

“I Saw a Dragon!”

Envisioning Hyperobjects: culture, collaboration and madness in the Anthropocene

.Of Mountains, Dragons and Human perception

When I was a kid I used to go to the Alps a lot with my family. I always thought that having a childhood close to the wilderness is what brought me to grow up with an early and vague sense of abstract mysticism; not religiousness in the most immediate sense, but rather a sense of limitedness in front of the immensity of nature. Of course as a child everything looks bigger, more mysterious and interesting, and mountains are indeed the symbol of a scale of dimension and temporality that goes beyond the human one.

Me and my brother were always playing in the woods with a few friends, imagining stories very much in the style of roleplaying (imps living in the trees, monsters coming out at night, things like these...) and the reason why I'm talking about this is a story that stuck in my mind only to come out many years later as one of our friends one day came up with a philosophically interesting storyline, perhaps borrowed from some fantasy novel: what if the Montseuc (the mountain we were on) was only a part of a huge creature, a sleeping turtle as big as the whole valley, and we were playing on it unaware of its extremely slow life, perhaps as ancient as the world, careful not to wake it up with our playful activities.

We played with these ideas for a couple days and then forgot about it, as kids do, but it resurfaced in my mind recently reading Jack Kerouac quoting ancient Chinese poetry and Timothy Morton's theory of the 'Hyperobjects', essential to this essay. Kerouac's 'The Dharma Bums' and 'Desolation Angels', perhaps his most Buddhist pieces of writing coming chronologically after the most famous 'On the Road', are a lot about mountaineering and self-awareness especially thanks to the influence of Gary Snyder, early member of the beat generation and one of the most serious Western Zen scholars.

Snyder has the merit of having translated into English essential pieces of ancient Chinese poetry; especially important for the beats were the teachings of Hanshan, literally translated into English as "Cold Mountain", a legendary hermit monk who lived in the 9th century. In the beginning of 'Desolation Angels' Jack Kerouac lives in a hut on Desolation Peak, Washington, and tells a story very similar to that of my childhood friend: he says that Hanshan attributes the birth of the idea of dragons to mountains and the inability to really envision them. Men are too small to perceive them, but the rocky surface of mountains is the skin of dragons, the trees are their hair and the cliffs their spikes and teeth: they move through eternity at a pace that is unperceivable to our limited nature, slowly crossing geological eras. We move on them, unaware of their eternal life, calling them mountains.



IMG 1:

Hanshan and his sidekick Shide portrayed in a Japanese illustration by Sesshu Toyo, Muromachi era, 15th century.

Doing research I did not encounter the exact reference Kerouac refers to in Hanshan's production, and it's very likely that he invented this as a metaphor and attributed it to a higher "authority", after all Kerouac himself teaches the importance of freedom and fictional elements in literature and culture-making, but it is also obvious that such tale is grounded in ancient Buddhist philosophy such as that of Hanshan. Moreover the word "dragon" appears in many Chinese mountains' names, and of course both Snyder and Kerouac were aware of this.

So what is the issue with dragons and mountains? The very idea of dragon is rooted in the difficulty to imagine, or, better, to envision, something that goes beyond the human scale. There's all kinds of dragons and they carry very basic similarities inbetween them: they are partially snake-formed, and from there they can take all kinds of forms and powers. Especially in the Chinese culture they are similar to gods and appear to be linked to the element of water, people prayed to them in order to end droughts, be sheltered from the destructive and unpredictable powers of nature such as, especially, floods.

In Western (Christian) culture Dragons exasperate the demonic features of snakes; they are maleficent and threatening creatures rather than a savior supernatural power, the king of monsters and a menace to mankind. It is the serpentine and amphibious creature that is killed by Saint George, the most prominent warrior-saint within Christian tradition: once a threat to the kingdom of Silena, nowadays Libya, to which the king needs to sacrifice his own daughter, is killed by the Saint thanks to the power received by Christ.¹ The human God grants to its herald the power to submit nature and kill it, saving its daughter and showing to the people of its kingdom how mankind can save itself from the threats of the natural order through violence, dominating it and putting itself at the center of the world.

A rather arrogant and anthropocentric view of the world, if compared with the Chinese one and the Buddhist poetry of Hanshan, a man who called himself Cold Mountain and wrote verses such as:

1 Jacopo da Varazze (13th century), *Legenda Aurea*, Turin: Einaudi, 1995

Cold Mountain is a House
Without beams or walls.
The six doors left and right are open
The hall is blue sky.
The rooms all vacant and vague
The east wall beats on the west wall
At the center nothing²

Such view, that sees mankind as an organic part of Nature rather than its violent dominator, is at the basis of an ecologic consciousness fundamental to retrieve in order to counter the effects of Anthropocene. Our inability to perceive such “dragons” pushed humanity and its last-born tool – Capitalism – to damage them and cause their retaliation under the form of floods, typhoons, desertification and natural disasters that go by the unprecise yet useful umbrella term of “climate change”, precisely the occurrence that caused the once banal and everyday question of “what’s the weather like?” into a problematic one that immediately and implicitly summons thousands of potential links and issues.

British scholar Timothy Morton in his book ‘Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World’, one of the most important contributions to ecological theory of the last decade, talks precisely about this: a hyperobject is something that escapes the grasp of human understanding because of its unfathomable size, yet precisely because of this limitless characteristic it permeates all aspects of our existence.



IMG 2:

Raffaello Sanzio
San Giorgio e il drago
oil on canvas, 28,5 x 21,5 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., USA

2 Hanshan (9th century), *Cold Mountain Poems*, transl. Gary Snyder in *The Gary Snyder Reader*, Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1999. p. 525

.How can one think about something that is Hyper-

Very much as the dragons described in the previous paragraph, hyperobjects are unperceivable for any human on its own: we might be aware of their existence, or we might not; we might see a tooth and call it the Matterhorn; we might deny their very action despite seeing it every day, blaming it on other forces. We can see only parts and bits of them, for as we try to grasp their essence they withdraw, escaping our understanding while at the same time always being present and influencing our lives.³

Morton gets to the definition of hyperobjects departing from the Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), a concept developed among others especially by Graham Harman that expands Heidegger's theories to get to a philosophy rejecting anthropocentrism focusing on "objects", their existence and strongly rejecting correlationism – i.e. the idea that philosophy can only talk about what correlates with human thinking – thus analyzing the world and its object only in relation to the human mind and thought. Hyperobjects do exactly this: with their vastness, they render humans as tiny, limited and hardly relevant. A necessary exercise in humility, much more similar to Hanshan's retreat and fusion with his cold mountain than to St. George's arrogant heroism in killing the Dragon.

Morton's preoccupations relative to such entities, emphasized by his highly personal and rather obscure, non-academic, style of writing are legitimate and comprehensible, especially approaching the problem of global warming, perhaps our time's most debated hyperobject. Despite the term by itself being so broad that several critical voices have been raised against it arguing that almost any super-subjective entity could be ascribed to the category, Morton is fairly precise in summarizing its qualities: "Hyperobjects [...] are viscous, which means that they "stick" to beings that are involved with them. They are nonlocal; in other words, any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to. In particular, some very large hyperobjects, such as planets, have genuinely Gaussian temporality: they generate spacetime vortices, due to general relativity. Hyperobjects occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in their being invisible to humans for stretches of time. And they exhibit their effects interobjectively; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects. The hyperobject is not a function of our knowledge: it's hyper relative to worms, lemons, and ultraviolet rays, as well as humans."⁴

In these regards, it is evident how the aforementioned dragons could very much be a different, more ancestral and abstract, metaphor for what was rediscovered under a new light by Morton and other thinkers related to OOO and Speculative Realism. Hyperobjects, very much as dragons, are impossible to perceive and define with our own strength because they belong to a very different realm compared to humans in terms of vastness and temporality. Because of this we need help from the outside; even a supercomputer can't understand global warming, as it is a machine and it can only read it, but it can provide information about it in order for humans to try to gain access to it.

³ See Timothy Morton, *A Quake in Being*, introduction to *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 10

Despite this, we need to read hyperobjects from a human perspective in order to give sense to the term, as getting to a minimal scale virtually anything could gain the status of Hyperobject, as Ursula K. Heise argues.⁵ This is evident from the point of view of analytical philosophers such as Peter Van Inwagen who, in opening his book 'Material Beings', relies on the words by physicist Richard Feynman: "consider an object... what is an object? Philosophers are always saying, 'Well, just take a chair for example.' The moment they say that, you know they do not know what they are talking about any more. What is a chair? Well, a chair is a certain thing over there... Certain? How certain? The atoms are evaporating from it from time to time - not many atoms, but a few - dirt falls on it and gets dissolved in the paint; so to define a chair precisely, to say exactly which atoms are chair, and which atoms are air, or which atoms are dirt, or which atoms are paint that belongs to the chair is impossible. So the mass of a chair can be defined only approximately. In the same way, to define the mass of a single object is impossible, because there are not any single, left-alone objects in the world."⁶

Morton with his endeavors against correlationism will most likely disagree with this, but the most direct way to solve this "Kosuthian"⁷ issue is to state that, in order to continue in our inquiry, we need to narrow down our focus on hyperobjects which are *hyper-* relating to a human scale. Dragons have hyperobjects of their own, which act on a scale that is beyond their own status, which is already hyper- for humans. To resort to an example used several times throughout Morton's book we can think of the half-life of Plutonium-239, which is of 24.100 years: a timespan hardly imaginable from a human perspective, as if we go back in History of Art, we find the first cave paintings in the Chauvet Cave at about 32.000 years old. Some of the effects of global warming are able to survive more than 100.000 years, a time scale belonging to dragons rather than humans.



IMG 3:

The mural paintings on the cave of Laja Alta, not far from Cádiz, in southwest Spain, are thought to be the oldest ones featuring sailing boats, dating back to more than 6000 years ago according to recent radiocarbon tests. One of such ships also appears in the Scandinavian Institute of Culture's coat of arms.

5 Ursula K. Heise in University of Chicago's Critical Inquiry, 04/06/2014

6 Richard Feynman in Peter Van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. vi

7 See Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, artwork from 1965

Philosophy can tackle conceptual problems acting on levels science can't reach, and the other way around, complementing each other rather than adopting a divisive approach such as the provocation raised by Feynman. Carlo Rovelli, one of the most influential theoretical physicists of our time, wishes that "philosophers who are interested in the scientific conceptions of the world would not confine themselves to commenting [on] and polishing the present fragmentary physical theories, but would take the risk of trying to look ahead."⁸

This essay is suggesting that one way, perhaps the only one, for humans to achieve a satisfactory gaze on hyperobject, is precisely to be able to "look ahead" as wished by Rovelli, or more precisely to collaborate in order to achieve a point of view allowing us to see them from above, as a Giraffe or a Brontosaurus. Morton argues that one of the faculties that allow Hyperobjects to elude our attempts to grasp them, as a squid vanishing in its ink cloud, is their non-locality; a feature that is intrinsically contradictory and allows them to be present and absent at the same time. They involve such gigantic scales of time and space that render them absent from time and space, and at the same time present in any point of our "here and now".

At this level the local becomes a mere abstraction, yet it is the only thing humans can really experience: "The wet stuff falling on my head in Northern California in early 2011 could have been an effect of the tsunami churning up La Niña in the Pacific and dumping it on the land, La Niña being a manifestation of global warming in any case. The Japan earthquake of 2011 was also plausibly a manifestation of global warming, since changing temperatures in the ocean change the pressure on the Earth's crust. Heavy rain is simply a local manifestation of some vast entity that I'm unable directly to see. Thus, the right-wing talking heads are quite correct to be afraid of global warming. It means something ontologically scary about our world. It means that not only is everything interconnected—a fatal blow to individualists everywhere—but also that the "I refute it thus" stone-kicking that we've come to expect from reactionaries no longer works. 43 The 'Well it's snowing in Boise, Idaho, so global warming is a crock' meme is a desperate attempt to put this ontological genie back in its bottle."⁹

It becomes then necessary to create a broad network, a body of local knowledges that stretches around the globe and allows us to perceive the limits of a titanic object such as climate change, cutting through the illusionary veil represented by the abstractness of local manifestations of our hyperobject. Collaboration in this case can be the tool to go beyond our current level of knowledge and, if not grasping it completely and understand global warming, at least get to see its boundaries in a slightly clearer way.

8 Carlo Rovelli, *Halfway through the Woods*, p. 182. Quoted in Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018

9 T. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 43

.Seeing the dragon underneath its disguise (without losing our mind)

I believe it is important to have this conversation via ether,¹⁰ a modality that breaks the locality boundary and allows us to expand the moment through the internet, highlighting peculiarities of the two places we are connecting and showing how these two points in a global network can join forces and basic things that make them similar: here in Venice (in many tourists' words everyday called *the sinking city*) we had several major floods during the last few months, the images of which circulated around the world – hopefully helping to spread consciousness of the disasters our Lagoon suffered during the last decades, and not only of the global threat of climate change. At the same time, only a few hundred meters from where my image is now showing, several buildings are sinking at a slow but steady rate especially around Oslo's central station, as shown by the European Space Agency's data in 2016, a severe rate similar to that of San Francisco's Millennium Tower skyscraper. Curiously enough, the best way to envision such slow chthonic trends is not to monitor them from very very close or from the underground, but, rather counterintuitively, we need to get really far, observing them from space.



IMG 4:

This image was realized by ESA with their Sentinel-1 satellites in a timeframe going from 26 December 2014 to 28 October 2016. Oslo's station is sinking at a rate of 10-15 mm in the satellite's line of sight, which projected on a ground-level perspective translates to roughly 12-18 mm per year. By contrast Venice, famous worldwide as the "sinking city", has an average sinking rate of about 2mm per year.

It is clear that, as suggested by the Director earlier, we do not need many of the new luxury buildings on Oslo's bay area, even though many of them – most importantly the new Opera house – have foundations that limit their proneness to sinking, even though they do not alleviate the pressure on the precarious reclaimed land they stand above. Just as we do not need the huge cruise ships crossing Venice, eroding the ecosystem by causing abnormal increases in violence and height of waves, other than the faster pace of water in entering and leaving the Lagoon through canals realized for such ships which further aggravated the floodings. At the same time Stockholm's archipelago (also, if you will, under the cultural "umbrella" represented by the SIOC) is suffering from the same problem of erosion because of cruiseships passing through the channel called *Furusundsleden*.¹¹ There, as in Venice, a very simple and immediate, even

¹⁰ This conference was given via Skype on January 6th 2020 between Venice and the sioc's floating HQ: a sailing boat harbored in Oslo's neighborhood of Aker Brygge.

¹¹ Lars Granath, *Erosionsskador I Furusundsleden 2000-2013*, quoted in Karin Almlöf, *The Holy Timetable, in Greening Maritime Transport*, 15/03/2016

though not quite radical, solution would be to impose speed limits suited to the size of such ships,¹² yet we struggle to implement even such palliative solutions.

I am not saying that cruise ships, or even subsidence, are by themselves hyperobjects; I am rather pointing at how such limited manifestations do allow us to gaze upon a small portion, extremely local, of such titanic entities: when we are looking at the breathtaking image of a cruise ship overshadowing the churches of San Marco and San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, and later on during the day we need to put on our boots to prepare for the coming unnaturally high flood, we are relating ourselves to at least two Hyperobjects crossing their paths in the point we experience as the “here and now”: namely climate change (in the form of rising sea level) and capitalism, intersecting with the bigger hyperobject represented by our biosphere.



IMG 4:

Barena Bianca, an art collective based in Venice I am part of, developed a campaign of mobile manifestos to circulate during the last Biennale's period. Each poster reported data related to the lagoon's ecological and sociological disaster during the last century. The poster in this particular photo, shot at Punta della Dogana while a Costa cruiseship was passing, shows how the lagoon's salt marshes capacity to absorb CO₂ dropped by five sixths due to erosion.

Obviously none of us can grasp on its own the immense consequences of the mindless and uncontrollable actions that such dragons can set in motion, but what is necessary is that at least some degree of understanding is developed if we – and I am saying “we” as “humanity”, not as “me and the people now sitting in sioc's sailing boat” or “the people who will read the essay” – seek to act against such effects. It is not the time nor the place to analyze the actions of the hyperobject (or dragon) named “Capitalism” and their consequences – it is not a swamp I want to sink in just now – but now that the hyperobject “Climate Change” is getting more and more known and visible, I hope that widespread consciousness and collective action can be achieved in the immediate future.

The point of connecting several local manifestations is to obtain a view as broad as possible on a hyperobject in order to frame it and challenge it. For what is out of reach for an individual or a precisely defined community (such as, for example, the 52.000 residents of Venice) can be reachable only through shared, constant and serious struggle, for two reasons: the first is simply the necessity to go beyond the

12 Gianmarco Scarpa, Luca Zaggia, Giorgia Manfè et al., *The effects of ship wakes in the Venice Lagoon and implications for the sustainability of shipping in coastal waters*. In Scientific Reports 9, 12/12/2019

aforementioned abstractness; the second is that gaining an understanding of such gigantic entities can drive a human being crazy, and it becomes necessary to share the burden of such consciousness with a collectivity.

From the year 2000 onwards the term “Anthropocene” has been increasingly popular, spreading also in mainstream media and everyday debates around climate issues. First used by Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, the word expresses the idea that the era we live in is the one in which anthropic activities reached a level that fundamentally acts on the world changing the biosphere, influencing nature itself.¹³ This era starts in 1784 with the establishment of James Watt’s steam engine, that started depositing carbon in the Earth’s crust with its ability to be – as the patent itself states – an all-purpose machine at the core of industrial revolution.

Morton builds on this by saying that the advent of Anthropocene was the beginning of “the end of the world” which, very much as the nuclear bomb, perhaps the most powerful symbol of mankind’s arrogance in manipulating nature, does not simply end with a blast; it unfolds its mortiferous radioactive powers through time and space, invisible and intangible to the human naked eye until a late stage of degeneration. This is why Morton states that the ecologist call for action because the world will end “unless we act now” is not effective: it fails to acknowledge that the end of the world has already occurred and we are inhabiting it every day. Here we see the reason behind the author’s choice to start the first part of his book – ‘What are Hyperobjects?’ – by quoting the first line of Percy Shelley’s Hymn to Intellectual Beauty: “The awful shadow of some unseen Power [/ Floats though unseen among us; visiting / this various world with as incostant wing / As summer winds that creep from flower to flower]”.

Fighting, or, rather, living under the threat of such unseen and chaotic powers is becoming everyday more the cause of anxiety, fear and neurological breakdowns which are becoming the main threat to human health nowadays, as notes Byung-Chul Han in opening his recent essay ‘The Burnout Society’: “Neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century.”¹⁴

The age of late and, more importantly, finally self-aware Anthropocene seems also to be the age of widespread mental suffering, as for example rising suicide rates especially among youth during the last 20 years sadly testify.¹⁵ In her recent seminal book ‘Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene’ Donna Haraway proposes to venture beyond the definition of Anthropocene, precisely too focused on the human dimension of our time, and gets to the definition “Chthulucene”, borrowing the name from the Californian spider *Pimoida Cthulhu* who lives most of her life underground, therefore the name calling for the word chthonic, in turn derived from the ancient Greek chthonios (χθόνιος), “subterranean” or, more precisely, “of, in, or under the earth or the sea.”¹⁶

13 Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, ‘*The Anthropocene*’, in Global Change Newsletter 41.1 (2000), pp. 17-18

14 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, transl. Erik Butler, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015, p. 1

15 There’s a lot of studies on the matter, both on a local and global level, a good summary on mass media can be found in William Wan, ‘*Teen suicides are increasing at an alarming pace, outstripping all other age groups, a new report says*’, in The Washington Post, 17/10/2019

16 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 53

Similarly to Morton and the thinkers of speculative realism, Haraway sees the narratives implicit in the terms “Anthropocene” and “Capitalocene” as far too rooted in a human perspective, while her proposed term brings it to a different scale: in the end mankind produced some of the effects that might lead to its own extinction, but it is not the only actor – and more importantly not the only affected being – in this drama. Haraway’s attempt is to produce a narrative which is not completely disrupted, just slightly “reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story.”¹⁷ Mankind emerges as not the superstar in this act, but as one of many profoundly chthonic beings, which happened to grow to its current height thanks to the support provided from its planet: the giants on whose shoulders we are standing in the metaphor coined by Bernard of Chartres in the 12th century¹⁸ might be the great thinkers of the past, but at the same time such giants were walking on the back of a dragon, of a planet, of Gaia and its ecosystem.

The term Chthulucene, obviously summons a large reference especially for mass popular culture: that of the infamous monster-deity forged by writer H. P. Lovecraft in the early 20th Century. Haraway refuses, and rightfully so, the reference of such “mysogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu”,¹⁹ thus the slight change in positioning the h. Lovecraft was a deeply problematic man, a misogynist and with open nazi sympathies (he famously wrote about Adolf Hitler “I know he’s a clown, but God I like the boy!”²⁰). I will not focus on Lovecraft’s human figure now, but I want to point out a few aspects that might render his literary version of Cthulhu relevant in our age: its invisibility, dormancy and his ability to condemn to madness those who are able to see or, rather, envision him. What allowed Lovecraft’s writings to survive the test of time is arguably not his nazism, which somehow permeates bits of his tales, but his sense of horror for the unknown which lies deep into human nature and has quite a few similarities with the nature of hyperobjects and of our contemporary time. As the author states in the opening to his most theoretical writing: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”²¹

Cthulhu in the Lovecraftian imaginary acts as a purely malevolent incomprehensible force whose physical existence lies hibernated in a drowned city called R’Lyeh, in the Southern Pacific Ocean – the very symbol of inaccessibility on planet Earth. His very existence is the source for a constant, subconscious state of anxiety for mankind, and his dreams travel the depths of sea and earth invading the psyche of men around the world. A number of cultists embrace the cult of Cthulhu, worshipping idols of his physical appearance until fainting under epileptical seizures envisioning the monster: a giant hundreds of meters tall, bearing monstrous attributes such as a body covered in scales, tiny wings on his back, claws and an octopus-like face – unsurprisingly, he is also described as a “squid-dragon”. In the first novel that mentions him, “The Call of Cthulhu”, Lovecraft talks about a Norwegian sailor who loses his mind after being in contact with the demon, and at his return can only speak nonsensical bits about his experience. The rest of his crew dies

17 *Ivi*, p. 55

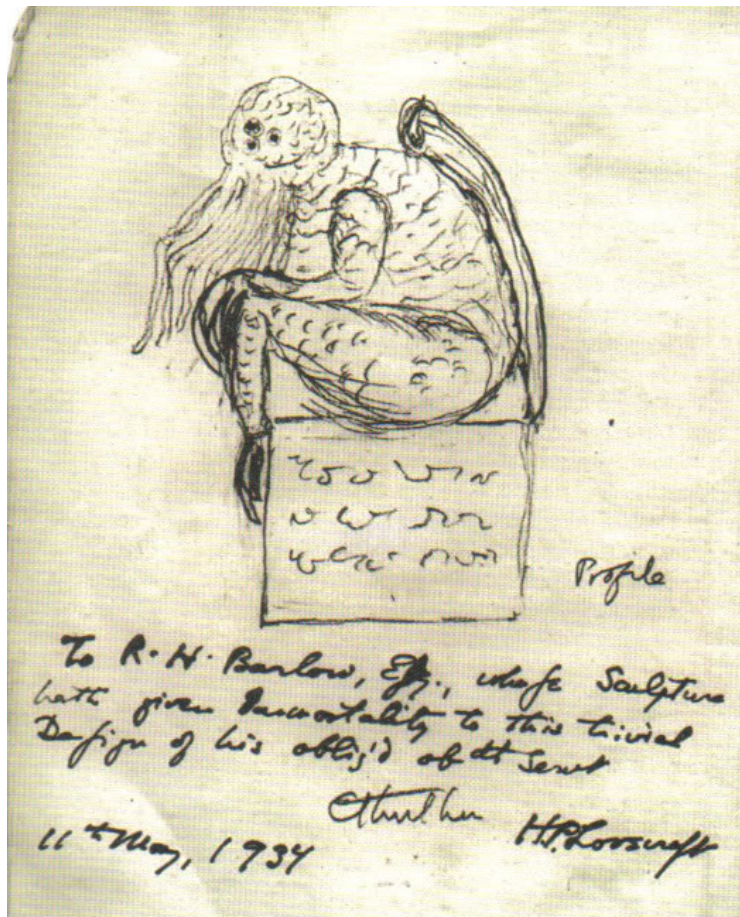
18 “Dicebat Bernardus Carnotensis nos esse quasi nanos gigantius humeris insidentes, ut possimus plura eis et remotiora videre, non utique proprii visus acumine, aut eminentia corporis, sed quia in altum subvehimur et extollimur magnitudine gigantea.” John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2013, vol III, v. 4

19 D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, p. 101

20 H. P. Lovecraft to J. Vernon Shea, 8 Nov 1933, in *Letters to J. Vernon Shea*, ed. Carl F. Stauch and Lee McBride White, New York: Hippocampus Press, 2016, p. 203

21 H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, first published in *The Reclused*, n. 1 (1927), pp. 23-59. It is now entirely accessible on <http://www.hplovecraft.com>

immediately and his second in command becomes a laughing maniac after directly looking at Cthulhu, the captain survives because of being able not to gaze directly at the demon – much like Orpheus – and is able to share memories about non-euclidean geometries, unspeakable horrors and other elements of which the human mind cannot make sense. After his return to Oslo he puts all his energies in writing down his memories, which are unspeakable but can be formalized in writing. After that, the sailor dies for inexplicable causes, and the wife only says that “the events at sea broke him”.²²



IMG 5:

An original sketch by H. P. Lovecraft depicting the statue of Cthulhu, laying hybernated at the bottom of the Southern Pacific ocean. The sketch was mailed to his friend Robert Barlow, a poet and anthropologist expert in early Mexican civilizations, among others professor to William S. Burroughs, who later took care of Lovecraft's literary estate before committing suicide in 1951. Barlow took 26 pills of Seconal, leaving pinned upon his door in Mayan pictographs "Do not disturb me. I want to sleep a long time."

text: "To R.H. Barlow, Esq., whose sculpture hath given immortality to this trivial design of his obliged obedient servant, H.P. Lovecraft"

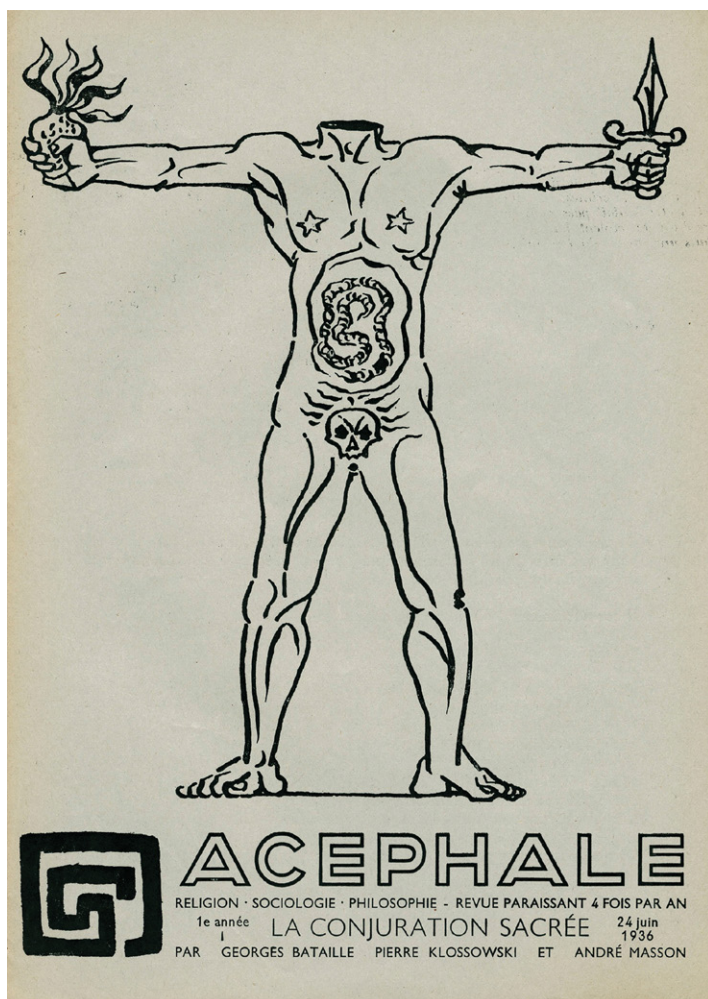
These elements are part of the sensation of powerlessness mankind feels towards gigantic elements such as the hyperobjects. Just as the wicked dreams of the demon travel through the sea and the earth inducing fear and anxiety in the whole mankind and condemning some to pure madness, the mere existence of things such as the global warming are always present and escape our attempts to fully frame it. Borrowing Lovecraft's metaphor, it would surely be enough for a human to understand it to lose its mind.

One can think about Friedrich Nietzsche – arguably the most famous example of madness within the field of philosophy – going insane on the 3rd January 1899 in Piazza Carignano, Turin, famously hugging a horse to protect him from its master's whip before fainting. When he woke up, he never retrieved his mind, and sent some last letters later on published with the fairly disrespectful title of "Letters of Insanity". In one of these, sent to the great professor Jacob Burckhardt while impersonating Dionysus, Nietzsche seems to state that he has transcended one of the limits that render a human as himself, the principle of subjectivity,

²² H. P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*, first published in *Weird Tales* vol. 11 n. 2 (Feb. 1928), pp. 159-178. Accessible on the internet at <http://www.hplovecraft.com>

declaring that “this autumn I was, clad as lightly as possible, present twice at my funeral, first as Count Robilant (no, that is my son, insofar as I am Carlo Alberto, down below) but I was myself Antonelli.”, he is saying that he witnessed his own death, under the form of aristocrats members of the Savoia family (then the Royal family of Italy) for his essence was the same as that of Carlo Alberto. This was intended as a “joke” just after stating, more explicitly, that “I am fundamentally every name in History.”²³

This letter, written only three days after the breakdown, seems to testify something very different from the widespread and superficial narrative that sees Nietzsche as a fool who lost his mind due to syphilis or brain cancer: an overly simplistic interpretation for any serious scholar, yet Nietzsche’s madness remains today a quite obscure and almost taboo topic. A particularly interesting analysis among the many attempted is a minor, brief and highly cryptic writing by Georges Bataille, perhaps precisely for its obscure style quite close to Nietzsche’s letters, that makes us wonder if the French philosopher also ventured on the edges of Nietzsche’s abyss in his quest to understand its thought: *La folie de Nietzsche*, first published exactly fifty years after the happenings of Piazza Carignano on Acéphale, a public review founded by Bataille and others which was also a powerful voice against Nietzsche’s appropriation by Nazism.



IMG 6:

Cover for the first issue of *Acéphale*, bearing an illustration by André Masson of the headless man, which later became a kind of logo for the public review and the secret society revolving around it through the years.

Masson, who created the drawing with Bataille sitting at his kitchen table and listening to *Don Juan*, later described the moment saying that: “I saw him immediately as headless... - But what to do with this cumbersome and doubting head? Irresistibly it finds itself displaced in the sex, which it masks with a ‘death’s head’... Automatically one hand (the left!) flourishes a dagger, while the other kneads a blazing heart (a heart that does not belong to the Crucified, but to our master Dionysus)... The pectorals starred according to whim (W)hat to make of the stomach? That empty container will be the receptacle for the Labyrinth that elsewhere had become our rallying sign. This drawing, made on the spot, under the eyes of Georges Bataille, had the good luck to please him. Absolutely.”²⁴

23 Friedrich Nietzsche, letter to Jacob Burckhardt written on the 6th January 1899, in *Nietzsche, Nihilism and the Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Jeffrey Metzger, London: Continuum Books, 2009, pp. 77-78

24 A. Masson in *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, ed. R. Lebel and I. Waldberg with M. Duchamp, London: Atlas Press, 1995, p. 12

Bataille begins the essay on the 50th anniversary of Nietzsche's breakdown with a poem commemorating this event as a tragedy, then going on with a sinister and almost Zarathustra-like prophecy in which the whole production of thought of mankind's history – quite a hyperobject by its own means – gets incarnated in a living being: a human who transcends its own limits, killing God himself in the same instant as he gaze upon him to become God itself, then leaps into nothingness and reincarnates in “a man, insignificant as any passerby, but with no possibility of rest whatsoever.” a being whose existence escapes the rules of logic and language, that leads to the conclusion that this “man incarnate” must also go mad.²⁵

In the following lines Bataille makes explicit that in his analysis the reason for Nietzsche's madness was indeed that he transcended the limits of his philosophy, eventually embodying it as a whole. An awakening similar to that of Siddharta rather than a mental breakdown, and a teaching for men to come.

We can accept that if Nietzsche went insane after staring for many years into the abyss; Bataille in turn perhaps ventured very close to the same Abyss that eventually gazed back in Nietzsche's soul as well, to come out with his brilliant and obscure theory. They, like other equally great thinkers, have done this to give to mankind precious pages of knowledge that are now incorporated in our culture, precisely the hyperobject that Bataille imagines to be embodied into this “man incarnate”, an allegorical creature close to what he theorizes to have happened to Nietzsche himself.

25 First published anonymously as *La Folie de Nietzsche* in *Acéphale* n. 5, June 1939, pp.1-8, later claimed by Georges Bataille. Translated into English by Annette Michelson as *Nietzsche's Madness* in October, vol. 36, “George Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing” (Spring, 1986), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, p. 42-45

.Conclusions: for a life in harmony with dragons

To conclude: what can allow humans to unveil the dragons, understanding them without on one hand causing their wrath and on the other losing their own minds? These beasts, seemingly absent of will but whose movements can twist our world in an instant. Bataille's suggestion is that Nietzsche's step was a crucial one: through his act of going "insane" – which as shown is not to be conceived a descent into madness but rather an ascent towards a philosophical revelation – is very similar to what he wrote to Georg Brandes on the 4th January 1899: "To my friend Georg! Once you discovered me it was no great feat to find me: the difficulty now is to lose me..."²⁶ His feat was to unveil a philosophical truth, now accessible to the humans of the future, the same who he entrusts with his heritage. Now it is not necessary anymore for anyone to lose its mind on the quest for such truth.

Lovecraft was probably unaware of Bataille's theories but had an intuitive sense of such madness-inducing abilities of unthinkable concepts, especially related to terror. In the incipit of his 'Call of Cthulhu' theorizes that "the most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age."²⁷ In these last words of the sentence the reactionary and retrograde nature of Lovecraft's position clearly emerges: in awe towards the terror of the unknown we must lose our mind or seek shelter by retreating into ignorance and tradition. Lovecraft's idea is similar to a horse who, frightened to remove its blinders for the first time and gazing at the world with its nearly-360-degrees sight, begs its master to put it back on. Quite typical of the traditionalist right one might argue.

The solution, thanks to men like Nietzsche who lost their mind in their quest for knowledge, is rather a third one as indeed our nature as humans is not to voyage that far and science provides us with too limited of a tool. The solution to this dreadful dilemma for mankind is not to retreat but rather to advance thanks to some other tools it built: culture, net-making and kin-making, thus going beyond our own nature and limits as humans.

Contemporary thinkers tackling issues related to postmodernity, the ecologic crisis and the late stage of capitalism are adopting a progressively less and less anthropocentric view of the world. In the end the great discovery made by Nietzsche is precisely the revaluation of all values: the consciousness that everything is relative and mankind can place itself where it desires in its own, man-made, system of values, without the broader order of things caring much about it. Twisting this around we can relate Nietzsche's discovery to the cultural shock produced by the Galilean studies that proved Ptolemaism wrong: the Earth – and therefore mankind – is not the center of the Universe, just a part of it. Without us the planet would survive, the universe as a whole wouldn't even care about the disappearance of the entire solar system.

26 Friedrich Nietzsche in Claudia Crawford, *To Nietzsche: Dionysus, I love you! Ariadne*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 95

27 H. P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*, accessible on the internet

It seems like the anti-anthropocentric drives of such discoveries are not fully digested yet.

The “tentacular thinking” suggested by Haraway consists precisely in this: if we desire to obtain a better understanding of such colossal entities, we need to abandon a point of view that is, in Nietzsche’s famous words “human, all too human”, becoming tentacular instead; finding allies and role models in the natural world.

One must think as a lichen, a spider, a wave of the sea, a forest or a salt marsh, a satellite, the ocean itself, the biosphere. We need to create connections between different points of such dragons, knowing its scales and seeing them in relation between each other in order to perceive them in their whole unthinkable extension.

Then and only then we will be able to envision the dragon, but not in order to fight it. There is no sense in fighting such a power. The point of seeing the dragon is, as Haraway would put it, to be able to make kin with it: understand its seemingly chaotic ways of acting in order to harmonize our existence to it.

Written inbetween Venice and Madrid during the turn of the decade,
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