

# Urban Monstrosities



# Urban Monstrosities:

## *Perversity and Upheaval in the Unreal City*

Edited by

Joseph DeFalco Lamperez  
and J. Alexandra McGhee

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For my parents  
Gary Lamperez and Michele DeFalco  
and in loving memory of John DeFalco Lamperez

*J. D. Lamperez*

To all the monsters

*J. A. McGhee*



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*J. A. McGhee*

## INTRODUCTION

# ON MINOTAURS AND AMAZEMENT; OR, WHAT CAN THE URBAN MONSTER DO FOR YOU?

JOSEPH DEFALCO LAMPEREZ  
AND J. ALEXANDRA MCGHEE

Perinthia, one of the sublimely eccentric structures described in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972), has been modeled, we are told, after the elegance of the night sky. "Summoned to lay down the rules for the foundation of Perinthia, the astronomers established the place and the day according to the position of the stars" (144), a method meant to ensure that cosmic order structure the city from its foundation. Perinthia would thus "reflect the harmony of the firmament" so that "nature's reason and the gods' benevolence would shape the inhabitants' destinies."<sup>1</sup> But when the city is duly constructed and a generation born inside its borders, these lofty expectations give way to a cohort of freakshow curiosities, some even bearing a tinge of monstrosity: "In Perinthia's streets and square today you encounter cripples, dwarfs, hunchbacks, obese men, bearded women. But the worse cannot be seen; guttural howls are heard from cellars and lofts, where families hide children with three heads or with six legs."<sup>2</sup>

On one level, these offspring disturb their fellow townsfolk because they appear grotesque. But this generation is *uncanny* insofar as it suggests that order and monstrosity share an opaque alliance within the limits of urban space. Thus, "Perinthia's astronomers are faced with a difficult choice. Either they must admit that all their calculations were wrong and their figures are unable to describe the heavens, or else they must reveal that the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*. trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt (1974), 144.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Calvino, 145.

Perinthia exemplifies an unsettling idea: monstrosity and the cosmic order exist in some kind of baffling accord that becomes visible within the bounds of the built environment.

The vaguely timeless quality characterizing Perinthia mirrors the reappearance of urban monstrosities across genres and epochs. While the 1st century C.E. satirist Juvenal, for example, lamenting the pretensions of upwardly mobile Romans, wonders “who/ Could endure this monstrous city, however callous at heart,/ and swallow his wrath?”<sup>4</sup> the phrase reappears nearly two millennia later in H.P. Lovecraft’s “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936). There, the narrator observes of the ruins of an ancient, alien city, that

there was something vaguely but deeply unhuman in all the contours, dimensions, proportions, decorations, and constructional nuances of the blasphemously archaic stonework. We soon realised from what the carvings revealed that this monstrous city was many million years old.<sup>5</sup>

While the contexts of this phrase could hardly be more varied, the divergent settings in which it appears suggest that urbanity and monstrosity are linked in texts ranging across a wide cultural, geographic, and temporal expanse.

In our reading, these and other echoes reflect that the monster and the city exist in partial conformity with one another. Like the monster, which “exists only to be read” and acts as “a glyph that seeks a hierophant” according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in *Monster Theory* (1996), the city also demands (and yet confounds) that readers decipher its illegibility.<sup>6</sup> In the seventh book of *The Prelude* (1805) William Wordsworth, for example, exclaims of London—the “monstrous ant-hill on the plain,” “monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound”—that “The face of every one/ that passes by me is a mystery!”<sup>7</sup> In *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) Thomas de Quincey, meanwhile, reports encountering “such enigmatical entries, and such sphinx’s riddles of streets without

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<sup>4</sup> Juvenal. “Satire I.” in *The Classical Roman Reader: New Encounters with Ancient Rome*. ed. Kenneth John Atchity and Rosemary McKenna. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1997), 252.

<sup>5</sup> Lovecraft, H. P. *At the Mountains of Madness*. In *The Classic Horror Stories*. New York: Oxford (2013), 234.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1996), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude, Book Seventh*. In *The Complete Poetical Works*. London: MacMillan and Co. (1993).

<<http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww293.html>>. Bk. VII, lines 628-29.

thoroughfares, as must, I conceive, baffle the audacity of porters, and confound the intellects of hackney-coachmen.”<sup>8</sup> That decrypting the city appears necessary and impossible in equal measure produces a “simultaneity of anxiety and desire”<sup>9</sup> that for Cohen exemplifies monstrosity. The city is monstrous insofar as “it does not permit itself to be read”<sup>10</sup> during these and other such crises of interpretation.

That monsters reside on the edge of what Julia Kristeva calls the symbolic order,<sup>11</sup> eluding processes of signification that they themselves help set into motion, suggests that the city is monstrous in that it too defines the limits of meaning as it yields new social forms. Cities and monsters resemble one another further as they fail to resolve into a *gestalt*. A kaleidoscope of commodities, bodies and things that grow radically egalitarian as they fail to coalesce, the hodgepodge of urban life resembles Harvey Greenberg’s description of the *xenomorphs* in *Alien* (1979), which he calls “a Linnean nightmare” unwilling “to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things.’”<sup>12</sup> Wordsworth registers this effect when he writes that “the same perpetual whirl/Of trivial objects” threatens to preclude “a feeling of the whole.”<sup>13</sup>

But while such innate resemblances clarify that cities and monsters occupy shared conceptual terrain, urban monstrosity is also part of a wider dialectic that witnesses rationality and its antithesis struggle for the soul of the built environment. The urban monster, we claim, exemplifies the irrational half of this struggle. Urban theory has long wrestled with this duality comprising order and unreason: in *The City in History* (1961) Lewis Mumford writes that the Greek urban planner Hippodamus realized “that the form of the city was the form of its social order . . . [and] that town planning should have not merely an immediate practical aim, but an ideal goal of larger dimensions.” Hippodamus conceived “of his art as a

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<sup>8</sup> De Quincey, Thomas. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. In *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, Vol. III*. New York: A.&C. Black, 1897. <<https://archive.org/stream/TheCollectedWritingsOfThomasDeQuinceyVolIII/TX/T/0000%20-%2000397.txt>>. 393.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Poe, Edgar Allen. “The Man of the Crowd.” In *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales*. New York: Library of America (1984), 388.

<sup>11</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press (1982), 67.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, Harvey Roy. *Screen Memories: Hollywood Cinema on the Psychoanalytic Couch*. New York: Columbia University Press (1993), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude* Bk. VII, lines 725-6, 736.

means of formally embodying a more rational social order,”<sup>14</sup> an awareness reflecting “confidence that the processes of reason could impose measure and order on every human activity.”<sup>15</sup> Mumford laments such attempts to impose given agendas upon the city, noting that the more geometrical and outwardly perfect the built environment becomes, the more an indefinable urban vitality appears to suffer. For Mumford, this struggle is less rooted in the contingencies of history than Michel Foucault suggests in his description of what he calls the “great confinement,” probably the most familiar account of how the forces of rationalization transformed urban space. According to Foucault, Enlightenment-era cities banished the irrational from their confines, meaning that “order no longer freely confronted disorder, reason no longer tried to make its own way among all that might evade or seek to deny it.”<sup>16</sup>

The reappearance of urban monstrosity across place and period, however, leads us to agree with Mumford that these processes recur. Thus, the rationalization of urban space beginning in the seventeenth century was neither historically unique, nor absolute. Joseph Rykwert describes just one deviation from this pattern:

London provided the one outstanding exception in the great European effort at rationalization. When much of the City burned in the Great Fire of 1666, several, mostly rectilinear, plans were drawn up by prominent experts. The most famous one, by Sir Christopher Wren – in which an orthogonal grid is broken by oblique radiating avenues – proposed a plan for rebuilding the City, which interweaved avenues in the way the French had perfected in the park context as at Chantilly and Versailles. The citizens’ ferocious attachment to their property rights ended any possibility of “rationalized” improvement.<sup>17</sup>

London’s urban labyrinth paired against the orderliness of French landscaping is merely one early modern expression of a binary that has long structured urban discourse.

Seeking to reimagine these well-worn polemics, Abraham Akkerman has developed a model that he names “philosophical urbanism.” The drive toward order, reason, and utopian harmony resolves into what he terms

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<sup>14</sup> Lewis, Mumford. *The City in History: Its Origins, its Transformations, and its Prospects*. Wilmington: Mariner Books (1968), 172.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, Michele. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Rykwert, Joseph. *The Seduction of Place: The History and Future of Cities*. New York: Vintage (2002), 49.

“the Citadel,” while chaotic and egalitarian urban processes bear signs of what he calls “the Garden.” In what amounts to a kind of manifesto clarifying the stakes of this dichotomy, Akkerman writes that

the Citadel is perceived as representing . . . stability, solitude, and solidity, whereas the Garden represents the respectively opposite traits of ingathering and change, multitude and softness . . . the Garden symbolizes concealment and surprise, while the Citadel is the epitome of surveillance and lucidity. Throughout the history of civilization, at least in the West, the Garden and the Citadel . . . have come to represent the deliberate fashioning of human environments.<sup>18</sup>

Departing from Mumford and Foucault alike, Akkerman refuses to celebrate one half of this urban duality at the expense of the other. However, he omits any reference to the role that the trope of the urban monster might play in this ancient dichotomy. To redress this oversight and extend the diagnostic capacities of Akkerman’s approach, we propose a variation addressing the twinned accounts of the minotaur and the labyrinth referenced in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 C.E.). In our reading, the Citadel and the Garden map onto Ovid’s paired descriptions of the Cretan labyrinth and the monster housed within. Constructed to entrap the minotaur that would be locked inside its sinuous corridors, Daedalus’ maze in our reading clarifies the link between illegible space and monstrosity.

The labyrinth has long served as a reference point in urban discourse: as Kristen Veel writes, not only was “the modern industrial city . . . conceptualized as labyrinthine at the time of its emergence”; apparently, “the link between the city and the labyrinth . . . is by no means exclusively modern.”<sup>19</sup> Cities channel the longstanding fascination with labyrinths, expressing this mythic structure in tangible form: for Walter Benjamin, “the city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth.”<sup>20</sup> If the labyrinth is the city’s surreal alter ego, Ovid’s lasting description of this form offers a blueprint suggesting the role of the monster in urban space. Containing the Minotaur not only requires that the labyrinth remain impossible to navigate; it also licenses a baffling overgrowth of the built environment.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>19</sup> Veel, Kristen. “The Irreducibility of Space: Labyrinths, Cities, Cyberspace.” *Diacritics*, 33.3/4 (2003), 152.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press/ Harvard University Press, (1999), 429-30.

The origin story of Daedalus' legendary maze unfolds as follows. Having had carnal knowledge of a bull, the Queen of Crete gives birth to

a strange hybrid monster. Minos resolved to remove this shame, the Minotaur, from his house, and hide it away in a labyrinth with blind passageways. Daedalus, celebrated for his skill in architecture, laid out the design, and confused the clues to direction, and led the eye into a tortuous maze, by the windings of alternating paths. No differently from the way in which the watery Maeander deludes the sight, flowing backwards and forwards in its changeable course, through the meadows of Phrygia, facing the running waves advancing to meet it, now directing its uncertain waters towards its source, now towards the open sea: so Daedalus made the endless pathways of the maze, and was scarcely able to recover the entrance himself: the building was as deceptive as that.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the monster calls forward the riotous complexity of the edifice that entraps it. The gap dividing the navigable palace from the "endless pathways of the maze" thus suggests that monstrosity acts as a kind of design principle, inspiring uncanny proliferation and ingenious feats of construction. The first instance of the mythic form on which urban space is premised finds expression in reference to monstrosity.

However, the rational/irrational binary crops up in the *Metamorphoses* no less than other instances of urban discourse. Ovid soon goes on to describe the more familiar story of Theseus rescuing Ariadne from the minotaur before threading his way out of the labyrinth:

In there, Minos walled up the twin form of bull and man, and twice nourished it on Athenian blood, but the third repetition of the nine-year tribute by lot, caused the monster's downfall. When, through the help of the virgin princess, Ariadne, by rewinding the thread, Theseus, son of Aegeus, won his way back to the elusive threshold, that no one had previously regained, he immediately set sail for Dia, stealing the daughter of Minos away with him.<sup>22</sup>

This version of the tale does not reference the pairing of dreamlike urban landscapes and the monsters that they harbor. More prosaically, Theseus shows instead that weird creatures and the weird spaces in which they dwell can both be quelled if one employs the right technique. Foiling the

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<sup>21</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses: A Complete English Translation and Mythological Index*, Book VIII. Trans. A.S. Kline, 2000: 152-182.

<<http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph8.htm>>. Bk. VIII, lines 152-82.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

minotaur and deciphering the labyrinth are as bound up in this version of the tale as are spatial overgrowth and monstrosity in its predecessor.

We claim that both models of urban monstrosity remain active in descriptions of the built environment. Like Theseus thwarting the monster and its maze, Sherlock Holmes and his many imitators use ratiocination to root out deviance throughout London, decoding mysteries while threading their way through the urban warren. While this model of urban engagement has become almost as familiar as Holmes himself, however, its counterpart has not. Thus we align Daedalus, whose labyrinth is illegible enough to baffle the minotaur in perpetuity, with writers and artists invoking monstrosity as an occasion to imagine new kinds of form and encounter in the built environment. We claim that a pattern of urban experience modeled after Daedalus' response to monstrosity is as important as (though less familiar than) its Thesean counterpart.

As well as licensing writers to reimagine the limits of urban experience, the monster also charts processes of urban flux as the principle of organization within a given city shifts. Again, Wordsworth deploys the trope of the urban monster to finesse from the upheavals of early-nineteenth-century London a representational style suited to new urban forms. As the Industrial Revolution reshuffled populations and British imperial design lent the metropolis a stronger cosmopolitan tinge, Wordsworth's London swelled with new inhabitants whose lives unfolded across unfamiliar trajectories. The urban monster evoked so often in "Book VII" is at once a shorthand for these upheavals, as well as a metaphor helping the reader to envision a new urban dispensation.

The monster remains no less useful as a barometer of evolving urban forms in our own day. "Looking for Jake" by China Miéville, the foremost practitioner of a subgenre of urban fantasy that he and others have dubbed "weird fiction," makes comparable use of urban monstrosity. Premised on an opaque non-event that witnesses the principle of organization in London lapse from the "deep order of chaos" to entropy overnight,<sup>23</sup> the story revolves around London's Gaumont State building in Kilburn. For anthropologist and geographer Doreen Massey, this neighborhood exemplifies the nascent global interconnectedness of contemporary London.<sup>24</sup> We submit that the building's role as architectural monster in

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<sup>23</sup> Miéville, China. "Looking for Jake." In *Looking for Jake: Stories*. New York: Del Rey (2005), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Massey, Doreen. "A Global Sense of Place." In *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press (1994).  
<http://www.unc.edu/courses/2006spring/geog/021/001/massey.pdf>. n.p.

Miéville reflects Kilburn's inchoate identity in our own world. Massey writes that

While Kilburn may have a character of its own, it is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares. It could hardly be less so. People's routes through the place, their favourite haunts within it, the connections they make . . . between here and the rest of the world vary enormously. If . . . people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places. Moreover, such multiple identities can either be a source of richness or a source of conflict, or both.<sup>25</sup>

Kilburn exemplifies how "the geography of social relations is changing," revealing that "places are processes, too"—unbounded and interacting with sites and cultures stretching beyond them.<sup>26</sup> Like Wordsworth, Miéville marks this changing urban order in reference to monstrosity. The narrator of "Looking for Jake" states that "I can't leave Kilburn behind. There are secrets here I haven't found. Kilburn is the centre of the new city, and the Gaumont State is the centre of Kilburn." We claim that the monstrosity of Miéville's Kilburn emerges in reference to the flux of its real-life counterpart, whose global trajectories and contacts show that bounded space has become de-territorialized to an unprecedented degree.

Eventually, Miéville's narrator tells us,

I'm going to walk the short distance up Kilburn High Road to the Gaumont State, and I'm going to read its plea, its command, and this time I think I will obey. The Gaumont State is a beacon, a lighthouse, a warning we missed . . . [it] exerts its own gravity over the changed city. I suspect all compasses point to it now . . . [it] is the generator of the dirty entropy that has taken London. I suspect there are many fascinating things inside. I'm going to let it reel me in.<sup>27</sup>

Escaping this architectural monster would mean shirking a rare kind of knowledge. Instead, the narrator suggests that being in essence devoured by urban monstrosity will afford him contact with the weird logics that have reconditioned London. To undergo the new dispensation governing the city, the narrator eschews a Thesean approach to follow Daedalus, whose labyrinth was only imaginable in reference to the monstrous minotaur.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Miéville, 20.

The authors in this collection, after the fashion of the mythic engineer himself, look toward the monster as the premise upon which new urban logics unfold. Jonathan Newell's chapter, "A Vivisection," shows that China Mieville's *Kraken* (2010) takes up ideas from decadent literature only to subvert them, creating a new kind of novel about London's monstrosity. If the decadent novel of the nineteenth century responds to the Darwinian focus on the possibility of racial degeneration, expressing Victorian insecurities about undesirable populations, weird fiction—and *Kraken* in particular—spotlights these populations to celebrate, rather than condemn them. This celebration honors precisely what these populations had been condemned for: their deviance and deformity. Morphological deformity thus becomes a sign of social health in urban space in Mieville's vision of London.

In "Limbo's Dreary Scope," Kostas Boyiopoulos examines the necropolis in *fin-de-siecle* literature that includes James Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night* (1874) and M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901). Positing that the concept of the necropolitian Limbo allows us to reread the industrialized city as inhabited by the living dead, Boyiopoulos identifies a "tension between monument and ruin" in these works that ultimately results in the realization of *fin-de-siecle* authors that "the earth is an immense tomb."

Steven A. Nardi scrutinizes the metaphor of the monstrous city in the context of American modernism in "'Some steel-souled machine-room': Henry James's *The American Scene* and the Consuming City." Nardi shows how James equates urban monstrosity with modern growth, characterizing the city as a living creature that consumes the old society and the passive observer alike. Focusing on passages describing early twentieth-century Manhattan, Nardi teases out both James's terror of multiplicity (of people, structures, meaning) in modern industrial cities, and the hope that this growth will revivify a society in decline.

In "Arrogant Fools with Blunt Instruments," Erik Bond reads Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) against *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), arguing that both triangulate troubled mental life, monstrous urban space, and architectural barriers. Bond reads the novels' protagonists, the neurosurgeon of *Saturday* and the eponymous Dr. Jekyll, one of the original mad scientists, as aligned with the monstrosity that surrounds them in urban space. Bond ultimately posits that neurosurgeons and novelists are the same, cutting away in order to heal and remaking the worlds around them.

Berit Michel's essay, "A Tale of Two (or Three) Cities," explores China Mieville's *The City and the City*, which presents readers with a

“conceptually absurd cityscape” in which inhabitants of Beszel and Ul Qoma—two different societies existing within the same physical space—must “unsee” citizens of the other city or risk being transported to a third space, called “Breach.” Although the novel is not nominally fantastical, Michel argues that it turns the conventions of urban fantasy on their head by alerting us to the innately speculative qualities within “the spatial patterns of cityscapes.” Even without elements of the traditionally surreal or fantastic, the city lays claim to a kind of monstrosity that defies categorization.

In “A Spectre So Violent: The Malevolent City in Skinny Puppy’s Post-Industrial Music,” Owen Coggins analyzes the songs of the Vancouver-based band to posit that the poisoned postindustrial city has at its core a monstrous logic mirrored in the music’s deconstructive sonic idiom. The essay disrupts the nature/culture binary to uncover a perversely productive integration of these concepts, arguing that “Skinny Puppy records are actually monstrous machines” designed for inhabitants of urban space. The reflexivity of the music evokes “the monstrous city which creates monsters [that] contribute to making the city monstrous.”

In “Flâneurs of the Fallout: Monstrous Gaming in Post-apocalyptic Cityscapes,” Gwyneth Peaty examines the monstrosity of the city through the eyes of the wandering outsider. By tracing overlappings and incongruities between literary versions of the *flâneur* and the player-customized avatars of modern virtual games, particularly *Fallout 3*, Peaty argues that this digital trope allows players to regain a sense of agency over material spaces and bodies put into jeopardy by the threat of terrorism and nuclear warfare. As the virtual *flâneur*’s traditional detachment from her surroundings is supplanted by greater involvement with the game world, the player is able to shape the urban space and fight back against monstrosity in the digitally recreated world.

In “Vampire in the City of Glass,” Simon Bacon reads *Blade Trinity* (2004) as examining a symbiosis between the vampire and the modern-day city. Arguing that the film explores the nature of “undead memory,” the essay situates the modern city as a time-denying, surveilling emptiness that parallels the vampire’s insatiable need to consume life. As the film’s protagonist, Blade aligns himself with the city’s urban ruins, and thus with memory rather than vacuous consumption. Blade is thus linked to the past but moving towards the future, despite his own desperate attempt to remain in stasis as a human-vampire hybrid.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# A VIVISECTION: CHINA MIÉVILLE'S *KRAKEN*, DEGENERATION, AND THE URBAN GOTHIC

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The misshapen, mystic, mutating London of China Miéville's New Weird urban fantasy *Kraken: An Anatomy* (2010) can trace its pedigree back to a long tradition of London phantasmagoria: its lineage would surely include Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (1996) and Michael Moorcock's *Mother London* (1988), with Iain Sinclair's *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997) and Peter Ackroyd's *London: A Biography* (2000) lurking in a closely neighbouring taxon. Following its heritage further back, one arrives at another cluster of *Kraken*'s forbears in the urban gothic and early weird fiction of the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*, prominent specimens of which include Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Like its gothic and decadent ancestors *Kraken* posits a hidden London lying just beneath the skin of the metropolis, a shadowy second city inhabited by criminals and monsters—categories which, under the influence of Darwinism and criminal psychology, became conflated at the end of the nineteenth-century, merged in the figure of the “degenerate.” Works of Victorian urban gothic fixated on this categorical confusion of criminality and monstrosity, doubtless exacerbated by the Whitechapel murders of 1888-91 and other troubles in the East End and often embodied in monstrous literary figures—H.G. Wells' Beast People, the shape-shifting beetle-woman of Richard Marsh, Arthur Machen's fiendish hybrid Helen Vaughn, and similarly liminal creatures.

This chapter traces the influences of the gothic tale of degeneration on *Kraken*, drawing connections between the proto-weird fiction of the late nineteenth-century and the “New Weird”—defined here as Jeff and Ann

VanderMeer describe the genre, as a form of predominantly urban fantasy “that subverts the romanticized ideas ... found in traditional fantasy”—and reading Miéville’s fantasy as a semi-parodic descendent of the urban gothic that apes the anxiogenic tropes of its literary ancestor, refusing to demonize the denizens of its margins, the underclass that nineteenth- and early-twentieth century gothic texts feared and abjected.<sup>1</sup> By playfully subverting what Erin O’Connor calls the “deformito-mania” of the nineteenth-century, the Victorian fascination with the “abhuman” body, as Kelly Hurley describes it, Miéville effectively has his cake and eats it too.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand he initially seems to exploit the same anxieties surrounding bodies, identity, class, and species that obsessed urban gothic authors, capitalizing on the degenerate’s violation of cultural and biological categories for aesthetic effect, lending his monsters their memorable grotesquery. Simultaneously, however, he undermines the problematic political implications surrounding gothic narratives of degeneracy, refusing to demonize the abhuman denizens of *Kraken*’s fantastic underworld: thus, rather than simply recapitulating or updating the anxieties of urban gothic, *Kraken* confronts and reconfigures them. By taxonomizing *Kraken* in relation to nineteenth-century urban gothic and decadent literature, I thus want to establish a kinship between Miéville’s New Weird fantasy and *fin de siècle* urban gothic while simultaneously noting some of the ways the New Weird subverts, undermines, alienates, and evolves from its literary ancestors.

Theories of degeneration predate Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) with works like Bénédict Augustin Morel’s *Traité des dégénérences* (1857), but following Darwin’s seminal evolutionary treatise they grew progressively feverish. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso increasingly wed theories of degeneration to crime, urbanism, animality, and the working class, arguing that the “born criminal” was an atavistic throwback to an earlier rung on the evolutionary ladder supposedly betrayed by physiological features, often of some bestial sort. As Kelly Hurley writes, “Lombroso does not restrict himself to the most recent human ancestors, the primates: his criminal also shows abnormal physical correspondences with ‘remote ancestors’ like dogs, rodents,

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<sup>1</sup> VanderMeer, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. *The New Weird*. San Francisco: Tachyon (2008), xvi

<sup>2</sup> O’Connor, Erin. *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture*. London: Duke UP (2000), 150; Hurley, Kelly. *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin De Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP (1996), 3.

lemurs, reptiles, oxen, birds of prey, and domestic fowl, to name a few.”<sup>3</sup> Projecting human values onto the fundamentally amoral dynamics of natural selection, theories of degeneration contributed to, and were informed by, the climate of pessimism and decline endemic during the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*. As H.G. Wells puts it in his essay “Zoological Retrogression” (1891): “The zoologist demonstrates that advance has been fitful and uncertain; rapid progress has often been followed by rapid extinction or degeneration.”<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, degenerationists connected their theories to cultural production, with critical works like Max Nordau’s polemical *Degeneration* (1892)—a text dedicated to Lombroso—arguing that forms of “degenerate” art (especially literature) were exacerbating degeneration: “the physician, especially if he has devoted himself to the special study of nervous and mental maladies, recognizes at a glance, in the *fin-de-siècle* disposition, in the tendencies of contemporary art and poetry, in the life and conduct of the men who write mystic, symbolic and ‘decadent’ works, and the attitudes taken by their admirers in the tastes and aesthetic instincts of fashionable society, the confluence of two well-defined conditions of disease ... viz. degeneration (degeneracy) and hysteria.”<sup>5</sup>

The influence of degeneration on late Victorian urban gothic and early twentieth-century weird fiction has been noted by many scholars, made manifest in the pages of gothic fiction in monstrous figures constituted out of a mass of culturally loaded signifiers. In Stevenson’s novella, for example, the degenerate Hyde is a manifestation of “the slime of the pit” and “amorphous dust,” images of the primordial protoplasm from which all life evolved and of the Biblical dust from which Adam was created: merging criminal and monster, Hyde is “caged in [Jekyll’s] flesh,” and must use “ape-like tricks” in his quest to wrest control away from Jekyll’s rational self, suggesting that the primitive simian from which humanity evolved still lies latent in us all, despite our pretensions of civilization and self-control.<sup>6</sup> Fear of degeneration is derived from our evolutionary kinship with the planet’s other species, from Darwin’s revelation that all

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<sup>3</sup> Hurley, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Wells, H.G. “Zoological Retrogression,” in *H.G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, 158-168, eds. Robert Philmus and David Hughes (1891). Reprint, Berkley: University of California Press (1975), 167)

<sup>5</sup> Nordau, Max Simon. *Degeneration*. 1892. Reprint, New York: H. Fertig (1968), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 1886.

Reprint, Peterborough: Broadview (2005), 91-2.

organic life is intimately interrelated, and from doubts as to whether the blind forces of evolution will “elevate” humanity or degrade it. As H.G. Wells wrote, “there is no guarantee in scientific knowledge of man’s permanence or permanent ascendancy ... The presumption is that before him lies a long future of profound modification, but whether that will be, according to present ideals, upward or downward, no one can forecast.”<sup>7</sup> Thus the climax of Machen’s *Great God Pan*, in which the monstrous Helen devolves in a kaleidoscopic series of metamorphoses, “[descending] to the beasts whence it ascended ... to the abyss of all being” until she becomes primordial “jelly” and is lent its particular horror, as Adrian Eckersley has noted.<sup>8</sup>

The city, as a center of civilization but also of crime, naturally becomes figured as a locus for degeneration, a liminal space, a breeding ground for devolution. As such, the London of urban gothic accrues a monstrosity of its own, reflecting the animality of its denizens: in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), for example, London’s streets become “the black web of some sprawling spider,” the brickfield kilns spouting “fanlike tongues of fire,” cobblestones and factories becoming animate, animal, uncannily organic.<sup>9</sup> London’s status as a mythic, “unreal city,” a locus for monstrosity, has a long history: as Peter Ackroyd writes, “Nymphs have been seen along the banks of its rivers, and minotaurs within its labyrinths of brick ... The city’s topography is a palimpsest within which all the most magnificent and monstrous cities of the world can be discerned.”<sup>10</sup> The newly born industrial proletariat, popular targets for theories of degeneration, were largely confined to cities like London, and the concept of degeneration, pretensions of scientific objectivity notwithstanding, was deeply imbricated with capitalist class concepts. As Hurley contends, scholarship on degeneration “was an effective means of ‘othering’ large groups of people by marking them as deviant, criminal, psychotic, defective, simple, hysterical, diseased, primitive, regressive, or just dangerous.”<sup>11</sup> The close juxtaposition of stratified socioeconomic classes within nineteenth-century London, a city in which “the most abject poverty can appear beside glowing wealth and prosperity,” made it especially prone to monsterization; it is no wonder, then, that *fin-de-siècle*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>8</sup> Machen, Arthur. *The Great God Pan*. 1894. Reprint, London: Secker (1992), 284.

<sup>9</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1891. Reprint, London: Penguin (2003), 154.

<sup>10</sup> Ackroyd, Peter. *London: The Biography*. London: Vintage (2001), 771.

<sup>11</sup> Hurley, 16-17.

gothic fiction seized on an industrialized London to people with monstrous figures encoding theories of degeneration.<sup>12</sup>

Gothic texts with representations of degeneration, like Wilde's, Machen's, Stoker's, and Stevenson's, were quickly denounced and labeled degenerate themselves by critics like Nordau, who, for example, condemns Wilde's behaviour and fiction as possessing "a malevolent mania for contradiction."<sup>13</sup> As Judith Halberstam points out, however, such denunciations missed the mark by attacking gothic texts: "Rather than condoning the perversity they recorded, Gothic authors, in fact, seemed quite scrupulous in taking a moral stand against the unnatural acts that produce monstrosity."<sup>14</sup> As Noël Carroll argues, following Mary Douglas, one of the key features of monsters, the major source of the disgust and fear they precipitate, is their tendency to violate social and biological boundaries, defying categorization: "They are un-natural relative to a culture's conception of nature ... Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening."<sup>15</sup> Degeneration, essentially, gothicizes evolution, exploiting the horror nineteenth-century bourgeois readers—white, "civilized," Western, educated—would have felt when confronted with their own close hereditary kinship with other life-forms, challenging traditional modes of thought and shattering conceptions of nature and the permanence of the human form and replacing it with the threat of indeterminacy and formlessness. As Hurley observes, "Degeneration came to stand in for a sort of general turpitude with which modern society was infecting itself, and against which modern society had to police itself" by playing off such social anxieties.<sup>16</sup> Thus, urban gothic authors tended to exacerbate their readers' *fin-de-siècle* neuroses. While some self-consciously decadent texts may have flirted with the attractions of decay and degeneration, they were always aware of the perversity of this attraction: after all, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ends with a portrait of dissolution and death, the wages of Dorian's sin. While decadent characters like Dorian Gray "look on evil simply as a mode through which [one] could realize ... conceptions of the beautiful," the temptation of reveling in decay is always balanced with an awareness that such activity is ultimately self-destructive.<sup>17</sup> The political implications of gothic

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<sup>12</sup> Ackroyd, 772.

<sup>13</sup> Nordau, 319.

<sup>14</sup> Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows*. London: Duke UP (1995), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Carroll, Noël. 1990. *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge (1990), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Hurley, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Wilde, 275.

depictions of degeneration, then, are problematic to say the least: while exploiting the potential of gothic monsters, a metaphor suggesting the unease surrounding degeneration, urban gothic authors further entrenched class divisions, exacerbating Victorian social anxieties and re-inscribing highly normative bourgeois values.

Like its *fin-de-siècle* forebears, *Kraken* fixates on evolutionary anxieties, confluences of criminality and monstrosity, and the image of London-as-organism. *Kraken*'s London is a veritable tangled bank of grotesques: here are fecund "ecosystems of godhood" and streets which are "stone synapses hardwired for worship," populated by "theurgic vermin,"<sup>18</sup> here are "monsterherds" and thugs who breed guns like pigeons, "Farmers squeezing their holy metal beasts to percussive climax, fertilization by cordite explosion... protecting baby guns deep in the bone cages, until they hatched."<sup>19</sup> As in Stevenson's *Strange Case*, flesh becomes a prison, with the arch-criminal figure of the Tattoo literally incarcerated in skin, "en-dermed," criminality and monstrosity bleeding into one another as the flesh marks corruption.<sup>20</sup> The law of the jungle is in full effect, and only the fittest survive in a brutally amoral Darwinian arena of predation and parasitism: "Might made right, and that was no moral precept but a statement of fact."<sup>21</sup> But unlike its nineteenth-century ilk, *Kraken* refuses to vilify its own chthonic margin. Rejecting the teleological misconceptions that shaped Victorian theories of degeneration, *Kraken* does more than simply recapitulate or even update the neuroses of urban gothicism. Even while it deploys similar configurations of monstrosity and criminality within a monstrous urban setting, *Kraken* confronts the problematic socio-political implications of degeneration head-on. Instead of simply demonizing the principles of transmutation underlying urban gothic's devolutionary anxieties, *Kraken* presents a universe in which "a thing has power... because *it's a bit like something else*"—in which the fundamental, underlying connections between organisms are much more than just a source of horror.<sup>22</sup> Much as Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* (2007) introduces many of the major tropes of children's fantasy—the chosen one, the Campbellian quest, the book of destiny—only to subvert them for its own ends, so does *Kraken* undermine urban gothic's reactionary dread of degeneration. By introducing a

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<sup>18</sup> Miéville, China. 2010. *Kraken: An Anatomy*. New York: Ballantine Books (2010), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 387, 304.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 260.

bestiary of city-bred monstrosities and urban abominations only to undermine the evolutionary anxiety underlying the fear and disgust such figures generate, *Kraken* substitutes its own brand of inclusive Marxist politics for the reactionary ideology, intertwined with imperialist capitalism and the dynamics of self and other, center and margin, lurking behind the nineteenth-century gothic monster. Instead of demonizing the monster and so “othering” the urban working class or projecting a teleological or bourgeois ideology onto evolutionary theory, *Kraken* affirms the global connectedness between organic life-forms that evolution implies, embracing a non-hierarchical, classless ecocentrism. Accordingly, the worst villains of *Kraken* aren’t degenerate monstrosities but egomaniacal, anthropocentric individuals representing the very forces that vilified the degenerate in the nineteenth-century: normative patriarchal science and dogmatic religious moralism.

A prime example of *Kraken*’s subversion of the urban gothic’s degenerative obsessions can be found in the “Krakenists,” the cult of squid-worshipping fanatics first suspected of “squidnapping” the novel’s eponymous cephalopod from the Darwin Centre for their own nefarious purposes. At first the Krakenists are presented as a singularly sinister group, their verses glorifying the primordial animality of their chosen god—“The *hard maw of a sky-bird* in the deep trenches of water”—while simultaneously stressing a deeper connection between the human and the animal: “It’s a tactile god with as many tentacles as we have fingers, and *is that coincidence?*”<sup>23</sup> The novel’s protagonist, Billy quickly compares the Krakenists with “the Cthulhu cult,”<sup>24</sup> alluding to Lovecraft’s collection of “degenerate Esquimaux” and “very low, mix-blooded, and mentally aberrant” fanatics, whose rites include chants mingling the voices of humans and beasts: “Animal fury and orgiastic license here whipped them to demoniac heights by howls and squawking ecstasies that tore and reverberated through those nighted woods like pestilential tempests from the gulfs of hell.”<sup>25</sup> Lovecraft’s racialized version of degeneration, of course, channels the anxieties of the urban gothic literature only just predating his own weird fiction—Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928) was inspired in large part by the texts of Arthur Machen and other authors of the urban gothic. By invoking the Cthulhu cult, *Kraken* inspires images of dark, atavistic rituals, human sacrifice, and devolution: the text primes us to expect a group of deranged zealots, a degenerate organization of criminal extremists whose reverence for the bestial directly correlates to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>25</sup> Lovecraft, 134, 139, 137.

depravity. In doing so, *Kraken* invokes the same tropes of degeneration as those employed in *fin-de-siècle* urban gothic and early twentieth-century weird fiction. The Krakenists, like the Cthulhu cultists, revel in the violation of boundaries between human and animal, the same violation which lent the “degenerate” monsters of the urban gothic their particular horror by defying notions of stable human identity and undermining nineteenth-century cultural conceptions about the hierarchical structure of the natural (and social) world. The Krakenists also base themselves inside of the London metropole itself, making them even more threatening and further linking them with degeneration and the urban gothic. London’s police, national symbols of British authority and civil stability, compare the Krakenists directly to “Al Qaeda and the Al-Quaedalinoes,” seemingly updating the anxieties the Krakenists generate for a post 9/11 readership; like the urban gothic, itself exploiting fears of a British empire in decline and of threats from within the heart of supposedly rational western civilization itself, *Kraken* seems to harness and entrench pre-existing sociopolitical anxieties, updating the trope of degeneration for a twenty-first century audience.<sup>26</sup>

Or so it seems. When he actually meets the Krakenists, Billy finds his expectations utterly disappointed: “Billy had expected ecstasy, the febrile devotions of the desperate speaking in tongues or tentacles, but this fervour—and fervour it was, he could see the tears and gripping hands of the devout—was controlled. The flavour of the sect was vicarly, noncharismatic, an Anglo-Catholicism of mollusc-worship.”<sup>27</sup> Not only are the Krakenists innocent of the squidnapping, they are more interested in scholarship than militant radicalism or occult terrorism, adopting a pacifistic policy based around the doctrine of “The movement that looks like not moving.”<sup>28</sup> While in the final, climactic sequences of the novel the Krakenists do adopt physical forms that mingle the human and the animal—“a man with arms raised to display blisters bursting and making themselves squid-suckers, another with a wicked beak where he had had a mouth”—they do so as a last resort in a heroic, sacrificial assault on one of the novel’s truer villains.<sup>29</sup> By setting the reader up to expect the Krakenists to exemplify villainous, degenerative forces but then presenting them first as inoffensive, decent people and later as heroes, *Kraken* deploys the *fin-de-siècle* tropes of the urban gothic only to carefully undermine them, exposing the ugly anxieties that they metaphorize. While

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<sup>26</sup> Miéville, 39.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.