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Questions of Empathy and Understanding: Monsters in Modern French Fiction

Abstract

This essay suggests that fictional monsters are like weather vanes, anticipating the winds of change that have prompted successive generations to revisit fundamental questions on the nature of humanity. With examples sourced from major texts in the modern French canon by Hugo, Zola, Tournier and Darrieussecq, as well as from the recent 'téléroman', *Les Revenants*, it postulates that, via the agency of the narration, the reader's (or spectator's) contact with the monster is profoundly affective. The argument is upholstered with recent research on the extent to which responses to such fictional encounters are modulated by empathy.

"Only France has no monsters", or so it is proclaimed in the foreword to a large volume dedicated to the academic study of monsters.[1] This strange pronouncement alludes to a familiar myth, of the French nation as the land of Descartes and beacon of the Enlightenment, a place where monsters and other relics of recondite belief systems have been banished to the outer reaches of popular fantasy; in fact, belief in science and the march of progress has been punctuated by the irruption of the Gothic and fascination with exoticism in myriad forms.[2] Readers of the Ashgate compendium will soon learn that monsters are both ubiquitous and culturally specific. Ciphers of our humanity, they run amok in myths of origins, and in the era of the "posthuman" they have crept back into our lives to warn us of the dangers of the Anthropocene.[3] Throughout history civilisations have evolved and sustained their own unique sets of monsters, from the mami wata of west, central and southern Africa, to the zombies of Haiti and the Caribbean region, to the Japanese oni. European monsters are arguably tamer, less likely to regulate customs

[1] Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p.xxvii.

[2] Colin Davis argues that in a world where dead people can appear on screens *as living beings* we can no longer easily extricate ourselves from the world of spirits. See Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p.20. The notion of France as a civilisation not given to interest in monsters is of course nonsense. French medieval bestiaries are notable sources for the monstrous imaginary – see Michel Pastoureau, *Bestiaires du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Seuil, 2011) – and the extraordinary typology of monsters compiled in 1573 by Ambroise Paré, royal surgeon to four French kings in the 1500s, testifies to a fascination with what Wes Williams describes as 'nature's capacity to generate abnormalities in sea and sky, above and below ground, in humans as in other animals' (*French Studies*, 71.1, January 2017) a passion that Paré shared with the great thinkers of his day, Rabelais and Montaigne. See Ambroise Paré, *Des monstres et prodiges*, Édition de Michel Jeanneret (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

[3] The Anthropocene refers to a geological epoch, when human activity becomes the most significant influence on the ecosystem of the planet. It succeeds the Holocene, though geologists differ as to whether the Anthropocene began 2000 years ago, in 2016, or has yet to arrive.

or behaviour and more so to be confined to the pages of novels, or brought to life on screens. Yet they are still there, they too reflect aspects of our humanity, and in this respect France is no exception. Although the tendency in modern times is to attend to the monstrous, this study will not lose sight of the monster as a distinct, corporeal entity. In childhood our fascination with, and dread of, things with scales, slime or too much fur, suggests a riot of the senses. So, from the pages of modern French literature and contemporary televisual culture this essay will summon an assortment of cyclops, ogres, hybrids, talking animals and zombies.[4]

As the nations of Western Europe lurched into modernity, the monsters of myth and folklore, far from being rejected, were harnessed to deep-seated social and cultural change. Michel Foucault demonstrates how the phenomenon of the monster was progressively assimilated to legal process, in order to discriminate against humans with "abnormalities". Foucault unlocks the nuances in the discourse of jurisprudence. Whereas the monster in and of itself has always fallen outside the law, the shift from "le monstrueux", conceived as a state of being, to "la monstruosité",[5] understood as a form of agency, paved the way for legal interpretations that would exclude those of "aberrant corporeality"[6] from the mainstream of French society. Subsequently Foucault is able to trace a history of the human monster in France, identifying three successive foci of interest: in the Middle Ages the bestial human, during the Renaissance conjoined twins, and in the early modern period the hermaphrodite.

Though extraordinary in and of itself, the interpolation of monsters in what we would now consider to be a morally reprehensible normalisation of negative attitudes to disabled or biologically unorthodox people is a singular manifestation of an underlying trend, whereby humans naturalize monsters and the monstrous. The direction of travel is from the margins to the centre, from the inconceivability of genocide – the term did not exist before 1942, when it was first used by Raphael Lemkin[7] - to Adolf Eichmann's reflection, famously cited by Hannah Arendt, on the "banality of evil".[8] Or, from the werewolves of medieval Europe to the serial killers and paedophiles of today, who are diagnosed as people with damaged or dysfunctional brains.

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[4] As well as giving thought to the incidence of monsters in works by Hugo, Zola, Tournier and Darrieussecq, this article will also reflect upon the intensely literary exploration of human frailties and strengths in the face of the supernatural conveyed by the long-form television drama *Les Revenants*, first aired on Canal Plus in November 2012.

[5] Michel Foucault, *Les Anormaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p.51.

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

[7] Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Clark, New Jersey: Lawbook Exchange, 2008).

[8] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994).

These types of scenario apply mainly to Hellenist civilisations and to communities regulated to a greater or lesser extent by the doctrines of one or other of the great Abrahamic faiths. According to Chet Van Duzer, who has collated references to a vast range of monsters in manuscripts dating from ancient civilisations to the end of the sixteenth century, European concepts of monstrosity originate in the exaggerated, confused reports of encounters with local humans and fauna brought back to the Old Continent by the early explorers.[9] In other cultures, including advanced capitalist societies like Japan, monsters roam freer, are more abundant and often playful. There seems to be a correlation between societies with spiritual plenitude and breadth, and the significance of monsters, which would in turn suggest a more developed connivance between the human and animal worlds. In the West too attitudes could be said to have evolved. The moral bias is not always a negative one; for example Joseph Merrick, the so-called "Elephant Man" of Victorian England would be treated differently today.

The incidence of monsters does tend to raise ethical issues, and this is consonant with the etymologies of the term, the Latinate words *monstrare* ("to show") and *monere* ("to warn"). However, my concern here is more with the prevalence of monsters in literary, and briefly audio-visual, narratives of the modern era. Specifically I contend that the sensory aspects of these representations indicate something fundamental, though as of yet no more than glimpsed, about the role and purpose of literary and other fictions.

By dint of their being at best only partially human, monster characters in literature implicitly ask us to revise our normative reading habits. So, how characters in fiction relate to monsters, and how we as readers concomitantly respond to scenarios involving humans and monsters, is of paramount importance. In order to tease out the ramifications of these encounters, this discussion will draw on recent research relating to the role and function of empathy in the mechanics of reading fiction, as well as some contemporary thinking around the concept of the "posthuman". The analysis will also refer intermittently to a type of modern Gnosticism, exemplified by Mircea Eliade's seminal essay *Le Sacré et le profane* (1957) and the quasi-theological thought of Søren Kierkegaard, who is often hailed as the forefather of twentieth-century existentialism. My reason for consulting gnostic thinkers is that monsters are not secular beings. They belong in part to the animal world, or at least to the human quest to understand the natural world. Moreover, so many of those important moments in fiction and in people's lives, those moments when we experience extremes of emotion, acquire clarity, truth or at least some sort

[9] Chet Van Duzer, "*Hic sunt dracones*: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters", in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p.424: "Some creatures in the New World were so strange to European eyes that they were interpreted as monsters."

of explanation through the intercession of paradigms of thinking that have their origins in religious faith.

Empathy and the monster

Claims for the significance of empathy in human relations have grown voluble over the past decade, due in part to the results of experiments conducted on macaque monkeys that appeared to confirm the existence of mirror neurons. These are defined as neurons that fire both when an animal acts and when the animal sees, or hears, the same action performed by another.[10] Notwithstanding some circumspection within the academic community of neuroscientists – the brain of the macaque monkey is a more reliable test site than that of the human - a significant number of experiments have shown that certain areas of the human brain display surges of activity when people experience an emotion and the same surges of activity when they see another person experiencing an emotion.[11] Moreover, it has been argued that mirror neurons play a crucial role in the way that we appreciate the creative arts.[12]

In the sphere of literary criticism the fuss over mirror neurons has bolstered the positions of theorists like Pavel and Schaeffer, who have long urged scholars to take more seriously the concept of the text as affect.[13] Specifically, it has shed light upon the nature of the attachments that readers form with fictional characters, "l'intuition tenace que le personnage excède sa condition linguistique",[14] the kind of urge that, for those raised in the formalist or structuralist traditions of literary criticism, must always be resisted. For the purposes of this essay the question hinges on whether the text facilitates empathy with monstrous entities in ways that could or would not happen in everyday life. Moral philosophers, who tend to be more sceptical over the extravagance of some positions in which empathy is seen as the root of all that is good in humankind, differentiate helpfully between "emotional" and "cognitive" empathies. "Emotional empathy" arises when one feels the same feelings as the other, "cognitive empathy" when one understands the other, can read the mind of the other even, without necessarily experiencing his or her emotions.[15] Bullies, psychopaths and torturers have highly developed cognitive empathy. Bloom

[10] Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie eds., *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2011), pp.xxviii-xxx.
[11] Marco Iacaboni, "Within Each Other: Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain", in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, pp.45-57.
[12] See David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience", *Trends in Cognitive Science* 11 (2007), pp.197-203.
[13] Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).
[14] Françoise Lavocat, « Identification et empathie: le personnage entre fait et fiction », in Alexandre Gefen and Bernard Vouilloux eds., *Empathie et esthétique* (Paris: Hermann, 2013), p.143.
[15] See Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy* (London: Bodley Head, 2016), pp.16-17.

cites the example of O'Brien, Winston Smith's tormentor in Orwell's *1984*, who is able to manipulate Winston to such an extent that he is able to deduce what scares him the most, even though he has been given no prior information.[16]

Although David Hume and Adam Smith were interested in what we would now recognise as empathy, the term "Einfühlung" was first coined by Robert Vischer in 1870 and developed as a concept by Theodor Lipps in 1903. As its title implies, Émile Zola's late novel *La bête humaine* (1890), seventeenth in the Rougon-Macquart cycle, boasts an array of characters with sinister inclinations and thus proposes itself as a study of human monstrosity: "…elle [la bête humaine] explicite, brutalement, la conviction que l'homme porte en lui, dans ses instincts primordiaux, une part de bestialité et de matérialité irrepressible."[17] But Zola's monsters are remote. As one of his translators points out, the author of *J'accuse*, which is surely one of the great fraternal deeds in French history, lacks novelistic empathy: "… subtle analysis of character is not one of Zola's interests or objects. On the contrary he is at pains to show that in the modern world the mass, the crowd, is more significant than he individual, and that herd instincts (…) are depriving modern man of the means or even the will to think and act for himself."[18] Instead, in a classic case of psychic displacement, morose train driver Lantier can only express feelings of love for his favoured locomotive, whom he baptises la Lison.[19] Over several pages he lavishes an absurd sexual attention over the machine, which assumes in his mind aspects of the ideal woman.[20] Twice in this section la Lison is described as "obéissante", the irony being that the locomotives in this novel will prove to be anything but. Consider the train that hurtles from the tunnel to obliterate Flore, the cousin wracked by jealousy and longing who has already derailed la Lison and injured Lantier. Zola's literary freeze-frame depicts the headlight of the locomotive as a single blazing ball of eye and mouth, like that of the enraged cyclops roaring out of its cave, "ébranlant la terre d'un soufflé de tempête […] L'œil se changeait en un brasier, en une gueule de four vomissant l'incendie, le souffle du monstre arrivait, humide et chaud déjà, dans ce roulement de tonnerre, de plus en plus assourdissant. » (*La bête humaine*, p.1273).

Events, actions and motivations in *La bête humaine* prefigure the stunning finale to the novel when Lantier and his stoker Pecqueux come together in their fatal embrace, wrestling until they tumble and their bodies are shredded beneath the

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[16] *Against Empathy*, p.38.
[17] Henri Mitterand, *Zola et le naturalisme* (Paris: P.U.F., 1986), p.75.
[18] Leonard Tancock, 'Introduction' to Émile Zola, *La bête humaine*, translated by Leonard Tancock, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.13.
[19] For an informed discussion of the importance of contemporary theories of human psychology to Zola's treatment of automatism in *La bête humaine*, see Rae Beth Gordon, "*La bête humaine*: Zola and the Poetics of the Unconscious", in Brian Nelson ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2007), pp.152-168.
[20] Émile Zola, *La bête humaine* (Paris: La Pléiade, 1966), pp.1127-1132.

wheels of the machine, which, driverless, finally assumes its autonomy. The final sentence is sealed with the image of the monstrous runaway train as a metaphor of doom. With its cargo of drunken soldiers the engine, "libre de toute direction", screeches blindly through the Normandy stations and on to the future, into the twentieth century and on, to the destruction wreaked by industrial warfare and holocaust:

> Qu'importaient les victimes que la machine écrasait en chemin! N'allait-elle pas quand même à l'avenir, insoucieuse du sang répandu ? Sans conducteur, au milieu des ténèbres, en bête aveugle et sourde qu'on aurait lâchée parmi la mort, elle roulait, elle roulait, chargée de cette chair à canon, de ces soldats, déjà hébétés de fatigue, et ivres, qui chantaient. (*La bête humaine*, p.1331)

Another literary monument, this one a historical novel written and published sixty years previously, looks further into the future. Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) also features France's most famous monster. At the time of writing Hugo was preoccupied with the ongoing restoration of the cathedral. He wanted it to proceed along traditional Gothic lines rather than assume a neo-classical refit. So, though a complex and multi-layered work of prose fiction, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, as we can see from the extensive architectural descriptions in the text, may also be read as a publicity campaign for Hugo's vision of the cathedral and what it would mean for Paris, the Notre Dame of the great writer's imaginary. Recent research has unearthed evidence from the archives of the Tate Gallery indicating that Quasimodo was probably based on a real person, a hunch-backed stonemason who was working in the cathedral at the time when Hugo was writing the novel and moreover at the same time lived in a street adjacent to the Hugo residence.[21] So the intriguing question pertains as to why Hugo should have wanted to exaggerate the disability of this person and thereby create Quasimodo.

The answer may lie in the aesthetics, in the aesthetics of the renovation of the building, and in the way a person looks and how others respond to him or her. Quasimodo, with his congenital deformities, is shunned by humanity. His environment is another place entirely, within the edifice of the cathedral, where the marble figures of saints and bishops look on him benignly and the demons and monsters carry no hate for him in their hearts. Hugo makes this distinction absolute: « Et la cathédrale ne lui était pas seulement la société, mais encore l'univers, mais

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[21] "Real-life Quasimodo discovered in Tate archives", *The Daily Telegraph* (15 August, 2010). https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwj08Jjn0rLYAhVNKlAKHX3nAPUQFggsMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.telegraph.co.uk%2Fculture%2Fbooks%2Fartsandentertainmentbooksreview%2F7945634%2FReal-life-Quasimodo-uncovered-in-Tate-archives.html&usg=AOvVaw3PpozDvUjt36ASysn4hDep Consulted on 30 December 2017.

encore toute la nature. »[22] The emphasis here is on "toute la nature", a completely different order of things.

However, where Quasimodo is persecuted for reasons of aesthetics, for not appearing properly human, the other outcast, la Esmeralda, with her white goat and her drum, is harassed for her beauty. This persecution of the "égytpienne", her most common designation in the novel, is of course justified in racial terms. In two famous encounters, where care for the other being overrides competing emotions, the reader is bound into their relationship. In a gesture redolent of Christian mysticism, la Esmeralda approaches Quasimodo in the stocks and offers him water. The gesture is spectacularly reciprocated, binding them together and also we as readers affectively to their characters, when Quasimodo abseils down the cathedral wall with the aid of a bell rope and rescues la Esmeralda from the scaffold. His cry of "asile" billows out from inside their sanctuary and is taken up by the crowd. It is repeated time and again by Quasimodo, materialising in various apertures of the cathedral to the acclaim of the crowd (*Notre-Dame de Paris*, pp.447-500), a loud, sustained call to exile that would be heeded by his creator two decades into the future.

Mircea Eliade emphasizes the symbolic importance of the threshold: "Le seuil a ses 'gardiens': dieux et esprits qui défendent l'entrée aussi bien à la malveillance des hommes qu'aux puissances démoniaques et pestilentielles."[23] La Esmeralda is removed from danger and brought across the threshold by her rescuer into what is self-evidently a sacred space. But this space is also profoundly other, completely detached from what is outside, "toute la nature" of Quasimodo. Hannah Thompson has shown how this symbiosis of the monster with the cathedral is encrypted in the lexicon of Hugo's text. Mimetic holes in these descriptions, shortcomings of the naturalist mode which, Thompson argues, gape whenever the realist writer attempts to name the monstrous, to capture in language that which defies the norm, are here plugged by 'metaphors taken from the realm of monumental architecture'.[24] That Quasimodo's 'monstrosity' should be melded with Hugo's celebration in prose of the cathedral is, as Thompson explains, consistent with the writer's thoughts on the aesthetics of gothic architecture expressed in *Préface de Cromwell* (1827), in which the grotesque is superimposed over the sublime. His characterization of Quasimodo in relation to the cathedral is thus a heroic gesture: 'Hugo's combination of the grotesque with the sublime rescues the monstrous from the realm of the abject, and reclaims the disabled body from the realm of the abnormal' (Thompson, p.112).

In the context of recent work in the field of disability studies, Thompson deliberately maintains a narrow focus, using the term 'monster' as a synonym for the

[22] Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Paris: Folio, 1974), p.208.
[23] Mircea Éliade, *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris : Folio, 1965), p.29.
[24] Hannah Thompson, *Taboo: Corporeal Secrets in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Legenda, 2013), p.110.

'deformed body'.[25] Hugo, however, addresses the feelings that monsters inspire in the non-monstrous. He depicts both Quasimodo and la Esmeralda as forms of alterity, shunned by the people. The cathedral is for these two exiles "un lieu de refuge" (*Notre-Dame de Paris*, p.448), and in the climax of this iconic scene of the novel we have Quasimodo exclaiming again and again his and la Esmeralda's new found status as refugees. With the crowd's (albeit fleeting) response, stirring possibly from a deep-seated impulse to shelter and protect those who have been cast out, it is as if Hugo is asking his readers to hear their better voices.

In Chapter 3 of his exegesis of *Les Misérables*, entitled "Touchy Monsters", Mario Vargas Llosa observes that Hugo's characters represent "extreme and unusual forms of human behaviour".[26] They are marked out, spokespeople for issues of their time and of future times. Zola's locomotives and Hugo's hunchback are portentous monsters. They are both characterised by their "hideous monocularity"[27] - Quasimodo's ocular wart survived the journey from nineteenth-century novel to Disney cartoon – but they are fundamentally dichotomous. We sympathize with the victimised hunchback and the values of an inclusive mutually dependant society, yet by the same token the prospect of rampaging, destructive forces beyond our control, represented by the runaway train, looms over us today.

The Destiny of the Ogre

« Tu es un ogre me disait parfois Rachel. Un Ogre?"[28] The opening sentence of Michel Tournier's second novel *Le Roi des aulnes* (1970) with its phatic "tu" ushers his reader into the world of the ogre, which in this case is a Parisian garage mechanic, a social misfit who eats raw meat and is drawn to young children. Given that he has a tiny penis ("microgénitomorphe") his paedophilic instincts pose no material threat to the children he befriends. Instead, his large hands, like Quasimodo's, confer upon him a certain *tendresse*; he, like the hunchback of Notre Dame, is equipped for the bearing of others. However, Tournier's ogre will follow a very different destiny. The title of the novel and the capitalisation of the "O" in the first sentence signal that the forthcoming narrative will be nested in the archetypal European story of the Ogre, Goethe's poem *Der Erlkönig*, which, for Marina Warner, expresses a "timeless fear", personifying "death as a danger above all to the young".[29] The prosaic beginning to

[25] Hannah Thompson, 'État present. French and Francophone Disability Studies', *French Studies*, 71.2 (April 2017), pp. 243-251.
[26] Mario Vargas Llosa, trans. John King, *The Temptation of the Impossible: Victor Hugo and* Les Misérables (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.56.
[27] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, " Postscript: the Promise of Monsters", *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p.455. For an analysis of the eye and perception in Hugo's work see Bradley Stephens, *Victor Hugo, Jean-Paul Sartre, and the Liability of Liberty* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011), pp.144-147.
[28] Michel Tournier, *Le Roi des aulnes* (Paris: Folio, 1975), p.13.
[29] Marina Warner, *No Go to the Bogeyman. Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.24.

Le Roi des aulnes is thus a magic bean ready to spout a thick, entwined beanstalk of lofty aesthetic ambition, for Tournier will replant the Erl King story in the maelstrom of the Second World War and in the machinations of the Nazis, who finished by almost driving to extinction the young Germans they purported to venerate.

Tournier's early work has been criticized for a tendency to guide his readership through the story via a formidable intellectual substructure which is embedded in the text; one commentator has referred to a "protective terrorism" on the author's part.[30] It is as if Tournier betrays a gnawing anxiety over the reception of his work. With a novel like *Le Roi des aulnes* however, which explores the phenomenon of Nazism through the mythology of the ogre, his worries are justified. The textual digressions that saturate the narrative and attach themselves to the events in the story seem to indicate a desire to develop a cognitive empathy with his readership. However, their effect on the reading experience is quite different. They impart an intense, obsessive quality to the narrative such that, in the early stages of the novel a succession of Tiffauges' experiences – as a child the piggyback fight in the playground and the licking of the open wound, as an adult the visit to the Louvre and the accident to the garage assistant – are depicted as what Éliade terms "hiérophanies",[31] or manifestations of the sacred. Analogies are drawn with Tournier's theories on the mystical powers of the photograph - Tiffauges is a keen photographer - which elevates its subject to a mythical status: "La photographie promeut le réel au niveau du rêve, elle métamorphose un objet réel en son propre mythe. L'objectif est la porte étroite par laquelle les élus appelés à devenir des dieux et des héros possédés font leur entrée secrète dans mon panthéon intérieur » (*Le Roi des aulnes*, p.168). This sense of a series of privileged encounters immortalised in photographs encourages Tiffauges, the outsider, to believe that he exists within his own mythical, sacred time, as a being within Being. He thus embodies a vulgarization of Heidegger's concept of Dasein; he, like the subjects of a photograph, has a calling, a destiny to follow.[32]

Evocations of the ogre in *Le Roi des aulnes* drop neatly into a moral duality, which opposes the tyrant, memorably depicted in *Le Roi des aulnes* through the character of Herman Göring, to the bearer; Atlas the titan who bore the sky for eternity, or Saint Christopher, the bearer of Christ. Tiffauges oscillates between the two. Tournier's preferred schematic interpretation involves seeing the novel as an exploration of *la phorie*, or the act of bearing. Tiffauges experiences intense feelings

[30] Michael Worton, "Intertextuality: to inter textuality or to resurrect it?" in D. Kelley and I. Llasera eds., *Cross References: Modern French Theory and the Practice of Criticism* (Leeds: The Society for French Studies, 1986), p.15.
[31] *Le sacré et le profane*, p.29: "Tout espace sacré implique une hiérophanie, une irruption du sacré qui a pour effet de détacher un territoire du milieu cosmique environnant et de le render qualitativement different."
[32] For a more detailed discussion of the pertinence of Heidegger's thinking to *Le Roi des aulnes*, see David Platten, *Michel Tournier and the Metaphor of Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp.91-96.

of euphoria, *eu-phorie*, at moments when he reconnects with his singular ogrish essence. These are transmuted into communal, more beneficial feelings of "la phorie" when he bears children on his back. His destiny will take him, ostensibly as a prisoner-of-war, to Northern Prussia, where he scours the land on a large horse in search of perfect Aryan specimens to bring to the elite Hitler Youth training centre at Kaltenborn. Here he assumes the master trope of the novel, Goethe's poem *Der Erlkönig*, set to music by Schubert, about a father's fear that his child will be stolen in the night by the bogeyman. However, as the fire rages in the castle of Kaltenborn, and the guns of the Red Army echo in the distance, Tiffauges fulfils his vocation as Saint Christopher, as he carries a Jewish child, whom he has secretly sheltered in the castle, on his shoulders across the marshlands, sinking under the unbearable weight of the Star of David.

The centrepiece of *Le Roi des aulnes* concerns the period of time Tiffauges spends as a servant to the Ogre of Rominten. Herman Göring, head of the Luftwaffe presides over a hunting estate, which is like an enchanted garden. Göring himself cuts an extraordinary figure: fat, white-uniformed, enveloped in swathes of fur. He is accompanied everywhere he goes by a pet lion and is an expert in animal droppings. Life on the estate is regulated by extensively detailed rituals and hierarchies related to hunting deer. Prehistoric cattle called aurochs, back-bred by the Nazis, graze on the grasslands. The codes of behaviour are impenetrable to all but the *initiés* and certainly beyond the knowledge of le Professeur Essig, a member of the bespectacled category of human being despised by Göring. This is a sacred, fantastic place, completely out of time and yet much of the detail is historically verified.[33] The ogre-in-chief of *Le Roi des aulnes* exists on the outer edges of Nazi mythology, his world a fantastical vision of archaic insanity.

Pig mania

Marie Darrieussecq's coruscating début novel *Truismes* connects with a prominent feature of our knowledge of monsters, namely their hybridity.[34] It is a story narrated in the first person of a young woman who turns into a pig. From the day of its publication in 1996, when Jean-Luc Godard bought the film rights, *Truismes* has attracted a sizeable popular readership as well as academic attention. It offers a withering critique of patriarchal society; on repeated occasions the protagonist falls victim to squalid, violent sexual abuse. A self-proclaimed "féministe dans la vie",[35]

[33] For more detail on the fantastic elements of Göring's fiefdom, see *Michel Tournier and the Metaphor of Fiction*, p.180.

[34] In addition to the centaurs, gorgons and mermaids of popular mythology and folklore, the Roman historian Pliny the Elder records a proliferation of partially human hybrids in eastern Africa and India. See Chet Van Duzer, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p.397.

[35] Cited in Helena Chadderton, *Marie Darrieussecq's Textual Worlds: Self, Society, Language* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), p.43.

Darrieussecq says that she was inspired to write the account of a young woman transforming into a sow by the random misogynistic appellation, "tu es une grosse truie", and it is true that much of her subsequent writing can only be gauged within feminist paradigms of thought. However, reading *Truismes* raises an interesting issue concerning the female consciousness of the narrator. Her experiences, unlike those of Tournier's ogre, are left unwrapped, so the reader is free to wander around in the text without the guide of an intellectual voice. This absence has not escaped one of her more astute critics who points out that by creating a narrator who is "anachronistically uncritical of the power structures in which she is enmeshed",[36] Darrieussecq attenuates the political clout of the novel.

It is the adverb "anachronistically" that jars for, notwithstanding the absence of cyborgs and supercomputers, *Truismes* is infused with a posthuman sensibility. Beyond the satire of the cosmetics industry, the ethnic cleansing and scenes of bacchanalian cruelty associated with fascist governance, and the lampooning of convenience mass culture, this is a story about environmental degradation and possible renewal. Towards its end the narrator leaves a Paris with crocodiles in the Seine and piranhas in the sewers to take up her country residence in a state-of-the-art pig-sty. There she fully assumes her hybridity, able to revert from porcine to human form and back again.

Darrieussecq's radical design is apparent precisely in this decentring of the human subject. *Truismes* departs from its obvious literary source in that the narrator's metamorphosis, unlike that of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's novel, does not happen overnight but occupies and indeed subtends the entirety of the narrative. While the truisms or commonplaces of a corrupted human society echo in the background, the narrator chronicles changes in her physical condition, her moods, and her behaviour. Though not conventionally intellectual, she displays an acute attentiveness to environmental changes and above all, as she gradually acquires the cognitive apparatus of the pig, a receptiveness to the awakening within herself of new sensory perceptions, chief among which is the olfactory.

The narrator of this heavily scented novel initially works in a perfumery and later falls in love with Yvan, the manager of a different perfumery, Loup-Y-Es-Tu, though only after the latter has transformed, almost homophonically, into a werewolf: from Loup-Y-Es-Tu to loup-garou. And in a Manichean twist to the plot she relies on her souped-up nostrils, capable of detecting a familiar perfume on the winds blowing across the fields, to thwart her mother's betrayal and save herself from butchery. Her own metamorphosis may be characterised as a journey through

[36] Shirley Ann Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p.78.

smells, from the toxicity of a decadent, human civilisation to the pungency of the wild. The reassuring odours of her bucolic refuge are as materially dense – note the repetition of the adjectives in the quotation below - as the bodies of the sows with whom she shares her pig-sty: "…je me blottissais dans mon corps massif, rassurant, au milieu des autres corps massifs et rassurants. Cette odeur ça me protégeait de tout, ça me revenait du fin fond de moi, j'étais en quelque sorte entrée chez moi".[37]

One reassuring element of posthuman theory is that, in a world overcrowded with competing modes of cultural expression, it harbours potential for a reinvigoration of the literary. However, any such resurgence would be conditional on our willingness to recognise the folly of our anthropocentric arrogance and accept the limitations of human knowledge, expressed here by the tremulous inquisitiveness of Darrieussecq's pig-woman narrator. Reworking a classic essay by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, Ridvan Askin suggests that works of literature are "quintessential aesthetic objects", and that these literary objects function as "tools of *aisthēsis*", of feeling, perception and sensation.[38] Askin's thinking picks up on the aesthetic theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for whom the poem or work of art consists of a "*bloc de sensations (…) un composé de percepts et d'affects*",[39] beautiful instruments that may help build knowledge or understanding but convey no a priori meaning.[40]

The idea that art or literature can reach the as yet unknown is given sharper definition by Harriet Hawkins, who, inspired by chaos theory, sets out to show how sophisticated, timeless literature – she sticks to Shakespeare and Milton – mirrors the mathematical complexity (based on non-Euclidean geometry) of the natural world that the advent of computer graphics has only recently begun to reveal. This emergence of complex, beautiful patterning in nature, known as "fractals" – an example would be the effects of tidal erosion on coastlines - has some telling implications. Firstly it confirms the fact of our "puny existence"[41], measured by the shrunken dimensions of human knowledge and cognition. Secondly, in contravention of the classic tenets of Kantian metaphysics, we are required to contemplate the notion that beauty in nature exists beyond our capacity to apprehend it, and thirdly

[37] Marie Darrieussecq, *Truismes* (Paris: Folio, 1996), p.144.
[38] Ridvan Askin, "Objects", in Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge: C.U.P, 2017), p.171.
[39] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), p.154.
[40] Deleuze's principle of *l'empirisme transcendental*, initially developed in *Différence et repetition* (Paris: P.U.F, 1968, p.187), holds that thought begins with sensory experience, only in Deleuze's eyes experience is scattered beyond the human; it may emerge from non-human systems such as plants or machines.
[41] David Ruelle, cited in Harriet Hawkins, *Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture and Chaos Theory* (New York/London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), p.9.

that literature, which is both empathic and sense-oriented, exists as one of the tools that can help to prise open the secrets of worlds beyond human existence.

It is this heuristic quality that makes Darrieussecq's fiction so appealing. Reading the description of Yvan's metamorphosis from company director to wolf in *Truismes* we encounter dynamic, fresh, perfectly contoured sentences, oscillating between the physical phenomenon – "Yvan a donné un violent coup d'épaule et tout son arrière-train a bougé comme un arbre arraché" – and the awe of the observer – "Mon sang s'est figé dans mes veines, j'étais incapable de bouger" (*Truismes*, p.118). The monster that emerges – « gris argenté, avec un long museau à la fois solide et très fin, une gueule virile, forte, élégante, de longues pattes bien recouvertes et une poitrine très large, velue et douce » - is heralded as « *l'incarnation de la beauté* ». (*Truismes*, p.120).

The role of literature and writing in a posthuman context is also foregrounded in *Zoo*, a collection of Darrieussecq's short stories that span her career. In "My mother told me monsters do not exist",[42] a writer burdened by work pulls back her curtains in the small hours of the morning and an unspecified, though apparently living, entity falls to the floor. Having first questioned the reliability of her cognitive skills, the narrator attempts to shoehorn the creature - an indistinct, dark blob - into a zoological category. Although the creature displays evidence of bat-like behaviour, zoology fails her; the monster evades all known categories but remains a living, sentient being. One morning, when she finds it squatting on the sink chewing a crust of bread, she relinquishes thoughts of putting it out with the household rubbish, offers it a feast from her larder and sets off to purchase an indoor pen. What she doesn't do, and from the perspective of literature and the posthuman this is significant, is succumb to the temptation to interpret this arrival of an unidentifiable, living object as the symbolic manifestation of a different intrusion, that of the voyeuristic, curtain-twitching neighbour who had been bothering her for a while. The monster remains throughout "cette chose", the unknown within the human world.

In "Connaissance des singes" (*Zoo*, pp. 39-54), another story from the collection, the genus of the animal, a chimpanzee called Marcel, is not in doubt; what troubles the narrator is its domesticated environment. The chimpanzee belongs to her mother, who implores her to 'babysit' Marcel in her house in the Yonne while she takes a three-week holiday, primarily because the chimpanzee needs human company: "…il aime faire la conversation" (*Zoo*, p.45). The narrator discovers that Marcel's propensity for conversation is in inverse proportion to his eating habits; in brief, her mother has interned the animal and deprives it of food in order to stimulate conversation. However, the conversation is moribund. As the emaciated,

[42] Marie Darrieussecq, *Zoo* (Paris: P.O.L, 2006), pp.143-153.

melancholic chimpanzee acknowledges, "Je n'ai aucune culture" (*Zoo*, p.50), and his babysitter sympathizes, recognising the plight of any intelligent creature whose world-view derives from the banalities and truisms emitted by her mother: "Mais que peut connaître un singe de quatre ans qui n'a jamais quitté son Yonne natale?" (*Zoo*, p.52). The narrator makes good ethical use of her three-week stay with Marcel, feeding him until, fully satiated, he falls silent. On her return the mother confronts (what she perceives as) the disaster -"C'est une catastrophe" (*Zoo*, 54) - of a dehumanized chimp divested of his dungarees swinging from the branches of the trees by the canal. Conversely her daughter is jubilant, for she has succeeded in dismantling her writer's block. Before his words dried up, Marcel divulged some juicy details regarding her mother's love life, thereby providing the raw material for her next book.

These conclusions are reassuring in that Darrieussecq appears to advocate the view that human interference in animal matters should always be motivated by respect for the well-being and welfare of other species. Moreover, the story of Marcel confirms the results of scientific research, which shows that effective, or 'pro-social', empathy exists only within, and not across, communities defined by species or genus, whether human, mammal or fish.[43]

Patricia MacCormack offers a more radical, posthuman vision, based on the presumption that "we are all, and *must* be, monsters because none are template humans. The human is an ideal that exists only as a referent to define what deviates from it".[44] Her thesis is underwritten by a challenge to "majoritarianism", which she defines as the supremacy of a discourse or knowledge system where "it is not so much that things are monsters but certain traits, forms and ways of negotiating the world are considered the only ways, based on the privileging of concepts such as objectivity and logic".[45] Thus, the "monstrous posthuman" entails a deep questioning of basic tenets of human existence, such as concepts of narrative time and causality, which MacCormack describes as "arbitrary".[46] Some concepts, but not all. Further into her disquisition MacCormack tackles the question that inspires Darrieussecq's parable of the talking chimpanzee and effectively harpoons her own thesis by raising the problem of language: "The radical and uncomfortable issue is that we exist within purely human discourse, with all its ambiguities, temporal and spatial contingencies,

[43] See Jean Decety and John T. Cacioppo eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Social Neuroscience* (Oxford: O.U.P, 2011). Although Decety derives much of his work from functional neuro-imaging in humans and developmental psychology, he is at pains to point out that empathy has existed for millennia as a means of regulating behaviour in different species of animals.

[44] Patricia MacCormack, "Posthuman Teratology", in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p.294.

[45] *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p.296.

[46] *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p.295.

and to attempt to operate outside these is itself a human project".[47] In the sphere of the posthuman there will always be this doubling back to a human centre, because language acts as a buffer, blocking the transition from the human to the posthuman.

The zombie's touch

We might venture that cultural representations of monsters function as litmus tests of what it is, at any given time, to be human, rather than what it might be like, now or in the future, to be beyond the human. Arguably the most ambitious creative representation of the relationship of humans to monsters in the contemporary era was first broadcast in November 2012 by the French television channel Canal+. The first series of the television drama *Les Revenants* elevated the popular culture staple of zombies returning to the community where they once lived to a metaphysical plane. From the first episode, when a lepidopterologist's butterfly on display shatters its glass screen and flutters away, and a teenage girl killed four years previously in a coach crash walks briskly up the road one evening and into her family home, viewers are prompted to reflect on ideas of resurrection and immortality. The girl, Camille, is the first of a number of deceased individuals, most of whom died young of unnatural causes, who return to their previous lives unaware of what had befallen them, as if they have simply stepped through a fold in time.

The success of *Les Revenants* is due in part to the technical brilliance of its production, but also to a generic feature of the "téléroman", to use a term coined by Danielle Aubry[48]: its duration. In this case, seven hours of screen time allowed a team of scriptwriters, orchestrated for most of the first series by novelist Emmanuel Carrère, to elaborate a complex, polyphonic narration. The action is set exclusively in and around a small Alpine town wedged in a pass above a large reservoir. This is a fragile ecosystem, which seems gradually to break down over the course of the series. The water level in the reservoir drops mysteriously until eventually the church spire and rooves of the village that was flooded when the damn was first built are revealed. Undecomposed corpses of wild animals are suspended eerily beneath the surface of the water. At twilight and after dark the regular crackle of electricity, blinking neon signs and lights being extinguished feed anxieties, linked to the possibility of water shortages, over the fragility of the basic infrastructure that sustains modern life.

From the outset the viewer is subjected to a subtle process of visual and aural defamiliarization, achieved through the style of filming, the use of natural (and artificial) light, and an evocative, at times oppressive soundtrack supplied by Scottish

[47] *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p.302.
[48] See Danielle Aubry, *Du roman-feuilleton à la série télévisuelle: Pour une rhétorique du genre et de la sérialité* (New York / Oxford : Peter Lang, 2006).

rock group Mogwai. On the set of *Les Revenants* day-time filming was restricted to late afternoons, always after 3pm, and scenes were shot using high resolution digital cameras with acute depth-of-field. As a result the landscapes seem disarmingly still, almost as if there is a momentary freezing of each shot that disturbs the continuity. This hyper-naturalistic sense of alienation is reminiscent of the stylized portraits of American photographer Gregory Crewdson, which in themselves were influenced by the blank-eyed human figures that populate the modernist paintings of Edward Hopper. The effect created in *Les Revenants* is an eeriness which manipulates the consciousness of the viewer, who is obliged to look on these scenes not with the eyes of the rambler or nature lover, but with those of the thinker, the metaphysician even. He or she is impressed not by the finer details of the mountains or the nondescript modern buildings in the town but by the truth or otherwise of the image. For although the existence of nature is imperilled in *Les Revenants*, our primary focus is re-directed, towards the nature of existence.

The narrative is propelled by a sequence of privileged encounters between individual revenants and those citizens of the town who loved them. The temptation would be to understand these moments as "hiérophanies", as a wondrous exhibition of the sacred, but in no sense are they infused with the divine. Instead these are secular resurrections, manifestations of existence, scenarios illustrating the concept of subjective truth first articulated in 1846 by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard defines existence as the residue of metaphysics, as that which remains at the end of thought, when analysis is spent.[49] All that is left to the stunned townspeople (and the revenants) is belief, belief in the impossible reality of their existence, and it is with this belief, their burden of paradox, that they must now live and negotiate their relationships, with the revenants and each other, as, to use Kierkegaard's famously archaic phrase, "knights of the faith".[50]

Belief in the material reality of this existence is vouchsafed by the sense of touch. As Yi-Fu Tuan points out, it is primarily through touch that we empathize with our fellow humans; we use our hands "to know and comfort" members of our own species.[51] When the bereaved are first confronted by revenants, they refrain from touching. The exception to this rule is the reunion between Simon, a young man who committed suicide on the eve of his wedding, and Adèle, the woman he would have married and mother of the child he has yet to meet. Simon's quest to find Adèle is drawn out. When he finally tracks her down at her workplace, a glass-structured

[49] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).
[50] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de silentio*, trans. Alastair Hannay, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp.96-108.
[51] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p.11.

media library, the viewer accompanies him on his final approach via a slow travelling shot through a hall of mirrors. As the couple come together, the words of Adèle's rehearsed speech are eclipsed by gesture, as she reaches out to touch his face.

Director Fabrice Gobert insisted upon the human likeness of his zombies: « L'idée c'était que les revenants n'étaient pas des zombies mais des êtres humains comme tout le monde, même plus vivants que les habitants de cette ville qui sont en deuil et tournés vers la mort. »[52] These monsters are almost entirely humanized, though later they do develop zombie-like skin lesions. Our response as viewers is thus structured by our empathy, not the studied, calculating empathy of the moral philosopher but an edge-of-the-seat, emotional empathy, which for some scholars is the psychological motor that drives human relations.[53] In *Les Revenants* we follow each twitch, each tiny flexion of the exquisitely framed facial expressions of the characters – here the detail, recorded by an unflinching lens, is important – and we walk with them, via slow tracking shots, to their next encounter. From a greater distance the series may be assessed positively for its ingenious exploration of the effects of trauma, and more broadly as a study of mourning. However, the intense focus on narrative empathy places the viewer in the thick of things. We live vicariously the lives of these characters, we possess their interwoven stories, perhaps we feel their joy and pain.

Conclusion: Embracing the monstrous

The story of Serge in *Les Revenants* encapsulates much of the argument in this essay. He was a young woodsman and cannibalistic psychopath, killed out of desperation by his brother Toni to put an end to his murderous assaults on women in the underpass. On his return, he is situated empathically in relation to the viewer. We notice his confusion at the absence of his mother, his loneliness and the aggression of Toni, whose response when first greeted by the ghost of his brother is to hit him over the head with a spade. It is Serge's destiny to encounter Léna, originally the twin of the first revenante Camille, and now four years older than her teenage sister. Léna, who confronts the phenomenon of the revenants head on and gradually adjusts her life to the new realities of the community, is one of the more courageous of the bereaved townspeople, very much a "knight of the faith" à la Kierkegaard. The essence of their encounter, which takes place in the brothers' isolated, mountainside dwelling, is once again relayed through touch. Serge, who

[52]Rencontre avec Fabrice Gobert, "Les revenants, les secrets de tournage en Savoie".https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=8&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwiGwamVk7LYAhXFLlAKHRWsC_MQFgheMAc&url=http%3A%2F%2Farchive.is%2F84TEi&usg=AOvVaw2AlkR2yWG_-pIvZZZ5spmZ. Consulted on 30 December 2017.

[53] See C. Daniel Batson, *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer* (Hove, UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), and Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2009).

once sliced women's stomachs, turns healer, applying a herbal balm to the mysterious lesion on Léna's back. Later, in an electrifying scene, he pulls himself away from the assortment of hunting knives conveniently laid out on the table, and the couple make love.

Serge is the ultimate monster of contemporary western civilisation, though he has nothing of the arrogance of a Hannibal Lecter. Here the psychopathic cannibal is humanized. This makes for an audacious story, but with its promise of rehabilitation masking a panglossian world view it also constitutes an ethical and philosophical conundrum, which plumbs the recesses of our religious and secular identities. Monsters are designed to rock assumptions about the nature of our existence, and they do so by disturbing the logic of our senses. But these are not immaculate designs; rather they crop up from time to time to point us in different directions, towards those human secrets that have yet to be told.