The damned charm of Scylla and Charybdis

The crossing of all the Straits in the imaginary of the ancients, for the risk and the danger of death that it involved, has always constituted a initiatory test for the hero, called to challenge the adverse strengths of the nature, defeated which, he would have seen in front of himself open new horizons of knowledge. The navigation of the Straits of Messina, with their objective difficulties for the rapid and irregular tides, for the winds that exhale there violent and sometimes in conflict among them, for the oceanic depths of some lines of sea and for the richness of the varieties of the fish fauna that includes, from immemorial times she has represented a situation of serious danger for the sailors. If to this importance is added on the economic and political plan of the Straits of Messina, that, for its crucial geographical position in the Mediterranean, it constituted in every epoch the strategic epicentre of an extraordinary net of exchanges and markets, a forced stop in the great voyages, it is easily understood as around this corridor of sea a halo of charm and mystery is created, become fertile basin of a great mythological patrimony able to cross the centuries with numerous elaborations and variations, in a diachronic parable that, to the insignia of a Mediterranean culture, englobes from Scylla and Charybdis, to the Fairy Morgana, to Colapesce, to the Horcynus Orca of Stefano D’Arrigo.

The geologic structure of the sea backdrop and the meteoric phenomenons have done of the Straits of Messina a dangerous area with all the necessary factors to the development of the myth of a ruinous and bewitched passage, to the limit of the impassable one and the outskirts of the known horizon, ideal place where to place heroic tests of strength and audacity proper of the agonistic tension, ideological component of the myth, that springs from the exaltation of the test and the risk in it implicit. To cross the waters that separated the Sicilian banks from the Calabrian banks it was same as to go beyond and to profane a legitimus finis, a right border, beyond which the man lost his competences of dominion, lost the control of the ship, metaphor of his same life, and he was swallowed in the chasm of an abyss without end and without confinements, populated by two terrible monstrous divinities, Scylla and Charybdis, set to watch of the passage, that laid a trap whoever had wanted to overcome it. The consecration of the two mythological monsters is up to Homerus.

In Od. 12, 73-126 Scyllas and Charybdis are described with abundance of details by Circe to Ulixes, while the hero comes upon of person with the two monsters in voyage toward the Trinacria (ll. 223 – 59) and to the return (ll. 426-446). Scylla lives a tall cliff, inside an elevated cave on the sea. she has voice of a little bitch, but she is a horrible monster; she has twelve feet, six long necks and on each of them a horrendous head with three files of teeth, numerous and dense, "full of black death", she nourishes her of the sailors and of the cetacean that she is able to drive out looking through around the rock-cliff. "To the distance of a draught of arc" from Scyllla, Charybdis, invisible monster, hidden under a lower rock marked by a fig tree,
"three times a day" sucks (in etymological connection) from the bottom of the sea waters and living beings, and as many times she vomits what had sucked. Homerus tells that Ulixes, sailing in the Straits, was particularly careful to avoid Charybdis, seizing himself to the fig tree that grew luxuriant to the entrance of the cave in which the monster hid him, so that, when she vomited the tree, Ulixes could save and to take back the navigation; the hero nevertheless is able to avoid Scylla that abducted six men to his ship and she devoured them. A whole Greek literary tradition (see Thucyd. 4,24) and Latin (Lucr. I 722ff. Verg. Aen 3, 420 - 23; 684-88 etc.) enacts the position of the two monsters on the Straits of Messina. In the Latin literature the Homeric description of the "keepers" of the Straits resounds in diviner Helenus's words that he exposes to Aeneas, hero, fugitive from destroyed Troy, the dangers of the shores of Sicily and the best itinerary illustrates him for a sure navigation (Verg., Aen. 3, 420ff.). In comparison to Homerus the virgilian description accurately clarifies the geographical position of the two monsters; the father of the epic Latin sets in fact Scylla on the right bank of the Straits, therefore on the Calabrian slope, Charybdis on that left. Following traditions to Homerus give different news on the origins and on the stories of the two monsters: Charybdis would have been a woman from the very avid nature that, to have escaped the oxen to Hercules she was struck by lightning by Jupiter and sunk in sea, where it continued to suck all of this that happened her, easily passing to symbol of avarice and proverbial expression, while Scylla, above all for impulses coming from the Latin and italic ambit, as beautiful virgin appears, that would have assumed monstrous characters for sorceress Circe's intervention. According to Ovidius, in fact, Scylla didn't reciprocate the love of the newt Glaucus, which asked help to the magic of Circe. The sorceress, in love with Glaucus comes forward, but Glaucus rejects her. Circe then hurt and vexed, pushed by the jealousy, decided to take revenge of her rival; she polluted with poisonous potions the mirror of sea in which the girl was usual to make the bath, and she turned her into a monster that up to the abdomen she had the aspect of a beautiful girl, from the groin down she was surrounded from six heads of rabid and growling dogs (Met.14, 51-74). The dynamics of the winds and the tides that this mirror of sea governs, transfigured in the two monstrous creatures of the myth Scylla and Charybdis becomes object of a mythological fable that has as protagonists the two sea monsters and to which the authors of the Latin literature, field of investigation of my search, has drawn to full hands, as the numerous testimonies attest. Although in the ancient Rome the mythological histories have had great cultural relief (for the Romans to know the Greek pantheon and the biographies of heroes and nymphs constituted an educational capital ) and the treatment of the places finds a depth every time that Hellenic culture guarantees a connection among names landscapes and myths, nevertheless the analysis of the literary use of the myth of Scylla and Charybdis underlines as the Latin authors has approached to it with different formality that postpones to opposite points of view among them. We can...
isolate three narrative nucleuses that shortly clarify these different relative perspectives to an only theme:

1) Instrumental and didactic function of the myth, that uses the mythological story of Scylla and Charybdis as metaphorical emblem, cognitive grate and intellectual and moral stimulus in the development of the treated thematic. The most greater part of the readers ignored the details of mythology, to exception of some very known myths. The poet found the way of informing them of the nucleus of the fable. It deals with the literary function stricto sensu of the mythology, that is mainly that to constitute a reference: the poet postpones to a conventional treasure of knowledge and nobody could tell him cultured if he ignored it. Mythology is therefore to know that it serves as reference to other forms to know.

2) Scientific realism. The names of Scylla and Charybdis have the exclusive function of geographical location: some description is not found you detailed of the myth. Scylla and Charybdis offer the opportunity to expose relative thesis both to the genesis of the Straits, (a flood of the sea that demolished the edge of earth that united Sicily to the continent: Sall., *Hist.* IV 26; Verg., *Aen.* 3, 416 - 418; Sen., to *Marc.* 17, 2; Plin., *Nat. Hist.* 3, 73 and 3, 87; Mela 2, 115), and to the explanation of the sea vortexes (Charybdis is with the whirling sea that swallow the boats and drag her, making to resurface her up to the beaches of Taormina in Sall., *Hist.* IV 28 and in the *Naturales Quaestiones* 6,30, 1-3 Seneca underlines as the elements of the nature are as endowed with more narrow so greater impetus it is the passage that they has to face). From this attitude of concrete realism the passages that attest forms and ways of rationalization are explained and, sometimes, even of refusal of the myth (as in Verg., *Aen.* 3, 554-559: Anchises reassures the sailors, impressed by the moans that they seem to originate from the zone of the Straits, and, reorganizing the description of the place served as Helenus, he puts the prodigy within a natural phenomenon; see also Sen. *Ep.* 79,ecc.

3) Isidorus, *Etymologiae*, 13,18,3. Isidorus of Seville, Latin ecclesiastical writer lived among the VI and the VII sec. AD, in the section devoted to the tides and the Straits, he bases his principles on sources identified by the researchers in Sallustius, Vergilius, Lucretius and Florus, beyond the etymologies of the names of Reggio and Charybdis, according to the spirit of the title of the work, he does an admirable synthesis of the two perspectives above exposed. During the last shines of the Latin literature therefore the physical phenomenons of the Straits in Messina are treated by the Spanish bishop with a use of the myth that is not unbalance neither for the side mythological with instrumental and didactic function, neither for the scientific realism. Scylla and Charybdis are really identifiable places: the one is the cliff to peak on the sea of the calabrian coast, the other a line of whirling sea from whose depths emerge wrecks of ships. To this point Isidorus, departing from a visible reality to everybody, he explains the transfiguration of the places in the mythological imaginary, indulging in the description of the keepers of the Straits following the directives of the Homeric and virgilian tradition.
Although already from the end of the XIX century (the dissertation in 1894 of O. Waser is seen devoted to the study of Scylla and Charybdis in the Greek-Roman literature and in art) the myth that has made famous in every time the Straits of Messina has been object of study from illustrious researchers and on the side of the literary revision and on that of the iconographical production, it is seemed me interesting to deepen here the perspective of the literary use of the myth that foresees an interaction of myth and metaphor, inclusive to the first point of the subdivision of which above. Particularly it is seemed me worthy of attention the use of the myth of Scylla and Charybdis in the production of Ovidius, a Latin poet lived among I B.C. and I A.D., intellectual of the entourage of the Augustan poets, endowed with poetic versatile talent (he succeeds in spacing, only to quote the most known works, from the mythological epic, *Metamorphosis*, to the short poem on the fishes of the Black sea, *Ibis*, from the loving lyric for Corinna, *Amores*, to the short poem on the cosmetic of the women, *Medicamina faciei*) and very prone to the versification, consecrated by the tradition as erotic poet.

For his vocation of erotic poet Ovidius assumes the physiognomy of the uncomfortable intellectual in the *entourage* of the *Princeps*. The art to love (*Ars amatoria*) in fact, for her spicy too character, contravening to the program of moral restoration undertaken from August, together to some gossip divulged by Ovidius on the loving intrigues of a niece of the emperor, it made to earn to the poet the relegation at Tomi, an ancient place on the Black sea, where, after having begged more times (the works of the exile *Tristia* and *Epistles from the Ponto* testify it) the grace of the reentry in country, died in the 17 d. C.). Ovidius uses the myth of Scylla and Charybdis in almost all his works. Very famous it is the passage of *Met*. 14, 59ff. about the transformation of nymph Scylla from the pleasant and attractive aspect to monstrous creature to work of the spells provoked by the jealousy of Circe that had been rejected from Glaucus. In this passage the poet underlines with gruesome details the metamorphosis of the inferior part of the body (thighs, sides, feet), aiming at the image of a cut-off abdomen to the height of the groin that leans rabid dogs. Scylla discharges her fierce and vengeful anger on Ulixes that crossing that line of sea is deprived of his companions, and she would not even have spared the companions of Aeneas if before the passage of the hero of Troy had not been turned into rock-cliff, assuming an aspect of stone. Also in Ovidius it misses a description of Charybdis, invisible monster, that is defined " avida", greedy in this passage.

To the absence of the physical details of Charybdis it makes up for the constant characterization of the action of to suck and the throw back the overwhelmed ships, while for Scylla he always aims on the dogs that encircle the inferior part of the body and on the black abdomen (*atra alvus*), when Ovidius, talking about the trip of Aeneas that berths to Zancle, find the pretext to recall the myth of the Straits (*Met*. 13, 730ff.). On this line Scylla and Charybdis, therefore the Straits of Messina, represents then one of the most dangerous zones of the known world, often combined to the African gulfs of the Sirti as in *Fast*. 4, 499 ( see also *Ex P*. 4, 14, 9) or to the
Etna as in Tr. 5, 2, 73ff.. In both the footsteps Charybdis is denoted by the tautology of the geographical epithet "Zanclae" and from the usual verb *devoro*, to devour, which corresponds the action of the to bark for Scylla (as to Ex P. 4, 10, 25ff. ). To Met. 7, 62ff. Scylla and Charybdis, with the geographical location that the themselves names recall, they become metaphor of insurmountable obstacles that only the strength of the love succeeds in reorganizing and to overcome (see also Am. 2,17, 19ff.). The obstacle is very greater as more horrible and figurative it is the description of the monsters: Charybdis now swallows the billows (the verb used by Ovidius is *sorbere*), now returns them: *reddere*, while Scylla is *rapax*, that every thing grabs with avarice and with violence, and it barks encircled by the cruel dogs, *cincta saevis canibus*.

The metaphor of Scylla and Charybdis as undisputed certainty of death, conducts Ovidius to use the myth when he formulates the wish of death to an enemy (*Ibis* 383ff.), in the passage Scylla is *vorax*, voracious and both the monsters they complete the action of the *eripere*, to tear, evidently to the life. In a similar context also in Her. 12, 125-128 Scylla is *rapax* and Charybdis *resorbet*. Scylla and Charybdis finally constitute the emblem of monstrous women, that produce men to them it turns cruel in Met. 8, 119s. and in Ex P. 3, 122, in which Scylla is still enumerated among the women more salvages of the myth.

If on one side the contexts in which Ovidius chooses to use the myth of Scylla and Charibdys are to a large extent topical places, supple tools in the hands of a skilled fashionable poet very known from the youth of the time, more devoted to the idleness that to the duties of the Roman citizen, desirous of a subjective poetry that exaltes the individuality and the a little binding loves, from the other an analysis more deepened of the lexicon (adjectives and verbs) used by Ovidius to characterize Scylla and Charybdis is revealed the key for an interesting comparison with the most illustrious exponents of the Latin poetry before Ovidius. A linguistic investigation from the comedy (Plautus above all) to the elegiacs of the first generation (Tibullus and Propertius), passing through Catullus and Horatius has allowed to underline, with opportune and precise references, that the adjectives and the verbs that are denotative of the monsters of the Straits of Messina in Ovidius, find correspondence in the preceding poets, in which they assume connotative value in reference to a type of cruel and voracious, avid and rapacious woman, with an attractive aspect surely but with a bestial nature that ends up conducting the person in love, to its woman's service as a soldier, to the downfall and the death. Therefore Scylla and Charybdis in Ovidius represent the prototype of the cruel woman that or it doesn't correspond the feelings of the person in love or that, faking to reciprocate aims him in reality to squander his patrimony bringing him to the downfall. Through the known metaphor of the loving relationship as trip at sea or shipwreck, the woman Scylla / Charybdis makes the poet an anti - Ulixes, that doesn't succeed for the more to overcome the challenge of the dangerous waves and it ends smashed against the rock-cliffs. This typology of woman - monster, already studied for the Greek literature, with the charm that she provokes, is an admixture of beauty and horror that it finds full expression in
the Roman society of the times of Ovidius and it enriches of one tessera further the picture of the *femme fatale* that, feeding in various way the imaginations, the escapes, the symbols of the European culture, so much fortune had then from Shakespeare in up to the *Lupa* of Giovanni Verga.