



# NSTERS

AN UNNATURAL HISTORY  
OF OUR WORST FEARS

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## Introduction

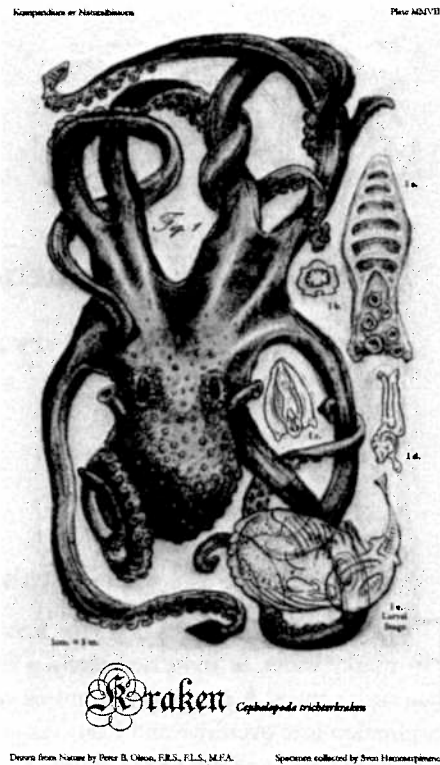
### *Extraordinary Beings*

#### PHOBIAS

EVER SINCE I WAS A SMALL BOY I've had a phobia about deep murky water, or more accurately, a fear of what might be living in such waters. A seemingly harmless swim in a weedy lake sends my imagination into overdrive and I can almost see the behemoths and leviathans rising up to gnaw off my extremities. I'm a grown man, for God's sake, and a skeptic as well. But no amount of reasoning with myself can begin to dispel the apprehension. I've never ruined a beach picnic by refusing to get in the water, nor have I needed to be talked down from an anxiety attack. Like most other "lite" phobics I just cringe a little bit and get on with the swimming. I'm annoyed by my irrational fear of sea monsters, but I've resigned myself to coping with it.

When I was living in Cambodia I occasionally went swimming in the muddy Mekong, but I winced at the idea that more species of giant fish live in the Mekong than in any other river in the world. Mekong catfish can grow to be eight or nine feet long and weigh between six hundred and seven hundred pounds, and goliath freshwater stingrays can be over twelve hundred pounds. Moving geographically to the deep seas of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, one finds an enormously long silvery snake-like beast called an oarfish. This nightmarish fish lives at depths of three thousand feet and has been seen and captured only after rare surfacing episodes due to illness. This ribbon-like giant, with striking red-headed "plumage," can grow up to fifty feet in length and probably inspired many early sailor

The Kraken is a mythical sea monster that has troubled sailors' dreams for centuries. The legend may be based on glimpses of giant squids or abnormally large octopi. Drawing of the Kraken, complete with faux scientific nomenclature, by artist Peter Olson © 2008. Reprinted by kind permission of the artist. [www.peterolsonbirds.com](http://www.peterolsonbirds.com).



tales of sea monsters. Add to this sort of oddity the fact that every once in a while science dredges up some hitherto unknown specimen from the deep, such as the ancient coelacanth or rare evidence of the giant squid.<sup>1</sup> I can almost hear my reptilian brain telling my neocortex, "See, I told you! Don't go in the water." But these real monsters are nothing compared to the nefarious beasts that swim in my head. These are modified versions of the real creatures, but always with sharper and more copious dentition, more poisonous dorsal spikes, and more razor-like claws for effortless laceration. And of course they're bigger too.

When the first two crazy people, I mean *scientists*, descended a quarter of a mile into the ocean in a crude bathysphere, they found unimaginable creatures. Off a Bermudan island in 1930 William Beebe and Otis Barton witnessed swarms of bioluminescent creatures—transparent eels, shrimp, and nightmarish fish—and giant shadowy figures looming just outside the range of their spotlight. They could descend only a fraction of the actual

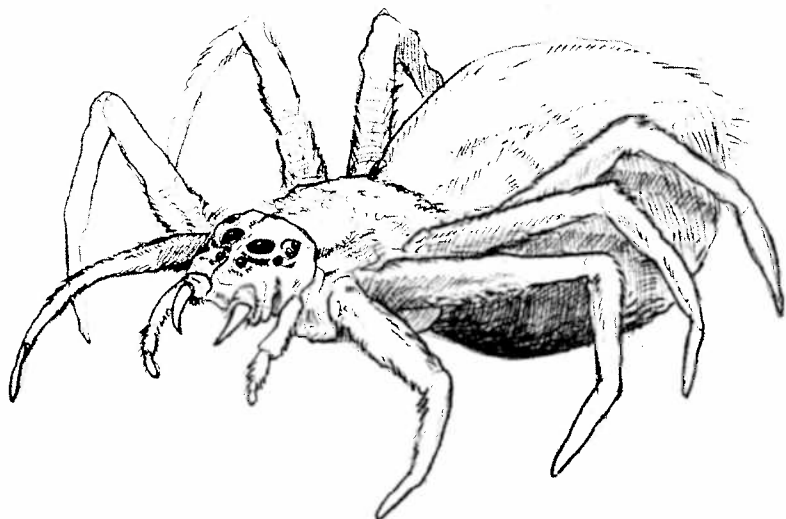
sea depth, but when asked to describe the receding waters below them, Beebe said that the abyss "looked like the black pit-mouth of hell itself."<sup>2</sup>

A survey of popular culture indicates that I am not alone in my fear of sea monsters. Television, movies, and video games are rife with neck-tensing narratives about underwater peril. The literature and imagery of high culture, too, have long been fascinated with the idea of watery fiends.<sup>3</sup> But there may be deeper reasons, below the stratum of culture, for the ubiquitous sea monster phobia. Evolution may have built this into our species over the span of many prehistoric millennia. Fear of murky water may have been a good survival strategy for ancestors who regularly fell victim to real predators; trepidation at water's edge may have been just the thing that helped some hominids to leave progeny. This is speculative, but it is consistent with basic Darwinian assumptions about the evolution of instincts.

In a telling passage from *The Descent of Man*, Darwin scandalously compares the intellects and emotions of humans and animals.<sup>4</sup> He tells several stories of his experiments at the Zoological Gardens, in particular his research at the monkey house. Darwin knew that monkeys had an "instinctive dread" of snakes, so he took a dead, stuffed, and coiled-up snake down to the monkey house. "The excitement thus caused was one of the most curious spectacles which I ever beheld," he wrote. A stuffed snake was too horrifying and the monkeys stayed far away from it, but a dead fish, a mouse, and even a live turtle eventually drew the monkeys in and they displayed no fear in handling them. Pushing the experiment further, Darwin placed a live snake in a bag and put this inside the cage. "One of the monkeys immediately approached, cautiously opened the bag a little, peeped in, and instantly dashed away." But then, in a human-like act of curiosity, "monkey after monkey, with head raised high and turned on one side, could not resist taking a momentary peep into the upright bag, at the dreadful object lying quietly at the bottom."<sup>5</sup>

To monkeys, snakes are monstrously threatening and so their instincts err on the side of caution. In a state of nature many snakes are real threats; from an evolutionary point of view, any monkeys that happened to be extra timid around them probably lived to procreate another day. One might say that monkeys have an *emotional caricature* of snakes in their instinctual vocabulary. The monsters of our human imagination may be similar caricatures, originally built on legitimate threats but eventually spiraling into the autonomous elaborations that only big brains can produce. In my brain, the piranha becomes the Loch Ness Monster.

Arachnophobia, or fear of spiders, seems to be a universal human dread, especially in children. The biologist Tim Flannery asks, "Why do so many



Many monster archetypes seem to tap into widespread arachnophobia. Some evolutionary psychologists believe that spider and snake phobias are the result of natural selection. Pencil drawing by Stephen T. Asma © 2008.

of us react so strongly, and with such primal fear, to spiders? The world is full of far more dangerous creatures such as stinging jellyfish, stonefish, and blue ringed octopi that—by comparison—appear to barely worry most people.<sup>6</sup> Flannery speculates that a Darwinian story connects human arachnophobia to our African prehistory. Because *Homo sapiens* emerged in Africa, he wonders whether a species or genus of spider could have been present as an environmental pressure. Africa is the place where the human mind acquired many of its useful instincts. If humans evolved in an environment with venomous spiders, a phobia could have been advantageous for human survival and could be expected to gain greater frequency in the larger human population. The six-eyed sand spider of western and southern Africa actually fits that speculation very well. It is a crab-like spider that hides in the sand and leaps out to capture prey; its venom is extremely harmful to children. One can see how a fear of spiders would have been highly advantageous in this context. Our contemporary arachnophobia may be a leftover from our prehistory on the savanna.<sup>7</sup>

In recent cognitive science debates, fears of snakes, spiders, and other creatures have been held up as examples of preset mental circuits in the human brain.<sup>8</sup> Though it is a controversial idea, a growing number of theorists argue that our brains come hard-wired with some belief content, such

as “snakes = bad.” The fact that phobias seem so resistant to revision in light of new experiences suggests that they are closed information systems. Even after a phobic person is told that a snake is not poisonous or witnesses the removal of the venom ducts, he or she still dreads handling the reptile. The phobia stays like a stubborn piece of antiquated furniture in the architecture of the mind.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps monsters are also part of our furnished mind. As cultural and psychological realities, monsters certainly seem unwilling to go away, no matter how much light we shine in their direction.

More important for my thesis, however, is the wonderfully ambivalent tension in Darwin’s zoo monkeys. The monkey cannot fully confront the snake, but he cannot leave it alone either. He is repelled *and* attracted. Of course, we are just like him; we cannot “resist taking a momentary peep . . . at the dreadful object lying quietly at the bottom.”

## REPULSION AND ATTRACTION

While perusing the disturbing deformed specimens at the Hunterian Museum in London,<sup>10</sup> I found myself standing beside a young boy and his mother. We were all staring at a display case that contained a series of tragically malformed babies floating in large jars of alcohol.

“Oh my God!” the boy cried out. He repeatedly shrieked as he moved around the frightening display cases. The Hunterian Museum is a treasure trove of macabre specimens, some dating back to the mid-1700s. The collection, like the one in the American Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, is an unsettling compendium of the ways Nature can go wrong.

“Oh Lord, I can’t believe it!” the boy gasped in his thick north England accent. He was moving into the pathology section of the museum now, and he was being drawn into the morose magic of Hunter’s collection. As he stared intensely at a fetus with two fused heads, his mother suddenly turned to him and asked, “Is this disturbing to you, William?” He didn’t look away from the cases, but responded, “God, yes. Very.”

“Shall we go, then, dear?”

“No,” he shot back, “absolutely not.”

WHEN MY SON AND I LIVED IN CHINA he demonstrated the same ambivalent human impulse. In China today, as in other parts of the developing world, it is still possible to see adults who suffer from birth defects that would have been routinely remedied in the West by early surgeries or procedures. Lack of decent health care has doomed many poor people to lifelong struggles with otherwise easily curable maladies.



Similar to those of the Hunterian and Mutter Museums, here is a vitrine of teratological birth defects from the Vrolik Museum. Many of us find them difficult to look at, and yet it is difficult to look away. Photo by Joanna Ebenstein © 2008. Reprinted by kind permission of the artist and the Vrolik Museum, University of Amsterdam.

In our neighborhood, an undeveloped suburb of Shanghai, my three-year-old son and I walked to school every day and stopped to drop a few coins in the begging cup of a hydrocephalic woman. Her head was swollen to the size of a large beach ball, perhaps three times normal size, and she rested it sideways on her shoulder as she sat on the sidewalk. My son was frightened of her, but he staunchly resisted my attempts to avoid her and insisted every day that we stop to say “Ni hao” to the “big head lady,” as he referred to her.

These are examples of what we’ve all experienced at some time or other: the simultaneous lure and repulsion of the abnormal or extraordinary being. This duality is an important aspect of our notion of monsters too.

*Monster* is a flexible, multiuse concept. Until quite recently it applied to unfortunate souls like the hydrocephalic woman. During the nineteenth century “freak shows” and “monster spectacles” were common; such exploitation of genetically and developmentally disabled people must be one of the lowest points on the ethical meter of our civilization.<sup>11</sup> We have moved away from this particular pejorative use of *monster*, yet we still employ the term and concept to apply to *inhuman* creatures of every stripe, even if they come from our own species. The concept of the monster has evolved to become a moral term in addition to a biological and theological term. We live in an age, for example, in which recent memory can recall many sadistic political monsters.

## INHUMAN

In 2003 I lived within walking distance of the infamous Security Prison S21, a torture compound in Cambodia. It took months for me to get up the nerve to visit. Pierrot, the Swiss owner of my guesthouse, told me that he still refused to go after ten years in Phnom Penh. “You will not get me in that place, mon ami.” He explained, “It is the maker of bad dreams, and I wish to sleep well.” Like Pierrot, I didn’t want to go to S21 either. But S21 was a place of monsters, real monsters and real victims, and I could not altogether leave it alone.

Over and over again one hears the same story of torturers—whether Nazis, Pinochet lackeys, American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, or Khmer Rouge teenagers at S21—the story that they were just “following orders.” But before we dismiss these people as demons that bear no resemblance to us, we should remember Stanley Milgram’s famous experiment on the psychology of obedience to authority, in which average Americans were made to believe they were shocking other average Americans with lethal doses of electricity simply because a man in a white lab coat insisted that they do so.<sup>12</sup>

Most people who hear about Milgram’s study ask themselves what they would do as a test subject. Or we wonder how we would respond if we were told that prisoner *X* is an enemy of freedom and that we must pressure him to give up information about an imminent terrorist plan. Or worse yet, we wonder what we would do if someone held a gun to our head and told us to cut someone else’s throat. That’s what happened at S21, over and over again. If we were in that situation, would we become monsters? Or does such heinous action require freewill agency in order to qualify the perpetrator as monstrous?



A torture bed in the Khmer Rouge prison S21. Seventeen thousand Cambodians lost their lives in this monstrous place. The building is now a memorial museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo by Stephen T. Asma © 2008.

The term *monster* is often applied to human beings who have, by their own horrific actions, abdicated their humanity. In *The Fragility of Goodness* Martha Nussbaum makes the Aristotelian argument that our humanity is indeed a fragile mantle, one that can be corrupted by forces internal and external to us.<sup>13</sup> Like Hecuba in the Greek tragedy, who finds her child dead, a human being can lose so much that is precious to her, through war or persecution or chance, that she sinks to the level of an animal, or worse. Everyone has the potential to become monstrous.<sup>14</sup>

In Cambodia I walked the dusty dirt roads to the uneventful-looking compound S21. It looked uneventful because before 1975 it was simply known as the Tuol Svay Prey High School. It was converted into Security Prison 21 by Pol Pot's security forces, and it became the central detention center for suspected enemies of Angkar, the mysterious and authoritative higher organization or party of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>15</sup> By 1976 approximately twenty-five hundred prisoners had passed through the bloody corridors of S21, and each year that followed saw increased numbers of tortured prisoners, until they totaled around seventeen thousand by 1979, when the Vietnamese Army liberated Phnom Penh. When Vietnamese soldiers stormed S21 they were horrified by the carnage they discovered

there. Only seven survivors were found alive in the compound; no one else who entered S21—not one of the seventeen thousand people—made it out alive.

My guide for the tour was Ladin, a small woman in her thirties with a broad and somewhat sad face. She smiled and gestured for me to walk with her across a small field of dust and burned grass. We were the only people moving through the compound. All the classrooms of this former high school had been converted into prison cells and torture chambers. Iron bars were installed over the windows and doors and barbed wire snaked everywhere. On the ground floor little brick cells had been fabricated to hold one prisoner each, with not even enough space to lie down. Larger rooms held hundreds of prisoners chained together, unable to move—starving, dehydrated, injured from their interrogations, dying.

Ladin led me to one of the torture chambers. The floor was checkered with tile, and the walls were mottled and dirty. A battered bed frame sat in the center of the room; shackles and chains lay on the bed. Underneath the bed was a huge dried stain of blood that had pooled there from countless victims. The room was left just as it was found when S21 finally fell in 1979. The last victim, tortured to death as the Vietnamese were entering Phnom Penh, was discovered here and photographed. The gruesome photo now hangs over the bed. It shows a mangled man lying in this bed before me, his head caved in, his throat slit, blood everywhere, a rooster standing on the body picking at the corpse. I left the room quickly.

The phenomenon of this torture prison is a testament to human depravity, because the vast majority of the men, women, and children who were brought here had done absolutely nothing wrong and were as mystified by their imprisonment as you or I would be if someone dragged us out of bed tonight and charged us with bogus crimes. Hearsay, suspicion, and paranoia led the Khmer Rouge's Security Office, Central Committee, and Ministry of Defense to descend violently upon innocent farmers, teachers, engineers, students, workers, and whole families, accusing them of being enemies of the revolution.<sup>16</sup>

My guide, Ladin, explained to me that she was ten years old when the Khmer Rouge came to her home, forcibly removed her father and brother, and sent her to work in the fields from sunrise to sunset until she almost starved to death. She never saw her father and brother again and still has no knowledge of their fate. I wondered how she could come to this wretched place day after day and offer tours of events that had shred her own life. Perhaps walking these terrible hallways had some paradoxical therapeutic effect on her. I didn't understand it. I didn't understand any of it.

## UNTHINKABLE

One aspect of the monster concept seems to be the breakdown of intelligibility. An action or a person or a thing is monstrous when it can't be processed by our rationality, and also when we cannot readily relate to the emotional range involved. We know what it's like to hate, for example, but when we designate a monstrous hate, we are acknowledging that it is off our chart. We don't have to go all the way to Pol Pot's Cambodia to find modern monsters. Many more are very close to home.

On May 11, 2005, thirty-four-year-old Jerry Hobbs was charged in Lake County, Illinois, with the brutal murder of his eight-year-old daughter, Laura, and her best friend, Krystal Tobias. In a videotaped confession, Hobbs described killing the girls after he argued with his daughter in Beulah Park in Zion, Illinois. Hobbs, who had only recently been released from a Texas jail for an unrelated 2001 aggravated assault (chasing a guy with a chainsaw), believed that his daughter had stolen money from her mother. According to him, Laura was supposed to be grounded, but she had gone to the park to play and Hobbs followed her there. When his daughter argued with him and refused to come home, he said, he attacked her. According to his confession, Laura's friend produced a small "potato knife" to defend herself, but Hobbs wrestled it away from her and used it to stab the children repeatedly until they were dead.

This story achieved national attention in the spring of 2005, and Hobbs is currently awaiting trial in Lake County. He now claims that his confession was coerced by police and that he is innocent. In addition, many of the facts of his story don't add up. There doesn't appear to be physical evidence linking him to the crime, and the defense claims there is some physical evidence linking a different, unnamed person to the crime scene.

The principal investigator for Hobbs's defense team is my brother, David Asma, one of the investigators for the Lake County Public Defender's Office. Like dozens of previous grisly crimes, this one ended up on his desk within hours of the formal charge. My first reaction to hearing about the case was to recoil at the very sight of "monster Hobbs," so dubbed by the strident CNN legal commentator Nancy Grace, but my second reaction was "How can anyone defend this monster?"

The Public Defender's Office, and in particular my brother's job, is a gruesome world of mutilated bodies, rape, insanity, arson, guns, drugs, mendacity, and sadism. It is a place where the most monstrous of human behaviors are on display. But my brother's position is that "monsters" are matters of perception. A person is demonized, according to him, by people who stand to benefit from the derogatory labeling. Monsters are

"constructed" and serve as scapegoats for expedient political agendas. He, and most other public defenders, make a heuristic commitment to the innocence of their clients. My brother assumes that everybody he defends is (at least from 9 to 5) misunderstood. Hobbs's defense team argued, for example, that his confession was coerced by police who kept him awake and under questioning for an unhealthy stretch of time. The recent spate of death row pardons based on DNA evidence (even when there were confessions) makes this a more reasonable position than it first appears. Whether or not Hobbs committed the murder is something for a jury to decide. But his defenders cannot think of him as a monster if they are to do their jobs effectively. In addition, Dave must emotionally distance himself, for professional reasons, from the murders themselves. "I have looked at photos," he explains, "of the most grisly murders—sometimes for a whole year straight, everyday—but I cannot look at the victims as little girls or whatever the case may be. I must look at them, study them forensically, as *evidence*." When I press my brother, he admits that, yes, whoever did kill these little girls is a monster, but *on the job* he must adopt the working hypothesis that the killer is not his client (or in other cases, that his client may have done the deed but has mitigating issues).

It's worth noting, too, that the nature of most client-council relations would tend to bring the humanity of the accused to the forefront, would tend to de-monster them. The defender always sees another side of the accused than the wider public does. This is not, I suspect, the result of some deep moral mission or heart-of-gold goodwill on the part of the defender, but rather the result of mundane daily interactions and conversations. Over the course of many interviews and meetings, accused criminals and their counsel often end up sharing cigarettes and chatting about everything from recent sports scores to their similar musical tastes. The person you are defending may or may not actually be a monster, but it must be harder and harder to see him as such if you get to know him.<sup>17</sup>

## UNMANAGEABLE

Of course not all monsters are evil. Dragons in China, for example, are so loved that the Chinese consider themselves to be the "children of the dragon."<sup>18</sup> Some monsters start out harmless, but their own nature forces a turn toward malevolence. Mary Shelley's creature in *Frankenstein* is perhaps the most famous of the gentle-hearted giants gone bad. It is the failure of Victor Frankenstein and society generally to provide a space for him in the human family that turns the creature into a monster. "Shall

The Golem is a  
bumbling monster  
of Jewish folklore.  
The clay creature  
was animated  
by Rabbi Judah  
Loew to protect  
the Jewish ghetto  
but could not be  
controlled and  
wreaked havoc in  
Prague. Pen and ink  
drawing by Stephen  
T. Asma © 2008.



each man," the creature bitterly asks, "find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone?"<sup>19</sup> The creature is so alienated that he cannot even find solidarity with the nonhuman animals. This novel gives us a glimpse into the subjective interior of the monster's life and gives us a tragic archetype of the misunderstood outcast.

Long before *Frankenstein* we had the Jewish version: the bumbling, innocent, but also dangerous Golem of Prague.<sup>20</sup> Versions of the legend differ somewhat, but one iteration tells of a giant creature fashioned out of clay by a sixteenth-century rabbi, Judah Loew. At a time when the Jewish ghetto of Prague was regularly under anti-Semitic attacks, Rabbi Loew brought the giant clay sculpture to life by writing the word *emet* (Hebrew for "truth") on his forehead. The animated monster was to protect the Jewish people from outside aggression. It was strong and powerful, but it was also stupid and followed directions too literally or incorrectly. The Golem began by protecting the Jews, but its clumsy nature eventually led to its

accidentally harming them, sending the community into greater chaos. In the original Golem story the rabbi is able to shut down the bumbling giant and prevent further disaster by erasing the *e* from *emet* to create the Hebrew word for *death*. According to legend, the Golem's body still lies dormant in the attic of the Altneuschul temple in Prague, awaiting reanimation should the need arise.

In the stories of the Frankenstein creature and the Golem we see another important version of the monster concept: a creature or person who is dangerous to us, but not intentionally so. We might call them "accidental monsters." They've had a significant rebirth in recent science fiction that considers our possible encounter with alien life forms.<sup>21</sup>

## THE LITERAL AND THE SYMBOLIC

*Monster* derives from the Latin word *monstrum*, which in turn derives from the root *monere* (to warn). To be a monster is to be an omen. Sometimes the monster is a display of God's wrath, a portent of the future, a symbol of moral virtue or vice, or an accident of nature. The monster is more than an odious creature of the imagination; it is a kind of *cultural category*, employed in domains as diverse as religion, biology, literature, and politics.

As a *literal* creature, the monster is still a vital actor on the stage of indigenous folk cultures,<sup>22</sup> and it's safe to say that even in our developed and otherwise secular world, the idea of a literal demon or devil still haunts the minds of many evangelical and mainstream Christians. In this book I am concerned with literal monsters, but the monster as metaphor is probably more relevant for us now. In some cases, the literal and the metaphorical merge in a dance of causation, as in the case that Teresa Goddu tells of a vampire clan in Murray, Kentucky, in the late 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Here the legends of vampire activity, such as drinking blood and killing, actually inspired some teenagers to role-play, acting to such a degree that they murdered a parent.

Thankfully, most people don't have to worry about actual blood drinking and instead employ the monster concept metaphorically rather than literally. But even so, we have begun to realize the important role that metaphors play in shaping our thoughts and our experiences. According to the theorists Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, we have many conceptual metaphors that act like lenses for filtering and organizing our experiences: "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to



other people."<sup>24</sup> When we say "He was a monster," our listeners have a general sense of what we mean because they conceptually map some inhuman qualities onto the person we're talking about. We perform a metaphorical operation that helps us to understand one domain of action by seeing it through another, more concrete domain of action. When trying to convey the way your colleague at work "uses people" and seems to "feed" on their weaknesses, you refer to him as a "vampire." It's a classic case of using an obvious activity (drinking someone's blood for nourishment) to clarify a more subtle and intangible activity of instigated workplace drama. Johnson and Lakoff claim that these metaphors are often prelinguistic aspects of our thinking, shaped by cultural conventions and native psychophysical tendencies.<sup>25</sup> I suspect that monsters are metaphorical archetypes of this nature, and I want to trace the anatomy and evolution of some of these metaphors.

Hand in hand with this idea that metaphors shape our thinking, communicating, and even feeling is the idea that *imagination* is more active in our picture of reality than we previously acknowledged. The monster, of course, is a product of and a regular inhabitant of the imagination, but the imagination is a driving force behind our entire perception of the world. If we find monsters in our world, it is sometimes because they are really there and sometimes because we have brought them with us.

BOTH THE EAST AND THE WEST are rife with monsters of every stripe. Demons, dragons, ghosts, wrathful Buddhas, and supernatural animals occupy the theology, folklore, and daily rituals of religious cultures around the globe. The "hungry ghost" is a common creature in Asia. It usually represents a monstrous afterlife for a person who was gluttonous or greedy in this life; in the afterlife, the person is tortured by his insatiable hunger. These creatures, sometimes imagined with a giant stomach and a pinhole mouth or no mouth at all, continue to play an important role in Eastern cultures; Southeast Asia and China still have annual hungry ghost festivals. They are imaginative symbols of the frustrations of hedonism and the doomed pursuit of pleasure. A comparative study of similar Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist monsters could give us important insight into our common search for the ecstatic experience, our ascetic bifurcation of spirit and flesh, our quest for ideals and perfections, and our retreat from evil. Indeed, any comparative cross-cultural study of monsters in Eastern and Western cultures could provide an interesting picture of what is common and what is unique in our hopes and fears. But, anxious that such an East-West project might be too big for an in-depth analysis, I have chosen an

only slightly less daunting endeavor: a cultural and conceptual history of Western monsters. Here, too, the terrain is immense, but I believe that a coherent thread can be followed from the ancient to the contemporary. The concept of monster has evolved over time, and I hope to track some of the main branches of that Western genealogy. And I hold out the hope that some future book will take the East as its primary focus.

IT SEEMS IMPORTANT TO SAY A WORD about the word "monster." Obviously it's not a complimentary term. Like the words *imbecile* and *moron*, which psychologists once used as technical descriptors for IQ levels, the word *monster* once had a slightly less pejorative set of connotations but has now slipped wholly into the derogatory. The term was never entirely friendly, but in certain eras it was used to, among other things, designate those persons whom we now refer to as developmentally or genetically disabled. Perhaps the word is so charged with prejudicial values that it can never again be used in an objective or purely descriptive manner. No one who finds himself at the receiving end of the monster epithet can be confused about its negative connotations, and it is probably fair to say that, in reference to humans, there is no longer any truly *literal* sense of the term. To be completely accurate I should, throughout this book, place every instance of *monster* in scare quotes to indicate my ironic use of the term. This would be stylistically tedious, even irritating. So we'll have to be satisfied with a disclaimer: no disrespect is intended by the author to any particular monsters, living or dead.