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Reinterpreting Leviathan Today:
Monstrosity, Ecocriticism and Socio-Political Anxieties in Two Sea Narratives

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Abstract:

This article analyses two recent American rewritings of the Leviathan myth: Dan Simmons's *The Terror* (2007) and Tim Curran's *Leviathan* (2013). Belonging to a tradition that has fruitfully elaborated the sea monster paradigm, both novels respond to current concerns about the spiritual and ethical decline of Western culture, the perils of anarchy, the monetarization of relations, and the impending ecological disasters. Besides exploring the biblical and Hobbesian intertextuality of the two novels, the article investigates various meanings coalescing into the scary creatures represented by Simmons and Curran. Two other objects of scrutiny are the increasing spectacularization of horror in today's literature and the potentiality of nautical Gothic, a form of writing that connotes the sea as a perturbing generator of psycho-ontological distress.

Keywords: American Gothic, Dan Simmons, Leviathan, monstrosity, sea literature, Tim Curran

The Leviathan myth has been variously reworked in Western culture. A biblical symbol of God's power, it has acquired a variety of forms and meanings throughout the centuries, and continues to haunt the imagination of writers in the twenty-first century. This article analyses two recent American rewritings of the myth: Dan Simmons's *The Terror* (2007) and Tim Curran's *Leviathan* (2013). Both novels belong to a long-established tradition that has fruitfully elaborated the sea-monster paradigm. In addition to exploring the rich intertextuality of the two narratives, I will examine the transformation of marine monsters into opaque signifiers, which give flesh to a wide range of spiritual, socio-political, ethical and ecological anxieties. A second object of investigation is the fertility and metamorphic quality of the contemporary Gothic, which, as Catherine Spooner suggests, 'lurks in all sorts of unexpected corners'.¹ Besides producing blood-chilling effects that appeal to a sensation-craving audience, the two novels under scrutiny establish a significant relationship between the Gothic and the sea, which proves to be an effective vehicle for self-critical discourses on the flaws and contradictions of today's culture. By exploring this relationship, I reflect on the Gothic potentials of sea narratives which are largely neglected by criticism.²

In choosing the sea as a generator of horror, the novels of Simmons and Curran develop a literary tradition dating back to antiquity. ‘The ocean environment offers tremendous potential for monstrosity’, observes Emily Alder in describing ancient myths inspired by unfathomable sea depths.³ In ways similar to other marine monsters, Leviathan originates in folklore. Mentioned six times in the Bible, it also appears in the Apocrypha as one of the two monsters created by God. The symbolism of these occurrences is complex. Mostly conceived as a threat to order and stability, Leviathan is sometimes presented as an enemy to be crushed by God (in Isaiah and Psalm 74), sometimes as a frightful agent of the divinity and an instrument to punish human pride (in Jonah and Job). More confounding is its central role within a joyful image of Creation in Psalm 104:23: ‘O Lord, how manifold are thy works! [...] The earth is full of thy riches. *So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein*’ (emphasis original).

The creature’s elusive signification in the Bible is increased by the variety of its physical representations as great fish, crocodile, serpent, dragon, and whale. Still, these prototypes contain some recurrent traits that unify its complex symbolism. Always associated with underwater peril, the biblical Leviathan reveals the inherent fragility of the human condition in a world dominated by menacing predators and by an inscrutable God. Slightly different is, instead, the function it fulfils on an epistemological level. Bound up with theological questions concerning evil, human pride, and the authority of an awe-inspiring divinity,⁴ the monster plays a central role in mythical narratives intended to solve some theodicy problems and to make the cosmos more intelligible.

The biblical Leviathan has exerted a pervasive influence on Western culture, but its reinterpretation has significantly changed over the centuries. Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), for example, turns the monster into a metaphor for the commonwealth. Conceived as a response to the chaos of the English civil war, the Hobbesian treatise resorts to the Bible’s figurative language to theorize the need for a strong body politic, one in which the concentration of power in the sovereign’s hands is essential to counterbalancing the negativity of the natural state of war. By offering a disenchanting analysis of the brutish state of existence and the human wish for survival, Hobbes develops the Leviathan myth’s celebration of divine authority in new secular directions. A similar tendency emerges in later rewritings. American literature, in particular, exhibits a quenchless curiosity about Leviathan, which keeps reappearing in manifold shapes. Considering the maritime and religious background of the United States, a nation with an important history of navigation, fishing, whaling, and reports of disquieting sea creatures,⁵ it is not surprising that their literary culture is haunted by this biblical monster, whose horrific symbolism is deeply ingrained in the nation’s religious culture.

Religious imagery and sea-life experiences combine in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), which includes obsessive references to Leviathan. Melville’s complex novel, which blends realism with ancient lore, cetology with fantasy, draws on the biblical paradigm to dramatize widely circulating anxieties within mid-nineteenth-century American society. Enhanced by the whale’s appalling whiteness, the monstrosity of this Leviathan poses a threat to the nation’s ideals and reveals a disquieting ‘crisis in meaning, value, and representation’.⁶ A narrative of revenge, greed, satanic energy and racial tensions, *Moby-Dick* also exposes the

epistemological and existential disorientation of modern America, whose belief in progress is shaken by the resurgence of an uncanny monster that challenges order and signification.

In subsequent centuries, literary allusions to the myth multiply, as testified by H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928), Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and other texts that associate the monster with cosmic fear and the idea of a malignant world. Explicitly mentioned in many titles of contemporary novels, which delineate it in different ways,⁷ Leviathan is also evoked in a number of films about giant creatures that emerge from the abysmal sea to wreak havoc on Western civilization. The first American *Godzilla* film (1956), inspired by the 1954 Japanese original, is one of many popular films about destructive amphibian monsters. These literary and cinematic productions testify to the enduring fertility of the biblical myth which, by reappearing in ever-new horrific forms, comes to embody a wide range of concerns, including popular worries about nuclear experimentation and terror attacks.

What are the reasons for this intermedial proliferation? Why are today's readers and spectators so deeply lured by Leviathanesque creatures? And why is this myth so popular in American culture? Partly explained by postmodern tastes for horror-inspiring figures, which are widely circulated and hybridized, the obsession with Leviathan is illuminated by its links with two specific literary traditions: American Gothic and the sea-voyage narrative. Here, I explore the latter tradition as a macro-category including nautical Gothic, a form of writing that connotes the sea as a perturbing generator of psycho-ontological distress.

Let us start with American Gothic. In Andrew Smith's view, this tradition is distinguished by deep 'concerns about the past, identity, and notions of "realism"' which have taken different forms in a postmodern age dominated by 'moral relativism' and by 'a skepticism about the grand narratives [...] which once provided social and moral norms', while Eric Savoy objects to a reductive view of American Gothic as an embodiment of 'the dark nightmare that is the underside of "the American Dream"'.⁸ After observing that these two aspects – nightmare and dream – are closely interwoven, Savoy lists some strident contrasts characterizing 'the odd centrality of Gothic cultural production in the United States, where the past constantly inhabits the present, where progress generates an almost unbearable anxiety about its costs, and where an insatiable appetite for spectacles of grotesque violence is part of the texture of everyday reality'.⁹ Since the eighteenth century, the American Gothic tradition has indeed been characterized by a paradoxical combination of optimism and disquiet, faith in material advancement and irrational fears. These contradictions have become most evident in postmodern times when the nation's taste for pulp (and violent) fiction has burgeoned.

The above-mentioned views offer an explanation for the popularity of Leviathan on American soil. In addition to giving flesh to appetites for grotesque violence, Leviathan shadows forth what is repressed by dominant culture: its rise from unfathomable depths renders the anxieties of a society worried about the costs of progress and haunted by historical traumas which, by bearing upon the present, reveal new forms of violation that challenge the nation's faith in order and advancement. Also noteworthy is the American tendency to represent Leviathan in scientifically explicable, rather than supernatural, terms. Depicted as a gigantic whale by Melville, as a cryptid from a lost world by Curran, or a victim of nuclear experiments in the *Godzilla* films, the monster is generally given a credible form that makes its agency more uncanny.

In its most recent versions, moreover, the biblical myth substantiates what Steven Bruhm describes as two key features of contemporary Gothic culture: ‘the loss of wholeness’ and the craving for horror stories with minor variations.¹⁰ As analysis of Simmons’s and Curran’s novels will show, the fictionalization of water-predator attacks is not only a vehicle for socio-political critiques of American values. It also renders a post-Freudian experience of dissolution that helps to account for the nation’s compulsive consumption of the Gothic. Used in both novels as a figure of abjection, the monster constantly threatens to blur the boundaries between self and non-self, human and non-human. In so doing, it comes to represent the identity crisis felt by present-day individuals living in a world that has ‘taken away from us that which we once thought constituted us – a coherent psyche, a social order to which we can pledge allegiance in good faith, a sense of justice in the universe’.¹¹ Bruhm argues that this experience of loss boosts our appetite for repetitive horror stories such as the Leviathan fictions and films proliferating in our age, which make us relive traumas incessantly from a safe distance. Quite similar in their plots and paraphernalia, cultural products like *The Terror*, *Leviathan* and *Godzilla* create thrilling sensations in their consumers who, by watching the dissolution of others from a sheltered stance, feel alive in the face of death.

Doubtlessly inscribable within the American Gothic tradition, Leviathan is also a *sea creature* inextricably related to its marine environment and therefore associated with motion, freedom and adventure. For these reasons, its Gothic functionality needs to be viewed in light of the sea-voyage literary tradition, which has exerted a strong influence on Western cultures.

Since ancient times, the sea has generated stories of human action and courage. A space dominated by wild elements and inhabited by dangerous creatures, it offers countless opportunities for exploration and heroism; it also, and notably, reveals the vulnerability of the human condition in an environment controlled by primeval forces. Usually configured as a valorous transgression of boundaries in pagan cultures, the sea voyage acquires salvific meanings in biblical and Christian narratives, often symbolizing a life journey connected with a teleological design. With the advent of modernity, however, nautical metaphors becomes more complex. As famously theorized by Hans Blumenberg, Blaise Pascal’s motto ‘Vous êtes embarqué’ and its Nietzschean reinterpretation turn the sea voyage into a symbol of existential disorientation: such a change implies a new view of life as a condition of permanent embarkation on high seas, with no possibility of reaching a safe harbour.¹²

Further, the apparent solidity of a ship does not dispel the sense of vulnerability felt by seafarers. Despite continuous advancements in nautical technology, the sea literature of the last three centuries abounds in representations of the potential powerlessness and anguish of an embarked life. Such a tendency is evident in the travels fictionalized by Joseph Conrad, whose ships form perturbing stages on which unrepresentable forces take shape.¹³

As a floating heterotopic space,¹⁴ bringing voyagers into contact with different manifestations of the unspeakable – metaphysical, natural, social, and psychic – the ship fulfills an important function in many Gothic narratives. In *Moby-Dick*, for instance, the whaling ship guarantees no protection to the crew who, infected by the captain’s mania, are confronted by real and impalpable forms of monstrosity, including the appalling realization of living in a blank, heartless universe. The disquieting meanings coalescing in the vessel and the whale in Melville’s novel substantiate the idea that there is, in the Gothic tradition, a nautical subgenre

which represents the embarked situation as inherently contradictory: the sea is both free of constraints and oppressive, a ship is both a means of transport and a prison.

Nineteenth-century sea literature is ‘a crucial laboratory for that crisis that goes by the name of modernity’ and the psychological implications of the sea-voyage paradigm gain increasing prominence in successive centuries.¹⁵ Liquid, deep and obscure, the abysses inhabited by Leviathan and other monsters are increasingly viewed as projections of the unconscious – the source of all human passions, desires and phobias. The shift from typical Gothic spatiality strengthens, in many sea stories, the Blumenbergian idea of living an existence of perpetual struggle with no safe harbour in sight and no comforting teleology. Nautical Gothic conveys this disorienting sense of being permanently adrift alongside other paraphernalia that connote the sea as a generator of distress, including monstrous sea predators signalling a variety of spiritual and historical anxieties.

The above-mentioned novels by Simmons and Curran are interesting examples of nautical Gothic pivoting around Leviathanesque creatures, which rise from the water to prey upon human beings. Despite their differences, *The Terror* and *Leviathan* both repurpose marine tropes and draw largely upon biblical mythology. In both texts, moreover, the sea-voyage paradigm is skilfully deconstructed to suggest the frustration of human desires. Unable to navigate in pursuit of safety, glory or profit, the human protagonists are trapped in wild seascapes which become scary battlefields for survival. The sea monsters that dominate these scenes incarnate a number of anguished concerns by which present-day America is gripped, such as those raised by the dire consequences of capitalistic greed, mass consumerism, imperialism, and anthropogenic environmental degradation. In coping with these thorny problems, Simmons and Curran dramatize the loss of wholeness of their social system, whose ideological foundations are no longer shown to hold. Grim, sickening and unintelligible, the worldview conveyed by *The Terror* and *Leviathan* leaves little space for a process of rehumanization which, never conceived as a concrete possibility, is only intimated in brief narrative flashes. The main consolation offered to readers is that of living horror vicariously, of experiencing a jouissance which, while satisfying their hunger for the Gothic, makes them feel alive in the face of other people’s death. The agency of sea monsters, moreover, increases the readers’ anguished feelings as it combines the uncertainty inherent in all maritime adventures with the fears raised by predators emerging from unfathomable depths. For all these reasons, the novels under scrutiny are particularly effective to investigate the popularity of the Leviathan myth in American culture and the extent to which Gothic writers have recently reworked this myth to dramatize pressing worries.

A neo-Victorian novel that reimagines the Arctic expedition led by John Franklin and Francis Crozier in 1845-8, *The Terror* is a testimony to the Northern American ‘rush of Franklin tales’ and ‘the fresh “iconography of horror”’ produced by the 1984 discovery of new forensic evidence.¹⁶ By combining realism with fantasy, Simmons thematizes his personal solution to the tantalizing mystery of the fate met by the explorers and the hardships they experienced when ice-bound. Digressive and convoluted, the novel mentions many plausible causes for the men’s death, such as cold, scurvy, starvation and lead poisoning; but it also includes the agency of a supernatural killer, an Arctic Leviathan which proceeds to murder and devour the stranded men.

The Terror opens with a description of the British ships bound in ice in 1847. Unable to leave the polar region, the British explorers are threatened by the approaching Arctic winter with its freezing temperatures and oppressive darkness. The prospect is made more frightening by the presence of an unnameable monster, a ‘thing’ lurking somewhere in the frozen sea and ‘trying to get at them from below’.¹⁷ The setting conveys a pervasive sense of frustration and vulnerability. Instead of providing an escape from polar horrors, the sea becomes an obstacle to the explorers’ navigation. This irony is confirmed in successive passages describing the ships adrift in the frozen water: ‘They were in open sea ice – moving pack ice – and stranded [...] There was not a sheltering harbour, to their knowledge, within one hundred miles and no way to get there if there were one.’ (113) The absence of a ‘sheltering harbour’ and the image of ‘both trapped Royal Navy ships’ moving ‘in slow circles’ (115) parody the traditional sea-voyage paradigm. Caught in a slow rotation to nowhere, the explorers are gripped by the same disquiet that assails the modern voyager in Blumenberg’s theorization of permanent embarkment.¹⁸

The scarcity of fresh food reinforces the antagonistic function of the polar sea. Incapable of fishing and hunting like the Inuit, the explorers feel the hostility of the frozen environment which, apart from hindering their nutrition, turns them into easy prey. Relentlessly attacked by the Thing, they experience a process of meatification which makes them conscious of their vulnerable positioning in the food chain, and – more appallingly – arouses their bestial survival instincts. What the explorers undergo is a sort of Darwinian regression to a feral state, which becomes more evident when some of them start to devour the others. Their cannibalistic diet not only violates long established protocols of civilized behaviour, it also disregards the unofficial practice of shipwreck survivors drawing lots to see who is to be eaten so that the others might survive.¹⁹ Instead of being ready to sacrifice themselves for the common good, a group of sailors betray the ‘custom of the sea’ and, by using sheer violence, turn their shipmates into abject food. The temptation to feed like animals is strongly felt by all characters, including Doctor Goodsir. An honest man who firmly objects to anthropophagy, Goodsir cannot suppress an instinctual greed for human meat when he smells the burned flesh of his companions: ‘There was a smell in the air as if someone was grilling beef. Goodsir found himself salivating despite the sense of horror rising in him.’ (513)

The failure of British civilization is confirmed by the dangerous effects of the cans of food stored on board. Instead of guaranteeing survival, these aliments contain lethal quantities of lead that slowly kill the mariners. The suspicion of fraud raised by the processed food – a product of commercial speculation that endangers the consumers’ health – casts a dark shadow over the narrative of Victorian faith in progress. The very respect of law and authority is challenged by the mutiny of some crewmen who, in addition to breaking the taboo against cannibalism, violate other basic rules of their civilization. Apparently triggered by the Thing, the men’s descent into violence and anarchy is later shown to result from deep-ingrained impulses which, masked by the veneer of civilization, resurface in moments of difficulty when they reveal their true nature.

As I demonstrate elsewhere, *The Terror* questions the presumed superiority of the West by telling a counter-history of an expedition which, despite its tragic end, was celebrated as a symbol of imperialistic heroism in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ Apart from exposing the monetarization of social relations and the fragility of institutions, the novel unveils many

contradictions of a liberal ideology which, in the Victorian age like today, is artfully manipulated to serve the predatory instincts of powerful nations. Simmons's 'mock epic' of the Franklin story not only deconstructs Victorian colonial propaganda, but also encourages reflection on the imperialistic hubris of the United States, 'the power that dominates the earth' today, which is shown to 'share the British blindness and inability to learn'.²¹ The aggressiveness of American foreign policy is darkly mirrored by the myopic behaviour of the fictional British explorers who wreak havoc on the Arctic by killing animals and Inuit before engaging in a self-destructive mutinous struggle.

The Thing emblemizes this ambivalence. Initially connoted as an antagonist of the explorers, it arouses sheer horror with its aberrant corporeality, which poses a double threat to its victims: physical and interpretative. An amphibian hybrid combining the features of mammal, fish and reptile predators, the Thing terrifies the explorers because it eludes categorization. Besides resembling a huge polar bear, it is endowed with 'the speed and ease of a beluga whale' (205), has 'the black, dead, emotionless eyes of a shark' (326) and exhibits a head and a neck reminiscent of 'a snake' (364-5).

In the course of the narration, however, the creature acquires more ambivalent meanings, as it contributes to unmasking his victims' flaws and later embodies the mythical role of defender of the Pole. Its evolving functionality is inextricably connected with its confrontation with Franklin. During a funeral, the Captain compares the Thing with the Leviathan and invites his men to pray and confide in God, in imitation of the biblical Jonah. At the end of his speech, however, he shifts from spirituality to revenge, ambition and greed, as he offers his men a financial reward for killing the monster (220-1). By monetarizing the hunt, Franklin inaugurates a barbaric course of action that perverts the implications of the biblical tale he has mentioned. The punishment he gets for his action is dreadful, as he is brutally killed by the monster. Besides unveiling the Captain's dangerous passions Franklin's duel with the Thing is strongly reminiscent of the struggle between Ahab and the whale in *Moby-Dick*, in which the boundary between human and non-human monstrosity is similarly blurred.²²

Later references to Leviathan are made by Captain Crozier. During a religious service, Crozier quotes a passage from Hobbes's masterwork as if he were reading from an Old Testament book (309). The excerpt, drawn from the twelfth chapter of *Leviathan*, is meant to discourage his crew from yielding to superstitious fears. In another episode, the Captain confirms his secular, matter-of-fact approach to reality by reading again from his *lay Bible* at a funeral service:

Captain Crozier had quoted not from the Bible the men knew but from his fabled *Book of Leviathan*.

'Life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"' the captain had intoned. 'It seems it is shorter for those who steal from their mates.' (686)

A hint at the 'natural condition' of struggle to which humankind is destined, if unchecked by an authoritative body politic, this quotation shows Crozier's attempt to prevent his crew from falling into an abyss of violence. His words prove prophetic. Soon after the service, the precarious balance he strives to keep is upset by mutinous acts resulting in self-destructive anomie.

The Hobbesian worldview shared by Crozier goes through some revisions in the last part of the novel. After being wounded by the mutineers and saved by an Inuit woman, the Captain develops an alternative view of the state of things by adopting the natives' perspective. What he learns from an Inuit prophecy is that the Thing is a mythical entity, the *Tuunbaq*, which, like all polar creatures, partakes of a permanent spirit-soul called *inua*. In ways similar to the 'playful' Leviathan described in Psalm 104, the *Tuunbaq* is an essential part of the natural domain it inhabits and protects – a domain doomed to be annihilated by the arrival of 'the pale people – the *kabloona*' (869), who will cause the melting of the ice and the decline of wildlife.

Crozier's conversion to Inuit spirituality is enhanced by his encounter with the Thing. Their meeting, during which he feels the creature's eyes 'looking deep into him, predator's eyes searching for his soul' (912), amounts to a rite of initiation that inaugurates a new life for the Captain, announced by the final repetition *cum* variation of the famous *Leviathan* passage: 'The Francis Crozier *inua* still alive and well in Taliriktung had no illusions about life being anything but poor, nasty, brutish, and short. But perhaps it did not have to be solitary.' (935-6) Still conscious of the fierceness of the world and the perils of anarchy, Crozier nonetheless comes to view companionship as a relief from the pains of living and, in imitation of the *Tuunbaq*, strives to defend the Arctic from its invaders.

His decision to destroy the wreck of the *Terror*, in the novel's conclusion, is an act charged with multiple meanings. By burning the ship he had commanded, Crozier completes the actions performed by the Thing, which had damaged the vessel from below by making holes into its hull. As some critics have claimed, the Captain's resolve does more than question the moral righteousness of imperialism and its commercial logic; it also conveys an 'ecological message' which, on the basis of the apocalyptic Inuit prophecy, anticipates 'contemporary fears of cultural standardization, pollution and global warming'.²³ In addition to Inuit beliefs, Simmons seems to evoke here the Psalm 104 Leviathan which, as mentioned above, is an integral part of a prosperous natural realm. In imitation of its Inuit and biblical prototypes, the Thing is thus configured as a defender of the Arctic against the destructive invasion of the British explorers.

From a socio-political perspective, moreover, the destruction of the ship offers a glimpse of hope in solidarity. Without denying the reality of a brutish state of nature, Crozier conceives possible new bonds of affinity among humans, animals and the environment. His silent communication with his tongueless mate and with the Thing is evidence of fecund relations which, though frail and temporary, constitute an alternative to the tension-ridden economy on board the vessel. Before erasing the ship, a symbol of Western aggression, the Captain learns how to share his dreams and his vital breath with other beings. This act anticipates current theorization of non-anthropocentric forms of solidarity such as Peter Sloterdijk's spherology, based on the conviction that human beings create various worlds (spheres) together with other people, animals or things. What Sloterdijk proposes is a non-anthropocentric notion of solidarity that can be usefully applied to anarchist practice to promote an opening towards all those in need of solidarity, including animals and the environment. If read in light of these ideas, Crozier's interaction with the *inua* counterbalances the explorers' bent for relational violence, which reaches its negative climax during the mutiny.²⁴ Although the Hobbesian notions of anarchy and struggle are still looming large in the conclusion, the novel alludes to the possibility of finding some relief in newly conceived anarchist practices which, like the

burning of the ship, might be instrumental to creating interpersonal, inter-species and inter-organic bonds of solidarity.

Through blending mythical and philosophical tropes, Simmons provides a thought-provoking reinterpretation of Leviathan which sheds light onto some functions and forms of the contemporary Gothic. Apart from responding to postcolonial, ecological and socio-ontological concerns widely felt in the twenty-first century, the monster featured in *The Terror* enacts two phenomena that are gaining strength in Western (and especially American) cultures: the increasing spectacularization of horror and the representation of human vulnerability through nautical Gothic tropes.

The sea-voyage failure dramatized by Simmons becomes more evident in Curran's *Leviathan*, which conveys a tragic sense of being permanently shipwrecked and lost on land. The novel pivots around two horrific experiences had by Johnny Horowitz at a holiday resort: a hurricane and a sea-monster attack. A cynical member of the paparazzi who is suffering from a professional and existential crisis, Horowitz decides to take a break from a job he has come to loathe. His sojourn on Seagull Island, reached by ferry, is meant to give him leisure to reflect on the questionable life he has thus far led as a 'a parasite feeding off the carcasses of celebrities' and selling 'shit' to a mass audience that 'liked the smell and taste of it'.²⁵ Strongly critical of the questionable morality of 'Middle America' (5), his thoughts are reported in indirect speech and punctuated with self-deprecatory equations of his self with non-human forms of life conventionally perceived as degraded: 'parasite', 'worm', 'reptile' (5).

With an ironic twist, this figurative language gains flesh when Horowitz makes a blood-chilling encounter. While investigating the mystery of a fenced-off shore of the island, he witnesses the opening of a Cretaceous Gateway, which is crossed by abominable prehistoric creatures. Various reptile predators and 'an absolute sea monster' engage in a fierce struggle under Horowitz's eyes; he perceives the boiling water go 'red with blood' (23-4). Not only visual, the sensations that assail him are auditory ('the tearing of flesh and the crunching of bones'), olfactory ('He could smell the meat and blood'), and overwhelmingly physical, as proved by the 'waves of nausea passing through his lower belly' (23, 21). Diegetically related to the temporal shock provoked by the Gateway, the sickness felt by Horowitz is also interpretable in light of Julia Kristeva's theorization of nausea as a form of abjection through which the I rejects the non-I in order to live.²⁶ The fascination and repulsion generated by this primeval scene condense the protagonist's wavering between death- and life-drives, between a self-destructive bent (signalled by his moral laxity and alcohol consumption) and a self-affirming wish for regeneration in the face of his society's decay.

The difficulties posed by this internal struggle are well rendered by the constant resurfacing of Horowitz's old habits. Tempted by the prospect of making easy money, he strives to collect proofs of the extraordinary phenomenon, which he aims to sell to a sensation-craving public. In a long ironic sequence resonant with allusions to Melville and Hemingway, the protagonist strives to catch some primitive specimens but the prey he hooks (a giant squid and a carnivorous reptile) baffle his efforts. In his greedy pursuit of monsters, moreover, Horowitz brings devastation to the island. Besides causing the death of Nate, an honest man he convinces to join his venture, he contributes to luring a gigantic sea reptile into the interior of the island. After surviving the fury of the beast, which destroys a village and devours many inhabitants, Horowitz relinquishes his plans. His final words attribute the catastrophe to a violent hurricane

that hits the island during the monster's raid: 'Johnny laughed dryly. "Of course it was a hurricane [...] .what do you think it was? A giant fucking monster from the sea?"' (127)

The hurricane is one expedient used to create verisimilitude. Apart from offering the hypothesis of a temporal Gateway opened by geomagnetic forces (56), Curran employs the violence of the elements to increase the realism of his Gothic narrative which, in line with the American tradition, is made more perturbing by plausible details. Neither supernatural nor science fictional, the novel resorts to typical strategies of 'cryptofiction' to represent the human encounter with fiery predators.²⁷ Described as a cryptid – 'an immense sea monster that science had probably never described' – the beast is a hybrid of real and legendary reptiles, such as dinosaurs, crocodiles, Godzilla, sea serpents, and dragons (108-9). Like many present-day works featuring dinosaurs, and like the Godzilla films repeatedly evoked in the text (29, 62, 120), *Leviathan* produces blood-curling sensations with its credible elements, which strengthen the uncanny effects of the vicarious horror experience lived by the reader.

In comparison with *The Terror*, Curran's novel is an equally innovative rewriting of the Leviathan myth which, first evoked in the title, reappears in various passages. Closely intertwined with these biblical allusions are Gothic paraphernalia drawn from many sources, which become vehicles for pressing concerns. A postmodern horror pastiche imbued with bitter irony, *Leviathan* is primarily an anguished response to the aggressive capitalism and the boundless consumerism of American society, whose moral decline is epitomized by Horowitz. His confrontation with the monster is legible in the context of what is called the Anthropocene – an age which, unlike the Cretaceous evoked in the novel, is conceived as dominated by human activities that deeply affect the environment and climate.²⁸ Like debates over the Anthropocene, *The Terror* and *Leviathan* exhibit conflicting attitudes about fears of an imminent catastrophe and hopes in the human ability to develop a new sense of responsibility. As we have seen, Simmons concocts a mythical monster to expose the risks of global warming while promoting new forms of solidarity. For his part, Curran uses a primitive creature to warn people against the human search for unlimited material comfort but also to encourage a more responsible approach to the world.

The latter approach is implied by some textual passages of *Leviathan*. In the climactic episode of his encounter with the beast, for example, Horowitz's experiences temporarily cure him of his cynicism. He first considers the possibility of getting out 'of the tabloid racket' and living the unsophisticated life of a 'beachcomber' (95-6); later on, he feels personally responsible for Nate's death (106-7). And, when he sees the creature devour old Matt Packard, he has the impression of witnessing 'some sort of communication', 'an understanding' (122). Despite its horrific implications, the old man's meeting with Leviathan suggests an inter-species link founded on natural predatory roles, which are immune from the monetarization and the selfishness of anthropocentric relations. Unafraid of 'looking death in the eye', Packard approaches the monster as 'an old and valued friend' that can grant him the death he aspires to: 'He wanted his life to have a grand, dramatic climax.' (122)

In ways similar to Simmons, Curran questions the degeneration of the present world by hinting at alternative, albeit brutish, forms of natural solidarity. Apparently different in their time setting, both novels cope with pressing concerns about today's moral and environmental degradation. In Simmons's case, the contemporaneity of these concerns is granted by neo-Victorian strategies of interconnection between the nineteenth century and our time, as well as

by a skilful use of the Inuit prophecy evoking an uncontaminated mythical age against which our dreary present is set. In *Leviathan* the degeneration of today's America emerges by contrast with the pre-human world inhabited by the monster: 'A world before men dirtied the waters and fouled the air. About as close to natural perfection as you could get [...] it was beautiful, and like anything beautiful, it was also incredibly deadly.' (98)

The moral and ecological critiques woven through *Leviathan* are supported by a particular deconstructive strategy: the denial of navigation. Instead of taking the ferry back to the continent, Horowitz willingly confines himself to the island devastated by the elements and by sea creatures. The broken 'hulks of the boats [...] battered by immense waves' (111) during the double assault launched by the hurricane and the monster are symbols of an inescapable condition of shipwreck which has turned land itself into an uncanny seascape. Besides attaching gloomy connotations to the protagonist's existential crisis, the impossibility of the sea voyage confirms the metamorphic quality of nautical Gothic which, even when deprived of some basic paradigms, preserves its symbolic energy and its horror-inspiring potential to the full. Despite their textual differences, *The Terror* and *Leviathan* both refunctionalize marine tropes and confirm the strong fascination exerted by sea monsters in American culture – a culture that continues to produce and consume gothicized postmodern versions of the biblical Leviathan.

Notes

¹ Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London, Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 8.

² Emily Alder, 'Dracula's Gothic Ship', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 15 (2016), 4-19.

³ 'Sea Monsters', in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (ed.), *Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2014); see also 'Leviathan', *ibid.*

⁴ Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters. An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 63-9.

⁵ See Breverton's *Phantasmagoria. A Compendium of Monsters, Myths and Legends* (London, Quercus, 2011), pp. 190-1, 197, 218-19.

⁶ Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea. Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 93.

⁷ *Leviathan* is a recurrent title of contemporary British and American novels, including novels by Paul Auster (1992), Warren Tute (1959), Philip Hoare (2008), Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea (1975).

⁸ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 41, p. 141; Eric Savoy, 'The Rise of American Gothic', in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 167.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁰ Stephen Bruhm, 'The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, pp. 269, 272.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹² Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997), pp. 18-19.

¹³ E.g. the colonial exploitation associated with voyages in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899), or the psycho-ontological disquiet felt by the narrator in 'The Secret Sharer' (1909).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics*, 16 (1986), 24.

¹⁵ Casarino, *Modernity at Sea*, p. 1.

¹⁶ The 1984 discovery of high lead levels in the bodies of three supposed members of the expedition inspired contemporary writers. Cf. Catherine Lanone, 'Monsters on the Ice and Global Warming: from Mary Shelley and Sir John Franklin to Margaret Atwood and Dan Simmons', in Andrew Smith and William Hughes (eds.),

EcoGothic (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 31 ff. The wreck of the *Terror* was discovered in Canada in 2016; the remains of the *Erebus* were located two years earlier.

¹⁷ Dan Simmons, *The Terror. A Novel* (London, Bantam Books, 2007), p. 29. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

¹⁸ In Arctic exploration, getting frozen in was sometimes useful. In 1893, for example, Fridtjof Nansen allowed his ship to be captured in an ice pack to prove his theory on the Arctic current flowing. In *The Terror*, however, the sense of circling around is not hopeful but aimless, made more frustrating by the protagonists' fears.

¹⁹ While animals feed, humans conceive nutrition as part of a civilizing 'system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour'. Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds.), *Food and Culture. A Reader* (New York and London, Routledge, 1997), p. 21.

²⁰ Mariaconcetta Costantini, 'An Arctic Leviathan: Gothic Fantasies of Regression and Ecological Concerns in Dan Simmons's *The Terror*', *Rivista di Letterature moderne e comparate*, 67:3 (2013), 265-79.

²¹ Lanone, 'Monsters on the Ice', p. 39. Lanone quotes an interview by Simmons revealing his critique of American imperialism.

²² Intertextual links with *Moby-Dick* are anticipated in the epigraph of *The Terror* which, drawn from Melville's novel, is centred on the 'elusive quality' of white creatures (n.p.).

²³ Lindgren Leavenworth, 'The Times of Men, Mysteries and Monsters: *The Terror* and Franklin's Last Expedition', in Anka Ryall, Johan Schimanski and Hennig Howlid Wærp (eds.), *Arctic Discourses* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 241.

²⁴ Sloterdijk's ideas are expounded in the volumes of his *Spheres* project (1998-2004) and in later studies. On the philosophical connections between his sphereology and contemporary anarchism, see Iwona Janicka, 'Are These Bubbles Anarchist? Peter Sloterdijk's Sphereology and the Question of Anarchism', *Anarchist Studies*, 24:1 (2016), 62-84.

²⁵ Tim Curran, *Leviathan* (Lexington, Severed Press, 2013), p. 6. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay of Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982) pp. 2-3.

²⁷ 'Cryptid', *Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, pp. 105-13.

²⁸ See, among others, Christian Schwägerl, *The Anthropocene. The Human Era and How It Shapes Our Planet*, trans. Lucy Renner Jones (Santa Fe, Synergetic Press, 2014).