

The Deep

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*Yea slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.*

Coleridge

As much as two thirds of our planet sleeps beneath water a thousand fathoms deep. We live alongside this briny profundity and skim sustenance from its surface. We pollute it through carelessness and also by design. Compelling evidence exists to suggest that it accommodates the richest habitat to be found anywhere and yet for the most part we are content to remain in a relationship of yawning ignorance with it. To date not even a hundredth of it has been explored.

History tells us of civilisations whose interest in the oceans far surpassed that which has been traditionally asserted in the West. Numerous so-called “primitive” coastal societies had a dedicated member who could dive to extreme depths without any means of artificial support, having been hardened for this endeavour since birth. Ethnologists have likened the role played by these individuals in their societies to the role of shamans in American civilisations or medicine men in certain tribes of sub-Saharan Africa. In many respects the comparison is appropriate, but ultimately does neither full service to the diver's calling nor to the métiers of the shaman or medicine man. The diver, for example, was not commonly

an expert in medicine, although he could be an authority on the analgesic effects of some salt-water plants. Neither was he necessarily considered a Magus, although equally archaeologists have shown that there existed at least a handful of villages in which there was no-one more important to communal life.

Such reverence was rare, however. Most times the diver was a fringe figure whose significance waxed and waned depending on the prevailing macro-societal conditions. During prosperous and peaceful times he could be largely ignored and the relevance of his status questioned – although rarely enough to see his position abolished. In times of war, or crop failure, or pestilence, on the other hand, his wisdom was often sought with toadying enthusiasm.

What was the precise nature of this wisdom? Little is known for sure because it was never documented and no doubt it differed from tribe to tribe, continent to continent. We are able to speculate, however, drawing not only from modern scientific tests, but also from cave paintings recently discovered in Chubut Province, Argentina, and from what has been extracted from numerous oral traditions on every continent.

At great depths pressure increases significantly. The effect of this, coupled with depleted oxygen levels, was to incite fervid and terrifying visions that the diver recounted and interpreted for his people – assuming, that is, he could return safely to shore. If the evidence has been correctly interpreted, it was not uncommon for these divers to be washed un- or semi-conscious onto the beach or for teams of oarsmen to be sent out to retrieve a body seen bobbing on the surface a long way out from the coast. (The first indication that a boat needed to be dispatched

was often garnered from changes observed in the ducking and weaving patterns of the gulls as they reacted to the appearance of potential carrion. In his pioneering work on the subject Professor Hutton has argued that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that this was the beginning of the use of birds in the practice of augury, and that later when the Roman soothsayer examined the entrails of a bird, his actions were a ritualistic echo of the search for a missing diver in the gut of a captured gull.) Whilst the dive was surely a punishing endeavour, it is believed to have been extremely rare for a diver not to return alive.

Beyond the travails of these divers lie the feats of certain individuals that were considered so distinguished that they have long since migrated into the province of legend. The greatest proliferation of these heroes rose out of India, China and the region now known as the Middle East, although examples exist, or at least existed, in almost every culture. These legends tell of men, normally of either humble or regal birth (it is fascinating to observe that the petit- and even the not-so-petit-bourgeoisie suffer a near absolute dearth of representation in the arranged ranks of these men) who are reported to have visited depths far greater than even the most experienced free diver could stand at the peak of his condition and in certain instances were subjected to such enormous pressures that would normally have resulted in the implosion of the human skull. Other legends tell of men spending days and sometimes weeks cutting paths through the theretofore trackless deep without once coming up for air. Among the most fêted was the Semitic Bo'sun of a fishing vessel who spent forty days trawling the benthos to return with the message that his crew should forget about the fish and turn their attention to men. His crew greeted him with a loyal but somewhat

baffled response – a bafflement that has persisted in the hearts of all but the most enlightened sailors to date. A second hero, equally though differently praised, was a son of the chief of Kapilvastu, a small principality believed to have been in present day Nepal. He is said to have passed seven sub aqueous weeks after one eventful night of contemplation beneath a Bo Tree. Whether one chooses to believe in the actuality of these feats or not, it is interesting to note that the observations made by these explorers have endured quite undiluted, some of them for thousands of years, and in many cases have exploded tribal, societal and cultural boundaries to take firm root in the clay of species wide relevance.

Another legend focuses not upon an individual but on an entire island race that was imbibed by the waters of the Atlantic in a single day and night of misfortune. The history finds its first expression in the writings of one of the greatest Hellenic mariners, in which he documents a conversation overheard when he was still a deckhand, between his then captain, the politicians Critias and Hermocrates and the explorer Timaeus. The isle Ἀτλαντὶς νῆσος or 'the island of Atlas' was home to a once great race of men whose descent into corruption and militarism led them to wage an antithetical war with the citizens of Athens, during which the Gods – with Poseidon at the helm – saw fit to demonstrate that their favour lay always with the peacemakers by inciting violent earthquakes and floods that not only devoured the island but also dragged all the warlike men of Athens into the abyss.

In later European – and latterly North American – society attention turned principally landward, with only polite and somewhat timorous lip service paid to the forces of the deep sea. In Britain they harnessed but one small portion of its power to conquer a quarter of the

world's land mass, which through naiveté they credited as being a quarter of the world, but in a response typical of the warmongering mindset (and excepting the occasional interruption of wedding parties by old seafaring men compelled by cruel fate to share their hard won knowledge of the terrors of below) failed to pay any attention to the morass of churning dark energy that extended for leagues beneath their hulls. How much human misery might have been spared if they had spent more time looking down into their own waters rather than across the sea to other lands lies outside of the already sprawling remit of this study.

In America, when the ground ceased to satisfy, they turned their noses skyward and built up, hundreds and hundreds of metres. Yet when even the lightning conductors of their behemoths failed to puncture the hymen of heaven and send God's divine light streaming majestically in, cleansing the world of heathens and purifying men's souls, a grand new plan was spun and the space programme was born. When, ultimately, the moon was revealed to be quite what most people had openly expected, a giant spherical rock, and when no marked increase in human happiness was plotted even after a stream of courageous men had bounced about on its surface, some wise people suggested that more attention should have been given over to exploring the depths that surround us, particularly considering that we knew (and still know) more about our disconsolate satellite than we do about the ocean floor. Since so much time and, significantly, money had been invested in this upward thrust, however, all such suggestions were quietly, if somewhat brusquely, dismissed.

In this historical climate it remains a wonder that some souls, whose interest in the sea was at times as

profound as the very deepest waters, were able to make themselves heard at all. And yet there are men whose voices have endured despite the opposing clamour. An excellent example was a young man from the city of Manhatta who, in the middle of the nineteenth century, was sent to sea out of Nantucket on a whaling ship by another New Yorker; himself then living in Massachusetts. This young man, buoyed by the belief that 'the world's a ship on its passage out and not a voyage complete' found himself on a ship baptised Pequod in the company of men – one man above all – each of whom had fought their own deeply wounding battles with the sub-pelagian darkness. History has often shown that as important as the quality of a great man's mind is, of equal importance is the company he keeps. This young man, fortuitously finding himself in such great company, was ideally positioned to observe that concentrating too much upon a single horror – even one so maliciously intelligent and brazen enough as to have made off with ones leg – will more than likely see a fellow pulled under to finish the short remainder of his life submerged in the gloom.

Five years after this young whaler's account was published to popular and critical disdain, a child was born in Moravia, then in Austro-Hungary, who despite his training as a doctor of neurological diseases would be the pioneer of the first scientific method of fishing and categorising the creatures of the deep sea. His activities confirmed two beliefs long maintained by mystics of the seaboard. The first was that the rhythms and currents of the deep do not always mirror those on land, but in many cases run contrary to them. It was to the effects of these forces that he attributed his discovery of *Architeuthis Parapraxis*, a twelve foot cephalopod of which a crew member wrote in a letter to his wife;

“It was ejected like a missile through the surface and into the stern of the boat where it lay flapping grievously for a moment before seeming to lose all form and, for want of a better word, liquefy – perhaps as a result of the significant differences in pressure between our realm and its. What most astonished the Captain, however, was that the waters from which he was so violently expelled gave the impression, at least on the surface, of being really very calm.”

The second of his discoveries was that with the setting of the sun a mass migration occurs, bringing previously unseen and sometimes quite monstrous creatures up to the shallows to spawn, only to retreat again at first light. The doctor quickly understood the significance of this nocturnal event; namely that the eggs, laid in arresting abundance by these migrants, played an essential role in the symbiotic interweaving of life on our planet. Briefly put, we as human beings can only survive and function thanks to the energy carried up from the abyss by these mysterious creatures which enters our ecosystem first through the fish we consume, and second through the oxygen synthesised from the creatures' leavings by shallow water plants. As is the fate of every great discovery (almost as if such a reaction was necessary to confirm a discovery's greatness) the doctor succeeded in thoroughly outraging the mores of fin-de-siecle Europe whose people refused with spiky indignation the thought of owing anything to something apparently so vile. Unsurprisingly, every attempt to ostracise the doctor and his discoveries was made. (Coincidentally around the same time, the celebrated author of *The Shame Of The Sun* so disillusioned by the crude nature of the public recognition he had longed for for so many years and recently obtained, opened the

porthole of his cabin on *The Mariposa*, bound for Tahiti and forced his bulky, sea-faring frame all the way through and swam down and down until “he seemed floating languidly in a sea of dreamy vision” then minutes later “ceased to know”)

Despite the furious opposition, the doctor was still able to amass a solid and loyal crew to accompany him on his voyages, many of whom would latterly become captains themselves; either in the doctor's expanded fleet or in ships of their own. Of particular interest was his first mate, a medical man also and a fellow German speaker, but not an Austro-Hungarian, rather a Swiss from the town of Kesswil, but living in Zurich at the time of his first voyage. At first a firm advocate of the doctor's deep sea fishing techniques – techniques to which we not only owe the discovery of *Architeuthis Parapraxis* but also *Saccopharynx Libidinous*, of the stupendous *Gulper Eel* family, and *Lophiiformes Neurosi*, a subgenus of Anglerfish – he later began to perceive certain limitations.

Two principal concerns dogged the Swiss. First was the rather unsavoury fact that owing to the hugely differing pressures between the deep and the surface, all of the specimens landed by the doctor were severely deformed before they might be examined and many of them died even before reaching the ship. His second concern was a nagging belief that despite his ruthless pioneering the doctor had failed to hit bottom, that there existed something deeper and more essential than the continental slope which the doctor, he believed, refused to acknowledge.

The relationship between the captain and his ambitious first mate started to sour when, acting alone, the Swiss invested in his own schooner and contracted the construction of an underwater vehicle – a bathysphere –

of his own design. For a time the men continued to correspond, and to keep each other updated on their respective discoveries, as the following extract from their collected correspondence demonstrates. The Swiss wrote:

“A quick word to let you know I am still alive. I am having grisly fights with the hydra... and not all its heads are cut off yet. Sometimes I feel like calling for your help when I am too hard pressed by the welter of material. So far I have managed to suppress the urge. I hope to reach dry land in the not too distant future.”ⁱ

Within two years, by 1914, however, their communication had ceased.

What then came of the Swiss' research and of what “welter of material” did he write? According to his log books – which he published from regularly after his repeated sub aquatic voyages – beyond the continental slope, which descends gradually to a depth of 4000 metres, lies the Abyssal plain. Scored with massive trenches and sprouting legions of tarring chimneys that pirouette forth sulphurous water as hot as molten lead, it forms the rocky noyau of our planet. It is a world of pitch blackness populated by grim creatures of simplistic primal build, like *Eptatretus Goliath*, a species of Hagfish – a huge cartilaginous worm that can tie itself in knots to better permit its teeth to rasp into the dead flesh of deep sea carrion. It was here, more than two miles down, in the crystal clear waters of the abyss, amongst hot vents and cold seeps, in this world of black punctuated only by the occasional blast of bioluminescence, that the Swiss believed he had unearthed the origins and principle driving forces of our existence: sulphur eating life forms that took their energy not from the sun, the grand exterior, as it was once asserted that all life must, but from the

infernal seething interior, the molten core of energy that shifts and churns deep within.

By the time that the Swiss hit the abyssal plain, the discoveries of his master had started bedding down in the public consciousness thanks, in part, to their popularising interpretation by noted cartoonists of the day. The effect of these interpretations was to render the somewhat disconcerting reality of what lay beneath the waters' surface a great deal more comfortable but also, regrettably, a great deal less like reality. The nadir was reached, perhaps, with the employment of Saccopharynx Libidinous – a remarkably proportioned predator whose mouth, several feet wide, hangs open in the water attendant upon the careless entrance of small and not-so-small prey – in a newspaper advertisement for an indigestion remedy. Within the span of a few years those who had refused even to meet the doctor had reinvented themselves as authorities on matters of the deep, whilst those who could still not stomach his advances chose to attack these straw doll “experts” rather than grapple directly with the doctor's rigging-raped hands. Whilst the doctor himself had made tens of thousands of voyages in his decades of seafaring, within a few years most of the hot air being generated about the deep – hot air enough to balloon the sails of the most impressive Armada – was coming out of two opposing camps both of whom were stuffed with members who couldn't even tell you in which direction the coast lay. It was also around this time that the descendants of the first mate of the Pequod – whose relationship with the deep had been decidedly “on-off” for several years – turned their backs on seafaring for good and ploughed all of their money into a coffee house in Seattle.

It remains heartening to point out, however, that even in this climate – when tides of verbiage, like the blast wind of an atom bomb, seemed to vaporise everything with which they made contact – that some figures rise up undamaged, unaffected, by the onslaught. It is impossible to generalise about these men and women for it is precisely their autonomy, their distinction from everything that surrounds them that is the source of their strength. I will however speak briefly of two adventurers that come to mind, but with the caveat that they are not, indeed by their nature could not be, representative.

The first was a fisherman, in the evening of life, from the small village of Cojima, just outside of Havana. He was just a boy when the doctor began his voyages and never read his reports. However, in his own unschooled manner he had developed a rapport with the sea to match the doctor's. He considered himself a simple pescador and no-one thought to question his judgement until an American – an unlikely artist, a rugged drunken brawler and veteran of the Spanish civil war – installed himself in the cabin next door. As though Fortune felt that anything short of momentous would not serve to demonstrate to the American at once the intensity and the fragile intricacy of the old fisherman's blood bond with the sea, she first saw to it that he went eighty four days without a catch. Only then did she subject him to the ordeal that would evidence beyond doubt his marriage to the eternal: an expedition of several days that saw him hook the biggest marlin ever known in those seas, only to be dragged into open water and have it snatched from him by sharks. The American would document the old man's story, publishing it to much acclaim but would, several years later, take his own life, so haunted was he by his personal visions of what lurked in the depths.

A brief second example concerns a young itinerant poet who at the age of nineteen found himself victim – if victim be the correct word – of benevolent possession by the muses. He did not concern himself only with the deep, but when he stood on the eastern American seaboard and inhaled, he interpreted the subtle saline aroma rising up from miles below to be one that presaged change. Along with hundreds of other verses, he penned the following:

“Oh the seas will split
And the ship will hit
And the sands on the shoreline will be shaking
Then the tide will sound
And the wind will pound
And the morning will be breaking

Oh the fishes will laugh
As they swim out of the path
And the seagulls they'll be smiling
And the rocks on the sands
Will proudly stand
The hour that the ship comes in

And the words that are used
For to get the ship confused
Will not be understood as they're spoken
For the chains of the sea
Will have busted in the night
And will be buried at the bottom of the ocean.”ⁱⁱ

Before we conclude a final word needs to be said about the Swiss doctor whom we left deep down in his submersible, scouring, cataloguing and interpreting the geological

formations of the abyssal plain. He died, coincidentally if you insist, at around the same time that the star of our itinerant was rising and in the same year that the American in Cuba, took a bullet to take his own life: 1961. So what of those forty-some years that have lapsed unmentioned? The Swiss continued his work for the rest of his life, plunging regularly in his submersible until very close to the end when his health no longer cooperated. His work ethic was rigorous – everything was examined and nothing was dismissed as unimportant to the grand flow of life below, but also above, surface. As he touched deeper and deeper plains and was subjected to pressures unimaginable for most of us, at depths where the water felt as thick and unnavigable as a bath tub full of treacle, his observations grew proportionately strange – so strange that certain voices were heard to imply, and not quietly, that the interplay of intense pressure and purified oxygen had interfered with his critical faculties. Still, he remained cuttngly lucid until his death and defended his discoveries with vigour and conviction, above all the glimpse he had been gifted of what appeared to be an underwater city. Centred around a mountain palace, divided by three circular moats and bisected by canals and tunnels, the city was heavily fortified. Even more astonishing was that the city, according to the Swiss doctor, was inhabited, by primal shadows of heroic men who lived, fought, loved and died within its walls and whose movements sent ripples ascending through the water. The ripples, which can still be detected today, are so small that by the time they hit the surface they are almost – almost but not entirely, never entirely! – unnoticeable. However, as they head shoreward and dandle across the thighs of those with only the courage to paddle where the adventurers mentioned here above have dived and dived

again, they transmit to us something of the character of the deep and cause us to tremble with fleeting comprehension at the uncanny majesty of existence.

i - The Freud/Jung Letters, Sigmund Freud & Carl Gustav Jung (Eds. McGuire, McGlashan, Picador 1979 p.258)

ii - Lyrics, Bob Dylan (Simon & Schuster, 2004 p.93)

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