

FROM THE SEA TO DEEP SPACE

The Leviathan in Herman Melville, Stefano D'Arrigo and Howard P. Lovecraft

Andrea Franzoni

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“Today, we face the monsters that are at our door and take the fight to them! Today, we are cancelling the apocalypse!”. With these words one of the main characters of the latest film by Guillermo del Toro — *Pacific Rim* (2013) — prepares for the last fight against the giant extraterrestrial creatures that have risen from the sea to put an end to mankind.

With the exaggerated style of a disaster movie, del Toro draws on the theme of the apocalyptic monster as in the Biblical tradition, the beast arising from the sea in the judgement day: the Leviathan. Del Toro's movie is only the last one of a series of works that, throughout the twentieth century, have played on the apocalyptic monster from the Bible, symbol of the evil that threatens the mankind in spite of its technological achievements. All of these works call into question the man's capability to give a sense to history in a God-less World.

This work analyses the use and transformations of the Leviathan in the three most important literary works in this field, from which this artistic trend has developed in the 20th and 21st centuries: *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville (New York, 1819 — New York, 1891), *Horcynus Orca* by Stefano D'Arrigo (Alì, 1919 — Rome, 1992) and *The call of Cthulhu* by Howard P. Lovecraft (Providence, 1890 — Providence, 1937).

What do they have in common? They all use the Leviathan not just as a symbol of a generic obsession for evil, but rather for its power to throw into crisis the space that men inhabit. Indeed, the latin word *monstrum* suggests a distortion of space: the disproportionate, the hypertrophic, the deformed burst into the human habitat. Thus, the *monstrum* calls into question the human ability to create and preserve the order in the World and the goodness of God's creation. It represents an objection to God's power to set a limit to the evil. In its excess, the *monstrum* reveals by antithesis the shocking possibility of emptiness.¹ But what is this monster?

* Andrea Franzoni, Faculty of Theology of Emilia Romagna (FTER), andrea.franzoni1982@gmail.com

1 Spila, Carlo: Il mostro apocalittico in *Horcynus Orca*, <http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/fileservices/filesDISP/SPILA.XP.pdf>, 231 (in Italian).

As anticipated, the Leviathan is a sea monster in the Biblical tradition, a symbol of the *primaeval* chaos. It is not an invention of the rabbinic literature, but instead it originates from the Babylonian mythology, with *Tiamat*, the huge dragon of the abyss, and from the Ugaritic mythology, with the seven-headed-dragon *Lotan*, which embodies the sea.² In the Bible, the Leviathan is an icon of the Abyss — *Téhom* — the vast emptiness that precedes creation. The dragon represents the forces that God had to subject when he shaped the World, but that are still there, threatening to swallow the whole creation at the end of times. In the Biblical tradition the Leviathan, indeed, always refers to an apocalyptic context.

In the Old Testament, for example, YHWH's victory on the great sea monsters is Israel's theological interpretation of a few tragic events that YHWH cured. "Ezekiel 32 represents the overthrowing of Pharaoh, Isaiah 27 represents the overthrowing of the three world empires, Ps 68:31 represents the overthrowing of Egypt and Ethiopia, Psalm 74 represents the overthrowing of Antiochus Epiphanes".³ Moving to the New Testament, in Saint John's Revelation the "great dragon", the "old serpent" (Rev 12:9) is one of the incarnations of Satan himself, corresponding in history to the domination of the Roman Empire at the times when Saint John wrote his book.

It is therefore an eschatological need to win the monster: it is a needed step, in order to save the World or to renew it. The apocalyptic monster is indeed not only a threat that can throw the chaos on the World, but also an opportunity for a new beginning. The nihilistic trend of our modern western society, indeed, is not only made up of indifference and contempt against any form of order, but it brings in itself the desire to create from nothing, in the same way as God did at the beginning of the creation, a new, evil-free world. However, this ambition causes restlessness and pessimism because any attempt at a new creation reveals a high destructive potential and brings the mankind closer to its end.

Our three authors deal with the Biblical monster in this precise context: if in the old times it was God's task to defeat the evil, in the modern age it is the man alone who has to face the apocalypse, relying only on himself.

The word "apocalypse" itself means the revelation that arrives when the end is near: it is only when facing the end that the man is revealed to himself.

No hook or spear ever caught the Leviathan, as it is written in the book of Job (cf. Jb 40:1); it represents the extreme limit beyond which the man becomes equal to God, or is annihilated by emptiness.

2 For the origin of the Leviathan in the Biblical literature see Gunkel, Hermann: *Creation and chaos in the primeval era and the eschaton: a religio-historical study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2006, 3–77; in particular 27–39.

3 *Ibid*, 60.

Moby Dick: the colour of the Devil

The plot of Herman Melville's novel is universally known: the foolish hunting of Captain Ahab searching for the white whale who mutilated him.

This masterpiece of the Northern American literature was published in 1851 and marked the beginning of the decline of Melville's career, which had begun with novels of large success as *Omoo* (1846) and *Typee* (1847). Borrowing the words from a study by Barbara Spinelli: "The shapeless, the empty, are Moby Dick's fabric".⁴ And in the white whale the shapeless and the empty become concretely assailable.

As in the Bible, in Melville's novel the water is the element that precedes God's creation and Moby Dick is the incarnation of this pre-cosmic forces. The many chapters dedicated to the anatomy of cetaceans suggest that Melville considers the whale a symbol of totality, as it also shown by the recurrent play on words between whale and whole. In Melville's words, "I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over."⁵

This totality is condensed in the symbolic whiteness of the whale, that Melville considers as a symbol of spiritual purity and, at the same time, of the emptiness that terrifies the mankind. White is visible absence of colour and, simultaneously, the solidification of all colours, it shows the undefined, the cruel immensity of the Universe, the emptiness that annihilates us when we see the Milky Way.⁶

In short words, Melville's white whale is nothing but an incarnation of Death. Indeed. when a sperm whale was captured by a whale ship, it was beheaded and skinned to extract oil from its head and tissues. The corpse, skinless and headless, became a white shapeless mass and was abandoned in the sea. Seeing a skinned whale at the horizon was considered as a sign of bad luck by seamen. Moby Dick, with its whiteness, is thus the living death that men will have to face sooner or later if they want to look for the truth: "Death is only a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored [...]".⁷

Moby Dick is thus the extreme limit where the beginning and the end of everything are joined: Ahab describes it as a wall,⁸ a white gravestone that

4 Spinelli, Barbara: *Moby Dick o l'ossessione del male*, Brescia, Italy: Morcelliana, 2010, 23 (in Italian).

5 Melville, Herman: *Moby Dick*, London, UK: Penguin Books, 1994, 434.

6 Cf. *Ibid*, 189–197.

7 *Ibid*, 459.

8 Cf. *Ibid*, 167.

hides the reality of things, and that must be removed by those who want to get in touch with that hidden truth. However, this is a hopeless challenge: Ahab himself admits that behind the Leviathan the void probably hides.⁹

The only way to know the secrets of the white whale is to follow it into the abyss where the World's foundations lie. It is particularly meaningful that Moby Dick's side is full of harpoons: it somehow keeps on its body the marks of the human attempts to penetrate its mystery, all of which gave no result; the white whale keeps cutting through the seas as if it were an immortal being.

Ahab's hunting can nothing but end in a disastrous shipwreck; the attempt to throw the harpoon on the whale's hump, that white promontory of the centuries where the hate of the whole of mankind gathered, from Adam to Ahab, brings Ahab to death and with him the whole crew of the *Pequod*. The crew should have been the destroyer of Moby Dick and as such the prototype of a mankind who's able to destroy the evil and to redeem itself.

In the end the infinite vastness of the sea closes as a tombstone on Ahab's ambition, a symbol of the man's promethean will.

Horcynus Orca: sea and death

Horcynus Orca was published in 1975 after more than twenty years of work, and it can certainly be considered "the European reply to Moby Dick".¹⁰ However, if Melville's novel was characterized by a "Biblical and planetary matrix", what prevails in Stefano D'Arrigo is an "anthropological and Mediterranean matrix".¹¹

Horcynus Orca is a story "of death and sea that ends on the desert of values of a World devastated by the war".¹² It is set in the first days of October 1943, right after the armistice between the Italian government and the Allies. It is the story of 'Ndrja Cambria, a sailor in the Regia Marina (the King's Navy), who tries to go back to his home in Cariddi, in Southern Italy, and to the certainty of his land's traditions. He is looking for an imaginary age of gold, but he will realize that those values are not there anymore, and he chooses death.¹³

9 Cf. Ibid

10 Steiner, Giorgio: Il mistero dell'Orca, Moby Dick d'Europa, in *Corriere della sera*, (November 4, 2003) (in Italian). However, the Italian critics started to be interested in D'Arrigo's novel only recently.

11 De Santis, Carlo: Intervista a Giuseppe Pontiggia. in Gatta, Francesca (Ed.), *Il mare di sangue pestato. Studi su Stefano D'Arrigo*, Catanzaro, Italy: Rubettino, 2002, 25 (in Italian).

12 Pedullà, Walter: Congetture per un'interpretazione di "Horcynus Orca", in D'Arrigo, Stefano: *Horcynus Orca*, Milano, Italy: Rizzoli, 2003, VII (in Italian).

13 Ibid, XXX.

The killer whale (Orca) of the title, only appears halfway through the novel — a literary monster of more than a thousand pages — but its presence is a constant threaten since the first lines of the book. Note also that the strait of Messina is mythologically known as the hideout of the monsters *Scilla* (Scylla) and *Cariddi* (Charybdis); and indeed, when ‘Ndrja crosses the strait on his fourth day of travel it is populated by monsters crawling under the sea surface at sunset. The killer whale, indeed, awakes from its sleep when ‘Ndrja gets to Cariddi.

The monster is described as “a giant, mysterious, unimaginable animal. [...] Its huge body went around in the endless, unfathomable darkness of the abyss”,¹⁴ silent and unexpected as any cataclysm is before it explodes. “It was the Killer Whale, the death-giving being who is itself immortal: she, the Death of the seas, Death itself, in one word”.¹⁵

D’Arrigo’s monster is an image of death, it is the death itself, the dehumanization caused by World War II, the end of civilization and of pre-war values. It embodies the fear and confusion that precede the ruin of the World. It is the symbol of the crisis of civilization.¹⁶ As such, its appearance announces to the people of the strait that an irreversible transformation is about to come. In D’Arrigo’s thought, the War marked the end of the world of tradition and the start of the industrial civilization, of the power of the market that eliminates the values coming from popular cultures. The killer whale is the herald of this transformation.

Unlike Moby Dick, D’Arrigo’s Leviathan dies under the shots of a more powerful Leviathan, an English warship. But it is precisely in death that D’Arrigo’s monster reveals its annihilating power. The death of the killer whale doesn’t lead to any revelation, no restoration of the lost order; on the contrary, it opens the gates of emptiness, the whale’s corpse almost melts in the sea to become once again part of that “obscure, dreadful, mysterious ocean of a breast that gave birth to it”.¹⁷

By dying, it further reinforces the tyrannic dominion of the sea on the fishermen, who will once again and forever have to strive to gain their sustenance from the sea. In a new perspective, though: not with the traditional means of fishing, but with the dehumanized techniques of industry.

The body of the killer whale itself is subdued to the new lifestyle imposed by the industrial civilization, which has now reached also Cariddi and its people. The dead whale, indeed, is dissected and its body becomes

14 Ibid, 617. Missing an English edition of D’Arrigo’s novel, we translated the excerpt from Italian.

15 Ibid, 618.

16 Cf. Spila, Carlo: *Il mostro apocalittico in Horcynus Orca*, 231.

17 D’Arrigo, Stefano: *Horcynus Orca*, 1010.

a source not only of nourishment, but a true “factory”, from which, as in an industrial process, all sorts of products are extracted: oil, combs, daggers, arrows, shoes, forks, knives.¹⁸ The death of the killer whale causes a mutation in the community of Cariddi: from a village of fishermen they change into a society of consumers.

With no hope of going back to the original world of his fathers, ‘Njdria himself will follow the whale’s doom: he intentionally heads for the bullet that a sentinel shoots from an English warship anchored in the strait. The whole of D’Arrigo’s novel thus can be summarized as the unavoidability of death (and the sea), which is the beginning and end of everything, a limit the man can’t transcend without sinking in his own nothing.

Indeed, in his coffin–ship ‘Njdria’s body is delivered to the sea, an image of a tomb but also of a mother’s breast.

The call of Cthulhu: the mutation of evil

If Melville’s and D’Arrigo’s Leviathans draw from the Bible and mythology, in Lovecraft’s work the Leviathan undergoes a complete mutation.

The call of Cthulhu — written in 1926 and published on the *Weird Tales* magazine in 1928 — opens a new period in Lovecraft’s literary production, with the appearance of what will be the themes of his narrative until his death: “the building of a new mythology with the Great Old Ones as main characters”.¹⁹ Lovecraft makes the object of terror shift from the Earth to the space: no more witches or demons, but creatures “coming from the stars that wait for the moment when they will take possession of our universe”.²⁰

The monster is here truly the alien, a different being, separated from our World, and so ancient that its shape can’t be described via human words. The obsession for chaos, which is the true substance of Lovecraft’s monsters, will find a complete expression in the short stories that follow *The Call of Cthulhu*. Among those, overall *The Colour Out of Space* (1927), *The Dunwich Horror* (1929) and the short novel — a masterpiece of Lovecraft’s writing — *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936).

A complex mythology based on the mysterious *Necronomicon*²¹ — a cursed book containing the revelations that the fool Arab Abdul Alhazred

18 Ibid, 989.

19 Lippi, Giuseppe: *Introduzione in Lovecraft, Howard P., Tutti i racconti 1923–1926*, Milano, Italy: Mondadori, 2012, XIV (in Italian).

20 Ibid. About this see also the short story *The Shunned House* (1924) which can be seen as a manifesto.

21 A literary invention that will see a long list of followers in horror and sci-fi literature after Lovecraft.

received from the Great Old Ones themselves, together with the spells that can recall them from the far space — is a way for Lovecraft to unveil the darkness lying in myths and religions of mankind. In Lovecraft's vision, indeed, beliefs are nothing but a trace left by the Great Old Ones' culture when they dominated the Earth before the beginning of mankind; a few men got in touch with that old mark, and were affected by the influx of those beings, that still live in the depths of space, beyond the stars. However, not all of the Great Old Ones left the Earth: some of them lie trapped under the ice of the Antarctic, while others have sunk in the depths of the Earth, together with their huge cities.

Lovecraft's monster, Cthulhu, is one of them: an anthropomorphous creature several kilometres high, with the head of an octopus and thin membranous wings.²² It is an ancient and very powerful being that came to Earth from the stars in the distant past, long before the first man traced his footprints on the Earth. It lies absorbed in a self-produced hibernation in the monolithic half-submerged city of R'lyeh,²³ in the Southern Pacific Ocean, a catacomb city where all of the Great Old Ones lie in a state of apparent death. Cthulhu is the minister of this offspring that came from the stars and it waits to be awoken in order to summon up the Great Old Ones and start their kingdom on Earth.

Even if dead, they have preserved their ability of dreaming, and it is precisely through the dreams that they communicate their secrets to the men. In this short story, Cthulhu is accidentally awoken by a group of unlucky sailors who unintentionally arrive at the bastions of R'lyeh; the city, indeed, has emerged from the abyss due to a cataclysm, and in that same abyss Cthulhu will fall down again together with the dark city at the end of the tale. "Who knows the end? — the protagonist asks himself — What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise".²⁴ Cthulhu exists and will keep on waiting in its stony prison.

This Leviathan coming from space — as well as the whole pantheon of monstrosities imagined by Lovecraft — is basically the representation of the social evil that is widespread in the Western civilization, and in particular in Northern America; there, the materialism and the loss of cultural integrity due to a multiethnic society have caused an irreparable decadence. For the author, the mankind will end up behaving as the Great Old Ones: "free and

22 The name of the creature probably comes from that of the Egyptian divinity *Chnumu*.

23 A symbolic representation of New York City, which Lovecraft considered as a place of perdition, as testified by other short stories of that same period: *He* (1925), *Horror at Red Hook* (1927), *The Mound* (1929).

24 Lovecraft, Howard P.: *The Call of Cthulhu*, in Lovecraft, Howard P.: *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, London, UK: Penguin Books, 2002, 169.

wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and revelling in joy”.²⁵

Lovecraft’s Great Old Ones, once again, represent social evil: the oppressive powers that act in modern society and threaten to bring it to madness. In Lovecraft’s view, the man is powerless in front of the powers of the vast emptiness above him, and he can either embrace the nature of the Great Old Ones and, in his words, “go mad from the revelation, or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age”.²⁶

Conclusion

To conclude, our three authors use the Leviathan to discuss the problem of evil in human history from an eschatological point of view. In contrast with Christian eschatology, where in Revelation we read that the sea (symbol of evil forces) will disappear (Ap 21,1), here the sea remains, and submerges the human affairs, forcing the man to live with this unavoidable presence. The fight against the Leviathan — a hopeless fight — is the centre of these authors’ narrative; through it, they present an eschatology without eschaton, completely immanent, where the possibility of the End of history is postponed and dispelled in an eternal return.

They assert that the man has to give up the hope of saving the history or defeating the chaos: any long time project is useless, and the man can only try to deal with the the incidental as he meets it.

The monster, the last enemy that separates the corrupted world from redemption, can’t be beaten from within history without causing the disappearance of the man, who is himself an image of the monster that he fights — indeed, Ahab, ‘Ndrja and Lovecraft’s mankind are all deeply marked by the scar of the original sin.²⁷

This is the key message of the three works: since the monster hides not only in the abyss of the sea but also, and overall, within the depths of the human heart, the man who tenaciously tries to defeat this monster with his own forces will certainly fail. Who can defeat the Leviathan, then, if no power on Earth can resist it (Cf., Jb 41:24)?

An impressive illumination of the 12th century, extracted from the *Hor-tus deliciarum* by abbess Herrad of Landsberg, shows God the Father in the

25 Ibid, 155.

26 Ibid, 139.

27 Interestingly, the identification of the Leviathan with the man was also seen under a positive perspective in Thomas Hobbes’ works. In his work “Leviathan or The Matter, Form and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil” (1651), the Biblical monster becomes a polymorphic being, a symbol of the State: the union of God, man, animal and machine.

act of fishing the Leviathan by using the human–divine nature of Jesus on the cross as a bait. This Medieval interpretation of the Leviathan — which dates back to Saint Jerome, Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Leo the Great and Gregory of Nyssa — is dominated by “the theological assumption that the devil, due to Christ’s crucifixion, lost the battle for mankind; deceived by the humble appearance of the God hidden in human flesh, the devil tries to swallow the crucified man–God, and got caught by the cross as if it were a hook”.²⁸ God alone, indeed, can eventually subdue the powers of evil. This element was already present in the conclusion of the book of Job. God presents himself as the one who, alone, can rule the great monsters, the *Tannin* — Leviathan and Behemoth — who were created by God himself (Cf. Jb 38–42).

But the illumination from the *Hortus deliciarum*, the victory of Christ over the monster of the sea, opens to another perspective on the victory of good on evil, which is directly related to the life of the men in the *post-Christum* time. The Christian, indeed, can live as a redeemed in the present time, he doesn’t need to wait until the end of times to see the defeat of evil. In Jesus Christ, evil has already been defeated and the emptiness is redeemed itself.

In the *kenosis* of the Son of God, indeed, the emptiness doesn’t threaten to swallow the history of mankind anymore: paradoxically, it becomes the space where love and good can be achieved. This is the fascinating contradiction of Christianity.

Summary

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The modern faith in progress has always combined with some form of criticism. Artists and writers have often employed their visionary skills to offer a large number of critical reflections about the modern project. Through the Biblical Leviathan - an incarnation of primaevial chaos and at the same time the apocalyptic monster who fights against God and his angels at the end of time — Herman Melville, Stefano D’Arrigo and Howard P. Lovecraft assert the impossibility, for the man, to save himself with his own strength. As a symbol of the beginning and end of history, the Leviathan represents the threat of emptiness, both in the sense of a lack of meaning for history and the possibility of a new creation ex

28 Schmitt, Carl: *Scritti su Thomas Hobbes*, Milano, Italy: Giuffrè, 1986, 68 (in Italian).

nihilo. Urged by the problems of their times, these three contemporary authors summon the Leviathan as the possibility to create a new order in the World: an attempt whose only possible outcome is a failure.

KEYWORDS: Leviathan, monster of chaos, sea, death, emptiness, evil, creation, éschaton, meaning of history