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TIME AND 'MANYNESS': TEMPORALITY, ECOLOGY, AND FORM IN DON DELILLO'S
UNDERWORLD

by

ANDREW BOWIE HAGAN

Under the Direction of Chris Kocela, PhD

ABSTRACT

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* employs formal approaches to the novel that question the limits of language. DeLillo's novel charts an ecology of the human relation to the material world as it is created by language. He uses parataxis to demonstrate the methods whereby language receives limitation from its situation in frames of reference that are both historical and fictional. His formal techniques show how Cold War tropes inform interpretation of the material world through discourse, in terms of paranoia and knowledge, consumer capitalism and waste, and historically relevant forms of mimesis. This thesis argues that DeLillo's emphasis on the limitation of discourse through framing encourages the reader to consider the ability of language to generate awareness of the grounds for its situatedness in time and history. The reader's ceremonial engagement with the mimesis of the text creates the possibility for a temporality based in thought, dignity, and consequence to emerge.

INDEX WORDS: Temporality, Narrative, Ecology, Novel, Parataxis, Reference

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Andrew Bowie Hagan
2019

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by

BOWIE HAGAN

Committee Chair: Chris Kocela

Committee: Audrey Goodman

Pearl McHaney

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Angelica and Tom Clark.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

U: Underworld

TN: Time and Narrative

FID: Free-Indirect Discourse

1 Chapter One: Mimesis and Reality

1.1 Introduction

The decision of the United States government in February of 2019 not to renew the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces treaty¹ testifies to the continuing need to reflect on the history of the Cold War. Don DeLillo's 1997 novel *Underworld* offers hope that artistic engagement with this historical period might help to produce the awareness necessary to change human relations with the material world. DeLillo has himself said that he is interested in the "ways in which consciousness is replicated in the natural world" (DeCurtis 299); as Elise Martucci argues, DeLillo "invokes the reader's responsibility to understand the connections between the material world and the one we construct" (140). He does this by asking the reader to question the frames whereby discourse acquires figurative significance. DeLillo's novel provides an approach to Fredric Jameson's "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" (51),² charting an ecology of the human relation to the material world as it is created by language.

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* explores the role of naming and narration in mediating relationships to lived realities. His incorporation into fiction of American history during the period of the Cold War provides an extended meditation on Aristotle's conclusion that, as Paul Ricouer summarizes his thought, "history is based on the particular, poetry rises towards the universal" (*Rule 44*). *Underworld* uses a paratactic or episodic style of arrangement, juxtaposing differing genera of naming and narration. DeLillo utilizes fragments at the level of utterance, sentence, paragraph, and event. On one level, the name as fragment signals relation to generic

¹ "US Suspends Nuclear Arms Treaty with Russia" *The New York Times*. Feb. 1, 2019. Online edition. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/us/politics/trump-inf-nuclear-treaty.html>

² Thomas Heise makes this assertion to different effect (in "Whitespaces and Urban Ruins: Postmodern Geographies in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, 1950s-1990s").

worlds through metonymy, or substitution. Yet, as Paul Ricoeur argues in his masterful study *The Rule of Metaphor*, metaphor also functions at the level of discourse. By calling into question how habitually applied frames of discourse limit figurative value, the novel's use of fragments calls into question the figurative significance of speech acts and of the work itself. DeLillo's novel questions the being-in-the-world that American society makes present by its methods of narration.³ *Underworld* brings attention not only to characters' methods of narration, but also to the reader's subjective experience of its text, whose understanding and implementation of action in the world is informed through concepts and structures that act as organizing principles of experience. The reader refigures a relationship to the concepts and structures through which he or she had previously understood their own history and lived reality. DeLillo's book brings awareness to the frames whereby readers figure and refigure a world through naming and narration. If history creates an ongoing comparison with the present, DeLillo suggests that the reader's imaginative encounter may transform the dead metaphor of history into a living one.

This essay argues that DeLillo's use of form contributes to the thematic foci of the novel. The themes of waste and aesthetic recycling in *Underworld* have been thoroughly treated by critics.⁴ Critics have acknowledged the novel's emphasis on the ability of language and technology to mediate a relationship to the real and to history, as well as to create authentic

³ Ricoeur argues that "all *mimêsis*, even creative—nay, especially creative—*mimêsis* takes place within the horizons of a being-in-the world which it makes present to the extent that *mimêsis* raises it to the level of *muthos*" (*Rule* 48). Mark Wrathall and Max Murphey argue that "Dasein is a being-in-the-world" (10); as Anthony Lack interprets Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world, "The existence of Dasein and its way of being-in-the-world is primarily as an *understanding* and *interpreting* being" (15). *Underworld* shows how fictional modes of narrative historiography bring to light metaphorical modes of "being-as" and "seeing-as" (Ricoeur, *Rule* 253-4). The "revelation of the Real as Act" is thus posed in the potentiality of being-in-the-world to figure as *muthos* (Ricoeur, *Rule* 48).

⁴ See especially Mark Osteen, "Everything is connected: Containment and Counterhistory in *Underworld*"; Patrick O'Donnell, "*Underworld*"; Elise Martucci, "Taking Meaning out into the Streets: The Significance of Place in *Underworld*"; Paula Martin-Silvan's "The Rhetorics of Waste in Don DeLillo's Fiction,"; and Catherine Morley, "Don DeLillo's *Underworld* as Recycled Epic."

forms of mimesis. I will show how form in the novel demonstrates the problematic relationships of language to time and to history in *Underworld*.

Underworld foregrounds the artistic conditions of its own historical project in the historiography of its protagonist, Nick Shay. After Nick accidentally shoots George Manza, he is sent to a youth correction facility in Staatsburg, New York. There Dr. Lindblad, a psychologist, directs Nick's attention to his own history: "You have a history. You're responsible to it. You're answerable. You're required to try to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention" (*U* 512). The novel's effort to make sense of American history artistically may allow readers to see this injunction as a shared mandate for the novel and its reader. The book presents Nick's history, as it does the history of all its characters, through fragments. Nick's character exemplifies the book's attention to ways we name and narrate through the use of fragmentary particulars and their opposite, myth, organization, and *telos*. When Nick shoots George Manza, a Bronx waiter, heroin addict, and sometime confidant of Shay's, Nick is unable to put the pieces of the event together to make a coherent narrative. DeLillo's narration of the event makes Nick's confusion clear. George tells Nick that the gun Nick holds is unloaded. Nick tries to bridge fragments of knowledge into a causal continuum of the shooting:

He felt the trigger pull and then the gun went off and he was left there thinking weakly he didn't do it.

But first he pointed the gun at the man's head and asked if it was loaded....

He forced squeezed the trigger and looked into the smile on the other man's face.

But first he posed with the gun and pointed it at the man and asked if it was loaded. (*U*

781)

Nick's inability to put these fragments together in a meaningful chronology of cause and effect shines light on the task of the book as a whole. Nick uses narrative to efface the divisions of a fragmentary past that's difficult to pull together. One reason for this is the uncertainty surrounding the disappearance of Nick's father. Dr. Lindblad tells Nick that his father was the third person in the room the day he shot George. Even if this is not literally true, the disappearance of his father, Jimmy, guides Nick's efforts to become responsible in his life after George's murder. Nick and his brother Matt argue about the circumstances of their father's disappearance. Matt concludes that Jimmy, a bookie, left the family of his own volition; Nick has trouble accepting his father's guilt, believing, despite other indications, that he was murdered by the mob. Both Nick and Matt are motivated toward responsibility by the same event, but with different consequences, as I'll explore later in this essay. Both characters struggle to come to terms with uncertainty. Nick's uncertainty springs from his father Jimmy's disappearance and his own accidental killing of George; the myth he creates and holds to in later life represses the uncertainty he feels in youth:

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 hewed to the texture of collected knowledge, took faith from the solid and availing stuff of our experience. Even if we believe that history is a workwheel powered by human blood—read the speeches of Mussolini—at least we've known the thing together. A single narrative sweep, not ten thousand wisps of disinformation. (*U* 82)

Nick's confident containment of history in "a single narrative sweep" presents the opposite perspective of the novel's fragmented narrative structure, foregrounding the novel's problem of unity and parts in arrangement. Historicization may cover over history, as Donald Greiner and

Catherine Morley argue.⁵ The traditional teleological organization of “a single narrative sweep,” implies an endpoint from which all the events of a history or a narrative can be seen.

Teleological organization is the form most characteristic of the realist novel, in which the occurrences within a narrative world indicate their place in a system, the rules of which are made clear by the novel’s end.⁶ Realism’s need to signal each event’s relation to a larger system means that events must be interpretable. The reader arrives at this interpretation of meaning, guided toward the inevitable conclusion by the language of the narrator, but the narrator in realist novels is often the voice of history, what Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth calls the Narrator as Nobody (*Sequel* 27), that masks social consensus as the inevitable. George Lukacs argued the realist novel promoted totalitarianism⁷ : the certainty of meaning this style of narration attaches to events implies that their meaning is known and understood according to coordinate-maps shared by author and audience. *Underworld* foregrounds the problematic nature of knowledge and representation through narrative, while still emphasizing the value of the task. The book undermines the totalistic presumptions of the realist narrative techniques that would provide “a single narrative sweep” of history.⁸ DeLillo uses parataxis, or fragmentation, to utilize, while at the same time to ironize, the referential function which realist narrative systems provide.

DeLillo’s use of the (postmodern) technique of parataxis in combination with traditional fictional

⁵ The mythologizing tendency of history in *Underworld* is asserted by numerous commentators on *Underworld*. See Catherine Morley in *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction* and Donald Greiner, “Don DeLillo, John Updike, and the Sustaining Power of Myth.”

⁶ See Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, esp. pp. 1-91, “Perspective and Consensus.”

⁷ This is explored in the *Theory of the Novel*.

⁸ Johanna Isaacson writes, pertinently, that “the high postmodernist realist aesthetic, elliptical in structure and attuned to the logic of the fragment, itself suggest the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of a periodization-based apprehension of the totality” (30), insisting that the “only form of representation possible is representation of the break or the incommensurability of modernist forms to postmodern problematics” (40). Similarly, Philip Nel argues that *Underworld* “challenges the validity of hard-and-fast modern-postmodern binarism” (108).

methods (realist, teleological) emphasizes the importance that frames of reference play in creating meaning.

Readers incorporate historical reference with fictional reference in order to create a meaning that combines the particular in history with its figurative capacity. To say that this figurative capacity is poetic and thus “timeless” is, however, to miss the import of temporality’s particular inscription of poetic truth in lived time. Ricoeur argues that refiguration offers historicity to discourse—the opportunity to establish a perspective in relation to history. DeLillo shows how language establishes the possibility of a poetic truth based in historicity. *Underworld* shows the revelatory capacity of language: the capacity to reveal a relationship to lived experience by reinscribing the relation to history in our relation to discourse. DeLillo puts frames of reference in question. *Underworld* uses fragments in order to emphasize the process whereby language spills over into what it refers to—how we organize discourse in relation to lived reality (Ricoeur, *Rule* 85).

If mimesis covers over and hides, it always reveals relationship. Language reveals how we limit our conceptions of authenticity—things considered in their finality and potential for finality. DeLillo’s *Underworld* uses parataxis to emphasize the process of totalization that the reader undertakes in order to position language in terms of time, inscribing the interweaving reference of history and fiction in lived time. It is in this process of totalization that history and language offer the possibility for what Amy Hungerford calls a “mystical relation to the material world” (“Don DeLillo’s Latin Mass” 375). Limitation through language reveals how mimesis measures the space of our agency. *Underworld* uses parataxis to question how its forms of narration, including its ironic use of the epic mode, offer the capacity for historicity: the reader’s refiguration of fiction and history in lived time.

Long after Nick has left the prison in Staatsburg, he explains the murder of George to a woman he barely knows. The method he applies is exemplary of the problems DeLillo confronts in historical narrative in *Underworld*, as Nick explains that “I’ve tried to break it down, see it in its *component parts*. But there are so many whirling motives and underlying possibilities and so whats and why nots” (299, my emphasis). Nick’s effort to see a thing in its component parts derives from his training from the Jesuits. He travels to their camp in Minnesota to continue rehabilitation after his time in prison in Staatsburg. In Minnesota he’s instructed by Father Paulus, who connects ways of seeing with naming. He admonishes Nick, “You didn’t see the thing because you don’t know how to look. And you don’t know how to look because you don’t know the names” (*U* 540). Father Paulus’ statement assumes that we see and recognize things through concepts, and that our ability to name accords with our ability to recognize concepts. Nick applies these strategies as a discipline, a practice that feeds Nick’s desire for responsibility and structure. When Nick applies this technique to historical understanding, as he does in his later effort to see George’s killing in its *component parts*, he assumes that to see the parts clearly is to understand the nature of the whole. *Underworld* examines this proposition through its formal structures and through the content of its thematic foci.

In *Underworld*, DeLillo utilizes the formal technique of parataxis, deriving from the Greek word meaning “a placing side by side,” (*OED*) to emphasize its study of the fragment’s relation to the whole. According to Theodor Adorno, parataxes are “artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax” (131). Paratactic forms of organization are characteristic of oral literatures, such as those which produced *Beowulf* and the *Odyssey* (O’Connor)⁹. Their use in narrative signals an episodic organization, as opposed to a narrative

⁹ For more on the connection between orality and parataxis, see Alarik Rynell, “Parataxis and Hypotaxis as a Criterion of Syntax and Style, especially in Old English Poetry,” pp. 32-35.

arrangement based in muthos; while narrative syntax intends causal ordering, parataxis does not specify this causational structure. While Aristotle's praise of the unity created by emplotment led him to decry episodic poetry and parataxis, paratactic construction characterizes most postmodern works¹⁰.

This essay will consider the effects of parataxis at the level of the name/word, the sentence/discourse, and action/ plot. On both the level of the name and that of the sentence, paratactic form emphasizes a paradox inherent in all language-use. Adorno writes that "as conceptual and predicative, language stands opposed to subjective expression, by virtue of its generality, it reduces what is to be expressed to something already given and known" (137). DeLillo exploits parataxis in *Underworld* to several purposes. Patrick O'Donnell argues (quoting Frederic Jameson) that *Underworld* portrays a world in which the "object can be said to produce the subject" (109). I will show how *Underworld* uses parataxis to emphasize the paradoxical relationship of subject and object, as found in language, relation to the material world, and in conceptions of collective history and temporality. We can see the impact of parataxis at the level of name and of discourse. This essay begins by examining the use of parataxis at the level of the name or word.

1.2 Parataxis, Frame, and Name

DeLillo's parataxis at the level of the word in *Underworld* is based in the formal device of synecdoche. This is an aspect of metaphor, and specifically of metonymy or substitution. It suggests the detail is like the whole, i.e. "a sail" can stand for "a ship." Synecdoche, as a device,

¹⁰ For more on parataxis in postmodern works, see Ermarth, *Sequel to History* 166; Paula Martin-Salvan, "The Rhetorics of Waste in Don DeLillo's Fiction"; Brian Richardson, "Modern Fiction, The Poetics of Lists, and the Boundaries of Narrative"; Patti White, *Gatsby's Party: The System and the List in Contemporary Narrative*; Belen Piqueras Cabrerizo, "Bill Brown's 'Thing Theory' and the Quest of Unique Epistemology in Modernist and Postmodernist Literature: A Study of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*"; and Jan Albers, "The Functions of Lists in Postmodernist Fiction."

illustrates the logic of Nick's effort to identify a thing by its component part. DeLillo uses synecdoche throughout *Underworld* to indicate the component parts that give form to a concept that is explicitly named, as in DeLillo's account of the baseball game with which the book opens: "All the fragments of the afternoon. Shouts, bat cracks, full bladders and stray-yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can't be counted" (*U* 60), where "All the fragments of the afternoon" is the whole to which each fragment pertains. In *Underworld*, individual words are frequently strung together using commas, without introduction, to indicate concepts. The use of synecdoche in this fashion relies on a tradition of language use whereby individual words, phrases, and details signal the larger families of relation to which they belong: concepts, eras, systems, communities, corporations, and so forth. Words set side by side can indicate the component parts of a scene, or a societal situation to which there is no judgement or moral value attached; the description of a beach in a scene focalized by Nick provides such an example; the beach is identified by "blankets with radios, food, rented umbrellas, sand bodies crammed together, cardplayers, sailor hats, suntan oil" (*U* 772). When Sister Edgar looks at the souls she is charged with saving, collected at the Wall, the synecdoches she defines them by denote a value-judgement. She knows them by "Graffiti, illiteracy, petty theft." Elsewhere, values are implied, but not as clearly defined. Nuclear-scientist Eric Deming's sentence that describes the Abo Elementary School and Fallout Shelter implies the nuclear threat's impact on everyday society during the Cold War through a series of named objects: "The classrooms, the bedding, the canned food, the morgue" (*U* 411). The names "classroom, canned food, morgue," etc., represent not only the objects, but the objects as they function habitually in their societal contexts. These instances of synecdoche ask readers to summon the societal conditions (a limiting frame) that the appearance of these words together in one place represent. As figurative speech, the metaphors

are dead metaphors; the individual words as language in this instance represent little more than the objects they refer to. Yet the juxtaposition of these words asks the reader to make the figurative leap in defining the boundaries and the value of the whole which they stand for. In order to define what is figured in “the classroom, the bedding, the canned food, the morgue,” readers supply a series of human activities---the construction of bomb shelters, “duck and cover” drills, threatened nuclear holocaust that would endure beyond the span of human imagination, etc. Readers supply the ethical values and the temporal duration of any and all of these activities and objects, as their list form provides no temporal structure. The habit of connecting component part to whole trains the reader’s attention to each part’s role in an “ecology,” an order to which each object pertains. I will use the term “ecology” in this essay to indicate the order by which a thing relates to its environment; I will also use it to indicate the ability of acts of naming of narration to create an order of relation to others and to lived environments.

Words work figuratively as synecdoche only because the reader is able to see the whole that they are intended to stand for. The word may figure in any number of genera; to use the foregoing example, “the canned food” and “the classroom” could, in another context, and combined with other words, signal a canned food drive at the local school. The larger context in which the words acquire meaning for the reader defines the metaphorical value of the word in the sentence and the text.¹¹ DeLillo’s parataxis causes the reader to question his or her relation to the world of objects through discourse by making them question the temporal and sociological frames habitually applied. Parataxis at the level of the word draws attention to *framing* in several ways. The surplus of possible meaning presented by words without syntax causes the reader to

¹¹ Johanna Isaacson insightfully argues that “DeLillo shows the power of montage as a method while showing how the degree of pain and deformation that go along with atomic warfare ends up occluding this method of representation, breaking down systems of class typology or any legible signifiers” (40).

figure words' meaning in the context of the scene and the novel's entirety. Yet the system of reference to which DeLillo's reader is meant to apply the words of his text reaches outside the world of the novel. DeLillo's text is metafictional; he reminds the reader of their experience of reading. Nick Shay foregrounds the reader's experience of the text when he narrates the process of Klara's desert art: "Seeing brushstrokes mark a surface. *Pigment*. The animal fats and polymers that blend to make this word" (*U* 65, author's emphasis). "This word" appears in the text at large, without further specification; the lack of contextual reference (or frame) foregrounds the reader's experience of the text in both the immaterial and physical senses.

The reader's experience of the text thus becomes a possible frame, or context, of the work's ability to signify. In order to understand how *Underworld* refers to the reader's experience of it, it will be useful to introduce Ricoeur's study of Max Black in the *Rule of Metaphor*. In his study of Black's work, Ricoeur shows Black's innovation in distinguishing between focus and frame in the creation of metaphor (98). He uses the example that the word 'ploughed' functions metaphorically in "the chairman *ploughed* through the discussion," while the remainder of the sentence does not (*Rule* 97). Black calls the metaphor used in 'plough' the focus, while the rest of the sentence serves as a frame. The frame allows the word "plough" to function metaphorically because it provides context that limits the word's possible meanings, definitions and uses of the word that would lead us to see its meaning in other ways than it functions in the context of the sentence given. The words of Nick Shay discussed earlier, "*Pigment*. The animal fats and polymers that blend to make this word" (*U* 65), ask the reader to refer to the text as physical and material object—a thing in their world rather than something that portrays. This nod to the metafictional shifts the frame whereby *Underworld's* content acquires meaning.

DeLillo's creation of readerly awareness of the experience of the text is designed to generate awareness of the role of naming and narration in the process of mimetic figuration. In terms of Ricoeur's analysis of mimesis in *Time and Narrative*, he makes readers aware of all three levels of mimesis. DeLillo asks the reader to question the contextual framing¹² that gives our naming and narration meaning. By temporarily generating an awareness of the experience of the text as thing rather than referent, he encourages the reader to question how the thing (the text) is invested with meaning, and how the reader's experience of the text allows a refiguration of relation to the world (the full cycle of Ricoeur's mimesis, 1-3). The emphasis on the individual word in parataxis interrupts the process of subordination to the frame of context and referent, and creates an emphasis on the utterance, as opposed to the referential function. Rosemary Shay's mother's "method of documentary recall" is such an incantatory method: "She brought forth names and events and let them hang in the air without attaching pleasure or regret. Sometimes just a word" (*U* 101). As Rosemary's names "hang in the air," DeLillo's words also hang, temporarily, in the text, before the reader assigns contextual meaning. This stress on the utterance or speech act, rather than the referential function, creates the possibility of metaphor on the level of discourse.¹³

This possibility for discourse to function as metaphor is what is indicated by the mysticism of language of which Amy Hungerford writes,¹⁴ reflecting DeLillo's own pronouncement that language is in some ways "the final enlightenment." That is, the experience of the text is itself a proposition, a metaphor. DeLillo's use of shifting frames of reference makes

¹² My use of the terms focus and frame will differ from that of Max Black. I expand Black's term 'frame' to refer to the relationship of word and world. In the same way that Black's sentence limits the impertinent meanings of the word "ploughed," I use frame to indicate the contexts whereby the discourse in *Underworld* receives limitation.

¹³ Catherine Morley argues for the importance of "voice" and orality to the art of *Underworld*.

¹⁴ "Don DeLillo's Latin Mass" (345, 373)

the reader aware of the immanence of textual experience—the full circle of mimesis—whereby the experience of narrative becomes meaningful. If the experience of DeLillo’s text can be, as Hungerford rightly suggests, figurative, *Underworld* is concerned to explore *how* language is invested with value: in what frames do the object, the fact, the word, the sentence, and the speech act obtain, and how does their framing give them definition? Hungerford identifies language’s ability to free people to reach “a mystical relation to the material world and to what transcends the material world” in DeLillo’s work (“Don DeLillo’s Latin Mass” 375). Yet the instantiation of discourse in narrative necessitates temporal position. *Underworld* explores this relationship between language and time.

Underworld focuses its exploration of this dynamic through concepts of belief, language and narration, orientation toward objects, and historiographic perspective. The second half of this chapter will explore how DeLillo uses parataxis and frame in naming and narration, in order to create the grounds to interpret the significance of form in *Underworld*. The second chapter of this work will then explore how DeLillo uses these concepts to explore the relationship of language to time in *Underworld*.

1.3 Habitus, Frame, and Fiction

Underworld charts an ecology not merely of the objects of American history, but our naming and narration of their existence. The concept of ecology is useful to analysis of *Underworld* because it suggests that individual elements should be studied in coordination with their environments. The appropriateness of this framework is suggested by *Underworld*’s use of bricolage, in which the relation of the part to the whole is continually in question.¹⁵ The concepts

¹⁵ Philip Nel writes that “[DeLillo’s] language works like photomontage pasting together apparently disparate images in order to ‘disrupt our perception of the normal world’ because ‘commonplace objects become enigmatic when moved to a new environment’ (99). Nels very pertinently asserts that DeLillo “deploys ambiguities to create a

of frame and focus illustrate this relation of part to whole, one which *Underworld* mediates by formal technique.

DeLillo examines the role of figurative paradigms in the framing of objects and discourse. The Italian-American community of the Bronx defines the conditions of discourse for many of *Underworld's* characters. DeLillo grew up in the Bronx during the 1940's and 50s. The 1940's Bronx that the reader sees through *Underworld's* focalizing characters portrays a world where detail coheres with meaning.¹⁶ We can see how details obtain significance in the thoughts of Rosemary Shay, whose husband left her alone with two children, as she reflects on the pride of the Italian community, which she cannot share:

She heard the women talk about making gravy, speaking to a husband or child, and Rosemary understood the significance of this. It meant, Don't you dare come home late. It meant, This is serious so pay attention. It was a special summons, a call to family duty. The pleasure, yes, of familiar food, the whole history of food, the history of eating, the garlicky smack and tang. But there was also a duty, a requirement. The family requires the presence of every member tonight. Because the family was an art to these people and the dinner table was the place it found expression.

They said, I'm making gravy.

They said, Who's better than me? (*U* 698-99)

Details signify in the Shays' Bronx owing to the community that supports their meaning. This capacity to pass on meaning through tradition rests on an essentially conservative relationship to parts or details (in this case an expression); the relation between detail and

sharp tension that separates figure from ground" (111). I will explore in further depth how DeLillo uses the relation of figure and ground.

¹⁶ Elise Martucci cites Rosemary's speech in tying the significance of speech to place in *Underworld*.

meaning is allegorical,¹⁷ a case in which one term stands directly for another term or set of terms (in this case the meanings listed above by Rosemary). This ability for community to define relation to persons and objects is lauded in *Underworld* through the narration of high school physics teacher Albert Bronzini. He distinguishes it as the hallmark of a bygone era. In old age, Albert thinks he might cheer his friend, a similarly aged priest, by touring through the remnants of the knowable community of the Bronx. He himself revels in the “European texture of the street, things done the old slow faithful way, things carried over, suffused with the rules of usage” (*U* 672). Albert Bronzini takes care of his mother and reverts to a traditional formula to explain his life: “You are the son, you take care of the parents” (*U* 683). Traditional practices bind people to other people, but also find their expression in appropriate relationships to the material world, such as that of the neighborhood butchers:

The butcher stood at the corner of the window looking well-placed among the dangling animals, his arms crossed and feet spread. Bronzini saw an aptness and balance here. The butcher’s burly grace, watching him trim a chop, see how he belongs to the cutting block, to the wallow of trembling muscles and mess—his aptitude and ease, the sense that he was born to the task restored a certain meaning to these eviscerated animals....Bronzini thought that the butcher’s own heart and lungs ought to hang outside his body, stationed like a saint’s, to demonstrate his intimate link to the suffering world. (*U* 667-8)

Where they are seen to be appropriate, people’s relations to the objects of daily occupation are dignified and even sacred. What could be a degraded commodity acquires dignity because it

¹⁷ Joanna Gass usefully cites Walter Benjamin’s commentary on “the allegorist,” who “discerns significance in particularity” (“In the Nick of Time,” 127, in *Underwords*).

is raised by the respect and rituals of the community. The butchers know and tease Nick in his youth, playing a big-brother role in the community. It is when Matt strays from his duty of carrying a leg of lamb home to his mother that he is injured in a vicious card game. The importance of these rituals shows how shared codes of usage allow the quotidian materials of the butcher's trade to signify an appropriate relation to the natural world.

Characters can perhaps read the world of the Bronx allegorically¹⁸ because it is a knowable world. At the polar opposite of the “gothic cathedral of pork” (*U* 214) that Albert sees in the butcher shop is the dwelling of George Manza, a hell, as the narratives of two witnesses attest. Nick visits George at his apartment “down the yards”; his description shows the spiritual resonance of the material:

There were padlocked doors and doors ajar. There were basement passages connecting utility rooms and alcoves for trash cans and the old coal bins housed furnaces now and the storage rooms where merchants on the street kept their inventory—a smell that was part garbage and part dank stone, a mildew creep and a thick chill, a sense that everything that happened here was retained in the air, soaked and cross-scented with fungus and wetness and coffee grounds and mops in big sinks. (*U* 721)

The “dank” environment, “mildew creep and ... thick chill,” “fungus,” and “wetness” and “mops” suggest unhealthy conditions. The accumulation of details in the scene of ill-health, along with “the sense that everything that happened was retained in the air” creates an overtone of spiritual stagnation; the staleness is cleared away by no shouting and joyous children. Albert Bronzini also stumbles upon George, peering in at him while he's evidently in a heroin trance.

¹⁸ David L. Pike makes useful connections between *Underworld* and Dante's *Inferno* in “*Underworld* and the Architecture of Urban Space” in *Don DeLillo: Mao II; Underworld; Falling Man*.

Albert's focalization of the event indicates his attention to the spiritual qualities in the material world. "Ever-gregarious Albert" is drawn to a radio he hears playing, and "[decides] to follow the sound, sweetness, strings...to see what sort of company he might encounter here" (U 769). But the music is "so foreign to the figure of the man that he felt a need to turn it off" (U 769). George "direct[s] a dead stare at the facing wall" (U 769). In addition to George's incongruity with the beautiful music, he finds George "awake but unresponsive...thinner, smaller, severe," (770). Yet Albert's description of George's spiritual state is most forcefully rendered through his description of the material environment. George's room reflects the disorder of his life; it has "a certain anonymous squalor....A strew of lost and found and miscellaneous things, and anonymous faded colors, and things that were stored here not for future use but because they had to go somewhere" (U 769). Albert's description of his journey away from George's apartment calls to mind descriptions of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "[Albert] went down the wrong passage and into a narrower place, pipes running horizontally along the walls and a cloacal stink beginning to emerge. He walked over a grated drain where the smell was profound, a sorrowful human sewage, and it took him a while to find a door that led outside" (U 770). Here the details of the material environment represent allegorically the spiritual state of George's soul.¹⁹ Albert reads the Bronx of the 1950s in terms of this allegorical framework.

Underworld illustrates how earthly systems of order, knowledge, and narrative shape ecological and spiritual relationships to material reality. The nature of characters' relationships to objects (to parts) is informed by the frame in which the objects acquire meaning. If objects are the products of spiritual relation in the examples just discussed, objects in the case of fetishistic

¹⁹ For more on materialism in *Paradise Lost*, see Stephen Dobranski, *Milton's Visual Imagination* and N.K. Sugimura, *Matter of Glorious Trial*.

attachment become the unfree signifier of characters' desire.²⁰ Readers of *Underworld* study this attachment to objects most obviously through the Bobby Thompson homerun-ball. Marvin Lundy, a memorabilia collector, becomes aware of the care (the desire) that shapes his quest to trace the ownership of the ball:

For years he didn't know why he was chasing down exhausted objects. All that frantic passion for a baseball and he finally understood it was Eleanor on his mind, it was some terror working deep beneath the skin that made him gather up things, amass possessions and effects against the dark shape of some unshoulderable loss. Memorabilia. What he remembered, what lived in the old smoked leather of the catcher's mitt in the basement was the touch of his Eleanor, those were his wife's eyes in the oval photographs of men with handlebar mustaches. The state of loss, the fact, the facticity in its lonely length. (*U* 192)

Marvin's narrative framework converts part (object) into the lost touch of Eleanor. He applies his knowledge of himself to the "men in raincoats," memorabilia collectors he sees in San Francisco: "It was something else they sought, a forgotten human murmur, maybe, a sense of families in little heart-land houses with a spaniel flop-eared on the rug, a sense of snug innocence and the undiscovered world outside, the vast geographic" (*U* 320). People fetishize objects, casting their narratives into them. Charlie Wainwright, a Manhattan ad executive, is a willing dupe of his own capitalistic ideology. Charlie thinks the baseball's ownership transforms his character, as does ownership in general:

Yes, the baseball that marked him as a regular fellow with a soft streak despite his milled-steel veneer. He got fascist haircuts done by spadavecchia of Milan—his school

²⁰ Ricoeur calls a signifier "unfree" if there is no ambiguity attached to its figurative value (in *The Rule of Metaphor*).

actually, since Gianni was frequently overbooked. He wore striped shirts with white collars. He wore suits so compulsively custom fit a fart would split the seam. He played squash and handball, did Canadian Air Force exercises, applied bronzing agents to his face and body and sat in front of a sunlamp all winter long. A regular guy with a station wagon despite the giddy MG he'd just treated himself to, perfect for tooling the foothills of the Berkshires around their weekend place.

A sentimental weepy white guy. (*U* 530-31)

The narration jests with Charlie's "[devout]" desire to "believe" he possesses, in the baseball, the genuine object. In Charlie's narrative framework, ownership of the object allows him to think differently about himself. Charlie, a callous adman, invests the baseball, which he calls "an emotional object," with belief in order to convince himself of his own character. He wishes to show an emotional connection to his son and can only do so through the fetish object that signifies his "sentimental" side. Memorabilia in *Underworld* serves to illustrate the fetishistic narrative framework whereby human desire attaches meaning to objects.

The persistence of objects and images throughout history in *Underworld* indicates the book's recurring interest in our investment of the material world with meaning. Heidegger's concept of Care indicates an imagination of the world in its potential for completion. Definition of meaning allows us to define temporality in terms of this finality, or what Heidegger calls "authenticity" and "inauthenticity." We form the scope of our ambition in coordination with our understanding of ways that meaning is fixed or organized—both in terms of what is inauthentic—what "they" say—and what is authentic.²¹ *Underworld* engages the concept of

²¹Ricoeur, "Heidegger and the Concept of Ordinary Time" in *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3. For Ricoeur's relation to Heidegger's concept of Care, see also *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 60-64. See also Heidegger, *Being in Time*, esp. 406-422, and *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, "Time and Temporality," 229-274.

authenticity by considering how temporality emerges from its subjects' framing of the material world through language. If figurative value emerges from a temporal being that is defined in terms of finality (Heidegger's "authenticity"), language involves a negotiation with history and with others. *Underworld* explores the individual's role in producing meaning and interpreting communal memory through language.²² Klara Sax laments the loss of objects' habitually acquired meaning. She wakes one night from "a dream where objects are called chairs and curtains and beds but are also completely different, unsupported by the usual guarantees" (*U* 479). DeLillo asks readers to question these "usual guarantees" in a more general sense.

Pierre Bourdieu names the habitual interpretation of an objects' function its *habitus*. This concept of *habitus*, as I will apply it,²³ has much in common with the concept of ordinary language, a baseline of language use from which the deviation of figurative language use can be measured. This similarity allows us to discuss how DeLillo's uses of parataxis leads the reader to evaluate signifying capacity at several levels of mimesis. At the level of linguistic figuration, in the previous example of "the classroom, the bedding, the canned food, the morgue," the reader shifts between part and signified whole. At the same time, the ambiguous subjectivity or objectivity of paratactic language-use, in addition to the metafictional overtones of the work mentioned earlier, creates a focus on shifts in reference. The reader considers the individual word as abstracted from context and finds its reference in a real-world object, ("morgue," for example), but must also find the meaning of individual words, and the figurative whole, as in "the bedding, the classroom, the canned food, the morgue," as belonging to the relevant speaker

²² See Philip Wolf, "Postmodernism: Memory as Paranoia and Literary Construction (Don DeLillo)" in *Modernization and the Crisis of Memory: John Donne to Don DeLillo*.

²³ According to Verena Conley, the term *habitus* was coined by Marcel Mauss, who applied it as "a convention established by reigning cultural discourses, of which individual speech is an extension" (Conley 6). Used in differing ways by numerous critics, Conley argues that the concept of *habitus* serves universally to "[analyze] how structures determine practices" (6). I will use *habitus* to indicate habitual frameworks of mimesis in language.

and context within the world of the novel. This shifting back and forth between reference-levels creates a focus on the relation of the part to the whole and asks the reader to consider framing.

DeLillo frequently uses Free-Indirect Discourse (hereafter, FID) and focalizes without using quotations. In combination with parataxis, this technique allows DeLillo to emphasize the importance of characters' (and readers') framing of material. According to Ricouer, Emile Benveniste shows that all discourse, in utterance as well as in sentences, is in one aspect autoreferential (*Rule of Metaphor* 86). Sentence-level parataxis with focalization creates an ambiguity wherein speech is merely the author's but belongs simultaneously to the characters in the novel's world. We can see this ambiguity in a scene portraying the actual historical events of October 18, 1967. The events are focalized through young Marian Bowman, later Nick's wife. Students stage "DowDay," at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, where Dow holds a hiring fair. While the city is overtaken by riots, the radio station is "seemingly taking part" (*U* 599). As "the usual guarantees" are upended and "something had happened in the night to change the rules of what is thinkable," (*U* 598) DeLillo asks the reader to question the rules of textual interpretation. Marian "began to understand that the riot out there, if that's what it was, was being augmented and improved by a simulated riot on the radio" (*U* 599). The radio invades the real world; DeLillo's formal approach to narration mirrors this invasion textually. While the section begins by introducing the radio's announcements with "the radio said," the radio's announcements subsequently appear without attribution to speaker or source:

Faculty Document 122 authorizes force against students.

(quoted from *U* 599)

DeLillo mediates the framing of the radio's announcements through the elision of pronouns and attribution to speakers. For instance:

The radio said, Kafka without the f is kaka. Yes, we are talking about waste, we are talking about fertilizer, we are talking about waste and weapons, we are talking about ANFO, the bomb that begins in the asshole of a barnyard pig.

PigPigPigPigPigPigPig. (*U 600*, my emphasis)

Narrative focalization shifts from “the radio said” to the radio’s own speech in “*we are talking.*” This process culminates in the appearance of text without a pronoun, syntax, or narrative framing, separated from the paragraphs preceding and following: “PigPigPigPigPigPigPig.” The reader knows it is the radio’s speech represented; the lack of grammatical or syntactical framing leads the reader to interpret the passage as the repeated sound, “Pig,” emanating ostensibly from the radio. Yet the textual representation of words without space between them creates the sculptural quality of an untrammelled language event (a previously unrecognized signifier). This textual anomaly combines with paratactic construction and shifting focalization to create confusion over reference in the construction of meaning. The reader is forced to acknowledge the reference to their own experience of the text’s language. DeLillo emphasizes the experience of language here; language becomes referent, attaches to character and context, and creates events, but also provides a “ceremonial” event in the reader’s engagement with the text.

DeLillo uses of parataxis and FID in this way to simultaneously indicate several possible frames of reference²⁴. Though common frames of reference give significance to objects and events, DeLillo offers the possibility of considering significance through multiple narrative frames that indicate differing temporalities, and systems of value-creation. Klara Sax’s artwork

²⁴ Fred C. Robinson’s analysis of parataxis in *Beowulf* is especially relevant here. He argues that the poet of *Beowulf* uses parataxis to stimulate his listeners’ “powers of inference and the ability to entertain two simultaneous points of view that are necessary for the resolution of poignant cultural tensions”; he argues that the stylistic quality of “implicitness or logical openness” in parataxis (or what he calls the appositive style) is key to achieving the poet’s aim (in *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, pp. 13-14).

defamiliarizes objects by reframing them. If the Cold War provides a common determinant of realist perspective, a system of relations signified by the synecdoche of ever-circling B-52 bombers, Klara's art intends to question the meaning of American culture's activity by placing its objects in the larger narrative, generic, and temporal frames of the desert southwest. When Klara describes her artwork, where she and a crew of volunteers repaint B-52's, what she "want[s] to get at is the ordinary life behind the thing" (*U* 77). The bombers are used as a reference point for the social history that produced them. Klara's art places the bombers in terms of the scale of values (temporal and otherwise) provided by the desert: "It's the framing device. It's the four-part horizon," she says (*U* 70). *Underworld* explores the temporal and historiographical relationships of American culture to its objects, as well as the ambitions that produce material life. Klara's art indicates that our values create temporality. The framework by which we measure defines the nature of events. The Cold War era's dissolution means it "will no longer be the main—what do I want to say," asks Marvin Lundy...."Point of reference," answers Brian Glassic (*U* 170). Klara interprets this system of reference in terms of power, which "meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing.... You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction" (*U* 76). Social conditions, material objects, and the narratives through which they are interpreted mutually reinforce a common temporality. Klara's art seeks to defamiliarize people's relation to objects and to redefine values. DeLillo's formal techniques throughout *Underworld* push the reader to question how narrative acts give temporality and meaning to objects, actions, and events.

DeLillo's *Underworld* portrays historiography as a social, as well as a subjective, process. DeLillo uses parataxis and FID in his narrative of the 1952 National League

Championship to map the process whereby many particulars acquire the (mythologizing) status of common social history. Early in the chapter, DeLillo writes that “There’s a man in the upper deck leafing through a copy of the current issue of *Life*. There’s a man on 12th street in Brooklyn who has attached a taped machine to his radio so he can record the voice of Ross Hodges broadcasting the game” (*U* 32); the man in the upper deck is left without any immediate further description, but appears again later in this chapter: “Look at the man in the upper deck. He is tearing pages out of his copy of *Life* and dropping them uncrumpled over the rail, letting them fall in a seesaw drift on the bawling fans below.” Previously isolated, he becomes a part of the larger narrative; “he is moved to do this by the paper falling elsewhere, the contagion of the paper” (*U* 38). As the pages fall from *Life* magazine, there is an obvious but noteworthy distinction between the magazine’s pages where the objects are advertised and the objects themselves: “Pages dropping all around them, it is a fairly thick issue—laxatives and antacids, sanitary napkins and corn plasters and dandruff removers” (*U* 44). The “issue” refers to both the things advertised and to the magazine itself. When Jackie Gleason vomits soon after this passage, his puke is “liquidy smooth in the lingo of adland”; the discourse of the magazine informs the interpretation of the world. DeLillo foregrounds the place of discourse in the conception of a shared cultural event.

DeLillo’s baseball game is a metaphor for the complicated intertextuality of American culture. The meaning of the game extends beyond its immediate participants to “the woman cooking cabbage. The man who wishes he could be done with drink. They are the game’s remoter soul” (*U* 32). Just as the readers of a text bring something to a text that doesn’t properly belong to it, so the audience provides the game’s “remoter soul.” “The Triumph of Death” is written in a free-indirect style that further complicates the ascription of events to one actor or

another. The narrative is focalized through the radio play-by-play man, Russ Hodges, as signaled by pronouns—“Russ describes,” “he sees,” etc. Yet this more mediated speech is interspersed with text appearing without ascription to a speaker and separated from surrounding paragraphs.

For example:

He describes people standing in the aisles and others moving down toward the field.

Irving dropping the weighted bat. (*U* 35)

The use of present-progressive tense in ‘dropping’ refers the reader to Hodges’ radio play-by-play. Yet the sentence “Irving dropping the weighted bat” also indicates a progression of the action on the field as told by the novel; FID calls the readers’ attention to the forms of mimesis through which the event is interpreted. In “The Power of History,” DeLillo writes of his experience listening to the actual (historical) broadcast of the game when writing *Underworld*. We can thus consider the fictional mimesis at several levels. The broadcast is itself document of history. DeLillo’s fictionalization thus comments on how societal events acquire historical status, and gestures obliquely toward his fiction’s own role in figuring the “voice of history,” or what Ermarth calls the “Narrator as Nobody” (*Sequel to History* 27). DeLillo makes his readers aware of his intertextual intention by mimicking the style of the play-by-play in his description of Toots Shor’s interaction with Jackie Gleason:

The pitcher takes off his cap and rubs his forearms across his hairline. Big Newk. Then he blows in the cap. Then he shakes the cap and puts it back on.

Shor looks at Gleason. (*U* 33)

As in DeLillo’s narrative of the student protests in Madison, varying levels of textual reference point the reader’s attention to the frames whereby particularities are subordinated to a narrative

syntax that enables collective history and temporality. Collective history arises from narrative, gathering significance from the relation of frames of discourse.

DeLillo uses the capacity of parataxis and FID to signal ambiguity between the subjectivity and objectivity of language in order to question how characters ascribe temporality to events. DeLillo uses the ambiguity of parataxis to create multiple and overlapping temporal structures. A section of *Underworld* focalized through Chuckie Wainwright sheds light on DeLillo's exploitation of this formal dynamic. Chuckie is recounting the "Ballad of Louis Bakey," a story he has heard his fellow-pilot recount a few times before. Louis's tale recounts the pilot's actual exposure to a nuclear bomb as he flew over it as an unwilling and unwitting test subject. While the story is told through Chuckie's inner dialogue, Chuckie and Louis drop bombs from high over Vietnam in real time. DeLillo uses parataxis to alter the reader's awareness that Chuckie focalizes the speech. Facts and details are presented paratactically, but directly from Louis's perspective, as though Louis tells the story:

Whole plane's blacked out. Windows shielded by curtain pads covered with Reynolds Wrap. Crew holding pillows over eyes. Little nylon pillows that smell to Louis intriguingly like a woman's underthings.

A volunteer medic sits in a spare seat with five inches of string hanging out of his mouth and a tea-bag tag at the end of it. He has swallowed the rest of the string, which holds an x-ray plate coated with aluminum jelly, dangling somewhere below the esophagus, to measure the radiation passing through his body.

Louis does his phony countdown and waits for the flash. A strong and immortal young man on a noble mission.

"Three, two, one."

Then the world lights up. A glow enters the body that's like the touch of God. And Louis can see the bones in his hands through his closed eyes, through the thick pillow he's got jammed in his face. (*U* 613)

DeLillo's narration changes from Louis's reported speech to Chuckie's mediation of Louis's rendition of the tale ("Louis does his phony countdown..."). DeLillo uses the present tense, and a lack of pronouns, to mediate the event's action by the consciousness of a speaker—in order to create an immediacy in the experience of action. The shift is notable from the sentence "then the world lights up," which is without a pronoun, but still consciously marked by the use of "then" as narrated time. The next sentence shifts into present tense, objective experience: "A glow enters the body that's like the touch of God." The lack of mediation through pronouns or assigned speaker removes the action from its relevant contexts, and gives the event an existence coordinated temporally at several levels: 1) the time of its occurrence in Louis's life; 2) its time of telling by Louis; 3) its retelling through Chuckie's thought; 4) a time without framing, the objective and eternal. The sentence that follows returns the narrative to Louis's perspective. DeLillo presents actions whose pertinence in time the reader must determine; frequent shifts in focalization point attention to shifting frames of reference. DeLillo poses the action as potentially figurative in eternal temporality; the reader must determine figurative significance of the language by a process of determining temporal pertinence²⁵ and impertinence. The reader generates an awareness of framing's role in creating temporality by locating the temporal resonances of objects, actions, and speech presented paratactically, without quotations or the attribution to a particular speaker. This should lead the reader to question how he or she frames

²⁵ For more on the roles of pertinence and impertinence in metaphor, see Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, pp. 183-84.

the history of the Cold War that DeLillo narrates; the reader's framing is equivalent to a conception of horizon, one that would contribute to periodization.

DeLillo's use of parataxis to present speech unframed by syntax questions the process whereby we accept common historiography and sheds light on the political implications of historiography. In the Christian tradition, all things appear in their true light only in the eyes of the eternal—as Corinthians 13:12 argues, “For now we see in a mirror darkly, but then we shall see face to face” (*The Bible*, NRSV). Ermarth shows how this idea was reflected in medieval painting. Figures were presented singularly and without realistic framework, as they would appear before eternity (*Realism and Consensus* 6-16).²⁶ As Bakhtin points out, “all language “arises from man's need to ... objectify himself,” (67). Parataxis serves to bring awareness to the contexts that establish authenticity. In terms of temporality and historiography, *Underworld's* uses of parataxis show how frame and reference mediate language's relationship to time. The second chapter of this thesis will show how *Underworld's* situation in, and thematic focus, on the Cold War sheds light on the role of framing in mediating the relationship of discourse to time.

²⁶ Erich Auerbach argues Augustine establishes a stylistic relation to eternity through parataxis in *Mimesis* pp 70-75.

2 Chapter Two: History's Immanence: Language, Frame, and Parataxis

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic argues that all language presupposes an author's address to an audience ("The Problem of Speech Genres" 91). Language-use connotes an author, an implied author, and a hearer. Discourse is situated historically, whether or not the historical situation is emphasized by speaker or audience. Many critics have commented that DeLillo's novels explore the possibilities for religious or mystical experience of language.²⁷ Yet none have explored how a mystical experience of language also entails a relation to history and time. *Underworld* provides an extended meditation on the relationship of language to time.

Amy Hungerford cites DeLillo's statement in a letter to reader Jon Jackson that "fiction, as least as I write it and think of it, is a kind of religious meditation in which language is the final enlightenment" ("Don DeLillo's Latin Mass" 373). Hungerford concludes that DeLillo's novels evidence language "becom[ing] ... the instance of something like divine immanence" ("Don DeLillo's Latin Mass" 374). Hungerford quotes Sister Edgar's assertion that language is "a retaining medium that keeps the moment whole, all the moments, the swaying soulclap raptures and the unspoken closeness" (*U* 824), suggesting that this experience of language takes the place of plot in DeLillo's work. Hungerford argues that "plots can't do [the] ultimately spiritual work" accomplished by language (*Postmodern Belief* 74). In order to better understand how the "the religious meditation" that DeLillo sees in language is situated in time and history, I will examine more closely the relation DeLillo proposes between language and plot in *Underworld*.

Plot can be understood as a structured chronological enfolding of the action that adds to the meaning of the action. *Underworld* does propose an order in the series of events, one which

²⁷ See Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*; John McClure, *Partial Faiths*; Mark Eaton, *Inventing Hope*; Peter Schneck, "The Great Secular Transcendence," in *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction*; Kyle Garton-Grundling, *Enlightened Individualism*; Robert McMinn, "Underworld: Sin and Atonement," and David Cowart, *Don DeLillo, the Physics of Language* and "Shall These Bones Live?"

could add to its meaning. Yet, as Thomas Hill Schaub argues, “DeLillo makes no effort to develop suspense or set up the moment of discovery as one of resolution” (71). The novel’s historical situation of events moves from 1991 towards 1952. The countdown structure moves backwards in time as the reader’s knowledge progresses, towards Nick’s accidental killing of George with a shotgun. This has led Samuel Cohen to see in DeLillo’s arrangement the inevitable ends contained in the seed of beginnings (198). I began by discussing Nick’s inability to transform the fragmented events that comprise his killing of George into a causal narrative. Nick’s quest to understand the progression of the fragments of his life through narrative mirrors DeLillo’s attempts to organize fragments of American history in *Underworld*. The jest invoked by DeLillo’s arrangement (one which Cohen takes at face value) emphasizes the problematic nature of historiography. DeLillo juxtaposes two other historical events as foundational²⁸ to the temporality and to the arrangement of *Underworld*: the “Shot Heard Round the World” that won the National League Pennant and the Soviets’ second test of an atomic bomb. As numerous commentators on *Underworld* have argued,²⁹ DeLillo asks readers to question the causal relationships that historical contiguity proposes. His novel argues that historiography organizes events according to the structures of its own logic. DeLillo engages this logic by considering the role of figurative mimesis in historiography.³⁰

The questionable status accorded to teleology by the author’s arrangement leads the reader of *Underworld* to question how form adds to meaning in the novel. *Underworld*’s diverse

²⁸ Ricoeur discusses the importance of “founding events” in creating calendrical periodization in *Time and Narrative*, Volume Three, 106.

²⁹ The mythologizing tendency of history in *Underworld* is asserted by numerous commentators on *Underworld*. See Catherine Morley in *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction* and Donald Greiner, “Don DeLillo, John Updike, and the Sustaining Power of Myth.”

³⁰This inquiry derives from Ricoeur’s conclusion in Volume 1 of *Time and Narrative* that “temporality is brought to language to the extent that language configures and refigures temporal experience” (54).

approaches to temporality include historical dating and referents. In order to understand how individual instances of discourse contribute to meaning at the level of the work, we can look to Ricoeur's analysis in *Time and Narrative*. He asserts that plot emerges in contemporary novels through the figurative value developed in tropes.³¹ I will show how form and language describe a relationship to time in *Underworld*. The novel examines historiographic logic in terms of the figurative value of narrative mimesis. DeLillo leads the reader of *Underworld* to understand its teleology as the unfolding of a metaphor and proposes a temporality that emerges in accordance with the values created by figuration. Ricoeur explores the nature of metaphorical speech in *The Rule of Metaphor*. In his study of Aristotle, he argues that metaphor has been understood to function primarily at the level of the word, tracing a disconnect from the understanding of metaphor's function at the level of discourse. Ricoeur shows that Aristotle sees *muthos* (emplotment) working through *lexis* (word/ figure). For Aristotle, he explains, the function of *muthos* (also understood as arrangement) is to show readers *how* an action happens. He finds that narrative's metaphorical value at the level of discourse works to elevate meaning at the level of *muthos*, making present a "being-in-the world" at this level of plot, also seen by Aristotle as "an action that occurs." The figurative value of tropes contributes to our understanding of *how* the action occurs. Ricoeur also argues in *The Rule of Metaphor* that in discourse, and in particular the sentence, "language passes outside of itself," to that to which language refers (85). The force of mimesis hence consists in its ability to "connect [the] referential function to the revelation of the Real as Act" (*Rule of Metaphor* 43-48). Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor's role in emplotment allows us to see how the figurative value of discourse can translate into "an action that occurs," that is, "plot."

³¹ See *TN*, Volume Two, pp. 7-28, "The Metamorphoses of the Plot."

Underworld's thematic deployment of parataxis illustrates the problematic bridge between instances of discourse and *telos*, "plot." Parataxis positions instances of discourse as some way singular and individual; the arrangement of each utterance next to one another both creates and limits the ambiguity of figurative meaning offered by individual utterances. These individual instances of discourse are figurative of temporal relationships. Similarly, the temporal reference of individual terms derives from their interaction with surrounding terms. DeLillo's uses of parataxis and FID generate and limit figurative impertinence in the temporal-value of utterances. The fragments in *Underworld* acquire referential value from the limitation of impertinence, both from application to the scope of characters and to the frames presented by the world of the novel.³² Though the novel presents fragments, each of these fragments can be considered in terms of discourse and frame. The reader then finds the pertinence of the work's various terms (fragments) by considering the pertinence of disparate fragments (instances of frame and discourse). By presenting history through fragments, DeLillo asks the reader to establish a new equivalence to the narrative terms of history (fragments), with metaphor considered not as substitution, but as new meaning. For A.J. Greimas, as read by Ricoeur, the function of narrative is to change potential values (of characters and narrative actors).³³ Considered as a whole, *Underworld* shows how our narration of the historiography of the Cold War creates the potential of a metaphor, a change that occurs, in the relation of language to material reality. DeLillo argues in "The Power of History" that language "delivers us, paradoxically, from history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs, its arrangement of stark

³² See Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 183-84.

³³ See Ricoeur, *TN*, Volume Two, pp. 44-60, "The Narrative Semiotics of A.J. Greimas."

pages, and ... allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate.” *Underworld* invests history with new figurative potential.³⁴

The ceremonial experience of language in *Underworld* acquires a temporal dimension through the interaction of focus and frame. The figurative tropes of metonymy ask the reader to consider the temporal framing of its discourse in differing ways; this thesis has so far discussed the comparison to the eternal and to the “now” of the reader, for example.³⁵ These frames are superimposed on the framing devices offered by the world of the text; these include the scope that characters see their own worlds through, as well as the frame of common historiographical referents provided by historical dating and events. The novel’s quasi-divorce from chronological time makes the framing of human action by time central to *Underworld*’s effort to establish the figurative value of its own language. The conditions that mark different historical periods are diverse, as are the identities of characters. The young Nick Shay is a different narrator in his youth than when he presents the world in his maturity. The differing values these diverse settings and perspectives create through the relationship of language to the material world compose a temporal ecology.³⁶ What I indicate by this is the temporal qualities inherent in the unfolding of a metaphor.

DeLillo’s book asks the reader to refigure their narrations of history. In the example used earlier in this essay, the reader locates the sentence “a glow enters the body that’s like the touch of God” in the contexts of the original speaker (Louis Bakey), narrator (Chuckie Wainwright),

³⁴ Similarly, Paul Gleason writes that “DeLillo proposes art and language as means by which the individual can reinvent and redeem the waste that defines America in the second half of the twentieth century” (130).

³⁵ For more on the “now of the reader” and its relation to narrative temporality, see *Time and Narrative*, Vol. Two, pp. 61-99, “Games with Time.”

³⁶ What I call ecology in regard to time is relational, just as Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth calls temporality “rhythm” in *Sequel to History*; however, her conception of a purely relational temporal “rhythm” is particular to parataxis and to postmodernism. *Underworld*’s temporality is conceived through the reader’s reckoning; modernist and realist historiography (in the forms of chronological dating and historical referents) overlap with postmodern temporality, leaving the ultimate determination of reference (and thus of temporality) to the reader.

the author (DeLillo), the text (*Underworld*), as well as the historical referent (nuclear testing in the American desert southwest during the 1940s and 1950s). As I asserted earlier, the use of Free-Indirect Discourse and parataxis creates an awareness of narratorial framing. The sentence “a glow enters the body that’s like the touch of God” has ambiguous connotations. In this sentence, DeLillo connotes the primordial contact of God and Adam portrayed by Michelangelo in his *Sistine Chapel*. Yet the metaphor’s evocation of wonder and eternity (an instance of discourse untouched by time, in present tense narration and un-mediated by pronouns) is immediately limited in the mind by the connotations of death and disease implied by the bomb. A reader’s knowledge of the temporal consequences of nuclear testing and weaponry is the most important factor in limiting the impertinent metaphorical value of this sentence and accordingly, defining temporal value. The reader’s process of limitation through the novel’s focalizers further defines its pertinence. DeLillo examines how the framing of discourse creates its figurative and temporal values. If DeLillo proposes the immanence of language, he also proposes the immanence of language in history: acts of narration propose relationships to the past and create relationships for the future. As Ricoeur writes, “the narrative function, taken in its full scope, is ultimately defined by its ambition to refigure our historical condition and thereby to raise it to the level of historical consciousness.”³⁷ Modes of historiography and narration are themselves proposed as essential contributors to the ecology of temporal relations. This essay will show how temporality emerges as a quality of discourse as metaphor in *Underworld*. I will show how DeLillo explores the roles of knowledge, capital, and historiography in framing discourse during the Cold War era. This ecology can be mapped in the text’s stances toward narration, using the concepts of focus and frame.

³⁷ In *TN*, Volume Three, 102.

2.1 Narration: Mimesis and Images

DeLillo's historiographic approach to the Cold War period examines the figurative significance of paranoia as a narrative procedure. DeLillo examines how narration figures a relation to a world of objects; in terms of Ricoeur's conception of mimesis¹⁻³, DeLillo examines, through his characters' thought processes, the full mimetic cycle whereby narrative refigures a relation to the outside world. Numerous commentators on *Underworld* have examined the role of images in mediating the real. I will show how DeLillo uses images to evaluate the figurative value of mimesis; this will shed light on the role of figuration in creating the temporal ecology of mimesis in *Underworld*. The novel suggests that images play a notable role in framing the popular imagination during the Cold War period in America. In "The Power of History," DeLillo connects the mediums of our age (or of the late 1990s) to the temporality of narrative. He writes that "the microwave, the VCR remote, the telephone redial button and other time-collapsing devices may make us feel that our ordinary household technology reflects something that flows through the deep mind of the culture, an impatient craving for time itself to move faster." *Underworld* asks readers to consider American culture's reflective capacity in terms of the mimetic value of its narration—the value of its narration in terms of what Ricoeur calls application.³⁸ DeLillo writes of the famous faces in contemporary culture that "you can't figure out who the person is inside the name or what the context is that gave such abrupt prominence to the name, but it never actually matters and this is the point" ("The Power of History"). We can see this loss of humanity in the fame gained through media in *Underworld*.³⁹ In the following

³⁸ Ricoeur borrows the term 'application' from Hans George Gadamer in *TN*, Volume Three (in "The World of the Text and the World of the Reader," esp. pp. 157-160; he separates it from the term 'reference,' using 'application' to refer to refiguration.

³⁹ Timothy Parrish notes DeLillo's interest in the "material and narrative effects of technology" (in *Underworlds* 86); Kathleen Fitzpatrick cites Baudrillard's contention in "History, a Retro Scenario" that the "mythical energy" of events is debased by the forms of our narration. See also Randy Laist, *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels*.

section I will examine how the quality of narrative mimesis contributes to the figurative value of historiography in *Underworld*.

In *Underworld*, the constant media replay of home video footage of random and terroristic murders committed by Richard Henry Gilkey, a man who shoots people on the interstate dubbed “the Texas Highway Killer,” serves as the exemplar of the narrative mimesis created by television. Matt Shay’s character traces the relationship of this narrative frame to human reality. Matt hears the “odd sound of the caller’s voice, leveled-out, with faint tremors at the edges, odd little electronic storms, like someone trying to make a human utterance out of itemized data” (*U* 217). The medium disembodies Gilkey just as it disembodies news anchor Sue Ann Corcoran, mimetically reproducing them as mere simulacra. “The green eyes [Sue’s] peered away from the screen. And the altered voice went on, talking in that flat-graphed way...” (*U* 217). Matt begins to interpret her movements according to the semiotic system of the news broadcast: “Her elbows rested on the desk now, hands tucked together beneath her chin. Matt wondered what this meant. Every position meant a shift in the news” (*U* 217). The semiotic system of the newscast is self-referential; television’s mimesis erases the reference that the broadcaster’s position could carry to her everyday human existence (mimesis₃).

DeLillo links the media’s effect on refiguration in Matt Shay’s analysis of employment (mimesis₂). Matt sees a “searing realness” (*U* 157) in a home video shot by a child that catches accidentally one of the Highway’s Killer’s murders. This tape imposes a structure on experience, as it is “the nature of any footage...to give things a shape and a destiny” (*U* 157). Matt reflects on the paradoxical ability of the home video to structure experience. The medium’s lack of organization by event guides the viewer’s conception of its *telos* (mimesis₂), creating “a jostled sort of noneventness,” that is “‘blunt,’ ‘aimless,’ and ‘relentless’” (*U* 156). This lack of narrative

structure leads Matt to reflect that “the world is lurking in the camera, already framed” (*U* 156). The child’s footage causes Matt to see the narrated quality in everyday life, where “the things around you have a rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look” (*U* 157); his perception of the film defamiliarizes and refigures Matt’s relationship to the objects of everyday life (mimesis₃). Matt notes the technological means by which the child gains a part in history: “It is the camera that puts her in the tale” (*U* 157). He directs the reader towards an examination of narration in terms of mimesis.

The “reality” of the values that mimesis instills has an important relation to historiography in *Underworld*. DeLillo writes of “the debasing process of frantic repetition that exhausts a contemporary event before it has rounded into coherence” (“The Power of History”). Similarly, Philipp Wegner cites Slavoj Žižek’s assertion that in order to assume a place in the symbolic order as law, and thus its significance in historical narrative, events must recur (56). Wegner argues that *Underworld*, and the 1990s, more generally, are “wedged between the traumatic Real and its still absent symbolic repetition” (57). Ricoeur asserts that history does not claim to represent the past, but a “standing-in-for” the past.⁴⁰ History derives its truth-value from its claim to represent events that actually occurred, while poetry and literature claim figurative truth-value. In “The Power of History,” DeLillo argues for the consequences of narrative mimesis for the temporal being of humanity: “The quick and pitiless end of such a person’s career is inherent in the first gathering glimmers of fame. This is how time is collapsed.” DeLillo examines the ability of societal forms of narration to inscribe historic events with figurative significance, in order that their symbolic repetition might allow them to take a place in the narrative structure of societal historiography. He argues that as he found them preserved in radio

⁴⁰ See *TN*, Volume Three, pp 144-156, “The Reality of the Past.”

broadcast before writing his novel, “Thomson and Hodges are unconsumed. And the work a novelist may do in examining the recent or distant past may strike him as similarly blessed...” (“The Power of History”). DeLillo thus proposes the role of mimesis in creating a temporality that respects and preserves the dignity of human experience.

2.2 Paranoia and the Mythology of History

DeLillo accords to narrative mimesis the power to inscribe events in the symbolic order of history or as DeLillo suggests, “debas[e]” them (“The Power of History”). DeLillo grounds the basis for our thinking about the events of history in terms of their consequences for refiguration of reality.⁴¹ Paranoia is presented as a historical phenomenon, but moreover serves to illuminate contemporary perspective towards historiography, mythology, and knowledge. If paranoia serves as a figurative paradigm for the book’s inquiry into historiography and “connection,” it is not one that the book finally endorses. Rather, *Underworld*’s formal tactics position methods of narration as central to establishing a responsible relation to material reality through representation.

In relation to knowledge, parataxis again proves central to DeLillo’s project; narrative framing refigures orientation toward the particular. The paradigm of paranoia that surrounds the systems that shape life during the Cold War in *Underworld* leads characters to doubt their ability to act meaningfully. Matt ponders the meaning of fragments in terms of their participation in different frameworks. During his time serving the army in Vietnam, Matt reads photographs: “When he found a dot on the film he translated it into letters, numbers, coordinates, grids, and entire systems of knowledge” (*U* 463). He questions his knowledge of the reality that the dots

⁴¹ Timothy Parrish sees the importance of history’s narration in *Underworld* primarily in terms of postmodernity’s debasement of the real, arguing that “the US government itself authorizes its own story through endless media recreations of fictional news events made to placate an audience eager to be deceived” (in *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse* 216). The Trump administration would surely call this false news.

represent: “When he found a dot on the film he tried to make a determination. It was a truck or a truck stop or a tunnel entrance or a gun emplacement or a family grilling burgers at a picnic....” (U 463). In the environment of Vietnam his necessary preoccupation with sign and signified warps into paranoia; he cannot but be shaken by the inconsistencies of life as a soldier and “rumours about a secret war” (U 462). His identifications of signs (dots on the photographs) have consequences that he cannot predict: “The dots he marked with his grease pencil became computer bits in Da Nang, Sunday brunch in Saigon and mission briefings in Thailand, he guessed, or Guam” (U 465). This disconnect between sign and signified leads Matt to question the meaning of particulars in terms of the family of systems their presence represents. The mysterious intermarriage of governmental, industrial, and capital systems creates confusion over the frameworks through which he should interpret phenomena. He notices that “The drums resembled cans of frozen Minute Maid enlarged by a crazed strain of DNA” (U 463) and asks himself, “how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?” (U 465). “Orange juice” is framed by its potential connection to the military-industrial system that produces agent-orange, tingeing its semantic or figurative value by contiguity with corrosive and cancerous agents of war. At first glance, Matt seems to be mired in paranoia. However, Matt’s process of questioning frameworks provides an ironic inquiry into the habits of dubious connection that comprise paranoid thinking, one that eventually leads him towards responsibility.

Matt’s inner disquisition on dots (fragments) and systems questions his paranoia as it makes it present. He sees that history mythologizes.⁴² A picture of Ralph Branca and Bobby

⁴² Catherine Morley argues in *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary Literature* that *Underworld* shows this tendency of history to mythologize. See also Donald Greiner, “Don DeLillo, John Updike, and the Sustaining Power of Myth.”

Thompson, the pitcher and hitter involved in the “Shot Heard Round the World,” hangs in the Quonset hut where Matt identifies dots. In the picture of Branca and Thompson, Matt sees “the binary, black-white yes-no zero-one hero-goat” (*U* 466), the reductive mythology that effaces a complex history full of fragments. He dwells on the words sprayed on a supply hut, “*Om mani padme hum*,” and tries to reconcile this message of peace with the violence that surrounds him. He catches the brain’s tendency to make connections among contiguous, but incongruent items: “Om does not rhyme with bomb. It only looks that way” (*U* 466). DeLillo questions the connection of the bomb to the baseball game Matt makes when glancing at the picture of Branca and Thompson; he thinks it “could just as easily be Oppenheimer and Teller, their bodies greased with suntan oil as they quote Hindu scriptures to each other” (*U* 466). Elsewhere in *Underworld*, Albert Bronzini ridicules the newspaper’s juxtaposition of the baseball game with the Soviet launch on its front page. Matt’s final declaration in the passage cited above, “all technology refers to the bomb,” should be viewed with skepticism. The newspaper’s juxtaposition of the bomb with the baseball game was a historical fact that DeLillo saw and marveled at, as his writing in “The Power of History” tells us. DeLillo points the reader’s attention to the dubious connections created by contiguity. Matt’s creation of a parallel leads the reader to think skeptically about the novel’s own connection of the two events in “The Triumph of Death.” The pretended dependence of the novel’s narrative structure on this contiguity should cause the reader to question *how* the history of the Cold War is related to the narrative mimeses we associate with this historical period.

2.3 Systems, Responsibility, and Discourse

The ability to understand particulars in terms of systems is key to both the Shay brothers’ quests for agency and responsibility. Matt deliberates during Part Six of the novel on whether he

will act on his ethical qualms over the work he does as a scientist advancing the state of nuclear weaponry; many of his deliberations return through memory to his time during the Vietnam war, a time that shapes Matt's views of consequence. Matt enters the Vietnam War in order to be responsible where his father had failed to be. He "could not evade the sense of responsibility. It was there to be confronted. He did not want to slip away, sneak through, get off cheap, dodge, desert, resist, chicken out, turn tail, flee to Canada, Sweden or San Francisco, as his old man had done" (U 463). Yet Matt's time in Vietnam erodes his trust in his own agency. Matt finds himself "systemed under," and asks, "how can you tell the difference in syringes and missiles if you've become so pliant, ready to half believe everything and to fix conviction in nothing?" (U 466). Matt's uncertainty demonstrates the importance of knowledge and narration in creating the possibility for responsibility.

Matt's older brother Nick echoes his brother's loss of agency. Nick is content to be lapped by "The caress of linked grids that gives you a sense of order and command" (U 89). He is effectively charmed by his introduction into the corporate world, "the smart new world of microprocessors that read coded keys. I liked the buzz and click of the card in the lock. It signified connection. I liked the feeling of some power source accessible to those of us with coded keys" (U 303). For Sister Edgar, the unknowability of systems saps the agency of discourse. She laments "how the intersecting systems help pull us apart, leaving us vague, drained, docile, soft in our inner discourse, willing to be shaped, to be overwhelmed—easy retreats, half beliefs" (U 826). What is pulled apart is the connection of discourse to the particular—to a referent. As Mark C. Taylor argues of speculation in *Cosmopolis*, money has "no referent" in the real world (240). Nick, whose training with the Jesuits teaches him to identify, name, and distinguish one thing from another, laments the loss of presence and

substance in particular things, and connects this loss to capital. He says that the movement of “instantaneous capital... [makes] for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from the architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream” (*U* 786). Nick’s Jesuitical training teaches him to see and name parts in order to understand the whole; capital acts to obscure this relationship.

Nick’s analysis in “Das Kapital” interprets technology and capitalism as devices that frame (by obscuring) human relationships to the real world. If Nick asserts that capital annihilates particularity, *Underworld* shows elsewhere that Cold War consumerism distorts human relationship to objects through discourse. Numerous critics of *Underworld* have noted the close link in the novel between advertising’s discourse and the military-industrial complex.⁴³ *Underworld*’s Manhattan ad-executive Charlie Wainwright is a gleeful example of this marriage, for whom “Every third campaign featured some kind of play on weapons” (*U* 530). The mechanism through which discourse merges with products and systems of capital is illustrated in *Underworld* through parataxis. Parataxis holds separate one thing from another; readers joins words or sentences to an implied frame. DeLillo exploits this formal characteristic to show how American consumer capitalism uses discourse to imply its own narrative frames’ attachment to objects.

DeLillo’s portrayal of young Eric Deming’s household emphasizes consumer capitalism’s relationship to discourse through the use of parataxis. While parataxis holds words apart from each other, consumer capitalist discourse implies the connection of these single words to the sociological worlds it offers to its buyers. The promise these worlds offer is, to say the least, hollow. DeLillo’s defines 1950s consumerism by tying middle class American concepts of

⁴³ See Philip Wolf, *Modernization and the Crisis of Memory: John Donne to Don DeLillo* and Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*.

lifestyle to the availability of new products and vocabulary. Eric's mother is an example of the middle-class housewife proud of new material things and their shiny vocabulary: "all the things around her were important. Things and words. Words to believe in and to live by" (*U* 520).

These words are displayed in the novel paratactically in a list of two columns:

Breezeway	Car Pools
Crisper	Bridge Parties
Sectional	Broadloom

Eric's mother thinks the world to be very conveniently organized by products and the words that accompany them. Her diminished reflective capacity is shown by the combination of social world with product-name. Her *habitus* melds the boundaries between object, advertising, and discourse; she relishes this union in "'Jello': The word went anywhere, front or back or in the middle. It was a push-button word, the way so many things were push-button now, the way the whole world opened behind a button that you pushed" (*U* 517). Her son Eric's upbringing further illustrates the relationship of objects (as products) to discourse. Actions and their language are known in terms of products; the advent of the verb "simonizing" is one example, as Eric shouts "Hey Dad, saw you simonizing the car" (*U* 518). His father waxes the car, but the product's connotations, created through advertising, endow the act with social significance. This is marked societally by naming the act in terms of the product. Similarly, the infection of language by products forms desire, as: "Eric ate Hydrox cookies because the name sounded like rocket fuel" (*U* 519). Products fuel desire by projecting the consumer's participation in a social world (in this case the military wonders of Cold War prowess). If "longing on a large scale is what makes history," (*U* 11) *Underworld* shows how the complicity of the advertising industry with the military-industrial complex distorts human relationships to objects through discourse. The consequences for societal historiography are aptly diagnosed by Philipp Wolf. He argues

that *Underworld* shows a fifties consumerism that feeds on novelty and whose legacy is an instant amnesia. More than merely diagnosing the structural dynamics of consumerism,⁴⁴ DeLillo implicates a distorted *narrative* relationship in the creation of waste. DeLillo points to the role of discourse in perpetuating this depthless relationship of human action to material reality.

2.4 Framing an Ecology: Narration

Underworld explores the role of discourse in mediating human relationship to objects and to the environment. We have just examined the relation of discourse to the world of objects in the novel; DeLillo's inquiry into these relations should direct the reader to question how the novel's framing of its own discourse creates a figurative relation to the world represented by the work. We can view *Underworld*'s relation to its own discourse in terms of an ecology of mimesis. The narrative framing of objects through habitual relation is put into question by parataxis, as the first chapter of this thesis shows. Parataxis removes the organization of relationships between subject(s) and object(s), with several consequences. In a paratactic construction of nouns, no subject exists; in the earlier-discussed sentence "the bedding, the classroom, the canned food, the morgue," the presence of these nouns merely implies the subjects who built, produced, and used the objects that comprise the Abo Elementary School and Fallout Shelter. In terms of temporality, DeLillo asks his reader to consider the life-cycle of a can of beans, the concrete morgue, the fallout from nuclear testing, as well as the American society that produced these realities. The author does not imply temporality by an event; instead temporality is figured in terms of an implied ecology of relations. Readers supply all the

⁴⁴ Wolf argues convincingly that a decline in the organic memory of communities can be attributed to the fifties consumer's desire for novelty and persuasively ties fifties consumerism to the production of waste that is the focus of *Underworld*.

temporal characteristics of the world indicated—the time of people’s actions as well as their material, ecological, and spiritual consequences; “Ye shall know them by their fruits” is aptly applied to DeLillo’s novel (*KJV*, Matthew 7:16). We can see this ethical or spiritual aspect of ecology in the book’s Epilogue, when Nick visits a test-site in Kazakhstan with a potential business partner. Nuclear testing creates realms of human suffering: “disfigurations, leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function” (*U* 800). There is “*guilt* in every dosed object, the weathered posts and I-beams left to the wind, things made and shaped by men, old schemes gone wrong” (*U* 792, my emphasis). The ecology of relations that DeLillo proposes in *Underworld* is an order in which spiritual and material reality are closely tied.

Underworld puts narrative practices at the center of this ecology. DeLillo directs the reader’s attention to the full cycle of mimesis. We have examined the paranoia that governs Matt’s relationship to objects, tempting him towards irresponsibility. In terms of historiography, Matt’s paranoia is the exemplar of narrative equivocation in the face of history. His colleague Eric Deming tells him stories that he doesn’t believe of “downwinders,” people who lived downwind from test sites in Utah and Nevada, “for the edge. The bite. The existential burn” (*U* 406). Eric and Matt choose to consider the effects of nuclear technology mere myth. The uncertainty of knowledge masks consequence and erodes responsibility.⁴⁵ Though their responsibility does not deliver them from their troubled participation in systems, DeLillo’s characters do create narratives responsibly. Matt leaves his position in the nuclear weapons field. We can see the ability of narrative practice to offer the possibility for responsibility in Nick’s narration of goods in the supermarket:

⁴⁵ Mark C. Taylor points out that the question of the ball’s authenticity becomes symbolic for belief in the real (including the reality and threat of the bomb) in *Underworld* (193-94).

We didn't say, what kind of casserole will that make? We said, what kind of garbage would that make? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of? Can the package be recycled and come back as a tawny envelope that is difficult to lick closed? First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product as food or lightbulbs or dandruff shampoo. How does it measure up as waste, we asked. We asked whether it is responsible to eat a certain item if the package the item comes in will live a million years. (*U* 121)

Nick's narrative practice shows his awareness of the full cycle of Riceour's mimesis (1-3). He reads the world of objects (mimesis₁) differently because of his knowledge of their end. This reading capability allows him to make the narration of his actions consequential, and to assume responsibility for environmental decisions. John McClure reads Nick's recycling practices as empty routine.⁴⁶ As I will argue later in this chapter with regard to Sister Edgar's narrated routines, the emptiness of habitual practice is a plausible reading. DeLillo's purpose here is more to direct the reader to the methods whereby narrative organizes experience. Nick's strategies in assuming responsibility through corporate life are clearly without value, and his recycling may in fact act to repress or control an uncontrollable history and reality. As I will show, DeLillo's own uses of formulaic narrative argue for a reading of form (recycled and otherwise) as a problematic but necessary approach to the organization of fragmentary experience.

Nick's narration of his own reading practices assumes a formulaic character, one that describes his family's habitual procedures when faced with an object. Narration mediates Nick's conception of temporality. He narrates a temporal unfolding of the objects he sees in the material

⁴⁶ David Cowart reads Nick's recycling efforts as "freighted with dread," (59) and indicative of a need for a more general spiritual recycling. He interprets narrative recycling as an "inspired" aesthetic strategy (in "Shall These Bones Live?" 61).

world and his relation to them as an actor. DeLillo uses these narrative formulae throughout *Underworld* to create an ecology of narrative frame. Temporal framing contributes to the establishment of the figurative significance of discourse. In *Underworld*, the generation of figurative value from the text involves a consideration of the temporal frames through which the reader interprets discourse. This leads us to question how the temporality expressed in the novel contributes to its meaning—its metaphorical value at the level of “an action that occurs.” DeLillo leads the reader to understand temporality’s emergence in terms of the framing of discourse. This includes literature’s own framing of its discourse through conceptions of genre.

Underworld questions the political assumptions of epic; the book makes use of epic’s generic conventions with varying levels of irony. Formulaic phrases represent paradigms of action in response to varying conditions, mimicking the ‘type-scenes’ and formulae used frequently by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁴⁷ Nick’s descriptions of his family’s processes are formulaic and figurative. Nick’s acts (both in themselves and as acts of narration) are temporally and ethically figurative—they signify an ecological relation. DeLillo’s formulaic sentences indicate habitual actions; they remove themselves from the progressive action of the narrative in order to become descriptive (as does the imperfect tense in the French tongue). These descriptive phrases anatomize American culture,⁴⁸ yet still imply values. DeLillo utilizes the formulae of epic narration to describe the actions typical of characters’ approach via narration to differing times and places in

⁴⁷ See Mark W. Edwards and M.N. Nagler for more on “type-scenes” and formulae in Homeric epic. Edwards defines type-scenes as routines—repeated “actions and scenes [that] take standardized forms”; these can also be called “themes” (309). DeLillo’s uses of these type-scenes are parodic in that they are often underdeveloped, often expressed in a single sentence. Edwards points out the Homeric epic’s frequent use of epithets that include forms such as “He answered” (308); DeLillo’s single sentences mimic the routine of type scenes through formulaic epithet. For example, “She prayed and she thought” (*U* 251).

⁴⁸ Patrick O’Donnell places *Underworld* in the genre of the Anatomy. I argue that *Underworld*’s valuation of relationships in taking-stock makes it more appropriately an epic.

history. These narrative formulae are used by Homer in *the Iliad* and *Odyssey* to educate, demonstrating procedures which society habitually enacts and remembers in narrative.⁴⁹ DeLillo does not use the technique to imply the fixed societal conditions that epic narration supported in Homer's Greece but rather to illustrate how our conceptions of history emerge from the typicality of societal responses to varying conditions. DeLillo uses formulae to show paradigmatic narrative responses. As Nick Shay narrates his family's process of evaluating products, he does so through formulae: "First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product as food or lightbulbs or dandruff shampoo" (*U* 121). When a group of nurses faces the jeers and even violence of men in the streets on their way to work, they adapt by running from home to work and starting a buddy system to check on each other's safety. In DeLillo's description, "they figured it all out and posted it on a board. Then they changed into running shoes and waited for green" (*U* 567). These responses are figurative of relations beyond an individual time and place—the nurses' courage responds to the conditions of a particular time and place in American history—but moreover become figurative of historical period as it is characterized by human narration. In this way, DeLillo's technique mirrors that of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which characters' actions during life are figurative of a relation to the eternal.⁵⁰ This allegorical figuration can be compared to DeLillo's employment of an allegory in the presentation of setting described earlier in this essay.

⁴⁹ See Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*. Havelock's portrayal of the relationship between epic and society in Homeric Greece is a contested issue among scholars. Richard P. Martin pertinently argues that "epic...is on the level of ideology a metonymy for culture itself" (18). While not embracing the extent of Havelock's claims to the Homeric epics' educational reach, Kurt A. Raaflaub emphasizes the Homeric poets' ability to provide moral values to guide listeners through typical societal conflicts (62).

⁵⁰ See David L. Pike, "Underworld and the Architecture of Urban Space" for more on parallels to Dante's *Commedia*.

We can see how DeLillo's use of this trope signifies its temporal, literary, and figurative value in the example of Klara Sax. She narrates what's done in a nightclub in New York in the seventies: "First you laugh, then you dance" (*U* 590). Formulaic narration creates a narrative self-consciousness in *Underworld's* focalizers. Her focalization repeats the sentence, "she watched Mike and Acey dance" during this section; the sentence is meant to carry significance in and of itself, though Klara elaborates its meaning slightly in the surrounding passages (*U* 490). Repetition typifies this event as something habitual or figurative of this time in Klara's life and shows Klara's distance from her friends. Moreover, its repetition removes the phrase's potential to give new information in the narrative, giving the utterance literary and figurative significance instead. This leads readers to see Klara's narration as recollection or reflection. In this way, the book marks the artifice of formulaic narration in its focalizers and reveals its own techniques of historiography and narration, marking the techniques of its characters' historiography and its own reportage as literary and figurative.

DeLillo sometimes uses formulaic sentences in an unambiguous way to signify typical cultural perspectives toward situations, as when Nick Shay and his wife Marian visit a National Park in Arizona with their children and Marian begins to cry, remembering her mother's death. The typical disjunction between the parents' sense of serious events and the children's obliviousness to it all is indicated by the lawlike regularity: "And the kids were singing, 'Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall...'" (*U* 354). Here, typicality merely serves to illustrate the cultural background. More importantly, DeLillo uses these regular, lawlike narrative formulae to define conceptions of temporal periods.⁵¹ Nick Shay uses formulae to characterize the practices

⁵¹ Philip Wegner's statement that *Underworld* embraces a new reign of clichés is applicable here: "faire-faux becomes the sign of a new realism, in opposition to the making-true of old" (47).

that comprise his time in a Staatsburg correctional facility: “All that summer I shoveled snow and read books” (*U* 503). Rosemary focalizes the loneliness of a time in old age through practices: “She listened to the radio and did her work” (*U* 677). Yet DeLillo also uses formulaic sentences to describe moral and ethical relations during historical situations. In DeLillo’s portrayal of the Cuban Missile Crisis, “they kicked off their shoes and spilled their drinks.... A young man majoring in Wardrobe management chugalugged a glass of straight scotch, a stone’s throw from Cuba” (*U* 595). Here DeLillo’s narration paints an ironic portrait of a societal response to crisis. The regularity of the sentence’s procedures (“kicked off their shoes and spilled their drinks”) opposes the uniqueness of the threatened apocalypse. DeLillo’s temporal normalizing of the event (through these narrative formulae) defamiliarizes the missile crisis’s status in recorded history. His flattening of history serves to ironize the novel’s narration of history. Tony Tanner points out that DeLillo’s jargon-filled language in *Underworld* flattens difference. Similarly, these narrative formulae flatten time through their representation, but by doing so, they make evident the variegated terrain that narration hides. Showing the inauthenticity of narrative perspectives towards time, DeLillo exposes the authentic. A narrative relation to temporality thus becomes figurative of a relation to authenticity in *Underworld*. Though Philipp Wolf argues that simulacra are the symptom of forgetfulness in *Underworld*,⁵² I argue that the novel’s often ironic utilization of formulaic narration demands that its readers question societal modes of remembering, asking how narrative mimesis creates a relation to time and to history.

DeLillo’s use of paradigmatic narrative formulae emphasizes the mythologizing tendency of telos; as Northrop Frye writes, “every muthos implies an ironic retreat from reality” (qtd in

⁵² “Baseball, Garbage, and the Bomb: Don DeLillo, Modern, and Postmodern Memory” pp. 69-74.

Time and Narrative 17). This is doubly pertinent when applied to the diverse particularity of American history; we can apply Aristotle's conclusion that (as Ricoeur summarizes), "history is based on the particular, poetry rises towards the universal" (*Rule* 44). DeLillo shows characters' attempts to apply routine and creates his narrative by collecting these narrative approaches. DeLillo anatomizes a society narrating itself. He achieves his anatomy through collection, repetition, and variation of tropes, one of which is this formulaic sentence. I have discussed earlier the contributions of the metonymic trope, synecdoche, in parataxis. The statement, "the bedding, the canned food, the classroom, the morgue" acquires significance through its figurative implications. Since *Underworld* is composed of a series of fragments, formulaic sentences also function as metonymic fragments that imply a background of ecological relation or ironize the ecological background they imply (as in the case of the Cuban missile crisis).

2.1 Conclusion: Parataxis and Containment

DeLillo emphasizes the "ironic retreat before reality" that these narrative procedures partake as formulaic, mythical, and repetitive. The novel's narrative technique ironizes its own encounter with the complex historical reality it confronts.⁵³ Thomas Hill Schaub likens repetition in the novel to the children Albert Bronzini describes playing games, who "take the pockmarked world and make something bracing and rule-bound and smooth, and then spend the rest of their lives trying to repeat the process." He argues insightfully that repetition "collapses distinction and difference under the spatial inertia of an idea, a word" (76). Yet DeLillo's commentary on the refiguration available through mimesis is more ambiguous than the collapse Schaub reads. A section focalized by Sister Edgar exemplifies DeLillo's stance. Sister Edgar serves as a model of

⁵³ John Duvall argues that DeLillo's portrayal of baseball in "Pafko at the Wall" exemplifies an American longing for the ahistorical quality of myth ("Baseball as Aesthetic Ideology"). Donald Greiner contends that myth confronts death. I would argue instead that the self-conscious irony in DeLillo's mythologizing of historiographic narrative shows how myth and ritual both seek to efface or control change.

Cold War paranoia, one whom *Underworld* proposes as twin to J. Edgar Hoover. She suppresses with prayer and discipline her fears of AIDS, communism, uncleanliness, and life in general. DeLillo shows the narrative strategy through which she applies discipline: “She cleaned and she prayed.... She prayed and she thought” (*U* 251). These sentences typify her behavior. Yet the reader sees the hollowness of Sister Edgar’s routines; she cleans as compulsively as she prays, worrying because “she hadn’t cleaned the original disinfectant with disinfectant” (*U* 251). She goes on to conclude that her relationship to signs and symbols is corrupted: “And the regression was infinite because it is called infinite regression. You see how fear spreads beyond the pushy extrusions of matter into the elevated spaces where words play upon themselves” (*U* 251). DeLillo depicts her rituals through formulae, displaying the link of her action to formulaic narrative. Yet he also shows the problematic use of narrative to contain experience (and by extension, history). DeLillo’s own frequent use of formulaic sentences to universalize (typify) the particular throughout *Underworld* is thus ironized.⁵⁴ DeLillo’s ironizing of his own technique shows the inefficacy of ritual narration without attention. The formulae of epic were designed to reinforce the habitual practices of ancient societies; yet far from merely preaching the emptiness of repetition and narrative ritual, DeLillo’s intention is that readers should question how narrative practice creates temporality and figurative value. The reader’s ritual refiguration of historical narrative must be self-aware, attentive to the consequences of discourse in the figuration of the real. DeLillo’s ironic relation to generic convention suggests DeLillo’s confidence that the reader will respond skeptically and constructively to the novel’s

⁵⁴ DeLillo uses these formulaic sentences to show how characters approach their environments throughout *Underworld*. J. Edgar Hoover narrates the actions of men in a bathroom: “They unzipped and peed... They unzipped and zipped”....“They peed, they waggled, and they zipped” (*U* 577). Nick describes his family’s recycling habits: ““we bundle the newspapers but do not tie them in twine, which is always the temptation” (*U* 807).

historiographic and narrative techniques and question the relation of mimetic practice to the real.⁵⁵

DeLillo's "Epilogue" shows the importance of framing in deciphering the relationship of time to the material world, and thereby deriving the figurative value of discourse. Sister Edgar dreams of atomic detonations portrayed in cyberspace. She sees the word "peace" spelled out, an action that closes the text of *Underworld*. This has led Samuel Cohen to read *Underworld* as an effort to provide formal closure and containment to the period of the Cold War;⁵⁶ I argue that the book's meditation on genre provides a sense of closure that is, if anything, ironic. "Peace" is a word that "appears in the lunar milk of the data stream," in an imagined cyberspace, disembodied, without time or space, anticipating the technological simulacrum of eternity sought by the makers of the Convergence in DeLillo's 2017 novel *Zero K*. *Underworld* provides an extended meditation on the *situation* of the particularities of history, discourse, and the spirit through frame, space, and time.⁵⁷ DeLillo turns the containment that "peace" might provide inside out by situating the pronouncement of the word in cyberspace.⁵⁸ He writes that "you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world" (*U* 827), questioning, as Elise Martucci observes, the relationship between word and world, (141) but also the role of generic framework and medium in serving to "fit, fasten, bind together" (*U* 827) a word and its world.

⁵⁵ Lenny Bruce's comedic portrait of a woman in Centralia jestingly demonstrates the importance of the reader's skepticism in framing narration. The woman hears president John F. Kennedy speak of "maximum peril" and "Abyss of destruction" but thinks he's probably talking about a movie she's seen and refers the danger to the build-up of grease in her oven (*U* 508). Samuel Cohen and John McClure have noted this search for a relationship to the real in the character Lenny Bruce. Telling a joke about a woman who blows smoke rings through her vagina, he tries to steer the story towards the real-world conditions that might confront his character. His perspective moves from the lightness of comedy to the seriousness of epic; the emphasis in DeLillo's focalization is on narrative's possible relationship to the real.

⁵⁶ *After the End of History* 201

⁵⁷ DeLillo continues this meditation in *Zero K*

⁵⁸ Molly Wallace writes that peace is "a push-button word," sapped of its meaning by being placed in cyberspace. Yet DeLillo's emphasis throughout *Underworld* on the relation of discourse to the real indicates that his message is neither cynical nor hopeful, but rather directs our attention to the conditions that attach discourse to reality.

DeLillo's "Epilogue" positions the figurative value of discourse within an ecology of temporal, ethical, and material relations.

During a tryst with Donna, a swinger at an Arizona conference that Nick Shay attends as a waste-management professional, he reflects back on his effort to find a word "to penetrate the darkness," a monosyllabic word to be used to meditate on the unknowable mystery of God (*U* 296).⁵⁹ The initiative derives from Nick's Jesuitical training, and specifically from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th CE mystical text given to Nick by Father Paulus. As Nick tells Donna, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a guide to the contemplative life, teaches the disciple to seek God "through ...his unknowability" and "to develop a naked intent that fixes us to the idea of God" (*U* 295). He searches for "a word that is pure word, without a lifetime of connotation and shading" and lights for a moment on the word "*aiuto*," an Italian his father had used, which means "help" (*U* 296). Nick decides "*aiuto*" is too fraught with history. This instance shows Nick's continual movement away from a painful and thorny personal history, but the futility of his quest for a "word that is pure word" offers the reader a broader lesson. Because of its basis in discourse, Nick's meditation on the eternal necessitates historicity, a situation in relation to the past and to the future.

As Nick uses language to meditate on an eternal and unknowable God in time, Ricoeur ultimately confronts the inscrutability of time in its relation to narrative. Attempting to conclude *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur presents Aristotle's idea that we have "being in time" (*Volume 3* 262), or as *The Remembrance of Things Past* places us, "in the dimension of Time" (qtd in *Volume 3* 272). He likens time to the eternal in our inability to apprehend it from the outside, so to speak. Though he argues that time is necessarily singular,⁶⁰ this unity cannot support the

⁵⁹ cf. *The Cloud of Unknowing* 46

⁶⁰ *TN*, Volume Three, pp. 249-260

(discredited) conception of a totalized history. Ricoeur needs the concept of narrative identity (see *TN*, Vol. 3 246) in order to acknowledge the differentiation necessary in historicization. The Other (the past as different) must coexist with the Same (the constancy of identification), preserved through their relation in the Analogous. Though time is singular, Ricoeur dwells on Aristotle's statement that "things are in time as they are in number" (qtd in Vol. 3, 262). The totalization of time always relates the unitary and unchanging to the numerous and changing, only apprehended in metaphor. Ricoeur argues that the narrative identity of individuals and communities coheres in a dynamic unity that persists through collective historiography. He asserts that "the reaffirmation of the historical consciousness within its limits requires in turn the search, by individuals and by the communities to which they belong, for their respective narrative identities" (*TN* Vol. 3, 274). *Underworld* engages this search for narrative identity in several ways. By ironizing the epic mode, DeLillo questions the varying narrative identities that propose the totalization of history.⁶¹ As this essay has aimed to demonstrate, Ricoeur proposes narrative identity as that final mediation whereby language acquires limitation. Narrative identity manifests in narrative form. *Underworld* portrays identity in relation to the Cold War as a matter of skepticism involving knowledge, trust, and belief in the limits invested in discourse and narration.

Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity seeks to create a bridge between the poetics of narrative and the aporia of time. Yet Ricoeur argues that narrative can only serve as a metaphor for time. In the final paragraph of *Time and Narrative*, narrative identity comes to serve as the

⁶¹At one level, *Underworld* signals its attention to narrative identity through its acknowledgement of the historical disenfranchisement of the African American community, shown in the persons of Cotter and Manx Martin, whose tale is left out of the record of transmission of the Thompson homerun baseball. This omission is signaled textually by black pages that bookend sections that narrate the history of the Martin family. Unfortunately, the scope of this essay does permit an extended engagement with DeLillo's presentation of narrative identity through sociological category. For more on the role of community, historiography, and race in *Underworld*, see Matthew Mullins, *Postmodernism in Pieces*.

final arbiter of limits. I have used the concept of frame to indicate this final limitation of language. *Underworld*'s thematic dependence on parataxis shows how narrative identity accords limits to the figuration of time: it illustrates how discourse acquires meaning as figure, "an action that occurs," by asking the reader to question its frame. The novel uses parataxis to emphasize the reader's act of framing "manyness" at the level of word, sentence, event, and work (through a conception of genre). Parataxis demonstrates the aporia of time at work. Though it shows the unity and singularity of identity and containment (DeLillo's "retaining medium"), it also reveals the inability of language to provide closure. Because its reference is ultimately in question, the device reminds us of language's incomplete relation to the total—to time, the eternal, and the divine. DeLillo's use of parataxis in the novel does not position discourse as totalizing, but rather creates a paradigm for epic that emphasizes the "circularity" of mimesis (Morley) and the importance of limitation and application in the process of totalization. The skeptical reader of *Underworld* learns the lesson taught by Nick's Jesuit instructor, Father Paulus, who advises Nick that "intensity makes for moral habit. Not mere repetition" (*U* 539). Using parataxis to express the problematic relation of the eternal to the material, the many in unity, DeLillo opens a space to question the limitation and expression of the sacred in the contemporary era. The temporality that emerges from its fragments is that of a metaphor. The reader generates new figurative value in their response to the text's demand that they consider the frames of discourse and their role in mediating language's relation to material reality.

Underworld does not present the historical period of the Cold War as a place to look back on from someplace else. Instead, it is a history that is immanent in the reader's engagement with discourse. Its values are remade by the work of the contemporary imagination just as its legacies make the conditions for its reimagination possible. The reader's ceremonial engagement with the

mimesis of the text creates the possibility for a temporality based in thought, dignity, and consequence to emerge.

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