

Romanticism strikes me as the last epoch in which the secularized and emancipated individual sought to regain a metaphysical dimension. When Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné traveled to Falun in 1733 to inspect the petrified miner on exhibit there in a vitrine, his subsequent verdict cut like a knife through what he perceived to be the superstitious sensationalism of the local population: “He is not petrified but only salted in vitriol, and as salt dissolves in the air, it too will pass over the course of time. However, at the beginning of the 19th century, when the story of the petrified miner became famous in Germany by way of Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert’s book “Views from the Dark Side of Natural Science”, it sounded far less profane. The focus of Schubert’s narrative lies in the unexpected reunion between the body of the young miner, who was buried for 50 years underground – apparently intact and untouched by time – and his fiancée, by then a frail old woman who identified him. Various temporalities interpenetrate here and permeate history metaphysically: the conserved body of the miner, kept young by his transformation into inorganic matter, in contrast to the biological decay of his aged fiancée, whose memory of the miner, in turn, seemed to reverse time. After Schubert, many well-known German Romantic writers recognized the potential impact of this narrative, including E.T.A. Hoffmann, Johann Peter Hebel, Achim von Arnim, and Friedrich Hebbel. They all dealt with this story in various ways and pulled it farther and farther into the realm of fiction.

The space of the mine is of particular importance in these narratives; it is an allegory for the individual psych, and one’s descent into it, to a place where one comes dangerously close to the hidden layers of the unconscious. At the same time, the mine is the first completely artificial and technological space created by man. The drawings of the Falun copper mines reminded me of animal burrows when I encountered them in a Swedish archive of 18th century hand-drawn maps. They are similar to how I imagine the tunnel-systems of the Arctic ground squirrel to be, which they have been digging in the frozen permafrost since time immemorial. When scientists found a 32,000 year-old squirrel burrow deep under the Siberian soil, thousands of frozen seeds fell into their hands, seeds that the animals had deposited in their feed stores, to eat after hibernation. The Arctic ground squirrel has the longest hibernation of any animal species, lasting 8 months without interruption, with a body temperature of -2 degrees Celsius. The heart almost stops beating, breathing stops for several minutes. It is as if the animal enters a state between life and death so as to survive the extreme conditions of the Arctic winter, only to be revived with the arrival of Spring. Adepts of cryonics probably imagine the time they will spend head down in steel containers, their bodies cooled down to -140 degrees Celsius with helium, after they have been classified as clinically dead, as a similar sort of hibernation. It’s an attempt to move a limit that until recently was considered immovable. If biological decay can be stopped, can we not justifiably hope to be revived at some unknown point in the future, like the 32,000-year-old seeds from the burrow of the

Arctic ground squirrel that were resuscitated in a Russian laboratory?

The plants grown from these seeds represent a living piece of ice age that can no longer be found in today's nature. Certain sci-fi books inevitably came to my mind when I first heard about them, along with pop-cultural references such as Frankenstein or Jurassic Park. I was all the more astonished by the delicate inconspicuousness of the plants when I first saw them. They belong to the *Silene* genus of flowering plants. Once again Carl von Linné enters into this text, a figure who – according to Strindberg – was more of a poet than a naturalist. In order to establish his classification system, he had to find thousands of names for classifying the plants and animals that were known at the time. One of these names is *Silene*. It is believed that it refers to Silenus, demi-god from Greek mythology and tutor of Dionysus. A multi-layered figure, something between a ridiculous drunkard and a wise guide. The wisdom of Silenus shows in his answer to King Midas' question regarding what is the most desirable thing of all in life: "the best thing for a man is not to be born, and if already born, to die as soon as possible." Today, as this genus of plants is known foremost for its inconceivably old Ice Age specimens, its name seems to retroactively produce a certain irony. In view of the life history of these plants, one might rather think of the following Apollonian principle: "The worst thing is to die soon, but the second worst thing is to die at all."

– Christian Kosmas Mayer

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