



Monstrous body: between alienness and ownness

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ABSTRACT

Monstrosity has its recognized place in cultural narratives but in philosophical discourse it remains mostly untouched. In my paper I make an attempt at phenomenological inquiry into the experience of the Other's monstrous body. I am beginning with some remarks concerning Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault, the philosophers who devoted some attention to the problem of monstrosity and the monstrous, but my analysis is mainly based on the works of Bernhard Waldenfels, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Waldenfels emphasizes that the corporeal self is somehow perceived as alien, always somewhat distanced and not totally graspable. He also argues that the closer the Other, the stronger activation of the boundary between the spheres of the ownness and the alienness is caused. A promising framework for the analysis of the ambivalent reaction brought about by the encounter with a monstrous human body can be provided by Husserl's phenomenological inquiry into the process of pairing, developed in his *Cartesian meditations*. It seems that in this experience the pairing process is frustrating and deranged because the process of apperception is disturbed by a cluster of untypical or quite unique characteristics of the monstrous body. In result, its sense remains unclear, puzzling and challenging. Interesting light on the experience of the Other's monstrous body could shed Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, especially the ideas of flesh and chiasm outlined in his last work. The radical character of the monster, while does not render it something totally different from the own, elucidates, however, the contingency of the order under which the human corporeality is subsumed.

KEYWORDS:

monstrosity; the monstrous; pairing; flesh; chiasm

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INTRODUCTION

The category of monstrosity has its recognized place in cultural narratives, with many exemplifications in literature, fine arts and films. Even though some periods have expressed greater, some lesser fascination with this category, monsters inscribed on various interpretative discourses have been omnipresent in the history of culture. The notion of monstrosity refers primarily to the bodily “strangeness”, although it should be noted that in the past that did not necessary mean any deformity, or disturbance of morphological “normality”, since it could have referred to something extraordinary, because exotic and as such unusual and unknown. Anyway, it can be said that there were two main interpretational patterns of monstrosity: monsters were viewed as a violation of natural order or — on the contrary — as a revelation of the fundamental chaos underpinning apparently well-ordered nature, which came to the fore. Thus, they were seen as both a result and an indicator of contingency of life forms. Sometimes those apparently inconsistent interpretations were somehow combined in the view that monsters should be considered a sign of a limited character of our knowledge and the manifestation of the basic yet not known laws.

MONSTERS AND THE MONSTROUS

A special significance has been ascribed to human monsters, because in this case we encounter a peculiar dialectic of both monstrosity and the person. The tension caused by these disturbing ambiguities has given rise to many narratives trying to “tame” human monsters by inscribing them on various discourses, like naturalistic, symbolic, aesthetic, theological and, last but not least, scientific, mainly medical. What is especially interesting, in opposition to what was claimed by Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault, it could be noted that the discourses are rather synchronic than diachronic, and there is no chronological order in which the next narrative erases the former one. Even though each cultural period has manifested its favorite, I would say privileged discourse, other discourses are never totally mute. Since human monsters invariably evoke a whole range of reactions, from surprise and horror, through embarrassment, to disgust and repulsion paradoxically quite often accompanied by a sort of sympathy and fascination, there is an everlasting display of mixed emotions triggered by the encounter with the human bodily monstrosity.

Against this background it seems rather odd that philosophy has shown a little interest in the phenomenon of corporeal monstrosity, especially nowadays when phenomenology of embodiment has become one of the most important themes in the contemporary phenomenological enquiry. Nevertheless, apart from Monstrosity and the monstrous by Canguilhem and *Abnormal* by

Foucault, the topic remains mostly untouched in philosophical discourse. This silence is quite surprising given that “the monster” seems to be a perfect example of the alien, as a radical Other, while “otherness” belongs to the cluster of philosophical subjects that have drawn much attention.¹

I would like to begin with a crucial relationship between monstrosity and the monstrous, that is the problem to which both Canguilhem and Foucault devoted their analyses, although it seems that they dismissed the topic too easily. Focusing on the link between monstrosity and the monstrous, Canguilhem pointed out that in the past the monster was viewed as a result of the monstrous. However, arguing that: “The Middle Ages retain the identification of the monstrous with the felonious, but enrich it with a reference to the diabolic” (Canguilhem, 2005: 189), he slightly oversimplified the issue. In his book *On monsters*, Stephen Asma shows that a pattern of Christian attitude to monstrosity was rather complicated and multilayered. The authors who maintained that existence of monsters was against nature were reprimanded by Isidore of Seville, who reminded them that it was the will of God — their Creator — that endowed monsters with their nature, as it was the case with all other beings (Asma, 2009: 75). Anyway, Canguilhem states that since the monstrous is something lying outside the norm and the resulting monster “is the living being of negative value” (Canguilhem, 2005: 188), it is the monstrosity, not death, that is considered the counter-value to life. Death is regarded by Canguilhem as the limitation from outside,² whereas monstrosity as “the accidental and conditional threat of incompleteness or distortion in the formation of form” (Canguilhem, 2005: 188) is understood as the limitation from inside. Thus, it seems that Canguilhem has reduced the notion of monstrosity to non-viable cases, whereas although the vast majority of “monsters” are not able to survive, it is first and foremost the living ones that draw attention to monstrosity and are responsible for the everlasting interest in this phenomenon. Nevertheless, Canguilhem recognized the ambivalence in our attitude to monsters: repulsiveness (fear or even terror and disgust) on the one hand and attractiveness (or even a sort of fascination) on the other hand, and he argued that this ambivalence stemmed from the special significance of the monster as a token of appreciation of life. The possibility of monstrosity reveals the contingency of life, its susceptibility to failure and — paradoxically — makes its successful occurrences more valuable. Canguilhem’s statement that being a kind of the

¹ Saying that I am interpreting Waldenfels’ distinction between the other and the alien, see Waldenfels, 2011: 11–12, 72–74.

² The genetics does not back this assumption up. As a biological claim his opinion seems incompatible with the phenomenon known as programmed cell death (“cell suicide”, *apoptosis*), which has been known since 1972. Canguilhem’s essay *La monstruosité et le monstrueux* (to the English translation of which I am referring) is based on his lecture originally delivered in Brussels in 1962.

marvellous in reverse, the monstrous is a proof of freedom of life is somehow parallel to medieval appreciation of the monsters as a manifestation of omnipotence of divine creation.

Canguilhem argued that with the progress in natural science the bond between monstrosity and the monstrous had been gradually undermined. He held that due to the advances in scientific understanding of physical deformities, the status of morphological monstrosity changed in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Claiming that, he referred to the works of two French zoologists: Etienne Geoffroy de St Hilaire (1772–1844) and his son, Isidore Geoffroy de St Hilaire (1805–1861), who developed the scientific explanation and categorization of the monsters. In their view, morphological monsters are the effects of the errors of “nature”, resulting in excess, lack or displacement of organs, but they are not in contravention of the blueprint of the species. Both authors maintain that there is nothing extraordinary or unnatural about the monsters: they are the products of the same natural processes that engender “normal” bodies, but in their case “something went wrong”. Isidore Geoffroy de St Hilaire has complemented their account of monstrosity with the opinion that anomalies are not a chaotic output, but — on the contrary — a strictly regulated product, because they do not represent “a random disorder but another order, equally regular and equally subject to laws” (Wright, 2013: 111). The final stage of the process of attenuation of the relationship between monstrosity and the monstrous was the ability to produce monsters in the laboratory. If they could be obtained experimentally in accordance with the biological rules, they ultimately lost their prodigious character and became predictive. Thus, according to Canguilhem, the commencement of teratology in the middle of the 19th century was the moment when monstrosity lost “any relation with the monstrous” (Canguilhem, 2005: 191). Canguilhem insisted that since “monsters” could be produced in the scientific laboratories, they lost their mysterious character and the causal link between the monstrous and monstrosity was definitively broken off. Becoming explainable, they have also become somewhat transparent. Canguilhem goes even further suggesting that the scientific explanation has its annihilating effect on all monsters: the past, present and future, relegating them to the realm of imagination (Canguilhem, 2005: 192). He admits however, that this realm could become potentially risky if the scientists fail to resist the temptation to make a use of what they have been bestowed on by the science. If the knowledge how to create monsters becomes “the sport of scientists” (Canguilhem, 2005: 191), the link between the monstrous and monstrosity will be again at work, but this time a real one.³

³ Nowadays, the problems of genetic manipulation are referred to in the discussions on human enhancement and transhumanism. Although very interesting, those problems remain beyond the scope of this paper.

Foucault also tends to nullify the problem of corporeal monstrosity. He argues that in the end of the eighteenth century the problem of human monstrosity lost its somatic character, acquiring that of a “monstrosity of character” According to him, in modernity not a corporeal, but behavioral or moral monstrosity has gained its special status of the monstrous (Foucault, 2003: 73–74). Thus, it could be noticed that both Canguilhem and Foucault have underappreciated “the enduring power of the body as a visual signifier of monstrosity” (Wright, 2013: 104), since monstrosity does not have to be regarded as having diabolical underpinning to provoke fascination and ambivalent, repulsive/propulsive reaction.

One of the most revealing descriptions of the encounter with the human monstrous body can be found in the account provided by Frederick Treves, an English surgeon, who reported his first reaction to the painted image of Joseph Merrick, “the Elephant Man”⁴:

It was the figure of a man with the characteristics of an elephant. The transfiguration was not far advanced. There was still more of the man than of the beast. This fact — that it was still human — was the most repellent attribute of the creature (Treves, 2014: 115; emphasis of mine).

What is quite significant, some authors while quoting this passage cut out the last sentence, probably because they find it somewhat disconcerting, embarrassing, etc., or just not important enough to be cited.⁵ In my opinion, on the contrary, this fragment seems the most elucidating testimony of the puzzling experience of meeting human bodily monstrosity. As Margrit Shildrick has pointed out, it is not a difference but primarily the troubling familiarity of the anomalous Other that provokes the anxiety: “the intimation that the monstrous others *are* all too human, close kin of even the most normatively embodied self” (Shildrick, 2018: 170; author’s emphasis). In his phenomenological xenology, Bernhard Waldenfels has also observed that the closer the Other, the stronger activation of the boundary between the spheres of the ownness and the alienness is caused (Waldenfels, 1997: 43–44). Not only “Corporeality and alienness are intimately connected” (Waldenfels, 2011: 43) but from the point of view of his responsive phenomenology of alienness, a corporeal self is also

⁴ Joseph Merrick, known as “the Elephant Man”, who suffered from Proteus syndrome (although it was not genetically confirmed) and possibly additional neurofibromatosis, gained a lot of interest among medical milieu in Victorian England. Frederick Trevor was a physician, who took care of him and studied his case. Joseph Merrick is a hero of David Lynch’s film entitled *The Elephant Man*, see: Leroi, 2005: 205–206; Wiczorkiewicz, 2009: 317–323.

⁵ See for example the otherwise very interesting paper by Małgorzata Bugaj, “‘We understand each other, my friend’. The freak show and Victorian medicine in *The Elephant Man*” (Bugaj, 2019: 86).

somehow perceived as alien, that is “never entirely present to itself” (Waldenfels, 2011: 43), always somewhat distanced and not totally graspable. On the other hand, “the alienness within myself opens paths to the alienness of the Other” and to its constitution “on the basis of my ‘sphere of ownness’” (Waldenfels, 2011: 53). Saying that Waldenfels refers to Edmund Husserl’s *Cartesian meditations*, so it seems interesting to find out whether Husserl’s work can provide better understanding of the ambivalent reaction brought about by the encounter with the monstrous human body.

CORPOREAL MONSTROSITY AND PAIRING

In the fifth Meditation Husserl argues that the Other is experienced as both an object belonging to the world and a subject experiencing the world. In the world that is experienced by the Other, also I am involved as experiencing the world within the Other. The starting point is I reduced to absolute transcendental *Ego* by phenomenological *epoche*. The transcendental *Ego* is restricted to the stream of pure conscious processes, so the world is given to this *Ego* as immanent *transcendens*. The next parts of the fifth Meditation present a gradual process of constitution of the phenomenon of the objective world. The subject of the constitution is the transcendental *Ego*, who first attempts to delimit what is peculiarly his own. The result of this process is a founding stratum of the phenomenal world. The part of this stratum is the “Nature” included in the ownness and — as such — totally abstracted from any intersubjective sense. Among the bodies belonging to the purified Nature, the transcendental *Ego* encounters a very peculiar object, that is his body, which is the only one that is not just body (*Körper*), but an animate organism (*Leib, lived body*) as well. According to Husserl, it is the only object to which fields of sensation can be ascribed and which can be ruled by the transcendental *Ego*. Thus, the result of the transcendental reduction effected on myself is “my animate organism and my psyche, or myself as a psychological unity”, that is “my personal *Ego*, who operates in this animate organism” (Husserl, 1960: 97; author’s emphasis).

Now, within and by means of what has been constituted as the first stratum, that is as “his ownness”, the transcendental *Ego* constitutes the objective world, primordially experienced as the sphere of not-I. The first level of this constitution is the Other in the mode of the alter ego. By means of the constitution of the “other ego” or “egos”, as Husserl puts it “a universal superaddition of sense to my primordial world” occurs and the world is given as “the identical world to everyone, including me” (Husserl, 1960: 107). In this way the phenomenon of the one identical world is constituted as the correlate of the harmonious community of monads, comprehended as individual constitutive intentionalities. In

this world *egos* present themselves as worldly objects with the sense of psycho-physical human beings.

Now, I would like to take a closer look at the process of analogical apperception of someone else, that is especially important to my analysis of the experience of the monstrous human body. Let us start with the moment when a body enters my perceptual sphere. The body can acquire the sense of an animate organism only by an apperceptive transfer from my animate organism, that is the only body which is constituted originally as an animate organism. Husserl says: "It is clear from the very beginning that only a similarity connecting within my primordial sphere, that body over there with my body can serve as the motivational basis for the 'analogizing' apprehension of that body as another animate organism" (Husserl 1960: 111; author's emphasis). Husserl emphasizes, that the process of assimilative apperception is neither inference from analogy, nor a thinking act, but an intentional act that transfers back to a primal constituting. To explain this process, he introduces a notion of pairing as a primal form of passive synthesis designated as association. In pairing two data are given in the unity of consciousness, and as appearing with mutual distinctness the data found phenomenologically a unity of similarity and are always constituted as a pair. In the paired data there occurs a mutual transfer of sense that is, as Husserl says: "an apperception of each according to the sense of the other, so far as moments of sense actualized in what is experienced do not annul this transfer, with the consciousness of 'different'" (Husserl, 1960: 113).

Entering my field of perception, a body "similar" to mine own must come into a phenomenal pairing with my body, hence a sense of animate organism is transferred to it. According to Husserl, this is happening through a verifying process in which the experienced animate organism of another proves itself as an animate organism by changing but harmonious behavior, indicating psychic sphere of the Other as alter Ego (Husserl, 1960: 113–116).

Let us consider a situation when the field of my perception enters a monstrous human body that is similar, but also not similar to my own animate organism. Emphasizing the continuity of the process of fulfilling data, Husserl indicates that if there is something discordant about the behavior of a body, it becomes experienced as a pseudo-organism (Husserl, 1960: 114). The monstrous body of the Other is still a human body, and as such it still maintains enough of common features to initiate the process of pairing. Nevertheless, the process of apperception is disturbed by a cluster of untypical or quite unique characteristics of the body. Some of the data evoke the intentional process of transfer of the constituted sense of an animate organism, whereas others refer to some different sense. Breaking the process of transfer of the sense of an animate organism, these unique data initiate the intention of a different, but this process also cannot be fulfilled, since there is no constituted sense to which the

consciousness can intentionally refer. The process of pairing is deranged, and the monstrous body cannot be fully apprehended, so its sense remains unclear, puzzling and challenging.⁶

HUMAN BODILY MONSTROSITY AND FLESH

It could seem that by introducing the notion of life-world in *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology* Husserl made a shift towards intersubjectivity. As Herbert Spiegelberg noticed, Maurice Merleau-Ponty repeatedly referred to Husserl's statement that "transcendental subjectivity is an intersubjectivity", but this statement cannot be traced in the texts of Husserl's, whereas the closest one, that appeared in the sixth volume of *Husserliana* clearly gave priority to transcendental subjectivity over transcendental intersubjectivity (Spiegelberg, 1960: 517). Given that "the body is forever at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, that is his philosophy is truly a philosophy of the body, a philosophy that is not only about the body, but it springs from the body as emblem of an opening that exceeds us" (Morris, 2014: 119; author's emphasis), let us find out if his philosophy can provide a fruitful framework for the phenomenology of the human bodily monstrosity.

Opposing the antinomy of the For-itself and the In-itself, in his concept of the transcendental intersubjectivity Merleau-Ponty has adopted a different perspective. He has re-united the subjective and the objective in the primordial phenomenon of the world as it is given in our lived experience of being-within-the-world and with Others. Referring to the unity prior to our constituting acts, Merleau-Ponty argues that sensations depend on their figure-ground context, and it is the context that determines their sense. According to Spiegelberg, there are two main points of Merleau-Ponty's account, namely that sensations are intrinsically meaningful, but on the other hand they are also open in the sense of being indeterminate and ambiguous at the margins. Perception is an existential act, neither merely receptive nor merely creative. The view developed by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of perception*, Scott L. Maratto summarized as the collection of the following ideas: „the subject is necessarily embodied, the mental life is ultimately rooted in bodily behaviour, and the intersubjectivity and language are themselves constitutive features of the life of the perceiving body [and] cognitive life is necessarily embodied and situated" (Maratto, 2012: 5). Merleau-Ponty clearly states that I can recognize the Other as the alter ego because of our common bodily form. Giving priority to "I can" rather than "I am", Merleau-Ponty argues that this process occurs through identification of the bodily capacities

⁶ For more see: Alichniewicz, 2017: 215–221.

I possess with the ones expressed in the body of the Other. In his *Phenomenology of perception* Merleau-Ponty says:

it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together compromise a system, so my body and the other's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 412).

It is sometimes claimed that in *The visible and the invisible* Merleau-Ponty developed a quite new account of the relation between the self and the world, the self and the other and the perceiver and the perceived, which are essential to his phenomenological inquiry, and this new version is incongruous with the one presented in his previous books, especially in *Phenomenology of perception*. However, this is not necessarily the case. It seems obvious that with the notion of "flesh" that is introduced in *The visible and the invisible*, Merleau-Ponty went further in his idea of not only the mind and the body, but also of the incarnate subject and the surrounding world as reciprocally founding each other. Moreover, it seems that *The visible and the invisible* is rather a kind of refinement of some ideas concerning subjectivity, which were formerly depicted. It can be also viewed as an attempt at overcoming limitations of his earlier thought. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor pointed to the belief that *The visible and the invisible* could provide a promising ground for the clarification of the relationship or even "bond between self, others, and the world, and to affirm a positive status of difference and alterity in relation to this bond" (Evans & Lawlor, 2000: 1).

Given the incomplete character of Merleau-Ponty's posthumous work, it could be argued that the precise meanings of both "flesh" and chiasmatic relation are not totally clear, yielding the notions susceptible to various interpretations. According to Frank J. Macke, "Merleau-Ponty defines 'flesh' as chiasm, as an interlacing of a being with, potentially, all other beings. As a complex tissue of experience and in experience, flesh cannot, thus, be encountered as a familiar 'thing'" (Macke, 2014: 84; author's emphasis). Merleau-Ponty says: "the thickness of the flesh and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not obstacle between them, it is their means of communication" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 135). Although flesh cannot be grasped as a "thing", it enables "dialogue [...] with things and others" (Macke, 2014: 86). The notion of flesh that is chiasmatically intertwined with the world, the things and the others renders no separation between the perceiver and the perceived. The flesh is not a static union, but a dynamic structure of alterity and reversibility, Merleau-Ponty says: „réversibilité [...] est vérité ultime" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 201).

I would argue that the concept of flesh and chiasmatic intertwining would provide the perceiving subject with a more “friendly” ground for the encounter with the monstrous human body. It could be said that the seer and the seen, in this case: the perceiver and the perceived monstrous body of the Other are intertwined with one another in a dynamic structure of alterity and reversibility that could be understood as “a communion with otherness” (Maratto, 2012: 8). In this communion, a kind of strangeness/familiarity dialectic of both my own body and the monstrous body of the Other happens. Maratto has pointed out that this communion is

the mark of a certain primitive kinship between my bodies and the bodies of other selves. “Intercorporeity” names at once this mysterious familiarity of my body with things and with the bodies of others and, at the same time, a no-less-mysterious sense of the strangeness of “my own” body. An appreciation of both of these dimensions, the familiarity and the irreducible strangeness characterizing my bodily life, is crucial for any adequate account of subjectivity and self-consciousness (Maratto, 2012: 8–9).

Since the idea of intercorporeity becomes a central feature of Merleau-Ponty understanding of the bodily experience of the world, the seer and the seen are conceived as dimensions of the rich texture of the flesh, intertwined with each other. They differ, but the difference is constituted to their chiasmatic relation: “The flesh is the connection that comes out of the difference” (Hotanen, 2014: 96)

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of chiasm does not render any separation between the lived body and the world, the self and the Other, the perceiver and the perceived. The relation between the perceiver and the perceived is understood as a kind of a structure in which the make-up of habituated processes occurring in the perceiver is permanently open to exchange with the perceived objects. Merleau-Ponty argues that the habits of the lived body are augmented by perceptual structures, whereas perceptual field is sharpened by the lived body. That means that through perception the incarnated *Ego* and the world co-constitute each other. Furthermore, it is claimed that the process of habituation is especially augmented when the perceiver encounters objects having unique features. Thus, although Merleau-Ponty did not take up the problem of corporeal normality and abnormality in his last work, it could be argued that in the view of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of chiasmatic relation, the encounter with a human monstrous body could enhance the process of habituation and perceptual structures.

It could be argued that phenomenological inquiry performed by Husserl, Waldenfels and Merleau-Ponty can cast some light on the phenomenon of the encounter with the human bodily monstrosity. Coming back to Waldenfels, it can be said that a radical character of the monster, which “challenges us, calls upon us, or puts our own possibilities in question in an alienating, shocking, or amazing

fashion” (Waldenfels, 2011: 36) does not render it something totally “different from the own and the familiar” (Waldenfels, 2011: 35). It elucidates, however, the contingency of the order under which the human corporeality is subsumed, enabling us to transcend the binary standard of normality vs. abnormality.

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