

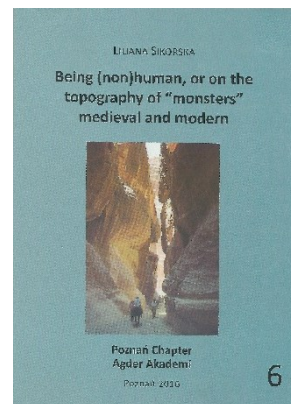
Of Maps and Monsters: A Discussion of *Being (Non)Human, or on the Topography of “Monsters” Medieval and Modern* by Liliana Sikorska

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Abstract

The concept of humanity has taken on new meanings in the era of posthumanist debate. Engaging both prehumanist and posthumanist perspectives, Liliana Sikorska strips away layers of cognitive mappings performed over hundreds of years in Western culture to expose in her recent essay the mechanisms that have exacerbated the East–West divide. While the majority of discussed texts come from medieval and Victorian literature and culture, it becomes obvious to the reader of her book that the issues she explores are still haunting the lives of people and nations worldwide today.

Keywords: the East–West divide; human vs. nonhuman; Orientalism; travel writing; maps; the Middle Ages; the Victorian Era.

Several cognitive maps inform Liliana Sikorska’s essay, which is at once boldly universal and deeply personal. The most obvious is the juxtaposition of medieval versus Victorian understanding of the world, which spans some 600 years of the Western world’s relations with the Orient. However, the allusions and references throughout the book reach far beyond this massive arch, back to ancient geographies, on one hand, and (fast) forward to products of contemporary intellect and popular culture, on the other. The purpose declared

in the introduction is “to show the mechanisms that contributed to the widening of the East–West divide” (Sikorska, 2016, p. 9) in the Middle Ages and again, though in a different way, in the nineteenth century. Meticulously researched and documented, a selection of literary-cultural texts from medieval and Victorian times serves to demonstrate that far from being a curio cabinet for antiquarians and other collectors, her book addresses dilemmas and debates that are still very much part of globalized lives today. Copious footnotes in Sikorska’s book abound in references to recent cultural theories, films, TV series, and political phenomena (including Clinton–Trump and Brexit debates) that mirror or exemplify past conflicts. Thus our present is exposed in Sikorska’s essay as a collection of footnotes to the past, which is—as it turns out—by no means dead and gone. Apart from past and present ideologies, the essay is also informed, though not in any partisan manner, by the debate about humanity and posthumanism.

Viewing medieval maps as “discursive weapons,” Liliana Sikorska shows that “the development of geography, and so maps, was only possible through the re-iteration of Ancient cosmographic theory re-appropriated through Christianity” (2016, p. 13). Religion indeed made a difference by providing map-making and map-reading with a clear sense of direction and hierarchy. Sikorska refers to two specific maps—at once navigational tools and ideological sums of knowledge: the *Madaba Mosaic Map* (in St. George’s Church, Madaba, Jordan) of c. 560 and the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* (in Hereford Cathedral, UK) of c. 1300. A detail of the former map, admittedly the most notable “detail,” is in fact offered in Sikorska’s book as a photograph (Sikorska, 2016, p. 10) in addition to a verbal commentary on the significance of the depicted city of Jerusalem. The latter map is discussed on pages 13–16, but not represented visually. What the two maps have in common, despite the distance in time and space, and despite the difference in the materials and artistic techniques employed in their making, is the centrality of Christian imagery, and especially of the Holy Land. Jerry Brotton offers in his book short discussions of both maps, which indeed lend themselves to such comparative remarks (Brotton, 2014, pp. 32–35, 56–59).

Sikorska refers in her study to a whole range of medieval texts, including William Caxton’s *Mirror of the World* (1480) or the imaginary travel writing of John Mandeville. Pointing to their fantastic or at best second-hand quality, she notices that European writing did not benefit at all from the accounts of Chinese explorers, who visited Europe and India “before Europeans ever reached the Orient” (Holt-Jensen, 1988, p. 13 in Sikorska, 2016, p. 15). Medieval Europeans were not interested in “comparing notes” with other traveling people because they apparently sought confirmation of what they already “knew” about the world, rather than new inconceivable data collected by other (and for this reason specious) “races.” Despite the possibility of frightening phenomena, the world of medieval cartographers—in the literal and metaphorical sense—was an orderly place. Medieval morality plays and bestiaries quoted by Sikorska illustrate the thesis that in the Middle Ages the enemies of Mankind were first and foremost the World, the Flesh, and the Devil (Sikorska, 2016, p. 17). Bestiaries offered classifications of animals, which, as Sikorska argues, seem to prefigure “the Victorian obsession with categorization, plus the Darwinian mode of systematization and minus the religious element” (Sikorska, 2016, p. 21).

The staunch belief in the divine plan (Sikorska, 2016, p. 23) allowed medieval Europeans to accommodate a large variety of different “races,” clearly showing the privilege of pure breeds, while treating hybrids with “derision and disgust” (Sikorska, 2016, p. 21). Especially maps in their visual forcefulness demonstrate the possibility of relegating the Other to the margins of the known world. On the *Hereford Mapa Mundi*, the monstrous peoples “fill sub-Saharan Africa. From the North the map shows cave-dwelling ‘Troglodites,’ a poisonous ‘Basilisk,’ a race called ‘Blemmyes’ with ‘mouths and eyes in their chest,’ and the ‘Philli’ who ‘expose their newborns to serpents’” (Brotton, 2014, p. 58). All the monsters are grouped far away from the center of the map (Sikorska, 2016, p. 21), that is Jerusalem. In addition, they are separated from the rest of the world, as if for the sake of protection, by a thick dark line of a snake-like river.

In the very preface to his book, Brotton dispells the enticing illusion that there is such a thing—even today—as an objective, scientifically accurate or correct map. He argues instead that “maps answer the specific needs of their intended audience” (Brotton, 2014, p. 7), which applies to the oldest petroglyphs as well as to digital maps available on contemporary mobile phones. While Jerry Brotton uses the concept of map as “a graphic representation that presents a spatial understanding of things, concepts, or events in the human world” (Brotton, 2014, p. 7), Liliana Sikorska seems to extend its meaning to accommodate literary texts as well. A larger part of her discussion of the ways in which the East–West relations have been conceptualized consists of an analysis of *Guy of Warwick* (13th cent.), one of the longest and best-known medieval romances featuring the struggle of the Western world with “Monstrous Races” (Sikorska, 2016, p. 26–37). Sikorska rightly points to the compensatory function of romance writing, which sought to patch up the reality that was far less glorious. Saracen romances asserted the victory of European Christianity “at the time when the foundations of Christendom began to shake with the first and rather fast growing heretical movements, and in the post-Crusade period with the undeniable loss of Jerusalem” (Sikorska, 2016, p. 37). Thus the deepening of the divide between the East and the West seemed to be a side effect of ideological battles fought primarily in Europe.

The ideological context seems comparable over 500 years later when Sir Richard Burton ventures into the Orient. By then Rudyard Kipling had coined the hypocritical concept of the “white man’s burden,” throwing wide open again the door to imperialist endeavors. Liliana Sikorska focuses on Burton’s travels and the resulting travelogue *First Footsteps in East Africa* (1856), written by an Englishman who was not only “urbane,” “educated,” and “cultured,” but also “truly interested in the East” (Sikorska, 2016, p. 39). Burton’s perspective could hardly have been anything but “western, imperial,” but his inevitable bias seems to be redeemed by the “desire to translate the East to the West” (Sikorska, 2016, p. 43). From today’s perspective, his “reading” and “mapping” of the East, though far more enlightened and sympathetic than the attitudes of *Guy of Warwick*, are still informed by a staunch belief in the superiority of his own culture. In conclusion to her study, Liliana Sikorska brings the story of the widening divide to the present, pointing to numerous examples of very recent products of Western culture that have inherited prejudice (and pride too) from their antecedents ages ago. In this sense her book successfully combines the scholarly

discipline with the conversational style of such a “lover’s dictionary” as René Guittou’s *Dictionnaire amoureux de l’Orient*, which likewise focuses on the new significance of old concepts in the world of dynamic change. For example, his reading of the Crusades (1095–1291) and especially his comments on the post-Holocaust perspective on crusading, juxtaposed with George W. Bush’s use of the word “crusade” after 9/11 are good examples of an attempt to show the relevance of old stories today (Guittou, 2016, pp. 214, 216).

The selected references to W.B. Yeats’s famous poem “The Second Coming” (1921) in Liliana Sikorska’s book, though astoundingly relevant to the explored concepts and texts, remain cryptic and hopefully inconclusive. As a subtext of the discussion in Sikorska’s essay, the vestigial presence of Yeats’s thought is far more awe-inspiring than *Guy of Warwick* and *First Footsteps in East Africa* put together. It seems that Sikorska says less than she would like to say about her own idea of the cosmic (dis)order that interested Yeats to such a great extent. It is clear that she has several stories to tell of deep medieval past, relatively recent Victorian past, the present world, as well as the story of her own exploration of the places described by others. Her own story is told in the fifteen photographs from the author’s collection. These are mostly images of places and occasionally of people: the author herself and the dedicatee of her book, her friend and colleague from Jordan. Thus the men’s world of medieval Crusaders and Victorian anthropologists is counterbalanced—meekly but efficiently—by two female scholars of today who share ideas over the great divide between Poland and Jordan.

It seems difficult for Sikorska to let go of the idea of the “East.” There are so many thoughts, afterthoughts, and loose ends that ask to be tucked into the rich tapestry. What follows the conclusion is a postscript, a short note on the travels of the artist Aleksander Laszenko, accompanied by three reproductions of woodcuts he made in the 1930s, depicting scenes from his travels to the East. It is a coda to the whole story, but especially to the photonarrative pieced together from the images shared by the author and documenting her own travels. The reference to Laszenko at the end makes it clear that in more than one sense contemporary travelers retrace the steps of their predecessors, facing comparable joys and dilemmas. Liliana Sikorska chooses to end her story with the brief remark on Laszenko, but the reader feels that this is where she could actually begin, telling another story about ways of representing the East in Polish photoreportage. In fact, such a study already exists. Even though, predictably, Kinga Siewior’s book features most prominently the work of Ryszard Kapuściński, the story of Polish travelers with cameras begins around the time of Laszenko, with Ferdynand Antoni Ossendowski and Ferdynand Goetel in the 1920s (Siewior, 2012, pp. 65–111). The abruptness of conclusion and postscript in Liliana Sikorska’s essay show that the story, like haunting, has no end.

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