

The Life Below the Ground

The Life

Below the Ground

**A Study of the Subterranean
in Literature and History**

by Wendy Lesser

Faber and Faber Boston and London

For Nicholas

*who shares my interest in tunnels,
subways, and holes in the ground*

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the bottom of the deepest ocean chasm, or the source of a volcano's lava. This is not to say that the barrier to accessibility remains firmly fixed. Preindustrial Europe could not have imagined the nineteenth-century coal-miners who were to burrow miles deep in the earth, nor could those miners have pictured the oil wells of the twentieth century. What this indeterminacy means is that the underground has always been situated oddly between the visible and the invisible—between that which one can see and touch in one's normal life, and that which one must accept on faith.

This may explain, in part, why the real underground I have been describing has given rise to so many fictional or imaginary undergrounds. There was, to begin with, Hades—that is, the imaginary underground is first of all the locus of death and rebirth, the place where dead souls go to be washed of their memories and returned to life on earth. In this sense, the underground is both place of origin and place of final rest. From this land of the shades developed the idea of the Christian hell—no longer the abode of the undifferentiated dead, but a place of eternal punishment for the damned alone. The notion of the underworld has always held something of mystery and terror for the living, but with Christianity the subterranean began to be equated with evil—a connotation which carries through to the present. The word “underground” is associated with poverty, with criminal activity, with the socially unacceptable. Even when a group purposely describes itself in this way (as do certain political or artistic movements), the choice signifies a rejection of the conventional notion of good, an adherence to the opposite of the accepted political code or aesthetic standard.

When I first began telling people that I was working on a book about the underground, the response was startlingly consistent and startlingly inappropriate. “Oh, you're writing about politics?” was the most frequent response, and “Oh, you're writing about pornography?” the second. It never occurred to the vast majority of my interlocutors that I might be writing about holes in the ground, and sewers, and basements, and so on.

Of course, if I were only writing about real holes in the ground, this would be a very different kind of book—a work of city planning or archaeology, possibly a book like David Macaulay's *Underground* (which, though written for children, is actually very informative for adults), or Benson Bobrick's *Labyrinths of Iron* (a wonderfully imaginative history of subways). And if I were writing about the Weather Underground or underground movies, it would be a book that didn't

concern itself with tunnels or basements (except insofar as the revolutionaries hid there, or the movies were shown there). But my true interest in the underground is neither totally concrete nor totally figurative. I care about the points at which the real and the imaginary overlap—where places in the ground become hidden places in the individual or social mind, and vice versa. I am interested in the underground as a vital and responsive metaphor—not a pure figure of speech like the Weather Underground or the present-day Christian hell, but an active bringing together of two different degrees of reality.

This has partly to do with my own place in history, of course. I am too close to the Weather Underground to pay attention to it fairly, and too far away from the medieval notion of hell to “remember” its powerful connection with a geographical underworld. But I think the issue is more than just that of personal limitation. I don't think idiosyncrasy alone explains why the chapters in this book focus on a particular period of history lasting less than two centuries.

There was actually a time (we are beyond it now, and hence the inappropriateness of the usual response to my topic) when the underground had both a strongly physical and a strongly figurative meaning. I would date this period roughly from the 1790s to the 1950s—perhaps, if I were to be ridiculously specific, from the French Revolution in 1789 to the launching of the first manned space flight in 1958. Before that time, the two senses of the underground, the hole in the ground and the hidden aspect of existence, had not yet converged; after that, they became split apart, and the underground lost much of its mystical capacity to enchant. But during that period the idea of the underground was a powerful, terrifying, and entrancing one, in part because it was still developing in so many directions.

What I am talking about here, in a larger sense, is the way a metaphor exists in time. The underground is itself an excellent metaphor for metaphor. It is, on the one hand, a real place in the world, and on the other hand it is an idea or a feeling: the physical place seems inherently suggestive of the spiritual or literary connotations, and those connotations in turn enrich our experience of the material object. Like all good metaphors, the underground is simultaneously and inseparably a concrete thing and an abstract notion. But it is not always the *same* notion. What the underground “represents” (if I can use such a clumsy word for so delicate an operation) varies not only with the individual writer or reader, but with the time period in which the metaphor resides.

It should be clear by now that my idea of metaphor carries with

it a certain belief about the relationship between the individual and history. I am reacting, I think, against two other, mutually opposed ideas about metaphor. One of these implies that the individual author is solely or largely responsible for the creation of metaphor. It is this sense which we draw on when we say that So-and-so writes very metaphorical prose whereas Whatsisname tends to be quite literal, or when we praise the richness of metaphor in a particular poet's work. From this point of view, Karl Marx, George Gissing, and Maxim Gorky would be directly responsible for the underground's significance as a metaphor for the lower class, Lewis Carroll and Sigmund Freud would have given it a connection to the unconscious, Ralph Ellison would have made it mean escape, and so on. This theory (which I am painting in its broadest and therefore least tenable form) posits the world as a bank of raw material out of which each author draws the images he needs, using them for his own purposes. Though it is a theory easily discredited by references to the social and linguistic context of literature, it is nonetheless a powerful theory that appeals to our ideas about how great writers work, and I do not wish to abandon it entirely.

The opposite theory, and one which I find in some ways more pernicious, suggests that metaphor is eternal and unchanging. This idea is inherent in the Jungian notion of archetypes, and it often takes its most persuasive form in the work of Jungian writers. Unlike critics who see each metaphor as newly invented by a single author, Jungians are interested in the continuity of metaphor over time, and are therefore, like myself, attracted to the repetition of a single image in various cultures and periods. The Jungian psychologist James Hillman has pursued this technique in *The Dream and the Underworld*, an exploration of the idea of death in dreams, in myth, and in the literature of psychology. For Hillman, there is only one meaning to the underworld metaphor, and that is death; all of the various shapes which this image takes are merely the shadowy signposts pointing toward that deepest reality. There is a stern Platonic rigidity to this conception, implying that we live in a world whose ambiguity and multiplicity are merely deceptive, and where our only task is to puzzle out the clues and find the single true meaning that lies behind each object or image. Nothing ever changes in this pre-established world of meaning, and since the material world we live in obviously *does* change over time, that world has to be rendered meaningless for this idea to work.

I would situate my idea about metaphor somewhere between these two extremes. If everything were up to the individual, Dante's

rich and terrifying underworld would not be so firmly located between the pagan openness of Virgil's and the secularized emptiness of T.S. Eliot's. And the same example, which contradicts the "individualist" notion of metaphor, can also be used against the "eternal" definition: the three underworlds are clearly related to each other, but they are also quite different. That difference—the obvious change in the metaphor over time—is what first attracted me to my subject. For what I thought I noticed was a moment in history, now virtually past, when the underground became a particularly intense metaphor. The seeds for this transformation were already there in myth and literature, the materials Hillman draws on for his evidence. But they needed the catalyst of historical event to set them off.

When the Western world began to change toward the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century, the significance of the underground also began to change. And I think the reason the metaphor grew more powerful was that the boundaries between fantasy and reality, between things in the mind and things in the world, became vague and blurred in regard to the subterranean. Old ideas which had been attached to fantastic tales now gained association with actual places one could touch and see—with mines, and subways, and tunnels, and excavations. And the pride that people felt in this technological downward progress mingled with the old fears held over from myth and religion to produce the distinctive lure of the underground, a feeling that was a mixture of horror and curiosity, attraction and repulsion.

I have been somewhat arbitrary in locating this transformation during the period 1789 to 1958; certainly the dates could easily waver at either end. But the last decade of the eighteenth century does seem to signal the start of a subterranean era. The French Revolution, for instance, is not the only "underground" event that took place in the 1790s. In 1793 a British amateur archaeologist published his account of several hundred barrows which he had excavated for historical rather than purely antiquarian reasons; in other words, he was looking for a key to the past as opposed to some nice ancient crockery. This was the beginning of modern archaeology. And in 1795 the Scottish scientist James Hutton, often referred to as the founder of modern geology, published the first full version of his ideas in his *Theory of the Earth*.

These developments influenced Western thought as a whole, but they seemed to take particularly strong hold in England (and later in the rest of the English-speaking world). For internal economic and social reasons as well, Britain became the focus of nineteenth-century concern

with the underground. Thus industrial development and major metropolitan renovation led to political and social “subterranean” inquiries that matched and responded to the concern with the physical underground. The 1830s, for instance, were the period of Edwin Chadwick’s nearly fanatical exploration of the sanitary conditions of London—an effort brought about by the lack of proper sewage facilities among the very poor, and the resulting prevalence of contagious disease in the closely packed urban population. The 1840s marked Friedrich Engels’ analysis of the conditions of miners in England, along with other citizens classed in the “lower depths” of British society. In the 1850s, the newly founded Metropolitan Board of Works set out to modernize London’s sewer and water system by installing a series of underground pipes. And in the 1860s Britain opened the world’s first subway system, the London Underground. Meanwhile British writers began picking up the idea of the underground in their work. Novels like *Hard Times*, *North and South*, *The Nether World*, and *Demos* explicitly referred to the lower classes as subterranean creatures. From the realism of such novels the underground metaphor took off in different directions—to the children’s fantasies of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Princess and the Goblin* on the one hand, and to the science fiction worlds of H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* and Bulwer Lytton’s *The Coming Race* on the other.

Similar underground developments were occurring at about the same time in other Western countries. Jules Verne wrote *Journey to the Center of the Earth* in the 1860s, following decades of French geological debate. Eugène Sue and Victor Hugo wrote about poverty, criminality, and the Paris sewers in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The Paris subway system, the *Metropolitain*, opened in 1900. The Americans also opened a subway—a small underground streetcar system in Boston—in 1897, and the New York subway system began operating in 1900. Before this there had been a different kind of “Underground Railroad” in America, the one used to bring escaping slaves to the free northern states. And soon after the turn of the century came the rapid development of “underground” political activity such as that advocated by Emma Goldman, John Reed, and other major figures of the American left.

The subterranean continued to be a factor in the early twentieth century—in European trench warfare of the First World War, in Freud’s new idea of the unconscious, in the buried shelters in which British civilians hid from bombs during the Second World War, and in black

American writing from the 1940s. The underground also appeared in the developing popular arts of this century—in science fiction, in thriller fiction, and particularly in the movies. But at the same time the idea was starting to fade: its importance waned as the culture began to look outward rather than downward for its imaginative vehicles and its technological progress. The real death blow to the underground era came, I think, with the launching of Sputnik.

This is not to say that the importance of the underground ended equally for everyone, everywhere. To the inhabitants of cities like London and New York (and probably Paris, Rome, and Mexico City as well, though I know them less well), the underground continues to be an active metaphor. Thus Margaret Drabble can write a contemporary novel like *The Middle Ground*, about sewers, radical politics, and the things that bubble up from the unconscious; Iris Murdoch can make a similar use of the London subway in *A Word Child*; and Graham Swift, in his recent work *Shuttlecock*, can construct a fiction about a man who rides the Underground to his basement workplace, where he does confidential work for the Secret Service and eventually uncovers damning information about his father’s undercover work during the war. For these British novelists, the connection between the figurative and the real underground is still alive: the metaphor is still vital and useful.

Far into this century, New York’s subways have continued to exert both a mythic and a concrete influence over the people who use them. Randall Jarrell, in a letter to a German correspondent, wrote in 1949: “You would hardly believe how ugly, violent and overwhelming a big city like Detroit is; and in New York, looking at the crowds waiting in the subway stations, I’ve often thought, ‘This is Hell. Hell must be exactly like this.’” In 1982, *The New Yorker* magazine picked up the same idea in one of its cartoons. In the first of five panels, a well-dressed man walks down some unidentified steps. As we progress through the panels, his appearance changes—he acquires hooves, then furry legs, finally a beard, horns, and a cape—and in the last panel a full-blown devil waits for a train in what is clearly a subway station. This is the subway station as hell, but it is also the New York citizen as unleashed id, for that transformed gentleman is Pan (in the midway panels) as well as Satan.

Some American cities, on the other hand, are too young to remember the underground era. Their present incarnations cannot hark back to that earlier period because they were never part of it; in fact, they arose under conditions that were diametrically opposed to it. This

is particularly true, for instance, of a newly burgeoned city like Houston, now one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country. Situated in a hot, flat, featureless part of the Texas landscape, the city seems to have no geographical rationale: "Why should these crazy people have settled here," I can hear the archaeologists of the future wondering, "rather than anywhere else?" In older cities the stimulus for the city's existence lay on the surface—in major ports, or obvious trade routes, or sheltering mountains, or whatever—and the exploration of the underground came after the fact, after the city had already been settled. But Houston reverses this pattern. The reason for Houston's location lies underground, in the existence of oil, and thus the city grew backward, from underground exploration to surface settlement.

Moreover, Houston continues to have a reversed relationship to the underground even in its developed form. In older cities (and in fantasy and science fiction), the conventional, middle-class, "normal" people occupy the surface territory—the city's streets and sidewalks—while the poor, the criminal, the outlandish, and the demonic inhabit the lower depths. But in Houston the climate is so notoriously unbearable that the city-builders have connected all the downtown buildings with a maze of underground tunnels, through which office-workers and shoppers pass from bank to hotel to office building and back. Only the bums—only the "lower classes"—are out on the hot sidewalks and streets; everyone else is underground. This subterranean region is not the dank, dark, gloomy place of nineteenth-century imagination: it is wrapped in tweed wall coverings, and tiled floors, and indirect lighting, and well-regulated air-conditioning. The Houston underground has been reclaimed from the earth and turned into a shopping mall. And as if to signal that Houston is indeed the city without an underground past—the post-underground city—the National Aeronautic and Space Administration has for many years located its major launching facilities there.

For a literary example of some of these Houstonian reversals, one can turn to John Cheever's novel *The Wapshot Scandal*. Written from roughly 1959 to 1964, in the very earliest years of the space age, Cheever's novel is in part about a man who, as an employee of a Missile Research and Development program (the ancestor of the "Star Wars" defense), plays a small role in outer-space exploration. At one point the research site itself is described as "a population of twenty thousand, divided, like any society, whatever its aspirations, into first class, second class, third class and steerage. The large aristocracy was composed of

physicists and engineers. Tradesmen made up the middle class, and there was a vast proletariat of mechanics, ground crewmen and gantry hands. Most of the aristocracy had been given underground shelters and while this fact had never been publicized it was well known that in the case of a cataclysm the proletariat would be left to scald." As in the Houston case, the older underground pattern has here been turned on its head. This new subterranean realm of the space age is no longer the haunt of the poor and the outcast, but on the contrary is now the refuge of the highest class, and safety rather than danger lies downward. The Peter Sellers mad-German-scientist figure in *Dr. Strangelove* makes a similar point in the closing minutes of that movie, which came out at about the same time as the Cheever book—that is, just *after* the end of what I have defined as the underground era.

My own relationship to this underground history is a peripheral one. I was born at the end of the era, only six years before the launching of the first manned Sputnik, and I grew up in the kind of middle-class surroundings against which the underground has always defined itself. Moreover, because these surroundings were in suburban California, they lacked any obvious relationship to an underground. There were no basements in my neighborhood, and no subway stations. There were no poor people to speak of in my town, and virtually no black people (they lived across the highway, in an unincorporated area of another county). There was no crime, and what underground politics there were (the origins of the New Left, the remnants of the Old) were so above-ground that they took place in foodstore parking lots and main-street bookstores. I don't even remember ever seeing an excavation for street or sewer repair; perhaps they did such work only at night, when the children were asleep. The whole notion of a physical underground simply did not accord with the way life was lived in California—which is partly what Edmund Wilson was getting at, I think, when he made the remark: "All visitors from the East know the strange spell of unreality which seems to make human experience on the Coast as hollow as the life of a trollnest where everything is out in the open instead of being underground."

So my own feeling about the underground came mostly through fantasy and fiction. From the age of twelve to the age of sixteen I read nothing but science fiction books, which are riddled with various undergrounds (still, in the space age); before that, I read children's books in which the underground often played a major role, and after that, when I was seventeen, I read John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook The*

World. For me the underground was first a place in the imagination, and second a place in history; it had nothing much to do with my own life in any public sense.

This began to change when I went to college in an East Coast city with an old subway system. As an undergraduate I took courses in geology and archaeology—desultorily, randomly, without connecting them. I was interested in city planning (I was interested in cities *period*, as a way of escaping the suburbs), and I looked into the archaeological history of cities, studying excavation reports on long-buried Near Eastern and Mayan civilizations. For several years Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*, with its sweeping glances at sanitation, transportation, and other underground developments, was my bible. And I began to look closely at the city around me, to ride the subway into and around Boston. During one of these trips it occurred to me that one could do a sociological study of the city's neighborhoods simply by riding the subways—by seeing who got in and who got out at various stations, until the car converted from all-white (at the Cambridge end of the line) to all-black (at the Roxbury end). Such observations will seem banal to anyone who grew up in cities, but to me they were news.

It didn't occur to me to write about the underground, however, until ten years after that thought about the subways, when I had just completed some research on nineteenth-century London. I was struck by the way the Victorians were both terrified and entranced by the underground. The idea of a citizenry which feared the gloomy, sunken alleys where its own underclass dwelt, and at the same time named one of its first subway engines "Cerberus," caught my fancy. In its manner of conquering the underground, through slum renovation and through technological advances in drainage and transportation, the Britain of the late nineteenth century also appeared to be conquering a much older fear of hell. Somehow the facts that the poor lived in basements, that rats scurried through the sewers, and that evil stemmed from below had all been brought together—not only in the novels of the period, which might be expected to take such imaginative liberties, but in the journalism and sociological reporting as well. This was the heart of my initial idea about the underground, a version of which now appears as the chapter called "The Nether World."

But the mixed attitude toward the underground, and the tendency to bring together various manifestations as if they were all part of the same fabric, came through in other cultures besides that of Victorian London. It stretched back to Virgil and Dante, and forward to

the movies of the late twentieth century; it included Dostoyevsky and Kafka as well as Verne and Ellison. Though in writing this book I have kept mainly to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I have not stayed strictly within the confines of my self-defined "underground era." When recent works seemed to bear directly on my topic—as do Thom Gunn's "Bringing to Light," Oliver Sacks's *Awakenings*, and Graham Greene's "Under the Garden"—I have not hesitated to include them, despite the fact that they were written in the 1960s and 1970s. Nor have I sliced the topic neatly into self-contained pieces, producing separate discussions of sewers, subways, basements, hells, and so forth. For the whole point, in my view, is to demonstrate how much all these things overlap—how the various downward explorations include all the other undergrounds as well as the one specifically being addressed. It is impossible, of course, to draw all the connections at once; my own limitations, as well as the size of the effort, prevent it. But when I bring archaeology sharply into conjunction with poetry, or science fiction with social novels, I hope to suggest the kinds of connections that do exist. By calling the metaphor of the underground to people's attention, I am trying to give it back some of its ebbing vitality—to make my readers perceive the way in which the underground functions in their own imaginations, in their own lives.

Why, then—if I am so interested in the physical aspects of the underground as well as its imagined side—have I chosen to focus so heavily on literature? I don't think this is really a book of literary criticism, as such. What I intended is that literature here be used as a kind of common experience: a vessel in which the underground metaphor is carried and preserved, ready to be excavated as needed. If instead I had based my discussion on interviews with sewer workers, or trips into caves, I would be stuck in my own late-twentieth-century period, and I suspect my "evidence" would be even more subjective than it is at present. With literature (and other accumulations of the written word), I can go back in time or across geographical barriers, and you can check me out at every step. Partly to enable you to do exactly that, I have relied mainly on readily available works of literature rather than obscure texts buried in specialized libraries; and I have assumed an English-speaking reader who, like myself, has no knowledge of Latin and only the slightest acquaintance with other languages.

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, I have been far from comprehensive, even in my selections within categories. I certainly do not cover every work of underground science fiction, nor every novel

of Victorian social realism. This is partly a result of limited space and time, but it is also because I wanted this to be a personally written book—a book which stemmed from my own gradually brewing notions of the underground as well as from what other authors had to say. So, for instance, in my chapter on “The Child’s Underground,” I could have looked at many other books besides the few discussed there; but I particularly wanted to consider only books that *I* had read as a child, so that this reading would be an informed re-reading, imbued with the knowledge of the child I once was.

If I were to wait thirty years before completing this book, it would be a very different work, in many ways probably a better one. Not only would I have read more and learned more about the underground itself; I would also, I hope, have a fuller understanding of the terrors and entrancements of the underworld, a stronger sense of what birth and death mean, and a greater awareness of the unconscious. But I wanted to write this book now, to venture on my underground exploration just as I stand on the edge of that dark wood which, according to Dante, marks the middle of our life’s journey, and the beginning of our descent into the underworld.

The Thriller Underworld

... for this is under ground, where old men scratch for knowledge, gold, and death.

—John le Carré, *The Naive and Sentimental Lover*

IN THE OPENING SCENE OF STEVEN SPIELBERG’S *INDIANA Jones and the Temple of Doom*, the dumb-blonde heroine, on being introduced to the swashbuckling eponymous hero, is surprised to learn that he is a famous archaeologist. “I thought archaeologists were little men who were always looking for their mummies,” she sneers. “Mummies,” Indiana Jones snarls under his breath.

Besides setting up the tug-of-war relationship that prevails between these two characters, this initial exchange also suggests the underground elements that are to surface later in the movie: the subterranean (and illegal) Temple of Kali, scene of the film’s major criminal actions and source of the plot-motivating mystery; the even deeper mine worked by stolen children, whose labor fuels the Temple’s operations; and the final hair-raising chase through the mine’s underground tunnels. But in addition, the opening conversation about mummies and mummies introduces an important confusion that carries beyond the limits of the movie, defining the underground as alternately (perhaps even simultaneously?) womb and tomb.

If one wants to find the subterranean metaphor used imaginatively in the late twentieth century, it is to movies like *Indiana Jones*—or to the thriller novels which are its literary equivalent—that one must generally turn. Though what I am calling “the underground era” may have ended in 1958 or so, it still survives vestigially in the popular arts, where the subterranean retains not only its allure but its usefulness. Speeding subways, dank sewers, empty basements, and buried store-rooms make ideal settings for chase scenes, break-ins, criminal hide-aways, or the cornering of suspects. Moreover, such locations provide a physical analogue to the metaphor that informs most thrillers: the idea of a criminal “underworld.” It makes a kind of poetic sense for