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**A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF THE UNKNOWN – THE ARGUMENT
OF THE BODILY IN DON DELILLO**

Don DeLillo's prose presents a consistent criticism of today's culture as a system programmed to produce death. Having dissolved all essences, the culture of today finds it hard to summon conviction behind its values. Searching for it, the culture engages in games of descriptions which tend toward paranoid of secrecy. Alternatively, trying to exorcise its horrors, the culture reveals its secrets in a process of endless multiplication of representations. Here all meanings are soon preempted, all difference and defining contours dissolved, while the self is eager to accept easy propositions and become amorphous. Both tendencies result in fascination with cruelty and death. While in the novels preceding *Underworld* DeLillo analyses and identifies this double bind, in his last book he makes an effort to suggest a remedy to it. His use of the themes of the bodily develops a consistent metaphor of strength, which resides in the bodily as the very substance of life. At the same time, the novelist suggests that, in order to be preserved, this substance should remain undisclosed.

I am going to discuss DeLillo's understanding of cultural dilemmas in the light of the philosophy of Richard Rorty. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty proposes an analysis of the present state of consciousness which aptly corresponds to DeLillo's vision of it. It is the world in which humanity for the first time in history sees itself as a coincidental offshoot of evolution, unfounded on any metaphysical concept beyond social or historical chance. It faces the consequences of living in the advanced Enlightenment which has negated its initial premises and annulled all foundations. The major issues converging in DeLillo and Rorty are language and self. Rorty starts by de-divinizing these concepts and presenting them as purely historicist constructs which do not imitate essences. They are received cultural textures, "webs of belief and desire." Occasionally, the texture will be woven radically anew in an act of strong poetic creation,

giving impetus to progress. Rorty's protagonist is someone called a liberal ironist. As an ironist, this person accepts happily the contingent character of the vocabulary in which she describes her self-image. As a liberal, she embraces one primal value: the avoidance of cruelty. However, the value itself is but a choice, a poetic creation, another experiment in the evolution of thought.

Rorty claims that there is no neutral ground from which to argue for or against the vocabulary he offers. We cannot step outside the discourse and summon a proof whose source would be located beyond it. All we have is descriptions competing within the discourse to which they should be admitted indiscriminately. Thus, Rorty can only hope that, with time, his description will prevail. Presenting the clash of descriptions in more detail, DeLillo's novels add a new perspective to the picture outlined by Rorty, pointing to pathological side effects of the wholly arbitrary struggle between vocabularies. While Rorty encourages us to view the lack of foundations as a fact opening up humanity's creative potential, for DeLillo's characters, in *Underworld* as well as in the novels preceding it, it is a source of disfiguring anxieties. Eventually, we will see how DeLillo's fears prove stronger than Rorty's optimistic belief in poetized progress.

DeLillo's characters are faced with the need to find modes of adjustment in the world of contingencies. Some characters will undertake various measures to escape contingency seeking refuge in such concepts as History, Reason, or the essential Self. Apart from confronting the trauma of JFK's assassination – the event that shattered the sense of what is real and shared by the official discourse and the individual subject¹ – *Libra* portrays an attempt to find essence through History. DeLillo's Oswald is a social misfit. To overcome isolation, he longs to become a part of larger historical processes. But the passage to History seems to require a channel of state agencies and political organizations. Seeking a transcendental process, Oswald finds the game of conspiracy and secrecy. Agents of KGB, CIA, FBI, and American right-wing organizations all find roles for Oswald in the games they play. Their fantasies clash with Oswald's and prevail as truer to the idea of the free play of redescriptions, exemplifying a recurring pattern in DeLillo. Unwittingly, Oswald succumbs to the paranoia of plotting and conspiracy. He ends up as a willing tool in the hands of people who hold views opposite to his. DeLillo leaves no illusions: there is no capitalized History beyond human visions and obsessions.

Another chance for an essence seems to lurk in the concept of the Core Self. The promise to hit upon it is afforded by the idea of isolation. One

¹ For a detailed discussion of the consequences of Kennedy assassination on the individual consciousness and the novel, see Federman (1147–1149).

of DeLillo's most haunting images is the desert or its alternative version: a small closed room. In *The Names*, an archeologist linguist Owen Brademas, a man who has spent his life unraveling the mystery of identity, ends up in a sparsely lit room, somewhere in India. In *Mao II*, the writer Bill Gray finds himself self-imprisoned in his study, hoping to escape the web of the world's descriptions and reach the core of his creative self.

Just like the hunt of History, the search for the Core Self also results in adverse effects. Rather than clarity of mind, DeLillo's hermits find obsession and weariness. In his cell in India, Owen Brademas knows he is dying. His Reasonable Self is smothered by the knowledge of its contingent finality. To the eternal question of identity Owen provides the truest answer possible: "[I am] no one" (*Names* 292), but he finds no remedy against the dissipating gloom of this realization. Neither does Bill Gray, who understands that self-imprisonment only produces disintegration. Bill's talent abandons him; he loses the sense of the language and cannot write any more. Instead of the Essential Self, isolation produces hallucinations.

The mere knowledge of non-essentiality results in apathy and stagnation. That is why the contingent self is compelled to legitimize its existence by devising meanings out of the material afforded by the world and other selves so that they become the missing substance. Initially, the elements are combined at random in the process which DeLillo sees as obsessive plotting. The rooms in which DeLillo places his hermits invariably get filled with the records of these obsessions. In *Libra*, Oswald is summoned to comment on the behavior of Francis Gary Powers, the captured U2 pilot. Oswald watches Powers sit in the cell at a small table fully engrossed in drawing straight lines on a piece of paper. This is how the restless mind starts to project its incoherent buzz outward. With time the lines on the paper will get organized into a larger structure: a journal, or a calendar. Empty rooms inevitably get smaller, stuffed with material. Bill Gray of *Mao II* is surrounded by notes and maps representing the progress of his novel. But the web of possible connections and developments is endless, and the book turns into a roomful of files. Drawing and organizing files is DeLillo's metaphor of the restless self devising its projects, and his most exemplary characters here are the CIA agents and anti-Castro activists of *Libra*. "Once you start a file," says one of them, "it's just the matter of time before the material comes pouring in" (*Libra* 143). Running files and devising conspiracies is compulsive:

Stalking a victim is a way of organizing one's loneliness, making a network out of it, a fabric of connections. Desperate men give their solitude a purpose and a destiny (*Libra* 147).

In DeLillo we learn that all institutional activities are driven by this psychological imperative. Agents of various political affiliations all engage in games of fantasies. Espionage becomes a metaphor for all our systems in their never ceasing effort to recreate the substance. Even religion, supposedly the noblest of our pursuits after essence, is flawed, as it can never be satiated: the absolute evades us with the flow of ever-changing rephrasings. As a character says in *The Names*:

Wherever you will find empty land, there are men who try to get closer to God. They will be poor, they will take little food, they will go away from women . . . When Mohammed was, there still were men who went away from him. Closer to God, always in their mind to remember God. . . . Always some men go away (*Names* 149).

Thus, in all spheres of human activity, be it religion or politics, people weave their fantasies until these become realities in the world. DeLillo's characters are frequently faced with a weird impression of finding reflections of their most secret drives in the vistas of the public discourse. The visible world is a clear message communicating what used to be hidden in us. We might easily exchange intimations with our friends sending them newspaper clippings, as a background character in *Libra* does. Hence, too, the awe with which *Libra's* characters regard Lee Harvey Oswald on the TV screen. There is a deep and tense accord. Oswald's look is:

. . . a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations into his sense of the crime (*Libra* 447).

Here DeLillo's novels seem to question an important tenet of Rorty's model which turns on the separation of the private and the public. Rorty writes:

For my private purposes, I may redescribe you and everybody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. But as I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which all the human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated (91).

The assumption is that we could structure our public discourse keeping it free from the idiosyncrasies of our private self. There is no place for such hope in the world of DeLillo's novels. Here, the private extends continuously into the public, and the public is just a larger projection of our most intimate drives. All culture is idiosyncratic texture.

As we have seen, those who reject this reality end up used by others or suffering disintegration. However, DeLillo points to one other mode of adaptation: ecstatic affirmation of the texture. His most mind-compelling

creations are charismatic madmen who joyfully accept the free play of cultural descriptions. The more intense the play of descriptions, the happier they feel. Murray Siskind of *White Noise* reveres the reality of the consumer world simulacra. He feels elated by the atmosphere of the mall and greedily absorbs all aspects of the mass culture. Similarly, in *Libra*, David Ferrie finds thrilling pleasure in tracing the impact of coincidence on human life.

Characters like Siskind or Ferry, wallowing in the profusion of patterns, tend to mysticize them. Murray Siskind talks at length about the mystical quality of the supermarket. David Ferrie laughs in Oswald's face hearing the worn-out Marxist depreciation of religion. To this Ferrie replies:

Dumb. Shortsighted. You have to understand there are things that run deeper than politics. . . . Penance was the major sacrament of my adolescence. I used to haunt the confession boxes. I went from one to the other. I told my sins, I made up sins, I said my act of contrition. . . Only a fool rejects the need to see beyond the screen (*Libra* 320).

Ferrie and Siskind do not reject this need. To the contrary, although they are ironists, they re-divinize the world by ritualizing its descriptions. But rituals made of fully contingent material are in desperate need of validation. The only non-contingent entity which might inject meaning into fictitious constructs is death. DeLillo's ironists are attracted to the mysterious and the morbid. For them, all activity naturally seeks its validation in the act of killing. The sect in *The Names*, otherwise founded on a purely arbitrary mental combination, validates its own existence through ritual murder. In *White Noise* Siskind will push the novel's protagonist Jack Gladney to kill; in *Libra*, Ferrie works on Oswald, making him believe in the end that he needs to shoot the president.

DeLillo's madmen frequently point to irrational, uncanny forces shaping our actions. In *Libra*, David Ferrie tells Oswald that although the conspirators have been trying to manipulate his life, they did not arrange for his job at the book depository. Neither did they have power to arrange the route of the presidential motorcade. He says:

There's something else that's generating the event. A pattern outside experience . . . (*Libra* 384).

DeLillo teases us as to the source of this paranoia: is it him, his characters, or us? Here is Frank Lentricchia on *Libra*:

DeLillo does not do what the media right convicts [sic] him of doing – imply that all Americans are would-be murderous sociopaths. He has presented a politically far more unsettling vision of normalcy, of an everyday life so utterly enthralled by the fantasy selves projected in the media as our possible third person . . . that it makes little useful sense to speak of sociopathology or of a lone gunman (204).

However, if the electronically processed image emanates a causal aura, it remains to be explained why it produces death and violence.

The prevailing set of metaphors in DeLillo's latest, most ambitious novel *Underworld* is based on the clash between the urge to hide and to reveal. The private and public paranoias of the cold war era were produced by the former drive. However, at some point, the opposite impulse seems to take over. Part I of *Underworld* opens with a conceptual arts project in which a former bomber fleet is displayed on a desert plateau and painted in bright colors. It is the open, democratic culture appeasing, at last, its former hidden horror. The other powerful metaphor of exposure in *Underworld* is waste management. Refuse, personal or cultural garbage, such as nuclear waste, shamefully testifying to our ugliest drives, previously kept in secret, now contributes to the aesthetics of the age. Toward the end of the novel we see people bringing their children to view a waste plant at work, absorbing tons of garbage to transform it magically into new products. People feel elated by the process.

For DeLillo today's culture brings all descriptions into view, and reveals all secrets. For sure, there are various kinds of secrets. While it is healthy for a culture to clarify its political secrecies, delving into the mysteries of the very private is counterproductive, and DeLillo especially focuses on the cultural impulse to foreground what used to constitute our privacy. Toward the end of *Underworld* the narration records this impulse with acuteness:

They are trading garbage in the commodity pits in Chicago. They are making synthetic feces in Dallas. You can sell your testicles to a firm in Russia . . . (*Underworld* 804).

The problem is that with all secrets redescribed we lose a crucial ingredient of our moral life: intensity. A scarce commodity today, it is devoured through restless self-referentiality. As a result, there appears a feeling of skepticism which precludes action. A character in *The Names* says:

The world for thousands of years was our escape, our refuge. . . . The world was where we lived, the self was where we went mad and died. But now the world has made a self of its own. What happens to us now. . . . How do we say the simplest thing without falling into a trap? (*Names* 297)

The image domination is, of course, the major culprit in the process. DeLillo fears that the culture of endless multiplication of representation is fast-exhaustible. He is nostalgic for the past free from: "frantic repetition that exhausts a contemporary event before it has rounded into coherence" ("Power" 62). As a result, the image culture turns toward violence, horror and death, the only non-contingent entity, in an attempt to recreate meaning. DeLillo's most generic version of electronic image is the Zapruder

footage, echoed later in the "Texas Highway Killer" episode of *Underworld*. Significantly, both films do not show the killers. Instead, they concentrate on victims, on their pain, on the horror of the event. Eventually, DeLillo implies, this is all an image does. That is why the force David Ferrie demonizes in *Libra*, and Lentricchia identifies as the media projecting our self-conscious third person ego, is ultimately deadly.

Here then is DeLillo's central dilemma. On the one hand we have the consciousness of finality and contingency which brings the reasonable Enlightenment self to the dead end of skepticism. An alternative mode of adaptation re-divinizes contingency, turning it into a ritual. Here, the contingent self will weave its idiosyncrasies until they become a part of public institutions in which power is married to secrecy and paranoia, and which seek validation through death. This culture's final product is the nuclear destruction horror. On the other hand, the culture of frantic proliferation of representations, the culture intent on revealing all secrets, exhausts meaning, and is death-bound too.

Underworld brings all strings of this morbid conundrum together. The novel might be seen as a meditation on the culture which, unwilling to admit its shadowy side, purges itself of it in a process which neuters consciousness. A firm voice in DeLillo's complex discussion warns against the simple annihilation of our darker mysteries. Something in the novel seems to be implying that they should be wrestled with and contained rather than incinerated by the ubiquitous open discourse. To deliver the admonition, DeLillo looks for a metaphor of strength that will allow us to confront our inescapable ugliness; it is to be commanded to produce the necessary ingredient of our moral life: desire and intensity. Increasingly, as the novel evolves backward in time, this metaphor appears to consist in the full endorsement of the bodily.

The treatment of the bodily in *Underworld* is rooted in the earlier novels and can be fully understood only with reference to them. DeLillo's writing features a consistent string of associations between bodily decay, linguistic decay, and the disintegration of the self. David Ferrie, the man whose element is chaos, suffers from an unknown form of cancer. Another madman in DeLillo, a baseball memorabilia collector in *Underworld* named Marvin, keeps missing words. Soon, we learn that Marvin also suffers from cancer. And again it is a unique form of the disease whose newly made up name is not included in dictionaries.

In *Mao II*, the writer Bill Gray warily traces all his typewriter misspellings. He is convinced they signal a growing brain tumor. As we noted earlier, Gray's creativity withers away in isolation. The writer is no longer able to master his material. Here, the previous dependency seems reversed: amorphous mass of language, no longer commanded by the writer's will, takes the shape of a disfigured body. Bill Gray feels physical aversion to his book:

He looked at the sentence, six disconsolate words, and saw the entire book as it took occasional shape in his mind, a neutered near-human dragging through the house, humpbacked, hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth (*Mao* 55).

Later we learn that Bill Gray does in fact suffer from an internal disease, possibly cancer. Again, bodily decay and disfigured feel of the language are interlocked.

In DeLillo, the integrity of one's relation to language has crucial bearing on the person's actions. The inability to capture the shape of written language marks failure in confrontation with the free play of descriptions in the outer world. The strength to master language has a moral significance. Bill Gray says:

Every sentence has a truth waiting at the end of it and the writer learns how to know it when he finally gets there. . . . I've always seen myself in sentences. I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence. The language of my books has shaped me as a man. There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right. It speaks the writer's will to live (*Mao* 48).

But as we have seen, Bill Gray loses this integrity. It seems that our relationship with language needs some organizing principle, a fulcrum that could lift language toward self-integrity and make it a tool for overcoming isolation. DeLillo finds it in the mode of communication in which language emanates from the presence and consciousness of the bodily.

In *Underworld*, we see one of the characters, a high school teacher Alfred Bronzini, taking full pleasure in a hot bath after the day's work. Relaxed, he comes upon a thought that explains a curious sensation he had earlier that day: the taste of a tangerine he had eaten made him think of Morocco. Now, Alfred solves the puzzle:

Tangerine, Tanger, Tangier. The port from which the fruit was first shipped to Europe. He felt better now, thank you. How language is webbed in the senses (*Underworld* 683).

Language is here linked to the bodily sensation. DeLillo would like language to match the body, to clad it warmly. The passage ends with the statement that: "Nothing fits the body so well as water." However, the total melting of language into amorphousness of "water" is out of the question. The temptation is, of course, the thrill of the "coming out of stasis" and the issue is explored in *The Names*. Owen Brademas, the western skeptic, knows there is ecstasy to be found in speaking in tongues, the experience corresponding to obliterating oneself in the crowd of religious fanatics. However, for DeLillo, merging with the religious crowd is not an option; self-dissolution in the rhythms of the religious chant cancels the self and, as a result, its darker side remains unrallied.

Entering the chant spares one the ordeal of confronting the ugly in the self. Thus the ecstasy of the mantra precludes individual moral life. Interestingly, it also separates us from our bodies. Describing the ecstatic chant of the Moonies participating in a group marriage at the Yankee Stadium, DeLillo writes:

They are forgetting who they are under their clothes, leaving behind all the small banes and body woes, the daylong list of sore gums and sweaty nape and need to pee, ancient rumbles in the gut . . . the fungoid dampness between the toes, the deep spasm near the shoulder blade that's charged with mortal reckoning (*Mao* 8).

The self retains its individual integrity through linguistic communication and bodily consciousness. It is because language rests on the bodily, derives intensity from its heat, its purity or filth. Language of integrity comes to its full realization through the tone of the voice, through gesture. Frequently, DeLillo's characters, wearied in the struggle for self-definition, find consolation in the presence of other people that is both bodily and linguistic. In *The Names*, the narrator James Axton ponders on the rejuvenating atmosphere of Athens at night:

People everywhere are absorbed in conversation. Seated under trees . . . they bend together over food and drink, their voices darkly raveled in Oriental laments that flow from radios . . . Conversation is life, language is the deepest being. We see the patterns repeat, *the gestures drive the words*. It is the sound and picture of humans communicating. It is talk as a definition of itself. Talk (*Names* 52).

The mystery of the bodily and its deepest impulses are explored fully in Part 6 of *Underworld*. Here, having dug backwards in time, DeLillo places the heart of his argument at the end of the novel, against the flow of time. The tale returns to the Bronx of the 50's and we are taken on a tour of its streets, following the paths of Alfred Bronzini. The Joycean association enriches the scenes. The main interest is located in the life of the streets: people work and rest, struggle and desire, live and die. Bronzini talks to a waiter, a barber, and a butcher – professions devoted to the life of the body. Raw meat is advertised in shopwindows. Children's games recreate the drama of death's chase after life. Tokens of predation, suffering, and death are inscribed in the portrait of life. The flavor of the street testifies to the truth of the culture that is predatory at its deepest heart, and this truth constitutes the reality of the place.

This is also the place where Nick Shay, the novel's central character, lives the youth of desire and aggression. The virile "realness" of this life contrasts vividly with the melancholy of Mr. and Mrs. Shay's house in Phoenix presented in Part I and the Epilogue. Here Nick's narrative voice is subdued by the segregated and calculated order of the consumed life.

The narration is a methodically scanned series of programmed household activities interrupted by suspended moments of insight into the absence of intensity. The life seems already lived and a shadow of its vigor is sought in the past:

I do the books on the new shelves and stand in the living room and look at the carpets and the wall hangings and I know the ghosts are walking the halls. . . . I stand helpless in this desert place looking at the books (*Underworld* 810).

However, young Nick's life in the Bronx, "real" as it may be through its proximity to blood passions, is clearly purposeless and on its way to a catastrophe. Nick's natural aggression must be shaped and transformed if it is to be productive, and the argument for the process is provided in the character of the Jesuit, Father Paulus.

Although a background character, Father Paulus expresses the crucial voice of DeLillo's internal discussion. He stands for a full acknowledgement of the great desires of the body – the sexual and the predatory. Asked about the strains of celibacy, Father Paulus confesses unabashedly:

I would like to screw a movie star, Albert . . . I want to screw her in the worst way possible and I mean that in every sense (*Underworld* 672).

Within the same conversation, speaking in turn on the nature of a chess master, Paulus states:

The psychology is in the player, not the game. He must enjoy the company of danger. He must have a killer instinct. . . . Willful in the extreme (*Underworld* 674).

But the desires are acknowledged only to be mastered. Above all, Father Paulus stands for the self-discipline of the contained instincts. Such is his definition of the fully-conscious moral action. However, it must be noted that the containment of desires entails leaving them unrevealed. The darkness our souls harbor should remain its mystery if they are to be used as fuel for the will. Such is the teaching remaking the shapeless soul of Nick Shay and positioning Nick's further development against the prevalent cultural current of the times.

The revolutionary impulse to bring the dark mysteries into the open and neutralize them gained tremendous momentum and produced an adverse effect of sterilizing the culture, which DeLillo places mostly in the America of the 80's and 90's. The urge to reach for every mystery, to redescribe it and level it with the rest of the discourse, dictated by the intention to tame the unpredictable in man, has purged the culture of all conviction. DeLillo's metaphor for this state is the obliteration of the

bodily. Bodily filth and heat pervading the Prologue – set in the early 50's – make it contrast vividly with the four decade distant opening of Part I:

This is a car assembled in a work area that's completely free of human presence. Not a spot of mortal sweat . . . The system flows forever onward, automated to priestly nuance . . . Hollow bodies coming in endless sequence. There's nobody on the line with caffeine nerves or a history of clinical depression (*Underworld* 63).

When, two chapters later, we see Nick and his colleagues at a baseball game, the game is a hushed display behind the glass of a restaurant window, a mediated spectacle whose former substance seems screened and lost.

What remains are the creations of the bodiless mind projected onto the desert of total arbitrariness and contingency. The human mind, formerly the source of beauty and organizing energy pondered upon by Bronzini in Part 6, has seen through itself and grown monstrous. DeLillo is clearly wary of the mind's terrific power to materialize its reveries; he implies that we have lost the ability to check this power. His characters often inquire into the method of mental projections as if trying to decode the meaning of the surrounding culture. What they see around them is what the mind has become: a shameless, amorphous, paranoid web of boundless connections, without the defining contour, deprived of all difference. In this mass everything is true and possible: miracles are frequent and easy. For DeLillo the unbounded freedom of discourse in which all descriptions are admitted with no restrictions, and no pre-determined order, so much advocated by Rorty,² distorts the culture into a formless chant – white noise.

It is the hard questions concerning the origins of civilization that this culture is trying to evade. The springs of civilization are dark and polluted. In *Underworld*, there is a continuous link between the lofty steel and glass metropolis, the trademark of our times, and its vast stinking landfills. Garbage is at once the product of civilizational progress and its cause, as an impetus to the organizing impulse. Civilization is bound inextricably to its Other: ugliness, as an unavoidable product of the civilization building testifies to the fact that the process stems from elements opposite and alien to it. The metaphor of garbage, signaled in *White Noise* and *Libra*, becomes central in *Underworld*, in which it complements DeLillo's treatment of the bodily. Nick Shay is the one who works to "contain garbage" and the profession requires a special state of the spirit. DeLillo's characters feel

² Speaking of the shape of discourse which would be most useful in our liberal society, Rorty warns against a situation in which certain descriptions would be disqualified as a rule: "It is central to the idea of a liberal society that, in respect to words as opposed to deeds, persuasion as opposed to force, anything goes. This openmindedness should . . . be fostered. . . . for its own sake. *A liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of such [unrestricted] encounters turns out to be*" (51–52 – Rorty's italics).

that the pungent stench of garbage heaps is a challenge to the constitution of their selves; it is a reminder of the ugly which partly makes us. Beauty, order and civilization happen when our primal ugliness is admitted, kept within limits, and mastered. However, it takes more than pure mind to confront it: it takes intensity which the self-conscious mind annuls.

If our world is a game, DeLillo implies, it needs will to be played. The world as a fact beyond our consciousness, like pieces on the chessboard, is still and meaningless in itself. As Father Paulus says, "the psychology is in the player, not the game" (*Underworld* 674). This psychology must take the challenge of the ugly that underlies it, and the task is too much for Matt Shay, Nick's brother, who has to abandon chess unable to cope with:

. . . what is always there beneath the spatial esthetics and the mind-modeling rigor of the game, beneath the forevisual bursts of insight – an autoworld of pain and loss (*Underworld* 457).

Such is DeLillo's version of the civilizational discontent. Those strong enough to exercise self-discipline, to sublimate the instincts, and not to yield to the paranoias of easy belief, gain, like Nick Shay, integrity and some degree of independence from the world, but may be burnt by the struggle. Nick Shay is DeLillo's most complete character, a "serious man" who is determined to "live in the real," but his success is costly. To cling to the identity of one's body, humbled by its dark mystery, is to consent to one's separateness and the world's necessity; it is to deny oneself the sudden joy and communal spirit whose power sometimes overcomes the physical world's rigid laws.

Sister Edgar, DeLillo's example of religious faith grown sterile by the lack of desires, does not find strength to withstand such denial, her true faith distorted, and decides she has witnessed a miracle, a reductive presumption from the point of view of the Catholic canon. Seeking alleviation of pain after the murder of the homeless girl Esmeralda, she decides the girl's face shows miraculously in the billboard advertising orange juice. Such screen for the display is by no means accidental; the advertisement produces a carefully designed aura and the reader recalls the making of it described earlier in the novel (531–532). The thoroughly behaviorist prediction of the consumer response underlying the composition of colors and shapes is spell-binding and its success means subjugation of the human will. What Sister Edgar does witness is the aura of the nebulous culture – the false faith to which she succumbs. Characteristically, at this instant, she becomes:

. . . nameless for a moment, lost to the details of personal history, a *disembodied fact* in liquid form, pouring into the crowd (*Underworld* 823 – italics mine).

DeLillo's focus on the bodily is reflected in the language of *Underworld*: Prologue and Part 6, where our measuring ourselves against our deepest bodily nature is mainly developed, feature a change in language and style. However, the writer searches for this aesthetics only in *Underworld's* chronological beginning, running against time,³ which shows that DeLillo turns away from the liberal progress that Rorty praises as decreasing the amount of cruelty in the world.⁴ It is interesting to note that Rorty faces the same dilemma as DeLillo: finding conviction in one's views despite the knowledge of their contingency. Rorty's answer is the "poetized" culture in which truths are made, not discovered. But since his other goal is solidarity, he wants poesis without pain and exploitation,⁵ and his measure is the close private/public split.

DeLillo finds the split implausible and is unwilling to give up all essences. His writing looks for an ultimate essence, the only non-contingent entity: the dark and the ugly residing in the bodily. It is the one thing that should not be incorporated into the Rortean web of free redescriptions. The body is the ultimate reality – it is the clock of our life and the house of life and death (235). The body dies constantly, but DeLillo implies that the bodily – the source of our failures – also makes our beauty possible. Moreover, the body's physicality provides for our separateness; it defines us and produces the vital difference. Confronting the body's ugliness and its limitations is the first step to nourish the will. This confrontation is dangerous: the results cannot be predicted. But the attempt to eliminate this unpredictability produces a false tranquility. What DeLillo sees in *The Web* at the end of *Underworld* is a fake quiet – bodylessness washed of all argument. *Underworld* has a virtual ending: its final word – "peace" – appears on a computer screen. The ring is sarcastic: this "peace" sounds rather like Miltonian Satan's exit hiss.

³ Here is DeLillo on his language: "Something I discovered after I finished writing the book . . . is that much of [it] is nearly saturated with compound words, many of them which I invented or grafted together. In Part Six, suddenly the language is a bit different. It's a bit simpler. *It's more visceral*" (Howard 15 – italics mine).

⁴ Discussing differences between Foucault and himself, Rorty observes: "A large part of Foucault's work . . . consists in showing how the patterns of acculturation characteristic of liberal societies have imposed on their members the kind of constraints of which older, premodern societies had not dreamed. He is not, however, willing to see these constraints as compensated for by a decrease in pain. . . . My disagreement with Foucault amounts to the claim that this decrease does, in fact, compensate for those constraints" (63).

⁵ It seems a difficult goal to attain. Critics and poets frequently point to the exploitative side of poetry. Here is a random example from Frederick Turner: "For a highly gifted poet to export his productions to others is a form of imperialism. . . . anyone who is moved by another to see the world in a different way is the victim of exploitation (370).

Insisting in *Underworld* that there are mysteries in us which we should not dare touch, Don DeLillo proposes an argument which is Catholic at its roots. It is Protestantism with its shift of the responsibility for faith from external hierarchy to the individual that placed a tremendous pressure on the self to boldly explore its darkness and exorcise its filth. As Sacvan Bercovitch observes, the impulse was directed against individuality residing in the imperfection of the flesh (14–15). On this view, Catholicism regards the mystery of man with more humbleness. DeLillo's vision considers this humbleness as necessary. We need it, he implies, as a corrective perspective without which the frantic efforts to overcome our limitations tend to disfigure our perceptions. For DeLillo, then, our sanity and existence require that we refrain from pursuing certain regions of self-knowledge. In this vision morality, will, and life are enabled by preserving limits to knowledge. Existence continues only with a certain amount of the unknown.

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