‘Impossible Tales’: Language and Monstrosity in the Literary Fantastic

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation analyzes the ways in which monstrosity is articulated in fantastic literature, a genre or mode that is inherently devoted to the challenge of representing the unrepresentable. Through the readings of a number of nineteenth-century texts and the analysis of the fiction of two twentieth-century writers (H. P. Lovecraft and Tommaso Landolfi), I show how the intersection of the monstrous theme with the fantastic literary mode forces us to consider how a third term, that of language, intervenes in many guises in the negotiation of the relationship between humanity and monstrosity. I argue that fantastic texts engage with monstrosity as a linguistic problem, using it to explore the limits of discourse and constructing through it a specific language for the indescribable. The monster is framed as a bizarre, uninterpretable sign, whose disruptive presence in the text hints towards a critique of overconfident rational constructions of ‘reality’ and the self.

The dissertation is divided into three main sections. The first reconstructs the critical debate surrounding fantastic literature – a decades-long effort of definition modeling the same tension staged by the literary fantastic; the second offers a focused reading of three short stories from the second half of the nineteenth century (“What Was It?,” 1859, by Fitz-James O’Brien, the second version of “Le Horla,” 1887, by Guy de Maupassant, and “The Damned Thing,” 1893, by Ambrose Bierce) in light of the organizing principle of apophasis; the last section investigates the notion of monstrous language in the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft and Tommaso Landolfi.
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To the memory of my father

“Come, let’s away to prison: We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage…”
William Shakespeare, King Lear V.3
Introduction

This dissertation analyzes the ways in which monstrosity is articulated in fantastic literature, a genre or mode that is inherently devoted to the challenge of representing the unrepresentable. Through the readings of a number of nineteenth-century texts and the analysis of the fiction of two twentieth-century writers (H. P. Lovecraft and Tommaso Landolfi), I show how the intersection of the monstrous theme with the fantastic literary mode forces us to consider how a third term, that of language, intervenes in many guises in the negotiation of the relationship between humanity and monstrosity. I argue that fantastic texts engage with monstrosity as a linguistic problem, using it to explore the limits of discourse and constructing through it a specific language for the indescribable, built around the core principle of apophasis. The monster is framed as a bizarre, uninterpretable sign, whose disruptive presence in the text hints towards a critique of overconfident rational constructions of ‘reality’ and the self.

The fantastic mode identifies a way of writing that flourished especially in the nineteenth century in the United States, Germany, France, England and (with some delay) in Italy. A decades-long critical debate has been developing around its definition; in this study, I consider a story fantastic if it employs a generally realistic setting to stage the encounter of a character with unknown and ineffable forces, usually (but not necessarily) of supernatural origin. The specificity of this type of narrative, compared to other genres or modes featuring the supernatural such as the epic and the fairy-tale, lies in the fact that the world it reconstructs is a faithful image of ‘reality,’ i.e. regulated by scientific laws and the rules of logic and identity; it is therefore dependent on a post-Enlightenment, post-scientific-revolution interpretation of
magical and supernatural thinking as a superseded cultural code. In the economy of a fantastic story, the impossible event or manifestation cannot be ascribed to mere physical causes such as dream or hallucination: the text refuses to be read this way. This sets up the fantastic occurrence as an inexplicable breach or “déchirure”\(^1\) in the fabric of reality, prompting questions on the relationship between real and unreal, natural and supernatural, possible and impossible, subject and object. In fact, according to Tzvetan Todorov, whose seminal *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970) has defined subsequent critical debates on the supernatural in literature, the fantastic is a fertile ground for the analysis of issues underlying all literary texts precisely because it foregrounds the relationship between real and imaginary: in this sense, it represents “the quintessence of literature.”\(^2\) Such foregrounding takes the shape of represented encounters on the edge of the natural and the possible, resulting in characters being stuck in a cognitive and linguistic deadlock.

The fact that fantastic literature deals in bizarre occurrences and supernatural apparitions that disrupt the laws of nature and logic (as established by a rationalistic, secularized culture) should not lead us to consider it, as Todorov does, “nothing but the bad conscience of [the] positivist era”\(^3\) – its irrational counterpoint. In fact, the fantastic presupposes an epistemological model based on philosophical naturalism (i.e. nothing in the world exists outside the confines of nature and man’s only instrument for the study of nature is the scientific

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1 Roger Caillois, “De la féerie à la science-fiction,” in *Anthologie du fantastique*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), vol. I, 8. In this study, quotations in Italian always appear in the original language, while quotations in other languages are given either in the original or in English, whenever a published translation is available.


3 Ibid.
method) in order to question its absolute validity; it critiques overconfident constructions of reason by applying to them the same skepticism cultivated by scientific thought. In doing so, it undermines nineteenth-century Positivistic optimism in the indefinite enlargement of the human sphere of knowledge (and the notion of a unitary subjectivity as agent of this operation) through the representation of dark areas of nature and the self, which it frames as ultimately impervious to human cognition. The defining trait of a fantastic story is to be found not only in the epistemological doubt experienced by a character when faced with an inexplicable occurrence, but also in the related struggle that s/he experiences when attempting to describe it. Hence the seminal questions staged by the fantastic: “what is this?” and, or especially, “how do I talk about it?” The fantastic experience coincides, more than anything else, with “quella vicenda che consiste nel fatto di raccontare”\textsuperscript{4}; it is an “avventura conoscitiva,”\textsuperscript{5} but also an *avventura espressiva*. This is why its narrators are usually autodiegetic, i.e. they are the main character in the story. Through this focalization, a fantastic text generally provides a limited point of view and a fragmentary account, creating an economy of withdrawn information that heightens the mystery around the events described, as well as the impotency of the narrator to make sense of them through a linear narrative. Not by chance has the fantastic been compared to the detective story; however, if all pieces of a detective story usually fall into place, in a fantastic text the narrative material never fully yields to logical discourse, and the narrator (who is no Sherlock Holmes) is constantly at a loss for words and explanations.


\textsuperscript{5} Emanuella Scarano, “I modi dell’autenticazione,” ibid., 381.
The fantastic interrogates the extent to which a subject’s conceptual limits are also his or her discursive limits; it lures its narrator-characters into situations in which their experiences exceed their linguistic means. The present study takes the issue to the extreme by interrogating how a genre or mode especially concerned with ways of telling, whose “every page subverts linguistic categorizations,” describes the indescribable figure par excellence: the monster. Horrific synthesis of species and beings, or delirious parody of existing creatures, the monster is an enemy of fixed categories; it begs the question of whether it is real or imaginary, because it is by definition neither or both. Its ontological multiplicity defies the structural sequencing of rational thought, deductive reasoning and syntactical order. If the fantastic is the quintessence of literature, is the monster the quintessence of the fantastic? The hypothesis advanced in this study is that its puzzling presence materializes (in ways that are all but straightforward) the limits of knowledge and discourse and allows for an even more explicit treatment of exquisitely fantastic questions in the texts. How does one represent the unrepresentable? How does one name the unnameable? How does the text describe this effort and what are the stakes of this act of naming? What do monstrous encounters reveal about the nature of language and our relationship to it? Can language itself become monstrous?

In the first chapter, I offer a detailed reconstruction of and commentary on the critical debate around the fantastic genre or mode. It is by now a critical commonplace to acknowledge that every study on the fantastic, no matter its nature and aims, must begin with a more or less ample survey of the critical literature to date. My dissertation is no exception to this rule, and for good reason. The fantastic is a very debated province: depending on critic and ‘school’ of

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6 Todorov, 168.
thought, its chronological scope varies from the entire intellectual history of mankind (if it is made to coincide with the faculty of imagination) to the past two centuries (if restricted to a specifically modern textual tradition); its typological criteria may include a mere dozen texts (according to Todorov’s strict *hésitation* theory) or coincide with the entire body of world literature (in the evaluation of Jorge Luis Borges). Therefore, it is unwise to enter into a discussion of the fantastic without first defining what, exactly, is meant by this category. The chapter begins with a brief discussion on the difference between fantastic as genre and as mode, embracing the position adopted, among others, by Remo Ceserani, who associates the term both with a localized textual tradition (*genre*) and with a set of rhetorical and formal strategies, thematic networks and textual approaches that become available across several genres (*mode*). I show how the tendency of fantastic literature to engage with modern epistemological and philosophical debates determines the ways in which it frames super- or preternatural phenomena, as well as its relationship to thematic and structural aspects of realistic literature. A fantastic story relies on the conventions of literary realism, and the readerly expectations they generate, in order to undermine them from the inside, perverting the referential credibility of the text through fragmentary, opaque, and unreliable narratives.

According to the noted theoretical formulation advanced by Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic is the hesitation experienced by the character and the reader alike when faced with an event that falls outside the parameters of conventional reality; this hesitation disappears whenever the character (and the reader) explains the event either as a natural or as a supernatural phenomenon, thereby making a choice that dispels the fantastic ambiguity. In the chapter and throughout the entire study, I move away from the notion of choice (which, as demonstrated by Orlando, Amigoni, Lognani and others, is not entirely productive) and
approach the fantastic as a thematization of doubt achieved through the represented reaction of the narrating subject (Benedetti), regardless of whether such doubt is dispelled in the end; I also choose to forgo any critical consideration on the slippery, extra-textual entity of the reader.

In the last section of the first chapter, I offer an analysis of the narrative and rhetorical strategies displayed by a number of classic texts from the nineteenth century. All of these devices (such as a flaunted unreliability of the narrator and a thematization of the act of telling through the representation of fictive audiences) confirm that the fantastic mode is structurally concerned with the conditions of representation.

The second chapter introduces the question of monstrosity into the equation. Not unlike the fantastic, monstrosity is a slippery notion that begs definition – the irony being the fact that its only fixed characteristic seems to be its indefinability. However, if we shift the focus from its constitutive features to its (textual) impact, we realize that, in a fantastic text, the encounter with monstrosity seems to provoke in the characters a radical “inability to «tell».” The infinitive is to be intended in its two related meanings: both as “to distinguish” (i.e. to subject the creature to a process of taxonomization which it always escapes – therefore pointing to its irreducible hybridity) and as “to speak” (i.e. to drag the unruly, ineffable monstrous sign into the realm of language). No figure makes more evident how the question of classification is essentially linked to an act of naming.

Monstrosity is usually present in all lists of fantastic themes compiled by the critical literature, together with other thematic staples such as the double, life after death, the fragmented body, the déjà vu and so on. Because of the distinctiveness of its recurrent themes,

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fantastic literature lends itself well to the kind of thematic criticism indicted by critics such as Roman Jakobson and Leo Spitzer: the collection of rough data about the appearance of a certain theme across a number of literary works, a method that, while building a solid basis for the exercise of critical reading, if used by itself lacks the capacity to penetrate and illuminate any deep interrelation between an element and its context. As suggested by Remo Ceserani (editor, together with Mario Domenichelli and Pino Fasano, of a *Dizionario dei temi letterari*), thematic criticism should privilege “quei temi che si prestino, più facilmente di altri, a svolgere una funzione costruttiva nel testo anche dal punto di vista formale, divenendo procedimenti testuali, fornendo un tessuto metaforico alle invenzioni narrative, svolgendo un ruolo attivo nel gioco di tematizzazione dei procedimenti formali e di testualizzazione dei temi.” With these warnings in mind, the second chapter raises the following questions: what happens when we intersect the monstrous theme with the fantastic genre? Considering that monsters pop up all over the literary landscape, in fables, fairy-tales, mythology, epic, and religious narratives, just to name a few, what does a monster do in a fantastic text? What can we learn about this literary mode from the way it accommodates the cumbersome presence of its monstrous figures?

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8 On this see Pierluigi Pellini’s account of the recent critical redemption of thematic criticism from its fame as “ingenuo positivismo contenutista” (Pierluigi Pellini, “Critica tematica e tematologia: paradossi e aporie,” *Allegoria*, no. 58, 2008: 61; for a recent, comprehensive reflection on contemporary developments of thematic criticism, cf. this and other essays in the section “Il tema: la critica tematica oggi” on the same issue of *Allegoria*).


After tracing the origins of apophasis and defining the role of the monstrous creature in medieval theorizations, I discuss the significance of apophatic discourse for the study of fantastic literature, with special stress on the question of affirmative language and rational knowledge. Within this framework, I carry out an in-depth analysis of three short stories from the second half of the nineteenth century, whose most immediate unifying criterion is the presence of a material ghost (a tangible but invisible being): “What Was It?” (1859), by Fitz-James O’Brien; the second version of “Le Horla” (1887) by Guy de Maupassant; and “The Damned Thing” (1893) by Ambrose Bierce.

Through the readings in this chapter, I try to show how, at the rhetorical level, the elusive presence of the monster determines a constant performance of unsayability, especially reliant on the abundance of paraliptical statements (saying that something will not or cannot be said, and then saying it precisely through or despite this disavowal). Since the creature cannot be assessed directly though the senses or through mere logical reasoning, language has to content itself with fragments, ellipses and descriptions per viam negativam; the monster is always the object of a partial, tangential and ultimately incomplete knowledge. I read the appearance of these unusual monsters, which sow discord among the senses and suggest that the realm of material reality may be wider than humanly assessed, in light of the expansion of human faculties determined by late nineteenth-century scientific advancements such as the discovery of radio waves, telegraphy, and electromagnetism. If, on the one hand, these achievements determine an enlargement of the human domain over areas that were previously considered inaccessible, on the other they highlight the permanence of many more such areas, suggesting
that “the more we see, the less we are.”

In conclusion, in these texts the figure of the material ghost works as a structuring principle on several levels: it determines the rhetorical-stylistics of their narrators; it hints at a broader notion of cataphatic (affirmative) language as unequipped to penetrate extrasensorial provinces of the real; it undermines any cosmology made to measure for the human mind, preventing “the adequation of the real with intellect.”

The third chapter goes on to analyze the “teratologically fabulous” creations of two twentieth-century authors, H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) and Tommaso Landolfi (1908-1979). Despite their significantly different approaches to the fantastic mode, both bodies of work allow for a reflection on the ‘survival’ of the mode after the end of the nineteenth century, when, according to Tzvetan Todorov’s notorious periodization, the blurring of boundaries between the real and the imaginary weakens the background against which the fantastic sets its disruption, and psychoanalysis makes the fantastic “useless” by appropriating (and ‘explaining’) its themes and tropes. In fact, far from resigning to its own death, twentieth-century fantastic makes the most of its belatedness by engaging explicitly with the literary tradition, heightening its reflexivity (already a structural feature of the mode) and thematizing its preferred devices and procedures. In teratological terms, this translates into the spawning of new, non-traditional monsters, unsettling embodiments of precisely the issues that Todorov associated with the end of the genre. For instance, the vast, indifferent cosmos that serves as a

14 Todorov, 160.
backdrop for Lovecraft’s stories is populated by monsters that reflect the epistemological earthquake caused by Albert Einstein’s and Max Planck’s discoveries in theoretical physics: their bodies respond to an “abnormal, non-Euclidean” geometry; their dwelling places and their immemorial existence bend spacetime in ways that are inconceivable for (and profoundly incompatible with) the human mind. In order to describe such unthinkable dimensions, language makes itself monstrous through a “lushly overwritten” style, loaded with qualifiers and synonyms, that seems to mirror the innumerable appendages of the inconceivable creatures it struggles to describe. The notion of monstrous language is also thematized through the recurrent presence of “pseudobiblia,” fictional treatises of forbidden lore whose mere reading can push an individual to (and past) the edge of sanity. The virus of monstrosity hatches within those words in the same way as it lays dormant in the genetic makeup of a number of unfortunate characters, “searchers after horror” who pursue some forbidden truth only to find the inhuman within themselves, according to a principle of “progressive and ineluctable transformation of the monster-object into the monster-subject.”

Tommaso Landolfi’s peculiar brand of monstrosity builds a linguistically-inflected model for the unconscious, suggesting that a subject’s stability and rationality is primarily dependent on a functioning relationship with the language s/he uses, and that when that relationship is affected (i.e. revealed as precarious and based on convention), the character’s

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mental infrastructure disintegrates completely. Consequently, Landolfi’s fiction does not rely on classic vampires and werewolves for the activation of the fantastic space, nor on the uncertain epistemological footing provoked by the non-traditional ghosts of nineteenth-century fantastic; instead, it transforms words themselves into monsters, locating the typically fantastic experience of the unknown in the relationship between the subject and his/her own language. In his fiction, words come alive in the shape of tiny, animal-like creatures demanding to be heard; everyday objects are made strange and eerie purely by virtue of a twisting of their signifiers; obsessive thoughts materialize outside a character’s brain in the form of undefinable creatures with unheard-of names, with paradoxical ‘bodies’ straddling the boundary between word and thing. These word-monsters offer an iconic representation of Landolfi’s aporetic conception of narrative, whereby the impossibility of dominating discourse clashes tragically with the impossibility of living outside of it, translating into a notion of the ultimate impossibility of literature.
Chapter I
The literary fantastic

“Raisonnons un peu, s’il vous plaît, car la logique est de mise partout, même dans les contes de revenant.”
Charles Nodies, Inès de las Sierras

1. Reframing the supernatural

In a typical fantastic story, the author establishes a realistic, verisimilar world in which a seemingly supernatural event occurs, such as the return of the dead or a monstrous apparition. This event appears to have the same ontological weight (to be just as real) as the familiar, everyday objects and events that surround it, but is fundamentally at odds within the secular, naturalistic worldview that the characters embrace and represent. Such a worldview, which has theoretically banished the supernatural and is impervious to mystery and superstition, is therefore shown as relative and unstable, because incapable of accounting for a significant portion of the human experience. The characters’ reaction dramatizes the epistemological doubt and the linguistic deadlock that is the hallmark of fantastic narratives. One could also describe fantastic fiction by demarcating its territory within the larger realm of supernatural literature, on account of its treatment of supernatural or inexplicable elements. For instance, in epic narratives and fairy-tales, magical occurrences and monstrous creatures do not conflict with the diegetic world in which they occur; they are expected to be a part of it. Conversely, a
fantastic text sets up a world just like ‘ours’ until the appearance of the supernatural rips through the fabric of realistic illusion; the result is that of an element out of place, whose incongruity gives the text its vital energy and deeper significance.

This basic model (with due variations) is especially observable in a cluster of texts written between the last decades of the eighteenth century and the entire nineteenth century in certain areas of the Western world – mainly France, Germany, England, the United States and Italy. On the one hand, these texts crystallize “una precisa tradizione testuale”\(^{19}\) – a historically-determined, convention-bound genre. On the other, they participate in a literary mode, meaning “un insieme di procedimenti retorico-formali, atteggiamenti conoscitivi e aggregazioni tematiche, articolazioni dell’immaginario storicamente concrete e utilizzabili da vari codici linguistici, generi artistici o letterari.”\(^{20}\) Therefore, the fantastic also represents a textual ‘approach’ or form on a par with the comic, tragic or pastoral, with a fundamental difference: while other modes are usually considered super-historical, the fantastic has a relatively recent birthdate. At the same time, it endures as a “temptation” until today in the shape of “a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed.”\(^{21}\)

In order to understand the features of this mode, it is especially important to assess it against the intellectual-historical conditions that underlie its emergence. In his landmark study of the fantastic, French-Bulgarian critic Tzvetan Todorov describes it as the dark side of scientism: “the literature of the fantastic is nothing but the bad conscience of [the] positivist


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 8.

era. Todorov, 168.

23 If, on the one hand, it is naïve (and downright incorrect) to picture a completely rational post-Enlightenment, it is equally so to conceive fantastic literature as its irrational counterpoint. The mode generally shows the same commingling of scientific and para- or pseudo-scientific sensibility, the same tension between complete immanence and a longing for the spiritual, that is already embedded in Positivistic culture.


the world. At the same time, it expresses a fundamental mistrust in the expressive and revelatory possibilities of language.

It should not surprise us, then, that the fantastic generally shows, “nelle sue stesse strutture narrative e nei procedimenti formali che usa, un’evidente preferenza per le questioni epistemologiche.” This is the angle from which most fantastic themes are approached, such as death, the double, the monstrous, the nocturnal, the repressed: these are keys to open up and explore new, unsettling perspectives into the nature and borders of the known world, as well as into monolithic representations of subjectivity. One need only look, for instance, to the theme of death and its semantic constellations – a privileged territory of exploration in fantastic texts. Over the last decades of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, the idea of death and the process of dying underwent a discursive makeover, which the literary fantastic translated into novel approaches to the question of the relationship between life and death. The dissemination of mechanistic conceptions of the human body, the pervasiveness of materialistic philosophies and popular inquiries into animal magnetism and hypnosis (such as Luigi Galvani and Giovanni Aldini’s experiments with electricity on dead tissue) were part of a debate that influenced, and was also shaped by, fantastic reflections on the spirit/matter dualism, the question of the life after death and the hubristic misuse of science (the most immediate literary reference is of course Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein*).

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27 Ibid., 21.

28 The experiments took place in the last two decades of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth between Italy and England. When Luigi Galvani observed the legs of a dead frog twitching when touched with two metal tools, he speculated (erroneously) that electricity was intrinsic to muscle tissue; his nephew held a public demonstration of the same phenomenon on the body of a recently executed man in London in 1803. The phenomenon came to be known as “galvanism.”
In particular, the decoupling between (living) matter and the mind or consciousness that should control it is a common fantastic theme, connected to the exquisitely modern question of the fragmentation of subjectivity. Hence the many stories on broken bodies and unruly body parts. In Théophile Gautier’s “The Mummy’s Foot” (1840), when a long-dead Egyptian princess appears in 1840s Paris to reclaim her mummified limb, the connection with recent theories of animal magnetism is made explicit: “[the foot] commenced to act in a nervous manner; contracted itself, and leaped over the papers like a startled frog; one would have imagined that it had suddenly been brought into contact with a galvanic battery.”\(^{29}\) In “Storia di una gamba” (1867) by Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, a man suffers the amputation of a leg after a war injury; he becomes obsessed by its severed limb and feels that his physical “disequilibrio” and “incompletazione”\(^{30}\) have sentenced him to a state in between life and death. In Arrigo Boito’s “Il pugno chiuso” (1870), a doctor reports on the case of a man with a clenched fist that he cannot open by any effort of his will, either because of a curse or due to nervous pathology. In all these examples, the body part, with its actual or projected autonomy, is in fact the protagonist of the story, as corroborated by the titles.\(^{31}\)


\(^{31}\) The fragmented body motif in fantastic literature has been explored, among others, by Vittorio Roda in *I fantasmi della ragione: fantastico, scienza e fantascienza nella letteratura Italiana fra Otto e Novecento*, Napoli: Liguori, 1996, especially in chapter I, and in his article “Problematiche della corporalità nel Tarchetti fantastico (ed in altri),” in *La tentazione del fantastico: narrativa italiana fra 1860 e 1920*, ed. Friedrich Wolfzettel and Peter Ihring (Frankfurt Am Main: Guerra, 2003), 193-213; as well as by Angelo M. Mangini in *Letteratura come anamorfosi: teoria e prassi del fantastico nell'Italia del primo Novecento*, Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2007, especially in the section titled “Il corpo diviso.”
The possibility of intermediate stages between life and death and of suspended states of consciousness informs a number of fantastic texts that openly thematize popular psychic practices of the time. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, German physician Franz Mesmer elaborated a theory according to which all living beings were united by a subtle substance or fluid, whose “tides” could be influenced by the planets in the same way as sea tides; this energy could be channeled and directed by a conductor in order to facilitate healing. Mesmerism, despite being disproved by scientific authorities at the end of the century, continued to thrive in the following decades and became at times conflated with spiritism and hypnosis. In E. A. Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845), a terminally ill man is mesmerized (hypnotized) on his deathbed; the doctor, who is also the first-person narrator, seeks to determine “to what extent, or for how long a period, the encroachments of Death might be arrested by the process.” After the passes (special hand movements performed by the doctor-mesmerist), Valdemar plunges in a deep trance-like sleep, from which he is able to interact verbally with the people around him. Interrogated on his state and feelings, he declares himself first asleep and then finally dead, whereupon he appears to stop breathing but remains suspended in a state of half-life. It is concluded that “death (or what is usually termed death) had been arrested by the mesmeric process.” For the following seven months, the doctor and his colleagues continue to call upon the ‘dead’ man, until they finally decide to wake him. Upon being revived, M. Valdemar seems to suddenly realize the horror of the artificially-induced twilight zone he is inhabiting and bursts in a chilling exclamation: “For God’s sake! –


33 Ibid., 129.
quick! – quick! – put me to sleep – or, quick! – waken me! – quick! – I say to you that I am dead!”34 Finally, soon thereafter, the narrator and his companions witness the impossible: “[Valdemar’s] whole frame at once – within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk – crumbled – absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putrescence.”35

The fantastic also introduced a new vocabulary for a thematic staple of supernatural literature: ghosts. Modern spiritualism (the belief that ghosts not only exist, but can communicate with the living) took the shape of a discipline around the middle of the nineteenth century, but the question had been receiving scholarly attention for decades. In 1766, Immanuel Kant penned the essay “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated through Dreams of Metaphysics” in order to challenge the writings of Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg: in Kant’s view, spirits have no metaphysical quality, but are indeed the product of far more prosaic physical causes, such as an upset stomach. The spirit-seer suffers a delusion of the senses akin to a mental projection: “the confused person transposes mere objects of his imagination outside himself and takes them to be things that are actually present before him.”36 Schopenhauer engaged with this study in his 1851 “Essay on Spirit-Seeing and Related Issues,” in which he took the reality of spirit-seeing as a given and treated it not as subjective perception, but as an

34 Ibid., 130.

35 Ibid.

objective phenomenon. Around this time “[s]piritualism was reshaped by the very scientific discoveries that had sparked its resurgence, ‘naturalizing’ phenomena once attributed only to supernatural agency. Within this new paradigm, such phenomena were described as ‘paranormal’, and, therefore, natural.” An effort to reconcile spiritism and science was especially visible in the English-speaking world: academic circles were created for the investigation of ghost sightings such as the Society for Psychical Research at Trinity College, Cambridge (England) in 1882, followed three years later by the American branch. William James, professor of psychology and philosophy at Harvard and brother to Henry James, occupied a prominent role in the society. Unsurprisingly, many elements of Henry James’s ghost story The Turn of the Screw (1898), considered by Todorov “a remarkable example” of the ambiguity he regarded as the constitutional trait of fantastic literature, were inspired by ‘real’ accounts of ghost sightings that the writer had been exposed to during societal meetings or in written proceedings. In fact, the story suggests the possibility (among many others) that the ghosts of two previous inhabitants of the manor may have lingered on to haunt the children by virtue of the intensity of their wickedness; this is reminiscent of the coeval theory of “thought-transference” expounded by some members of the Society for Psychical Research,


39 Todorov, 43.

according to which a dying person could project a lingering telepathic image of themselves to the living.\textsuperscript{41}

Another privileged territory for both techno-scientific and fantastic explorations from the turn of the nineteenth century onwards was that of speculations on mechanical human beings. In the wake of contributions such as Julien Offray de la Mettrie’s \textit{L’Homme-Machine} (1747), in which the French physician propounded a fully materialistic vision of Man, there was a surge in the production of highly specialized mechanical devices in the shape of animals or human beings. Around this time, Jacques de Vaucanson created a Flute-Playing automaton, as well as a popular mechanical duck, which by virtue of special mechanical contrivances appeared to be able to eat and defecate. In 1769, Wolfgang von Kempelen unveiled the notorious Chess-Playing Turk, which toured Europe for decades and became immensely popular (it even prompted E. A. Poe to write an essay speculating on its workings in 1836). Fantastic tales liberally explore the uneasy relationship between humans and their simulacra: usually man-made, these automata crystallize the dialectic between nature and artifice, creation and production, all the while challenging the exceptionality of the human and even reframing the question of modern (“romantic”) love.\textsuperscript{42} This theme is developed, for instance, in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” (1817), where the protagonist’s realization of being in love with a life-like wooden doll precipitates his descent into madness; in Prosper Mérimée’s “The Venus of Ille” (1834), where a statue is suspected to have killed a young man in a fit of jealousy; and

\textsuperscript{41} Shane McCorristine, \textit{Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750-1920} (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), especially section II.

\textsuperscript{42} This last point in particular is raised and explored in Simona Micali, “‘The alchemic marriage’: passione e tecnologia tra Ottocento e Novecento,” in \textit{Studi di letterature comparate in onore di Remo Ceserani}, ed. Mario Domenichelli et al., vol. II, \textit{Letteratura e tecnologia} (Manziana, Roma: Vecchiarelli, 2003), 53-78.
in 1886 novel “The Future Eve” by Auguste Villiers de L’Isle Adam, in which a fictionalized Thomas Edison creates a female android as a partner for his friend Lord Ewald, who is tormented by the dullness of his human fiancée.

2. Charting the critical field

2.1. Inclusivism and exclusivism

Before venturing further into the analysis of the features of fantastic literature, it will be useful to sketch the field of current criticism in order to help situate and refine our approach to the subject. Critical contributions can be loosely divided into two main schools, mirroring an “exclusive” and an “inclusive” tendency. The exclusive school considers the fantastic in light of its neighboring genres and attempts to define its specificity through historical rooting and an intersection of thematic and formal characteristics. This approach was generally embraced by a number of French scholars who, in the 1950s and 1960s, effectively founded a contemporary theory of the genre (Pierre-Georges Castex, Louis Vax, and Roger Caillois). Tzvetan Todorov recognized the importance of their critical endeavors, and in fact elaborated on them, as he devised his enormously influential theory of fantastic literature (in the already-

43 A clear and detailed discussion of the schools of fantastic criticism can be found in Stefano Lazzarin, “Dérive(s) du fantastique. Considérations intempestives sur la théorie d’un genre,” Comparatistica XIV (2005): 113-136. The distinction is also advanced by Remo Ceserani in Il fantastico, especially in the introduction (“Delimitazione di una modalità dell’immaginario”).


mentioned *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*). Other scholars belonging to this group include, in the Italian area, Remo Ceserani\(^{47}\) and Lucio Lugnani.\(^{48}\)

By contrast, the “inclusive” current tends to regard the fantastic either as one expression of the universal and super-historical human faculty of imagination, or as a term including the entirety of non-realistic literature. This corresponds to a lesser interest in discussing the specificity of the fantastic *vis-à-vis* similar genres; in the generally loose taxonomy traced by these critical works, the fantastic comprises (or is part of a system including, depending on the critic) fantasy, fairy tales, science fiction, horror and more. Critics who operate under similar assumptions include Eric S. Rabkin,\(^{49}\) Kathryn Hume,\(^{50}\) and Rosemary Jackson.\(^{51}\) Lazzarin summarizes the main difference between “exclusive” and “inclusive” criticism through the following chart, with the left column describing the (mostly Anglo-American) branch of inclusive criticism and the right column the (mostly French and Italian) exclusive variety:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>théorie ample et inclusive</th>
<th>vs</th>
<th>théorie restreinte et exclusive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>critère thématique</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>critère thématico-formel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>définition intuitive et fonctionnelle</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>définition rigoureuse et taxinomique</td>
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définition méta-historique vs définition historique

catégorie, sentiment, impulsion, activité vs genre ou mode littéraire

In this work, I embrace the exclusive critical approach. As established in the previous section, the ways in which the fantastic codifies the supernatural is heavily dependent on a modern approach to ‘the natural’ and its boundaries, as well as to the instruments and limits of human knowledge. These preoccupations give the fantastic genre/mode both an array of themes and a distinctive rhetorical vocabulary. Watering down the meaning of fantastic to encompass all that is non-realistic (with the conceptual problems that even the latter term entails), or conflating it with literature or imagination in general, appears to create more hermeneutical problems than it solves.

In this context, paying attention to genre-specific terminological distinctions is all but an idle exercise. For instance, in these pages I never adopt the term “fantasy” as an interchangeable alternative to “fantastic.” I regard fantasy literature as invested in setting up an alternative dimension where the relationship between the depicted and the ‘real’ world is not at all the central concern. A text such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) does not explicitly invite a comparison between the natural and physical rules that regulate life on Middle Earth and those of the world as we know it. The character of Legolas will not elicit a reaction of disbelief on the grounds that elves ‘do not exist.’ Similar criteria apply to fables

52 Lazzarin, “Dérive(s) du fantastique,” 131-132.

53 Cf. the uncompromising position of Jorge Luis Borges, according to whom “toda literatura es esencialmente fantástica” because the mere idea of realistic literature is “falsa” (Jorge Luis Borges and Osvaldo Ferrari, *En diálogo*, México: Siglo XXI, 2005, 160).
and fairy-tales, or what Todorov refers to as the “marvelous.” On the contrary, I will show how fantastic literature interrogates the limits of our knowledge of the world (and our capacity to articulate it and describe it) precisely by adopting a mimetic stance.

2.2. Definitions of fantastic literature

A degree of mimetic quality to the fantastic has been recognized by exclusivist critics since the earliest theorizations of the genre. Pierre-George Castex, for instance, identifies the peculiar quality of the genre in a complication of the dialectics between “mystère” and “vie réelle”:

Le fantastique, en effet, ne se confond pas avec l’affabulation conventionnelle des récits mythologiques ou des fées, qui implique un dépaysement de l’esprit. Il se caractérise au contraire par une intrusion brutale du mystère dans le cadre de la vie réelle; … «Il était une fois,» écrivait Perrault; Hoffmann, lui, ne nous plonge pas dans un passé indéterminé; il décrit les hallucinations cruellement présentes à la conscience affolée, et dont le relief insolite de détache d’une manière saisissante sur un fond de réalité familière.⁵⁴

Roger Caillois stresses the sheer impact that this “intrusion”⁵⁵ has on the system of rational thought that props up the foundations of conventional reality: a rip in the fabric of “légalité quotidienne,”⁵⁶ the fantastic is therefore equivalent to “un scandale, une déchirure, une irruption insolite, presque insupportable dans le monde réel.”⁵⁷ In framing the fantastic event as literally outside the rules (be those rules physical, logical, psychic), Caillois identifies its

⁵⁴ Castex, 8.
⁵⁵ Caillois, Au coeur du fantastique, 9.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 161.
distinctive quality in its relative position with respect to the real. The question of the fantastic as relative space is the foundational tenet of Tzvetan Todorov’s landmark *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. While he fundamentally agrees with his predecessors by stressing the importance of the relationship between the mysterious event and the worldview encouraged by the story, he grounds his theory of the fantastic on the “hésitation” produced in the character and the reader alike when faced with an inexplicable event, projected against a background of regular, familiar reality:

> In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination -- and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality -- but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.\(^{58}\)

The hesitation brought about by this inexplicable event, in the face of which the subject is torn between a natural and a supernatural explanation, is the fleeting space of the fantastic. Once this choice is made, the fantastic itself dissolves. In Todorov’s view, this space does not outline “an autonomous genre,” but is instead located “on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny [étrange].”\(^{59}\) In a marvelous text, the supernatural is a seamless feature of the world depicted, such as it is in fairy-tales, fantasy fiction, epic sagas and other narratives in which the supernatural is not, or does not have to be, “justified.”\(^{60}\) For instance, the Cinderella

\(^{58}\) Todorov, 25.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 41.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 54.
tale does not dwell on the inherent strangeness of talking mice, but rather focuses the reader’s attention towards an edifying parable of injustice and retribution (to advance but one interpretation). On the contrary, *étranger* designates fiction where an apparently supernatural event is ultimately revealed to be natural, thus dissolving the ambiguity in favor of a reaffirmation of the laws of nature. One such story would be “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) by Edgar Allan Poe, a typical locked-room mystery where no rational explanation seems possible. In the story, Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter, two wealthy women leading a retired life, are found brutally murdered in a room of their fourth-floor Paris apartment. Everything points to a supernatural perpetrator: the door is locked from the inside and windows are nailed shut; the two bodies bear signs of an inhumanly violent force; witnesses have heard the voices of a Frenchman and of someone else speaking an unidentifiable language. In the end, C. Auguste Dupin, a Sherlock Holmes prototype, uses logic and critical thinking (Poe included this story among his “tales of ratiocination”\(^61\)) to uncover the truth: of all things, it was an escaped orangutan who climbed to the fourth floor, opened the (only seemingly) shut

window and killed the two women; the sounds it made were not recognized by any witness because they were indeed inhuman.62

Todorov’s framing of the fantastic through the key notion of hesitation is certainly his lasting contribution to the critical debate. Suffice it to say that subsequent criticism has mostly adhered to his criteria or amended them in various ways, without ever proposing radically alternative solutions. Still, his system is problematic for several reasons. Its extreme clarity and totalizing aspirations, in good part due to an unwavering structuralist approach, ultimately reveal themselves to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* made accessible (and in many ways inaugurated) the critical debate about a whole literary universe that had been thus far relegated to a specialized niche; on the other, its ideological approach at times forced the raw material of its analysis into a Procrustean bed, making it even more evident that the elusive nature of the fantastic needs to be worked with rather than against.

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62 This story is generally recognized as having inaugurated the modern detective genre. There is an interesting relationship between detective and fantastic fiction, not only because, as noted by Todorov, both genres play on a protracted ambiguity (although the detective story, with its rational resolution, belongs to the *étrange*, Todorov, 49-51), but also because of the pivotal role that the revealing detail plays in both. An interesting case in point is represented by William Hope Hodgson’s 1913 collection of short stories featuring occult detective Thomas Carnacki (*Carnacki, the Ghost-Finder*); each of these stories sets up a mysterious case that is eventually revealed by Carnacki to be ascribable, depending on the single case, either to human machinations or to genuinely supernatural causes. In his study on the contiguity and contamination between detective fiction and spiritualism, Srdjan Smajić remarks that, “[w]hile the rationalist protocols of nineteenth-century detective fiction ostensibly preclude non-rational forms of knowledge and, even more so, supernatural occurrences, the genre consistently displays signs of affinity with clairvoyance and telepathy, intuitionism and spiritualism” (Srdjan Smajić, *Ghost-seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 6).
As already mentioned, Todorov’s fantastic is by definition a temporary state, or a liminal area between two stable elements.\(^6\) Taking this view at face value leads to considering the fantastic an excessively volatile state and creates typological paradoxes such as texts entirely declined according to the fantastic ambiguity and then finally resolved through the means of the \textit{étrange}. Todorov is aware of such borderline cases, so much so that he conjures up the median category of the “fantastic-uncanny.”\(^6\) For instance, in the story “Il pugno chiuso” by Arrigo Boito, an apparently inexplicable phenomenon is resolved in the end by what seems to be an affirmation of reality through hard evidence. Levy, an avaricious money-lender, dreams about a highly valuable red florin and wakes up with the feeling of the coin in his clenched fist. He is ecstatic at first, but soon realizes he is unable to control his hand: no devil or surgeon\(^6\) can get his fist to open and release its treasure. He commits suicide in the presence of a beggar named Paw, who in turn picks up what he thinks is the florin in the dark and becomes subjected to the same curse. As Paw finally dies surrounded by greedy onlookers, the very last line of the story zooms in on his now open fist and reveals that the red florin is not there. The greater part of the story flirts with the supernatural in such systematic ways that to classify it comfortably into the wide stream of realistic literature (perhaps by invoking a psychic disorder such as \textit{idée fixe} or monomania as a plausible cause for the characters’ ailment) does not do justice to the text. While the resolution of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” however unusual, responds to an internal coherence of the text, meaning it is probable according to the text’s logic, a similarly

\(^{63}\) To be exact, Todorov describes the \textit{étrange} as a genre that is only delimited on one side (its border with the fantastic), while “on the other, it dissolves into the general field of literature” (Todorov, 46).

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 44 and following.

‘natural’ explanation in Boito (which is given not through the positive affirmation of clues and counter-facts, but simply through the absence of evidence for the supernatural explanation) pretends to clarify, but in fact does not. We are reminded of M. R. James’s instructions for the creation of successful ghost stories: “It is not amiss sometimes to leave a loophole for a natural explanation; but, I would say, let the loophole be so narrow as not to be quite practicable.”

What I am driving at is that the mere presence of the “loophole” should not override the fact that it is impracticable. Therefore, as we try to define the specificity of fantastic literature in a more elastic way, it seems more productive to heed Francesco Orlando’s suggestion, which points us to “la tematizzazione del dubbio, non importa quanto protratta e come risolta.” A further clarification is in order as regards the kind of doubt that the fantastic provokes. Elizabeth Bennet’s doubt about the true nature of Mr. Darcy, however thematized, does not make *Pride and Prejudice* a fantastic novel. What is called into question in a fantastic text are the means and strategies through which we know the world and the extent to which these means can be trusted, i.e. the value of “every powerful explanatory paradigm” such as that of scientific materialism.

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67 Francesco Orlando, “Statuti del soprannaturale nella narrativa,” in *Il romanzo*, ed. Franco Moretti, vol. I, *La cultura del romanzo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), 214. In this essay, and in the book-length posthumous study *Il soprannaturale letterario*, Orlando classifies the fantastic as one of the multiple “statuti” of supernatural literature. He refrains from including post-Enlightenment supernatural literature in the capacious category of the marvelous (the result of a “pigra, antistorica assimilazione retrospettiva,” *Il soprannaturale letterario: storia, logica e forme*, ed. Stefano Brugnolo, Luciano Pellegrini, and Valentina Sturli, Torino: Einaudi, 2017, 4), and instead organizes all iterations of the literary supernatural along a spectrum that has “credito” (understood as belief) on one end and “critica” on the other. Traditional, hesitation-based fantastic is situated at the cusp where “credito” and “critica” have the same textual weight.

In the same vein as Orlando’s corrective to Todorov, both Ferdinando Amigoni and Lucio Lugnani suggest a subtraction of focus from the notion of choice, which is so central for the dénouement of Todorovian fantastic. Amigoni takes Todorov to task regarding what he perceives to be a blatant imbalance between the two terms of the choice imposed by a fantastic text. Namely, while choosing a natural explanation (the étrange) allows for a confirmation of a complex Weltanschauung, with its deep values and beliefs, embracing the supernatural explanation (marvelous) implies a complete rebuttal of it. The “vertigine epistemologica” staged by the fantastic narration is unlikely to be relieved by a simple rational decision (i.e. faced with the apparition of a ghost, the character decides to believe in the existence of otherworldly creatures). This in turn is mirrored by Lucio Lugnani’s proposal to substitute the notion of hésitation with that of impasse. In his view, the temporary opposition between natural/rational and supernatural/irrational is not a faithful description for the state of radical doubt into which the characters are cast: faced with an event that clashes spectacularly with their entire system of knowledge and values, they are left in a state of deadlock. The luxury of a choice could not be further away: this cognitive short-circuit does not resemble “l’esitazione di chi è a un bivio, ma lo smarrimento di chi è finito in un vicolo cieco e non può tornare sui propri passi.”

3. On fantastic and realism

3.1. Fantastic as perversion


70 Lugnani, “Verità e disordine,” 73.
The mimetic-veridical aspirations of the fantastic that we have touched upon in previous sections deserve to be explored in more depth. In particular, it might be productive for our purposes to turn our attention to the complex relationship between fantastic and realistic fiction – a critical point that should never be overlooked.\textsuperscript{71} We have to keep in mind that the term “realism” suffers a similar fate of referential ambiguity as “fantastic,” inasmuch as it can be considered both a literary genre and a narrative mode. When I speak of “realistic” in this study, I refer to an approach (or mode) that casts literature as a truthful reflection of reality (with all the problematic and contextually-bound connotations that such terms bear), theoretically unmediated by feeling and opinion and interested in ordinary aspects of human life. Naturally, iterations of the mode can take very different paths, as demonstrated, for instance, by the differences between English realism, French naturalism and Italian \textit{verismo}.

Lucio Lugnani uses the notion of “reality paradigm” to articulate the difference between realistic and fantastic narrative. In short, the reality paradigm can be understood as the intersection between the episteme (scientific knowledge) and axiology (the value system through which we arrange and evaluate the world around us) of a certain society, necessarily considered with respect to a specific time and place.\textsuperscript{72} In realistic literature, the reality paradigm functions as a set of coordinates and assumptions to which the text implicitly refers (through the objects and methods of representation) and against which it can be read. A realistic text, in a way, aims to \textit{mirror} the reality paradigm to which it refers. Moreover, narrative techniques

\textsuperscript{71} “[N]on si insisterà mai abbastanza sull’assoluto, vitale bisogno di realiztico che il fantastico ha per nascere e sussistere” (“Per una delimitazione del genere,” 55).

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 54.
work in unison to enhance what Roland Barthes calls “the reality effect”: events are usually narrated in the third person for the sake of objectivity and the authorial voice often disappears in the fabric of the text. Fantastic literature, on the contrary, is concerned with deviations from (transgressions of) the reality paradigm; in this case, the supposed naturalness of that system of knowledge and values suddenly becomes open to question. In this sense, a fantastic tale can be considered “una serie di enunciati semanticamente pertinenti e coerenti, compatibili con un paradigma di realtà su cui il testo o meglio l’idea globale di testo è costruita, … interrotta dall’emergenza di un enunciato impertinente, logicamente incoerente e contraddittorio.”

The deployment of certain narrative techniques and rhetorical strategies can also be read in dialogue with the conventions of realism: in a typical fantastic story, third-person narration gives way to the partiality of knowledge and vision implicit in first-person narration; the trustworthiness of what we read is openly disavowed by the narrative voice; the artificiality of literature and the opacity of the text are purposely highlighted; meta-literary references are abundant.

It is also worth noting that the fantastic favors novellas and short stories over the form of the novel, generally associated with realism as a genre. The reasons for this phenomenon deserve more systematic study, but for now we can advance a structural hypothesis. The ‘transparency’ effect pursued by literary realism is mostly achieved through a process of accumulation. Detailed descriptions of the environment contribute to build a world that is seamlessly coherent in itself and in its relationship to the extra-textual dimension. This very process of gradual building is part and parcel with the genre. On the other hand, the fantastic

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74 Gianluigi Goggi, “Assurdo e paradigma di realtà: alcuni nodi del fantastico,” in La narrazione fantastica, 92.
is interested in moments of cognitive short-circuit, not unlike epiphanies (although, paradoxically, such epiphanies refrain from showing what James Joyce called the “whatness” of things and tend to further mystify, rather than reveal); it sets the background against which such moments unfold, but it is this dynamic process of unveiling (and its consequences for the psyche of the characters) that is at the heart of the entire narrative edifice. Intuitively, short narrative seems structurally more suited to represent such lightning-bolt moments.

Having said all this, it is important to correct the commonplace according to which “fantastic” is merely antithetical to “realistic.” I am thinking for instance of Rosemary Jackson’s rather simplistic view of “fantastic tales […] as an opposite version of realistic narrative,” reminiscent of the Todorovian maxim discussed above. The relationship between the two terms is complex and fraught in ways that a mere oppositional model does not exhaust; conversely, fantastic narrative could be visualized as a crooked branch growing out of the large trunk of realism. We might also take the metaphor a little further. If we consider the destructive or corrosive action that fantastic doubt has on the stability of the materialistic-positivistic worldview, we can imagine the crooked branch as a sick appendix with the potential to affect the health and solidity of the entire plant down to the roots. It is rather a process of perversion than reversal. Therefore, it should not surprise us that the fantastic subsumes many features of realistic narratives (a typical fantastic story will usually disguise itself as a realistic one) only to better set up its coup de théâtre. This sustained strategy of preparation for an event that, instead of explaining and disclosing, provides further confusion (the opposite of agnition, the

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76 Jackson, 25.
final part of a narrative or dramatic text where identities are revealed and narrative knots are untied) is a common organizational trait of fantastic narratives.

“The Venus of Ille” (1837) by Prosper Mérimée, set in the Catalonian countryside, opens with a slice-of-life description of the preparations for a wedding between the son of a well-to-do antiquarian and the daughter of a wealthy family. Colorful observations on the antiquarian’s family’s house, mores and character traits all establish a solid ground of realistic illusion. However, the bourgeois idyll comes to an abrupt end when the groom is found dead in the marital bed the morning after the wedding. The story insinuates the strong suspicion that a beautiful but evil-looking statue of Venus, recently unearthed in the antiquarian’s garden, has come to life at night and killed the groom in a fit of jealousy (before the wedding, he had slipped the ring on the statue’s finger during a ball game). This suspicion is fueled by the suppositions of the protagonist-narrator, but it is never confirmed. In fact, the latter part of the story shows a progressive decline in referential credibility. Hearsay, superstitions, groundless deductions complement the dubious testimony of the one witness to the crime, the bride, who claims to have seen the statue kill her husband; her trustworthiness is further undermined by the magistrate who indirectly reports her words, framing them as the ravings of a madwoman. A wedding turns into a funeral, the beginning of a new life makes way for death, the celebration of a union begets tragedy and disintegration. It is not unusual for a fantastic story to pervert the Bildungsroman model, chronicling the subject’s slow and inexorable detachment from reality and society, describing dissolution rather than evolution.⁷⁷

3.2. A photograph of the impossible

In H. P. Lovecraft’s short story “Pickman’s Model” (1927), a narrator named Thurber relates to his friend Eliot how he came to associate with Richard Upton Pickman, a disgraced painter who has since mysteriously disappeared. Thurber, who is gathering data for “a monograph on weird art,”\textsuperscript{78} is a great admirer of Pickman’s “genius”\textsuperscript{79} and at first does not agree with the Boston Art Club’s decision to expel him on account of the scandalous and unnerving nature of his art; he sees in Pickman a profound knowledge of nature and an insight into “the actual anatomy of the terrible” and “the physiology of fear;”\textsuperscript{80} in a way that reminds him of Füssli, Doré or Goya. One night, Pickman brings his friend to the run-down North End part of Boston in order to show him a secret studio he has rented under a false name. In this place, especially in the cellar, he can truly “let himself go”\textsuperscript{81} and paint without restrictions. The “morbid art”\textsuperscript{82} that Thurber sees there horrifies and fascinates him to an extreme degree. The pictures convey a “loathesomeness” and a “moral foetor”\textsuperscript{83} that the narrator finds difficult to describe: they show demon-like creatures resembling the human form, with vaguely canine features, intent on feeding on corpses. The background of these scenes is often an actual place in contemporary

\textsuperscript{78} Lovecraft, “Pickman’s Model,” 199.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 197.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 198.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 203.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
Boston, including a subway tunnel. Still, the chief reason for Thurber’s horror has little to do with the subjects depicted:

But don’t get the idea that it was all this hideous business of theme and setting which struck me faint. … It was not any mere artist’s interpretation that we saw; it was pandemonium itself, crystal clear in stark objectivity. That was it, by heaven! The man was not a fantaisiste or romanticist at all— he did not even try to give us the churning, prismatic ephemera of dreams, but coldly and sardonically reflected some stable, mechanic, and well-established horror-world which he saw fully, brilliantly, squarely, and unalteringly. God knows what that world can have been, or where he ever glimpsed the blasphemous shapes that loped and trotted and crawled through it; but whatever the baffling source of his images, one thing was plain. Pickman was in every sense – in conception and in execution – a thorough, painstaking, and almost scientific realist.  

A “fantaisiste” or “romanticist” is an artist whose subject is the fleeting matter of dreams and whose style, we are given to understand, is the opposite of “cold” and “sardonic”: warm, enchanted, filtered through emotional participation. This style mirrors the fanciful nature of the experience or objects it describes. On the contrary, Pickman is an “almost scientific realist” because of the “minute exactitude” of his brush, the “sharp[ness]” of his outlines and the fact that he abstains from “the use of selectiveness or bizzarrerie.” However, Pickman too, like the fantaisiste, paints the stuff of dreams or nightmares, “daemons,” “ghouls and witches”; the point is that he depicts them with an attitude conventionally associated with the representation

84 Ibid., 204-206. Emphasis in the original.
85 Ibid., 207.
86 Ibid., 206.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 205.
of tangible, familiar, everyday objects. There is something blasphemous about this “almost scientific” approach to the dark underbelly of conventional reality (“It was the technique, Eliot – the cursed, the impious, the unnatural technique!”); and we can advance the hypothesis that Pickman was expelled from the art circle not strictly because of his concerting with obscure evil forces, but because of the way he has dared to represent them.

So far, we have established the fantastic impulse as the irreconcilable tension between a solid, familiar world informed by the primacy of scientific materialism, and a super- or unnatural element that cannot possibly be accommodated within that system. If we keep this in mind, the ending of the story seems to throw off part of its premise. While in the cellar, one big canvas from a collection of “half-finished monstrosities” strikes Thurman: it portrays a squatting, Goya-esque ghoul feeding on a barely recognizable human body, standing out against the brick wall of the same cellar. While contemplating the painting, the two hear a scuttling noise outside the cellar door. Blaming the rats that infest the building’s foundations, Pickman grabs a gun and goes to investigate the commotion, while Thurber’s attention is caught by a crumpled photograph tacked to a corner of the canvas, which he assumes to be a reference picture for the background. When a gunshot startles him, he inadvertently stuffs the piece of paper in his pocket. It is only the next morning that he pulls it out and examines it, to his utter horror:

Well – that paper wasn’t a photograph of any background, after all. What it shewed was simply the monstrous being he was painting on that awful canvas. It was the

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89 Ibid., 207.

90 Lovecraft, “Pickman’s Model,” 207.
model he was using – and its background was merely the wall of the cellar studio in minute detail. But by God, Eliot, it was a photograph from life.\textsuperscript{91}

This last detail somehow resolves the ambiguity around the status of the ghoul. It suggests that one can only represent a nightmare with such clarity of vision and precision of outlines because he has physically seen it, therefore because it is not a nightmare. If ontological doubts about the nature of the monstrous vision are dispelled (therefore dissolving Todorovian ambiguity – which, as Chapter 3 will demonstrate, is not a particularly productive approach to twentieth-century fantastic), its function is intact: it opens up the door of cosmic horror, the powerful feeling of primordial fear (linked to the experience of a dimension that lies outside or beyond human understanding) that humans are generally shielded from by virtue of their own ignorance.\textsuperscript{92}

A few elements stand out in this story. In typically fantastic guise, it is a story about representation more than anything else. It self-reflexively puts forth a theory of “weird” art, its scope, its claims, and its intended effect on the viewer/reader.\textsuperscript{93} Most of all, and this is what interests us here, it explores the contradiction inherent in a supernatural literature that purports

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 210. Emphasis in the original.
\item The notion of merciful ignorance, which will be analyzed in Chapter 3, is developed in the incipit for Lovecraft’s coeval short story “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926): “The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age” (“The Call of Cthulhu,” in Tales, ed. Peter Straub, New York: The Library of America, 2005, 167).
\item It is notable that, in the same year as “Pickman’s Model,” Lovecraft published his landmark piece of criticism, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” in which he advances a theory of weird literature.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
to tell the truth; and in doing so, it questions both the boundaries of nature and the very meaning of truth. As explained by Todorov, allegory is the enemy of the fantastic, as it allows to explain away those elements in the story that do not add up; fantastic narratives, on the contrary, aim to be taken at face value. A fantastic creature does not stand in for something else: it just is. Hence the typical attitude of the narrator, who is usually also a character and a witness in the story: s/he is well aware of how unbelievable his or her story sounds, and yet s/he cannot refrain from telling it, out of an obligation to truth.

The photograph has to be read in the context of this effort: to offer a harder, colder kind of “realism” that will make us alert to the insufficiency and partiality of vision promoted by a fully secular naturalism (“there are more things…”). In the story, the difference between the paintings and the photograph is not at all a qualitative one. The latter is merely an enhancement in terms of ‘coldness,’ minuteness of detail, detachment of reproduction. In fact, an interest in photography is only the natural evolution of the fantastic’s “retorica documentaristica,” the frequent incorporation of manuscripts, diary entries, letters, in order to sustain the narration’s truth claims in the face of the impossibility of the facts recounted. Pickman’s photograph, in short, can help us visualize the inherent tension that lies at the heart of the fantastic mode – a maddeningly incomprehensible and unnatural presence standing out against a background of

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94 Among the conditions that a text must fulfill in order to be considered fantastic, Todorov includes the fact that “the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as «poetic» interpretations” (Todorov, 33).

95 Stefano Lazzarin, “Istantanee dall’aldilà. Sul tema della fotografia nel racconto fantastico otto-novecentesco,” in Studi di letterature comparative in onore di Remo Ceserani, vol. II, 44. (However, it is not by chance that Thurber has no photograph to show Eliot in the end, because he has burned it: the doubt about the veridicity of his account cannot after all be dissipated; the ambiguity remains as to Thurber’s sanity and trustworthiness.)
solid reality (literally, the brick wall of the cellar): a “mystère en pleine lumière,” or a monster in a photograph.

4. Narrative and rhetorical features of fantastic literature

4.1. “La vicenda del narrare”

As already discussed, the fantastic mode interrogates the reliability of a fully naturalistic worldview and epistemology. This translates into a thematization of doubt concerning the binary oppositions undergirding this worldview, such as supernatural/natural, rational/irrational, possible/impossible, and so on. We have also defined the territory of the fantastic through the way in which it frames the supernatural – therefore pointing to the inadequacy of any identifying criteria based purely on thematic considerations. A fantastic text is not merely about the supernatural; rather, it tells the story of a subjectivity’s reaction to a certain object or event (generally of supernatural origin), and the chronicle of the struggle undertaken by that subjectivity to make sense of, and find words for, such an experience.

This kind of approach is reminiscent of Henry James’s thoughts on how an effective fantastic story should be written, as explained in his foreword to “The Altar of the Dead” (1895):

The safest arena for the play of moving accidents and mighty mutations and strange encounters, or whatever odd matters, is the field, as I may call it, rather of their second than of their first exhibition. By which, to avoid obscurity, I mean nothing more cryptic than I feel myself show them best by showing almost exclusively the way they

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96 This is the title of a book by Maurice Barrès.

97 Benedetti, 332.

98 The notion of fantastic as reaction is expounded in Benedetti, passim.
are felt, by recognizing as their main interest some impression strongly made by them and intensely received.\footnote{99}{Henry James, Preface to “The Altar of the Dead,” in \textit{The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 265.}

What remains to be established is whose reaction we are talking about. It is obvious that the hesitation described by Todorov cannot be attributed to the actual, external reader of a text, whose possible response – an extra-textual element that is bound to the many and disparate conditions surrounding the act of reading – does not hold much value for the purposes of mode definition. Instead, Carla Benedetti calls attention to the “istanza narrativa”\footnote{100}{Benedetti, 295.} and adds that, in a fantastic text, the subjective trace of the narrator (a personal “traccia” that is naturally implicit in every act of storytelling, not only literary) is markedly informed by “un rapporto conflittuale con l’oggetto del proprio racconto.”\footnote{101}{Ibid., 296.}

In fact, we could consider the ‘telling’ to be the main event of a fantastic tale, rather than the story that is told:

\begin{quote}
Raccontare ad altri ciò che è difficilmente credibile, ciò che al narratore stesso continua ad apparire incompre Kend ce e che sarebbe piuttosto indotto ad escludere dal campo del possibile, raccontare ciò che sfida le sue capacità conoscitive, che sfugge alla definizione e che mette a dura prova le stesse possibilità del discorso, è una vicenda altrettanto rilevante di quella vissuta dal personaggio del racconto.\footnote{102}{Ibid., 331-332.}
\end{quote}
The fantastic, therefore, is both an “avventura conoscitiva”\textsuperscript{103} and, or mainly, an avventura espressiva. Carla Benedetti’s definition of the fantastic as tied to “l’instaurazione di un limite interno al discorso”\textsuperscript{104} has the advantage of substituting the supernatural with the unsayable, therefore accommodating instances in which the creatures or events depicted have more to do with a para-natural dimension (as will be the case for the three short stories analyzed in Chapter 2); moreover, it reveals it to be a capacious category for the inclusion of more fluid, less codified twentieth-century fantastic. The next chapter will focus on discussing the broader philosophical implications of this expressive challenge through the notion of monstrosity; what concerns us in this section is to illuminate how these aspects translate into a number of distinctive narrative and rhetorical features.

4.2. Unreliable narrators

As one would expect, it is very common for fantastic stories to be organized around internal focalization (“the narrator says only what a given character knows”\textsuperscript{105}) or to make use of autodiegetic narrators (i.e. the narrator is the main character of the story). According to Francesco Orlando, who studied the evolution of the literary supernatural from thirteen-century miracle plays to Kafka and Bulgakov, the Age of Reason necessarily changes the way in which supernatural tales can be told. He considers for instance the emergence of Gothic literature in late eighteenth-century England: in this case, due to questions of knowledge and perception

\textsuperscript{103} Emanuella Scarano, “I modi dell’autenticazione,” ibid., 381.

\textsuperscript{104} Carla Benedetti, “L’enunciazione fantastica come esperienza dei limiti,” ibid., 327.

occupying center stage in philosophical and scientific debates of the time, narrative devices such as the main character’s *ignorance* around the real nature of the events s/he witnesses become an important way to refresh and update literary iterations of the supernatural. This formal innovation is inextricably linked to the core of the fantastic mode: “È infatti tale peculiarità che permette – per la prima volta nella storia letteraria – che sul soprannaturale medesimo ricada il dubbio.”¹⁰⁶

While an incompleteness of vision is usually intrinsic to first-person narration, in the case of fantastic literature this partiality is usually flaunted and underlined, not least through a narrator’s self-doubting statements about his/her own perception. In the incipit of “The Black Cat” (1843) by E. A. Poe, the narrator makes two moves at once that are apparently contradictory. He assures the reader that his mind is perfectly sound and that he has empirical evidence as to the facts that befell him, and yet he sympathizes with anyone who would refuse to believe his story: “For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad I am not – and very surely do I not dream.”¹⁰⁷ In this and many other fantastic texts, the narrator anticipates, and justifies, a reaction of incredulity on the part of the listener/reader. Counterintuitively, addressing head-on the blatant improbability of one’s testimony can be seen as an attempt to strengthen a bond of credibility

¹⁰⁶ Orlando, *Il soprannaturale letterario*, 69. He refers in particular to the internal focalization on Emily in Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic masterpiece *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). In this study, although I occasionally refer to landmark Gothic works and to their structural and thematic overlapping with fantastic fiction, I never embark on a contrastive typological analysis of the two. To my knowledge, this has been attempted recently (in a sustained way) by Anna Quema, “The Gothic and the Fantastic in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *English Studies in Canada* 30, no. 4 (2004): 81-119.

between who tells and who receives the story, making it clear that the same set of reality-granting principles is shared.

In a textual economy where what is “vero” does not generally correspond to what is “verisimile” (i.e. things that appear to be improbable are sworn to be true by those who experienced them), the narrator may resort to specific tactics to corroborate his testimony and bolster his credibility. In E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*, the narrator reflects at length on how to begin telling the story of the unfortunate Nathaniel so as to put his readers in “the right frame of mind for the reception of things of no ordinary degree of marvellousness.”

He then considers, and performs, a number of openings:

“Once upon a time” – the loveliest opening for any story, but too sober! “In the little provincial town of S. there lived’ – a bit better, at least going back to the beginning. Or, as it were, *in medias res:* “«Go to the devil!» cried the student Nathaniel, his eyes filled with rage and terror, as the barometer-dealer Giuseppe Coppola…” – I did in fact write that at a time at which it seemed to me I perceived something comical in the wild eyes of the student Nathaniel; his story is, however, in no way amusing. I could in the end find no form of expression whatever which reflected anything of the colours of my inner vision, so I decided not to begin at all.

What the narrator does instead is begin the story with a direct transcription of Nathaniel’s and Clara’s letters, so that the readers ‘hear’ from the characters’ voices something that would not

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108 Scarano, passim.


110 Ibid., 100-101.
have been "significant, original, gripping"\textsuperscript{111} enough if rendered by any of the usual narrative tricks.

In E. A. Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” (1842), the narrator explains the circumstances through which he came upon a manuscript, and then proceeds to transcribe the manuscript itself, without adding any further comment (without closing the frame). Emanuella Scarano interprets this failure to offer an interpretation as a sign of the hermeneutical impotence of both the narrator and the reader.\textsuperscript{112} In her view, it is precisely through an authenticating device (the manuscript) that the voice of the narrator in the first part is devalued, since the juxtaposition destroys any hierarchy of reliability.\textsuperscript{113} Moreover, the narrator describes himself as "desperately wounded" and on the brink of "delirium,"\textsuperscript{114} one more detail that causes us to doubt his testimony.

Hoffmann’s and Poe’s texts, as well as the Lovecraft story that we have previously discussed, offer examples of the way in which fantastic texts authenticate themselves by including supposedly unfiltered reproductions of documents such as found or bequeathed manuscripts, letters, doctor’s notes, diary entries, passages from other books, and (later)

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{111} Ibid., 100.
\bibitem{112} Scarano, 381. In this case the eventual silence of the narrator in fact models and anticipates the supposed bewilderment of a reader faced with this story; this is made more explicit by the narrator depicting himself in the act of reading: “Long – long I read…”; “… I there read the vague and quaint words which follow” (Poe, “The Oval Portrait,” in \textit{The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe}, vol. I, 366, 368). A reader picking up “The Oval Portrait” will see a \textit{mise en abîme} of him- or herself in the figure of the narrator perusing the “small volume.” The contamination of genres and styles (Gothic reminiscences in the first-person description of the abandoned castle, an ekphrasis of the portrait, the third-person narration of the painter’s story), as well as an ironic reference to “the fancy of Mrs. Radcliffe,” all contribute to heighten the hyper-literary quality and meta-literary awareness of the text.
\bibitem{113} Scarano, 383.
\bibitem{114} Poe, “The Oval Portrait,” 366.
\end{thebibliography}
photographs. It is as if the burden of interpretation was thrust entirely upon the narratee(s),\footnote{Scarano, 360. The fragmentary nature of many fantastic narratives can be interpreted as the ultimate sign of truthfulness: all the narrator-witness is able to offer in good conscience is “una serie di dati sicuri ed autentici, ma non dominabili dal discorso” (365).} while the narrator only takes it upon himself to relay facts and transcribe documents in the most objective way possible, regardless of how incredible they seem in the context of a naturalistic/skeptical outlook. According to Scarano, this attitude is reminiscent of the relationship between a high degree of authentication and a low degree of interpretation that is found in historiography.\footnote{The narratee is the entity to whom the narration is addressed, often a clearly identified figure in the story. The multilayered structure of many fantastic texts makes it wiser to privilege this notion over the trickier, and less specific, notion of the reader.} One can identify here one of the aspects of modern horror cinema that have been influenced by the peculiar ways in which the fantastic frames the supernatural; in particular, a specific cinematic sub-genre, that of “faux documentary” or “mockumentary” horror, makes ample use of photographs and videotapes to capture horrific instances of the supernatural. The introduction of an objective class of evidence (not the characters’ words but images engraved on film) lends an air of indisputability to the otherwise unbelievable events that such images capture. In films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Trollhunter* (2010), the tape that has been recorded by the unfortunate protagonists is found in the place where they mysteriously disappeared; the audience uncovers their fate (and finally gets to know the truth) by watching that tape, which is nothing but the movie itself.

In the economy of knowledge and verification established by the fantastic, the character of the doctor or scientist deserves a separate mention. A supposed agent of the re-affirmation of the light of scientific reason over the dark corners of supernatural mystery, this figure is paradigmatic of the contamination between literary and scientific discourses in the nineteenth
century; a contamination to which, as already discussed, the fantastic mode is especially receptive. It is also worth noting that, while in the first half of the nineteenth century the fantastic privileges the figure of the artist as protagonist (after Romantic interest in the artist figure, as codified for instance in the Künstlerroman genre – towards which the manuscript in “The Oval Portrait” gestures), medical figures abound in iterations of the genre from the second half of the century, either as narrators or as actants of other kinds. These figures are assumed to be respectful of empirical evidence, unclouded by personal judgment and adverse to groundless speculation. However, owing to the fantastic’s skepticism towards the self-sufficiency of scientific thought and its pretense to encompass all aspects of human life, the figure of the scientist is itself shown as a progressively less authoritative source of knowledge: from the ethically ambiguous scientist-mesmerist of M. Valdemar, to the doctor who seems to be fascinated by superstitious beliefs of an orientalized Poland just as he sets out to dispel them in “Il pugno chiuso,”\textsuperscript{117} to the unsettlingly fetishistic anatomist in Camillo Boito’s “Un corpo” (1870), to the doctor in the first version of Guy de Maupassant’s “The Horla” (1886 – a figure that significantly disappears from the second, longer version of the story), who ends his report on a (psychotic?) patient declaring openness to the supernatural explanation. The logical end to this gradual loss of \textit{voce in capitolo} is the figure of the doctor in Camillo Boito’s “Macchia grigia” (1877), who is nothing but a silent addressee of the narrator’s manuscript. As noted by Friedrich Wolfzettel, his silence testifies to the abdication of modern science and represents

\textsuperscript{117} The same fascination comes through in the narrators of two of Mérimée’s fantastic tales, the already-mentioned “Venus of Ille” and the much later “Lokus” (1869); although they are not scientists (one is an archeologist and the other is a philologist), they both find themselves in provincial or remote locations (the Catalanian countryside and the Lithuanian region of Samogitia) where mysterious occurrences and an atmosphere of terror and superstitions subtly affect their rational skepticism and scholarly detachment.
“l’impotenza della ragione di fronte al mondo fantasmatico evocato proprio per mettere in dubbio il carattere unilaterale dello scientismo positivista.”\textsuperscript{118} The waning credibility of intradiegetic representatives of science and reason is consistent with a general observation: fantastic texts do not admit authoritative conclusions of any kind and generally undermine themselves as coherent ideological wholes, affirming “il trionfo del parziale sul totale” through a narration that is itself “irrimediabilmente plurim[a] e «divis[a]».”\textsuperscript{119}

4.3. “The story won’t tell”

The very act of telling is represented in countless fantastic stories, in ways that lead to the frequent presence not only of narrators who participate in the events recounted, but also of narratees of various kinds. Importantly, this act is usually given the shape of an aesthetically incomplete or intellectually unsatisfactory experience. The text presents itself as a necessarily incomplete account, where the conflicting relationship between the narrator and the material of their story is mirrored by the frustration of an unsatisfied audience, represented or implied.

In Hoffmann’s “Automata” (1819), the story of a group of friends exchanging and debating stories about the supernatural, this frustration is embodied by an intradiegetic audience of eager listeners. After two stories have been shared, Theodore begins reading from a manuscript of his own, entitled “Automata,” an intricate tale involving an uncannily realistic


\textsuperscript{119} Angelo M. Mangini, Letteratura come anamorfosi, 264.
automaton known as the Talking Turk. When he interrupts his reading *in medias res*, other members of the party complain:

“Well,” said Ottmar, when Theodore came to a sudden stop, “is that all? Where is the explanation? What became of Ferdinand, the beautiful singer, Professor X------, and the Russian officer?” “You know,” said Theodore, “that I told you at the beginning that I was only going to read you a fragment, and I consider that the story of the Talking Turk is only a fragment. I mean that the imagination of the reader, or listener, should merely receive one or two more or less powerful impulses, and then go on swinging, pendulum-like, of its own accord.”

Here the philosophical foundation of the fantastic as a narrative that mirrors the fragmentary nature of human knowledge becomes a declaration of poetics. Not only is it foolish to pretend to offer ‘the whole story’; it is also undesirable on the level of literary effect. A fantastic text, in sum, has an obligation to disappoint. Feeding as they do on information gaps and blank spaces, fantastic stories often function as training sessions in ambiguity and dramatize the discomfort that comes with declaring oneself at a loss.

When Prosper Mérimée finished reading his short story “Lokis” to an audience including the Empress Eugénie at the Château de Saint-Cloud in 1869, he reportedly asked one member of the audience “Avez-vous compris, vous?”; when the person hesitated, the writer replied gleefully “Vous n’avez pas compris, c’est parfait!” To be sure, the story in question is all

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but straightforward in its construction and meaning. It opens with a frame narrative in which a learned comparative philologist ("the Professor") prepares to tell a story entitled "Lokis" (from the Lithuanian word for "bear") to two people, Adelaide and Théodore, whom we assume to be his pupils. The story, which he reads from some notes he took at the time of the events and rearranged in a "manuscript-book", recounts a peculiar experience he had in Lithuania a few years before. After being offered to translate the Gospel of St. Matthew into Jmoudic, the language spoken in the Lithuanian district of Samogitia, the professor set off on a journey across the country to further his knowledge of the language and local customs. While there, he spent a few days at the residence of young Count Michel Szémioth, whose library contained invaluable material for his translation work. During his stay, he learned that the Count’s mother, a gaunt, disheveled woman, had gone mad with fear many years before: two days after her wedding, during a hunt, she had been carried off by a bear and rescued just in time, but her mental health was forever affected. Not even her baby, born nine months later, had restored her mental balance, and in fact pushed her into a "redoubled frenzy" which made her want to kill the little "beast" she had just given birth to. The professor observed strange ‘feral’ behavior on the part of the count; he noticed his hairy arms and unusual facial features and the terror he struck in domesticated animals. When Ioulka, a superficial, coquettish girl whom the Count loved passionately, finally agreed to marry the young man, the Professor was invited to celebrate the wedding. However, in a way that is reminiscent of Mérimée’s earlier “The Venus of Ille,” the wedding night ended in tragedy. The morning after, the bride was discovered

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124 Ibid., 13.
horribly mauled on the marital bed, while the groom had disappeared. The professor remembered that, during the night, he had seen “a dark body of great bulk” leave the newlyweds’ apartments through the window. The story ends with a return to the narrative frame, as the professor makes a digression into the comparative etymology of the word “bear” and is soon cut short by a member of his little audience (“«I could quote you endless other instances…» But Adelaide observed that it was late, and we ought to go to bed.”)

Throughout the whole story, the possibility that the bear has raped the Countess and generated a half-man half-bear is repeatedly suggested, but never confirmed. The ending too is left open, as Count Michel’s tormented love for and jealousy towards Ioulka could have provided a plausible motive for the murder. At the beginning of his reading, the professor reads the title of his story and adds a “Lithuanian proverb as a motto: Miszka su Lokiu, / Abu du tokiu.” The proverb, whose approximate translation is “Michel with bear, one and the same,” remains untranslated and unexplained in the text. When the reading is over (a moment that the professor punctuates by announcing “[t]he end” and shutting the book, confirming the predilection of fantastic narratives for icastic images, as codified by Ceserani), Théodore enquires about the meaning of the title “Lokis”, since no character in the story bears that name. The professor’s answer is not very enlightening:

125 Ibid., 71.
126 Ibid., 74.
127 Ibid., 3.
128 Ibid., 73.
“If you were thoroughly steeped in the law of transformation from the Sanskrit into Lithuanian, you would have recognised in locis the Sanskrit arkcha, or riksha. The Lithuanians call locis that animal which the Greeks called ἀρκπος, the Latins ursus, and the Germans bär. Now you will understand my motto: «Miszka su Lokiu, Abu du tokiu.»”

The small audience is very clearly not “steeped” in Lithuanian morphology; moreover, the phrase “now you will understand” reads like a blatant non sequitur, because no additional information has been given towards the comprehension of the “motto” (which, again, is never followed by a translation). It seems that the story has come full circle from a mystery into another. Not to mention that “Sanskrit r,kṣa is neither the etymon or a cognate of Lithuanian lokis,” which casts further doubts on the reliability of this explanation – and by extension on the reliability of everything we have read so far.

The story is informed by coeval developments in the field of linguistic science, especially those related to comparative philology. This discipline, which pursued a rigorously scientific approach to the study of the relationship between modern languages and their Proto-Indo-European ancestor, mirrored the concepts and terminology of contemporary evolutionary theories. “Lokis” seems to undermine the very idea of such a model of progressive development on two fronts, biological and linguistic. Of the notion of a diachronic progression from beast to human being, the story illuminates the darkest implications; not the process of development and improvement, but the creeping lingering of a bestial side congenital in human

131 Fudeman, 113.
132 Ibid., 113-114.
nature. Moreover, this troubling core is left between the lines, substantially unarticulated.\textsuperscript{133} It is not by chance that the clarification is expected to come (and does not eventually) from an investigation into words and their origin/etymology; instead of illuminating what they refer to, they remain opaque, resistant to comprehension (“«Come, Théodore, do you understand what Lokis means? » «Not in the very least.»”\textsuperscript{134}).

Henry James’s fantastic novella \textit{The Turn of the Screw} begins \textit{in medias res} with the image of an enraptured audience: “The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless …”\textsuperscript{135} The main narrator belongs to a small circle of friends who tell each other “strange tale[s]”\textsuperscript{136} on Christmas Eve. Although we are not given too many details about the story in question, we are given the audience’s reaction to it, a feeling of thrilled suspension. One of the members of this circle, Douglas, claims he can do better: he is in possession of a manuscript written by and bequeathed to him by a governess (now dead), which contains a first-person account of events that are way too dreadful to be imagined. He delights in his audience’s curiosity and skillfully manipulates expectations through a blend of hyperbole and vagueness:

> “Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It’s quite too horrible.” This, naturally, was declared by several voices to give the thing the utmost price, and our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes over the rest of us and going on: “It’s beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it.” “For sheer terror?” I remember asking. He seemed to say it was not so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace.

\textsuperscript{133} About 15 years later, Maupassant will elaborate on the terrifying consequences of evolutionism in his short story “Le Horla” (1886-1887), which will be examined in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{134} Mérimée, “Lokis,” 73.

\textsuperscript{135} Henry James, \textit{The Turn of the Screw}, 21.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
“For dreadful – dreadfulness!” … “For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain.”

The “little … auditory”’s reactions thematize readerly expectation: they are plunged “in a rage of curiosity” by the way Douglas “work[s them] up.” However, this quest for readerly satisfaction is destined to fail, as the story contained in the manuscript, an exercise in perfect narrative ambiguity, refuses to reveal itself either as a ghost story or as the case study of a mentally ill woman. In fact, a final explanation never comes, as Douglas has already anticipated: “The story won’t tell … not in any literal, vulgar way.”

Such perfect ambiguity is so engrained in the narrative construction that critics like Shoshana Felman read the novella as a commentary on the violence of a certain kind of univocal, ambiguity-suppressing reading: just like the governess, torn between an initial belief in the angelic goodness of her children-protégées and a growing doubt that they might be evil, ends up strangling little Miles in an attempt to possess a knowledge that escapes her, so reading for the “meaning” of the story stifles the life out of the text: “… the governess’s very satisfaction at the success ending of the reading process is compromised by the radical frustration of a tragic loss: the embrace of meaning turns out to be but the embrace of death; the grasp of the signified turns out to be the grasp but of a corpse.” Felman’s reading

137 Ibid., 22.
138 Ibid., 25. In an interesting analogy, The Turn of the Screw was itself published in 12 installments on Collier’s Weekly, therefore incorporating delay and expectation into the textual history itself.
139 Ibid., 24. Emphasis in the original.
highlights the fact that the verb “to grasp” is present both in the first lines and in the last lines of the novel, confirming that the text’s alpha and omega is in fact the question of intellectual grasping, or capire (etymologically capio, to seize, to take), which is represented by Cicero with the image of a closed fist.\footnote{Ibid., 163.} It is tempting to read Arrigo Boito’s already mentioned short story “Il pugno chiuso” precisely through this lens; that story, too, sustains a similar ambiguity, and the final image of the released fist reads like the letting go of control over the meaning of the story. The people surrounding Paw’s body as he dies and opens his hand are another example of an eager audience searching in vain for meaning and closure. James’s novella, in conclusion, is about experiencing the fantastic impasse: rather than inviting to choose one interpretation over the other (none of which is especially encouraged by the text’s internal logic), it thematizes the challenge of staying with the ambiguity.
Chapter 2
Monstrosity as function of apophatic discourse
in nineteenth-century fantastic literature

“Pour effrayant que soit un monstre, la tache de
le décrire est toujours plus effrayante que lui.”
Paul Valéry, Au sujet d’Adonis

1. Telling monsters

Over the past few decades, the study of cultures through the monsters they engender\textsuperscript{142} has emerged as a rich field of enquiry, with a multidisciplinary approach spanning literary criticism, cultural studies, art history, religious studies and classics to media, gender and disability studies. Following the first attempts at formalization (such as J. J. Cohen’s landmark 1996 collection \textit{Monster Theory}), the landscape of “monster studies” has been enriched and shaped by miscellaneous collections of works by authors of many and diverse theoretical and scholarly backgrounds (perhaps the most logical format for a work on monstrosity)\textsuperscript{143} as well as

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discipline-specific compendia.\textsuperscript{144} Other works have focused more specifically on the spiritual and philosophical implications of the monster trope from the Middle Ages to the contemporary world.\textsuperscript{145}

As a preliminary observation, these studies acknowledge the sheer pervasiveness of forms of monstrosity in every culture and tradition (the monster being as much a local as a transcultural product), as well as the continuing relevance of the notion in contemporary cultural representations. The longevity and incessant renewal of our monsters, be they giants, centaurs, ghosts, zombies, traces the history of a culture's fears, anxieties and desires; monsters are always a site of projection and fantasy. Depending on the specific cultural moment it inhabits, the monstrous creature is a sign for something other, marking cultural, racial, political, religious, sexual, economic, and geographic difference. Monsters are liminal figures, policing the boundaries between human and inhuman, familiar and unfamiliar, normal and abnormal:\textsuperscript{146} themselves being obscene examples of hybridization and impurity, they are both champions and transgressors of epistemological distinctions.

Owing to the very shape-shifting nature of monstrosity, every attempt to discuss the phenomenology of a typical monster is bound to end with a methodological impasse. In this respect, it is probably wise to heed Asa Simon Mittman’s suggestion:

\textsuperscript{144} Such as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, \textit{The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters}, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.


\textsuperscript{146} Cohen, 12.
…[T]he monstrous does not lie solely in its embodiment (though this is very important) nor its location (though this is, again, vital), nor in the process(es) through which it enacts its being, but also (indeed, perhaps primarily) in its impact. No study could hope to pin down the monstrous in terms of physicality, though this is its most obvious marker. That which is “monstrous” in one culture (dark skin according to some medieval Christian texts, light skin according to some medieval Muslim texts, and so on) does not translate to others’ Others. Certainly, hybridity is common, as are giantism and dwarfism, and other forms of excess or lack (too many arms, too few, though these can just as well be markers of divinity), as well as certain activities, like anthropophagia, but the common ought not be substituted for the constitutive. I could not hope to describe the physical, behavioral or geographic parameters of the monstrous, here or anywhere. By definition, the monster is outside of such definitions; it defies the human desire to subjugate through categorization. This is the source, in many ways, of their power. Instead, then, I would look to the impact(s) of the monstrous. … Above all, the monstrous is that which … calls into question our (their, anyone’s) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us (often with fangs at our throats, with its fire upon our skin, even as we and our stand-ins and body doubles descend the gullet) to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization.¹⁴⁷

A representation of this failure – the moment when categories underlying (and upheld by) scientific rationalism show their insufficiency – is, as we have already shown, the heart of the fantastic mode. What kinds of creatures produce such an effect in fantastic texts? How do they help us further illuminate the features and concerns of the genre? What kind of “everyday legality” do they outline through their disruptive presence?

I suggest that, in texts that are ascribable to the fantastic mode, monstrous creatures generally activate a network of references gravitating around two concepts: hybridity and ineffability. These two qualities are framed by the narrative as being intimately connected: they offer, in negativo, the image of an epistemological framework in which the natural world is neatly divided into taxonomical categories by an intellectual act of isolation and description.

A fantastic text shows that the encounter with monstrosity results in “the inability to «tell»,” in both senses of the word: to distinguish one thing from all others through individuation and categorization; and to speak, to use language in order to frame it, place it, control it.

In *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Noël Carroll attempts to define the horror genre by postulating two conditions. In order to be considered such, a horror story, novel or film needs to include a monster in its diegetic universe; also, the way the monster is presented has to elicit a mixed reaction of fear and disgust. These conditions help differentiate the genre from stories of terror (such as those centered around serial killers or otherwise mentally unstable individuals – “all too human” stories) and also from exquisitely Gothic texts such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

In order to trace the monstrous roots of hybridity, Carroll turns to Mary Douglas’s 1966 study *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. In this classic book, the anthropologist analyzes the ways in which different societies determine what (or who) is considered impure and therefore deserving of being relegated to the margins of culture. She reaches the conclusion that impurity or uncleanness is generally attributed to elements that are perceived as straddling cultural categorizations. She offers the example of the Lele people of Congo, who shun the flying squirrel on account of it not being classifiable either as a land animal or as a bird. From this follows an understanding of unnaturalness in terms of the

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148 With this formula, Jack Halberstam qualifies specifically the monsters of Gothic literature (Halberstam, 23).


*interstitial*. It is but a short logical step to apply this notion to the phenomenology of the monstrous. Ghosts, zombies, the Frankenstein creature are both alive and dead; wolfmen straddle two distinct species of the animal kingdom, wolves and humans; mechanical dolls are neither fully sentient nor fully inanimate. Monsters are therefore to be intended as “category mistake[s]”\(^{151}\): they expose the limitations of any cultural scheme that seeks, and fails, to categorize them. Carroll delimits this notion (which is admittedly very broad) in a way that resonates with the epistemological preoccupations of fantastic literature: he saves the monster label for “any being not believed to exist according to contemporary science.”\(^{152}\)

Let us consider the description of the bas-relief of Cthulhu found by the narrator among the notes and files of his late uncle, Professor Angell, in H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928):

> It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful.\(^{153}\)

\(^{151}\) Carroll, 31.

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 27. There is no monstrosity to be found, for instance, in the Grand Guignol, because it “requires sadists rather than monsters” (ibid., 16). In this study, I concentrate on monstrous embodiments rather than monstrous acts – morphological rather than moral monstrosity. The reason for this choice is hopefully clear by now, and it has to do with the primary concerns of the fantastic mode – how it privileges the conditions and limitations of perception (especially sight, the faculty of ‘epidermic’ observation) in the construction of the real and the natural.

The figure in the bas-relief is what Harvey Greenberg would call “a Linnean nightmare”: a set of disparate characteristics making up an ultimately unclassifiable being. Through the “freakish compilation” that is the monster’s body, “the too-precise laws of nature as set forth by science are gleefully violated.” What the narrator can do, in order to render the thing “faithful[ly]” into words, is hoping to catch its “spirit”: the physical appearance of the figurine is way beyond any attempt at precise, analytic description.

Count Michel Szémioth in Merimée’s “Lokis” is, like all werewolves (or were-bears?), a creature that straddles species, and as such casts a disquieting shadow over the notion of man as a rational being, far removed from bestiality as he is from his primitive past. Not by chance, the hypothesis of Michel actually being a monster is never openly allowed into the discursive arena, but always kept looming in the background, implied, between the lines. As seen in Chapter 1, the (well-grounded) suspicion of Michel’s monstrosity finds its counterpoint in a language that becomes opaque and, instead of clarifying, adds to the confusion.

In fact, and most importantly, the manifestation of monstrosity is concurrent with – both leads to and is generated by – linguistic disturbances. According to David Williams, in Western intellectual history monstrosity and language are inextricably linked by the same origin story, the myth of the tower of Babel. The destruction of the Tower and the fragmentation of one

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154 Quoted in Cohen, 6. In this passage, Greenberg describes the Alien monster from the noted sci-fi franchise, inaugurated by Ridley Scott’s eponymous 1979 movie: the creature “def[ies] every natural law of evolution; by turn bivalve, crustacean, reptilian, and humanoid. It seems capable of lying dormant within its egg indefinitely. It sheds its skin like a snake, its carapace like an arthropod. It deposits its young into other species like a wasp. … It responds according to Lamarckian and Darwinian principles.”

155 Ibid.

156 Benedetti, 312-315.
language into many sanction the contingency of man-made structures, just like the plural body of the monster defies any unified and absolute knowledge of nature and the real. From this point of view, “the monster is, animally, a variety of Babel”\textsuperscript{157}: a linguistically-inflected conceptualization of the limits of human understanding.

With the simultaneity of its multiple nature, monstrosity defies syntactical order; it sabotages tenses with its conflation of past and present (primitive instinct and modern rationality, dead body and living spirit); itself a sign with no verifiable counterpart, it insinuates in the gap between the sign and its referent to show the precariousness, or the insufficiency, of such a binary system. A “confused[…]” and “paradoxical[…]” combination of “meanings”, the monster “«…lässt sich nicht lesen» – it does not permit itself to be read.”\textsuperscript{158} This could be a reason why the creature assembled by Frankenstein has no name; its body is a jumble of identities, of mind and matter, of death and life, in a cacophony that cannot be reconciled into a single chord, an identifying marker that will allow his creator and other characters to “tell” it somehow. At the same time, it is language that imposes upon the creature a marker of extraneity and non-belonging, as the lack of a name deprives the creature of a lineage and of the most

\textsuperscript{157} Michel Serres, Disorder and Order, quoted in Williams, “Monsters, Then and Now,” 245.

essential nucleus of social structure, according to a model in which language represents the province of man *par excellence* (an assumption that the fantastic is invested in challenging).\(^{159}\)

In conclusion, the monster of fantastic literature is often represented as a hybrid, indescribable creature, whose presence activates the beating heart of the literary mode: “an experience of limits.”\(^{160}\) Armed with these preliminary considerations, and with the intention

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\(^{159}\) The case of the word “mostro” in the Italian cultural context is illustrative of a similar phenomenon of exclusion by way of discourse. The word has become common currency (and hackneyed journalistic lingo) since the 1980s, owing to the practice of designating with this epithet the perpetrator(s) of the infamous streak of double homicides that plagued the Tuscan countryside (“il mostro di Firenze”). In this case, the *mostro* became a receptacle for cultural anxieties around sexuality, the transforming relationship between the countryside and the city, the Americanization of Italian society. This process is strikingly reminiscent of the way in which traditional monstrous (fictional) topoi become sites of complex investment: one may think of how the vampire theme took on sinister undertones relating to the AIDS contagion in Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 *Dracula* (Cohen, 5). In fact, the epithet “mostro” serves the purpose of a discursive expulsion of the perpetrator from human society. No human being can be capable of such acts: they cannot but be the product of an unnatural force. The notion of categorical interstitiality is still very much relevant. Part of the interest in the monsterization of the Florence serial killer is precisely how this label helped to project them into a narrativized or mythical space, straddling the boundary between reality and imagination. It is telling that the perpetrators (and the instigators) of the Tuscan killings have never been fully ascertained, while the impact of the acts themselves were quite visible: materially, in the form of a long trail of bodies, and culturally, through the lasting trauma suffered by Italian culture and society upon recognizing the presence of such an internal, uncanny threat. Proof of the discursive resistance to the notion of serial killing in Italy (and the perception of such a notion as exclusively American) is the fact that the most immediate Italian translation of “serial killer” (“pluriomicida”) still fails to capture the methodical, deliberate nature of the phenomenon (Ellen Victoria Nerenberg, *Murder Made in Italy: Homicide, Media, and Contemporary Italian Culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012, in particular Chapter 1).

\(^{160}\) Todorov, 93. At this point, we should also specify that, while we have preliminarily described the kind of monstrosity that the fantastic is interested in staging, “…a monster is not by nature fantastic. It becomes truly so only if it manifests itself outside all systems and all doctrines. Animated with a perverse autonomy, it must assert itself in its total freedom. Nothing or no one ought to be able to explain it away, or to integrate it into a theology or cosmogony” (Lévy, 56; emphasis in the original). This does not apply, for instance, in the case of the systematization offered by Festus in his epitome of Flaccus entitled *De Verborum Significatione*, where the etymology of “monster” is explained precisely through the role that such a creature evidently fulfills in the great scheme of creation: “monstrum quod monstrat futurum et monet voluntatem deorum” (quoted in Evanghélia Stead, *Le Monstre, le singe, et le fœtus: tératogonie et décadence dans l’Europe fin-de-siècle*, Genève: Droz, 2004, 15). Moreover, as demonstrated by some of the texts I analyze in Chapter 1, obviously not every fantastic text needs a monster in order to be considered such, nor do I mean to imply this. The present study considers how the monstrous theme intersects with the fantastic mode, in order to demonstrate how reading the latter through the former allows one to tease out with special clarity some foundational aspects of the mode, such as its apophatic quality (cf. the next section).
of bringing them into much sharper focus, we can now move on to an exploration of the nexus between monstrosity and language through the notion of apophasis.

2. Fantastic fiction as apophatic discourse and the function of monstrosity

Fantastic texts typically abound in instances of a specific rhetorical device known by the many names of paralipsis, preterition and apophasis. This device describes a situation in which a speaker says s/he will not, cannot or should not talk about something that s/he subsequently proceeds to talk about, or that is brought up precisely through this denial. It allows one to approach a topic by the back door, as it were, without tackling it directly.\(^{161}\)

The typical fantastic narrator is overwhelmed by the enormity of what s/he witnessed. Not only can their intellect not fully come to terms with what their senses perceive; their means of articulating both the events and their reaction to them are revealed as completely inadequate. There is no way on earth the narrator of Fitz-James O’Brien’s “What Was It?” (1859) could possibly express his dismay upon verifying the presence of an invisible creature in his room (“I cannot even attempt to give any definition of my sensations the instant after I turned on the gas…”\(^{162}\)); in Lovecraft’s “Pickman’s Model,” which we have analyzed previously, Thurber recognizes the sheer impossibility of describing the artist’s perverse pictures (“There’s no use in my trying to tell you what [the paintings] were like, because the awful, the blasphemous

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\(^{161}\) This is probably what Stefano Lazzarin is thinking of as he reflects on preferred rhetorical devices in fantastic and horror texts: “quella figura della narrazione d’orrore – non so se qualcuno l’abbia repertoriata e battezzata con un nome preciso – che consiste nel riflettere sull’indicibile e l’inconcepibile nel momento stesso in cui lo si mette in scena” (Stefano Lazzarin, “Il volto velato. Iperbole e reticenza in Howard Phillips Lovecraft e nel racconto fantastico e d’orrore otto-novecentesco,” *Between IV*, no. 7, 2014: 5).

horror, and the unbelievable loathsomeness and moral foetor came from simple touches quite beyond the power of words to classify163; the reader of E. A. Poe’s “Berenice” (1835) is informed that s/he is reading the product of an illicit act of writing, “a tale which should not be told.”164 And yet the story of Berenice is told, Pickman’s art is described in minute detail, and the consequences of the encounter with the invisible being are extensively addressed. The urgency behind the fantastic avventura espressiva is dictated precisely by the extraordinary nature of the experiential material it aims to describe; the apophatic claims on the part of the narrators are therefore negated by the very existence of the text in which they are made. What is the point of this performance of intellectual, logical, expressive limits, which the narrative itself frames as impassable and yet cannot refrain from trying to overcome?165 What is the relationship of the monster to this performative disavowal?

Apophasis is a particularly loaded concept when referred to monstrosity. In order to explore this connection sensibly, it is important to define the origin, features and purpose of apophasic discourse, all of which become apparent if we look at the first instances of codification of this category in medieval Neoplatonic philosophy.166 While for Plato and

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163 Lovecraft, “Pickman’s Model,” 203.


165 This is an ancient narrative device exemplified, for instance, by the topos of ineffability in the Commedia.

166 The following discussion of monstrosity as function of apophasic theological discourse owes much to David Williams’s research into the topic, as laid out in his 1996 book Deformed Discourse and his 2012 article “Monsters, Then and Now.” In these works, the scholar traces a genealogy of the monstrous as function of what he terms “deformed discourse,” the aesthetic counterpoint to the philosophical and theological tradition of negation, as developed by Neoplatonic philosophy and Christian apophasic theology. In this context, monsters are symbols whose incoherence is revealing of the limits of representation and human knowledge, as will be clarified in the following pages.
Aristotle apophasis simply pertains to the logical act of negation,\textsuperscript{167} the notion has a foundational role in the theological system elaborated by Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite around the 5\textsuperscript{th}-6\textsuperscript{th} century. Such a system participates in a tradition with Neoplatonic roots which was enormously influential throughout the Christian Middle Ages and left a significant mark on Western mysticism (and in turn on modern spiritualism \textit{via} important figures such as Emanuel Swedenborg). In Dionysius’s formulation, knowledge is attained \textit{per viam negativam}, or through apophatic statements (“apophasis” coming from ancient Greek ἀπόφημι, “to say no”, “to deny”, or more literally “away from speech”\textsuperscript{168}). God, the ultimate object of knowledge, can never be known by what He is, but only by what He is not. By transcending the limits of human understanding and logic (which rely excessively on positive assertions), man can experience the union of subject and object and know God as paradox, a knowledge that goes beyond affirmation and negation and that the monstrous figure symbolizes.

Apophasis is opposed to cataphasis (κατάφημι, “to say yes”, “to affirm”), which is the first degree of knowledge in Pseudo-Dionysius’s system: it identifies the kind of knowledge that is attained through the senses and proceeds through rational demonstration, trying to determine what something or someone \textit{is}. The cataphatic method is associated with the scientific and logical mindset, which, in order to offer positive (affirmative) definitions, differentiates and classifies the objects of its analysis. This process, as Roland Barthes observes apropos of the plates of the \textit{Encyclopédie}, carries with it a certain fragmentation of reality: “to appropriate is to fragment the world, to divide it into finite objects subject to man in proportion


\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 2.
to their very discontinuity; for we cannot separate without finally naming and classifying …”

Pursuing the idea of an exhaustive knowledge of the world by naming, defining and classifying hides, according to Dionysius, a fundamental fiction. First, it attains an imperfect (partial, fragmented) knowledge of the object, because defining a rose as red, for instance, limits its being to that characteristic and ignores all others. Also, it acts as a veil concealing the fundamental limits of human intellection – which are, in Dionysius’s theological discourse, marked by the supreme mystery of God towards which human intellect strives but that it can never fully encompass. We have to keep in mind that, “[w]hile Denys’ science is theology and his subject is always God, the epistemology he describes is applicable in general to the way the human mind works in relation to all objects of knowledge”: whatever the nature of what is being investigated, its wholeness will never be penetrated through mere cataphasis. Proceeding per viam negativam by saying what something is not allows to reach a fuller truth, because it grants “liberation from the limitations of predication” and frees the mind from the cage of “logico-linguistic assertions.”

In this system, the figure of the monster plays an essential role. Pseudo-Dionysius formulated a complex theory of representation and signs built on a foundation of semiotic pessimism (i.e. the sign never exhausts the essence of its referent). In such a system, the monster quite literally embodies the limitations of rationalistic and logical thinking for being a

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170 Williams, Deformed Discourse, 32.
171 Ibid., 33.
172 Ibid., 26.
sign with no verifiable referent, an unnatural signifier that points towards what is outside or beyond nature – therefore a shortcut to transcend the limitations of logical and linguistic thinking. In Dionysius’s words, “A manifestation through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible ... I doubt that anyone would refuse to acknowledge that incongruities are more suitable for lifting our minds up to the domain of the spiritual than similarities are.”\(^\text{173}\) In the apophatic system, the monster is an aesthetic rendition of paradox, alluding to the supreme paradox that underlies all things.

St. Thomas and other medieval Christian thinkers subsumed Dionysius’s system in some cases, and re-elaborated it in others to adapt it to their Aristotelian roots.\(^\text{174}\) Negative theology gives epistemological privilege to devices like the metaphor and the paradoxical sign and aims to reach – through a sort of self-destruction or transcendence of language – supreme silence in contemplation of the divine mystery (mystery has its root in \(\mu\upsilon\epsilon\iota\nu\), “to close one’s eyes” or “to close one’s lips”, and is etymologically and conceptually associated with the mystical\(^\text{175}\)). On the contrary, the scholastic tradition is essentially cataphatic or affirmative and proceeds through syllogism and analogy; it relies upon reason and the logical nature of language and eschews the anti-intellectualism that is potentially intrinsic in apophatic theology.\(^\text{176}\) For scholastic philosophy, the monster retains its disruptive potential, but this disruption is understood in different terms: it embodies the denial of the foundational law of non-contradiction, the Aristotelian principle according to which in nature everything is equal to

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\(^{174}\) Ibid., 48 and following.

\(^{175}\) Ibid., 38.

\(^{176}\) Ibid., 54.
itself and dissimilar to anything else \((A = A \neq B)\). The “impossible form”\(^{177}\) of the monster challenges this binary thinking by uniting contraries within itself; its threat is logical as well as ontological.

David Williams regards the copious monsters that pepper Christian medieval art and literature – haunting the walls of churches, stalking the margins of manuscripts – as a reminder of the \textit{via negativa} excluded by Aristotelian logic, pointing to a rhetorical and ontological \textit{coincidentia oppositorum} that was to be found only outside that system.\(^{178}\) The excess, miscegenation and chaos embodied by the monster is a sign and a warning, as the etymology reveals (\textit{monstrare}, to show, and \textit{monere}, to warn): coming from, and returning to, an ‘outside’ of language and logic, it prevents “the adequation of the real with intellect.”\(^{179}\)

To sum up, in a context of overreliance on reason, logic and structure, in turn manifested through a fundamental semiotic optimism, the monster stands for the revealing power of incongruity.\(^{180}\) Its antimimetic, antilogical quality short-circuits the relationship between language and reality and alludes to alternative ways of knowing (the monster itself shows – \textit{monstrare} – instead of representing – \textit{repraesentare}\(^{181}\) – the latter being a typically cataphatic mode of signification). What is revealed is therefore generally the contingency or non-necessity of the ways in which the human mind orders and understands the world, and in which it pretends to describe it.

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\(^{177}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{178}\) Ibid.

\(^{179}\) Ibid.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{181}\) Ibid., 4.
I suggest that representations of monstrosity that abound in 19th- and 20th-century fantastic literature operate in analogous ways, pointing towards spaces that are not only inaccessible to human intellection but also, consequently, ineffable. The impossibility of description lamented by most fantastic narrators, both through paraliptic rhetorics and through the thematization of fractured, crippled and incomplete language, delineates a secular brand of apophatic discourse for the fantastic mode, one that “concentrate[s] on the unsayable and generate[s] discourse deliberately out of this experience.”\footnote{William Franke, ed. On What Cannot Be Said, vol. I, 4.} This attitude towards language speaks of a deep mistrust of anthropocentric rationalism and of any notion of an ultimately intelligible world. However, one should keep in mind that, in Neoplatonic and scholastic theologies, the monster alludes to “a realm where ultimate truth resides but cannot be known,”\footnote{Williams, “Monsters, Then and Now,” 246.} a realm whose existence is as certain as its ultimate unintelligibility. On the contrary, in a context of philosophical naturalism and logical positivism (in which fantastic literature is steeped and to which it reacts), the incongruity cultivated by the literary mode and represented by its monstrous agents does not lean on the certainty of an unknowable transcendency: what is at stake in this case is the very idea of the limits of human knowledge as well as the definition of (and the attitude towards) mystery. In an 1883 article titled “Le Fantastique,” Guy de Maupassant laments the fact that with the so-called Age of Reason “we
have rejected the idea of the mysterious, which is now simply what remains to be explored.\(^{184}\)

In other words, a determination to illuminate areas that were until then considered outside the domain of scientific inquiry (phenomena traditionally attributed to supernatural causes) leads to an “apocalypse du mystérieux,”\(^ {185}\) which is manifested in the limits of the gnoseological circle being pushed further and further into the unknown. The skepticism of the scientific mind denotes a certain cognitive *horror vacui* in its pursuit of plenitude, of cataphatic certainty; as Heidegger puts it, “science wishes to know nothing of the nothing.”\(^ {186}\) A monster in a fantastic text is a guardian and catalyst of a super- or sub- or preternatural dimension infested by paradox and lack; it teases and attracts the taxonomical mind, demanding and at the same time refusing to be mapped; pushing the potential of language to its expressive extremes, only to let it crash against a wall of silence and meaninglessness.

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184 Guy de Maupassant, “The Fantastic” [article in *Le Gaulois*, October 7, 1883], in *Guy de Maupassant’s Selected Works: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Robert Lethbridge (New York & London: W.W. Norton &Co., 2017), 284. In this article, Maupassant announces the imminent death of the fantastic, intended both in the metaphysical sense (as the “unknown”) and as a cluster of narrative genres (such as the epos, the fairytale and Hoffmann’s and Poe’s “troubling works”); this double demise being the consequence of “skepticism” overcoming “superstition” (284). As we discussed in Chapter 1, the case could be made for the very opposite: skepticism defines the *modus operandi* of the fantastic mode itself as it scrutinizes the foundations of scientism and what it perceives as a dogmatic refusal of the supernatural. In fact, the peculiar way in which the supernatural is told in the wake of the Age of Reason is precisely the essence of *le fantastique*. Maupassant’s article anticipates many of the theoretical points made by Todorov in *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, including the notion of “hésitation”: “…[W]hen skepticism had finally overcome superstition, art became more subtle. The writer played with ambivalence, touching on the supernatural rather than being immersed in it. He created terrifying effects while still remaining within the realm of the plausible, leaving the reader hesitant and fearful. That reader, left unsure what to believe, lost his footing as in water where you can’t see the bottom, clinging desperately to reality only to immediately fall back even deeper, once again struggling in a confusion as awful and as frightening as a nightmare” (285).


This Heideggerian “nothing” is relentlessly circled around, alluded to, glimpsed at in fantastic texts. With its antimimetical, antilogical quality, the monster hints at \((\textit{monstrat})\) a signification void or a mystery that can be talked around, rather than about; a space that discourse itself pushes to the limits of signification.\(^{187}\) Such gaping holes in the fabric of discourse can be read productively against Fredric Jameson’s analysis of the “strategies” with which modern non-realistic fiction “reinvent[s] the sacred.”\(^{188}\) In his already-quoted essay on “Magical Narratives,” he traces the ways in which romance, which he considers a literary mode, survives in and past the increasing secularization manifested in bourgeois realism. While in the Romantic era the increasingly disappearing “magical function” is replaced by what he calls “new positivities”, such as psychology,

at the end of the nineteenth century, … the search for secular equivalents of this kind seems to have reached a dead end, and to be replaced by the new and characteristic indirection of modernism, which, in what from Kafka to Cortázar is henceforth termed “the fantastic,” seeks to convey the sacred, not as a presence, but rather as a determinate, marked absence at the heart of the secular world.\(^{189}\)

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\(^{187}\) Not by chance has fantastic literature been read through instances of overwhelming unspeakability such as the numinous or the sublime (as Carla Benedetti does in the aforementioned “L’enunciazione fantastica”). The Kantian notion of sublime denotes an experience of the limits of human perceptive and intellectual faculties when faced with the intuition of an unlimited and unmeasurable absolute; similarly, the fantastic represents the consequences of an encounter with something that cannot be assessed or conceptualized according to familiar schemes, and that for this reason stalks the boundaries of discourse (Benedetti, 302-303). Rudolf Otto’s theory of the numinous describes the essentially non-rational and suprasensible experience of the divine, pointing to something that can only be experienced or described indirectly. For Otto, the monstrous in particular is a “fairly exact expression for the numinous in its aspects of mystery, awfulness, augustness and «energy»; nay, even the fascination is dimly felt in it” (Rudolph Otto, \textit{The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950, 28).

\(^{188}\) Jameson, 145.

\(^{189}\) Ibid.
While Jameson’s understanding of “fantastic” is somewhat different from the one I subscribe to in this study, the movement he describes ends up clarifying the essential continuity between an apophatic discourse of the sacred and an analogous one in a secularized context.

I would like to analyze how this “determinate, marked absence” is thematized, and given paradoxically palpable shape, in a strain of teratological fantastic tales from the second half of the nineteenth century, paving the way for a less traditional notion of monstrosity in twentieth-century fantastic and supernatural representations, built around embodiments outside established taxonomies or around a complication of the very notion of embodiment. I trace this vein in three texts of disparate renown and fortunes that are arguably linked by a clear affiliation: the above-mentioned “What Was It?” (1859), by Fitz-James O’Brien; the second version of “Le Horla” (1887) by Guy de Maupassant; and “The Damned Thing” (1893) by Ambrose Bierce. In the first text, an invisible creature’s body is the empty space around which scientific reason and descriptive language run aground; in the second, the limits of human understanding, articulation and self-fashioning take the “opaque[…],” “transparen[t]”\textsuperscript{190} shape of a mind-controlling entity coming from an undefined outside; in the third, the narrow spectrum of a man’s perception accounts for his violent destruction at the hands of an unseeable predator.

3. “Stretching tightly round a vacant space”: “What Was It?” by Fitz-James O’Brien

Fitz-James O’Brien (1826-1862) was an Irish expatriate to the United States who wrote poetry and a number of influential texts of fantastic and science fiction. In his best-known short story,

“What Was It?,” a group of “plucky and philosophical” individuals (among which is the narrator Harry, a man of letters with a love for leisurely opium-smoking sessions) move into a run-down boarding house in New York City. The house has a reputation for being haunted; as soon as they are settled, the tenants (all avid readers of supernatural literature) begin to expect a classic ghost to manifest itself, but are eventually forced to accept that no such presence inhabits the building. One night, after a particularly brooding, opium-fueled conversation with his friend Dr. Hammond on matters of terror and “the proneness of the human mind for mysticism,” Harry retires to his bed only to be attacked, in the complete darkness, by a strong, wiry creature whom he eventually manages to overpower. Upon turning on the light, the man realizes he is holding down a physical, material, but completely invisible being. Over the course of two weeks, the tenants keep “the Thing” in restraints in Harry’s bedroom while they try to study its nature and determine what to do with it. They eventually resolve to give it chloroform in order to take a cast of it with plaster of Paris, which reveals the creature to be a “distorted, uncouth, and horrible” imitation of a human being. The captive eventually dies from starvation (it refuses any food offered to it) and the cast of its body is donated to the cabinet of curiosities of one Dr. X, eventually making its way into a “well-known museum” in the city.

The story relies on a rather original take on the hybrid-creature trope: with the transparency of a ghost and the materiality of an animal, the “Thing” seems to come from some

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192 Ibid., 196.
193 Ibid., 207.
194 Ibid., 209.
interstitial territory between nature and super-nature. At the beginning of the story, ghosts are evoked only in hearsay and in the words of other witnesses, but they never actually make an appearance. Previous caretakers have abandoned the house for fear of strange supernatural phenomena:

These people declared that they were troubled with unnatural noises. Doors were opened without any visible agency. The remnants of furniture scattered through the various rooms were, during the night, piled one upon the other by unknown hands. Invisible feet passed up and down the stairs in broad daylight, accompanied by the rustle of unseen silk dresses, and the gliding of viewless hands along the massive balusters.\footnote{Ibid., 191. My emphasis.}

The emphasis on sight recalls the notion of ghost as apparition, projection, hallucination or visible spirit, a matter whose details were widely discussed in psychic circles of the time (see Chapter 1). In all these cases, the spirit is an airy and evanescent presence, whose transparency is strictly related to its immaterial nature. The narrator and his fellow tenants are instead plagued by a different kind of haunting: the creature that attacks Harry can be touched, has a physical, weighty body; its “bony hands”\footnote{Ibid., 199.} can strangle a man, its teeth can bite his neck, its heart can throb as a result of physical strain. It is a material ghost: “It breathed. I felt its warm breath upon my cheek. It struggled fiercely. It had hands. They clutched me. Its skin was smooth, like my own. There it lay, pressed close up against me, solid as stone, – and yet utterly invisible!”\footnote{Ibid., 201.} This does not chime with the expectations of the house tenants, who are hungry
for a good old-fashioned ghost story. Upon learning of the shady reputation of their new abode, they begin to expect that occult presences will show up: “[w]e absolutely awaited their advent with eagerness.”198 A mere creaking noise establishes “an instant silence” among the guests, “and every one [is] prepared for an immediate clanking of chains and a spectral form.”199 The passage pokes fun at the conventions of Gothic novels (the traditional Medieval castle being replaced by a dilapidated boarding house on Twenty-Sixth Street) and at the supernatural craze of the time, especially evident in periodical magazines and popular publications (which were O’Brien’s main source of revenue). Fourteen years before the story was published, William Gilmore Simms had complained: “[t]he world has become monstrous matter-of-fact in latter days. We can no longer get a ghost story … The materialists have it all their own way.”200 O’Brien’s peculiar choice of monster shows not only how, “in the mid- to late nineteenth century[,] ghosts and materialist science were mutually possessed, each haunted by the other,”201 but also how this reflected in the way ghost stories were being reimagined.

In fact, with the typically fantastic penchant for intertextuality, the story makes it evident that turning for clues to previous examples of terror-inducing literature will not be of much help in figuring out the nature of the mysterious visitor. During their “gloomy”202 conversation, Harry and Hammond construct a proper bibliography of the supernatural, evoking certain chilling details in Brockden Brown’s 1798 Gothic novel Wieland and Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s

198 Ibid., 193.
199 Ibid.
201 Taylor, 416.
1842 novel *Zanoni*, as well as E.T.A. Hoffmann’s masterful literary style. The narrator himself is a modest supernatural expert (therefore especially qualified as “indagatore dell’incubo”\(^{203}\)), having published, as O’Brien actually had, a ghost story in *Harper’s Magazine*.\(^{204}\) However, none of these references provide Harry and Hammond with useful hermeneutical tools: the “terrible Enigma”\(^{205}\) cannot be explained through this genealogy of terror.\(^{206}\)

The most coveted book among the tenants is *The Night Side of Nature*, a collection of ghost stories published in 1848 by popular English writer Catherine Crowe; a copy of the book has been acquired by one of the boarders and is regularly stolen to be read in hushed little groups around the house. In the Preface to her collection, Crowe calls attention to that side of nature (its “veiled department”) that is only “strangely and imperfectly”\(^{207}\) glimpsed at in our day-to-day lives. This region promises to hold important revelations for us, and yet “science, at least science in this country, has put it aside as beneath her notice, because new facts that do not fit into old theories are troublesome, and not to be countenanced.”\(^{208}\) Despite their expertise

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203 This is the famous nickname of Dylan Dog, the main character of the eponymous horror comics series created by Tiziano Sclavi in 1986.

204 The story, whose title is mentioned in the text, is “The Pot of Tulips” (1855); it concludes with the narrator paralipemptically declaring he will not go into “the question of apparitions,” but that he has elaborated “a scientific theory … reconciling ghosts and natural phenomena” (O’Brien, “The Pot of Tulips,” in *Collected Stories by Fitz-James O’Brien*, edited by Edward J. O’Brien, New York: A. & C. Boni, 1925, 148).

205 “What Was It?,” 201.

206 The only non-existing literary work to be mentioned is “Goudon’s History of Monsters” (198), the book Harry tries to read (and then flings across the room in fear) right before his first encounter with the Thing. This detail probably paves the way for the manifestation of something completely unprecedented and never before conceived by human mind, suggesting that a new chapter in that History of Monsters is about to be written.


208 Ibid.
in all things occult, it is in the guise of classic scientists that Harry and Hammond approach the creature, which translates into their showing the same pattern of behavior that Catherine Crowe’s book denounces. Faced with a “new” phenomenon, they resort to “old” means of investigation: while the possibility of an affiliation of the Thing with “spirit-circles” is briefly considered, the creature’s appearance activates Harry’s “scientific pride” and Hammond’s inquisitive nature (“Let us reason a little, Harry … “I don’t know what it is … but please the gods I will, with your assistance, thoroughly investigate it.”) They demonstrate the existence of the creature for the benefit of the bystanders through a simple experiment utilizing mass and gravity (dropping the creature on the bed in order to make the boards creak and an indent in the mattress appear). However, the story suggests that their methods of inquiry barely scratch the surface of the Mystery. The entire extent of the men’s curiosity regards the outer shape of the creature; all their “wishes” are “satisfied” once they make the invisible visible. Therefore, after the plaster cast has been made and an idea of the creature’s features has been obtained, what remains to be done is simply to get rid of it. Once the phenomenon has been forcefully dragged into the confines of scientific observation (the ultimate price being its death), no more can be learned from it that falls outside traditional channels of inquiry. The men’s knowledge of the creature remains superficial, epidermic – quite literally. No attempt is made to investigate its origin, and with it its nature: the fact that it comes from nowhere (it

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210 Ibid., 204.
211 Ibid., 205.
212 Ibid., 206.
213 Ibid., 207.
“dropped, as it seemed, from the ceiling”\textsuperscript{214} is briefly mentioned and never seriously entertained.\textsuperscript{215}

The ultimate inadequacy of the characters’ literary references and scientific knowledge is mirrored by the repeated claims of impotence by narrator-Harry. The first paragraphs have already made clear that he anticipates reactions of “incredulity and scorn” upon releasing such a “strange narrative,”\textsuperscript{216} something he is by all means reluctant to do. And yet in the guise of a typical fantastic narrator, he overcomes his “diffidence” towards his own material in order to relate, “in as simple and straightforward a manner as I can compass, some facts that passed under my observation …”\textsuperscript{217} The narrative material does not easily lend itself to simple and direct reporting. Apophatic statements punctuate the tale, linking the exceptionality of the event with the inadequacy of the intellectual and expressive means of the narrator: “I cannot even attempt to give any definition of my sensations the instant after I turned on the gas”\textsuperscript{218},

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\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 198.
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\textsuperscript{215} In fact, the text even insinuates the suspicion that the creature was never there in the first place, adding a further layer to the story and pushing it in the direction of Todorovian \textit{étrange}. From the very beginning, parts of Harry’s account smack of charlatanry. First, there is the simple fact that we never know of anyone touching the creature except for him and Hammond. All other tenants are too afraid to approach it; therefore, they have to rely on the two men’s words alone if they are to believe the creature exists and has certain tangible features. Naturally the cast can be taken as evidence of the Being’s presence; however, how can one be sure that the two main characters are not involved in some sort of scheme with “worthy physician” Doctor X, who administers the chloroform (and whose museum/cabinet of curiosities will eventually be endowed with the cast), and with the “well-known modeler” who is depicted as being “busily engaged” (a suspicious pleonasm) in enveloping the creature with plaster?
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\textsuperscript{216} O’Brien, “What Was It?,” 190.
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\textsuperscript{217} Ibid. My emphasis.
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\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 200.
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“Imagination in vain tries to compass the awful paradox”\textsuperscript{219}; “the confusion and terror that took possession of the bystanders, when they saw all this, was beyond description.”\textsuperscript{220}

The verb “to compass,” in its double meaning of “encircle” and “comprehend,” points to the conceptual heart of the story. The creature is always only seen 	extit{per viam negativam}, through the objects that surround it or that its body affects: “Hammond stood holding the ends of the cord that bound the Invisible, twisted round his hand, while before him, self-supporting as it were, he beheld a rope laced and interlaced, and stretching tightly round a vacant space.”\textsuperscript{221}

Again, the presence of a body on Harry’s bed can be discerned by “[a] deep impression [that]

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 201. My emphasis.

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 203. The image of a crowd looking with curiosity, fear and surprise at an unusual creature crystallizes the freak-show subtext that permeates the entire story. These undertones deserve a brief mention, as they help contextualize the story and shed some light on its title. When Harry and Hammond first capture the creature and resolve to prove its presence to their fellow tenants through a simple experiment, the narrator walks the audience through it with the following language: “«Now, my friends», I said, as Hammond and myself held the creature suspended over the bed, «I can give you self-evident proof that here is a solid, ponderable body which, nevertheless, you cannot see. Be good enough to watch the surface of the bed attentively». These sound like the lines of a magician or a circus showman. Between the years of 1846 and 1860, Connecticut showman, impresario and fraudster P.T. Barnum, who had made a fortune by acquiring the American Museum in New York City and transforming it into a giant repository of bizarreries and live freak-shows, promoted the exhibition of two freaks (an unusually short white man and an African man with microcephaly) in a London and New York City show significantly called “What Is It?” Spectators were invited to form their opinions about the nature of those “nondescript[s]” in promotional material such as this advertising poster: “Is it a lower order of MAN? Or is it a higher order of MONKEY? None can tell! Perhaps it is a combination of both” (quoted in Rosemarie Garland Thompson, Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 69; for a deeper analysis of the relevance of Barnum’s shows to O’Brien’s tale, see Joyce L. Huff, “The Domesticated Monster: Freakishness and Masculinity in Fitz-James O’Brien’s ‘What Was It?’,” Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, no. 4.2, 2008, accessed 6 February 2018, http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue42/huff.htm). In O’Brien’s story, this freak-show subtext works in two directions. First of all, since it evokes a context of ruthless for-profit spectacularization, it counteracts the narrator’s earnest-sounding promises of objectivity, as well as the credibility of his scientific attitude. At the same time, it exposes the post-Darwinian anxieties of species miscegenation and racial promiscuity that these shows leveraged and exorcized, evoking the notion of “category mistake” that we have already analyzed.

\textsuperscript{221} O’Brien, “What Was It?,” 203.
marked itself distinctly on the pillow, and on the bed itself.” The same goes for the plaster cast, which offers just a negative image of the creature. My point is that language, too, functions as the ropes and plaster cast, as Harry and Hammond attempt to define, circumscribe, taxonomize the creature:

It was shaped like a man, – distorted, uncouth, and horrible, but still a man. It was small, not over four feet and some inches in height, and its limbs revealed a muscular development that was unparalleled. Its face surpassed in hideousness anything I had ever seen. Gustave Doré, or Callot, or Tony Johannot, never conceived anything so horrible. There is a face in one of the latter’s illustrations to “Un Voyage où il vous plaira,” which somewhat approaches the countenance of this creature, but does not equal it.

First of all, the image described by Harry is only a reproduction, an impression left in plaster by the ever-elusive Thing. Moreover, the entire description is implicitly played in the negative key: the creature is shaped like a man, but distorted; the muscles have an unparalleled strength (again, not that of a normal man); the face surpasses other known forms of hideousness; its horrific quality is unrivaled by artistic representations; the face in Johannot’s illustration, ugly as it is, still does not equal the creature’s. As in the case of the bibliography of terror already provided, previous aesthetic renditions of the horrible are called to the aid of a mind at a loss, although these visual references only approach the form that is being described. Harry’s repeated apophatic claims (fragments of a discourse that affirms its own impossibility) find an iconic expression in the image of an empty space encircled by restraints, which on the one hand make the features of that space visible, and seem to capture its outline fleetingly, while on the

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222 Ibid., 204.
223 Ibid., 207-208.
other hand emphasize its irreducible emptiness. O’Brien’s story highlights how the literary fantastic recognizes the paradox of finding its sense around a lack in its discursive capabilities, and how it self-consciously brings this lack center stage through a phantasmagoria of teratological figures and the related performance of rhetorical limits.

4. “The rule of mankind is over”: “Le Horla” by Guy de Maupassant

Guy de Maupassant, who is mainly associated with realistic novels and short fiction, wrote a handful of fantastic short stories across the entire span of his brief but extraordinarily prolific career, from “The Flayed Hand” (“La main d’écorché”) in 1875 to “Who Can Know?” (“Qui sait?”) in 1890 – the latter considered a sort of coda to the pinnacle represented by “Le Horla” (1887).\(^{224}\) Perhaps as a testimony to the unsettling, ‘unplaceable’ quality of this fantastic tale, since its publication “Le Horla” has been often linked to, or more simply explained through, Maupassant’s biographical details. The writer had contracted syphilis in 1875, and over the course of the following fifteen years his physical and mental health slowly deteriorated. By the time stories of paranoia and hallucination like “The Apparition” (1884) and “Le Horla” were

\(^{224}\) In this study, I will focus on the second version of “Le Horla,” an expanded and revised version of the homonymous story Maupassant had published the year before. Differences between the two texts have been the subject of much criticism. For our purposes, it will suffice to say that the evolution of the text goes towards a process of fantasticizzazione, mostly achieved through the shift from a third-person story with a framed sub-story to a text wholly constructed according to the journal format (as argued by Stefano Lazzarin, *Il modo fantastico*, Bari: Laterza, 2000, 63-69). The 1886 version is set in a mental hospital, where a psychiatrist shares with his colleagues the extraordinary case of a patient, who in turn proceeds to give a first-hand account of his terrifying experience (this account in a stand-alone format, though substantially enriched, constitutes the second version of the story). The frame is closed at the end by the final remarks of the doctor, who appears to be unsure whether the patient should be regarded as a madman or whether an alien race destined to overthrow mankind has in fact set foot on earth. For this reason, Roger Bozzetto suggests that the first version belongs rather to the science fiction genre, while the second internalizes the threat in ways that make it into a purely fantastic tale (Roger Bozzetto, *Le fantastique dans tous ses états*, Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 2001, 162).
being reprinted (in 1891 and 1892 respectively), he had been committed to an institution, where he died in 1893. At this time Maupassant’s declining health was public knowledge and reprints in journals were accompanied by texts speculating on his state and clinicalizing the tales as symptoms of his condition. However, not only did the writer’s hallucinatory episodes arise later than when he was writing “Le Horla”; the biographical connection itself, justified or not, does little to illuminate a story whose breadth and relevance force us to consider it “à la fois personnel[le] et métaphysique.” In fact, throughout the whole story, it is never clear whether the narrator is simply mad and hallucinating, or whether he is being pushed to the edge of sanity by actual events of unprecedented cosmic significance – making for a purely Todorovian fantastic tale.

In the story, narrated in the first person through dated journal entries, an unnamed man is haunted (or believes he is) by an invisible being. The story opens with an idyllic description of the countryside surrounding his childhood home; along the Seine, a peaceful trail of ships sails by, including a beautiful Brazilian three-master that the narrator salutes with joy. Only four days later, he begins to feel feverish and plagued by an inexplicable sense of impending doom; he also experiences terrifying episodes of sleep paralysis. Later he begins to suspect, and then is progressively certain, that a mysterious entity is drinking the water and the milk from his nightstand while he is asleep. Fearing for his mental state, he leaves the country and


\[226\] Ibid., XXVIII.

\[227\] Bozzetto, 110.
decides to spend some time in Paris, where his “unsettled imagination” appears to be soon cured of its paranoia. There he witnesses (and is deeply affected by) an experiment in hypnosis performed by a doctor on Madame Sablé, the protagonist’s cousin, whose will becomes completely subjugated to that of the doctor until the latter frees her from his “spellbinding force.” Back in the country, the narrator has an encounter with the being in full daylight as he sees a rose being picked by an invisible hand and floating in the air; then again at night, when the pages of a book move as if somebody was reading them; and finally when he sees the “opaque transparency” of the thing’s body obstructing his own reflection in the mirror. The man realizes he is being mentally controlled by an “unknowable creature from a supernatural race,” “stronger than [man], his successor in this world,” who is enslaving his will and dictating his actions. When he comes across an issue of the Revue du Monde Scientifique reporting “an epidemic” of the syndrome he is experiencing among the population of São Paulo in Brazil, he remembers seeing the three-master a few months before. Has he inadvertently invited the being into his home with that salute? In a desperate attempt to get rid of the parasitical presence, he decides to lock it into a room and to burn the whole house to the ground, killing his servants in the process. However, he soon realizes that even fire


229 Ibid., 189. “Spellbinding force” translates “puissance magnétique” in the original. Sandra Smith, the translator of the Norton edition I am consulting, chose to expunge similar terminology from the text; in another instance, “magnétisme” is translated as “casting a spell” (195).

230 Ibid., 196.

231 Ibid., 193.

232 Ibid.

233 Ibid., 195.
cannot affect the superior makeup of the Horla’s biology and finally resolves to kill himself, either as a pure act of deliverance or in order to take the Horla’s life with his own.

The story is incredibly complex in the way it interweaves its themes, with the main plotline flowing off into many rivulets whose significance is not always immediately evident. However, many of its key questions seem to coalesce around the invisible body of the Horla: the persistence of mysterious forces outside the reach of the scientific mind; the inherent limitations of man; the epistemological overreliance on sight; and the impotence of language. Under many different angles, the creature reaffirms the premise of apophatic discourse: that there is a ‘beyond’ to human understanding and articulation.

4.1. The mirror and the page

Throughout the story, every encounter with the creature precipitates the unnamed narrator into a deeper pit of doubt and despair; ascribing the first episodes to hallucinations, he gradually convinces himself that he is in fact stalked and mentally possessed by an invisible being. All his remaining doubts are removed by an especially shocking encounter, documented in a frenzied diary entry describing the man’s plan to attract and physically harm the creature. The passage is worth reproducing in its entirety:

August 19. I will kill him.\footnote{It is notable that the Horla is always referred to as a masculine entity. This detail, together with his near-unspeakable name, his omnipotence and his transcendence of human limitations, contribute to cast him as an almost divine figure, whose coming has been announced by a select number of prophet-like figures (such as Mesmer). Other details, however, seem to assign him feminine qualities, such as his association with milk and, implicitly, with the moon later in this diary entry.} I have seen him! Yesterday, I sat down at my table and pretended to be writing with great concentration. I knew very well that He would come and hover around me, quite close to me, so close that I might be able to touch Him, grab hold of Him. And then… then, I will have the strength of a desperate man: I will
use my hands, my knees, my chest, my head, my teeth to strangle Him, crush Him, bite Him, tear Him apart.
And feeling every part of my body ready to pounce, I waited for Him.
I had lit my two lamps and the eight candles on my mantelpiece, as if I might be able to see Him in the bright light.
Opposite me was my bed, an old oak four-poster bed; to my right was the fireplace; to the left, I had carefully closed my door, after leaving it open for a long time, in order to draw Him in; behind me was a very tall wardrobe with a mirror that I used every day to shave and dress, where it was my habit to gaze at myself, from head to toe, every time I walked by it.
And so, I pretended to be writing, in order to trick Him, for He was also spying on me; and suddenly, I felt, I was certain, that He was reading over my shoulder, that He was there, almost touching my ear.
I sprang up, my fists clenched, and turned around so quickly that I nearly fell over.
And then? ... It was as bright as day inside the room and yet I did not see my reflection in the mirror! ... It was empty, bright, deep, full of light! But my reflection was not there... and I was standing right opposite it!
I could see the clear glass from top to bottom. And I stared at it wild-eyed. I didn’t dare take a step forward; I didn’t dare make a move, and yet I could sense that He was there – He was there but He would escape my clutches once more, He whose invisible body had devoured my reflection.
I was so very afraid! Then suddenly, I gradually began to see myself in a mist, deep inside the mirror, in a fog as if through a layer of water; and it seemed as if this water glided from side to side, slowly making my image clearer with every moment that passed. It was like the end of an eclipse. The thing that was hiding me did not appear to have any clearly defined shape, but a sort of opaque transparency that gradually grew more and more visible.
I could finally see myself clearly, just as I did every day when I looked at myself in that mirror.
I had seen Him! I could still feel the terror of that moment that made me continue to tremble.²³⁵

Out of the rich network of references in this passage, I choose to dwell on two in particular: the theme of sight and that of the written word. Both of these aspects are pivotal to the reading of Maupassant’s text, but also identify typical features of the literary fantastic. I read both

themes in the light of what appears to be the story’s conceptual heart: man’s loss of discursive mastery over himself and the world, coupled with an interest in how that very loss is articulated.

We could argue that the reason why the mirror episode is the point of highest “terror” in the tale is because Maupassant’s story, just like O’Brien’s, operates within the dominant paradigm of sight. The meaning of the fantastic’s fixation for optical instruments and distorted perspectives becomes clearer if we contextualize it in the light of nineteenth-century developments in physiological optics and technologies of vision, as well as Comtian, empiricist theories of perception. In this frame of reference, discourses about vision are “restructur[ed] … to foreground inference and cognition,” creating a preferential connection between what is visible and what is real. This comes forth with great evidence in O’Brien’s story, where the characters’ incredulity towards an unseeable (but touchable, hearable) creature points to a different degree of reliability between data provided by sight and those obtained through the other senses. When “[k]nowledge, comprehension, reason, are established through the power of the look,” the very notion of an invisible portion of reality undermines the primacy of the eye, sabotages the alignment of the senses and creates epistemological and metaphysical paradoxes.

236 Smajić, 68.
237 Jackson, 45.
238 The reliance on the eye as privileged instrument of knowledge is of course not a specifically modern characteristic. For instance, the perfect tense of Ancient Greek verb ὁράω (“I see”) is ὤρισα, which could literally be translated as “I have seen, I have been a witness,” but instead commonly denotes the result of that very action and is in fact translated as “I know,” or sometimes through the bulky periphrasis “I know because I saw.” (The same applies to the English expression “I see,” which is equivalent to “I understand.”)
A specific interest in questions of vision is a commonly recognized trait of fantastic literature. In particular, according to Angelo M. Mangini, anamorphosis or distorted perspective can be considered the essence of the entire literary mode. In the noted painting “The Ambassadors” (1533) by Hans Holbein, a distorted elongated shape lies at the feet of two human figures. Only from a specific angle can one clearly see that the object is in fact a skull, a clear omen of death that goes unperceived by observers for as long as they look at the painting in a traditional, frontal way. In this painting, precisely the deployment of an artifice linked to contemporary advancements in optical science tricks our eyes into failing us. The provisional and uncertain nature of our sight-based apprehension of the real is frighteningly exposed. What is called into question, therefore, is the transparency of the eye as a window onto the world, since it is itself liable to distortions, just like any other optical instrument. The fact that the optical illusion yields the image of a skull is also significant. According to Mangini, anamorphic distortions both represented in and embodied by the literary fantastic ultimately sabotage the principium individuationis – i.e. “quelle distinzioni che … garantiscono lo sviluppo e l’integrità della coscienza: Io/Altro; reale/irreale; parte/tutto; vita/morte.”

In Camillo Boito’s short story “Macchia grigia” (1877), the narrator’s sight is disturbed by a grey spot in his eye, which slowly takes the shape of an old man for whose death he feels responsible (the reference to Poe’s “The Black Cat” is quite evident). By the end of the story, the world around him is progressively obscured by the growing spot – a physical embodiment of a macchia sulla coscienza – which tarnishes the immediacy of the relationship between world and consciousness as established by the neutral channel of sight. The character’s entire sense of self is revealed as dependent on his sight: the manuscript, which is addressed to his ophthalmologist, ends on a desperate note: “O guarisco o mi strappo gli occhi” (Camillo Boito, “Macchia grigia,” in Senso: nuove storielle vane, Milano: Treves, 1899, 109).

Mangini, 73.
particular, the latter opposition, pointing to the ultimate experience of dissolution-through-indifferentiation, can be said to underpin the entire mode both structurally and thematically.\textsuperscript{241}

Even before the mirror episode, the story has shown the narrator’s complete reliance on his eyes as neutral conveyors of reality and guarantors of his mental stability (“This time, I am not mad. I saw it… I saw it… I saw it! I can no longer have any doubts. I saw it!”\textsuperscript{242}). In the passage quoted above, in an instance of the mechanism we have seen at play in O’Brien’s – whereby new, unexplained phenomena are investigated through old, familiar means –, he goes as far as lighting “two lamps and … eight candles,” with the inherently paradoxical hope of seeing the unseeable better. In describing the set-up of his trap, the narrator accounts for a large mirror in front of which he is accustomed to dress “every day,” and in which “it was my habit to gaze at myself, from head to toe, every time I walked by it.” The repeated nature of the action speaks of the character’s need for constant reassurance regarding the permanence of his being and the tangible borders of his identity; an identity that is both constructed and reaffirmed through the image in the looking glass. When that image fails to show, the narrator feels literally “devoured” by the body of the Horla, becoming one with the light that now fills the entire rectangle of the mirror. As the terrifying moment comes to an end, the narrator is both grateful to be able to distinguish himself again (meaning both “discern” and “separate” his own image; note the further repetition, “as I do every day when I look at myself”), and forever changed by having experienced the precarious contingency of his being. The “I” depends on the “eye,” and the Horla makes this relationship evident as it sneaks into it to wedge it open.

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{242} Maupassant, “Le Horla,” 190.
Moreover, the above episode suggests, through an interesting and unusual detail, that there is more to the process of self-individuation than phenomenal evidence. As he plans to attract the creature, the narrator’s first thought is to sit down at the desk and *pretend to be writing*; soon thereafter, he feels the Horla being drawn to the writing, peeking over his shoulder as if wanting to partake of that signifying act that he is so jealously guarding.

In order to understand this detail, it is necessary to consider how the relationship between the narrator and the Horla is framed throughout the story. As we learn from one of the later diary entries, the narrator finally realizes that the Horla is in fact a creature of blatant biological superiority; using language that is strongly redolent of Darwin’s evolutionary biology, the being is described, with a blend of fear and admiration, as the occupant of a higher step in the *scala naturae* that extends “from the oyster up to man.”

By virtue of the “delicate” and “subtle” nature of his body, as well as the irresistible strength of his will, he is the new king of all creation, just like man has been until the Horla’s coming. The stakes of the human race being superseded at the top of the food chain are very clear:

Ah! The vulture ate the dove; the wolf devoured the lamb; the lion killed the buffalo with its sharp horns; man killed the lion with his arrow, with his sword, with his gunpowder; but Le Horla will make of man what we have made of horses and cattle: will we belong to Him, become His servant and His food, solely by the power of His will. How wretched we are!

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243 Ibid., 196.
244 Ibid.
245 The adjective “new” is repeated multiple times with reference to the Horla; is it an alien entity, therefore new to earth? Is it new in the sense of “newly evolved,” as indicated for instance by its need for milk? Or has it always been an unspoken, dormant part of human life, hidden under the radar of perception, as the story also seems to suggest?
The Horla literally makes man into an animal, insofar as the presence of a higher being in nature’s ladder contradicts human exceptionality and groups him with the rest of the inferior species. With this in mind, we can investigate the role that language plays in this dynamic. In the context of evolutionary linguistics, which developed in the second half of the nineteenth century through the works of scholars such as August Schleicher (1821-1868) and Max Müller (1823-1900), languages were both studied comparatively and with an eye to their development from an Indo-European Ur-language; often similar concepts and terminology were used to describe the evolution of languages and that of organic beings, especially after On the Origin of Species was published. In this context, “as the theory of evolution eroded the barrier between humans and animals, some linguists saw language as the essential criterion that continued to separate the two.” For instance, in his Lectures on the Science of Language (1861), Müller interrogates himself on the difference between “brute” and “man” and comes to the conclusion that “the one great barrier between the brute and man is Language. Man speaks, and no brute has ever uttered a word. Language is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it.” One wonders, then, if the narrator’s pretense of writing “with great

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247 In light of this, we are better equipped to diagnose the narrator, as it were, than the doctor he consults at the onset of his mysterious illness. The medical man finds “that my pulse was high, my eyes dilated, my nerves highly strung, but with no alarming symptoms,” and suggests he take “showers” and drink “potassium bromide” (179), which unfortunately turn out to “have no effect at all” (178). However, their uselessness is easily explained if we read the protagonist’s symptoms as nothing but the physical manifestations of fear, in keeping with the fight-or-flight instinct of a creature about to be preyed upon.

248 Fudeman, 114.

249 Ibid.

250 Quoted in ibid. Emphasis in the original.
concentration,” ostensibly a performance to attract and deceive the creature, is not to be read more properly as an attempt to reclaim power, much like the show of force put up by a threatened animal in order to scare its opponent (in this regard, the fact that the narrator is only “pretending” acquires new meaning). How else, then, are we to interpret the iconic image of the Horla leaning over the narrator’s shoulder, if not as an attempt to cross this Rubicon?

Hoping to learn useful information about the invisible being, the narrator borrows a fictional treatise written by one Dr. Hermann Herestauss, “Doctor of Philosophy and Theogony,” on “the instances of all the invisible beings who exist alongside man or who are dreamed by us”\textsuperscript{251}; however, one night he catches the Horla itself calmly perusing the book: “… I saw, I saw – yes, I saw with my own eyes – another page rise and fall down onto the one before it, as if some hand had been leafing through it. My armchair was empty, at least it looked empty; but I realized that he was there: he was sitting in my chair and reading.”\textsuperscript{252} The imagined posture of the Horla mirrors the power of the action he is performing: he is, in every sense, occupying the place of man.

In fact, throughout the whole story, the creature is associated with a disturbance in the narrator’s relationship to language. The short story is, like many fantastic tales, a chronicle of progressive decay and disintegration, and this is evidenced both by the protagonist’s declining mental health and by a coterminal loss of mastery over his words. Since the very beginning, before the creature even manifests itself, the narrator reports that every night he “tr[ies] to

\textsuperscript{251} Maupassant, “Le Horla,” 193. Just like O’Brien’s protagonists, he too searches for clues in literature of various kinds; his experience and expectations also seem very much shaped by his readings (e.g. “I have never read anything that is like what is happening in my home,” 193; my emphasis).

\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 194.
read,” but he “do[esn’t] understand the words; [he] can barely make out the letters.”\textsuperscript{253} The jumble of letters on the white page somehow anticipates the blinding whiteness of the mirror where the narrator’s image fuses with that of the Horla; once again a collapse of meaning ensues from a lack of difference, “dall’ipotesi di una continuità e d’una contiguità inesplorate e orribili.”\textsuperscript{254} It is no wonder, then, that the narrator, overcome with what looks like delirium, baptizes the creature with an inexistent word that is in fact a portmanteau, the blend of two signifying units making a new word altogether, “Horla,” \textit{hors-là}, the out-there: out of the reach of language, of comprehension, of the fumbling hands of the narrator; unrecorded in Dr. Herestauss’s learned book on invisible creatures; outside the confines of mapped phenomena and taxonomized species.

And what better attempt to establish an orderly sequence of discrete, rationalized events than a dated diary? We have already noted the preference for first-person narration in fantastic texts as marker of an interest in questions of testimony, belief and partiality of vision; in this case, the collection of diary entries evidently betrays the protagonist’s attempt at establishing mastery upon his own story by dividing it up in manageable units. Unsurprisingly, entries become more and more frequent as the narrator’s plight worsens; after the rose-picking episode, the first encounter with the creature in full daylight, they become daily (until a final, mysterious twenty-day gap between the second last and the last entry, in which the narrator is writing from a hotel in Rouen, having destroyed his house in the fire the day before). If the make-believe writing in the mirror episode fails to establish control over the creature, so does the actual diary, of which the former is a \textit{mise en abîme}. As the story progresses, the narrator’s

\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 179.

\textsuperscript{254} Lugnani, “Verità e disordine,” 192-193.
articulateness makes way for obsessive repetitions, anacolutha and ellipses (“He has come, the… the – what does He call Himself? – the… I feel as if He is shouting out His name to me and I cannot hear it… the… yes… He is shouting it… I am listening but I cannot… say it again… Le Horla… Now I’ve heard it… Le Horla… that is who He is… Le Horla has come!”255), until the very last words of the diary, followed by silence and death – which, in the case of our unnamed narrator, amount to the same thing.

4.2. The void of the monstrous, the plenitude of monstrosity

In the second diary entry, the narrator laments the first symptoms of a vague malaise that he is unable to define as either physical indisposition or mental distress (“I don’t feel well, or rather, I feel somewhat sad”256). Wondering how this mysterious state supplanted the bliss he felt only a few days before, he reflects on the tendency of the human mind to balk at the unknown: “How weak our minds are, and how quickly they panic and are led astray the minute one small, incomprehensible fact assails us! Instead of reaching a conclusion with the simple words: «I don’t understand because the reason escapes me», we immediately imagine terrifying mysteries and supernatural forces.”257

This notion resonates with the article Maupassant had published in Le Gaulois four years before (already quoted in section 2 of this chapter). In the 1883 article, Maupassant declares, or rather mourns, the imminent death of fantastic literature on account of a general change in attitude towards mystery and the irrational; after centuries of fear and terror, he declares, our

256 Ibid., 178.
257 Ibid., 184.
mind has shed all vestiges of superstitious beliefs. (In an earlier article in the same newspaper, entitled “Mystery and Myth,” the writer speaks of a “liberation.”258) In his view,

Only a few hundred people still cling to the idea of visiting souls, the influence of certain beings and things, lucid sleepwalking, and phony ghosts. It’s over. Our poor anxious minds, limited in their capacity to understand anything without an apparent reason, terrified by the endless spectacle of an incomprehensible world, have for centuries been subject to strange and childish beliefs with which to explain the unknown. Now, aware of how mistaken we were, we still seek to understand, without knowing for sure. But the first great step has been taken. We have rejected the idea of the mysterious, which is now simply what remains to be explored.259

It is all the more interesting, then, that “Le Horla” pervasively contradicts this position, not only by breathing new life into the themes that the article describes as outdated remnants of another age (supernatural literature seems very far from its supposed demise); it also qualifies this “liberation” from the darkness of ignorance in a rather sinister light, in order to put forth a much less optimistic view of the trajectory and place of humankind in nature.

With the onset of his malaise, the narrator decides to leave for Paris, in hopes that the company of people and the genius loci will dissipate the fog of his paranoia, hatched in the solitude of the countryside. During a dinner at his cousin’s house, he meets Dr. Parent, who is an expert in “nervous conditions”260 and devoted to the study of magnetic influences. When challenged about the “experiments with hypnotism and the influence of suggestion”261 that he

258 “Mystery and Myth” [article in Le Gaulois, November 8, 1881], in Guy de Maupassant's Selected Works, 283.


260 “Le Horla,” 185.

261 Ibid.
is extolling, the doctor situates such incredible advancements in the context of a linear progression of human knowledge throughout history. In the past, the intellect, still “in a rudimentary stage,” marveled at the impenetrable mysteries of the world in ways that engendered “the popular belief in the supernatural, legends of wandering spirits, fairies, gnomes, ghosts, I would even go so far as to say the legend of God …” However, he continues, over the past few years Mesmer, together with his disciples, has begun to dissipate irrational fears with the torch of his knowledge, which he has bestowed upon the world. By doing so, he has invented a different vocabulary for phenomena that were already very much familiar, but inexplicable and therefore frightening. As exemplified in Maupassant’s story “Fear” (1884), once the cholera, “the indescribable and ghastly Being who comes to us from the far East” (with Orientalization serving as a further suggestion of complete and threatening alienness), is reduced to a microbe by doctors, it loses its fearful power.

The epistemological shift from an unknown, fear-inducing entity to a known, scientifically-classified element has been described by science historian Georges Canguilhem,

262 Ibid., 186.

263 Ibid.

264 Cf. this passage in Luigi Capuana’s short story “Un vampiro” (1902), where a couple is haunted by the ghost of the wife’s former husband and asks for help from a skeptical doctor friend, who finally overcomes his complete denial and embraces the notion of a continuity between supernatural belief and scientific thought: “Quello che qualche scienziato ora ammette, cioè che, con l’atto apparente della morte di un individuo, non cessi realmente il funzionamento dell’esistenza individuale fino a che tutti gli elementi non si siano per intero disaggregati, la superstizione popolare – ci serviamo di questa parola – lo ha già divinato da un pezzo con la credenza nei Vampiri, ed ha divinato il rimedio” (Luigi Capuana, Un vampiro, Roma: Voghera, 1907, 61-62). Echoes of the peculiar monstrosity of the Horla reverberate across this tale; for instance, after feeling an inexplicable tap on his shoulder, the doctor sees against the light “una mano grigiastra, mezza trasparente, quasi fosse fatta di fumo” (80).

who sees in this passage a movement from the realm of the “monstrous” to that of “monstrosity.” In his 1962 essay “Monstrosity and the Monstrous,” Canguilhem establishes a functional difference between these two terms and traces the fluctuating relationship between them in the context of Western culture. According to his framework, monstrous refers to any kind of organic phenomenon that is perceived as abnormal and incomprehensible, and as such engenders a response of fear and fascination (it is “a category of the imagination” on account of its suggestive, evocative power). An example of this would be the dizzying variety of imaginary creatures in medieval bestiaries. Monstrosity, on the contrary, is associated with biological objects that can be studied and classified; for instance, the phenomenon of conjoined twins framed as embryological anomaly. While in classical antiquity a monster is considered an omen and sacrificed as a product of abhorrent hybridization, in the Middle Ages monstrous beings are at the center of debates on the origin of evil and its place in creation, as well as a symbol for the limitations of human intellect, as exemplified by our previous discussion of its role in apophatic theologies. Such discourses affirm the inaccessibility of absolute truth while recognizing man’s natural tendency to seek knowledge: the monster provides an aesthetic rendering of this paradox.

Moving further in his diachronic survey, Canguilhem explains how, in medical treatises of the sixteenth and seventeenth century (Liceti, Paré, Malebranche, Eller), credit is given to

266 Before moving forward, I want to specify that, throughout my dissertation, I always use the two terms interchangeably; I introduce Canguilhem’s distinction here simply as a tool for the analysis of a specific aspect in Maupassant’s text.


the idea, already expounded by Hippocrates, that imagination itself can create monstrosities; for instance, a woman beholding certain images during pregnancy can cause the shape of the child to be affected accordingly, through a process that sees “fiction fashio[ning] reality.”269 At this stage, fascination towards abnormalities is sometimes indistinguishable from scientific investigation; more than “a census of monstrosities,” medical discourse of the time is still essentially “a celebration of the monstrous.”270

A significant methodological shift takes place in the first half of the nineteenth century, when teratology (from τέρας, marvel, monster, and λόγος, discourse) is born as a proper scientific discipline, informed by a will to illuminate and classify, backed by comparative anatomy and embryology. This development has two important consequences. First, a blurring of perceived boundaries between monster and human. Thanks to epigenetic theories (the notion that an embryo develops gradually from indifferetiation to complex structures), it becomes easier to think of morphological monstrosity as an instance of arrested or otherwise thwarted development along a spectrum culminating with a fully-formed non-pathological living being. These ideas also pave the way for Darwin’s theory of evolution. In his study on the relationship between monsters and reason during the Enlightenment, Michael Hagner talks about the epistemic shift that came with late eighteenth-century epigenetic theories: “This was a crucial moment for the temporalization of humans, because human existence was no longer infinitely far away from deformation, disorder, hybrids, and transitory forms. Humans no longer began

269 Canguilhem, 33. We can see a trace of this old belief in Merimée’s “Lokis,” where the doctor discounts any possibility of count Michel being the way he is on account of the mother having received a strong impression during pregnancy (“I do not believe much in stories of fright and longings of pregnant women,” 55).

270 Canguilhem, 33.
their existence as perfect creations, but as vulnerable embryos and potential monsters." If we look at late nineteenth-century monstrous narratives of the Gothic and fantastic tradition, we realize that the notion of situating monstrosity on a spectrum that includes the human is in fact a foundational motif. For instance, in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), the same body literally slides in and out of monstrosity, in ways that are made possible, and regulated by, scientific advancements in the field of chemistry.272

The second major consequence of this shift in approach is that, on the one hand, the monstrous suffers a general “reduction”273 to the “wise and dull”274 notion of monstrosity; on the other, fantastic (imaginative) investment in the monstrous does not disappear. It is hardly an accident that Canguilhem chooses such etymologically analogous, almost equivalent terms to describe the two approaches, so as to signal their inescapable contiguity. When Camille Dareste (1822-1899) founds teratogeny (τέρας + γένεσις, creation of monsters) around the middle of the nineteenth century, which champions the possibility of modifying embryos in order to produce biological anomalies, he shows how a positivistic determination to parse reality (“the attempt of all possibilities” as “part of the code of experimentation”275) ends up

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272 A similar premise, with a stress on optical science, underlies the story of Griffin in *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells (1897).

273 Canguilhem, 36.

274 Ibid., 38.

275 Ibid. Emphasis in the original.
flirting with the same irrational fascination with the monstrous that the positivistic spirit sets out to banish.  

With this in mind, we can read “Le Horla” as a meditation on the resistance of the monstrous, locus of fear, mystery and subjection, to monstrosity, locus of rational control and scientific classification. In some way, the notion of monstrosity implies the search for plenitude that cataphatic discourse embodies; it betrays a will to anthropomorphize the world. Instead, the figure of the Horla – a creature made of pure will, unburdened by the weight of a body, or at least endowed with an unseeable one – eludes and undermines precisely the anatomical discourse of monstrosity delineated by Canguilhem. This means that it is unknowable in cataphatic terms (evidence-based, positive knowledge), while negative statements seem to be the only ones available: the Horla has no body, it does not die as humans do, it is only seen as it erases someone else’s reflection, it is not from here (whatever the meaning of the adverb). In representing the resistance of the monstrous to the human quest for total knowledge, it is a symbol for its limits – for the Heideggerian nothing testifying to an unknowable outside. Moreover, Maupassant’s story makes evident the tight link between the monstrous theme and the fantastic literary mode. Being firmly placed as it is in the territory of the monstrous (i.e. of fear, fascination, disgust, all fundamentally related to its unknowability), the figure of the Horla

Canguilhem explains how, during this time, biologists themselves are often caught “flagrante delictu as […] surrealists” (39) in ways that produce unexpected associations between the scientific discourse and the realm of poetic imagination, based on the latter’s inherent capacity for teratogenesis. He mentions Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont and ultimately the surrealists as the authors who outlined the “sulfurous path” of the monstrous in literature (ibid.).

Williams, Deformed Discourse, 5.

“Untimely death? All human horror springs from this idea! After man, Le Horla. After we who could die on any day, at any hour, at any moment, through any accident, after us has come the Being who need not die until it is His time, at exactly the right day, hour, minute, because He has reached the end of His existence!” (Maupassant, “Le Horla,” 200).
represents and activates precisely the kind of reaction that the fantastic is interested in exploring.

In fact, the way the creature is described evokes a model of parasitical threat or interiorization of the monstrous that will become more and more important in twentieth-century fantastic. For instance, in both O’Brien’s and Maupassant’s text, the invisible entity attacks the narrator in his bedroom, the heart of his home, making a case for the creature as a mobile agent of an unheimlich geography.\(^{279}\) In “Le Horla,” the invasion and penetration of the intimate and the familiar goes as far as mind control, one of the ways in which the narrator is effectively pushed out of his Heim. This helps us interpret the detail of the servants’ death: not only does the man lose Freudian mastery in his own house, he even kills the physical testimonies of that power. In rounding out the notion of a parasitical presence inside the confines of the familiar, Maupassant also hearkens back to centuries-old vampire lore. The creature is openly qualified as a “vampire”\(^{280}\) feeding on the life of his victims in the scientific review that the narrator consults; upon reading the article, the man wonders whether his salute to the ship caused the creature to “jump […] off the boat onto the riverbank,”\(^{281}\) thereby evoking the belief according to which a vampire can only cross the threshold of a house if invited by the owner. The ambiguous provenance of the creature contributes to its undefinable alienness: earlier in the

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\(^{279}\) This anxiety of invasion is perfectly represented by the diegetic mapping of Stoker’s Dracula (1897), for instance. The count belongs to an exotic Outside (Transylvania) but is represented in his attempts to invade the body of the British empire and that of its men and women. It is a dynamic of parasitical incubation that underlies deep cultural anxieties manifested through a discursive fixation on boundaries and their penetration. “I do not doubt that he hovers near the spot which I inhabit,” Victor Frankenstein replies, when asked by the local magistrate about the whereabouts of the deadly creature (Shelley 197). I will expand upon the notion of unheimlich in Chapter 3, section 3.1.


\(^{281}\) Ibid.
text, a cosmic origin is suggested (“One day, as they are traveling through space, one of them will land on Earth in order to conquer it …”282), while later in the text, its “race”283 is said to have been born in São Paulo, the capital of a far, threatening Brazil, plagued by medieval epidemics. With the Third Republic consolidating its colonial power precisely in these years (1870s-1880s), the story seems to depict an opposite movement to that of expansion and domination. The French territory is inoculated with an unknown virus – the pathogen being carried by the foreign ship through the ‘bloodstream,’ symbolized by the Seine, deep into the heart of the nation. In this sense, the mysterious body of the Horla can be said to lie at the crossroads of several interwoven discourses regarding France’s capacity to control the colonies, the recent birth of the discipline of tropical medicine and a creeping fear of the primitive.284

5. “There are colors that we cannot see”: “The Damned Thing” by Ambrose Bierce

“The Damned Thing” (1893) is one of the best-known short stories by American author Ambrose Bierce (1842-circa 1914), Civil War soldier, journalist, satirist and author of “grim and savage”285 narratives of war, fantastic and horror. The story is divided into four brief sections and documents a coroner’s inquest into the circumstances of the death of Hugh

282 Ibid., 194.
283 Ibid., 195.


285 Such is the opinion of H. P. Lovecraft, who admired Bierce greatly and devoted to him a substantial passage of his critical essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (New York: Ben Abramson, 1945, 66).
Morgan, whose mangled corpse lies on the table of the small cabin in the wilderness where the story takes place. In the presence of a silent jury, made up of Morgan’s fellow “farmers and woodsmen,” a coroner is reading a book to himself and waiting for the arrival of the one eyewitness to the crime, young writer William Harker, who shows up soon thereafter and proceeds to read a statement about Morgan’s death from a manuscript of his own. His words are quoted directly in the entire second section. One morning, while on a hunting trip, he and the victim heard a rustling of leaves coming from a bush, and while Harker dismissed the cause of the disturbance as a startled deer, Morgan seemed immediately alarmed. They pointed the shotgun towards the origin of the noise but did not spot any animal, until they witnessed a most strange phenomenon: the wild oats on the ground appeared to be flattened progressively in a straight line, as if by the action of a huge mass moving towards them. Cursing what he referred to as “[t]hat Damned Thing,” Morgan fired his rifle in the direction of these movements, before Harker was violently pushed to the ground by “some soft, heavy substance.” Getting up, he heard inhuman growling and saw Morgan struggling as if suffering a seizure, with parts of his body being periodically erased from view (“blotted out”) by some unseen mass. When he finally reached him, Morgan was dead.

This account does not convince either the coroner or the jury. In the third section, the former skeptically examines the devastation on the body (mainly evident in bludgeoning marks and in the skin having been torn to shreds) and asks the jury to step out and deliberate. In the


287 Ibid., 860.

288 Ibid.
meantime, Harker recognizes the book in the coroner’s hands as Morgan’s diary and asks to see it, but the officer hastily dismisses its relevance for the inquest and buries it in his pocket (justifying his decision with a fairly illogical excuse: “all the entries in it were made before the writer’s death”). The jury rules that “the remains come to their death at the hands of a mountain lion, but some of us thinks, all the same, they had fits,” and the inquest is closed. The final section of the story is the direct transcription of a number of entries from Morgan’s diary, with a short introductory note by the narrator. He speculates, not without a touch of irony, that the diary must have been kept from evidence because “possibly the coroner thought it not worth while to confuse the jury.” The entries document Morgan’s previous encounters with the puzzling phenomenon; first, he observes his dog bark furiously towards a specific point and then chase after something into the brush; then he sees the stars over a ridge being gradually blotted out from left to right as if by the passage of something opaque. After hunting down the creature with no luck, finding only footsteps and traces, he speculates that, just like the ear cannot perceive sounds that are too high or too low, so the eye cannot see colors past

289 Ibid., 862.
290 Ibid.
291 Ibid.
either end of the solar spectrum. He concludes that the Damned Thing must be of one such color.  

The story exhibits many of the stylistic staples of fantastic fiction that we have previously dwelled upon, with an even higher degree of self-awareness. The makeshift trial in which different voices clash actually reproduces the enunciative setup of a typical fantastic text, with a fictional audience (the jury), torn between several possible versions of the facts, acting as arbiter of how the events unfolded. Written texts (Harker’s manuscript, Morgan’s diary) act both as physical evidence in a judicial sense and as an instance of those documentary materials privileged by fantastic narration. There is also a token representative of medical science and legal authority, so selflessly devoted to objective truth that he conceals important evidence because it does not reconcile with his preferred, although patently unsatisfactory, explanation. In Chapter 1, I quoted M. R. James’s recipe for the perfect ghost story, which is also productively applied to a number of fantastic texts: “It is not amiss sometimes to leave a loophole for a natural explanation; but, I would say, let the loophole be so narrow as not to be quite practicable.” In this case, the coroner’s motivation for disregarding the diary is precisely his attempt to squeeze through that loophole: it is easier to think that Morgan may have been mauled by a mountain lion. By acting in such a manner, the official dramatizes the

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292 While Maupassant was likely not familiar with O’Brien’s tale, Bierce was probably influenced by both O’Brien and Maupassant (Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Damned Thing, The,” in The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters, 122). In fact, Bierce was accused of plagiarizing “What Was It?” and defended himself thus in an 1894 issue of Prattle: “In O’Brien’s story a man is attacked by, and overcomes, a supernatural and impossible being, invisible because transparent; in mine a man is attacked and killed by a wild animal that cannot be seen because, although opaque, like other animals, it is of an invisible color” (Bierce, “The Damned Thing,” 864n). In other words, in “What Was It?” the creature is framed as having transparency as a quality, which puts the focus on the riddle posed by its biological makeup (as plainly stated in the title). Instead, what Bierce’s story especially foregrounds is the limited bandwidth of human senses; the Thing does have a color, only Morgan and Harker are not equipped to see it.
hermeneutical work performed by a Todovian character-cum-reader as s/he faces an inexplicable event and chooses the path of the étrange: the world as it was before the fantastic disturbance, with its seemingly solid paradigm of reality, must be restored at all costs.\footnote{The jury chooses this path as well, having been deprived of the knowledge of a crucial piece of evidence. The farmers’ choice is therefore motivated by ignorance, not by willful neglect.} In the words of Harker, “[w]e so rely upon the orderly operation of familiar natural laws that any seeming suspension of them is noted as a menace to our safety, a warning of unthinkable calamity.”\footnote{Bierce, 860.} However, the less natural explanation (i.e. non-conforming to known natural laws) is the most probable according to the story’s internal logic, especially in the eyes of someone who is in possession of all the evidence. Such a clarification is provided by Morgan himself in the last section, which the narrator unequivocally titles “AN EXPLANATION FROM THE TOMB.”\footnote{Ibid., 862.} The solution to the enigma (provided we accept it) does not point to the supernatural proper, but to a territory that is tangential to the natural and the “familiar” (a key word in the story).

This becomes clearer once we read the diary entry in question, in which Morgan explains the invisibility of the creature through a discussion of the limits of sensory perception:

Oct. 7. – I have the solution of the mystery; it came to me last night – suddenly, as by revelation. How simple – how terribly simple! There are sounds that we cannot hear. At either end of the scale are notes that stir no chord of that imperfect instrument, the human ear. They are too high or too grave. I have observed a flock of blackbirds occupying an entire tree-top – the tops of several trees – and all in full song. Suddenly – in a moment – at absolutely the same instant – all spring into the air and fly away. How? They could not all see one another – whole tree-tops intervened. At no point could a leader have been visible to all. There must
have been a signal of warning or command, high and shrill above the din, but by me unheard. …

It is known to seamen that a school of whales basking or sporting on the surface of the ocean, miles apart, with the convexity of the earth between them, will sometimes dive at the same instant – all gone out of sight in a moment. The signal has been sounded – too grave for the ear of the sailor at the masthead and his comrades on the deck – who nevertheless feel its vibrations in the ship as the stones of a cathedral are stirred by the bass of the organ.

As with sounds, so with colors. At each end of the solar spectrum the chemist can detect the presence of what are known as ‘actinic’ rays. They represent colors – integral colors in the composition of light – which we are unable to discern. The human eye is an imperfect instrument; its range is but a few octaves of the real ‘chromatic scale.’ I am not mad; there are colors that we can not see.

And, God help me! the Damned Thing is of such a color! 296

In another instance of contamination between a traditionally supernatural phenomenon (ghosts) and the rules of physical science, Morgan dives into the question with the instruments of deduction and observation in order to produce a logical hypothesis. His elucubrations land him in what Catherine Crowe had called “the night side of nature”: a preternatural dimension just outside, or beside, the scope of known natural phenomena, just like certain sounds and colors lie just outside the spectrum of our sensory capacities. This theory pushes further in the direction of Maupassant’s unnamed narrator’s attempts to explain away the impossible presence of the Horla through biological vocabulary. Terminological precision is also employed here (although the notion of ‘actinic’ rays as a separate optical category was later disproved297), grounding the scientific dignity of the explanation. Morgan’s theory even explains the misalignment of the senses provoked by a material ghost such as O’Brien’s (a presence that impresses upon all senses except sight) through the synesthetic analogy between

296 Ibid., 863.

297 Ibid., 864n.
“notes” and “rays,” as well as by virtue of almost literal repetitions (compare “There are sounds that we cannot hear” and “…that imperfect instrument, the human ear” with “The human eye is an imperfect instrument … there are colors that we can not see.”)

As evidenced in the nature of the creature and the explanation offered by Morgan, the story taps into contemporary discussions of the occult as suprasensational. Leaning on the research of German scientists Gustav Theodor Fechner and Ernst Heinrich Weber into psychophysics (the relationship between stimuli and perception), scientists and philosophers of spiritualist leanings, such as William James, entertained the possibility that the supernatural be simply what is natural, but not perceived by the senses. According to this view, the occult is tantamount to what does not cross the “threshold” (Fechner’s terminology) past which a sensation is triggered. Contemporary scientific advancements boosting the signal of human perception and widening existing knowledge of the physical world, such as the discovery of radio waves, telegraphy, and electromagnetism, are seen as a testament to the progressive sharpening of human faculties, allowing for an enlargement, possibly *ad libitum*, of the human province. In *The Widow’s Mite and Other Psychic Phenomena* (1904), American publisher and spiritualism enthusiast Isaac K. Funk (1839-1912) wonders whether the next stage in human evolution will come into being precisely through a cultivation of perceptive faculties:

> Is it hard to believe that these rudimentary faculties are growing for the next stage of evolutionary development, in harmony with the environment of our objective or subjective nature, or both; and that when developed they will make us citizens of the universe – both the inner and outer – as our present physical senses have made us

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299 Ibid., 203.
citizens of this planet? This is man’s history, a slow adjustment of himself to his environment.  

Such views are reminiscent of “monstrosity” as codified by Canguilhem: strictly speaking, the notion that every biological phenomenon, even the most puzzling, can be accounted for with the instruments of science and reason; broadly intended, a conquering attitude towards phenomena that were previously considered mysterious, based on the assumption (denounced by Heidegger) that the phenomenal world contains merely objects or beings for the intellectual consideration of man.  

“This is man’s history”: this is how the history of man unfolds – but also, this history is man’s history. 

In “Le Horla,” this anthropocentric perspective is explicitly overturned. If any development or evolution or adjustment is in effect, it certainly does not concern the human; in fact, it happens to its detriment, at the hands of uncontrollable and unaccountable forces. On closer inspection, Morgan’s “revelation” is not really about the nature of the Damned Thing as it is about the inherent limitations of human perception and understanding. The discovery that human senses cover a certain bandwidth, while revealing, is not necessarily empowering. Insofar as similar realizations “extend our insight at the very moment our essential blindness – spatial, temporal, cognitive, sensory – is illumined,” they design an indifferent and unknowable universe in which “the more we see, the less we are.”

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301 Williams, “Monsters, Then and Now,” 24. 

302 Taylor, 417. In Henry Adams’s formulation, we are “adrift on a sensual raft in the midst of a supersensual chaos” (quoted in Stark, 216).
In this economy of information withdrawn, inaccessible or incomplete (some of the pages in Morgan’s diary are torn and the first entry begins mid-sentence), the monster’s presence and features are only ever inferred, rather than known. Morgan’s hunting mission relies on a study of the evidence around or after the body of the creature. The dog is going in a semicircle and barking towards the center, therefore the monster must be standing there; stars are being erased from the sky progressively on the top of a hill, so something must be walking along the ridge; in the morning, “fresh footprints suggest that it has been stalking the area outside the house. The creature must have a big furry body like that of a bear or a yeti, as one can gather from Harker being thrown to the ground by a “soft, heavy substance.” Finally, the ultimate evidence of the monster’s passage lies on the table in the cabin, and it is the mangled body of Morgan himself. This piecing-together effort, this symbolic movement towards the unknowable creature – this archaeology of the monster – finds its expressive equivalent in a wealth of apophatic statements. At the first glimpse of the “unfamiliar and unaccountable phenomenon,” Harker is dumbstruck (both in the moment and later, in recollection): “I was about to speak further, when I observed the wild oats near the place of the disturbance moving

303 “Looking at the stars last night as they rose above the crest of the ridge east of the house, I observed them successively disappear – from left to right” (Bierce, 862). It is certainly notable that, of all the things the creature could have obscured with its passage, it is indeed the stars in the night sky. This is reminiscent of the mirror episode in “Le Horla,” where the narrator’s reflection is “absorbed” by the interposing body of the creature. In “The Damned Thing,” both the stars and the body of Morgan are, in a calculated repetition, “blotted out,” suggesting in both cases the temporary annihilation (and at the same time the ultimate fragility) of any man-made orderly structure, such as the self (on a micro-level) and the constellations (on a macro level; “cosmos” coming from the Greek word for “orderly arrangement”).

304 Ibid., 863.

305 Ibid., 860.
in the most inexplicable way. *I can hardly describe it*\(^{306}\); a particularly shocking sight, that of Morgan apparently fighting with air, calls for a special linguistic effort (“it was as if he had been partly blotted out - *I can not otherwise express it*\(^{307}\); Harker’s fear upon hearing Morgan’s cries mingle with the Damned Thing’s “hoarse, savage sounds”\(^{308}\) is equally indescribable (“*Inexpressibly* terrified, I struggled to my feet…”\(^{309}\)). The keynote to this chorus of unspeakability is provided by the title: if the Horla is roughly placed in a taxonomical network and baptized through a neologism (although one that describes its position rather than its nature), Bierce’s story ultimately documents the abdication of biological enquiry and terminological precision in favor of an affectively loaded, generic moniker (“damned”, “thing”).

6. “I find evidences of its presence”: fantastic apophasis and monstrous reconstruction

“[T]he apparently causeless movement of the herbage, and the slow, undeviating approach of the line of disturbance were distinctly disquieting”\(^{310}\): in the absence of the familiar and habitual connection between grass being pressed down and the sight of a physical body treading on it, Harker’s mind immediately reaches for a reassuring epistemological principle, that of cause and effect. The fact that the consequential link between these two terms has become

\(^{306}\) Ibid. My emphasis.

\(^{307}\) Ibid. My emphasis.

\(^{308}\) Ibid.

\(^{309}\) Ibid. My emphasis.

\(^{310}\) Ibid. My emphasis.
unhinged accounts more than anything for the unnerving nature of his plight. In fact, a cataphatic model of knowledge relies heavily on a study of the nature of causes through their manifestations or effects.

Going back to our earlier frame of reference, scholastic philosophy builds on Aristotle’s notion of four types of causes (as expounded in *Physics* II 3 and *Metaphysics* V 2) to establish the *via causalitatis* as “the basis of understanding”: despite stressing the unknowability of God through the ultimately limited means of human reason, scholastic thinkers are still very much drawn to the notion that an empirical study of creation (considering “beings and things as effects”) would allow for “an understanding of God as their cause.” On the contrary, Pseudo-Dionysius insists on the incompleteness of such a method; in his view, as synthesized by David Williams, “[j]ust as the complete nature of fire is not discovered through the analysis of a warm object, still less is the First Cause of all contained within the aggregate of His effects.”

In the three stories that we have discussed, characters are faced with a wealth of signs pointing to an ostensible nothing. The monstrous creature – “the effect for which no cause exists” – sabotages causality as ordering principle: all these monstrous encounters seem to yield is a constellation of orphan effects. In all three cases, the creature is only known, however imperfectly or intuitively, through a process of reconstruction or recomposition: in indirect ways, such as through a plaster cast, against one’s reflection in the mirror, against the starry

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311 Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 35.

312 Ibid.

313 Ibid., 92.
sky, and by the traces it leaves behind.\textsuperscript{314} We are reminded of Asa Simon Mittman’s warning, according to which “the monster is known through its effect, its impact.” There is no other way to go about this exploration: either for sheer impossibility of assessing the real nature of the monstrous (“What Was It?”) or for the intolerable stakes of an actual encounter (“The Horla,” “The Damned Thing”), the monstrous can only be glimpsed \textit{per viam negativam}: as such, it sanctions the failure of cataphatic knowledge as sole instrument of negotiation of human existence within nature and the cosmos.

This perspective, however, does not imply a discursive erasure of the human, but again a renegotiation of its position. It has been observed that, due to the fact that they ultimately expose the contingency of human structures, these fictional creatures epitomize “the most quintessential of late nineteenth-century paradoxes: that humanist endeavors culminate in – are crowned by – posthumanist revelations.”\textsuperscript{315} Unquestionably, these stories suggest that reality is not made in our own image; that some Thing, or Enigma, or “horrible force”\textsuperscript{316} exceeds the constraints of anthropomorphism and therefore invalidates it as a standard. However, precisely the fantastic nature of these tales – the fact that they are concerned with a subject’s response to having stumbled upon his or her cognitive, sensory, expressive limitations – preserves and guarantees a fundamental reliance on humanism as ultimate touchstone. One might even say that the fantastic needs to take an anthropocentric cosmological perspective as a given (just like it needs, as already demonstrated, a solid substratum of ‘realism’ through which its

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\textsuperscript{314} The work of “[m]onstrous interpretations”, according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “must content itself with fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows, obscured glimpses – signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself” (Cohen, 6).

\textsuperscript{315} Taylor, 417.

\textsuperscript{316} Maupassant, “Le Horla,” 195.
corrosive droplets can infiltrate), rather than a view informed by typically posthuman “flat – as opposed to hierarchical or anthropocentric – ontologies.”

This intuition is also corroborated by the shared narrative function of our three material ghosts: all are represented in the clear attempt to harm human beings (or, in “Le Horla”’s peculiar lexicon, to dethrone them). This happens to a variable degree in the stories; in fact, there is a progression in the dangerousness of the creatures. In O’Brien, the Enigma eventually succumbs at the hands of man, but still enters the picture in the act of trying to suffocate Harry; the unnamed narrator in Maupassant’s story becomes enslaved to the Horla and ends up committing suicide as a direct consequence of the encounter; in Bierce, the Damned Thing hunts and kills Hugh Morgan. The stories suggest that something about these creatures is fundamentally threatening to and incompatible with human existence (as shaped by the notion of a world at the complete disposal of human intellection). In the case of Maupassant and Bierce specifically, if on the one hand the threatening creature testifies to the ultimate impotence of its human opponents, on the other it paradoxically recognizes and sanctions their power precisely in the act of trying to overthrow it. There is, in other words, still a Rubicon to be crossed.

From an archaeology of the monstrous derives a language that is necessarily broken and fragmented. If the monster can only be approached and glimpsed at (if not known) through its traces, by the same token language can only access it sideways, or metonymically. The diaries and chronicles document the shadows that are cast by the creature and through them they reconstruct its shape, but they can never describe it directly – on pain of being silenced, or

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317 Taylor, 421.
rather realizing that silence might be the only option. Paralipses, incomplete sentences, repetitions, hesitations are ways to stress the necessarily tangential nature of any such account; what the paradoxical need to describe the indescribable looks like. Language performs its own coming into being as strain and effort, always on the edge of an unspecified revelation that never comes. In these fantastic stories, literature and language are shown as flowing out of the encounter with non-human provinces and their denizens: language is an ill-fitting sheath for an uncrackable Enigma, but it is also – most importantly – generated by the encounter with it.

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318 According to Fredric Jameson, the fantastic represents “an object world forever suspended on the point of meaning, forever disposed to receive a revelation, whether of evil or of grace, that never takes place” (Jameson, 146).
Chapter 3
Twentieth-century mutations of monstrosity: the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft and Tommaso Landolfi

Shall I say the voice was deep; hollow; gelatinous; remote; unearthly; inhuman; disembodied? What shall I say?

H. P. Lovecraft, “The Statement of Randolph Carter”

La solita storia infine: chi così dice di non aver niente da dire è uno a mezza strada tra il silenzio e l’espressione, un infelice cui il silenzio gioverebbe, ma che non sa conquistarsi nemmeno il silenzio.

Tommaso Landolfi, “Rotta e disfacimento dell’esercito”

1. A brief note on twentieth-century fantastic literature

According to the periodization established by Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic “appeared in a systematic way around the end of the eighteenth century with Cazotte; a century later, we find the last aesthetically satisfying examples of the genre in Maupassant’s tales.”319 He explains this decline by noting that, in the twentieth century, the distinction between real and imaginary, i.e. the foundation on which the fantastic creates the hesitation effect, becomes less relevant: “…today, we can no longer believe in an immutable, external reality, nor in a literature which

319 Todorov, 168.
is merely the transcription of such a reality.\textsuperscript{320} It is undeniable that the structural device of hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation becomes less and less frequent after the turn of the century (in a way, James’s 1898 “The Turn of the Screw” represents a brilliantly executed swansong for traditional fantastic/ghost stories). Still, in this study we have moved away from hesitation as defining trait and have preferred to approach the fantastic as the literary exploration of a reaction to the unknown and the unsayable; this prevents us from agreeing with Todorov on this issue. Such a framework also explains why later fantastic fiction is mostly at ease with relinquishing the supernatural.

If the turn-of-the-century epistemological earthquake – associated, among other factors, with the emergence of psychoanalysis and the birth of modern physics – unquestionably destabilizes Positivistic certainties, it also seems that a number of writers engage with and elaborate its consequences precisely by recurring to the fantastic key. The appearance of psychoanalysis is, in Todorov’s view, the main reason why the fantastic has been essentially “made useless”\textsuperscript{321}:

There is no need to resort to the devil in order to speak of an excessive sexual desire, and none to resort to vampires in order to designate the attraction exerted by corpses: psychoanalysis […] deal[s] with these matters in undisguised terms. The themes of fantastic literature have become, literally, the very themes of the psychological investigations of the last fifty years.\textsuperscript{322} In short, a writer who produces fantastic tales in the twentieth century speaks in an obsolete code that everyone has already cracked; or, the fantastic is tantamount to an aesthetic toolbox

\textsuperscript{320} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid., 160.

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., 160-161.
whose instruments have become, by the late 1800s, blunt beyond repair. Still, this view chooses not to consider the ways in which twentieth-century fantastic – developing a meta-literary tendency that is already inherent in the mode – focuses its attention on the tools themselves by applying them to new, unusual tasks, and by finding creative impulse precisely in their acknowledged bluntness. Through these paths, the fantastic not only survives the turn of the century, but makes the most of what Jacques Finné has identified as the “usure thématicque” of its genre-specific imagery. This gives rise to self-reflexive texts in which, according to Stefano Lazzarin, “è possibile identificare tutti gli artifizi del fantastico ottocentesco, ma mutati di segno.” Such narratives are invested in the exploration of uncharted areas of the real and the self either through a re-functionalization of classic themes, tropes and devices, and/or through narrative material that is not consecrated by genre conventions or by cultural and


324 This also applies to a number of nineteenth-century fantastic texts, which breathe new life into tropes of earlier Gothic novels. We have seen one such example in “What Was It?,” where the “clanking of chains” (193) is evoked precisely to be counterpointed by the typically fantastic device of the tangible ghost, and the haunted castle is replaced by a dilapidated boarding house in Chelsea. Moving towards the end of the century, a number of narratives appear that rely on fantastic and supernatural stock images for comic effect (developing a deep vein of disparaging humor that already underlies most fantastic literature, as noted in Ceserani, “Le radici storiche di un modo narrativo,” 36). In Oscar Wilde’s novella “The Canterville Ghost” (1887), a clanking of chains by the resident specter only prompts an offer of lubricant by the home owner. A few years later, George Méliès shoots the short silent film *Le manoir du diable* (The Haunted Castle, 1896), detailing a man’s encounter with the devil against the backdrop of a medieval castle. The film, technically the first horror ever produced, aims at inducing laughter at the clueless reaction of the poor protagonist. It includes a procession of stock figures from the Gothic, fantastic and also folk-tale repository (bats turning into vampires, ghosts with sheets over them, a beautiful woman transforming into an old hag, a skeleton, witches with brooms, mischievous sprites, crucifixes, all in the space of three minutes).

literary tradition.\textsuperscript{326} (As we will see, the latter operation usually entails dizzying teratological births.) If we are dealing with a death, then the corpse of traditional fantastic literature goes on to fertilize the landscape of its twentieth-century counterpart in ways that yield original and interesting results.

Far from aiming at any sort of systematic review of twentieth-century fantastic, in this chapter I choose to focus my analysis on H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) and Tommaso Landolfi (1908-1979), two writers who, despite obvious differences, share a number of interesting traits.\textsuperscript{327} In their works, the deep interconnection between monstrosity and language, which I have already identified as a feature of traditional fantastic literature, is pushed even further, eventually achieving a process of \textit{monsterization of language} itself, following distinctive modalities and aims. Lovecraft’s monstrosity is comorbid, as it were, with the representation of linguistic disturbances. This nexus manifests itself both through a hypertrophic narrative style and in the thematization of parasitical monstrosity within the word and the self. His fiction features an unheard-of pantheon of secular god-like creatures hailing from far-away planets, allowing for a personal interpretation of the fantastic mode through the genre of cosmic horror (or weird literature). Such a system feeds off contemporary discoveries in theoretical physics and physical cosmology and uses them to complicate acquired notions of the scientific mind.

\textsuperscript{326} Stefano Lazzarin creates a typology of Novecento fantastic literature that includes three categories, each pointing to a different way of interpreting the cumbersome heritage of the fantastic Golden Age: hyper-fantastic, meta-fantastic and neo-fantastic (“Tre modelli di fantastico per il secondo Novecento,” \textit{Allegoria} 69-70, 2014: 41-60).

\textsuperscript{327} I do not aim to establish a relationship of literary filiation between the two writers; however, it should be noted that Landolfi was in fact a reader of Lovecraft. The latter is hinted at through the title of his short story “The Dunwich Horror” (“l’Orrore / di Dunwich”) in the poem “Terrore d’occhi neri e bianche cluni,” included in Landolfi’s 1972 collection \textit{Viola di morte} (Tommaso Landolfi, \textit{Viola di morte}, Milano: Adelphi, 2011, 269).
as neutral observer of natural phenomena. Einstein’s notion of spacetime and the discovery that time itself is a relative concept deeply guides Lovecraft’s pursuit of “externality (whether of time or space or dimension).”328 This entails the creation of a literary universe in which mankind is seen as if from outer space, dwarfed and inserted into a broader context: “The humanocentric pose is impossible to me,” he writes in a letter, “for I cannot acquire the primitive myopia which magnifies the earth and ignores the background.”329 The pervasive, multifarious forms of monstrosity in his fiction are reminders of the “puerility”330 of any approach that regards the human-sized as a standard with any philosophical validity. From the cosmic scope of Lovecraft’s monstrosity, my analysis moves on to Tommaso Landolfi’s exploration of the linguistic scaffolding of the self. His fiction takes to the extreme the inherent skepticism of the fantastic towards “every powerful explanatory paradigm”331 in order to carve a literary discourse that undermines the very possibility of narrative. In his tales, every signifying act that strives for meaning and coherence is framed as intrinsically flawed, because it overlooks the deep fracture dividing words and things. In that fracture a number of monster-words swarm undisturbed, waiting to encroach upon the mind in those moments when the arbitrariness of language is suddenly revealed. These entities, emerged from an “abisso


331 Franke, A Philosophy of the Unsayable, 1.
dell’anima” or “fondo d[i] … follia,” have the alluring and destructive quality of the unheimlich, as defined by Sigmund Freud: both terrifyingly strange and eerily familiar, they have the power to disintegrate those boundaries between mind and matter, subject and object that hold up sanity and identity. The fantastic short-circuit and the related teratogenesis happen in language, making for an ouroboric, claustrophobic narrative.

2. H. P. Lovecraft’s cosmic horror

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) was born in Providence, Rhode Island, where he spent most of his life. Plagued by ill health and economic difficulties, he lived and died in poverty, publishing only a few of his works in contemporary pulp magazines and obtaining almost no recognition during his lifetime, except for a circle of friends and followers. Among them was August Derleth, who curated and published Lovecraft’s works after his death, sometimes forcing his own interpretation onto it as he added to what later became popular as the “Cthulhu mythos” (the god-like entities, places, languages and mythology that make up Lovecraft’s fictional universe). Through his fiction and his formal and informal critical reflections, Lovecraft theorized and embodied more than any one writer the genre of weird literature or cosmic horror, which focuses on the relationship of man to the unknown in the context of a vast, indifferent and inscrutable universe. This relationship is explored through the conceptual resources offered by astronomy, geometry, and theoretical physics, as well as through a

334 I am referring to his landmark work of criticism “Supernatural Horror in Literature” as well as his monumental body of letters.
philosophical outlook that amounts to “a bizarre synthesis of ancient mechanistic philosophy, German pessimism, and the most rigorous positivist materialism.” In his stories, usually well-educated, rational protagonists stumble upon deliriously unnatural creatures and dimensions, engaging in an epistemological and expressive effort so titanic that it breaks the banks of reason and selfhood.

The first thing one notices about Lovecraft’s modern bestiary is precisely its break with classical teratological creatures. According to S. T. Joshi,

At the very outset of his career, Lovecraft appears to have determined that the monsters that had populated previous supernatural fiction – vampires, ghosts, werewolves, witches, and the like – were outmoded in his day. The advance of science, in his judgment, had rendered these entities so implausible that they were of little aesthetic value in literature.

Except for a small number of stories, Lovecraft’s monsters are generally nightmarish representations of slimy, post-Darwinian category mistakes, all (alien) flesh and no thought or spirit. In Cthulhu’s pseudo-mythology, the figure that sits at the pinnacle of the pantheon is Azatoth, “a blind and mindless creature at the center of chaos,” hinting towards the shattering of human conceptions of teleology and structure. Such creatures are rarely wicked or harmful in the sense we have attributed to the Horla or the Damned Thing; instead, they are tokens of the absolute indifference that describes the relationship of the cosmos to the human race. In the

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335 Lévy, 30.
337 Ibid., 390.
history of the so-called Great Races or Ancient Ones who predate – and will follow – the existence of men, humans are accidents or, at the most, useful vessels for the furthering of alien species’ growth and development.

These beings dwell in titanic spaces of unfathomable proportions, often in hidden and remote corners of the earth. Such settings – a radical update on haunted castles and country houses, which are all too human spaces – complicate the very notion of space and time in ways that are heavily influenced by contemporary discoveries in astro- and theoretical physics. In “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), the narrator explains how he put together information gathered by himself and by his late grand-uncle, a professor of Semitic languages, in order to uncover the existence of a dark cult almost as old as earth, spanning from the New Orleans swamp dwellers to the Esquimaux. The cult worships the Great Old Ones, extraterrestrial creatures who came to earth at the beginning of time and now lie dormant in remote corners of the planet, waiting for the moment when they will claim it for themselves. In the written account of a now dead Norwegian seaman, whose ship was sailing across the South Pacific, the narrator reads about the crew’s terrifying experience of stumbling upon the underwater city of R’lyeh, temporarily emerged from the water after an earthquake. Its spaces look utterly incompatible with human existence and perception: the man’s necessarily vague description speaks of a geometry that is “abnormal, non-Euclidean,” of stone pillars of “unbelievable size” and “dizzying height,” and “crazily elusive angles of carven rock where a second glance shewed

338 Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 193. See also the allusion to relativity: “In this phantasy of prismatic distortion it moved anomalously in a diagonal way, so that all the rules of matter and perspective seemed upset” (193-194). Interestingly, these dimensions are also explained through a reference to Futurist aesthetics (“[w]ithout knowing what futurism is like, Johansen [the seaman] achieved something very close to it when he spoke of the city…,” 192).

339 Ibid., 192.
concavity after the first shewed convexity." The inconceivable nature of the place anticipates the appearance of Cthulhu, recklessly liberated from a deep cave by the seamen themselves; the creature is also paradoxical in its being at once a mountain, a mass of slime, and a squid “with writhing feelers,” endowed with inherently contradictory features such as “flabby claws.” The city of R’lyeh and its horrific denizen are a metonymy of the general inhospitableness of the entire universe, when seen through the lens of Einstein’s discoveries.

Trying to do justice to the vertiginous teratology of H. P. Lovecraft is an act that is doomed to failure, in the same way as his narrators try (and often die trying) to describe the unthinkable monstrosities they face. However, it is precisely by tackling the way in which the Providence writer performs and conceptualizes this difficulty that we can find a productive way into his sinister pantheon. If on the one hand monstrosity is at the core of Lovecraft’s fiction (“[t]here is not a tale where [monsters] do not intervene in some manner or other”), the way it is explored, articulated and manifested is mainly in its interaction with language. This nexus develops along two parallel lines: through a trademark narrative style that proceeds by dizzying accumulation and cancerous overgrowth; and through the association of linguistic perversion, debasement or opacity with a process of monsterization of the human, which often coincides with the revelation of an already-monstrous element in the familiar fabric of the real and the self.

340 Ibid., 193.
341 Ibid., 195.
342 Ibid., 194.
343 Lévy, 59.
2.1. Language grows tentacles

Lovecraft’s baroque, antiquated style was famously targeted by American critic Edmund Wilson a few years after the writer’s death. In a 1945 review on *The New Yorker*, Wilson asserts that “the real horror” in Lovecraft’s fiction is “the horror of bad taste and bad art,” justifying his appraisal with this observation, among others:

One of Lovecraft’s worst faults is his incessant effort to work up the expectations of the reader by sprinkling his stories with such adjectives as “horrible,” “terrible,” “frightful,” “awesome,” “eerie,” “weird,” “forbidden,” “unhallowed,” “unholy,” “blasphemous,” “hellish” and “infernal.” Surely one of the primary rules for writing an effective tale of horror is never to use any of these words – especially if you are going, at the end, to produce an invisible whistling octopus.

Even considering what S. T. Joshi sees as Wilson’s strong “prejudice” against genre fiction, supposedly demonstrated by his suspicion of detective stories and fantasy, Wilson has a point. Narrators in Lovecraft’s tales are typically engaged in a struggle to describe what is, by their own admission, indescribable, and they respond to this conundrum through a paroxysmal overproduction of language: adjectives pile upon adjectives, synonyms chase after synonyms, in “tottering towers” that creak under the enormity of the meaning they are invested with. In other words, Lovecraft’s texts exhibit apophatic rhetoric to a much greater degree than we have

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345 Ibid., 48. Another notable commentary on Lovecraft’s style is offered by American writer Joyce Carol Oates, a great admirer of his work, who notes that “[i]n Lovecraft, … style and self-parody are indistinguishable” (Joyce Carol Oates, “The King of Weird,” np).

346 Wilson, ibid., Joshi’s note.

seen in earlier iterations of the fantastic.\textsuperscript{348} Statements of indescribability are so common throughout the stories and novels that they almost feel like knee-jerk reactions: “the effect was subtly menacing in a way I can never hope to depict,”\textsuperscript{349} says the narrator of \textit{At the Mountains of Madness} (1936) upon contemplating the underground city; encountering an image of loathsome monstrosity, the narrator of “The Outsider” “cannot even hint what it was like”\textsuperscript{350}; “no mere writing could convey”\textsuperscript{351} the quality of the cry heard by Luke Fenner in \textit{The Case of Charles Dexter Ward}; “the Thing,” i.e. the gigantic, flabby body of Cthulhu, “cannot be described; there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy…”\textsuperscript{352}; and so on. As we have come to expect, such declarations of descriptive impotence are contradicted by an unprecedented amount of data: an inordinate use of descriptors such as adjectives and adverbs; the mention or transcription of documents, letters, book passages; a wealth of precise dates and times of occurrences, specific details about characters and places, exhaustive background information.

However, I suggest that, if we look at Lovecraft’s style in the light of the conceptual resources we have employed so far, its aesthetic rationale becomes evident. Lovecraft builds a language for the ineffable on excess rather than lack, according to a principle that is both

\textsuperscript{348} This performance of discursive limits is picked up by Eugene Thacker, who echoes our earlier discussion as he frames supernatural horror (in particular Lovecraft’s) as a vessel for contemporary philosophical thinking: “What an earlier era would have described through the language of darkness mysticism or negative theology, our contemporary era thinks of in terms of supernatural horror” (Eugene Thacker, \textit{Horror of Philosophy}, vol. I. \textit{In the Dust of This Planet}, Winchester: Zero Books, 2011, 2).

\textsuperscript{349} Lovecraft, “At the Mountains of Madness,” 530.

\textsuperscript{350} “The Outsider,” 13.

\textsuperscript{351} “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,” 248.

\textsuperscript{352} “The Call of Cthulhu,” 194.
compensatory and emulative. On the one hand, it entails the acknowledgment of a hole in the fabric of discourse, to which the text reacts by amplifying (quantitatively rather than qualitatively) its signifying ‘volume.’ On the other, it represents a paradoxical way of recuperating some degree of mimesis, since it often molds itself to the gigantic creatures of countless appendages that it struggles to describe.

In “The Dunwich Horror” (1929), Henry Armitage, a librarian at Miskatonic University (a fictional institution featured in many Lovecraft stories) fights an enormous, invisible creature wreaking havoc upon the imaginary town of Dunwich, Massachusetts. One night, Armitage and two colleagues enter the library to investigate a disturbance, only to discover that Wilbur Whateley (the invisible creature’s brother, a boy with undefinably odd features) has broken into the library in search of the Necronomicon, a forbidden book of occult lore that recurs in numerous Lovecraft texts and whose frightful content is always only alluded to. Whateley’s mission has failed and he has been fatally attacked by the resident watchdog. As he lays dying, the men are dumbfounded by the spectacle of his body:

The thing itself, however, crowded out all other images at the time. It would be trite and not wholly accurate to say that no human pen could describe it, but one may properly say that it could not be vividly visualised by anyone whose ideas of aspect and contour are too closely bound up with the common life-forms of this planet and of the three known dimensions. It was partly human, beyond a doubt, with very manlike hands and head, and the goatish, chinless face had the stamp of the Whateleys upon it. But the torso and lower parts of the body were teratologically fabulous, so that only generous clothing could ever have enabled it to walk on earth unchallenged or uneradicated. Above the waist it was semi-anthropomorphic; though its chest, where the dog’s rending paws still rested watchfully, had the leathery, reticulated hide of a crocodile or alligator. The back was piebald with yellow and black, and dimly suggested the squamous covering of certain snakes. Below the waist, though, it was the worst; for here all human resemblance left off and sheer phantasy began. The skin was thickly covered with coarse black fur, and from the abdomen a score of long greenish-grey tentacles with red sucking mouths protruded limply. Their arrangement was odd, and seemed to follow the symmetries of some cosmic geometry unknown to
earth or the solar system. On each of the hips, deep set in a kind of pinkish, ciliated orbit, was what seemed to be a rudimentary eye; whilst in lieu of a tail there depended a kind of trunk or feeler with purple annular markings, and with many evidences of being an undeveloped mouth or throat. The limbs, save for their black fur, roughly resembled the hind legs of prehistoric earth’s giant saurians; and terminated in ridgy-veined pads that were neither hooves nor claws. When the thing breathed, its tail and tentacles rhythmically changed colour, as if from some circulatory cause normal to the non-human side of its ancestry. In the tentacles this was observable as a deepening of the greenish tinge, whilst in the tail it was manifest as a yellowish appearance which alternated with a sickly greyish-white in the spaces between the purple rings. Of genuine blood there was none; only the foetid greenish-yellow ichor which trickled along the painted floor beyond the radius of the stickiness, and left a curious discolouration behind it.353

The description of Wilbur Whateley’s extravagant carcass shows the tension between the sheer accumulation of details, aiming at constructing an image that is as precise – as scientific – as possible, like the ekphrasis of an anatomical chart, and the ultimate inconceivability of the spectacle. Details are given according to the inherently fragmentary nature of cataphatic discourse, which breaks down its object into parts in order to apprehend it analytically.354 Armitage’s gaze, through which we see the scene, lingers on each limb of the monstrous body and assesses it with precision – yet the general outline of the creature remains mysterious. Graham Harman refers to this dynamics as Lovecraft’s “literary cubism,”355 a technique through which an object is represented as a mass of perceivable features whose unifying principle remains elusive. This monstrous body, completely exposed in all its minute details and yet still impossible to picture, crystallizes the ineffable core of cosmic horror that is and

354 Cf. Chapter 2, section 2, where I mention Barthes’s discussion of the Encyclopédie as a cataloguing effort that can only proceed through fragmentation.
remains unimaginable, despite the overload of sensory data and the sheer wealth of language matter employed to render it.

The awareness exhibited by the narrator of “The Dunwich Horror” regarding the automatic nature of his paralytic reflex (“[i]t would be trite and not wholly accurate to say that no human pen could describe it...”), and his calling into question the matter of visualization, suggest that there is one more aspect worth uncovering. If the declarations of indescribability by Lovecraftian narrators match those of typical fantastic ones, they are not substantially based – in contrast to the texts we have analyzed in Chapter 2 – on the visual inaccessibility of the Thing. In fact, apart from the actual example given by Wilson (the “invisible whistling octopus”), who refers to the creature described in the short story “The Dunwich Horror,” generally Lovecraftian monstrosity is either fully, obscenely visible or subjected to a progressive act of unveiling. The point is that this process of unveiling does not affirm, but rather undermine, the implicit association of seeing with knowing that emerges in the context of positivist science. Seeing more is not knowing more; the advancement of man’s status in nature through the enlargement of his sensory province (as anticipated by Isaac K. Funk in 1904) is a mere illusion. The monster’s features, size, dimensions do not correspond to

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356 On careful analysis, “The Dunwich Horror” too responds to the principle of making the invisible visible: the gigantic, destructive entity is defeated by three savants through a combination of incantations and a potent powder sprayer, which reveals the features of the monster to the horror of all those present (and allow to locate it in order to destroy it). By the way, this story presents obvious similarities with the three texts discussed in Chapter 2, representing an ideal continuation of the material-ghost tradition. In “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” Lovecraft demonstrates to be well-acquainted with those stories, praising “Le Horla” as a “tense narrative … without a peer in its particular department” despite its “indebtedness” (49) to O’Brien’s “What Was It?” and mentioning “The Damned Thing” as one of the most frequently anthologized works among Bierce’s “immortal tales” (66). While the spraying contraption is reminiscent of O’Brien’s plaster cast, the “bending and matting” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 408) of the bushes caused by the enormous entity (and used to retrace its movements) recalls the wild oats being pressed down by the Damned Thing’s body.

357 Cf. Chapter 2, section 5.
anything conceivable by the human mind, whose structures of thought simply cannot accommodate that evidence. Therefore, the nature of visual assessment is itself complicated, not to mention the possibility of faithful description. The gulf between things and words is deepened, not reduced, by the full exposure of such “unnamed and unnamable” dimensions.

If Lovecraft’s cosmic teratology seems to veer towards science fiction, the way it is used in his texts (and conceptualized in his critical writings) actually helps us take stock of the many shapes taken by the fantastic mode after its siglo de oro. In his celebrated 1927 essay titled “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” Lovecraft offers a small treatise on humanity’s “fear of the unknown” and a rich survey of the branch of literature it has spawned. This capacious category includes Gothic novelists such as Ann Radcliffe, Lovecraft’s “God of Fiction” and main inspiration Edgar Allan Poe, Maupassant and French symbolist Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, as well as recent or contemporary Anglo-Saxon practitioners of the horror and ghost story such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope

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358 As in the case of the Cthulhu bas-relief we have already mentioned, a general assessment of the physiognomy of the creature represented can be made, but only a vague impression can be conveyed: “If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 169).

359 “The Colour Out of Space,” 354. An analogous representational crux is posed by the appearance of Mr. Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1886 Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. This is how Mr. Enfield attempts to provide an identikit of Mr. Hyde to Mr. Utterson: “[h]e is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point. He’s an extraordinary looking man, and yet I really can name nothing out of the way. No, sir; I can make no hand of it; I can't describe him. And it's not want of memory; for I declare I can see him this moment” (Robert Louis Stevenson, Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 12).


Hodgson, and Lord Dunsany. Despite offering a prescriptive theory of the weird genre in terms of the emotional effect or “sensation” that it should provoke in the reader\textsuperscript{362} – a consideration we have steered clear of in this study – Lovecraft’s essay conceptualizes weird literature as interested in “man’s shuddering reaction to the unknown” and pursuing “a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.”\textsuperscript{363} This clearly resonates with what we have identified as the core of the fantastic mode.\textsuperscript{364}

Elsewhere he explains how a weird tale should aim for the gradual sabotage of a realistic framework (the “déchirure… dans le monde reel” described by Caillois\textsuperscript{365}), specifying that “in every detail except the chosen marvel, the story should be accurately true to nature. The keynote should be that of scientific exposition – since that is the normal way of presenting a «fact» new to existence, and should not change as the story slides off from the possible to the

\textsuperscript{362} “The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers …” (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” 16).

\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{364} I insist on this point because it is not usual to see Lovecraft mentioned in critical studies of the fantastic mode, not even in inclusivist ones from the Anglo-American area such as Rosemary Jackson’s, where he is barely mentioned; this is partly due to the fact that, through his literary criticism and his letters, Lovecraft effectively establishes the genre coordinates against which he is usually, and certainly not erroneously, read. My feeling, however, is that cosmic horror can be read as a genre that taps into the fantastic mode in various ways and to different degrees, depending on the single work and on the single author.

\textsuperscript{365} Caillois, “De la féerie à la science-fiction,” 8.
impossible.\textsuperscript{366} The fantastic quality of Lovecraft’s fiction is to be found in this misalignment. As already discussed, the language of scientific inquiry and classification is a cataphatic one; it belongs, by definition, to the sphere of the possible, the tangible, the verifiable, and it mirrors the knowledge that can be attained through logic and observation. Through this paradoxical imposition – having to describe mystery with the language of plenitude – Lovecraft creates for himself a stylistic cage, or what Benedetti defines “un limite interno al discorso”\textsuperscript{367}; this allows him to emphasize the desperate inadequacy of human means through “the pathetic stubbornness”\textsuperscript{368} of his narrators. Lovecraft’s works pursue this tension programmatically and to its extreme consequences, taunting the scientific eye through an obscene display of the horrific; pushing the language of rationality up to the edge of the abyss and often past it; staging its explosion through the cancerous multiplication of qualifiers decried by Wilson; making it tentacular to reflect its “teratologically fabulous” subjects.

2.2. Merciful ignorance and the taint of monstrosity

We have seen how Lovecraft’s fiction develops a language for/of the monstrous; let us now round out our exploration by examining how the monstrous is thematized in its relationship

\textsuperscript{366} Quoted in Lin Carter, \textit{A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos} (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), XV; emphasis in the original. This also describes Richard Upton Pickman’s painting technique, already discussed in Chapter 1: no matter its subject, even the most delirious, his brush retains the same scientificity of method; the clash between the detailed background of the cellar wall and the equally precise representation of the monster in front of it (the “marvel”) activates the fantastic short-circuit and calls attention to the issue of representation.

\textsuperscript{367} Benedetti, 327.

\textsuperscript{368} Lévy, 34.
with language. If we dig deeper into the mandatory professions of ineffability offered by Lovecraftian narrators and characters, especially in the context of their actions in the stories, we realize that something does not add up. Is it actually impossible to describe the monster, or is it better not to? In the opening comment of “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family,” the story of a man who embarks on a genealogical search until he uncovers a terrifying secret about his own ancestry that pushes him to suicide, the narrator reflects that “[s]cience, already oppressive with its shocking revelations, will perhaps be the ultimate exterminator of our human species … for its reserve of unguessed horrors could never be borne by mortal brains if loosed upon the world.”\(^\text{369}\) Here, then, is the ending point of the cataphatic trajectory that we have seen exemplified in the obsessive description of Wilbur Whateley’s body: gaining an actual understanding of what lies behind the kernel of “inconceivable, indescribable, and unmentionable monstrosity”\(^\text{370}\) would have “shocking” and ultimately self-destructive consequences. We witness an opposite movement to the one described in the first section: instead of stretching its expressive possibilities to monstrous extents in order to capture the unimaginable, the mind glimpses those “terrifying vistas”\(^\text{371}\) and retracts to a safer, if self-deceiving, dimension. Therefore, we are allowed to ask ourselves whether such repeatedly flaunted ineffability, aside from an obvious indicator of the limited scope of human faculties, could in fact be a defense mechanism; in this case, mystery (in the etymological sense we have


\(^{370}\) “The Outsider,” 12.

\(^{371}\) “The Call of Cthulhu,” 167.
already mentioned, i.e. “the closing of one’s eyes” or “the closing of one’s lips”) has a protective, conservative function.

In the already-quoted incipit for “The Call of Cthulhu,” the narrator expresses somber relief at the fact that the limited power of human faculties shields mankind from realizations that would plunge it into madness or into a new dark age.\(^{372}\) By the same token, many Lovecraftian narrators, for whom this merciful veil of ignorance has been torn, end their testimony with the wish that their manuscript be destroyed or their story never be told again, in the guise of inverted prophets: “Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye.”\(^ {373}\) The stakes of this suppression of information is indeed very high: if certain things were exposed, “then man must be prepared to accept notions of the cosmos, and of his own place in the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralyzing.”\(^ {374}\) As the narrator of “Arthur Jermyn” warns in no uncertain terms, we could all end up like him: “[i]f we knew what we are, we should do as Sir Arthur Jermyn did; and Arthur Jermyn soaked himself in oil and set fire to his clothing …”\(^ {375}\)

Words have the power to evoke monstrosity, or rather the corruptive power of monstrous revelations hatches within the word itself. In a short story by Ambrose Bierce titled “The Suitable Surroundings” (1889), Colston, a writer of ghost stories, reprimands his friend Marsh

\(^{372}\) Ibid.

\(^{373}\) Ibid., 196. Cf. also: “[i]t is for this latter reason that I urge, with all the force of my being, a final abandonment of all attempts at unearthing those fragments of unknown, primordial masonry which my expedition set out to investigate” (“The Shadow Out of Time,” 719).

\(^{374}\) “The Shadow Out of Time,” 719.

\(^{375}\) “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family,” 6.
for enjoying his literary works in streetcars and other noisy, crowded environments that are not conducive to an immersive reading experience. He challenges Marsh to read one of his manuscripts in “the suitable surroundings” – “[i]n solitude – at night – by the light of a candle”\(^{376}\) – warning him that such an experience could downright kill him. Albeit incredulous, Marsh follows his friend’s instructions and is found dead the following day in a deserted house with Colston’s manuscript on him. One of the men who find the body reads part of the manuscript to himself and then burns it before it gets to the coroner. The story leaves several explanations open as to the motivations of Colston and the man who destroyed the evidence, but none of them are entirely satisfying because the contents of the manuscript remain inaccessible. As far as we know, reading killed Marsh: whatever death-bearing property the ghouls in the story had, it was transferred onto the page and imbued into the words, not unlike the volume of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in “Il nome della rosa.”\(^{377}\) The burning of the manuscript spares others from exposure to potentially destructive knowledge. Sometimes it is wiser to put out the beacon of knowledge and remain in salvific obscurity: “The aperture was black with a darkness almost material. That tenebrousness was indeed a positive quality; for it obscured such parts of the inner walls as ought to have been revealed…”\(^{378}\)

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\(^{377}\) In “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” Lovecraft describes Bierce’s story as evoking “with singular subtlety yet apparent simplicity a piercing sense of the terror which may reside in the written word” (68). The following reference is to Umberto Eco’s 1980 novel, in which mysterious deaths in a medieval monastery are revealed to be caused by the poisoned pages of a manuscript.

\(^{378}\) Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 194.
Lovecraft’s fiction abounds with “pseudobiblia”\(^{379}\) such as “the dreaded *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred, the fragmentary *Book of Eibon*, and the suppressed *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Junzt”\(^{380}\); fictional treatises of forbidden lore that are usually evoked in conjunction with dark cults and practices. Their contents are mostly unknown and their objective materiality is almost irrelevant: what matters about them is that they are forbidden. Their *raison d’être* is not so much that of “giv[ing] a feeling of verisimilitude”\(^{381}\) to the stories, but rather that of being a function and symbol of the dangerous, destructive nature of a certain kind of knowledge. The words they contain are the host to a monstrous parasite that contaminates everything it touches.

Oblivion, lunacy and disintegration seems to be the final destination for those “searchers after horror” or “epicure[s] in the terrible”\(^{382}\) who get to know too much – usually men motivated by curiosity and a fatal love of knowledge. The seamen who witness the “tenebrousness” dissipate and Cthulhu come out of the cave are either killed on the spot by the monster, on the ship by fits of raving laughter, or soon thereafter by the mere fact of having experienced such horror. As the narrator of “The Call” concludes,

> I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me. But I do not

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\(^{380}\) Lovecraft, “The Dreams in the Witch House,” 655.

\(^{381}\) Lauterbach, 97.

I think my life will be long. As my uncle went, as poor Johansen went, so I shall go. I know too much …

Once the mind has been injected with the virus of horror (or truth, which in Lovecraft amounts to the same thing), the virus festers and spreads until one’s bodily integrity and soundness of mind disintegrate.

In fact, in exposing the fragility of such constructs, Lovecraft shows that “reason carries in itself its own germs of corruption.” An inflection of this parasitical model informs a number of stories where horror reaches a second stage, as it were, following the encounter with the monstrous: the recognition of some form of monstrosity within oneself. A good number of Lovecraft stories recount “the progressive and ineluctable transformation of the monster-object into the monster-subject,” describing a trajectory of interiorization of the other. For all its pursuit of “outsideness,” rather than posing a menace from an undefined hors là, Lovecraftian monstrosity is dangerous because it is already firmly established, if in an

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384 Lévy, 74.
385 Ibid.
embryonic phase, on the inside of an imagined boundary of safety, shored up by mere ignorance (either painfully acknowledged or actively preserved).\footnote{387} In “The Outsider” (1926), an auto-diegetic narrator gets free of some sort of dungeon where he has apparently spent all his life and wanders out through a wood and into a castle, where a party is being held. He tries to join the merry brigade but suddenly the partygoers run and scream in fear. The ending is quite “mechanical” in its predictability, as Lovecraft himself remarked ten years later\footnote{388}: thinking he has spotted the creature in a doorway, he approaches it and sees a horrendous monstrosity (“a compound of all that is unclean\footnote{389}”), only to realize he is facing a mirror and he is touching his own “rotting outstretched paw.”\footnote{390} Olmstead, the narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1931), is traveling through New England and ends up in Innsmouth, a decayed coastal town whose citizens exhibit odd physical features and a characteristically “shambling gait.”\footnote{391} He begins to investigate the history of the shady place

\footnote{387} Even cosmic menaces from remote corners of the universe, such as Cthulhu himself, embody a threat that comes from below, not above: it is not by chance that Cthulhu is described as lying dormant in the underwater city of R’lyeh. The same can be said of well-known short story “The Colour Out of Space,” a true manifesto of “outsideness,” where a meteorite lands in the middle of Massachusetts and creates a portion of “blasted heath” (passim) that corrupts the soil and brings about unsettling mutations in the crops, as well as turning inhabitants into incoherent, babbling madmen. On closer inspection, the story recounts the event \textit{ex post facto}; when the story takes place, supposedly in the 1920s, the meteorite has already fallen (1882). The protagonist, a surveyor who is in charge of building a reservoir in the area, can do nothing else but contemplate the consequences of this ever-expanding, seemingly unstoppable agent of corruption.

\footnote{388} Quoted in S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, \textit{An H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 198.

\footnote{389} Lovecraft, “The Outsider,” 13.

\footnote{390} Ibid.

\footnote{391} “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” 598. Lovecraft’s interest for backwoods areas (such as the Catskills in “Beyond the Wall of Silence” and “The Lurking Fear”) as spaces where the genetic pool has been hideously stagnant, giving way to monstrous inbreeding and related physical and mental decay, has heavily influenced the entire cinematic genre of folk horror and especially the foundational works of American horror, such as \textit{The Texas Chainsaw Massacre} (1974) and \textit{The Hills Have Eyes} (1977).
until he learns from the resident drunkard that the locals are the offspring of human females and “half ichthyic and half batrachian” entities – which explains their bulging, unblinking eyes and fishy smell. These hybrid creatures are said to become gradually more repellent, until they unfailingly disappear from public view. Chased out of the city by a horde of loathsome inhabitants amid “a bestial babel of croaking, baying, and barking without the least suggestion of human speech,” Olmstead researches the history of Innsmouth until he finds unnerving links between the place and the history of his own family. The discovery of a monstrous great-grandmother in his genealogical tree is crowned by the realization that he, too, has acquired “the Innsmouth look”: erupting in a monstrous exclamation (“Iä-R’lyeh! Cthulhu fhtagn! Iä! Iä!”), he decides to take to the sea and join his kin. The story traces the double movement that is typical of many Lovecraftian characters: Olmstead sets out to get to the bottom of the Innsmouth mystery, but ends up losing every vestige of humanity and becoming forever an inhabitant of the city’s inky waters. The alien language he speaks mimics that of the cult worshippers of Cthulhu and signals the terminal stage of monstrosity: after that, the story

392 Ibid., 595.
393 Ibid., 644. The paranoia of invasion also underlies Lovecraft’s racial and political stance; his racist views prompt him to write about the “Italo-Semitic-Mongoloid” masses corrupting the integrity of American culture in much the same terms as he describes swarms of sticky sea-monsters in his stories (quoted in Lévy, 61).
395 Ibid., 653.
396 The story describes this language as “enigmatical sense-impacts uninscribable save as gibberish” (“The Call of Cthulhu,” 171); as for the genesis of the word Cthulhu, Lovecraft explains it thus in a letter to Duane W. Rimel: “...the word is supposed to represent a fumbling human attempt to catch the phonetics of an absolutely non-human word. The name of the hellish entity was invented by beings whose vocal organs were not like man’s, hence it has no relation to the human speech equipment” (Letter to Duane W. Rimel, 23 July 1934; Selected Letters, vol. V, 10-11).
cannot but come to an end, suggesting that the last trace of Olmstead’s humanity went into the
drafting of this manuscript.

A very similar treatment of language as a marker of monstrosity is at the basis of one of
Lovecraft’s most accomplished stories. In “The Rats in the Walls” (1923), a well-to-do
American businessman called Delapore moves into an ancient family castle in England (Exham
Priory, an imposing construction dating back to Druidic times) after his son’s death following
a World War I injury. Upon moving, the man, who has reacquired the old family spelling of de
la Poer, is seen with the utmost suspicion by other villagers on account of old legends about
dark practices carried out by his ancestors, the “cursed of God.” Despite extensive and
beautifully executed restoration works, the walls seem to be teeming with rats. Following the
scurrying noise, which seems to retreat “downward, far underneath this deepest of sub-
cellars,” de la Poer discovers that the basement opens up, through a hidden passage, into an
immense underground vault. Together with a company of “assembled savants” (his friend
captain Norrys, as well as archeologists and antiquarians), he penetrates the dark recesses of
Exham Priory, where “horror pile[s] on horror” as they discover architectural remains from
different eras and biological remains of both human and “semi-human” origin (all of whom

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397 This is likely an homage to Edgar Allan Poe, as noted among others by S. T. Joshi (Joshi and Schultz, 223). In fact, “The Rats in the Walls” resonates with themes from Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher.”


399 Ibid., 89.

400 Ibid., 91.

401 Ibid., 93.

402 Ibid., 92.
are “invariably in postures of demoniac frenzy, either fighting off some menace or clutching some other forms with cannibal intent”\(^{403}\). It soon becomes clear that the de la Poers were followers of an ancient cannibalistic cult dating back to pre-Roman times, which the protagonist associates with the upsetting dreams he has been having while in the house (such as the image of ominous Trimalchio-like feasts “with a horror in a covered platter”\(^{404}\)). In the hidden depths of the vault, where humans have been preying on humans since they were still half-monkeys, the narrator is overcome by the emergence of some sort of racial subconscious – the monstrous seed that corrupts his family blood: mirroring the descent into the depths of

\(^{403}\) Ibid., 93. Apropos of this downward movement, Stefano Lazzarin has highlighted the correspondence between the rhetorical structure of Lovecraft’s texts and the physical architecture of the inhuman spaces in which characters move. Just like narrators constantly denounce the unsayable nature of the exceptional sights they contemplate, but always stumble upon something that is, paradoxically, more unsayable, more exceptional – so that no zenith or nadir of horror is ever reached - , in the same way, their adventure brings them deeper and deeper into “Piranesi[an]” spaces, where stairs lead to more stairs and cellars lead to more profound pits (“L’orrore è un crescendo tenebroso che sembra sempre sul punto di fermarsi per raggiunti limiti dell’umana facoltà di concepire, e non si ferma mai”; Lazzarin, “Il volto velato,” 8). This model, which can be summed up in the formula “infinito + x” (9), also describes a temporal descent, whereby an ancient past (both chronological and psychic) can be accessed through the same physical downward movement. In describing the position of his secret studio, unsurprisingly located in the basement of a dilapidated house, Pickman offers Thurber these hardly reassuring coordinates: “It isn’t so very far … as distance goes, but it’s centuries away as the soul goes.” In fact, we could visualize Lovecraft’s fictional universe as organized around a vertical axis, from the bowels of the earth to the depths of the cosmos, rather than responding to a flat, rhizomatic structure. The horizontal roaming described by contemporary modernist novels, whose ideal background is the city, has no prominent place in Lovecraft’s work (by the way, “The Rats in the Walls” was written between the date of publication of the first installment of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, 1918, and the appearance of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, 1925), if not in the guise of the “ville double” theme: a split between the ordinary, diurnal side of the city and a dark, secret underbelly where unseen and unimaginable things lie dormant (Lévy, 46). As already mentioned, his stories are usually set in small towns or in the backwoods of New England, places where encounters with the unknown are easier and more frequent. This spatial configuration reflects the writer’s aesthetic priorities: “I could not write about ‘ordinary people’ because I am not in the least interested in them. … Man’s relations to man do not captivate my fancy. It is man’s relation to the cosmos – to the unknown – which alone arouses in me the spark of creative imagination” (Lovecraft, “The Defence Remains Open!,” 53).

\(^{404}\) “The Rats in the Walls,” 91.
the earth, his language undergoes a striking involution from modern to archaic to Middle English, then Latin, Gaelic and finally incoherent beastly sounds:

Curse you, Thornton, I’ll teach you to faint at what my family do!… ’Sblood, thou stinkard, I’ll learn ye how to gust… wolde ye swynke me thilke wys?… Magna Mater! Magna Mater!… Atys… Dia ad aghaidh ’s ad aodann… agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas ’s dholas ort, agus leat-sa!… Ungl… ungl… rrrlh… chchch…

De la Poer is finally found in one of the deepest pits, crouching over the half-eaten body of captain Norrys. Here the reader will probably recall the repeated and slightly puzzling hints at Norrys’s plumpness scattered throughout de la Poer’s account, which otherwise does not linger on any other character’s physical traits. The taint of the narrator’s degenerate blood has been within him the whole time, only under the threshold of consciousness, just like the rats hiding in the walls; the repressed ‘genetic’ memory has emerged periodically in those descriptive slips, only to burst forth in the depths of the cellar. The ending actually preserves a classic degree of ambiguity: the protagonist is telling the story (to whom?) or writing the manuscript from a madhouse and still hears rats in the walls of his padded room, which leads one to believe he is mentally deranged; and yet, if Exham Priory has in fact been blown up (as he maintains), it is likely that some terrible secret did in fact fester in its foundations.

3. The impossible literature of Tommaso Landolfi

In a passage of his Pensieri (1845), Giacomo Leopardi recounts how one day in 1831 his friend Antonio Ranieri, walking through the streets of Florence, saw a group of people cry out in

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405 Ibid., 96.
terror over what they believed to be a ghost in the window of a *palazzo*, and that he ascertained was nothing more than “un grembiule nero … agitato dal vento.” He finds the fact all the more remarkable because, in his view, Italians are not a people to fall prey to such irrational beliefs. In fact, as a coda, he adds a jab at an imaginary foreigner who might smile at that scene: “[e] gli stranieri si tengano qui di sorridere, come fanno volentieri delle cose nostre; perché troppo è noto che nessuna delle tre grandi nazioni che, come dicono i giornali, *marchent à la tête de la civilisation*, crede agli spiriti meno dell’italiana.” As a matter of fact, while Leopardi is writing these words (in the 1830s), there is not the faintest trace on the Italian literary landscape of the fantastic terrors populating the pages of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Charles Nodier, Théophile Gautier, Ann Radcliffe, E. A. Poe and many others. The belatedness of the Italian brand of the fantastic is confirmed by the fact that the first proper attempts at the genre are courtesy of the Scapigliatura (Iginio Ugo Tarchetti’s collection *Racconti fantastici* is published in 1869). The reasons for such tardiness are probably to be found in a combination of factors, including a peculiarly rationalistic Romanticism associated with the political struggles for unification, the influence of Catholicism in the cultural discourse, the importance of the classical tradition, and an enduring notion of ‘sanity’ and rationalism as chiefly Mediterranean characteristics.

The last point is raised by Gianfranco Contini in the back cover of *Italie Magique* (1946), a collection of stories that has long been considered a landmark in the critical assessment of the Italian fantastic tradition: in his view, Italian and French surrealism are characterized by a

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407 Ibid.

408 Amigoni, 36.
“lucidité du contrôle”⁴⁰⁹ that is opposed to the Gothic mists of Northern traditions; more specifically, the Italian variety stands out for its ample use of ironic detachment. Contini’s collection succeeded in shedding light on the state of non-realistic literature in Italy at the time (a second 1988 edition with an added Postfazione does nothing but suggest the possible addition of Soldati and Calvino) but influenced subsequent criticism in ways that have gone mostly undetected for decades: first, the collection was highly idiosyncratic and reflected Contini’s personal taste – therefore the canon that it contributed to shape was debatable; second, and most important, it was meant as a collection of Italian literature in the genre of “magico-surreale,” rather than fantastic.⁴¹⁰ Another point about the Italian fantastic proper was made, more or less explicitly, by another influential anthology, Italo Calvino’s Racconti fantastici dell’Ottocento (1983). Calvino was also convinced of the peculiarly ‘intellectual’ quality of Italian fantastic literature in the twentieth century, while he did not think very highly of its nineteenth-century precursors. In the introduction, the writer famously explained the total exclusion of Italian writers as follows: “Ho lasciato da parte gli autori italiani perché non mi piaceva farli figurare solo per obbligo di presenza: il fantastico resta nella letteratura italiana dell’Ottocento un campo veramente «minore».”⁴¹¹

Indeed, fantastic fiction by nineteenth-century authors such as Iginio Ugo Tarchetti and the Boito brothers is strongly indebted to the masters of American, German and French


literature: however, the fact that the Scapigliatura borrows abundantly from non-Italian models should not be taken at face value. As demonstrated by Morena Corradi, in the decades following Italian unification, fantastic tropes and themes are absorbed by the cultural humus and come to inform and structure political, social and cultural discourses of the time.\(^{412}\) In the twentieth century, fantastic literature takes a very distinctive shape in Italy, through the many and diverse aesthetic directions pursued by writers such as Alberto Savinio, Primo Levi, Dino Buzzati, Antonio Tabucchi, Giorgio Manganelli. In these writers, the notion of a certain belatedness of the genre often translates into an extremely skillful and self-aware engagement with what Roger Caillois calls the “fantastique d’institution”\(^{413}\): “[i] temi e le metafore si fanno più idiosincratici. Il bestiario fantastico si arricchisce di esemplari inediti, l’elenco degli eventi impossibili di minimi, capziosi e disorientanti scompensi spaziotemporali.”\(^{414}\)

This is especially true in the case of Tommaso Landolfi (1908-1979), “vero e proprio Linneo degli animali inesistenti,”\(^{415}\) whose work features ultimate category mistakes, entities that straddle the boundary between language and beast, thing and thought. With Landolfi, the dynamic relationship we have been tracing between monstrosity and language is carried to the extreme. In his works, that which creates and summons monstrosity is the mere action of “ricerca o … sistemazione di parole”\(^{416}\): the signifying act is intrinsically teratogenic, because

\(^{412}\) Morena Corradi, *Spettri d’Italia*, passim.


\(^{414}\) Amigoni, 39.


any narrative that pretends to describe the world and the workings of the mind hides the fiction of its insurmountable arbitrariness. The gulf between the real (wherever it may be found) and the word, as well as between words and the subject who uses them, simply cannot be bridged. One may forget that it is there; but when a glitch in the signifying system occurs, one is occasionally exposed to the “terrifying vistas” that lie under, or beyond, language – to the unknown that activates precisely what we have been calling the fantastic reaction or experience. This experience, which is the chief concern of Landolfi’s fiction, works as a structural and thematic principle across his fantastic oeuvre.\textsuperscript{417} It makes for an irresistible “coazione metanarrativa,”\textsuperscript{418} whereby literature ultimately always talks about its coming into being; it determines the uncanny geography of his stories, where words slide seamlessly (and terrifyingly) from a familiar locus of habit and everyday use into a dimension that is external and alien to the subject, imposing upon the mind with clinging intensity; and finally, it translates into the thematization of monstrous language in the guise of unprecedented ‘monster-words.’ These include animated, talking words who surprise the narrator when he least expects it; unheard-of signifiers making their respective signified suddenly scary; and the ultimately interstitial class of creatures, things that straddle the boundary between word, thought, and animal all at once – mind-matter hybrids that are far more dangerous than any ghost or vampire.

\textsuperscript{417} In this section, I concentrate especially on Landolfi’s fantastic fiction, with occasional forays into works belonging to other genres. My approach does not specifically take into account the various stages of Landolfi’s fantastic, since I mostly analyze his work with respect to his attitude to language; this, as noted by Simone Castaldi, remains largely consistent throughout the years (Simone Castaldi, “Il linguaggio come funzione del fantastico nella narrativa di Tommaso Landolfi,” \textit{Forum Italicum} 44, no. 2, 2010: 359-360).

\textsuperscript{418} Silvia Bellotto, \textit{Metamorfosi del fantastico: immaginazione e linguaggio nel racconto surreale italiano del Novecento} (Bologna: Pendragon, 2003), 187.
Tommaso Landolfi (1908-1979) was born in the small town of Pico, in central Italy. He studied in Prato and then in Florence, graduating in Russian language and literature and associating with the intellectuals and writers gravitating around the Giubbe Rosse café. Always fundamentally disinterested in political matters, he was incarcerated for one month in 1943 for “discorsi di chiara marca antifascista.” A man of solitary temperament, he spent long periods of time in his Pico mansion or feeding his gambling addiction in Sanremo and Venice (the gambler being one of the recurrent figures in his literary work). While the first part of his writing career was mostly devoted to fantastic fiction, going forward his production diversified into other genres (autobiographical writing, poetry, fairy-tale, drama, *elzeviro*), despite cultivating a fantastic strain up until the final works.

Landolfi was never too keen on being considered a writer of fantastic stories:

Su una rivista italiana, a nessun proposito, giudizio sommamente lusinghiero sulla mia «opera»; e tra l'altro vi son definito, con lodi da fare il viso rosso, «autore di racconti fantastici». Sommamente lusinghiero, cioè inteso come tale: come mi dispiace, al contrario, e come è anacronistico. Ma se avessi voluto essere uno scrittore di racconti fantastici... Che cosa invece ho voluto essere o sono? E chi lo sa: come sempre la mia comprensione è stata ed è soltanto negativa («Questo solo di noi...»).

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419 Cronologia, in *Opere*, vol. I, XLVIII. These “dichiarazioni” were hardly dictated by a vocation to *impegno*, but rather to the writer’s genetic aversion to every form of authoritarianism. Interestingly, in the autobiographical fiction *La bière du pêcheur* (1953), the jail experience is welcomed with relief because it frees the narrator from “ogni pensiero e ogni possibilità d’azione” (*La bière du pêcheur, Opere*, vol. I, 638). In 1944, Landolfi and his father were driven out of the family mansion by the Germans and were forced to go into hiding in the mountains. In *La bière du pêcheur*, the narrator uses words that echo those used to describe the consequences of his past incarceration: “… soprattutto mi conveniva, quella vita, perché non comportava alcuna decisione e alcun impegno; almeno, era facile e persino giustificato credersi sotto il peso incrollabile d’una vasta fatalità, alla quale fosse, per così dire, affidato il compito di pensare per noi. In questo beato senso d’irresponsabilità e di abdicazione io trovavo il mio pane” (638). The title of this work is spelled in all capitals in order to establish an ambiguity between two alternative meanings (or a combination of them): *La bière du pêcheur* (*The fisherman’s beer*) or *La bière du pêcheur* (*The sinner’s coffin*).

Ferdinando Amigoni ventures a guess as to what the ellipsis could stand for: “…se avessi voluto essere uno scrittore di racconti fantastici…ora sarei ricco e famoso tra pendolari e vacanzieri”; but perhaps the context of Landolfi’s aesthetic approach can point us in a different direction. On the one hand, as demonstrated by this and other passages, the writer is deeply convinced of the anachronistic nature of fantastic narration in his own times. The great century of European fantastic literature has come to an end. From the onset of his career, Landolfi is a rather isolated figure in the Italian literary landscape, between the lyricism of Ermetismo and the fiction of writers such as Palazzeschi and Moravia (with the exception, perhaps, of Bontempelli’s realismo magico); after the war, Neorealism and the literature of impegno represent cultural proposals that are diametrically opposed to Landolfi’s conception of literature and the role of the writer. However, we should keep in mind that Landolfi’s literary trajectory does not simply register a loss of investment in the fantastic genre, but a general skepticism towards literature itself, as observed by Romano Luperini: “[l’]evoluzione dello scrittore è segnata … dalla progressiva disgregazione dello stesso strumento letterario.” In light of this, we can assume the ellipsis to imply something along the lines of “sarei nato nel secolo scorso,” or most likely, “…non avrei scritto affatto.”

Still, if we take the liberty of ignoring Landolfi’s distaste for the fantastic label (not least because it is so blatantly contradicted by his writing practice), we realize that some of his metaliterary reflections are redolent of our previous discussion of fantastic as perversion of (and therefore dependent on) realism:

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421 Amigoni, 67.

Sembra infatti che una deviazione parziale debba risultare, dal punto di vista rappresentativo, più mostruosa d’una totale, in quanto si tiene più prossima a una realtà corrente e verosimile senza attuare quel rovesciamento e quella proiezione in dimensioni del tutto fittizie e arbitrarie che inevitabilmente e unicamente impegnerebbero facoltà secondarie del lettore, spingendolo a una valutazione meramente intellettuale e convincendolo per questa via che si tratta di mero gioco.423

In Landolfi’s fiction, these partial deviations are chiefly linguistic perversions, entrusted with the activation of the fantastic space.424 However, such literary explorations are never joyous or playful, even when they seem to give in to postmodern excess (“[non] si tratta di mero gioco”). They have a tragic, desperate character, ultimately owing to the fact that, more than anything, “Landolfi [è] terrorizzato dalla perdita del senso”425 and is not interested in its Dadaist deflagrations. We may also read the above passage as a theory of the monstrous, to be intended as deviation from, or corruption of, what is considered natural/habitual/human, rather than as complete alterity. This model, which we have seen developed in Lovecraft,426 also makes sense in the context of Landolfi’s monster-words – linguistic disturbances that stand out against the

423 Landolfi, Rien va, 285.

424 According to Simone Castaldi, Landolfi’s brand of the fantastic, “prescindendo da una individuazione di ordine strettamente tematico, scaturisce principalmente da questioni di ordine linguistico”; throughout the writer’s career, both in his fiction and in his autobiographical production, “la lingua diventa luogo di rifugio, di mascheramento, occasione di giuoco, ambito deputato del grottesco e principalmente fonte prima del fantastico …” (Castaldi, 360). In this respect, Landolfi’s work perfectly illustrates the movement described, among others, by Rosalba Campra: “[e]l pasaje de un fantástico prevalentemente semántico, come en el siglo XIX, a un fantástico del discurso” (Rosalba Campra, Territorios de la ficción: lo fantástico, Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2008, 187).

425 Amigoni, 86.

426 One thinks of certain Lovecraftian hybrids such as Wilbur Whateley, whose composite body is gloriously alien but whose features are still “partly human, beyond a doubt” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 390), or the Deep Ones from “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” once-men turned anthropomorphic fish-frogs.
apparently familiar background of everyday language, all of a sudden showing an incongruous, alien face.

3.1. The frightening face of the familiar

The notion of once-familiar psychic entities resurfacing in consciousness lies at the heart of the experience of the unheimlich, as argued by Sigmund Freud in a well-known 1919 paper. In this text, Freud ventures into the field of aesthetics in order to investigate the psychoanalytical etiology and the literary conditions necessary for the experiencing of uncanny feelings. He begins by dissecting the word heimlich, whose root denotes something familiar, belonging to the home (Heim), but also (by virtue of its intimate quality) something secret, concealed, kept from sight – so that its meaning ends up coinciding with its opposite, unheimlich i.e. unknown, unfamiliar. The ambiguous geography mapped by this etymological foray, together with a targeted reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Der Sandmann,” help Freud flesh out his conclusion: the uncanny arises not just when there is a conflict of interpretations (or mere intellectual uncertainty, as his predecessor Ernst Jentsch had speculated in his 1906 On the Psychology of the Uncanny), but when this conflict is established between, on the one hand, an ideational content that has been repressed (for instance the castration complex) or a primitive belief that has been surmounted (such as animism), and on the other a reality in which those elements have come to be regarded as unknown or impossible. This content has to be expelled from consciousness for the sake of the reality principle, but its Unheimlichkeit (its having-been-familiar) grants it a peculiarly forceful quality. Freud lists a number of themes that are usually

associated with the effect, namely the *Doppelgänger*, the recurrence of the same (*déjà vu*), wishes or presentiments coming true, magic and witchcraft, death (dead bodies, ghosts and spirits), live burial, dismembered limbs (all of which are especially dear to fantastic writers). The category of the uncanny is a productive critical tool to illuminate the position that Landolfi’s monster-words occupy with respect to the subject. First of all, they hail from a dimension that sounds very much like the unconscious: “Donde vengono difatto queste strane parole su cui io non ho dominio, sorte d’un tratto e che mi son come estranee, se non dal fondo d’una mia follia?”

Far from being pliable products of a speaker’s will, they impose upon him with an “insopportabile intensità psichica,” provoking both acute terror and obsessive fascination. They point to a path that, if followed, could lead to the mental and linguistic collapse of any (seemingly) cohesive, rational subjectivity.

In the story “Il babbo di Kafka” (1942), the Freudian theme is dealt with rather explicitly. In the text, the Bohemian writer and a friend (the narrator) witness a horrifying scene: the resuscitation of Kafka’s father, by now long dead, in the form of a giant spider with Hermann Kafka’s head. The disgusting hybrid (“l’animale, o uomo,” “colla faccia rivolta all’insù, … un poco inclinata, nella posizione d’un rosso,”) reminiscent of certain nightmarish paintings by Odilon Redon (and possibly an ironic literalization of Freud’s structural theory in its vertical arrangement of body/animal/Id vs mind/human/Super-Ego), advances slowly towards the men while staring reproachfully at his son. While the narrator screams and runs, Kafka, overcoming

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429 Amigoni, 82.
431 Ibid., 290.
the anguish he felt as a child when accused of unknown wrongdoing, chases the spider “nel grande salone buio,” but loses it in the meanders of his big, empty house. He searches for it in vain for days, fearing he will have to leave the house if that thing keeps haunting it ("«[m]a guarda,» si diceva «c’era a casa mia un simile animale e chi l’aveva mai visto! Chissà poi quanti altri ce ne sono dello stesso genere. Se non lo acchiappo non potrò più vivere qui»"); when he finally finds it, he squashes it to death. By killing his father (i.e. the monstrous projections that have crystallized around him in his mind), Kafka reclaims control of his house/consciousness, although this process is signaled as always constitutively incomplete ("[c]on ciò Kafka credeva d’essersene liberato per sempre, anche se a duro prezzo. Ma quanti ragni, grossi o piccini, non alberga un vecchio maniero!"). The killing is made possible by a final appearance of the elusive creature in full daylight, in a room “per la cui finestra il sole penetrava largamente”: as the classic fantastic trope of the “vecchio maniero” becomes a straightforward representation of one’s ultimately unknowable psychic life, so the creature

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432 Ibid.
433 Ibid.
434 Ibid., 291.
435 Ibid., 290.
haunting it exemplifies one of Freud’s definitions for the uncanny, which he borrows from Schelling: what “ought to have remained … secret and hidden but has come to light.”

In the story “Parole in agitazione” (1968), this coming to light translates into an actual act of regurgitation. One morning, while brushing his teeth, the narrator spits out in the sink, instead of toothpaste, a number of tiny, frenzied words (“[n]on so come spiegarmi: erano parole ma erano vive, e guizzavano di qua e di là nel lavandino…”437). The words address him to ask for a redistribution of their meanings based on their phonetic associations; for instance, Locupletale, meaning “attinente alla ricchezza,” claims its meaning should rather be “attinente a ruscello o in genere ad acqua che scorre … Perbacco, lo – cu – ple – ta – le: non ce l’hai l’orecchio?”438 Other words lay claim to different sounds that they think would be more appropriate to the object they signify, until the narrator, utterly confused by all the slipping and exchanging of meanings, decides to write down all the signifieds and to have words successively pick their preferred one in an orderly fashion. The little creatures, pacified, disappear, but the narrator finally has a frightening realization: he did not record the new pairings, has no “documento probante,” “[s]icché adesso, alle corte, lo sanno loro cosa

436 Freud, 223. The story also exemplifies an exquisitely fantastic procedure – already inventoried by Todorov – that works both on the thematic and on the rhetorical level: “the transition from mind to matter” (Todorov, 114) through the literalization of speech. At the outset of the story, the narrator asks Kafka what he would do if, say, a gigantic spider with the head of a man walked into the room that very second. The writer smugly replies he would kill the thing in an instant; “[n]on aveva finito Kafka di pronunciare queste parole e guardava ancora in aria di sfida la porta accostata, quando il battente girò lentamente sui cardini e si produsse punto per punto la scena da me immaginata” (289). The narrator has effectively conjured up the monstrous apparition with his words; he has created, and given disgustingly solid shape, to a nightmare. Moreover, with the appearance of the monster, “Il babbo di Kafka” stages the very act of literary creation, the coming into being of an entity made of words, yet so solid that it can be smashed with “un maglio da botte” into “una specie di midollo più o meno liquido” (291).


438 Ibid., 856.
significano, non io. È terribile." These words are not only uncanny because they are animated, but mostly because of the movement they describe, graphically represented by the regurgitation: from the inside to the outside of the narrator’s body, expelled and rejected but still coming back, demanding to be heard. No wonder the narrator, when the ordeal is over, still lives in fear of their return: “ma sempre in casa saranno restate, e un giorno o l’altro, vedrete, mi risalteranno addosso.”

Upon their appearance, words rebuke the narrator for being “un di quelli che ci tratta e bistratta,” presumably a writer; then the man himself alludes to the reckless use of words by “taluni romanzieri o giornalisti.” But the story is not a mere indictment of the degradation of language into lazy cliché. To be sure, the narrator of “Parole in agitazione” seems to have fallen prey to an acritical approach to language dictated by habit and its comfortable certainties: the suggestion being that he uses words like he brushes his teeth – without thinking. However, he stands accused not only of bistrattare, but also, more simply, of trattare [le parole]. The story suggests that the act of signification always already implies an improper use of language, because it pretends to ignore the underlying approximation and fiction regulating the relationship between words and things. That is to say, the redistribution of meanings effected by the narrator, far from rectifying mistakes or creating further chaos, only highlights the intrinsically arbitrary nature of the previous arrangement.

439 Ibid., 858.
440 Ibid.
441 Ibid., 855.
442 Ibid., 856.
A similar communicative short-circuit is pursued in another tale entitled “La passeggiata” (1966), which opens with the following passage (and continues for two pages in the same vein):

La mia moglie era agli scappini, il garzone scapruginava, la fante preparava la bozzima… Sono un murcido, veh, son perfino un po’ gordo, ma una tal calma, mal rotta da quello zombare e dai radi cuiussi del giardiniere col terzomo, mi faceva quel giorno l’effetto di un malagma o di un dropace! Meglio uscire, pensai invertudiandomi, farò magari due passi fino alla fodina.443

When the story was published, many readers and critics took it for a mere divertissement or an experiment in phonosymbolism. However, in the later “Conferenza personalfilologico-drammatica con implicazioni,” included in Le labrene (1974), Landolfi staged an imaginary discussion between himself and his critics (quoting actual reviews), revealing that all the words in the story could in fact be found in a Tommaseo-Bellini dictionary of Italian. Now, Landolfi’s intent in “La passeggiata” is not simply to play a trick on his readers (the pleasure of the literary game is certainly part of the issue, but not all there is to it). The short story is rather a meditation on the uncanny nature of language, entrusted to a selection of words that look and sound unknown on first impression, but are subsequently revealed to be firmly established in the Italian lexicon (if in its periphery).444 What creates disorientation is not the words themselves (the reading of the story), but the act of re-reading that takes place once we know those words are, or used to be, our words. Put into the context of Landolfi’s fiction, it seems possible that the desired outcome of the experiment be mostly to stress how

443 “La passeggiata,” in Racconti impossibili, Opere I, 591.

444 This return of the linguistically repressed (admittedly, a loose version of the Freudian concept) is interestingly dramatized by the textual history of “La passeggiata” – the fact that Landolfi returned on the topic in “Conferenza,” and then finally in one of his last writings, the elzeviro “Fatti personali.”
the difference between “scaprugginare” and “preparare le scanalature delle botti” is purely a difference in degree and not in kind. All words, regardless of their acquired familiarity through use, are endowed with an intrinsically alien character, which does not especially depend on the degree to which they are trattate and bistrattate.

In a number of well-known stories, prosaic, everyday entities turn into something utterly monstrous purely by virtue of linguistic deviations. Like Medieval teratomorphic writing, where words not only point to their usual meaning, but also carry an excess of unrelated signification through the human and monstrous bodies that compose the illuminated letters,\footnote{Williams, Deformed Discourse, 216-222.} so familiar objects are made strange by an ultimately uninterpretable further layer contained in their respective signifiers. Why are potatoes, in “La morte del re di Francia” (1937), suddenly referred to as canie? What is strange about them, if not the opaque, suggestive signifier that makes such a household staple inexplicably alien?\footnote{The word emerges as a fantasy of species contamination in the dream-like internal monologue of Rosalba: “Le patate a terra. Spigate. Le patate, si capisce, sono animali. Alzano una strana testa con un lungo collo dal loro corpo bitorzoluto. Il collo e la testa verdi, il corpo color terra. Strani animali. … Strani animali anche i cani. Che sgomento però! Comunque le patate le chiameremo… mettiamo canie. Ecco una bella parola: «Sbuccia le canie e tagliale sottili!» Eh eh” (Landolfi, “La morte del re di Francia,” in Dialogo dei massimi sistemi, Opere I, 28).} What does our confusion with respect to these entities say about our epistemological habits? The narrator of “Le labrene” (1974) is obsessed by the eponymous little reptiles, commonly known as geckos; the fantastic quality of the tale, centered around the protagonist’s paranoia and his conflictual relationship with the material of his own story, originates mainly from the haunting and unusual word through which
“[...]la turpe bestia” is designated. In “Il dente di cera,” the third part of the story “Teatrino” (1939), a man is having dinner in a boarding house with the hostess, when the woman accidentally loses an artificial tooth. She explains that she makes her own prosthetic teeth out of “cera giassa,” a qualifier whose mysterious meaning provokes utter shock and bewilderment in the man:

«Di cera?...»
«Di cera giassa.»
«Signora, ve ne prego, che scherzi son questi? ... Voi volete profittare della mia debolezza!»
«Perché? Che volete dire?»
«Come che voglio dire! Ma s’è mai sentita una cera giassa! Che cosa intendete per cera giassa?»
«È una cera, cera... cera giassa insomma.»
«Signora smettetela, voi volete provocarmi. Sapete meglio di me che non esiste una cera giassa ... Mi fate sudar freddo e mi mettete una smania, un formicolio nelle membra...»

The man’s alarmed reaction (culminating in physical violence) is dictated not by the quality of the object itself, but by the maddeningly elusive nature of the word used to describe it. Canie,

447 “Le labrenè,” in Le labrenè, ed. Idolina Landolfi (Milano: Adelphi, 1994), 14. There is much to be said about this story as regards its fantastic qualities. In the taxonomy of Novecento fantastic delineated by Stefano Lazzarin (who identifies, as already mentioned, a hyper-, a meta- and neo-fantastic streak in twentieth-century iterations of the mode – all of which are perfectly represented in Landolfi), “Le labrenè” would probably appear among hyper-fantastic texts. This is true not only with regard to themes (a protagonist with an obsession that drives him mad, a case of suspended animation, a Poe-esque fear of live burial), but especially as concerns narrative devices. For instance, it features a textbook unreliable narrator whose only instruments for apprehending reality are his sensory and deductive faculties, but whose very unreliability is pushed to such extreme lengths as to become almost parodic. After coming into contact with a disgusting labrena and losing consciousness, the protagonist slowly comes to, only to realize he is suspended in a state of apparent death (“vita o sopravvita”, 15). He cannot move or speak; someone closes his eyes “pietosamente,” with the result that “mi rimasero soltanto e per unico tramite col mondo l’odorato e l’udito” (ibid.); then his face is covered (for better preservation) with a handkerchief soaked in vinegar, rendering his nose useless; finally, being placed in a coffin muffles the soundscape around him. All this information leads us to question – to say the least – his account of the events occurred during his sopravvita (his widow kissing his cousin at the wake, his being buried alive and then rescued at the last minute).

448 “Teatrino,” in Il mar delle blatte e altre storie, Opere I, 257.
labrene and a tooth made of cera giassa are not properly monstrous entities, but they seem to monsterize the signified they are attached to. A gecko itself is not monstrous if we call it gecko, but it might become so if we call it “labrena”; similarly, a fake tooth may be mildly disgusting, but its material reality is irrelevant when its name is sufficiently haunting to stick to a man’s brain fibers until he goes insane.

The process of de-familiarization of language as a way into the mystery that underlies it is theorized in a famous passage of the autobiographical novel Des mois (1967), where Landolfi introduces the notion of “parole-viticci”:

Ciascuno avrà fatto, volontariamente o per caso, l’esperimento che consiste nel rigirarsi dentro una parola fino a svotarla del tutto di significato; essa cioè sembra allora staccarsi, non solo dall’oggetto al quale va abitualmente legata, ma da ogni possibile oggetto od appiglio o sostegno, ed arricciolarsi, convolgersi nella mente, simile dapprima a quelle punte di frasche che il fuoco del camino torce avanti di bruciare, e da ultimo soltanto a se medesima. Parole-viticci, si potrebbero forse chiamare queste parole senza immaginabile rapporto colla realtà fenomenica. Ora: che cosa sono esse? Sono oggetti irriconoscibili o veramente parole autonome? E, nel secondo caso, donde vengono o cosa simboleggiano? E noi stessi che dobbiamo farne, in quale spazio, in quale abisso dell’anima lasciarle sciamare? Ancora una volta ci sentiamo superati da alcunché o da alcuno; né, sgomenti, troviamo nulla di meglio che frettolosamente ritrarci da quel mondo di ombre minacciose e riportare le parole al loro valore trito, provvisorio.449

Every word, if seen from up close, threatens to lose its meaning – or better, to reveal its inherent meaninglessness. An extraordinary “monomania” or “nervous intensity of interest” is what dictates one of the pastimes of Egaeus in E. A. Poe’s “Berenice,” i.e. “to repeat monotonously some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea

449 Des mois, Opere II, 765.
whatever to the mind." This literary antecedent evokes images that are far from comforting (where did that monomania lead Egaeus?), but the narrator of *Des mois* manages to snap out of a potentially lethal fixation by retreating to the reassuring world of habit and commonplace.

3.2. “E allora perché non taci?”

A worse fate befalls the unfortunate protagonist of sci-fi novel *Cancroregina* (1950), who is writing a chronicle-diary from a spaceship adrift around the moon. It is precisely through an effort of “ricerca o… sistemazione di parole” that the narrator unwittingly summons an unsettling entity, which he calls with the neologism *porrovio*. This entity appears completely unannounced in the text, like a sudden realization:

Il porrovio! Che bestia è il porrovio? Mi duole dire che io stesso non lo so … Lui ha un’aria tra il tapiro e il porco o il babirussa, è quasi senza collo. Compare quando la notte corre come una lepre al sole, colle orecchie trapassate dalla luce; e quando dall’ombra mi spia e mi cova la follia, accovacciata come un gatto, o meglio come un escremento di vacca, cogli occhi gialli. Da molto tempo la mia vita è ossessionata dalla ricerca o dalla sistemazione di parole. Il porrovio si aggira grigio nelle tenebre, il porrovio viene, va, il porrovio è una massa che io non posso inghiottire. Il porrovio non è una bestia: è una parola.

The pinnacle of monstrous interstitiality has been reached: the *porrovio* is not only a Linnean nightmare, a mash-up of species; it is a word, a psychic phantasm and a material entity at all once. The same can be said about the *vipistrello*, or mental bat – another *bestia-parola* obsessing the narrator of *Cancroregina*. This unheard-of creature ("mostruosa" because of a

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“deviazione parziale” rather than “totale”: a slight orthographic alteration) flaps around the inside of the cranium, but it can be expelled, and therefore materialized, through a powerful sneeze.\textsuperscript{452} Few things reinforce the notion of the permeability between mind and matter more than the image of a porous skull.

The consequence of these apparitions can be compared to those described by Arthur Schopenhauer in the already-mentioned treatise on ghost-seeing:

\begin{quote}
\ldots with these perceptions, the boundary between subject and object, as being the first condition of all knowledge, becomes doubtful, indistinct, and indeed quite blurred. ‘Is that outside or inside me?’ is asked by everyone – as it was by Macbeth when a dagger floated before him – by everyone who is not deprived of caution and reflectiveness by a vision of such a nature.\textsuperscript{453}
\end{quote}

In Landolfi’s fiction, the appearance of word-animals such as the porrovio accompany the disintegration of the principium inviduationis ("quelle distinzioni che … garantiscono lo sviluppo e l'integrità della coscienza: Io/Altro; reale/irreale; parte/tutto; vita/morte"\textsuperscript{454}), and above all the distinction between subject and object, the necessary foundation of both knowledge and discourse. In the context of our interpretive grid, the porrovio is an enemy of cataphasis: logical affirmations about the real based on detached observation, entrusted to a transparent, objective language. It is not surprising, then, that as soon as the porrovio makes its way into the mind of the character, both his mental structure and its linguistic scaffolding

\textsuperscript{452} “È forse proprio questo il miracolo operato dalla scrittura di Landolfi: riuscire a rendere una perturbazione linguistica più immediatamente fisica nei suoi effetti di un mostro uscito dal laboratorio del dottor Frankenstein” (Amigoni, Fantasmi nel Novecento, 83).

\textsuperscript{453} Schopenhauer, 298.

\textsuperscript{454} Mangini, 73.
begin to putrefy\textsuperscript{455}: the narrative loses coherence, words are deformed into deranged puns and the novel itself comes to an end, according to a model seen in “Le Horla.”\textsuperscript{456}

The point of these teratomorphic words is to show (\textit{monstrare}), with their paradoxical body and their ambiguous status, that the pretense of dominating (domesticating?) discourse is laughably absurd. Even the mere idea of telling a story is blindly optimistic, as suggested by the exquisitely apophatic title of Landolfi’s 1966 collection, \textit{Racconti impossibili}. One of the stories included therein, “Rotta e disfacimento dell’esercito,” opens with an exercise in the “mestieracci[o]\textsuperscript{457}” of writing stories: it describes some rather unexciting events in a country household during a classic dark-and-stormy night. Then the story ceases abruptly, giving way to a disenchanted reflection on the meaning of that exercise. Not only traditional stories such as these cannot, in good conscience, be written anymore (there is always a tinge of nostalgia in


\textsuperscript{456} There is an undeniable wealth of similarities between \textit{Cancroregina} and Maupassant’s tale, starting with the fact that both texts are diaries detailing a character’s encounters with unprecedented entities and chronicling the slow deterioration of his mental faculties. The narrator’s progressive loss of control over his thoughts in Maupassant’s tale mirrors the disintegration of the protagonist’s logico-linguistic faculties in the second to last entry in \textit{Cancroregina} ("Eh no, qui c’è la mano di mascalzoni, o almeno di mascalzi, di macabassati, insomma d’una spudorata genia; questa è l’opera di persecutori, o di persecumucche,” 564; “Morirò, e allora, fra l’altro, ha voglia lei a dire, ce la vedremo con Cancroregina, Cancrore, Cancroprincipessa, Cancrofamigliareale, Cancroecceteraeccetera…”, 565); as a parodic exaggeration of the ominous last entry in “Le Horla” ("I will have to kill myself!")\textsuperscript{564}, Landolfi’s narrator declares that he is, with a self-denying statement, “morto da due giorni” (565). In a further analogy, a few lines after the first appearance of the \textit{porrovio}, the narrative ends with a long ellipsis – two full lines of dots, a long trail leading to nothingness. Aside from the narrative structure, Maupassant and Landolfi’s works create interesting connections when it comes to the nature of their creatures: for instance, both names are neologisms with a strongly evocative power (\textit{Horla} points to an unspecified outside; \textit{porrovio} has undertones of “poro” and “porro,” evoking notions of permeability and anomaly, respectively; Lazzarin, “Parole-viticci,” 317-318). A comparative analysis of Landolfi’s and Maupassant’s texts can be found in Maria Carla Papini, \textit{La scrittura e il suo doppio. Studi di letteratura italiana contemporanea} (Roma: Bulzoni, 2005), 179-197.

\textsuperscript{457} Landolfi, “Rotta e disfacimento dell’esercito,” in \textit{Racconti impossibili, Opere} II, 674.
Landolfi’s attitude towards the great narrations of the past): indeed, as a general principle, “[o]ccorre avere una tal quale dose di follia per raccontare una storia, e forse il titolo di tutta intera la presente racconta doveva essere, meno ambiguamente, Racconto: impossibile.” 458
And yet, this story is being written, if in the negative key. The narrator catches the inherent contradiction of his position and anticipates the following objections:

Basta o non basta dire «Io non ho niente da dire?» Ovvero: dire «Io non ho niente da dire» è dir qualcosa o è dir nulla? Per carità, non tiriamo ora fuori il metro logico, altrimenti la risposta è palmare, e come tale inservibile. Difatto a chi dica «Io non ho niente da dire» il volgare oppone: «E allora perché non taci?» 459

But – he replies to his imaginary critic – “quel sere [himself] sente il bisogno di dire” 460: he can only live in and through language, even if all he can talk about is that he cannot talk about anything. In fully apophatic guise, Landolfi’s fantastic makes discourse out of its own limits, but, contrary to the ultimate trajectory inherent in an apophatic discourse of the sacred, never seems to be able to transcend itself. While Pseudo-Dionysian negative philosophy prescribes the ‘suicide’ or abdication of language as a condition for the “liberation from the limitations of predication,” 461 in Landolfi’s tales words never truly go away: they stalk, they haunt, they scare, and cling to the mind like tendrils. The “abisso dell’anima” that is relentlessly hinted at and glimpsed through a phantasmagoria of monstrous and monsterized language ultimately

458 Ibid., 675.
459 Ibid., 676-677.
460 Ibid., 677.
461 Williams, Deformed Discourse, 33.
coincides with a silence – an unknowable hors là – that is always fatally out of reach. As in a tragic catch-22, language is both in the way of any process of unveiling and discovering, and the only instrument available to man to attempt such an operation, therefore leaving him eternally “a mezza strada tra il silenzio e l’espressione.”\footnote{Landolfi, \textit{Rien va}, 677.}
Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to define the ways in which a literary mode especially concerned with ways of saying defines the monster – the undefinable *par excellence*. I have retraced the philosophical and literary-historical pedigree of the genre/mode *vis-à-vis* its preferred rhetorical and narrative procedures, in order to highlight its interest in the limits of empirical knowledge and the conditions of representation. One might say that the first chapter shows a meta-critical example of the textual model described in chapter 2 apropos of the Thing or Enigma: through a reconstruction of theories of the fantastic and an analysis of its recurrent features, I have attempted to circle around the ghost of the fantastic – to close in on it – in order to arrive at a working definition.

Throughout this study, I have preferred not to frame the fantastic in terms of the irrational side of Positivistic scientism; rather, I have found more use in the concepts of cataphasis and apophasis, because of a number of reasons. First of all, as I have shown in Chapter 1, the fantastic mode is still steeped in a context of scientific rationalism, whose language and means it adopts precisely in order to probe the limits of such a philosophical model. Analogously, apophatic discourse does not reject rational discourse (the discourse of logic and scientific classification that I have been referring to as “cataphatic”), but constantly dramatizes its pitfalls and its self-deceiving fictions of completeness. If apophatic theology points to an ultimate truth whose existence, however inaccessible to merely human means, is not disputed, fantastic apophasis describes a secular tendency to corrode overconfident representations of the world as made to measure for human cognition, but remains suspended, as explained by Jameson,
“on the point of meaning, forever disposed to receive a revelation, whether of evil or of grace, that never takes place.”

Another reason why cataphasis and apophasis are particularly handy notions when dealing with fantastic literature is that they point to specific conceptions of language and representation; therefore, they are especially effective tools for approaching a literary mode that is inherently preoccupied with “quella vicenda che consiste nel fatto di raccontare.” The fantastic mode is intrinsically apophasic because it participates of a discourse that constantly states its own limits – or rather builds itself on those very limits, flaunting and thematizing them, in the texts I analyzed, through the figure of the monster.

I have examined a strain of nineteenth-century texts featuring the innovative figure of the material ghost – a figure whose elusiveness (both to the senses and to rational speculation) allows for the introduction of an (in)visible hole at the center of narrative, the “limite interno al discorso” that is the hallmark of the mode. By provoking – and frustrating – the principle of horror vacui that characterizes a certain scientific mindset, and that informs the cataphatic impulse to total description, the monster ultimately functions “to critique the overconfident constructs of rational analysis.”

I have shown how the language-monstrosity nexus carries over to later iterations in ways that both bridge the gap between ‘classic’ and less traditional fantastic, and at the same time highlight the specificity of the paths chosen by the fantastic mode in the first half of the twentieth century. Such specificity consists in a heightened reflexivity over the means and

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463 Jameson, 146.
464 Benedetti, 297.
465 Ibid., 327.
466 Williams, Deformed Discourse, 6.
purposes of the mode and a frequent thematization of its procedures. In particular, in the works of H. P. Lovecraft and Tommaso Landolfi, the fantastic’s built-in curiosity towards manifestations of the ineffable, together with its predilection for uncanny transfigurations of the familiar, are distilled into the notion of monstrous language. In H. P. Lovecraft’s fiction, this principle is both stylistic and thematic. I have shown how Lovecraft’s hypertrophic style, in its glorious disregard for any principle of ‘good’ writing, tries both to compensate for the fundamental ineffability of the inhuman spectacles beheld by the characters and to recuperate some degree of mimesis by growing the tentacles and appendages that characterize the bodies of its monstrous subjects. Subsequently, I have demonstrated how, in Tommaso Landolfi’s works, the fantastic experience is chiefly located in the subject’s tormented relationship with words, in his awe and fear of their uncanny power, in his obsession for the “ricerca o … sistemazione di parole.” Animated words, regurgitated from a mysterious ‘inside,’ impose their presence on the narrator and demand to be listened to, calling attention on their intrinsic mystery; disquieting signifiers such as canie and giassa make the familiar strange purely by virtue of linguistic deviations; word-thought-animal mash-ups such as the porrovio and the vipistrello demolish the walls that should hermetically seal the mind from the world, the speaking subject and the spoken object; tendril-words impose upon the mind with the fixity of an obsessive thought, transforming the friendly face of language into a ghoulish grimace.

Upon conjuring, ill-advisedly, one such parola-viticcio, Landolfi describes the consequence of this encounter by lamenting that “[a]ncora una volta ci sentiamo superati da alcunché o da alcuno…” The discourse of monstrosity that I have tried to explore in this

467 Landolfi, Cancroregina, 564.
468 Landolfi, Des mois, 765.
study is crucially articulated around this experience: one feels overcome, superseded (dethroned, in “Le Horla”’s lexicon), but does not know by whom or by what. Akin to the sublime or the numinous, the monstrous is always somewhere beyond one’s capacity to know, understand or explain: “[h]e knew that he was in presence, but knew not of what,”\(^{469}\) writes the governess to describe the demeanor of little Miles in the last pages of *The Turn of the Screw*. This also illuminates Lovecraft’s point about the passivity of his narrators, in a statement on the importance of dreams as models for his stories: “I believe that – because of the foundation of most weird concepts in dream-phenomena – the best weird tales are those in which the narrator or central figure remains (as in actual dreams) largely passive, & witnesses or experiences a stream of bizarre events which – as the case may be – flows past him, just touches him, or engulfs him utterly.”\(^{470}\)

The necessarily limited focus of this critical enterprise can illuminate (*per viam negativam*) ways in which this research approach could be applied and expanded. For instance, the texts I analyzed could be re-read with attention to the glaring absence (at least on the surface of the text) of any discourse on femininity. This aspect, which I acknowledge as a critical vacuum (a ghost?) in the present study, would probably yield interesting results when analyzed in the light of the fantastic’s tendency to de-center the subject and his mastery over the narrative – a subject that is always by definition male. In some of the texts I analyzed, features of femininity are attributed to monstrosity, as in the case of “Le Horla.” In the thousands of pages written by Lovecraft, for instance, very few women appear, and those who do generally

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\(^{469}\) James, *The Turn of the Screw*, 117.

\(^{470}\) Letter to Henry Kuttner, 16 April 1936, in *Selected Letters*, vol. V, 236.
perform the function of vessels for, or promiscuous generators of, monstrous beings.\textsuperscript{471} The question of femininity in and through the fantastic has been broached by a good number of recent studies,\textsuperscript{472} and it might not be unwarranted to analyze the subject specifically through the lens of the fantastic’s apophatic rhetoric.

In this project, I have intentionally left out a literary genre that especially complicates the notion of monstrosity as linguistic otherness: fantasy. As clarified in Chapter 1, drawing a distinction between fantastic and fantasy is all but an idle exercise. Knowing that the fantastic is especially interested in testing the movable border between real and imaginary, but has to postulate it in order to stage its disruption, helps us situate the figure of the monster as a function of this dialectic. Fantasy, however, structurally requires a complete suspension of

\textsuperscript{471} Cf. Joyce Carol Oates’s observation: “…virtually no women appear in [his] work, for to Lovecraft, the most asexual of men, for whom Eros manifested itself primarily in landscape and architecture, «male» and «female» have no more vital relationship with each other than atoms. In the lushly overwritten “The Thing on the Doorstep,” an unfortunate marriage between a precocious scholar-poet and a young woman with mysterious hypnotic powers is revealed to be, in fact, a marriage between the scholar-poet and the young woman’s deceased father, who had seized demonic possession of her body at the time of his death, and manages at last to seize possession of the scholar-poet’s body as well. What seems initially to be a tale of vampiristic erotic obsession turns out very differently indeed” (“The King of Weird,” np).

disbelief, thereby changing the conditions under which it should be read. J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy fiction builds a world populated by various species of beings more or less far from the human form. What becomes of monstrosity when humanity is only one of the many shapes in which heroes come? Also, these beings speak culture-specific languages, codified and rendered in their original characters in detailed appendices to the main body of the text. This specific case is interesting because linguistic deviations are not especially framed as markers of inaccessible otherness, since they are already given in translation.

Speaking of modal shiftings, there is perhaps a more fertile avenue in which this line of research could be channeled. The fantastic genre inaugurated a way of framing the supernatural, or more generally experiences that exceed human understanding and articulation, that has revealed itself to be extremely resilient in subsequent narratives of all sorts. In particular, the monster as function of a reflection on the boundary between real and imaginary, mind and matter, has influenced heavily the course of cinematic representations of the unknown, with an unsurprising frequency in the horror genre. In fact, the main vessel for monstrous narratives today, as already suggested by Noël Carroll in his already-cited The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart, is horror cinema. Carroll offers an interesting study of the literary pedigree of the cinematic supernatural (although this is not his main focus) as seen through the figure of the monster, opening up productive avenues for inquiry. Whereas he concentrates his attention on the features of disgust associated with the monstrous figure, it would be interesting to tease out the ways in which these monstrous presences are articulated with respect to language. For instance, I am thinking of an important

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473 I am referring to the six appendices added to the third volume of The Lord of the Rings’s trilogy, The Return of the King (1955).
strain cultivated by horror cinema from its very beginning, where the monstrous creature is denoted through generic, O’Broienesque terms or simple pronouns: Tod Browning’s *The Unknown* (1927), Gordon Douglas’s *Them!* (1954), Robert Gordon’s *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982) and *They Live* (1988), *It* (the 1990 mini-series directed by Tommy Lee Wallace and its 2017 enormously popular remake by Andy Muschietti), David Robert Mitchell’s “It Follows” (2015), and so on. In these films, the unnameability of the creature is directly related to its dangerousness; the monster in “The Thing,” for instance, cannot be pinned down to a name because it cannot be crystallized in a form – it is a shapeshifting entity that can morph into any of the characters, making it impossible to identify it and destroy it.

If fantastic literature (together with its Gothic and sci-fi counterparts) constitutes a treasure trove of themes for genre cinema, one could also argue for a special suitability of its formal features to a visual translation. I have often commented on the visual paradigm underlying many fantastic stories, and on the fact that visual disturbances (such as those induced by the material ghost) are at the root of the fantastic experience.\(^{474}\) In this connection, we should also mention the inherent “figuratività” of the mode, as explained by Ceserani: “il modo fantastico ha cercato di attivare tutti i possibili procedimenti di figuratività e iconicità impliciti nella pratica narrativa …[attraverso] il ricorso a procedimenti di sottolineatura di elementi gestuali e visivi, di messa in posa e messa in scena.”\(^{475}\) Moreover, the partiality of vision cultivated by a fantastic text (chiefly through its use of first-person narration) finds an

\(^{474}\) Jack Halberstam has demonstrated the continued importance of the visual in contemporary horror narratives of monstrosity in his previously-mentioned study *Skin Shows*.

\(^{475}\) Ceserani, *Il fantastico*, 83.
interesting analogy in the use of point-of-view shots. The abundance of this device in horror cinematic language is easily understandable: first, it encourages identification with the main character, and secondly, it establishes a partial domain over the visual surroundings, which is essential for setting up the (gradual or sudden) revelation of the horrific that is the hallmark of the genre. This becomes especially evident in movies that present themselves as entirely shot through a hand-held camera, such as Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez’s *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza’s *REC* (2007).

The nexus between monstrosity and language is thematized in many contemporary films and TV series of the horror/sci-fi genre, in such pervasive ways as to demand further analysis. In Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016), an advanced alien civilization visits Planet Earth to teach mankind its ideogram-based language, which is soon revealed to be something of a monstrous entity itself: contracting every principle of sequentiality structuring human language and thought, it contains—and allows its speaker to experience—the past, the present and the future all at once. Monsters in the HBO show *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) are classic growling, inarticulate zombies, but allow for interesting reflections on linguistic questions. The show conceptualizes the issue of naming the monster (and what the need for such an operation reveals) through the fact that the various communities of survivors call the undead in different ways, such as “walkers,” “biters,” “munchers,” “eaters.” This element points to the cultural specificity of every act of ordering the world, as well as to the feeling of belonging created and sanctioned by these group-specific designations: the small communities of survivors come

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476 On this point, a short story by Lovecraft comes to mind that exploits the point-of-view perspective in remarkably cinematic ways. In “The Shadow Out of Time” (1936), while a man’s body is possessed by the mind of an alien, his mind is stuck in the alien’s monstrous body; in a passage of his diary-testimony, we get the description of the man looking down at his own limbs, only to find “green tentacles” hanging down from his head (Lovecraft, “The Shadow Out of Time,” 744).
together physically to escape the hordes of zombies roaming the planet, but especially come
together *in language* by virtue of the distinct labels they put on those entities. I mention these
texts (among a wealth of possible others) with no systematic intent – merely as examples of
the ways in which the intricate tangle of language and monstrosity is revealed as constantly
productive even in contemporary narratives of the supernatural. As for the present study, I hope
to have been able to pull some productive threads out of this tangle within the context of the
literary fantastic.
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