The Unmaking of History: Baseball, Cold War, and *Underworld*

KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK

> It is true that once the substitute Brooklyn pitcher, Ralph Branca, whose mere presence in the game seems not amenable to narrative explanation . . . released the ball, and once the fifth New York batter, Bobby Thomson, began his swing of the bat, a combination of a few special cases (mainly ballistic) of the general laws of motion with the National League ground rules on home runs suffices strictly to entail that Thomson hit a home run. It is hard, however, to envision the combination of conditions and laws that would strictly entail a decisive precondition of that home run: to wit, that Thomson decided to swing at Branca's pitch in the first place.
>
> —J. H. Hexter

> It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature.
>
> —Henry James

IN 1968 J. H. HEXTER APPROPRIATED THE NEW YORK GIANTS' MIRACULOUS 1951 National League pennant victory as a historical event through which he could explore several basic principles of historiography. The resulting article, "The Rhetoric of History," has since achieved classic status among postmodern historians whose work draws upon Hexter's conclusion that history is built not simply of facts but of narratives.[1] By arguing that the full communication of one's knowledge about history requires use of a nonscientific, and even metaphoric, language, as well as a rhetoric that owes much to storytelling, Hexter anticipated the reconsideration of the practice of historiography by poststructuralist theorists from Jacques Derrida to Linda Hutcheon. Far from positing the writing of history as a pseudoscientific, objective communication of facts and figures, Hexter instead uses the example of the Giants' win over the Brooklyn Dodgers to unearth the inevitably subjective impulses behind all historical study:

> The original question, "How did it come about that . . . ?", has become the more amorphous "Tell me (or let me find out) more about. . . ." The demand is no longer for further *explanation*. A reasonably full explanation is presumably already in hand. That explanation itself has led reader and writer of history alike to shift the ground of their interest. Because of it they have become aware that they have stumbled onto one of the great events in baseball history, the event that culminated in Bobby Thomson's home run—the equivalent (in its sphere) of the defeat of the Armada, the battle of Stalingrad, the Normandy landings. What they want under these circumstances is not more or fuller explanation; what they want is confrontation with the riches of the event itself, a sense of vicarious participation in a great happening, the satisfaction of understanding what those great moments were like for the ordinarily cool Russ Hodges, Giant radio announcer, who, as the ball arched from Thomson's bat into the stands, went berserk and screamed into the microphone, "The Giants win the pennant! *The Giants win the pennant!* THE GIANTS WIN THE PENNANT!" And what those moments were like for those who saw what he saw and for those who heard him. (42–43 italics Hexter's)

The best means by which one can evoke this "sense of vicarious participation" is, Hexter argues, narrative; only in telling stories about the past can the historiographer move beyond the facts and figures of the game's statistics to the announcer's hoarse screams, the maddening roar of the crowd, and the shower of paper raining down over the left-field wall.

Hexter's choice of the Shot Heard 'Round the World as the moment from which to build his inquiry into the historical effectivity of narrative should come as little surprise to readers of Don DeLillo. The 1992 publication of "Pafko at the Wall" produced much excited discussion among DeLillo's readers about the interrelationships of baseball and history. This novella brings its readers inside the Giants' 1951 pennant win by presenting the game from a number of different perspectives: that of Russ Hodges, of course, calling the game from the chaotic press box; but also that of Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Toots Shor, and J. Edgar Hoover, watching the game from Leo Durocher's box seats; and that of Cotter Martin, an African-American teenager watching illicitly (he has both skipped school and jumped the turnstile[2]) from the bleachers. From these

various perspectives we are able to piece together an understanding of the cultural value of this moment, of what DeLillo describes as "another kind of history," a memory with "protective power" (70). And thus, on first reading, it would appear that DeLillo's project in "Pafko" is precisely that which Hexter describes, a move from explanation to vicarious participation. But as John N. Duvall points out (292–95), the effect of the baseball game as DeLillo writes it is to steal focus from that much more looming event that takes place in the background, outside the consciousness of everyone present except Hoover: the second Soviet atomic test blast. And, in fact, the rest of the novel *Underworld*, of which "Pafko at the Wall" was mere prologue, provoked disappointment in a number of sport-literature critics when it turned out that the narrative in its entirety was not about baseball after all, but instead about the Cold War that the game had hidden.[3] Hexter's comparison then of Thomson's home run with "the defeat of the Armada, the battle of Stalingrad, the Normandy landings" highlights not simply the power that narratives of history might reveal, but also what their peculiar focus might leave out.

In this essay I will explore *Underworld*'s interplay between baseball and history, suggesting that the novel's relationships to both the game and the Cold War reveal a move beyond the self-reflexive logic of postmodernity—in which history is its writing—and into a new logic of unmaking. In this new logic history's textuality is called into question, as traces of the past are seen to conceal as much as they reveal about the workings of history; these traces must be dismantled in order for history to be understood. This logic of unmaking, I will further argue, produces a dramatically altered relationship between the individual and the mythic, a concept that once indicated the sacred, a higher truth, but now instead connotes an untruth—a shift that bears profound consequences for the conception of the self.

History, Mythology, Narrative

The interconnections of baseball and history have long surfaced in sports fiction, ranging from imaginative reconsiderations of historic incidents (as in W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*), to narratives that explore the interconnections of past and present (Kinsella's *Iowa Baseball Confederacy*; William Kennedy's *Ironweed*), to explorations

of the mythic underpinnings of accounts of both games and times past (Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*). Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* most explicitly takes on the relationship between baseball's overwhelming production of text—in the form of scorecards, statistics, game reports, league analyses, newspaper articles and columns, and so on—and the production of history itself. In this novel history does not merely exist or reside in textual form but is rather *brought into being* by text itself. Henry's role as "auditor" (26) for the UBA, as he quite cannily describes it to the B-girl he has brought home, extends from statistical record-keeping to the more explicitly historical work of keeping "a running journalization of the activity, posting of it all into permanent record books, and I help them with basic problems of burden distribution, remarshaling of assets, graphing fluctuations. Politics, too. Elections. Team captains. Club presidents. And every four years, the Association elects a Chancellor, and I have to keep an eye on that" (27). This work that Henry describes, maintaining the "official archives" (55) of the UBA—otherwise known as the Book[4]—reveals the way that written records create history, sliding as he does from numbers to texts to politics, with each seeming to lead automatically to the next. Henry takes obvious pleasure in pondering the interconnections of his records and the history that they create, teasing his friend Lou with his veiled insights:

> At 4:34 on a wet November afternoon, Lou Engel boarded a city bus and spilled water from his hat brim on a man's newspaper. Is that history?
>
> "I . . . I dunno," stammered Lou, reddening before the sudden distrustful scowl of the man with the newspaper. "I (wheeze) guess so."
>
> "Who's writing it down?" Henry demanded. (50)

Henry's causality here is clear—present actions become history by being written down. The writer alters worlds. Henry's texts ultimately produce political factions, religious rituals, infighting, death. Hexter's concern then with the "rhetoric of history" becomes crucial as the form that history takes will largely be determined by the manner in which it is recorded.

This concern resurfaces in very different form in *Underworld*; the differences between Coover's treatment of the production of history and DeLillo's reveal something of a paradigm shift in the post-

Cold War period. Echoing Hexter's title and coincident with the fall, 1997, release of *Underworld*, DeLillo produced a brief article entitled "The Power of History." This article works most plainly to illuminate the relationship, for DeLillo, between his novel's uses of history and its forays into the imagination. In the article DeLillo describes two contradictory senses of history's power with regard to narrative. The first is the power of history to draw the novelist in, to give him access to material larger than himself: "A fiction writer feels the nearly palpable lure of large events and it can make him want to enter the narrative." History can thus "reinvigorate the senses," giving the novelist a "subject of strong and absorbing proportions." On the other hand, history's power over narrative comes to be perceived as a trap, and one from which only the novelist's use of imaginative language can help the reader escape: "Language lives in everything it touches and can be an agent of redemption, the thing that delivers us, paradoxically, from history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs, its arrangement of stark pages, and that allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate." The novelist's rhetoric, far from *creating* history, instead helps the reader escape history.

A fundamental contradiction lingers then in DeLillo's dual conception of history as something that should be sought out and as something that must be escaped; history as inspiration and history as trap. In his essay DeLillo distinguishes two distinct kinds of history, kinds that may perhaps be understood as differences in historical medium:

> Newsreel footage of Bobby Thomson's home run resembles something of World War I vintage. But the shakier and fuzzier the picture, the more it lays a claim to permanence. And the voice of the announcer, Russ Hodges, who did the rapturous radio account of the game's final moments, is beautifully isolated in time—not subject to the debasing process of frantic repetition that exhausts a contemporary event before it has rounded into coherence.

History, here again created by the records baseball leaves behind, is for DeLillo at its purest, its most "permanent," when those records are least complete; historical significance here seems to vary inversely with picture quality. The problematic nature of history, history as trap, arises when the picture becomes too clear, when the historical event and its recorded traces become most identical.

These recorded traces are the "flat, thin, tight and relentless designs" from which the novelist hopes to deliver us—from history reified into photographic, or filmic, or otherwise concrete form.

DeLillo's concern with the damage that reification works upon history echoes Baudrillard in "History, a Retro Scenario": "Photography and cinema contributed in large part to the secularization of history, to fixing it in its visible, 'objective' form at the expense of the myths that once traversed it" (48). The previously mythical stature of history has been transformed by these technologies of ostensible preservation into something fixed, into DeLillo's "flat, thin, tight and relentless designs." But, in order to read this "secularization" as a genuine "expense," one must have a very specific understanding of the nature of the mythic. Myth functions here not as Barthes's ideological structure nor as Benjamin's potentially fascistic aura but rather as a narrative repository for the sacred, for the transhistorical. The secularizing force of visual media, in other words, by defusing history's myths, demotes it from the teleological to the momentary, from the universal to the quotidian. This transformation, according to Baudrillard (a judgment with which DeLillo seems to concur) bears great consequences for the novel: "The age of history, if one can call it that, is also the age of the novel. It is this *fabulous* character, the mythical energy of an event or of a narrative, that today seems to be increasingly lost" (47 italics Baudrillard's). That mythical energy is still clearly at work in Coover's *Universal Baseball Association*, and thus its loss cannot be easily read as a symptom of the fragmentation of the experimental postmodern novel. In fact the subterranean connections between mythology and Coover's metafictional strategies bear this out; as Deeanne Westbrook points out, "mythology" derives from two related roots, *mythos*, "word," and *logos*, "word" (5). Mythology may thus be thought of as words about words and so is always operating at the same metadiscursive level as metafiction. The loss of "mythical energy" in narrative then cannot be casually attributed to postmodernist experimentation or disaffection; at issue is a much deeper, later reassessment of myth, of history, and of narrative itself, a reassessment that lies at the heart of *Underworld*.

Returning then to my earlier suggestion that *Underworld* is, on the whole, not about baseball but rather about the history of the Cold War that begins in the background of the Giants' victory: this argument, although perhaps generally accurate, overlooks two important facts about the book. First, that the Cold War's history is

told not forward in time but backward, retracing a path from the post-Soviet 1990s to the Russian H-bomb tests in 1951. And second, that although this may not be a story about baseball, it is in fact a story about *a baseball*, the ball with which Bobby Thomson hit the Shot Heard 'Round the World. The novel's structural inversions reveal a need to free the narrative from the "objective" forms of a demythologized history. Similarly, a breakdown in baseball's own mythic nature—a mythicity that, as Deeanne Westbrook points out, is inherent in the game itself[5]—has similarly secularized it, fixing the game's meaning in its physical objects. These objects, from the piles of memorabilia in a New York basement collector's shop, to Marvin Lundy's replica of the Polo Grounds scoreboard, to the baseball itself, condense and reify the game's lore into something with exchange value rather than mythical value. Russ Hodges thinks of such a souvenir baseball as "a priceless thing somehow, a thing that seems to recapitulate the whole history of the game every time it is thrown or hit or touched" (26). This particular baseball does indeed retain some sentimental or emotional value for its owners, but that value degrades over its lifespan until it reaches Nick Shay, who claims that he "didn't buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it. It's not about Thomson hitting the homer. It's about Branca making the pitch. It's all about losing" (97). What history of the game still inheres in "the object" is a history of loss; its sentimental value has become inextricably entangled with—and, one might argue, degraded by—exchange value. This baseball is no longer priceless, as Russ Hodges would have thought, as it is repeatedly bought and sold; it is *not* thrown or hit, but rather removed from the game altogether.

If myth has been replaced by commerce, a profound loss that demonstrates a fundamental change in American culture, the change is irrevocably tied to the Cold War itself. The connection of the sport's commodification and postwar politics is made most evident in the photographic remnants of the Prologue's mythical showdown between Branca and Thomson; the pair appear in every era the novel encounters, photographed with each successive president, the photos becoming more and more stock. Each Cold War president is driven to keep alive the country's myths—and yet, as Baudrillard suggests, in rendering these myths photographically concrete, their "mythic energy" is erased. Thus, the novel's structural inversions: the transformation of American culture—and American history—into the objects and images it has left behind,

objects and images devoid of the mythic, demands that historiography become less a straight-forward telling of the story of history than a "counterhistory,"[6] an archeological project, breaking down the monoliths that the secularization (or media-driven reification) of history has created. In this sense *Underworld* is less a history than a reevaluation, not simply telling the story of the Cold War but, in some fundamental sense, untelling it.

Underworld is thus a two-sided novel. On the one hand, in its inextricable interconnections of narrative and history, the novel clearly becomes part of the literary genre Linda Hutcheon has famously described as "historiographic metafiction." This genre, which includes novels such as *Ragtime, V., The Public Burning, Midnight's Children,* and *Slaughterhouse-Five,* weaves together historical fact and fictional imagination, purposefully blurring the line between the two. As Hutcheon argues, "historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did take place in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present" (97). Historiographic metafiction suggests then that the past can be known through its historical traces; *Underworld,* by its interactions with those traces, similarly comments on the natures of both history and narrative. As I have already suggested, however, metafiction requires a certain continuing faith in the power of myth and particularly in the mythical power of history. In *Underworld* myth is lost; the novel instead acts to dismantle the genre of historiographic metafiction and its preconceptions, working not to create the past out of its narratives but instead to excavate and deconstruct the traces a reified history has left in the present. In so doing, the novel undermines all narrative processes, both the realist and the metafictional. Although Hutcheon claims for historiographic metafiction the "deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation" (92), DeLillo performs the same kind of contamination-and-challenging of *narrative* representation, calling the possibility of the accurate telling of any story into question.

This challenge to narrative leads to the novel's numerous structural and thematic reversals and inversions. About a third of the

way through *Underworld*, Nick Shay and Big Sims, his mentor in the world of waste management, visit a landfill project in the company of Jesse Detwiler, a "garbage archaeologist" who had recently addressed their industry convention. Staring out at the crater being filled with the detritus of Western civilization, Detwiler falls into what the narrator refers to as a sort of "talk-show" patter, giving them his polished interpretation of the spectacle before them:

> Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. (287)

The inversion implied in this theory—"Garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it," as Detwiler later says (288)—is one of the novel's central tropes. DeLillo, by pointing to garbage's primacy, powerfully reverses our thinking about the relationship between civilization and waste in our culture, highlighting the dozens of instances of waste in the novel; waste both recyclable and hazardous; organic, inorganic, and human. In this waste, and particularly in its nuclear manifestations, we see that the mythic structures of the Cold War itself—the epic battle between good and evil—have crumbled in its aftermath, revealing the hidden costs of maintaining those structures. In this sense, in the post-Cold War period, the novel argues that the myths with which we protect ourselves—the myth of civilization's primacy, the myth of democracy's triumph—are no longer the repositories of the sacred, the transhistorical, but instead the ideological. Mythology has become identical with reification; myths, or narratives, are all fated to be lies. Through this repudiation of both myth and narrative, the novel calls our attention to a powerful reconception of the self and reevaluation of American individualism in the post-Cold War era. The fate of the individual, as well as that of the narrative that must be simultaneously told and untold, can be most clearly explored through the character of Nick Shay.

Unmaking

Timothy Morris has argued that "baseball fiction, and more generally the whole culture of baseball, is about assimilation to an

American way of life" (3); baseball fiction is also overwhelmingly about self-making, about the formation of the American individual. *Underworld*'s central plot line, that revolving around Nick Shay, bears much in common with this traditional narrative, except of course that the story is told backwards, with each successive episode receding in time, revealing a bit more of the submerged content of the episodes that have gone before. The only story told forward in time is the story of the baseball itself, the physical manifestation of the transformation of the mythic from the sacred to the reified. These two narratives are inextricably linked, not merely because Nick Shay comes to own the baseball but because the history of each, like that of the Cold War, is called into question. Each of these narratives begins in a moment of loss, and each becomes so reified throughout the novel that the work of understanding both personal and cultural history becomes, of necessity, an archaeological project, excavating the present in order to uncover the past. As the baseball's own archaeologist, the obsessive collector determined to learn the secret of its origins, thinks, "Strange how he was compiling a record of the object's recent forward motion while simultaneously tracking it backwards to the distant past" (318). This is precisely the path that DeLillo follows in exploring Nick Shay's character, introducing him at present, in the early 1990s, before tracking him backward to the early 1950s and the long-buried moment of destruction that changed his life.

This inversion of traditional narrative structures and the reversal of our thinking about civilization and waste come together in *Underworld* to produce a unified aesthetic of decomposition, of degradation, an aesthetic we come to suspect was always inherent in the Cold War itself, if buried by its mythology. As Ihab Hassan has noted, theories of postmodernism are surrounded by a discourse of unmaking: "decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimization" (282). These terms are made literal throughout *Underworld*, as the novel's reversals allow us to witness both the decomposition of American culture into the garbage upon which it is founded and the regression of Nick Shay into genuine selfhood before that self was transformed into mythology.

Even the baseball story, ostensibly told in a traditional beginning-to-end structure, is undermined by that decay; in fact, that decay begins in the background of the game itself. As a torrent of

paper rains down onto the field from the upper deck in celebration of the Giants' victory, a reproduction of Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, ironically reproduced within the pages of *Life* magazine, falls right onto J. Edgar Hoover's shoulder. The paper floating down all around, the torrent of residues from purses and wallets and bags, is described as "happy garbage now, the fans' intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendably, in the form of pocket litter, personal waste, a thing that carries a shadow identity" (45). But this is only half of the story. Although the release of this cloud of personal waste seems somehow a *creative* force—as Russ Hodges thinks once it is all over, "this is another kind of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power" (59)—the happiness of this garbage, the protective nature of this history, comes at the desperate cost of ignoring the other waste being released simultaneously, half a world away: the second Soviet atomic test explosion. Only Edgar, *Life* and *Death* simultaneously in his hands, sees both sides of the equation:

> The meatblood colors and the massed bodies, this is a census-taking of awful ways to die. He looks at the flaring sky in the deep distance out beyond the headlands on the left-hand page—Death elsewhere, 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 theirs, liturgical and grave. What secret history are they writing? There is the secret of the bomb and there are the secrets the bomb inspires, things even the Director cannot guess—a man whose own sequestered heart holds every festering secret in the Western world—because these plots are only now evolving. This is what he knows, that the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets. For every atmospheric blast, every glimpse we get of the bared force of nature, that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert—for every one of these he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein. (50–51)

The secret history being written in this blast is of course that of the Cold War, a history based upon an inverted logic of death-in-life, of loss-in-victory. As we have seen, Nick Shay much later describes

the triumphal baseball as being "all about losing"; the loss is inscribed in the home run itself. Thus, the Shot Heard 'Round the World, whether Thomson's homer, the Soviet test explosion, or Nick Shay's own shot, the dark basement room and the man he inadvertently kills—these three blasts, in announcing the opening of the Cold War, introduce a logic of destruction into American life. Only by working backward from the end result, by excavating the hundreds of plots gone underground, can the novel rescue history from its inevitable decay.

This emphasis on narrative reversal brings with it some moments of sickening revelation. There is a minor character in *Underworld* we first meet as a nuclear weapons test official, and a hundred pages later we are profoundly unnerved to glimpse during his masturbatory adolescence (403, 514). The seriousness of adulthood, particularly of a life devoted to defense work, is undermined by the change of direction, which reveals the teenage pornographic fantasies that always underwrite adult fantasies of destruction. Through the discomfort of this particular narrative's inversion, the novel uncovers the ways that Cold War mythology has fundamentally damaged its characters' self-perceptions. In accepting—or worse, valorizing—the logic of destruction, all of *Underworld*'s lives come to be, like the baseball, about losing. The only legitimate life-narrative that the novel can take on appears to be an antibildungsroman, a story of self-unmaking, breaking down the logic of destruction to find the self that preexists the bomb. Just as Jesse Detwiler debunks the myth of the primacy of civilization, revealing the invention of art and culture and philosophy as mere attempts to keep from being overrun by refuse, the novel suggests that the traditional story of self-making is equally mythic. Rather than being made, being self-determined in any sense, the individual is rather unmade, a tissue of lies constructed as a defense against the sludge in which the self is mired.

The only kind of self-making available within the novel is tied to a fundamental corruption, a dishonest reliance upon narratives one knows to be false. As Nick thinks, during spring 1978, not long after having joined the field of waste management,

> I've always been a country of one. There's a certain distance in my makeup, a measured separation like my old man's, I guess, that I've worked at times to reduce, or thought of working, or said the hell with it.

> I like to tell my wife. I say to my wife. I tell her not to give up on me. I tell her there's an Italian word, or a Latin word, that explains everything. Then I tell her the word.
>
> She says, What does this explain? And she answers, Nothing.
>
> The word that explains nothing in this case is *lontananza*. Distance or remoteness, sure. But as I use the word, as I interpret it, hard-edged and fine-grained, it's the perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicate mobster—the made man. (275)

This emphasis on "madeness" is key to understanding Nick. The early disappearance of his father, a small-time bookie, has been mythologized in Nick's mind, as legend replaces the man who abandoned his wife and two sons with the man hit by the mob for his inability to cover a debt. Nick clings to this self-created legend despite the overpowering evidence to the contrary, despite a known mob figure pointedly telling him:

> "Jimmy was not in a position where he could offend somebody so bad that they would go out of their way to do something. No disrespect but he was penny-ante. He had a very small operation he was running. Made the rounds of the small bettors. Mostly very small these bets. This is what he did. Factory sweepers and so forth. You have to understand. Jimmy was not in a position to be threatened by serious people." (765)

Nick walks away pleased by the made man's concern but ultimately unconvinced: "He was grateful for the time, genuinely, but he didn't think he had to accept the logic of the argument. The logic, he decided, did not impress him" (766). The only logic that does impress him, particularly later, after finding himself in a basement room with a shotgun in his hand, is destruction's own logic, in which violence must be meaningful rather than random.

After the shooting, in which he has been used as the agent of another man's suicide, Nick obsessively asks himself two questions: "Why would the man say no if it was loaded? But first why would he point the gun at the man's head?" (781). The inverted progression implied by these questions, from secondary concerns to primary, from the role of the "victim" to the role of the self, reveals the source of Nick's determination to place himself within the cultural mythology of the gangster, who is "made" rather than unmade through killing. In his later life, in the earlier sections of the novel, we have seen this mythology become a joke for Nick, but one he nonetheless expends tremendous amounts of energy cultivating: "They asked where I was from," he says in the early 1990s, "and I replied with a line I sometimes used. I live a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix. Pause. Like someone in the Witness Protection Program" (66). Or: "Think of a young man or woman, think of a young woman speaking a few words in a movie gangster's growl. This is something I used to do for pointed comic effect to get things done on time" (87). Despite this comic twist, Nick's reliance on the figure of the gangster nonetheless becomes a crucial part of his personal narrative; thus we can sense the irony involved when Nick tells us, near the beginning of the novel, that

> I lived responsibly in the real. I didn't accept this business of life as a fiction, or whatever Klara Sax had meant when she said that things had become unreal. History was not a matter of missing minutes on the tape. I did not stand helpless before it. . . . I believed that we could know what was happening to us. We were not excluded from our own lives. (82)

Nick's determined play with the mythology of violence, with the logic of destruction, reveals just how far he stands from "the real"; his life has in fact been constructed as a fiction, a narrative, one from which he is largely excluded. Nick's barely sublimated desire for the life of the gangster—the choice of waste management being only one aspect of that desire—is partly an attempt to build a more threatening alter ego, but it is also a desperate stab at rereading the violence in his past as something purposeful rather than random.

In the novel's Epilogue we follow Nick to Kazakhstan, the old Soviet test site, now being used for underground nuclear explosions designed, all too ironically, to rid the world of hazardous waste. Nick begins on the plane to draw the novel's many lines of destruction and disintegration together:

> I tell Viktor there is a curious connection between weapons and waste. I don't know exactly what. He smiles and puts his feet up on the bench, something of a gargoyle squat. He says maybe one is the mystical twin of the other. He likes this idea. He says waste is the devil twin. Because waste is the secret history, the underhistory, the way archaeologists dig out the history of early cultures, every sort of bone heap and broken tool, literally from under the ground. (791)

This is a connection that has been building throughout the novel, inextricably tying the Cold War's logic of destruction to the refuse

and decay of American culture: just as Big Sims explains to Nick that "all waste defers to shit" (302), Nick's brother Matt posits that "all technology refers to the bomb" (467). Shit and the bomb come, in *Underworld*, to form a wholly secularized, dehistoricized, demythologized replacement for *Gravity's Rainbow*'s sacred triumvirate of American truths to be found in "shit, money, and the word" (28). The greatest loss in this demolition of the sacred is of course the loss of the word; the linear logic of linguistic communication has been undermined by the inversions the Cold War has produced.

In fact, before adopting the mythology of the gangster, Nick turned first to the word for a means to reconstruct the self he demolished in that basement room. "The minute I entered correction," he has by this point already told us, "I was a convert to the system" (502). Using his time in the correction system, Nick attempts to create a self:

> All that winter I shoveled snow and read books. The lines of print, the alphabetic characters, the strokes of a shovel when I cleared a walk, the linear arrangement of words on a page, the shovel strokes, the rote exercises in school texts, the novels I read, the dictionaries I found in the tiny library, the nature and shape of books, the routine of shovel strokes in deep snow—this was how I began to build an individual. (503)

By the novel's end, however, we have come to understand not only the impossibility of this kind of self-making but also the ways in which the traditional narrative materials of this self-making have themselves been unmade. Linear logic has given way to inversion, divergence, virtuality; text has become hypertext. "The real miracle is the web," Nick finally tells us, "the net, where everybody is everywhere at once" (808). But, the miracle of mystical union that the Web represents is itself described as "[a] fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than with difference itself, all argument, all conflict programmed out" (826). This fantasy, of difference without differences, of union without contact, of place without space, reveals itself—as well as the novel's final invocation of "Peace"—to be another kind of narrative illusion, a new, luminous myth of wastelessness. As Nick theorizes,

> Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging. The windows yield a strong broad desert and enormous sky. The landfill across the road is closed now, jammed to capacity, but gas keeps rising from the great earthen berm, methane, and it produces a wavering across the land and sky that deepens the aura of sacred work. It is like a fable in the writhing air of some ghost civilization, a shimmer of desert ruin. (809–10)

This ghost civilization is, of course, our own, written not in "bronze gates and whispered philosophy" (287) but in waste.

For J. H. Hexter there was liberation in arguing that history is composed not simply of facts but of narratives. In *The Universal Baseball Association* those narratives in fact *create* history. In *Underworld* DeLillo acknowledges the interconnections between narratives and history, while pointing out that many of those narratives are lies. The new locus of the sacred is in the landfill. History has been demoted to fable. And baseball? All but forgotten:

> This is how I come across the baseball, rearranging books on the shelves. I look at it and squeeze it hard and put it back on the shelf, wedged between a slanted book and a straight-up book, an expensive and beautiful object that I keep half hidden, maybe because I tend to forget why I bought it. Sometimes I know exactly why I bought it and other times I don't, a beautiful thing smudged green near the Spalding trademark and bronzed with nearly half a century of earth and sweat and chemical change, and I put it back and forget it until next time. (809)

This artifact, half-hidden between books—some that might, by a slight stretch of the imagination, be thought of as telling a subset of the truth "straight-up"; others that tell all the truth but tell it slant—carries with it several imperfectly remembered histories. Far from recapitulating the whole history of the game, as Russ Hodges idealistically supposed such a baseball might, this ball is only its material form: green smudge, dirt, sweat, trademark. Buried along with this baseball, in among the jammed bookshelves, are the history of the game, the history of the Cold War, and the history of the individual. The lingering irony, of course, is that DeLillo's project of unmaking history creates new narratives, adding to that jammed bookshelf. But the power of history, as DeLillo reminds us in "The Power of History," is nonetheless given a "free veer from time and place and fate" in its reversal. Only in exhuming history's artifacts, in excavating these half-forgotten traces of the past, in untelling the

already-told tales, can history be saved from its own "flat, thin, tight and relentless designs," the "stark pages" that reify myth into ideology.

Notes

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1. For a deeper exploration of Hexter's argument, as well as his own rhetoric, see Westbrook, 299–300. It should be noted that Hexter uses the term "history" to refer not to the past itself but rather to the disciplinary study of the past, thus inextricably tying history to the writing of history. My uses of this term should similarly evoke not events of the past but accounts of those events.

2. As well as being the only African-American fan present. For a reading of the dynamics of race in "Pafko," see Duvall's analysis.

3. Nonetheless, the readers of *Aethlon* voted *Underworld* number 16 in the journal's list of the 50 most influential sport-literature texts of the twentieth century. See Dewey, "*Aethlon*'s Fifty Most Influential Works Survey," 161–62.

4. A capitalization that carries obvious Christian overtones. For a reading of the novel as religious allegory, see Westbrook, 221–43.

5. See Westbrook: "The mythicity of baseball's texts emerges almost of necessity from a mythicity in the game itself — its rituals and roles, its characters, the tropological nature of its space and time, its 'plot' (the progress and rules of play), its object (to make the circular journey from home to home), its ground (a solid stage in a shifting cosmos), and its groundrules (the principles of order within this [con]text)" (10).

6. See DeLillo in "The Power of History": "Language can be a form of counter-history. The writer wants to construct a language that will be the book's life-giving force. He wants to submit to it. Let language shape the world. Let it break the faith of conventional re-creation." That conventional recreation is the form of mediated, reified history.

Underworld or: How I Learned to Keep Worrying and Live the Bomb

Thomas Myers

> Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but these organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times. . . . Future ages will bring with them new and unimaginably great advances in the field of civilization and will increase man's likeness to God still more. But in the interests of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character.
>
> —Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

> Yes, gentlemen, they are on their way, and no one can bring them back. For the sake of our country and our way of life, I suggest you get the rest of SAC in after them. Otherwise we will be totally destroyed by Red retaliation. My boys will give you the best kind of start, fourteen hundred megatons worth, and you sure as hell won't stop them now. So let's get going; there's no other choice.
>
> —General Jack D. Ripper, *Dr. Strangelove*

> But the bombs were not released. I remember Klara Sax talking about the men who flew the strategic bombers as we all stood listening in the long low structure of sectioned concrete. The missiles remained in their rotary launchers. The men came back and the cities were not destroyed.
>
> —Nick Shay, *Underworld*

> So listen folks, for here's my thesis.
> Peace in the world, or the world in pieces.
> —"Old Man Atom," Sons of the Pioneers, 1947

> We were born during the boom times, played house down in the bomb shelter,
> Suffered through the wonder years and silence at the dinner hour.
> But once upon a summertime, out behind the old garage,