

## ANALYSIS

*Underworld* (1997)

Don DeLillo

(1936- )

“Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) comes close to being an all-inclusive novel for the Nineties. It starts on October 3, 1951, with the shot heard round the world. Bobby Thomson’s home run in the ninth inning that gave the New York Giants the victory over the Brooklyn Dodgers in the pennant playoff. The ball Thomson hit becomes perhaps the most famous baseball in history, and the way it moves through America and touches a multitude of people forms the spine of DeLillo’s book. He traverses vast distances, but so does that single shot, that ball, that day, that event, making it a day people remember the way they recall where they were when John F. Kennedy was shot. The two shots, at some point, become interchangeable, one killing the President, the other killing the Dodgers and their fans’ hopes. In one sequence, in fact, some people distantly touched by the Thomson shot watch the Zagruder tape, speeded up, slow-motioned, played at regular speed in which Kennedy’s head is blown apart, seemingly from the front (which fits the conspiracy theory). Similarly, Thomson’s shot is played and replayed at different speeds in people’s minds, as baseball becomes an insistent emblem of larger American life.

Yet a baseball and a shot are not the sole metaphors DeLillo hangs *Underworld* on—another is waste, or, simply garbage. Garbage is everywhere; it appears to be the means by which our society survives. Entire civilizations are constructed on how they responded to garbage disposal, and no civilization more than America depends on waste disposal. Floating through the novel, as it did through the waterways of the world, is a garbage-laden barge of New York waste, turned away at every port and somehow indicative of how consumerism had led to waste-ism. Garbage is linked, of course, to excrement, each being what is forced out, an emblem of how a society turns matter into waste, substance into filth.

By way of narrative process with baseball and waste matter as his twin metaphors, DeLillo has continued the Mega-Novel. *Underworld* fits the model; it is both spatially and temporally adventurous, with time shifts as well as geographical changes. The novel roams the country, in different time zones, in differing years, and by the end it roams the world, in an epilogue about nuclear bombs being used in Kazakhstan to blow up the world’s nuclear waste. If there were a third emblem in the novel, it would be nuclear power, its actuality and its potential. On the day Thomson hit his historical homer, the Soviets exploded a nuclear device. But the bomb, which broke the American monopoly on nuclear power, had to take second place to the demise of the Dodgers and the Giants’ victory. In a way, the threading of the nuclear threat through the novel, culminating in the Epilogue, fits well into the Mega-Novel dimensions of *Underworld*: nuclear potential suggests vast space, countries warring in the heavens, and the Mega-Novel is nothing if not spatial, vast, oceanic, with no possibility of completion or resolution.

But the novel is far more than a free flowing, interrupted, often skewed narrative. There are brilliant set pieces, all continuous with DeLillo’s ability to find emblematic scenes that capture the odd ‘underworld’ aspects of American life. Klara Sax, connected to the main characters by a kind of string theory, has organized a crew which paints World War Two planes that have been decommissioned by the Air Force and given to her for refurbishment. Deep in the desert, she works to bring something inorganic and rusting back to life—to give the planes some of the grandeur they once had, and to remind the viewer that the planes, now dead on the ground, were once saviors of the American dream. DeLillo recreates this bizarre scene without sentimentality or even nostalgia, but with a hard-edged wit: that the woman, slightly off balance and not a little obsessive, yet has a grand vision. And that vision is one of the country, not to let brilliant metals decline into rust, not to make things part of a throwaway culture, not to permit everything to decline into waste. The theme of refurbishment of the old and useless is part of the waste theme; only here it is to delay waste, deep in a desert area where possibly no one cares except Klara and her motley crew.

In a later scene, which mirrors this one, DeLillo moves his main figure, Nick Shay to Kazakhstan, described as a forlorn place, a desert, deep into nowhere, like Klara Sax's location. In Kazakhstan, the 'waste' is more sinister throwaway, nuclear matter, and it is imported from all over the world by an organization called Tchaika (seagull, ironically recalling Chekhov), a capitalistic venture in the new Russia. Once the nuclear waste is organized, it is destroyed, seemingly, by nuclear blasts, although the implication is that even more waste is created. The blasts are underground, but as DeLillo demonstrated in *White Noise*, toxic fumes have already transformed towns and villages into horror stories of disfigured babies and children. Here, waste not only overtakes civilization it destroys as much as weapons themselves do.

In the earliest segments, DeLillo presents a different kind of scene, one that is balletic, graceful, and witty, recalling to some degree the choreography of Jerome Robbins in *West Side Story*. Instead of gangs dancing their way toward the audience, DeLillo has a group of young black kids running to the turnstiles of the Polo Grounds, hoping to gain free entrance by jumping the turnstiles. While many try, only a few will get through, and Cotter Martin is one of them. He is the key figure, since once he is positioned in the stands, he grabs the ball Bobby Thomson has hit to win the pennant for the Giants. The ball, having become one of the most prized of collectibles, is secured by an inner-city kid, whose father—one of the few stereotypical figures in DeLillo—steals the ball and sells it for drinking money. The sneaking into the ballpark, the maneuvering for a seat, the struggle for the ball, the chase by a white man into Harlem, the father's theft of the baseball—all these activities come as the consequence of a legendary event, one that grows in the American mind and in the meta-narrative of the novel itself.

The seemingly skewed individual scenes gain strength because, with typical DeLillo indirection, they link up with the major lines, about waste, the making of a legend, the weirdness of American life, the psychodrama being played out in unlikely locations, in activities which enable people to go on who otherwise might not. We recognize that the sense of America lies in individual lives, not in a sum total. DeLillo has caught the Nineties, angular, bifocaled, subcultured, divisible, lacking center or core, caught in a drift that neither fervent religion, nor morality, nor discipline, nor prosperity can salvage. There is the whiff of death, as expected when a country is ending, but DeLillo suggests the death starts much earlier, not in the Nineties, but in the Fifties, the time of seeming recovery.

One way to read the Thomson homer is of course as victory under extreme circumstances, but another way is to see it as defeat at the last moment, a monumental defeat especially for a Dodger team which late in the season had a 13½-game lead over the Giants, only to blow it. That the shot heard round the world came as the Soviets set off their own shot indicates, not triumph, but a world complicated beyond redemption. In brief, predictability vanishes, triumph and defeat are intertwined.

*Underworld* speaks of that 'other,' nether world, suggested by Sergei Eisenstein's silent film *Unterwelt*, whose footage was hidden away in an East Berlin vault. Since it deals with people living in the shadows, the film is subversive of all normalizing behavior, another emblem for DeLillo of how life is being played out beneath America's bourgeois surface. *Unterwelt*, made in the thirties, satirizes totalitarian regimes, whether Stalin's or Hitler's; Eisenstein as a revered Russian showing the 'other' side of Stalinism, but using a German title to implicate a rising Hitler. Eisenstein's creatures, DeLillo writes, 'humped and scuttled through the shadows, hump-lurched with hands dragging, and you can always convince yourself it's okay to laugh at cripples and mutants if everybody else is laughing...' One thinks of Dolin's *Alexanderplatz, Berlin (1929)*, which, when made by Fassbinder for German television, was all shadows, underworld life, people slinking and scuttling through streets.

What connection, we ask, does this have to DeLillo's main line, especially to baseball? Like so many other scenes—one involving a wall of death and a graffiti artist, the doomed young craftsman Moonman—there is a skewed, marginal linkage to waste, to a game lost as well as won, to the suggestion of entropy, a running down, a transformation of consumerism into garbage-ism. DeLillo has always been noted for creating that 'other' world—the Reverend Moon traducing the sense of marriage by marrying at time thousands of couples, or a toxic cloud upsetting a comfortable bourgeois life in a college town, or a professor of Hitler studies at a university, an expert on German history, who does not speak German, or a vast conspiracy working to make Oswald the fall guy in the Kennedy assassination.

The Moonman, mentioned above, creates an art form out of graffiti on a wall commemorating young lives ended abruptly. Here, too, is waste, only here preserved in a memorial on an inner city wall, not to be forgotten as waste normally is. Moonman also does subway cars, not to desecrate them, but to turn them into carefully painted art objects, dressing up an underworld into something transformed. As sixteen, Moonman--Ishmael Munoz—attempts to light up with neon paint what is gloomy and otherwise lost to death and burial. The wall is permitted, but his work on the subways is obviously illegal—and yet it follows another law, that of art transforming the world's dross, even resurrecting the dead.

Once again DeLillo has spread his network of skewed interests, so that Moonman is somehow a distant relative of Cotter Martin, another inner city boy who becomes alive when he grabs the son-to-be legendary ball. Klara-Cotter-Moonman, and a horde of others, are linked in that nether world DeLillo depicts as somehow more intense and emotionally crowded than the more mundane world lying above ground. He leads us into the new century, not with a straightforward story, but with dark possibilities.”

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions: 1980-2000*  
(Xlibris 2001) 467-71

“When *The New York Times* surveyed 124 writers and critics to determine the best work of American fiction during the last twenty-five years, Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* finished in second place with eleven votes. Only Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which received fifteen votes, ranked ahead of DeLillo’s massive 1997 novel. Almost a half-century of history is crammed into *Underworld*, and the constant interaction of the diverging plot lines with pop culture events and socio-political milestones adds to the piquant flavor of this rambling novel. *Underworld* starts with a famous 1951 baseball game, when Giant Bobby Thomson hits a game-winning home run, the so-called ‘shot heard ‘round the world.’

The book wraps up 827 pages later in cyberspace, where ‘everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyper-linked.... World without end, amen.’ DeLillo, for his part, steers clear of obvious links and hyperlinks in this massive work. Instead he jumps freely, and without warning, from vignette to vignette, character to character, decade to decade. DeLillo’s approach is essentially cinematic, based on masterfully conceiving and executing discrete scenes and making generous use of flashbacks. This large novel defies our expectations of linear narrative flow, and is instead built carefully, lovingly out of these isolated tableaux, each one possessing a drive and vitality of its own. DeLillo creates a unified whole through juxtaposition and contrast. To some extent, the chronology reverses the typical future-directed timeline of most fiction, and DeLillo himself has likened the structure of the book to the countdown to zero that precedes a missile or rocket launch.

Occasionally DeLillo will hold on to a setting and situation at length, as in the opening ballgame narrative, which unfolds leisurely over sixty pages, and involves a wide cast of characters. But more often DeLillo presents brief, potent interludes of only a few pages, which he sets up and delivers with a sure touch, and quickly abandons for the next stop on our itinerary. DeLillo is the master of discontinuity, and the moment you start to settle into the narrative flow is just when you can count on a change in scenery.

But the cinematic quality of DeLillo’s writing is especially evident in his dialogue. No modern writer constructs more engaging conversations than Don DeLillo, and one would need to look to the film industry (Quentin Tarantino comes to mind) to find someone in his league. It’s not just clever repartee—heaven knows we hear enough of that on TV in mind-numbing thirty minute and sixty minute chunks. Rather it’s DeLillo’s rare ability to capture that strange moment when two people are communicating, but really aren’t; when they are talking past each other, engaging in conversations that are almost simultaneous soliloquies. Yet DeLillo can also present oldfashioned descriptive writing of the highest order.

It may sound surprising, but my favorite passage in this book is several pages devoted to a description of the different components that make up a shoe. This section does little to advance the plot, but as you have probably picked up by now, this author is not overly concerned with pushing ahead a linear story line. Here DeLillo pauses from his other themes to demonstrate how a great writer can observe a wealth of details in something so banal that the rest of us would just ignore it. If I were picking assigned reading for creative

writing students, this account of how to look at a shoe would be toward the top of the syllabus. (Philip Roth offers us a similarly brilliant interlude on the construction of gloves in *American Pastoral*. If I could find a few more of these I would consider compiling a whole wardrobe anthology.)

However, no DeLillo novel would be complete without the opportunity for target practice, for satire and irony aimed at an appealing bulls-eye. This author is the expert at picking subjects that almost satirize themselves. Do you remember the Hitler Studies professor in *White Noise* who couldn't speak German? Well, we have more obvious targets in *Underworld*. DeLillo's technique is to take the matter and anti-matter of culture and force them together to see what happens. In *Underworld* we have J. Edgar Hoover (that name, once full of *sturm und drang*, slowly becoming consigned to the world of comedy) obsessed with a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. We have a former juvenile delinquent growing up to be a successful executive in the field of garbage. We have acres of decommissioned military aircraft taken over by a tribe of avant garde painters, who hope to transform bombers into works of art. DeLillo delights in sharp, ridiculous contrasts, and they have become a trademark of his books.

Yet I am more impressed by the moments when DeLillo abandons his irony and authorial distance, and enters deeply into the emotional heart of an interlude. In *Underworld* he presents a moving sub-plot involving a young abandoned girl trying to survive in the projects, and the social workers who hope to rescue her. This account is so raw and seemingly unfiltered, that it is hard to believe that it came from the pen of this quintessentially post-modern author.

Along the way DeLillo tosses in a bevy of real-life figures and historical events. In addition to J. Edgar Hoover and Bobby Thomson, we encounter Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Lenny Bruce, Toots Shor, the nuclear arms race, and an assortment of various other bits of contemporary history and popular culture. If *Underworld* were a shelf in your home, it would be covered with bric-a-brac, cheap mementos from past vacations, and a few important sentimental items almost hidden by the clutter.

*Underworld*, despite the claims made on its behalf, may not quite deserve enshrinement as the Great American Novel. I might even steer readers unfamiliar with this writer first to *White Noise* before urging them to tackle this big book. But if you are serious about taking the temperature of contemporary fiction you will eventually need to come to terms with *Underworld*. A lot of America has found its way into this massive work, and it is the author's most ambitious novel. Much like Bobby Thomson does at the start of *Underworld*, Don DeLillo has shown that he too is a Giant who can hit a home run that will long be heard 'round the world'."

Ted Gioia  
*The New Canon.com* (2014)

Michael Hollister (2015)