

Don DeLillo's Underworlds

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Widely recognized as Don DeLillo's magnum opus, *Underworld* (1997) is anomalous in DeLillo's now burgeoning oeuvre only because the novel's title announces emphatically what almost every one of his fifteen novels take as a central thematic concern: the "underworld," the clandestine realm that exists at the hem of known history or "conscious reality." It is, upon consideration, truly astonishing that books that treat so disparate a range of subjects as DeLillo's do—everything from college football, to rock music, to mathematics, to academia, to political assassination, to global terrorism—would all contend with his preoccupation with the shadow-world, a parallel realm to the waking world of the "real," but they do. DeLillo's underworlds exist in the minds of his characters as subconscious dreamscapes, unpopulated fields, spheres of dark possibility and secrecy, realms of id-ridden often thanatotic desire.

Novel to novel, the underworld, in whatever guise it assumes, insistently announces itself, impinging into the overworld, obtruding onto it, rupturing forth from the dreaming world into the waking world of the "real." The underworld wants out. Leonard Wilcox, while pursuing far different ends in his "Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and the Return of the Real," offers nonetheless a very useful way of thinking about the interpenetration of the under- into the over-world that is applicable to most of DeLillo's other novels. Wilcox argues that the novel *Underworld* is punctuated by "eruptions of contingency," that themselves "evoke Roland Barthes's notion of the punctum . . . a sting . . . cut, little hole in representation . . . a traumatic recognition" (27). Unlike Wilcox, I wish to identify the puncta that occur in DeLillo's other fictions as those traumatic moments when the repressed cultural unconscious, the underworld, erupt into the flow of history and potentially redirect its course in the way that a rock slide re-channels a river bed. "Longing on a large scale," DeLillo writes, "is what makes history" (11) and is an oft quoted passage from *Underworld*, but, as I hope to establish here, it applies to more than that novel alone (and I will confine myself largely to three representative novels), and "longing" must be understood necessarily to encompass the dreamers, the shadowy artificers, and the dreams of the underworld.

Published in 1972, *End Zone* is DeLillo's second novel, and takes as its ostensible subject collegiate football, West Texas football specifically, hallowed institution in a state that fetishizes the sport. Written and set during the richly paranoid middle phase of the Cold War, the atomic shadow hangs heavily over the scrub desert campus of Logos College. Despite the protestations of one of the college professors of protagonist

Gary Harkness, student athlete and doomsayer of the apocalypse, who harangues his class, saying, "I love sports. I love football. I reject the notion of football as warfare. Warfare is warfare. We don't need substitutes because we have the real thing" (164), the novel's primary conceit, however, suggests otherwise. Head Coach Emmett Creed understands the game as "a complex of systems . . . an interlocking of a number of systems" (199), the language here easily ascribable to military and political systems devoted to the culture of the bomb and the M.A.D. doctrine that so robustly animated the Nixon administrations. This prototypically American game resembles and replicates modern warfare, as even the most casual football fan has no doubt already considered. Games and especially the language of game-playing are central concerns of the novel. As the narrator reports of football, a game "known for its assault-technology motif," for "The exemplary spectator . . . it's the details he needs—impressions, colors, statistics, patterns, mysteries, numbers, idioms, symbols It is the one sport guided by language, by the word signal, the snap number, the color code, the play name. . . . Much of the appeal of sport derives from its dependence on elegant gibberish" (112-13). The narrator's discourse hums with ominous subterranean allegiances to the specialized lexicon of nuclear warfare, even as he describes lowly old football. It is no surprise, then, that the novel shifts from one language-dependant game to another.

Goaded by his morbid fascination with nuclear megadeath and the anxieties global extermination holds, Gary Harkness audits Air Force ROTC classes where he comes to the attention of Major Staley, who, sensing the right stuff in the young man, invites Gary to a motel room to participate in war gaming scenarios *tête-à-tête*. Just like wrong-headed spectators might misinterpret football as a loutish game of violence, Major Staley, before one gaming session with Gary, laments that anxious citizens misapprehend nuclear warfare: "People close their minds. They think nuclear war has to be insensate, both sides pushing all the buttons and the whole thing is over in two hours. In reality it's likely to be very deliberate There'd be all sorts of controls. You'd practically have a referee and a timekeeper" (82); in other words, an actual nuclear war would very much mimic their game playing. So, it is instructive to look at DeLillo's description of nuclear war gaming—rendered unequivocally in the most scintillating prose of this early novel—to see how its underworld incarnation, imagined nuclear holocaust between superpowers—might very well stand in as a transcription of the real thing. As Anya Taylor claims, "Words for the unimaginable and untellable still mesmerize at the end of the novel, despite the austerities of initiation" (69). With chilling precision, Staley lays out a series of unrelated but escalating exchanges as he establishes the "gaming environment," beginning with a crisis in the Sea of Japan and culminating the pre-game with "use of tactical nuclear weapons in West Germany [which] is first denied then claimed to be accidental. A brief cessation of hostilities. Charges and countercharges" (222). Gary then narrates, "At length we began. It took only twelve major steps or moves to complete the game There were insights, moves, minor revelations that we savored together Mythic images raged in my mind"(223). By move four, "SAC bombers assume maximum attack posture;" move 5 "COMRUS explodes a one-megaton nuclear device high in the air over territory west of Brussels"; by move 7 "ICBMs hit strategic targets throughout Europe Long-range missiles hit Grand Forks AFB in North Dakota. Step 10 "The city-busting begins SAC bombers raid selected cities from Murmansk to Vladivostok." Move 11 "Washington, D.C. is hit with a 25-megaton device. New York and Los Angeles are hit with SS-11 missiles." And then, ineluctably, terribly, step 12: "SIMcap dictates spasm response" (224-5). In other words "Boom!" Tellingly, as step 12 concludes, the

motel telephone rings and DeLillo writes, “Major Staley, turned quickly in his chair, terrified for a long second, and then simply stared at the commonplace black instrument as it continued to ring” (225). The overworld reasserts itself, but the question looms, where’s the real? The motel room? Is it instead in the taut, bristling jargon of the war game, or does it reside in actual, inevitable nuclear war itself that could, erupting forth from the minds of military strategists, play out in the starkly similar language of moves and counter-moves resulting in universal annihilation? Major Staley and Gary Harkness are benign underworld dreamers; Staley admits of their crude war gaming that “What we were playing . . . was barely the simulated thing,” but that is nothing less than ironic understatement.

In many ways, *Libra*, DeLillo’s treatment of the JFK assassination, his ninth novel (1988), is his most sustained and probing exploration of the underworld. Peter Knight’s synopsis aptly identifies that “*Libra*’s version of the Kennedy assassination is shaped by conspiracy, secret histories, and a sense of a hidden order behind the visible” (813). Moreover, *Libra* examines several complementary and conflicting underworlds—from engineered emplotments created by rogue CIA visionaries, to brutal mafiosos, to a lone individual who finds that it is “easy to matter” to the larger world if he simply submits to sociopathological impulses, acts, and then “enters history.” Character Nicholas Branch, one of many architects of alternate realities in the book, on contract for the CIA to write the “secret history” of the JFK assassination for the agency itself, sits at a desk in Langley, “the room of dreams,” assembling the “real” history from the “data spew” that has accumulated from over- and underworld investigations through the decades (14-15). His never-ending composition of the “secret history” has led him to believe that all history devolves to “men in small rooms,” coterries of individuals deliberating underworld possibilities, plots that will become puncta in the realm of the real. Ever the self-conscious author, “Branch thinks [his secret history] is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred” (181). He secretly calls his work the “Joycean Book of America . . . the novel in which nothing is left out” (182). Correspondingly, *Libra* is itself a Joycean enough account of the events leading to Dealey Plaza that it offers long Nighttown-like meditations, upwellings, eruptions from the pitching underworld, so as to lead to one character to pronounce axiomatically and with metafictional accuracy, “History . . . is the sum total of all the things they aren’t telling us” (321).

Not least of the underworld dreamers—a vital, volatile part of history’s sum total—that DeLillo imagines into being is Lee Harvey Oswald, a small room thinker himself. DeLillo’s Oswald is as complex as any other human, while also hobbled by inherent intellectual and affective deficiencies. Even still, he is perceptive enough to realize, as a nobody kid growing up in the Bronx, that “There is a world inside the world” (13). His revelation is that a world of secrets is a powerful hedge against anonymity. Oswald is psychologically invested in creating secret histories, even if his plots, inchoate ruminations, are obscure even unto himself. From young adulthood, Oswald understands, as he tries to “enter history” the first time by courting Soviet KGB agents with his negligible intelligence about the U-2 spy plane, “How strangely easy to have a say over men and events” (163). One need simply put into play whatever spectacular transgressive act that one might will. And in that regard, Oswald harbors grand and secret designs to inscribe indelibly his name in the annals of History with a capital “H.”

But in DeLillo’s complex imaginings of the conspiratorial plans leading to the murder of a United States president, Oswald is not the only dark dreamer from the

underworld. The anti-Castro element in Miami and the mob which has lost a lucrative foothold in Havana and loathes the Kennedy White House's anti-racketeering campaign both have underworld desires that might redirect the flow of historical inevitability. But most troubling are the rogue CIA agents DeLillo conjures who themselves wish to engineer a *coup d'état* in Dallas. Retired CIA agent Win Everett is an underworld fixer in all but name. Together with associates and without any knowledge that an actual individual like Lee Harvey Oswald even exists, Win, in his own small room of dreams, plots in sophisticated ways (that he believes will be studied by future generations in the intelligence community) of a fumbling assassin, someone with a back-story, and vows that "He will put someone together, build an identity, a skein of persuasion and habit, ever so subtle" (78). Win is "putting together a man with scissors and tape" (145). As Glen Thomas has argued of this abstract plotting, "Contingent upon the success of the plan is the creation of a single figure, 'a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the real world' (109). Imagine the flabbergasting shock when Win and associates are made aware that the solitary Oswald, with his mail-order rifle and his half-baked Fair Play for Cuba mentality, is actually walking the streets of Dallas, churning with dreams about mattering. Oswald is the real image Win has been creating, and we witness the nexus of underworld desires, the meshing of two plotters' designs, that takes on an air of inevitability. In that sense, it comes to seem fated that underworld desires will explode on an unsuspecting world on November 22, 1963, profoundly and permanently altering perceptions of the real and reality itself.

Finally, I want to turn to a late period novel, *Mao II*, (1991) to underscore the notion that underworlds surface throughout DeLillo's novel-writing career and also because one of the principal subjects of *Mao II* is terrorism, the peerless underworld phenomenon of our age, that is addressed in so many other of his books (*Players*, *The Names*, *Falling Man*) but never so succinctly as in this one text. Protagonist Bill Gray, a Salinger-like novelist with one great book in his past but without the will or possibly the capacity to execute a second one, is still marginally famous enough to provoke curiosity seekers and premature eulogists. Enconced in his New England safe house, Gray meditates on the terminal decline of the novelist in the contemporary era, a role that has been usurped in his estimation by violent extremists. He says to a visiting photographer, "There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of a culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness" (41). Underworld schemers and militants effect global transformative change without recourse to civil inquiry or debate, altering definitively "the inner life of a culture" through skyjackings and videotaped beheadings in small rooms. Later in the novel, uncharacteristically, escaping his self-imposed reclusivity by travelling to Beirut to aid in the release of another writer, Gray meets George Haddad, intermediary for the terrorist cell holding the hostage. Haddad seems to embrace strikingly similar views to Gray's regarding the shadowy men he represents and novelists who were once regarded as "the antennae of the race." Haddad expounds on the differences: "In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed. The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated Only the terrorist stands outside It's the novelist who understands the secret life, the rage that underlies all obscurity and neglect. You're half murderers, most of you" (157-8). Novelists, now largely irrelevant, have been supplanted by the spectral conspirator, "the violent

man who lives in the dark” (130), one who is willing to translate underworld visions into overworld realities. Apropos of nothing, Gray dies from a lacerated liver after being struck by a hit-and-run driver in a teeming Lebanese street, and the dead man’s passport and identification papers are filched by a passerby, effectively erasing Bill Gray’s identity; he has simply been expunged from public consciousness, another way of underscoring the novelist’s superfluity. By contrast, the secret shapers of the world thrive by book’s end, with one of the terrorists proclaiming, “Terror makes the new future possible [W]e make and change history minute by minute” (235). It is an awful assertion, and one we just may have to accept as the truth of the present epoch.

To return to *Underworld* briefly, we recognize that the novel offers DeLillo’s summative and definitive treatment of a career-long preoccupation. The difference between it and the others is one of encyclopedic scale. DeLillo’s focus is both macro- and microscopic. The book traces the “local yearnings” of various anonymous individuals to draft and order private, secret histories of their lives—characters like Cotter Martin and the novel’s protagonist Nick Shay—to the covert architects of global change, solitary men in small rooms who nonetheless dictate world events, individuals like J. Edgar Hoover who engage in “Longing on a large scale,” longing that results in what we come to call “History” (11). The secret history of Nick Shay’s father’s disappearance becomes an unattainable grail quest for Nick, the “real” story of his father’s abandonment of the family—Nick cleaves doggedly to the idea that the man was abducted by mobsters—becomes his adult mania, and he comes to believe without consciously knowing it that if he can control and constrain the narrative of his father’s absence, he can in some way order his present life. However, Nick’s underworld desire to know with absolute certainty his father’s story results in present-day disruptions to his marriage and contributes more generally to his inability to surmount an icy intellectual and emotional detachment from those who actually surround him. Likewise, but on a grander stage, the atomic bomb, *The Bomb*, the reality of its physical existence in the hands of the Americans and Soviets, creates the “History” known to news consumers and school children, while simultaneously spawning secret histories and intrigues that branch from the “official story” in bewildering profusion but are no less real simply because they are clandestine. As Hoover himself imagines it,

There is the secret of the bomb and there are the secrets that the bomb inspires, things even the Director cannot guess—a man whose own sequestered heart holds every festering secret in the Western world—because these plots are only now evolving. That is what he knows, that the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets. For every atomic blast . . . he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein. (51)

It is the unseen but very real covert realm that animates events on the world stage, and Hoover, the arch-conceiver and keeper of secrets, is perhaps best situated to comprehend the power of that recognition. Nick Shay, anonymous citizen, however, harbors the same realization. In conversation with an associate, Nick ponders an Italian word: “*Dietrologia*: It means the science of what is behind something” (280). It should be, I think, a richly suggestive textual moment for DeLillo’s readers.

Dietrologia in fact may well be one of the more apt descriptors for most of the novels Don DeLillo has produced to date. He carefully retracts the veneer of the actual-seeming to reveal the covert machinations of secret histories and history-makers. His underworld novels challenge linear constructions of historical progress, and instead re-imagine “History” in much the same way that Yeats conceived of interpenetrating gyres, with the exception that for DeLillo underworld disruptions redirect social change rather than manifest as ordered resolutions brought about through strict binary

symmetries. That these underworld puncta are often violent, "random" upwellings from the sociopolitical unconscious in no way diminishes the power of lone actors to re-channel history. In DeLillo's fictions there is persistently the apprehension of "a world inside the world" and with surprising regularity those underworlds make known their presence at the appointed hour in his earliest to latest novels.

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