

Among the lowest tribes of animals, the polypi are distinguished for their anomalies. The simplest form of one of these animals is a fleshy tube, open only at the top, and the opening surrounded by flexible arms, called tentacula. On each side of the tentacula are usually fine fibres, like hairs, called ciliæ. These are capable of such rapid motion that the eye cannot follow them; and the object of their movements usually is to produce eddying currents of water around their mouths, in order to bring food within their reach. A good example of these animals is the hydra, which is found in fresh water. It may be described as consisting of nothing but a stomach, with tentacula around its mouth to draw in its prey. It is an enormous glutton when it can obtain food, yet it will live four months without it. When two hydras contend for a worm, the stronger not only swallows the morsel, but also his antagonist and his own tentacula; the two latter, however, usually escape without being digested. When this animal is turned inside out, as it may be, digestion goes on equally well — a power which would be very convenient for the biped gormands of the Caucasian race. But the most remarkable fact relating to these animals is, their power of repairing almost any injury which they receive that does not absolutely annihilate them. If they be divided lengthwise into several strips, each piece will in a few hours become a tube; and in a day new tentacula will be produced and ready for taking in food. Or, by cutting up several hydras, different parts may be made to grow together, and become one animal. In this way, every variety of monster which “fancy yet has feigned or fear conceived” may be originated; and this is actually the way in which the hydra with seven heads, which has often been the occasion of gross imposition, has been formed.