

Uriel Descending

Written by Edmund Siderius

Saturday, 04 May 2013 01:29 - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 October 2013 00:40

Christoph and I had only just begun to explore one of the many “goblin tunnels” discovered beneath the Bavarian countryside, called by the locals *Erdstall* or *Schrazelloch*. At the time no one knew what they were for, speculating only that the twin engines of human activity, worship and war, must have played their part. I was interested in the tunnels’ design, acoustics, and geological properties, having some vague sense that their layout might be related to the infrasonic waves I was then studying as a post-doctoral student at Arsenault University. Christoph was exploring their anthropological implications. As a local, he was subject to innumerable jokes about the *Erdstall*

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Christoph was a dwarf: clever, driven, romantic, and caught between the Scylla and Charybdis that people often face on the fringes of society—between being fascinated by the myths surrounding his stature as narratives that gave history, common culture, and a sense of belonging to his otherwise isolating experience, and resenting them as parodies only able to obstruct his sense of self-determination. In either case, it seemed to me that these opposing aspects of his personality had ultimately collaborated in his study of the tunnels.

That day we had only intended to map out one of the lesser-known systems. It was perched between two properties and had, until quite recently, been politically inaccessible, as the owners of the lands around it contested each other’s rights to the now potentially lucrative cultural space. Capital abhorring a vacuum, tunnel adventures and fantasy-themed performances had already become a major tourist attraction. The protests over preservation were also well under way by then. Just like the Galapagos, whose endless admirers eroded in countless footsteps

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that which they purported to love and admire, the *Erdstalls*, now found, were slowly beginning to warp and shudder beneath waves of human interest.

Even my own activity wasn't so different, really. For the tourists the tunnels drew their magnetic properties from their histories and the mystery they had come to represent: the sublime, deep-and-deeper-still spaces of our unknown planet, and along with them, our unknown selves, but accessible now, if only through the ivory gate of imagination.

What was really in the *Erdstalls*?

Dirt, mostly, but also something more.

This elusive “something more” required no small amount of sifting to be understood, but it shone through, all the same.

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The entrance was small, covered over by matted grass, and heavily shaded by the ash trees overhead. Both parties in the dispute had refused to let the other tend the space, in fear that this care would lend some special rights to the property. So it had grow feral, seemingly forgotten, if only because suppressed. It looked more like an animal's den than the other well-swept *Erdstall*s now open to the tourists. Cautiously, with light in hand, Christoph pushed aside the grassy curtain.

We were greeted by damp earth and roots, and the heightened awareness of the thinning breeze. I had more trouble entering than Christoph, as the tunnels lingered at about four feet in height before opening up. First, we would scout the space. Then we would set up the equipment, examine the construction, and make what measurements we could in those limiting conditions.

On the first walk around the *Erdstall* seemed like many of the others. The same puzzling changes in the height and direction of the tunnels, no clear connection between place and use, some signs of the methods employed to construct it, but little in the way of overt symbolism or iconography.

“Did you feel that? Like the earth moved?”

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I had, but thought it only a moment of vertigo. Instead, Christoph's disconcerted expression in the wavering light reflected my own sense of discomfort and subtle displacement. He hesitated.

"Maybe bad air? Should we go?"

"No, not quite yet. Just let me sketch the outline first."

I made to trace the edges of the tunnels, when my hand fell upon an uneven surface. Not even fell. It seemed drawn towards it. There was an opening that either had not been there before, or else had been shadowed in just such a way as to seem inaccessible.

This was unexpected.

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There was another system running parallel to ours.

I called Christoph over.

The entrance was tall, but narrow, and we had to crawl sideways, crab-like, scuttling forwards. The parallel system stretched out like a promise in the darkness. When the tunnel opened up we could see a layer of black dust obscuring the ground. Branching passages spread out ahead of us, tangled like a system of roots, coiling in a dendritic whimsy that only hinted at human craftsmanship.

I turned to take in the space around me, and happened to glance behind at Christoph, who was staring down in disbelief.

We both stood petrified in a moment of recognition. There was no longer any breeze in the tunnel, but somehow a hollow wind whipped and played across the ground. The black dust rose up in rows of metal spines, not truly swaying, but crawling and tumbling over itself in an

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electromagnetic field. It lent an uncomfortable, claymation life to the motions, a surreality that was only reinforced when Christoph barely whispered:

“Where’s the way out?”

For a moment I thought I’d seen it, almost as if it were growing, or yawning, but then it seemed to fold in on itself, and out of sight.

Christoph seemed puzzled.

“This ... feels ... wrong.”

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Hoping that we could follow the walls, we groped around the ever more tangled tunnel paths until Christoph came to one that did not seem like the rest. It became more regular, with some few but tempting signs of linearity.

“Maybe this way?”

Still lightly brushing up against the wall with one hand, I followed him.

Then all pretence of coincidence fell away from the design, as the passageway abruptly ceased to be of soil, and gave way to a kaleidoscope of cold, rich colours all fitted together like puzzle pieces, but of a hard and porous stone. A sharp angle opened up into a huge, expansive space, cathedral-like, overlooking a rectangular courtyard. The height of the ceiling only increased with distance, and graspingly glancing out from the second story, our small light was almost smothered in the architecture. Below us stood what looked to be a kind of castle or altar crafted from enormous, childish building blocks, and across from that, in the deeper darkness of the courtyard, a larger-than-life merry-go-round forged from burnt brass, with ornate designs of suns, stars, or orbs of fire.

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Suddenly, I knew, and the revelation came more like an invasion than an insight: the merry-go-round's base was the icon of some religion that does not yet exist.

Christoph felt it too.

“It's a temple. It hasn't been built yet ... How can I know this? We need to get closer. We need to see what it means.”

A series of elaborate portcullises, three on each side of the upper level of the courtyard, lay open before us. At the end of each series there were stairs leading inward and downward towards the far side of the lower level.

We passed beneath two of these portcullises without incident.

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At the third the world turned inside out.

The cathedral curled into a puzzle box as the blocks around us began to fold in on themselves. Christoph had almost gotten down the stairs to the altar, but I had hesitated at the third gate.

We both ran.

Only one of us made it.

I cannot say if he was crushed, for as I watched the darkness and the space itself enfold around him, he seemed to go on folding with it, out of sight, until all that stood before me was a wall, dark, colourful, and flat.

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In shock, I pressed myself up against the more familiar earth of the tunnel, breathing heavily and feeling strangely like I was at sea, trying to find my footing with the waves undulating under me.

Then there came a sound like a rain-stick, a crescendo of clattering cascading down the passageway.

A sun exploded to my left, setting off a chilling, unearthly chiaroscuro throughout the tunnel complex. Crustaceans, things resembling crabs and lobsters and crayfish, but of gold, silver, and bronze, skittered like a swarm of rats away from that bright light, paying no heed to me at all, pouring past my feet, tumbling over one another and spasming to right themselves again in a chorus of clicking and twitching and animal panic.

An advanced wave collided with my psyche, and along with this information, I was imbued with the impulse to run.

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The disruptions were not simply in time or space, but in consciousness as well. Waveforms rose and collapsed in my comprehension as I forgot things—the names of all the streets in the town where I grew up, the sensation of water running over and through my fingers—but I also learned what I could never have known in a state of otherworldly elevation.

They did something, the children of the future, to the sun, our sun, and it had consequences that they could never suspect, and would never see.

Like a candle in the sky, the sun had flickered on for too long upon the cosmic winds, and ceased to shine. They didn't need to rekindle this fire, for by then they inhabited many worlds, but they sought to keep this one as a kind of showpiece.

In doing so they created a dangerous resonance.

In this the two were entangled: The surface of the sun and the centre of the earth are one and the same when one tries to fathom their extremes. Not solid, nor liquid, nor even gas, but plasma, puzzling and powerful. Whatever they did, whatever they intended, humanity had made these distant bodies into two poles inducing something like a current, voiding time and space,

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and then—a spark.

My thoughts scattered.

Feynman described the positron as an electron moving backward in time, but warned against applying such macroscale prejudices as “cause” and “effect” to the equation. But there were other ways of seeing things. Luigi Fantappiè, when he was trying to make some kind of sense of the advanced wave solution to the d’Alambert operator, described potential syntropic phenomena: moved by the future, but untestable until the future tested us.

Was I now being tested?

But how would we know what to look for? How would they? While there was light and sound and death and fire in great abundance when Krakatoa erupted, there were also almost-undetected infrasonic waves, which traveled the world over several times. How subtle, how powerful, then, would be the echoes of the sun?

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The dendritic paths curled into themselves as often as not, and the crustaceans underfoot made my directionless flight only more difficult, yet always the blinding light advanced, showing me, at least, what to avoid.

I turned down another spiral path and emerged to a dislocating scene of tranquil normalcy. Open air. Green. A breath of breeze through the tendrils of the trees. Soft sunlight. It was the quad at Arsenault University. Parked cars. Bikes locked to the railings of the New Academic Building. But no people. Hesitantly, I walked towards the quad. No. Whatever else it was, it was apparent that this was a kind of mindspace, twining over, through, and within our space like some inhuman origami. I went into the New Academic Building and down towards the basement. As I had come to expect, whether through my own efforts or some quirk of the wave's effects upon awareness, the basement led back into the *Erdstall*.

But I had only lost ground, and in the freshly sharpened intensity of that calamity of light, I could just make out figures more unsettling than the skittering and fleeing vermin underfoot.

It was a procession.

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A mad parade of writhing things casting long and flashing shadows, with manes of flame and limbs that moved in ways no mammal could compare with. They made noises like shrieking, but not in pain, in a strange, almost simian way, with the cadence of the grasping speech of human infants. And these were only the revelers at the head of the procession. Behind them, and further still behind them, was a seemingly endless array of stranger and stranger forms, far more aberrant and alien than anything human speech had evolved to lend a name.

Where were they going?

No. Directionality was a finite abstraction to those who had looked down upon us from the highest reaches of the multiverse. Our words grew meekly up from the earth of three dimensions, sending out green and tender shoots in, at most, a parallel series of impenetrable lines—seldom, if ever, truly touching.

And this, this could all be turned to ash.

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The loftiness of the procession would not stop it from extinguishing me as it passed. If the revelers even noticed.

And then, eclipsing all the other oddities, standing out magisterially as it made its way above the merry fray, striding upon the ceiling, humanoid, shirtless, and sexless, came the prime mover of that procession. The appearance of fabric around its legs was like that of some ancient monastic order, and it billowed and blew in the same magnetic wind that tugged at the dust upon the tunnel floor. Upon its face—perhaps as its face—there hung a flat, ornamental mask like the brass disk of some dark sun creviced and grooved and sharp, covering everything but its organ of speech.

Insight washed over me once again, as parts of my ego were extracted in exchange: This was the angel of the afterlife of our future sun, this majestic horror: Uriel. These distortions were the psychospacial echoes of its meteoric, cosmic decent into a lower plane. What would a multidimensional substratum look like when it had intersected at an oblique angle with our own space? Light, perhaps? Light gave life to this sphere, but also established its limitations: the speed of light, wave-particle duality, the uncertainty principle, even photosynthesis. Yet photons in extreme conditions could also break those limits, at such high-energy states that they came back around to bite their own tails. And I stood between where fang meets throat, a spark gap and gate drawing me only closer to this naked singularity.

With a slow and measured gesture, with frenetic forms teeming and terrible dancing beneath it, Uriel raised its left hand in a circle, passing it over the mask to come to rest at a slight angle beneath its mouth, with fingers splayed. It then raised its right hand over its head, fingers likewise fanning outward as it bowed, showing only more of the spears of the sun disk trailing

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behind it.

And then it began to speak.

It was not the Enochian of Dee, but Enochian it was all the same, the language of angels, awful and inhuman. It felt like I was being smothered in symbols and meanings both strange and familiar, all overlaid, entangled, accentuating features here, diminishing others there. Then I realized that these words from another world, they were waves. Not of sound, not of two or three dimensions, but the waves in my awareness that I had already experienced, the disturbance of multidimensional space. This was all the Enochian echo from a sun that has yet to set.

“Illuminate in darkness.

Liberate in darkness.

Illuminate in darkness.

Liberate in darkness.”

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Despite its oratory pose, its mouth never moved. Its expression was silence. Its proclamation all-encompassing.

And then there was no way out.

No further shoot or branch of the tunnels to take. Only the terrible options of having to turn and face that which was itself faceless, or look away and be sure to see no more. It was all I could do to find some crevice in which to cower, half eclipsed.

If ever we were to dull or sharpen our senses five-, tenfold, remaining as we were in all other respect, we would no doubt perish. As the procession approached I could feel an uneven eruption of all of my faculties: my sight, now so fine that its resolution engulfed understanding in the details of what passed before me; the wild maned things, each strand of blazing hair a fiery continent, each flailing thrust of their tangled limbs a global conflagration; my hearing, so expansive that I could just make out the crystalline collisions of distant nebulae, their individual stars softly tinkling and sparkling like chimes upon the void.

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Unable to properly place myself at the center of that jarring divide between the cosmic and the microcosmic, it was all I could do to discern that the maned creatures, with their maimed and broken motions, had passed me by, their speaking-like shrieking-like simian singing echoing in the births and deaths of systems. And so it went, each shadowy form cast in the crazed illuminations parading past.

Even that most majestic of monsters, Uriel, arced through the procession, then set, as my skin crawled with the combined sensation of every unseen mite and worm burrowing and gnawing its way through the ecology of my flesh. Then, when I thought that I must surely die, or go mad, or disintegrate into a prismatic spray of conflicting perceptions, it almost felt as if I had been elevated so that I could just touch the translucent membrane separating this sphere from some other, unlimited realm.

And then I was forced to descend.

But I was not extinguished.

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After the procession passed by me, cast in darkness and in dread, I huddled up against the wall, waiting for the world to seem right again.

It never has, but nonetheless, here I must remain.

I was too small to notice.

Every miner working below a depth of thirty feet died that day. It was the only evidence that something monumental had occurred. No one on the surface felt the slightest disturbance or tremor.

After that enormous sunset it seemed quite a simple matter to make my way out of the *Erdstall*. Every tunnel, every turn, simply straightened out, as if there had been only one direction after all. It was more difficult by far to emerge into the light, to see that once familiar orb glaring in the sky like a hangman's trophy, tugging at the world with its awful, open mysteries.

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Those few who found themselves in that liminal space between surface and center contracted what came to be called a “future fever”, akin to chronic déjà vu but also quite different. We could tell, we could tell with a terrible clarity, the limitations of all we thought we knew about the world, each theory’s incompleteness, the glaring limitations of every belief and dogma, but we could offer no alternative.

And that was worst of all.

I knew that the past could imperil the present, that the present daily endangers the future; I just never imagined that in all of this calamity, we would have to face the future itself, not as a friend, but as an alien, ominous adversary. Now my mind is alight, smoldering, electrified, ephemeral. I’ve learned twelve languages since then: Coptic, Syriac, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Mandarin ... Dreams still speak to me of unimaginable machines, aspects of nature unnatural, but always, these visions are only enough to cast doubt on what is known, and never do they offer me any real guidance or greater insight. My heart, I know, cannot carry this burden for long, and I suspect that soon I, too, will be buried beneath the waves of light that lap against the shores of some other world, embracing ours. And even this thought is soon followed by its shadow—a shadow that has come to lead me:

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