

MONSTROSITY IN LITERATURE,  
PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND PHILOSOPHY

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## PREFACE

Monsters have long been objects of fascination and horror. In one sense, society needs monstrosity. The centuries-old separation of humans from animals upon which so much of the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] rest cannot survive *without* the monsters it perpetually conjures up only to dispel them all the more completely. Yet if those monsters were no longer spirited away but, instead, unhesitatingly faced, then the monster's stare would transfix this anthropomorphizing gaze until classificatory schemes shatter just as surely as would each and every social order come apart at the seams were monstrosities allowed to loosen the fabric of society. Monstrosity presents thought with a preeminently modern problem: classifications begin to fall apart, order turns into disorder, normality bleeds into abnormality and the very ground of the human starts to give way. This is the ever-present fear that forces thought to not only harden itself against monstrosity, but also, and perhaps more importantly, compels thought to infuse its monsters with the type of unassailable fantasmatic consistency this volume throws into question. Monstrosity's critical significance for various disciplines has not passed unnoticed. Some time ago historians of science Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park noted that the increasing critical thematization of monsters and "fascination with the extraordinary and the marginal" in the history of science have been made possible by a persistent "deep questioning of ideals of order, rationality, and good taste" (Daston/Park 1998, p. 10). But it is not only the history of science which has picked up on monstrosity's contemporary resonance. Numerous monographs and anthologies in various disciplines have been inspired by the recent publication of Foucault's lec-

ture *Abnormal* (French 1999; English 2003; German 2003), wherein monstrosity is regarded as essential to the genealogy of normality.<sup>1</sup>

The following essays examine monsters and the monstrous as they emerge at the intersection of literature, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. Here it is not so much a question of those real, bodily monsters of former centuries (such as the hermaphrodite) that have since lost their power to terrify and migrated into aesthetics<sup>2</sup> on account of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's increasing scientification and naturalization. This volume is concerned, instead, with the broader category of the monstrous (as well as its cognates, like the uncanny) and attends to the ways in which this monstrosity figures as both a subversive category at the same time as it is transformed into the other of whatever the prevailing order deems proper and normal. For something very peculiar happened during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Monsters of flesh and blood were replaced by a new form of monstrosity. Now the slightest deviation from order (criminals, different races, etc.) became monstrous, since every order was racked by the "invisible monstrosity of the interior" (Overthun 2009, p. 59, translation E. V.) it attached to particular bodies – a development whose most extreme consequence was the annihilation of the monstrous (the "Jew") in National Socialism. Monsters and the mon-

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1 For the German context, see e. g. Geisenhanslüke/Mein 2009a; Röttgers/Schmitz-Emans 2011; Shelton 2008; Stamberger 2011: Geisenhanslüke and Mein relate the conjuncture of the theme of monstrosity to the Darwin anniversary of 2009, but also to the "public horror about the creation of 'monstrous' human-animal-hybrids in stem cell research; to the media staging of moral monsters under the banner of incest, cannibalism, and pedophilia, and to the current outrage at the insatiable greed of monstrous managers leading to the collapse of the financial market, as it were a monster in itself" (Geisenhanslüke/Mein 2009b, p. 9, translation E. V.). For the Anglo-American context, see Cohen 1996; Hock-soon Ng 2004; Kearney 2003; Knoppers/Landes 2004; Wolfe 2005.

2 See Overthun 2009; Hagner 1995. Of course, one would have to also mention those very "freaks" that were exhibited at fairs until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

strous are, thus, indissociable from historical attempts at both constituting and confronting society's alien other.

Literature as well as film has proven particularly receptive to monstrosity. Although life is notably poor in flesh and blood monsters, Georges Canguilhem writes, the same cannot be said for the realm of fantasy (see Canguilhem 1965). There, in fantasy and fiction in particular, monsters continue to leave their mark, especially when monstrosity has been either banished from scientific rationality or society is intent on "integrating" monsters within another type of normality (see Hagner 1995, p. 81). Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the enlightened and supposedly autonomous subject of philosophy has been haunted by literary *doppelgangers* such as puppets, automata, and monsters (see Meyer-Drawe 2011, p. 308). These *doppelgangers*' very uncanniness urgently points, whether we like it or not, to that monstrosity at the heart of the modern subject.

Indeed, the subject's fundamental monstrosity and the sense of the uncanny were not only articulated by literature, but became essential to the inner development of psychoanalysis itself. It was not, however, the monstrous "coming from the outside" that concerned psychoanalysis, but all those small and seemingly insignificant monsters pulsing from within the subject's very insides. Within the context of Lacan's return to Freud, psychoanalysis has shown itself especially receptive to the idea that the monstrous, which does not simply mark an alienated or distorted limit-figure of humanity to be overcome, but also designates something like the horror at the core of all human existence and is thus to be defined as a terrifying excess inherent to "being-human."<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to both literature and psychoanalysis, philosophy has long been decidedly less open to the monstrous. Functioning as a kind of border control dedicated

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3 Here, one would have to refer to the categories of the uncanny in Freud, of the abject in Julia Kristeva, or of nausea (see also Shelton 2008).

to defending the reigning order of things against monstrous violations, philosophy has repeatedly attempted to banish monstrosity from its totalizing political as well as aesthetic representations of thought and human nature. In this way, philosophy turned a particular conception of the human into a transcendental norm and normality, thereby transforming every conception that did not correspond to its norm into versions of some monstrous other. Like scientific rationality, philosophy was subject to “the anxiety of the indeterminate and the ambiguous” (Gamm 1992, p. 50, translation E. V.). Since the mid-twentieth century, however, philosophy itself has undergone considerable transformations. In the wake of – and, perhaps, under the influence of – both literature and psychoanalysis, recent philosophy has experienced a kind of return of that monstrosity it long repressed. The work of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek testify to this new philosophical conceptualization of relations between thought and the monstrous.<sup>4</sup>

It is against the background of these brief reflections that the essays gathered in this volume examine particular texts and authors in order to render visible particular dimensions of monstrosity. The section “Literature” opens with

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4 These works also imply reading the history of philosophy against the grain. For instance, Slavoj Žižek demonstrates again and again that the monstrous is to be grasped as the reverse side of the modern subject since Kant; that is to say, the authors of German idealism attempt to come to terms with the uncanny and the monstrous as a kind of “pre-ontological dimension of the spectral Real” that, according to Žižek, “precedes the ontological constitution of reality” (see Žižek 1999, pp. 46–50). Gerhard Gamm also points out that “the philosophical discourse of modernity, taking as its point of departure Hegel’s speculative thinking of difference, recognizes that it has to take recourse to the other of itself: the alien, madness, body, gender, death, even its own blind spot or the unfathomable – in short, it has to take recourse to the determining indeterminateness of a stationary fastening ground that is carried by an impulse or differential sense corroding and subverting all (reasonable) ground” (Gamm 2000, p. 89, translation E. V.). This very movement is the site of the monstrous.



Ryan Crawford's trenchant critique of different reading and interpretive strategies that, by employing the category of monomania, have turned *Moby Dick's* Captain Ahab into a psychological and political monster. Benjamin M. Schacht and David Calder analyze monstrous crimes depicted in seminal works by Richard Wright (*Native Son*) and Tennessee Williams (*Suddenly Last Summer*), thereby bringing to the fore the social and spatial ramifications operative in the construction of monstrosity. On the other hand, Joela Zeller traces different figures of the monstrous in works by Thüring von Ringoltingen, Heinrich von Kleist, and Oskar Panizza in order to demonstrate the uncanny capacity of monsters to cross social, sexual, and even religious borders. The section "Psychoanalysis" is opened by two essays that demonstrate psychoanalysis's complex grasp of monstrous formations in the context of film. Andrea Wald examines *film noir* and shows that the *femme fatale*, as figure of the monstrous, threatens patriarchal orders; Todd Kesselman's reading of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* employs Freud's category of the uncanny in order to throw light on numerous Kantian questions articulated in/by this film; and Erik Vogt's essay traces a number of psychoanalytic/philosophical/religious figures of monstrosity in Slavoj Žižek's multi-faceted *oeuvre*. The section "Philosophy" opens with James R. Watson's reading of Franz Kafka's "Report to An Academy"; by bastardly linking Kafka's text on the "humanization" of an ape with Freudian insights into the workings of language, he unearths the monstrous order of both contemporary capitalism and Hegel's conceptual system. James Murphy's essay revolves around the question of violence and the monstrous images of the colonized (and the colonizers) in Frantz Fanon. Finally, Gerhard Unterthurner's close reading of *History of Madness* and *Abnormal* brings to the fore two very different approaches to the monstrous in the seminal work of Michel Foucault.

The original idea of assembling a collection of essays on monsters in literature, psychoanalysis, and philosophy arose out of a workshop organized and held in the context of the

2010 ISSEI conference held in Ankara, Turkey. We would also like to express our gratitude to Ryan Crawford for his invaluable and indefatigable editorial suggestions.

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