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‘The Land Shall Sink’

The Lovecraftian Nature of Sea Level Rise

Eric Fleischmann

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In 1917, H.P. Lovecraft wrote the following lines in his short story “Dagon”: “I dream of a day when [the nameless things] may rise above the billows to drag down in their reeking talons the remnants of puny, war-exhausted mankind—of a day when the land shall sink, and the dark ocean floor shall ascend amidst universal pandemonium.” Now, in the 21st century, it appears as though his unnamed narrator’s horrific vision has escaped Lovecraft’s fiction and entered into the real world. As outlined by GlobalChange.gov, sea level is expected to rise anywhere from one to four feet by the year 2100 and only continue at the current rate or an even higher one in the following centuries. Even small rises in sea level can have disastrous effects and, as Marine Insights reports, this poses an extreme threat to coastal areas—where almost 40% of the population in the United States resides—with flooding frequency projected to rise from 300% to 900% in comparison to what was recorded fifty years ago.

Other than the outer reaches of space there is possibly no place quite as mysterious and terrifyingly unknown as the ocean. The National Ocean Service writes that more than 80% of this realm

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that covers about three fourths of our planet “remains unmapped, unobserved, and unexplored.” The ocean has also historically presented a seemingly unfathomable dimension to reality—spawning legends of enormous beasts like Charybdis from Homer’s *Odyssey*, the biblical Leviathan, and the infamous kraken. This is certainly a central reason for Lovecraft’s interest in—along with those furthest regions of space—the watery deep, which helped inspire such things as the octopus-like Cthulhu who resides in the sunken nightmare corpse-city of R’lyeh.

To be openly dramatic, when we cause sea levels to rise, we are messing with forces we do not fully comprehend. But saying *we*, as many on the left have pointed out, is a misleading generalization. Although most individuals do have substantial impacts on the environment, many major environmental issues can be traced directly to a minority of capitalists. As the often quoted point goes: Only about 100 companies are responsible for around 70% of greenhouse gas emissions—gases which are causing the heating of the earth and consequently sea level rise. These capitalists are akin to Obed Marsh from Lovecraft’s *The Shadow over Innsmouth* who, in order to obtain wealth in the form of gold and a strange “foreign kind of jewellery,” is said to have helped the undersea monstrosities known as the Deep Ones infiltrate and genetically infect the town. The drive of global capitalism to squeeze every last cent out of the natural world is bringing the ocean to our doorsteps, just as if we were the partially complicit yet also victimized residents of cursed Innsmouth.

The aforementioned link between the heating of the earth and rising sea levels is specifically the expansion of water when it warms and the deterioration of ice sheets, but certainly the most famous such process is the melting of glaciers. This is all well and widely known, but consider that the oldest glacial ice in Antarctica is possibly 1,000,000 years old and the oldest in Greenland is more than 100,000 years old. This whole affair is not just about the stirring of deep and mysterious forces but also ancient ones,

and perhaps no one mulled over the consequences of awakening ancient hibernating entities more than H.P. Lovecraft. *At the Mountains of Madness*, one of Lovecraft's novellas, is written as an account by the geologist William Dyer of his encounter with the strange Elder Things and shoggoths—existing in a formerly-passive state beneath the arctic—in the hope it will deter further exploration. These creatures, like the annual 260 gigatons of water released from glaciers between 2003 and 2009, are being brought back into play, and humanity is now under existential threat because of it.

Many authors have discussed how climate change poses certain cosmic and anti-humanist threats to our anthropocentric understanding of the world. Eugene Thacker, in *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy (Volume 1)*, considers how it is difficult to think “of the world as absolutely unhuman, and indifferent to the hopes, desires, and struggles of human individuals and groups.” But this “Cosmic Pessimism” is represented by media images of, for example, “the cataclysmic effects of climate change.” In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Timothy Morton discusses the titular hyperobjects—objects massively distributed spatially and temporarily—in particular global warming along with several other items of ecological concern such as Styrofoam cups, plastic bags, and nuclear radiation. According to Morton, “By understanding hyperobjects, human thinking has summoned Cthulhu-like entities into social, psychic, and philosophical space. The contemporary philosophical obsession with the monstrous provides a refreshing exit from humanscale thoughts.” Glaciers and oceans are certainly hyperobjects, and the images of their respective melting and rising can serve as some of Thacker's representations, but sea level rise is Lovecraftian in a particularly vivid aesthetic dimension. The ocean is an alien and largely unknown portion of the earth and glacial water is a primordial force finally being released after a slumber that has lasted eons.

In a video released a few months ago, academic internet personality ContraPoints makes the observation that one problem facing environmental activists is that climate change fundamentally lacks an antagonist. Furthermore, an important point of Morton's book as well as James Bridle's *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* is that climate change is so vast and vague that it cannot be pinned down, quantified, or fully *thought*. Bridle even derives the title of his work from a passage in *The Call of Cthulhu*—which he also quotes wholly within the book—that contains the line: “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.” In the context of this piece, this apt metaphor seems to verge on the literal. With all this in mind, perhaps a strategy of environmental thought could be to identify an antagonism within this gargantuan, undefinable, and unthinkable thing called climate change. If we are capable of revealing a more horrifying, Lovecraftian nature to at least sea level rise, is it possible we might induce a response closer to that which would ensue if Cthulhu truly rose from the depths?