HARTS & Minds

THERE IS THE TROUBLE, THERE IS THE TOIL: KATABASIS AND THE UNDERWORLD TOPOGRAPHY OF COMA.

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Abstract

This article examines the depiction of the psychological topography of the underworld within various examples of coma fiction. Throughout, I explore tales from Greco-Roman and Christian tradition to illustrate how frequently authors compare the coma state to a katabasis (a journey of descent), with the victim forced to travel through various depictions of interior, psychological spaces of the underworld in order to escape from the confines of the coma state.

I argue that the historically shifting approaches to psychological analysis, from Freud's depth psychology to James Hillman's archetypal psychology (itself a development of Jungian theory of how mythological archetypes operate within the human psyche) have influenced how both writers and readers understand the mind. I suggest that this has had a palpable impact upon the representation of coma within fiction, designating the mind and, consequently, the interior state of coma as a physical, geographical space.

To illustrate the topography of the underworld in katabatic coma narratives, I refer to a range of contemporary texts, from Liz Jensen's *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* to Iain Banks's *The Bridge*. Drawing links between varying theories of psychology and more narratological ideas of Northrop Frye and Rachel Falconer, I explicate how the topographical models of mind created in such texts appear to assimilate traditional, mythological stories of katabasis and imagery of the physical underworld in order to concretise the abstract world of coma.

By utilising Robert Pogue Harrison's discussions of the places of the dead and his exploration of humanity's creation and containment of physical places, I conclude by proposing that the pursuit of the writers of coma fiction is similar to that of the authors of katabatic stories of antiquity. I suggest that both katabatic narratives and coma fiction are united in their attempts to concretise and to contain abstract concepts: death, in the first instance, and the human mind in the second.

Key Words: Coma, space, place, hell, landscape, katabasis, topography, underworld, mythology, psychology.

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Arthur Frank, in his work on illness and patient narratives, writes that 'any sickness is an intimation of mortality, and telling sickness as a restitution story forestalls that intimation.'[1] One paradigm of the restitution story is the mythological narrative of katabasis, a word derived from the Greek originally referring to 'any physical descent, through a cave mouth or other such entrance, into the earth.'[2] During the katabatic journey, the hero travels to the underworld, before returning to the land of the living, days or even hours later. Once back, the katabatic hero will have changed inexorably, their experience in the underworld impacting upon them forever. The biblical figure of Lazarus, for example, is denied a voice after he has been brought back from the dead by Christ, an idea that Nikos Kazantzakis plays upon in his controversial reimagining of the life of Christ, *The Last Temptation*. When asked by an old villager whether he 'had a pleasant time in Hades', [3] Lazarus remains silent, suggesting that his time in the underworld defies language. It seems that whilst he has been brought back from the dead, some part of Hades will always remain with him. However, in the tradition of the katabatic hero, despite the trauma he has experienced through dying, he has fulfilled an ultimate victory: triumph over Hades and, furthermore, over death itself.

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Within a literary genre that I will refer to as 'coma fiction', authors frequently create topographical models of the mind, appropriating imagery from katabatic mythologies in order to define psychological places of the underworld through which the coma victim must journey.

Over the course of this article, I will look closely at the manifestations of the underworld in specific works of coma fiction, but before I do this, I would first like to address how I will make the distinction between the two paradigms of the underworld that I will be examining throughout the course of this article: Hades and Hell. For the purposes of this discussion, when referring to the various depictions of the underworld of Greco-Roman tradition, I will use the designation *Hades*, and the capitalised *Hell* when referring to the underworld of Christian thought. However, because of the locus of both, I will use the term *underworld* as a general term to describe the subterranean place to which all of the katabatic heroes discussed, herein, descend.[4]

Beneath The Fog and The Darkness: The Underworld of the Mind

One specific journey of descent in Greek mythology, and one that is particularly pertinent to this discussion of the topography of the coma-underworld, is the katabasis of Odysseus in Homer's the *Odyssey*. In Book Eleven of the *Odyssey* (the '*nekyia*'), the witch Circe allows Odysseus to leave her island so that he may commune with the dead in order to fathom what his next course of action should be. As instructed, Odysseus performs a ritual through which he is able to seek advice from the blind seer Teiresias. Whereas some scholars, notably Raymond J. Clark, see this as a full *nekyia*, an actual descent, others see it as a *nekyomanteia*, or 'calling up' of the dead. Indeed, when Odysseus first sees Teiresias, it does seem, through his use of passive verbs, as though it is a conjuration that simply appears *before* him, 'Now came the soul of Teiresias the Theban, holding | A staff of gold, and he knew who I was and spoke to me.'[5] However, as Clark points out, over time it appears as though Odysseus has actually descended, that a physical journey into Hades has taken place. This is supported when Odysseus is addressed by Anticleia, his dead mother, 'My child, how did you come here beneath the fog and the darkness | and still alive?'[6] To this, Odysseus replies, 'Mother, a duty brought me here to the house of Hades.'[7] Both statements clearly imply that Odysseus has physically travelled to the underworld, emphasised later when Odysseus (narrating this tale to his wife, Penelope) says that he 'descended into the House of Hades'. Circe, too, says of Odysseus, 'Unhappy men, who went alive to the house of Hades, | so dying twice, when all the rest of mankind die only | once'.[8] As Clark posits, Circe's remark suggests that Odysseus 'will be unlike other men', which 'further distinguishes the catabatic journey from a necromantic consultation.'[9]

Odysseus's *nekyia* is a particularly instructive example of katabasis when discussing the representation of descent narratives in coma fiction. Through the ritual taught to him by Circe, Odysseus both summons and walks alongside the spirits of Hades. Odysseus's katabasis is also more pertinent than some of his contemporaries as he is truly on a quest for knowledge (the prophetic knowledge of his future) which he hopes to gain from the underworld; rather than Herakles or Theseus, for example, he is not looking to sack Hades, or defy the God of the underworld himself. This form of katabatic quest for enlightenment is again a running motif throughout coma fiction and the fact that, as Clark points out, Odysseus will no longer be like 'other men' is a motif also utilised within such narratives. Odysseus's quest starts out as a psychological encounter that soon transports him on a physical journey into Hades. In the examples of coma fiction I will be discussing, a similar transition takes place, albeit somewhat inverted; the physical departure triggering the coma which, in turn, triggers a psychological journey through the underworld. Like Odysseus, the coma victim, in the works

of fiction I will be discussing, is depicted as being stationary in space, yet simultaneously experiencing a physical journey.

This katabasis that takes the hero beneath 'the darkness' on a journey of enlightenment also resonates with another classical Greek text, Plato's 'allegory of the cave' in Book VII of the *Republic*. This extended metaphor outlines the consequences of a 'soul's earthly imprisonment',[10] discussing how we are all 'men living in a sort of cavernous chamber underground, with an entrance open to the light and a long passage all down the cave.'[11] This restrictive 'cave' represents the human mind and the potential it has to stagnate, oppressing the individual within its chambers of darkness. However, the cave also represents the possibility the mind offers the individual to escape into the light and shed his 'unquestioning acceptance of material values'.[12] If the mind is a cave, albeit a complex and multi-faceted cave (after all, Plato doesn't specify exactly how far-reaching this metaphorical 'long passage' is), then we can extrapolate this image and suggest that the narrative of interior coma descent constitutes a katabasis of the psyche. Within Plato's parable, the physical katabasis is transformed into the psychical katabasis, and we are once more reminded of the 'cave' being the starting point for a descent to the underworld. The depictions of journeys into the supposed underworld of the coma unconscious, therefore, constitute a psychical katabasis with the mind being the point of departure, the cave of the earth (where, for example, the Christian katabatic heroes, Lazarus and Christ were laid before their own journeys to the underworld), now made flesh.

This concept of the mind as cave is exploited in Liz Jensen's *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax.* The novel is centred upon a young boy, the eponymous hero, Louis, who lies in a coma following a tragic "accident". The dual-narrative structure follows both Louis's interior coma narrative, in which he tries to come to terms with the underworld of coma, and the exterior coma narrative of his physician, Dr. Dannachet, who attempts to learn of the true cause of Louis's accident; a suicide attempt after witnessing his mother, Natalie Drax (suffering from the syndrome *Munchausen's-by-proxy*) murder his father by pushing him over a cliff edge. It is this same cliff edge, we eventually learn, over which Louis willingly steps in plain vision of his mother. The guardian of Louis's coma-underworld is the sinister and obscure figure, Gustave, a shadowy 'Other' who is eventually revealed to represent Louis's murdered father, Pierre. It is through this revelation, alongside Gustave's Virgilian[13] guidance through the landscape of Louis's coma, that the image of the mind as cave is developed. At one point, Gustave says to Louis, 'I just remember being in a dark place. A cave.'[14] The fact that Gustave resides within Louis's mind exacerbates this image of the mind as a physical space; a cave. This image is emphasised further when, later, Gustave decides to guide Louis deeper into this psychical underworld, a journey that significantly involves Louis 'climbing down into the danger'[15] in a trajectory that once more evokes a physical katabatic descent. This level of the coma which manifests itself as a liminal space is also described by Louis as 'a cave' with 'walls all around, white stone like bone, like inside a creepy skull.'[16] Louis, unknowingly at the time, uses a pertinent simile, bestowing upon his unconscious the physical designation of the skull/cave in which his mind *literally* resides. On the walls of this cave, scrawled in blood, are the names 'Catherine' and 'Louis'. The former name was that of Pierre Drax's first wife with whom he had planned to adopt Louis from his birth-mother, Natalie, before being seduced by Natalie herself. Despite being cloaked as a descent into the mind of his father, into his father's 'cave', this katabatic descent becomes a journey into Louis's own mind, where he confronts the family secrets that he has repressed in the world outside of his coma. In journeying into this space of his psyche, a space which echoes the dark, damp and cavernous topography of Hades, Louis finally confronts the truth of his mother's syndrome and the repeated, life-threatening dangers she has subjected him to.

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The image of the cave is made more complex, later, when Dannachet learns that Pierre Drax's body has been discovered in a sea-cave cut into the cliff-side over which he was pushed. Like those earlier katabatic heroes of Christian mythology, Christ and Lazarus, he was 'stuck in that cave for three days.'[17] Louis's katabasis of coma, then, with his father as Virgilian guide, also acts as a prophetic dream and chimes with Odysseus's own katabasis due to the fact that both protagonists acquire a certain 'knowledge of the future.'[18]

These familiar archetypes of katabasis are rife within coma fiction with underworld topography appearing frequently, not least the motif of 'hellish' shades. These *eidola* are immaterial images or spirits that represent memories or acquaintances of the 'overworld' but are somehow empty, devoid of both earthly attachments and of the *thymos* (the body) yet who seem to crave attention of the flesh (hence the blood sacrifice that Odysseus performs). The *eidola* as described by the ghost of Achilles in the *Odyssey* are 'the senseless | dead men… | [the] mere imitations of perished mortals',[19] desperate to hold onto what once made them human and yet failing to understand the need to do this, anchoring into Achilles's use of the adjective 'senseless'. Gustave, in *Louis Drax*, is one such 'senseless' *eidolon*; a shade in Louis's coma-underworld. Unable to remember the exact details of his life in the overworld, even possessing a different name, he is still inextricably drawn to the fragmented memories of that world and desperate to re-unify them. Topographical *eidola* also appear frequently within interior coma narratives: the false realities of the narrator's shadow-world in Alex Garland's *The Coma*; the oppressive cityscape of Nicholas Royle's *Regicide* (the author implying that the map that the protagonist finds is a drawing of his coma-damaged brain, the *gyri* and *sulci* representing the Orwellian streets of the city). In these novels, the coma-protagonist, like Drax, must travel downwards and deeper into the nadir of their coma-underworld in order to gain katabatic knowledge and return to the overworld. In *The Coma*, this lowest point is referred to as a 'void'; in *Regicide*, as 'the Dark', both reminiscent of the darkness and bleakness of the archetypal Hadean underworld and Plato's image of the cave.

The post-Jungian theorist, James Hillman (one of the chief exponents of archetypal psychology, a practise that analyses the influence of polytheistic mythologies upon the individual's psychological life), elaborates upon this use of archetypal imagery of the underworld. He builds on the Freudian idea of the descent to the id 'through the cracks and crevices of consciousness'[20] being similar to the descent of the katabatic hero into Hades via the cave-mouth. He writes, 'Where do contents of consciousness go when they fade from attention? Into the unconscious, says psychology. The underworld has gone into the unconscious: even become the unconscious.'[21] This concept, then, has arguably been adopted by the writers of coma fiction discussed herein, with authors using the idea of the coma unconscious as a springboard for an exploration of 'the fundamental relation of the psyche with the realm of the dead'.[22]

Jung, among other theorists and scholars (including the narrative theorist Northrop Frye) points toward the development of depth psychology as being a key influence upon how we navigate toward such a geographical understanding of the inner workings of the mind and the 'underworld' of the unconscious. Freud, in particular, maps out a topographical model of the mind that, like Dante's vision of the cosmos, consists of various spatial levels to which we can travel. The very nature of depth psychology is to attempt to delve into the darkest depths of the psyche in order to confront the particular *eidolon* at the heart of the disturbance. This 'shade' is brought into the light and normalised in rational, concrete terms, stripping it of its mystery – its 'hellish' qualities. Returning to the case of *Louis Drax*, like the depth psychologist and the katabatic hero of antiquity, the eponymous hero also journeys into the deepest realms of his coma-underworld in order to excavate and retrieve, what Rosalind Williams would call, the 'absolute truth'[23] about his mother. It is only this psychological embodiment of a geological process that will allow him to return to the overworld. This

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notion of psychological 'excavation' is often manifested in common parlance, as we are asked to 'dig deep' or to 'dredge our minds', to 'get "down to bedrock" or brass tacks',[24] metaphorically concretizing the vertical topography of the psyche.

The Lower World: Coma and the Excavation of the Underworld

One text, in particular, that equates the coma condition to a katabatic excavation of the underworld is Iain Banks's novel *The Bridge*. Similar to other texts, such as Welsh's *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, Banks creates a multi-layered topography of the coma consciousness, though unlike the protagonist in Welsh's novel, the unnamed narrator of *The Bridge* has no real control over his transitions between layers of consciousness. Instead, each layer possesses its own distinct narrator: fractured alter-egos of the master-narrator's psyche who jostle for narratorial supremacy. One of these narrators appositely takes the form of a Scottish barbarian who embarks upon an overt journey of descent into the underworld of antiquity, encountering such archetypal figures as Charon, ferryman of the River Styx.

The complex narrative structure of the novel is scaffolded by individually titled sections, themselves containing undertones of the katabatic quest-narrative within the physical space of the underworld. The novel is split into three main sections, 'Coma', 'Triassic', and 'Eocene'. These are then each split by a sub-division, 'Metaphormosis', 'Metamorpheus', and 'Metamorphosis' respectively, which are then split into further divisions, one to four or, in the case of the final 'Metamorphosis' section, split into four named divisions: 'Oligocene', 'Miocene', 'Pliocene', and 'Quaternary'.

There are several conceits at play within this intricate matrix. The first thing to note is that this core three-part structure is evocative of the stages of the katabatic quest, the three stages that Joseph Campbell would call the 'departure', the 'initiation', and the 'return'.[25] In this katabasis of coma, it is the coma itself, as is the case with *Louis Drax,* which proves to be the departure point for the descent from the cave-mouth of the mind into the unconscious underworld of 'the bridge'. The use of geological epochs is also revealing when analysing the interior landscape of coma. As the novel progresses, each section moves forward chronologically in terms of epoch, ending at the most recent period at the time of writing the novel; the 'Quaternary'. Each period represents significant geological and evolutionary change, suggesting that throughout his katabasis, Banks's narrator is in a constant state of developmental flux. This leads to a form of transfiguration, as he gradually re-unifies his fractured pre-coma identity, an identity that will nevertheless remain forever changed through the process of 'destruction and rebirth of the self through an encounter with the absolute Other.'[26] Ultimately, transfiguration is the result of every katabatic journey: Herakles, as a consequence of defeating and capturing Kerberus, acquires the knowledge that after he dies, his spiritual form will reside on Mount Olympus, but his physical form will be trapped in the underworld forever. In Christian scripture, Christ harrows the underworld of Hell and undergoes a more 'glorious' transfiguration, achieving the ultimate victory of a katabatic hero: the defeat of death itself.

The narrator's psychological journey is described in terms of physical topography, moving through the layers of the earth in an attempt to escape from the underworld of coma and return to the overworld. The deeper into his coma the narrator descends, the deeper the layers of the earth become, exemplified by the 'Triassic' section of the novel; the point of his unconscious from which he must attempt to return. The closer he gets to the overworld, the more recent the epoch and, consequently, the layer of earth he traverses. This structure creates another topographically vertical model of the mind and of consciousness, the layers of which, like Drax, the narrator must 'excavate' in order to escape the underworld. Geographical and physical spaces, then, play a key role throughout the novel. It is within one such form, the

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sinister, oppressive structure of 'the bridge', that the central narrator, John Orr (itself a pun on a geological 'ore', once more implying a sense of katabatic excavation) resides.

The bridge itself is an imposing, constantly-evolving structure that spans a seemingly endless expanse of water; the landmasses between which it stretches cannot be seen in either direction, immediately creating an image of limbo. Orr, the main hero trapped within the coma-underworld and the chief alter-ego of the unnamed master-narrator, has no recollection as to how he has arrived in this place. He knows only that he was 'fished […] out of the sea.'[27] This reflects traditional katabatic mythologies where the descent-hero has to cross vast areas of water to reach the underworld; the Mesopotamian *Gilgamesh* mythology and Odysseus's own katabasis being core examples. In mythology, the sea itself is also often represented as a departure point for a katabatic journey, as Frye explains, 'The lower world [is] reached by descent through a cave or under water',[28] reflecting Louis Drax's katabasis which is similarly initiated by his plunge into the sea.

The socio-political environment of the bridge is highly oppressive, with bureaucratic divisions of social class laid in vertical relation to one another. The further down the bridge you are forced to live, the more insignificant you become, reflecting David Pike's observation that one of the chief tendencies of certain narratives of descent, such as Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Lucian's *Voyage to the Underworld*, was to create and satirise 'a transparently social or political allegory of contemporary life on earth.'[29] Each of these spatial divisions also reflects the delineations within Dante's topographical imagining of Hell in the *Inferno*, which itself adopts ancient archetypes of 'hellish' society, and certainly not without its share of satirical undertones to which Pike alludes. Thus, when Orr is abruptly stripped of his relatively high status as psychiatric patient, he is condemned to dwell in the nether regions of the bridge, living alongside the faceless masses. At this lowest point, the environment is described as 'cold and dark' with 'grey waters' that 'crash white outside',[30] the constant repetition of 'darkness' and 'dampness' reflecting Odysseus's own descent 'beneath the fog and the darkness' discussed earlier. Mapping Orr's descent through the layers of the bridge against various Greco-Roman depictions of the underworld, this lowest point of the bridge becomes comparable with the lowest zone of Hades, Tartarus, which was, as Hillman explicates, 'in the imagination of late antiquity […] a region of dense cold air without light'.[31] Traditionally, it was in this 'pneumatic region'[32] where the shades that had made some form of terrible transgression (usually against the Gods) were subjected to torturous, repetitive punishments. Sisyphus, for example (who significantly appears in *The Bridge* in the master-narrator's "barbarian" coma fantasy), was forced to roll a huge rock up a hill, only to have it roll all the way to the bottom just before he managed to get it to the summit. Tartarus is frequently described as 'an almost bottomless pit of anguish and despair'[33] and this is emulated by Orr's own descent into the lower depths of the bridge where he suffers psychological punishment as a faceless *eidolon*.

Aside from the references to Tartarus, numerous infernal images of Christian thought appear within the topography of the bridge, mechanised visions of Hell that reflect the author's fascination with science, geology and engineering. It is revealed that the master-narrator once studied geology, before training and working as an engineer. Several times, this narrator's alter-ego, Orr, encounters horrendous accidents within the bridge, happenings that conjure images of mechanical suffering and Christian Hell-fire. At one point, Orr inspects a sketch of the bridge that his one friend (and Virgilian guide), Abberlaine Arrol, has drawn for him. It depicts trains that are 'grotesque, gnarled things, like giant maggots' and 'girders and tubes' that 'become branches and boughs, disappearing into smoke rising from the jungle floor; a giant, infernal forest.'[34] Here, Banks makes an open reference to the bridge being an 'infernal' place; a sinister, smoking forest that may even nod towards Dante's departure point for Hell in the *Inferno*. This artistic impression of the underworld of the bridge, combining

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topographical details of both Hades and Hell, clearly contains monsters (there are always monsters in the underworld) but these monsters are grafted to the physical environment, onto the ironwork of the bridge so that the metallic, topographical detail of the landscape becomes organic as a result of the creatures being integrated into the physical space. When discussing the ultimate goal of the katabatic journey, Pike observes that 'it requires the descent through hell to teach the protagonist allegorical interpretation.'[35] By confronting various manifestations of Hellish and Hadean topography, alongside *eidola* within the world of the bridge, the narrator is gradually able to gain allegorical understanding of the cause of his coma: a car-crash instigated by him driving whilst drunk, absent-mindedly marvelling at that masterpiece of engineering down-river, the Forth Rail Bridge (itself transformed into a topographical *eidolon* within the coma-underworld).

As part of his acquisition of 'allegorical interpretation', the narrator, as Orr, has to leave the mechanical topography of the bridge and move into the world beyond, burrowing downwards into the very centre of the earth. The geological divisions of the novel are stressed once more, again echoing katabatic descent through the physical earth and the master-narrator's desire to dig deeper towards the heart of his coma-underworld. In doing this, he attempts to achieve enlightenment to trigger his transfiguration and process of 'rising'. As Williams posits in her discussion of the travails of the 'subterranean' adventurer, '[T]he lower world is, paradoxically, identified with higher truth.'[36] Like Drax and the katabatic heroes of antiquity, the hero of Banks's novel has to journey to the deepest landscapes of his coma in order to gain the knowledge that will allow him to return to the overworld.

The deeper Orr travels into the earth, the more extreme his visions of the underworld become, but also the more traditional they become in a Catholic sense of *contrapasso*, where the 'form of retribution [is] exactly suited to the nature of each sin,'[37] Banks again tapping into the Christian conception of Hell. Earlier, in one particular moment of clarity, Orr considers why he is trapped within this Hell, saying: 'I do not know why I am here. Because I did something wrong.'[38] The seamlessness between this call-and-response utterance, between the doubt and the certainty, echoes the notions of Hell being a place of punishment, with the individual being so accustomed to the torture that they almost become senseless with it; accepting their lot, knowing they have committed a wrongdoing and deserve their punishment in some way, but losing track of the specifics of their transgression. Later, within the heart of the earth, Orr encounters two warring armies and sees the prisoners of war captured by one particular faction thrown into 'pools of boiling mud'.[39] They are then dragged out again, with more mud shovelled onto them so that they become 'gnarled statues', symbols of the punishment that awaits other rebels or transgressors in this psychical underworld. Similarly, within the ninth circle of Dante's Hell, (a place that, like *The Bridge*, also punishes traitors) the transgressors are punished by being turned into gnarled and distorted statues, trapped in time. However, unlike the traditional Christian image of Hell-fire, Dante envisions his innermost circle of Hell as being a place of utmost cold, Satan himself held in a frozen lake of blood. Once more, we see the interchangeability between Hell and Hades and the mythological traditions of both, Dante's ninth circle echoing the cold, pneumatic region of Tartarus, rather than the traditional Christian image of Hell. Banks, too, adopts this 'magpie' approach, developing his own vision of the underworld based upon both the Christian Hell and manifestations of the Greco-Roman Hades.

In the *Inferno*, Dante travels down through Hell until he re-emerges on the other side of the earth; he and Virgil climb down Satan's body and it is at this point that an inversion occurs: 'I raised my eyes, believing I should see | the half of Lucifer that I had left; | instead I saw him with his legs turned up'.[40] He has descended into the earth via one hemisphere, and ended his katabatic journey emerging into the other hemisphere, staring at the stars and leaving Satan behind forever; a 'turning upside down at a zero point and a return to the surface of some

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kind.'[41] In *The Bridge*, a similar inversion occurs, an inversion that is again accentuated by the geological, spatial denominations of the chapters. As Orr journeys deeper into the landscape of the bridge (his unconscious), paradoxically, he comes closer to the surface of the waking overworld, as represented by the increasingly modern geological epochs. As Falconer suggests, '[k]atabatic inversion thus inverts the hero's sense of entrapment into one of liberation or insight.'[42]

Such depictions of 'hellish' inversions are rife within the literature of mythological descent. Hillman, for example, discusses how in the Egyptian underworld imagination, '[t]he dead walked upside down so that stuff of their bowels came out through their mouths.'[43] In another one of Orr's many visions of the underworld, he imagines that 'the bridge is part of a circle', Banks again paying homage to Dante's topographical model of the nine circles of Hell, but also employing archetypes from various mythological tales, not least this hellish inversion of faecal matter. Orr envisions himself trapped on a different manifestation of the bridge, staring at macabre sexual orgies on the shore opposite, where the women, in an image reminiscent of the sirens in the *Odyssey*, call to him to join in their sexual depravity. He cannot cross the ocean, however, because of the 'carnivorous fish' which inhabit the water, embodying the monstrous guardians of the underworld inherent in katabatic mythology (the hell-hound, Kerberus, being one such example). Orr details his frustrated revenge upon these 'Hell-bags': 'I waited until I needed a crap, then threw the turd at them. Those obscene brats *used* it in one of their filthy sex games'.[44] In a scene that harks back to Hillman's discussion of Egyptian inversion within the underworld, faecal matter, a symbol of discarded, 'dead' matter, becomes a symbol of sexual desire and virility. Such an archetypal inversion provides us with an overall vision of the underworld, a mirror world that seems to represent the overworld in the form of *eidola*, yet which subverts all of the meanings and associations of that world, not least the concept of time. At once, there occurs the impossible re-running and collapsing of time, the repetitious punishment of Sisyphus, for example, that never reaches a conclusion, and yet the descent hero must move *through* time and space in order to complete his katabasis and get back to the overworld. The *Inferno* is a paradigm of this dichotomy of hell-time: Dante perceives shades trapped in time, and yet his own journey is framed by a time-scale, descending at 6am and re-emerging at 6pm. Set against this oxymoronic inversion of time is the other inversion of place; the return to the overworld by climbing further into the underworld, an inversion present in all of the works of coma fiction discussed herein.

In another great example of Greco-Roman descent literature, the *Aeneid*, Virgil notes that:

> The way downward is easy from Avernus.
> Black Dis's door stands open night and day.
> But to retrace your steps to heaven's air,
> There is the trouble, there is the toil. [45]

However, this notion of the difficulty of the katabatic return is something of a moot point, as explicated by Falconer in her discussion of Eduard Norden's work on the inversion of return, '[The difficulty of return] is only true in a limited sense; it is easy to go to Hades by dying, but difficult to cross over when alive; and the return journey in most cases occurs swiftly and with little hindrance.'[46] The keyword in the extract from Virgil is 'retrace' and that a return involves travelling back through the spaces of the underworld already covered. But this doesn't occur in the *Inferno* as Dante travels *through* Hell to come out on the other side; a return he describes in less than seven lines. Odysseus, too, at the end of his own katabasis, seems to find the return easy by simply turning away from the teeming, tortured souls of Hades and returning to his ship. A process of toilsome 'retracing' does not occur. Contrary to Virgil's statement, the katabatic return seems to be not so difficult and this model is likewise

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apparent in coma fiction. In *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, no sooner has Roy faced up to his inner demons than a return is triggered; in *The Coma*, a similar transition occurs, the return initiated by confronting the simple contents of a briefcase. In *The Bridge*, the return seems to be entirely in the master-narrator's hands; at the deepest point of the Hell/Hades of coma, all the hero of Banks's novel has to do is to make the cognitive decision to return and a return will be granted. As the master narrator says, '[t]he choice is not between dream and reality; it is between two different dreams.'[47] In the end, return from the underworld is all about *choice*, an active decision that is in itself an inversion of Orr's passive helplessness within the space of coma. Similarly, in *Louis Drax*, return from Hades is a matter of choice, as summarised by Louis in the novel's final lines, 'I know that one day, if I want to, I can do it. I can take one step forward. And then another.'[48]

The Limits of Mortality: **Coma and the Boundaries of Place**

In his work on the dead, and his explorations of the places where the dead co-habit the world of the living, Robert Pogue Harrison makes a 'controversial claim', that 'places are located in nature, yet they always have human foundations.' He asserts that places 'do not occur naturally but are created by human beings through some mark or sign of human presence.'[49] Harrison therefore suggests that out of the abstract notion of space, through the creation of concrete landmarks, humanity creates more tangible concepts of place. It is this process that allows nature to 'become bounded,' thus granting man the power of 'human containment'.[50]

This creation of place as a form of human containment of an abstract concept is resonant within the tales of katabasis from antiquity: the construction of subterranean topographies in an attempt to concretise and rationalise the abstract concept of death and the afterlife. By attributing physical, traversable landscapes to the underworld and, moreover, by allowing their heroes to return from these places, authors of katabatic narratives are able to 'contain' death by describing it in terms of tangible, imaginable and topographical imagery. Similarly, as discussed earlier, the pursuit of depth psychology was to 'contain' the somewhat abstract concept of the mind within a more 'bounded', perceptible model: a physical and geographical landscape.

I would therefore argue that many writers of coma fiction, in their creation of such interior, psychological landscapes of the underworld, are perhaps walking in the footsteps of the great heroes of katabatic narratives of old, in their attempts to metaphorically harrow the hell of a liminal space. In other words, by 'binding' the unconscious state of coma within topographically concretised depictions of a physical underworld, these writers are attempting to contain and comprehend coma. This process of containment is rife within the works of fiction I have discussed, with authors creating places out of the abstract space of the unconscious (just as Plato concretised the concept of the mind into the place of the cave). In Liz Jensen's novel, the interior space of Louis's unconscious becomes concretised and 'bounded' in the form of his own cave which, in turn, increasingly maps the subterranean topography of Hades. At the deepest point of descent, and shortly before reaching the point of katabatic enlightenment, the cave is described as 'a freezing mouth breathing out.'[51] Here again, the resonance with the deepest part of Hades – Tartarus – is made apparent through the reference to cold air, expelled from the 'mouth' of the cave. Banks's novel borrows topographical motifs from traditional representations of both Hades and Hell to represent a vertically-structured 'hellish' society, the layers of which the coma victim must travel through in order to return to the 'waking' overworld. At one point, when Orr is cast down to the lowest reaches of the bridge (this particular novel's version of Tartarus), he wakes from a nightmare and believes he is 'encased in ice.'[52] This not only stresses the references to Tartarus, through the depiction of a 'cold' landscape, but also chimes with Dante's own nadir

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of Hell in the *Inferno*, itself influenced by various strands of Greco-Roman thought as dramatised in the katabatic works of Homer and Virgil. Banks even openly alludes to katabatic descent in the narration of the Barbarian alter-ego, who has to travel through the Hadean topography of the 'Underwurld' [sic], and is at one point told to 'Beware Lethe, the waters of oblivion.'[53] The 'containment' of the space of the mind in a physical place is once more emphasised, this particular reference to Lethe, the river of forgetfulness within Hades, acting as a warning to the Master-Narrator to battle against the potential oblivion of coma.

Ultimately, the underworld topography attributed to the interior state of coma allows authors and readers alike to rationalise the terrifying prospect of a violently-induced, prolonged state of unconsciousness. I suggest that these authors are creating, to return to Frank's terminology, 'restitution narratives' that allow human containment of coma, thus articulating an intimate understanding of mortality. Significantly, in all of the works of fiction discussed, the protagonist returns from his coma underworld (or at least, gains the knowledge of *how* to return). In this way, by allowing their protagonists to travel through and return from a physical underworld, both writers of coma fiction and of katabatic tales of antiquity are, in turn, allowing mankind to attempt to confront and work through the various and varied abstractions of existence.

Notes

[1] Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 85.

[2] Rachel Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 19.

[3] Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 382.

[4] The concepts of Hades and Hell are united by the fact that in both Greco-Roman and Christian tradition, their location is beneath the earth – they are both conceived as an 'underworld'. However, traditionally the Christian Hell is seen to be a place where sinners are punished, whereas Hades is seen to be a place where all souls reside, its deepest point, Tartarus, being the one zone where transgressors (usually transgressors against the gods) are punished. This being said, there is certainly interchangeability between the terms, 'Hades' and 'Hell'. Indeed, in certain versions of the Bible, 'Hades' is used rather than the designation 'Hell', and in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus of c.425AD which details Christ's 'harrowing' of Hell, a conversation between Satan and the Greco-Roman god Hades, himself, is imagined. It must be noted that up until this 'harrowing', Hell was also a place where all souls went to, regardless of whether or not they were sinners, reflecting both Hades and the Sheol of Hebrew scripture. Indeed, when the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek in c.200BC, the underworld of 'Sheol' was translated into 'Hades' and likewise in modern translations of the Bible, 'Hades' was substituted for 'Hell' from the Old High German and Old English verb *helan*, meaning 'to conceal'. Once more, the connection to Hades can be made as Hades, himself, in Greco-Roman culture, was invisible, with very few physical depictions of him. James Hillman explains that he was a 'hidden presence', whilst tracing an etymological investigation into the name Hades which, he notes, can be translated as 'the hider' or 'the unseen one'. For further discussion of the etymological and cultural development of Hades/Hell, see Richard N. Longenecker in *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, ed. Donald E. Gowan (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 188-190, James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 27-32 and Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, pp. 18-20.

[5] Homer, *Odyssey*, Trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), Book 11, lines 90-91, p. 170.

[6] Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11, lines 155-156, p. 172.

[7] Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11, line 164, p. 172.

[8] Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 12, lines 21-23, p. 185.

[9] Raymond J. Clark, *Catabasis: Vergil and the Wisdom-Tradition* (Amsterdam: B.R.Grüner, 1979), p. 77.

[10] Stephen L. Harris and Gloria Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1995), p. 822.

[11] Harris and Platzner, p. 826.

[12] Harris and Platzner, p. 822.

[13] In Dante's epic vision of the Christian underworld, he transforms the poet Virgil into a literary character and guide through the nine circles of hell, whilst also using many mythological details of Virgil's own underworld present in his epic poem the *Aeneid* (itself influenced by Homeric depictions of Hades).

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[14] Liz Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 100.

[15] Jensen, p. 175.

[16] Jensen, p. 176.

[17] Jensen, p. 227.

[18] Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harbinger, 1963), p. 62.

[19] Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11, lines 475-476, p. 180.

[20] Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, p. 111n6.

[21] James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 65.

[22] James Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account* (Woodstock: Spring Publications, 1997), p. 38.

[23] Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), p. 49.

[24] Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 65.

[25] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (New York: Bollingen, 1968).

[26] Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, p. 1.

[27] Iain Banks, *The Bridge* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), p. 83.

[28] Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 59.

[29] David L. Pike, *Passage Through Hell* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 7.

[30] Banks, *The Bridge*, p. 224.

[31] Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, p. 38.

[32] Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, p. 38.

[33] Harris and Platzner, *Classical Mythology*, p. 200.

[34] Banks, *The Bridge*, p. 157.

[35] Pike, *Passage Through Hell*, p. 113.

[36] Williams, *Notes on the Underground*, p. 45.

[37] Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, p. 25.

[38] Banks, *The Bridge*, p. 186.

[39] Banks, *The Bridge,* p. 311.

[40] Dante, *Inferno* in *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (London: Everyman's Library, 1995), Canto XXXIV, lines 88-90, p. 61.

[41] Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, p. 45.

[42] Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, p. 53.

[43] Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld,* p. 183.

[44] Banks, *The Bridge*, p. 191.

[45] Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (London: Harvill Press, 1984), Book VI, lines 126-129, p. 164.
  The original text reads:
  facilis descensus Averni:
  noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;
  sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,
  hic opus, hic labor est.

[46] Falconer, p. 43.

[47] Banks, *The Bridge*, p. 380.

[48] Jensen, *Louis Drax*, p. 227.

[49] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 18.

[50] Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, p. 19.

[51] Jensen, *Louis Drax*, p. 174.

[52] Banks, *The Bridge*, p. 194.

[53] Banks, *The Bridge*, p. 211.

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Biography

Matthew Colbeck is a PhD student within the School of English at the University of Sheffield, researching the representation of coma and brain injury in literature, with a particular interest in the ethical issues of writing about cognitive impairment and disability. As part of his research, Matthew has established a writing group, *The Write Way*, in which all participants have experienced coma or brain injury. The group published their first collection of writings, *Head-Lines*, in October 2011. The second edition is currently being compiled.