

To what Purpose Is this Waste? From Rubbish to Collectibles in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

We were the Church Fathers of waste in all its
transmutations. (*Underworld*, 102)

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Waste, junk, and rubbish; things abandoned, commodities consumed, and objects no longer functional abound in Don DeLillo's eleventh novel, *Underworld* (1997).¹ "To what purpose is this waste?," I might ask, thus echoing the disciples' indignation when they saw that a woman poured "very precious ointment" on Jesus's head just before his last supper (Matt. 26:8). Jesus replies that the woman did it for his burial (26:12). Cultural objects, be they ointment or typescripts, tend to lose their value after use; ointment applied and a critical essay edited and published become waste. But, what, besides this general tendency, is the purpose or significance of waste in the DeLillo novel? In my article, I shall read the various possibilities of signification that *Underworld* dramatizes by its insistence on waste, junk, and rubbish. This problematic involves systems of value, of difference, and of language. One of the meanings is indeed metaphysical, which perhaps justifies my use of a biblical title and opening paragraph that otherwise would seem like a far-fetched waste of time.

1. Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998). All subsequent references are to this edition of the novel and will be given parenthetically in the text.

First, I shall briefly sketch a theoretical framework on the basis of social anthropologist Mary Douglas, sociologist Michael Thompson, and the economic writings of Georges Bataille. Second, I shall trace the instances of waste in *Underworld*, and read them through the insights suggested by the theorists. At the same time, the novel surpasses their seemingly all-encompassing taxonomies by managing and recycling waste in improbable ways.

Purity, Danger, and Rubbish

Mary Douglas's classic book on social anthropology, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, provides a structuralist analysis of dirt and matter out of place, and of the ideas of pollution and taboo, which are culturally associated with them. Douglas maintains that dirt is a product of a differential system. The very existence of dirt implies the existence of a system; the systemic ordering and classification of matter brings about a by-product, a category which includes the rejected, the excluded, the inappropriate.² In Douglas's analysis, dirt epitomizes a general tendency in symbolic systems. Different systems of classification hinge on what is excluded from them or on what is marginal to the idea of inclusion.³ For instance, the grammar of a given language implies accounting for the ungrammatical; the felicity rule of effectively performed speech-acts depends on the possibility of unsuccessful acts; and the code of fashion needs to be ruled out of the unfashionable.⁴ Although Douglas's classification seems highly productive, it totalizes the realm of possibilities by not allowing for mediating middle alternatives. Junk and rubbish are relatively useless and valueless, but they do not pollute nor are dangerous. Consequently they will not incite taboo behavior nor pollution avoidance, which are the Douglasian tokens of uncleanness.

2. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 48.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

4. Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 169.

Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (1979) perceptively accounts for this marginal area of cultural objects that Douglas overlooks. Thompson divides objects into two main categories, transient and durable ones: The former have finite life-spans and by definition eventually decrease in value; the latter can, in an ideal case, be infinite and retain or even increase in value.⁵ There is a third category, rubbish, which is where the transient objects go after they have lost their value without, however, having ceased to exist. Nevertheless, the potential value of rubbish in a way hibernates for is has the capability of becoming a durable object with a regained and even increased value.⁶ Retro clothes or suddenly found interest in paraphernalia qua collectors' items are good examples of this dynamic category.

Douglas's and Thompson's theoretical elaborations acknowledged, there still remain, in the actual world, phenomena that defy neat categorization. For instance, waste is not exactly rubbish, but it is not only dirt either. Sometimes waste paradoxically verges on transience and durability only briefly visiting the category of rubbish.

The ubiquity of waste can be thematized with the help of French philosopher Georges Bataille. In contrast to traditional economics, which maintains that the basis of economy lies in self-interest and in the accumulation of valuable resources, Bataille claims that the principles of expenditure and loss make the financial world go round. Traditional, in Bataille's terms, "restricted" economy is based on scarcity, whereas his "general" economy stems from the notion of excess: people produce more than they need for survival and thus tend to circulate the "surplus" in an unproductive manner.⁷ The expenditure or wasting of the extra products results in, besides general economic activity, more waste material than would be the case on the minimum level of survival. Bataille does not explicate the relationship between expenditure and the resulting waste, but ideas of devaluation, exclusion, and rejection are, nevertheless, recurring themes in his theorization of limits. A pragmatist would consider it a blessing that air-traffic controllers are not usually committed

5. Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), pp. 7, 103-4.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

7. Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1985), pp. 116-18.

to the post-structuralist theory of meaning and that Ministers of Finance do not generally buy into Bataille's economics (although the latter, by urging people to consume more in order to fight economic depression, sometimes unwittingly align with his idea of expenditure). The validity of his economics in (post)modern world notwithstanding,⁸ Bataille's anthropological thematization of commodities rather than money supply is potentially productive in reading the material and immaterial world of DeLillo's *Underworld*.

Trajectories of Cultural Objects

Waste appears in a number of guises in DeLillo's *Underworld*. The novel starts with a depiction of the legendary Giants/Dodgers baseball World Series play-off game on October 3, 1951; at 3:58 PM the final home run ball, hit by Bobby Thompson of the Giants, disappears into the audience. The ball is now a used one: it has lost a considerable amount of its actual exchange- and use-value. By a curious twist of economic and cultural logic, however, the used ball has both lost and gathered value during its victorious flight from Thompson's bat into the maddening crowd. The ball becomes a collectors' item once its crucial role in the game is realized. The fate of a transient object is played out in fast forward: from transience into collectible durability via rubbish in a few seconds. The ball itself, of course, remains practically intact during these transformations; only the cultural meaning arbitrarily attached to it changes and brings about the radical increase in its exchange-value.

In the ordinary course of economic events, the use-value of a thing is realized when it is used; at that very same moment that value also disappears since it cannot endure use. In a sense, the use-value of an object only lasts when it is not realized but postponed and exchanged for another commodity, thus bringing the exchange-value into play.⁹ Para-

8. For an excellent account and critique of Bataille's economic theory, see Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 67-96.

9. Denise Hollier, "The Use-Value of the Impossible," trans. Liesl Ollman, in Carolyn Bailey Gill, ed., *Bataille: Writing the Sacred* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 136.

doxically, however, the used and hence use-valueless baseball gains extreme exchange-value exactly because of that loss. This aberration is, of course, due to the special cultural context of the game, which relates more to the cultic than to the mercantile.

The ball's trajectory from waste or rubbish to durability therefore deviates from the usual fate of objects in the material world. The ball is unique in the sense that exactly it, not some other out of a box or tube of practically identical balls, happened to be hit at the crucial moment of the game. The baseball fans present at the game know the value of the aura associated with the ball; there is considerable commotion and even a fight over the ball's possession immediately after it lands among the spectators:

And Cotter is under a seat handfighting someone for the baseball. He is trying to get a firmer grip. He is trying to isolate his rival's hand so he can prise the ball away finger by finger.

It is a tight little theater of hands and arms, some martial test with formal rules of grappling.

The iron seat leg cut into his back. He hears the earnest breathing of the rival. They are working advantage, trying to gain position.

The rival is blocked off by the seat back, he is facedown in the row above with just an arm stuck under the seat ...

It is a small tight conflict of fingers and inches, a lifetime of effort compressed into seconds. (47)

The game is in a sense transferred from the baseball diamond onto the bleachers; both the game and fight share aspirations of glory – and profit. Baseballs and diamonds share more features than an iconic occurrence in a sports idiom. Both a diamond and the home run ball have minimum of use-value but maximum of exchange-value. As Bataille states, the value of jewels is not based on their beauty or brilliance but on the property lavishly expended on them; otherwise jewelry could be replaced by worthless fakes.¹⁰ The home run ball hence resembles more an object that once belonged to a famous person than a industrially produced figurine. Figurine collectors can form a club, whereas a club of those who own the home run ball of the Giants/Dodgers game is a logical impossibility. To emulate Groucho Marx's famous dictum, the owner of the genuine ball would never join such a club.

10. Bataille, op. cit., p. 119.

Since the value and distinctiveness of the genuine home run baseball hinges on its singularity, both fakes and means of detecting them abound in the novel. The ball that disappears and bounces back throughout the novel forms one of the *Leitmotifs* of the heterogeneous and massive Underworld.

The border crossing from the realm of rubbish to that of durable brings about a number of paradoxes. The uniqueness of the ball is so vital that contestant balls annul its value; the obscurer the evidence of originality, the more convincing the argument (96, 98). The baseball epitomizes a special case of transient objects in systems of value. The ball represents an authentic experience of a historic event; it is a collective memento, even a relic. In a similar fashion, a piece of Jesus's cross would merely be a souvenir if his death were not included in the tenet of millions of believers.

The baseball is relatively durable; after one game it still is usable for its purpose, albeit probably not in official series games. The majority of waste and rubbish is, however, more transient than that. When the game is over, the audience indulges in a veritable orgy of wasting by disseminating everything transient at hand:

But the paper keeps falling. If the early paper waves were slightly hostile and mocking, and the middle waves a form of fan communality, then this last demonstration has a softness, a selfness. It is coming down from all points, laundry tickets, envelopes swiped from the office, there are crushed cigarette packs and sticky wrap from ice-cream sandwiches, pages from memo pads and pocket calendars, they are throwing faded dollar bills, snapshots torn to pieces, ruffles paper swaddles for cupcakes, they are tearing up letters they've been carrying around for years pressed into their wallets, the residue of love affairs and college friendships, it is happy garbage now, the fans' intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendingly, in the form of pocket litter, personal waste, a thing that carries a shadow identity – rolls of toilet tissue unbolting lyrically id streamers. (44-5)

This scene can also be read as a version of everyman's democratic potlatch, excessive expenditure of, not valuables as in northwestern American Indians' culture as analyzed by Marcel Mauss, but of worthless waste or rubbish. Interestingly enough, Bataille's reading of potlatch and gift emphasizes the wasting quality of the act of giving: in some "primitive" cultures, the valuables expended used to be downgraded to the status of rubbish or waste, which was dramatized by symbolically throwing them at the receiver's feet or by actually destroying them in a

conspicuous manner.¹¹ In the public wasting scene of *Underworld*, the "gift" given is already invaluable and the act is anonymous, without any expectation of gratitude or return. Not even this form of waste is unmarkedly typical. In the spectacular context of the ball game, even littering commences to signify something other than it literally seems to be. The torn pieces of paper hover about the scene, where sports history was only a while ago being made, gaining the status of visual ovation, of a translation of the auditory into the visible and the tactile. This expenditure as uninhibited littering presumably awes J. Edgar Hoover, that notoriously cleanliness-obsessed chief of the CIA, who would rather Hoover his private box than witness public wasting. As an exception to the logic of the gift, however, Hoover randomly receives, among other paper waste, a reproduction of Brueghel's painting "The Triumph of Death" torn from a copy of the *Time* magazine. With mixed feelings of interest and aversion, Hoover keeps and files the picture for closer inspection in the privacy of his office.

Still another form of waste is figured in the opening scene of the novel. J. Edgar Hoover is suddenly informed that the Soviet Union had conducted an atomic test. "The sun's own heat that swallows cities" (24), as Hoover conceives atomic power, does not digest without by-products; nuclear metabolism produces nuclear waste. In a novel in which everything is secretly connected, it is hardly surprising that the radioactive core of an atomic bomb is the exact size of a baseball (172). Handling this form of waste is the occupation of Nick Shay, who is the novel's protagonist if there is any, and it is extensively dealt with in the later chapters of *Underworld*. In nuclear waste, extreme durability is combined with extreme danger. The protagonist's act of malting that waste relatively undangerous by storing it, in fact, aims at overliving eternity, at surpassing ultimate durability. In other words, nuclear waste parodies the idea of durable objects, whose life-spans are, in an ideal case, infinite and whose value remains the same or even increases. Nuclear power, which enables the ever-increasing production of commodities, itself yields waste that is extremely durable. In this curious constellation, it is the ultimate power that is transient and the waste that is durable. The situation resembles an interpretation of the significance of the Giants/Dodgers

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-2

constellation suggested later on in the novel: "'It's not about Thompson hitting the homer. It's about Branca making the pitch. It's all about losing.'" (97) The suppressed second term of the winning/losing dyad may be as constitutive as waste in the product/waste opposition.

Producing Waste

One of the protagonists of *Underworld*, Nick Shay, works in a company managing all kinds of waste and garbage. Waste is the persistent after-image of consumerism; waste remains when the urges to buy, own, and use have momentarily been satisfied. The strata of garbage eternalized in the veritable archives of dumping areas meticulously preserve the traces of consumers' lives. Nick's co-worker Brian describes a gigantic landfill in New York in historic terms:

It was science fiction and prehistory, garbage arriving twenty-four hours a day ... He imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza – only this was twenty-five times bigger ... He found the sight inspiring. All this ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort to fill maximum waste into diminishing space. The towers of the World Trade Center were visible in the distance and he sensed a poetic balance between that idea and this one. (184)

Sims, another worker in the firm, makes bolder generalizations about the role of garbage in history; the rejected turns out to be the grand narrative of culture:

Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. ... And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics. (287)

Sims, who also lectures on the subject at UCLA, even states: "'We let it [garbage] shape us. We let it control our thinking. Garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it.'" (288). This re-interpretation of how civilization developed, is at least partly due to the interpreter's line

of duty. The constant preoccupation with waste changes one's perceptions of external reality, just like the category of rubbish usually remains virtually invisible to Westerners preoccupied with objects of value and use.¹² Sims complains that "everything [he] see[s] is garbage"; he notices scraps of food, leftovers, and cigarette butts everywhere (283). Nick and his wife have gone even further in this debris world-vision. They see "products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought. We didn't say, What kind of casserole will that make? We said, What kind of garbage will that make?" (121) In their vision, the arrow of time does not reverse its flight but gathers momentum. The time of waste wastes anything but time.

Commodities are thus potential garbage. But is garbage also a potential commodity? In the wonderful world of *Underworld*, the answer is definitely Yes. On a general level, Nick's company thrives on waste: "My firm was involved in waste. We were waste handlers, waste traders, cosmogologists of waste." (88) Waste is even traded "in the commodity pits in Chicago." (804) But *Underworld* features waste as a product in more direct ways as well. Two characters are depicted as browsing in shops that carry out-of-ordinary items, including "phone taps of ordinary anonymous men and women," "autopsy photos," and, interestingly enough, "movie stars' garbage, the actual stuff deep-frozen in a warehouse – you looked in a catalog and placed an order" (319). This "garbage on demand crystallizes a number of curious transformations: products become waste, which in turn becomes a product because it functions as a memento of a famous person; since this re-definition of garbage only applies to its exchange-value, not to its (biological) transient quality as such, it has to be made durable by freezing it. Now the regained exchange-value and durability meet, at least as long as the buyer can afford a freezer and the electricity it needs. This kind of waste qua commodity forms a special case of "garbologism," i.e. the sifting of a famous person's "detritus for tell-tale evidence to substantiate" one's Ph.D thesis.¹³ I would call the results of the non-academic, commercial preservation and marketing of debris "garbage collectors' items."

If purchasing garbage seems like an exaggerated perversion of the

12. Cf. Thompson, op.cit., pp. 2-3.

13. Ibid., p. 92.

ordinary state of affairs in the actual raw material/product/waste chain, the novel provides an anecdote which problematizes the very commodity/waste opposition. A restaurant puts its garbage bags containing food waste in an iron cage, or otherwise "[d]erelicts come out of the park and eat it" (283); the restaurant will not allow the garbage be eaten, "[b]ecause it's property" (284). In this case, garbage still has use-value (it is edible), but the cultural system of purity and dirt categorizes it as waste. Edible garbage is food in the wrong place in two senses: culturally, food becomes dirt when it is removed from the plate to the garbage; economically, a serving in a restaurant is a sellable commodity, unlike when it is stuffed in a Cinch-Sack and taken to the backyard.¹⁴

There are other instances of waste as products in the novel as well. The very process of recycling is analogous with the industrial production of goods: "assembly lines of garbage, sorted, compressed, and baled, transformed in the end to square-edged units, products again, wire bound and smartly stacked and ready to be marketed." (809) It is hardly surprising that in postmodern society even excrement gets simulated and thus turned into a commodity: "They are making synthetic feces in Dallas. They have perfected a form of simulated human waste in order to test diapers and other protective garments. The compound comes in a dry mix made of starches, fibers, resins, gelatins and polyvinyls. You add water for desired consistency. The color is usually brown." (805)¹⁵

In the same shopping district where frozen garbage lure movie fans, there is a large store which sells old copies of *National Geographic*. The store's clientele consists of men in raincoats, furtively thumbing the magazines, never lifting their heads. Rather than "interested in photos of wolf packs on the tundra at sunset," they indulge in a "pornography of nostalgia" that the earnestly read and reread magazines represent (320). It is even suspected that "the folders themselves were the fetish items here," or to take the logical step further from the supplemented to the supplement, the empty folders might be the ultimate kick (320). The wrapper, usually torn and thrown away, here gains the status of a product instead of waste – which role is presumably played by the wrapped. For

14. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 91-2.

15. There is also a rumour of a boatload of "shit" off San Francisco; the load is misinterpreted ("a mixup over a word") as being heroin, although it actually is "treated human waste" (330).

the fetishist the use-value of an object begins when it is out of service, when it is no longer useful in the ordinary sense of the word.¹⁶ In a similar fashion the used home run ball is fetishized precisely because it has fulfilled its original purpose and entered the category of rubbish.

The possibility of impropriety is inscribed in the economy of objects, be they conventional commodities or redefined waste. When there is a product, there is a crime or a misdemeanor. A restaurant owner has to hire a man to take away the trash at illegal, non-ordinance hours (361). The FBI fights organized crime figures by ransacking their garbage; the agents

substituted fake garbage, to allay suspicion – aromatic food scraps, anchovy tins, used tampon prepared by the lab division. Then they took the real garbage back for analysis by forensic experts on gambling, handwriting, fragmented paper, crumpled photographs, foodstains, bloodstains and every known subclass of scribbled Sicilian. (558)

Ironically enough, a "garbage guerrilla" (557) is reported to be planning to steal off the notoriously private and bacteria-phobic J. Edgar Hoover's garbage and expose it to the public. Hoover's assistant says:

'Confidential source says they intend to take your garbage on tour. Rent halls in major cities. Get lefty sociologists to analyze the garbage item by item. Get hippies to rub it on their naked bodies. More or less have sex with it. Get poets to write poems about it. And finally, in the last city on the tour, they plan to eat it.' (558)

Moreover, a documentary film is rumoured to be made of the tour, "for general release." (558) Needless to say, Hoover has a dossier on the suspected guerrillas, which consists of rumors, rubbish details, inessential pieces of information; this dossier is, however, for Hoover's purposes, a "deeper form of truth, transcending facts and actuality." (559) The harmless, rubbish form of information – the white noise, as it were – can be turned into a product which endangers the subject's life.

Due to his waste-sensitivity, Nick meticulously recycles his household garbage. The following description is repeated, or should I say, recycled several times almost verbatim in the novel:

16. Cf. Hollier, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

We used a paper bag for the paper bags. We took a large paper bag and put all the smaller bags inside and then placed the large bag alongside all the other receptacles on the side walk. We ripped the wax paper from our boxes of shredded wheat. There is no language I might formulate that could overstate the diligence we brought to these tasks. We did the yard waste. We bundled the newspapers but did not tie them in twine. (102-3; cf. also 89, 119, 803-4)

If waste indeed is the real base on which civilization, with all its noble pursuits, is built, how does Underworld, as an ideological and aesthetic structure, bear witness to this hypothesis? In what follows, I shall dig into waste and its relationship with art, religion, language, and literature as repeatedly suggested by Underworld.

The Art of Waste

Waste can be (re)turned into a consumable product, a commodity with exchange-value (but usually without use-value). Besides mementoes, relics, and souvenirs, art objects are characterized by a combination of minimal use-value and potentially maximal exchange-value (or at least a considerable amount of mental capital tends to be invested in them). Or more specifically, rubbish, as an interface between transience and durability, has become a resource eagerly tapped in modern art.¹⁷ In fact, the history of twentieth century art abounds in examples of use of transient rubbish. Marcel Duchamp's urinal, Tyree Guyton's "Heidelberg Project" in Detroit, and Carsten Pedersen's installation with parked crashed cars in Copenhagen all turn virtual junk into art objects. A piece of junk is removed from its context into a museum, art gallery, or is otherwise framed from its usual surroundings; in addition, the object is usually renamed. An artist, unlike an ordinary person, has the authority to do all these transformative gestures.

Waste, or at least wasting of property, can be a more general principle of institutional art than just another trend in modernism. Bataille sees expenditure as the constitutive factor of art. In Bataille's analysis, dif-

17. Cf. Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-3; Culler, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

ferent forms of art, either actually or symbolically, represent expenditure, which is then transferred onto recipients. Architecture, music, and dance are based on actual expenditure, presumably in the sense that they require, in high culture, considerable economic input in order to exist. In literature and theater, the symbolic representation of a tragic loss causes anguish and awe in the viewer or reader. The artist her/himself is not, in Bataille's view, outside this economy, for s/he is condemned to misery, hopelessness, and loss of self.¹⁸ The accuracy of his analysis in connection with contemporary artistry and its possibility of economic success aside, Bataille is nowadays, more than he was in his own time, right in emphasizing the monetary infrastructure of certain art forms.

Underworld features a few artist figures whose work relates to the problematic of waste. Klara Sachs, Nick's former mistress, used to do castoffs of "aerosol cans and sardine tins and shampoo caps and mattresses," which practice earned her the nickname "Bag Lady" (70). Nowadays she is using junk of a different order; she is painting 230 old, deactivated B-52-long-range bombers, not representing them but actually covering their steel surface with paint. This turning of junk into art objects takes place in a desert, whose dry air is ideal for keeping the metal safe. The desert setting resembles a museum in other respects as well; the military will keep the area intact and free from any other activities – once finished, the installation of waste will remain unharmed in the wasteland.

Artlike constellations of junk come into existence unintentionally as well. In New York, a team of unemployed young men, led by a graffiti artist Ismael aka Moonman 157, salvage car bodies for recycling:

Sometimes there were forty or fifty cannibalized cars dumped in the lots, museum quality, a junkworld sculpture park – cars bashed and bullet-cratered, hoodless, doorless and rust-ulcered, charraed cars, upside-down cars, cars with dead bodies wrapped in shower curtains, rats ascratch in the glove compartments (241).

Moonman sees this as art but has no authority to define it as being such, unlike, say, a relatively established artist like Klara Sachs. Although Klara humbly notes, "We took junk and saved it for art. Which sounds nobler than it was. It was just a way of looking at something more care-

18. Bataille, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-20.

fully." (393), plain seeing, without the power to recontextualize, is not (institutional) saving.

Moonman's own art form, graffiti, in a sense reverses the idea of Klara's bomber project. Moonman marks and paints whole functional subway trains, not out of order car bodies or airplanes; at the same time he turns a valuable commodity into a sort of waste, into a vehicle that is still running but that is considered as "dirty" and in need of cleaning. The transience of seemingly durable objects is colorfully underlined. By the same gesture, however, Moonman does elevate mundane subway cars into art in the sense that at least some members of the art world would like to save and "show" his work in museums (377). "Showing" is a curious word in connection with graffiti, which are by definition more public and exposed to viewing than any traditional art form in the context of a museum or a gallery. Here "showing" apparently refers to an institutional framing, to an authoritative transformation of a waste-like object into a work of art. In fact, Moonman can be interpreted as manipulating the durability/transience system by speeding the inevitable wear-out process, thus exposing the object to rubbishness and thereby opening up the possibility of a new durability in the form of art. That Moonman is not interested in the role of an artist as a public figure is beside the point; he – with the help from a gang of graffiti painters he mobilizes – performs all the necessary gestures needed in transforming a durable or transient object via rubbish into a durable art object, except for the recontextualization. That change in context can and will be done by any authoritative member of the art world – to which Moonman himself does not belong.

"Waste is a religious thing"

Waste and religion perhaps form an even less likely pair than waste and art. What seems to verge on blasphemy, however, turns out to be relevant in many aspects of metaphysics. Paul Quinn is probably right in proposing that *Underworld* is DeLillo's most Catholic novel; besides

being one of its ideological discourses, Catholicism provides the novel with the rhetoric of wonderment and of the sublime.¹⁹

Nick, who was educated by the Jesuits, recognizes a number of similarities between waste and religious phenomena. Jesuit training has taught Nick to read reality intensively, "to examine things for second meanings and deeper connections"; he even wonders if the Jesuits were thinking about waste (88). Though apparently profane, waste has a sacred or taboo side to it: "Waste has a solemn aura now, an aspect of untouchability. White containers of plutonium waste with yellow caution tags. Handle carefully." (88) On the other hand, ordinary household waste is seen as interrelated part of a larger plan, "in a planetary context" (88). Waste, especially radioactive waste, is a religious thing because it entails belief: "It was religious conviction in our business that these deposits of rock salt would not leak radiation ... We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary to respect what we discard." (88)

As the dark side of happy consumption of products, waste relates to death but also to transcendence and to the sublime. Waste is a reminder of the inevitable transience of most objects, including human beings. The itinerary of objects toward and finally across the border of waste is transgressive: by witnessing that process we become aware of the anxiety relating to denial, law, sin, and – fundamentally – death. Perhaps for this reason waste is dramatically removed from this world to the other side:

We built pyramids of waste above and below the earth. The more hazardous the waste, the deeper we tried to sink it. The word plutonium comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld. (106)

The vertical axis of waste and death, ranging from the depths to the heights, is epitomized by two examples from two cultures. Ancient Mayans used to bury their dead with old broken things; "They used the dead as a convenient means of garbage disposal." (767) On the other hand, contemporary American high tech produces, when failing, "space burials." The seven astronauts of the exploded space shuttle have "fallen to sea but [are] also still up there, gravled in frozen smoke" – a "soaring

19. Peter Quinn, "Hitting the home run," rev. of *Underworld*, by Don DeLillo, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 Dec. 1997, p. 21.

and clean" form of death (227).²⁰ At a more quotidian level, even the fastidious recycling arrangements are "like preparing a pharaoh for his death and burial" (199).

According to Bataille, the basis of sacred things is a loss of some sort, be it the shameful crucifixion of the Son of God or the bloody wasting of sacrificial animals. Sacrifice equals bringing about sacred phenomena.²¹ In *Underworld*, the aura of the baseball relates to the cultic and ritual meaning of the game, and its value is that of exchange and hence expenditure, not of use. The exponentially growing amount of money wasted on the ball and the veritable quest for it are tokens of the sacred in disguise of profane profit-making.

What is beyond the borderline of the everyday is a taboo, be it the unspeakability of excrement or the ineffable name of god. Atomic energy and the resulting nuclear waste epitomize these tongue-tying extremities, as Klara Sachs tells Nick:

'They didn't even know what to call the early bomb. The thing or the gadget or something. And Oppenheimer said, It is merde. I will use the French. J. Robert Oppenheimer. It is merde. He meant [sic] something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit. You can't name it. It's too big or evil or outside your experience. It's also shit because it's garbage, it's waste material.' (76-77)

In the Soviet Union, the very same substance and principle used to cause "unknown diseases," and make it necessary that "[f]or many years the word radiation was banned" (800-1). Atomic energy qua Oppenheimerian excrement epitomizes Douglass's purity/danger dichotomy in its extreme: as both taboo and pollution, both nuclear weapon and waste actually hazard the lives of those who are exposed to their presence.

The borders to be crossed include the ultimate limit, the end of history, the Christian apocalypse. In *Underworld*, this eschatology is mixed with scatology. Lenny Bruce tells a story about a young prostitute who manages to blow smoke rings vaginally; some people who come to the

20. Death and possible apotheosis, or at least immortality, in cleansing flames relates to the mythical bird, phoenix. Not insignificantly, the recycling and waste-managing Nick lives in a suburb of Phoenix, Arizona (66), a city that is, in a false etymological aside, linked with Phoenicia (120). Sacrifices of children by burning was one of the peculiarities of the Phoenician religious practice.

21. Bataille, op. cit., 119.

brothel to witness the event give the phenomenon an apocalyptic interpretation:

They think it's an omen, a sign from heaven that the world is about to end. God had selected a poor illiterate undernourished orphan girl to convey a profound message to the world. Because isn't it possible that all these O's coming out of her womb refer to the Greek letter that means The End. (630)

In this reading, the time of waste and the waste of time are about to come to a final limit, beyond which neither human comprehension nor language can reach. The ultimate borderline is thus sublime, sub *limen*.

Not a Word Wasted: Recycling Lit(t)erature

The word "underworld" in *Underworld* condenses a number of the novel's thematic concerns. The word refers to the Mafia, the scum and margins of society, filmic representations of mad scientists and gangsters by Eisenstein and von Sternberg respectively, the place where waste is dumped, and the realm of death. This kind of polysemy dramatizes an important feature in DeLillo's narrative strategy. The novel recycles, utilizes to the full, signifiers but also performatively studies this very same principle. The recurrence of the word *waste* is exemplary of this literary re-use. Nick combines his professional interest in waste with his linguistic curiosity; as a hobby, he teaches Latin, a dead language, once a week at a junior college. Nick ruminates, in an etymological aside, that the word waste has "such derivatives as empty, void, vanish and devastate" (120). On another occasion, when recounting his meticulous recycling procedures, Nick explains, "receptables, from the Latin verb that means receive again" (102). Both of these constituents of waste managing resemble the conventional and arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified: words can be re-used by emptying and refilling their semantic contents. Both the mythological Pluto's fate and the words describing it participate in this general economy of signification: "They took him [Pluto] out to the marshes and wasted him as we say today, or used to say until it got changed to something else" (106).

On the other hand, the material world consists of particles that secretly connect the apparently dissimilar: "you can't tell the difference between one thing and another, between a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing" (446). Conversely, use and naming impose the difference on what looks fundamentally the same, or rather what remains imperceptible. A Jesuit teacher demonstrates this linguistic undoing of the quotidian to Nick the schoolboy by asking him to name the parts of a shoe: "You didn't see the thing because you don't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names." (540) In a Batailleian context, the use of a shoe as an example rather than as a garment could be read as linguistic fetishism, as a passionate translation of an object into another category of use-value. Another corollary of the relationship between naming and the named also ties in with the veritable scumbag side of language, with linguistic scatology; the narrator comments on the obscenities that Lenny Bruce utters in a stand-up act: "In fact the words were thrilling. Many people had never heard these words spoken before an audience . . . and there was an odd turn of truth, a sense of unleashing perhaps, or disembarassment." (585)

The systems of value and the categories of durable, transient and rubbish also inform the discourse of *Underworld*. Words and phrases are repeated until they lose their informative value and are drawn closer to white noise. Like products, words are exposed to deterioration. Appropriately enough, Klara's accent changes the very word "deteriorated" into "deteriated," and her idiosyncratic laughter sounds like "a long wet whinnying letter *k*" (81; emphasis in original). The phonetic disintegration of standard English is even more prominently audible in the multicultural South Bronx gang of young people that Catholic Sisters are trying to take care of: "They spoke an unfinished English, soft and muffled, insufficiently suffixed, and she [Sister Edgar] wanted to drum some hard *g*'s into the ends of their gerunds" (243; emphasis in original). To reverse the linguistic decay, some words are given new value by using them in new contexts; Lenny Bruce blurts out the following litany, "Mick spic hunky junkie boogie," which the narrator comments, "There was no context for the line except the one that Lenny took with him everywhere." (585) On the other hand, the very non-standard pronunciation can be interpreted as an attempt to foreground the phonemic surface of language; one char-

acter has a "fake stutter he liked to use to texture the conversation" (417) and another one overpronounces certain words "for effect" (714). All these deviations from the unmarked use could be described as *Sprachgefühl*, "a feel for language, for what is idiomatically hip" (585).

The excavation and utilization of the historic strata of words obviously connects *Underworld* to prior fiction, to the compost of intertexts of which all literature is composed. The novel's final scene dramatizes this stratification of words by describing a computerized plunge into a digital encyclopedic dictionary on the Internet:

A single seraphic word. You can examine the word with a click, tracing its origins, development, earliest known use, its passage between languages, and you can summon the word in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Arabic, in a thousand languages and dialects living and dead, and locate literary citations, and follow the word through the tunneled underworld of its ancestral roots. (826)

In addition to "underworld," a single word – perhaps not as seraphic as sublime – that summons links to earlier American fiction is "waste." In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, the acronym WASTE refers to a secret postal network of outcasts. The hidden connectedness of phenomena is the obvious connection between DeLillo and Pynchon. Conspiracies, overwhelming systems, and paranoia are the tokens of the world where "everything's connected" (289).

Certain themes and narrational decisions link the DeLillo novel with contemporary American fiction: baseball connects *Underworld* with Malamud's *The Natural* and Roth's *The Great American Novel*; length, complexity, and polyphony bring to mind Gaddis's *Recognitions* or *JR*. Instead of going into these possibly heuristic intertexts in detail, I shall have a brief look at *Underworld's* intratextual relationship with DeLillo's prior oeuvre. *Underworld* can be read a *summa* of DeLillo's literary concerns. The connectedness of everything ties in with *The Names* (1982) and especially *Libra* (1988), which also features a long section set in the Soviet Union. The importance of sports is shared by *End Zone* and *Underworld* alike. The quest for the fetishized baseball is analogous with the search for the supposed pornographic film clip of Hitler in *Running Dog* (1978). As regards commodities, consumption, and waste, *White Noise* (1985) is the most relevant DeLillo novel to be compared with *Underworld*. *Underworld* studies the rear end of consumption and the

sacredness of waste; *White Noise*, in contrast, presents quasi-religious rituals of shopping and takes pleasure in litanies of commodities owned.²² *White Noise* conspicuously consumes Naziana and Americana, whereas *Underworld* recycles both in a dramatization of systems of value, cultural meaning, and the transcendence of the quotidian.

If "[c]apital burns off the nuance in a culture," as the first sentence of the novel's final chapter, "Das Kapital," has it (785), *Underworld* recalls those very nuances with an intensity of and insight into the poetry of the material world. To answer my title's question, waste has an abundance of purposes in *Underworld*, all of which make it not a collectors' but a recollectors' item.

22. Cf. Thomas J. Ferraro, "Whole Families Shopping at Night!" in Frank Lentricchia, ed., *New Essays on White Noise*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), pp. 30-1; Frank Lentricchia, "Tales of the Electronic Tribe," in Lentricchia, *op. cit.*, p. 94.