

THE TECHNOCRATIC MONKS: ART, DEFENSE SYSTEMS, AND LAPSED CATHOLICS IN DON DELILLO'S *UNDERWORLD*

ALEXANDRU BUDAC

West University of Timișoara

Abstract: *A kaleidoscopic narrative encompassing all of Don DeLillo's recurrent motifs – sport games and war games, paranoia and secret codes, obsessed collectors of secular relics, religious rituals superseded by consumerism, dysfunctional relationships – , Underworld (1997) is at least as relevant today as it was in the late '90s. My paper centers upon land art and desert lore as tropes meant to convey loneliness and the feeling that we have become a mere abstract audience in the political theatre, but it also takes into consideration the main protagonist's Jesuit education.*

Keywords: *Catholicism, Don DeLillo, Italian Americans, nuclear war, postmodern art, Underworld*

1. Introduction: A strong belief in big numbers

Generally considered as Don DeLillo's masterpiece, *Underworld* (1997) is a summa comprising his favorite topics, those specific to his early works and those he has been approaching in a more minimalistic, low-key manner after the September 11 attacks: the American cult for sporting events, the media saturated culture, nuclear angst, paranoia, political cabals, the capital flows, the whole catastrophic specter a human mind can conceive, the quest for personal redemption through art. What singles *Underworld* out among Don DeLillo's books is not its historical acumen and its encyclopedic ambition, but rather the fact that, in this novel, more than anywhere else, DeLillo follows in the steps of Walt Whitman, as writer Rachel Kushner phrased it, by addressing his fiction to the people of the future (Kushner 2015: ix). This kaleidoscopic, disrupted postmodern saga about life in the United States during the Cold War from 1951 to the early 1990s might seem today not necessarily prophetic or prescient, but rather morally accurate. DeLillo's aesthetic takes advantage on the military-industrial complex, the media culture, the way humans living in big cities reshape their environment in order to probe how modern-day life affects their emotional balance and distorts their consciousness. Joseph Tabbi (1995: 174) notices that DeLillo acomodates "the collapse of distinctions between nature and technology"and that "the material world becomes, in his fiction, the concrete material and outward form of everyday thought."

Underworld is a novel about solitude in an interconnected world and about anxieties which are even more pervasive now than they used to be almost thirty years ago. What makes *Underworld* exceptional is neither its politics – actually DeLillo "never became a political novelist" (Cowart 2008:154) –, nor its paranoid

framing (Thomas Pynchon is still the best at that). Its vibes, both funereal when it comes to the corporate culture, and uplifting when human bonding through sports fandoms and parental love comes into focus, are fueled by small talk, petty misunderstandings, private jokes, unexpected time arcs which bring together small objects – a treasured baseball or the comfortable sole of a running shoe –, ancient children games adapted to the New York streets. All these are conjured up only to get lost immediately in a world obsessed with big things: big business, big projects, big crowds, big landfills, big communication networks, big planes and airports, and even bigger bombs. The technocrats of *Underworld* replace the faith and religious rituals with a strong belief in mathematical systems and obsessive compulsive disorders of the bureaucratic kind. One might say that they are number fetishists:

Numbers on a large enough scale may well come to substitute for an idea of God, and in relation to such a sea change we may fear an addictive compulsion to believe only in the numbers, whose combinations are capable of infinite modulation. (Fletcher 2012: 390)

The commitment to statistics, mathematical models, and bleeding edge technology in every aspect of human life renders ethical issues redundant, because a high degree of abstractization disconnects one's perception from the real state of things. While assessing – in his conversation with the philosopher Nick Bostrom – our general inability to evaluate future risks and the consequences of our actions in the long term, Sam Harris (2021: 324) notes that “people are not able to locate the moral injury”, if the model regarding future actions for a better life on our planet is too hypothetical or utopian. We tend to react better to moral issues, like the suffering of our peers, when we recognize them in a way that makes possible a straightforward and compassionate analogy with our own lives. “As we scale the problem, people care less.” (idem: 322). In *Underworld*, Don DeLillo's belief in the redemptive force of artistic creativity and his reevaluation of some Catholic precepts in a secular context mend this fracture between the cold technocratic thinking and affectivity. Even so, one must take notice that “DeLillo's literary Catholicism is all stained glass: beautiful artifice, ornamentation in place of lived belief.” (Ripatrzone 2020: 26)

2. The trickster and the land artist

The insidious consequences of action at a distance which renders one's tasks, the human relationships, and even the possibility of total annihilation more and more abstract troubles Matt Shay, whose work for a secret facility called The Pocket, hidden “somewhere under the gypsum hills of southern New Mexico” (DeLillo 2015: 401), consists in evaluating the risks of a nuclear accident:

There were people here who weren't sure whether they were doing weapons work. They were involved in exploratory research and didn't know exactly what happened to their findings, their simulations, the results they discovered or predicted. This is one of the underlying themes of the systems business, where all the work connects at levels and geographic points far removed from the desk toil and lab projects of the researchers. (DeLillo 2015: 401)

Lost in a white desert, where even animals bleached themselves to escape predators in that “sea-bottomed world”, Matt Shay, his face “pressed to a computer

screen” (DeLillo 2015: 402), tries to understand how his colleagues, “the bombheads” (idem: 403, 404), can be fully dedicated to their work and yet indifferent to the consequences of the weapons of technology. Matt reminisces about his childhood years – those first years after his father left to buy a pack of Lucky Strikes, never to return – when his mother took him to Loew’s Paradise, where he liked to immerse himself in the Italian décor. There were paintings with gilded frames, statues, marble busts, and angels on pediments, but most of all there was the glowing light of the projector, so soothing an experience that he would not have been surprised to see his father’s ghost summoned up in the semidarkness. (idem: 408) This used to be for Matt Shay the most genuine spiritual experience:

He climbed to seats near the ceiling, where stars twinkled and moved. The whole sky moved across the ceiling, stars and constellations and misty blue clouds. His mother wanted him to be an altar boy when he was old enough but this was more tremendous than church. (DeLillo 2015: 407)

As an adult, the former moviegoer and former chess prodigy delves in the numbers pouring out of his computer screen, overwhelmed by uncontrollable emotions every time he hears the sonic boom of military aircrafts flying at low altitudes across the desert, “and then the afterclap rolling off the mountains, like they were blowing out a seam in the world.” (408) He came to this place, the Pocket, to seek self-knowledge, yet he ends up stoned and paranoid at parties, driving erratically among the dunes, the names of people and places floating “deeper into the white parts of the map, where he would try to find a clue to his future.” (422) The desert, which is both a landscape and a state of mind, “features in nearly all of Don DeLillo’s novels as an ‘end zone’ of meaning.” (Tanner 2000: 203)

This estrangement from one’s daily activity, this living in denial is in stark contrast to Albert Bronzini’s dualistic conviction - that no matter what physicists say, it is we who imbue time with meaning (Bronzini is a science teacher and Matt Shay’s chess mentor, a benign character in *Underworld*):

There is a balance, a kind of standoff between the time continuum and the human entity, our frail bundle of soma and psyche. We eventually succumb to time, it’s true, but time depends on us. [...] Never mind the time theorists, the cesium devices that measure life and death of the smallest silvery trillionth of a second. He thought that we were the only crucial clocks, our minds and bodies, way stations for the distribution of time. Think about it, Einstein, my fellow Albert. (DeLillo 2015: 235)

This is an assessment of things by someone endowed with a charitable nature, the Italian American teacher, a “redemptive figure” in *Underworld*, who dedicates himself to helping others. (Giaino 2011: 135-136) Bronzini’s line of thought echoes in a subtle, secular way Saint Augustine’s meditations on time from Book XI of his *Confessions*. The bishop of Hippo argues that we deceive ourselves by trying to measure time. We speak of a “long time” or a “short time” when we refer to the past or the future, but this is just a matter of subjective perception, because the former has passed and one has to rely on memory, whereas the latter does not yet exist, it is related to our still unfulfilled expectations. So, we are always aware of periods of time from the present moment when we speak and think, but the present has no duration and our habitual use of words – that is, the past, present, and future tense – is rather inaccurate. (Augustine 1961: 264-269)

However, he proves that we do measure time, because, when he recites a psalm or reads a book, he continuously pays attention to the words already spoken and confined to memory, while anticipating the parts still to be recited. “It is in my own mind, then, that I measure time.” (idem: 275-278) Reciting the psalm makes him aware of the way small parts relate to the whole and serves him well in extrapolating the private reading to “the narrative of a person’s life, in which the parts are individual actions, or the narrative of a period of history, in which the parts are individual lives. Life is a text, whose living is its reading.” (Stock 1998: 239) Augustine’s rationale is sound from a Christian perspective, where he contrasts human life with God’s eternity. Conversely, for the characters of *Underworld*, subjective time perception is deeply affected by statistics, news, loops in Home Video systems, repressed traumas, addictions, deadlines, anxious expectations, selfishness. As a consequence, the small parts of their lives seem not to add up from their point of view, but the fragmented stories cohere unexpectedly in the larger frame of events that DeLillo designs for each of them.

For the most part, the dominant voice in *Underworld* is Nick Shay’s, Matt’s older brother, afflicted by the unsolved disappearance of their father, Jimmy Constanza, and haunted by a crime committed in his teens, namely the killing of the waiter and drug addict George Manza with a sawed off shotgun. Was it truly an accident or a death wish? Harold Bloom (2019: 411) states that “until *Underworld*, DeLillo’s characters are curious blends of personalities and ideograms.” Usually, DeLillo provides obsessive compulsive disorders to the characters who are morally dubious and control freaks, such as the Vietnam veteran and lone gunman Glen Sely in *Running Dog* (1978), the ex-CIA operative Win Everett in *Libra* (1988), the FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and Sister Alma Edgar, the charitable Catholic nun who wears latex gloves when she meets the sick and poor from Bronx in *Underworld*. Nick Shay does not abstract himself into an ideogram of fear and control, not even to the degree that his brother Matt takes on the aseptic whiteness of the desert. Nick is free as few of DeLillo’s male protagonists are. Paul Giaimo (2011: 131-132) astutely describes him as an “Italian American trickster”, a petty gangster’s apprentice in his teens, called *scucciament*’ by his boss (DeLillo 2015: 695) – in dialect, from *scocciare*, to irritate, to annoy – but also a storyteller in his adulthood, able to imbue his life with significance while narrating it. (Giaimo 2011: 131)

After he gets out of the juvenile correction facility in Staatsburg, Nick Shay is sent to a Jesuit extension program at Fordham University – the university DeLillo graduated from – where his case comes to the attention of the “black-suited and roman-collared” (DeLillo 2015: 538) Father Andrew Paulus. He kindly – yet in all priestly seriousness – sermonizes Nick:

One of the things we want to do here is to produce serious men. What sort of phenomenon is this? Not so easy to say. Someone, in the end, who develops a certain depth, a spacious quality, say, that’s a form of respect for other ways of thinking and believing. Let us unnarrows the basic human tubing. And let us help a young man toward an ethical strength that makes him decisive, that shows him precisely who he is, Shay, and how he is meant to address the world. (DeLillo 2015: 538)

Their dialogue, rich in ethical paradoxes, has been an object of critical interest ever since the first edition of the book. Father Paulus explains to his pupil the Thomistic notion of velleity, “volition at its lowest ebb”, that is one person’s

proclivity not enough known and honed by herself or himself that cannot strengthen a character. “Intensity makes for moral accomplishment. [...] A sense of purpose.” (idem: 539) The Jesuit priest proves that Nick is not able to name the parts of his own shoes – from “the sole” and “the heel” and “the tongue” onward the language becomes arcane indeed (“the cuff”, “the quarter”, “the welt”, “the vamp”, etc.) – because he does not know how to look around him, and he does not know this because he does not master the right words. (540-541) Father Paulus wants this young man with anger issues to convert his violent drives into moral fiber, so he teaches him Thomas Aquinas’ concept of “natural reason” and Aristotle’s categories by exemplification. (Giaino 2011: 145-146) Thomas Aquinas holds that human beings are naturally inclined to seek the truth and desire the good. Although the whole universe is governed by God’s “eternal law”, not fully accessible to us, the thirteenth-century theologian maintains that human beings can freely participate in it through the “natural law”, that is through their reason and virtuous acts meant to forestall unnatural behavior. (Kerr 2009: 75-78) Father Paulus seizes the opportunity to ingrain these teachings in his Italian-American pupil:

Sometimes I think the education we dispense is better suited to a fifty-year-old who feels he missed the point the first time around. Too many abstract ideas. Eternal verities left and right. You’d be better served looking at your shoe and naming the parts. You in particular, Shay, coming from the place you come from. (DeLillo 2015: 540)

Nevertheless, in his fifties, Nick Shay is an executive for a waste management company, a faithless sacerdotal reader of human history in dunes made of human residue, a rationalist among “cosmologists of waste” (DeLillo 2015: 88), another technocrat. Don DeLillo shrewdly reveals the relation between the Jesuit educational system – the emphasis on rigour, discipline, methodology, and the dangerously induced feeling that, once accepted by the Society of Jesus, one should count oneself among the elect and must put the order’s interests before anything else – and the way elites are trained in our corporate world. If there is still a trace of the Latin mass in Nick’s view of the world, a sense of transcendental experience, it should be sought after in Nick’s – and by extension in DeLillo’s – faith in language, as Amy Hungerford (2006: 344-347) argues.

Nick Shay’s work uncannily relates to the artistic visions of Klara Sax, who has not always been a land artist. Back in the early ’50s, when she was married to Albert Bronzini, Matt Shay’s good-natured chess teacher, she used to be an aspiring painter in search of her own style, but opened her painting room to receive Nick instead - only seventeen, a teen trickster. In “this intimacy tinged with incestuous estrangement”, she reaches a “kind of erotic disruption” (Boxall 2006: 208-209) that will help her mature as an artist. One might say that, despite the generation gap, Klara and Nick had a brief affair, yet he describes their passionate meeting as “Just an occurrence, a thing in two episodes, a few hours only [...]” (DeLillo 2015: 72), another past experience measured in units of subjective time. When Nick Shay broods on their first encounter, at the beginning of the novel set in 1992, he is fifty-seven years old and she is seventy-two and an accomplished artist, a celebrity surrounded by reporters and student apprentices. Klara’s ambitious project consists of turning an aircraft boneyard into a work of art, a landscape painting, using all the available strategic bombers. For Klara Sax, the B-52 stratofortress is a synecdoche of a war that did not take place in the end and a

source of assurance that borders on aesthetic rapture when she evokes their prowling in the sky:

War scared me all right but those lights were a complex sensation. Those planes on permanent alert, ever present you know, sweeping the Soviet borders, and I remember sitting out there rocking lightly at anchor in some deserted cove and feeling a sense of awe, a child's sleepy feeling of mystery and beauty. I think this is power. I think if you maintain a force in the world that comes into people's sleep, you are exercising a meaningful power. (DeLillo 2015: 75-76)

She cherishes nose art – unit insignia, mascots and cartoons, and most of all the pin-ups with long legs and apotropaic function, the closed world of young men at war, a world “with its particular omens and symbols”. (idem: 77) Klara Sax entitles her project *Long Tall Sally*, after the girl in the famous song, painted on a B-52, which operated during the Vietnam War.

What Klara really talks about is the creative means of turning waste into art in the same way that Nick finds religious impulses in the bureaucracy involved with waste – especially nuclear waste – management. Tony Tanner (2000: 144) states that these moments when “a configuration of ordinary things suddenly takes on an extra glow of meaning” are what passes for secular epiphanies in Don DeLillo's fiction. Tanner stresses that “epiphanies have to be caused rather than insisted on, and *Underworld* suffers somewhat from this failing.” (ibid.). He might be right, but the British critic refers to the most evident of the epiphanies, to those that take place near landfills, in the desert, on the abandoned nuclear test sites, whereas I think that it is the small epiphanies that sustain the novel's finesse. When Nick Shay sees Klara Sax for the first time in forty years, she has an injured foot, a sprained ankle “wrapped in a tan elastic brace”, and “one white running shoe” on the good one. (DeLillo 2015: 67) Considering how long it took for Father Paulus' lesson to come to fruition, one might say this is Nick's private epiphany. But we, the readers, do not know this yet.

Sports games and fan crowds have always been the object of DeLillo's fascinated interest. The playing field strategies enhance his analogies between mass entertainment and the possibility of obliteration at an unprecedented scale, such as the rich, albeit technical, verbiage of a football training camp that the protagonist translates into the language of thermonuclear war in *End Zone* (1972) or “the Shot Heard Round the World” (DeLillo 2015: 669). This is the home run that makes the Giants victorious against the Dodgers at the New York Polo Grounds on October 3, 1951, which takes place at the same time with a major Soviet atomic test in *Underworld*. But sports and sportsmanship also sustain the writer's sane and tender meditations on the human body. Sports have never been a topos in Western literature and, since the Greek poet Pindar, not many a writer has tried to reproduce in language the dynamic of human bodies clashing competitively in the arena. In DeLillo's case, perhaps the best example would be *Amazons* (1980), a funny, bawdy memoir of Cleo Birdwell, the fictitious first female player to be accepted by the National Hockey League, a novel DeLillo renegades and which has not been reprinted since the 1980s, at the author's request. Nevertheless, DeLillo's fascination with healthy, athletic bodies does not reside solely in aesthetics or erotic longing.

Another novel, *Running Dog*, concerns the possible existence in a private collection of a pornographic film involving Hitler and a few prominent Nazi officials during the last days of The Third Reich. The hunt for this improbable

piece of erotica that nobody has actually seen ripples through the black market and puts in motion art dealers, corrupted collectors from the U.S. Senate, mafia bosses, sleazy traders in the adult movie industry, and two female journalists from the radical *Running Dog* magazine, who seize the opportunity to write the investigative report of their career. The involvement of the agent and Vietnam War veteran Glen Selvy brings a covert paramilitary organization – the Radial Matrix – into this muddy business that actually turns up murderous from its very beginning. Earl Mudger, former CIA operative in Saigon and the mastermind of the Radial Matrix, wants Glen Selvy, one of his best men back in the war days, who does not always work in the interest of his team, dead. Mudger sends his emissaries – two Vietnamese hitmen he brought back home with him– in pursuit. At their first encounter, Selvy – who gives a new meaning to the “running dog” in the title – seems to have the upper hand, but when the hunters and their game arrive at an abandoned Radial Matrix training base in the west Texan desert, the otherwise skilled agent makes a quite suicidal mistake and ends up dead. The only hitman left alive decapitates him in order to bring a trophy to Earl Mudger. Thus, when Selvy’s acquaintance, Levi Backwater, a desert hermit also connected to the secret activities of the Radial Matrix, wants to perform a Tibetan rite for the dead man, as they had mutually agreed on before the final confrontation, he has not the deceased’s mandatory strand of hair to fulfill it. Tom LeClair underscores the way DeLillo correlates Selvy’s emotional cold detachment and conditioned military training to the objectification and commodification of the body in pornography – because pornography “is the most obvious effect of a culture’s denying the whole body” – and the main theme of *Running Dog*, namely Hitler’s immortality (and the immortality of all the evils he epitomizes) on footage, despite the fact that his body has never been found. (LeClair 1987: 172-173)

3. Conclusion. The whole body

Unlike Glen Selvy and other ill-fated male characters in Don DeLillo’s fiction, the lapsed Catholic Nick Shay finds his immanent redemption. He has the ability to develop coping strategies in order to deal with his father’s disappearance, his criminal past, his wife’s infidelity – and his own cheating on his wife, Marian –, the way others refer to his ethnicity, his problematic job and so on. Earl Mudger, one of the villains in *Running Dog*, while talking about his illegal activities in Vietnam with the journalist Moll Robbins, notices that “there’s a neat correlation between the complexity of the hardware and the lack of genuine attachments. Devices make everyone pliant. There’s a general sponginess, a lack of conviction.” (DeLillo 1989: 91).

Nick Shay’s personality is somewhat elusive, but it is never spongy. And he is not a man who lacks convictions. When one looks at the contemporary world through his eyes, one cannot miss the fact that, for him, technological transgressions are transgressions against the body. His arrival at the Museum of Misshapens, a necropolis of victims (infants mostly) of radiations in Kazakhstan (DeLillo 2015: 799-801), alongside Brian Glassic, his colleague – and his wife’s lover – is strong and sinister proof of that. Don DeLillo, a monist who does not believe that man was created in the image of God, makes clear by the way his writing underlines the importance of human bonding that destroying the environment and mutilating the body are horrendous acts of secular profanation.

Maybe this is why Nick's gaze is longing, yet not detached, cynical or concupiscent. For example, when he looks at Marian, his wife, he can see her from many perspectives at the same time:

She wore beat-up jeans and an old tank top that drooped in front, the kind of woman who grows into her beauty, I think, who becomes beautiful over time and then one day you see it, sort of suddenly and all together – it becomes a local scandal of surprise and comment. (DeLillo 2015: 114)

Even when his thinking makes use of the inanimate objects and the images of mass consumerism – clothes, brands of cosmetic products, and furniture – the words he chooses do not separate the appearance from personality. And when he decides to visit Klara Sax in the desert, the mind and the landscape merge in the same feeling:

Let's just say the desert is an impulse. I'd decided in a flash to switch planes and get a car and hit the back roads. There is something about old times that's satisfied by spontaneity. The quicker you decide, the more fully you discharge the debt to memory. I wanted to see her again and feel something and say something, a few words, not too many, and then head back into the windy distance. It was all distance. (DeLillo 2015: 63-64)

Of the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and charity – the second one still has some promising ring to it. Or, at least, Nick Shay makes us believe it has.

References

- Saint Augustine. 1961. *Confessions*. Translated with an Introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin. London: Penguin Books.
- Bloom, Harold. 2019. *The American Canon: Literary Genius from Emerson to Pynchon*. Edited by David Mikics. New York: Library of America.
- Boxall, Peter. 2006. *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (published in the Taylor & Francis e-library). New York, Abington: Routledge.
- Cowart, David. 2008. "DeLillo and the Power of Language" in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Duvall, John N. (ed.). Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press,
- DeLillo, Don (under the pen name Cleo Birdwell). 1981 (1980). *Amazons: An Intimate Memoir by the First Woman Ever to Play in the National Hockey League*. New York: Berkley Books, pp. 151-165.
- DeLillo, Don. 1989 (1978). *Running Dog* (reprint). New York: Random House.
- DeLillo, Don. 2004 (1972). *End Zone*. London: Picador.
- DeLillo, Don. 2011 (1988). *Libra*. New York: Penguin Books.
- DeLillo, Don. 2015 (1997). *Underworld*. New York: Picador.
- Fletcher, Angus. 2012. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. With a Foreword by Harold Bloom and a new Afterward by the author. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Giaimo, Paul. 2011. *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Fore of a Writer's Work*. Santa Barbara, Oxford: Praeger.
- Harris, Sam. 2021. "Will We Destroy the Future? A Conversation with Nick Bostrom" in *Making Sense: Conversations on Consciousness, Morality and the Future of Humanity*. London: Penguin Random House, pp. 319-351.

- Hungerford, Amy. 2006. "Don DeLillo's Latin Mass" in *Contemporary Literature* 47 (3). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 343-380.
- Kerr, Fergus. 2009. *Thomas Aquinas: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kushner, Rachel. 2015. "Introduction" to Don DeLillo. *Underworld*. New York: Picador, pp. vii-xiii.
- LeClair, Tom. 1987. *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Ripatrzone, Nick. 2020. *Longing for an Absent God: Faith and Doubt in Great American Fiction*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Stock, Brian. 1998 (1996). *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Tabbi, Joseph. 1995. *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Tanner, Tony. 2000. *The American Mystery: American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo*. Foreword by Edward Said. Introduction by Ian F. A. Bell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.