

On the monstrous and the grotesque

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P.S. The devil mostly speaks a language of his own called Bellsybabble which he makes up himself as he goes along but when he is very angry he can speak quite bad French very well though some who have heard him say that he has a strong Dublin accent. (James Joyce, *The Cat and the Devil*)

Among all things that can be contemplated under the concavity of the heavens, nothing is seen that arouses the human spirit more, that ravishes the sense more, that horrifies more, that provokes more terror or admiration to greater extent among creatures than the monsters, prodigies and abominations through which we see the works of nature inverted, mutilated, and truncated. (Pierre Boaistuau, *Histoires Prodigieuses* (1561). Used by George Bataille as the epigraph to *The Deviations of Nature*)

The terms *monstrous* and *grotesque* are implicated in much contemporary artistic practice. In this context, as interpretive categories, they indicate works wherein the 'aesthetic' achieves an extreme degree of affectiveness – to use a Baudelairean notion, the subject's response to such works is *convulsive*. Although it does not draw specific examples from contemporary art, this essay is concerned to develop an account of the affective power (Boaistuau's 'arousal of the human spirit') of the monstrous and the grotesque. It begins by arguing that the range of phenomena that Western thought has placed under the jurisdiction of these terms was anticipated in the two orders of deformation ('disproportion' and 'combination') implied by Platonic metaphysics, and that behind this founding distinction lies a single concern: the fear of multiplicity within unity, of 'the many in the one'. The enduring notion, implicit in Plato and explicit in Aristotle's account of biological generation, that monstrosity results from revolt against the Father is discussed with reference to Shelley and others, and the connections with the theme of disproportionality drawn out. The essay argues for a distinction between the two terms that turns on the question of artifice, and the real or apparent ability of that artifice to 'domesticate' the aberration. The sense of monstrosity begins to be asserted, it is suggested, as the aberration exceeds, or obscures its containment by, artifice; as its character changes from something 'produced by' to something 'given to' man. The sense of monstrosity within aberrant phenomena would then be related to their ability to touch upon theistic/animistic conceptions. Thus invested with intentionality the monstrous phenomenon comes 'given', as it were, as a

vehicle or indicator of immanent retribution for the transgression of 'natural' law.

THE METAPHYSICS OF MONSTROSITY

As a starting point we will assume the conventional understanding of the monster as a being whose existence runs against, or is contrary to, nature – with the proviso that for 'nature' we understand 'what has been naturalized'. (For the present the terms 'monstrous' and 'grotesque' will be treated as synonymous). Within this general definition, modern biology recognizes two principle categories of monstrosity: those cases in which members of the body are absent or display excessive growth or malformation, and those in which the body is doubled, wholly or partially, along one of its axes. When set against the body projected by classical aesthetics, this distinction can be understood as being founded upon a single concern: that of the fragmentation of the body, of multiplicity within unity – the fear of the 'many in the one'. Within the first category would be found all those deviations whose incommensurability of parts fragment the classical body. Behind the second category we recognize the monstrous trait of 'combination'; here lodge all those figures into whose oneness are compressed forms oxymoronic and unreasonable in their conjunction – man-beasts, hermaphrodites, cyborgs, etc. This dual thematic, within which the range of phenomena identified by Western thought as 'monstrous' or 'grotesque' is inscribed, is anticipated in, and can be tracked through, the two classes of deformation implied by Platonic metaphysics.

(A) DISPROPORTION

In the tenth book of the *Laws*, Plato legislates against all those who would deny that the universe came into being through 'art'. Here he seems to refer to the Ionian *physiologoi* who understood the order of the cosmos as immanent in nature and not as the work of a supreme intelligence. The philosopher had already opposed this view in the *Timaeus*, in which he presented a 'likely story' of the origin of the cosmos. His account describes the actions of a transcendent god, styled 'Craftsman', who reduces the pre-cosmic chaos to order. The meaning of the verb which corresponds to the Greek noun *kosmos* is, as Gregory Vlastos puts it, to set in order, to marshal, to arrange: 'It is what the military commander does when he arrays men and horses for the

battle; what a civic official does in preserving the lawful order of a state; what a cook does in putting foodstuffs together to make an appetizing meal; what Odysseus' servants have to do to clean up the gruesome mess in the palace after the massacre of the suitors.'¹ More than simply 'order', *kosmos* is the result of a crafted, proper, and decorous arrangement, it is both moral and beautiful. It obtains where activities – political, military, social, architectural – are correctly pursued; it dissolves in disjuncture when a disproportion between constituent parts occurs.

Foundational to Plato's account is the distinction, which *Timaeus* sets out at the start of his exposition, between two orders or reality. One is the realm of changeless being which is eternal and which can be apprehended by the intellect through reason; the other is the realm of ceaseless becoming which comprises all that which is available to the senses and of which only opinion, and not true knowledge, may be gained. Throughout Plato's text the practice and figures of Euclidean geometry are associated with the metaphysical order. An object of the intellect, projecting an exactitude never obtainable in the material world and outside the reach of time, geometric figuration lodges firmly in the realm of being. It is through geometric technique that the Demiurge, the divine craftsman, brings the pre-cosmic chaos to order: 'Before that time they were all without proportion or measure; fire, water, earth and air bore some traces of their proper nature, but were in the disorganized state to be expected of anything which god has not touched, and his first step when he set about reducing them to order was to give them a definite pattern of shape and number.'² Each of the elements is assigned a three-dimensional geometric form, the four most 'perfect possible bodies' distinct but capable of transformation into one another. The material world is unified, brought toward perfection and into form, by relating its elements to one another through a metaphysic of 'continued geometrical proportion'. The cosmic fabric comes to be 'at unity owing to proportion; in consequence it acquired concord, so that having once come together in unity with itself it is indissociable by any but its compounder'.³ In similar fashion, the Demiurge tailors the world-soul material guided by geometric-harmonic relationships. In shaping the universe he chooses the sphere as most appropriate to its plenitude and totality. Judged as being in perfect repose, complete unto itself, of pristine equilibrium and coherence, it is the very Form of forms, the exemplar of a homogeneity 'incalculably superior to its opposite'.⁴ It appears microcosmically reproduced on human shoulders as the seat of the divine orbits of the soul. Geometry provides both the means and expression of Unification.

Classical anthropometry was marked by an insistence on the 'organic' character of the human body, its unitary nature assured by the proportional interrelationship of its parts. As distinct from the modular grid which structured the figure in Egyptian art, the dimensions of the parts of the

Classical body were expressed through one another. As a unity it circumscribed a closed network of references which secured its form and markedly aesthetic character. The proportional scheme and geometric frame set out by Vitruvius explicitly describes a *homo bene figuratus*. According to Galen, the canon of Polyclitus, the founder of Classical Greek anthropometry, was a definition of that 'wherein beauty consists'; its intention was, writes Panofsky, to 'realize a "law" of aesthetics'.⁵ The Classical body developed as geometricized and cosmic; through the Renaissance this character is stressed. An anthropomorphic decorum is effected and thereby form is achieved: all members occupy their proper position in the network of relationships within which they are subordinated to the unity of the object. The prelude to monstrosity, then, would be the challenge to this unity through deformation. In its distortion the body comes to consist of many and not one. Greek art did not countenance this; even that paradigmatic hybrid the Chimera was reduced to a whole by being trapped within an organic proportionality.⁶

(B) COMBINATION

In the second division of the main body of the *Timaeus*, Plato develops an exposition of the distinction between Form and Copy, an opposition corresponding to that between being and becoming. What appears within the transitory world of becoming does so as a likeness of an eternal and unchanging Form or Idea which exists on the level of being. Although the Copy has the same name as the Form and resembles it, it is necessarily imperfect, a 'moving shadow' which points to an existence outside itself. To have any claim to reality the 'shadow' requires a medium or 'place' in which to appear. This is provided by a third, interstitial term *chora* described as a receptacle into and out of which pass copies of the eternal realities. We shall not be wrong, Plato tells us, if we describe it as 'invisible and formless, all-embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp'.⁷ Compared to a 'mother', *chora* provides a necessarily neutral material on which the father-figure of the Form impresses its likeness. While appearing at points to share attributes of both Forms and material reality, it must at the same time have no qualities. To ensure authentic and uncontaminated recording the *chora* must be characterless, leaving no imprint, scent, or trace upon the Copy-child. If it were otherwise an aberration, a deformation, would result degenerate to the degree that it had strayed from its paradigm and become of mixed and therefore imperfect type. In compromising the image of the father the contribution of the matrix would produce a hybrid, an incoherent signifier whose distortion truncated its reference to the metaphysical order.

In Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, a strikingly similar economy of procreation is set out. The monstrous appears,

he affirms, when the body-image of the progeny denies its parenthood: 'he who does not resemble his parents is already in a certain sense a monstrosity; for in these cases nature has in a way departed from type. The first departure', he continues, 'indeed is that the offspring should become female instead of male.'⁸ The female emerges as a deformed male; monstrosity, Aristotle states, 'is actually a kind of deformity.'⁹ The domain of the monstrous opens with the interruption of the father-author's reproduction of himself through the 'material' of the female. In the monster the self-display of the author in the progeny is erased, the father's mimetic making of the child in his own image undone. Aristotle argues that it results from a lack of mastery by the father over the maternal material. When the 'movements' imparted by the male act upon the female material it acts back upon them. If it does so with superior force it remains unmastered.¹⁰ Contained in the semen is a hierarchy of characteristics that act upon the female. Those which are individual and specific to the father have greater force in generation than those which are general – the hierarchy descends from personhood, the most individual, to animalhood, the most general. It may be that the most forceful movements imparted by the father are reduced by the resistance of the female material and fail to master it. In such cases they will 'relapse', deferring to those closest to them in the hierarchy. Thus, for example, the father-image may be forced to defer to the grandfather, and, failing resolution there, to remoter ancestors.¹¹ In the most extreme case, where mastery over the material is refused at every point, a slippage down the chain occurs until only animality remains. The point is reached in which the offspring 'appears finally to be not even a human being but only some kind of animal, what is called a monstrosity'.¹² The monstrous is born of the unruly, unmastered feminine; it is the result, one might say, of choral effectivity in which the paradigm-copy relationship is transgressed. This, then, is the cause of all monstrous human and animal combination. It is not the case, however, that a child could be born with an animal head; rather the animal is manifested through the human for so that the latter bears a resemblance to it. 'A certain physiognomist', Aristotle notes, 'reduced all faces to those of two or three animals, and his arguments often prevailed on people.'¹³ The association of the mother with the birth of monstrosity was to form a persistent theme in European thought on the subject. The notion that the maternal imagination could shape the progeny, first put forward in a text attributed to Empedocles, was widely held and gained particular credence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁴ The monstrous child was seen as the result of the displacement of the father's image by the conjurings of the female mind during conception or pregnancy. The monster thus signified illegitimate female desires, an illegitimacy expressed in the replacement of the father's image.

At this point, then, we can underline two themes related to monstrous deformation. On one hand there is the relationship with geometry and proportionality; and on the other there is the question of gender, and the association of monstrosity with resistance to the authority (or law) of the Father. These two are far from unrelated. We will pick them up later.

SIGNIFICATION AND MONSTROSITY

The etymology of 'monster' leads to the Latin *monere*, to warn. The monster exists, historically, from the Greek *teras* to the Latin *monere* and beyond, as a sign to be interpreted, a token of sin and divine displeasure, as the lexicon of the divine or the satanic. Augustine stated that monsters were revelations of God's will; Martin Luther read the body of the hideously deformed 'monchskalb' as an expression of the degeneracy of Rome. The monster's potency as a sign derives from the opacity of its signification. With the loss of formal coherence and unity, whether by hybridization or surplus, deficiency or distortion of members, it incites interpretation. The monstrous acts, as does the grotesque,¹⁵ as a repository to catch what falls between the classifications of language. In this sense, monsters are the nightmares of metaphysics, haunting all situations where classification is enacted. The internal incommensurability of monstrous and grotesque figures may be described but it is not simply named by what language gives; nouns themselves mutate, in their inadequacy, into polysemic grotesqueries. 'The unnameable' obstinately remained the name of the monster of Victor Frankenstein. Burdened by difference the monster exists transgressively as a 'floating' signifier with both a lack and an excess of significations which compels explanation or interpretation in order to anchor it in the order of things and thereby remote its threat. Even the decorative Renaissance grotesques were seen by some writers as hieroglyphs to be decoded;¹⁶ Ginevra Bompiani argues that the Chimera, itself described as a hieroglyph, became 'in the early days of modern philosophy . . . the metaphor of metaphor'.¹⁷

Monstrosity appears frequently as a sign of sin and transgression; the monster stands often as an illustration of vice and of an assault upon decorum. As such it is 'one who has so far transgressed the bounds of nature as to become a moral advertisement'.¹⁸ Ruskin argued that corporeal degradation, the pollution of form, was indeed essential for the expression, in art, of vice.¹⁹ In so far as the body is the signifier of the soul, the soul of the monster is in doubt. The monster's formal corruption points to an analogous disturbance or degeneration in the condition of its soul. Its soul is either entirely absent or irrevocably contaminated and as such it lacks that which licences entry into theological narratives of separation and salvation. There is no myth, whether theological, psychoanalytical or other, of departure and return, schism and the recovery of plenitude and presence, proper to the monster.²⁰ Likewise monstrosity is

the result of a tainted and illegitimate act of creation. The monster is bad-born, ill-conceived; it is the fate of defective or transgressive couplings. Writing in the twelfth century, the Anglo-Norman ecclesiastic Gerald of Wales considered that the malformations of the Irish body indicated a people who turn away from God. He thought it unsurprising that nature should contravene her laws when 'dealing with a people that is adulterous, incestuous, unlawfully conceived and born, outside the law, and shamefully abusing nature herself in spiteful and horrible practices'.²¹ In Thomas Hardy's novel, *Jude the Obscure*, the trickery and inadequacy of Jude and Arabella's marriage is marked by its fruit, the ancient child 'Father Time' who grotesquely combines infancy and old age. Like his ogre-ish namesake, Kronos, he, in time, 'devours' the children of Jude and Sue.²² Given the special privilege that Western metaphysics accords the voice as the locus of presence, we would expect the monster, as an entity of ontological disjunction, as an entity of compromised self-presence, to have a peculiar and characteristic voice. Indeed for Hegel the riddling voice of the Sphinx was indicative precisely of defective self-presence; the Sphinx stood as emblematic of the whole Symbolic state of art in which Idea and material rest in an antagonistic relationship, and remain, without resolution in each other, in relative obscurity.²³ And are not all those narratives in which we meet a well-spoken monster here exemplary? The voice, taken as the sign of an intact soul, anticipates a subsequent transformation back to human form. In such cases the monster woos the heroine with his voice until some transformative gesture, perhaps a kiss, touches the soul and draws it 'back', as it were, into the body. Conversely, an abject, cracked, or bestial voice is the sign of an unreachable soul.

DECORUM AND THE GROTESQUE BODY

Both the monstrous and the grotesque must be understood phenomenologically. The locus of the particular experiences to which these words point is not primarily in the object itself but rather in the *perception* of the object, and this will be contingent upon the positionality of the observer. A phenomenon experienced as monstrous at one historical moment may not arouse the same feeling at another. The operative principle of monstrosity might be described as the coming together of what should be kept apart; the sense, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham says of the grotesque, that something is illegitimately *in* something else.²⁴ Within the word 'illegitimately' the history of monstrosity plays itself out. Theories of proportion and systems of decorum assign to everything a due and proper place. Through them things are spaced, set apart, made appropriately distant. The high and the low, the noble and the base, the good and the bad are separated out, and systematized. In monstrous and grotesque phenomena such spacing collapses. Things that should be kept apart come together and live through one

another. A feeling of contradiction exists; formal discriminations collapse and an unnatural and filthy equivalency reigns. In the monster multiplicity exists in unity (figures have many heads or limbs, bodies are conjoined), death exists in life (dead matter is animated), distinct creatures exist within each other. All juxtapositions are unreasonable and oxymoronic. The sense of monstrosity or grotesqueness appears to increase as the things between which decorum interposes the greatest distance are fused. For a culture that identifies 'childhood' with purity and innocence, the 'corruption of minors' is an infinitely more monstrous deed than the 'corruption of adults'.

Monstrous and grotesque figures are generated by operations upon the periphery of the body, undoing its coherence and thereby its separation from other bodies and from the world. The creator of the grotesque is, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, in a kind of madness, 'drunk with hyperbole'. The grotesque body exists opposed to the closed, proportional, geometrical body of Classical unity. In the former everything is in transformative motion, it is a body in the act of becoming; in the latter all is static and in repose. The material with which the grotesque works is all the 'convexities and orifices' that lead 'beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths'.²⁵ These it hyperbolizes; the smooth, impenetrable, beautiful surfaces which separate off the body it ignores. The nose, mouth, ears, phallus, vulva, and anus offer themselves to the grotesque for:

it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome. . . . This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, in the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and the new body. In all these events the beginning and the end of life are already linked and interwoven.²⁶

The grotesque body is animated by an irrepressibly fertile energy which manifests itself not least for Bakhtin in its hilarious, ecstatic and parodic deformations of the authoritarian figure. In his study of Lautréamont, Gaston Bachelard also thematized the dynamism and energy of the grotesque although here it has a markedly different character. In contrast with the 'organic' fecundity and temporality which Bakhtin's work foregrounds, the emphasis is on explosive and aggressive movement; metamorphosis in Lautréamont is an acceleration of temporal moments of appalling formal vitality.²⁷

The sense of the grotesque emerges at all points where the coherence and separation of the body breaks down or is thrown into question. Bakhtin emphasizes ingestion and elimination, all phenomena which confuse the body/world divide. Neither fully of us, nor fully alien, abhorrence and

disavowal attend these, defending the unity and separateness of the subject. We are here in the zone of the sacred and the taboo, the zone of both-and. Why, asks a text attributed to Aristotle, of all the things which our body might generate, even in its decomposition, do we accept only that which is produced by semen as being our offspring, as being 'of us'? We must deny, it affirms, all excretions and putrefactions, and all that spring from them, for they are other than us. And therefore monstrous progeny, which are the result of putrefied semen, cannot be considered our offspring.²⁸ Georges Bataille described monsters as the dialectical opposites of geometrical regularity. They stood in opposition to form, naturalized as the very idea of beauty ('the necessarily beautiful Platonic idea'), secured in its status by a geometric architectonic.²⁹ But it is his notion of *informe* that suggests a more convincing insight into the monstrous. The adjective 'formless' functions, he argues, to depress the status of things. What is formless, in Bataille's sense, is abysmal; it is what escapes all the shape-giving and constructive codifications of philosophy, the logical 'mathematical frock coat' which philosophy seeks to give to what exists.³⁰ As Rosalind Krauss puts it: 'Informe denotes ... the reduction of meaning or value, not by contradiction – which would be dialectical – but by putrefaction: the puncturing of the limits around the term, the reduction to the sameness of the cadaver – which is transgressive.'³¹ It is along this perforated surface that the grotesque would lie. The monstrous and the grotesque emerges in a puncturing of form, its demonstrative undoing, which both conserves form and supplements it. Mutilation retains its character only in so far as the sense of the pristine form is recoverable within the affected figure. Monstrous and grotesque figures must therefore conserve a complex of significations within themselves and refuse to pass over into the unitary condition of formlessness. The hideousness of Frankenstein's monster arose not because of its radical departure from the human (and divine) image, but rather because it is all too close to it. As the monster says to Frankenstein: 'God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance.'³²

At all points where anthropomorphism exists, such as in architecture, literature or the political constitution, the grotesque and the monstrous threaten. Here the themes of disproportion and transgression of the law of the Father may be drawn together. As the unity of the classical ideal was secured through its proportional, geometric architectonic, so the disruption of proportionality was the eruption of monstrosity, the awful 'many in the one'. The notion of a hierarchy of estates among men, an order constituted by degrees of importance, was commonplace in medieval and Renaissance Europe. As the body of man was a microcosm, a representation of the order and disposition of the divinely created universe, so it was a trope for the correct, decorous,

and divinely ordained arrangement of the polity. According to Walter Raleigh, just as God had organized all creation hierarchically so he 'hath also ordained kings, dukes or leaders of the people, magistrates, judges, and other degrees among men'.³³ In the Tudor state the 'body politic' was a common image; its order required the submission of all to their assigned position, the lower classes labouring to support the nobility (shoulders and arms), the judiciary (the ears), the priesthood (the eyes) and the prince (the head). And as with other bodies, the collapse of proportionality disrupted unity and raised the monstrous. It was for this reason that John Knox considered monstrous the 'regiment of women' that he castigated in 1558. As William Starkey stated twenty years earlier: 'The partys in proportion not agreying ... make in thys polytyke body grete and monstrose deformyte'.³⁴ When Edmund Burke came to write on the regicidal French revolution he drew heavily on the trope of the body politic: the revolution is seen as dismembering the natural composition of the monarchic nation and in its place founding something wholly unnatural, a body politic of monstrous figure marked everywhere by disproportionality.³⁵ The monstrous runs through Burke's commentaries: the new French polity, against natural order, is monstrous and its propagators are themselves monsters, raising themselves up, out of nature, turning against their father.³⁶ The guillotine is emblematic; agent of a monstrously dispassionate speed and seriality of execution³⁷ it realized the figure of the acephalic king, the fragmented, disunified body politic without a head.

Far from being any sin, disproportionality is in fact the primal transgression the sin performed against the Father. As well as being the sin of the revolutionaries, it was Lucifer's (rising above one's station, the pride that comes before the Fall) and also Adam's.³⁸ The distinction between Heaven and Hell, and Earth and Paradise, is thus founded in monstrosity: it disrupts unity and plenitude, and instigates difference. As the sin against the Father (the founding of a certain difference from Him), monstrosity is a kind of speech, one not contained within the discourses of patriarchy. Shakespeare most commonly applied the term 'monster' to those in rebellion against the parent while Burke's revolutionary monsters, turning against their father the king, are 'miscreant parricides'.³⁹ In *The Stones of Venice*, John Ruskin linked the emergence of the 'base grotesque' which, for him, emblemized the Fall of Venice, to the hubristic sin of 'vain-glory'; with disproportion was born this monstrosity which beckoned, he argued, immanent divine retribution.⁴⁰ The theme appears too in the incident which, for Goethe, epitomized the grotesque atmosphere of the carnivals which he witnessed in Rome: that of a boy blowing out the candle held by his father and shouting '*Sia ammazzato il Signore Padre!*' (Death to you, father!). 'In vain the old man scolds him for this outrageous behaviour; the boy claims the freedom of the evening and curses his father

all the more vehemently.⁴¹ Again, Walter Benjamin, seeking a lineage for Lautréamont's work fixes on, simply, 'insurrection'.⁴²

Barbara Johnson's reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (in which we first hear a woman's voice speaking of monstrosity) suggests that it inverts this pattern. The primary transgression in the novel, she argues, is the desire for self-reproduction: monstrosity would therefore be the result of the father's desire for resemblance.⁴³ Taking this in the context of our present discussion we can recognize it as nothing less than the inversion of the entire Platonic-Aristotelean edifice dealing with generation. Here, in its absolute form, is the liquidation of all hubristic choral effectivity – reproduction without woman, the annihilation of the choral moment – and it is seen not to secure form but to inaugurate monstrosity.

THE MONSTROUS, THE GROTESQUE, THE DIABOLIC

Semantically the categories 'monstrous' and 'grotesque', often taken as being synonymous, lie closely aligned. Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 defines 'grotesque' as 'Distorted of figure; unnatural; wildly formed', and 'monstrous' as 'Deviating from the stated order of nature' ('nature' becomes 'universe' under the entry for 'monstrosity'), 'Shocking, wonderful. Generally with some degree of dislike'. 'Irregular; enormous' and 'Shocking; hateful'. The verb 'to monster' is the anti-cosmic act 'to put out of the common order of things'; the noun 'monster' is 'Something out of the common order of nature' and 'Something horrible for deformity, wickedness or mischief'. Around the monster cluster notions of the transgression of nature, repulsion and threat. But moving on to 'deformity' we find 'Ugliness; ill-favouredness; ridiculousness; quality of something to be laughed at; irregularity'. Contained within the field mapped out by the monstrous and the grotesque we find both horror and laughter. Hate and humour is one of the dualities around which the particular experiences of the monstrous and the grotesque are in operation, and it offers a clue to a provisional distinction between the two terms.

The epigraph from Joyce at the outset of this essay, a 'tail' taking the place of a 'head', introduces the devil. To confuse and confound what should be orderly is the prerogative of Satan. When he first appears in Moscow, at the beginning of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, the impressions he induces in the minds of the two unfortunates who encounter him are markedly and diabolically contradictory. Hosts of angels, as Harpham points out, each of whom necessarily has exemplary formal perfection, are always portrayed as looking alike; each of the damned, however, is unique. The sketches which Michelangelo made for *The Last Judgement* show the outcasts who tumble downward metamorphosing as they fall into uniquely contorted and confused grotesqueries. They have 'surrendered their structural integrity and formal coherence in the

act of transgression'.⁴⁴ As Ruskin put it: 'Malice, subtlety, and pride, in their extreme, cannot be written upon noble forms . . .'.⁴⁵ To the Fall of Man, Charles Baudelaire closely linked the 'monstrous phenomenon' of laughter.⁴⁶ Moving from the maxim *The wise man laughs only with fear and trembling*, Baudelaire noted 'that the sage of all sages, the Incarnate Word, has never laughed'.⁴⁷ Laughter is of diabolic origin; it is proper to the estate of men and devils. He writes:

Laughter is satanic: it is therefore profoundly human. In man it is the consequence of his idea of his own superiority; and in fact, since laughter is essentially human it is essentially contradictory, that is to say it is at one and the same time a sign of infinite greatness and of infinite wretchedness, infinite wretchedness in relation to the absolute being, of whom man has an inkling, infinite greatness in relation to the beasts. It is from the constant clash of these two infinities that laughter flows.⁴⁸

It comes, then, from mankind's grotesque position, from the co-presence in it of contradictory situations, both elevated and abject. As nations, Baudelaire suggests, gain increasing intelligence 'or peer into the gloomy furnaces of metaphysics', as their sense of superiority rises, they 'begin laughing diabolically like Melmoth'.⁴⁹ Continuing, he begins to develop a definition of the grotesque. As in other comic form it relies on human pride (the disproportionality which brings the Fall) to evoke laughter. But here the laughter, drawing on mankind's relationship with nature, is immediate, convulsive, and primitive. The laughter that the grotesque produces comes not, as in other comic form, from a sense of superiority over other people, but rather from a sense of superiority over nature. It is instantly and intuitively grasped; no decipherment is required. It is notable that Baudelaire's definition omits all reference to terror. Ruskin, in contrast, argued that both the ludicrous and the fearful are always present in the grotesque, with the specific character of the grotesque phenomenon depending on the balance between the two. It is here, perhaps, that some distinction between the monstrous and the grotesque can be offered. In Baudelaire's conception, man's superiority over nature is achieved and expressed in the manipulation of nature by art. Man moulds, dismantles, fractures, and reconfigures nature – it lies exposed before his will, he expresses his superiority over it, and he laughs. But that laughter must also be, in Baudelaire's terms, a sign of ignorance and as such must be seen as marking the immanent exhaustion of a necessarily imperfect art. It is the containment of the grotesque deformation within art that allows it to confirm man's superiority. Where, however, there is excess, where the grotesque figure lives beyond art, escapes it, or in some way promises to escape it, its character changes from something constructed to something 'given'. As such it would correspond to disempowerment and man's abject nature would be asserted. Transgressions which escape art would then be objects of terror. The monster of

Frankenstein was a creation of 'art' and not of 'nature'. But the art did not project a monster, rather it became so in the inadequacy of the art to it, in its escape from art. Indeed we recognize it as a monster from the start only in so far as it is understood to be a production which is against God/Nature, which is therefore 'bound to fail', and which thus sits in an always excessive relationship to artifice. The experience of the monstrous in aberrant phenomena, that is their developing existence as 'fearful objects', would then be related to theistic/animistic conceptions (the 'bound to fail') in which the monster comes, immanent, imbued with intention, 'given' to man, as vehicle or indicator of vengeance for the transgression of 'natural law' (the law of the Father). The historic emergence and use of the term 'grotesque' within the field of art tends to underpin its poles of meaning; monsters, however, are rarely ludicrous unless an art makes them so. The suggestion, then, is that the grotesque enfolds the monstrous, with the sense of the latter asserting itself within the former as the sense of power changes to paranoia.

In the case of the representational arts, a key condition of possibility for monstrosity would be the *sense* of the effacement of representation the apparent collapse of representational 'distance'. Of all media it is the photograph, with its peculiar linkage to its referent, which has typically achieved this. As Derrida has put it: in the final analysis photography 'is unable to produce or domesticate its referent. It must assume it to be given . . .'.⁵⁰

The language of the devil, to which Joyce points, is a punning language pieced together from word fragments. Its untranslatability is a mark of the fall, proving its exile from ideality. It seeks not to conserve categories but rather constantly deforms them, dismantling, truncating, combining, inverting. The grotesque word, which is the point from which this satanic language of incessant invention flows, although fallen, in fact holds, as the Creative Word, the very essence of the divine.

NOTES

I am grateful to Marina Warner and to Iain Boyd Whyte for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

1 – Gregory Vlastos, *Plato's Universe* (Oxford, 1975), p. 3.

2 – Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth, 1977), pp. 72–3, §53.

3 – Plato, *Timaeus*, p. 44, §32.

4 – Plato, *Timaeus*, p. 45, §33.

5 – Erwin Panofsky, 'The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles', in *Meaning of the Visual Arts* (New York, 1955), pp. 67–8.

6 – Panofsky, 'The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles', p. 62. This is in sharp distinction to Egyptian renderings of 'monsters' such as the Sphinx in which the grafted parts retain their fragmentary character by conserving the module proper to their source-animal.

7 – Plato, *Timaeus*, p. 70, §51.

8 – Aristotle, 'Generation of Animals', in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ, 1984), I, iv, iii, p. 1187.

9 – Aristotle, 'Generation of Animals', p. 1191.

10 – Aristotle, 'Generation of Animals', p. 1189.

11 – Aristotle, 'Generation of Animals', p. 1189–89.

12 – Aristotle, 'Generation of Animals', p. 1191.

13 – Aristotle, 'Generation of Animals', p. 1191.

14 – Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Harvard, 1993).

15 – G. G. Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ, 1982), pp. 3–4.

16 – E. H. Gombrich, 'Introduction: Aims and Limits of Iconology', in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London, 1975), p. 20.

17 – Bompiani, 'The Chimera Herself', p. 377.

18 – Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth Century Writing* (Oxford, 1990), p. 12.

19 – John Ruskin, 'The Stones of Venice, vol. III', in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, eds E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London and New York, 1904), II, p. 175, §53.

20 – See Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London, 1991), pp. 149–81.

21 – Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans.

J. J. O'Meara (Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 118; for monstrous figures, pp. 72–4.

22 – On Kronos and related matters see Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London, 1998), pp. 52–77.

23 – G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1988), I, II, i, pp. 360–1. Compare Bachelard's comments on the soundscape of Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* in which he highlights the prominence given to the cry as the antithesis of language. 'A howl gives birth to Ducasse's phantoms . . .'. Gaston Bachelard, *Lautréamont*, trans. Robert S. Dupree (Dallas, 1986), pp. 64–5.

24 – Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, p. 11.

25 – Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), p. 318.

26 – Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 317.

27 – Bachelard, *Lautréamont*, pp. 6–7.

28 – Aristotle, 'Problems', in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ, 1984), 2, iv, xiii, pp. 1353–4.

29 – Georges Bataille, 'The Deviations of Nature', in *Visions of Excess: Select Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Alan Stoekl (Manchester, 1985), p. 55.

30 – Georges Bataille, 'Formless', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Alan Stoekl (Manchester, 1985), p. 31.

31 – Rosalind E. Krauss, 'No More Play', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1985), p. 64.

32 – Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 172.

33 – Cited in E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 19.

34 – Thomas Starkey, *England in the Reign of King Henry the Eighth: A Dialogue between Cardinal Pole and Thomas Lupset, Lecturer in Rhetoric at Oxford*, ed. J. M. Cowper (London, 1878), p. 84.

35 – Burke wrote of 'the portentous State of France where Elements which compose Human Society seem to be all dissolved, and a world of Monsters to be produc'd in the place of it'. After the Terror of 1793 he described France in such terms as 'a monster of a state' and a 'monstrous compound'. Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth Century Writing*, p. 18.

36 – see Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth Century Writing*, pp. 15–19.

37 – Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: the Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London, 1994), p. 10.

38 – An analogy made, for one, by St Hildegard.

- 39 – Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth Century Writing*, pp. 13, 17.
- 40 – John Ruskin, 'The Stones of Venice, vol. III', pp. 146–7, §18.
- 41 – J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey [1786–1788]*, trans. W. H. Auden and E. Mayer (Harmondsworth, 1982), iii, p. 468.
- 42 – Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), p. 188.
- 43 – Barbara Johnson, 'My Monsters/My Self', *Diacritics* 12 (Summer 1982), p. 3.
- 44 – Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, p. 7.
- 45 – John Ruskin, 'The Stones of Venice, vol. III', p. 174, §53.

- 46 – Charles Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts', in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Cambridge, 1981), p. 145.
- 47 – Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts', p. 142.
- 48 – Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts', p. 148.
- 49 – Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts', p. 148.
- 50 – Marie-Françoise Plissart and Jacques Derrida, 'Right of Inspection', cited in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Demigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1994), p. 521.