I knew it was necessary; I couldn't tell him I'd done it because he wouldn't have understood why I'd done it. He would have been horrified, and very likely never have been my friend again. So I had to act the tortured, self-blaming child […]. (Banks 1990: 89-90)

And again after the death of Esmerelda:

> I knew that three deaths in my immediate vicinity within four years *had* to look suspicious, and I had already planned my reaction carefully. […] [I] tried to psyche myself up into something that might look like a terrible state for a wee boy to be in. […] Somebody stayed in my room all night and, whether it was my father, Diggs or anybody else, I kept them and me awake all night by lying quiet for a while, feigning sleep, then screaming with all my might and falling out of bed to thrash about the floor. […] By the end of the week I was still having the occasional fake nightmare […]. So I got to even up the score and have a wonderful, if demanding, week of fun acting. (Banks 1990: 120-2)

It is typical of psychopath individuals to be lacking empathy and to be unable to feel remorse or guilt, since they do not possess the moral emotions which the normative subject usually develops in childhood. Psychopathy is further ascribed to a deficit of the VIM (violence inhibition mechanism), a "cognitive mechanism which, when activated by non-verbal communications of distress (i.e., sad facial expression, the sight and sound of tears), initiates a withdrawal response; a schema will be activated predisposing the individual to withdraw from the attack".[166] However, lack of VIM is not sufficient for an individual to be diagnosed as a psychopath, since psychopathy is also caused by peculiar cognitive anomalies and by specific environmental circumstances.

When it comes to Frank it is undeniable that the undergone trauma of castration – albeit a fake one – and gender conditioning could have provoked a faulty response of his cognitive and emotional makeup. Frank's mimicry of guilt and self-reproach derives from his intake as to what sort of emotions violence ought to arise, yet it does not

[166] Robert J. R., Blair, 'A Cognitive Developmental Approach to Morality: Investigating the Psychopath', *Cognition,* 57 (1995), p. 3

reveal a deeper level of genuine feeling within himself: due to the deficiency of his violence inhibition mechanism and to his lack of empathy, he is only able to deem an act “bad” because others – family and peers – have taught him so. Accordingly, he is not able to distinguish between conventional rules and moral rules – the latter being considered more serious than the former – thus treating them as if they were interchangeable, failing to recognise the distinction between the two. Hence, to him a simple rule such as “wear clothes in public” and a moral one, like “do not kill”, have the same value and can both be broken, albeit transgressions must be perpetrated in secret. Unable to feel empathy for his victims, be them animals or children, Frank is merely able to understand when one of his crimes ought to generate negative feelings such as remorse and sadness and he has developed the capability to perfectly imitate them, yet he is not able to truly *feel* them due to his psychopathy.

What is interesting to notice is that Frank ascribes his murderous instincts to his – non-biological – gender, underlining once again how the physical and the psychological sphere are closely intertwined and co-dependent: “It occurred to me then, as it has before, that that is what men are really *for*. Both sexes can do one thing specially well; women can give birth and men can kill. We – I consider myself an honorary man – are the harder sex." (Banks 1990: 154) According to this reasoning, his violence and drive to supremacy over women, animals and other – “weaker” – people, is a justified and honourable demonstration of masculinity.

3.3 Frank’s Uncanny Double

Mental illness and psychopathic behaviour can be found in another character throughout the novel: Frank’s older brother, Eric. Although he lingers over the narrative *in absentia*, manifesting himself only through disturbing and frenzied phone

calls to Frank, he plays a fundamental role in triggering Frank's anxiety and consequent need for protection.

Eric, by the beginning of the novel, is hospitalised in a mental institution due to his derangement, culminated with the killing of several dogs:

> Apparently dogs had been disappearing from the town for a couple of weeks before some children saw my brother pouring a can of petrol over a little Yorkshire terrier and setting fire to it. Their parents believed them and went looking for Eric, to find him doing the same thing with an old mongrel he had tempted with aniseed ball sweeties, and caught. They chased him through the woods behind the town but lost him. (Banks 1990: 190)

As the reader will discover in chapter nine – "What happened to Eric?" – he was not always mad, as hinted by the brother: "Eric, with all his brightness, all his intelligence and sensitivity and promise, left the island and tried to make his way; chose a path and followed it." (Banks 1990: 180) Eric, a once promising, *normal* young man felt a pressing need to go away from the island where his family lived to work as a doctor, and this urge "consumed him, as it does *any real man*" (Banks 1990: 182) [my italics]. Hence, there was a time when Eric was perfectly sane and, most importantly, a "real man" in the eyes of Frank, albeit an extremely sensitive one[167].

However, after the trauma he was subjected to following his encounter with a severely ill child whose head was infested by maggots, his slow descent into madness began, and the first symptoms of psychopathy came to the fore. His decision to follow his path, ultimately "led to the destruction of most of what he was, changed him into quite a different person in whom the similarities to the sane young man he had been before only appear obscene" (Banks 1990: 180). To Frank, Eric is now a liability, he brings with him the threat of entropy within the perfectly balanced world of the younger

[167] "he was too sensitive to other people's feelings" (Banks 1990: 181)

brother, who is uncertain as to how to feel with regard to Eric's escape and his journey toward home. He imagines the older brother as "a force of fire and disruption approaching the sands of the island like a mad angel, head swarming with echoing screams of madness and delusion" (Banks 1990: 165).

Eric too commits atrocities throughout his life marked by mental illness, yet his evil deeds do not resemble Frank's inasmuch as the latter gives proof of being able of cold calculation and of hinging his actions on the need to survival and self-assertion. Eric, on the contrary, displays much less control over his actions, which appear chaotic and frantic, simple sadistic outbursts, rather than meticulous acts of revenge.

Eric is somewhat uncanny to Frank: he is, after all, a familiar presence returning into Frank's life, albeit presenting himself differently from what he remembered. He represents the *Unheimlich*[168] exerting his disquieting power over Frank within a disturbing frame of interferences: the past invading the present, the mad intruding the "sane"'s life, the repressed feminine disturbing the masculine, now more violent than ever.

Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche* identifies multiple sources of the uncanny: the incertitude as to whether an object is animated or not, omnipotence of thought and "magical" practices based on the latter. However, the most striking example of uncanniness is given by the figure of the *Doppelgänger*. Freud grounds his theory on the figure of the Double on the considerations brought forth by Otto Rank, who considered how in antiquity doubles were connected to the idea of guardian spirits. Drawing from this idea Freud suggested that such figures are created by the

[168] *Unheimlich* is used with reference to the theory of Sigmund Freud who defined it as the feeling of fright and disquietude one feels facing the return of the repressed, of something once familiar. I discuss the notion of uncanniness in chapter two, "Monstrous Minds".

individual's mind so as to protect himself from the loss of the ego, yet when the early stage of self-love comes to an end, the double changes its shape and acquires a much darker aura. It goes from being a reassuring presence and the personification of the promise of immortality, to being an omen of death, "a vision of terror, just as after the fall of their religion the gods took on daemonic shapes".[169]

Throughout the novel, Eric plays the function of "the proverbial mad (wo)man in the attic – who comes to haunt by invading domestic space".[170] He invades, then, Frank's *Heimlich* in the same way as the "monstrous doubles" of Gothic fiction used to invade and disrupt the life of their sane, morally righteous *alter egos*: he is, feasibly, the Hyde to his Jekyll, openly manifesting the symptomatology and destructive potential of Frank's restrained psychopathy, yet never actually showing himself directly until the very last chapter. However, the duality presented in the novel is more sinister still, insofar as neither Eric nor Frank could display a virtuous, *stable* personality, thus twisting the Double trope of the Gothic tradition – where the *Doppelgänger* is usually assigned the part of the persecutor – and turning it into a disquieting dialogue between two individuals just as perverse.

3.4 Monstrous Beliefs

Frank's life revolves around the need to please the "Wasp Factory", a complex apparatus built by him, who considers it the most important component of his – invented – personal cult. The Factory, according to Frank's imaginary beliefs, is able to foretell future events, yet in order for it to function properly he needs to provide it with sacrificial wasps, whose way of dying within this intricate device will ultimately be

[169] Sigmund, Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 143

[170] Martyn James, Colebrook, 'Bridging Fantasies: A Critical Study of the Novels of Iain Banks' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hull, 2012), p. 51

symbolically interpreted by Frank so as to foresee the future. The cult of the Wasp Factory is also hinged on precise obsequious rituals, that Frank performs daily and that are all hinged on his animalistic urge to protect his territory, and they go from micturating on the so-called "Sacrifice Poles" to spread his scent, to killing small animals and then exhibiting their severed heads all around the perimeter of the island as a warning. The reader is plunged in this semi-religious set of ceremonies from the very first chapter, "The Sacrifice Poles", whose title in itself is instructive as to the intrinsic principle of this fabricated mythology.

"Sacrifice", for instance, sheds light on the fact that Frank's rituality and beliefs are hinged on violence and death. The Sacrifice Poles[171] are totemic poles which Frank positioned around the perimeter of his territory, which ideally protect his safe space while simultaneously warning whichever living being approaches it about their faith, should they decide to trespass. Each pole displays the impaled heads of several animals[172], and Frank micturates on them so as to "infect" them with his scent and, according to his beast-like reasoning, power:

> I thought of the Sacrifice Poles. They were my early warning system and deterrent rolled into one; infected, potent things which looked out from the island, warding off. These totems were my warning shot; anybody who set foot on the island after seeing them should know what to expect" (Banks 1990: 5)

The meaning ascribed to the Poles and their very aesthetic resonate with images of tribal spirituality, hinged on the search for earthly signs of divine manifestations, prophecy and sacrifice. Frank's belief in the power of blood as means of exchange for protection and the symbolism applied to the Sacrifice Poles, as well as to the Factory,

[171] The use of capitalisation for the various items included in his doctrine (Sacrifice Poles, the Factory) further stresses Frank's obsequiousness.

[172] "One of the Poles held a rat head with two dragonflies, the other a seagull with two mice." (Banks 1990: 1)

recall atavistic attempts to decipher the world through magic practices. Magic, as asserted by Freud, “must serve to the most varied purposes. It must subject the process of nature to the will of man, protect the individual against enemies and dangers, and give him the power to injure his enemies”,[173]and these are precisely the aims Frank ascribes to his sacred totems. According to him, their function is to foretell any forthcoming event which may cause him harm, or disrupt the equilibrium of his microcosm.

All of Frank’s ceremonial objects are collected and safeguarded in the Bunker, his temple, his secret chamber of perversion decorated with his fetishes and sacred memorabilia:

> I looked around the Bunker. The severed heads of gulls, rabbits, crows, mice, owls, moles and small lizards looked down on me. They hung drying on short loops of black thread suspended from lengths of string stretched across the walls from corner to corner […]. Around the foot of the walls, on plinths of wood or stone, or on bottles and cans the sea had surrendered, my collection of skulls watched me. The yellow brain-bones of horses, dogs, birds, fish and horned sheep faced in towards Old Saul […].” (Banks 1990: 57)

The almost esoteric display of skulls and severed heads, all pointed toward the skull of the dog which allegedly castrated Frank, indirectly reveal that his entire mythology is founded on revenge and, most importantly, death. Frank’s cult is obscure, twisted, relying on violence and the shedding of his enemies’ blood: it is the religion of a monster, indeed, the spiritual product of his depravation.

The novel owes its title to the Factory, an intricate mechanism built by Frank which serves as entity of prediction, it plays a prophetic role. He seeks advice from the Factory when he is confronted with a difficult situation, approaching it with the same awed obsequiousness that ancient peoples would have shown to oracles or high priests:

[173] Sigmund, Freud, *Totem and Taboo, Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (London: Routledge, 1919), p. 131

"The Wasp Factory is beautiful and deadly and perfect. It would give me an idea of what was going to happen, it would help me to know what to do" (Banks 1990: 154). It is impossible to distinguish the essence of the Factory from death, insofar as the latter is what fuels it, and what gives it meaning:

> The reason it can answer questions is because every question is a start looking for an end, and the Factory is about the End – death, no less. Keep your entrails and sticks and dice and books and birds and voices and pendants and all the rest of that crap; I have the Factory, and it's about now and the future; not the past. (Banks 1990: 154)

The Factory safeguards Frank's darkest secrets[174], and it ultimately mirrors his intentions and hopes since, as Freud stated, all forms of magic "clearly and unmistakingly show the tendency of forcing the principles of psychic life upon the reality of things".[175]In other words, the apparent truths it reveals are merely the projections of Frank's death wish on his opponents and of his unconscious, dark desires.

Frank calls it "the Wasp Factory" because wasps are at the core of its functioning. It was built out of an old clock of big dimensions, which used to hang on the walls of a bank, and thus it presents twelve numerals on its face which is transformed by Frank into a complex web of tunnels. At the beginning of his ceremonials he puts a wasp inside the face of the clock, and from there the doomed insect has to choose which tunnel to go down to. At the end of each tunnel, there is a different room, corresponding to a different way of dying:

> Sometimes the wasp will fly, or crawl upside down on the bottom of the circle of glass […] but sooner or later they all choose a hole and a door which work, and their fate is sealed. Most of the deaths the Factory has to offer are automatic, but some do require my intervention for the *coup*

[174] Before practicing his rituals, Frank recites his "secret catechisms" which "contain [his] confessions, [his] dreams and hopes, [his] fears and hates […]. For that reason alone they are very dangerous" (Banks 1990: 157)
[175] Sigmund, Freud, *Totem and Taboo,* p. 152

> *de grâce*, and that, of course, has some bearing on what the Factory might be trying to tell me” (Banks 1990: 160)

The wasps can die because of spiders, fire, blades, electricity or even drawn in Frank’s urine. It is a disturbing device, to say the least, used to receive answers as to what will happen or when, or how, but its symbolism is not always clear. This is why Frank’s interpretation of the events is extremely important: the Factory is a truth-telling entity, yet it has nothing to do with magic and omnipotence of thought. What it always shows is what lies in the shadows of Frank’s twisted mind.

The Wasp Factory feeds on Frank’s interiority, it chews his trappings and sacrifices and eventually spits them out to reveal the fears and psychotic urges of its creator. It is, in itself, a monstrous Creature: Frank(enstein)’s extreme attempt at exerting control over the very world which rejects him, disfigures him and toys with his very sense of *self*. In a final flare of contemplation Frank realises that “the Factory was [his] attempt to construct life, to replace the involvement which otherwise [he] did not want”. Monstrous in body and mind at this point of the narrative, Frank concludes his reflection with the disturbing consideration that “it is always easier to succeed at death” (Banks 1990: 243).

CONCLUSION

Studying the evolution of monstrosity throughout time ultimately leads to the realisation that monsters are but the other side of humanity. The monstrous body is a medium to display the fears and anxieties which haunt a particular era, it brings to light what we would rather keep in the shadows: all of our imperfections and sins, our vulnerability and weaknesses. The skin of the monster is the site of corruption, yet it is also the site of revelation, and it has been exploited ontologically to problematize the understanding of human nature, and from a socio-political perspective to challenge and criticise the inconsistencies of the social order. Most importantly, the monster displays a kind of body which is characterised primarily by the idea of liminality: it is usually neither human nor animal, neither natural nor unnatural, neither male nor female, as it exists exactly at the borders of the known and it defies categorisation. The monster carries with it the idea of *multiplicity* that both threatens the ideal, unitary body, and serves to "challenge the homogeneity of society by revealing its tensions".[176]

The monster is a transgressive, challenging and threatening being, however, the boundaries of the "natural order" that it transgresses are dictated by the spiritual and scientific laws in force. What ought to be considered monstrous, then, changes according to times because it is a concept that strongly depends on the socio-cultural context of the historical period taken into consideration. From antiquity to the nineteenth century, monstrosity was ascribed to the realm of the body, as discussed in chapter one. The deformed body of the monster was then interpreted as signifier for

[176] Daniel, Punday, 'Narrative Performance in Contemporary Monster Story', *The Modern Language Review,* 97 (October 2002), pp. 803-20 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3738613>

something *else*, a divine message, an omen, and thus it was always subjected to individual interpretation. “Monstrous births” – the births of deformed children, such as Siamese twins or hermaphrodites – according to this interpretative key, never went unnoticed. Some of these instances became famous to the point that truth and myth started to mingle, as in the case of the notorious Monster of Ravenna[177], whose alleged portraits and descriptions were reported all around Italy in the sixteenth century. It was depicted as a monster with both human and animal features, and to each physical peculiarity it possessed was assigned a specific symbolism[178]. Legends about monstrous births happened to circulate at critical moments in history, usually on the verge of a war. The figure of the Monster of Ravenna, for instance, was charged with political meaning because of the outbreak of the Battle of Ravenna which took place briefly after the birth of the monster. Monstrous births prove fundamental as to understand the extent to which the body – the grotesque body, the deformed and abnormal body – has always been heavily charged with symbolism and hence connected to its socio-political background.

The body has been at the core of the notion of monstrosity for centuries, yet in order for it to be described as monstrous it had to be twisted: the ideal proportions it ought to exhibit according to the Humanist standard had to be altered and its symmetry, perfect balance and beauty had to be desecrated. As a consequence, monsters’ bodies were never corresponding to the normative, accepted standard of physicality; on the contrary they arrogantly displayed their alterity, their belonging to a dimension of *otherness*. Monsters violated and made sport of their depravity, they rejected morality, and this was mirrored in the abnormalities their bodies presented.

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[177] Further reference to the Monster of Ravenna can be found in chapter one, “Monstrous Bodies”.
[178] The presence of both male and female genitalia, for instance, was interpreted as a symbol of depravity.

The monstrous body was usually the result of different alteration processes: zoomorphism, magnification, miscegenation, disfiguration and/or the unnatural fusion between two distinct and oftentimes opposing natural and cultural categories, whose union would be considered impure and sinful. The vampire, for instance, is the perfect exemplification of this process, insofar as it walks in between life and death, merging the two states in a body that resonates with humanity and yet distances itself from it because of its animalistic need for blood and incapability of baring the light of the sun. Its liminality is presented in the epithet "undead", which indicates a creature which is neither alive nor a corpse. It is what Noël Carroll calls a "fusion-figure"[179], an umbrella term that encompasses all of those monsters whose body is split between two natures and two conditions, including the revenant, the possessed, the zombie and the contemporary cyborg.

The process of fusion clearly shows the multiplicity of the monstrous body, yet to understand the direction that monstrosity is taking in contemporary culture and literature, it is important to take into consideration the process of monster formation denominated as "fission". According to this method, the contradictory elements that compose a monster are distributed over several different identities which, however, are always interconnected. This is the case of the Double, or *Doppelgänger*, which proves central to the understanding of monstrosity from the advent of psychoanalysis in the nineteenth century to nowadays. In chapter two it has been discussed how the studies of Sigmund Freud are at the core of the contemporary conception of the individual, whose sense of self is not necessarily rooted in spirituality, but rather in the inner workings of the mind. The constant introspection promoted by psychoanalysis brought

[179] Noël, Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York – London: Routledge, 1990), p. 44

unprecedented attention to the subjectivity of the individual, consequently promoting self-reflection and a strong interest for all the mysteries of the human mind. The attention that was once directed to the body and to the realm of the physical started to be channelled to the psychological dimension of people, and this naturally implied a transformation of the idea of monstrosity. The Double became a popular figure of Gothic and horror fiction because, in this sense, it epitomises the split the modern Man might feel after wandering for too long within himself, and after finding what, perhaps, ought to have remained in the shadows. It is the other, darker face of psychological introspection: the so-called "beast within" made flesh.

The interest in the pantheon of terrifying monsters of ancient times that haunted the folklore of our ancestors, such as dragons, chimaeras, krakens and the like was replaced by a strong fascination with "human monsters". Nevertheless, if at first monsters were labelled as such solely on the basis of physical deformity or imperfection – as exemplified by monstrous births – at the shift of the century, in the post-Freudian era, monstrosity was absorbed by the psychological and behavioural fields. In particular, monstrosity became interwoven to the concept of the *Unheimlich* (the uncanny) which, according to Freud, would be the feeling of fright and vulnerability perceived when facing something repressed come back to light, something once *Heimlich* – familiar and homely – which now scares us because even if a part of us can recognise it, it results estranged from our consciousness. Monsters would then raise a strong feeling of uncanniness inasmuch as they remind us of the human and yet twist it and distance themselves from it.

The monsters that generated in the twentieth century were the deranged criminal and the abnormal individual, both of whom were thoroughly analysed in the publications of

Michael Foucault[180]. In particular, he shed light on the way the modern monster was received by the audience, and he pointed to the practice of confinement of the mad and the deviant. This is relevant insofar as it demonstrates the extent to which the monster is, to all effects, as part of society as the normative person, underlining thus its belonging to humanity. The monster birthed by psychoanalysis informs the contemporary monster, whose power to scare and disquiet is hinged on the fact that it is uncannily *human* and, most importantly, it can deceive us to the point that we might even find it *perfectly* normal, even fascinating.

The quintessential contemporary monster is the serial killer, a figure whose popularity has increased exponentially throughout the twenty-first century, starting from the sixties and seventies. It is paramount to take into consideration that contemporary culture is deeply marked by the advent of mass-media, and free access to the Internet allows for a faster, more immediate circulation of information worldwide. Nowadays the majority of families has access to a computer and to a television. This is why monster studies need not overlook the trends which flow into popular culture through the several platforms available and accessible to the general audience. Google, Facebook, Instagram, Netflix and many other digital portals are widespread and affordable to the average person, and by paying close attention to the news and cultural trivia in circulation it is evident that a big portion of the current entertainment programmes are dedicated to the cult of the macabre. It is through those media that serial killers and other contemporary monsters proliferate and mesmerise the most varied audiences all over the world. In fact, many serial killers built their own public persona through television, as in the case of Ted Bundy, the notorious murderer to

[180] Michel, Foucault, *Abnormal, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson, trans. by Graham Burchell (London – New York: Verso, 2003)

whom Netflix has dedicated a highly successful documentary in 2019 ("Conversations With a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes") and to which followed many others[181]. Monsters, then, are well under the public eye, and what is more they are even able to fascinate and to charm those around them and they show a great ability to manipulate the news and to take advantage of them to engorge their ego.

Monstrosity has become subtle, almost imperceptible, and it destabilises us because it forces us to confront ourselves with the idea that there is just a fine line separating us from the dark abyss from which monsters dwell, lurking. In light of these considerations, Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory* (1984) is a gem of contemporary Gothic literature, in which converge all the facets of monstrosity, from the most evident ones to the more inconspicuous ones. Frank, the main character, is a monster both under the physical and the moral point of view. On the one hand, he defies biological categorisation because of his alleged castration and the ultimate revelation that he is, in fact, a *she*. In this sense, Frank corresponds to a more traditional acceptation of the monster, whose abnormality is to be found in the deformed and grotesque body that problematizes representation insofar as it does not allow for classification. He is a liminal creature that challenges the traditional binary thinking of Western culture, especially so because at the end of the novel he embraces his gender indeterminateness.

On the other hand, he belongs to the modern conception of monstrosity, that corresponds to moral depravity and extreme wickedness of character. Frank is a child who has killed three other children, family members, because of his twisted sense of morality and because of the disturbing precepts of his personal mythology. The latter is, in fact, hinged on animalistic behaviour and on the urge to avenge any wrongdoing

[181] To name but a few: "I Am a Killer" (2018), "Serial Killer, with Piers Morgan" (2018), "The Confession Killer" (2019), "American Murder: The Family Next Door" (2020) and "The Night Stalker" (2021).

suffered by the child, albeit *right* and *wrong* depend solely on his subjective sense of morality. From this point of view he resembles the apathetic and manipulative figure of the serial killer, insofar as they display the same *modus operandi*: they commit atrocities, yet they are convinced of the legitimacy of their actions because of their sense of righteousness based on their narcissistic sense of morality and they are capable of manipulating other people's reactions because of their knowledge of the moral values embraced by those around them.

Frank epitomises the contemporary monster especially in consideration of the fact that monsters mirror the fears and anxieties of their era: the monstrous is above all "that which creates this sense of vertigo, that which calls into question our […] epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us […] to acknowledge the failures of systems of categorization".[182]Accordingly, Frank is a character who plays with the much discussed theme of gender and sexuality, and what is more he is a child forcing the adult reader to consider that even children – who ought to be the epithet of purity and innocence – could be monsters.

Monstrosity in contemporaneity would then seem to be marked by the question: where does humanity end, and where does the monstrous start? In ancient maps unknown and dangerous territories would be indicated by the writing "HIC SVNT LEONES" ("Here Be Lions"), which was later transformed into "HIC SVNT DRACONES" in the Lenox Globe and the Da Vinci Globe in 1504. It was easy, then, to point at a remote land and feel safe in knowing that the dragons were miles away from us. It was comforting to

[182] *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous,* eds Asa Simon Mittman, Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), pp. 387-435

think to be invincible: dragons could be slayed, after all. Monsters were not as scary when they could be identified, pointed at and isolated. They could be enclosed – *foreclosed* – away, out of sight, under control. Yet everything changed: monsters look like us, now, and perhaps they live within ourselves, locked away where the light of our consciousness cannot reach. *Ubi* sunt dracones, now? They are, indeed, among us. They flow into our homes through the media and through our bookshelves, they talk to us, they whisper unrepeatable things that we have learnt not to listen to. Yet there they are, ubiquitous, threatening. They are our anxieties made flesh, and our deepest fears shine through their skin. Monsters are just the other face of humanity, and they will keep haunting us as long as there will be traumas and fears we are not ready to face. Yet we are attracted to them to the point that the horror genre has become one of the most prolific ones throughout the last century: we want to read about monsters, we want to be scared by them, and most importantly we need them to exist so that we can feel *normal*, *other* from them.

Where are the monsters? Sometimes, as Frank, among others, has taught us, they can be found in the mirror.

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