

Maledicta Paradisus ...

Scott Billings

Thoughts on the problem with entrances and exits

Constantly preoccupied by defensive measures, the mole-like narrator of Kafka's *The Burrow* is consumed by the problem with entrances and exits of his underground dwelling. Near the center of the burrow lies the Castle Keep, a chamber which serves as his refuge in the event of danger and the lingering threat of another creature penetrating into his burrow. The Castle Keep is the result of much arduous labour. Complete with beautifully vaulted ceilings, this chamber holds all of his stores—his food and everything he needs. It is the place he longs to be whenever he is not. To him the Castle Keep exists immanently as his personal paradise, the space of absolute perfection. He recounts a grand plan for the most ideal design of the Castle Keep—one which exists only as pure unrealizable concept: to completely enclose the space with thick mud walls and a protective air gap encompassing its entire surface. Within this impossible architecture, he desires to exist both simultaneously on the outside, watching guard, *and* on the inside, immersed in the murmurous silence of the Castle Keep.

Thus the issue of entrances and exits is one driven by the duality of the body: existing both as an outside and an inside. Although the shape and network of the burrow is necessitated by the shape and mobility of his body, the narrator longs to be liberated from the pragmatics of his animality; in particular, the need to eat and shit. Indeed, without an ordinary entrance and exit, the interior space of his ideal Castle Keep fails due to the pragmatic necessities of the body. There is space only for a limited amount of food, but moreover a limited space for the inevitable accumulation of his own feces. William of Auvergne, remarked on a similar problem with the concept of Paradise: "*maledicta Paradisus in qua tantum cacatur!*" [Cursed Paradise in which there is so much defecation!]. In the space of everlasting life, an existence populated with human animal bodies which reproduce and eat but never die—that is, without exit—the pragmatic issue of the accumulation of feces is all too reasonable. Does the animal body of man belong in his own conception of Paradise?

The same problem of the body is ever prevalent in populated modern cities: the necessity to remove the waste of its inhabitants in order to prevent filthy and unhygienic conditions which can lead to outbreaks of disease and dysentery. The sewage system of the modern cityscape exists as an underground network—not unlike the burrow—which remains hidden from the social reality of the surface: the exteriority of the city. The interiority of the city consists of a vast infrastructure of channels, linking all dwellings into the singular space of the sewage plant. Ironically, the private dwelling of the individual is linked together in a single public space through the entrances and exits to this shared network. It is here, inside the modern water closet, that the interior digestive tract of the modern human body is extended, continued, and elongated into the interior network of the city, collecting into the singular depository of the city sewage plant. Food passes

from the mouth, through the stomach, along the upper and lower intestine, out the anus, into the toilet, down the pipe, into sewer main, through the underground channels, and into the sewage plant. Here the sewage is often 'refurbished' as manure or 'night soil' used to fertilize crops and make new food to be consumed again, thus completing a long single cycle of 'redigestive' movement—in a sort of giant municipal autocoprohagia.

Although seemingly repugnant, the consumption of feces is widely practiced amongst many animal species. The dung beetle in particular feeds exclusively on the feces of other animals providing all its necessary nutrients. The dung beetle is known for rolling a ball of dung around with them everywhere, both as a source of food and a brooding dwelling. The beetle can be quite protective of its dung ball, exerting great effort in its security, fighting off other envious beetles attempting to hijack its dung. The dung acts as a personal nomadic storage life source, a mobile Castle Keep clutched constantly within its grasp. As a scavenger, the behavior of the dung beetle is remarkably beneficial to agriculture. They improve soil fertility by burying and consuming dung, but also by removing dung from livestock fields, preventing habitats for pests. The dung beetle thus acts as a miniature sewage system agent in the natural world.

Functioning now as a museum, the former sewage plant of Prague in Bubeneč opened its doors to the public revealing its once hidden underground facility. Although designed for function, the architecture of the space is sublime. Frequently described as a cathedral buried beneath the ground, the interior façade consists of vaulted ceilings, arched passages, and elliptical ventilation shafts. From inside, the sewer holes reverse. Above ground, they act as entrances to the hidden underworld. On the inside they appear as a kind of spectacular entrance to the otherworld, resembling an oculus of a cathedral dome, the passage to Paradise. The space appears paradoxically as both the repugnant burrow of the modern underworld and the idyllic portal to the paradisiacal otherworld.

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