

The Subversion of Nature in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

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Abstract: *This article focuses on one of the main themes of Don DeLillo's complex and critically acclaimed novel Underworld from 1997, namely the centrality and ubiquity of garbage and other forms of waste in both the physical world and in people's minds in the second half of the 20th century. It is both a brilliant satire and a scary cautionary tale that situates itself squarely in the tradition of "toxic narratives" recently made famous by Cormac McCarthy's The Road. Pre-apocalyptic rather than post-apocalyptic, the landscape of DeLillo's novel is disturbingly familiar both in its mundane recognizability and in its outlandish strangeness, as the reader is transported from monster landfills in New York City, described in oddly romantic terms, to the disastrous consequences of nuclear waste in the former Soviet republic of Khazakstan, horribly realistic in its depiction of the human cost of this ultimate tampering with the natural order. Throughout this tale of hubris in the name of progress and consumption, DeLillo weaves a narrative of human fallibility and desire that is a perfect counterpoint to the enormous global issues that will ultimately decide the survival of life as we know it on this planet.*

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Don DeLillo's *Underworld* from 1997 is one of the truly seminal works of contemporary American literature, by many critics singled out, along with Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* from 1973, as the high point of postmodernist literary achievement in America. It is increasingly seen as one of the great map-works of the modern imagination, where a number of intriguing trajectories of multiple plotlines investigate American culture in

the second half of the twentieth century. It begins with the immortal baseball game between the Giants and the Dodgers in October of 1951, in the early years of the Cold War, and closes in contemporary cyberspace more than forty years later. In the words of Thomas Dewey, "it is as well a fierce satire that examines with the glowering dissatisfaction of an Old Testament prophet the contemporary lurch into the wasteland, our terminal fascination with violence, the tentacled reach of domestic entertainment technologies, our deep faith in the propaganda of consumerism, our indulgence of fanaticism."¹ Along with a great many other themes and phenomena, one is tempted to add. *Underworld* is a work about connections and designs, on many levels and among a number of people, the ultimate kaleidoscopic attempt of one imagination to make his particular sense of the meaning of life in his own time and place. It is, as many critics see it, perhaps the last best attempt to write the Great American Novel in the 20th century.

There are many daunting and confusing forces at work in this world, and yet DeLillo has never given up his belief that the human being is up to the task of making his own personal sense of his own existence. In his famous essay entitled "The Power of History," he observes that "against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self. Here it is, sly, mazed, mercurial, scared half-crazy. It is also free and undivided, the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality."² A concomitant aspect of this polarity is the author's broad focus on the connections between the public and the private, where the fleeting lines of demarcation between the consciousness of the individual and the forces of the material world that surrounds him is a never-ending negotiation for meaning and survival.

It should perhaps be clear already at this point that DeLillo and *Underworld* are not easily subsumable under a conventional heading of "nature writing." *Underworld* is basically an intensely urban novel, where ordinary definitions of the natural landscape are nostalgic memories at best, with an exception made for the desert landscape of the Southwest. But I think it must be legitimate here, as DeLillo does, to ask what happens when people no longer possess a healthy and functional relationship to the categories of a living and sustaining nature. The surrounding world does not go away, even

1 *UnderWords: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's Underworld*, eds. Joseph Dewey et al. (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2002): 10.

2 Quoted by Robert McMinn, in Dewey: 45.

if fields and streams and forests are no longer an immediate part of our everyday lives. And so one of the key thematic strands in the novel is focused on the subversion and destruction of our traditional natural environment and what people are left with in its place; in other words, how does our natural and creative Overworld become a seared and demonic Underworld, how does grass turn to cinder, flowers to waste, growing things to garbage, and the perennial processes of a self-sustaining nature to the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima?

One of the perversions of the natural scene that pops up again and again in DeLillo's fiction is the way that the media, and most importantly television, focus endlessly on terrible disasters and mindless acts of violence, which are repeated over and over again in an almost mesmerizing fashion, without any attempt made at a contextual understanding of the larger meaning of these events. In an interview with David Remnick from 1997, DeLillo had the following to say about this aspect of the television newscast:

People seem to need news, any kind—bad news, sensationalistic news, overwhelming news. It seems to be that news is a narrative of our time. It has almost replaced the novel, replaced discourse between people. It replaced families. ... After the earthquake in San Francisco, they showed one house burning, over and over, so that your TV set became a kind of instrument of apocalypse. This happens repeatedly in those endless videotapes that come to life of a bank robbery, or a shooting, or a beating. They repeat, and it's as though they're speeding up time in some way. I think it's induced an apocalyptic sense in people that has nothing to do with the end of the millennium. And it makes us—it makes us consumers of a certain type. We consume these acts of violence. It's like buying products that in fact are images and they are produced in a massmarket kind of fashion. But it's also real, it's real life. It's as though this were our last experience of nature: seeing a guy with a gun totally separate from choreographed movie violence. It's all we've got left of nature, in a strange way. But it's all happening on our TV set.³

In *Underworld* this particular theme is developed through the episode of the Texas Highway Killer, where a young girl quite inadvertently happens to capture on her camcorder the random, senseless killing of an anonymous motorist. As this footage is played and re-played over and over again on television screens across the nation, the original horror of the viewer is transformed into a kind of benumbed aesthetic fascination with the details of the grisly scene that is strangely addictive. In his essay on "The Power of History," DeLillo has provided his own gloss on these phenomena:

3 "Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld," in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2005): 143-144.

And if you view the tape often enough, it tends to transform you, to make you a passive variation of the armed robber in his warped act of consumption. It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape.⁴

The subversion of nature, and its corresponding exploitation of waste products, take many forms in *Underworld*. From early on in the novel, its main protagonist, Nick Shay, who refers to himself as “a cosmologist of waste,” speculates on the significance of his calling: “Waste is an interesting word that you can trace through Old English and Old Norse back to the Latin, finding such derivatives as empty, void, vanish, and devastate.”⁵ Frequently the characters of the novel invert the traditional ways of relating to nature by devising elaborate rituals of ordering and recycling their used-up trash and garbage. In the Shay family, this is business as usual:

At home we separated our waste into glass and cans and paper products. Then we did clear glass versus colored glass. Then we did tin versus aluminum. We did plastic containers, without caps or lids, on Tuesdays only. Then we did yard waste. Then we did newspapers including glossy inserts but were careful not to tie the bundles in twine, which is always the temptation. (89)

This ritualization of the recycling process reflects the deep human need for control and connection, even if we are here presiding over a modern wasteland rather than a living nature, with or without a connection to a transcendent power. To drive home his point with even greater satirical force, the author sends our protagonist and his wife out shopping with a very special perspective in mind. As Robert McMinn has pointed out, they are so intent on the recycling process that they see the products on the supermarket shelves in terms of their potential as household waste, making a kind of perverse transsubstantiation possible.⁶

Marian and I saw 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? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of? Can the package be recycled and come back as a tawny envelope that is difficult to lick closed? (121)

4 Quoted by David Cowart, in Dewey: 53.

5 Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997): 120. Page references to subsequent quotes from the novel will appear parenthetically in the text.

6 See Dewey, 45.

What DeLillo is doing here, much as Rudolf Otto attempts to do in *The Idea of the Holy*, is to analyze and play with the floating boundaries that exist between the sacred and the profane. In *Underworld*, the subversion of nature is accompanied by a sacralization of waste. Not only is Nick Shay employed as a waste manager (with headquarters in Phoenix, Arizona, not surprisingly ...), but even as early as during his Jesuit schooling in rural Minnesota, this theme is brought up: "The Jesuits taught me to examine things for second meanings and deeper connections. Were they thinking about waste? We were waste managers, waste giants, we processed universal waste. Waste has a solemn aura now, an aspect of un-touchability" (88).

In a corresponding chapter, we follow one of Nick's colleagues to what is advertised as the world's greatest garbage dump, the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island in New York. Here he is inspired to indulge in a quasi-religious vision of the magnitude of this three-thousand-acre shrine to the gods of consumption:

He imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza—only this was twenty-five times bigger, with tanker trucks spraying perfumed water on the approach roads. He found the sight inspiring. All this ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort to fit 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. Bridges, tunnels, scows, tugs, graving docks, container ships, all the great works of transport, trade and linkage were directed in the end to this culminating structure. And the thing was organic, ever growing and shifting, its shape computer-plotted by the day and the hour. In a few years this would be the highest mountain on the Atlantic Coast between Boston and Miami. Brian felt a sting of enlightenment. He looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about ... [A]nd he saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order, they were adepts and seers, crafting the future, the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians, the landscapers who would build hanging gardens here, make a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire. (184-185)

It is striking how DeLillo here intermingles words traditionally associated with religion and worship with the smelly details of this part of the modern throw-away world. At the same time, this enormous heap of waste is described in terms of many of the metaphors we tend to associate with a more traditional, even romantic, view of nature, such as mountains, perfumed water, parks, and gardens. The many personifications are also very effective, emphasizing the organic, monster-like nature of the growing pyramid of waste that, significantly, overlooks the World Trade Center.

Paralleled with these personal experiences of a kind of mundane epiphany, the problem of waste surfaces as a public problem on several occasions in the novel, for instance during the New York City garbage strike of 1974 and in the repeated references to the “ghost ship” circling the globe with its mystery cargo of highly toxic waste that no one wants to admit onto its shores, not even the LDCs (Less Developed Countries) that the Western waste managers are usually able to bribe into taking on their own most dangerous refuse. This ship is rumored to be mafia-owned, like much of the rest of the garbage business, registered in either Liberia or Panama, and is generally symbolic of all that is wrong with a culture that is unable to face up to the consequences of its own wasteful, exploitative lifestyle.

But Nick Shay’s employer, the Waste Containment Co., known in the industry as Whiz Co., is trying hard to remedy this problem, working out ways to stem the growing tide of garbage rising up to engulf the world. At a seminar in the Mojave Desert, expert waste managers, landfill engineers, and garbage archaeologists assemble to discuss the status and plot the future of their industry. On an excursion to a monster landfill in the area, Nick waxes almost lyrical in his description of the landscape before him:

I was taken by surprise. The sight of this thing, the enormous gouged bowl lined with artful plastic, was the first material sign I’d had that this was a business of a certain drastic grandeur, even a kind of greatness, maybe—the red-tailed hawks transparent in the setting sun and the spring stalks of yucca tall as wishing wands and this high-density membrane that was oddly and equally beautiful in a way, a prophylactic device, a gas-control system, and the crater it layered that would accept thousands of tons of garbage a day ... (285)

Such an effusion makes it abundantly clear that even in the most unpromising of environments, poetry and nature refuse to go away, as the protagonist transforms his vision of waste and decay into a romantic perception of the scene before him. In a similar way, DeLillo seems to feel, contemporary Americans wave their personal wishing wands to make the incessantly growing slagheaps of mindless consumption disappear as if by magic.

An even a more radically reductive and totalizing way of looking at the world is espoused by Jesse Detwiler, the greatest garbage hustler of them all, who provides the following gloss on the history of civilizations:

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. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we

couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics. (287)

Perhaps the most pervasively important mantra in *Underworld* is constituted by various versions of the phrase "everything's connected." For anyone familiar with DeLillo's fiction, this theme can be found in all his work, from the humorously coincidental to the darkly paranoid. Among the myriad significant links and connections that constitute the dense web of this massive novel, the interaction between the capitalist system of consumption and waste on the one hand and the notorious "military-industrial complex" on the other is particularly relevant in this connection, both leaving behind mountains of waste for posterity to deal with. In Mark Osteen's brilliant analysis of this theme, he emphasizes the way the concept of containment is equally relevant for both of these contexts:

The architects of the waste and weapons systems also colluded to devise a totalizing ideology of containment: just as the U.S. government tried to contain the Soviet Union by building more and more nuclear weapons that it could never use, so we also built landfills to house the remains of our rampant consumption. The ideology of containment thus encompasses weapons and waste, whose devastating physical and psychological repercussions constitute DeLillo's primary theme in *Underworld*. The novel dramatizes how the proliferation of weapons and waste has fuelled a rigid binary thinking, an "Us versus Them" mentality, that has alienated us from nature and from our own better nature.⁷

There are also a number of other ways in which the dominance of waste and trash over the processes of a growing nature are accentuated in the novel. The book's most prominent artist, Klara Sax, only becomes truly famous when she starts to paint the carcasses of 230 abandoned B-52 bombers which have been left behind in the desert landscape of New Mexico. She has developed a trash aesthetic that makes her as much a connoisseur of waste as Nick is in his chosen field. Searingly and eerily beautiful, this bomber graveyard, a monument to the aftermath of death and destruction, is viewed by Nick and his wife from above as they float over the scene in a hot-air balloon, representing an experience of almost ecstatic affirmation that seems much more meaningful than any earth-bound experience of a living, growing, flowering nature is able to provide.

7 Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000): 215.

It is quite inevitable that two other literary texts have come up frequently in the discussion of these aspects of *Underworld*, namely T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. These two works, both published in the 1920s, portray the withering of an earlier civilization based on a more direct, functional and organic relationship to the natural world. The "living dead" in the waste land of Eliot's London are paralleled by the morally and spiritually bankrupt inhabitants of Fitzgerald's New York and Long Island. For these people, the image of the "Valley of Ashes," presided over by the derelict, unseeing eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, is a fitting symbol of what happens when water disappears, both physically and metaphorically, and people are left with a perverted and unsustainable relationship to the natural order.

In *Underworld*, DeLillo takes these bleak and disillusioned visions of modernity one step further. While Nick Carraway and his acquaintances physically pass through the "Valley of Ashes," the whole of Nick Shay's America seems to have *become* a similar wasteland. It is thus entirely fitting that *Underworld* increasingly focuses on what is arguably the most fundamental and potentially devastating subversion of nature that humanity has yet come up with, namely the terrifyingly surreal threat of nuclear disaster. The extent to which the threat of the Bomb was pervasively present in American life during the heyday of the Cold War in the fifties and sixties is convincingly summed up by historian Paul Boyer:

So fully does the nuclear reality pervade my consciousness that it is hard to imagine what existence would have been like without it. It is as though the Bomb has become one of those categories of Being, like Space and Time, that according to Kant, are built into the very structure of our minds, giving shape and meaning to all our perceptions.⁸

But even if the threat of immediate extinction is an important dimension in *Underworld*, it is not the horrifying spectacle of the *Enola Gay* dropping the bomb over Hiroshima or the insanely dangerous brinkmanship of the Cuban missile crisis that is the main focus of DeLillo's doomsday vision here. Instead, in keeping with the thematic of waste that informs the novel, he describes the consequences for ourselves and our natural world of the radioactive fallout that is the effect of nuclear proliferation. There is a price to be paid for subverting the natural order, and that price

8 *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985): xviii.

is memorably and terrifyingly analyzed in the concluding sections of this massive novel.

In the short "Epilogue" (not very subtly subtitled "Das Kapital"), the reader is invited along to post-Soviet Russia and especially to the newly independent Republic of Khazakstan, to witness the consequences for the so-called developing world of the operations of capitalism in this area. In a nightmare vision that the famous Borat himself could not have invented for his next mockumentary, our protagonist Nick Shay is taken along to the Ground Zero of the Khazak test site, where Viktor Maltsev's company will try to vaporize nuclear waste by blowing it up underground in a nuclear explosion! Maltsev goes every American waste-hustling capitalist one better, as evidenced in this exchange:

You have your own capitalist tools now. Don't you, Viktor?

You mean my company?

A small private army, I hear.

Also intelligence unit. To protect our assets.

And scare the hell out of the competition.

He tells me that the name of the company, Tchaika, was his idea.

Tchaika means seagull and refers poetically to the fact that the company's basic business is waste. He likes the way seagulls swoop down on garbage mounds and trail after ships. ... It is a nicer name, besides, than Rat or Pig. (790)

And, one might add, it is a kind of ultimate euphemism for a company that destroys contaminated nuclear waste by means of nuclear explosions for an exorbitant fee.

But Viktor Maltsev is not the ultimate villain in this nightmare scenario. He comes at the tail end of Soviet nuclear radiation atrocities, years of shoddy and unprotected testing of nuclear devices large and small. In a grotesquely horrifying "Museum of the Misshapens," Nick is shown every conceivable deformity in fetuses preserved in pickle jars, and when he is later taken to a modern radiation hospital for "downwinders," he is confronted with the living, breathing results of the total disregard for the value of human lives that is the ultimate fallout of the nuclear race:

The clinic has disfigurements, leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function. ... He says there are unknown diseases here. And words that are also unknown, or used to be. For many years the word radiation was banned. Doctors said this word only at home, to their wives or husbands or friends, and maybe not even there. And the villagers did not say this word because they didn't know it existed.

(800-801)

Although this climactic part of the novel is the most frightening vision of the consequences of our subversion of nature, DeLillo also focuses on the waste and pollution closer to home. In Section 5 of the novel, entitled “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry,” he confronts the forces of commercialized capitalism responsible for so much of the garbage world that people prefer to forget about. John Duvall has described the strategies of the profit-chasing juggernauts of these industries in the following words:

Du Pont’s advertising slogan, of course, is fully implicated, serving as a form of ideological waste management. The images implied by the slogan makes it difficult for people to link the company with pollution. Yet with the vinyls, the polymers, the plastics, and the pesticides come not just an increase in immediate creature comforts (better things) but also the toxic waste that means increased cancer rates and irrevocable damage to the water table.⁹

Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* is a dauntingly complex and hauntingly unforgettable book. The cautionary tale that I have tried to describe in its barest outlines here is just one of a great many tales that make up the novel. In words echoing the vision of Nick Carraway at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Joanne Gass has summed up this strand of *Underworld*’s intricate fabric in a succinctly memorable way:

Like Nick Carraway, we still believe in the promise of the American frontier where we can remake ourselves in whatever image we choose. ... We also practice a blissful ignorance of the consequences of our frontier brinkmanship. DeLillo’s cautionary tale reminds us that the price of our progress is high indeed. We still look out across our American landscape and see opportunities; we do not see ourselves as part of the landscape; we see it as a commodity. And, if we have ruined the landscape, we move into cyberspace—our isolation from nature is complete. We continue to plow forward recklessly, gobbling up the natural resources, leaving behind a wasteland of refuse, a wasteland to which we turn a blind eye even as we pick through that garbage, collecting the memorabilia, trying to make sense of our past.¹⁰

When *Underworld* was first published in 1997, it featured on its cover a picture that four years later would come to seem eerily prophetic of the overwhelming disaster of 9/11. In the foreground of the black-and-white

9 *Don DeLillo’s Underworld: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2002): 44.

10 “In the Nick of Time: DeLillo’s Nick Shay, Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway, and the Myth of the American Adam,” in Dewey: 128-129.

photograph is the silhouette of a church steeple with a cross on top, while the background is taken up by the two tall towers of the World Trade Center, with a bird in flight closing in on the nearest building. Less spectacularly, but no doubt more consciously on the author's part, the novel itself may seem today prophetic of our contemporary concern with human waste, nuclear and otherwise, after Tjernobyl and Naples and Fukushima. While works like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* are dystopian post-apocalyptic visions of what might lie ahead in a more or less distant future, DeLillo's novel is a more dispassionate pre-apocalyptic analysis of many of the most important implications of our current failure to salvage Planet Earth. The insidiousness of the subversion of nature that he chronicles in *Underworld* is largely due to its quotidian ubiquity, as people adjust and conform and exploit the waste that seems to have taken on an unstoppable life of its own.

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