

Dirty Deeds & Dungeons Deep

Squeezing down the role-playing rabbit hole

In this piece, I'd like to explore descent myths. Not from position of cultural anthropology, nor from a semi-surrealist Lewis Carroll kind of angle (though bear in mind that the Master Gygax took that very turn himself with the early 80s modules EX1 & 2), nor even from the essentially Modernist perspective of Joseph Campbell (much as I dig the man and his work). No. I'd like us to descend together right here and now, as no doubt you are all used to, and skilled in, doing. Grab your torches and iron spikes, your ten foot pole and a bag of iron rations because, dear reader, we are going down. Down to where 'fact' becomes symbol, to where symbol opens its heart into image. Down.

Down where, I hear you cry? Into the dungeon – where else? 'Dungeon' – a funny word, from the old French *donjon*, which is one of those false-friend words that has come to mean something different in English translation than in the original French (in this case it means 'keep' in the original, as in fortification, castle or tower; in English it simply means 'prison', or more precisely dark, underground, damp, menacing, impenetrable, inescapable place). Further down we go – past the 'cold white bones poking through the thin flesh of progress', down into wisdom where 'a man is granted as much life as he can imagine', as Cecil Collins put it.

Hey, mind your step, these stones are slippery! Dungeon, in gaming imagery and design, is of course really all about underworld – the place one ends up in after leaving the above-ground day-world light. And now we're into deeply mythic (and inherently psychological) territory. So why are we, player and PC alike, here? Is it the search for treasure (a trapped love, the intensity of the lived experience, simple survival, symbolic and/or literal gold?) or adventure (we're here because we have to be here? We like the 'band of brothers' bonding of these expeditions?) or to gain knowledge and wisdom (are we taking some sort of initiatory test?). The textbooks speak of this underworld as a place for heroic endeavour, for facing death (or perhaps undeath?) undergoing trials, exposing ourselves to a stripping away (of possessions, of individuality, of vitality, life-force, maybe of life itself?) – the classic encapsulation being in stories such as that of Inanna, or Persephone, or Orpheus, or a thousand others before. And in roleplaying milieu, it's the Temple of Elemental Evil, or Rappan Athuk, or the unvisited levels beneath Castle Greyhawk, to pluck just three resonant exemplars out of the collective.

Now, whilst these themes may indeed hold some truths, they say little of what it is like down here (mind your head) or what happens here, or about *who lives here* (Shhhh! What was that?). They don't say much about shadow, about power, domination, cruelty, horror, terror and loss (I'm thinking, never

mind the game, there are dungeons aplenty in the 'real' world – the ones in heads and hearts, the ones in our culture, the ones that the Josef Fritzls' of the world love to build). Dungeons, let us remember, are also places that exert a strange attraction, sometimes even a voyeurism – they pull us, call to us, entice us into their unknownness, sometimes willingly, sometimes despite ourselves, seduction is a function of the dungeon's allure. Tourists in Europe pay good hard cash to go to the London Dungeon (or the ones in York, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Edinburgh etc) to undergo an hour or two of gory shock, fear, fascination, 'experience'... I have even been myself, and enjoyed the ritual immensely. But why? It seems to me that what you get with a dungeon is a series of stories (i.e. narratives) of local (i.e. specific) events and places, often from deep history (i.e. memoria) that provoke responses and reactions in the mind and guts (fear, revulsion, disbelief) with a focus on murder, war, plague, execution, torture, supernatural hauntings, madness and always, best of all, the endless darkness itself. We have entered fully into the shadow, and different rules apply here.

As Terence McKenna reworked the ageless aphorism (and daubed it on the wall here, in his best dungeon graffiti style)

The bigger you build the bonfire, the more darkness you reveal

In game terms of course, dungeons also represent playgrounds - free-fire zones if you will, places of raw 'kill or be killed' encounter, like a giant paintball arena for the imagination, and the soul. And of course dungeons are not only literal underground places - in the tropes of fantasy settings, there are many sci-fi dungeons (whole planets even), psychologically charged chthonic places and times – dungeons are very human, part of the architecture, the *style*, if you like, of our human imagination. It is as though we need our dungeons in order to connect with our purpose and meaning, all too often in crass ways (projecting and splitting off 'evil' so that we can presume to be 'all good', thus assuming that we can avoid the very same showdown inside ourselves, manifesting efforts at 'perfection' that lead us deeper into the mire, even whilst blinding us with dogmas – paladins beware!); sometimes in deep and sophisticated ways, knowing that the dungeon is a manifestation of the unconscious (unknown) aspects of our self, and that we are the agents of contact through which self and other, known and unknown, nature and culture, come together. With swords.

Of course in roleplaying games, there are many levels to this (what's that foul stench, by the way?) since as players we are just sitting in a room with some friends, but as characters (PCs if you like) 'we' are right in the thick of the vividly imagined action. So we begin to create (or co-create) specifics – of place, time, narrative – one could meaningfully ask, *whose dungeon is this?* Is it mine as a player? The GM's? Did we make it up together? Or is it calling from its own side too, coming-into-being as a body and a world enmeshed? Is it

our job to *differentiate* our 'stuff' from its' stuff? Dungeons in roleplaying settings are a great example of how and where *figure* and *ground* become one. Roleplaying characters don't exist *other* than in their dungeons, and fantasy dungeons *require* characters to animate them – the self in one implies the other in, well, the other. The other in me (as a player) creates the character-body I can then roleplay as a self. And the dungeon is the contextual ground, the place of deep beingness out of which the rest arises (and passes). Hey, use your lock-pick on that chest there... carefully, ahhhh, now what's *that*?

I read a story on a news website this morning about a British man taken hostage in Georgia (the ex-Soviet one, presumably..., though who knows?), locked in a dungeon (naturally) and visited once per day to be fed slops and given a stub of candle (which would burn for 40 minutes or so). In its light he could see dead rats, dripping cave walls, and his own body. The light made the darkness worse, yet he survived months of this partly by 'hanging on' until the light was brought each day – the light symbolised his hope for release, and his archetypal condition – *I am alive*. Inwardly, however, this wretched literal dungeon experience led to a sense of inner-freedom – the man engaged in imaginal conversations in turn with each member of his family – one each day, all day. A day with his father, another with his mother, and so on out into every distant third cousin or 'honorary' relative he could think of – dredging up specific memories, confessing thoughts and feelings that were previously taboo, letting himself go into these relationships and into their meaning more deeply than ever he had allowed before. In a place of extreme neglect and abandonment, he connected to love, and this gave a paradoxical momentum to the transformation of his inner experience, providing the 'why' to companion his 'how'.

Stay close there, don't want you getting lost do we?

Eventually, this man was freed by his captors, no doubt relieved, elated, and also changed by the experience, 'wholed' perhaps? Ensouled, even? And he is just one of many human beings who undergo a literal version of this experience all the time. Why do I mention such a thing here? Well, in part to contextualize gaming (*who lives in the game? Who lives in the dungeon?*) and to highlight the power of imagination, but mostly to illustrate how dungeons (as places of shadow) work. They remove freedoms in various ways, they impose limits, they assert power over us, and they demand from us, ultimately, a kind of surrender, a sort of acceptance that strips away (and often kills) the heroic part of us so that the soulful part, the deeper eco-cosmological part, can be fully born (given that PCs are related to heroic aspects of our personality, or at least that they exist in heroic landscapes, this can mean that even 'successful' PCs are changed by their experiences – no-one enters a dungeon and comes out the same). Its worth noting here (oi! watch that torch, its about to go out, here take this one) that the heroic, in psychological terms, is mostly related to the reasonable daylight world of the ego, the known (or that which presumes to know) – hence, in true descent myth terms, to enter a dungeon is

to risk ego-death (for PC and player, to some extent), and yet roleplaying is *about* such risk, and therefore about such death. One could say, from such a perspective, that all roleplaying is about descent, and therefore is a rehearsal, a preparation, for death. A *donjon* it would seem, is the ideal place for a *petite-mort!*

Now, here in this sump of the world, we come upon some other denizens of this dungeon dark – look, there’s Nathaniel Hawthorne croaking at us through the gloom

What other dungeon is so dark as one’s own heart! What jailer so inexorable as one’s self!

Hmmm. Thanks Nate, that figures – though you’re looking a little skeletal for my liking. And behind him, why, is that not John Milton I espie? Since when was England’s second greatest poet clad in the rags and weeds of a ghoul? I guess these poets really let themselves go *post mortem*. Stand back, he’s going to speak:

*He that has light within his own clear breast
May sit in the centre, and enjoy the bright day
But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts
Benighted walks under the midday sun
Himself his own dungeon*

Cheerful sages, eh? I thought you’d enjoy their company! Keep moving, there, that’s right, don’t let them touch you, mind! So let’s recap, nibble on those iron rations you brought for a minute. So the only way is down, clearly. The reason for going down is, well, necessity, when all is said and done. And there are no maps. All we have is our complexes – the tension between remembering and forgetting, the memory of something too vile to forget, but too painful to remember. I wonder, *what is it that we ask our dungeons to carry for us?*

Talking of absent maps, and of fantasy cartography in general (the word derives from the Greek ‘chartis’ – map, and Latin ‘carta’ – paper/papyrus and the Greek ‘graphein’ – to write; so we have the ‘map-writers’, those who explore and record their passage, the adventurer marking a path, making a way through the unknown), the dungeon, being so dark, deep and unknowable, is precisely the place where the ‘map-writer’ is most needed and required. Here in the depths of *terra (terror?) incognita* the functions of thought and reason seek to describe experience, to measure and delineate and ‘map’ form onto emptiness. The ego, if you like, seeks to reassert itself in the form of plans, through imposing structure upon chaos. This is fascinating territory (and as Korzybski told us ‘the map is not the territory’, in other words, all maps are metaphors, save for the map at one to one scale, which is, according to Jorge Luis Borges, ‘tragically useless’). And take this further – since in role-

playing games we're dealing with the urge to map *non-existent places*, or at least, places with no conventional 'object world' form. Yet show me a roleplaying game that isn't obsessed with cartographies, often of the most baroque and intense kinds. What have we got here then? A visual aid to imagination, to orientation in terms of place, space, flow; a toolkit for the mind's eye, or an abstraction, a movement away from direct experience – away from the taste of an apple towards a description of 'apple flavour'? It could go either way, frankly!

Yet I think, perhaps, our maps are much more than this – could they be notes towards an unfolding of inner space? Re-presentations of places yet to exist, or already existing in imaginal time and space, symbolic guides to newly apprehended meaning 'convincing because they imply authenticity' (Alan MacEachan). Are they underpinned because they arise out of warm relationship embodied into the world through imagined experience? Because, often, they are new, unique, requiring naming (so just how do we *title* our maps, and to whom do they pass? *Whose map is it anyway?* The PC's? the GM's? the party's? the players'?) I am reminded, down here in this dank airless dungeon, of a slogan of the Situationist Internationale –

We will play upon topophobia until we create a topophilia

which if I understand it correctly means, we will play with the places we fear until our engagement transforms them (from instinctual, to conditioned, and finally to symbolic style) into places we may love. Is that not a motivation to plunge into the nearest dungeon (inside your own heart, never mind inside your imagination)? Is it not also a species of psychogeography?

It also reminds me of Herman Melville (see him over there in that witchlight, grinning away to himself? Old, mad Herman, love him, rattling his mantra at us):

It is not down on any map; true places never are

I think he's getting at what I'll call 'the Field'. The magnificently elegant and dynamic web of connectivity, through which events emerge, occur and return, and in which we are all most completely embedded. This unmappable Field **is** home, and in order to avoid an even darker shadow, an even worse dungeon, (that which can be termed 'the repression of the sublime'), we must attempt to map it, to articulate it to ourselves. That is why, I believe, in all the kinds of dungeon we may find ourselves within, we are *more* alive, not less.

But hey, it's getting crowded down here, among the bones of these long dead companions in ideas and imaginings. Just round that stalactite there's even a spot for William Burroughs (but keep those mushrooms you picked safe, he'll pick your pockets soon as look at you to get his paws on a score). Listen:

I am acting as a map maker, an explorer of psychic areas... a cosmonaut of inner space, and I see no point in exploring areas that have already been thoroughly surveyed

Acting! Isn't that what we're doing, you and me, here in this (w)hole? Is it role-playing? And how do we know? *Who is role playing, anyway?* (By the way, as Master Gyga noted in his somewhat autistic 1987 manual 'Role Playing Mastery', we must first, and at all times, be sure that we are not engaged in 'role assumption', but that we are truly in the 'play' of our acting selves).

Are you still there? Hey, are you with me? Ahh, I get it - your eyes have adjusted - you can see in the dark now. Well, good for you. Give me a hand with this rope then. Finally, to quote a not-yet-dead writer familiar enough with dungeons and shadow - it might be worth lending our ears to Neil Gaiman, as he brushes past us on his drow-borne litter, dreaming his whispers in thieves cant, no doubt, that:

The tale is the map that is the territory

(Now, role a d6 for initiative, quick - before he casts darkness... ahh, too late. Back in black. Now, where's that pole you brought? I need to prod ahead, I've got a bad feeling about this...)

But you know, if we get out of here, alright, don't squeal like that - *when* we get out of here, we'll write all this down, we can even add your map to these words - then we'll show the folks back home. And of course, they won't understand a word, nor believe us when we sing of our journey, they'll just smile and shrug and pour us another drink. And that's OK, because we will *know*. And someday they will have a journey of their own to make, and you can bet that it will start with a step down.

*Keith Hackwood
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