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LIMINANIMAL
The Monster in Late Victorian Gothic Fiction

The animal characteristics of the monster in late Victorian gothic fiction make visible the biopolitical rationalisation of life in modern societies. Key moments in Bram Stoker’s Dracula and R.L. Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde provide evidence for the animality of late Victorian gothic monsters. In an extended reading of Richard Marsh’s 1897 novel The Beetle, this essay shows how the liminality of the monster in late Victorian gothic fiction is rhetorically articulated as a figural aberration that can only be reabsorbed into the dominant discourse by the use of animal imagery. In the face of ever more sophisticated calculations concerning populations in the nineteenth century, Victorians’ increased awareness of humans’ animality as Darwin’s theory of evolution became culturally assimilated allowed this transformation to be encoded as a biological mutation. The monster’s status as a liminal creature that occupies an indeterminate zone between human and animal draws attention to biopower’s dividing practices, which create social categories, such as race, that come to be understood as biological classifications.

Keywords: monster; animal; biopolitics; Victorian fiction; Darwin; race; creaturely; liminality

I

Readers of late Victorian gothic fiction (hereafter LVG) have long recognised the animality of many of the monstrous figures that people its pages, but the relation between animal and monster that such recognition calls into question has remained curiously under-theorised. Under rubrics as varied as ‘degeneration’, ‘racial panic’, ‘gender inversion’ and ‘polymorphous perversity’, the gothic sensibility at the end of the nineteenth century has plausibly been ascribed to fears inspired by mass movements and class mobility, to cultural anxieties concerning Britain’s others at a time of increased imperial expansion in the face of global economic recession or, alternatively, to the proliferation of discourses on sexuality that both resist and account for mechanisms of social normativity. Yet the phenomenon of the gothic has seldom been studied in the context of an equally expansive discourse on the social, philosophical and scientific status of the animal that pervaded late Victorian
The monsters’ animality, in existing accounts, is acknowledged only to be dismissed as a mark of their radical alterity.

This is a curious occlusion, not least because the monstrosity of Dracula, Jekyll and Hyde, and even Dorian Gray, to name only the most famous monsters in LVG, cannot be reductively inscribed within a mythic or supernatural order of representation. Indeed, these figures make themselves known or show themselves (se montrer, in French, the etymological root for the English ‘monster’, from monstrum, the Latin for portent) as anomalous or aberrant or precisely ‘as’ monstrous within the realist worldview that would reject them on both epistemological and ontological grounds. These monsters are monstrous only to the extent that they violate the protocols and conventions that sustain the mimetic logic of the literary ecology they inhabit, which must accordingly assert its priority by rejecting that which falls outside its purview. Accordingly, the familiar if no less frightening figure of the animal comes to stand in as a proxy for the human other and thus as a representational vehicle for the creaturely pathos we tend to associate with the figure of the monster in LVG. The monsters’ animality, in other words, functions as a supplementary figure for their unrepresentability.

LVG monsters, moreover, typically do not show themselves as fully formed monsters when they make their entry into the fictional worlds that resist them but rather become monstrous through transformative processes that give form and impulse to their narrative development. These processes establish a link with the rich literary tradition of human/animal metamorphoses that stretches at least as far back as Ovid. Yet, in the fictional context of LVG, the processes by which the monster becomes a monster have now to be understood in the context of Darwinian evolution and its dynamics of random mutation and sexual selection. Science, rather than myth or superstition, lends plausibility to the representation of the monster even when traditional science is itself misrepresented and misused in these works. Scientific discourse in these texts informs experiments that are capable of producing (Jekyll) as well as destroying (Van Helsing) monstrous creatures. LVG scientists are in some sense ‘mad’ doctors – they have outsized ambitions, they are often asocial beings and, like H.G. Wells’ Dr Moreau, they are at times even ‘monstrous’ themselves; but at the same time, they are scientists and, as such, they lend a degree of legitimacy and realism to otherwise far-fetched premises and implausible outcomes. In this case, the recourse to the animal as a figure for the realistic representation of the monster’s monstrosity responds to a rhetorical logic of substitution for which science merely provides thematic ballast.

The critical occlusion of the animality of the monster in LVG, as I hope to show in what follows, masks a prior occlusion occurring at the very site of its monstrosity: the animality of the human. The monster, I will argue, comes to occupy that indeterminate zone or border created between the human and the animal through what Giorgio Agamben (2004: 37) has called the ‘anthropological machine’: that discursive apparatus that, operating within different domains of knowledge and culture (philosophy, science, literature, politics etc.), isolates the non-human within the human and thereby animalises the human. This zone or border, in urgent need of redefinition as culture begins to assimilate Darwin’s theory of evolution in the late nineteenth century, can be profitably aligned with the space occupied by what Eugene Thacker (2010: 97) has called the ‘creature’, a
figure that can be ‘positioned somewhere between animals and monsters, the normal and the pathological, the well-formed and the de-formed’. A creature traced by transcendental forms of thought. The creaturely, in this reading, would be that human figure whose humanity becomes disfigured by a form of political violence that targets the bare, biological bases of life. This form of effacement corresponds to Eric Santner’s (2006: 26) description of the creaturely as an ‘excess’ of humanity, yet differs from it in that the monster in LVG retains as an index of its monstruity an explicit animal reference whose allegorical operations have been evacuated of theological determination. Indeed, the monster in LVG belongs to a historical conjuncture in which the animal comes to stand in for a radical form of alterity that bears the marks of political exception.

II

To be sure, the border dividing human and animal was a highly contested discursive site throughout the nineteenth century. As Ivan Kreilkamp (2005: 92–4) has persuasively shown, the publication of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species in 1859—the event through which the discourse on animals in late Victorian culture is typically routed—provides only one narrative strand in a complex cultural, scientific and political history of human/animal relations that informs and indeed underwrites the Victorian period as a whole. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, for instance, which was founded in 1824, propagated through its annual reports lurid descriptions of animal suffering and mistreatment that, according to Kreilkamp, triggered what he calls ‘mimetic sympathy’ (93), a modality of affect that became associated with the moral purposes of reading itself. But the discourse on animal cruelty did not in fact trouble the distinction between humans and animals; it merely displaced it, creating in its stead a subcategory of animals that were vested with human subjectivity. Dogs, cats and horses became the favoured emblems of an enlightened attitude towards animals that not only acknowledged their ‘wants’ and ‘desires’, but also willingly granted political rights to non-humans so as to curtail their suffering, the privileged occasion, from Jeremy Bentham on, for the display of powerful affect. In Anna Sewell’s extraordinarily popular novel Black Beauty (1877), to give only one example, animal suffering is narrated from the perspective of a horse who, having been granted sentience, reason and voice, shows us that human cruelty is also a gross misunderstanding of animals’ own desires to be ‘good’ human companions.

Another strand of this dense history of relations between animals and humans in the nineteenth century approaches the indeterminacy of the animal/human dichotomy from the opposite perspective by considering the animalisation of humans. In ‘Our Animal Cousins’, Harriet Ritvo (2004) analyses the use of categories of zoological classification to mark the distance separating different human groups. In nineteenth-century iconography, for instance, the Irish were routinely compared to ‘great apes’ (49), an all-too-common representational strategy of racist ideology. More generally, however, the fascination with hybrids and cross-breeding unsettled the ostensible species barrier that separated humans and animals. While hybrids were often proven to be the product of hoaxes – hoaxes for which
Darwin himself occasionally fell – they also offered a compelling spectacle that captured the Victorian imagination. In the Victorian imaginary, the connection between humans and our non-human ‘cousins’ (as Ritvo calls them) could occasion a wide variety of hybrids, many of which were the product of suggestion, representation or resemblance. For Ritvo, these connections show that ‘similarity remains as firmly embedded in contemporary culture as does the scientific and theological assertion of difference’ (66). The seemingly uncanny resemblances obtaining between members of different species both justified and made possible the comparative methodologies that natural history used during this period to establish phylogeny.

From this perspective, the emergence of a whole new cast of monstrous characters in LVG can be assimilated to a discourse in which the monstrous is readily imagined as animal insofar as the animal serves as an uncanny human double that simultaneously is and is not a human other. Resemblance and similarity across species may well account for the morphogenesis of the monsters in LVG, but this account begs the question of the animal’s monstrosity: why should the animal be monstrous? Let me begin to address this question by considering two familiar scenes. The first scene occurs in the middle of Stevenson’s _Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde_ (1886). It is an exchange between Poole, Jekyll’s butler, and the lawyer Utterson, on the subject of Hyde:

“Then you must know as well as the rest of us that there was something queer about that gentleman – something that gave a man a turn – I don’t know rightly how to say it, sir, beyond this: that you felt it in your marrow kind of cold and thin.”

“I own I felt something of what you describe,” said Mr. Utterson.

“Quite so, sir,” returned Poole. “Well, when the masked thing like a monkey jumped among the chemicals and whipped into the cabinet, it went down my spine like ice. O, I know it’s not evidence, Mr. Utterson, I’m book-learned enough for that; but a man has his feelings, and I give you my bible-word it was Mr. Hyde!”

(Stevenson, 2003: 37)

It makes sense that Jekyll be transformed into the ape-like Hyde rather than into, say, a dog or an ass, but it does not necessarily follow that Hyde should as a matter of course become a murderer, a monster whose physiognomy is indescribable; a monster, indeed, whose name the lawyer Utterson dare not even utter. To say that Hyde is ‘like’ an animal is perhaps to affirm only that his monstrosity exceeds the language that is used to describe him; but it is also to say that Hyde’s inhumanity is categorical in a biological rather than a moral sense, and in an immanent rather than a transcendental sense. It is Jekyll himself who makes this point most forcefully when, in his confession, he describes Hyde’s state of being when, after having committed a murder, he finds himself in Regent’s Park, the only pastoral or quasi-pastoral setting in the text: ‘I sat in the sun on a bench; the animal within
me licking the chops of memory; the spiritual side a little drowsed, promising subsequent penitence, but not yet moved to begin’ (58). In a ‘state of nature’, Hyde is described as the ‘animal within’ whose actions, like those of wild animals, are not subject to the human laws that guide the ‘spiritual side’ of Jekyll to repent. The creaturely, in this instance, is viewed as a barely domesticated animal other that exists within civilised human forms, like a park in the midst of the city.

The next scene occurs near the end of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Jonathan Harker, Quincey Morris, Arthur Holmwood, Dr Van Helsing and John Seward – the so-called vampire hunters – are all waiting for Dracula to appear in his house in Piccadilly.

Suddenly with a single bound he leaped into the room, winning a way past us before any of us could raise a hand to stay him. There was something so panther-like in the movement – something so unhuman, that it seemed to sober us all from the shock of his coming. The first to act was Harker, who with quick movement, threw himself before the door leading into the room in the front of the house. As the Count saw us, a horrible sort of snarl passed over his face, showing the eye-teeth long and pointed; but the evil smile as quickly passed into a cold stare of lion-like disdain.

(Stoker, 1997: 266)

Dracula may well provide a vivid personification of the spectre of the creepy Continental who crosses the Channel to prey on young English girls. Yet he is often enough likened to animals – an engorged leech, a hungry wolf, a jackal, a rat, a bat of the sort that flies in the ‘northern heights of London’ (174) – to suggest that his animality, however obvious, is hardly incidental to his outsized monstrosity, especially to those who would hunt him like a ‘wild beast’ (267). In his madness, Renfield, the ‘zoophagous maniac’ who worships the Count, comes to stand in for this multiple identification since he seeks to accumulate life by establishing a virtual food chain of animal-eating animals: first spiders, then a bird, then a kitten (69–70). Dracula, this proliferating taxonomy suggests, is not merely an animal, a single beast; rather, he encompasses the Animal Kingdom as a whole. The creaturely, in this instance, comprises an atavistic animality located within every individual. The novel expresses the threat of this atavistic expression by enclosing the figure of the animal in a series of confined spaces (Renfield’s asylum, the zoo, the room in Piccadilly, Dracula’s coffins), as though maintaining the social order were a matter of containing the monstrous animal self from the world of the living.

It is instructive to compare these LVG animal monsters to what is perhaps the most famous pre-Darwinian monster in the British novelistic tradition. The monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is not only created out of human body parts obtained from the charnel house; it is also a ‘being of gigantic stature’ (1996: 32). Even though the monster is figured as belonging to a new species, it is arguably his exaggerated or super-sized human traits, rather than his animality, that make him fearsome. ‘I am malicious,’ the monster insists, ‘because I am miserable’ (98). He has given up any hope of finding a human who feels ‘emotions of benevolence’ (98) towards him, and thus pleads with Victor Frankenstein to create a companion of
another sex for him who is ‘as hideous as myself’ (99). After listening to his story, Frankenstein consents to create a female monster but only if the monster promises to take her to the ‘vast wilds of South America’ (99), where he will pose no danger to man. Indeed, the monster in Frankenstein is depicted, after Rousseau, as a naturally good man who is corrupted by society. His exile from society is thus also a ‘return’ to a state of nature: ‘My companion,’ he assures Frankenstein, ‘will be of the same nature as myself’ (99). The absence of animal tropes in the description of the monster is perhaps unremarkable insofar as Frankenstein follows the script of eighteenth-century gothic fiction, whose conventions, as Eve Sedgwick (1980: 12) has shown, can be reduced to a numbingly repetitive though surprisingly coherent formula containing the same themes, the same situations, the same narrative discontinuities, the same inside/outside tensions, but no animals to speak of. The same, incidentally, can be said about its exact contemporary, John Polidori’s The Vampyre (1819), a story that, for all its vampirism, has no recourse to the animal as a figure for Lord Ruthven’s monstrosity. This comparison puts into perspective the proliferation of animal imagery in gothic’s late nineteenth-century revival, a feature which must now be counted among its own conventions.

This development suggests that something in the intervening century made the relation between beast and monster a conjunction so naturalised as to go almost unnoticed. There is no mistaking the monster in LVG for the lawyers, doctors, real estate agents, bankers, politicians, scientists and other Victorian professionals among whom it circulates. Yet this difference, far from signalling a shift from the referential to the poetic or otherworldly, is contained within a rhetorical system that takes under its mantle figurative as well as narrative and intertextual operations that remain within the purview of the real. In thematic terms, the narrative in LVG can be said to be ‘about’ the attempt to ‘capture’ the monster within an empirical explanatory matrix (science, the law, politics, the economy) that excludes it but that must nevertheless reabsorb it as its own, using its own terms. The criterion for distinguishing between monster and human is no longer referential (no one is supposed to assume that the word ‘monster’ corresponds to the thing named; there is always ‘something’ else, an unnameable remainder to that which shows itself), but it is still, through the mediation of the animal, resolutely phenomenal in practice. Accordingly, LVG calls for an immanent reading practice that, in seizing on human otherness, would limit, in tracing it, an otherwise implicitly endless allegorical relay of extra-referential readings. Sometimes, a beast is only a beast.

The point of insisting on the presence of the beast in LVG is not, or not only, to argue for an understanding of its emergence as some undesirable yet inevitable by-product of Darwinian evolution assimilated to social engineering. Rather it is to suggest that the figural operation that installs the beast as a human other in the fictional text through the medium of the monster is no different in kind from the discursive acts that structured Victorians’ attitudes towards non-humans. At its most radical, this would be to suggest that the animal as such is nothing if not a figure insofar as it encompasses a multiplicity of the living for which a single name, a single category, is insufficient. The rhetorical figure that names an entity with no adequate referent in reality is catachresis. Etymologically, catachresis means ‘to misuse’, and, as a figure of abuse, the monster, in its sheer fictionality, its utter constructedness, dramatically captures the catachrestic performance whereby the
animal is installed as a unitary figure for human otherness among the otherwise vast multiplicity of the living. To imply that a cat, a monkey or the lions we meet at the local zoo are mere figures of speech is, of course, asinine; yet, the proliferation of the discourse on the animal at the end of the nineteenth century and its displacement into the monstrous in LVG powerfully suggest that the animal is also a narrative event in its own right, entering into the dense figurative landscape of genre fiction through various characterisations. For rather than remaining the unifying or univocal figure of strict Cartesian binarism, the animal comes to occupy a space of indeterminacy in the Victorian imaginary for which the monster is an apt figure, less for its sheer monstrosity than for its liminality, an insubstantial materiality that multiplies rather than reduces difference.

LVG is the privileged site for this figural operation for both historical and formal reasons. On the one hand, the confluence of a series of historical events at the end of the nineteenth century created the conditions of possibility for conceptualising a different taxonomic logic through a reconsideration of the human’s place within it – we can think of the growing influence of Darwin’s theory of evolution in diverse domains of knowledge; the reinvigoration of animal rights discourse after the passage of the Cruelty to Animals Act in 1876; the Victorian predilection for and sentimental attachment to pets; the expansion of trade in exotic animal species; the confinement and display of animals in circuses, zoos and other spectacles; the persistent instrumentalisation of animal labour; the mechanisation of animal slaughter; and the continued use of animals as both objects and subjects of scientific experimentation. On the other hand, LVG, with its peculiar structure of address, formal experimentalism and figurative plasticity, allows us to glimpse some of the discursive mechanisms that come into play in the use of the animal to demarcate the human. These mechanisms are nowhere as visible as in LVG’s preoccupation with identifying and then reaching beyond existing limits of taste, of decorum and of proportion so that the human subject becomes untethered, even if only provisionally, from its institutional determinations and normative identifications (of race, of gender, of nation and of class). Indeed, the peculiar ontological status of the animal in LVG goes some way towards explaining the persistence of what can be thought of as the genre’s ‘liminality’. This is the proposition set forth by the gothic whereby the limits of conventional realistic representation are pushed and, in being pushed, located and described so as to be able to cross into a space of interiority to which access had previously been barred. To be sure, this is the realm of psychology – to say that LVG is ‘uncanny’ is hardly uncanny – but it is also the realm of privacy, sexuality and ideology, sites whose general contour and field of application are reconfigured by the growing cultural awareness of the human’s animality and which now come to comprise the vectors of a properly biopolitical order. And, as my argument will make clear, it is within biopower that we must locate the animality of the monsters in LVG.

III

Let me offer an example of this type of figural operation from a novel that is not as well known as the ones I have already mentioned. Richard Marsh’s novel The
Beetle was published in 1897, the same year as Bram Stoker’s Dracula and was, at least initially, the more popular of the two. The two texts bear formal and thematic similarities: the use of multiple narrators; the presence of an animal or animal-like creature with mesmeric powers that comes from abroad; the use of the marriage plot as a narrative device; and the deployment of science and technology as counter-discourses to the monstrous. Both novels also have recourse to similar figural patterns: the figure of the threshold, for instance, serves as a rhetorical placeholder for the transformative operations that the monsters both stage as monsters and experience as monstrous characters intent on transforming others. (Recall the curious use of ‘passing’ in the Dracula quotation above.) But in The Beetle, the motif of the threshold is rather more salient: characters move across different states of consciousness, orders of being and stages of civilisation as though they were passing through so many doorways. The narrative structure, of which I offer an extended analysis below, can be said to be constructed through a series of thresholds to the extent that the action moves swiftly across time and space in a series of relays premised on inside/outside, then/now, self/other, human/animal binaries whose difference remains suspended in the figure of the monster.

Narrated by four different narrators – a clerk, an inventor, a detective, the daughter of a politician – the novel stages the liminality of the human/animal divide through its treatment of a monstrous beetle with hypnotic powers. The beetle is in fact a priestess from the Egyptian cult of Isis who has come to England to exact revenge on her/its former lover, one Paul Lessingham, now a powerful member of parliament but once a colonial adventurer in northern Africa. In the course of the story, the beetle undergoes a series of transformations. Not only does it ‘transmigrate’ from human to animal and back again, but it also undergoes, in what is perhaps a first for world literature, a trans-generational, trans-species gender transition:

directly I saw him, I recognized that some astonishing alteration had taken place in his appearance. To begin with, he seemed younger, – the decrepitude of age had given place to something very like the fire of youth. His features had undergone some subtle change. His nose, for instance, was not by any means so grotesque; its beak-like quality was less conspicuous. The most part of his wrinkles had disappeared, as if by magic. And, though his skin was still as yellow as saffron, his contours had rounded, – he had even come into possession of a modest allowance of chin. But the most astounding novelty was that about the face there was something which was essentially feminine; so feminine indeed, that I wondered if I could by any possibility have blundered, and mistaken a woman for a man; some ghoulish example of her sex, who had so yielded to her depraved instincts so as to have become nothing but a ghastly reminiscence of womanhood.

(Marsh, 2004: 61)

In this passage, the syntactical transition from ‘[h]is features’ and ‘[h]is nose’ to ‘her sex’ and ‘her … instincts’ represents a rhetorical anomaly that corresponds to the trope of anacoluthon. This figure marks a further transition from the logic of
substitution we have come to expect in the use of metaphor to a performative logic of acts that brings into being a new configuration, as in metamorphosis. This double valence, a structuring feature of the threshold itself insofar as crossing a threshold implies a difference and a displacement, extends into the monster’s powers over the humans it encounters in England. In the novel’s first part, the beetle takes possession of Holt, an impoverished clerk who has entered into the beetle’s room through the window in a solitary suburban villa that he finds open by chance after having been denied access to the workhouse. The story begins to unfold in the familiar pattern of a marriage plot when we learn that the beetle has come to England to disrupt Lessingham’s engagement to Marjorie Lindon, the daughter of a prominent politician. It is an engagement, it is worth noting, of which the beetle is somehow cognisant even though it is one of the best-kept secrets in the social set in which the couple move.

Sydney Atherton, who is somewhat too insistently portrayed as a genius, does not suspect that Marjorie, an old friend, is already engaged when he asks her to marry him, a proposal she cannot in any case take very seriously since she knows him to be rather unreliable in his attachments. Being moody and mercurial, Atherton has the tendency to exchange the object of his desire with relative ease. The same lack of constancy, as it turns out, applies to his vocation, which is described as that of an inventor. He is currently at work on developing a weapon of mass destruction, a particularly lethal biochemical concoction referred to as Atherton’s Magic Vapour, whose destructive power he describes in these terms: ‘a hundred thousand men, – quite possibly more! – would drop down dead, as if smitten by the lightning of the skies’ (137). Dora Grayling, a rather grey but nevertheless wealthy heiress in love with Atherton, offers to fund his research, which, if proven effective after testing in the Amazon Basin, will no doubt eliminate the need for war and guarantee perpetual peace. Like Dora, the reader tends to trust Atherton, if only because he too has hypnotic powers which are stronger than the beetle’s and render him resistant or immune to its charms. Furthermore, Atherton’s scientific training enables him to offer the reader a learned first-hand account of the beetle’s transformation:

Beyond doubt it was a lamellicorn, one of the Copridoe [dung beetle]. With the one exception of its monstrous size, there were the characteristics in plain view; – the convex body, the large head, the projecting clypeus. More, its smooth head and throat seemed to suggest that it was a female. Equally beyond a doubt, apart from its size, there were unusual features present too. The eyes were not only unwontedly conspicuous, they gleamed as if they were lighted by internal flames . . . .

The beetle, though endowed with supernatural powers, is afraid of electricity, of whose spectacular effects, in all its primitive atavism, it is apparently unaware. In the same laboratory, which becomes a crucial narrative hub in the novel, Lessingham comes unhinged when he sees a drawing of the beetle that the latter has left behind as others might a calling card. The illustration is mysterious insofar as
it is rendered in an unknown medium, ‘by some process of photogravure’: ‘It was of
dull golden green; the colour was so well brought out that, – even to the
extent of seeming to scintillate, and the whole thing was so dexterously done that
the creature seemed alive’ (115). Embarrassed and understandably concerned about
his political career after this episode, Lessingham approaches Augustus Champnell,
a ‘confidential agent’, who agrees to look into the matter. In practical terms, this
means forcing an entry into the house inhabited by the beetle after Atherton has
left Marjorie behind when he is forced to follow Holt, who is now being used as a
decoy operated telepathically by the beetle itself, who lies in wait for Marjorie.
Champnell, accompanied by Lessingham and Atherton, discovers upon returning to
the villa that Marjorie has disappeared and that the beetle has mysteriously
decamped. By questioning a neighbour who spends her days gazing out of her bed-
room window, they realise that the beetle has ‘disagreeably surprised and hypno-
tised’ (286) Marjorie, who is now dressed as a man in Holt’s old clothes. Marjorie
and the beetle, which has been seen carrying an ‘enormous bundle’ through the
streets of London in the manner of, well, a beetle, have now boarded a train
bound for Southampton. Champnell and the others eventually decide to follow the
beetle in a ‘special’ train in what is perhaps the first locomotive chase scene in lit-
erature. The train carrying the beetle unexpectedly derails, destroying the beetle
and rendering Marjorie senseless. Fully recovered after a three-year internment in
a lunatic asylum, Marjorie marries Lessingham, Atherton marries Grayling and
order is finally restored to the Commonwealth.

I have described the plot at some length in order to show how the motif of
the threshold, at once performative and figurative, drives the rhetorical economy
of the novel, shifting or making mobile the border between individual agency and
institutional determinations that would curtail it in the form of racial, sexual,
national and class identifications. Indeed, the threshold, as it appears in the scenes I
have described, marks the moment of transition from one state of being to another
(human/animal, man/woman, upper class/lower class, young/old, English/for-
eign) as an event that puts into motion two types of discursive operations: a per-
formative logic of acts (most dramatically staged in the novel as hypnotic acts) and
a figurative logic of cognition (formally rendered by the use of different first-per-
son narrators, whose collective task it is to give a coherent account of the beetle).
The marriage plot achieves closure only after the monster is eliminated and thereby
functions to stabilise or re-establish the human/animal divide and reaffirm the
authority of the discourses that sustain it. The anthropological machine, in this
reading, operates by means of the political, scientific and legal languages that
domesticate the monster as an animal. But if this reading is correct in linking the
animal and the human through the figure of the liminal monster, why is this novel,
and LVG more generally, so invested in spectacularly staging the permeability or
porosity of the border that separates human and non-human, only to then restore
that border with all the force of an overdetermined prohibition? Stated in some-
what naïve terms, why is it important to police the human/animal divide? The
answer I think lies with the political status of the animal at the end of the
nineteenth century and, more precisely, with the increasingly problematic imple-
mentation of biopolitics in an age in which biopower needs to be reconfigured to
take into account a new cultural awareness of human animality.
IV

Biopower, in Foucault (2003: 243), is aligned with, but does not coincide with, disciplinary power: it is primarily a regulatory technology of life addressed to a multiplicity of humans rather than a technique centred on the body; a ‘massifying’ seizure of power directed at ‘man-as-species’ rather than an ‘individualizing’ discipline directed at ‘man-as-body’. Biopolitics begins to take form when the fact of biological living – the status of the human as a living animal – becomes politicised at the level of population, of race, of species; a process that begins, according to Foucault (1978: 139), at the end of the eighteenth century. For Agamben (1998: 3), Foucault’s attempt to situate the rise of biopower at the so-called ‘threshold of the modern era’ tends to underestimate or mis-state the extent to which biopolitics was installed as a condition of possibility of sovereign power as such. It is not simply a structural feature of the modern state and its institutional dispositions; it is a founding principle of sovereignty insofar as the sovereign makes use of the state of exception to re-inscribe biological living within a social order that categorically excludes it so as to claim an unconditional capacity to kill. The production of the biopolitical body through the re-inclusion of ‘bare life’ into politics constitutes, for Agamben (15), the ‘original activity of sovereign power’. It is in this process of re-inscription that the figure of the animal comes to play a crucial role since the state of exception functions by animalising the human and by creating transitional or hybrid forms of life whose very anomaly represents at once the banning of bare life and its re-inscription.

In Agamben’s telling, it is not so much that biopolitics upsets the strict ontological distinction Western metaphysics maintains between human and non-human animals only the better to reaffirm it. Rather, biopolitics exploits, by making unstable, a distinction that already exists within the human between life as a physiological function and life as a social form of existence that tends towards the occlusion of the biological.

The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human … passes first of all as a mobile border within living man, and without this intimate caesura the very decision of what is human and what is not would probably not be possible.

(Agamben, 2004: 15)

Citing the eighteenth-century French physiologist Bichat, Agamben (15) writes of the ‘internal animal’ and the ‘external animal’, both of which live within the human. According to Agamben, the ‘split between the functions of vegetative life and the functions of relational life’ is of considerable ‘strategic importance’ insofar as biopolitics proceeds by means of a ‘progressive … redefinition’ of the internal animal, which now comes to include the ‘biological heritage of the nation’ (15).

From this perspective, it is not difficult to see that Hyde is not so much an embodiment of Jekyll’s ‘evil nature’ as much as an externalisation of his ‘internal animal’, an animal that must be made visible as monster the better to sacrifice it in the interest of biopower. That the relation between Hyde and Jekyll, Jekyll and Hyde, is mediated almost entirely through legal discourse points to the importance
of regulating and policing the ‘internal animal’. The performativity of this discourse makes transformation possible in a civic context, much like the genetic code makes biological transformation possible in ‘nature’. Utterson, whose name is itself a performative re-enactment of the legal power of utterance, is both executor and executioner, making sure in the end that Hyde remains hidden. Similarly, the various forms of transfusion in Dracula put into circulation blood, money and earth, but also promises, contracts and documents. By tracing the path of these exchanges, the vampire hunters render visible, perhaps unwittingly, the dense network of capillaries through which biopower operates. Through the blurring of institutional and individual agencies in the marriage plot, the mobile threshold between human and animal that animates the narrative in The Beetle becomes a biopolitical exercise in the maintenance and regulation of social order and sovereign power. For all the energy these novels invest in suppressing the very monsters that have advanced, and indeed justified, their narratives, the literary use of animal imagery makes visible those mechanisms of biopower that would otherwise remain implicit in the discursive deployment of the law.

Insofar as these examples presuppose a division, or threshold, within a population that excludes the monster-as-other from the purview of the institutions that would legitimatize the incorporation of the subject into society, LVG would seem to illustrate the principle of visibility that underlies disciplinary power in Foucault’s account of panopticism (1977: 202). Consider, for instance, Utterson’s discursive hesitation before the unutterable unrepresentability of Hyde’s face; or Harker’s difficulty in recording the precise contours of Dracula’s physiognomy; or the visual rendering of the beetle as though it were painted on an archaic Egyptian parchment. But the disciplinary model fails to explain sufficiently the nature of the divisions upon which LVG narratives are articulated, chief among which is the human/animal divide. Operating on the basis of regulatory principles that determine the limits of life (birth, death, health etc.), biopower creates divisions and subdivisions within a population that are conceptualised as biological barriers that separate particular groups of humans from other groups of humans. Race is the term we have inherited from the Victorians to name these groups. Foucault (2003: 355), firmly though reluctantly, argues that biopolitics both explains and justifies its grip on life on the principle of racism. Racism functions by biologising the threshold between human and animal as a division internal to humanity, understood not as an individual body but as a population. In this context, the monstrosity of the monster in LVG can be said to function as a racial marker insofar as the animality of the monster makes its monstrosity a biological – or, better, biologised – category. And to the precise extent that monstrosity is, by definition, that which is undesirable, unfathomable, radically other, so too will race prove to be a categorical aberration on the order of the creaturely, or, as the history of the twentieth century only too clearly shows, a monstrous creation.

By way of conclusion, let me suggest that the importance of the animality of the monster in LVG, as I have been describing it, lies in its capacity to make visible
the animality of the human. The discursive space separating human and animal that results from this reversal now becomes a zone or site of figural possibility and impossibility best captured in the figure of the monster. It would be excessive, though perhaps not entirely misguided, to suggest that LVG, with its extravagant use of monsters, its generically monstrous texts, and its odd though appealing pulpiness, represents a concerted political response to biopower. To be sure, biopower enters a state of crisis in the last decades of the nineteenth century on account of the staggering growth of urban populations, the global economic downturn following the Depression of 1873 and a sustained period of imperialist expansion during the so-called Scramble for Africa. Yet, then as now, it is very hard to articulate a response to a form of power that takes life itself as the object of political rationalisation. It is nevertheless appropriate to read LVG as a complex staging of the stakes involved in thinking politics as a function of life. The monster, at any rate, makes visible the two sides of the biopolitical equation: biological determinism as politics (Social Darwinism, eugenics and other dividing practices) and biological agency as political activism (animal rights as human rights). If one takes biopower to be the deployment of power over, or rather through, life in the context of population dynamics, sexual behaviours, mortality rates, medical practices and so on, it is clear that the only way one can resist it, if one indeed can resist it, is to engage in a new politics of life, a biopolitics that incites us to make a new life for ourselves so as to transform life itself. If there is anything to take away from LVG, then, it is its imperative to experiment with biological living; if the monster is an animal, as I have argued, then it ought to be read as a figure for the plasticity of life.

Notes

2. The distinction Agamben (2004: 37) makes between the modern and the pre-modern anthropological machines rests on the difference between the animalisation of the human (a modern result of the machine) and the humanisation of the animal (the product of the pre-modern machine). The monster in LVG, in my reading, is a thoroughly modern form.
3. Thacker’s (2010: 96–158) argument on univocity, within which his treatment of the creature is elaborated, suggests that the creature, in the more ‘anarchic’ version of the Scholastic tradition that he is examining and which extends to the work of Gilles Deleuze, is ‘immanent’ in so far as it marks a relation ‘between Life and the living’ that occurs ‘after’ life and thus escapes the axis Creator–
4. This is how Shelley (1996: 32) renders it: ‘A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me.’
5. Victor Frankenstein’s narrative, like Rousseau’s Confessions, begins with the phrase ‘I am by birth a Genevese’ (Shelley, 1996: 17).
7. In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida (2009) uses the word ‘bêtise’ to make visible the divide in Western thought between humans and non-humans but also to suggest that there is something asinine, if not bestial, about this use of reason.

References


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