

THE LOGIC OF IMAGINATION

(AVATARS OF THE OCTOPUS)

It is often difficult to distinguish between the animals of fable and those of zoology. The sphinx, the chimera, the centaur and the hippogriff belong, and always have belonged to the first category. But animals such as the unicorn have long been catalogued and described in works of natural science. In the seventeenth century, a catalogue such as John Johnston's *A Description of the Nature of Four-Footed Beasts*, written in Latin, translated into English and published in London in 1678, still distinguishes eight different types with corresponding illustrations. Indeed, a unicorn is no more improbable than a narwhal, whose horn, incidentally, was long thought to be the unicorn's. If we thus confuse real animals with mythological ones, what

Translated by Rosemary Kew.

becomes of the habits, size and appearance given to them by travellers on returning from the far countries where they claim to have seen them?

Thus it is inevitable that imagination should take precedence over observation whenever vertebrates, arthropods or molluscs show an anomaly or even a fortuitous resemblance with a trait known in other animals but incongruous in this one: thus the design which calls to mind a skull on the thorax of the death's head moth (*Acherontia atropos*) creates the belief that the hawk moth brings bad luck. Similarly the *Fulgora laternaria*, because of its frontal protuberance in the shape of a saurian, sows terror amongst the Indians of Guyana and Northern Brazil where it lives. Anyone who sees it or near whom it flies will die.¹ The praying mantis, whose predatory hands, joined and folded, make it look like a woman at prayer, and who alone of all insects can turn its head and follow with its gaze without moving its body the predator which threatens it or the prey which it desires, because of this peculiarity which makes it look human, becomes the object of various superstitions and even important myths wherever it is common. In Southern Africa it appears as the supreme divinity or an important hero among the Hottentots, Bantus and Bushmen.² This is in no way a local creation belonging to a particular area and explicable by history or tradition. The mantis is common in a sufficient number of climates, and every time evokes sufficiently similar responses for this hypothesis to be excluded. Besides, the human appearance of the mandrake has caused no less havoc. A supplementary argument is added by the *Fulgora*: as soon as it became known to Europeans through a few drawings and descriptions, it held their interest and brought to birth the tenacious legend of its luminosity, hence its completely usurped name of *laternaria*. Victor Hugo, who was extremely sensitive in this domain, immediately uses the inoffensive cicada as a symbol of the dark forces of the abyss. In *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Lautréamont makes a similar allusion. There must definitely exist an objective, and visibly efficacious, element of unfamiliarity.

¹ Cf. Roger Caillois, *Méduse et Cie*, Paris, 1960, p. 148-162.

² Cf. Roger Caillois, *Le Mythe et l'homme*, Paris, 1938, p. 39-99.

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We must therefore admit that in the vast range of living beings, some are met whose appearance alone, and sometimes also whose habits, both astonish and stimulate the human sensitivity. It is sufficient that their general bearing, or one simple significant detail of their form, should take—as we say a vaccination takes—on our imagination and set it in motion. This phenomenon is not, however, limited to animals: a tree-trunk struck by lightning, a transparent stone, a strangely sculpted rock or one which echoes or sways, sometimes a whole area which impresses because some aspect of it is not as usual, or a meteor, eclipse or comet, indeed any natural phenomenon which seems to run counter to the laws of nature, normally produces similar effects, be they permanent or temporary. However it is obvious that one extraordinary natural occurrence could not have the permanent and widespread effect of a remarkable species of animal.

Among the most well-known of these, the bat, peacock, snake, spider, tortoise and many others have the privilege of setting our imagination in motion, and certain of them of arousing an obscure fear or some invincible repugnance, and sometimes a quasi-visceral pain, so that fables, more or less numerous and complex, proliferate around them. They are the gateway to dreams, or at least to curiosity; they even go as far as to provoke an inexplicable terror. It seems to me that the octopus serves as one of the most instructive illustrations of such a crystallisation.

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Outside the realm of natural science, however, studies devoted to the octopus do not appear to be numerous. Henry Lee dedicated a monograph to it some time ago, *The Octopus, or the Devil-fish of Fiction and of Fact*, London, 1875, which I have unfortunately been unable to procure to date; more recently, a psychoanalytical study from the pen of Jacques Schnier, "Morphology of a Symbol: the Octopus," *The American Imago*, XIII (1956), pp. 3-31, assembles round the octopus archaeological, iconographic and literary factors which he compares with the dreams and obsessions of his patients. Basing

himself on the authorised interpretations which he takes from Freud's "Medusa's Head," *Collected Papers*, London, 1950, J. C. Flügel's "Polyphallic Symbolism and the Castration Complex," *Intern. Journ. Psychoanalysis* V, 1924, 2, pp. 155-196, and E. Jones' *Nightmare, Witches and Devils*, New York, 1931, he likens the octopus's tentacles to the Gorgon's snake hair, which he sees as a multitude of little penes. The child, having felt cannibal instincts towards its mother, would come to think of her as a female demon ready to devour him. I reproduce here the conclusion of the article: "Now to summarise the material that has been gathered from anthropological, literary and clinical sources in our study of the octopus symbol; we can say first, that its meaning is highly over-determined. In any given context, whether myth, art or personal fantasy, it may have one or a multiple of unconscious roots. It may function as a defence against fear of castration—supplying in fantasy a penis to the object identified as female. By endowing the tentacles with phallic attributes, a polyphallic symbol is created. Because of its suction discs, gripping and entwining characteristics, it can act as a defence for overwhelming guilt feelings originating in powerful oral impulses. By projecting the oral impulses originally directed towards the mother onto the suction discs and grasping tentacles, fear of one's own destructive tendencies is abated. In certain instances, the parrot-like beak capable of biting and tearing may also be significant in this respect. For women, the resentment resulting from the observation of a missing member, can be resolved by the fantasy of a femal object equipped with an organ or multiples of it."

Such interpretations, whose mechanical and almost inevitable character can scarcely leave room for doubt, are not very instructive. Nonetheless they should be included in any report. For the faithful they bring to the problem its ultimate and foreseeable solution; for the unbelieving, they constitute a series of revealing fabrications to be added to the others, and which represent a new burgeoning, in a new and propitious environment, of the images the animal usually evokes, provided only that general sensitivity is brought into play. In this respect, they provide us with the latest avatar of the mythology of the octopus.

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The octopus has been known and represented since earliest antiquity.³ It occupies a privileged position in the decoration of pottery from Cnossos, Mycenae, Rhodes, and Cyprus, where it most often appears stylised, symmetrical, tentacles spread out in a circle, in accordance with well-developed geometry which improved with time. The animal became almost abstract. Its suckers disappeared with the 3rd Mycenaean era. Its vastly elongated and curling tentacles finally became no more than simple arabesques, although they showed harmonious spiral tendencies from the beginning. A good illustration of this is provided by the standard weight in red porphyry from a shop in Cnossos, on the facets of which figures an octopus in relief, probably to dissuade the merchant from deceitful alterations. The vase of Gournia, now in the museum of Candia, is exceptional in boasting a realistic and threatening octopus, round-eyed and with tentacles spread out in a circle to seize an invisible prey. One can also find the octopus represented on frescoes and as an ornament on beaten gold; its effigy appears on shields (it is mentioned once as being on the shield of Achilles), on numerous coins, notably those of Taranto, Crotona, Syracuse, Paestum, and of Eritrea. On Roman mosaics representing the undersea world, the octopus is naturally present among dolphins and flying fish. It is difficult to identify the animal, as some have tried,⁴ with Scylla, in the *Odyssey*, a sea monster with twelve arms and six heads, each jaw of which is furnished with three rows of teeth, "full of the shadows of death." The Lernean Hydra, with its nine heads, is not an octopus either; and besides, the octopus is never judged worthy of a contest with any monster-defeating hero: neither with Hercules nor the lesser Bellerophon. Similarly, it was proposed, well before psychoanalysis, but with as little probability, that the snake hair of Medusa should be iden-

³ References in Otto Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt*, Leipzig, t. II, 1913, pp. 508-513. For the Minoan, iconography in Jean Charbonneau, *L'Art égéen*, Paris, 1929 and in Arne Fururmark, *The Chronology of Mycenaean Pottery*, Stockholm, 1941.

⁴ Among them Willy Ley, in a work which is in fact more fantastic than rational, *Animaux fabuleux, créatures imaginaires*, tr. into French, Paris, 1964, p. 126.

tified with the tentacles of the octopus. In fact the octopus, constant in decoration, is unknown in mythology as in cult and ritual, except on the occasion of the Amphidromies which take place five days after a child's birth: the parents or relations bring one to the mother, doubtless for her purification.

And yet antiquity is not lacking in precise knowledge of the octopus. In his *Natural History* (IX, XLVIII, 30), Pliny notes that it changes colour when frightened. He also remarks on the belief that it eats its own arms when food is scarce, but only to warn his readers that it is an unfounded belief: the conger eels eat them. Nevertheless he does allow that the arms of the octopus grow again like a lizard's tail. The legend that it eats itself persists nonetheless. Thus in Horapollon the hieroglyphic which represents it provides the symbol for the prodigal who squanders his own goods.

The octopus is held to be intelligent. Pliny enthuses over the skill with which it prevents large shellfish from closing up again by placing a pebble between their valves when they begin to open, so that it can feed at ease on the animal's flesh. It is thought capable of moving stones of some considerable size to build its house. A huge one was found in the Temple of Poseidon at Lesbos: legend had it that Enalos pulled it out of the sea and deposited it there with the aid of a monster octopus. Trebius Niger, who was with Lucullus when the latter was proconsul in Betica, considerably exaggerates the size of an animal which rarely reaches the length of two metres in the Mediterranean. In a report which seems to have made a great impression on Pliny, he tells of an octopus at Carteia, which used to leave the sea and raid the salt provisions in the containers where they were kept. Fences of unusual height were put up to prevent this. The octopus got over them by climbing a tree. One night the dogs caught its scent. The guards were surprised at its size and thought they were dealing with a monster. To make an end of it they needed the efforts of several men, who killed it with tridents. It was enormous: its head was the size of a barrel of fifteen amphorae;⁵ a man needed both arms to encircle a single tentacle: its suckers looked like basins and had the capacity

⁵ It is generally thought that the amphora contained about 40 litres.

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of an urn. The remains of the creature, which were presented to Lucullus, weighed seven hundred pounds.

This same Trebius Niger was also the first to give credence to the rumour that an octopus could kill a man in the most excruciating way by dragging him to the bottom of the sea and sucking out all his blood.

Other than this mention, which remains isolated, the octopus in Antiquity seems to have provoked neither fear nor revulsion. It was noticed that it accommodated its colour to the background against which it rested. It was also held to be a model of prudence and wisdom. A father gave to his son Amphilochos, who was going abroad, the advice that he should imitate the conduct of the cephalopod and learn to adapt to the customs of the countries through which he would pass. Besides this, the octopus was much sought after for its meat, and as bait for marine eel fishing. It was thought of as food for the poor. Diogenes is said to have died from eating a raw octopus. In any case, edible or no, the octopus was not generally portrayed as formidable. Even its suckers were not feared: to make it release its hold one had only to sprinkle it with fresh water or to turn it on its back; then it had no strength. "In this attitude its limbs stretch out and no longer grip," explains Pliny.

Beyond the Mediterranean Basin, J. Schnier cites, albeit rather vaguely, some pre-Columbian jars from Peru ornamented with patterns, paintings or engravings of anthropomorphic octopods which only distantly resemble the creature. Also he mentions on the one hand a cosmogonic tale from the Samoan islands in which an octopus emerges from the primordial cliffs, creates fire and water, and then the sea by breaking its ink sac; and on the other hand a Polynesian legend in which a monster appears successively in the form of a gaping shell of great width, then a huge octopus and finally a whale, into whose mouth the hero, Nganaoa, throws himself (*ibid.*, pp. 5, 10, 21). It is hard to draw any useful instruction at all from such summary information, except that the octopus has drawn attention to itself in almost every place where it is found.

In Europe, neither the Middle Ages nor modern times have brought any notable change of attitude. The octopus continues its decorative career in medieval iconography: it is found notably in

the Melchian representations of the Last Judgement when, at the moment of the resurrection, fish and sea monsters must give up the dead that they have devoured. In the eighteenth century it was still purely ornamental: Pigalle sculpted it with a branch of coral and a tuft of seaweed on the base of one of the receptacles for holy water in the Église St-Sulpice in Paris. On the other hand, in specialised literature, it is no longer content with climbing fences: it scales walls, comes in through windows, walks on roofs. Above all it takes on monstrous proportions, and thinks nothing of taking the life of a careless diver. The larger type are said to attack vessels and drag them down to the depths. It rivals in dimension the Kraken of the Scandinavian naturalists, which is gigantic but so lacking in aggression that it is identified, despite the arms attributed to it, rather with the whale than with the polyp, as the octopus is still called in Latin or even French texts. The monster described by Olaus Magnus as being “easily able to wreck several sizeable ships with large, strong crews,”⁶ does not seem to refer to any known species and resembles the octopus only by the huge eyes which the primate of Sweden attributes to it.

When a sounding warns a crew of abnormal shallows, says the bishop of Bergen, Eric Pontoppidam, in his *Histoire naturelle de Norvège* (1753), they rapidly remove the ship from the danger spot and proceed until they are in the normal depth of water once again. “They stop, and then usually see rising out of the open sea a huge creature which appears above the waters, and whose back forms an island so extensive that it seems to be a quarter of a mile wide. In the distance this mass looks like a heap of stones and rocks covered with seaweed; hills can be seen, and hollows in which the fishes leap until they reach the edge and can jump back into the sea; and as the whole mass rises, one begins to notice teeth and what appear to be arms which, unfolding as the kraken rises higher, eventually reach such a size that a full-sized ship would not brave their attacks with impunity. Having remained thus almost motionless for some time, the living mountain dives slowly back into the water; this moment also is very dangerous for ships that come too

⁶ Olaus Magnus, *Hist. gent. sept.*, XXI, 5, Rome, 1555.

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close because as the kraken submerges vast eddies form, whose whirling waters would drag everything in the vicinity down with them ... it seems that these arms are antennae or links by which it not only moves its great mass, but also seizes to itself all the prey it can find..." The monster is classed by the author with the octopus by reason of indications whose hypothetical character he does not hide.

Other data confirm the immensity of the kraken; it needs several months "to fill its voluminous stomach" and several more to complete its digestion. Indeed, "when this process is ended, the sea is made dirty, discoloured and fetid over a large area by its results." The dreadful smell also attracts new shoals of fish which become the kraken's prey, and the cycle begins again.

Denys-Montfort translates and quotes at length these "observations" in his *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière des mollusques*,⁷ published in six volumes at the beginning of the nineteenth century, following a work by Buffon. He devotes slightly over four hundred pages to the different types of octopus. He it was, if I am not mistaken, who first made a monster out of it, in the moral sense of that word. He describes it as hateful and fierce. This is what differentiates it from the kraken, which is not deliberately dangerous. Denys-Montfort reiterates this several times. If he points to the kraken as "the biggest creature in our world" or "the greatest creature nature has made on our planet," if he attributes mythical dimensions to certain octopods, he likes to insist that the latter are aggressive. From a votive offering in a chapel at Saint-Malo, he draws a giant octopus attacking a ship. He represents it reared up along the length of the hull, towering above the rails and entwining its tentacles around the masts. He arranges the whole with that extreme care for symmetry which never leaves him, in his own illustrations for his long study of the varieties of the creature. The encounter is supposed to have taken place off Angola. The learned scholar discourses at length⁸ on the terrible struggle at

⁷ Paris, An X (1802), t. II, p. 408-410 = Pontoppidam, *Hist. Nat. Norv.*, t. III, ch. VIII. The octopus is described in t. II, p. 113-412 and t. III, p. 5-117.

⁸ *Ibid.*, t. II, p. 271-274.

the end of which the valiant sailors managed to save their lives and their ship. Victory came only after a prayer and thanks to the protection of their patron saint. Hence the votive offering which occasioned the naturalist's tale. The author makes the following naive comment on his illustration: "We were not able to depict the struggles of the crew, because in such a small space it would have been difficult to portray the combat." In support of this episode he does not fail to cite numerous examples of attacks on ships by giant octopods which sometimes dragged them down to the depths of the sea. The custom had become established of repeating such a catalogue.⁹

This is not the main new feature; rather it is the basic ferocity which Denys-Montfort gives to the octopus. For him it is in essence a malevolent creature, which has in its nature an irresistible propensity for destruction and carnage; the octopus "destroys for the sake of it," he affirms, without the slightest proof of course, but in an all the more significant way. He depicts it as a "professional assassin who, constantly lying in wait on the public highway, lives on murder and blood, worrying about neither board nor lodging."¹⁰ He praises it on one point only. By a perplexing contrast which is meant to emphasise the natural cruelty of the monster, he gives it an exemplary conjugal life which in some measure redeems the blackness of its soul. The octopus is described as so faithful and so full of attention towards its mate that the author sentimentally likens them to Philemon and Baucis growing old together.

In fact the naturalist is mistaken in these last two points as well. He is giving us his own musings rather than information and observations. Not only does the octopus show concern for a permanent residence, but it builds itself a house which it leaves as little as possible and to which it becomes so attached that it could not survive in captivity (a state to which it ordinarily adapts very well in other respects) unless given the necessary materials for reconstruction. As for the octopus's conjugal fidelity, this is more than doubtful, since the animal is almost

⁹ Henry Lee, quoted by J. Schnier (p. 9) reports that an Englishman living in China saw in a shop a print showing this time a sleeve fish, attacking a three hundred ton junk and eating sailors "like strawberries."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, t. III p. 88.

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necessarily polygamous, there being such a great disproportion between the number of males and females of the species.

In 1839, the *Dictionnaire pittoresque d'histoire naturelle* appeared in instalments. E. Jacquemin, to whom the article on the octopus is entrusted, sets out a history of the determination of the species. Guillaume Rondelet (1507-1550) gave it its modern name, and Swammerdam described it in his *Biblia Naturae* (1737-1738). Cuvier and Lamarck specified its characteristics. The author laughs at the credulity of Denys-Montfort, but still affirms that the octopus is a danger to bathers. "It seizes you in its strong arms," he writes, "clings to your body by means of its suckers and drags you to the bottom of the sea; and you are unable to free yourself from its embrace."¹¹ This study, however, composed as it is without exaggeration, is what one can expect from a scrupulous scientist.

This is only a truce. In 1861, in his book *La Mer*, (II, ix) Michelet outdoes in lyricism the invectives of Denys-Montfort. According to him the octopus ushers into the marine world a reign of carnage and terror. He talks of a "monster spider," which once had a huge body, but whose giant size has diminished in the course of time. This eternal larva, sucking in a world without substance, has itself remained gelatinous. It "has the strange and ridiculous appearance, almost a cartoon if it were not so lethal, of an embryo going to war, of a cruel, angry, soft, transparent foetus; but tensed, and breathing out murder." The octopus does not kill to eat. "It needs to destroy. Even when full to bursting it still destroys." It pursues every creature and throws its arms, whips and suckers against it, not to mention—an innovation of the author—paralytic emanations: "a magnetic force which renders combat unnecessary." The creature does not immobilise only by means of its tentacles; it has at its disposal "the magic force of a mysterious thunderbolt." Its electric lashes perform a pantomime of horrible snakes. Michelet, basing himself on the "serious tales" of navigators whom he names, esteems that it was wrong to reject with irony the accounts of Denys-Montfort and of Orbigny, the descriptions of the kraken, and the witness of sailors telling how, leaping onto the deck, the beast wrapped its

¹¹ *Dict. pitt. hist. nat.*, t. VIII, pp. 338-340.

huge limbs around masts and rigging. Such monsters, if they existed, would have “endangered nature” and “emptied the world.” But if they did exist (there is after all still some doubt in Michelet) huge birds fought against them; the planet, better organised, diminished their foodstocks, so that present-day octopods are less vast and also “a little less fearsome.” Next the author goes into raptures over the argonaut, “graceful swimmer,” and “the pretty blue-eyed cuttlefish.” As for the octopus, in the final stages of its decadence, it is revealed in the end to be not very dangerous. To get rid of one, one has only to overcome one’s disgust and turn it inside out like a glove. Michelet finally addresses it with scorn: “You are more mask than being,” an empty bladder, and when it is dead there remains nothing but “a nameless thing, a bubble of collapsed sea-water.”

The credulity of the naturalist and the lyricism of the deluded historian are only a prelude to the almost theological meditation of the poet which stems directly from them. Indeed, in the chapter which he devotes to the octopus in *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (Liv. V, ch. 2), which includes Gilliatt’s fight, Victor Hugo, even if he says nothing about Michelet, whom he can hardly fail to have read, refers explicitly to Denys-Montfort, from whom he has manifestly taken the major part of his documentation. He even holds him to be “one of those observers whom a high dose of intuition elevates or casts down to the level of the sage.” What this scientist had done was to suggest that the octopus had quasi-human passions. Thus “the octopus hates,” since “in the absolute, to be hideous is to hate.”

The whole chapter deserves to be carefully re-read. Indeed, the success of the book sealed for a long time the legendary fate of the octopus. Curiously, the poet turns out to be less credulous than the scientist. He remains silent on the terrestrial wanderings of the creature, he tends to reduce its dimensions, and he takes as legendary its power to sink full-sized ships. But the resources of his rhetoric have all the more free rein to push to the limits of endurance the phrases forged by his visionary lyricism. From the opening lines, God is blamed because whenever it pleases him, he “excels in the execrable.” Hugo quickly discerns that horror results here from a connivance of the imaginary with the real: “at certain moments, one is tempted to

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think, the unknowable which floats in our dreams meets in the possible magnetic points around which it forms itself, and from these obscure fixations of the dream, beings emerge. The Unknown has marvels at its disposal and uses them to compose the monster." Further on he states as a principle that: "All ideals being allowed, if terror is the aim, the octopus is a masterpiece." Impressive phrases abound: "Like a beast made of ash, living in water..."; "Malady turned to monstrosity"; "A dragon with emotions"; "Viscosity with its own will—what could be more terrifying! Glue shot through with hatred"; "This hideous, ravenous star..." "spread out in pallid rays, a spectral sun." In short, such beings, "veritable blasphemies of creation against itself" and whose existence is complicated by improbability, are amphibians of fantasy and reality.

I shall omit the well-known litany which compares the weapons of the most fearsome animals to the octopus's apparent lack of all offensive or protective devices, but which, by reason of its suckers, is the most effectively armed of all. Indeed, for the first time here, the octopus is considered almost exclusively as a living keyboard of suckers.

The writer neglects almost all else to emphasise the operation by which a man finds himself finally emptied into this "terrifying monstrous sack." The victim, breathed in "by a thousand dreadful mouths," is drunk alive. The description stresses the viscous nature of the creature, closely associated with the indescribable atrocity of death by suction. The poet's evocative power is such that his work spreads and perpetuates a conception of the animal which is in many respects new (and mythical), to the extent that the hitherto dialectal name (first found in the Channel Islands) of "*pieuvre*" which he uses from then on takes the place in current parlance of the traditional word "*poulpe*" (from *polypus*). Littré is able to cite only one example of the word "*pieuvre*," viz. Hugo's use of it in *Les Travailleurs de la mer*. In 1878 the new name was included in the Dictionary of the French Academy, with the same example. The recent Robert dictionary gives 1866 as the date of the appearance of the word in French literature: it was in this year that the novel was published.

From then on, that is to say from a relatively recent date, the octopus has found a place in a half-fantastical zoology, in which

(and this has yet to be accounted for) there is no place for the species which resemble it most closely and which are no less disturbing to look at, such as the cuttle-fish, or the squid which for its part genuinely grows to considerable size.

A little later, in the first of the *Chants de Maldoror*, published separately in 1868, two years after *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, when the hero is preparing his famous invocation of the Ancient Ocean, Lautréamont makes him regret the fact that the “octopus with its silken look” is not with him in this solemn moment, sitting beside him on a rock on the shore, his belly of quicksilver against his aluminium breast. Maldoror then describes himself as a monster, and congratulates himself for the fact that the reader cannot see his face, which is yet less hideous than his soul. Through antiphrasis and in order to ridicule Hugo’s description, he addresses the beast in terms which combine grandiloquence with sarcasm: “O thou whose soul is inseparable from mine; O thou, the fairest of the inhabitants of the earthy globe, and who rulest o’er a seraglio of four hundred leeches¹²; thou in whom nobly rest, as if in their natural residence, by one accord, indissolubly linked, the tender virtue of communication and the divine graces.”

At the end of canto 2, the real octopus gives way to the mythical one: Maldoror takes the form of an octopus to face the Creator, cause him to suffer and counterbalance his omnipotence.

The legend rapidly takes its course. After the “*poète maudit*,” it reaches the writers of semi-didactic works designed principally for the young. In some ways, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1869) forms a catalogue of immeasurably enlarged submarine fauna: Jules Verne describes lobsters a hundred metres long, crabs weighing two hundred tons, gigantic sea-spiders, molluscs of colossal proportions. In this bestiary the octopus occupies a supreme place. It recurs several times in the illustrations of Neuville, and the attack on the *Nautilus* by giant octopods provides the last episode of the novel before the final turn of events and the escape of the prisoners from the submarine. The crew barely escapes the danger by cutting the tentacles of the

¹² This is the figure given by Hugo. The *Dictionnaire pittoresque d’histoire naturelle* makes do with 120 pairs.

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monsters with axes, and even then one of the sailors perishes in the struggle, seized, brandished and crushed by the arm of an already mutilated octopus. The combat must have made a great impression, for it will never cease to reappear in one form or another.

This episode is often linked with a search for treasure sunk with the ship which carried it, or hidden by pirates in an underwater cave, with the result that the monster takes the place as guardian of the accursed treasure of the dragon of ancient legends. It seems useless to accumulate examples. Every reader will easily find them in his own experience. Here, nevertheless, is that witness which I for my part shall bear to the frequency of the episode, and the constancy of the desire which it is required to satisfy. Around 1940, in the suburban cinemas of Buenos Aires, series of films were shown following the same theme or featuring the same star. For a modest sum, those who wished could watch five long consecutive films devoted perhaps to someone suffering from amnesia who finds his past again, or to a faithful dog, an invisible man, or to the avatars of a vampire which finishes with a sharp, fire-hardened timber through its heart. One of the series which recurred the most often had as its common denominator very little other than the fight of a diver or of an incautious swimmer with the inevitable monster. That the repetition of a combat whose conclusion could not vary much did not bore the audience says much for the pleasure that they took in the episode. Similarly, a Californian daily newspaper, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, features in its edition of 11th September, 1954, a proposed Hollywood film script entitled *The Monster under the Sea*, in which a giant octopus, a new King-Kong, pulverises a submarine, sinks ships, destroys the Golden Gate and sows terror throughout San Francisco.

I mention these facts only as indications amongst others of the persistent fascination and hyperbolic horror eventually exercised by an animal which is after all more edible than terrifying, since a certain date and in a geographical area which was originally quite small, but which has since rapidly expanded.

It is worthy of note that in the beginning the seed was sown by two or three widely circulated works. For the phenomenon to reap a destiny so disproportionate to its deserts, it must have

contained some element capable of acting on the imagination with exceptional vigour.

As we have seen, Antiquity did not regard the octopus as horrible, but rather as harmonious. Neither, with one exception, was it held to be dangerous. After that, the chroniclers are content to enlarge its dimensions as they do for other sea-creatures, for example crabs, which they sometimes describe rising from the waves to seize ships with their giant pincers. Nor does the octopus, in the other areas where it abounds, seem to have evoked the same paroxysm of disgust and of fascinated terror. Yet it has in such places given rise to an abundant folklore. In Japan it is, if anything, considered as benevolent. Thus the faithful bring to the temples of Yakushi, Buddha the healer, votive offerings representing the octopus, thanking him for having got rid of their warts (doubtless identified with the animal's suckers). In general the octopus appears strangely humanised: it is represented as a good-humoured person, if not jovial, familiar if not playful, with a handkerchief over its brow and knotted behind its head in the manner of the common people. It is waving a fan, or protecting itself with a parasol, more out of coquetry than necessity, and it waddles around in a kindly manner on its tentacles. It is often found as a sign outside bars and restaurants, and it is associated especially with ideas of gaiety and intoxication. The octopus also appears in comic strips where it figures as a clumsy and blushing hero, wishing to render service, but who, failing in all his attempts, makes blunder upon blunder and brings about catastrophes. The shaven head of the Buddhist priest, through its resemblance to the animal's hood, often causes it to be called *tako-nyudo* (the octopus priest). From this there naturally arises the idea that it is a hybrid—half-man, half octopus. A print of Kouniyosi (1791-1861) represents a giant octopus rising out of the ocean. It dominates all maritime fauna. Its eyes are huge. Just below it an enormous crab is holding in its raised claws a Samurai sword in its sheath¹³. Such a presentation of the octopus as a monster seems to be an exception. In any case it is absent from a collection of prints published in 1875 by Outamaro

¹³ Print reproduced in the article quoted by J. Schnier (pl. 3, p. 17), who sees in the aggressive crab a symbol of the phallic and castrating mother (p. 26).

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and called *The Octopus Priest off Tsukada*. The tale illustrates a tradition according to which the courtesans of Yoshiwara took an octopus from the island (or a picture of it) for their guardian spirit.

The same erotic relation, but much more explicit, appears in a famous print by Hokusai. It plays on the capacity for embracing and sucking of the mollusc. The octopus, between the thighs of a recumbent woman, is greedily attached to the genitals of its victim, consenting and doubtless satiated, caressing her and entwining itself around her, exploring her and breathing her in with its eight suckered arms. These arms enclose the lover's body in a lascivious network, yet without reaching the neck and shoulders; these are left to the attention of a smaller octopus which lets its tentacles wander over her and applies its mouth, or more exactly its horny beak, almost a trunk, avidly to her open and inviting lips. The artist has taken advantage of the superfluity of lewdness found in the texture and shape of the creature. There is assuredly some horror accompanying the scene, but the engraver is visibly striving to communicate the rapture provided by a partner whose touch can be felt in so many places at the same time. In his work on Hokusai, Edmond de Goncourt has not failed to notice the ecstatic expression of the woman "submerged in pleasure, *sicut cadaver*, to such an extent that one does not know whether she is alive or drowned."

By following this ambiguous path, the octopus here shares in the dubious reputation that it assumes in the West. But in general it does not evoke anything like the same repugnance and terror. My attention has been drawn to some Japanese films which demonstrate the traditional fight between octopus and diver. It is more than likely that this is a borrowing from Western productions.¹⁴

The phantom which has gained such extraordinary credence in the West from the beginning of the nineteenth century, comes only in part, then, from the intrinsic characteristics of the model to which it is supposed to correspond. However, the exaggerations of someone like Trebius Niger, or the impure composition

¹⁴ I owe all this information to the kindness of Bernard Franck, to whom I wish to acknowledge my appreciation.

of Hokusai, show that even in a rebel milieu, in which reigns a totally different idea of the creature, it is still capable of inspiring a more dramatic and worrying vision of itself. What was happening in Europe at the time when this terrifying image established itself?

A general sensitivity, which was rapidly developing at that time, influenced even descriptions claimed to be scientific, which have found a place of honour in zoological treatises. Exploited by a writer of genius, who contributed an atmosphere both visionary (from his own temperament) and realistic (from his knowledge of the folklore of the islands of Sark and Guernsey where the chance of exile took him), these descriptions suddenly opened up new vistas. The success of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* completed the procedure. The octopus passed from one register to the other because the new emotiveness desired it to be so. The "roman noir," which from the end of the seventeenth century constitutes one of the first examples of this emotiveness, made widespread the taste for mystery, horror, ghosts, obscure and malevolent forces. The octopus was simply carried along by the ground-swell. It was not the only member of the animal kingdom to benefit. The frenzied meditation of Toussnel on the bat is in all respects equal, except in talent, to Hugo's pages on the octopus.¹⁵

In Toussnel's work, that inoffensive winged creature becomes the object of a vehement declaration of excommunication; it is denounced as "the black spirit of the abyss, Satan's standard-bearer, the emaciated and pallid phantom which fear of hell causes to appear at the bedside of the dying, the spectre with the dreadful laugh which rises from the graves at dusk and returns at dawn, the skeleton with the scythe, hovering in the regions of Erebus, with the silent flight."

In both cases, as in many others, for cathedrals, ruins, crumbling keeps, ghosts, the same phenomenon of enhancement of value occurs, as it occurs later in the narrower realm of painting, for the guitar and the harlequin, which suddenly become wide-ranging allegories, recurrent and almost obsessional, without any

¹⁵ A. Toussnel, *L'Esprit des bêtes, Zoologie passionnelle*, Paris, Librairie Phalanstérienne, 2nd edition 1855, p. 281.

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explicit meaning being attached to them. A new aspect of things, hitherto unperceived, swings, if I may use that word, into the visible, and suddenly occupies a privileged position there. There must surely have been a favourable concourse of elements predestining, or, to be more modest, allowing the object to be metamorphosed.

As one may expect, the data which serve as point of departure for this spontaneous fabrication owe nothing to scientific investigation. Yet it is interesting to realise the extent to which contributions from the latter are lacking, even when superstitious inventions run parallel to science and could be enriched by it. Pliny, the reader will remember, dwells on the intelligence of the octopus. Contemporary research has reached a precise estimation of this, notably through the work of Martin J. Wells, who for long years carried out a considerable number of experiments on the octopus. By coquetry or reaction he paradoxically portrays it as full of grace and beauty. Nevertheless, when he claims that it is remarkably gifted, he is expressing a well-founded conviction. The fact is that it learns quickly. The scientist had no difficulty in getting the octopus to recognise plane geometrical figures: square, circle, triangle, trapezium, standing or lying rectangles. On the other hand it could not distinguish the weight of objects, and confused the cube and the sphere. Faced with the problem of finding its way in mazes and labyrinths through which it must pass in order to reach its favourite dish—a crab-separated from it by a glass screen, it overcomes the difficulties after few attempts. Its failures, as with weight and volume, arise from the same cause: its nervous system is not coordinated. The pieces of information it receives arrive at intervals and independently of one another. Unlike men and arthropods, it seems to have no awareness of the shape of its body, nor of the room it occupies in space, nor of the movements it executes. In this the author distinguishes one of the characteristics of soft organism. Yet he does not hold this against the octopus: rather, he admires it for being able to supplement so well a fundamental disadvantage for which it is not responsible.¹⁶

¹⁶ Martin J. Wells, "Intervertebrate Learning," *Natural History*, New York, vol. LXXV, No. 2, Feb. 1966, p. 34-41.

It is in the context of the repertoire of the octopus and of the cryptic or terrifying attitudes it is capable of adopting in time of danger that one must clearly perceive the extent to which reality and sure information remain foreign to the despotic orientations which direct the hypnotised imagination, whether it refutes or confirms them. The octopus presents itself to the attentive and unprejudiced eye as a slow, clumsy animal with poor defenses (it has neither shell nor carapace), but yet blessed with exceptional faculties of camouflage and intimidation. In turn alga, sponge, rock or fan, it has a vast repertoire of forms¹⁷ at its disposal. Its arms can fold beneath its abdomen or curl up above its head at will. Its head can sink into the body or rise up slightly above it, or rear up to such a height that the animal suddenly seems to be standing up. When it swims it looks like a closed umbrella; at rest it has the air of a half-inflated balloon. When the need arises it fans out its tentacles in perfect symmetry, but the symmetry wavers and disappears at will, becomes disruptive so as to destroy the characteristic shape of the creature and to liken it immediately, by a suitable distribution of the colours it adopts, to the gravel or coralline algae which are its favourite resting place.¹⁸ Then the white patches of the hood and tentacles spread so as to complete the illusion. This so-called “*flamboyant*” aspect is accompanied by a delicate mottling brought about by the play of chromatophores. It is mimicry rather than aggression, aimed at concealing the animal which is frightened or lying in wait rather than terrifying a possible predator. On the contrary, to alarm the latter it makes itself visible and even ostentatious. It takes on the appearance of a sort of demoniac mask—“dynamic”—to use the neologism which J. Z. Young¹⁹ invented for the occasion. The creature combines the remodelling of its outer skin (the membrane of which is distended to the maximum), the dilatation of its pupils, the drawing in of its arms towards its stomach and bending them back through the greatest arc so as

¹⁷ Andrew Packard and Geoffroy Sanders, “Ce que la pieuvre montre au monde,” *Endeavour*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 104, May 1969, p. 92-99.

¹⁸ J. A. Beerens de Haan, “Versuche über den Farbensinn und das psychische Leben von *Octopus vulgaris*,” *Zeits. f. vergl. Physiol.*, 1926, IV, p. 766-796.

¹⁹ *Proc. Zool. Soc.*, London, CXL, 229, 1963, quoted by Packard and Sanders.

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to surround the central effigy with a huge crown. A recourse to fascination derived from the ocelli, so common in the animal kingdom, finds here one of its most remarkable illustrations: "Most of the body forms a pale mask, edged with dull red or brown, in which the bases of the suckers are visible and near the middle of which are two large, dark 'eyes.' These are formed by the dilated pupils of the real eyes, enlarged by the dull bar which crosses them and which then thickens and spreads to cover the whole of the upper eyelid. The body, arms and head are all flattened according to a plan, the eyes staring straight ahead. The papillae are retracted. This attitude is completed when the octopus is disturbed while away from its house; it directs powerful jets from its sac against the source of the trouble and moves, apparently by swinging along on its fourth pair of arms, so as to keep its mask turned towards the intruder. If the trouble increases or becomes very suddenly apparent the second arms are projected in an arc to the side and forward, like two converging tentacles, then rapidly retracted."²⁰

This parade, as often with insects, depends simultaneously on sight and movement: a combination of dance and mimicry, spasms and trances, and above all great care to maintain, by pivoting about itself, the fixity of its petrifying false gaze, and finally the intervention of a phenomenon designed to increase the enemy's alarm: the emission of waxy flakes (the *Fulgora*), of strident noises (numerous hawk moths), of foul-smelling emanations, (the *Papilio troilus* caterpillar), and in this case the projection of a liquid towards the assailant.

One further ultimate manoeuvre of dissuasion remains at the octopus's disposal—a manoeuvre which has been called the "passage of clouds": "Waves of dark colour move from the head towards the exterior and lose themselves in the general mottled aspect of the background. The cloud habitually descends the first part of the arms when the octopus rises up."²¹

Such methods of intimidation, frequent in insects, are well-known to naturalists. In the octopus they seem to have remained unnoticed till systematic observation revealed them to the spe-

²⁰ *Endeavour*, loc. cit., p. 97.

²¹ *Endeavour*, loc. cit., p. 97.

cialists, even though the creature's swaying motion when raised on its arms corresponds quite well with the attitude in which Japanese artists love to present it. It is in any case unlikely that the diverse and gripping demonstrations which the octopus is accustomed to give could have contributed much to the mythology of which we have seen it become the object.

Is it at least truly dangerous? The diver attacked by an octopus which strangles him with its tentacles and drinks him alive seems definitely to belong to local legend. It has joined, in the range of superstitions, the battleship dragged to the bottom of the abyss by a giant squid. In their work *Le monde du silence*,²² J.-Y. Cousteau and Fr. Dumas react strongly against the legend which presents the octopus as a formidable adversary: the creature is easily frightened, and its suckers, which are easily detachable from the skin, leave no long lasting trace. Nevertheless there are cases, although in truth very rare, when the octopus can be lethal. The strange thing is that this applies to the smaller species, for example *Octopus maculosus* Doyle, from the Indian Ocean, whose bite is venomous and whose size is no more than twenty centimetres. This type has bluish markings on its skin, which, when it is irritated or alarmed, turn to bright red. A fatal accident is mentioned in the classic catalogue by Bruce Halstead on formidable sea-creatures.²³ The author does not think the octopus should worry mankind to any extent. The larger species do not leave the deep waters. On the other hand, a fisherman near Darwin in Australia, who had for amusement allowed a little octopus to climb from his forearm to the nape of his neck, died in hospital despite treatment two hours after he had been bitten. The pain spread progressively outwards from the wound. Inflammation and shooting pains followed, then the man could not salivate or swallow, then came suffocation and vomiting, paralysis of movement and breath, and finally death.

Nothing, it is obvious, could be further from the legend. Neither the tentacles nor the suckers nor the size of the animal play the smallest part. Only the creature's poison and its beak contri-

²² Paris 1957 ch. X, p. 139-141.

²³ Bruce W. Halstead, *Dangerous Marine Animals*, Cambridge (Maryland), 1959, p. 44-47.

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buted. Besides, the distance of the place and the recent date of this tragic news item preclude it from having had the slightest influence on a mythology which developed in the antipodes a century earlier. Both the repugnance and the fear which the octopus inspired have no real support except in its immediate appearance. It is only its looks which encourage the imagination in such a persuasive way. The counter-proof, furnished by reality, is even more convincing than if the animal were totally inoffensive.

The octopus—now is the time, or never, to give it the new name which the developing myth has imposed over and above the ancient name of polyp—is from the first approach a composition of the more than disquieting images of spider and leech. It appears as a giant marine spider²⁴ but more fearsome because it lives in a different environment, not at the centre of a trap, but as a trap itself. Its suckers furnish it with several hundred obedient leeches along the length of eight equal whips. To these organs is attributed principally the power to pump out blood and life, whereas in fact they are used above all and perhaps exclusively for gripping and locomotion. It is with a horny beak that the octopus grinds up the crabs and shellfish which are the mainstay of its diet. It was doubtless tempting to compare it to the leech, familiar as much by its presence in most ponds as by the medicinal usage which caused it at the time to be preserved in glass jars and sold by chemists. It is equally linked with the distant vampire with its downy wings, demonic limbs with which it gently fans the travellers to keep them asleep. The vampire does in fact belong to the same family of human blood-suckers. The legend of the cheiropter nourishes the legend of the cephalopod. Better, the authors of incredible tales are eager to imagine giant spiders which appear as the

²⁴ This is one of the first comments of Victor Hugo in the chapter analysed: "It (the octopus) is arachnid in form and chameleon in colouration." The spider, here, plays a much more important role than the octopus. As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, the one and the other represent the Terrible Mother and Fatality. Cf. Charles Baudouin, *Psychanalyse de Victor Hugo*, Geneva, 1943, ch. VI, "Arachne-Ananke," pp. 127-148. J. Schnier (*art. cit.*, p. 25), interpreting the confidences of a young girl, believes that, for her, the octopus symbolises attraction and love for her mother, but the spider symbolises the revulsion that she inspires in her at the same time.

terrestrial copy of the octopus and which, like the octopus, lurking in the depths of a cave, snatch in transit anyone who ventures inside and empty him of his blood. Erckmann-Chatrian and Horacio Quiroga, among others, have furnished remarkable examples of variants showing the extent to which the imagination loves to bring together the octopus and the spider in the same phantasm of the enveloping monster which operates by suction.

The huge head and disproportionate eyes of the octopus evoke the penitent's cowl of the sadistic torturers of a mysterious Inquisition. It does not cease to observe while it operates. This peculiarity appears in the case of the libidinous octopus of Hokusai, which overhangs the body of the woman it possesses and never leaves her with its eyes, as if it found an increase of pleasure in watching her pleasure grow.

The animals tentacles have the dual and simultaneous role of adhesive straps and of whips. Its radial symmetry is that of a carnivorous corolla alternately opening and closing, bursting out and retracting. The beast consists only of a sac, a glutinous pocket, but one which controls what we could feel justified in calling a "spider" of powerful muscles—since it is precisely this term that designates, in French, the bunch of extensible straps that are used to attach luggage to the roof of a car. Here an almost impalpable jelly deploys around itself straps which, it is thought, are capable of imbibing vital juices, of sucking them in through the victim's epidermis. These elastic and avid serpentine knots are disposed around a dark vulva into which it seems that the prey, bloodless and torn, must finally be engulfed, leaving behind but an empty shell. A sexual element adds its own brand of disorder to the others, even when it remains elusive or unexpressed.

These are the basic traits of the octopus, which are remarkable enough to win it a place of honour in the bestiary of the accursed. I earlier expressed surprise at the fact that similar species were excluded. The reason is that in this field an unconscious process of selection based on obscure yet demanding criteria must necessarily operate. The most appropriate is the winner. The octopus disqualifies the squid although this too has tentacles and suckers, and even sports two long agile strands

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which can reach ten metres in length. Some large pelagic species like *Architenthis princeps* can be truly colossal, and it is certainly the biggest of the invertebrates. But it swims, it looks too much like a fish, it does not lie in wait behind rocks. A rigid cartilage maintains its body's shape. It does not rear up like an enormous, isolated, entirely deformable head placed directly on a radiating array of arms. It does not move in a kind of complicated and heavy creeping motion which seems terrifyingly malicious. It is less compact and at the same time less able to spread itself out. And finally, it does not have the absolute and slippery softness which makes the octopus seem like the acme of the hideous.

Such parallels tell one something about the mechanisms of the imagination. They give one a clue as to the coherent pattern hidden behind arbitrary or unusual elements, a pattern which, one noticed, can be formulated according to a decipherable system.

This is not without an objective counterpart in the totality of nature of which, after all, man is also a part. It is for this no less dependent than any being or configuration. Some philosophers have not hesitated to identify the real with the rational. I am myself convinced that another brave attempt, depending on and evoking a great deal of meticulous enquiry, would lead us to discover the network of proven analogies and latent connexions which constitute the logic of imagination.