◆ Afterword

One Critic’s Monster . . .

Edward H. Friedman

The sleep of reason produces monsters.
Francisco de Goya

It is clear that the individual who persecutes a man, his brother, because he is not of the same opinion, is a monster.
Voltaire

Where there is a monster, there is a miracle.
Ogden Nash

I don’t want to see the zipper in the back of the monster suit.
Like everybody else who goes to the movies, I want to believe the monster is real.
Eric Stolz

The monster was the best friend I ever had.
Boris Karloff

The essays in this collection deal with the concept of monstrosity, or the monstrous, over time, from classical antiquity onward. The monstrous is played out, so to speak, on many platforms, from the horrifying to the benevolent, from tales of terror to moralizing bestiaries, and through incarnations that reflect periods, perceptions, and societal and authorial
mindsets of wide varieties. On one level, the monster is viewed as outside
the realm of nature and thus of ethical values, and, on another, as a link to
examinations of subjectivity. Interposed in the dialogue are the metaphorical
and metonymical thrust of the monster and the making and breaking of
boundaries, as the individual rejects and, perhaps reluctantly, embraces the
Other. The monster may be our enemy, and the monster may be ourselves.
Whatever the case, in every sense it can be said that we create our monsters,
as authors, critics, metacritics, and members of distinct communities. Each
of the contributors to the current volume establishes unique parameters and
discrete definitions for a consideration of monstrosity, and each selects texts
and conditions under which to scrutinize the topic. There are, then, multiple
hands at work in the composition of every essay, and there is no stable frame
of reference for the terms employed. In the afterword, I would like to look at
the structuring devices of the essays, in order to demonstrate the flexibility
and elasticity of approaches to the monstrous, as well as the benefits to
criticism of what may be deemed the looseness of the signified. This could
be classified as engaging, as opposed to taming, the monster in us. Cultural
studies as a discipline tends to place texts in context(s)—opening doors to
open doors, as it were—and that will be my modest task here.

In the first essay, José P. Barragán and Luis Martín-Estudillo study the
question of monstrous births, which allows them to take into account the
field of medical discourse. They note that, while there was widespread
interest in unusual labors and deliveries in Europe in the sixteenth century,
Spain became involved more notably during the political transitions (and
crises) of the seventeenth century. Fascinatingly, the ties between scientific
and fictional writing were pronounced, and the documents surveyed are
written in the vernacular and in Latin. The birth of “monsters” and the
analyses and policies related to them occupy a firm middle ground between
science and myth, or myth-making, and between the natural and the anti-
natural, as created and processed by the medical specialists and the public at
large. In the matter of isolating and contending with monstrosity, the
lexicographer Sebastián de Covarrubias, medical treatises, and contemporary
theory make intriguing (con perdón) bedfellows, and anything that
encompasses obstetrics and gynecology will, obviously, bring women into
the picture. Although one could expect clear differentiation among birth
defects or irregularities, this was not always the position, and monstrosity
often was in the eye (and mind) of the beholder. Science, pseudo-science,
and interpretations based on any number of rationales figured in
assessments, diagnoses, and spiritual and secular judgments. When
documentation, from the past or from the present, was lacking,
commentators could conceive their own explanations and their own
justifications. The essay leads the reader to contemplate the blurring of fact
and fiction, the positing of accusations and blame, and the marriage of
medical authority with the manufacturing of ideas; the history of science
merges with the creative imagination and with gender issues. The survey is meaningful and highly suggestive, and it introduces the theme of exposed monsters and hidden agendas, which becomes a motif within the volume.

In “What Kind of Monster Are You, Galatea?,” Julio Baena invokes Claude Lévi-Strauss to summon and to problematize the rendering and categorization of myth. Although his essay hardly shies away from twentieth- and twenty-first-century theory, Baena uses Luis de Góngora’s nymph to muse on monstrosity. He observes that the lone allusion to a monster in the Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea is, paradoxically, in reference to Galatea, as a “monster of cruelty” in her rejection of suitors. The Cyclops nonetheless becomes a receptacle for all that is monstrous, past and present; he is the prototypical scapegoat. Baena chooses to explore the monstrosity that marks Polifemo as different and the monstrous condition as portrayed in the world around him. The idea of culture as a marker of the failure of nature is captivating, and Góngora’s Polifemo is an ideal exemplum of the dialectics of aesthetics and nature exalted, unbridled, and successfully or unsuccessfully reined in. The poem analogously confronts emotion, yearning, and the mysteries (and ironies) of attraction and availability, and Baena argues, together with theorists and practitioners of art, that desire coexists with fear. The implied equation is that horror mixes desire and fear, and that the two never can be mutually exclusive. Góngora and the writers of his period show that beautiful creatures can serve as monsters, and the hybrid (or “mongrel”) Acis is a superb mixed metaphor—or, arguably, mixed metonym—for the faces of the monstrous. Galatea, for her part, is silent, her monstrosity contained until she and it are cured by love. Like Polifemo, she disrupts the world around her, the natural economy, and she defers harmony. Baena’s nuanced reading of Góngora is essentially a reading of the inevitable collisions of art and its referents and of the many forms of evil, the monsters that have existed forever and that cannot exhaust the circles and cycles of madness—“the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to,” in the words of Hamlet—that life cannot elide.

“Zayas Unchained: A Perverse God, or Theological Kitsch?,” by Bradley J. Nelson, is not only an exercise in describing the monstrous, but also in reviewing the seemingly limitless critical potential of María de Zayas’s novellas. Zayas is a major talent, and her works are as puzzling as they are brilliant: overdetermined, intuitive, precocious, combative, and hard to decipher. My personal hypothesis is that Zayas has a profound understanding of feminine (and masculine) psychology without having the tools and the lexicon for articulating her thoughts—a lexicon that is second nature to us now, thanks to Sigmund Freud and significant others. This may hint at why she resorts to black magic and the supernatural. Because the novellas do not come in neatly wrapped packages with seamless structures, they are all the more intricate, challenging, and, on occasion, impenetrable. Nelson starts by summarizing a scene from Quentin Tarantino’s 2012 film
Django Unchained and its blend of brutality, a strange and paradoxical sense of honor, and a social and judicial system based on class. Nelson will access Zayas through Tarantino and through a 2010 essay by Malcolm K. Read, who rejects certain feminist assumptions and pronouncements in commentaries on the narratives via a critique that likewise could be subjected to respectful disagreement. Nelson himself welcomes Read’s view as a bouncing-off place. Read appears to see an anachronistic bias—a postmodern and liberal direction—to much of criticism on the works of Zayas. Nelson, for his part, wishes to illuminate irony and philosophical deadlocks in the second series, Desengaños amorosos. Nelson avoids feminist labels by concentrating on “the feminine,” and he finds that Zayas treats theological concepts such as free will and providence with a recognition of gender difference. Women are defenseless in a universe in which they are not covered by options open to men. They are left on the outside to suffer, to be mutilated, to die at the hands of men (and of other women). Zayas has little faith in a future redemption on earth or beyond. In ways that diverge, Zayas’s men and women have monstrous traits, qualities that go against the will of the Father. The author—creator of the stories of violence and unrestrained emotions—becomes a type of monster, as she replicates the mindset of her male counterparts. Nelson invites us to read the Desengaños, and specifically the notion of desengaño, disillusionment and disillusionment, ironically, as a pretext for men (and depraved women) to commit violence disguised as religious acts.

Bonnie L. Gasior notes that Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, like María de Zayas but not necessarily with the same motives or arguments, has been labeled as “monstrous” for her deviations from the norm. Sor Juana is, indeed, a singular figure. In “Monstrous Maneuvers and Maneuvering the Monstrous in Two of Sor Juana’s Dialogic Romances,” Gasior envisions the writer in dialogue with herself, playing both the masculine and feminine roles in an adversarial poetic joust. The masquerade—the misdirection with respect to gender—would make the undertaking fall under the rubric of monstrous. In this reading, the feminine is simultaneously empowered and trapped, a monster from any angle, whether anguished or triumphant in the performance that is being enacted. The circumstances of Sor Juana’s literary enterprise underscore the “abnormality” of the conditions of composition and the forces that work against the nun who wants to express herself. Gasior’s essay presents a thesis, a close reading, and an evaluation of context. It may inspire, as well, an inspection of rhetoric and politics of the term normalcy, which, among other things, constrains women and pushes them into the realm of the monstrous. Neither science nor theology nor social mores nor the literary establishment can save the woman as artist from an association with transgression. The theme of redemption becomes especially powerful, and ironic, as a catchall for women caught in the blind alleys of inequality and prejudice. One may assume that for her art and for
higher purposes, Sor Juana is willing to enter into forbidden spaces and to play the monster, with full awareness of what she is doing.

“Occupying the Isle; or, Which Monster—and Which Island—are We Talking About?” is the title of José Antonio Giménez Micó’s essay, which gives the spotlight to a celebrity monster to vie with the Cyclops Polyphemus: Caliban, who first gains notoriety in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Giménez Micó focuses on variations of the character, most strikingly in the “black theater” piece *Une Tempête* by Aimé Césaire. Giménez Micó calls the work an example of the cry for decolonization that situates Césaire among the African and Caribbean thinkers who reached out to representatives of the dominant cultures. Caliban, in his composite manifestations, asks for entry into society not by mere assimilation but by change, through, in part at least, assimilation in reverse—that is, through subversion—by asking the Other (from his perspective) to accept reciprocal adaptation. On every plane, language is key, as symbol and as metonym. Giménez Micó’s aims are comprehensive; he is not addressing Elizabethan England or colonial Latin America alone, but rather a traditional struggle, which includes today’s world and today’s images. An appropriate guide is Jorge Luis Borges, who demystifies the search for authenticity and thus the parameters of authority. Parody, as a hybrid and hence monstrous practice, is a means to this end. Always mindful of Shakespeare, Césaire transforms the tempest into a tempest, adding to the scope of the emblem and to the transgressive strategies. By way of an extensive examination of Caliban and Ariel, Giménez Micó attempts to demonstrate how *Une Tempête* neutralizes the binary *nature versus culture*. The field of analogues is broad and absorbing, reaching, for example, a comparison of Caliban to Malcolm X and of Ariel to Martin Luther King, Jr. Giménez Micó opens and closes his essay with references to Hernán Vidal’s interpretation of the rivalries, ideological and physical, of Europe and Latin America. By denouncing the inhabitants of Latin America as monsters, their enemies can fight to subdue their historical identity and to deny them their own place, their own space, through distortion and trivialization. To resist is to identify, with vigor and with conviction, the real monsters.

The center of Carlos Vargas-Salgado’s essay is the novel *Estrella distante* (1996) by Roberto Bolaño. The text is a merger of history, politics, and literature, with subtle interconnections and with an emphasis on the production of message systems within art. Bolaño writes of the monster through a projection of evil, with the goal of contesting and undermining the reader’s perception of monstrosity. The novel builds upon real events in a determined moment—the rule of Augusto Pinochet in Chile—but creatively, and with an eye on how societies in all times and places take recourse to monsters as a means of justifying phenomena and actions. For Vargas-Salgado, Bolaño relies on the technique of *derealization* (the divesting of a sense of reality, or realism) and on *distancing devices* to motivate the reader.
to think about style as a bearer of proposals, theses, and points of view. The hunt for monsters in *Estrella distante* is a mechanism by which the novelist uses aesthetics to interrogate ethics and to construct a backward-and-forward movement that serves as a springboard for reader-response. Reflection is part and parcel of a journey in which literature is art and much more. Given Bolaño’s background, history and politics are inserted into the narrative scheme, which conveys—foregrounds—the ironies that surround us. One aspect of irony has to do with monsters, which refashion and reconfigure themselves as regimes and allegiances change, and thereby as those who get to name the enemy change. Bolaño’s fiction inevitably will be self-conscious, for he is telling stories about himself, about his homeland, and about people who may be heroes one day and monsters the next. While beautifully crafted and rich in form, narratives such as *Estrella distante* cannot avoid cruelty because they must be true to history, true to those who have felt pain and vindictiveness. The pursuit of answers to difficult questions is enhanced by art, and art is enhanced by the seriousness and significance of the pursuit.

The primary subject of “Threatening Masculine Images of Power: María Lionza and Juan Vicente Gómez as a Vampire in Arturo Uslar Pietri’s *Oficio de difuntos*,” by Julio Quintero, is the Venezuelan sociopolitical structure and its power struggles and gender inflections. Juan Vicente Gómez, the individual who controlled Venezuela’s government and economy during the first third of the twentieth century, is the focal character, a man of radical contradictions and a “monster” whose life is summoned in *Oficio de difuntos*, a 1976 novel by Uslar Pietri. At the other end of the critical spectrum stands María Lionza, a legendary indigenous figure of the sixteenth century who becomes the object of a cult. In *Oficio de difuntos*, Aparicio Peláez, the stand-in for Gómez, is a spectral presence, having died the day before the narrative begins. The story follows Father Solana, based on Carlos Borges, a priest and an enigmatic member of Gómez’s list of enemies and supporters. Quintero emphasizes Uslar Pietri’s decision to kill off Father Solano in the novel and—figuratively, of course—to resurrect Gómez in 1976. In context, Aparicio Peláez is a phantom, a supernatural being, a type of shaman (*brujo*), a vampire, and a composite, if uneven, of good and evil. The hyperbolic vision of his authority and of his masculinity draws attention to and promotes a breakdown of Venezuelan identity and gender roles, and more so when María Lionza enters the frame. The monstrous reconstruction of Gómez—already monstrous—exaggerates the sexual biases and inequities that would threaten any social and political system that strives for a fair and democratic society. Uslar Pietri, somewhat ambiguously (and fittingly), brings Gómez back into a national dialogue some forty years after the leader’s death, to review history and to check the influence of the patriarchy. Through Peláez, Gómez fades in and fades out, a ghostly reminder of the past. Venezuelans similarly revive María Lianza, a
crucial counterpoint to Gómez and a reminder of injustice and of difference. It is lamentable that the story can hardly be seen as bereft of relevance for the new millennium.

The woman as outsider is prominent in Ariel Zatarain Tumbaga’s “Vampires in Balún Canán: The Monstrous and Dzulum,” a study of Rosario Castellanos’s 1957 novel, a work that highlights the abuses of the Tzeltal-Mayans by non-indigenous Mexicans. Zatarain Tumbaga relates the women in the narrative to the Dzulum, a supernatural monster-like figure. The background of Castellanos’s text is the implementation of agrarian reforms by President Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, a time when women’s rights and suffrage were also on the table. Zatarain Tumbaga submits that a particular reading of the Dzulum in Balún Canán would be a function of whether the novel is seen as indigenista or feminist. The monster devised by Castellanos is prone to take as its victims non-indigenous women (ladinas), like their indigenous counterparts unstable and abnormal characters who themselves may be tagged as monstrous. Zatarain Tumbaga interprets Castellanos’s symbolism as the embracing of Tzeltal mythology by dejected and frustrated women. The shift is a cry of rebellion and an identification with an Other of nonconformity, dissidence, and monstrosity. Zatarain Tumbaga is guided by theory and by statements in the writings of Castellanos for his approach to the monstrous (including the figure of the vampire) in the portrayal of women. Tzeltal legend permits Castellanos to move from specific (that is, feminine-oriented) categories to a universalized marginality. Zatarain Tumbaga posits that discourses on women by Bram Stoker, author of Dracula, together with the “monster-vampiress,” are a source of Castellanos’s portrayal of nonconformist women. To an extent, Castellanos moves from the indigenous woman to the non-indigenous woman to marginalized figures in general. She positions herself in the past—employing models from myth, legend, and literature—in order to gain access to rural Mexico and to the attempts to improve the lot of women and, by extension, of all the enfranchised. For the essayist, Balún Canán seems, in the end, to be a feminist novel that, to its benefit, is not exclusively so.

In his commentary on monsters for a post-human age, David R. Castillo observes that monstro historically has been linked to a defiance of the law—be it natural, political, or moral—and to anti-natural births. Hybridity of many sorts fits into the category. Monsters may both scare and fascinate those with whom they come into contact. This may be related to the baroque aesthetic (and rhetoric) of excess, as Castillo reports in his study Baroque Horrors, in which he advocates for multi-faceted and diachronic approaches to the topic. Vampires, for example, are very much with us, and they have been for some time. Bram Stoker helps to initiate a literary and cultural gift that keeps on giving, in all the major media and with variable levels of sophistication, seriousness, and satire. Zombies, needless to say, are in the game, as well, and they even seem (appear?) to intrude upon “real life.”
Citing several sources, Castillo argues that we try to explain these mysterious creatures as, correspondingly, we use them to try to explain ourselves: vampires as metaphors for predatory practices of capitalism and zombies as soulless consumers. The apocalypse is near and unavoidable, so we visualize self-destruction. A bit paradoxically, to be sure, we—as products of capitalism and of ideological state apparatuses—do not hesitate to covert dire prophecies into for-profit entertainments. Without mentioning films and television shows and their potentially huge audiences, one can admire the success of such tomes as Seth Grahame-Smith’s Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, a tribute (of sorts) to Jane Austen, one of a number of such refurbishings. Castillo evinces a little pride and a little prejudice in elaborating upon “Spanish zombies” of recent creation, on occasion served up as trilogies. Zombies have, in fact, made it big in Spain, though the literary vehicles are, as is to be expected, of mixed quality, and have enjoyed varying degrees of success. One book that stands out to me—because it is the only one that I have read—is Lazarillo Z: Matar zombis nunca fue pan comido, by one Lázaro González Pérez de Tormes. I found it in a Madrid bookstore in 2010, shortly after its publication, at about the time that zombies had invaded the British canon. Let us say that Lázaro fares better as a solo act or in tandem with the anonymous author, but his nuevas andanzas con zombis have some inventive twists and turns, if not an unassailable nod for instant classic status. And it is thrilling, but not surprising, that there are quixotic resonances in the zombie phenomenon. A conclusion of Castillo’s informative and incisive essay may be that we do not have to look for the zombie in us; the zombie will take care of that.

In “Monstrous Birth: The Evolving Neighbor in Albert Sánchez Piñol’s La pell freda,” William Viestenz focuses on the concept of alliances in the debut novel (2002) of the Catalan writer. Monster here refers to “real” monsters, that is, an alien kind of creature resembling the frog (carasapo) that inhabits the remote island where the protagonist places himself, with only one recognizably human neighbor. As the author plots an ironic representation of friendship and enmity, the text investigates not only what is neighborly but what is human. As compared with the cold and cruel cohabitant of the island, the monstrous creatures would seem to rate higher on a scale of humanity. The clash of cultures and of personalities goes beyond the exotic and the esoteric to become an allegory of relations. (One is tempted to avoid saying human relations.) Viestenz places the narrative threads against the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas into the more contentious arena staked by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida. Sánchez Piñol devises a unique environment for his questioning and for his analogical novelization of morality. For Viestenz, Sánchez Piñol argues that Levinas operates in a vacuum, without taking into consideration the predispositions and mindsets that any individual will assume. La pell freda sets human beings in an isolated realm, with monsters at the doorstep. The
site becomes a laboratory of sorts, in which the reader can record progress and retrogression, and can appreciate the paradoxes that the author embeds into the text. The rendering of the “humanization” of the creatures is a crux of the critical argument and a rich component in the analysis of the novel (and its human subjects). Viestenz brings Jacques Lacan into his reading of language, subjectivity, and male-female dynamics in the novel, with Aneris, the siren figure of the creatures, in center stage. As with monsters, neighbors covers an especially wide range of meanings and applications, with rhetoric and politics complicating interpretation. Sánchez Piñol quite literally cuts his characters off from civilization to see how they get along and what we can make of their bonds and breaking points.

Megan Corbin begins “Controlling Contagion: The Threat of the Madman from Outer Space” with an allusions to Michel Foucault, Hugo Vezzetti, and Mariano Plotkin, among others, and to madness as a political tool. Madness, in short, is an interdisciplinary phenomenon. The claim of madness bears comparison to the claim of monstrosity; it is as often constructed as certifiably present. Because medicine is one of many factors in the attitudes toward madness, response to those who are deemed mad moves, at some point and dramatically, from exclusion to vigilant control. Corbin looks at nineteenth-century Argentina, where politics and psychiatry become unified through practices of containment, and she segues into the twentieth century with respect to the forging of a national identity (and its ties with dictatorial policies). The normal and the abnormal become part of the discourse, and the terms come to have some synonymity with obedience and disobedience. Corbin uses as examples the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, labeled locas, and the Eliseo Subiela film Hombre mirando al sudeste, the protagonist of which is a schizophrenic or an alien. In discussing the film, she stresses the broad symbolism of the rubrics of Self and Other, reiterating the inseparable ties between political ideologies and assessments of mental status (through tags and judgments, both bound to rhetoric). An enemy—an authoritarian regime—can demonize and “disappear” an Other, in a dialectics of truths and alternate truths that can lead to or away from a desired liberation. Corbin brings in, a bit anecdotally, the documentary film LT 22 Radio “La Colifata” (2007), directed by Carlos Larrondo, in which a radio station founded by a doctor in 1991 played recorded messages by “mad” patients. The inversion of repression encourages one to rethink the structures and deconstructions of madness.

The collected commentaries in Writing Monsters: Essays on Iberian and Latin American Cultures encompass an impressive group of readings of the monstrous. They demonstrate that monsters can be real, imagined, or the imagined made real. The literal and the figurative frequently intersect, their differentiating elements blurred. Monsters erupt from the mysterious, the unknown, the feared, the suspicious, and the strange, from anything that deviates from the norm, the so-called normal, the ordinary. Monsters can be
personifications of our innermost doubts and anxieties. They can be benign and innocent, and we nonetheless can convert them into the enemy, in order to push them to be fearful of us and thus to make ourselves the enemy, monsters in our own right. Societies and artists of all media can create monsters, to rule, to fabricate conflict, to enforce dogmas, and, in contrast, to give rise to beauty. Alongside myriad monsters of the mind lie—we should not forget—real monsters of cruelty, violence, injustice, discrimination, bigotry, and perversity. A common strategy of these real monsters is to turn monstrosity upside down, designating as monstrous what is for them the Other, the foe, the rival. Race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, and physical appearance are factors in determining worth and in determining the monstrous. Literary, social, and political monsters—be they physically present or figments of the imagination—are simulacra of archetypal mythological and legendary battles of heroes (and heroines) with monsters such as dragons, giants, and beasts of various stripes. Horror genres depict grotesque and hideous beings that can fill an audience with enormous dread, but, arguably, the most egregious and the most frightful monsters are invisible or, alternately, dressed in the robes of kindness and concern while concealing vile motives. Monsters can deceive us—drawing us in and letting us down, or worse—and there are likely to be monsters within us at some time or another.

Monstrosity evokes the extreme, and, accordingly, the monstrous lends itself to the baroque, the neobaroque, and the postmodern. The intertext of the monster is, in a word, gargantuan. The fact that the terms and the baggage carry substantial weight gives us the opportunity to read literature, nonfiction, and social and political systems within shared theoretical frames that aid in comprehension. We can acknowledge parallels and distinctions, and a given field of reference can proceed into another or, conversely, accentuate difference. One can think of monsters in the most classic of Spanish texts: Frestón and the other enchanters (some human, if not humane) in Don Quijote, the statue of Don Gonzalo de Ulloa (and Don Juan Tenorio himself) in El burlador de Sevilla, Segismundo (who moves from monster to perfect prince) in La vida es sueño, Góngora’s Polifemo, and on and on. The same is true of Latin American literature and of all national literatures. Read as a unit, with the solid introduction by Adriana Gordillo and Nicholas Spadaccini, the essays are skillful critical and metacritical enumerations of how writers—and the cultures in which they work—perceive, define, and represent monsters. While the monstrous has been proven to connect to the creative impulse in virtuoso style, monsters are, on the whole, far more tragic than comic. They are integrated into the world of art for diverse purposes, and they should be taken seriously, even when levity may seem to be in the air. Monsters of any type are not to be trifled with, but by studying them we may end by resisting the temptation to lower our guard when they are near, to fight losing battles when they challenge us,
or to emulate them. In the labyrinth of life, all roads lead to confusion. As we march forward, let us seek to follow Theseus rather than the Minotaur.