

Article

# The Bounds of Narrative in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*: Action and the Ecology of *Mimêsis*

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**Abstract:** The interrelationship of natural and cultural history in Don DeLillo's *Underworld* presents an ecology of *mimesis*. If, as Timothy Morton argues, ecological thought can be understood as a "mesh of interconnection," DeLillo's novel studies the interpretation of connection. *Underworld* situates its action in the Cold War era. DeLillo's formal techniques examine the tropes of paranoia, containment, excess, and waste peculiar to the history of the Cold War. Parataxis and free-indirect discourse emphasize the contexts of reference in the novel, illustrating how hermeneutics informs the significance of boundaries. DeLillo's use of parataxis exemplifies the conditions that propose and limit metaphor's reference to reality, conditions that offer the terms for meaningful action. I utilize Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics to demonstrate how *Underworld* situates the reference to reality in its temporal and narrative condition. The historical situation of the novel's narrative structure allows DeLillo to interrogate the role of discourse in producing and interpreting connection. *Underworld* offers layers of significance; the reader's engagement with the novel's discourse reaffirms the conditions of a meaningful relationship with reality in the pertinence of a metaphor.



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## 1. Introduction

Figurative conditions present an ecology in Don DeLillo's 1997 novel, *Underworld*. A work of fiction, the novel is grounded in the history and historiography of the Cold War era. DeLillo's ecology shows how narration proposes the conditions of relation to a world that the text's reference opens. DeLillo charts an ecology of interrelation between narration and reality. Ecology studies organisms in interrelation to their environment (Ingold 1992, p. 39); language functions differently in different contexts. DeLillo shows how the contexts of reference shape the relationship of narrative to reality. His formal techniques illustrate how the contexts of discourse signal the terms of the community's relationship to narrative. This essay will use the philosophy of Ricoeur to understand the logic and the consequences of DeLillo's mimetic ecology.<sup>1</sup>

*Underworld* asks the reader to question the relationships it proposes between American culture and its historiography. In doing so, DeLillo asks the reader to question a relationship to ideology. In "Science and Ideology" Ricoeur argues for a primary understanding of "ideology" as a community's relationship to its symbols.<sup>2</sup> For Ricoeur, the power of ideology rests in the promise of symbols to hold meaning. In questioning the relationship between a "word and its world," in Elise Martucci's phrase, DeLillo's novel questions the relationship between his own art, the reader, and the world that opens in front of the text. In doing so, DeLillo invites the reader to consider the stakes of the figuration of history, a practice that holds promise for both the conservative and the utopic aspects of our relation to symbols and to narrative.

<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur's thought has been applied to "environmental hermeneutics" by Brian Treanor (2014) and Forrest Clingerman et al. (2013).

<sup>2</sup> In "Science and Ideology" (Ricoeur [1991] 2007, pp. 246–69). Ricoeur does not discount the aspects of domination historically associated with the word's use, but rather seeks to place these aspects in perspective.

*Underworld* presents an ecology of figurative systems. DeLillo charts the consequences of those mimetic paradigms for humans and for the natural world. The novel shows the interrelation of natural and cultural history, for richer or for poorer, in the marriage of *mimesis* and ontology. By situating its narration in the conditions of the Cold War, *Underworld* shows how historical tropes such as containment, paranoia, consumer capitalism, and the military-industrial complex inform the hermeneutics of its characters. The novel emphasizes the differing systems of interpretation whereby symbols become meaningful. The relation to discourse illustrates the conditions that govern a reading of the world through secular faiths and through the sacred.

DeLillo's writing demonstrates the method of his characters' hermeneutics—their search for hidden meaning. Many critics describe how DeLillo's works evoke a "mysticism in language," based either in secular transpositions of faith or faith in the divine.<sup>3</sup> Amy Hungerford argues that language in *Underworld* provides "instances of something like divine immanence" (Hungerford 2006, p. 374). For Hungerford, the immanence of language becomes available in *Underworld* at the cost of plot, which "can't do the ultimately spiritual work of language" (Hungerford 2010, p. 74). Yet the novel betrays a thematic concern with the situation of discourse in time and history. Her reading overlooks the temporality of discourse as an indicator of its part in action. Ricoeur argues that narrative's resemblance to an action (plot) may be based in the unity of change in figures or tropes, as is common in contemporary fiction (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 2, p. 25). *Underworld* offers this possibility of metaphorical unity through the reader's constructive response to the fragments of the text.<sup>4</sup> While *Underworld* provides an abundance of significant connection,<sup>5</sup> I argue that DeLillo's text foregrounds a meditation on methods of reading and interpreting connection.<sup>6</sup> *Underworld* trains the reader's attention to the conditions that govern the reference of discourse and its interpretation as metaphor. Ricoeur argues that the reference of metaphor in narrative renews the reference to reality. The reference of narrative discourse to reality indicates the condition of its reference within a hermeneutic. I will use Ricoeur's philosophy to illustrate how DeLillo portrays the conditions of this reference in metaphor, temporality, and narration. The novel's attention to the historicity of discourse befits the situation of its action in history of the Cold War era. The possibility for mystical engagement with language in *Underworld* emphasizes the situation of discourse: its reference to a world that discourse projects. DeLillo points attention to the figurative conditions through which symbols maintain relationship with reality and with time.

<sup>3</sup> See Hungerford (2010); John McClure (2007); Mark Eaton (2006); Peter Schneck (2010); Robert McMinn (2002); David Cowart (2002a; 2002b) and Kathryn Ludwig (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Several critics have similarly asserted the reader's responsibility to "labor," as Mark Osteen argues, in the construction of *Underworld's* meaning (Osteen 2000, p. 216; Martucci 2007).

<sup>5</sup> For a convincing reading of unity in *Underworld's* plot elements, see Jesse Kavadlo (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur's conception of reference and metaphor distinctly differs from that of Derrida; a recent article by Sean Donovan Driscoll clarifies these differences. He argues that *The Rule of Metaphor* responds, albeit indirectly, to Derrida's "White Mythology" (Driscoll 2020). Ricoeur's reading of Aristotle in *The Rule of Metaphor* prioritizes metaphor's connection to the illocutionary act rather than metaphor's connection to the noun, creating the grounds for its ultimate reference to a world to which discourse belongs. According to Driscoll, both Ricoeur and Derrida argue metaphor involves a "transfer of names," or *epiphora onotamatos* (Aristotle qtd. in Driscoll, p. 124). For Ricoeur, metaphor's "transgression" of order ultimately recuperates meaning (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, p. 21); for Derrida, metaphor's transfer threatens meaning. Ricoeur responds to Derrida, arguing that "the category-mistake is the deconstructive intermediary phase between description and redescription" (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, p. 21). Ricoeur's mimetic cycle creates the means for this redescription; narrative configuration changes referential values. The reader reinscribes the "new semantic pertinence" of metaphor in the reference to reality (Driscoll, p. 124), a reference that Derrida denies. *Underworld's* study of connection permits DeLillo to demonstrate the conditions of metaphor's reference. Paranoid and superstitious habits of connection in *Underworld* follow Derrida's system of reference and show the play of language without limitation. As Driscoll quotes Ricoeur, "abstracted from the referential function, metaphor plays itself out in substitution and dissipates in ornamentation; allowed to run free, it loses itself in language games" (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, p. 40). DeLillo points our attention to the conditions of linguistic reference; though *Underworld* shows paranoid connection, it does not endorse this habit of reading. The combination of paranoid referential systems, whether they signify as metonymy for a character's point of view, act in tandem with the identity of rich metaphorical meaning present in *Underworld*; the emphasis on differing systems of reference teaches readers to be attentive to the conditions that inform the reference of metaphor to reality.

## 2. Ricoeur: Reference and *Mimēsis*

Ricoeur's philosophy approaches hermeneutics through symbols and texts; it thus provides a fitting approach to DeLillo's portrayal of hermeneutics in *Underworld*. Instead of what he viewed as the flawed, "direct" route to existence proposed by the ontology of Martin Heidegger, Ricoeur's hermeneutics takes a "detour" through the understanding and interpretation of symbols and texts by which existence becomes conscious and intelligible (Vanhoozer 1991, p. 42).

Ricoeur's narrative conception of temporality contributes to his ontology. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur adumbrates the argument<sup>7</sup> that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in its turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 1, p. 3). His narrative temporality addresses the "complicity and the contrast of internal time-consciousness and objective succession" (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 3, p. 22). He conceives of *mimesis* in terms of action.<sup>8</sup>

Ricoeur argues that mimetic configuration transforms our understanding of "quasi-characters," the linguistic entities through which humans understand the world and through which they conceive of action. He argues that historiography cannot evade the terms of ordinary language; consequently, the "quasi-characters" that fiction utilizes also serve as agents by which historiography defines its inquiry and its conclusions. According to Ricoeur, humans understand the world and conceive of action in it through the "split reference" of fiction and history. For Ricoeur, this "split reference" projects a "third time" of interwoven reference that negotiates among subjective, "lived time" and public, "cosmological time" (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 3). Humans conceive of events, action, and thus, temporality, in terms of the "quasi-characters" of the world opened by this reference. For Ricoeur, quasi-characters receive renewed referential value through the mimetic cycle. In Ricoeur's description of the mimetic cycle, language's initial reference to reality changes through the process of *mimesis*.<sup>9</sup> The reader applies this changed reference in reality's renewed conception.

The possibility for a "mysticism in language" or an "immanence of language" depends on the relation of language to reality within time. The contexts of reference define the significance of discourse as act within the world it projects. For Ricoeur, the reference of discourse does double-duty. As "language event," it refers both to itself and to "a world that it claims to describe, to express, or to represent" (Ricoeur [1991] 2007, p. 145). He argues that discourse "projects a world" at the level of the sentence and of the work. The reader opens the reference of this world projected by discourse (*ibid.*, p. 147). As Ricoeur argues, *written* discourse excludes itself from the situation of reference in the context of a world that is common to speakers in a dialogue (*ibid.*, p. 146). Writing removes speech from its immediate situation, emphasizing the inferred context of its reference; it forces us to imagine how discourse projects a world. Opening the text, the reader opens the reference of the world that discourse projects, opening "new dimensions of our being-in-the-world" (*ibid.*, p. 147). The reference of discourse contains the figurative contexts that define its meaning as action. The event of discourse can be understood in terms of its contribution to the ordered unfolding of an action that begins and ends—the configured action that Aristotle calls *muthos* or plot.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur argues that the "circle of narrativity and temporality" is not vicious, but rather, a "healthy" circle, "whose two halves mutually reinforce one another" (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 1, p. 3).

<sup>8</sup> See especially David Pellauer (2015). Ricoeur argues the priority of the speech act in Aristotle's conception of metaphor; for Ricoeur, the speech act involves a predicate and, thus, "introduces and presupposes the idea of time" (Pellauer 2015, p. 74). Ricoeur treats "discourse" as narrated action, at the level of the sentence and the work. Narrative ordering changes the significance of narrative entities—their revelation of the temporal unfolding of action.

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur describes this process of *mimesis* in *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur's *mimesis*<sub>1</sub> indicates the world as the subject initially understands it through narrative (and in language). *Mimesis*<sub>2</sub> indicates the configuration achieved through narrative emplotment. *Mimesis*<sub>3</sub> signals the reader's re-application of language to the world. Ricoeur argues that the reader's experience of the world as configured by fiction transforms their subsequent understanding and interpretation of reality (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 1, pp. 52–87: "Time and Narrative: Threefold Mimesis").

DeLillo's use of formal techniques in *Underworld* illustrates how the conditions of reference project the value of literary discourse in the greater action of history's unfolding. The figurative conditions of discourse propose the event's revelation of the order of an action; the event becomes figurative in terms of its contribution to the progress of this action toward completion. Martin Heidegger names this consideration of things in their capacity for finality "authenticity" (Heidegger 1962). DeLillo's novel acknowledges the many perspectives through which history is "totalized," and the differing semantic conditions that inform a narrative of things in relation to "ends". He recognizes the limitation of perspective in drawing the bounds of narrative and portrays this limitation as necessary to meaningful action. He uses formal techniques to demonstrate how the limitation of narrative's relation to reality informs the conception of things in terms of ends. This limitation offers the possibility of finitude in meaningful narrative (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 3, p. 274).

DeLillo's use of parataxis and free-indirect discourse shows how the limitation of discourse sustains a meaningful relationship to history and to reality. By composing the novel in parataxis, DeLillo interrupts the continuity of the figurative conditions projected in the reference of the novel's discourse. He creates an emphasis on the contexts of reference that limit the pertinence of his fragments to the resemblance of a meaningful action. In tandem with parataxis, he uses free-indirect discourse to emphasize the contexts of identity that inform reference in the novel. By emphasizing the contexts of reference, *Underworld* shows how the limitation of perspective informs concepts of authentic narrative. The novel's thematic use of parataxis emphasizes the mutual limitation of overlapping perspectives. DeLillo shows how history's totalization occurs through the metaphors for intersubjective experience that discourse creates; "total, for whom?" DeLillo's novel asks. He shows how the community and the individual's conceptions of authenticity coincide in collective historiography. As Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* indicates, it is the community's identification of the conditions of authentic discourse—the condition of its application to reality and to history—that coheres in the "dynamic unity" of narrative identity. The limitation of narrative's reference sustains the meaningful temporal application of discourse to reality, the "reaffirmation" of historical consciousness "within the limits of its validity" which Ricoeur calls narrative identity (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 3, p. 274).

Written after the ostensive "end" of the Cold War, DeLillo's novel shows how the definition of ends and beginnings derive from the reference of discourse. The significance of discourse as an event derives from its participation in the resemblance of an action, its revelation of significance in the world its reference projects. The limitation of this reference in fiction redefines its part in an action, and thus, its contribution to temporality. In the novel's Epilogue, *Underworld's* Sister Edgar, a Catholic Nun, sees atomic detonations in cyberspace. She sees the word "peace" spelled out in "the lunar milk of the data stream," an action that closes the text of *Underworld*. This leads Samuel Cohen to interpret *Underworld* as DeLillo's effort to provide formal closure and containment to the period of the Cold War (Cohen 2009, p. 201). However, the reader must ask how the spelling of "peace," in cyberspace or in the context of DeLillo's novel defines an event in the contours of a world that begins and ends. The reader must, as DeLillo writes, "try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world" (DeLillo 1997, p. 827); *Underworld* leaves the situation of this "peace," in the world of the novel and the history of the world, in question. The lack of reference to a world anticipates the absence of a reference to reality projected by discourse in the simulacrum of existence portrayed in the "Artis Martineau" chapter of DeLillo's 2017 novel *Zero K*.<sup>10</sup> *Underworld* provides an extended meditation on the situation of its discourse—its necessary reference to a world that it projects.<sup>11</sup> Instead of containment,

<sup>10</sup> Peter Boxall argues that "DeLillo's novels of the 21st CE—the first novels, perhaps of his 'late' phase—evoke an extraordinary lack of spatial or temporal awareness, a sudden and drastic failure of the bounds that hold us in time and space" (Boxall 2012, p. 689). David Cowart describes similar dynamics of language and time in *The Body Artist* (Cowart 2002b, p. 202–210.)

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hill Schaub argues that DeLillo hopes to "evoke" the "thick lived tenor of things" (DeLillo 1997, p. 827) in this scene and in the novel as a whole (Schaub 2011, p. 82).

DeLillo's situation of "peace" in cyberspace asks the reader to define the application of its discourse to reality, thus creating a meaningful relationship of its narrative to history.

Augustine begins his *Confessions* by asking how God is contained ("[capere]") in the things of the world (Augustine 2014, p. 7). DeLillo's novel is concerned to account for the relationship among discourse and the things in the world. He portrays an ecology of *mimesis* in which the capacity for meaning in understanding and action is proposed through differing frameworks for interpretation of the visible. Recognizing the limitations of perspective, DeLillo recognizes humanity's tendency to overdetermine the correspondence of its *mimesis* to reality—to efface the diverse reality of history in the unity of poetry and myth. Just as *Underworld* seeks to account narratively for the material waste of consumer capitalism and the Cold War's legacy of nuclear waste, DeLillo's characters make efforts to contain the mystery of reality through narrative, an aesthetic reflection of the historically situated desire to contain nuclear energy, sex, communism, as well as the loose ends and dark alleys of public and private history. Many critics have noted *Underworld's* thematic concern with waste and its thematic response in aesthetic recycling. While John McClure argues that the preoccupation with ritual narration shows the vanity of narrative as a strategy for containment, I contend that DeLillo shows the problematic necessity of the relationship *mimêsis* establishes with reality. The novel emphasizes the conditions whereby *mimêsis* proposes its reference to reality. If, as Richard P. Martin argues, "epic . . . is on the level of ideology a metonymy for culture itself," DeLillo's discourse retains an element of irony in its ordering of history that requires the reader's skeptical interpretation (Martin 2005, p. 18). *Underworld* offers an anatomy of American history and culture, yet the reader's response to the text interprets the significance of its fragments' in terms of their value as metaphor.

*Underworld's* reader becomes aware of the conditions of interpretation. The relationship to discourse illustrates the novel's thematic focus on containment, excess, and waste. DeLillo's use of the fragment exemplifies the limits the novel accords to narrative's connection between the material world and symbols. The interpretation of the fragment's metaphorical qualities engages both its identity and its production of surplus meaning. The reader limits the fragment's identity (its pertinence as metaphor) according to the contexts of its reference; parataxis and free-indirect discourse emphasize these contexts. *Underworld* shows how discourse connects us with reality and history according to the contexts that inform its significance as metaphor.

In *Underworld*, the dynamics of metaphor exemplify the conditions of our relationship to reality, including the material world and history. The book helps us to understand how the relation to reality is mediated by a relation to symbols. The relation to discourse serves to illustrate the conditions of metaphorical relation to a world. Cycles of repetition in *Underworld* show how temporality arises from the figurative conditions that inform their interpretation of significance and action. The novel makes this perceptible by describing characters' relation to reality through their relation to symbols.

DeLillo's invitation to consider our metaphoric relation to the material world indicates the inseparability of subject and object, individual and collective, ideology and utopia. *Underworld's* narrative creates metaphors that express "the contradictions of being" (DeLillo 1997, p. 444). The book suggests that these contradictions provide the metaphors that we must live within, in being, as in narrative. Mark Osteen argues that *Underworld* describes the failure of narrative attempts to contain the terrifying other; historically, narrative containment has oversimplified reality and alienated us from it (Osteen 2000, p. 215).<sup>12</sup> He points out that binaries "partake of each other" in the novel (p. 240); in aesthetic recycling, narrative offers "a form of grace" (ibid., p. 216). Indeed, *Underworld* suggests that narrative creates metaphors for time with which we must remain in relationship.

<sup>12</sup> Osteen does not use the word reality, but "nature". I have chosen to emphasize the word "reality" in this essay and avoided the word "nature"; however, Ricoeur's mimetic cycle shows how narrative creates a dialogue between history (how things are), "nature," and poetry—how things might be—in the reference to reality. For more on this distinction, see fn. 14.

As this essay will show, the immanence of discourse necessitates a relationship to time. The reader's limitation of *Underworld's* discourse offers the conservative or utopic possibilities for meaning in the interrelation of its fragments. Parataxis emphasizes the novel's thematic focus on the interrelation of parts; the reader gauges the reference of its fragments in relation to the work as a whole. The book's narrative structure reiterates the lesson that it is not only action that resounds in history, but the conditions of reference, for readers of the world and those who narrate. The novel's anatomy of narrative conditions portrays an ecology of relation. In the same spirit that Augustine asks his God how the material contains Him, DeLillo inquires how *mimesis* contains reality—how narrative reveals a relationship to reality. *Underworld* considers the conditions that inform the reference of its discourse.

The novel shows the interrelationship of cultural and natural history, for richer, for poorer, in the marriage of mimesis and ontology. *Underworld's* action renews our conception of history's possibility. DeLillo investigates how narrative's resemblance of reality shows the limits drawn ultimately not by language but by our relation to the world through the forms of language. As a novel that represents both history and its poetic qualities, the reference of *Underworld* permits the utopian possibility of time yet maintains the useful function of ideology: it reaffirms the social pact of language-use. The individual and the community's identification of significance through narrative maintains the useful function of ideology; it offers a relationship to time that reveals the terms of action and change.

### 3. "I Have Shored These Fragments": Time and "Manyness"

*Underworld's* dependence on fragments creates an emphasis on the reader's situation of its discourse. DeLillo's ability to create the resemblance of a unified action from the wreck of time insists on the reader's renewal of time's remains. The reader's renewal of these fragments in their capacity for new meaning animates them and gives history worth and new life. In this way, *Underworld* mirrors *The Wasteland*, as Paul Gleason argues convincingly (Gleason 2002).<sup>13</sup> T.S. Eliot's poem provides an intertext for the novel; DeLillo frequently references the work in connection with protagonist Nick Shay. As Gleason points out, *Underworld* creates parallels to the vegetation ceremonies through which *The Wasteland* proposes new life, both in the burial rites associated with waste, and in the novel's aesthetic recycling. Like Osiris, the possibility for renewal of the body of the past is revived in the care of its fragments.

The possible unity of American history is represented in *Underworld* by a baseball. *Underworld's* historian, Marvin Lundy, gathers a partial, fragmentary narrative of the baseball's provenance. The record of the ball's transmission through history is never completed. This baseball, the homerun ball that wins the 1951 National League Pennant, is caught in the stands by an African American youth, Cotter Martin. His father Manx Martin steals the ball from Cotter and sells it for thirty dollars and change. Their connection to the baseball is never recorded by Marvin in the history of its transmission. Black pages segregate the sections of *Underworld* that narrate the Martin family's history from other parts of the book. These divisions are visible in the physical artifact of *Underworld* like the strata that separate differing rock-types in the geological record of a road-cut. These separations recognize the African American community's absence from Marvin's history of the baseball and gesture towards its absence from the record of American history. *Underworld* acknowledges the limitation of historiographic perspective, thus acknowledging the limitation that informs any conception of narrative identity; this limitation brings levels of identity to the partial and fragmentary record of the whole. Ricoeur argues history is singular, though it is "totalized" through many perspectives; *Underworld* demonstrates the condition of perspective that underlies the telling of history.

Ricoeur argues that time, like the homerun-ball, is singular. DeLillo offers multiple perspectives on history's identity; the unity of time holds together only metaphorically in

<sup>13</sup> See also Cowart (2002a).

portraying “all the fragments of the afternoon,” the “sand-grain manyness” of things in time (DeLillo 1997, p. 60). For Ricoeur, narrative portrays the unity of time as metaphor (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 3, p. 250). He argues that history stands-in for the reality of the past; narrative likewise creates a metaphor for time’s passage. For Ricoeur, the metaphor that narrative creates for time’s action applies to both reality and history; the reference of fiction and history join in “split-reference”. As a memorabilia collector, Marvin realizes that his search for the baseball stands-in for a lost past, in the form of his deceased wife Eleanor. He gives form to his loss in memorabilia, to make visible “the state of loss, the fact, the facticity in its lonely length” (DeLillo 1997, p. 192). In this case, the ball serves as metaphor for lost “touch” of Eleanor by serving as a substitute for a name or noun—a thing for a thing. While history can “stand-in” for the reality of the past, the “split reference” of *mimesis* must refer to time both as it is and as it is figurative; it serves as metaphor not as substitution for a known quantity but as interaction, offering a metaphor for change and metaphor as new meaning—the utopian possibility of time. Ricoeur sees the capacity for metaphor to show time in its possibility in the function of metaphor as discourse (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, pp. 1–48).

Ricoeur argues that in Aristotle’s conception, *mimêsis* must be faithful to things as they are and at the same time, “elevate human action”. *Mimesis* refers to both the real and to “things as they could be” (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, p. 45). Noting the importance of epiphora, “a movement from . . . to,” in Aristotle’s conception of metaphor, he argues that language refers to something beyond itself in the metaphorical value of discourse, at the level of the sentence and of the work. Ricoeur argues that “there is no reference problem in language: signs refer to other signs *within* the same system. In the phenomenon of the sentence, language passes outside itself; reference is the mark of the self-transcendence of language” (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, p. 85). The reference to a world reveals the importance of metaphor to *mimêsis*. Ricoeur argues that, for Aristotle, *mimêsis* is always a *mimêsis phuseôs*—a *mimêsis* of nature (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, p. 46).<sup>14</sup> Discourse acts as a metaphor for the action that it figures in the world. Instead of merely substituting metaphorically for a past reference, discourse serves as a metaphor that creates the conditions for meaning in a new configuration of time.

Ricoeur points out that whereas the system of language is virtual, discourse always appears *in time*. For Ricoeur, discourse is “the counterpart of what linguists call language systems or linguistic codes. Discourse is language-event or linguistic usage” (Ricoeur [1991] 2007, p. 145). The fixation of discourse signals its own limitation of the abstract system of language *as action*; its reference draws the bounds of the world in which it intends to become figurative as act. The figurative value of the event of discourse is always measured through its relation to a world that it projects its significance in terms of. Discourse appears in time; the value of its reference is changed by its ordering in *mimêsis*; Ricoeur understands the value of reference in terms of its contribution to the order of an action. He argues that “temporality is brought to language to the extent that language configures and refigures temporal experience” (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 1, p. 54). The configuration of events contributes to the unity of action in narrative. This unity of action in *mimêsis* serves as a metaphor for time’s unity; Ricoeur argues that though things *in time* are many, time is singular (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 3, p. 262). The event of discourse in *mimêsis* renews the significance of time in its capacity to be figurative of action.

Parataxis exemplifies the “manyess” of things in time. DeLillo asks the reader to make a leap: to imagine how the resemblance of change among fragments offers a metaphor for the unity of time. *Underworld’s* arrangement in parataxis offers both the utopic and

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur reads Aristotle’s *mimêsis* of nature (*mimêsis phuseôs*) as a faithfulness to “things as they are”. *Mimesis* must remain faithful to history while still elevating it. This important point has a bearing on narrative’s ability to redress human understanding of “nature”. In applying Ricoeur’s thought to the subject of ecology, Timothy Morton’s reading of Ricoeur does not recognize this dual responsibility; he argues that Ricoeur’s conception of metaphor “wants to fit nature like skin fits the hand—it is the hand” (Morton 2007, p. 70). Instead, Ricoeur’s interpretation of Aristotle suggests that the ordering of *mimêsis* addresses a tension between nature and metaphor. The plot of *mimêsis* refigures the significance of being-in-the-world; the act of narrative configuration “makes [being-in-the-world] present” in terms of its possible change. (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, pp. 44–48).

conservative possibilities of discourse as event. *Underworld* leaves the reader to decipher the figurative background of discourse in the novel and identify the resemblance of the novel's events to a unified action. The limitation of narrative perspective is exemplified by the book's historian, Marvin Lundy, who organizes a history of the baseball around the fragments of evidence he collects. Marvin's premise for narrative is the "dot theory of reality, that all knowledge is available if you analyze the dots" (DeLillo 1997, p. 173). His method reaches from fragmentary evidence toward the unity of action and meaningful connection. *Underworld's* chronological organization works backward from history's traces towards their causes, following the logic of Marvin's "dot theory of reality".

Temporality in the novel emerges from an interrelation of parts to the proposed ordering of a whole. While the introduction describes the 1951 Pennant game, the body of the novel moves roughly backward from 1992 towards 1951. Readers' knowledge moves closer towards a full picture of protagonist Nick Shay's killing of his friend, the local waiter and heroin addict George Manza. DeLillo juxtaposes two other historical events as foundational to the temporality and to the arrangement of *Underworld*; he uses this historical contiguity to consider the confluence of subjective and public history. The baseball that Marvin traces is the bullet that Bobby Thomson released in "The shot heard round the world," the homerun hit from the pitch of Ralph Branca to win the 1951 National League Pennant. The United States learned that same day of 1951 that the USSR had successfully tested its second atomic bomb.<sup>16</sup> Readers of *Underworld* learn through the dialogue of Father Paulus with high school physics teacher Albert Bronzini that the next day's newspapers juxtaposed the news of the Soviets' atomic test with the homerun and a headline that dubbed the homerun this "shot heard round the world". (DeLillo 1997, p. 669). Bronzini questions, "Is the rest of the world all that interested?" For him, the juxtaposition marks the skewed values produced by American self-importance. His comment shows the ability of values to create a misleading unity among the contiguous. DeLillo asks readers to question the significance of the relationships that contiguity proposes.

In "The Power of History," DeLillo reveals that he marveled at the contiguity of these two events when he saw them share space on the front page of a 1951 newspaper. DeLillo's jest in organizing his novel around this contiguity emphasizes the problematic nature of historiography. *Underworld's* attention to modes of historiography contributes to its thematic focus on methods of reading connection. The novel's organization allows DeLillo to interrogate the methods whereby public history and lived reality intersect in narrative. The public and the subjective coexist in the metaphor of discourse. *Underworld's* action is tethered to public history; the symbolic value *Underworld's* narration of public (historical) events is by no means arbitrary and carries great explanatory worth.<sup>17</sup> The narrative structure of the novel involves intricate repetitions; this repetition underscores the significance of the event as symbolic action. *Underworld* is concerned with the temporal structures that emerge from differing methods of reading and narrating connection.

DeLillo's portrayal of Matt Shay, brother of Nick Shay, exemplifies the need for a skeptical approach to the narrative order that flows from the contiguous. While stationed in Vietnam, Matt looks at a picture of Branca and Thomson that hangs in the Quonset hut where Matt works. In pitcher and hitter, winner and loser, Matt sees "the binary, black-white yes-no zero-one hero-goat" (DeLillo 1997, p. 466), a reductive mythology that effaces a nuanced history.<sup>18</sup> He dwells on the words sprayed on a supply hut, "*Om mani padme hum*," and attempts to reconcile this message of peace with the violence that surrounds him. Matt's association of the mantra with the bomb follows his association of Robert Oppenheimer and Edward Teller with Hindu scripture. Yet Matt questions the

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur argues that "founding events" create calendrical periodization; see (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 3, p. 106).

<sup>16</sup> (Osteen 2000, p. 217).

<sup>17</sup> Much useful criticism has described *Underworld's* rich explanatory value in relation to history. See, for example, Osteen (2000) and Timothy Parrish (2008). For detailed description of *Underworld's* narrative structure, see Kavadlo (2004) and Duvall (2002).

<sup>18</sup> Many critics have demonstrated *Underworld's* portrayal of the mythologizing tendency of history. See, for example, Catherine Morley (2009) and Donald Greiner (2002).

logic that would connect the mantra and the bomb: “Om does not rhyme with bomb. It only looks that way” (ibid.). The novel includes layers of connection and significance; its juxtaposition of contiguous fragments requires the reader to distinguish the significance of connection by investigating the basis for resemblance. Though the book is concerned with narrative’s adequacy to modern technology and especially to the bomb, Matt’s oft-quoted declaration that “all technology refers to the bomb,” should be viewed with skepticism; it is perhaps more true of *Underworld* that all technology refers to *mimêsis*. DeLillo’s novel argues that historiography organizes events according to the structures of its own logic. While Samuel Cohen argues that DeLillo’s arrangement demonstrates the inevitable ends that are contained in the seed of beginnings (Cohen 2009, p. 198), DeLillo illustrates the axiom that *what counts* as evidence informs the nature of action in narrative.

#### 4. Quasi-Characters: Essence and Action

DeLillo examines how semantics propose the aspects of narration through which we grasp the particularity of forms and consequently interpret their participation in an action. He shows how different ways of seeing meaning in the world derive from practices of narration. We see, know, and act on the world according to our delineation of the concepts through which we see reality unfold. Ricoeur argues that this proves equally true of historical writing as it does of fiction; he calls those delineated agents of history “quasi-characters”. The delineation of quasi-characters creates the ground for their change and transformation in *mimêsis*. We can see how the delineation of quasi-characters figures in the *mimêsis* of an action through the eyes of *Underworld*’s protagonist, Nick Shay. Marvin sells the homerun ball to Nick, for whom, like Marvin, the “telling” of the tale also serves as a remembrance of loss. Holding the ball, “going back a while, connecting many things,” Nick tries to ‘re-member’ the fragments of his own history (DeLillo 1997, p. 131). Just as Marvin hopes to revive the unity of time by completing a narrative of the baseball, Nick buries the torn body of his past, the body of Osiris. He recounts a narrative to renew reality.

The novel portrays Nick’s attempt to come to terms with loss and failure. During Nick’s early youth his father Jimmy Costanza disappears; as a teenager, Nick accidentally shoots a friend. In the wake of these failures, Nick makes an effort to become responsible. After Nick accidentally kills George Manza, he is sent to a youth correction facility in Staatsburg, New York. There Dr. Lindblad, a psychologist, directs Nick’s attention to his past: “You have a history. You’re responsible to it. You’re answerable. You’re required to try to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention” (ibid., p. 512). The novel’s attempt to make sense of American history narratively allows readers to see Dr. Lindblad’s injunction as a shared mandate for novel and reader. If Nick accounts for personal loss, *Underworld*’s narrative accounts for a broader loss in the history of the Cold War. The arms race produced nuclear waste and fallout; consumer capitalism generated material waste. Nick becomes a waste management professional whose company manages nuclear waste. The telling of *Underworld*’s tale of woe revives a responsible relationship to history, to the self, and to the material world. DeLillo shows how the figurative conditions of reading and narrating create the possibility of agency.

DeLillo creates an ecology of relation among seeing, understanding, and action. The novel’s composition by fragments emphasizes the need to distinguish the part’s relation to the whole. Nick’s methods of narration exemplify the formal dynamics of the novel. After shooting his friend George Manza, Nick struggles to put the pieces of the event together to create a coherent narrative. Before Nick pulls the shotgun’s trigger, George tells Nick that the weapon he holds is not loaded. Nick later tries to bridge the fragments that remain in his memory to configure the action of the shooting:

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

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

He force-squeezed the trigger and looked into the smile on the other man’s face . . .

But first he posed with the gun and pointed it at the man and asked if it was loaded. (DeLillo 1997, p. 781)

Here, Nick's narration seeks to bridge the divisions of a fragmentary past that escapes coherence. He hopes to understand his action's exemplification through aspects. Long after he leaves Staatsburg, New York, he attempts to come to terms with George's death: "I've tried to break it down, see it in its *component parts*" (ibid., p. 299, my emphasis). His strategy derives from his training with the Jesuits at a Minnesota camp, where he continues his rehabilitation after leaving New York. There he's instructed by Father Paulus. Paulus has Nick define each part that he sees, training his discipline in terms of the part's ordered relation to the whole. Paulus connects ways of seeing with naming. He admonishes Nick, "You didn't see the thing because you don't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names" (DeLillo 1997, p. 540). Paulus' statement follows the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, who argues for a correspondence between the divine and the things in creation. For Aquinas, the definition of a thing reveals its essence and its act of existing ("*esse*"); equally, "no essence or quiddity can be understood without an understanding of its parts" (Wippel 2016, p. 80). *Underworld* questions how naming and seeing reveal a correspondence to acting and being. Many critics have shown how DeLillo's novels portray the replacement of faith in divine order with faith in the secular: in systems, technology, and paranoia.<sup>19</sup> *Underworld* investigates how these tropes peculiar to American history inform the relation between narrative and reality. The novel studies the conditions that shape the reference of visible and material forms to the invisible.

*Underworld* shows how the integrity of *mimêsis* is weakened by paranoia and capitalist systems. Paulus teaches Nick to read an analogical order in the world, a figurative paradigm in which the created world corresponds with eternal order. *Underworld* presents the effects of this paradigm's disappearance by examining the relationship between the visible and invisible. In the analogical paradigm, as in *mimêsis*, the ability of narrative to *show* the logic and order of an action relies on the logic of metaphor. In Aristotle's conception, as an aspect of discourse, or *lexis*, metaphor "makes visible" or sensible; it serves the function of *lexis*, by showing *how* an action appears (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, pp. 60, 38). In Aristotle's conception, *lexis* "externalizes and makes explicit the internal structure of *muthos*," which Ricoeur translates as configuration, emplotment, or plot (ibid., p. 41). Metaphor makes the order of action visible, illustrating how a figure holds the potential to unfold action. Narrative reveals a relationship between the form that appears in telling and the invisible order its reader or hearer understands.

In the case of *mimêsis*, each event becomes figurative according to its ability to show the order of the action in the plot. Nick's reading of his action in terms of "its *component parts*" implies that the identity of things in the world corresponds to the action that they participate in. This metonymic framework of identity, action, and meaning creates a uniform basis for interpretation. Long after the shooting, Nick tells himself that he believes that the rules of history operate in a similar coherence: "a single narrative sweep, not ten thousand wisps of disinformation" (DeLillo 1997, p. 82, my emphasis). Yet the writing through which Nick's character presents his narrative in *Underworld* appears in fragments, belying the unity of history to which Nick attests. His confident containment of history in "a single narrative sweep" epitomizes the formal conflicts of the novel. Nick's narrative unity represses the unruly shards of traumatic disorder that he recognized in youth.

Nick's teleological organization of "a single narrative sweep," implies an endpoint from which all the events of a history or a narrative can be seen. This teleological organization characterizes the realist novel; events within realist novels indicate their place in a system, the rules of which are made clear by the work's end.<sup>20</sup> As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues, the significance of events in realist novels emphasizes the system's coherence (Ermarth 1983). While *Underworld* offers coherence, the novel questions the interpretive

<sup>19</sup> See McClure (2007); Eaton (2006); and Schneck (2010).

<sup>20</sup> See (Ermarth 1983, pp. 1–91), "Perspective and Consensus".

systems that propose this significance. The differing figurative contexts that inform the reading of *Underworld's* fragments undermine the totalistic presumptions of the realist narrative techniques that would provide “a single narrative sweep” of history. Instead, DeLillo portrays an ecology of *mimêsis*. He emphasizes the interrelation of parts whose reference is informed by different contexts<sup>21</sup> for interpretation, each of which contributes to the composition of novel's order.

DeLillo's fragments participate in overlapping temporal structures.<sup>22</sup> *Underworld's* action is explicitly tied to the historical calendar by dates in chapter headings and remains tethered to the history of the world from 1951–1992. The novel shows how the reference of discourse indicates the figurative conditions of temporality, offering layers of overlapping metaphorical significance in the novel's narrative structure. As Jesse Kavadlo argues, “characters and events repeat” in *Underworld* (Kavadlo 2004). This repetition leads the reader to reflect on the differing systems that offer the significance of resemblance to events. The inclusion of categorical resemblance is but one among many layers that inform the significance of connection; spiritual and ethical resemblance form the deeper currents of *Underworld's* symphony. DeLillo's repetition directs the reader's attention toward the properties of language, event, metaphor, and memory that contribute layers of significance.<sup>23</sup> Readers gauge the temporal span of consequences that unfurl from every aspect of connection that offers the promise of meaning; the structure of *Underworld* teaches that connection does not necessarily indicate change. The novel asks the reader to decipher the systems of interpretation and action that produce, at one level, substitutive metaphor—the equivalent of historical repetition without change. The reader recognizes, equally, metaphor's capacity to reflect a new relation to time. The book's formal techniques reflect DeLillo's focus on the systems of interpretation that govern the significance of metaphorical connection.

DeLillo uses parataxis to emphasize the contexts of reference that inform the relation of discourse to reality.<sup>24</sup> Each fragment of discourse acquires its figurative significance from its part in the evolving conception of a figurative action—its contribution as event. DeLillo's writing leads readers to understand the significance of discourse events in terms of the contexts of reference. As Ricoeur points out in *Time and Narrative*, the entry into fiction initially signals a break with the reference to reality. He argues that in the process of mimetic configuration, fiction transforms the reader's initial understanding of fictive symbols' meaning. As Ricoeur notes in his reading of A.C. Greimas, narrative emplotment changes the potential value of the symbols and concepts involved in narrative—their potential for action (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 2, p. 49). The reader applies this changed understanding of narrative entities in the reference to reality. *Underworld* utilizes the formal technique of parataxis to draw attention to the referential function's place in the mimetic cycle and role of *mimêsis* within history.

## 5. Parataxis and *Habitus*

Parataxis emphasizes what's missing: the contextual conditions that govern the interrelationship of fragments to each other and to a whole. DeLillo uses parataxis to train the reader's attention to the shared resemblance among the fragments that his *mimêsis* utilizes. Deriving from the Greek word meaning “a placing side by side,” parataxis lacks syntax (“parataxis, n”. *OED* 2019). At the level of the word, DeLillo's parataxis functions commonly in *Underworld* as synecdoche, a form of metaphor that illustrates metonymy.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Nel (2002) makes the pertinent argument that DeLillo emphasizes the relation between figure and ground.

<sup>22</sup> Joanna Isaacson (2012) insightfully discusses this relationship between figurative paradigms and periodization in *Underworld*.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Osteen's reading of the categorical significance of oranges is an interesting test-case. Osteen argues that oranges represent the interconnectedness of capital systems in *Underworld*. Thomas Hill Schaub reads DeLillo's use of the trope of oranges as a “random salting” of connection. He argues that DeLillo seeks to “produce in the reader affects” that its paranoiac characters experience (81). I argue that DeLillo intends to show the layers of connection and meaning that can inform interpretation, leading the reader to discern their value.

<sup>24</sup> For more on parataxis in DeLillo's work, see especially Paula Martín-Salván (2006); Belén Cabrerizo (2011) and Patty White (1992). For more on parataxis in postmodern fiction, see Ermarth (1992).

Synecdoche suggests that a detail is like the whole—“a sail” can represent “a ship,” for example. In *Underworld*, DeLillo arranges words side by side to describe actions and states of affairs. The use of synecdoche relies on the traditional aspects of language: individual words, phrases, and details signal the larger families of relation to which they belong. When the novel’s Sister Edgar looks at the souls she is charged with saving, the synecdoche she defines them by indicate their relation to crime. She knows them by “Graffiti, illiteracy, petty theft” (DeLillo 1997, p. 243). Because of its lack of syntax, parataxis calls attention to the metaphorical resemblance that binds language from disparate categories together. The reader sifts metaphorical pertinence from impertinence, gleaning the resemblance among terms from context, and leaving the chaff of impertinent meanings that each word offers. The reader applies this process more generally to the fragments of DeLillo’s text.

*Underworld*’s nuclear-scientist Eric Deming describes the Abo Elementary School and Fallout Shelter to Matt Shay; he sums the situation using synecdoche: “The classrooms, the bedding, the canned food, the morgue” (DeLillo 1997, p. 411). The reader sorts the metaphorical pertinence and impertinence of these details, which act metonymically to describe the nuclear threat’s place in school life during the years of the Cold War. His use of metonymy asks readers to imagine the framework of resemblance that makes these words signify as figurative. The reader disregards the impertinent meanings of individual words that do not contribute to the resemblance of a whole. The names “the classroom, the canned food, the morgue,” etc., represent not merely their objects but the historical contexts that their appearance together calls to mind for Eric and Matt. In order to define what is referred to in “the classroom, the bedding, the canned food, the morgue,” readers supply a series of human activities—the building of bomb shelters, the repetition of “duck and cover” drills, a teacher’s mindfulness of threatened nuclear destruction, etc. Synecdoche asks the reader to supply the items’ resemblance to broader historical conditions.

*Underworld* shows how the symbolic value contained in the material world creates a “seeing-as”. “The canned food” or “the morgue,” do not function as synecdoche because of the language that names them; rather, it is the symbolic value of their objects that makes them synecdoche. The symbolic value that objects acquire through their function in society serves as a shorthand for the conditions they embody. Pierre Bourdieu encapsulates this relationship between humans and objects in the word *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977).<sup>25</sup> The *habitus* represents the calcification of symbolic meaning in objects; the words used in “the classroom, the bedding, the canned food, the morgue” do not provide additional layers of meaning but refer transparently to the resemblance established by the objects. The symbolic shorthand through which we read the material world informs the conception of action in *mimêsis*. *Underworld* shows that the history marked or buried in the material world bears a part in the preconditions of *mimêsis*. *Underworld*’s artist figures articulate this oft unheard language, making it available to the conscious change effected by organization in narrative.

DeLillo’s novel shows how the *habitus* offers the conditions for its articulation and refiguration. Many of *Underworld*’s central characters are artists that transform the *habitus* of objects. Ismael Muñoz spray-paints subway cars, giving them new significance. He hopes that his paint creates an awareness in the working world of the people who live out of sight, bringing them into plain view. The artist Klara Sax recontextualizes historical objects; she redefines their resemblance, bringing new meanings into consideration. When Klara describes her art installation in the desert of Arizona, where she and a crew of volunteers creatively repaint B-52’s, she says that what she “want[s] to get at is the ordinary life behind the thing” (DeLillo 1997, p. 77). She recalls seeing lights in the sky on the Maine coast and wondering if they came from the B-52s that circulated during the Cold War “on permanent alert, ever present, sweeping the Soviet borders” (ibid., p. 75). The

<sup>25</sup> See “Structures and the Habitus,” in Bourdieu (1977) pp. 72–95. While Katharine Breen (2010) locates the origin of the term *habitus* in the medieval period, Verena Conley traces its recent critical advent to the work of Marcel Mauss, who applied it as “a convention established by reigning cultural discourses, of which individual speech is an extension” (Conley 2012, p. 6). Used in differing ways by numerous critics, Conley argues that the concept of *habitus* serves universally to “[analyze] how structures determine practices” (Conley 2012, p. 6).

bombers function metonymically for the social history that produced them. In Maine she saw “power” reflected in the bombers; this power “held the world together” (ibid., p. 76). For Klara, the common coordinating map enabled by US and Soviet “greatness, danger, terror,” permits a system by which to “measure things” (ibid., p. 76). Klara’s art refigures the bombers in terms of the possible values provided by their appearance in the desert: “It’s the framing device. It’s the four-part horizon,” she says (ibid., p. 70). The viewer must reevaluate the bombers’ resemblance—previously metonymic for the social history of the cold war—in terms of a new relationship. The bombers sit in an array on the desert floor. The viewer sees the planes from far above and interprets the original relationship among bombers and their social history in terms of this third term, the desert. The viewer understands their resemblance to an action through this different term.

The bombers and their history take on a figurative meaning in relation to the desert’s pertinent figurative aspects—most notably, the temporal duration of geological scale. The pertinence of the Cold War and the B-52’s to this third term creates a new measure of resemblance and new figurative meaning. DeLillo examines the aspects of narration through which we apprehend the particularity of forms. While Klara’s art uses the voice of the material *habitus*, DeLillo shows that the relationship of discourse to reality in *mimêsis* renews our conception of its reference, changing its relation to the material world.

*Underworld* illustrates how the reference of discourse reveals the conditions of the relationship between narrative form and the order it represents. The reference of discourse in DeLillo’s novel is textually interwoven with reality and with the material world. This relation of discourse to the material world can be better understood by mixing two terms. I dare to use Bourdieu’s term where Ricoeur does not and suggest that Ricoeur’s *mimêsis*<sub>1-3</sub> proposes the relation to language in terms of a *habitus*. *Mimêsis*<sub>1</sub> can be thought of as the *habitus* of language. The concepts through which language names and sees the world might equally represent the unspoken symbolic value ascribed to objects. Language acquires its objective meaning and use through people’s historical and habitual relation to its forms. *Underworld* is concerned to show how the reference of discourse derives from its situation in the historical and the material.

## 6. Language as Object: Ideology and Utopia

DeLillo’s use of parataxis sheds light on the role of discourse in maintaining a relationship to time and to history. Naming and narration create a way of containing the material, offering a usable figurative relationship with reality. Like the pertinence of the B-52s, the bomb eludes language, as Klara describes in an interview about her art:

we all tried to think about war but I’m not sure we knew how to do this. The poets wrote long poems with dirty words and that’s about as close as we came, actually, to a thoughtful response. Because they had brought something into the world that out-imagined the mind. They didn’t even know what to call the early bomb. The thing or the gadget or something. And Oppenheimer said, It is merde . . . He meant something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit. It’s too big or evil or outside your experience. It’s also shit because it’s garbage, it’s waste material. (DeLillo 1997, pp. 76–77)

DeLillo asks the reader to question the situation of reference in narrative. His attention to artist figures that defamiliarize the material world requires readers to understand how history shapes reference. Klara’s desert art poses the resemblance of the B-52s to the work of the eons as an enduring question, shifting the configuration of the narrative in which the B-52s prove significant. In generating the resemblance of the B-52s and the Cold War period to the desert’s rocks, Klara’s art poses the B-52s as figurative of a relationship to time—to the beginning and end of action. Similarly, the situation of reference in terms of its participation in an action dictates either the conservative or the utopic relation to discourse.

DeLillo’s use of parataxis shows how a relationship to time is contained in the community’s relationship to symbols. Parataxis points attention to language and text both as objects and as metaphor. While readers interpret paratactic words according to their

presentation in the context of a speaker, they are also reminded of the words' aspects of categorical and metonymic reference. Theodor Adorno argues that parataxis emphasizes the historical and objective qualities of language, writing that "as conceptual and predicative, language stands opposed to subjective expression, by virtue of its generality, it reduces what is to be expressed to something already given and known" (Adorno 1992, p. 137). Parataxis in *Underworld* emphasizes these historical and objective aspects of language to draw attention to its customary function in producing meaning and its root in the historical and the material. The reader's organization of its fragments necessitates the opening of their reference in either a conservative or a utopic relation to their historically established meaning.

In addition to its conservative properties, the reliance of parataxis on resemblance as an organizing principle proposes the utopian possibilities for metaphoric relation to meaning in language. Adorno saw this productive and utopic possibility in the parataxis of Friedrich Hölderlin, for whom parataxis served as "artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax" (Adorno 1992, p. 131). The absence of syntax in parataxis creates a space for readers to weigh the figurative value of language. DeLillo's parataxis brings out the conflict in language-use between community and individual. Conservative meaning exists alongside the creative aspects of metaphor—its impertinence and eventual recuperation of meaning. DeLillo's use of parataxis invites the reader to participate in gauging the bounds of his narrative. The conditions of reading and measuring value are at stake. In this way, the function of *Underworld's* parataxis mirrors its function in *Beowulf*. As Fred C. Robinson argues, the poet of *Beowulf* uses parataxis to stimulate his listeners' "powers of inference and the ability to entertain two simultaneous points of view that are necessary for the resolution of poignant cultural tensions". He argues that the stylistic quality of "implicitness or logical openness" in parataxis is key to achieving the *Beowulf* poet's aim (Robinson 1985, pp. 13–14). *Underworld's* reader weighs the figurative value of discourse in differing epistemological conditions. The novel requires the reader to measure the conservative or utopian values of resemblance proposed by fragments and open their reference in an according temporality.

Parataxis draws attention to the contexts of its reference; their visible absence informs limitation. As Ricoeur argues, metaphorical meaning is produced by limiting pertinence and impertinence in order to find resemblance. DeLillo uses parataxis and FID in this way to simultaneously indicate several possible frames of pertinence.<sup>26</sup> Though common frames of pertinence give significance to objects and events, DeLillo offers the possibility to consider significance through multiple narrative frames that indicate differing temporalities and systems of value-creation. Language receives limitation according to its pertinent resemblance; *Underworld* poses the important question: resemblance to what, and to whose frame? Limitation defines the pertinence of narrative's metaphors for identity in the conception of action.

## 7. The Situation of Reference

*Underworld* portrays historiography as a communal as well as a subjective, process. He uses parataxis and FID in his narrative of the 1951 National League Championship to map the process whereby many particulars acquire the (mythologizing) status of common social history. Just as the readers of a text open the text's reference in light of their own

<sup>26</sup> One can model the mutual limitation of DeLillo's paratactic fragments in terms of the limitation of figurative terms employed in Max Black's theory of frame and focus. Black's theory shows how pertinence and impertinence works within the sentence. For Black, the metaphorical sense of a word is made clear by the non-metaphorical content that surrounds it. In his study of Black, Ricoeur uses the example that the word 'ploughed' functions metaphorically in "the chairman ploughed through the discussion", while the remainder of the sentence does not (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, p. 97). Black calls the metaphor used in 'plough' the focus, while the rest of the sentence serves as a frame. The frame allows the word "plough" to function metaphorically because it provides context that limits the word's possible meanings, definitions and uses of the word that would lead us to see its meaning in other ways than it functions in the context of the sentence given.

experience,<sup>27</sup> so the audience acts as the game's "remoter soul". The meaning of the game extends beyond its immediate participants to "the woman cooking cabbage. The man who wishes he could be done with drink. They are the game's remoter soul" (DeLillo 1997, p. 32). DeLillo's use of language in "The Triumph of Death" interweaves the reference of social history, in the form of the baseball games' play-by-play, with the more subjective and personal experience of the games' audience. "The Triumph of Death" is written in a free-indirect style that complicates the ascription of events to one actor or another.

The narrative is focalized through the radio play-by-play man, Russ Hodges, as signaled by DeLillo's uses of pronouns—"Russ describes," "he sees," etc.; DeLillo's use of FID points our attention to the sources of history's narration:

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

Irving dropping the weighted bat. (DeLillo 1997, p. 35)

We move into action through the present-progressive tense of Hodges' radio play-by-play. "Irving dropping the weighted bat" narrates the action on the field as told by the novel; in addition to describing Hodges' call, DeLillo's FID draws the reader's attention to the forms of *mimêsis* that conceive the event. In "The Power of History," DeLillo writes of his experience listening to the historical broadcast of the game when writing *Underworld*. We can thus consider the fictional *mimêsis* occurring at several levels; as the broadcast is itself a document of history, DeLillo signals his own fiction's role in creating the terms of history's narration.

DeLillo's writing shows how the conception of history through the particular metaphorical forms of narrative creates a common source of reference. His use of language allows him to create metaphors for intersubjective experience.<sup>28</sup> The game's action creates a metaphor that serves as a reference for the interaction of the audience. DeLillo's description of Toots Shor's interaction with Jackie Gleason in the stands mimics the style of the radio play-by-play:

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

Shor looks at Gleason. (DeLillo 1997, p. 33)

Shor's look at Gleason refers as metaphor to the pitcher's glance on the field. DeLillo points the reader's attention to the contexts of discourse that limit the pertinence of reference as metaphorical action. DeLillo's writing shows how language creates metaphors for the intersubjectivity of narrative's metaphors for action.

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

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur describes how the individual reader opens the reference of the world-projected by discourse. The reader opens the reference of the text according to the history of their accumulated experience with language and literature. In opening the text's reference, the reader "opens the world"; the individual's world or "*Umwelt*," meets an other-world, the "*Welt*" (Ricoeur [1991] 2007, p. 147).

<sup>28</sup> Jesse Kavadlo (2004) makes the plausible argument that DeLillo's use of the fragment and FID in "The Triumph of Death" evacuates agency. Because of the focus in "The Triumph of Death" on what Kavadlo calls the "indelibility" of subjective and collective historiography, I argue that DeLillo's FID emphasizes the ability of language and narrative to create metaphors for intersubjective experience.

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

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

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

"Three, two, one".

Then the world lights up. A glow enters the body that's like the touch of God. And Louis can see the bones in his hands through his closed eyes, through the thick pillow he's got jammed in his face. (DeLillo 1997, p. 613)

DeLillo's narration changes from Louis's reported speech to Chuckie's mediation of Louis's rendition of the tale ("Louis does his phony countdown . . ."). DeLillo uses the present tense, and a lack of pronouns, to mediate the event's action by the consciousness of a speaker. The shift is notable from the sentence "then the world lights up," which is without a pronoun, but still consciously marked by the use of "then" as narrated time. The next sentence is unmediated by pronouns: "A glow enters the body that's like the touch of God". The lack of mediation through pronouns removes the action from its relevant contexts and gives the event an existence coordinated temporally at several levels: (1) the time of its occurrence in Louis's life; (2) its time of telling by Louis; (3) its retelling through Chuckie's thought; (4) a time that is less consciously informed by these perspectives.

DeLillo presents actions whose pertinence in time the reader must determine; frequent shifts in focalization point attention to shifting frames of reference. The reader must determine the figurative significance of discourse by a process of determining temporal pertinence and impertinence. In this case, the most important limitation to the temporal situation of action is the reader's knowledge of nuclear radiation. The reader sees cancer and death in the "glow that enters the body". DeLillo makes the reader aware of the process whereby narration receives limitation and becomes consequential to reality.

We see the consequences of nuclear testing when Nick Shay visits a test site in Kazakhstan. He witnesses "disfigurements, leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function" (DeLillo 1997, p. 800). Though elsewhere, Matt Shay is drunk with the bomb's god-like power, DeLillo shatters the vanity of this myth. When Nick visits Kazakhstan and recognizes the legacy of nuclear testing, he sees "guilt in every dosed object, the weathered posts and I-beams left to the wind, things made and shaped by men, old schemes gone wrong" (DeLillo 1997, p. 792, my emphasis). DeLillo's figurative ecology shows the ethical consequences of *mimêsis* for the environment and humanity. Readers gauge temporality by conceiving narrative's ends.

*Underworld* puts narrative practices at the center of this ecology. DeLillo directs the reader's attention to the full cycle of *mimêsis*. We have examined the paranoia that governs Matt's relationship to objects, tempting him towards irresponsibility. In terms of historiography, Matt's paranoia is the exemplar of narrative equivocation in the face of history. His colleague Eric Deming tells him stories that he doesn't believe of "downwinders," people who lived downwind from test sites in Utah and Nevada, merely "for the edge. The bite. The existential burn" (DeLillo 1997, p. 406). Eric and Matt choose to consider the effects of nuclear technology mere myth. In *Underworld*, the uncertainty of knowledge masks consequence and erodes responsibility.<sup>29</sup> Though their responsibility does not deliver them from their troubled participation in systems, DeLillo's characters do maintain a response to reality and history through narrative; Matt's deliberation helps him to leave his position in

<sup>29</sup> Mark C. Taylor points out that the question of the ball's authenticity becomes symbolic for belief in the real (including the reality and threat of the bomb) in *Underworld* (Taylor 2013, pp. 193–94).

the nuclear weapons field. For most of *Underworld's* characters, especially Nick, the book's pages bear witness to the responsibility of an account, the act of telling. DeLillo asks the reader to consider how this narrative creates the bounds of action.

## 8. Reference and the Material

The situation of the reference of *mimêsis* within the bounds of a world that ends and begins creates a metaphorical relationship of being to time—a new “being-as”. We can consider *habitus* as the entry-point to the *mimêsis* of the real—to things as they are. Ricoeur argues that *mimêsis* shows the unconcealment of this average, ordinary, everydayness—a quotidian condition of relation that Heidegger calls “being-in-the-world” (Ricoeur [1977] 2003, p. 48). As Ricoeur argues, *mimêsis* at the level of discourse “connect[s] [the] referential function to the revelation of the Real as Act” (ibid.). In doing so, *mimêsis* shows “the capacity of being-in-the-world to figure as *muthos*”—the potential concealed in the *habitus* for action and for change (ibid.). *Underworld* emphasizes the articulation of the invisible by drawing attention to the figurative conditions that give fictive reference meaning.

The singularity of action that limits the reference of text is exemplified by writing, but also by reading. As it emphasizes the contexts whereby its own discourse receives limitation, *Underworld* argues for the immanence of textual experience. Words appear momentarily in the reader's world, a fact, before their subordination to the referential world of the novel. By pointing attention to the symbols' immediacy as object and subsequent conversion into meaning in the world of the novel, parataxis in *Underworld* recalls its reader to the context of orality that writing presupposes. Rosemary Shay's “method of documentary recall” presents the fact of an utterance before its interpretation in the hearer's mind: “She brought forth names and events and let them hang in the air without attaching pleasure or regret. Sometimes just a word” (DeLillo 1997, p. 101). As Rosemary's names “hang in the air,” the appearance of synecdoche in the text causes the reader to weigh DeLillo's words momentarily before assigning meaning in the larger framework of the novel. The words' separation from syntax causes a slight interference to arise between the reader's *habitus* of relation to individual words and their reference within the world of the text. This creates an awareness of the process whereby the reader assigns reference to the text's symbols—how they model a world in situating the reference of the text.

As language is objectified and material in the article of the text, DeLillo's novel questions his own novel's textually interwoven relation to reality. Nick Shay foregrounds the reader's experience of the text when he describes his experience of Klara Sax's desert art: “Seeing brushstrokes mark a surface. *Pigment*. The animal fats and polymers that blend to make this word” (DeLillo 1997, p. 65, author's emphasis). “This word” refers to “*Pigment*,” but is also autoreferential. Nick's description of *Pigment's* physical components directs the reader's attention to the “animal fats and polymers” that make the ink of “this word,” as well as Nick's reference to a word within the world of the novel. DeLillo's book asks its readers to consider narration as an engagement with the material world.<sup>30</sup> DeLillo makes readers aware of the novel's construction of the conditions of reference.

## 9. Narrated Action

DeLillo uses *Underworld's* situation in history to show how historical conditions inform the figurative conditions that shape the significance of discourse in time. *Underworld's* ecology portrays *mimêsis* in interrelation with the cultural, political, and epistemic conditions of the Cold War. In the case of *mimêsis*, each event becomes figurative according to its ability to reveal (to *show*) the order of the action of the plot. DeLillo portrays an ecology of *mimêsis* in which the capacity for meaning in understanding and action is proposed through differing frameworks for interpretation of the visible. The allegorical realism his characters see in the Bronx of the nineteen-fifties disintegrates as the novel moves towards

<sup>30</sup> For more on “textual materiality,” see Bill Brown (2014), “[concept/object] [text/event]” in *ELH*, vol. 81, No. 2, pp. 251–52.

the nineteen-nineties; the novel shows capacity for action in relation to the figurative conditions through which characters interpret the world.

*Underworld* shows how *mimêsis* accounts for the production of material waste and the legacy of the nuclear arms race: nuclear waste and fallout from nuclear testing. Nick and his brother Matt both grow up to become involved with the nuclear industry—Nick as a waste management professional that deals with nuclear waste, Matt as a nuclear physicist and engineer. They begin their journey in the Italian American Bronx of the 1950s, a knowable community where details cohere with meaning. Rosemary Shay, Nick and Matt's mother, observes a realist, metonymic figurative paradigm in her neighbors' speech. Rosemary "heard the women talk about making gravy, speaking to a husband or a child, and Rosemary understood the significance of this. It meant, Don't you dare come home late. It meant, This is serious so pay attention. It was a special summons, a call to family duty" (DeLillo 1997, pp. 698–99). The book's characters read a spiritual and allegorical significance in the material world of the Bronx. Albert Bronzini, a high school physics teacher and Matt's chess teacher, revels in the "European texture of the street, things done the old slow faithful way, things carried over, suffused with the rules of usage" (ibid., p. 672). These codes of usage inform the interpretation of the material environment; the common values of the community create shared significance. Bronzini remarks a "sense of balance," in the "gothic cathedral of pork," at the neighborhood butcher's shop. He thinks that the butcher's "aptitude and ease, the sense that he was born to the task restored a certain meaning to these eviscerated animals," bringing the significance of dignity to what could be a degraded commodity (ibid., pp. 667–68). However, the metonymic paradigm of the Bronx does not reign throughout *Underworld*.

Later in life, both Nick and Matt struggle to find adequate forms of narration to account for their relation to the systems they find themselves wrapped up in. The novel portrays the effects of paranoia and capitalism on the relationship to *mimêsis*. Clothed in corporate identity, Nick loses the ability to distinguish his own character. He admits a complacent surrender to the "caress of linked grids" that his position among contemporary systems offers him. Abandoning himself to the figurative system of the corporation, he sacrifices the integrity of self-definition. Nick's loss of integrity in systems parallels capitalism's annihilation of particular and integral meaning. Capital generalizes value, annihilating the contexts that allow limitation. Echoing Marx's statement that, "all that is solid melts into air" (Marx and Engels 1992, p. 6), Nick observes that the "movement of instantaneous capital [makes] for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream" (DeLillo 1997, p. 786). Commodified exchange creates a universal framework of valuation: capital planes the contexts that give particular things unique value. *Underworld* argues that the context of meaning is equally important in giving value to the forms of language.

Matt finds himself "systemed under"; he cannot limit the meaning of the fragments of his experience because of their participation in unknowable systems. During his time serving the army in Vietnam, Matt reads photographs: "When he found a dot on the film he translated it into letters, numbers, coordinates, grids, and entire systems of knowledge" (ibid., p. 463). He questions his knowledge of the reality that the dots represent: "When he found a dot on the film he tried to make a determination. It was a truck or a truck stop or a tunnel entrance or a gun emplacement or a family grilling burgers at a picnic . . ." (ibid., p. 463). In the environment of Vietnam his necessary preoccupation with sign and signified warps into paranoia.<sup>31</sup> Matt questions the meaning of particulars in terms of the family of systems their presence represents. The mysterious intermarriage of governmental, industrial, and capital systems creates confusion over the frameworks through which he should interpret phenomena. He notices that the "The drums [of agent orange] resembled cans of frozen Minute Maid enlarged by a crazed strain of DNA" (DeLillo 1997, p. 463) and asks himself, "how can you tell the difference between orange

<sup>31</sup> The novel often associates Saussure's system of linguistic reference, as well as Derridean dissemination, with paranoia.

juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?"<sup>32</sup> (DeLillo 1997, p. 465). The semantic or figurative value of things is mingled by a muddled epistemology. He identifies the source of his troubles in a later paranoid episode:

He felt that he'd glimpsed some horrific system of connections in which you can't tell the difference between one thing and another, between a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing". (DeLillo 1997, p. 446, my emphasis)

He cannot limit the figurative value of things because he cannot distinguish the identity of things from the technological systems that produce them—their participation in these systems informs their reference and their figurative value.

The limitation that form gives to meaning inheres in the relationship of *Underworld's* characters to discourse, but this relationship also represents characters' trust in the meaning held in the form of the material world. The novel's characters liken paranoia to a disease that disintegrates the relationship among form and meaning. For *Underworld's* Edgar J. Hoover and his "twin" in the novel through worldview, the Catholic nun and teacher Sister Edgar, paranoia springs from fear—of communism, sex, and life's uncontained otherness. As the U.S. sought to contain communism, Sister Edgar tries to contain her fears of this other and what she sees as the equally unruly disease of AIDS, through narrated action. She suppresses her fears of AIDS, communism, uncleanliness, and life in general with discipline and prayer: Sister Edgar "cleaned and she prayed . . . She prayed and she thought" (DeLillo 1997, p. 251). The reader sees the hollowness of Sister Edgar's routines; she cleans as compulsively as she prays, worrying because "she hadn't cleaned the original disinfectant with disinfectant" (ibid.). Her action has no meaning because its relation to discourse is not limited by an order of relation to reality. Discourse dissipates in unlimited *différance*: "And the regression was infinite because it is called infinite regression. You see how fear spreads beyond the pushy extrusions of matter into the elevated spaces where words play upon themselves" (ibid., my emphasis). Sister Edgar cannot limit the relation of discourse to reality. By consequence, her actions hold no meaning and give her no sense of agency.<sup>33</sup>

For Sister Edgar and Nick, the chance for meaningful action abides in the relation to discourse. Their inability to represent the world in discourse saps their ability to act meaningfully. Sister Edgar laments "how the intersecting systems help pull us apart, leaving us vague, drained, docile, soft in our inner discourse, willing to be shaped, to be overwhelmed—easy retreats, half beliefs" (DeLillo 1997, p. 826, my emphasis). Sister Edgar's conviction abides in the articulation of action through symbols—the symbolic import of actions. She assumes her inner discourse bears a relation to her ability to act. Ricoeur's theory of action supports Sister Edgar's connection. He argues that "if, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms. It is always already symbolically mediated" (Ricoeur 1990, vol. 1, p. 57). For Nick and for Sister Edgar, context limits the figurative value of discourse. This limitation defines the symbolic conditions that allow them to act meaningfully in the world.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See footnote 23. Mark Osteen argues that DeLillo uses the trope of orange to signal the interconnection of capital in the novel (Osteen 2000, p. 241). For Osteen, Matt's recognition of interconnected capital systems points towards his sense of a "deeper level of connection" that the novel's structure more widely reflects. Matt questions, "how can you tell the difference" between things that connect "at levels outside your comprehension?"; Schaub (2011) answers that "one cannot tell the difference. But the question is specious if not paranoid, because in such thinking all differences are dissolved into the effects of 'the same massive system'" (81). I do not think that *Underworld* endorses this paranoid reading, but rather structures the novel's tropes to allow signification on multiple levels, forcing the reader to interpret the grounds for significance among its connections.

<sup>33</sup> As Ricoeur notes, William Von Humboldt recognized in the reference of discourse to reality the "great justification of language"—the ability to "establish the relation of man to the world". He argues that "if you suppress this referential function, only an absurd game of errant signifiers remains" (Ricoeur [1991] 2007, p. 149).

<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Ricoeur's analysis of texts as a model for action shows how this relationship to meaningful action is established by the limitation of symbols. He argues that likewise, "meaningful action is an object of science only under the condition of a kind of objectification that is equivalent to the fixation of a discourse by writing" (Ricoeur [1991] 2007, p. 148).

In each of the above cases, the ability to usefully limit the metaphorical value of discourse in relation to reality creates the possibility for meaning and meaningful action. When Nick thinks that “It is interesting to think of the great blaze of heaven that we winnow down to animal shapes and kitchen tools” (DeLillo 1997, p. 82), his limitation of meaning through symbols maintains their revelation of an order. For Nick, capitalism planes the contexts of limitation that give particular things particular value. For Sister Edgar and for Matt, the unlimited play of non-identity in paranoiac epistemology threatens their ability to establish a reference to reality and to act within it. The novel points our attention to the contexts that inform the significance of symbols.

## 10. Conclusions

DeLillo maintains an ironic stance towards the containment that *Underworld's* discourse provides. His novel both uses and ironizes the techniques characteristic of the epic. *Underworld* mimics the use of “type scenes” or “epic formulae” characteristic of Homeric epic.<sup>35</sup> These formulae present habitually narrated action. Formulaic sentences show how characters approach their environments throughout *Underworld*. Nick Shay uses narrative procedures to describe how his family approaches grocery-shopping:

We didn't say, what kind of casserole will that make? We said, what kind of garbage would that make? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of? Can the package be recycled and come back as a tawny envelope that is difficult to lick closed? First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product as food or lightbulbs or dandruff shampoo. How does it measure up as waste, we asked. We asked whether it is responsible to eat a certain item if the package the item comes in will live a million years. (DeLillo 1997, p. 121)

Nick uses narration in his effort to become responsible. He contains reality by the imposition of narrative. Like Sister Edgar, Nick flirts with neurosis in the attempt to control reality through narrated action; his formulae for the family's recycling habits exemplify this tendency: “we bundle the newspapers but do not tie them in twine, which is always the temptation” (ibid., p. 807). John McClure interprets Nick's recycling as an empty routine that represses an unruly past. Yet *Underworld* utilizes these formulae to narrate its action throughout the novel, making McClure's reading less plausible. To some extent, DeLillo ironizes the novel's imposition of order on history. Narrated action in *Underworld* contains a relation to reality; the book asks the reader to gauge its quality.

The ironic focalization of history emphasizes the reader's ability to gauge the entities and the action that *mimêsis* refers to. DeLillo's language often refers to the authentic by betraying inauthentic perspectives.<sup>36</sup> The reader learns to interpret the temporality implied by *Underworld's* discourse by establishing a relationship to the forms of narrative. Though Schaub argues accurately that *Underworld* shows how repetition “collapses distinction and difference under the spatial inertia of an idea, a word” (76), the skeptical reader of *Underworld* learns the lesson taught by Nick's Jesuit instructor, Father Paulus, who advises Nick that “intensity makes for moral habit. Not mere repetition” (DeLillo 1997, p. 539). Repetition in *Underworld* demands the reader's awareness of the terms of metaphorical significance and invites the reader to the intensity of mystical engagement. The reader must redescribe the action of history's unfolding as a metaphor that renews the present.

*Underworld's* emphasis on the metaphorical significance of its form asks the reader to consider the relationship to reality and to history in terms of the metaphorical qualities of narrative discourse. The novel's focus on reference shows how the limitation of identity and non-identity in metaphor ultimately produces a meaningful basis for action. It is

<sup>35</sup> Both Mark W. Edwards (2005) and M. N. Nagler (1974) describe the use of “type-scenes” and formulae in Homeric epic. Edwards defines type-scenes as routines—repeated “actions and scenes [that] take standardized forms”; these can also be called “themes” (309). The Homeric epic's frequent use of epithets includes short forms, such as “He answered” (308); DeLillo's portrayal of narrated actions mimics the routine of type scenes through formulaic epithet. For example, “She prayed and she thought” (DeLillo 1997, p. 251). His use of these type-scenes retains an irony, in that they are often underdeveloped.

<sup>36</sup> On communal memory and the authenticity of *mimêsis*, see especially Phillip E. Wegner (2009) and Philipp Wolf (2002).

the reference to reality—the figurative value of discourse as act—that gives narrative the capacity, through the mimetic cycle, to stimulate awareness of its terms and, hopefully, change the terms through which we understand our relationship with the natural world. *Underworld* creates metaphors for history and time that portray the union of subjective and public experience, poetics and ontology, natural and cultural history. By acknowledging how possibility opens from history, language, and perspective, the novel's reader becomes aware of the contexts that limit the identity and non-identity of narrative as metaphor. *Underworld's* reader must reaffirm the grounds for connection and renewal in time and narrative.

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