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Introduction: Dimensions of Monstrosity

In his study of horror fiction, Joseph Gixti contends that monstrous individuals symbolise the ‘means of evading the real implications of the uncertainties and discomforts which appear to be endemic to the constantly changing social, political, and economic conditions of our technologically oriented cultures’.¹ Gixti is correct in asserting that monsters in horror fiction are often metaphors for ‘unpleasant social and existential realities’² that contemporary society seeks to deny and expurgate. They become ‘scapegoats’, embodied as abjectly and horrifyingly other, which must be confronted and destroyed. However, Gixti’s view that monsters are used as evasive means of such ‘uncertainties and discomforts’ is problematic. Sophisticated monster narratives often provide searching commentaries about the way culture and ideology work. These narratives show how monstrosity is profoundly interrelated with the culture that produces, camouflages, marginalises and resists it. It is perhaps true that monster narratives may not, as Gixti asserts, offer the ‘tools’ to understand the ‘meaning’ of the monster or the way it functions;³ nevertheless, they provide the context within which monsters are fashioned and understood. This study proposes to read some important monster narratives in this light. Drawing predominantly on recent psychoanalytical and cultural theories, I want to demonstrate that some narratives foreground monsters to problematise the notion of ‘reality’ constructed as the ‘Symbolic order’ – an ideological construction which largely dictates the way society and culture operate.

If major nineteenth-century Gothic narratives, especially *fin de siècle* Gothic, situate the monster as geographically and physically other,⁴ the monster in much contemporary literature is located, by contrast, in an ‘elsewhere’ that is intimately with(in) us. The monster ruptures the

reality of the self from *within* the subject – it reveals that the self is ultimately a complex ‘construction’ of society, culture, language and ideology, one which, in the process of becoming constructed, has subjugated ‘something’ more fundamental within the self. But this ‘something’ cannot be totally erased, and, given the right circumstances, can return to disrupt the frail construction. Often, these moments are profound and irreversible: they are, bluntly, the ‘moment of the monster’. Here, the work of psychoanalysis is especially valuable in disclosing these moments, but analysis does not end with just the excavation.⁵ It is the aim of this introduction to posit a ‘theory’ of the monster using the psychoanalytical insights of Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek and Julia Kristeva; my aim is to show that not only are the monster, the unconscious, and ideology intricately related, but that monstrosity is often a struggle with, or a traumatic experience of, what is known in the Lacanian model, as the Void. And of course, to build a theory of the monster using psychoanalysis, important concepts such as desire, fantasy, the abject, the gaze, and their relationship with monstrosity, must first be carefully established.

Monstrosity is largely *interpellated* by the Symbolic gaze which prescribes certain significances to particular bodies and behaviours, rendering them monstrous. And as aberrant bodies are most directly visible, it is not surprising that such bodies, failing to conform to the Symbolic normative, are immediately coded as monstrous. Briefly referring to the historico-sociological studies undertaken by Étienne Balibar, Michel Foucault and Francis Barker, I will demonstrate how the concept of law grants freedom and autonomy to the subject, but simultaneously dominates and subjugates it as well. It is my contention that this paradoxical relationship between bodies and the law engenders monsters. The law, translated into psychoanalytical terms, is resonant of the Law-of-the-Father, and bodies which imperil this law (because they are abnormal or criminal, for example) must be repressed or eliminated. But of course, this is precisely the ironic crux of the matter in contemporary monster narratives: for here, the monsters have learned to elude the Symbolic gaze, significantly manipulating and deconstructing it instead in multifaceted ways.

The paradox of the monster

‘The monster is eloquent,’ writes critic Peter Brooks.⁶ Brooks’s formulation, moreover, is paradoxical because the monster is conventionally excluded from the language which has otherwise determined it. That

is, although the monster is situated within language, its trademark is that it is unspeakable. The monster is the impasse of language, but is at the same time also an incarnation of language. More significantly, once the monster is articulated – that is, once it is embodied in words – it can no longer be unsaid.⁷ Clearly, there is a problematic relationship between language and the monster. Jonathan Dollimore, in his study of Shakespeare's Caliban, argues that the perverse language Caliban utters is not the result of his 'essentially perverted nature', or of his coloniser's corrupting language upon his 'essentially good nature'; instead, Dollimore surmises that:

He curses in terms of a language which constructs him as potentially that kind of subject even as he learns it. In this sense, he possesses no essential nature, perverted or true, but an identity partly formed in and by language. ... It is within and by language that he is made or made able – created/coerced – to curse.⁸

Dollimore's view is that Caliban's monstrosity is constructed by and in language. It is language that has 'created' and 'coerced' him to occupy the position of a monster because it is the only language he knows – the language of his masters who pronounce his monstrosity. This is not the same as language 'corrupting' him. To say this would presuppose that Caliban has an 'essentially good nature', which his colonisers' language subsequently distorts with their linguistic influence; but Dollimore denies Caliban any 'essential nature' altogether, and declares that he is a monster because language has constructed, even incarnated, him so. To a point, Dollimore's view agrees with Brooks's in that monsters are 'birthed' by language. But Brooks's argument goes a step further: he argues that the monster 'exceeds' language. What I take Brooks to mean is that although the monster may be created by language, it subsequently surpasses language and even jams it, forcing language to encounter an impasse and/or to become monstrous itself. The monster can do this because, although situated within language, it is also 'an excess of signification, a strange by-product or leftover of the process of making meaning'.⁹ Monsters are born in language, but take root when meaning falters. They are eloquent, but their utterance is of a radical kind which surpasses language. Alain Grosrichard provides a clue to the kind of eloquence the monster utters. For him, the monster delivers 'truth from elsewhere ... whether the monster delivers the truth to us or receives it from us, only the direction flow changes. Truth always passes through the monster'.¹⁰ The monster is a conduit

which transfers a truth which must be '[interpreted] before eliciting an explanation'.¹¹ It seems that Grosrichard subscribes to the notion that the monster is ultimately situated in language, and that it has no significance (truth) until it is interpreted and explained. But I want to argue that this is not the case entirely. Like Brooks, Grosrichard sees the monster as part of, and *beyond*, language. Unlike Brooks though, who argues that the monster emanates from language, Grosrichard's monster is external, arriving from an 'elsewhere', which must subsequently be incorporated into familiar systems of knowledge (such as language). Brooks's monster begins with language and subsequently moves beyond it, whilst Grosrichard's is already beyond language, which language must then incorporate in order to understand.

The 'truth' that Grosrichard's monster delivers is of a metaphysical kind – 'a divine sign of an impending threat or punishment'.¹² The origin of the monster – the 'elsewhere' – in this case implies the supernatural, a view which corresponds with the etymological meaning of the word 'monster'. 'Monster' as critics tell us, is derived from the Latin *monstrum*, from which the verbs *monstrare* ('show' or 'reveal') and *monere* ('warn' or 'portend') are formed, and which also refers to a divine omen that announces God's (or the gods') will or judgement.¹³ The supernatural may be the traditional 'elsewhere' of monsters, but psychoanalysis has unearthed another 'elsewhere' which has become, in my view, increasingly the heuristic site to locate the 'origin' of many contemporary monsters. If traditional monsters are intruders from beyond who penetrate the human system to signify God's judgement, contemporary monsters are intimately bound to the very human system which they inhabit, and which they subtly undermine. That is, the monster is now a part of us, with us, and sometimes, even within us. The 'elsewhere' is the human psyche, and more specifically, the unconscious – the repressed other which returns to haunt, and subsequently disrupt, the surface. Whether supernatural or unconscious, the truth which the monster delivers is always terrible because it reveals something which we deny and fear.

Another paradox of the monster is its place as an 'intimate stranger'. The monster has physical and social proximity to the human, but signifies nevertheless, as a threat. Through acts of definition and delineation, humankind attempts to contrast itself from monsters. In his study of the monster as a literary trope, Joseph Adriano points out that the monster is situated either as metaphor (if it involves 'a representation of some human characteristics') or as metonymy (if it is 'represented in incongruity with the human, in

juxtaposition').¹⁴ Adriano's division is rather simplistic, but typifies the point that the monster is defined *against* the human – as either somewhat similar, or totally other. The term 'human' can further be extended to include human concepts about, for example, the natural world: a twenty-foot parrot is a monster because it defies the humanly constructed order of things. Humanness, then, with all its connotations, is the yardstick to distinguish the monster.¹⁵ The need to maintain 'humanness' as normative necessarily relegates threatening entities to an 'other'. The more perilous the (potential) threat, the more monstrous the other becomes. Yet, what is revealed in this dialectic is that monsters attest to an unspoken understanding that the 'human' may not, after all, be stable and coherent. As Jeffrey Cohen argues, monsters must always 'be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literal-historical) that generate them'.¹⁶ Monsters then are always, in different degrees, the product of cultural, social and historical anxieties. They are projections of some ideological crisis, and become 'embodied' (such as in literature and/or through scientific classification) so that such anxieties can be 'controlled', examined, understood, and subsequently, 'resolved'. As an example, consider the transformation of socio-cultural *angst* into the phenomenon of literary monsters found in nineteenth-century Gothic narratives, especially *Dracula* (1897) and H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896).¹⁷ Franco Moretti, for example, understands the vampire to be the displacement of 'the antagonism and horrors evidenced *within* society *outside* society itself'.¹⁸ Staged through literature, a society's anxiety about its 'intimate stranger' is revealed and fictively resolved by making it exclusively an 'other'. But this form of 'resolution' belies the fact that there is already present a familiar monster which cannot be so easily cathected. *Dracula*, for example, cannot be definitively killed. Literature as a vehicle to expurgate the 'other' fails, in the end, to resolve the anxieties experienced: the monster cannot be destroyed because *it is within the self*. The intricate fabric that knits together human reality and experience – language, culture, society, gender and sexuality – is fundamentally a construction of fantasies to provide the human subject with coherence and meaning. But when this subject's reality is somehow exposed for its fantastic nature, there is a possibility that the she will encounter a profound loss of subjectivity. This dissolution of subjectivity has several consequences: death, madness, and, as this study will demonstrate, monstrous becoming.

Psychoanalysis and the monster: from fantasy to the object

My reading of selected monster narratives relies heavily on psychoanalytical theories; hence, it is necessary at this juncture that I discuss some of the key terms that will recur intermittently throughout this book, and how exactly I will be deploying them. I begin with Jacques Lacan's notion of fantasy. As he has famously demonstrated, fantasy is the 'support of desire'; it signifies a 'lack', the desiring after an object which is always already lost:

[It] is not the object that is the support of desire. The subject sustains himself as desiring in relation to an ever more complex signifying ensemble. This is apparent enough in the form of the scenario it assumes, in which the subject, more or less recognisable, is somewhere, split, divided, generally double, in his relation to the object which usually does not show its true face.¹⁹

For Lacan, it is the fantastic quality of the object, and not the object *per se*, that rouses desire. This, of course, is not recognised by the subject, who continues to view the object as desirable. The split (or doubling) experienced by the subject in relation to the object is the vacillation of desire between the object as *substitute* of desire (that is, fantasy) and the *Real* object of desire which is impossible. This 'Real' must be distinguished from the familiar 'real': the former is psychoanalytically loaded, and denotes the (lost) original site of desire; the latter represents an ideological position within the Symbolic order, which, in Judith Roof's definition, is 'the set of rules and language that comprise the sociocultural order in its largest sense. This means not only language and laws, but the principles of substitution and displacement through which language and Law work... [the] Symbolic order's substitutive process contributes to the psychic development of individuals and grounds the organisation of societies'.²⁰ In Roof's assessment, the Symbolic order permeates and encompasses every aspect of what is designated 'reality'. Monsters, on the other hand, expose the 'constructedness' of this reality, and reintegrates the subject into its original locus in the 'Void'.²¹ This Void occupies 'the deepest level of our psyches', and confirms 'that our desires and our identity come to us from outside [that is, *interpellated* by the Symbolic order] and that they are founded upon a void'.²²

Fantasy thus serves as a screen to distinguish the subject from the Real by positioning 'an ever more complex signifying ensemble', or a

complex system of objects and signifiers, to motivate the subject into repressing the impossible original site of desire. But as Žižek points out:

symbolisation ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully 'covering' the [R]eal, that it always involves some unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt. The [R]eal (the part of reality that remains non-symbolised) returns in the guise of spectral apparitions To put it simply, reality is never directly 'itself,' it represents itself only via its incomplete-failed symbolisation, and spectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the [R]eal, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality.²³

Žižek demonstrates that there are two forms of 'reality': one is a construction of the Symbolic mechanism (variously represented as culture, gender, sexuality, and ideology), and the other is that which is outside the Symbolic mechanism, and which ultimately encompasses all aspects of the first real. This 'surplus' reality is known as *the Real* which persistently haunts reality. Fantasy belongs in reality because it symbolises desire through a complex ensemble of signifiers, thus effectively alienating desire from its original point (in the Real); but fantasy is also always already threatened by the spectre of the Real:

The symbolic order is 'barred', the signifying chain is inherently inconsistent, 'not-all', structured around a hole [Void]. The inherent non-symbolisable reef maintains the gap between the symbolic and the [R]eal, that is, it prevents the symbolic from 'falling into' the [R]eal – and again, what is ultimately at stake is this decentring of the [R]eal with regard to the symbolic is the cause: the [R]eal is the absent cause of the symbolic. The Freudian and Lacanian name for this cause, is, of course, *trauma*.²⁴

In this model, trauma is the realisation that reality is ultimately nothing more than a Void disguised as signifying fantasy. Trauma is the disappearance of the Symbolic and the resurfacing of its excess – the Real. The fact that the Real is non-symbolisable immediately aligns it with the Void, serving perhaps, as a reminder of the presence of this 'hole'. If this view is appropriated to the intimate monster, it is then clear that the monster is the surplus of the constructed subject which defy the Symbolic mechanism. The monster rejects its place in the

Symbolic and recalls the subject's original impossible desire now constituted as a Void. And as much as the monster is separate from the self (Reality is *not* the real), it is nevertheless *a part of* the self (Reality is the *surplus* of the real), *an intermediary figure between the self and its collapse into trauma*.

In contemporary monster narrative, the monster can be read as being both real and unreal: that is, the monster is *irreal*. Fantasy contains the surplus by constructing desire around variable and increasingly complex objects, which ironically become progressively difficult to sustain. That which is constituted as reality is experienced to its limits and the Real becomes impossible to ignore. Consequently, the subject becomes a 'hole in the other';²⁵ that is, the subject, in confronting monstrosity (often) within itself, encounters its own dissolution, and transforms into a 'surplus' of itself which can no longer be Symbolically contained. To an extent, this would also culminate in a psychoanalytical definition of horror. As Žižek argues:

[The] relationship between fantasy and horror of the Real that it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time, it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference. Are not the images of the ultimate horrible Thing, from the deep-sea gigantic squid to the ravaging twister, fantasmatic creations *par excellence*?²⁶

In his usual play of paradoxes, Žižek demonstrates that to conceal is already to disclose, and the more complex the concealment of fantasy, the more it arrives at its own limits, and the more horrible is the Real in its re-emergence. The monsters in horror fiction are projections of deeper, more fundamental and primal, anxieties which are cast as physical *embodiments* (the gigantic squid, the vampire), so that they can be subjugated. Žižek uses the familiar 'Thing' (*Das Ding*) to describe the limits of Symbolisation which give birth to the Real. The Symbolic, in its most powerful manifestations, is represented by the *objet petit a*, which is:

[n]ot what we desire, what we are after, but rather, that which sets our desire in motion, in the sense of the formal frame which confers consistency on our desire: desire is, of course, metonymical; it shifts from one object to another; through all these displacements, however, desire nonetheless retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of phantasmic features which, when they are encoun-

tered in a positive object, makes us desire this object – *objet petit a* as the cause of desire is nothing other than this formal frame of consistency.²⁷

The *objet petit a* is the object *par excellence* of fantasy;²⁸ it motivates the subject to desire, but always within the boundaries of reality; it is reliant on objects which are phantasmic in the strictest sense because, despite their elicitation of a belief that they *are* desirable, they never ultimately fulfil desire. The *objet petit a* both encourages and defers desire. Nevertheless, it is necessary because it disguises desire as a product of the Symbolic. For its dissolution would mean trauma (and its constituent, horror). This trauma is the loss of subjectivity as we know it: subjectivity is now replaced by its own impossibility, ‘a hole in the other’. This is what encountering the monster entails: the subject’s anchoring in reality is suddenly displaced, leaving it staring into an endless gape of the threatening other. The subject is now liminal, positioned as unreal, experiencing within itself the monstrous.

One interesting and recurrent characteristic which I have observed in reading contemporary monster narratives is that they share a similar etiology of horror. Often implicitly, but sometimes explicitly, monster narratives posit the feminine (or directly, the maternal) as the source of impossibility. Deploying Lacan’s and Kristeva’s conceptual frameworks, I want to offer a tentative interpretation of the relationship between monstrosity and femininity. Lacan’s Symbolic order can be characterised by three things: language, masculinity (patriarchy) and the law. Entry into the Symbolic is also an initiation into language; through language, one comes to know, and consequently master, reality (‘the world of things’).²⁹ For language is a fitting tool to structure reality, substituting absence for presence: it can embody and engender (no)things. ‘Law’ is one such structure. Finally, the Symbolic order privileges the masculine. It is centred around the metaphor of the Father (both the Law- and the Name-of-the-Father).³⁰ In both language and Law, it is this ‘emblematic metaphor’ that is manifest ‘in the more overt power structures of modern western culture [that is organised] around a series of prohibitions and exchanges’.³¹ Familiar notions of continuity such as ‘concepts of generation, real property, legacy and tradition’, and even reproductive rights (Roof calls them ‘illusions’) are all deployments of patriarchy.³² Roof is clearly suspicious of the order, an order which she views as organised along the axis of gender and sexual differences, with the male being the superior (read normative) gender and sex. More precisely, if reality is, as argued, a construction, it

is fundamentally a 'masculine' construction. The feminine becomes necessarily repressed and consigned to the other.

Following Julia Kristeva, I shall maintain that the impossible object of desire is located prior to the subject's initiation into the Symbolic order. This pre-Symbolic stage (Kristeva calls it the 'semiotic' stage) is, however, never completely forgotten, but is instead relegated to the unconscious. Kristeva argues that the semiotic re-emerges whenever Symbolic language encounters an impasse.³³ For Kristeva, the semiotic is located within the maternal, and more specifically, the maternal womb, or the *chora*. Hence, lapses in linguistic performances implicate the 'return of the repressed', the maternal other. Moreover, this semiotic display is also the surplus of the symbolic, for despite its integration by the latter, continues to exist beyond it. If we agree with Lacan's and Kristeva's theories, the maternal then will take the place of the original point of desire which, through Symbolic initiation, becomes impossibly lost to the subject, but continues to exist spectrally. It is therefore not surprising that in horror writing, the monster's origin is usually with the feminine, either explicitly represented through a birthing process, or more obliquely embodied in the simultaneous *fear of and desire for* the feminine exhibited by (usually) 'haunted' male characters. However, this is not an essentialist attempt to collapse the maternal/ feminine and the monstrous into each other. My argument is that although contemporary monster narratives seem to posit the woman as the original site of horror, it is ultimately not woman, but what she represents (or *fails*) to the Symbolic order that situates her in such an etiological position. Here, Lacan contributes an important insight: he first demonstrates that the subject's desire (or 'want-to-be') is related to an 'appeal to receive the complement from the other, if the other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want, or lack'.³⁴ The 'other', in this case, is the mother. He then argues that the (m)other herself fundamentally lacks what the child desires but misconstrues that desire as the child's need for love, which she willingly embodies and confers.³⁵ With the completion of the Oedipal process however, the child will reject his mother's (misconstrued) desire, and directly, his own as well. This rejection is ultimately rooted in the child's search for his own lack in the mother: 'by refusing the mother's demand, is not the child demanding that the mother should have a desire outside him, because the way towards the desire that he lacks is to be found there'?³⁶ The mother is crucially the subject's locus of want, or lack. This lack is the impossible desire which is lost upon entry into the Symbolic. The child rejects her because he sees the

mother as substituting their shared lost desire with love. In other words, when the child realises that the mother is also subject to the Symbolic, she becomes disqualified as *his* object of desire, thus betraying both the child's and the mother's lack. The loss of the maternal through rejection is simultaneously the origin of the subject's lack. The mother represents each subject's awareness and constant reminder of his own loss and impossibility of desire which the Symbolic subsequently, but insufficiently, substitutes.³⁷

Perhaps the most sustained argument for the relationship between the maternal and horror is made by Kristeva in her now classic, *Powers of Horror*. Admittedly, Kristeva's theory of abjection is somewhat essentialist, but it nevertheless proves useful (for my purpose) in designating the maternal as the locus of abjection. This is primarily because the maternal confounds (b)orders by externalising the internal, typified especially by child-bearing and menstruation.³⁸ This has been quickly appropriated by feminists for a reading of the monstrous feminine in film and literature³⁹ which often, however, overlooks other important issues in Kristeva's theory. Kristeva, for example, declares that there is 'nothing like the abjection of the self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded'.⁴⁰ Abjection is not merely a confusion of (b)orders, it is also a 'wanting' of all forms of reality characterised by the Symbolic mechanism: what is abject is what has become, or is becoming, emptied of reality. The abject confuses borders because it breaks out of its containment (such as, in this case, the maternal body) and becomes, in the process, a surplus, something which is both a part of, and more than, its container. More importantly, this surplus destroys the fantasy of the stable, unimpeachable body inscribed by and within the Symbolic economy. When this happens, the subject is confronted with its own loss, admitting entry to the Void of the impossible. Hence, the abject is a twofold process: first, it breaks out of the Symbolic casing and becomes an excess (the Real that cannot be symbolised); then, it confronts the subject with its own sense of (ir)reality by leaving the subject emptied of reality. Kristeva's abject body is fundamentally experiencing a loss, or a deconstruction, of reality. What replaces it is the Void, the origin of the monster.

Taking together these two views of the maternal body – as reminder/embodiment of the subject's lack and as abject – it is clear why many narratives of monstrosity and horror position the feminine as monstrous. Traditional monsters, for example, are often characterised by confused embodiments (male/female, human/animal)⁴¹

which disrupt the coherent and unified body. This characteristic is, of course, what constitutes the abject most profoundly. It seems that there are only two alternatives for the feminine other: she can either subscribe to the patriarchal order and repress her subjectivity, or challenge the order and risk being deemed transgressive, and marginalised. Both alternatives however, result in a single end: she will be read as 'lack' anyway and be subsequently rejected by the child. For the subject (that is, the child), the mother represents the loss of a desire which must consequently be substituted with fantasies. If these fantasies are somehow shattered, the spectre of the lost desire would take traumatic form, resurfacing to destroy the subject's Symbolic foundation. He is 'returned' to the Void, which in a different configuration, is also the pre-Symbolic (or semiotic). Thus, either as subjected or transgressive, the maternal other will always be registered as abject, or monstrous.

The gaze, the body and subjectivity

The monster is traditionally (and still) objectified as the threatening other. According to Timothy Beal (writing in the context of the monster movie), it usually occupies a position of indefatigable power as long as it remains unseen or partially seen, or doubtfully recognised. This, however, is short lived, for the monster will always be 'captured' by the gaze eventually. Once this happens, the stage is set for its defeat and elimination.⁴² This view has similarities with Laura Mulvey's famous observation of the fetishised women on screen in that both the monster and women are disempowered and objectified under the 'gaze' of their audience.⁴³ This comparison has further significance. The monster also becomes 'castrated' and 'effeminised' once it is subjected to the 'full-frame camera shot'. Interestingly, this 'frame' indicates once again the confinement which assimilates or destroys otherness. As long as the monster remains out of sight, it is outside Symbolic limitations and positioned as a 'surplus' (it is representative of the Real); but once framed, it becomes 'real' and will be subscribed to, or destroyed by, the very Symbolic mechanism which it initially eludes and threatens.

However, in many contemporary monster narratives, this subordinate position is duly reversed and even inverted. Here, the monster learns to manipulate visibility to remain visible and unseen *at the same time*. From this 'Möbius strip' (to use a popular Žižekian metaphor) position, the monster is both being gazed at *and* gazing back; it is also

the monster's gaze that has more significance and power, suggesting the Medusa who petrifies her victims with her gaze. In this way, the contemporary monster succeeds in evading the regimentation of Symbolic policing (gazing) while effectively manipulating this gaze to suit its perverse ends. Freud writes that the 'terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something'; he goes on to show that this 'something', is the female genitals surrounded by hair, 'essentially those of this mother'.⁴⁴ Freud's view not only confirms my reading of the feminine as the locus of monstrosity, but echoes many contemporary monster narratives portrayal of the monster as *the* castrating, and not the castrated, element. I understand Freud's view of sighting the mother's genitals as traumatic to be analogous to the confrontation of the subject with his origin in the Void. The mother's genitals remind the subject of his place before and beyond the Symbolic, and relate him back to his surplus position. The Medusa is threatening because she confronts the subject with his illusion of fantasy, resulting in the resurfacing of the uncanny (see next chapter) and the destabilising of his Symbolic self-construction. Unlike the traditional monster which consequently meets defeat, the contemporary monster often signals its spectator's complete disempowerment because it remains stubbornly irredeemable. It is an embodiment of trauma and the Real, which repositions its spectator as a 'hole in the other'. Especially in narratives in which the monster is also the narrator, the reader becomes 'the unwilling' spectator who is implicated in the monster's atrocities, thus positioning the reader both within (as vicarious participant) and without the text (as observer): the reader too, becomes a 'surplus' figure – that which remains unsymbolisable in the text but is nevertheless implied through an act of reading. In this sense, the reader can be considered an *implicit* monster.

Monstrosity is most visibly registered in the body. It is the loss of a body (the maternal) as object of desire that opens up the space of trauma, and it is the body *via* the psyche which registers trauma. Certain contemporary monster narratives posit the body as the repository of trauma to which it is either submitting, or against which it is struggling. That is, there are wilful as well as reluctant monsters, and the way in which they choose to utilise their (monstrous) bodies will determine if they are going to subvert the status quo, entrap themselves further within a hostile Symbolic mechanism, or liberate themselves through a resignification of their bodies. In the case of the third category, being monstrous actually resists negative codification. To be monstrous is sometimes not a choice as such a categorisation has

already been presupposed and pre-inscribed onto particular bodies (such as deformed bodies and 'freaks'⁴⁵); but monstrous bodies can nevertheless choose to deconstruct the injurious coding of the Symbolic order, and in the process, recuperate by re-assigning for themselves new codes. This re-codifying of the monstrous body is best exemplified in Angela Carter's novel, *Nights at the Circus* (1984), which will be the focus chapter four.

As argued, contemporary monster narratives often ascribe the traumatised, haunted and monstrous body to the feminine. David Punter, for example, argues that the fiction of monstrosity (more specifically, the Gothic) is always about the dissolution of the body's protective (that is, the Symbolically constructed) 'casing', which nevertheless betrays it to the Void of its original place with the maternal:

[The] dialectic of monstrosity, then, has been within Gothic from the beginning, and it focuses on the body, on what we might call the 'case' of the body, in the redoubled sense which we might give to that vexed term: the 'case' as casing, as protective 'shell' which is always on the verge of dissolution; or 'case' as individual example, the unrepeatability of the body, precisely that unrepeatability which renders the body, even while it suffers most, perpetually unamenable to the rule of the law. The battle between the monster and the law is at all points an attempt to exceed or encompass the other.... The monster resists even the strongest of performatives, we might even say it is that shape which will have that perpetual exemption from the obedience which at once returns us ambivalently to the omnipotence and powerlessness of the infant, and also to a time before words, a time which precedes even a putative consciousness of undifferentiation, wherein performatives had no purpose or purchase.⁴⁶

Punter's pun on the word 'case' paradoxically suggests both the subject's body as an encasement, as well as the body under subjection to the Law. It is the body that is simultaneously constructed and protected by the law (from a Lacanian perspective, the Law-of-the-Father), and subjected to it against which the body proceeds to retaliate. It is this struggle between the body's subjectivity and subjection that incarnates the monster. As a result of the struggle, the subject returns to its site of origin where, in its seemingly powerless state, it is actually most powerful. Here, before and beyond the Symbolic frame which limits the body, the subject is free: it is undifferentiated and has no

need to perform its (Symbolic) constructions (language, sexuality, gender, ideologies), which is how I read Punter's 'performatives'.

Interestingly, the body's relation to the law is what positions the subject as both an autonomous, spontaneous entity, as well as a body intrinsically limited in freedom.⁴⁷ According to Étienne Balibar, the human as subject originates with Kant. He points out that in Kant's essay 'What is Man', the version of the subject is intricately related to the *citizen* – a civic and political entity 'which implies epistemological, ethical and aesthetic rationality',⁴⁸ and is, at the same time:

subjected to ... particularly the legal state ... [he] can belong to the state as a *free and autonomous subject* only inasmuch as every institution, every state, is conceived as a partial and provisional representative of humanity, which in fact is the only absolute 'community', the only true 'subject of history'.⁴⁹

In other words, to be human, part of one's freedom and autonomy must be subjected to the state; and because the state represents humanity, one should advocate freedom and autonomy. But this is obviously a circular argument; Kant's ideal is quickly subverted when, as Michel Foucault demonstrates, the body becomes coded in two ways by socio-political powers in the seventeenth-century: the first focuses on the body as machine (it can be optimised, made useful, obedient, and efficient – an '*anatomo-politics of the human body*'), while the second is concerned with the body as a 'species' (the body channelled towards propagation, health, life and longevity, and supervised by the state – a '*biopolitics of population*').⁵⁰ Thus, the body became increasingly subjected to political and social constraints, and dominated by state power. But as Punter shows, the body is not always compliant to its subjection, and finds ways to challenge and even subvert domination. In a different but related context, Francis Barker also argues for the impossibility of absolutely subjecting the body:

The body ... is not a hypostatised object, still less a simple biological mechanism of given desires and needs acted on externally by controls and enticements, but a relation in a system of liaisons which are material, discursive, psychic, sexual but without stop or centre. It will be better to speak of a certain 'bodilyness' than of 'the body'.⁵¹

More than a state mechanism, the body is a profound network of inter-relationships, which is fundamentally without limit or centre. The

body, in other words, is in a constant flux, slipping from one signification to another. But viewed from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, it could also be said that the body is like a 'hole' capable of incorporating various significations and codings; to put it differently, this constant flux and interrelationship betray the subject's desire for 'an ever more complex signifying ensemble',⁵² that is, the search for the impossible desire through an increasingly complex ensemble of substitutive fantasy objects. But the fact that this flux cannot cease implies that this 'system of liaisons' is a construction of the Symbolic which merely screens off the Void with fantasies, but cannot completely 'plug up' (to borrow Žižek's phrase) the Void that is fundamentally with(in) the subject. Hence, whether it is Punter's 'law', or Balibar's and Foucault's 'legal state', or Barker's 'system of liaisons', it is, in the end, the mechanism of the Symbolic order which constructs the body, and which the monster defies.

It seems that there are at least four ways in which narratives can represent the relationship between the monster and the Symbolic. The first is a re-signification of the monster so that it remains a positive challenge against a rigid and homogenising Symbolic regime. This is very difficult, and in this study, only one narrative – Carter's *Nights at the Circus* – succeeds brilliantly in affirming the monster by re-assigning to it new codes. In the second, the monster remains a powerful and unfaltering threat that openly transgresses and subverts the Symbolic. In this instance, one adopted by many traditional monster narratives, the monster is either finally destroyed, or, on a more benign note, rehabilitated and reintegrated into society. The third alternative showcases the elusive monster. This monster defies re-signification, is indomitable and profoundly threatening because it is either 'hidden' or cannot be directly encountered; hence, it cannot be destroyed or rehabilitated. More chillingly, it has learned to manipulate the Symbolic and has become assimilated into society, where it clandestinely carries out its atrocious acts. The supreme example of this type of monster is the serial killer.⁵³ The last category of monster narratives is unusual because it involves geopolitics: that is, monstrosity in these texts is more the consequence of a subject's relationship with certain space. Lived space, like the home for example, can assume monstrous proportions when it becomes a repository for the subject's unconscious; the home becomes the locus of the subject's projected anxieties, bringing into relief the repressed other and (possibly) transforming the subject into a monster. Other 'monstrous' space would include the city with its 'unofficial' (read repressed) histories, and the Baudrillardian simulacra

with its capacity to homogenise monsters with humans. It is the concern of the next two chapters to analyse the relationship between monstrosity and geopolitics.

Reading monster narratives

One common feature in the contemporary monster narratives under discussion in this study is that the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is no longer viable. These texts, to quote Kristeva, confront us with:

our disturbing otherness, for that indeed is what bursts in to confront that 'demon,' that threat, that apprehension generated by the projective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as proper, solid 'us'.⁵⁴

In most of the texts under discussion, it is not only a 'projective apparition of the other' that confronts, but concrete, visceral embodiments of otherness as well. The monster is no longer merely spectral but a (corpo)realised entity betokening our worst fears and anxieties. Here, I want to introduce the nine narratives that will be analysed in the subsequent chapters, and the forms of monstrosity they represent. Understandably, my analyses of these texts will be heavily informed by the theoretical groundwork laid in this chapter. I am, however, aware of the limitations of psychoanalysis as a narrative theory: one problem is the unavoidable 'psychoanalysing' of fictional characters. This is, however, a kind of strategic methodological premise, one that does not imply that characters have an internal, psychic world – as though they are 'real' people – but is used to elicit important insights into, for example, the difficult relationship between the Symbolic and the Real. I hope to rectify this limitation by deliberately confronting psychoanalytical theory with other relevant theories of reading – including post-modern geopolitics, gender and cultural studies – to tease out the subtle and multi-layered dimensions of monstrosity.

Chapter one deals with a very unusual representation of monstrosity called space. Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) and J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975) will be the focus of this chapter. Both novels, in my reading, deal with repressed layers of signification that exist in lived space and which instigate certain psychic unconscious in its inhabitants, resulting in expressions of monstrosity. In the case of *Hawksmoor*, it is a city with a very long history made up of official and, more importantly, unofficial or repressed ones. It is the latter that

continues to subsist unspoken and spectral, and which implicates certain individual inhabitants in strange ways. I begin this study with a fictively 'historical' text to mainly counter the accusations by New Historicism concerning the alleged ahistoricity of psychoanalysis. In this, I follow Joan Copjec when she writes that:

Historicity is what issues from [an] inevitable and constitutive misapprehension of ourselves – from what Freud would call the latency of historical time with regard to its own comprehension. This notion of latency must not be positivised, as though something lay dormant but already formed in the past, and simply waited to emerge at some future time; this would indeed be a continuist notion. Instead, latency designates our inaccessibility to ourselves, and hence our dependence on others – on other times as well as other subjects.⁵⁵

Hawksmoor, in my view, confirms, in many ways, this concept of latency. Positing two figures in history which mirror each other, the novel rehearses this 'dependence' on the self to an other who may be distanced by time. But in my reading, I want to further posit that it is because these two figures *inhabit a shared space* that enables the evil of the past to catch up with the present. Hence, although time may distance, space retains that groundedness and *unheimlich* quality for the repressed to resurface. Ballard's novel problematises the condition of modern living. High-rise apartments afford one a sense of luxury and comfort, but also set the stage for a manifestation of the uncanny. Living in box-like cells with the awareness that one is always below someone (unless one lives on the topmost floor) can result in taphephobia, which is fundamentally related to the uncanny. And as Fred Botting has argued, 'the uncanny marks the decomposition of fantasy underpinning imaginary subjective integrity and the assumption of symbolic consistency: its apprehension discloses, in horror, nothing but a void'.⁵⁶ In *High-Rise*, the fantasy of modern comfort that is linked, as I will demonstrate, to the masculine prerogative is slowly dissolved by the return of the repressed, resulting in curious sadomasochistic performances and gender reversals amongst its inhabitants.

Chapter two deals with serial killers, whom Peter Hutchings deems as 'horror's new monsters'.⁵⁷ This is, however, not entirely true, as the monsters in great Gothic literature have often been serial murderers (Frankenstein's monster and Dracula being cases in point). Purportedly, Hutchings is considering only American horror, but even this is

inaccurate. The figure of the murderer, including the multiple killer, as 'a means of questioning the ramifications of American-style democracy on ideas of American selfhood' has, according to Linnie Baker, captivated American horror well over two hundred years, beginning with Charles Brockden Brown's *Weiland* (1798).⁵⁸ What is 'new' however about contemporary serial killer narratives is the incredible elusiveness of the monster, denying such narratives ethical or redemptive closures. These killers have learned to identify and merge with their space in order to perform atrocities undetected. Chapter two continues to concern itself with space, but with special emphasis on the serial killer as an inhabitant of this space. And, unsurprisingly, two American serial killer narratives will be considered – Bret Easton Ellis's notorious novel, *American Psycho* (1991), and Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie* (1996). The invisibility of the killer in Ellis's novel is largely to do with his hyperconformity with what Baudrillard calls a simulacral space. Disconnecting himself from any originality and identity, he becomes instead, a duplicable and exchangeable (therefore undetectable) body which is also potently destructive. In such a hyperreal space, typified by a capitalist society where the self is mediated through signs such as money, fashion, and television, bodies come under the 'dictatorship of images'.⁵⁹ Serial killing, in this sense, becomes another act of accumulating and dispersing depthless and indistinguishable signs. The multiple killer in Oates's novel, on the other hand, learns how easy it is to fool the Symbolic mechanism by resignifying himself to fit in with the mechanism's expectations. From this vantage point, this 'narcissistic' monster sets out to find a perfect victim whom he will turn into a love-slave, or zombie, and, if this fails (and it often does), kill. Matias Viegner observes that 'it is impossible to murder someone without losing one's identity through an invasion of representation – all the murders that came before – just as it is impossible to "really know someone"'.⁶⁰ The serial killer in these two narratives however, has *already* relinquished his identity before he even begins killing. The killer in *American Psycho* has no 'real' identity of which to speak, while *Zombie's* killer disguises his monstrous nature with a semblance of civility. Remaining anonymous is their weapon, because in this way they can then become integrated into an unsuspecting, and hence, defenceless, society. More crucially, killing becomes a method of trauma control for the killers in that the very act itself temporarily diffuses the loss of (the murderer's) subjectivity.

Chapter three focuses directly on a distinct institution within the Symbolic mechanism – the family. Two novels about the child as

monster and destroyer of this Symbolic system will be analysed: Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984) and Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988). The predecessor of the monstrous progeny is, of course, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), but it is really only in the last thirty years that narratives with monstrous children really took effect. In novels such as Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1963), J.G. Ballard's *Running Wild* (1989), and more recently, Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992), the murderous child remains an enigmatic presence which, according to James Kincaid, embodies 'cultural needs or fears' which are not 'adequately disposed of elsewhere'.⁶¹ Here indeed, the 'elsewhere' is finally located in the home. Kincaid goes on to argue that the child can be invested with this, or any, kind of enigma precisely because:

The child was impermanent, untrustworthy, protean, here-today-gone-tomorrow. Whatever meaning we placed there wouldn't last too long. The child could be erased, was in fact in the process of being erased, even as we packed the meaning in.⁶²

However, it will be clear that both Banks's and Lessing's monstrous children will undermine Kincaid's observation of the child as effaceable. In the two narratives, the monstrosity which the child embodies signifies a powerfully subversive element that permanently damages the Symbolic institution of the family. Here, it is not the child that becomes erased, but the very mechanism it defies. Both horror novels emphatically align the monstrous child with the feminine, thus rehearsing Kristeva's theory of the maternal abject in interesting ways.

Chapter four considers the body as a site for monstrous representation. This is, without doubt, the most visible of monstrous forms, and deformed individuals and 'freaks' are its main repositories. Patrick McGrath's neo-Gothic story, 'Angel' (1991) and Angela Carter's celebrated *Nights at the Circus* (1984) – two narratives which showcase the angel – will be discussed. Acceptable, even lauded in religious or mythical iconographies, this body becomes strangely discomfiting when situated in '(corpo)reality' because it inverts and denies what David Williams calls 'the constituent elements of the ideas of form and order' which include aspects such as categorisation, hierarchy, differentiation, and similarity;⁶³ that is, it exemplifies a 'confusion of categories, the levelling of hierarchy, the synthesis of differentiated phenomena, and dissimilitude'.⁶⁴ Ontologically destabilising, the angel, in order to survive, must ambiguate its presence as artifice. This means that the

angel must 'perform' its angel-ness (with its associated qualities such as transvestism) in order to conceal it. Both narratives deal with this theme of disguise, but McGrath's tale is decidedly bleak, for it is a decaying angel still holding on to a (mythical) past glory, that presides. Carter's angel, on the other hand, is forward-looking, and, in this study, represents the possibility of resignifying monstrosity as something positive.

Both narratives, moreover, are about the power and/or limits of language as a tool for articulating the monster. This is a contention which will occupy the conclusion to this study. Through a close reading of Janice Galloway's short story, 'Blood', I return to my earlier argument that the monster is both a creation and deconstruction of language. Galloway's eerie story metaphorically foregrounds an over-represented (and thus, monstrous) body that language denies. But in the process of trying to speak the unspeakable, meaning and form commingle inchoately, disrupting both in the end. This allegorical tale reinforces the main premise of this study that the monster ultimately evades all forms of Symbolic mechanisms (including language), and serves as an ever-present danger of returning the Void to our fragile subjectivities.

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