

The Underworld, From Here

By Kathleen Watt

AS TRAVELOGUE, THE STORY of Orpheus in the Underworld is a simple one. The famous poet and singer of Greek mythology, Orpheus, who could charm the gods and wild beasts with the beauty of his music, has lost his beloved Eurydice to death. So he has followed her across the River Styx to Hades, to plead for a reprieve. With his lyre, he has won her release back to life, on condition that he neither speak to her nor look back at her, until both he and Eurydice have achieved the living world once again. This proves too much for the loving couple, and what happens after that is tragic. But it is the story of Eurydice's rescue that has been irresistible to composers—Christoff Willibald Gluck preeminent among them.

Of course, Orpheus isn't the only one ever to have visited the Underworld and lived to tell about it. There have been lots of others, before and since, including Odysseus, Herakles, Aeneas, Theseus—and these are just the Greeks. And it's just possible that we ourselves have deep personal knowledge of this Orpheus, his journey, and the collective imagination that created him. For we suppose ourselves indulgent spectators on the naïve inventions of the pagan ancients, which only incidentally supply the underpinning of Gluck's transporting music. But there are many ways in which Orpheus' experience is our own, daily, whether it be underground, in the suffocating heat, the limitations and deprivations of the metropolitan underground, or in the more ephemeral promptings of intuition, the subconscious, and our dreams.

Lurching along noisy rails under Manhattan, for example, I am losing myself in the poet W. H. Auden's reflection on *Landscape with Fall of Icarus*, the 16th century painting by Pieter Breughel the Younger—who must have read Vergil, who might have invented Icarus. I've seen Breughel's painting of the plowman toiling in his high field that looks out to sea. The plowman doesn't even see the winged boy fall out of the sky, right over his neat rows of Belgian clay. That's the thing. The plowman doesn't notice, but it doesn't mean the boy didn't fall. I mean, the Underworld is *in our midst*. When is it ever not—or we in its? Foolish Icarus may mock the Sun, rueful Daedalus may watch the melting wax of his own hubris drop the son into the sea—all without disturbing a plowman's day in the field. Or vice versa. It's right there in Breughel's

painting of 500 years ago. Or so I am thinking, as our subway conductor announces a delay in service, due to congestion in the tunnel up ahead.

The paradigm of the Underworld—or Hell, or the collective Unconscious—especially the journey there and back, is so fundamental to the human fabric that it occurs constantly in the history of civilization, both literally and figuratively. It is made by pilgrims and wanderers, adventurers and seekers, ancient and modern, waking and sleeping. There were Jesus, Dante, Gulliver and Captain Nemo; Jean Valjean, Alice of course...why, I myself have been to the dark side—haven't you? It is an exploration of the projected self, perhaps, or some experience of the self turned inward. It may be not only universal, but timeless as well. For like Alice, we emerge from our visit there with self-knowledge, or, like Eurydice, not at all. It's that simple. The details may change but the paradigm persists. We may be surprised to find how very well we know this territory, after all.

For example, the proscenium to Dante's *Inferno* admonishes, roughly, "Surrender all hope, ye who enter here...." And beyond the vestibule can be seen the souls of the Futile, perpetually running. But wait—don't I see that every day at rush hour, at the portals of, say, Grand Central Station?

Likewise, in the Catacombs of Paris, one monument is inscribed, "Come, people of the world...it is here that the greatest of masters, the Tomb, holds its school of Truth." Here, where bones and skulls are heaped upon bones and skulls, one guesses that the master of this "school" owes little to that eloquent appeal. For he packs in the crowds just as surely in New York's Green-Wood draws the tourist busses.

Of course, near my home in Brooklyn the sign says merely, "The 2 and 3 trains will be *rerouted* to the East Side *for the rest of the year*." I'm thinking "This is going to be hell." And like a mythological soul seeking passage into Hades, by ferry across the River of Woe with a token upon the lips, my crossing under the East River will still cost me the dollar-fifty fare.

But access to Hell is gained not by the portal alone. Some of those who could not—or would not—pay the fare have become "The Mole People" of New York, so named by author Jennifer Roth. These are they who choose instead to tarry in the darkness of forgotten subway

sidings, subsisting by primitive natural laws in makeshift communities beneath the sidewalks of the 21st century, going nowhere.

In London's urban legend, the subterraneans are called "Troglodytes," and they share their space with "sewer pigs" and "killer rats," and trains carrying walled-up cars full of skeletons, on tracks to oblivion, due to "blasphemously terrible events," Well. These are the apocrypha of the year 2000. But how is it that Breughel, again, has already imagined our times—in *The Triumph of Death*—with its armies of skeletal demons marauding by cartload, sweeping up hapless peasants and terrified Cardinals for another round. And truthfully, waiting wearily on a late-night subway platform, I do sometimes wonder what's really inside those slow-moving yellow armored cars.

In Paris, where Breughel never was, things have been going on underground for centuries, and curious tourists can now add even the sewers to their sightseeing itinerary. A seeker there may meditate upon 1,304 miles of canals, magnificent vaulted feats of underground engineering, each vault named by a neat porcelain plaque, an eerie street in the shadow city beneath the City of Light. It is into these tunnels that *Les Misérables* fugitive Jean Valjean escaped, to his redemption, braving what Victor Hugo called "the inside of a tomb already prepared, death in the mire beneath a cover! Slow suffocation by filth, a stone box where asphyxia opens its claw in the mire and clutches you by the throat; fetidness mingled with the death rattle; slime... sulfurated hydrogen...dung...with that enormous city which knows nothing of it all, over one's head!"

The Catacombs that advertise "the Tomb, the greatest of masters" are farther down, carved into the chalky bedrock under Paris. There the underground tourist can stroll through the bones of five or six million Parisians, stacked in a maze of ten-foot-high walls, bleached corridors accented with a periodic layer of skulls laid like an elegant coping in an eternal interior décor.

Travelling elsewhere in Europe, we find much older "cities of the dead," like those under the streets of Rome. There, hundreds of miles of galleries date from the second century, when persecuted Christians developed immense multilevel caves for the ordinary dead, so that they might continue to live as a contiguous Christian community after death. Today these galleries are

visited by thousands of pilgrims from all over the world, who doggedly descend into the musty damp to implore intercession of the venerated martyrs.

Older still are the prehistoric caves of Lascaux, Altamira, Avignon, and hundreds of unexcavated others, where our Cro-Magnon ancestors have left on the walls the imprint of the way things looked to them. Archaeologist and art historian Robert Hughes describes the caves as “an art gallery that could be entered only by crawling on your belly through a hole in the earth...” Once inside, a tiny tunnel opens out into a labyrinth of pitch black intersecting passageways, lighted wanly by pathetically unreliable torches, by which these prehistoric artists and journalists recorded the events of their days. Often they were not alone in their underground studios, as witness the bones of animals strewn across the uneven floor. Hughes suggests that the instinctive human fear of small dark places, caves both actual and figurative, may have arisen from the experiences of these impressionable humans, vulnerable and terrified, “...fears that became absorbed into a later, more developed culture, in such narratives as that of the mythical Cretan labyrinth, in whose core the terrible Minotaur waited.” Hughes further connects the pagan explanation and the Christian concept of Hell—another dark place where terrible retribution is exacted—which the human psyche is already primed by many centuries to fear. Hughes considers this “the strongest Cro-Magnon element left in modern life.” Is it any wonder that we are afraid to go to Hell?

But here now is Carl Jung, human brain expert, to say maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe it isn’t really the prehistoric condition that has planted the myths of Underworld and Hell in our collective psyche. Maybe these and all other archetypes spring *from* the fountainhead of psyche, where they exist by primordial nature. “How else,” he wondered, “could it have occurred to man to divide the cosmos...into a bright day-world and a dark night-world peopled with fabulous monsters, unless he had the prototype of such a division in himself, in the polarity of the conscious and visible, and the unknowable unconscious?”

Consider for a moment the way these caves are typically discovered. A patch of loose gravel under the hapless wanderer gives way to an unexpected echo. A draft blowing out of the ground catches the attention of curious boys. Is it the past whispering in the ear of the future? The resonance of truths we may have forgotten? In ancient Greece, seekers made laborious pilgrimage to Delphi especially to hear the Oracles of Earth delivered by a priestess in a

subterranean cave. Sometimes her clairvoyance was explained as the issue of a prophetic trance, induced by the fumes of natural gases, exhaled from the ground. In our own time, on the West Coast of Africa, the wizards of Loango still descend into an artificial pit or narrow hollow, remain there for some time absorbing a blessed effulgence—and emerge inspired. Surely there is some thread that connects the wisp of dust in the desert, marking caves underground, to the vapors of the oracular earth that carry secrets from the Underworld.

At least, we can't resist thinking so. In *Notes on the Underground*, Rosalind Williams charts the intersection of the psyche and technology. In the late 18th and 19th centuries it was impossible to escape a theme of excavation, “from the digging up of Troy to the digging of railway tunnels through the Alps.” And every treasure that was unearthed refreshed the quest to “recover the truth about the past by digging ever more deeply...In both social narratives and technical projects, excavation was cast in mythological terms, as a heroic journey into forbidden realms.” Jules Verne, for example, took his readers *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. H. G. Wells introduced his to *The First Men In The Moon*. And in the early 20th century, Lewis Mumford turned to the underground as an environmental metaphor of a burgeoning technological society:

“The mine...is the first completely inorganic environment to be created and lived in by man....If the miner sees shapes on the walls of his cavern, as the candle flickers, they are only the monstrous distortion of his pick or his arm: shapes of fear. Day has been abolished and the rhythm of nature broken: continuous day-and-night production first came into existence here. The miner must work by artificial light even though the sun be shining outside; still further down in the seams, he must work by artificial ventilation too: a triumph of the ‘manufactured environment.’”

Often there is hell to pay. “When the Earth is restless, miners die,” wrote Peggy Seeger about the Spring Hill, Pennsylvania mine disaster of 1958. Twelve men were miraculously rescued after eight days of entombment in a tunnel “three feet high and a hundred long.” When they had run out of provisions, and the lamps had given out, and the darkness had closed around them so that the miners themselves could not know which of them had breathed his last, they “lived on songs and hope instead...hope imprisoned in a three-foot seam.”

The Underworld seems to work in reverse as well: “Sleep, and Death, his brother, dwelt in the Underworld,” writes renowned classicist Edith Hamilton, but “dreams...ascended *from* there to men,” the false ones passing through a gate of ivory, and the true ones through a gate of horn. Few of us return from a meeting with Death, the better to savor life, of course, but most of us do know Sleep, his brother—and some of us would like to know him better. We travel with him to that Underworld, as it were, every night, and behind us, as we return, trail our dreams.

It’s these implanted *impressions* of the Underworld that we can’t escape, you see. In spite of our sophisticated selves, this Underworld is always in our midst, as we are in the midst of it, whether as cause or as effect. On an ordinary workday we may wake from a receding dream, straining to part a veil of forgetfulness as the alarm startles us awake, feeling that something primeval has visited, through a portal of ivory or horn, or perhaps the Looking-Glass. We descend into the ground, to ride our train to Gotham City, steeling our senses against a stench like that of mythical Harpies, and dodge the relentless entreaties of the homeless and the hopeless, like Dante repelling the grasping hands of the Shades of Hell. The trip is often unpleasant, to be sure. But we have a not irrational confidence that the third rail, deadly as it may be, also has the power to deliver us, body and soul. Body to its destination on the surface; soul to some higher attainment, perhaps, enlarged by all that it has witnessed underground.

Another time, travelling perhaps, and standing on the same stones where Ovid may have recited his poem of tragic Orpheus, we may feel a stirring of eons past. And then we know that we are on our journey—not just on vacation. So we listen more carefully for ancient wisdom within ourselves.

Sometimes when the orchestra is tuning, and theatergoers are rustling into their seats, fragments of melody and hasty whispers rush together in a sound like the wind, like an Aeolian Harp from somewhere beyond the golden proscenium. And in the enveloping hush between lights down and curtain up, hundreds of others like ourselves surrender collectively to preternatural possibilities. Then, certainly, the sense of the Orphic Underworld is not ancient but incipient, not allegorical but visceral, neither outside nor inside, but both.