



## Underground in literature Images, texts, suggestions

by Giuseppe Pace

The concept of Underground goes beyond its physical and territorial meanings. It is deeply rooted in the humankind, in its philosophical and cultural evolution, in art and collective imaginary. In literature, the first relevant underground for the western imaginary is certainly the Plato's cave, as described in the VII book of the Republic, a fictive world that the dull senses of men perceive as authentic. The underground becomes the prison of the intellect, from which only the wisdom of the philosopher can free the individual. This negative vision of the Underground evolves and changes to positive in the modern age, where "...occult, hidden, deep places, whether geographically determined or peripheral and inaccessible areas of the mind" (Bombara, 2018) become the sites that welcome life, authentic also if squalid, painful, oppressive. The world above, limited by law and convenience imposed by society or by ourselves, develops in a space destined for the wayward perception and consciousness. On the contrary, the Underground symbolises the irrational, the shapeless with all its chaotic, uncontrolled, cynical, resentful

spontaneity. In literature, the representations of the Underground become icons of modernity and freedom, as a rejection of essential rules, of a depth not only topological but of thought (Bombara, 2018).

In his *Memories of the Underground*, Dostoevsky remarks that the authentic man of the contemporary age is precisely the one who chooses to live below the surface, avoiding contact with others and taking refuge in solitude (Dostoevsky, 1864). As a place of identity, the Underground is a potentially infinite theme. It is real and virtual place: hell, unconscious, turned image of ourselves. In the modern era, the Underground becomes an extension of the contemporary city above, which is a place of contradictions, from the one side expressing the highest degree of civilization, but on the other side producing an unspeakable lowness, deviating from the law, breaking the morality, and gathering disinherited, marginalized, rebellious masses. In that sense, the underground city appears the authentic core of the city, an expression of the real and vital essence of its inhabitants.

With his ruins, caves, foundations, alleys, hypogea, Naples could be considered the city/Aleph. It seem to contain every aspect of humanity, from the sublime to the miserable, and its underground inspired writers, from Strabo, Virgilio to Pasolini, La Capria and contemporary (Lucia, 2018)

This short repository on the literature on the underground does not pretend to be comprehensive but only stimulating a further reading on the Underground.

**Giacomo Leopardi** (1827), *Small Moral Works* (Italian: *Operette morali*), Italy

**Fyodor Dostoevsky** (1864), *Notes from Underground* (Original title "Çàïèñèè èçú ïïäïñüÿ"), Russia

**Eugène Sue** (1842/1843), *Les Mystères de Paris*, Paris

**Lewis Carroll** (1862-64), *Alice's Adventures Underground*, Christ Church College, Oxford, Oxfordshire

**Jules Verne** (1877), *The Underground City* (Extraordinary Voyages #16), France

**Arthur Conan Doyle** (1892), *Beyond the City: a novel*, The Floating Press, UK

**Jack Kerouac** (1964), *The Subterraneans*, Grove Press, US

**Italo Calvino** (1972), *Invisible Cities* (Italian: *Le città invisibili*), Giulio Einaudi Editore, Turin.

**Charles Bukowski** (1973), *South of No North: Stories of the Buried Life*, Black Sparrow Press, Los Angeles

**Dino Buzzati** (1984), *Cronache nere* (*Black chronicles*), Theoria, Milano

**Haruki Murakami** (1997), *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (Original title アンダーグラウンド, Andôguraundo), Japan

**Mick Jackson** (1997), *The Underground Man*, Faber & Faber, UK

**Erri De Luca** (1999), *Tufo*, Dante & Descartes, Naples

**Colson Whitehead** (2016), *The Underground Railroad: A Novel*, US, Anchor Publisher

**Nathan Englander** (2017), *Dinner at the Center of the Earth: A novel*, US, Knopf.

Important reference for the Italian Literature is the special issue "Tematiche del sottosuolo nella letteratura e cultura italiane" RIVISTA DI STUDI ITALIANI Anno XXXVI, n 2 Agosto 2018, edited by Daniela Bombara.



“Seeing Calvino” is an art project performed by Matt Kish, Joe Kuth e Leighton Connor: they have re-interpreted the 55 fantastic cities created by the Italian writer, one for week, publishing paintings on line

[\[https://seeingcalvino.tumblr.com/\]](https://seeingcalvino.tumblr.com/)