

Introduction

THE NATURE OF MONSTERS. SKETCHES OF THE HISTORY OF TERATOLOGY

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Nuñez behaved very strangely. He used incomprehensible words. Perhaps invented. One of them was *to see* ...

What does *to see* mean? Certainly, explaining it to the inhabitants of the village of the blind where he found himself was not at all easy. People thought that he was talking nonsense. That it was not possible to recognize someone without hearing or touching them. That it was absurd that those beatings of wings that they heard close to them from time to time were not angels, but creatures called *birds*. That everyone outside of that community was active in the period of *hot*, which elsewhere was called *day*, and slept during the *cool*, which, beyond the valley, was called *night*. That, beyond the mountains, there was a large city called *Bogota* ...

What a strange word, this one! A word devoid of meaning and so funny as to induce the inhabitants of the village of the blind to use it as a name for their guest. However, he, Bogota, continued to talk about things that were nonexistent. For the local doctors, who were also blind, he had a real disease: “Those queer things that are called the eyes, and which exist to make an agreeable soft depression in the face, are diseased, in the case of Bogota, in such a way as to affect his brain. They are greatly distended, he has eyelashes, and his eyelids move, and consequently his brain is in a state of constant irritation and distraction”. It was necessary to perform surgery, removing the eyeballs. Only then would he recover and become *normal*. Like all of them.

The events narrated are the plot of *The Country of the Blind*, a story published in 1904 by Herbert George Wells in the famous *Strand Magazine*. It is a disturbing story, which, with all the potential and limits of fiction, clearly shows the difficulties associated with having to define what is normal – or sound or healthy or vital or functional or beautiful or acceptable or appropriate, etc. – as compared to what is not. Not only fiction, though: any art form, when it is truly art, helps us to look beyond the here and now. It intertwines with history and events, and sets out the scope. Hence, my choice a couple of years ago to set up a research group on the evolution of the concept of *monstrosity*, which would be formed not only of historians of medicine, but also scholars of scientific imagery with widely diverse training and interests.

And so the project *The Nature of Monsters. Sketches of the History of Teratology* came into being, a collaboration between the Inter-University Research Center “Seminario di Storia della Scienza” (at the time still an interdepartmental center of the University of Bari Aldo Moro) and the Department of Molecular Medicine, History of Medicine Section, University of Rome La Sapienza. The first outcome of this synergy was a conference, held in Rome, 13 January 2012, when numerous students of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, accustomed to far more technical reports on clinical topics, were captivated by lecturers who spoke to them of things that were at the same time so distant and so close. This volume contains the texts of those talks, to which, for completeness, we have added others written by foreign scholars.

What does the word *monster* mean? Many things at the same time, but also a refusal by society. Fortunately, the term has no right to citizenship in contemporary medical culture. Even the more aseptic term *teratology*, the status of which was defined in the first half of the 19th century by Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (more than by than his father Étienne), although still in use, is currently employed with great caution, because of the cultural baggage it conveys. A story that has ended, then? Yes and no, because, although in a very different way from the

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past, medicine continues, by its nature, to be a science that needs to define boundaries: healthy/sick, normal/pathological, live/dead, etc. For centuries doctors, philosophers, theologians, jurists, artists, etc. exchanged opinions on the concept of monstrosity. They strove to define what for them was not acceptable. To identify the nature of those beings which, despite being born to a woman, were sometimes not perceived as human. To establish, in fact, the boundaries between the human and the not human. Often between the human and the beast: the monster was, in fact, often understood to be the result of carnal intercourse with an animal, an excessive imagination in some way linked to an animal or an atavistic regression, that is, an involution to a state of primitiveness.

The monster represented for man the constant threat of losing his position of excellence in the *chain of being*, the cosmic order. For this reason, it had to be identified and eliminated, or at least measured and monitored. This is a history of exclusion that must be told. Retracing the history of those who were denied the status of humanity (or saw it somehow reduced) makes it possible to understand how the question *quid est homo?* has been answered in various eras. Studying the exception it is possible to understand the rule more clearly. And it is precisely this aspect to which we have tried to pay attention.

What are the cultural references that can be drawn upon? Many have accumulated over the years. To name just a few: Michel Foucault, Claude-Claire Kappler, Jean Céard, Jacques Le Goff, Leslie Fiedler, David Williams, Jose Gil, Charles T. Wolfe, Olivier Roux, Richard Kearney, Armand Marie Leroi ... Many of them have paid particular attention to the early modern era, in which, for a complex web of historical causes, monster's presence in the media grew significantly across Europe and, consequently, attempts at an etiological interpretation of these monsters multiplied.

In this scenario, an important contribution has been offered in recent years by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, who, in an extraordinary

effort of synthesis, have created order in the category of the marvelous between the late Middle Ages and the early modern age. Arousing wonder were the fantastic species (Blemmyes, cynocephali, etc.) that populated the boundaries of the known world, where natural law was blander and nature seemed to occasionally take a few liberties; but also deformed newborn, such as the famous monster of Ravenna, who, in 1512, not in remote Africa, but in Italy, which was the heart of Christianity and where the laws of nature were understood to be more rigid, had foretold sorrowful future events with his body, as readable as the text of a message from God. We decided to focus on precisely these last subjects, inhabitants of the same world as us and not imaginary figures placed in an undefined elsewhere, carriers of a natural divine and social meaning. Obviously, it would be impossible to trace the entire history of Western teratology. Instead, the intention is to offer an overview of significant cases, which, starting in late antiquity, but focusing mainly on the modern and contemporary ages, could provide elements useful for understanding the dynamics of the creation, the consolidation and, in a certain sense, the crisis of teratology.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all those who were close to me and helped me in the organization of activities and the management of the numerous materials. First of all, the manager and staff of *Medicina nei Secoli*, in particular the director Valentina Gazzaniga, but also Carla Serarcangeli and Stefania Lenci, who have hosted my work in this prestigious journal; Silvia Marinozzi, who demonstrated her great organizational skills during the seminar in Rome and whose infectious enthusiasm allowed me to overcome many difficulties; Claudia Addabbo and Stefano Spataro, who helped me in editing the texts; and Sara Donahue, who often intervened to correct the overly Globish English of native Italian speakers.