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SCENES FROM THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

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I want to start with two passages from H. G. Wells. The first is from *The Invisible Man* (1897). Here is Griffin, the Invisible Man himself, explaining the benefits of invisibility to his former classmate Kemp:

‘We have to consider all that invisibility means, all that it does not mean. It means little advantage for eavesdropping and so forth – one makes sounds. It’s of little help, a little help, perhaps – in housebreaking and so forth. Once you’ve caught me, you could easily imprison me. But on the other hand I am hard to catch. This invisibility, in fact, is only good in two cases: It’s useful in getting away, it’s useful in approaching. It’s particularly useful, therefore, in killing. I can walk round a man, whatever weapon he has, choose my point, strike as I like. Dodge as I like. Escape as I like. ... Not wanton killing, but a judicious slaying. The point is, they know there is an Invisible Man – as well as we know there is an Invisible Man. And that Invisible Man, Kemp, must now establish a Reign of Terror. Yes, no doubt it’s startling, but I mean it. A Reign of Terror.’ (124-5)

My next passage is from *The War in the Air* (1908). It describes the destruction of New York by the aerial bombardment of the German zeppelin fleet:

The City of New York was in the year of the German attack the largest, richest, and in many respects the most splendid and in some the wickedest city the world had ever seen. She was the supreme type of the City of the Scientific Commercial Age; she displayed its greatness, its power, its ruthless anarchic enterprise, and its social disorganization most strikingly and completely. She had long ousted London from her pride of place as the modern Babylon, she was the centre of the world’s finance, the world’s trade, and the world’s pleasure; and men likened her to the apocalyptic cities of the ancient prophets. She sat drinking up the wealth of a continent, as Rome once drank the wealth of the Mediterranean, and Babylon the wealth of the east. ...

For many generations New York had taken no heed of war, save as a thing that happened far away and affected prices and supplied the newspapers with exciting headlines and pictures. The New Yorkers felt perhaps even more certainly than the English had done that war in their own land was an impossible thing. In that they shared the delusion of all North America. They felt as secure as spectators at a bullfight; they risked their money perhaps on the result, but that was all. And such ideas of war as the common American possessed were derived from the limited, picturesque, adventurous war of the past. They saw war as they saw history, through an iridescent mist, deodorized, scented indeed, with all its essential cruelties tactfully hidden away. ...

And then, suddenly, into a world peacefully busied for the most part upon armaments and the perfection of explosives, war came; came the shock of realizing that guns were going off, that the masses of inflammable material all over the world were at last ablaze. ...

The City Hall and the Court-House, the Post Office, and a mass of buildings on the west side of Broadway, had been badly damaged, and the three former were a heap of blackened ruins. In the case of the first two the loss of life had not been considerable. But a great multitude of workers, including many girls and women, had been caught in the destruction of the Post Office, and a little army of volunteers with white badges entered behind the firemen, bringing out the often still living bodies, for the most part frightfully charred, and carrying them into the big Monson Building close at hand. Everywhere the busy firemen were directing their bright streams of water upon the smouldering masses: their hose lay about the square, and the long cordons of police held back the gathering hordes of people, chiefly from the East Side. (128-39)

In 1901, at the very beginning of the twentieth century, Wells published a work of prophecy, *Anticipations*. The passages I have just cited, by no means untypical of Wells, startlingly anticipate our own concerns: the invisible terrorist and the spectacular destruction of the imperial megalopolis - 'the centre of ... the world's trade', in Wells's eerily prescient formulation - symbolize the world we have inhabited since September 11 2001. We are not the first to inhabit such a world. While Niall Ferguson's position as tame intellectual for the Neocons, not to mention the conspicuous academic and financial success that inevitably

follows from that position, is one which I find troubling, nevertheless I do agree with at least one thing he has to say: it is the central contention of his book *Colossus* that America is (and has long been) an empire in denial of its own imperial status (Ferguson, 2004). It is my position here that what we are living through now is America's late-imperial decadent phase.

Theorists of inevitable imperial decline or degeneration have historically tended to be written off as interesting cranks (like Volney), phobic bigots (like Nordau), or cosmic misanthropes (like Spengler). It's not difficult to see why. Their sense of inevitable historical patterning, and even *in extremis* of cyclical history, sits uneasily with our own postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives – of which which we're all supposed to be in favour – not to mention the alleged post-Cold War, post-ideological 'End of History' phase our generation has been wrestling with for much of my professional life, which, when it isn't being presided over by charlatans like Samuel Huntington or Francis Fukuyama, seems to have Karl Popper's writings on *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies* as a philosophical basis. Now, Popper is brilliant, and extremely hard to argue against – particularly for a non-philosopher like me – and has surely been vindicated by much of the twentieth century when he writes in *The Open Society and its Enemies* that political ideology must be viewed as a branch of *aesthetic utopianism*, and that the 'out and out radicalism ... of the aestheticist's refusal to compromise' means that the utopian politician 'must eradicate the existing traditions. He must purify, purge, expel, banish, and kill.' (176). There's no question that very many utopian thinkers and writers – Swift, Malthus, Galton, Wells himself – have for these very reasons found themselves drawn inexorably towards genocide as the Final Solution to the problems of humanity. Towards the end of his life, Aldous Huxley, who knew more than most about utopias, looked back over the middle years of the twentieth century, and wrote:

the theoretical reduction of unmanageable multiplicity to comprehensible unity becomes the practical reduction of human diversity to subhuman uniformity, of freedom to servitude. In politics the equivalent of a fully developed scientific theory or philosophical system is a totalitarian dictatorship. In economics, the equivalent of a beautifully composed work of art is the smoothly running factory in which the workers are perfectly adjusted to the machines. The Will to Order can make tyrants out of those who merely aspire to clean up a mess. The beauty of tidiness is used as a justification for despotism. (31)

Better, surely, the messy contingency of postmodern non-systems than *this*.

And yet, reading Spengler, for one, I am struck by how modern he seems, particularly in his absolute and fundamental insistence on what we would now call cultural relativism: his theory of history, as he writes,

admits no privileged position to the Classical or the Western culture, as against the Cultures of India, Babylon, China, Egypt, the Arabs, Mexico – separate worlds of dynamic being which in point of position count for just as much in the general picture of history as the Classical, while frequently surpassing it in point of spiritual greatness and soaring power. (13)

So - what if they're on to something, these theorists of inevitable decline? Spengler posits an historical progression from *Culture* – an opening up of artistic and intellectual possibilities - to *Civilization* – an 'extensive' phase, in which culture is not susceptible of improvement, but merely of growth. 'Imperialism,' Spengler writes, 'is Civilization unadulterated', and 'is to be taken as the typical symbol of the end', characterized by 'petrifacts ... dead bodies, amorphous and dispirited masses of men, scrap-material from great history'. (28) As soon as cultures become civilizations, the seeds of their doom are planted. Once they become empires, they are always already on the slide.

Unquestionably, empires tend to be haunted or shadowed by visions of their inevitable downfall. It's no accident that one of the key intellectual documents of the early years of the modern British Empire should be Edward Gibbon's magisterial *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, its first volume published in the year of American independence, 1776, its last the year before the French Revolution, 1788. It is one of the great monitory texts, written only a generation after James Thomson and Thomas Arne, both patriotic Scots Unionists, had composed 'Rule Britannia' as the triumphant centrepiece to their royal masque *Alfred* (1840). Opening with a survey of the Roman Empire's territories at the height of its imperial expansion and power in the age of Augustus, Gibbon charts many hundreds of years of imperial dissolution, degeneration, and decadence in all its glorious detail.

Three years after Gibbon's last volume, and the other side of the French Revolution, C.-F. Volney published *The Ruins, or A Survey of the Revolution of Empires* (1791, translated into English in 1795), which is best described as a work of revolutionary orientalism. The idea for a systematic, theoretical study of inevitable imperial decline came to Volney as he travelled across the Middle East, writing *Travels Through Syria and Egypt in the Years 1783, 1784 and 1785* (1797):

I journeyed in the empire of the Ottomans [Volney writes in *The Ruins*] and traversed the provinces which formerly were the kingdoms of Egypt and of Syria. ... I wandered over the country, and examined the condition of the peasants: and no where perceiving ought but robbery and devastation, tyranny and wretchedness, my heart was oppressed with sorrow and indignation.

Every day I found in my route fields abandoned by the plough, villages deserted, and cities in ruins. Frequently I met with antique monuments; wrecks of temples, palaces, and fortifications; pillars, aqueducts, sepulchres. By these objects my thoughts were directed to past ages, and my mind absorbed in serious and profound meditation. (1-2)

Volney was to become an influential figure for English Romanticism, of course. *The Ruins* is one of the books Frankenstein's Monster reads as a part of his exemplary Enlightenment education. Percy Shelley was much influenced by his reading of Volney, and encapsulated the ideas and images of *The Ruins* in one of the central canonical poems of the English language, 'Ozymandias'. And I can't be the only person to have thought immediately of the 'vast and trunkless legs of stone' of the statue of 'Ozymandias, king of kings', the Pharaoh Rameses II, when I saw the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein, broken at the knees – though Bush and Blair should also be read this poem every day as a reminder of the vanity of imperial-oriental adventures:

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The tomb of Rameses II at Thebes is shaped like a male sphinx, and revolutionary orientalism of the kind I am discussing here has frequently taken an Egyptomaniac flavour. In 1871 Edward Bulwer-Lytton published *The Coming Race*. In that novel, Bulwer-Lytton's narrator travels through a form of Symmes Hole. Symmes Hole – named for John Cleves Symmes, the American writer who in 1818 (the same year that Shelley wrote 'Ozymandias') theorized that the Earth was hollow, with vast holes at the Poles leading to subterranean worlds beneath (Poe, Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs and L. Frank Baum were all at least fictive Symmesians, hollow earth theorists).¹ Here, underground, he discovers Humanity 2.0, the Vril-ya, a race of super-evolved winged Egyptians:

¹ See David Standish, *Hollow Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Da Cao, 2006).

But the face! it was that which inspired my awe and my terror. It was the face of a man, but yet of a type of man distinct from our known extant races. The nearest approach to it in outline and expression is the face of the sculptured sphinx – so regular in its calm, intellectual, mysterious beauty.
(160)

The Coming Race comes at the end of what was for Bulwer-Lytton a distinguished and lucrative career as a catastrophist and ‘Last of the Race’ novelist (the phrase is Fiona Stafford’s), beginning with *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and progressing through *Rienzi*, *The Last of the Roman Tribunes* (1835), *The Last of the Barons* (1841), and *Harold, The Last of the Saxons* (1848).² The narrator of *The Coming Race*, a chauvinistic American, recognizes that, because of their mastery of the combined elixir and superweapon Vril (after which Bovril is named – it is supercharged ‘Bovine Vril’!), the Vril-ya are ‘a race fatal to our own ... our inevitable destroyers’ (Bulwer-Lytton, 423, 435). Specifically, he has a dark vision of the complete destruction of *America*: ‘considering ... the pugnacious valour of my beloved countrymen, I believe that if the Vril-ya first appeared in free America ... my brave compatriots would show fight, and not a soul of them would be left in this life, to rally round the Stars and Stripes, at the end of a week.’ (416-17)

In that same year, 1871, saw the publication of General Sir George Tomkyns Chesney’s *The Battle of Dorking, or Reminiscences of a Volunteer* (1871). Tomkyns’s tale of a Britain completely unprepared for a sneaky German attack was hugely influential, elicited numerous fictional responses of varying hawkishness, and set the tone for half a century of paranoid British invasion fantasies, often fingering the Hun, which take us right up to the fifth-columnist, phoney war novels of the late-Edwardian period – *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *The Riddle of the Sands*.

Chesney’s fantasies of an imperial England under threat from powerful outside invaders brings us back to Wells, of course, as, in the 1890s, with British imperial expansion very near its zenith, but with ominous cracks beginning to show by way of the Boer war and the Boxer Rebellion, it was he who produced the most celebrated of all paranoid imperial invasion narratives, *The War of the Worlds* (1898). From there, it was just a decade to the more pressing concerns of *The War in the Air*, in which the rather abstract Martians had been replaced by the altogether more familiar Hun, as if to vindicate Chesney’s suspicions of a generation earlier. But it also carries us forward to *The Invisible Man*, as Griffin, the Invisible

² For Stafford’s study of Bulwer-Lytton, see Fiona J. Stafford, *The Last of the Race: The Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 261-88.

Man, is let loose in London, and holes up in Omnium, a department store on the Tottenham Court Road (I sometimes find myself wondering what Walter Benjamin would have made of that). Subsequently holed up at an inn in Iping, Griffin is initially taken for ‘an Anarchist in disguise, preparing explosives’ (22). The anarchist, the terrorist, the dynamitard, the Fenian, the invisible army of infiltrators from within – these figures roamed at large in the cultural imaginary of the fin-de-siècle and Edwardian periods. Everyone knows *The Secret Agent* (1906), of course, and Wells and Conrad were for some time friends, correspondents, and, if not collaborators exactly, then mutual influences.

But surrounding *The Invisible Man* and *The Secret Agent* is an economy of other texts of this kind. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Dynamiter* (1882), whose mad bomber, ‘Zero’, an archetypal Invisible Man or Man of the Crowd – nobody, anybody, everybody – vaporizes himself at the close in a botched dynamite explosion at a London railway station: the Unionist Scot Stevenson named Zero in ironic honour of Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, whose Clan na Gael Fenian organization were conducting the first modern terrorist bombing campaign, the ‘dynamite campaign’ of the 1880s, and who went under the *nom du guerre* of ‘Number One’. Tom Greer’s *The Modern Daedalus* (1885), has an Irish inventor discover the power of flight – like Bulwer-Lytton’s Vril-ya, though detachable wings: armed with these wings, a Fenian army bombs London into submission, thus securing Irish independence (I often wonder whether Joyce had read this novel). Coulson Kernahan’s *Captain Shannon* (1896) has as its protagonist a cross-dressing Irish anarchist, probably modelled on Oscar Wilde – Kernahan and Wilde were friends, Wilde was a vocal supporter of anarchist causes – who once again brings London to a standstill with an astonishingly bloody bombing campaign. London is, in fact, destroyed in acts of spectacular violence many hundreds of times in the fiction of the period – by Martian invasion, by plague (Guy Boothby’s *Pharos the Egyptian*, a tale of imperial revenge if ever there was one), by fire (Cutcliffe Hyne’s ‘London’s Danger’), by volcanic eruption (Grant Allen’s ‘The Thames Valley Catastrophe’), by the coming of a new ice age (Fred M. White’s ‘The Four White Days’), by flood (Richard Jefferies’s *After London*), by aerial bombardment (E. Douglas Fawcett’s *Hartmann the Anarchist, or the Doom of the Great City*). And by poison gas, in M. P. Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud* – whose protagonist, Adam Jeffson, on finding himself the last man alive, goes oriental, dresses as a Turkish sultan, grows an enormous forked beard, pierces his ears, and dedicates himself to burning all the cities of the world to ashes, starting with London and Constantinople. He is saved from universal catastrophe because he is at the North Pole at the time, where he

discovers a strange obelisk covered in mysterious writing in the middle of an unfrozen, circular lake.

In *The Time Machine* (1895), Wells's time traveller finds himself 800,000 years in the future, in a London which has become one of Volney's Ruins: all that remains of the city is a giant sphinx and a ruined museum. Towards the end of the book, he propels himself many years further into the future to witness the end of the world:

The horror of that great darkness came on me. ... Then like a red-hot bow in the sky appeared the edge of the sun. ... As I stood sick and confused I saw again the moving thing upon the shore – there was no mistake now that it was a moving thing – against the red water of the sea. It was a round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, it may be, bigger, and tentacles trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about. Then I felt I was fainting, but a terrible dread of lying helpless in that remote and awful twilight sustained me while I clambered upon the saddle. (65)

The German physicist Rudolph Clausius's invocation of the principle of entropy in his own formulation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics (1850), with its implication that, the solar system being a closed system, the eventual heat-death of the sun and the end of all life on earth was a scientific inevitability, had a profound effect on later Victorian thinking, with images of a dying sun occurring in, for example, the works of Dickens, of Conrad, and here in *The Time Machine*. Images of Dead London, to repeat, abound in late Victorian and Edwardian fiction, and it's worth remembering that what we have here at the very close of *The Time Machine* is an image of the end of *London*, for while the Time Traveller moves forward through vast gulfs of time, he stays completely still in space, never leaving his study – the whole novel, thus, never leaves London. The same can be said for another great fin-de-siècle apocalyptic text, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow tells his tale under a metaphorically dying sun:

And at last, in its curved and impeceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white turned to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men. (4)

Like Wells's Time Traveller, Marlow's tale of colonial atrocity in the Congo never leaves London, for the tale is told aboard a bark on the Thames, the centre of 'a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth' (4). As Marlow famously says of London: 'And this also ...

has been one of the dark places of the earth' (5). Dickens at the beginning of *Bleak House* also images forth an infinite London, stretching forward in time to the very ends of time, with its snowflakes 'gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun' – but also stretching back to the dawn of time, 'as if the waters had but recently retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.'(1)

1922, a high watermark for high Modernism, saw Joyce's *Ulysses* image forth Dublin in familiar terms, as symbolic universal *omphalos*, yes, the divine navel and centre-point of the earth, from whence springs all creation – 'lord Talbot de Malahide, a gentleman much in favour with our ascendancy party. He proposed to set up there a national fertilizing farm to be named OMPHALOS with an obelisk hewn and erected after the fashion of Egypt' (383)³. But Joyce's Dublin is also a destroyed city at the end of an apocalyptic war:

Dublin's burning! Dublin's burning! On fire, on fire!
(Brimstone fires spring up. Dense clouds roll past. Heavy Gatling guns boom. Pandemonium. Troops deploy. Gallop of hoofs. Artillery. Hoarse commands. Bells clang. Backers shout. Drunkards bawl. Whores screech. Foghorns hoot. Cries of valour. Shrieks of dying. Pikes clash on cuirasses. Thieves rob the slain. Birds of prey, winging from the sea, rising from marshlands, swooping from eyries, hover screaming, gannets, cormorants, vultures, goshawks, climbing woodcocks, peregrines, merlins, blackgrouse, sea eagles, gulls, albatrosses, barnacle geese. The midnight sun is darkened. The earth trembles. The dead of Dublin from Prospect and Mount Jerome in white sheepskin overcoats and black goatfell cloaks arise and appear to many. A chasm opens with a noiseless yawn. (555)

As with so many of the examples we have seen of these late-Victorian and Modernist dead cities (in Dickens, in Wells, in Conrad), Joyce's apocalyptic Dublin carries with it distinctly colonial or imperial overtones, as there seems little doubt that this is in part a

³ The word *omphalos* gained particular cultural currency (or notoriety) in the nineteenth century in the wake of Philip Henry Gosse's *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (London: John Van Voorst, 1857). Gosse was a naturalist, but also an avowed member of the Plymouth Brethren (as recorded in his son Edmund's classic 1907 memoir *Father and Son*). *Omphalos* was his doomed (and much ridiculed) attempt to reconcile his Biblical literalism with his professional knowledge of the radical implications of nineteenth-century geology, through his distinction between *prochronic* (pre-creation) and *diachronic* (post-creation) time. Thus, Adam was created with a navel (hence *Omphalos*), just as God created the Earth with a complete fossil record – the navel and the petrifacts (along with hundreds of other examples) are evidence purely of prochronic time, and in no way contradict the literal truth of *Genesis*. For a sympathetic modern scientific study of *Omphalos*, see Stephen Jay Gould, 'Adam's Navel', in *The Flamingo's Smile* (1985; New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), pp. 99-113.

fictional rendering of recent events in Irish history. Indeed, the journey from the viceregal residence in the Phoenix Park which affords the novel the opportunity for a panoramic overview of Dublin streets and architecture, would have been made for the last time in 1922, with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty which led to the foundation of the Irish Free State on December 6 1922.

1922 also saw the publication of the greatest of all aesthetic monuments to Dead London, Eliot's *The Waste Land*. All I want to do is to quote a few lines from it here, by way of introducing my final section:

What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (77)

But no longer unreal. Real, say Slovenian Žižek and Terry Eagleton (Žižek, 2002, Eagleton, 2005). Hyper-real, say others. Ground Zero may be our 21st-century *omphalos*, but it can hardly constitute an invisibility, whatever Jonathan Safran Foer might write in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (which I'll look at shortly). Can there *be* a more overdetermined site? Can it be any more discursively visible? The first thing to say here about 9/11 is to reiterate the point made by the great urban theorist Mike Davis, which is that no-one can honestly claim surprise. The event had been rehearsed so many times in the 1990s alone. Readers will certainly all be familiar with the growing number of representations of the 9/11 tragedy in recent years, in a number of high-profile novels and, of late, films.⁴ What may be forgotten in the wake of recent history is the ways in which the events of September 11 2001 were uncannily prefigured by a number of (even higher profile) Hollywood blockbusters of the 1990s, which featured the spectacular destruction of symbolic American architecture as central showcase effects: *Independence Day* (1994) (in which the White House, the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty are destroyed), *Godzilla* (1998) (Chrysler Building, Pan-Am/Met Life Building), *Armageddon* (1998) (Chrysler Building), *Deep Impact* (1998) (Chrysler Building). These scenes provided a template and a hermeneutic for the inevitable cinematic character of the 9/11 attacks themselves, as Davis

⁴ Novels include Frederic Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2005), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision* (2005), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006). Films – of varying genres – include *Fahrenheit 9/11*, dir. Michael Moore (2004), *United 93*, dir. Paul Greengrass (2006), *World Trade Center*, dir. Oliver Stone (2006).

suggests: 'the attacks of New York and Washington D.C. were organized as epic horror cinema with meticulous attention to *mise-en-scène*. The hijacked planes were aimed to impact precisely at the vulnerable border between fantasy and reality. ... George W. Bush, who has a bigger studio, meanwhile responds to Osama Bin Laden as one *auteur* to another, with his own fiery wide-angle hyperboles' (5). Musing on the fate of the World Trade Center as very much the greatest spectacle (the greatest *spectacular*) of the century so far, Jean Baudrillard famously writes:

As for what should be built in their place, the problem is insoluble. Quite simply because one can imagine nothing equivalent that would be worth destroying – that would be worthy of being destroyed. The Twin Towers were worth destroying. One cannot say the same of many architectural works. Most things are not even worth destroying or sacrificing. Only works of prestige deserve this, for it is an honour. (46)

No other event this century has been so analysed, theorised, described, written about, represented. It is, in fact, almost ridiculously easy to theorise, as if our theorists had been anticipating the event which would give terrible form to their grim, dire or apocalyptic abstractions. Said and Orientalism; Debord and Baudrillard, the spectacle and the simulacrum; Girard, violence and the sacred. It is as if it had already been written for us – and *by* some of us, as Davis, Baudrillard, Žižek, Eagleton and numerous others have themselves contributed directly to 9/11 writing.

Omphalos. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Foer's wise child Oskar Schell, whose father dies on 9/11, plays a game of word-association with his analyst Dr Fein:

He said, 'Family.' I said, 'Family.' He said, 'I'm sorry, I don't think I explained this well. I'll say a word, and you tell me the first thing you think of.' I said, 'You said "family" and I thought of family.' He said, 'But let's try not to use the same word. OK?' 'OK. I mean, yeah.' 'Family.' 'Heavy petting.' 'Heavy petting?' 'It's when a man rubs a woman's VJ with his fingers. Right?' 'Yes, that's right. OK. There are no wrong answers. How about safety?' 'How about it?' 'OK.' 'Yeah.' 'Bellybutton.' 'Bellybutton?' 'Bellybutton.' 'I can't think of anything but bellybutton.' 'Give it a try. Bellybutton.' 'Bellybutton doesn't make me think of anything.' 'Dig deep.' 'In my bellybutton?' 'In your brain, Oskar.' 'Uh.' 'Bellybutton. Bellybutton.' 'Stomach anus?' 'Good.' 'Bad.' 'No, I meant, "Good. You did good." 'I did *well*.' 'Well.' 'Water.' 'Celebrate.' 'Ruff,

ruff.’ ‘Was that a bark?’ ‘Anyway.’ ‘Ok. Great.’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Dirty.’
‘Bellybutton.’ ‘Uncomfortable.’ ‘Extremely.’ ‘Yellow.’ ‘The colour of a
yellow person’s bellybutton.’ (202)

Omphalos, bellybutton, stomach anus, singularity, Ground Zero: the novel redoubles these images or emblems for the no-place – the invisibility that is also the centre of the world, the Symmes Hole. Oskar’s grandfather, in a letter written in 1963 to his son, Oscar’s father, who disappears into the void of Ground Zero, writes:

Only a few months into our marriage, we started marking off areas in the apartment as ‘Nothing Places’, in which one could be assured of complete privacy, we agreed that we would never look at the marked-off zones, that they would be nonexistent territories in the apartment in which one could temporarily cease to exist ... it was a rule that you never would look at that rectangle of space, it didn’t exist, and while you were in it, neither did you ... (109-10)

And then there’s the mythical Sixth Borough of New York, an island just off the coast of Manhattan, which Oskar’s father tells him about. The Sixth Borough began to drift away from New York, a millimetre at a time. When it becomes apparent that it is about to drift away altogether, Central Park, which used to lie in the middle of the Sixth Borough, is torn up, lifted by gigantic hooks, and placed in the middle of Manhattan instead:

‘And what about the Sixth Borough?’ [Oskar asks his father.] ‘What do you mean?’ ‘What happened to it?’ ‘Well, there’s a gigantic hole in the middle of it, where Central Park used to be. As the island moves across the planet, it acts like a frame, displaying what lies beneath it.’ ‘Where is it now?’
‘Antarctica.’ (222)

I want to close, not with 9/11 exactly, but with the Twin Towers, and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, in which they are a recurring symbol. It is of course *the* great novel of waste, and waste is DeLillo’s authentic subject, here and elsewhere. Brian Glassic, one of a number of the novel’s characters who work for the Whiz Co waste management company, finds himself at the Fresh Kills landfill site on Staten Island:

He imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza – only this one 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 Centre were visible in

the distance and he sensed a poetic balance between that 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. (184)

Brian imagines, entombed in the heart of the pyramid, a condom – ‘think of his multitudinous spermlings with their history of high family foreheads, stranded in a Ramses body bag and rendered snug in the deep down waste’ – as his colleague Nick Shay describes his own recycling habits – ‘It was like preparing a pharaoh for his own death and burial.’ (185, 119). In 1974, Klara Sax watches the Twin Towers being built – ‘She saw it almost everywhere she went’ (372) – while, earlier in the novel but later in her life, she moves to the desert to create art installations from decommissioned nuclear bombers. In 1951, at the baseball game which opens the novel, J. Edgar Hoover is fascinated by a torn magazine page which floats down onto his shoulder, a reproduction of Breugel’s ‘The Triumph of Death’:

a painting crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead – a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin. Edgar has never seen a painting quite like this. ... He looks at the flaring sky in the deep distance out beyond the headlands on the left-hand page – Death everywhere, Conflagration in many places, Terror universal, the crows, the ravens in silent glide, the raven perched on the white nag’s rump, black and white forever, and he thinks of a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh test site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes, out where the enemy lives in long coats and fur caps, speaking that old weighted language of their, liturgical and grave. What secret history are they writing? (41, 50)

Nick Shay explains his business, the business of waste management: ‘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) And here we are, then, at the end, down the Symmes Hole and into the Plutonian depths, the underworld of subterranean pyramid-builders.

DeLillo has this year returned to the twin towers for his 9/11 novel, *Falling Man*. Near the beginning of that novel, a character receives a postcard, posted before September 11 but delivered after. It is from a friend in Rome, and the image is a reproduction of the cover of the first edition of one of P. B. Shelley’s works of revolutionary orientalism – not ‘Ozymandias’ this time but, even more appropriately, *The Revolt of Islam* (8).

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