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Blasts from the past

by [James Wolcott](#)

Review of *Underworld* by Don DeLillo

No American novelist writes crowd scenes like Don DeLillo; no one else even tries. Other writers may juggle large casts of characters, but DeLillo is the only one who papers his backgrounds with thousands of extras, as if he were shooting the teeming masses—democracy in the raw—through a wide-angle lens. He possesses an imperial directorial eye on the page, a David Lean-like power to choreograph chaos into the rough pageantry of history-in-the-making. For DeLillo, there's no such thing as mindless spectacle. His human circuses, which he monitors from his control booth, powerfully, complexly signify. The major event in DeLillo's novel *White Noise* was a major evacuation from "an airborne toxic event," a white cloud that acquired the doomy, symbolic charisma of Moby Dick. (It was also a prophetic preview of the environmental "haze" that has smothered Southeast Asia for much of this year.) DeLillo is fascinated as well by the semiotics of billboards, neon signs, and corporate logos, which he has dubbed the international Esperanto of jet-lag. Fittingly, much of the mob action in his fiction is set in stadia or sports arenas (there being few logos more universal than the Nike "swoosh"). His novel *End Zone* treated football as absurdist farce; under a pseudonym, he reportedly wrote a racy potboiler about a women's hockey team called *A Amazonas*, and *Mao II* opened with a mass wedding of Moonies at Shea Stadium in which the couples seemed to descend from the mothership. His latest and most immense novel, *Underworld*, also begins in a ballpark—the old Polo Grounds, which DeLillo leaves as wreathed with noble vapors as a Confederate battlefield. [\[1\]](#)

Originally published in *Harper's*, the opening chapter of *Underworld* recreates the most famous single moment in baseball history: Bobby Thomson's pennant-winning home run off of Ralph Branca in the 1951 series between the Giants and the Dodgers—"the shot heard round the world." Using the metafictional devices of E. L. Doctorow in *Ragtime*, DeLillo mingles fact and legend, intercutting the bullfrog posturing of big shots like Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, and J. Edgar Hoover (all actually in the ballpark that afternoon) with the darting of smaller fry. DeLillo not only evokes the smells and atmosphere of the Polo Grounds—the crisp fabric of the air—but makes a visit to the men's room carry the ritualistic echo of the Roman baths:

Men passing in and out of the toilets, men zipping their flies as they turn from the trough and other men approaching the long receptacle, thinking where they want to stand and next to whom and not next to whom, and the old ballpark's reek and mold are consolidated here, generational tides of beer and shit and cigarettes and peanut shells and disinfectants and pisses in the untold millions, and they are thinking in the ordinary way that helps a person glide through a life, thinking thoughts unconnected to events, the dusty hum of who you are... .

The day's festivities fall under a pall. As Hoover in the VIP box tries to be a regular guy around Sinatra and Gleason, he gets word that the Soviets have detonated an atomic bomb within their own borders, "a red bomb that spouts a great white cloud like some thunder god of ancient Eurasia." Amid cheering fans, he alone hears the rumble of the arms race to come. The arc of Thomson's home run mimics the flight of a missile, the blizzard of shredded paper that falls from the stands imitating the ash of radioactive fallout. (Into Hoover's lap falls a magazine reproduction of Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death*, with its hellscape of fire and flayed flesh.) Like *Mao II*, *Underworld* doesn't build to a climax; it builds *from* a climax, tracing the seismic ripples generated from its tremendous opening. In the outfield, the ball Thomson hit is recovered by a kid named Cotter Martin, who scoots home with his prize. The baseball, which will change hands over the years and become a coveted jewel of Americana, is what Hitchcock called the "MacGuffin"—the pretext to set the plot into motion.

But what plot? Shuttling back and forth in time, *Underworld* straddles the transition from the industrial age to the information age (the last chapter is set in cyberspace). Hopping back and forth in space, *Underworld* switches from the money temples of the metropolis to the barren sweeps of the Southwest desert. Patterns appear. The number thirteen, for example. (Ralph Branca's jersey number was thirteen.) The bull's-eye logo for Lucky Strike cigarettes. Familiar motifs surface. As in previous DeLillo novels, *Underworld* flickers with forbidden footage which seems to have been processed in the collective-unconscious darkroom of America. Pot parties are held in an artist's studio as a bootleg of the Zapruder film is shown on a bank of TVs, President Kennedy's head exploding again and again in a "terrible mist of tissue and skull." A videotape of a Texas serial killer claiming a victim is replayed on the news until it acquires the hypnotic minimalism of pornography and makes normal life look dolled-up. "The things around you have a rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look. The tape is surreal, or maybe underreal is the way you want to put it. It is what lies at the scraped bottom of all the layers you have added." One section of the novel is called "Cocksucker Blues," a title taken from Robert Frank's long-suppressed documentary of the Rolling Stones on tour. *Underworld* itself derives its name from a supposedly "lost" film by Sergei Eisenstein called *Unterwelt*, which is screened at Radio City Music Hall for thousands of cinephiles (a Susan Sontag dream date), who find themselves bombarded with creaky pictorials of zappy destruction—sci-fi Brueghel.

The herky-jerkiness of DeLillo's narrative is intended to convey the schizoid jitters of the atomic age. By day, we pursue the American dream; by night, we prepare for Armageddon. Both eat up resources (more gadgets, more guns), and leave behind mountains of debris. The novel's lead mouthpiece, Nick Shay, is a waste specialist who harbors deep thoughts and forebodings on the significance of the ever-mounting dump piles that are the end result of runaway consumption. Whether it's consumer packaging or hazardous waste, mankind is fooling itself in thinking it has its byproducts under control. We are at the mercy of the materiality of the world. We're up to our glazed eyeballs in useless junk.

Thematically, DeLillo has his ducks in a row. (He always does.) Like Norman Mailer in *Harlot's Ghost*, DeLillo is composing a psychological symphony of Cold War worry, a secret history of betrayal, paranoia, espionage, and military escalation smoothed over by official lies and *Reader's Digest* pieties. We American dupes brush our teeth a shiny white as our individuality rots at the root in the death ray of TV. Interestingly, both novels resurrect the standup comic Lenny Bruce to play the imp of the perverse, whose sick jokes and cackling laugh cut like Zorro through the cardigan sweaters of *Father Knows Best* family values. Comparing Mailer's Lenny Bruce to DeLillo's—well, it's no contest. The scene in *Harlot's Ghost* where Lenny Bruce scandalizes the ruling-class wasps with his jabbering tongue (get your coat, Mildred, we're going) is so stiff and stagy it belongs on the History Channel. Mailer is unable to convey Bruce's pimpy swagger as a performer. DeLillo's

Lenny Bruce is a true charismatic, a pasty golem who seems to possess an independent existence and a cold skin. In the spirit of Albert Goldman's pop biography *Ladies and Gentleman, Lenny Bruce!*, DeLillo seems to be channeling Bruce from some hip room in the hereafter: "Lenny was a handsome guy with dark hair and hooded eyes and he resembled a poolshark who'd graduated to deeper and sleazier schemes. His brows were set at a cosmopolitan arch that seemed to function as an open challenge to his hustler aspect—if you're dumb enough to believe my scam, that's *your* problem, schmucko."

When Lenny Bruce makes his first appearance in *Underworld*, it's at a night club in West Hollywood during the hairiest period of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962:

The seating at the Troubadour consisted mainly of folding chairs and when enough people laughed there was a wheezy groan from the slats and hinges. And the audience sat there thinking, How real can the crisis be if we're sitting in a club on Santa Monica Boulevard going ha ha ha.

"*We're all gonna die!*"

Lenny loves the postexistential bent of this line. In his giddy shriek the audience can hear the obliteration of the idea of uniqueness and free choice. They can hear the replacement of human isolation by massive and unvaried ruin. His closest followers laugh the loudest. Their fan-fed vanity is gratified. They're included in Lenny's own incineration. All the Lennies. The persecuted junkie. The antihypocrite. The satirist and nose picker. Lenny the hipster fink. Lenny the ass mechanic, girl-spotting in hotel lobbies. Lenny the vengeance of the Lord.

Heard in a club in San Francisco a week later, the audience full of aging dharma bums, the same material seems to land off to the side. The beats in the audience are ahead of Bruce when it comes to thinking the unthinkable:

The beats didn't need a missile crisis to make them think about the bomb. The bomb was their handiest reference to the moral squalor of America, the guilty place of smokestacks and robot corporations, Time-magazined and J. Edgar Hoovered, where people sat hunched over cups of coffee in a thousand rainswept truckstops on a jazz prairie, secret Trotskyites and sad nymphomaniacs with Buddhist pussies—things Lenny made fun of. Lenny was showbiz, he was suited and groomed and cool and corrupt, the mortician-comic... .

It's a nifty piece of pop criticism that DeLillo delivers, a personality analysis of the audience that sums up an entire social wave, the evocation of "rainswept truckstops on a jazz prairie," a snapshot marriage of Jack Kerouac and Robert Frank (Kerouac having written the foreword to Frank's *The Americans*). The Lenny Bruce sections showcase how attuned DeLillo is to the nervous system of every subculture he enters in *Underworld*, from swingers playing musical beds at a hotel to waste specialists talking shop. It's a legacy from the New Journalism, this Silly Putty ability to shape-shift and imitate anyone at will. Some of the best scenes in *Underworld* are like day-glo passages from Tom Wolfe played on a black-and-white TV: social observation decolorized into a grainy monochrome of nostalgia. ("It is all falling indelibly into the past," is how DeLillo describes the dying glory of that day at the Polo Grounds.) Where Wolfe is exhilarated by the coltish energies of capitalism, the giddy froth and reckless abandon, DeLillo (a less fun guy) is drawn to the dark, glacial agents of change—the submerged megatrends. Wolfe puts on fashion shows, DeLillo takes institutional readings. He can look at a glass tower and perceive that although it's hooked to the world through faxes and modems, it inevitably becomes a citadel unto itself: "The corporation is supposed to take us outside ourselves. We design these organized bodies to respond to the market,

face foursquare into the world. But things tend to drift dimly inward.”

For all its scanning of the horizon, *Underworld* also abdicates interest in what’s out there and begins to collect inward. A technocrat of literature, a didact despite his lab-goggle detachment, DeLillo seems to be making an instructional series on the many faces of anomie in *Underworld*; his own thoughts are free to circulate, but his characters seem stuck in whatever national mood is prevailing at the moment, like lost souls to flypaper. DeLillo applies such torturing attention to detail that, like other clinical overlords (the director Stanley Kubrick comes to mind), he sometimes loses sight of the overall design; perfectionism becomes a way of blocking out other, larger, more organic problems. The result is a finely calibrated morass, a jumble of big set-pieces. One of the mantras of *Underworld* is “Everything connects” (e.g., “‘What do we know?’ Sims said. ‘That everything’s connected,’ Jesse said”), which turns out to be wishful thinking. A lot of elaborate foreplay comes to naught.

Ominous import, for instance, is accorded the private life and public mystique of the Texas Highway Killer, only to have him drop out of sight and rate a memory-jogging mention hundreds of pages later (“No one talks about the Texas Highway Killer anymore”). DeLillo’s re-creation of Truman Capote’s *Black and White Ball* in 1966, in which J. Edgar Hoover and his longtime sidekick Clyde Tolson function as a queeny Tweedledum and Tweedledee, is an imaginary portion of inside dish, a bitchy caricature that reads like Gore Vidal by way of Cindy Adams. A scene in a condom shop seems to be included only so DeLillo could do a virtuoso riff on the varieties of latex on display, ditto a similar routine on the distinctive properties of Jell-O. A religious miracle in which the image of a slain girl rises above a lake is a piece of magic realism that bears no relation to the rest of the book. I could cite other examples, but we’d be here all day. DeLillo’s novels have flubbed their plot expectations before— *Running Dog* succumbed to mystification; *The Names* was a complicated geopolitical thriller which couldn’t solve its own puzzle, and punted—but never this protractedly. The novel is so determined to be great, it can’t get out of its own way.

Underworld goes beyond the intellectual sovereignty of a godlike author, indulging in ponderous self-reflexive gamesmanship that seems like a fusion of man and computer. He seems to be parodying himself with his H.A.L.-like monotone on earthling behavior, as in a deadpan paragraph on the mystery of how people and baggage disperse so quickly from airports (“people with their separate and unique belongings, the microhistory of toilet articles and intimate garments”). Other times, it’s as if DeLillo can’t pull himself away from the pinball machine: he repeats himself as if ringing up a score. Time and again his Nick Shay recites his recycling ritual—“We do tin versus aluminum,” cans versus bottles, paper versus plastic; on and on like a rosary. Another character fixes himself a sandwich as if he were an alienated worker on the assembly line: “He spread the mayonnaise. He spread mayonnaise on the bread. Then he slapped the lunch meat down. He never spread the mayonnaise on the meat. He spread it on the bread. Then he slapped down the meat and watched the mayo seep around the edges.” Equally formalized and mechanical are some of the long exchanges of male dialogue, which have the budda-bing-budda-boom head bob of David Mamet or Martin Scorsese characters trying to punch their way out of a paper bag:

Muzz looked into the side mirror.

“You hit my bumpah you fuck.”

The guy said something.

“You trying to do?” Muzz said.

The guy spoke into his windshield.

“Tell him,” Nick said, “Where’d you get your license?”

Muzz put his head out the window but did not turn toward the car behind them.

“Where’d you get your license to drive that piece of shit?”

The guy said something into the windshield.

“Tell him Sears Roebuck or what?” Nick said.

Muzz looked into the mirror, his face an inch from the glass.

“Sears Roebuck you fuck?”

The light changed and people began to blow their horns.

That’s the last we see of Muzz, who has a manhole to crawl into somewhere.

Nick Shay is obviously DeLillo’s alter ego in the book—he does the most wisecracking when young, the most soul-searching when middle-aged, has the most mama-mia sex—and the startling aspect of *Underworld* is how much of a classic *Bildungsroman* it becomes after Bobby Thomson’s homer clears the wall. The epigrammatic brooding on waste, the Bomb, airport lobbies, and serial murder is really a thick smog cover for this portrait of the artist as a young punk. However far it roams, it ends up nosing around the old neighborhood. Born in 1936, DeLillo was raised in the Bronx, which is for him what Chicago was for James T. Farrell and Nelson Algren—the raw goods. Gritty, aggressive, even its name—Bronx—sounds like a brick hitting you on the head. Other cities seem painterly, the Bronx is pure photojournalism. Or as a nun in *Underworld* harangues a busload of tourists: “Brussels is surreal. Milan is surreal. This is real. The Bronx is real.”

T. S. Eliot said mankind cannot bear too much reality, and I must be unable to bear too much Bronx, because somewhere in the middle of DeLillo’s boyhood flashbacks I was out of my mind with boredom, trapped in a naturalistic rut of reading about dim bulbs making their nightly rounds:

There were a thousand sameshit nights when he played knock rummy with a guy named Fontana in Fontana’s father’s plumbing supply store, a nominal nickel a point, or shot a game of pool and had a slice of pizza at Half Moon with JuJu and Patsy, nights that always ended down, disappointed someway, and once he phoned Loretta from the candy store and told her he had his dick in his hand and studied the pause at the other end, knowing she was in the room with her mother, her brothers, her grandfather and who knows who else, and he went downstairs sometimes and stood smoking alone, late, in the doorway of Donato’s grocery, spitting occasional grains of tobacco into the wind.

Running it all together into one lyric laundry list doesn’t make it less of a knucklehead routine. What’s never developed in *Underworld* is how young Nick, a crude-talking toughie who is sent upstate for killing a man (an existential *acte gratuit*), eventually matures into the Schopenhauer of modern waste disposal. He must have been suppressing a lot of inner life between fist fights.

So unwieldy and disjointed is *Underworld* that DeLillo has to manufacture an epiphany at the end—an ascension into cyberspace, the afterlife perceived as a murky hyperlink of everything ever written—to position some of the themes and characters into some sort of harmonic convergence. He uses rhetoric to wrap everything in a bow. “A word appears in the lunar milk of the data stream,” DeLillo announces, seated before a computer screen. His language lifts, he drops his customary cool, and his penultimate paragraph becomes a prose-poem which achieves a strained eloquence due more to its church-organ sonority than to its actual content. What is this word that “carries the sunlit ardor of an object deep in drenching noon, the argument of binding touch”? Like Eliot offering benediction at the end of *The Waste Land*, DeLillo blesses his toxic wasteland with a simple word:

“Peace.” It is more than a sacred note, it is a cosmic chord. The word gets a paragraph all to itself in the book.

Underworld's final reverberation can't rescue the novel from entropic rundown, although it's understandable why its humble grandeur would leave most reviewers suitably wowed. Many of them wanted desperately to be wowed, having waited so long in the front lines of DeLillo fandom for mainstream readers to play catch-up. For decades DeLillo has accrued a rising dividend of goodwill for doing audacious imaginative, solid-integrity work (no slick-magazine slumming for him), and has benefited from the perception that although his books have been praised and awarded, he's never really had the commercial breakthrough he deserved. *White Noise* did well, but it wasn't whopping, like, say, *Gravity's Rainbow*. Even *Libra*, DeLillo's novel about Lee Harvey Oswald that many considered his most accessible, proved to be too literary for conspiracy buffs. A lot of money and promotional effort went into boosting *Underworld* onto the bestseller list. His publisher reportedly paid \$1.3 million for English-language rights, and screen rights were sold for almost another million more. Vital to this marketing campaign was the participation of the famously reclusive and elusive DeLillo himself, a proud loner who was coaxed out of the phantom zone for this book to give readings, grant rare interviews, and have his grim picture taken. “A critic of consumerism gets the hard sell,” was the ironic subtitle *Publisher's Weekly* gave to its article on the packaging of DeLillo. Of course, promotional muscle and a supine, panting press aren't enough to put over a book—otherwise unsold copies of Robert Hughes's widely hoopla'd *American Visions* wouldn't be stacked into little forts in some bookstores.

No, the clue to the book's commercial and critical success is embedded in its opening sentence. “He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful.” The key word is “American.” *Underworld* addresses our fascination with ourselves, our collective self-preoccupation; it's an American novel on American subjects for the American century that will soon stagger into the American millennium. The minimalism of Seventies and early Eighties fiction has been vanquished by this heavy-duty maximalism. Like Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, *Underworld* undertakes a master surveyor's summing-up of America as idea and ideal, an investigation of what makes America so unique and Faustian on the world stage. Because the country is so crowded, antic, and spacious, the books are crowded, antic, and spacious. (As if to out-do everyone, William T. Vollmann is said to be working on a novel so voluminous that it can't find a publisher.) *Underworld* not only feeds this need for a guidebook to the tainted soul of America but, unlike the others, conveys a mood—a bluesy air of melancholy that reflects the battle fatigue left by a half-century of assassinations, nuclear buildup, and media barrage. The diagnosis of *Underworld* is that white, middle-aged, middle-class America is in the dumps literally and emotionally. The Soviet Union is flat on its back, but we're dead on our feet. It's a message that resonates with those who have experienced malaise ever since the Age of Aquarius went bust. “*Underworld* ends with a transcendent and redemptive act of grace,” veteran lefty and unreconstructed bleeding-heart John Leonard writes in *The Nation*, adding, “While this astonishing novel may have earned it, America certainly hasn't.” To the literary establishment, *Underworld* is the valedictory, the monumental tombstone, America deserves. But the best parts of the novel aren't when DeLillo is courting the blues, but when he has Bobby Thomson at bat or Lenny Bruce on stage, and the writing turns jazzy. He's like a teacher who departs from his lesson plan or a priest who strays from his sermon, and decides to wing it. His words fly. Then destiny calls, and it's back to the doldrums.

Notes

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