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Apocalyptic Nostalgia in the Prologue of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

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Throughout his career, one of Don DeLillo's most prevalent themes has been the nature of post-apocalyptic awareness. In *White Noise* (1985), the most unsettling aspect of the Airborne Toxic Event that menaces the Gladney family is not its physical existence as a billowing cloud of deadly chemicals, but the manner in which, once the cloud is gone, the deadliness persists – invisibly, genetically, virally. A similar mood informs DeLillo's treatment of 9/11 in his most recent novel, *Falling Man* (2007), in which the collapse of the World Trade Center is depicted as less of a discrete event in history than as an ongoing condition embedded in the structure of the survivors' sense of memory, identity, and temporality. DeLillo's characters repeatedly grapple with the existential contradiction which Frank Kermode has called the "immanent apocalypse" and which Jean Baudrillard has identified as a nuclear "implosion." DeLillo's fictions commonly depict the post-apocalyptic sensibility Kermode and Baudrillard describe; a historical transition from the conventional kind of apocalypse – the end that will happen – to the postmodern variety – the end that is always already happening. DeLillo's most concise illustration of this condition is arguably the prologue to his 1997 opus, *Underworld*. Originally published in 1993 in *Harper's* as "Pafko at the Wall," this 50-page vignette tells the story of the famous Dodgers-Giants game in 1951, the game concluded by Bobby Thompson's three-run, game-winning, pennant-deciding homer that came to be known as "The Shot Heard 'Round the World." DeLillo evokes and manipulates the nostalgia inherent in this collective memory to dramatize the manner in which apocalypticism enters into the structure of Cold War perception. According to DeLillo's conceit in the prologue, the crack of Thompson's bat announces the postmodernizing of the apocalyptic imagination in the American psyche. This narrative device allows DeLillo to interrogate the apocalyptic shift from various points of view, as well as to induct the reader into a sense of his or her own situatedness within this historical reinscription.

The prologue to *Underworld* is arguably one of the most celebrated pieces of American writing from the last two decades. The story of Thompson's homer is a great

one and DeLillo tells it with breathless, Whitmanesque ebullience. He swoops his movie camera around with fluidity and precision, closing in tightly on a single face, easily shifting his focus to take in the entire stadium, then zooming into another tight close-up. The effect is exhilarating but never disorienting. Probably, we already know the general arc of the story as soon as we figure that we are at The Polo Grounds for a Giants-Dodgers game in 1951. Furthermore, we already know many of the characters in the story; Jackie Gleason, Frank Sinatra, J. Edgar Hoover, Toots Shor, Jackie Robinson, and Willie Mays, for instance. These are all characters with whom we are already intimately familiar; and just as the game replays itself with no surprises for the reader, so these characters are all true to type. Gleason is loudmouthed and boozy, Sinatra is snide and reserved, Hoover is paranoid and sexually repressed; the reader's expectations are rewarded in amusing and eloquent ways. The narrator speaks directly to the audience from the first sentence, "He speaks in your voice, American." Regardless of the reader's national identity, he or she is swept willy-nilly into the community of this narrative. The mood of the whole chapter is one of an intimate bond between the narrator and the reader of promises made and kept and of the nostalgic reverence for a past that we all share.

There is no other stretch of writing in all DeLillo's thirteen other novels as accommodating to the reader's assumptions as this prologue. DeLillo has recreated significant historical events and personages before, most memorably in *Libra*, in which he restages the Kennedy assassination. In the prologue to *Mao II*, DeLillo presents a Moonie mass-wedding at Yankee stadium and uses many of the same narrative techniques which we observe in the *Underworld* prologue. But what is unique to the *Underworld* prologue is the lack of complication between the audience and the telling. In these other examples, DeLillo is working very deliberately to unsettle our assumptions, whether they are lone nut assumptions or vast conspiracy assumptions, and confound our easy sympathies, be they partial to the Moonies on the field or the baffled parents in the stands. The prologue of *Underworld* invites us to step out of these snares of complexity and bask in the sepia-toned warmth of a vanished past. The openness of this invitation is almost certainly what accounts for the popularity of this piece. It is this sheen of nostalgia that is most distinctly in contrast with the tone characteristic of DeLillo's ten previous novels. In *White Noise*, Murray Siskind says, "Nostalgia is a product of

dissatisfaction and rage. It's a settling of grievances between the present and the past. The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence" (258). Although we need to be wary of allowing DeLillo's characters to speak for DeLillo himself, Murray's theory of the violent underside of nostalgia seems an appropriate warning for DeLillo's readers as they find themselves seduced into this prologue's bright sentences.

Of course, a distinctly sinister tone invades the story through the character of J. Edgar Hoover. It is through Hoover that we first learn of the Soviet atomic test performed in Kazakhstan on the same day as this ballgame, and it is from Hoover's fascination with a Bruegel painting that the preface receives its title, "The Triumph of Death." The inclusion of Hoover's secret knowledge and his dark imagination presents a challenge to the sunlit world and the celebratory tone of the story as a whole. Baseball and nuclear war, nostalgia and apocalypse, jubilation and dread, have become forced into a blatant juxtaposition which doesn't equate one with the other exactly, but which does jolt the imagination into considering structural parallels within these surprising dyads. It is as if DeLillo is intentionally drawing out our capacity for nostalgia and simplicity for the purpose of making us confront our weakness for these values in a new light, the nuclear light of an explosion that is spatially distant but temporally contemporaneous. DeLillo builds this panorama of prelapsarian America precisely to illustrate his vision of the manner in which this innocence has become infected and compromised. The critical moment of the crack of the bat and the flight of the ball signifies both the birth and the death of memory. Even as the homerun ball hurtles out of history and into legend, so does the very possibility of legend seem to become complicated by association with the ambiguity and perspectivism of history. The overall arc of this prologue is that it elicits a nostalgic reading for the purpose of announcing the death of nostalgia.

Hoover's counter-narrative of apocalyptic fascination progresses throughout the prologue in two encounters which indicate the nature in which the vision of the end of the world enters into the world of the baseball game. The first incident is the news of the Soviet bomb, whispered into Hoover's ear. The news "works into [Hoover], changes him physically as he stands there" (24). The news of the bomb is not a discrete fact among other facts; it constitutes an ecological reorganization of identity and perception. Looking at the Polo Grounds crowd under the influence of the secret intelligence, Hoover

intuits a new kind of community. “All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction” (28). The possibility of an apocalyptic showdown with a nuclear enemy is enough to bring the apocalypse into the physical and perceptual moment.

This impression is enhanced and made explicit during the central moment of the story; the moment of the homerun. Instead of watching the game, Hoover’s attention has become intently involved in a pair of magazine pages he has snatched from the confetti of litter falling down from the upper deck; a reproduction of the painting which gives the preface its title, “The Triumph of Death.” It is as if Hoover’s imagination had plucked these pages from the sky as an apocalyptic analogy to the frenzied celebration of the Giants’ victory thundering through Hoover’s physical environment. “He stands in the aisle and they are all around him cheering and he has the pages in his face. The painting has an instancy he finds striking” (50). The narrative voice, looking over Hoover’s shoulder, shares the same enthusiasm in itemizing Bruegel’s grotesque images that it has previously lavished on the baseball crowd. When Hoover refocuses his attention from the vision of the painting – “the tumbrel filled with skulls ... the naked man pursued by dogs ... the gaunt dog nibbling the baby in the dead woman’s arms” (50) – to the public world of the celebrating crowd – “Those who run around the bases calling out the score. The ones who are so excited they won’t sleep tonight. Those whose team has lost” (51) – his vision, and the reader’s, is colored with shadow images of the apocalypse. Watching a man drop from the outfield wall, Hoover perceives “something apparitional in the moment and it chills and excites him and sends his hand into his pocket to touch the bleak pages hidden there” (55). In a way, a bomb has fallen on the scene, even if nobody but Hoover and the reader knows it. Hoover’s two secrets, the news of the Soviet Bomb and his hidden Bruegel print, allow him a private prophetic thrill which is located halfway between the worlds of myth and history. The crowd will discover the new conditions of American existence in an hour when Truman announces the bomb test, or the next morning when they read the twin coverage of the game and the bomb in October 4’s *New York Times*, but we know what they don’t know yet, that their innocence has been nuked in the very stroke of its giddiest triumph.

The kind of apocalypse they have been subjected to is that unique variety of apocalypse characteristic of the Cold War. Of course, Cold War panic had been in full swing for several years by 1951. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg had just been sentenced to death that summer for their alleged complicity in the Soviets' theft of American atomic intelligence. But with their second nuclear test on October 3, 1951, the Soviet Union seemed to confirm that the stakes were all-or-nothing; that what hung in the balance was not national sovereignty or economic policy, but instantaneous global annihilation. The experience of a nuclear bomb victim, as everyone learned from Hiroshima, is that one second you are standing in the sunshine, and the next second all that's left of you is your shadow. The nuclear apocalypse is not something that will happen, but rather something that enters the structure of the present moment itself, infecting perception with an eschatological tint. Frank Kermode famously described this viral sort of apocalypse in 1966. "No longer imminent, the End is immanent. So that it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import; the whole of history, and the progress of the individual life, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent" (25). For someone living in the throes of an immanent apocalypse, everything becomes charged with a kind of radioactive numinosity. The Universal Doom enters into everything, as it does for Hoover as he lets his perception drift into the superimposition of the image of the apocalypse and the sight of the American moment physically surrounding him. The Doom even infiltrates our own thoughts and longings, our own nostalgic reveries and all of our thrice-told legends of Giants.

As is well known, DeLillo's inspiration to write this story came neither from the fact of the game itself nor from the fact of the bomb-test, but from the image of the front page of the *New York Times* from October 4 which ran both headlines – the game and the bomb – in parallel columns. DeLillo describes his experience of finding "two headlines, symmetrically matched. It was like fitting together two pieces of pottery" (Gerald, 119). The frisson in the parallelism between the bomb and the game, this typographic conflation of the apocalyptic and the quotidian, is representative, DeLillo suggests, of the nature of the immanent apocalypse. When the End of time infiltrates the phenomenological structure of lived experience, all information takes on an equivalent, ultimate significance; eschatological immanence confounds values of fact and myth, the

likely and the unthinkable, the world of the living and the world of the living dead. It is this sense of convergence which DeLillo interrogates in this preface; this sense in which the nature of knowledge is fundamentally altered not merely by the fact of the bomb, but by the manner in which this fact appears in the mediated environment as one component in a complex and interrelated system of inscrutable, even paradoxical, lines of force. Red Smith sounds presciently DeLillian in his contemporary recap of the game. “Now it is done. Now the story ends. And there is no way to tell it. The art of fiction is dead. Reality has strangled invention. Only the utterly impossible, the inexpressibly fantastic, can ever be plausible again” (126). The sportswriter ushers us out of the world of easy values and into the hyper-world of the quotidian apocalypse.

The turning point in DeLillo’s story is obviously the moment of the Thompson homer. By briefly considering the four major points of view through which this moment is perceived, we can attend to the manner in which DeLillo dramatizes the dynamics of the transition from a prelapsarian America to a post-apocalyptic one. Clearly, we have already seen Hoover, who doesn’t attend to the homerun hit at all, but whose secret intelligence conveys its dark implications to the rest of the narrative. Upon first receiving word of the Soviet test during the game, Hoover had contemplated that the threat of Universal Doom was something all Americans had “in common;” Americans are a populace held together by the unseen ties of a coming apocalypse. But after the epochal homerun is scored, and after Hoover has encountered the Bruegel print, his impression of the apocalypse mutates from a future possibility that brings people together under the umbrella of doom into a present actuality that freezes each individual in some uniquely horrific posture of damnation. Hoover’s apocalyptic vision is initially collective and imminent, but as history turns over into a new era, Hoover’s imagination reconfigures this vision as one that is individual and immanent. DeLillo artfully employs the conceit of the “Shot Heard ‘Round the World” as the hinge between the conventional and the viral modes of apocalypse.

Indeed, the end of the game does constitute a decisive shift in the eschatological structure of the moment. The end of any game is a finalizing of a history: the moment when the possible closes down into the over-and-done-with. The crowd of sports fans makes a sudden transition; people who had their hopes and fears focused on some point

in the future become people whose futures have already been decided for them. They go from being people living in open time to people living beyond the end, drifting in the wake of an apocalypse that has come and gone. DeLillo's depictions of the crowd as they watch the game emphasize the unity of the baseball audience. The crowd is a kind of meta-person, made up of the similarly directed attention of its constituent members. The narrator tells us that "Longing on a large scale is what makes history" (11). In order for history to have a future, it is suggested, the engine of longing must be continuously pushing on to a collectively-aspired condition. Throughout the game, the magical influence of the crowd's collective longing does its work of constituting both the shape of the future and of the crowd itself as a coherent entity. "They are waiting to be carried on the sound of the rally chant and rhythmic handclap, the set forms and repetitions. This is the power they keep in reserve for the right time. It is the thing that will make something happen, change the structure of the game and get them flying to their feet" (19). The crowd's magic is focused reciprocally both on bonding them together as a crowd and on a future-directed collective intentionality. The rushing of the fans out onto the field after the winning homerun represents an implosion both of the identity of the crowd and of the future-directed longing. Immediately after the game is lost and won, there's nothing to band together and wait for, there's only an explosion of panicky bacchanalianism. DeLillo's descriptions of the crowd as a single character with a single eye and a single voice disintegrate into surreal images of individuals running the bases, honking car horns, speaking in tongues, and otherwise trying to express their astonishment. This imploded crowd lends itself to Hoover's Bruegel-induced reveries because they are a picture of people who live beyond the history they have assembled to long for. Apocalypse has become an individual crisis rather than a collective possibility.

We see a similar transition happen on a more intimate scale through the experiences of Cotter Martin. We first meet Cotter through the first sentence of the prologue; he is the one who "speaks in your voice, American" (11). Baseball has accomplished its nostalgic-pastoral job of overriding disparities in race and class to create a national brotherhood, a corporate voice, into which Cotter and the reader are appropriated. When Cotter, who turns out to be a poor black kid, finds himself befriended by Bill Waterson, a white businessman, race and class do not seem to be a

factor at all in the dynamics of their relationship. Such trivial differences are overwhelmed by Cotter and Bill's more fundamental identity as Giants fans. While the game is going on, Cotter is so existentially fused with the outcome of the game that it promises to determine his own personal identity as either a winner or a loser. If the Giants don't win, Cotter will have to find "the twisty compensation in this business of ... being a loser" (33). But as soon as that homerun ball drops into the stands, "The game is way behind him. The crowd can have the game. He's after the baseball now and there's no time to ask himself why" (45). Cotter has cut himself loose from his concern with the game and the crowd. Both are irrelevant under the new dispensation. In the post-apocalyptic landscape, it's every man for himself. Correspondingly, the Jim-&-Huck liaison between Cotter and Bill turns ugly, first in their hand-to-hand struggle for the ball under a row of seats, and then out in the street, where the issue of their social and economic inequality becomes an explicit issue for the first time. Cotter knows he can't run away from Bill, because the very sight of a white adult chasing a black kid generates its own conclusion in the minds of onlookers. Cotter's only hope is to get to Harlem, where he will have the "home field" advantage. The new conditions of individuation which follow the end of the game abolish the bonds of national unity and throw both Cotter and Bill onto a self-consciousness of their social identities. Now that the game is over, the whole world is the game. Cotter discovers that the new contest is in his own skin and his own neighborhood.

DeLillo's grotesque portrait of Jackie Gleason suggests that the waxing omnipresence of television is part and parcel of his Americans' immanent apocalypticism. In an interview, DeLillo has suggested that some of the historical significance he discovers in the 1951 ballgame comes from the fact that it is one of the last major media events that predated widespread television reportage. "Today, events like [the Giants-Dodgers game] are shown on television over and over again, until they lose their power only hours later" (Burger). DeLillo addresses this cultural transition by his inclusion of Gleason in the ballgame crowd, two days, we are told, before "The Honeymooners" is scheduled to premier. Throughout the game, the fawning crowd of admirers treats Gleason as if he were a human television set; they want him to do his famous catchphrases, they want him to repeat his zingers over and over again. At the

moment of the homerun, Gleason is vomiting, horribly, graphically, expansively. Like Hoover and Cotter, his attention has become redirected from the game to his own personal crisis, and something similar has happened to Frank Sinatra, sitting next to him, who is so disgusted by Gleason's crapulence that he can't pay attention to the game. As a harbinger of the televisual world to come, Gleason's vomit represents the televisual tendency toward making everything visible, the emptying-out of secrecy and latency. His puking is described as somehow consistent with the rain of glossy magazine advertisements that falls around him from the upper-deck magazine-ripper; "The waste is liquidly smooth in the lingo of adland" (44). His gastric apocalypse is a reverse replay of all the hot dogs and beer he'd consumed during the game, a kind of disgusting commercial-in-reverse. The consumption urged by the free-floating advertisements find their echo in Gleason's post-consumption display, as if the circle between desiring and post-desiring had been flattened into a post-apocalyptic realm in which the waste-land is an immanent aspect of commodity-land.

If Gleason represents the televisual future, the moribund age of radio is personified in the figure of Russ Hodges, the voice of the Giants. It is Russ who initially brings apocalyptic language to bear on the game itself. He characterizes the game as "live-or-die," the culmination of "the pennant race that has brought the city to a strangulated rapture, an end-shudder requiring a German loan-word [possibly *Gottterdammerung*] to put across the mingling of pleasure and dread and suspense" (14-15). At the same time that he looks forward to the End, he is also the prologue's most nostalgic figure. His memories are constantly carrying him back, to the Dempsey-Willard fight in Indianapolis, his days in Charlotte calling games, to the last days of summer vacations past. Russ is self-conscious of this nostalgic vein in his mood; he notices that he has been "wistful and drifting and this is so damned odd, the mood he's been in all day, a tilting back, an old creaky easing back, as of a gray-haired man in a rocker" (25). The "easing back" into the past seems called out by Russ's prophetic intuition that "something big's in the works, something's building" (15). These two threads, of forward-looking apocalypticism and backward-looking nostalgia, come together at the moment when Russ screams his way into history. "Russ is shouting himself right out of his sore throat, out of every malady and pathology and complaint and

all the pangs of growing up and every memory that is not tender. He says '*The Giants win the pennant*' ... He can't stop shouting. There is nothing left of him but shout" (43). At the critical moment, the apocalyptic and nostalgic tendencies both implode into a single momentum of disembodiment. Russ has managed to refine himself out of existence, so it seems, by the force of his nostalgic-apocalyptic yearning. In the aftermath of the game, Russ's nostalgia is nostalgia for a future when people will talk about the ballgame that has just been played. "The fans at the Polo Grounds will be able to tell their grandchildren – they'll be gassy old men leaning into the next century" (60). The apocalyptic moment has fallen into the nostalgic mode; a grand narrative from a vanished past. Likewise, nostalgia has become millennial, directed toward an end-time populated by geezers with one foot in the 21st Century and one foot in the grave.

DeLillo seduces the reader with the promise of gratifying a pre-apocalyptic variety of nostalgia, only to leave us with a kind of nostalgia that is saturated with apocalyptic suggestions. He plays on our will to idealize a past when the apocalypse was safely located in the future as a possibility, as opposed to a present in which the End has become immanent in the structure of psycho-history as a subcutaneous dread. DeLillo offers such nostalgia as a delusory antidote to the Cold War condition Baudrillard identifies when he writes,

An explosion is always a promise, it *is* our hope: note how much ... the world waits for something to blow up, for destruction to announce itself and remove us from this unnameable panic, from this panic of deterrence that it exercises in the invisible form of the nuclear ... But this is precisely what will never happen. What will happen will never again be the explosion, but the implosion. No more energy in the spectacular and pathetic form – all the romanticism of the explosion, which has so much charm, being at the same time that of revolution – but the cold energy of the simulacrum and if its distillation in homeopathic doses in the cold systems of information (55).

DeLillo evokes his reader's nostalgic response to this epochal American narrative for the purpose of illustrating the impossibility of such nostalgia. In accordance with Murray Siskind's formulation, powerful nostalgia has brought us closer to violence. In the crack of Thompson's bat, DeLillo forces us to hear the echoes of the Kazakh ka-boom and all of its phenomenological fallout. In the convergence of these two phenomena, DeLillo

suggests the proliferation of other obscure convergences and a corresponding complexity in our categories of collective and personal memory and desire.

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