

The serious artist and the Cold War

David Walsh
3 November 1998

Underworld, by Don DeLillo,
Scribner, New York, 1997,
827 pages, \$27.50 (hard cover), \$16.00 (paperback)

"The conflict between these causes for despair and the rekindling of these obdurate yearnings results in this shuddering, which is peculiar to our times, the one that it is the function of art to register, since all we ask is for art to grasp at every moment what is in the air, so that it may isolate it on white-hot plates of elective metal."—André Breton, 1949

Anyone concerned about the fate of literature and society ought to welcome Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld*, a serious effort to trace out the impact on the American psyche of the Cold War, even if that attempt, in the end, falls considerably short.

DeLillo, born in 1936, is a significant writer, the author of 10 previous novels. *Underworld* strikes me as his most interesting work by far.

White Noise (1984), about a society overflowing with media-created images, is observant and occasionally quite amusing, but suffers from a somewhat self-consciously brittle tone that grows tiresome. This passage, in the book's first chapter, conveys something of its overall flavor:

"I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. I invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968. It was a cold bright day with intermittent winds out of the east. When I suggested to the chancellor that we might build a whole department around Hitler's life and work, he was quick to see the possibilities. It was an immediate and electrifying success. The chancellor went on to serve as adviser to Nixon, Ford and Carter before his death on a ski lift in Austria."

Libra (1988) is in many ways a remarkable and convincing fictionalized re-creation of the Kennedy assassination. Even if one differs with some of DeLillo's more dubious conclusions—for example, that Lee Harvey Oswald was a genuine left-winger swept up in the desire to be annihilated by history—his portraits of CIA men, Cuban exiles, Mafia gangsters and assorted lowlifes involved in the organization of the alleged conspiracy are indelible.

The book won him the enmity of various figures within the political and media establishment. Right-wing columnist and television commentator George Will, that self-important snob, described *Libra* as "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship." He went on, "It is well to be reminded by books like this of the virulence of the loathing some intellectuals feel for American society, and of the frivolous thinking that fuels it." Will has attacked *Underworld* in similar language.

This theme, that DeLillo badmouths the US and should be rebuked, perhaps punished, for doing so, has been advanced by numerous others. The *Washington Post's* Jonathan Yardley derided "DeLillo's ostentatiously gloomy view of American life and culture," in his review of *Libra*. In the *New Criterion* in 1985 one Bruce Bawer asserted that most of DeLillo's novels "were born out of a preoccupation with a single theme: namely, that contemporary American society is the worst enemy that the cause of human individuality and self-realization has ever had." Having earned the ire of this unattractive crowd is entirely to DeLillo's credit.

Mao II (1991) represented a falling-off, it seems to me. A reclusive American novelist is asked to help in the effort to free a poet taken

hostage in Beirut. Crowds—of Moonies, of Mao supporters, of Khomeini mourners, of British football fans—abound, but nothing much is made of them. The book exudes a general sense of revulsion with the existing state of affairs after a decade of Reagan and Thatcher, but its quasi-post-modernist pronouncements seem sharply off the mark. "Years ago," says the writer, "I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness." Unfortunately, the book and all its characters simply leave one cold.

Underworld is an ambitious work. Its lengthy prologue unfolds in October 1951 at a famous baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, decided by a three-run home run off the bat of the Giants' Bobby Thomson in the bottom of the ninth inning. In attendance (this is historical fact) are singer Frank Sinatra, comic performer Jackie Gleason, restaurateur Toots Shor and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Also there is Cotter Martin, DeLillo's creation, a kid from Harlem who has skipped school and jumped the turnstile to attend the game; he will end up grabbing the game-winning ball, an object that proves to be of some significance for the development of the novel. (Three small fragments of the book subsequently follow Manx Martin, Cotter's father, as he makes off with the prized ball and attempts to sell it to fans lined up for tickets outside Yankee Stadium.)

On this same day, October 3, 1951, news of a Soviet nuclear test reaches the American government and press. DeLillo has Hoover, who is informed of the fact during the game, say to himself: "There is the secret of the bomb and there are the secrets the bomb inspires.... For every atmospheric blast ... he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein." These "secrets the bomb inspires," or the secret life it inspired, figure largely in DeLillo's work.

The novel is an attempt, at least in part, to write an unofficial history of the Cold War, about the life, particularly the emotional life, driven underground by the threat of universal destruction. DeLillo seems to argue that the unexploded atomic bomb—and the set of relations bound up with it—stunted, distorted and shriveled lives, almost as surely as a detonated bomb's lethal radiation.

After this opening, the novel jumps forward to 1992. Its principal character, Nick Shay, employed by a waste management company, is driving across the Southwest to visit his former lover, Klara Sax, now a well-known conceptual artist. She is painting abandoned B-52 bombers in the desert. Shay and Sax had a brief affair when he was a teenager and she a restless housewife in the Bronx in the early 1950s. Shay lives in Phoenix now, in a state of unresolved emotional tension. The disappearance of his father when he was 11 years old ("He went out to get a pack of cigarettes and never came back") still disturbs him.

From this point the book proceeds backward in time. Part 2 is set in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. A videotape of a man shot while driving his automobile, the work of the "Texas Highway Killer," is omnipresent. Television stations play it over and over. Nick and his wife, Marian, go about their somewhat stifled lives. She falls into an affair with one of her husband's coworkers, Brian Glassic. Glassic meanwhile goes to see a memorabilia dealer in New Jersey who claims to possess the famous game-

winning baseball, a ball that Nick will eventually buy for a large sum of money. Nick visits his mother who still lives in the Italian neighborhood in the Bronx where he grew up. His brother Matt, a former chess prodigy and later a weapons analyst, is also there. There is friction between them. Other figures come into view, including Albert Bronzini, Klara's former husband and Matt's chess tutor; Sister Edgar, the elderly nun who taught Matt as a child and now distributes food in the South Bronx; and Ismael, once a legendary graffiti artist, who now presides over the spray-painting of "a memorial angel every time a child died in the neighborhood."

Part 3 takes place in 1978, Part 4 in 1974. DeLillo presents a variety of scenes: waste management specialists sharing a conference center with a "swingers' convention"; a graffiti-painting session in a Bronx subway yard; weapons research in New Mexico; the screening of Sergei Eisenstein's "legendary lost film," *Underworld*, at Radio City Music Hall in New York; intelligence work in Vietnam.

Incidents, historical and fictional, in the 1950s and 1960s comprise Part Five. Nick progresses from a correctional institute, where he has gone as a juvenile for killing a man, more or less accidentally, to an experimental Jesuit college in northern Minnesota, to working for a behavioral research firm in Illinois and meeting his future wife. He shows up in New York City during the black-out of November 1965. J. Edgar Hoover makes another appearance, as a masked guest at Truman Capote's Black and White Ball at the Plaza Hotel in 1966. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, comic Lenny Bruce makes a series of tour dates. American pilots, including one whose father bought the famous baseball outside Yankee Stadium in 1951, drop bombs from B-52s, the same planes Klara Sax will paint more than two decades later.

In a final, 150-page section, DeLillo represents the Bronx in 1951-52, beginning the day after the play-off game and the Soviet atom test. There is a large cast of characters: Nick, his mother and brother; Albert Bronzini, Klara and his aging mother; Nick's friends; the denizens of a pool hall; Sister Edgar's class, complete with bomb drill. It all leads up to Nick's shooting George the Waiter, a heroin addict, with what he thinks is an unloaded shot-gun.

In an epilogue, *Das Kapital*, set in the present or immediate future, Shay and his wife's lover visit a nuclear testing ground in Kazakhstan (perhaps the original 1951 location?) that a venturesome Russian entrepreneur has turned into a giant waste disposal site. Meanwhile in the Bronx crowds gather to witness a miracle—the face of a mysterious girl, who was raped and thrown off a roof, appearing on a billboard. The novel's last passages take place in cyberspace: Sister Edgar "on a whim" visits "the H-bomb home page," and in a great thermal blast, "joins the other Edgar," Hoover, her "more or less kindred spirit but her biological opposite, her male half, dead these many years." Finally: "A word appears in the lunar milk of the data stream.... Peace."

Underworld is a disquieting novel. It makes conservative critics nervous for good reason. Whether or not DeLillo has succeeded in working out the psychology of the Cold War era, an impossible task for a single work, he has certainly registered some of that era's pervasive anxiety and unhappiness and alienation, and given it human form. "Didn't life take an unreal turn at some point?" someone asks. DeLillo describes a society living in a kind of suspended animation, going through the motions. One senses that no real human difficulty can be confronted. Postwar America is a "success story" in which people busy themselves with everything except what's destroying them. Repression takes the form of this evasion of an authentic inner life.

En route DeLillo writes some exceptional set pieces, some of them so good it is hard to imagine their being surpassed. He is an acknowledged master at recreating personalities and locales. The extended Lenny Bruce routines, the author's invention, are remarkable.

Remarkable too, perhaps brilliant, are the 10 pages the author devotes to introducing the reader to the world and inner life of the "Texas Highway

Killer." At first one doesn't know who he is, this man making a mayonnaise and "lunch meat" sandwich, then driving miles and miles out in the middle of nowhere to see his only friend Bud. One rarely encounters a piece of prose that so devastatingly captures the sense of the dead-end quality, the nothingness, the futility, the randomness of a certain kind of contemporary American existence. One passage:

"When he first walked into the house and Bud barely noticed him, it was like the normalcy of dying. It was the empty hollow thing of not being here. A forty-mile drive into being transparent, awful but not unaccustomed. But now this scrutiny as to what he wears and what he looks like. A panic set in. He tried to think of what to say. There might be something he could say about the dog. He searched for a glimpse of the dog through the sheeting. How nothing gets dirtier than plastic sheeting, retaining, absorbing the dirt."

All in all, one pays tribute to DeLillo's ambition and insight, and his obvious talents as a writer. The best parts of the book are extraordinary.

Having acknowledged that, however, one is compelled to note, somewhat regretfully, that the experience of the book as a whole is considerably less interesting than the synopsis perhaps suggests. The novel is better as an idea "on paper" than it is read. There are a good many dull stretches, and worse than that, none of the novel's characters makes a deep and lasting impact on the reader. *Underworld* is impressive as an undertaking, but not intellectually or emotionally powerful. It produces almost none of the responses one associates with a great novel, that sort of reading experience, as the film director Fassbinder observed in regard to his early encounter with Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, "which dangerously often wasn't reading at all, but more life, suffering, despair, and fear."

To explore why this is so is a complex matter, but I would suggest that first and foremost the novel lacks the element of a genuinely spontaneous response to reality. In fact, there is something about the work that almost suggests fear of and opposition to such a response. To put it most harshly, one might say that *Underworld* almost always remains a schematic work, brilliantly so perhaps, a work that takes schematism to its limits, but schematic all the same. It has the self-conscious feel of a thesis being fleshed out.

In a piece published in the September 7, 1997 *New York Times*, entitled "The Power of History," DeLillo described the origins of the work. He noted that several weeks after the fortieth anniversary of the famous ballgame he went to a library and looked up the *Times* of October 4, 1951. There were two "mated headlines": "Giants capture pennant" and "Soviets explode atomic bomb."

He wrote: "I looked at the screen for some time, feeling a detached fascination, a clash of impulses, really—I think I was trying to be objective in the face of something revealed, an unexpected connection, a symmetry that seemed to be waiting for someone to discover it."

Another possible reaction might have been: this is precisely the sort of seductive and all too convenient juxtaposition of events that an artist ought to have resisted. In effect, DeLillo had now assigned himself the arduous task of justifying this quite arbitrary connection over the course of his novel. It is a bit absurd, and unworthy of such an obviously serious writer, but it seems to have been the case.

And it is an arbitrary connection. Neither the particular game in October 1951 nor the sport itself, and I speak as a lover of baseball, can support the weight the author places on it. Baseball is simply not that important. Insofar as DeLillo tries to give the game and the ball some kind of world-historical metaphoric significance, perhaps as vestiges of an earlier period when objects and events had authenticity, it simply suggests that he fails to grasp the mainspring of the postwar period.

The main problem with the book is not that DeLillo has got the history "wrong" as such, but there are certainly some points to be raised. One might suggest that the author begins at a point, in 1951, where another

account might have ended. A great deal had taken place by that time. To adequately account for the stagnant, foul atmosphere of the 1950s would require an examination of at least the previous 15 years: the era of the Popular Front, the relations between liberalism and Stalinism, the subsequent sharp turn to the right by the liberals, the general decline in left-wing influence in the late 1940s under the combined impact of the economic boom and state-sanctioned anticommunism. Was public opinion, was the "American psyche" shaped by the atomic bomb, or by the deadening political and social reality that the bomb seemed to put a decisive stamp to?

Although the problem is not simply that DeLillo has his history wrong—that would make life easy—there is a connection between his historical and aesthetic outlooks. Or, to put it another way, which social and intellectual processes feed into his susceptibility to schematism, his extreme self-consciousness?

A novelist doesn't choose the conditions under which he writes. DeLillo came of age during the 1950s. Many commentators have noted his fascination with political paranoia. He wrote one novel, as I have noted, about one of the principal unsolved conspiracies of our time, the Kennedy assassination. The famous Zapruder film of the 1963 shooting makes an appearance in *Underworld*. More generally, the book is rife with rumors and conjecture. Here are a few instances; one could name a dozen more:

Nick's brother, Matt, works as a weapons analyst during the 1970s. A colleague spreads horrifying stories about the fate of workers at nuclear test sites, which he himself doesn't believe to be true. Matt remembers his tour in Vietnam. He "felt he'd glimpsed some horrific system of connections in which you can't tell the difference between one thing and another, between a soup can and a car bomb, because they were made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing... And how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?" Later agent orange, or some "weirdshit chemical from the CIA" turns up as "the new graffiti killer" used by the New York City transit system to scrub its subway cars.

One of Nick's co-workers at the waste management company repeats rumors about a mysterious ship (jokingly referred to as "The Flying Liberian") that is carrying some unnamed toxic cargo. A "waste theorist" of their acquaintance suggests the vessel is carrying CIA heroin. The first man, who is black, contends that the government is deliberately undercounting the number of blacks in the US. A preacher in Harlem in the 1950s rails about the Masonic insignia on the dollar bill. The memorabilia collector asserts that there were 20,000 empty seats at the Giants-Dodgers play-off game because they sensed "some catastrophe in the air," i.e., the Soviet atomic test. He also claims that the birth-mark on Gorbachev's head is a map of Latvia! Nick believes his father was murdered by gangsters, although everyone assures him the man simply got tired of his family and took off. Etc., etc.

DeLillo often mocks the paranoia, but it is all-pervasive and its validity or nonvalidity becomes almost secondary. Within the framework of the novel, it perhaps represents the only possible resistance, rational or not, to the giant conspiracy, the arms race, that "they" have organized. (The powers that be are themselves paranoiacs, Hoover, of course, being the consummate example. Sister Edgar, his alter ego, is convinced the KGB has infiltrated the Bronx.)

The author is no doubt right to underscore the powerful strain of paranoia that characterized the Cold War years. The atom bomb scare, the anticommunist witch-hunt, in addition to the growth of massive, impersonal institutions and corporations whose operations seemed farther and farther from the control of the average citizen, undoubtedly helped nourish an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust.

But again wasn't there something about the postwar *political* environment in the US that encouraged, or perhaps obliged, whispering in

corners? The constriction of debate, the extreme narrowness of the political spectrum, the suppression of genuine dissent—in general, a public arena in which no decisive social question could be considered and discussed critically, didn't this push debate to the margins and distort it? Paranoia is the language and revenge—in the mind, not in reality—of the marginalized, the overwhelmed.

Here is where DeLillo's social outlook causes him artistic difficulty, or where the two work hand in hand. He belongs to a generation and a social layer deeply distressed, perhaps horrified, by the evolution of American society, but incapable, for a variety of historical reasons, of imagining an alternative course of events. His sensibility, his artistic consciousness is profoundly rooted, embedded in the era that contributed so much to shaping him.

A novel, perhaps more than other form, presupposes and affirms the social world, history, great events. DeLillo, in his *Times* essay, observes, "A fiction writer feels the nearly palpable lure of large events and it can make him want to enter the narrative." The decline in the influence of left-wing thought and a general crisis of artistic perspective has made it more difficult in recent years for fiction writers to get a handle on society. On the one hand, there are works of word play and wild inwardness; on the other, a self-constricted, minimalized "realism." Virtually no one can bring emotion and social life together in an authentic fashion.

DeLillo's remarks on writing combine perceptive remarks with fashionable post-modernist arguments. He describes fiction as a "counterhistory." He comments, "Against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self. Here it is, sly, mazed, mercurial, scared half-crazy. It is also free and undivided, the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality." One needn't concur with every formulation here to agree with the general, subversive sentiment.

DeLillo is unable to answer directly, however, whether the counterhistory is any more truthful than the official version? He dances around the question. "Doesn't a fiction writer," he asks, "necessarily distort the lives of real people? Possibly not as much as the memoirist does, intentionally, or the biographer, unintentionally. That's the easy answer. The deeper reply begins with a man who distorted the lives of real people as a matter of bureaucratic routine," i.e., J. Edgar Hoover. Where does that leave us? Answering lies with lies? Does the legitimacy of paranoia, speculation, rumors lie in this—against the official lies, one spreads one's own untruths?

"Ultimately," he goes on, "it [fiction] obeys the mysterious mandates of the self (the writer's) and of all the people and things that have surrounded him all his life and all the styles he has tried out and all the fiction (of other writers) he has read and not read." Too much reverence for language and not enough feeling for life, in my view.

A writer's attitude to emotion and the subjective must have something to do with his view of humanity. In response to a critic's claim that he was America's "coldest and most pitiless novelist," DeLillo told an interviewer, "I don't dote on my characters, which I take to be a nineteenth century pastime that's survived in a rather robust form. But I don't know how work that contains so much evident love of language can be called pitiless, *more or less regardless of what happens to the characters.*" (my emphasis)

I think this is a disturbing view. The alternative to coldness is not "doting" or sentimentality, but a depth of feeling which consists of equal parts compassion *and* criticism, something that is all too often absent in *Underworld*. (The desire to change a monstrous reality, and not simply add to the world's texts, should come into play, it seems to me.) To put it crudely, isn't the cult of language, which DeLillo's book suffers from—it is annoyingly over-written, self-conscious, too often the work of a show-off—related to a disappointment in human beings? Doesn't the fear of demonstrating warmth emerge, in the case of a serious individual like

DeLillo—but not only in his case—at least in part from the nagging feeling that one cannot have too much sympathy for a population that seems to have acquiesced to dreadful social and political conditions? The question may be posed in the artist's mind, albeit unconsciously—do these people deserve sympathy?

This is not an indictment of DeLillo. In the first place, it was not the author's fault that he grew up in a reactionary time, whose political dynamic is still so little understood. Second, at his best he overcomes his prejudices and paints human beings with affection and understanding. But the difficult historical situation presents a problem.

My criticism of *Underworld* is not sociological. DeLillo has the right to his views, and he is remarkably perceptive in many ways. My contention is that his skepticism about humanity and about the objective power of art encourage a self-referential, pedantic, rigid, overly-mediated kind of fiction, one that is not spontaneous enough, not sympathetic enough, not liberating enough.

It should go without saying, after having spent this much time on the book, that I recommend *Underworld* to any serious reader.



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