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## Above the Hadal Deep: The Miracle and Curse of Consciousness in J. M. Ledgard's *Submergence*

*Submergence*, by J. M. Ledgard. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Coffee House Press, 2013.

An English spy is held captive by a band of Somali jihadists while, somewhere off the coast of Greenland, the woman he loves rides a submersible to the ocean floor. The plot may sound like Ian Fleming meets Jules Verne, but *Submergence*, J. M. Ledgard's second novel (after *Giraffe*, published by Penguin in 2007), isn't a tale of espionage or adventure: instead, it is an exquisitely rendered investigation into the existential anxiety, hope, and wonder undergirding these popular genres.

The novel's core polarity is laid bare in an early description of Danny Flinders, the bio-mathematician and deep-sea explorer for whom James More, her secret service paramour, longs in his captivity:

. . . she was trying to understand the pullulating life in the dark parts of the planet at a time when, up above, mankind was itself becoming a swarm and setting off in ever more artfully constructed but smaller and more mindless circles.

There is a sense of wonder and possibility in the "pullulating life," a sense of chaos and futility in the "swarm" we call civilization. The manmade mess above the surface ("We're nature's brief experiment with self-awareness," Danny tells James.) stands in contrast to the biological stability that lies beneath ("Any study of the ocean . . . should serve notice of how easily the planet might shrug us off."). It is the sentence-by-sentence juxtaposition of wonder and futility, chaos and stability that makes Ledgard's novel such a remarkable achievement.

*Submergence* is, on one level, a dramatization of "nature's brief ex-

periment." What does it mean to be "aware" in a complex and diffuse historical moment? The novel explores this question through vignettes that cumulatively represent the mesmeric scope of twenty-first-century life: in his captivity, James More thinks about everything from satellites mapping the globe to microbial life in the hadal deep. On one page, he contemplates the true nature of his jihadist captors; on the next, he recalls fragments of the dense canon that defines Western culture (Brueghel, Milton, and Donne make frequent appearances).

What emerges is, to paraphrase John Berger, a way of looking at the world. "It is easier," the omniscient narrator asserts, "for human beings to explore outward than it is for them to push inward." *Submergence* calls for us to narrow the gap between inward and outward exploration by pointing our consciousness in the direction of something other than "artfully constructed, mindless circles." Ultimately, we must submerge ourselves in the present (global) moment, even if we "envy the Victorian explorers for having such obvious goals and for the contrast they experienced between the world they discovered and the world they returned to."

Of course, Ledgard does not tell us *how* exactly to disrupt our "mindless circles" or suppress our envy, but he does, with ample erudition and a precise ear for language, show us what an alert and engaged twenty-first-century consciousness might look like. As James waits for his captors either to execute or release him, he watches his "subconscious [try] to make sense of a whole that [is] guttering and shedding itself like a planet in its infancy." *Submergence* is most profoundly concerned with this effort to understand the *whole*. If Ledgard levels any explicit critique it is against the present day drive for specialization, and if he exhibits any particular nostalgia, it is for the far-ranging curiosity of the Enlightenment. Who, he seems to ask, is paying attention to the bigger picture? More importantly, *how* can a single consciousness pay attention to a whole that has become so unruly?

The task, Ledgard suggests, requires a sprawling form such as the novel. A political and war journalist by trade, Ledgard uses the novel as a means to probe rather than report, to ask existential questions that cannot be answered but must be explored. In doing so, he affirms one possible future for the genre: post-Sebald, the line between fiction and non-fiction has become increasingly blurred, and authors like Ledgard and Teju Cole are publishing novels in which the protagonists do a lot of thinking, not about themselves, or not solely about themselves, but rather about the world in which they live. In one sense, this marks a return to form--Defoe was a journalist long before he wrote *Robinson Crusoe*--but the novel spent much of the twentieth

century dwelling on the isolated and alienated consciousness, and it might be time, given the precarious state of the planet, for the genre to look outward again; maybe the novel's twenty-first-century task is to help repair the alienated consciousness by showing it how to reflect on something other than itself. "The greatest privilege of education," Ledgard writes, in a possible echo of Berger, "is to renew and clarify your mind through the perception of others." In an age of instant messaging and pilot-less aircrafts, the novel remains the only form capable of rendering "perception" in blow-by-blow detail.

Ledgard's *Submergence* offers a compelling investigation of a world (*our* world) in which doom and largesse sit side by side. Thoughtful without being dogmatic, beautiful without being precious, it is exactly the novel we need right now.