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He is neither large nor small, about five foot seven, with a slim frame. He is white with slicked-back brown hair. His powerful eyes are always a bloodshot, fiery red, recalls Jamall, a veteran of the tunnels who had given me sketchy directions to “Satan’s den.”

“Madness is the most powerful evil,” Jamall warned. Jamall does not believe the Dark Angel is really the devil, but he does believe that the man is mad, and from his madness he derives evil powers.

He is mad. But most who have met this self-proclaimed Angel of Death, including the police, are at least slightly afraid of him because he believes he is the devil, and, in his black tunnel, he has an edge.

Tunnel people steer clear of his den.

“It’s the vibes he gives off,” another homeless man explains. “The guy can look at you and he knows what will scare you. Maybe it’s the way he stares; maybe it’s what he says. And if he can’t scare you, he threatens voodoo on people you know. Weird-ass guy. Everyone laughs but no one wants to get near him.”

“Satan’s den” is simple: a bed of stacked cardboard on which blankets are neatly laid, scattered books and magazines, and rats the size of cats. The rodents often walk up unafraid to visitors in his den and sniff, but they stay away from Satan.

“Down here,” he declares, “I am the law. I keep the order.”

He refuses to go upstairs for prolonged periods of time because, he says, he belongs underground.

However, he has been seen aboveground. Sergeant Bryan Henry, the first and, for a long time, only officer charged with policing the tunnels, acknowledges the sense of power he projects.

“Upstairs he looked at me as if saying, this is your turf, cool,” recalls Henry, “but I get you on my turf, down below, it’s you and me and you are mine. I’ll take you.” Henry, a hulking cop, rolls his shoulders as if suddenly cold at the memory. “He is a dangerous individual,” he says. “Very dangerous.”

Satan uses the fear he incites to live better. Runners, mostly young homeless men, bring him food—not for reward but for what they believe is their own safety.

“I do it cuz the man scares the shit out of me,” says Rico, who is six foot three and 240 pounds. “It would be unlucky for me to leave him without food. When I run stuff down, he tells me ‘it’s about time’ and that he was going to ‘make things get nasty’ for me.

“One time I thought, ‘This is shit, man. I’m not afraid of this hot dog,’” Rico goes on after a pause. “I didn’t go down with food that day. Next day I broke my leg climbing a fence I climb hundreds of times. Crazy,” he shakes his head.

Even before the cast was dried, Rico made his penance trip to Satan. “I swear I never knew such pain! And he was waiting for me. He knew! He said, ‘That’s what happens when you don’t serve me. Next time it will be worse. Much worse.’ I believe him, man,” Rico said, wide-eyed.

A young transit cop in Penn Station says he doesn’t mind seeing “Satan” in the terminal aboveground, but he makes sure he wears a cross when going into the tunnel where he might encounter the Dark Angel.

“It’s like, up here he knows better than to do anything,” the cop says. “But under there, he thinks the turf is his and he can do anything. And a guy like that, he’s capable of anything.”

Police walkie-talkies don’t extend deep into the tunnels, “so you’re all alone,” the officer says. “You got no back-up. It’s strange but the radios carry right up to his camp, but, as soon as you reach his area, they go dead.”

Harold Deamues of ADAPT had one of the most striking encounters with the Dark Angel.

“We were walking along looking for people and suddenly it felt all weird like, quiet or something. Me and my partner were looking straight ahead and suddenly this guy, arms crossed over his chest, rises out of a coffin-shaped box. I almost started screaming. Me and my partner, we thought this was the real Dracula,” Deamues now roars with laughter at the memory, but adds, “I mean under there, anything is possible, you know what I’m saying?”

Deamues, who has the best rapport with “Satan” of anyone who has encountered him, does not believe the man takes drugs because he always speaks fluently and coherently. Rico has never seen him even light a cigarette.

“But his eyes are red, always red and glowing,” says Rico, wondering why.

I notice this striking redness as the Dark Angel paces about his den, talking on and on. Each of my questions is lost to his monologue. He seems hardly aware of me, but it can only be me to whom he is speaking. I am glad he is not staring at me as he speaks. Instead he focuses on his tirade.

“You have left the world of fairness and good. Goodness can no longer reach you down here. You are no longer safe,” he says, now looking at the ground. Then he hisses. “Leave, little lost angel, before the tunnels swallow you and you are one of mine.”

I do leave, almost as quickly as he has appeared to me. My back feels cold, as though he has changed his mind and his hand will reach my shoulder and stop me. But it doesn’t. I turn to watch him swing a cloth robe across his back, fashioning a cape. Then he vanishes into his own darkness.

Rather than visiting him again, I press others for information about him.

Jamall responds decisively, “All you need to know about that guy is to avoid him.”

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The Underground In History, Literature, And Culture

“You do not know me if you think I am afraid, or that I build my burrow simply out of fear.”

—Franz Kafka, *“The Burrow”*

THE SELF-PROCLAIMED DARK ANGEL PERSONIFIES MANY VISCERAL fears ordinary people have of the underground and the creatures that exist there. Frightening philosophical and psychological notions of the underground, which have been passed from one generation to the next in our culture, color our perception of the region and the people who live there. For centuries, the depths have been depicted in literature and history as a nurturing environment for evil and madness. It is the perfect dark, unknown, and foreboding terrain on which imaginations avidly feed.

From those images, the subterranean environment in Western culture has evolved metaphorically as a mental landscape, a social environment, and an ideological map. The underground has been portrayed as a threatening underside of aboveground society. Although the symbolic significance has changed dramatically over the centuries, recurring metaphors in social and literary history have spawned widespread and enduring connotations, damaging prejudices, and a simple but deep fear of the dark—all resulting in serious obstacles to helping the underground homeless. Fortunately, scholars are recognizing and exposing this cultural inheritance—the first steps toward ridding ourselves of its pernicious effects.

The underground in literature is seldom portrayed as an Eden. One of the few exceptions is the ancient legend of Agharathi, which promises a 900-mile tunnel to a fantastically rich and sophisticated civilization. Several modern-day writers have tried to move Agharathi from the dark underground to the sublime mountains of Tibet, as in Hollywood’s Shangri-la, and into the vast oceans of Atlantis. However, adherers to the Agharathi legend still place it in the heart of the underground, some even claiming that the tunnel system under Central Park is part of the Agharathi network.

Mostly, the underground has long been synonymous with hell, in the Bible and in its interpretations. Dante’s rings descend downward, for example. In the nineteenth century, writers used the underground as a metaphor for a people who lived on the surface but were doomed by crime and mutilating poverty. Today’s criminal world is the “underworld” in popular terms.

In her book *Notes on the Underground*, historian Rosalind Williams explains that the underground was not always feared. She contends that subterranean iconography is based on historical and literary interpretations of underworlds as technological environments. Fear of the underground emerged historically, at the same time as fear of technological progress.

In prehistoric times, the underground was a comforting refuge from natural dangers aboveground. Humanity’s earliest constructions were burrows rather than buildings, “representing the wish to return to the dark, enclosed safety of the womb, which is so primitive as to be premythic,” Williams writes. Until the scientific revolution, the general image of the earth was that of a nurturing mother. “It was a sacred entity,” according to Williams. “To delve into the earth was akin to rape. Mining was therefore an enterprise of dubious morality, comparable to mutilation and violation.” Through the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, sinking a mine was a ritual operation and religious ceremonies were held before entering the sacred underground.

In the Renaissance, however, the oral and sacred epic tradition of the journey to the underworld was transformed into narratives that were written and secular. In these narratives, an adventurous, mad, or unlucky traveler discovers an underworld, which he enters and from which he sometimes fails to reemerge.

In some of these narratives the imprint of the earlier sacred tradition is still evident. William Beckford's *Vathek* (1787) tells how the caliph Vathek, a haughty monarch of portentous powers and appetites, enters into a pact with Eblis, the Oriental Satan. After renouncing his religion and God, the caliph is allowed to enter Eblis's Palace of Subterranean Fire, which lies below the ruins of an ancient city and holds treasure and talismans. When Vathek and his lover approach the ruined city, a rock platform opens before them and a polished marble staircase leads them downward to the realm of Eblis: "... they found themselves in a place which, although vaulted, was so spacious and lofty that at first they took it for a great plain. Eventually, their eyes became accustomed to the great size of surrounding objects, they discovered rows of columns and arcades running off in diminishing perspective until they concentrated in a radiant spot like the setting sun painting the sea with his last rays." They see an immense hall lined with pale specters, some shrieking, others silent, all with glimmering eyes and with their right hands covering their hearts being consumed by fire. Vathek and his lover begin to burn with hatred and are condemned to eternal despair.

In the introduction to *Vathek*, Jorge Luis Borges praised it as "the first truly atrocious hell in literature." Beckford set a precedent for a demonic underground that continues into contemporary works such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*.

Technology provided new images of the underground, and some literature began to depict the depths as a source of knowledge and philosophical truth. In particular, a new type of intellectual inquiry called natural science—now called science—emerged in the late Renaissance and depended on mining images to explain its principles and methods. Using excavation of the earth as a metaphor, Francis Bacon suggested researchers should dig "further and further into the mine of natural knowledge." For deep within the earth "the truth of nature lies hid in certain deep mines and caves" (in Williams, *Notes on the Underground*).

Throughout the eighteenth century and into the next, social and philosophical thinkers used the underground as a metaphor to dig into the rich truth. *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo's 1862 book on the underclass uprising in France, is a prime example of a narrative exploring the underground, metaphorically and literally. Crucial events are set in the sewers under Paris.

Hugo explained why he journeyed metaphorically into the depths:

The historian of moral and ideas has a mission no less austere than that of the historian of events. The latter has the surface of civilization, the struggles of the crowns, the births of princes, the marriages of kings, the battles, the assemblies, the great public men, the revolutions in the sunlight, all the exterior; the other historian has the interior, the foundation, the people who work, who suffer, and who wait, overburdened woman, agonizing childhood, the secret wars of man against man, the obscure ferocities, the prejudices, the established iniquities, the subterranean reactions of the law, the secret evolutions of souls, the vague shudderings of the multitudes, the starvation, the barefoot, the bare-armed, the disinherited, the orphans, the unfortunate and the infamous, all the specters that wander in darkness.... Is the underworld of civilization, because it is deeper and gloomier, less important than the upper? Do we really know the mountain when we do not know the cavern?

Historians have responded to Hugo's challenge for a century and a half, says Williams, digging beneath the surface manifestations to unearth submerged groups (homosexuals, criminals, and women), submerged evidence (dreams, sexual customs, and mental constructs), and submerged forces (economic, technological, and ecological).

Much of nineteenth century realism also incorporated the theme that a journey into the underground was a quest. "The pilgrim descends into the social depths in search of social truth," as Williams explains. "The descent is always metaphorical, but in view of the living conditions of the poor, it may be literal as well."

England's mid-Victorian realists in particular, like Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and George Eliot, were praised for their realistic descriptions of the social life of the "underground." George Gissing's 1889 novel, *The Nether World*, was eerily prescient in describing the plight of many of today's underground homeless, although in his book, the people striving to survive and maintain a modicum of dignity have been trapped physically beneath the surface rather than trapped by social circumstances.

It was Hugo who most effectively used the idea of a dark underworld to threaten the mighty and the wealthy. His subterranean world is not only poor but also ominous to French society. "Men heard beneath their feet the obscure course of a muffled sound, when some mysterious uprising of molehills appeared on the surface of civilization, when the earth fissured, the mouths of caverns opened, and men saw monstrous heads spring suddenly from the earth." Again, from "an enormous black hole ... the gloomy voice of the people was heard dimly growling. A fearful sacred voice, composed of the roaring brute and speech of God ... which comes at the same time from below like the voice of the lion and from above like the voice of thunder."

Although Hugo exposes the reader to the brutality of underground life, he also dramatizes the unbreakable ties between societies above and below ground, as in the climactic chase scene in which Jean Valjean carries Marius through the sewers. His message is that society underground is part of society as a whole and therefore can be rescued from its misery.
