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A Jazz Cathedral

A Reading of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

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To my father
who never went out for cigarettes

and

to my miss
who saw through the cloud of my unknowing

Pt. I: LONG TALL SALLY

Pt. I ch. 1

Opens with Nick driving through the desert. He uses suntan lotion and sunbathes in the car—a scene that would seem to recall his own youth in the Bronx (pt. 6 ch. 8 pp. 771-3): he already longs for “the days of disarray” (p. 806), for his youth lost and gone.

What happens immediately after that? A New York taxi appears out of the desert, “impossible but true” (65), as if out of Nick’s own reminiscences; although I would suspect that not many yellow taxis were seen in his Bronx neighbourhood.

Nick’s trip is a voyage into the past. This becomes clear even before the reader learns anything about the characters or the trip itself—but only retrospectively, upon re-reading.

Ποίσις

Meta-narrative.

In talking about the volunteers for Klara Sax’ project, DeLillo seems to describe some larger form of *poiesis*, more general, possibly to be applied to his own work as a novelist (cf. 86).

Klara’s words about the project, in particular, such as the remark about “rediscovering paint” (70) at the age of 72, may parallel DeLillo’s own mammoth novel, published when he was 60.

(same age as Pynchon, who in his own turn published *Mason & Dixon* that same year 1997)

The Long Tall Sally project is in the long run one of the most powerful and significant pieces of art in the novel, even though the reader does not and cannot know this yet. The project is a result of everything that has happened up to that point, both in the personal life of the fictional Klara and in the collective history of the Cold War. Yet it comes right at the beginning: since the structure of the book is chronologically reversed, the Long Tall Sally project appears before its causes, both direct and indirect.

This arrangement shows that art finally wins—and it does so even before showing *over what* art prevails. The reader is first confronted with the artistic reaction(s) to the facts.

Klara’s interview.

When asked why she wanted to do the B52's project, Klara comes up with two episodes from her personal memories, each bringing into play one factor: the B52's airplanes + the colours (75-6, 78-9). Plus she mentions the original Long Tall Sally (77-8) and Cold War in general.

Her interview is clearly one of the focal points in the novel.

Like all (good?) artists, she mixes personal impulses and experiences to social and historical commentaries, as a response to the times.

The desert.

It is one of the themes connecting pt. 1 with both the epilogue and with pt. 4: beginning, middle and end of the novel are thus linked in structure and theme. "The desert is central to this piece", says Klara (70). Then she plays the desert against culture, particularly against technology.

For similar treatments of the desert cf. other works by DeLillo: *Love-Lies-Bleeding* ; *Point Omega* ; possibly *Mao II*

And Klara finally connects the desert with weapons. Does this imply an attempt on the part of culture to *take revenge* on the desert for being irreducible? This would entail that the USA attacked their own, domestic desert, which is in fact what happened with the atomic tests.

Also, the desert and waste.

The girl in the desert.

Subtle thematic link between pt. 1 ch. 1 and pt. 4 ch. 3, between Nick and Matt, the two Shay brothers: both are sexually tempted by a young woman in the desert and have fantasies about her, which anyhow are eventually not carried out (79-82, 412-3, 404, 418-9)

Nick decides not to have sex with the young woman out of respect for Klara and their affair, not out of faithfulness to his wife Marian.

I guess the only possible link between the two women would be their ideals, or rather their commitment to their ideals.

Klara Sax + Ismael Muñoz

Over the decades both happen to be directing a group of co-workers, which might be huge as in Klara's case for the Long Tall Sally project, or small as Moonman 157's crew in the seventies, or even middle-sized as Muñoz's group of youngsters in the Wall.

The artwork in itself is also similar: either spray paint or graffiti. Vehicles of various types are concerned in two cases out of three. And while both Long Tall Sally and the Wall are elevated,

the graffiti in the tunnels take place underground. Their work also contains a strong sense of personality, of stressing the human, the personal and idiosyncratic (77-8, 434-41).

Funnily, Klara in the early nineties is very old (age 72) while Ismael in the middle seventies is quite young (age 16).

Pt. 1 ch. 3

Stadium Club, L.A.

Nick Shay having lunch with colleagues Brian Glassic and Simeon 'Big Sims' Biggs from Waste Containment plus the BBC producer Jane Farish, "headed [...] into the desert to interview Klara Sax" (93): this implies that the Long Tall Sally project is getting intense TV coverage even from European networks, cf. the interview for French TV that Nick witnesses in pt. 1 ch. 1.

They are at the Dodger Stadium and the Dodger (who have since 1951 relocated to L.A.) are playing the Giants.

They actually watch the game from the built-in restaurant, removed from the real event and especially, as Glassic points out, from crowd noise.

Glassic vents a sense of unreality/virtuality (92, 95) in relation to the L.A. Dodgers and the game they're watching but not hearing; the same sense, "fictitious... unreal", that Klara Sax has referred to while speaking with Nick in pt. 1 ch. 1 (73).

Another connection to ch. 1 is that "no one could explain the Dodgers who wasn't there" (93): the theme here is the difficulty of recalling the past with exactitude—a past that for Nick means NY. Also NY in itself is not easy to reproduce, as in the case of the fake taxi who has "more amateurish charm than accuracy" (81).

This theme works simultaneously on many levels.

It is difficult for the characters to remember the past, particularly if they were not there as in the case of Sims here (93)—all this even though the remembered past feels more real than the present, a point made often in pt. 1 (i.e. the early nineties).

On a more general scale, DeLillo might be saying that memory is a complicated thing not just for his characters but for everybody (in the real world as well), and especially for the novelist,

recreating the last 50-odd years of US history, and in pt. 6 the Bronx in the early fifties, re-using and recycling his own personal experience.

The crucial importance of 'having been there' is stressed, as opposed to the virtuality that is experienced by the characters in the nineties. TV is also concerned in this topic: here in the person of Jane Farish, the Englishwoman to whom Biggs recounts the facts. Reality and the past are reproduced for the sake of TV time. Obviously also connected to videos that capture history: the Zapruder film, the Texas Highway Killer...

Related to the sense of unreality that the men, or at least Glassic, feel at the game is the disaffection that Nick, a diehard fan in his youth, now feels towards baseball and the Dodgers, once his team.

Nick: "It's all about loosing... It's about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss" (97). Loss is obviously crucial to him, in the form of his family loss. But I think mystery is also a keyword here.

Ethnicity.

The subject as always is brought up by Biggs (97-9). For other Afro-Americans in the novel, see Acey Greene, plus the Martins and their neighbourhood in Harlem.

It's also interesting that Big Sims, the only black person in the group and "the only one here who still loves the game" to boot (95), is the one to downplay the value of Thomson's baseball, originally sold to Charles Wainwright by Manx Martin, himself a black man.

KMOX

Simeon Biggs who's from St. Louis (100) listened to the Oct. 3, 1951 game on "good old KMOX" radio station (94): whose personnel Russ Hodges shares his booth with during the game (15).

Pt. 1 ch. 4

Fittingly opening this chapter are Rosemary Shay's recollection of the past. She has a special ability, a mastery over her memories. "She was confident in her recall, moving through the past with a sureness she could not apply to the current moment or hour or day of the week" (101).

She and Nick watch reruns of *The Honeymooners* with Jackie Gleason (who appears in the prologue), and the show makes her life seem more real (103).

She's "prudent... in her recollecting" (103) implying maybe that forty years on she still considers it important to conceal her own feelings, to not let them go (see 698 ss). She summons back the past but carefully.

In the epilogue, Nick says that her mother died before he "could know her fully" (804) which probably means that up to the end she distanced herself even from her sons.

In this chapter, Nick thinks about his family (not only his mother and father but also his son Jeff and the talks between his mother and his wife Marian) as well as his work, the recycling they do in the house, and teaching their children the names of everyday objects.

Nick and Marian

She asks him and her mother-in-law both about his teenage years in the Bronx. Nick "told her about the car, not so petty" a crime (86), but not about the murder. Sincerity between the two of them? Especially regarding their faithfulness: they both have sexual adventures with other partners, Brian and Donna respectively.

Pt. I ch. 5

Condomology.

Obviously connected to the general subject of chemicals, Dow Chemicals in particular.

Also alienation? Brian confesses to a sense of alienation. Condoms are an alienating technology; yet it seems that many male characters barely in their teens used to carry a condom in their pocket or wallet: Nick Shay, Brian Glassic's brother, Eric Deming... Does it constitute some sort of rite of passage, of which the kids are unaware? Do they *have to* face the alienation?

Brian lists a series of technologies that may aptly describe the contemporary U.S.; yet they are mentioned in relation to their *smell*.

Be sensible.

"Never mind the words. [...] I hate to be sensible. I know it's thankless to be sensible in the face of somebody's primitive distrust" (113).

“I want him to pay a price for being sensible” (114).

“I heard music in the deep distance, a crooner doing lost songs, the kind of ballad that sometimes included a verse or two in slurred Italian...” (109) also Al Hibbler (110). “and a woman sang a ballad about a chapel in the moonlight...” (112).

Marian.

Nick’s words make her quite sexy. Seen through his eyes.

The subject of their relationship becomes more and more interesting, retrospectively. At the end of this episode Nick asks her about Brian. She will eventually tell him, or at least so he says in the epilogue.

Nick’s job in the bronze tower.

“I noticed how people played at being executives while actually holding executive positions. Did I do it myself? You maintain a shifting distance between yourself and your job.” &c. (103)

“In the bronze tower we used the rhetoric of aggrieved minorities to prevent legislation that would hurt our business. Arthur Blessing believed, our CEO, that true feeling flows upward freely from the streets, fully accessible to corporate adaptation. We learned how to complain, how to appropriate the language of victimization.” (119)

Interplay between first and third person, ‘he’ and ‘I’ (119).

Nick does an interview for the BBC (121), enhancing the parallels between his job and the project Klara in working on (see 102).

Immediately after, there is one single paragraph that might be from Jimmy Costanza’s own point of view (last paragraph p. 121).

The Rapture, Oct. 28, 1992. (127)

Rembrandt’s Homer

“Marian caught me looking at the ball. I was standing at the bookshelves with the ball in my hand and she thought it was like Hamlet gazing on Yorick’s skull or maybe Aristotle, even

better she said, contemplating the bust of Homer. That was nice, we thought. Rembrandt's Homer and Thomson's homer. We smiled at that." (132)

Yet another reference to a painter. Also implying a pun on the word 'homer'. Are these among the very few explicit literary references in the novel?

Most importantly this is a comment on Nick and the baseball. "Bad luck, Branca luck. From him to me. The moment that makes the life." (132)

Bad luck is a subject concerning other characters as well.

Marvin as "the schlimazel, bad-lucked in his own mind" (324).

Brian's daughter Brittany and Apartheid Simulation Day (112).

Pt. 3: The CLOUD of UNKNOWING

pt. 3 ch. 1

A JAZZ CATHEDRAL

“I’ve always been a country of one”. So begins the chapter, in Nick’s first person narration. He confesses “There’s a certain distance in my make-up, a measured separation like my old man’s” (275). Distance is the very same word Marian uses, fifteen pages earlier and roughly a decade later (pt. 2 ch. 9 p. 261). Nick even uses “an Italian word, a Latin word”: *lontananza* (275).

Nick connects this distance to his father and the mafia: “the perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicate mobster”. His father was *not there*, and this was his role model of maleness, husbandry, fatherhood. Yet how much of it is just posing on his part? He would like to be like a mobster, like his father; or rather, like the wishful image of his father he has constructed.

L.A. further links pt. 3 ch. 1 with pt. 2 ch. 9, two contiguous chapters if we do not consider the stand-alone final chapter of part 2. “People say L.A. is only half there” (275), like James Costanza.

Nick is in the city visiting the Watts Towers. The site, and especially its Italian-born immigrant creator Sabato Rodia, make Nick think once again of his own father: “the more I looked, the more I thought of Jimmy” (276). He watches the Towers and they become an instrument for seeing into, or rather just guessing at, his father current life: where he ended up and what became of him after he abandoned his family. Sabato Rodia *did* leave a sign of his presence, a memento of himself to future generations, and one which is still visited and admired to this day; unlike Rodia, James Costanza simply disappeared into nothing, leaving nothing behind. Notwithstanding the fact that very little is known about either one of them.

Sabato Rodia vs. James Costanza. And the Watts Towers as “a country of one”?

“The work he did is a kind of free-souled noise, a jazz cathedral, and the power of the thing, for me, the deep disturbance, was that my own ghost father was living in the walls” (277). Having nothing to grasp, to hold on as a memory of his father, Nick makes the Watts Towers themselves a sort of funeral monument, inhabited by a ghost: a place to visit and mourn.

MOJAVE SPRINGS

The second part of the chapter shows a conference of the company Nick has recently joined, Waste Containment, nicknamed Whiz Co. Nick is there with his more experienced colleague

Simeon Biggs, nicknamed Big Sims. Incidentally, the one who does not have a *nickname* is Nick. Maybe his name *is* a nickname: an empty label that does not grasp anything. This would be coherent with his elusiveness.

The Flying Liberian.

Big Sims and Nick chat about a rumoured ship navigating around the globe with a cargo of waste material. According to Biggs one of the rumours implies that the ship, maybe the entire company which owns the ship, is “mob-owned” (279-280). Maybe even Whiz Co. itself?

Dietrologia.

Nick keeps dishing out Italian words, always connected to the semantic field of the organized crime, of the obscure, the unsaid (*omertà*?). On the other hand, Biggs’ wife is German.

“Whiz Co. Was a firm with an inside track to the future. The future of Waste” (282). The company is about to become Nick’s own future.

Paranoia.

Big Sims and Nick pass the time rumormongering about a mysterious cargo ship, which Biggs dubs The Flying Liberian because of its reported registration (cf. 284). This pattern is mirrored in the mock-paranoid exchanges in the Pocket between Nick brother’s Matt and his colleague Eric Deming in pt. 4 chs. 2 and 4. In both cases the Shay brothers are new to their respective jobs: Matt has “been in the Pocket for five months” (402), while Nick has only “recently gone to work with Waste Containment” (278). In both cases, moreover, the rumours are spread by the Shays’ more experienced colleagues merely as jokes, as a laugh on their jobs. Nonetheless, unbeknownst to the characters, the rumours turn out to be true, in other parts of the world and of the novel. Since, in Jesse Detwiler’s words, “everything’s connected” (289).

Jesse Detwiler.

Nick’s and Simeon’s appointment with him becomes also a confrontation between a famous renegade figure of the sixties and two older persons with different cultural backgrounds: in Nick’s own words, “We’re not sixties people. We’re forties and fifties people” (288). Nevertheless when they mention the Lone Ranger and Tonto, a cultural product of their period, Detwiler proves more knowledgeable on the subject than they are. The brief exchange among the three men comments on the collective workings of culture. The two older men seek refuge

from the rhetoric assaults of Detwiler in radio drama, something they think belongs to their own childhood; but Detwiler uncovers a wider cultural behaviour, which they took for granted at the time but which has been acknowledged as racist by the time of Detwiler's generation: "Come on, Sims. You know the white man's horse. Why don't you know the Indian's horse?" (289). The former "garbage guerrilla" of the sixties (286) regards the different consideration his two companions had always, unconsciously, given to the mounts of their childhood radio heroes as a "deep cultural failure" (289). The escapist pop reference becomes problematic, an instance of the generational gap between them.

"I'll tell you what I see here, Sims. The scenery of the future. Eventually the only scenery left" (286).

Again waste is coupled with the future. Nick had talked about Whiz Co. as "a firm with an inside track to the future" (282), but in Detwiler's words waste becomes a sacred relic commanding awe and worship, eventually even a tourist attraction.

As in pt. 1, the American desert links the prehistoric civilizations who dwelled there with postmodernity: this is America. Detwiler turns the development of culture on its head: according to him garbage is not a product of society but the cause itself of the rise, of the invention, of culture: "garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilisation in response, in self-defence" (287).

Donna

Nick notices her in the same conference centre of the waste managers: she is part of a swingers club (cf. 278). He notices her sexy frame, while she initially did not notice him; her husband did, instead.

She argues that Nick hates the swingers, "because we make it public", she says (292). Possibly she has a point: Nick does like to keep his relationships a secret. And Nick's hate, Donna and her husband Barry sense, is "important", more than the biographical details the couple enjoy making up about strangers. More important, maybe, than Nick's own biographical details?

He himself agrees with her: "maybe you're not completely wrong about me, Donna. Maybe I have a theory about the damage people do when they bring certain things into the open" (294). He is convinced that sexual relationships should not be spoken about openly, but

rather kept a secret between the partners. This is what he does, consistently: his adventure with Klara Sax (then Bronzini) remains a secret for years, and

The reader is left to wonder, incidentally, what Nick would say about his wife Marian's liaison with his colleague Brian. Does Nick come to know about it, eventually? Would he even say something about it, or would he shroud it in silence as well?

He proceeds to explain his opinion to Donna, referring to a medieval book on mysticism he read while in correction "in a small Jesuit outpost in northern Minnesota" (299). He brings the book into the discussion in order to make his point, and the mention of the book calls into the frame the whole picture: his crime, his correction. Probably deep within this was the very reason that drove him into a sexual encounter with Donna: he wanted, needed to open up with somebody about his juvenile crime.

Pt. 3 ch. 2

"The song of loss that goes unwritten in the record" (309).

Protagonists of the chapter are Marvin Lundy and, gregariously, his wife.

Marvin has come to San Francisco, along with his wife Eleanor who wanted to see the city, for a chance to meet Charles Wainwright Jr., then "a crewman on a tramp steamer coming down the coast from Alaska" (306), and ask him about the baseball the late Charles Wainwright Sr. bought from Manx Martin on the night of the World Series game, October 3, 1951.

Chuckie's ship is late, and while they wait at the waterfront the Lundys are at once lured and progressively disgusted by a mysterious smell, which as it turns out comes from another ship. The smell reminds Marvin of his own smells during their honeymoon through post-war Europe, undertaken "on a mission important to Marvin's family" (308): trying to locate his half-brother Avram Lubarsky.

The two quests move at this point on parallel binaries in the text: in the present, upon Marvin's urging, the Lundys walk in the direction of the smell; in the past, "six years after the war" (308), they travelled through the Old World. In both cases the stench worsens as they progress. Eventually, Marvin's "BM", bowel movements, develop a "steamy aura", a "radiant

energy” (310): the same language appropriated to describe both nuclear weapons and waste. “The deeper into communist country, the more foul his BM” (311); until, after finally finding his brother in Gorski, “Marvin had to make an emergency visit to the hotel toilet, where he unleashed a firewall of chemical waste” (311-2).

While travelling through the Communist Bloc Marvin also goes into increasingly heated ideological arguments with the people he meets, exemplifying the Cold War mentality of Us & Them (312). “The newlyweds argued with an iron worker in a café, he was proud of the smoke and filth that hung over the landscape, this was progress, this was industrial might and drive” (310).

A point very much like this was also made on the other side of the Iron Curtain: for all their divisions, both blocs were bent on destroying the environment in the name of progress and industrialism.

“Yes, it galled Marvin to think of a man living under these circumstances [...] this was the thing that drove Marvin nuts, how the guy gets along without the basic whatevers” (313).

This is what the Cold War produces: poverty. On *both* sides of the Curtain, as the novel shows: conditions even worse than those endured by Avram’s family in Gorski are to be found the Wall neighbourhood in the Bronx, in the heart of New York.

Later in the chapter we learn how Marvin and Eleanor had met during the war and how “her main ambition was America [...] the things, the places, the bright buzz of products on the shelves, the sunblast of fortune’s favor” (314-5). Eleanor has, in a sense, *chosen* America: chosen to live there, unlike Marvin with his “Brooklyn-bornness” (314). Nonetheless, his own choice is championed by his anti-communist arguments, and later on by his obsession for baseball.

[but see the joke about Castro and the angel Gabriel for an instance of baseball’s popularity in a Communist country]

Ironically, Marvin’s family is Jewish, therefore not rooted in one place or even one country, as exemplified in the destinies of the two half-brothers. Belief in either system, seems to be the novel’s suggestion, even strong beliefs as in the case of the Lundy/Lubarsky, is influenced by context.

SECRETS

- While in the eastern bloc, the newlyweds Lundys are followed wherever they go.
- “His smell was a secret he had to keep from his wife” (310).

- Greenland: “the biggest secrets are staring us right in the face and we don’t see a thing”. “The bigger the object, the easier it is to hide it” (316).

Marvin’s paranoia extends to geography, something usually taken for granted: he will make similarly cartographic observations about Latvia in the eighties to Brian Glassic (pt. 2 ch. 3. Pp. 173-4).

Marvin hides the smell of his (physical) waste. The same thing will be undertaken on much grander scale in waste management; to the extent that Jesse Detwiler is free to argue for just the opposite: “Bring garbage into the open, let people see it and respect it. Don’t hide your waste facilities” (pt. 3 ch. 1 p. 286).

“The ball brought no luck, good or bad. It was an object passing through” (318).

The FLOAT

“I want you to show me the steamy underside”, Eleanor had told Marvin (318).

“Floating zones of desire. It was the what, the dismantling of desire into a thousand subspecialties, into spin-offs and narrowings, edgewise whispers of self” (319).

“A pornography of nostalgia, maybe, or was it something else completely?” (320).

“But in truth, let’s be honest, it was Marvin who shuffled, Marvin who was the true schlimazel, bad-lucked in his own mind, Marvin the Dodger fan, doomed in ways he did not wish to name” (324). Marvin believes in his own bad luck.

“You can’t precisely locate the past, Marvin. Give it up. Retire it. For your own good” (322). How does this resonate in the novel?

Pt. 3 ch. 3

Nick Shay and Simeon Biggs nightclubbing in Los Angeles. They move from one jazz club to the next, and while talking about the subject Big Sims mentions a photograph he has at home.

“We’ll go to a ball game sometime”, says Sims (327), which is what will happen in the early nineties (pt. 1 ch. 3).

The SHIP

Big Sims expounds the theory that the ship carries a cargo which “is not toxic chemicals, it’s not industrial ash and it’s not heroin”, but rather “a mixup over a word”: it contains *shit*, which is also slang for heroin; yet in this case it is literal shit.

Moreover, according to a rumour Big Sims has heard, the ship is “up the coast in San Francisco” (329). This suggests it may be the very same ship the Lundys see in the city’s waterfront while waiting for the arrival of the Lucky Argus; in which case its pungent smell would have been, actually, shit. That is, waste.

Nick’s talk with Donna probably triggers now other memories as well. The very the theme of memory is underlined, as when Nick says that the last bar they visit reminds him of “the great Northeast blackout” (332) of November 9, 1965, during which he had stepped into “a place practically outside time” (pt. 5 ch. 7 pp. 617ss.).

Nick also mentions Mario Badalato to Big Sims, who recognizes the name as a criminal’s. Nick observes Badalato was an acquaintance of his father, James Costanza (331-2).

In an autobiographical section, Nick thinks of his own arrest.

“I never think of the term [back east] as a marker of geography. It’s a reference to time, a statement about time, about all the densities of being and experience, it’s time disguised, it’s light up time, shifting smoky time tricked out as some locus of stable arrangement” (333). Moving to another part of the country marks another phase in one’s life, and this is especially true for Nick: it is a change in time more than space.

Possibly connected to Nick’s memories of his youth and of his crime is a consideration he makes to himself after the obviously hurtful exchange of head-butts with Big Sims: “Pain is just another form of information” (338).

The ETHNIC PROBLEM

Before this, before the night ended, came the conversation about the census. Big Sims recalls the census from his childhood, and how his mother had told him to hide inside the house. He is now convinced that “the number [of his fellow African Americans] is underinflated by maybe forty percent” (336).

Nick argues that he has “agreed” with Sims that they are “responsible men” going “against the tide”: “We don’t believe there are secret forces undermining our lives” (335); concluding appropriately that the only thing he can see in Simeon’s theory is “genuine paranoia” (336).

“I found southern California too interesting. [...] the place had that edge-of-everything quality that creeps into innocuous remarks and becomes the vanguard of estranged feelings” (340-1). This is an unusual evaluation of his stay in California. “We are backed up to a very big ocean”, says Big Sims (339).

“Phoenix was a neater package for me. I needed a private life. How could you have a private life in a place where all your isolated feelings are out in the open, where the tension in your heart, the thing you’ve been able to restrict to small closed rooms is everywhere exposed to the whitish light and grown so large and firmly fixed that you can’t separate it from the landscape and sky?” (341).

It comes as no surprise at this point that Nick should want “a private life” and would rather not let his very “isolated feelings out in the open”; especially following the direct contact with the swingers in Los Angeles, and their own choice not only to “trade sexual partners” but also, and maybe even more unsettlingly for Nick, to “talk about their feelings” (278) in the process. Moreover, a deeper mark than his first-person narration would admit was probably left on him by the visit to the Watts Towers, and the experience of being so intensely reminded of his father on the site, therefore having his most inner feelings, his own ghosts, very much in the open, projected into the open-air structures. As his stay in southern California winds to an end, Nick recalls the way it had begun, in a circular move that ties the opening of pt. 3 to the close.

He does, however, decide to tell Marian about Donna—even though not about what he has discussed with Donna: “I owed it to her. O told her for our sake, for the good of our marriage” (342).

And on “the first available Saturday” (342) the Shays visit an ancient ruin. Here again the desert is linked to the theme of ancient cultures, together with, obviously, waste: “I was becoming Simslake, too soon, seeing garbage everywhere or reading it into a situation” (343).

Watts Towers first mentioned here. Nick visits the site and thinks about his father, speculating about his being still alive and living in Southern California.

Waste

Nick Shay and Simeon Biggs (a.k.a. Big Sims) are in Mojave Springs for a conference on “The Future of Waste”. Important connection between the two terms: waste and the future. They tell stories about waste (B.S. mostly does), such as that of the restaurant that puts its own garbage in a locked cage rather than allow vagabonds to eat it—on the ground that it is “property” (282 ss.). The property principle rules over everything else, including the extra-costs of waste disposal and of the cage.

Jesse Detwiler

Detwiler had been a fringe figure in the sixties, a garbage guerrilla who stole and analysed the household trash of a number of famous people. (286 ss.) &c.

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cf. J. Edgar Hoover in pt. 5 “Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry”

“We’re not sixties people. We’re forties and fifties people.” (288)

Sims to Detwiler, talking about Shay and himself.

“A ship carrying thousands of barrels of industrial waste. Or is it CIA heroin? I can believe this myself. You know why? Because it’s easy to believe. We’d be stupid not to believe. Knowing what we know.”

“What do we know?”, Sims said. [...]

“That everything’s connected.”, Jesse said. (289)

“You know what I like about you? You make me aggressive, a little reckless,” I said. “I’m having a relapse just sitting here. I’m backsliding a mile a minute.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means all the interesting things in my life happened young.” (293)

The Flying Liberian → speculation. *Dietrologia*. (280)

It did not seem surprising, all these ghost-ship stories, even if they were only elusive hearsay, because we'd been told the night before that waste is the best-kept secret in the world. This is what Jesse Detwiler said, the garbage archaeologist who'd addressed the massed members about an hour after the tremor... (281)

Whiz Co. was a firm with an inside track to the future (282) &c.

↓

corporate work. See also the religious vocabulary Nick uses here.

And interesting that later this business of picking through garbage, old winos and runaway kids [...]—later, with Detwiler, the subject would reoccur, but differently, with a touch of the renegade theatre of the sixties. (284-5)

These were movie scenes... (292)

Secrets.

God and religion. *Todo y nada*. Sex.

Nick tells a stranger (Donna) about his youthful crime. (cf. 294-301)

You withhold the deepest things from those who are closest and then talk to a stranger in a numbered room. What's the point of asking why? (301)

He said, "Light up a Lucky. It's light-up time." (304)

↓

the POWER of COMMERCIALS.

Goes back to the Prelude in 1951, and to the board in Marvin Lundy's house. An alternate history? Made of everyday things that people remember, of popular memories?

See also Dow Chemicals about the power of commercials.

↓

Or perhaps the slogan has a personal meaning for the taxi driver, something related to his own life and impossible for a stranger to guess, just as in Nick's case. DeLillo may here be suggesting that there are other stories connected to the same things (a commercial in this case) yet different. A window open on other possible narratives.

The earthquake (?)

Is it a real event?

Pt. 3 ch. 2

Marvin Lundy's honeymoon to Europe. (cf. 308 ss.)

His family has sent him after his half-brother, a soldier in the Red Army during WWII and a Jew. Connection between Russia and the States. "Such Russian stuff, and here was Marvin looking for a baseball." (309)

Marvin's B.M. (bowel movements) in communist countries.

When he finally managed to find and meet his half-brother Avram Lubarsky (311-3) they quarrel over opposing regimes.

Marvin is in Switzerland, in a train under a tunnel, when Thomson hits the homer (313). A moment he will try to reach back to for the rest of his life.

Marvin's lists are interesting, though rambling.

3. The shock of other people's lives. The truth of another life, the blow, the impact.
6. the shock, the power of an ordinary life. (308)
4. The shock of lives unlike your own. Happy, healthy, lovely, lost.
9. And the bone cancer kid in Utah, which his mother blamed the government. (317)

This last notation anticipates a theme that will resurface in chapters to come, that of nuclear experiments in the desert. Besides, at that point Lundy has just been mentioning nuclear weapons.

The Float.

Conspiracy Theory Café (319). A pornography of nostalgia (320). Long Tall Sally (320). "The revenge of popular culture on those that take it too seriously". (323)

Marvin Lundy's idea of conspiracy

Actually seems to be an ironic take on Orwell's 1984 and the way history is rewritten for political reasons, in order to control and manipulate popular opinion. Obviously, in this case

Marvin's obsessions are funny and ridiculous rather than scary and menacing: e.g. the birthmark on Gorbacëv's head changing shape (173-4, 181) and Greenland changing shape, size and position on the map (315-6)

NAZIANA

See p. 174. cf. *White Noise* and *Running Dog*.

Marvin as schlimazel.

"But in truth, let's be honest, it was Marvin who shuffled, Marvin who was the schlimazel, bad-lucked in his own mind." (324)

pt. 3 ch. 3

This third and last chapter takes place in Los Angeles at night. The whole of pt. 3 develops in the southwest: the west coast and the desert in the interior. The novel travels back and forth in space, a movement that is not straight and one-directional.

"Back east" (333) Nick recalls his arrest.

"When I shot George Manza" and the facility in upstate New York (341).

Nick and Simeon talk about the census (333-6) and the underestimation of the Afro-American population.

Pt. 4: COCKSUCKER BLUES

Pt. 4 ch. 1

“Klara Sax’s summer at the roofline” (371).

She is now middle-aged (54 years old) and about to bring a major shift in her work as an artist.

The three chapters about Klara often return to the sky-high perspective on the city: “a hidden city above the grid of fever streets” (?). It may be what she needs at this point in her life, to distance herself from the heart of New York summer, both figuratively and not.

Meanwhile the Twin Towers are being built, adding further depth to the roofline theme. It was on 7 August 1974, while this part of the novel unfolds, that the high-wire artist Philippe Petit performed/accomplished his most famous ‘coup’, the walk between the Towers. The exploit made the news worldwide, and part 4 of *Underworld*, set in the summer of 1974 in New York, stretches beyond that date, closing with Klara Sax’s marriage (the third and final) in “one of those autumn days in New York” (496-7). Yet there is no mention either of Petit nor of his enterprise, as though more resonance could be obtained by building a hushed silence around the event, which has long since worked itself into the collective consciousness, especially in New York City.

At one point during *Man On Wire*, the 2008 Academy Award-winning documentary about Philippe Petit’s life

“She realized how rare it was to see what stands before you, what a novelty of basic sensation in the grinding life of the city” (379).

“COCKSUCKER BLUES” (382-5)

The documentary of the Rolling Stones’ North American tour of 1972 has never been officially released, and was a fairly new bootleg in 1974.

It is shown by Miles Lightman’s film group, which “showed rare things, mostly unrunnable in theaters for one reason or another” (382).

Klara watches the movie while spooning yogurt, a gesture that amounts to a kind of ironic commentary, one that seems to take away all the danger and edge of rock’n’roll and turn

it into a domestic affair. Acey Greene's commentary is also unusual in assessing the Stones as a "motherfucking band of emaciated millionaire pricks" (385): a definition that undercuts in both economic and ethnic terms the band's role, especially in those years, as musical revolutionaries. How could they embody an oppositional role to what they were in their own turn?

Pointedly, the criticism comes from an Afro-American lesbian; at one of the band's show in San Francisco, Acey was even addressed by one of the Stones' Negro bodyguards as 'Brown Sugar', fully expressing the ethnic divide implicit in her judgment. Klara on the other hand notices how all the women in the movie, minus one, were portrayed as girls (384-5).

There is another moment charged with ethnic overtones, and it comes directly from the film: "Two white men in room and one white man talking in black voice about, Put the brothers in touch with their cultural heritage" (384), possibly a reference to the rhetoric of the Black Panthers Party.

Long Tall Sally, the other explicit reference to rock'n'roll in the novel, is also racially charged: a song written and performed by an Afro-American artist, and possibly laden with slang and race-coded language (as suggested in pt. 5).

Klara Sax and Carlo Strasser: "All banking is secret, I think" (385).

Their dialogue, starting with a reference to the Titans of Finance which Klara has noticed in one of her days of the rooftop summer, sounds like a forerunner to the theme of *Cosmopolis*. Carlo owns "an old farm house near Arles, where he [goes] went to do his thinking"; which focuses, he admits, on "money": "It is becoming very esoteric. All waves and codes" (386). Carlo records money's evolution into a secret, one more in the list of the novel.

Klara about her friend and fellow artist Louise Nevelson: "She thinks reality is shallow and weak and fleeting and we're very different in that regard" (387). Does she see her own work as grounded on reality? As in the case of her cast pieces, made of throwaway objects.

Shortly after the connection seems confirmed by a mention of the garbage amassed in the streets because of the collectors' strike of that summer. "... and she saw how everyone agreed not to notice" (389). As in *a secret staring you in the face*.

KLARA SAX & ACEY GREENE

They are fellow artists in the same context, both divorced women. But there are just as many differences between them: Klara is a white heterosexual middle-aged woman with a

Jewish background, while Acey is young, Afro-American and a lesbian. Both are working on new projects at this point in their lives, and this more than everything else is what draws them together.

Acey Greene is “looking at” and “thinking about” Miss Golden Dream calendar of 1952, with Marilyn Monroe posing in the nude: a meditation on fame, U.S. pop culture, collective memory and its workings. The calendar was published mere months after the novel’s inception.

Acey’s general assessment of Klara’s work is sympathetic, but Klara feels slighted by an offhand remark Acey casually throws in: “What is it actually? Old factory window glass and burlap sacking” (393). At the same time, she admires Acey’s series on the Blackstone Rangers street gang, which she even compares to a fresco from the XVI century in “some Umbrian church” (394).

Klara Sax follows Esther Winship in the latter’s search for Moonman 157, persuading her to take the subway. In the Bronx, the two women are confronted with “a thing totally spooked by otherness”, entire blocks burned down by fire, with no sign of either fire workers or people worried about their or their neighbour’s houses: the responses that would be expected from the authorities in such a situation, ‘downtown’. “It was like a newsreel of some fractional war in a remote province” (395), yet it is only the Bronx: ‘total otherness’, the absence of the signs of civilisation, is inside New York itself.

“What a stark thing a secret is when it belongs to someone else. Now she knew what people meant by experience” (399).

Pt. 4 ch. 2

Matthew Shay working in an operation called The Pocket, in southern New Mexico.

Matt is there in order to test, define and shape himself; or so he says to himself. He is eager about the job, but also has doubts. On the one hand he trusts, or rather would like to, that “the questions and challenges” (413) might make him stronger; on the other he is not sure about this, nor about the moral/ethical and practical consequences of bomb making.

What are his real motivations, unspoken perhaps even to himself?

He imagines making a phone call to his elder brother Nick, telling him about his job and listening to Nick's opinions. Matt wants to see himself through Nick's eyes. He wants to be admired, to make an impression. To show that he, too, is apt for things that are important and character-defining.

Is this Matt's real, deepest reason for Matt to choose this job? Did he come to New Mexico at all because Nick in turn wants to live in Phoenix, Arizona?

Matt calls his girlfriend and future wife, Janet Urbaniak, and to his mother, who is also in contact with Janet; "he like[s] all these calls [...]—they gave him a life outside the Pocket" (412). The one person outside this triangle, the one person Matt does not call, is Nick.

Nick has had a crisis in his youth, has confronted it and come out stronger: squarer, hard edged, an adult; the way Matt has never been. "Nick had a graveness that was European in a way. He was shaped and made. First unmade and then reimagined and strongly shaped and made again" (416). This is what Matt longs for; Matt who "never stopped resembling the student he was at City College in the late fifties" (409), who looked like a "police sketch made from seven different descriptions", and who, therefore, is envious of Nick's solid and well-defined personality.

The irony in this, obviously, is that at the core of Nick's "strongly shaped" personality is a void, a secret. Yet so powerful was the "reshaping" that even Matt comes to long for it.

Matt shows various signs of never having grown out of boyhood, of never having developed as a adult: he has the same look, has never learned to drive (possibly not a major hindrance in New York City, but still mostly everywhere else in the States).

On the other hand, Matt has stopped playing chess, abruptly—or so it seems: "His chess was dark old history, suppressed forever. The history of a chess homunculus" (413). Signs of an arrested development: Matt has not developed *out* of his chess. It stopped and was then "suppressed".

Despite his doubts, Matt is also deeply fascinated by the job in the Pocket, or by its implications. He is fascinated by the atom bomb, and probably likes the idea of working where the technology is developed and tested.

There is on his part an ongoing fascination for weapons technology through the chapter—nuclear explosions (413), the planes going at mach speeds over the Pocket (408).

Even the desert wind, which opens the chapter and is later insisted upon, is revealed to be a symbol, a substitute for the atomic blast: “it backs and swirls and turns you around and knocks you flat” (418). Besides, the desert wind already has its mythology, “evolving metaphors and philosophies” (402), developed by “the poets of the desert nations”—unlike the atom bomb. Again: the wind makes the “laundry go horizontal on the backyard line, all of it [...] like people of all sizes and shapes snapping from the pressure, *letting their souls fly forth* to the gypsum hills” (417, italics mine). The sentence sounds like a description of the effects of the atom bomb.

The last reference in the series comes aptly at the end of the chapter, courtesy of Eric Deming: during a party thrown by the bombheads, of which Eric is one, he plays an ironic sketch in a mock-Hungarian accent, “paying tribute to the original bombheads, all those emigrés from Middle Europe” (421).

Descriptions of the wind abound: “[it] blew out of the Organ Mountains, busting up to fifty miles an hour, refiguring the dunes and turning the sky an odd dangerous gray that seemed a type of white gone mad” (402). Eric’s rumormongering concerns for the most part people defined as “downwinders”, most aptly. If the name “totally defines their existence” (405) is it because they lived downwind of an atomic blast or of the wind coming down from the mountains?

Where does Matt’s fascination for weapons come from? A hint is given in his imagined phone call to Nick; Nick would, at a crucial point, say “who knows the ticklish business better than I do, brother?” (416).

Is *this* Matt’s most secret motive? Does he want to equal, and surpass, Nick’s exploit with a weapon? Does he long to become more dangerous? In a flashback fittingly contained in the chapter, it is revealed that he has already served in Vietnam, even though he did “drudge work” there (see also pt. 2 ch. 6 pp. 220-1, pt. 2 ch. 5 p. 199).

By means of working in the Pocket, Matt is apparently trying to bridge the distance between Nick and himself. What will remain in later years is a sense of resentment.

Matt’s guilt for working at the Pocket is embodied in the protesters demonstrating outside the site, holding the sign “World War III Starts Here”. He fantasises about stopping by and talking to them, even about having sex with one of the female members of the group. Incidentally, Matt often has fantasies about things he would like to do but lacks the courage to.

Anyway he does eventually stop to talk to the woman; but she will not speak to him in return, resulting in an awkward and embarrassing one-way argument. Is this a symbol of his own conscience?

The terms in which she is described may imply she is one of the downwinders (418-9).

Matt reasons that fanaticism is necessary to this kind of work. “*World War III Starts Here*. Isn’t this exactly what he wanted from these people, a kind of sunstruck religious witness?” (419), which seems to connect the protesters the street preacher seen in “Manx Martin 2”. They are “sunstruck”, while he preached in the middle of the night; he was, appropriately if figuratively speaking, a lunatic. His sermons, too, concerned nuclear war. The protesters on the other hand do not preach; they won’t even talk to the workers at the Pocket.

At the opening of the chapter “base personnel [...] felt sorry for the sign carriers because they were windswept and unattractive” (404), but by the end Matt sees them as “beautiful and lonely” (419).

The bombheads “carried an afterglow of sixties incandescence, a readiness to give themselves compulsively to something” (404). A readiness, incidentally, that Matt would like to share as he joins the Pocket. Yet the bombheads are not “sixties people”, to quote Simeon Biggs’ expression (pt. 3 ch. 1 p. 288), but rather fifties people like Biggs and Nick Shay; at one point Eric Deming recalls “the placid nineteen-fifties” (410). They were all brought up on the principles of the Cold War. The counterculture of the sixties produced instead Jesse Detwiler, Rose Martin joining sit-in protests, and possibly even the protesters at the Pocket.

Pt. 4 ch. 3

In more than one sense, the centre of the entire novel. At its core is a different section, as if framed within.

The RETURN of the PAST

“Back home to the past” (442).

Klara Sax with her companion Miles Lightman, her agent Esther Winship and the latter's husband Jack Marshall at the Radio City Music Hall in New York for the world premiere "of the legendary lost film by Sergej Eisenstein, meticulously restored and brought to New York" (424).

Klara observes that Radio City Music Hall, a place she has last visited after its inauguration, seems time-framed in 1932 (424).

The movie itself, *Unterwelt*, is by this time nearly half a century old but has only recently been unearthed—quite the exact word, in this context.

The March from the Three Oranges suite by Sergej Prokof'ev, previously used as theme music for an old radioplay, the FBI in Peace and War, is now used to accompany the otherwise silent film, in a way that seems to call into play the radio commercial connection, reminding the older generations among the spectators of their childhood.

Down in the tunnels below street level, Ismael Muñoz saw a graffiti "maybe five years" before, e.g. when he was eleven, which read *Bird Lives* (435). Charley Parker was dead but he 'lived on'—and so did the past.

HOMOSEXUALITY

In those same tunnels, Ismael started having sex with men; he still does so, going underground in order to meet them (437). Sergej Eisenstein was probably a homosexual too, though closeted, and the second-person narrative voice pictures him "in the underground of bisexual Berlin" (444).

There are many gay men among the audience in the Radio City Music Hall (423-4), allegedly attracted by the theme of the movie—and possibly by the director's own sexual inclination.

And finally there are all the camp elements popping up in the chapter: from the location itself, to the music, to the choreography by the Rockettes and the movie.

The UNDERWORLD

Eisenstein's movie *Unterwelt* is set mostly in the underground, its characters surfacing only toward the end. The counterpose of the East and West blocs brings another movie into mention: "the other *Underworld*, a 1927 gangster film" (431). The 'underworld' as crime; which is a theme of the novel in its own right.

The ARTIST

Sergei Eisenstein had troubles with the Soviet apparatus but is now acknowledged as a master. Moonman 157 on the other hand is part of an underground movement of graffiti writers, unknown faces and names unless they are caught by the police, which they carefully try to avoid: “writers were being careful and playing safe” (435), “stay totally low and out of sight” (436).

Yet they have reached “total notoriety now” (440), and they want their pieces to be seen by as many people as possible, becoming famous through their tags.

Eisenstein and Muñoz are both artists persecuted by their governments who nonetheless pursue their visions, achieving results so potent they leave their mark on the eyes of the spectators: the effect not only of Moonman’s graffiti on passers-by but also of *Unterwelt* on Klara Sax.

ORANGE(S)

The love for Three Oranges Suite by Sergei Prokof’ev is used as accompaniment for the movie. Orange juice is also used to dissolve spray paint, i.e. graffiti, “because there’s an acid in the juice that eats into paint” (433). Rimester, a fellow painter, tells Moonman’s crew he has seen some of his art being treated with “the new graffiti killer, some weirdshit chemical from the CIA” (438). As though in counterpoint to the acid used by the state, Eisenstein drank milk (426).

UNTERWELT

“... it’s more likely the film acquired the title during its long repose in an underground vault in East Berlin” (426).

In the movie, a mad scientist with an atomic ray gun holds captive his victims underground. The scientist shoots them, and the rays turn them into mutants. This reminds Klara of the monsters in Japanese movies, the horror genre which evolved from the collective shock of the atomic bomb: movies in which everything is cliché (430).

But “Eisenstein’s creatures were fully human and this complicated the fun” (430). They are, figuratively, the victims of nuclear weapons all over the world. One of the prisoners, who fittingly looks like an earth worm, i.e. an animal who lives underground, still has “a human pathos about him” (429).

Moreover, “the film was embedded [...] completely in the viewpoint of the prisoners” (430), allowing, forcing the audience to identify with these people and their condition.

At the same time, the film lacks the mass scenes so typical of social realism and of the 1930s in general, when it was shot.

“There’s a lot of opposition and conflict” (429).

“There was none of the cross-class solidarity of the Soviet tradition” (430). These people are outcast, hidden from the collective eye, their very existences deleted. Having no right, they are not recognized as a ‘class’.

“They were people persecuted and altered, this was their typology—they were an inconvenient secret of the society around them” (443).

The prisoners escape to the surface but are then hunted down and recaptured by police-like horse patrols. They are persecuted by the state, and Klara sees the film as a possible metaphor of the persecuted artists during the great Stalinist purges (431).

The audience eventually realises it *is* actually a “film about Us and Them” (444). Yet the opposition is not between two blocs, is not directed outward but inward: the government, any government perhaps, against its own citizens. Hence also the reference to The FBI in Peace and War, “your own white-collar cohort of the law” (444): the USA had a police state not unlike the USSR.

Pt. 4 ch. 4

Matt meets Janet at the airport in Tucson and they go camping in an Indian reservation.

Even as he waits for his girlfriend at the airport, Mat is thinking about his brother; his first words to Janet are about him: “Should I call Nick?” (447). Again the phone call to Nick, who at the time is already living in Phoenix.

Many things converge in the reserve, for Matt.

He is reminded of the “penitents”, the ascetes who retired to the desert. This in turn connects to Matt’s education in a Jesuit school, to his childhood and to Sister Edgar—and therefore to Nick, who also studied at the Jesuits’ and spent his time in correction in Jesuit institutions.

Matt is also thrilled by the DeLillian desert, “where the interplay of terrain and weapons was a kind of neural process remapped in the word” (451).

He also wants to spend some time alone with Janet, so that they might talk about their common future.

Matt is “feeling unsure” about his job in the Pocket (453) and considers joining a think tank as an alternative. Interestingly this is exactly what *Point Omega*’s Richard Elster will do in his seventies during the Second Gulf War: “Passive, mild, middle-aged, ivory-towerish” (453). Again, weapons and the desert are linked, as in the Trinity site.

During the days in the desert Matt goes repeatedly back to his childhood and to his brother. He goes as far as defending Nick’s delusions against Janet’s sneers, despite not agreeing with him.

CHESS

At a certain point, Matt began to lose his matches, and “every defeat was a death inside the chest [...]. Basically dead at eleven, that was him”. The losses began to tell on him, until he could not take anymore, and stopped playing altogether. “how many years did it take him to get over the game?” (457).

Fischer – Spasskij (1972): Cold War.

Their matches bring the game into the public interest, into the news.

Matt roots for Fischer but also identifies with him. Fischer’s unwholesomeness lies “beneath” the game: “an autoworld of pain and loss” (547). Chess may be the output through which Matt elaborated the disappearance of their father; and Fischer’s tantrums mirror young Matty’s.

At the airport, Matt recalls his feelings of paranoia after smoking hashish (probably enhanced) at the bombhead party the day before. The psychotropic drug brought his conscience to a state in which “he’d glimpsed some horrific system of connections in which you can’t tell the difference between one thing and another” (446).

At the end of the chapter, during an insomniac night at the preserve, Matt remembers finding himself in that same state of mind while he served in Vietnam (461-7). The heat of the climate and the noise of the planes generate a sense of indistinct confusion (“Laos, Chaos, Cambodia”, 462) that allows everything to merge with its contrary, and differences to disappear.

Bobby Thompson and Ralph Branca become “the binary hero-goat inseparable in the end” (466). They do not only mingle one with the other, but with other couples as well: “they “could just as easily be Oppenheimer and Teller” (466); a reference more familiar to Matt.

“How can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?” (465).

“The drums [of agent orange?] resembled cans of frozen Minute Maid enlarged by a crazed strain of DNA” and reportedly cause cancer (463).

Agent orange, orange juice, cancer, atomic mushrooms clouds, drugs, weapons, capitalism, advertising, war—all are connected.

“Because everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does” (465).

And eventually “All technology refers to the bomb” (467).

“Shamans eat psychoactive mushrooms caps and in their trance see “a cloud shaped like a mushroom” (466). Not incidentally Matt reaches this awareness while on drugs, at the bombhead party, the party at which Eric Deming mimicked the original East European bombheads; “the universal slogan of the war [is] Stay stoned, man” (463).

Implicitly, the Cold War opponents are similarly united: “The binary black-white yes-no zero-one hero-goat” (466).

Pt. 4 ch. 5

The chapter opens on one of the artistic events Klara Sax joined during that summer. The first paragraph interestingly describes how the chats of the party-goers, initially awkward in the presence of unknown strangers, grow in participation and warmth; Klara is “half aware that the spirit of being friendly and funny and well-met was overtaking the place” (469) and realizes “this [becomes] an energy that moves among the guests like a circulating angel”: a positive force, implicitly capable of transcending the occasion and reshaping the world, becoming “basically the makings of human history” (469).

The ITALIANS

Klara's first husband, Albert Bronzini, is Italian: people who can only rely on their relatives and look suspiciously at anything that may divide the family, including success and the American Dream. They "tended to be wary of certain kinds of accomplishment, as immigrants, people who needed protection against the cold hand of the culture, who needed sons and daughters and sisters and others because who else could they trust with their broken English" (472). When young Albert came home from school with good grades his parents were upset, convinced that thanks to his intelligence he may leave their neighbourhood, "to the large bright world that began at some floating point only blocks away" (473). As the reader has already seen, however, Albert will not leave the neighbourhood; he will even take care of his dying mother (pt. 6).

A passage about Klara's work exemplifies how her upbringing is incorporated into her art, into the way she uses paint: "the pocked sidewalks... the tar roofs, and the fire escapes... the aluminium paint on the whistling radiator". Fittingly she paints with radiator paint, gesso, chalks: materials used for everyday activities rather than art. "And it took her years to understand how this was connected to her life, to the working-class grain" (471-2).

Even the ambitions she had for her work are "a familial thing". "She was only now beginning to wonder if she wanted to ensure herself a life unlaureled, like her father's" (472).

"She needed to be loyal to her past, even if this meant, most of all if this meant incorporating her father's disappointments" (473).

KLARA SAX and ACEY GREENE in a N.Y. CLUB

They talk about their respective work. Acey encourages Klara to start working again; meanwhile explaining about her new series, inspired by Marilyn Monroe but actually focusing on Jayne Mansfield—who lived her own pop myth and, unlike Monroe, loved it. "This is one peroxide blond. Constant secretion from every quarter. This is a woman with a heavy flow. Atomic Jayne" (484).

Greene's project is rooted in American pop culture and its deep connections with weapons, the Cold War.

The two women also talk about Klara's fling with a teenaged Nick Shay in early 1952 (476-7, 484-5). Klara explains they did it in her house. "And I've asked myself, was the thing more important than I was willing to admit?" (484). The affair was apparently crucial for both

partners; it also was for Nick, even though he might have been more aware of its significance, since his sexual experiences were still limited at the time. As for Klara, it may have showed her a way out of her marriage; perhaps even acting as a catalyst.

SAGAPONACK

Klara and Jack Marshall at Esther Winship's place.

She visits local artists (480). The vacation is meant to help her find her inspiration again.

Miles and Klara discuss Acey's series on the Black Panthers. He talks disparagingly about it: "You overrate her about 200%. Her stuff is all show. It's a cut above total shit" (479).

The ZAPRUDER FILM

Miles takes Klara to a videoartist's working and living space. Rooms are filled with TV sets of every size and type. The attendants smoke dope.

The Zapruder film is shown; at the time "almost no one outside the government had seen it" (488) making it another bootleg eligible for Miles Lightman's movie group. Because of its newness at the time, it is a shock to the viewers: the President being killed, the violence of the shots, and the event itself re-enacted after more than a decade. The attendants "knew a kind of floating fear, a mercury reading out of the sixties, with a distinctly trippy edge" (488).

Elsewhere DeLillo spoke of the Kennedy assassination "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century", and of the Zapruder film as the first instance, soon followed by the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald himself, of violence that was filmed and broadcast, nurturing a culture that would breed such phenomena as both the Texas Highway Killer and the endless replays of his crime(s). In the fiction of the novel, this is supposed to be possibly the very first projection of the Zapruder film to common citizens; yet it is already played over and over, tirelessly.

"They were like tourists walking through the rooms of some small private collection, the Zapruder Museum, one item on permanent display, the twenty-some odd seconds of a home movie, and it runs continuously" (495).

The WEST

In the course of the chapter Klara recalls twice how her father used to show the family "View-Master reels of the Grand Canyon and the great West" (473, also 493-4). Her memory of such

vistas, of his “3-D slides”, “his completely unreachable West” (494), congeals on what she sees and feels while flying from Los Angeles back to New York, overlooking the real West.

Klara’s impression is typical DeLillo: “It looked young and untouched, it had the strangeness of worlds we’ve never seen, it was not ours from up here [on the plane], it was too flowing new and strange—we hadn’t settled it yet” (494).

Watching it, she “remembered who she was. She pulled away from the window and she was a sculptor” (494): as though the West itself clarified her identity as an artist, as though she defined herself against such a backdrop. Years later her Long Tall Sally Project will take place in the American desert, in the heart of the historical West.

SACHS TO SAX

Klara’s father had a card printed for himself, with his family name spelled ‘Sax’ rather than Sachs. When discovered by his wife he makes some excuses, but Klara “thought he had the card printed because he did not want people to know he was a Jew” (483).

Klara’s family is Jewish, probably on both sides. Their Mitteleuropean background is represented visually and phonetically by the c-h in Sachs, which her father pronounced with the guttural, German sound.

When Klara divorces from Albert Bronzini she decides to adopt the spelling with the x, marking the beginning of a new life and of her upcoming artistic career. Curiously the chapter (and pt. 4 as a whole) ends with the words “the mystery of living in her skin” (498)m seemingly echoing her father’s choice in altering the family name: “what a distance he sought to travel from the grating sound of that c-h with its breath of reference, its guttural history and culture, these hallway smells and accents—from this to the unknown x, mark of mister anonymous” (483). Mister Mystery?

Similarly the Jew Marvin Lundy ends up collecting baseball memorabilia, that most American of hobbies.

Structure

Five chapters alternating between two settings. The two protagonists are respectively Klara Sax and Matt Shay. Both are having problems with their jobs and are at a crucial point in their sentimental relationships.

Despite the recurrence of characters and storylines, each chapter has a distinct and separate identity:

ch. 1 presents a middle-aged Klara Sax, “54 and between projects” (372) and her cast of comprimaries: her daughter Teresa, her lover Miles Lightman, her friend Acey Green, her dealer Esther Winship and Esther’s husband Jack Marshall. Plus the mysterious Carlo Strasser, whom Klara eventually marries in ch. 5.

The World Trade Center being built.

ch. 2 Matt Shay working in the Pocket in southern New Mexico.

His colleague Eric Deming spreads rumors about the effects on civilians of nuclear tests.

Matt took the job in order to test himself, to come out stronger;

pt. 4 ch. 1

She was 54 now, let that number rumble in your head—54 and between projects and humanly invisible and waiting to go back to work, to make and shape and modify and build. (372)

The World Trade Center was under construction, already towering, twin-towering, with cranes tilted at the summits and work elevators sliding up the flanks. She saw it almost everywhere she went. (372)

We need theatre. (374) cf. *The Day Room*

She’d been pulling color out of her work for years. For a while she used bitumen and house paint. She liked to mix colors in clamshells she’d brought back from Maine a dozen years ago. But there was less color to mix now. It felt right for her to pull it out. (376)

Art in which the moment is heroic, American art, the do-it-now, the fuck-the-past—she could not follow that, she could look at it and respect it, envy it, even, in a way, but not, herself, place hand to object and ,make some furious now, some brilliant jack-off gesture that asserts an independence. (377)

“—what a stark secret when it belongs to someone else.
Now she knew what people meant by experience, the way they used the word experience, and the form it took was not sex but knowledge, and the knowledge was not hers but her friend’s...”
(399)

pt. 4 ch. 4

There were men who walked those deserts a hundred years ago. (449)

The landscape made him happy. It was a challenge to his lifelong citiness but more than that, a realization of some half-dreamed vision, the otherness of the west, the strange great thing that was all mixed up with nation and spaciousness, with bravery and history and who you are and what you believe and what movies you saw growing up. (449-50)

The real reasons for Matt’s and Janet’s trip into the desert are revealed at p. 451

This is when Matt finally comes to grip with his self-doubts, the questions about his work, his identity, the man he wants to be, what he expects from life. In this chapter he recalls his military service in Vietnam—connected to a whole series of themes: Cold War, the development and use of toxic and cancer-causing weapons of war, his sense of alienation and unreality...

He waited while she lowered her pants and squatted, more or less in one motion, and she looked at him and smiled, a dirty sort of smile, a dirty-faced girl with mucky drawers—didn’t we do this once before, in another life? (453)

↓

Is this a reference from *The Sound and the Fury* ?

More about Nick’s belief about his father’s disappearance at p. 454, compared to conspiracy theory.

Bobby Fischer and Boris Spasskij playing chess in Iceland in 1972 (457).

Chess linked to the Cold War.

Plus: does Matt suffer from Asperger disease, like Bobby Fischer?

“Maybe I stayed a Catholic too long. Should have got out when I was ten.” [...]

“I don’t know what you mean by staying a Catholic. I told you what I think about conscience,” she said.

“It’s only partly that. It’s mainly that I feel I’m part of something unreal, when you hallucinate, the whole point of any hallucination, is that you have a false perception that you think is real. This is just the opposite. This is real. The work, the weapons, the missiles rising out of the alfalfa fields. All of it. But it strikes me, more and more, as sheer distortion, it’s a dream someone’s dreaming that has me in it.” (458)

Agent Orange

The drums resembled cans of frozen Minute Maid enlarged by a crazed strain of DNA. And the substance in the drums contained, so the rumor went, a cancer-causing agent. (468)

And how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension? (465)

Death and magic, that’s the mushroom. (466)

Matt also crucially thinks about his brother Nick, whose life has had and still has a great influence on the younger brother. At this point in his life, Nick teaches Latin in a place called Paradise Valley. (see 447)

The whole idea of the trip to the desert is an excuse for being alone with his fiancée, Janet. Probably in order to see himself clearly Matt needs to see himself through Janet’s eyes. Who, incidentally, seems stranger than he is (so far: but see following chapters). Or maybe Matt only needs/wants her support as he grapples with his job as a bombhead.

Janet will not give in, become compliant with the role that Matt has surreptitiously reserved for her in this situation. She does not talk him out of his job; just the opposite. It’s curious, though, that Matt’s official reason for their ‘vacation’ is to see a wildlife preserve (449) and wild animals: natural life as opposed to the death he’s engineering. To the extent that natural life is still natural here, of course. (see quote at bottom p. 449)

“I know you can’t tell me about your job.” (452)

Janet knows that this is the whole point of the trip: to talk about Matt’s job. Is she speaking at a deeper level as well, as in: I know you are not able to talk about the doubts and uneasiness you feel towards your job?

The first night, shortly after having fled from Boston, Janet *does* talk to Matt about her feelings, her uneasiness about the encounter, &c.

Pt. 4 ch. 5

- Klara struggling with her work
- And thinking half-jokingly about marrying Miles
- She also tells Acey about her fling with Nick, 13 years earlier

Esther Winship’s apartment seems to anticipate that of Lianne and her lover in *Falling Man*.

Pt. 5: BETTER THINGS for BETTER LIVING THROUGH CHEMISTRY

Pt. 5 ch. 1

October 22, 1962

Lenny Bruce in a West Hollywood club the Troubadour, on the night of President Kennedy's TV speech about the Cuban Missile Crisis. the audience is mostly composed of show biz. Bruce is spirited, doing impersonations, voices and improvisations; nonetheless he nails the core of the situation:

"The true edge is not where you choose to live but where they situate against your will. This event is infinitely deeper and more electrifying than anything you might elect to do with your own life. You know what this is? This is twenty-six guys from Harvard deciding our fate" (505).

The Missile Crisis, possible casus belli of World War III (an atomic war), is outside of people's range of option; it is being decided by the government with no regard for the citizens' right to decide. Bruce then also does a bit about Kennedy vs. Khrushchev.

"The first night on Earth when the Unthinkable crept up over the horizon line and waited in an animal squat" (508).

July 12, 1953

Staatsburg, the correction house in upstate New York where Nick is sent after being judged of "E-felony, criminally negligent homicide" (502) for the shooting of George Manza. The place is, in Nick's words, an early example of the increasing unreality of life in the second half of the twentieth century, and of the unreality of power in particular. Nick is disappointed by the apparent lack of seriousness of the system.

He has "regular appointments" with a psychologist, Dr. Lindblad, who tries to help come to terms with his crime; first with the details of the event itself. Nick sees the fact in retrospect

and what he saw still amazes him, if it no longer shocks him. “Because you were the shooter and the witness both and you can separate these roles” (510).

As the witness, he felt a degree of impotence in the face of what he was doing himself.

Nick remembers with clarity the shot and the jerk of Manza’s body as he was hit by the bullet. As he pointed the gun at George, the latter smiled. “But after that you were in unknown country”: “the whole body spasm, an arrhythmic thing, a thing outside the limits of experience” (509), that is Nick’s own experience. He registered the events but was probably unable, unprepared to process them.

In the attempt to do so, he tells himself: “forget for a minute that you’re the one that shoot him” (509), disjoining his position as both the killer and the only witness.

“And of course your own shock, the trauma of perception”.

Nick feels guilty, or at least considers himself guilty in front of the law, and thinks he should be made to pay; even though the section opens with the revealing words “It was a gesture without a history” (509): i.e. unpremeditated. He did not have any intention of shooting Manza, not to mention of killing him. Nick did not even know the weapon was armed. In this sense the charge against him was correct: he was ‘only’ responsible of firing a gun at somebody.

There were attempts to try as an adult, and then for manslaughter; which could have resulted in much harsher sentences, probably to the death penalty.

“Dr. Lindblad tries to work his soul. She believed in my salvation. She probed at the forces in my history [...]. But I didn’t know if I accepted the idea that I had a history. She used that word a lot and it was hard for me to imagine” that his own perception of his teenage years, the meaninglessness and boredom and aimlessness of his days “and sameshit nights” (511, also 711 in pt. 6 ch. 4) actually amounted to a form of personal history which “could have some sort of form and coherence” (511).

“Maybe there was a history in her files but the thing I felt about myself was that I’d leaned against a wall in a narrow street serving out some years of mostly aimless waiting” (511). Nick curiously feels as though he had to serve were not the time spent in correction but the years that came before, when he was free.

Nick does not see a meaning or direction in his life to that point; he will in fact proceed, during his time in correction, to rebuild his personality, becoming in a sense someone else.

On the other hand, Dr. Linblad tells him:

“You have a history [...] that you are responsible too. You’re responsible to it. You’re answerable. You’re required to try to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention” (512). These words sunk into him deeper perhaps than he realized at the time. He did give it his complete attention; but did he make sense of it?

“She told me that my father was the third person in the room the day I shot George Manza. This was frankly news to me. [...] She told me that one way or another the two events were connected” (512).

NICK SHAY’S OEDIPAL COMPLEX

Six years (512) after the disappearance of his father James Costanza, Nick had a sexual relationship with Klara Sachs, a potentially motherly figure to him even though only 31, and killed George Manza, possibly the adult male closest to him at the time and an acquaintance to his father.

Dr. Lindblad also asks Nick whether he would like to have a family in the future. And his answer at that point, as he ponders the matter for the first time, is no. “After what I’ve done? I don’t think I should be a father. Do you?” (509).

Extrapolated from the context this sounds as an open question to the reader: do we think Nick should become a father?

The ALLEY BOYS

The Alhambras, members of a street gang in Harlem and Nick’s mates in correction.

“They were doing nigger time, they said. They’d come up through Youth House and a number of reformatories, raised on the felony alphabet. [...] We were all juvies, under eighteen” (502). It is implicit in Nick’s words that the Alley Boys suffer a different treatment simply for being Afro-American; while he, though white, is not a WASP but an Irish-Italian Catholic.

The Alley Boys told the psychologist “they were in a state of total war with society,” which in turns, in their reasoning, wants them dead. And Nick agrees: “the Alley Boys were too smart not to know this. They told me they’d get released and go back to the street, which was another department of the penal system and vice versa, and they’d go back and do what they’d always done” (511).

The streets are an extension of the penal system: it is therefore as though they had been born in jail. The penal system is a continuation of the streets, of the ghetto: it will not change the Boys' behaviour, will not 'correct' them; they will hold the same lifestyle, before and after, inside and outside. They are at war, and will "pursue the conduct of the war" (511).

Nick is more lucky. Staatsburg and the Jesuit institution in Minnesota will change him and give him an opportunity to start again, a chance of a new life.

Pt. 5 ch. 2

August 14, 1964

Civil Rights protest in Jackson, Mississippi.

Rose Meriweather 'Rosie' Martin is one of the demonstrators, and has been for days as the marches move from town to town.

The episode shows the violence with which the protest is met by the police: sit-ins are beaten with billy clubs and brought by force to flatbed trucks; an armored van is used; policemen use gas masks to protect themselves from the gas which is sprayed. This in particular is a chemical product.

December 19, 1961

Charles Wainwright working as "an account supervisor at Parmelee Lockhart & Keown, a medium-sized agency located in the Fred F. French Building on Fifth Avenue in New York" (527); the same building that Klara Sax will recall from a childhood visit with her mother and her friend Rochelle.

"Copywriters [...] sat in their cubicles and stared at memos pinned down to the corkboard, wondering why they'd sell out if this was how it felt to be a sellout" (527). Together with, perhaps even more than the Italo-American atmosphere of the early fifties recreated in pt. 6, this episode strikes as one of the most personal for DeLillo, who worked as a copywriter for

Ogilvy & Mather (the same company also employed Salman Rushdie at one point) before firing himself to pursue literature full-time.

DEATH + COMMERCIALS

“In the Times every morning, wasn’t it a fact that the obits and the ad column tended to appear on facing pages?” (527).

Also the Bomb Your Lawn campaign (528-9) and the Equinox Oil campaign (529-30).

“These creative minds with their sublimated forms of destruction. Every third campaign featured some kind of play on weapons” (529). The prosperity of the Cold War was built on the industry of weapons. Possibly all kinds of prosperity within capitalism require a war industry. Charles Wainwright is on the phone with Dwayne Sturmer, an ad manager for “the lawn fertilizer division of a giant chemical company” (528).

Fertilizer ingredients + fuel oil = explosives

Hence the Bomb Your Lawn campaign, for which the copywriters wanted George Metelsky, “the Mad Bomber of the 1940s and 1950s, famous for setting off a series of blasts at New ork landmarks” (528).

Hence also the Equinox Oil campaign, which was crafted using “all the latest know-how” (529) but with a backward Cold War mentality: white car versus black car. Clear implication. U.S. versus USSR” (529). The commercial moreover is shot in the Jornada del Muerto in New Mexico, site of the Trinity Test. The black vs. white symbolism triggers “an amazing firestorm of protest” (530)—but not from the Soviet embassy, as expected and hoped, rather from the racial-conscious organizations. The Cold War fifties have given way to the Civil Rights sixties.

Nonetheless the chapter emphasizes the role and power of advertising.

“There is only one truth,” says Wainwright. “Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world” (530). This is how capitalism runs the world, using the power of commercials. Which in turn is inextricably interwoven with the weapon industry.

“There was an element of Russian chic in the culture these days” (533).

“Mad Avenue was getting younger all the time and Charlie was forty-six” (528).

His work environment his young, but at the same time firing people. Even the copywriters' jokes seem desperate attempts in the tense atmosphere. The love affairs between copywriters and secretaries are described in decadent terms: "It was an old form of mortification for some pattern of behaviour, or grain of being" (534).

"All technology refers to the bomb" (pt. 4 ch. 4 p. 467).

See also the title for this part of the novel, "Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry".

Pt. 5 ch. 3

January 11, 1955

Father Paulus speaks disparagingly of Pope Pius XII, Eugenio Pacelli. The episode shows the Father has a strong character and independent judgment. This is often the case in DeLillo, such as the nuns in *Underworld* and in *White Noise*.

Later Nick Shay has a talk with Father Paulus, an important, perhaps fundamental step in his growth and in the reshaping of his personality. "Sit down, Shay, and tell me how you're doing. A young man's progress. That's the title of this session" (537).

Father Paulus says "rage and violence can be elements of productive tension in a soul" (538) and speaks of the necessity for a man to "experience a full measure of the appetites and passions of his race, even if only to contain them or direct them, somehow, usefully" (539). Words that seem to suggest even a degree of admiration for Nick's deed, the shooting of another human being. Nick's response is to wonder "why he thought I carried a stain of special knowledge for having done what I'd done".

Even Father Paulus' following words suggest that he, for all the self righteousness of his tone, doubts himself and admires, even respects the force of Nick's actions. This may be the reason, Nick muses in retrospect, why the Father works despite the extremely rigid weather there instead of "retir[ing] to the South of France" (537).

The “rambling encampment” just south of the border with Canada shows Nick “the reality of a mass of land called North America, new to my experience” (537) as a native of the Bronx.

October 24, 1962

Lenny Bruce in San Francisco, with a audience of jazz musicians, college boys and beatniks from City Lights.

“The whole beat landscape was bomb-shadowed. It always had been. The bomb was their handiest reference to the moral squalor of America, the guilty place of smokestacks and robot corporations, Time-magazined and J. Edgar Hoovered” (545).

Lenny Bruce goes into the ethnic aspects of the Cold War: “Everything is real estate. You’re a product of you geography” (544)

June 14, 1957

Nick Shay on a car trip across the West with his girlfriend of the time, Amy Brookisher.

“... we had the chemistry of a long brutal marriage compressed onto weeks, the twang in the air of a thing that stays unadjusted...” (551).

Amy makes fun of Nick, calling him “a foreigner from New York” (552) and jokingly arguing that he only learned English after leaving the city.

And the trip is actually one of discovery for Nick, even though less of the nation than of the other sex.

Nick and Amy promised each other to share every thought and every experience.

“I want everything that happens to happen to both of us,” she said.

“So do I,” I said, and meant it, at the time, truly (553).

His attitude will change: there are things he will not share with Marian, instead revealing them to a woman he has just met—Donna, in Los Angeles. Possibly the most profound reason for his fling was actually to have somebody else he could confess his secrets to.

Did he confess them to Amy?

“All this time and all this talk and I don’t know anything about you, basically,” she tells him (553).

Pt. 5 ch. 4

November 28, 1966

J. Edgar Hoover and his aide Clyde Tolson prepare for the Black and White Ball, held by Truman Capote at the Plaza in New York.

There is perhaps an element of NY chic in certain chapters?

Here Hoover and Tolson are staying at the Waldorf, “Hoover’s hotel of choice during his sojourns in New York” (556). The Black and White Ball is at the Plaza. Also Radio City Music Hall.

By this time, Hoover has traversed the decades as a constant public figure and is therefore a fitting character for this section of the novel, which moves back and forth across the years. This episode in particular takes place in the mid-sixties, a decade that opposed everything that Hoover stood for and represented (it is three years after Kennedy’s death almost to the day).

Even as the chapter begins, “protests” are reported via a security memo that Tolson reads to Hoover: demonstrators will reportedly protest the Vietnam war outside the Plaza, for maximum visibility.

This section links at least with two other timeframes in the novel:

- The Shot Heard ‘Round the World
(Hoover asks Tolson where he was “when Thomson hit the homer”, 556)
Hoover also appears in the Prologue. Frank Sinatra also appears both then and now (570).

- Jesse Detwiler's garbage guerrilla

GARBAGE GUERRILLA

Garbage guerrilla turns the FBI's own "methods regarding organized crime figures" (557) against itself: against Hoover, who is flabbergasted when Tolson reveal that a "confidential source" squealed about this: "It was the end of the world in triplicate", he thinks (557). It is probably Hoover's worst nightmare, since it touches on his deepest fears; while Tolson goes over the ludicrous details of the guerrilla's alleged plans, his boss goes to the window and tries to concentrate on watching the Plaza "about a dozen blocks away" (558), as though he could not stand the mere idea of his garbage being stolen and exposed. "I liked the thirties", he says. "I don't like the sixties. No, not at all" (559).

The sixties came to represent the reaction of the counterculture to everything Hoover stood for. A time when people reacted and struggled for their rights, fighting therefore not against the outside enemies but against their own government.

"We can't use conventional methods, however clever, on these people. Because what they're doing flies in the face of ordinary confrontation" (558). What happens when the FBI's techniques are re-contextualized and applied to the head of the FBI? This practice questions methods, authority, legitimacy.

The DOSSIER: Paranoia and control

"The dossier was a deeper form of truth, transcending facts and actuality. The second you placed an item in the file, a fuzzy photograph, an unfounded rumor, it became promiscuously true. It was a truth without authority and therefore incontestable. Factoids seeped out of the file and crept across the horizon, consuming bodies and minds. The file was everything, the life nothing" (559).

Hoover made "people answerable to the details of his creation". He and the FBI *manufacture* the proofs to their ends. This impulse is ascribed to Hoover double impulse toward both paranoia and the need for control.

The BLACK and WHITE BALL

Images in black and white: a thing from the past. Would this reassure Hoover? the colours also symbolize a clean division between two groups, two opposites: good and bad, America and Russia, capitalism and communism. Would this also reassure him?

The dress code of the ball requires black for men, white for women. What about sexual orientations? Both Capote and Hoover, who even resemble each other, are homosexuals.

“... the factoidal data generated by the guests would surely bridge the narrowing gap between journalism and fiction” (560).

Like the chapter itself, which mixes reality and fiction? And is the gap “narrowed” by new journalism, for instance?

Tanya Berenger, the mask lady tells Edgar: “The ball tonight is a perfect setting for you. Because you are very black and white to me. So you’ll be totally in character, yes?” (562). She tells him he looks like a different character with the mask on, rougher and tougher. Perhaps even with a hint toward the gay leather community?

The woman “had been accused at various times of being [...] just about everything Edgar distrusted and feared” (561); yet instead of being distrustful, he finds himself “wondering whether he was worthy”, because the mask seems to have a life of its own, which he may borrow only if he proves “ballsy enough” (cf. 561-2). Tanya says leather is real, “like wearing someone else’s face” (562).

November 29, 1966

Clyde Tolson made the decision to show up late at the party, past midnight. Partly as a sign of distinction and partly also, probably, in an attempt to avoid the protesters, who are reported to abuse the party goers verbally and by throwing objects. When the two FBI agents get to the Plaza the great part of both the protesters and the curious bystander area actually gone; yet “their bulletproof black Cadillac” (568) is immediately tailed by the typical flower power car, a Volkswagen bug painted in psychedelic colours.

The two men try for a secondary entrance (the north steps) but are tracked by the VW. The protesters all wear masks of Asian children, probably mimicking the party’s masks; they also shout “White killer in black tie!” (589) at Hoover and Tolson, matching the black and white theme with the anti-Vietnam war stance.

Among the jet set they meet at the party is also Frank Sinatra, who greets Hoover with the words: “Jedgar, you old warhorse. Haven’t seen you since” (570). Apparently an offhand and

stylish remark from Sinatra, literally every word of the sentence is actually laden with resonances with the Prologue.

- The two might have met again in real life, but the last time they were seen in the novel (again, together) was the Prologue, 500 pages and fifteen years earlier.
- In that occasion it was Sinatra who coined the nickname Jedgar (29).
- The epithet “old warhorse”, beside being not so ironic, seems to latch with Albrecht Durer’s painting that gives the title to the Prologue.

“Clyde noted how the ballroom seemed to throb with cross current interests and appetites. Political power mingling lubriciously with art and literature” (571). Perhaps a meta-narrative moment in the novel?

“There was a self-conscious sense of some profound moment in the making. A dreadful prospect, Clyde thought, because it suggested a continuation of the Kennedy years. In which well-founded categories began to seem irrelevant. In which a certain fluid movement became possible. In which sex, drugs and dirty words became to unstratify the culture” (571).

The DANCE

Edgar invited Clyde to dance with a lady.

“Show your true colors”, he tells his companion (572); a nod to the party’s theme. Hoover, “tipsy and bitter”, is asking Tolson to manifest his sexual preferences. Tolson gave up his relationships when Hoover’s needs became clear (cf. 573). Hoover needed a partnership exclusive and total: a kind of common-law marriage, never celebrated and never consummated. As a closeted homosexual Hoover never fulfils his urges and this, Tolson believes, makes him “consistent” in the exercise of his office. In his campaign against homosexuals in the government Hoover is persecuting his own impulses. In Tolson’s eyes, Hoover is “great” for the rigour of his beliefs and “great and sad and miserable” for what he fights in his own nature—he cannot accept his sexuality, which would turn him into what he fights. Hoover defends and epitomizes the “traditional background and early American righteousness” (573), the “well-founded categories” (571) his own nature would put into question if he did not silence it. Moreover Tolson would, if his “Boss” required it, be a willing passive sexual partner: a scene of majestically ironic perversity if played out. “But the Boss only wants his company and his

loyalty”, to death (573). Hoover needs a devoted partner, someone he can also envision as a potential sexual partner; he likes to watch Tolson’s naked body in secret, via a series of mirrors arranged so that such episodes “would seem entirely accidental [...] to Edgar’s own mind as well” (565).

The nation’s greatest secret keeper, “a man whose own sequestered heart holds every festering secret in the Western world” (51), keeps his greatest secret even from his own conscience.

The woman Tolson chose to dance with looks “totally medieval” (572), triggering a series of references to the Middle Ages. Other guests, Tolson suddenly notices, are also dressed in a variety of executioner’s hoods and other similar apparels (572-4); one woman in particular reminds him “of all things and all people, the hip sick dopest comic—Lenny Bruce” (574). Bruce’s death several months before the Black and White Ball, “of acute morphine poisoning”, suggested to both Hoover and Tolson “the hellish sense of religious retribution out of the Middle Ages” (574).

Probably the same sense that appealed to Hoover in the painting *The Triumph of Death*—a painting he is now “so morbidly fond of” that he had charged Tolson with acquiring the original for himself, “as a gift to the American people”.

The woman “in modified medieval dress” reminds Tolson not of Bruegel but of the aura of retaliation (contrappasso) which surrounded Lenny Bruce’s death. The photo of his “bloated body”, Tolson bemuses, “could have been titled *The Triumph of Death*” (574).

The woman Tolson dances with shows a knowledge of the ball’s guests (also indentifying Klara Sax with her husband Jason Vanover, 574) that would put to shame Tolson’s own—he is especially “flattered and [...] unsettled” that she knows *him* too, while he has no idea who she is. “Which doesn’t happen very often, does it?”, she remarks (575).

As a matter of fact she is not on the guest list, not “part of the same motherfucking thing” (575): she’s a nobody out of the counterculture and therefore unknown, yet, to Tolson.

With one single sentence she demolishes the aura of the event, built page after page in Hoover’s narrative point of view.

The Dance happens unexpectedly, unannounced. The dancers seem to have materialized out of thin air. Not even Tolson had noticed them earlier: “How had they assembled so deftly?” (574). They appear and play their act with the precision of secret agents: the ‘happening’ had probably been carefully rehearsed.

“They formed a death rank on the dance floor, halting the music and sending the guests to the fringes. They commanded the room, a masque of silent figures, a plague...” (575-6).

Their appearance on the floor is solemn, grave, in sharp contrast to the Gatsbianesque party surrounding them—which they send “to the fringes”, rendering it *obscene*. An appropriation of the stage, of the spotlight.

A “mockery of their sleek and precious evening” (577) in Tolson’s words. And even though their dance is “graceful” (576) it marks a sudden, abrupt end to the Black and White Ball precisely because of the change of tone. The masked dancers bring a gloom out of the Middle Ages, or its representation, into the glitter of the scene with its vintage, black and white atmosphere.

They bring Death.

The “graceful pavane” of “skeleton men and raven women” is a memento mori brought deftly but forcibly into a social event meant to celebrate the rich and famous.

And, with “the sheen of Last Things in his eye” (575), it is eventually to death to Hoover’s embittered thoughts turn to: to his own coffin, which gives him a “dark solace”.

Tolson, meanwhile, hopes to see “Edgar dead, pray God, not for ten, fifteen years yet” maybe the sixties would be over by then” (578). Hoover would die in 1972, at age 77.

Tolson allows the young woman to “charm and tempt” him, “that radical enravishing self-possessed heartless come-hither bitch” (577). Hoover’s sarcasm toward Tolson is proved right.

The MASQUE of the RED DEATH

The protesters perform a recontextualization of Poe’s story. Each term in the title gains new meaning and resonance in the context of the Black and White Ball:

- Masque: a masked event with a dress code, which allows symbolism to be used as the protesters become ravens and skeletons.
- Red: the term taking perhaps even a political meaning in the context of sixties counterculture. Moreover the colour signifies blood and violent death.
- Death: unexpected, sudden, exactly as in Poe, it visits the upper class and their exclusive, secluded social event.

The protesters turn Poe's parable into politics: the plague of the red death ("plague" is Tolson's own word to describe the dancers as they appear on the floor, 576) violates the exclusivity of the guest list, of the "invitation only" policy (560).

Pt. 5 ch. 5

October 25, 1962

Lenny Bruce in Chicago.

President Kennedy had addressed the nation on October 22. This section's opening gives the sense of the tense atmosphere as the days passed and the level of danger escalated toward a war conducted with "SAC bombers carrying thermonuclear bombers" (580).

Again, the sections about the Cuban Missile Crisis shows the degree of powerlessness felt by citizens, who can do nothing but hang to the news (cf. 580, 584). This sense of powerlessness and inevitability is implied in Bruce's "*We're all gonna die!*" refrain, and leads in turn to paranoia—perhaps the underlying motive of all the sections featuring Lenny Bruce.

Lenny gets out a condom and tries to put it over his mouth, "because I don't want to inseminate someone". "Never underestimate the power of language" (582). What power does *his* language have?

"I just realized. This is what the twentieth century feels like" (584): industrial, chemical, "filmy", unnatural.

See also Lenny's bit about Saran Wrap, another industrial product, used as a contraceptive method "in the Bible Belt" (581-2). Lenny argues that the material comes "from outer space", brought to Earth by an alien race who is afraid to test it on themselves. A possible metaphor for the way governments treated the population, e.g. in early nuclear tests tested on unknowing residents, "downwinders". The idea is so engrossing that Lenny temporarily forgets about the Missile Crisis.

Also on the power of language: “an erudite riff on the German word *Sprachgefühl*, a feel for language, for what is idiomatically hip” (585). This is obviously quintessential Lenny Bruce, the instinctive “feel” for hip language. See also the last paragraph of the section, about “Lenny’s own hard bop”. Jazz is one of the novel’s leitmotifs.

July 2, 1959

Del Rio, Texas, on the Mexican border (589). Again the southwest, the desert.

Nick Shay takes his girlfriend Amy Brookhiser across the Mexican for an abortion, presumably in a private clinic. They take a taxi to cross the border in order not to be delayed on the way back to the States by anti-drugs and anti-weapons controls.

The walls in the clinic’s waiting or living room are painted floor to ceiling with “saying and occult symbols” (588). See the whole two paragraphs. does the passage have a symbolic meaning in the context? Maybe the fact that looking at “the pictures and the words” Nick says “I didn’t know how to think about any of this”; “I didn’t know what to call it” (588). A roomful of symbols and language that Nick is unable to decipher. He does not understand what faces him, is shut off from things that clearly do have a meaning. Moreover it all comes “unexpected” to him , as a surprise.

The abortion seems to find him similarly unprepared (he is 24 at the time).

In the taxi he tells Amy he believes he is having second thoughts, which may well be ‘first’ thoughts because he realizes only at this point the seriousness of the situation, having taken for granted that the abortion was the one possible choice.

Amy seems to pity his irresoluteness and to be much more ready for what will happen. The contingencies of the clinic do not surprise her as much as Nick.

This is perhaps the point: he is not ready for fatherhood, despite his own convictions: “I was willing to make sacrifices and be responsible. This is what I told myself. I wanted to fix myself to something strong, to a wife, I thought, and child” (588). Yet Amy is not the right girl for him: “she was the last thing I needed in this world” (589).

On the road, the pick up in front of their car goes into a spin, eventually facing the correct way again. Amy says that her grandfather’s comment would have been “Truck swapped end for sure” (589). Is this what happens to Nick, too?

October 27, 1962

Lenny Bruce in Ocean Drive, “in the municipality of Miami Beach [...] a stone’s throw from Cuba” (592). The room is called El Patio and there are Cubans among the audience and a Latin band playing mambos and cha-chas in the adjoining lounge, which keeps spilling into the nightclub.

Not surprisingly for Lenny “there was only one subject tonight and it was central to his existence” (590). He is as close as ever to the danger: “Those missiles are just over my right shoulder, dig” (590).

“And we won’t be killed for being Jewish. That’s the tricky part. They’ll kill us for being American. How do we feel about that?” what a way to begin a night of entertainment. There was a long lugubrious silence (591).

“Because the atomic bomb is Old Testament. It’s the Jewish bible in spades. We feel at home with this judgment, this punishment hanging over us. Illness and misfortune” (592).

The bomb interpreted in mythical, religious terms. See Oppenheimer famous quote from the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”.

Lenny’s remarks about Jewishness would seem out of place in Miami, had he not “been tipped off at the airport that the Dade Co. police had planted Jewish detectives in the audience. Yes, Yiddish-speaking fuzz who were prepared to glom onto every vile syllable he uttered in the mother-in-law tongue” (592).

The “vile syllable” is *shmek*, from which derives smack, the nickname for heroin. Is Bruce trying to outwit the detectives? Or maybe showing “the power of language”?

Shmek, “which is just another name for ordinary life” (594).

Talking about names and ordinary life, Lenny reveals his real name is Leonard Alfred Schneider, and that taking the name Lenny Bruce was a move “toward the invisible middle. I’m just like you, mister” (592). An attempt to make himself indistinct, unremarkable.

“But that’s not what the ordained people do. McGeorge, Roswell, Adlai. They remove themselves from any taint of the big middle” (592). The remark comes after a sketch about the

exotic names of powerful people. Once again, he underlines that these people are removed from the crowd, they stand apart.

Lenny says the navy has boarded a ship at the quarantine line with Cuba, and discovered it wasn't carrying missiles (as surmised on the 25th, cf. 580) but "truck parts and toilet papers. See, there it is, ordinary life trying to reassert itself" (593).

Citizens of either blocs have no saying and no interest in the missile crisis and "the big power relationships" (594) which involve threat so serious they might obliterate the world. Against this, people pitch their ordinary lives.

"That's the secret meaning of this week", Lenny says. "The secret history that never appears in the written accounts of the time or in the public statements of the men in power" (594). It does appear, though, in such works as *Underworld*, which offers a people's history of the Cold War of sorts.

Lenny speaks from the perspective of the end of the week, since it is now Saturday; there is a feeling that as the week winds down the danger will also disappear, as though surviving the week ensured surviving the Crisis. When Lenny eventually shouts his line "*We're alla gonna die!*" it sounds deflated, devoid of fears and of real danger.

Meanwhile the dancers from the lounge have progressively spilled into the nightclub and brought the dancing in there as well, "while test missiles in California were reprogrammed with Soviet targets" (594). But the week is over, the fear is gone. One-two cha-cha-cha. Ordinary life.

Pt. 5 ch. 6

October 18, 1967

Marian at home in Madigan, Wisconsin, visiting her parents.

For the first time she tells her mother about Nick, even though she has known him "all this time" (596). "He's not a secret" she tells her mother, "There's haven't been much to say that's all" (597). This may even be true if at the end of the episode, prompted by her father's simple

question “What is he?”, she realizes Nick has not told her much about himself (603-4). It appears then that from the very beginning of their relationship, Nick is shady, an enigma of sorts.

Marian’s mother “sense[s]” something about the relationship: “I think you’re very uncertain” (597). Does Marian have doubt she cannot manage to express openly?

At the end of the day she calls him, telling him about her day; and that she wants to marry him. Nic may be caught unprepared, because his remains silent for a while at the phone. The conversation makes Marian “damn mad, angry at him and at herself, mostly herself, she decided, and she was determined to get back to the grind, to the work of hygiened perfection, shaping herself, willing herself into tighter being” (604).

This is the same language Nick and his friends use in speaking about him. Is this part of why they are attracted to each other? Because of the willpower of each to reshape him or herself?

“... she needed outside forces to counteract her tendencies. She wanted to call Nick but knew he wouldn’t be there. [...] Her mother called her remiss and indifferent. She suffered from disambition, said her mother” (600). When reflecting upon her need her thoughts are immediately brought to Nick.

Marian listen to “WIBA, Up Against the Wall FM” on the radio (598) and realizes that students are protesting because “this was Vietnam week on campuses across the country. And this was Dow Day here in Madison, a protest against Dow Chemical, whose recruiters were active on campus” (599).

Dow Chemical produces a kind of napalm being used in Vietnam at the time. Therefore protests against the war merge with protests against the firm’s recruiting campaign in town. The episode recounts the various form of protest with details of street names, so that events can almost be followed on a map. The report acquires a lively feeling; the sense that things are happening minute by minute and often unexpectedly.

A recruiter for Dow is trapped in Commerce Hall with a potential recruit, and has a hard time keeping the interview from being figuratively invaded by the protest. “There were Dow interviews scheduled in three buildings but the sit-ins was taking place at Commerce”.

The protests seem quite articulate, with actions being carried out by various groups: trash fires, sit-ins, “affinity groups” (602) breaking windows. Plus at least two different theatre groups: the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the mysterious Terminal Theater (601-2), the same group

reportedly behind the sabotage of the Black and White Ball the previous year [November 28th, 1966 — October 18th, 1967]. They actually “keep turning up among the police” (601), which corresponds to what Tolson had said about them: “A group little seen and less known. Campus demonstrations mostly. [...] They’ve been known to act pout protests, playing all the roles, even the police” (576).

Marian has in fact seen “a multicolored Volkswagen beetle with painted faces in the windows” (600), which might well be the same one that had tailed Hoover’s and Tolson’s black limousine (568, 579). Are they impersonating the police even there, at the Library Mall in Madison?

Even if that is the case, police violence elsewhere in town is real: “The police were coming down hard now, clubs out, cops acting without orders or against orders, inevitably, riding their own rampant highs” (602). At the end of the day Marian’s mother will talk “about the broken bones of the demonstrators, the students with head wounds, clubbed, gassed, bleeding” (604). Her father’s response is much more cynical, which might account in part for Marian’s own personality.

The RADIO

The radio keeps reciting “Faculty Document 122 authorizes force against student” (passim in the section). Meanwhile The San Francisco Mime Troupe chants the same phrase “in front of Old Chemistry” (602). Upon hearing it, Marian thinks it is “Small wonder. Because it sounded as though the students were tearing up the campus and it looked as if, earlier in the day [...] as if something had happened in the night to change the rules of what was thinkable” (602).

A sentence that powerfully summarizes the sea change provoked by nationwide student protests as well as the other branches of the protest movement.

The radio is a complex phenomenon on this day.

It aims to inform, as in the case of Faculty Document 122, but to some extent also to fictionalize the event, mixing real-time with pre-recorded sounds: “augmented and improved by a simulated riot on the radio, an audio montage of gunfire, screams, klaxons...” (599).

“People everywhere listened to the radio, to the dialogue between what was real and what was spliced and mixed and processed and played” (601).

The radio also appropriates the language of slogans by the chemical companies: Dow but pointedly also DuPont. Certain phrases are repeated, such as Dow Day or Pig (598 and 599-600 respectively).

Dow: "Common Sense, Uncommon Chemistry" (602).

DuPont: "Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry" (602).

The slogans are repeated by female "soft and sexy voice" that even mimics an orgasm every time she repeats the DuPont slogans. Then a male voice explains how to manufacture "your own napalm" and even a nitrate bomb (603): unveiling once more the close connection between capitalism and the war industry. The technology is the same, the companies are the same. Jell-O and fuel rockets in the Deming episode of 1957 (pt. 5 ch. 2 pp. 513-21), the "Bomb Your Lawn with Nitrotex" ad campaign (pt. 5 ch. 2 pp. 526-35).

On the radio there is also "rock and roll everywhere, serpentine twangs of feedback rolling from window speakers" (602) and at one point even "heavy metal" (601), quite anachronistically since at this point the Black Sabbath did not even exist.

Marian eventually realizes that the radio had been "taken over" (603).

February 6, 1953

A brief episode about Nick Shay in the Bronx. He's now "thirteen, almost" (605), has quit chess but plays *sett'e mezz* with other children for pennies.

The real point of the episode, and the reason why Matt enjoys playing cards on the streets, is that his brother Nick is upstate and this fact gives Matt certain advantages: people are nicer to him now, treating him like they used to treat Nick, whose place he has taken over in a sense (cf. the episode at the butcher's); and he is also "a little bit of a hero with his brother upstate, doing what he'd done" (606). Matt likes being popular, yet he still defines himself in relation to his brother.

"They were the two of them alone [Matt and Rosemary]. He felt the solemn weight of the situation, the size of Nick's going" (606).

December 1, 1969

Charles “Chuckie” Wainwright Jr. Is a crewman in a B52’s bombing Vietnam. The episode is largely taken up by dialogues between Chuckie and his Afro-American crewmate Louis T. Bakey.

Louis is convinced that “you can’t fight a war without acronyms”—at least in modern warfare. Accordingly, the acronyms usually come “from technicians and bombheads” but occasionally “from the ranks” too (606). The different provenience give different results as well. “The ranks” have a direct experience “with the weapons systems they maintain and fly” (606). A B52 is known to them as a BUFF, for “Big Ugly Fat Fuck” (607).

B52’s featured in Klara Sax’ most ambitious work, the Long Tall Sally Project. In fact the Long Tall Sally painted in the nose of the very same aircraft in which Wainwright and Blakey are flying will inspire Klara for the name of her project. Eros and Thanatos? Perhaps an image of the USA: an innocent an awkwardly sexy girl painted on the fuselage of a massive weapon of destruction.

The two crewmates have a conversation about sex just before taking off (607).

“First we bomb them”.

“Then we fuck them”.

An instance of U.S. imperialism, or any other for that matter.

Their conversation then drifts toward marriages and sexual relationships: Chuckie has already been married, Louis does not want to (608); and they eventually focus on the cute girl painted on the aircraft. She’s been misnamed, Louis argues; she cannot be the original Long Tall Sally of the Little Richard song, since the latter “she black and she bad” (609). Louis olds that the correct interpretation of the lyrics to the song were disguised by the interpretation of the singer; not unlikely with Little Richard, as in the case of *Tutti Frutti*.

Wainwright points pout the song had been out for many years (released as a 7” in March 1956)and that nobody had yet made a point about the girl’s skin colour. Bakey’s argument is similar to what Simeon Biggs says about the census of Afro-Americans (pt. 3 ch. 3 pp. 333-8): the truth has somehow been silenced and disguised—under everyone’s eyes.

According to him, the title character of the song is a black woman, but this detail, is implicit and coded in the lyrics. In the process of becoming a pop cultural trope she had been whitewashed to the point of becoming a “skinny blond playing kissy-face” (610) painted on the nose of a BUFF in the Vietnam war.

The routine mission is filled with the technicalities of “bombspeak” (611), rounded off by the sang acronyms of the ranks (cf. 606).

The exchange between the two men actually takes place during a bombing mission in Vietnam. The episode is in a sense the ‘rank and file’ equivalent of the bombheads episodes featuring Matt Shay in the Pocket. This is where Matt’s work eventually ended up.

The novel shows the ‘bombhead’ technical work first and then the real-life applications. The reverse chronological order implies such weapons were design, built and used years before Matt began working on them. Should he therefore have known? He possibly did and simply did not want to acknowledge. The episodes in the Pocket are actually pervaded by a sort of ‘I don’t want to know’ feeling; in following years Matt will even try to expiate his weapon work with “nonprofit [...] to help third world countries” (pt. 2 ch. 5 pp. 198-9).

MOVIE VERSION: “The two men had been crewmates since Greenland [...] Their current bombing runs were [...] a different level of reality at any rate, easier to project as a movie” (608).

“in the playful movie version” (615).

Cinematographic allusions seem to play upon the similarities between this episode and Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*, especially the B52 scene.

GREENLAND: a extreme experience for “the rank and file” stationed there, an “otherworld” (610). Yet “maybe Greenland was just a delicate piece of wargaming played in a well-heated room in some defense institute” (611).

The Cold War as a wargame played on a map. “A place that never became more than a rumor [...]—the kind of unverified information that resembled his life” (615). Apparently they had no proof of truly being in Greenland.

A similar kind of confusion takes place in Vietnam, where they bomb indistinctly North and South, fighters and civilians and even those back in the U.S.A. who opposed the war (cf. 612).

Theirs is moreover “a mission based on the bullshit readings of image interpreters” (612): a massive firepower unleashed on the ground of uncertain information. Chuckie therefore asks Louis whether he ever wakes up in the middle of night feeling guilty for “dropping bombs on

people who never said a cross word to you” (615). Louis’ answer is a demonstration of the reliance on sheer power: they are the ones who drop the bombs, not the ones being bombed.

The BALLAD of LOUIS BAKEY

Louis takes part to an early A-test, flying a B52 twenty-six thousand feet over the Nevada Test Site in order to test the effects of a fifty-kiloton nuclear bomb on craft and crew. Louis speaks about the blast in religious, apocalyptic terms: “a glow [...] like the touch of God”, “heaven”, “flying right through Judgment Day” (613).

He also suffers long term health consequences.

“A strong and immortal young man on a noble mission” (613).

Pt. 5 ch. 7

November 9, 1965

Mick finds himself entering a bar in the Lower East Side, with no explanation given about how he ended up there. He has a chance meeting with an old mate from grammar school, Jeremiah Sullivan (incidentally, a Jewish name coupled with a surname of Irish origin).

The section intertwines its different aspects so that they reveal themselves little by little as the section progresses, while avoiding self-evident statements. We discover about the bar, its regulars, Jerry, the kind of children each of the two friends were and the kind of adults they have become, and perhaps most importantly about how Nick feels about himself at that stage of his life.

At the core, the meeting between Nick and Jerry shows the silent widening over the years of the “curious sense of separation” (619) they first sensed when they went to different high schools: “it was the school difference partly, [...] but also something irreconcilable, the style, the friends, the future”. Even then they could foresee their respective future would be different. However *how* different and *why* come up rather unexpectedly.

Jerry was the one who “had seemed for a time to be priestward bound” (619), the one who had probably catalyzed some sort of teenage admiration or awe; he would have appeared as a chosen one. Nick on the other hand had “been in correction and then more or less lost to news and rumor” (621), and this silence concerning his whereabouts might have prompted implications of bad endings. But now Nick is self-realized, looking good, happy about his job and his girlfriend (evidently Marian); while Jerry is bitter about his job, home, family, even about himself: “and all because he’d never killed a man” (621).

The accidental murder becomes a positive catalyst in Nick’s later life; it spares him from becoming perhaps another Jerry Sullivan.

He is at this point “doing some research project for some outfit in the Midwest” (618), a job that involves “visiting schools in ghettos and marginal parts of town” in New York City and in Philadelphia, “as a freelance associate in a behavioural research firm in Evanston, Illinois”. The aim of the project is “to alter traditional methods of school instruction” (619): evidently Nick’s goal, in freely joining it, is to use education to prevent other youths from making the same mistake(s) he made; possibly to give them the same insight he acquired while in correction as well as later as an adult. He wants to make a difference for them just as the events in 1951-2 made all the difference for him, changing his life—probably, all considered, for the better.

He also taught “Civics and English” (619), i.e. the subjects most important to *him* at the Jesuits’: Civics because it taught him what he had done wrong and how not to repeat it; English because it taught him the name of things. He now wants to teach Latin as well (619), implicitly acknowledging the importance of the period he spent at the Jesuits’. On October 3rd, 1951, Father Paulus had himself explained to Albert Bronzini that some of his brethren were thinking of a new form of institution, where among other things Latin may be taught as a spoken language (pt. 6 ch. 1 p. 675).

Nick also tells Jerry he does not want to come back to New York. He has distanced himself firmly and definitively from the city as the place of his childhood and upbringing, which had peaked with his crime.

At this point he still does not see himself as “the marrying type” (618), does not even want to see pictures of Jerry’s wife and children. He does not want to be a father; perhaps he does not want to be like *his* father. Hence the Oedipal ritual of killing a substitute father figure and making love to a his substitute mother figure (respectively George Manza and Klara Bronzini). The two acts will lead to a series of consequences that eventually lead to Nick’s fatherhood and even grandfatherhood.

While these talks unravel, the reader is shown the bar of which Jerry Sullivan is a regular; even though Nick “didn’t think of these people as regulars exactly. They were denizens. That was the word somehow, from the Late Latin” (621).

Incidentally, one of the men at the bar moans a paranoid monologue about being followed and spied by seeing-eye blind.

Jerry is still connected to the womb, to the neighbourhood that nurtured both of them; he can still, and is willing to, “recite the destinies of a hundred linked souls” (620). He even tries to convince Nick to join an impromptu school reunion organized “on the spur of the moment” (621). Nick on the other hand has cut himself clear of all these connections and has made a life for himself elsewhere, “out there” (619).

And when the lights go out (621-3) he uses the temporary general commotion to just walk away.

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