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Lourdes’s Monsters: A Critical Disability Studies Reading of the Spectacle of Disability

**Abstract**

Emile Zola’s 1894 novel *Lourdes*, J.-K. Huysmans’ 1906 travel narrative *Les Foules de Lourdes* and François Mauriac’s 1932 novella, *Pèlerins* all seek to represent and interpret the “monstrous” bodies of ill and disabled pilgrims who visited the town of Lourdes. This article uses Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s critical-disability-studies interpretation of the starer-staree relationship to explore the creative potential of the presence of disability in the literary text. All the texts under discussion are structured around a “quest-for-cure” narrative which subscribes to the outdated “medical” model of disability. Yet their narrators’ interest in disabled bodies leads to a set of powerful aesthetic encounters where narrators and readers are invited the celebrate disability for its own sake.

**Introduction**

Since the town of Lourdes in south-west France became the site first of scenes of miraculous healing, and then of national and international pilgrimage, in the second half of the nineteenth century, French writers have been fascinated by the spectacle of the disabled bodies which congregate there. Emile Zola’s 1894 novel *Lourdes*, J.-K. Huysmans’ 1906 travel narrative *Les Foules de Lourdes* and François Mauriac’s 1932 novella, *Pèlerins* all seek, amongst other things, to represent and interpret the “monsters” which their (always non-disabled) protagonists encounter as they wander through the town.[[1]](#footnote-1) The non-disabled narrators deployed by Zola, Huysmans and Mauriac can be read as examples of the usually dominant figure of the “starer” theorized by critical disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. According to Garland-Thomson, “everybody stares”.[[2]](#footnote-2) The starer turns a person who looks surprising, unusual, or disturbing into a spectacle by directing their persistent and curious gaze onto them. The person who has attracted the starer’s attention becomes a “staree” who must decide how to respond to this unsolicited stare. In *Staring: How We Look*, Garland-Thomson insists on the productive potential of the starer-staree encounter by repositioning it from something intrusive, threatening or embarrassing into a creative and mutually productive interaction. Her assertion that the staring encounter offers non-normative bodies a way of contributing to processes of meaning-making frequently denied them, invites us to look again at the signifying power of the monstrous bodies described in the literary text. It could be argued that the disabled pilgrims embody the notion of the grotesque theorized first by Victor Hugo and then by Mikhail Bakhtin.[[3]](#footnote-3) Whilst is it certainly true that nineteenth-century French literature is full of references to grotesque bodies, my critical-disability-studies reading of selected encounters with the spectacle of bodily difference moves away from the hierarchical grotesque-sublime binary. Instead, I suggest that the presence of the monster in these Lourdian tales can be celebrated as a disruptive force which has the power to call into question readerly preconceptions about the value of the disabled body.

My decision to use the term “monster” to refer to the disabled body may at first seem surprising, even shocking, to a reader not familiar with the emerging field of critical disability studies.[[4]](#footnote-4) But unlike most nineteenth-century understandings of the word, as discussed, for example by Miranda Gill, this article enacts a positive reclaiming of “monster” as a term of celebration rather than insult.[[5]](#footnote-5) Following the work of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, who celebrate the troublesome potential of the disabled body, I will knowingly seek to challenge the widespread assumption that physical difference from the norm is an undesirable condition which is best avoided, ignored or even eliminated.[[6]](#footnote-6) Rather than functioning as a marker of marginality, monstrosity in fact becomes a powerful creative force in the texts under consideration. As Jeffery Jerome Cohen shows throughout his 1996 edited volume *Monster Theory*, the monster is a highly meaningful and meaning-full figure which always “signifies something other than itself”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Following Garland-Thomson, I use the term “monster” to celebrate the creative and aesthetic potential of physical difference. By defining monsters as “unusually formed beings whose bodies are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary”, Garland-Thomson urges us to redefine disability in a more positive way as an intriguing bodily difference which invites interaction and engagement.[[8]](#footnote-8) My analysis of representations of monstrosity in the Lourdian narratives of Zola. Huysmans and Mauriac will suggest that despite their overtly negative attitude towards the non-normative body, all three texts reveal the unexpected beauty of the monster.

**The Quest-for-Cure Narrative and the Medical Model of Disability**

Lourdes is perhaps the only place in France where the spectacle of disability is visible on a daily, even hourly, basis in the public sphere. As Ruth Harris puts it in her important work on the town’s religious, historical and political significance in nineteenth-century France, in Lourdes, “the sick and dying, usually relegated to the unseen margins of society, took centre stage”.[[9]](#footnote-9) In his astonishing 1997 memoire *Le scaphandre et le papillon*, Jean-Dominique Bauby confirms that disability continues to occupy a privileged position in the town. He notes with surprise that when he visited Lourdes in the late 1970s, his hotel was wonderfully wheelchair-friendly: “l’ascenseur était surdimensionné, à la taille des brancards, et dix minutes plus tard, en prenant une douche, je réaliserais que notre salle de bains était équipée pour accueillir des handicapés”.[[10]](#footnote-10) In Lourdes, disability is the norm rather than the exception. But disability nonetheless occupies a paradoxical place in Lourdes. On the one hand, disabled people are a valuable commodity in the town. Not only does their presence keep the local economy afloat, they are also a useful way for their non-disabled helpers and carers to participate in the pilgrimage and feel closer to God. On the other hand, if so many disabled people travel to Lourdes each year, it is with the hope that such a journey will alleviate their symptoms or even cure them completely. To date sixty-nine cures have been officially recognised as miracles by the Roman Catholic church and many more people have had their conditions improve or disappear. The Catholic church’s presence in Lourdes thus encourages a problematic belief in the undesirability of disability which goes against recent work in critical disability studies that instead urges us to celebrate the creative, political or aesthetic potential of the non-normative body. According to critical disability studies scholar Dan Goodley, for example, we are entering the time of dis/ability studies in which: “disability is re-sited as a moment of celebration and desire that radically challenges the preferred desire to be non-disabled”.[[11]](#footnote-11) The works by Zola, Huysmans and Mauriac which are the subject of this article do not at first appear to share Goodley’s celebratory attitude to disability. Instead they all follow the logic of what we might call the “quest-for-cure-narrative”. A quest-for-cure-narrative can be defined in its simplest form as a story whose plot is structured around a character’s attempts to improve their somehow less-than-perfect body through medical, religious or other means. In the case of the specifically Lourdian quest-for-cure-narrative, the plot maps the various activities – taking the waters, praying at the grotto, witnessing the procession of the Holy Sacrament - which the disabled pilgrim undertakes in the hope that they will be rewarded with the miraculous transformation of their body from monstrous to non-monstrous. The story ends either happily, with the longed-for cure of the pilgrim, or unhappily, with the disappointing realization that a cure will not be forthcoming. The quest-for-cure-narrative depends therefore on an unspoken but always present assumption that cure is better than no cure, and that a normative body is more desirable than a non-normative one. This refusal to acknowledge the value of the non-normative body aligns the quest-for-cure narrative with the medical model of disability which critical disability studies has largely discredited. According to Tobin Siebers, the medical model defines disability as: “an individual deficit lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human being”.[[12]](#footnote-12) In this model, disfigurement and disability are posited as undesirable and unattractive, and are always unfavourably compared with the non-disabled or no-longer-disabled body held up as the physical and aesthetic ideal. Zola’s description, in *Lourdes,* of Sophie Couteau’s left foot before and after her miraculous cure illustrates the gulf that exists between the unattractive disabled body and the aesthetically pleasing non-disabled body. Sophie was cured of “une carie des os du talon gauche” during the previous year’s national pilgrimage. When she joins the pilgrimage train in Poitiers, the compartment’s inhabitants listen avidly as she tells them the story of her cure. Sophie’s pre-cure foot is described by Soeur Hyacinthe in terms which emphasize its unattractiveness: “Le pied était gonflé, déformé, et il y avait des fistules donnant issue à une suppuration continue” (*L*, p. 97). Here, references to its exaggerated size and the presence of unregulated bodily fluids are used to denote the foot’s monstrosity. By contrast, her post-cure foot is “très propre, très blanc, soigné même, avec des ongles roses bien coupés” (*L,* p. 99). By implying that Sophie’s visit to Lourdes not only cures her foot, but also renders it – and therefore her - more pleasing to the eye, this description reveals that Zola’s narrative subscribes to the medical model’s belief that physical differences are in fact defects best eliminated.

Given the attitude to Sophie’s foot illustrated here, it will come as no surprise that the plot of *Lourdes* follows the structure of the quest-for-cure narrative, and is indeed perhaps French literature’s best-known example of it. Zola’s novel ostensibly tells the story of the apparent cure of Marie de Guersaint who has been paralyzed since adolescence. As she participates in mass at the Grotto, Marie suddenly feels the weight of the paralysis leave her body.[[13]](#footnote-13) Against the backdrop of the crowd’s religious fervour, Marie dramatically rises to her feet and walks for the first time since her accident years previously. But rather than celebrating Marie’s cure and thus the medical model of disability which calls for and allows it, Zola’s novel instead questions the widespread assumption that being cured is the ideal towards which disabled people should strive. Whilst Marie is delighted by her cure, protagonist Pierre Froment has a more unexpected reaction. Pierre is a lapsed Catholic priest. Rather than using the cure to reaffirm his faith, he is troubled, even saddened, by it. His seemingly paradoxical reaction encourages the reader to question his or her own uncritical acceptance of the necessity of the cure which both the logic of the quest-for-cure narrative and the pilgrims’ religious passion encourages. This readerly unease is further facilitated by Pierre’s refusal to believe that Marie’s dramatic cure is the result of the Virgin Mary’s miraculous intervention. In fact, religious faith and scientific knowledge both take credit for Marie’s sudden cure by offering conflicting explanations for it, neither of which is wholly convincing to either Pierre or to the reader. Marie’s cure is an interpretive riddle which is not resolved by the novel’s end. Like the doctors in the *salle des constatations* where miracles are investigated, the reader is invited to actively interpret the available evidence. By puzzling over the nature of Marie’s inexplicable cure, we are therefore also invited to call into question the hierarchical binary opposition between disability and non-disability upon which both the quest-for-cure narrative, and the medical model, depend. Indeed, Zola’s refusal to endorse either interpretation obliges the reader to become dynamically involved not only in the re-definition of disability but also in the creative process more generally. In this moment of indecision, which is enabled by the presence of disability in the text, Marie’s non-normative body is transformed from passive object of medical investigation and spiritual ministration to creative maker of meaning. We shall see in what follows, that it is precisely the disabled body’s transformation from object of pity or horror into aesthetic object in its own right that allows for a celebration of disability for its own sake.

**The Horrified Stare of the Non-Disabled Narrator**

Although Zola’s problematisation of the various explanations for Marie’s cure goes some way towards calling into question the validity of the medical model of disability, the negative view of disability suggested by the logic of the quest-for-cure narrative is nonetheless further encouraged by the literary texts’ fascination with the aesthetic horror of the non-normative body. The difference between the pre- and post-cure versions of Sophie’s foot reveals the extent of the horror non-disabled protagonists experience when confronted with monstrous bodies. When Pierre asks for more details of her cure, he ascertains that Soeur Hyacinthe’s vivid description of the pre-cure foot is in fact based on over-imaginative speculation rather than observation. He learns that as Sophie kept her foot wrapped in bandages, no-one had in fact seen the foot before its cure. But the logic of the quest-for-cure narrative, together with the listeners’ prurient curiosity, demands that her audience are given a vivid image of the horribly deformed foot so that they can better appreciate the foot’s transformation from object of disgust to object of beauty. Even in retrospect, as they are told the story of the cure in the train carriage, Sophie’s audience - which includes the lapsed priest Pierre and, of course, the reader - need to visualize the horror of the pre-cure foot in order to fully marvel at its transformation. Even though they receive their information aurally rather than visually, Sophie’s audience take the same kind of “furtive, guilty, pleasure” from hearing about Sophie’s foot that Garland-Thomson identifies as a defining feature of the intrusive and inappropriate staring to which disabled bodies are often subjected by voyeuristic non-disabled starers.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Zola’s narrator is just as fascinated by the spectacle of the monstrous body as his characters. *Lourdes* is full of detailed descriptions of crowds of disabled pilgrims such as this one:

Puis, toutes les difformités des contractures se succédaient, les tailles déjetées, les bras retournés, les cous plantés de travers, les pauvres êtres cassés où broyés, immobilisés en des postures de pantins tragiques : un surtout dont le poing droit s’était rejeté derrière les reins, tandis que la joue gauche se renversait, collait à l’épaule. (*L,* p. 161)

The detail with which the monstrous bodies are evoked here reveals the fascinated curiosity of the narrator. Like the voyeuristic starer theorized by Garland-Thomson, Zola’s narrator is at once captivated and horrified by the contorted bodies he witnesses. Throughout the description of the pilgrims from which this extract is taken, Zola juxtaposes evocations of the stunning Lourdian landscapes with his descriptions of physical disability. Both thus become spectacles for onlookers, such as the “famille d’excursionnistes” (*L*,p. 161) to stare at.

These horrified tourists represent the non-disabled onlooker or reader who is easily shocked by visions of the abnormal or the abject but who is nonetheless unable to turn away from the fascinating scenes of disability which confront them. The procession of disabled pilgrims heading to the grotto becomes, like the scenery of the Pyrenean foothills, another kind of tourist attraction at which they – and we - are compelled to stop and stare: Disability is posited here as a macabre spectacle, a spectacle which reinforces the hierarchical binary opposition between the non-disabled writer or reader who is encouraged to stare, and the disabled victim who is always posited as the passive object of the pitying or horrified gaze, a hierarchy which, as we have seen, is also present in the quest-for-cure narrative.

Zola’s novel is not alone in its foregrounding of the non-disabled protagonist’s fascination with the spectacle of the monster. In François Mauriac’s 1932 novella, *Pèlerins*, two young men, the non-believing Serge and the devout Augustin, find themselves in Lourdes during a pilgrimage. Like Zola’s tourists, Serge sees the parade of disabled pilgrims heading to the grotto as an unmissable attraction, on a par with the region’s stunning rock formations and mountain peaks. Mauriac’s description of his protagonist’s desire to see the candle-lit procession suggests that Serge is excited by the promise of the fascinating spectacle of disability that is made possible when the “monsters” he has come to observe are clearly separated from the non-disabled onlookers: “Il y tenait comme au numéro d’un programme où le pathétique, l’horrible, le touchant, le pittoresque étaient dosés avec une science sûre par d’habiles metteurs en scène.” (*P,* p. 61). When Serge passes disabled people on the street, he is less inclined openly to stare at them with the curiosity of a tourist. Instead their presence makes him so uncomfortable that he averts his gaze:

Serge détournait les yeux des petites voitures, par pudeur sans doute, parce qu’il était trop bien élevé pour dévisager curieusement des infirmes, et puis, d’instinct, un garçon si puissant, si frais, redoute l’aspect des corps souffrants. (*P*, p. 2)

Serge’s reaction to these disabled pilgrims illustrates two additional, and widespread, responses to the spectacle of disability. Firstly, despite our natural curiosity and our persistent and irrepressible desire to stare, we are taught as children that staring is rude and so we avert our eyes. Secondly, we are afraid of disabled bodies because they tell us that our own non-disabled state is transient and temporary. As Garland-Thomson puts it, “seeing disability […] reminds us of the truth of our body’s vulnerability to the randomness of fate”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Unlike Serge, the narrator of Huysmans’s *Les Foules de Lourdes* offers a much more self-aware explanation for his own awkward reaction to the spectacle of disability. When he describes his visit to the *piscines* where Lourdes’s monstrous bodies are plunged, he admits that he is embarrassed by his non-disabled status:

On se sent bien petit, un peu honteux même de se promener là, en simple curieux, mais, après tout, on n’est pas sans doute inutile puisqu’on vient la prier pour les infirmes, puisqu’on ne lui parle pas de soi, mais d’eux! (*FdeL*, kindle loc 688-9).

By seeking to justify the presence of a non-disabled starer amongst the monstrous bodies of the pilgrim, Huysmans reveals that he is aware of the inappropriateness of his own staring impulse even whilst he continues to use it to gather information for his narrative.

Whilst these examples of starer dominance undoubtedly show that when Huysmans’s, Mauriac’s and Zola’s non-disabled tourists encounter disabled people in the pilgrimage processions, they can distance themselves from them by objectifying and thus marginalising them, the presence of such descriptions in literary texts nonetheless also demonstrates their power to captivate. This mixture of horror and interest contains elements of what Garland-Thomson calls “baroque staring”, that is, a kind of staring which “indicates wonder” and can thus “lead to new insights” because “wonder opens up towards new knowledge”.[[16]](#footnote-16) By including such episodes in their novels, Huysmans, Zola and Mauriac are transmitting these new insights to the reader by enshrining the spectacle of the monstrous body in the literary text. In so doing, the authors celebrate the narrative power of the monster and thus invite the reader to engage in active interpretation of the non-normative bodies on display. Like the creative possibilities offered by Marie’s unexplained cure, the unsettling spectacle of the disabled body can thus also be reclaimed as a moment of creative potential. According to Garland-Thomson, the relationship between the starer and the staree is a potentially productive interaction which, when properly managed, can function as a novel kind of story-telling: “staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what’s going on and demands the story. The eyes hang on, working to recognize what seems illegible, order what seems unruly, know what seems strange.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The Lourdian narratives provide several examples of encounters between the non-disabled starer and the disabled staree that reveal the transformative power of the monstrous body.

**The Transformative Power of the Stare**

We have already seen how Mauriac’s protagonist Serge manages his encounters with monstrous pilgrims by either watching them from afar or refusing to engage in staring exchanges with them. He thus distances himself from the lived realities of disability and refuses to acknowledge that these strange creatures are just as human as he is. But when the spectacle of the disabled body refuses to maintain the requisite distance and instead irrupts into his own lived reality, here the hotel restaurant, he can no longer look away and is therefore unable to repress his horror. Serge’s disgusted exclamation at the sight of a disabled boy reveals his outrage that the monstrous spectacle of disability is being inflicted on the unsuspecting non-disabled public by the boy’s parents: “Oh, ne regardez pas,… c’est dégoûtant! Comment un père n’a-t’il pas honte!” (*P*, p. 15). Here Serge’s wonder at the spectacle of the monstrous body is transformed into revulsion. His “baroque staring” becomes what Garland-Thomson, borrowing from David Roche, calls separated staring: “In separated staring, discomfort overwhelms both attention and curiosity so that baroque staring collapses under its own weight.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Serge is horrified that the unsightly presence of a disabled body is disrupting the decorous atmosphere of the dining room. Garland-Thomson’s discussion of social convention offers one way of understanding Serge’s reaction. According to her, “the social rituals in which we accord one another recognition depend on accurate reading of bodily and gestural cues. Unpredictable or indecipherable cues create anxiety. It is not that disability itself creates unease, but rather people’s inability to read such cues disrupts the expected, routine nature of social relations.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Serge’s travelling companion Augustin, on the other hand, is better able to interpret the disabled bodies he encounters. He understands that disability is such a common occurrence in Lourdes that it has stopped being something to be ashamed of. In nineteenth-century France, as in most societies then (and sometimes still now), disability was hidden from public view in part to protect the non-disabled majority from the knowledge of their own vulnerability. As Garland-Thomson explains:

Each one of us ineluctably acquires one or more disabilities—naming them variably as illness, disease, injury, old age, failure, dysfunction, or dependence. This inconvenient truth nudges most of us who think of ourselves as able-bodied toward imagining disability as an uncommon visitation that mostly happens to someone else, as a fate somehow elective rather than inevitable. In response, we have refused to see disability. Avowing disability as tragic or shameful, we have hidden away disabled people in asylums, segregated schools, hospitals, and nursing homes.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Instead of feeling ashamed of their son, and keeping him concealed at home or in an institution, the family feel able proudly to display both his disability and their acceptance of it by taking him out to eat in public. This is made possible because in Lourdes, as we have already seen, disability is the norm rather than the exception. As Augustin suggests with reference to the boy’s father: “il a vaincu cette honte, il accepte cette humiliation. Lourdes est l’endroit du monde où l’on perd du mieux toute vergogne, où l’on apprend à ne plus rougir.” (*P*, p. 15). Whilst this family have ostensibly travelled to Lourdes in the hope of a cure, their presence in the city has instead had a transformative effect on their attitude to their son’s condition. By moving from shame to acceptance, they have shifted from an adherence to the medical model of disability, to an understanding that their son’s disability is created, at least in part, by the prejudicial attitudes of normative society. They no longer yearn for a cure, because they can now accept his son for who he is without attempting to change him. As such their attitude foreshadows the “social model” of disability which was theorized by disability studies scholars in the 1980s as a response to the medical model, and which “defines disability not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment”.[[21]](#footnote-21) In a subversive challenge to the logic of the quest-for-cure narrative, Mauriac’s text thus suggests that Lourdes is important not for the miracles performed there, but for its ability to trigger a change in attitude by facilitating the non-disabled spectator’s exposure to disability.

The transformative potential of the monstrous body is further demonstrated in a little-known novella by French poet and novelist Francis Jammes, *Le Pèlerin à Lourdes*. In Jammes’s story, the pilgrim Jean Escuyot meets a priest who explains how his life was transformed by a sight that he witnesses at Lourdes some years earlier. As he was walking through the town he noticed a boy with a striking facial deformity: “Un enfant de mon âge dont la face était monstrueusement ravagée par un chancre ou un lupus qui déchaussait ses dents jusqu’aux narines, rongeait le nez, gagnait les joues et les paupières”.[[22]](#footnote-22) As he watched the boy, he witnessed a staring encounter in which a young girl cried out in horror at the sight of the young boy’s disfigurement. At the moment of this cry, the priest experienced a shock of revelation and was suddenly certain that his vocation was to work as a missionary in remote Oceania. By describing this moment of realisation as a miraculous curing of his faith, the priest reimagines the quest-for-cure narrative as a search for spiritual rather than physical healing. The monstrous body is thus transformed from the reason why the quest for cure is undertaken in the first place, to the means by which this cure will be achieved. These episodes from the works of Jammes and Mauriac both reveal that rather than being feared or despised, the monstrous body can in fact be celebrated for its power to transform the people who engage in meaningful staring encounters with it.

**Conclusion: A Celebration of the Monster**

The transformative encounters between starer and staree evokced by Mauriac and Jammes demonstrate that the monstrous body occupies a powerful and productive place in the literary text. In her work on late-nineteenth-century Decadence, Evanghélia Stead emphasizes the self-reflexive potential of the monster: “si le monstre est une pièce fondamentale dans la constitution de l’imaginaire décadente, c’est parce qu’il permet de s’interroger sur le bienfondé de la création, mais également sur l’écriture elle-même”.[[23]](#footnote-23) Like the texts discussed by Stead, Huysmans’ travel narrative *Les Foules de Lourdes* encourages us to read the monster as a marker of, or comment on, the transformative effect that the spectacle of disability can have on both narrator and reader. We have already heard how Huysmans’s narrator is fascinated by the spectacle of the monstrous body he discovers in the hospitals, streets and churches of Lourdes. As he encourages his readers to visit Lourdes, he gleefully insists that: “Il est bien certain qu’il faut venir à Lourdes si l’on veut se rendre compte de ce que peut devenir la loque décomposée de notre pauvre corps. Il n’est point de clinique qui présente un éventaire aussi varié de monstres.” (*FdeL*, p. 111). Unlike the works by Zola and Mauriac discussed above, Huysmans’s account does not embrace the plot structure of the quest-for-cure narrative. Instead it provides a detailed account of the narrator’s experiences of Lourdes in the form of a travel journal. Rather than focusing on the necessity of the cure, Huysmans is thus able to concentrate on the disabled body for its own sake. In so doing he transforms the reader’s attitude to disability by celebrating the aesthetic value of the monster in the text.

One such “monster” is the man with the hugely misshapen tongue who has travelled to Lourdes with the Coutances pilgrimage. When Huysmans’s narrator first catches sight of the man he is horrified by what he sees. His detailed description of the man’s face uses a disturbing evocation of unknown life-forms to emphasize his monstrosity:

Il lui pend d’un trou informe et limoneux, qui fut jadis une bouche, une langue énorme. La peau molle et violette, comme enduite de gomme, qui la recouvre, semble morte, mais le dedans remue et vit. Les joues sont descendues avec leurs poils, mais le menton est où ? Comment peut-il avaler ? Et cependant il mâche sa viande, mais en cachette, car cette langue, pleine d’on ne sait quoi qui brandouille, dégoûte même les lupus ! (*FdeL*, p. 104)

This man’s appearance is so repulsive, even to the other pilgrims with severe disfigurements who sit together at “la tablée des monstres” (*FdeL*, p. 103), that he eats alone with his face to the wall like a punished child. Yet the very fact that Huysmans is able and willing to look at him for long enough to compose and then include this description in his text allows his face to move from an unspeakable eyesore to an aesthetic object worthy of its place in a literary narrative. Huysmans makes explicit reference to the role of art in the aestheticisation of the horrible when he compares the three blind men he passes in a corridor to a well-known masterpiece by Breughel: “le souvenir me hante du tableau du vieux Breughel où les gestes tâtonnants et les apparences des diverses cécités sont si bien rendus” (*FdeL*, p. 112). By reminding the reader of the role art can play in the celebration of the monstrous body, Huysmans is self-reflexively commenting on his own narrative’s role in transforming monstrosity into art.

Tobin Siebers’s theory of “disability aesthetics” helps us to understand the transformative potential of Huysmans’s unflinching depictions of monstrosity. According to Siebers, by foregrounding, rather than hiding, the most unpalatable manifestations of human difference, literary and visual depictions of disability force their readers and viewers to confront and acknowledge their part in the marginalization of the disabled body: “when disability is made visible as a negative image, the suffering of the body really begins because, while physical impairment and injury may be painful, social injury is more painful for human beings”.[[24]](#footnote-24) by describing the “homme à la langue fluctueuse” in his text, Huysmans metaphorically turns him away from the wall and towards the viewer. In so doing he forces us to engage in a productive staring encounter with this man. As the staree metaphorically holds our gaze, he transforms our attitude to monstrosity by obliging us to acknowledge that our initial repulsion at the man’s appearance stems from our own irrational discomfort with unexpected difference. Although the man in question leaves Lourdes in the same state as he arrived, his face has been transformed into an aesthetic object through its inclusion in the text. His physical appearance has not changed. But our attitude to it has. Thanks to the many descriptions of monstrosity which Huysmans includes in his text, we are no longer disgusted by deformity: instead, the insistent presence of monstrosity in the text instigates a powerful process of denaturalization whereby we are forced to redefine our preconceived notions of what constitutes ugliness. As the narrator points out: “la laideur de tout ce que l’on voit, ici, fini par n’être pas naturelle, car elle est en dehors des étiages communs” (*FdeL*, p. 121). By emphasizing that ugliness is artificial rather than natural, Huysmans once again asserts its aesthetic value by thus associating it with the literary text which describes it. Instead of requiring Huysmans’s Lourdian monsters to hide their faces as we pass, we recognise, seek out and celebrate their inherent aesthetic potential.

This critical-disability-studies reading of the spectacle of disability in literary representations of Lourdes has shown that the monstrous bodies which populate texts by Zola, Huysmans and Mauriac, can be read as disruptive presences whose creative potential works to undermine the texts’ own reliance on the logic of the quest-for-cure narrative. Garland-Thomson’s theorization of the transformative potential of the starer-staree relationship has provided a model for the kinds of productive exchange between beholder (that is protagonist, narrator or reader) and monster which we have been examining. Through her thoughtful readings of Elaine Scarry and Susan Sontag, Garland-Thomson shows that “the impulse to stare at novel sights, whether we understand them as conventionally beautiful or repulsive, can move us towards recognising a “newness” that can be transformative”.[[25]](#footnote-25) Our reading of selected Lourdian monsters demonstrates that when we are brave enough to look at disability head on, we are rewarded with an invitation to construct new ways of understanding the previously negative connotations of the monstrous body. Rather than being a tragedy to be solved through the quest for cure, disability is instead revealed to be a valid and valuable creative, aesthetic and transformative experience for those of us who dare to stare.

1. Emile Zola, *Œuvres Complètes: Les Trois Villes,* I: *Lourdes* [1894] (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015); J.-K. Huysmans, *Les Foules de Lourdes* [1906] (Grenoble: Jerôme Milon, 1993); François Mauriac, *Pèlerins* (Paris: Editions de France, 1932). Abbreviated in the text to *L*, *FdL* and *P* respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Victor Hugo, *Préface de Cromwell* (Paris: Larousse, 1972) and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World,* trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an overview of existing intersections between critical disability studies and French studies see Hannah Thompson, ‘Etat présent: French and Francophone Disability Studies’, *French Studies*, 71.2 (2017), 243-251. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imaginary in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jeffery Jerome Cohen (ed), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 4. Cohen’s argument that the monster is central to the text is not without its drawbacks. See Hannah Thompson, *Taboo: Corporeal Secrets in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), pp. 105-107 for a discussion of how Cohen’s insistence on metaphorical monstrosity is in danger of denying the embodied experience of disability. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Garland-Thomson, p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jean-Dominique Bauby, *Le scaphandre et le papillon* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997), p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dan Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies: Theorizing Disablism and Ableism* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Much has been written elsewhere about *Lourdes* and it is not my intention to repeat it here. In his introduction to the 2015 edition of the novel (*L*, pp. 9-42), Bertrand Marquer provides a very helpful explanation of the novel’s historical, political and religious contexts. See also Kathleen Ann Comfort, “Divine Images of Hysteria in Emile Zola’s *Lourdes*”, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 30, 3-4 (Spring-Summer 2002), 330-346 and Barbara Corrado Pope, “Emile Zola’s *Lourdes*: Land of Healing and Rupture”, *Literature and Medicine* 8 (1989), 22-36 for more detailed readings of the novel’s presentation of illness and cure. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Garland-Thomson, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Garland-Thomson, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Garland-Thomson, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Garland-Thomson, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Garland-Thomson, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Garland-Thomson, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Garland-Thomson,p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Siebers, *Disability Theory*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Francis Jammes, *Le Pèlerin de Lourdes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936), pp. 79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Evanghélia Stead, *Le Monstre, le singe, et le fœtus: tératogonie et décadence dans l’Europe fin-de-siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2004). p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Garland-Thomson, p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)