

Signs of the Self

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Abstract: *The function of the monster as a sign (monstrare, to show) that warns against intellectual surquedry is an intellectual tradition reaching down from the third-century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius. Overly confident images of the self are shattered, often violently, by the monstrous negations that confront them. A discussion of two classic monsters, the doppelganger and the hermaphrodite, attempts to illustrate this by examining their appearance in three literary texts: Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, Flannery O'Connor's *Temple of the Holy Ghost*, and the Neil Jordan film *The Crying Game*.*

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Among the multifarious monsters of teratological tradition the types that seem to attract the most attention are those that provoke philosophical questions. Monsters engage our various intellectual discourses in ways that challenge many of the assumptions and conclusions of our theoretical enquiries, our understanding of the world and our place in it. Some of the most striking examples are those grotesques that appear to mock our very concepts of Self, deforming the signs by which we come to possess the sense of who we are and who, or what, we are not. Through the didactic application of its critiques of the philosophical questions of logic, language, Self and personal identity the monster teaches the important moral lesson of intellectual humility.

I would like here to look at two types of monster that engage the concept of the Self in different ways. The Double, or doppelganger, confronts us with the possibility of the multiplication of the Self in a way that eliminates the distinction and uniqueness of our being. Through a brief discussion of Dostoyevsky's *The Double* I try to show a literary instance of the terrifying phenomenon of the disappearing Self. A different dissolution of the normal sense of the Self is found in the Hermaphrodite, a monster of excess in that it possesses both sexes in a single body, defying human conceptual categories. A look at the recent film *The Crying Game* and at Flannery O'Connor's short story *A Temple of the Holy Ghost* will allow us to perceive the transcendental power of this monster, a power that lifts understanding above the limits of discourse and the material world.

Logic is a favorite target of the monster because it restricts human understanding through rules of thought. The law of the excluded middle, for instance, that holds that a proposition cannot be both true and false at the same time, or that a thing and its contrary cannot coexist, provides an essential structural element of rational understanding, but it is brought into question by, for instance, the mythological figure of Janus who represents the impossible simultaneity of past, present, and future, or the centaur, a single being containing both human and animal natures. Science is another target, particularly its confidence in order and its numerous categorizations and taxonomies that describe the world. What is left of biology's peremptory divisions when faced with

the Pegasus, a mix of avian and mammal natures, or the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary, a combination of plant and animal natures in one grotesque being?¹ And how does theology reply to mysticism's assertion that God himself is the *coincidentia oppositorum*, a title He shares with the monster?

This negating operation of monstrosity opens out to reveal a still more fundamental characteristic of the monster, that of paradox. That the hermaphrodite is both male and female, yet neither man nor woman, recalls the epistemological dynamic of the 5th century theologian known as Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite which involves a play between affirmation and negation. Its cataphatic step calls for the asserting of all possible names of a thing, then, in an apophatic move, the negating of those names. A third and final step transcends the dichotomy of affirmation and negation, surpassing words and logic so as to grasp the essence of the thing:

The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming... In the earlier books my argument traveled downward from the most exalted to the humblest categories, taking in on this downward path an ever-increasing number of ideas which multiplied with every stage of the descent. But my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable (1987: 139).

The monster is the paradox of the simultaneity of affirmation and negation, being and non-being, whose ultimate manifestation is God himself, pure simplicity and source of all multiplicity, and as Jesus, simultaneously man and God, a "monster" of mixed natures. The play of assertion and negation in the grotesque creates a dynamic by which the human mind is freed of the limitations of anthropomorphic words and signs at the point at which it passes beyond the binarism of affirmation and negation. The monster shows the way (*monstrare*/to show) to that point of possible transcendence.

This dynamic is found in all expressions of the monstrous: in the monstrous representation of divinity, the monstrous representation of nature, and - in the most intimate of all deformities- the monstrous rendering of the Self. The constitutive signs of the Self reflect the Dionysian structure of cataphasis and apophasis, initially prioritizing the affirmative signs of the self, then negating them. In the Dionysian discourse this process leads to a transcendence and divinization of the Self. In other negations of signs of the Self the result may not be divination but destruction. In both cases the signs are inevitably grotesque in that they signify a deformation of what we understand as natural.

The most familiar affirmative signs of the Self depend upon their negations. At the same time, there can be no negation of that which is not already affirmed, and herein lies the paradox of the monstrous. *I am human*. This assertion has meaning only if there is something that exists that is not human, and thus the affirmation includes within it its negation: *I am human (I am not animal)*. Similarly, the sign *male* is meaningful only if there is the *female* from which the Self distinguishes itself by putting the female sign in the negative. Thus the cataphatic or affirmative phase of bringing the Self into being already involves a nescient or concealed negation which is revealed and made prominent in the apophatic phase. The emergence of negative signs of the Self set side by side with the affirmative signs producing a monstrous simultaneity of affirmation and negation.

The confrontation of the Self with its grotesque contradiction, either as its exact opposite or as its exact similitude, provides one of the most powerful of psychological and philosophical paradoxes in human experience. This monster demands not only a questioning of the foundations of certain intellectual assurances, but also the surrender of profound psychic supports. Among them : *I am female; I am Protestant; I am Canadian*, and so forth. The negative phase declares what I am not: *I am not male; I am not Catholic or Jewish; I am not American*.

The integrity of the Self depends upon both the cataphatic markers and the apophatic markers. If any of these falters or fails, the sense of the self may be destabilized. Thus, to discover that what you had defined yourself against is actually what you are, can cause deep trauma. Someone who, for instance, has over-defined himself as “not Jewish” who discovers that, in fact, he is a Jew, may suffer psychological turmoil and damage to his self image, as depicted in Irvin D. Yalom’s novel *The Spinoza Problem* in which the Nazi Alfred Rosenberg, discovering that he is in reality a Jew himself, becomes a sociopathic anti-Semite. The role of the Other is crucial in this dynamic since it reinforces the importance of distinctions.

One of the several monstrous figures that challenge confidence in the stability of the Self is the doppelganger or Double, a monster who appears in aesthetic tradition variously as the evil twin, the shape-shifter, the androgyne, and the Antipodes, a race that lives on the under side of the Earth, each member a perfect replica of a person on this side of the earth whose every movement is reproduced in reverse by his antipodal double. The eighth-century *Liber Monstrorum* describes these eerie creatures who had already become so prominent in Christian culture that Saint Augustine had to address the question of the authenticity of their existence. He argued against the historical existence of an Antipodal race on the basis of the idea of the unity of the human race and of the uniqueness of the immortal soul (*City of God*, XVI.9). Saint Augustine’s argument is a sound, rational one: to believe there could be two human souls so alike as to be one is absurd, and thus those beings called Antipodes are, says Augustine, “fictions.” But the lasting power of these figures is such that imagination won out over reason, as is shown by their survival throughout the Middle Ages and in as late a work as *Alice in Wonderland*.

The doppelganger is the monster of perfect sameness. Even if one has never experienced being accosted in a public place by a mime who relentlessly copies one’s every gesture, one can imagine the eeriness that gradually wells up in the target. At first he tries to ignore the mime; then he probably smiles or laughs to show his equanimity; then he grows angry, and finally- as the Double continues to perfectly mirror the his every step, every facial expression, every physical attitude -, the feeling of panic arises from the awful sense that somehow he has become two instead of one.

This uncanny experience is one of loss, the profoundest of losses, that of the Self. It is based on the instinctive realization that paradoxically if there are multiple selves, there is no Self. The uniqueness of the Self, one’s individuality, dissipates in face of the existence of any being which is not Other. The psychologically complex relation of Self to Other is disoriented by the multiplication of the Self because it suggests that there is no Other, only an endless duplication of the image of the Self. Andy Warhol’s famous portrait of Marilyn Monroe expresses this weirdness. The multiplication of her image suggests a series without end, an endless regression. There is only Marilyn, but which is Marilyn? All, and therefore none. She is multiplied out of existence.



Figure 1. Andy Warhol -- Marilyn Diptych (detail), 1962

Dostoyevsky's novel *The Double* opens with the main character, Golyadkin, getting out of bed and staring into a mirror. For obvious reasons, mirror images are associated with the Double for, on the one hand, the reflection that the mirror offers us is the primary way that we get to see ourselves, but on the other hand, the reflection is not really us. It is, we assure ourselves, only a "likeness."

Dostoyevsky's construction of his main character makes of him something close to what is now called a paranoid schizophrenic, but at the same time the work is not merely a psychological novel that explores the pathology of its hero. The author manages to make the Double both an expression of Golyadkin's psyche and a grotesque independent agent who acts in the world of the novel and to whom the external world reacts. The "Younger Golyadkin," as Dostoyevsky sometimes calls him, is made autonomous by being hired at the same firm for which Golyadkin works and travelling independently in St Petersburg social circles. His colleagues interact with the new comer, who calls himself Mr. Golyadkin, and even recognize and comment on his exceptional similarity to Golyadkin.

Riding in a sumptuous carriage he has hired to take him to an important dinner party, Golyadkin becomes extremely self-conscious. When he discovers that his superior, to whom he is Assistant Chief Clerk, has caught sight of him in the conspicuous vehicle, he is suddenly aware of how pretentious he must appear. He sees himself, and the spectacle is distressing. Here Dostoyevsky begins calling into questions the securities and insecurities of the Self: "Shall I admit it's me or shan't I ... Or shall I pretend it's not me but someone extraordinarily like me...It isn't really me, it isn't, and that's all there is to it." (23) The scene reveals that Golyadkin's sense of self is already unstable and can be questioned and manipulated, and, as in this instance, denied.

Having been inexplicably barred entrance to the dinner party to which he had been invited, Golyadkin is in a state of confusion and despair. The author describes him as one who "had the look of a man wishing to hide and escape from himself... to annihilate himself completely." (64) Paradoxically, Golyadkin's self annihilation occurs, not through the elimination of the self, but its multiplication. Stopping on a bridge over the Fontanka river, Golyadkin has the eerie sensation that, as he leans over the railing to look down on the waters of the river, there is another presence with him doing exactly the same thing. But when he looks, there is no one there: "And yet he thought

someone had just been standing there, right beside him, also with elbows on the railings, and, strange to relate, had even spoken to him.” (65)

Dostoyevsky vividly depicts all the symptoms produced by the encounter with the Double. Golyadkin first feels shock and horror but later tries to ingratiate himself and befriend the Double, but the existence of the Double has only Golyadkin's destruction as his goal. The gradual disintegration of the Self reaches its climax with the hallucinatory excrescence of a multitude of selves that obliterate both the Self and the Other: “Darkness swam before his eyes. A whole procession of identical Golyadkins seemed to be bursting loudly in at every door.” (200) The seemingly endless multiplication of the Self in this instance destroys Golyadkin's personal identity. The “distinct individual” that Golyadkin claims to be throughout the novel is no longer distinct and thus ceases to exist psychologically. Golyadkin ends in an insane asylum.

A different but equally devastating figure is the monster of paradoxical difference and similarity, the Hermaphrodite. A monster because it incorporates two opposites in one body, contraries that nature intends to keep apart and distinct, the Hermaphroditic body queries the authority of nature itself. The Hermaphrodite negates the most basic personal distinction of all, one's sex, and does so through the confusion of the principle signs of sex, the genitals.

Contemplation of the Hermaphrodite produces a feeling of the uncanny similar to that of the encounter with the doppelganger. The confusion of signs that it exhibits produces intellectual uncertainty and psychological panic. Both male and female audiences of such a figure are forced to contemplate the negation of difference between the sexes and thus the negation of their own distinct Self. This experience produces the emotions that are the stuff of the uncanny.



Figure 2. Hermaphroditus *anasyromenos*, Roman marble, Imperial period (3rd Century CE).

In Neil Jordan's 1992 film *The Crying Game* the main character, Fergus, an IRA operative, has promised his prisoner, Jody, a captured British soldier whom he is suppose to execute, that he will look after Jody's girl friend when the soldier is gone. Although Jody dies by different means, Fergus keeps his promise and seeks out Dil, Jody's girl friend, eventually becoming sexually attracted to her. As the couple is about to have sex, Dil disrobes in front of Fergus, revealing signs of androgyny. Fergus is shocked by the woman's prominent phallus and becomes deranged and physically sick.

The camera is used in such a way that the audience shares Fergus' experience, seeing what he sees at the same moment he sees it. The shock value of the scene is undeniable and it succeeds in creating in the audience the same uncanny feeling that Fergus experiences. The image of the phallus that greets Fergus is a violent denial of difference, the difference that helps constitute Fergus' identity as male, for his maleness is, of course, at stake in his erotic attraction to Dil. Like other men, Fergus' self image as male is guaranteed by the existence of the Other, the female.

When, as in the case of Dil's sexual ambiguity, that Other ceases to be different and becomes like, rational understanding is confused and delirium ensues. The foundations of self identity are destroyed and the uncanny feeling of entering the abyss arises.

In his famous discussion of the uncanny, Freud begins with a linguistic analysis of the German word *heimlich* and its antonym *unheimlich*. The various meanings of *heimlich* include "familiar," "intimate," "secure" in the primary definition, but in the secondary definition it signifies "concealed," "secret," "private." The word is, in a sense, an antagonym; it contains its own antonym. What is "familiar" cannot be what is "concealed," nor can what is "secret" also be "familiar."

The primary definition of *unheimlich* includes "unfamiliar," "strange," "uncomfortable," "eerie." But its variant meanings include "unconcealed," "what is made known," "what should be kept secret but is revealed." Thus *unheimlich* also contains within it its own opposition: what is "unfamiliar" cannot simultaneously be what is "unconcealed" and "made known." Antagonyms function as grammatical contradictions of the law of the excluded middle, signifying at one and the same time a meaning and its opposite. They are semantic monsters asserting and negating simultaneously. In Freud's interpretation, the "unfamiliar" of *unheimlich* is precisely what is most deeply familiar and intimately known, but repressed. Further, according to Freud's analysis of the word, *heimlich* is also that reality that is concealed from the self. *Unheimlich*, the uncanny, is thus everything that ought to have remained hidden but has been revealed. In an important discussion of literary criticism J. Hillis Miller treats extensively these antagonyms, including *Heimlich/ unheimlich* (1977:440). Signs which reveal the uncanny are monstrous signs, signs in which similar and dissimilar have been grotesquely united. One such sign is the doppelganger; another is the hermaphrodite.

Freud continues to illustrate his theory of the uncanny through an interpretation of the E.T.A. Hoffmann story, *The Sandman*, in which the central character, Nathaniel, as an adult, encounters doubles of his father and his father's fellow alchemist, Coppelius. Spalanzani, the father double, and Coppola, Coppelius' double, devise a female automaton with whom Nathaniel, having seen her from afar through a spy glass and believing her human, falls in love. The ambiguity of a creature who is, in the mind of the main character, living but is in fact unliving, animate and inanimate at the same time, creates one of the elements of the uncanny in the tale. Freud, however, in order to reinforce psychoanalytic principles, insists that this is the minor element of the uncanny and that it is the Sandman himself who is the major uncanny force. This has to do with the story's dominant image of the eyes, which, as Freud points out, are found throughout literature, myth, and psychoanalytic narratives as symbols of the phallus. It is, in Freud's reading of the story, when Nathaniel sees Coppelius, the Sandman who "tears out children's eyes," gouging out the eyes of Olympia, the automaton for whom Nathaniel has erotic desires, that he goes insane. The scene revives repressed fears of castration, according to Freud, which originated from his violent encounter as a child with the same Coppelius. The symbolic castration of Olympia, a female, further confuses and threatens Nathaniel's sexual identity as the castration is transferred to him. The case with Fergus is similar; he is also symbolically castrated by encountering a hermaphrodite whose transgressive possession of the phallus psychologically deprives Fergus of his own.

Monsters are typically double signs, aesthetic antagonyms, as it were, signifying in one context a positive concept, in another its opposite. The grotesque bicephalic god Janus figured war when his face was visible on the closed city gate, peace when his other face could be seen on the open side of the gate; one side of his double-faced head symbolized the new year, youth, and vigor; the face on the other side betokened time past, old age, decline. Similarly the encounter with "another self" is not always a debilitating experience. Especially as symbol, monsters may lead to moral and spiritual enlightenment as we see in much religious symbolism.

The great Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade has described at length the important concept of androgyny in religion in general but in particular the widespread representation of God as androgyne in early Christianity. In Eliade's view the true import of the figure of the androgyne is not the presence of two sexes in one body, but the transcendence of the opposition. Thus the monstrous tradition of the hermaphrodite is not about sexuality but more urgently addresses ontology. In his seminal study of the androgyne, *The Two and the One*, Eliade identifies the bisexual figure as a sign of the cosmos and divinity itself reflecting the union of a whole set of fundamental dualities: inside and outside; time and space; good and evil; life and death; male and female. This union is the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the Neoplatonists which finds its trope in the monster who is not only a philosophical concept, but also a sign of man's spiritual transcendence. Speaking of transvestite practices in various cultures, Eliade identifies the purpose of these practices as "a coming out of one's self, a transcending of one's historically controlled situation, and a recovering of an original situation, no longer human or historical, since it precedes the foundation of human society; a paradoxical situation impossible to maintain in profane time." (113).

Eliade discusses several examples of this phenomenon in Christianity. This is striking because Christianity, more than most religions, accords great importance to logic and rationality, and yet one finds numerous examples of Jesus represented symbolically as monstrous. The 12th century seal of Roger, Archbishop of York, for example, pictures a three-headed figure around which is inscribed CAPVT NOSTRV. TRINITAS EST (This head is our Trinity). The Museo di Ethnografia Italiana contains a highly transgressive image of a three-headed Jesus.² The most developed idea of an androgenous Christ is found in the hagiography and iconography of Saint Wilgeforte, the origin of the bearded lady of the circus. In all religions such representations³ imparted to their beholders a sense of the union and coexistence of all opposites as a sacred phenomenon.



Figure 3. Saint Wilgefortis, illustration from Gebetbuch der Maria von Burgund (1477)

In a short story by Flannery O'Connor we find an expression of this Christian use of the figure of the hermaphrodite as theophany. *A Temple of the Holy Ghost* features a twelve year old girl reaching simultaneously physical and spiritual maturity. Her innocence is expressed both in terms of her understanding of sexuality and religion. Bragging that she knows how rabbits are born, she explains that the mother rabbit "spit them out of its mouth...six of them." (246). Similarly, her sins amount to nothing more than childish misbehavior, but in her opinion they are enough to keep her

from sainthood: "She could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick." (243)

The coupling of sexual and spiritual immaturity is played off against an example of quite imperfect maturity through the visit of two fourteen year old girls on holiday from their Catholic boarding school. Their false sophistication is seen in their mockery of the nuns' instruction that, "if a young man should... behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile... they were to say, 'Stop, sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!'" The two girls have sarcastically renamed themselves Temple One and Temple Two. This risible reference to the Holy Ghost introduces the central theme of the story, purity⁴- physical purity and spiritual purity, both of which require the transcendence of the banalities that obscure them.

The two weekend visitors return from a visit to a local carnival where they have seen a "freak" who, they explain to the child, "was a man and a woman both. It pulled up its dress and showed us." (245). The hermaphrodite is the catalyst for the beginning of the transformation of the child from religious clichés to spiritual depth. The hermaphrodite is reported to have said to his audience at the fair, "'God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way.' ... The child felt every muscle strained as if she were hearing the answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself." (245) The description is greatly elaborated in the child's imagination as she lies in bed at night. She adds to the hermaphrodite's monologue, inventing a series of statements that had not been reported to her, ending with the Hermaphrodite declaring, "I am a temple of the Holy Ghost."

The monster from the carnival freak show expands the idea of purity associated with the concept of the temple of the Holy Ghost beyond the limited physical one of sexual abstinence to the spiritual experience of oneness with God. The child's transformation of the hermaphrodite into a temple of the Holy Ghost and thus a sign of God is psychologically transferred to her, and through a kind of solidarity with the freak she begins to understand herself, too, as a temple of the Holy Ghost in a deeper way than ever before. The divination of the monster occurs when the child is at Benediction: "Her mind began to get quiet and then empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, "I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be." (248) The hermaphrodite as the *coincidentia oppositorum* here functions in a redemptive and epiphanic way.

Perhaps the most striking religious statement concerning the transcendence of dichotomy and the collapse of contraries and opposites is Saint Paul's description of Paradise. In his letter to the Galatians (3:28) Paul articulates a teleology as well as an anthropology that speak to questions of identity, difference, and categories:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Jesus Christ.

Paul contrasts this state of being with life under the "Law." On the literal level he is speaking of the law of Torah and halakah, but in an extended sense he is speaking about all human constructs of order, logic, and the regulatory structures of social life. These are necessary, Paul says, for they are a ladder to transcending them to a purely spiritual life.

The dualities that Paul cites are, as Martin Luther observed, “a list [that] might be extended indefinitely,” but Paul’s specifications are significant in that they are the foundation of personal identity. *There is neither male nor female* indicates that, as in the Pseudo-Dionysian idiom, there is *neither* male nor female yet simultaneously both male and female- the paradox that is visually manifest in the Hermaphrodite, both man and woman and neither man nor woman. The liberation of all constraints- existential, social, intellectual- that life imposes is experienced as unnatural and grotesque since who can imagine, let alone accept, an existence without boundaries?

By appointing the monsters as keepers of the gate to transcendence we both hold them at the safe distance of the imaginary, yet at the same time guarantee their continued existence and availability to our intellectual and psychological consciousness.

References

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Endnotes

1 For a discussion of these and other monstrous figures see my *Deformed Discourse: the Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press (1996). [↗](#)

2 Pictured on p. 134 of *Deformed Discourse*. [↗](#)

3 See my discussion in *Deformed Discourse*, 309f. On the subject of feminine representations of Jesus, see the highly instructive study of Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles (1982), particularly chapter four. [↗](#)

4 The author herself so described the theme of the story in correspondence. See *The Habit of Being: the Letters of Flannery O’Connor*. Sally Fitzgerald, ed. Vintage Books, New York, 1979, p. 117. [↗](#)

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