

“Apocalypse From Now On”:

The Historical Imagination in American Fiction of the 1990s

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Introduction

I was dreamin' when I wrote this, forgive me if it goes astray
 But when I woke up this mornin', could've sworn it was judgement day
 The sky was all purple, there were people runnin' everywhere
 Tryin' to run from the destruction, you know I don't even care

Say two thousand zero zero party over, oops, out of time
 So tonight I'm gonna party like it's nineteen ninety-nine

(Prince "1999", 1982)

Despite its name, the music video to Prince's "1999" is pure eighties theatricality: synths swell, spotlights pan across a smoky stage, Prince's shoulder-padded outline is illuminated. As the lights intensify, he emerges from the darkness decked out in a long glittered purple jacket. The drummer raises his sticks, Prince turns around sharply, some women make blank-eyed-sexy-faces at the camera and the song begins. "1999" is a song about a pair of different futures. On the one hand it looks forward to the "destruction" of the year 2000, a harbinger of inevitable social ("people runnin' everywhere") and environmental ("the sky was all purple") disaster. Prince gives the turn of the millennium a clear meaning. It is high drama apocalypticism at its finest, a momentous change imbued with ritual and prophecy, smoke and spotlights. But the song is first and foremost a call to celebrate and enjoy another future that will come before that, to "party like it's nineteen ninety-nine". And in this celebration there is a sense of resignation. Sure, the year 2000 will come and bring with it almost certain catastrophe but, singing in 1982, Prince "don't even care". Eighteen years before the coming of the millennium the bathetic conclusion has already been reached: to party on regardless.

This juncture of huge-event and non-event, of cataclysmic change and bland acceptance, of folds in time, of dreams, of not even caring, of messages gone "astray" and of glittered purple judgment day marks the nexus of this thesis. In line with Prince's treatment of his subject matter, it is my contention that art produced in the years leading up to the millennium is both routinely concerned with and highly ambivalent about the apocalypse and

eschatological ideas. In the course of this thesis I hope to answer a series of interrelated questions: How do the ideological challenges of 1990s America and strands of eschatological thought interact? How is this interaction mediated by ambitious and acclaimed historical novels of the time? What is the relationship between history, narrative and time in these novels? Do they present versions of time that are teleological? Past or future-facing? Linear or cyclical? Heterogeneous or homogeneous? And how, more generally, does the literary imagination contribute to and help make sense of our understandings of history and time? Let me begin from my vantage point in 2018.

The Year 1989: A New Beginning and An End?

Thirty-six years on from Prince's performance, the year 1999 holds a different place in Western imaginations. Seen from 2018, the decade leading up to the millennium appears uniquely naïve, stable, and oblivious to future political, economic and environmental disasters. A sense that the 1990s are situated in the calm before the storms and catastrophes of the twenty-first century – 9/11, the Iraq War, the 2008 financial crash, the rising fear of climate change, the growth of right-wing populism – is manifest in an intense and pervasive nostalgia surrounding the decade.¹ Contemporary critics and cultural historians alike have identified the 1990s as a moment in which excitement about the future, narratives of progress, a confident sense of renewal and a fervent belief in new possibilities emerge across the political spectrum. Situated between the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 (11/9) and the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in 11 September 2001 (9/11), between the Cold War and the War on Terror, the

¹ The internet abounds with reference to the 1990s as the “Best Decade Ever” (Anderson) or content such as “20 Reasons Why The ‘90s Were The Best Decade To Grow Up In” (Shabazz). An advertisement for the National Geographic television series “The ‘90s: The Decade That Connected Us” epitomises characterisations of the period as: “...A time when billionaires were created faster than ever before and when even the government had a surplus. Ten years before boom turned into bust. Ten years when the web was wide open. Ten years before global terror hit hard”.

1990s can be seen as what Hannah Arendt terms a “gap in time”: an “odd in-between period [...] in historical time, during which one becomes aware of an interval in time which is entirely determined by things which are no longer and by things that are not yet” (5).²

Not only are the 1990s looked back on as a moment of potential and opportunity but, from the very onset, this decade was viewed by those experiencing it as an idealised point in American history. Coming after more than forty years of a world order that was contingent on an antagonistic relationship with the USSR, the collapse of the Wall was an event with enormous repercussions for the United States. Described as the “end to a time of great actual violence in the world and great potential violence to America”, it brought relief from a particular form of anxiety and paranoia and a profound alteration in the United States’s sense of its place in the world; its national and international psyche (Cohen 4). With an eerie choice of date, on 11 September 1990, George Bush Senior gave a speech to a joint session of Congress that heralded the birth of a new era and proclaimed the existence of a “New World Order” in which “there is no substitute for American leadership”:

freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony. A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavor. Today that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we've known.

(Bush)

Bush’s dramatic rhetoric has echoes of Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 essay “The End of History?” and subsequent monograph *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Fukuyama notoriously proclaimed the triumph of liberal democracy as the dominant global ideology: “What we may be witnessing, is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of man’s

² Throughout this thesis I use “the Fall of the Berlin Wall” as a representation of the end of the Cold War and often use the two terms interchangeably.

ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (1). Considering these reactions, it requires no stretch of the imagination to see how the collapse of the Soviet Union supported a triumphalist view of American history, not only as testimony to the victory of freedom, democracy and capitalism, but also as a demonstration of the supremacy of a specifically American way of life. The 1990s emerges from characterisations such as Bush and Fukuyama’s as a unique historic moment brimming with possibility.

The notion of the victory of a liberal democratic narrative and defeat of communism also provoked a wave of new considerations of the past and the future. America may have triumphed, but what did the “New World Order” have in store? What could possibly follow on from “the end point of man’s ideological evolution”? In the face of such an apocalyptic-sounding “end point”, it seemed that modernist narratives of continuous progress needed to be reconsidered.³ Such questioning played into a wider challenge to “grand narratives” that had been under way in the West since the late-1970s; with grand narratives consisting of narratives *about* narratives, often characterised by the promise of social legitimisation through the realisation of a master idea and the attempt to give totalising meanings and chronologies for accounts of historic events (Childers & Hentzi 186). The idea that grand narratives were under pressure was first heralded by Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), which explicated contemporary postmodernism as the end of such narratives:

The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish

³ The working definition of ‘narrative’ in this thesis, comes from *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015): “A telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events, recounted by a narrator to a narratee (although there may be more than one of each) [...] A narrative will consist of a set of events (the story) recounted in a process of narration (or discourse), in which the events are selected and arranged in a particular order (the plot)” (Baldick).

stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.

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This process of de-legitimisation made it difficult to see grand narratives as offering any sense of absolute and universal truth. As Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. writes in the aptly named *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (1995): “In the end, postmodernist theorists questioned the very dichotomies that grounded the paradigm of traditional history: the supposedly inherent differences between literature and science, reality and its representations” (2). In an extension of Lyotard’s ideas, the fall of the Berlin Wall – and its implications for the grand narrative of communism – represented the final fragmentation of totalising systems for the interpretation of history in the West.

Taking history as a narrative used to give meaning to the passage of time, the fragmentation and disintegration of comprehensive historical narratives posed a challenge to understandings of time that had been previously taken for granted. Across diverse strands of American society and culture, 1989 signalled a new beginning caused by an ending and brought a drastic change to the country’s perception of its past, present and future.

The Year 2000: An End and a New Beginning?

Alongside the designation of the 1990s as an era situated in between regimes of international conflict and shaped by the ideological impact of the end of the Cold War, there is a further reason to consider the Janus-faced nature of the decade: its anticipation of the coming millennium. Simultaneously retrospective and forward-facing or, as Iain Sinclair writes, a “cocktail of déjà-vu and prophecy”, the end of the twentieth century presents a *fin de siècle* writ large. On account of the greater lapse of time, the *fin de siècle* of the end of the nineteenth century, routinely characterised as a period of decadence marked by a curious combination of degeneration and hope for a new beginning, has eclipsed that of the 1990s in historical, cultural

and literary scholarship. The convergence of these mixed sensibilities and the moment of the changing century has been termed “*fin-de-siècle* phenomenon” in which “[c]hanges which are actually taking place [...] tend to acquire extra (sometimes mystical) layers of meaning” and anything can become a symbol or sign of the coming disjuncture and disruptions” (M. Heffernan 31). However arbitrary its cause, the turn of a century inspires a moment of collective existential awareness. And the “(sometimes mystical) layers of meaning” surrounding the turn of a millennium surely exceed those of the turn of a century. Reliant as it is on a Christian temporal framework, hints of the apocalypse – redolent of chaos and redemption – necessarily attach themselves to the years leading up to the arbitrarily imposed moment of the year 2000.

In Christianity the apocalypse is either preceded or succeeded by the millennium, traditionally a time of utopian peace in which Christ will reign, often for a thousand years. Despite the recent tendency to associate the idea of the end of time with complete annihilation, the apocalypse has often been eagerly anticipated. As the moment of judgement, it is also the point at which the chosen will be saved and the rest will be damned, the ultimate resolution of all that has come before. The apocalypse, and therefore the millennium, entails a new assessment of the past, often accompanied by a sense of chaos and terror for the future. (Indeed, the turn of the second millennium inspired mass hysteria across Western Europe, with the rise of anarchist millenarian cults and fears of the catastrophic destruction of the world, as described in Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists in the Middle Ages* (1957).) But apocalypticism has also had great traction beyond religion: in his oft-cited work *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Frank Kermode argues that the idea of finality imbues the time before it with a significance that it may not otherwise have, so that everything is defined retrospectively by what happens at the end (14). In this way, the year 2000 signals a moment to consider anew both the past and the future.

Alongside the end of the Cold War, the millennium contributed to a sense of the 1990s as a “gap in time”; the sense of an ending associated with the approaching year 2000 put further pressure on the way in which time was perceived, considered and narrated. But, unlike 1989, the year 2000 provides a potential ending that is ahistorical – in that it is not connected to any particular defined event – and derived from eschatology: the strand of theology that is concerned with the end of humanity and history. The symbolic weight, drama and apocalyptic promise of judgement associated with the year 2000 generated a new series of issues about time and its ending in the 1990s.

Temporal Scales and the Literary Imagination

In the context of the combined pressure of the historic events of 1989 and the ahistorical status of 2000, this thesis seeks to explore the way in which literature negotiates different dimensions of time. In its ability to connect and inspire, to combine the individual with the collective, the interior with the exterior, to record the personal or individual experience of time (absent from sweeping accounts of history or eschatology) and incite empathy in a reader, literature holds together disparate understandings of time from the measurable, short and intimate to the vast and undefinable.

Even within chronologically dated history, time operates on multiple scales. Such scales are derived from the notion that there are many social and geopolitical levels or scales at which human beings form identities and make connections, each of which has an associated length of historical time. Thus, the personal scale of a human life has a temporal scale of under a hundred years, a family or community might have a known history that reaches back a couple of hundred years, a nation even longer and all of this is overshadowed by the vast temporal

scale of cosmological time. Each of these different scales inspires new questions about individual and collective association, responsibility and agency.⁴

Literature provides a potential means of capturing different scales of historical time and interweaving them into a meaningful pattern: a task that takes on a new urgency at a time when grand narratives are being called into question. It is an underlying assumption of this thesis that art diffracts and influences the wider concerns of the era in which it is produced. Artists reproduce, control and create systems and narratives in which to fit their present moment and versions of the past and the future, developing “structures for the accumulation, transformation, representation, and communication of social energies and practices” (Greenblatt 229-30). Taking artists as players involved in creating and sustaining social customs and environments, their works become the product of these complex transactions. Literary authors, as artists, are therefore in a unique position to replicate, express and shape cultural norms and boundaries through creative acts of interpretation and improvisation. In this sense the works of fiction they produce adhere to Derek Attridge’s claim that the “singularity of a cultural object consists in its difference from all other such objects, not simply as a particular manifestation of general rules but as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations” (63). Literary singularity comes from both its specificity – its appeal to the imagination, its aesthetic value, its ability to incite an empathetic reaction from its reader – and from its connectedness – its “nexus” between different discourses or cultures and ability to move between different zones.

⁴ My conception of temporal scales is partially indebted to Timothy Clark’s chapter “Scale Framing: A Reading” in *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015) in which he analyses the same short story at three different temporal scales: one personal, one national historical and one at the scale of the Anthropocene “at which scale effects and a certain impersonal ecological dynamic start to become visible and shade out more conventional considerations” (100). This thesis does not consider a geology-wide temporal scale. However, to some extent the ahistorical time, which I routinely term eschatological, has a similar effect in dramatically changing the length of perspective through which a narrative is considered.

In Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* (2008), she argues that literary texts need to be analysed in positive terms, countering critical trends that use literature predominantly as a means to challenge or problematise other discourses: "Literature's relationship to worldly knowledge is not only negative or adversarial; it can also expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are" (83). Felski celebrates literature's ability to generate new perspectives, for instance pointing out that crucial distinctions need to be made between novels and, say, history or theory "at the level of discourse" because (good) literature does not just depict or explain events but enfolds the reader within its narrative (89). Works of literature, Felski argues, "do not just represent, but make newly present, significant shapes of social meaning; they crystallize, not just in what they show but in their address to the reader, what Merleau-Ponty calls the essential interwovenness of our being in the world" (104). As demonstrations of our interconnected being in the world, literary texts interweave historical scales and bring them together with mythic and ahistorical versions of time.

The (A)Historical Imagination: Morrison, Roth and DeLillo

Understanding how, and to what purpose, this interweaving takes place is the enquiry at the heart of this thesis. While it is inevitably beyond the remit of my project to explore this question in every work of fiction produced in the American 1990s, I have chosen three texts through which to discover and understand this process: Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (all published in 1997).⁵ This selection presents a variety of unquestionably different approaches to some very similar underlying themes and concerns. *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* and *Underworld* all deal with shattered

⁵ This particular year, close but not too close to the coming millennium, perhaps signals a particular intensity of reflection on endings. Or perhaps it is mere chance that all three novels were published in the same year. Either way, it seems as logical as any act of periodisation and so a suitably random detail for a project that, to some degree, hopes to point out the arbitrariness of measured or organised time.

notions of historical narrative and use intimations of the apocalypse to precipitate questions about responsibility and agency.

Toni Morrison, Philip Roth and Don DeLillo are both a plausible and an unlikely triad of authors. All are acclaimed American novelists, born between 1931 and 1936, who were, by the late 1990s, at similar points in their lives and their careers: well-known, successful and with prodigious bodies of work behind them. It would be fair to say that they all deal in epic themes, asking fundamental questions about humanity and often about the American experience. But, setting their ambition and celebrity aside, the three writers appear to have little in common. The central concerns of their oeuvres are divergent: Morrison is regularly commended for her vivid prose and detailing of the experiences of (particularly female) black communities; Roth is celebrated for his dark comedy and explorations of Jewish family life and male sexuality; and DeLillo is renowned for his examination of vast political, social or cultural systems, such as the law, finance or mass culture.⁶ As such the three writers are customarily considered as players on very different geopolitical scales: Roth at a personal or familial scale, Morrison at a collective or communal and DeLillo at a systemic one.

Given these differences, it is evidence of the salience of the particular ideological pressures of the 1990s that (in the same year) all three authors produced works that are set, at least partly, in the “apocalyptic mood” of the Cold War period (Dickstein 227). They are all involved in looking back at the turbulence of America during the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation and the rise of new political and social movements of the 1960s and 70s. In turning to historical themes, Morrison, Roth and DeLillo share the concerns of Lyotard – or even of Bush and Fukuyama – in trying to understand the place of temporal narrative in the final years of the twentieth century. Indeed, the link between postmodern fiction and history is

⁶ A brief Google search finds Morrison quoted saying “I’m writing for black people [...] I don’t have to apologise” (Hoby), Roth described as a “towering novelist who explored lust, Jewish Life and America” (McGrath) and DeLillo as a writer “wired into contemporary America from the ground up” (McCrum).

a close one; arguably both show a reaction against modernism, in which the past is barely evoked and, when it does appear, is there to make a point about the present (Hutcheon 65). This link has led Linda Hutcheon to coin the term “historiographic metafiction”, a reference to postmodern historical fiction which “explicitly contests the presumptive power of history to abolish formalism” and in doing so highlights the relationship between history and fiction as two different types of discourse that both attempt to make sense of the past (69).

As examples, *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* and *Underworld* all sit at a juncture between fact and fiction, between “real world” connections and imaginative singularity. In *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (2001), Ann Rigney contends that:

...what defines the historical novel as a genre is precisely the interplay between invented story elements and historical ones. As novels, they are written under the aegis of the fictionality convention whereby the individual writer enjoys the freedom to make-believe in the existence of a world “uncommitted to reality.” As *historical* novels, however, they also link up with the ongoing collective attempts to represent the past and invite comparison with what is already known about the historical world from other sources.

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Novels that deal with history are necessary hybrid. However, as two discourses that set out to make sense of the past, history and literature are not, as Greenblatt and Felski have already intimated, straightforwardly equivalent. As Rigney argues elsewhere, while “both artistic and historiographical processes [should be considered] as agents in the ongoing circulation across different cultural domains of stories about the past” (2009, 4) so that scholars involved in any project that brings the two together need to take account of the “distinctiveness of artistic writing as a mediator of historical understanding” (2009, 7). Part of the artistic appeal of novels that deal in history comes from the remediation of knowledge in an aesthetic and imaginative form. Just as Felski sees literature “crystalizing” knowledge, so Rigney argues that historical fiction can make the past newly observable. As part of this process, each of these three texts can be seen using different creative techniques to occupy multiple moments in time

simultaneously as they bring the past into the present and come to life within their reader's imaginations.

As works of literature, *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* and *Underworld* use their singular ability to occupy multiple moments, scales and dimensions and to explore time that is both historical and ahistorical. In keeping with their quasi-mythical religious titles – referring to heaven, the pastoral idyll and hell – all three texts handle the colossal, the fantastical and the allegorical. They are all apocalyptic, epic and violent, ambitious and extensive works of literature with large casts of characters who operate across broad expanses of time.⁷ However, the diverse visions of the apocalypse that the three writers depict (as chapters two, three and four will demonstrate) lead the novels to propose very different ways in which human beings can navigate and even find meaning in time.

Morrison's *Paradise* presents what are essentially two visions of history: one is monolithic and reliant on a strict linear narrative; the other is flexible and made up of multiple and nonlinear narratives. Through the course of the novel, these two understandings of history come into conflict. Ultimately Morrison shows the greater value of the second of the two, offering hope for the future, not in a single narrative but in the acknowledgement and understanding of multiple, various and previously overlooked narratives.

Roth is less optimistic. *American Pastoral* portrays characters who adhere to grand narratives, on multiple scales, only to undermine the feasibility of maintaining such narratives and to show their limitations. Indeed, the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, appears to almost revel in postmodern confusion. The novel offers what little hope for the future it has in the form of a reflective question, posed at its end, urging the reader to consider the story – and therefore history – critically, independent of any overarching narrative.

⁷ Like their shared year of publication, the novels' epic proportions are a noteworthy similarity. While *Paradise* and *American Pastoral* are both part of trilogies (alongside other considerably sized novels), *Underworld* stands alone at a mighty 827 pages. Not only do they all contain extensive ruminations on the subject of time but the process of reading them necessarily takes up an extensive amount of time.

Finally, in *Underworld*, DeLillo depicts a state of constant temporal crisis in which events, characters and objects are all connected, irrespective of the temporal scales they occupy, and together face an increasingly pervasive apocalypse. The novel's many inter-temporal connections provide a different form of time altogether, creating a continuous cycle in which there is little scope for narrative or clear meaning. Nevertheless, DeLillo posits art as offering some kind of potential for redemption. Through the process of interweaving time, *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* and *Underworld* all offer some insight into how human beings can find agency within the apocalyptic chaos of the apparent end of history.

By demonstrating the extensive presence of eschatological thinking in 1990s American fiction, my project departs from other discussions of this topic. For instance, Cohen's *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (2009) covers all three of my cases and offers an interesting exploration of the particular treatment of recent history in the decade. However, Cohen does not elaborate on the connection between this treatment of recent history and the encroachment of noncontemporaneous, older and even biblical notions of time. He focuses only on the "end of history" after 1989 and not on other potential pressures put on understandings of history by the year 2000. In considering much older versions of time alongside the contemporary, I hope to challenge characterisations of the 1990s which present them as years that were uniquely hopeful, even utopian, and sees the decade as somehow detached from previous periods and devoid of the social, political, economic and environmental "crises" of our contemporary moment – in which 9/11 is so often taken as the definitive starting point for a new era of apocalypticism.

Such ominous anxieties, casting back to much older apocalyptic fears, find their way even into the most joyous celebrations of the approaching year 2000. The second verse of "1999" takes on a new and sinister tone:

I was dreamin' when I wrote this, so sue me if I go too fast
But life is just a party and parties weren't meant to last

War is all around us, my mind says prepare to fight
So if I gotta die I'm gonna listen to my body tonight.

The song trails off eerily to a child's voice repeating the line: "Mommy, why does everybody have a bomb?". "1999" is thus not only a song about the approaching year 2000. It is also a song about the life under the shadow of the bomb. A song that brings together the historical time of the Cold War and the ahistorical time of the millennium.

Chapter One

Unravelling Time in 1990s America

It is a founding premise of this project that periodisation provides an important and fruitful way of understanding a society and its concerns. Periodisation – the process of dividing up the past into distinct, quantifiable and often labelled sections – is by its very nature an act that essentialises. It is in many regards a crude process that has come under heavy criticism; like any taxonomy, it presupposes the dominance of certain events, concentrates on the experiences of particular (normally ruling) groups and treats specific modes of thought as definitive of a given time, even though they cannot have affected everyone, or even most people. That said, given humanity's tendency to narrativise and the inextricable relationship between narrative and history, periodisation is a necessary, even inevitable, way of making sense of the past. As Fredric Jameson writes, we “cannot not periodize” (2002, 29). Periodisation is implicit in any assertion of the connection between distinct phenomena from similar points in time. Furthermore, in its creation of categories, periodisation enables comparison and connection across temporal moments. Like any attempt to narrate reality, periodisation must be treated in a critical and analytical way but, used cautiously, it can also become a heuristic tool with the potential to render conventional versions of events unfamiliar in fruitful and original ways.

It is in this critical manner that I hope to consider the period of the long 1990s (1989 to 2001) in the United States, in which the effects of the end of the Cold War in the past and the millennium in the future jointly put new pressures on notions of historical narrative and therefore on understandings of time. In the light of this, the first section of this chapter considers the development and directions of some theories that aspire to characterise history and time in Western society. These theories mostly come from my period (their sheer number reflecting the topicality of the theme), with a few written on either side of it. The selection is by no means exhaustive given the huge amount of critical material that was produced on the

subject during these years. Instead I have chosen a few theorists who can be seen to exemplify two broad approaches: one which loosely considers linear or universal versions of time and another which considers time as nonlinear, possibly cyclical and as something that is experienced heterogeneously. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to ideas from eschatological thought. These ideas are mostly derived from a religious and spiritual tradition. In particular I will discuss the concept of millenarianism and demonstrate the pervasiveness of millenarian ideas throughout American culture and society. The third section of this chapter provides a rough overview of how the 1990s have been characterised in accounts of that era, produced at the time and subsequently. Throughout I hope to show some of the parallels and connections between contemporary and noncontemporary ways of thinking about time. Finally, in a fourth section, I will describe how my case studies show some of the singular ways in which these literary discourses negotiate historical narrative, describe homogeneous and heterogeneous experiences of time and address the challenges posed by notions of the end of time.

Regimes of History, Regimes of Time

The US victory at the end of the Cold War – perceived by many to mark the end of communism, the end of modernist narratives of progress, or even the end of history – gave the 1990s new ideological challenges. Such challenges were combined with the charged feelings of ending attached to the *fin-de-siècle* moment, given that, as Kermode has argued, the end has the power to define the meaning of what has come before. Together, these factors rendered the 1990s an era acutely aware of its position in the narrative of linear history. In the wake of the collapse of the USSR, the last few decades of the twentieth century and turn of the millennium generated a huge number of academic and non-academic books, journals and conferences that considered time in epochal shifts (Hartog 2). Efforts to understand time permeated culture in many forms.

Along with a new emphasis on and interest in the nature of time came a renewed fascination with the past, with memory and with history (as the turn to historical fiction intimates). “Since the 1980s,” writes Andreas Huyssen in the year 2000, “it seems, the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts, and this shift in the experience and sensibility of time needs to be explained historically and phenomenologically” (21). Society in the late-twentieth century was engaged in a constant effort to hold onto, explain and take responsibility for the past; as described by Huyssen, it feared a “culture of amnesia”, having recourse to new media and technology in order to hold on to the memories of the past in the face of the apparent postmodern fragmentation of meaning and narratives (27).

The fascination with finding a place in history at the century’s end also led to the claim that the present was shrinking, eclipsed by the past, no longer able to provide stability but instead entirely defined by obsessive attempts to remember and record what had come before (Huyssen 33; Hartog xviii). In *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (originally published 2003) the French historian François Hartog argues that, at any given moment in history, the specific way in which past, present and future are articulated has a crucial bearing on the present (xvi). Different historical epochs, which Hartog terms “regimes”, have different attitudes towards “historicity”. These “regimes of historicity” show how given cultures or societies approach their pasts, or in a broader sense describe “the modalities of self-consciousness that each and every society adopts in its constructions of time and its perceptions” (9). Such orders of time underpin our cultures so that we adhere to them without even noticing, discussing or negotiating them. Hartog describes the process by which history has always been determined as a linear narrative, in which one event or period follows on successively from another. He gives the example of the division of the past made by humanist scholars into “Ancient Times”, the “Middle Ages” and “Modern Times”, arguing that the idea of perfection through time, in which the present is sacrificed for the good of the future, emerges

from such divisions (13). This concept of “regimes of historicity” can be used to examine our relationship to historical time and understand how, contingent on the way in which past, present and future are configured, different narratives of history emerge (17).

Like many others, Hartog argues that our relations with time were shattered and confounded by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the events that followed it. Post-1989, as narrative and especially grand narrative became a problem, the prevailing “order of time ceased to be self-evident” (3). The West, which had started off the twentieth century with a tendency to futurism, had seen the horrors of war and genocide that futurism seemed to produce and became “presentist” or “short-termist” in reaction to a past that no longer made the future seem comprehensible (105-7). The obsessive revisiting and memorialising that Huyssen describes, the drive to explain things “historically and phenomenologically” comes from the sense that a new “regime” is underway, creating the need for a new understanding of the past in order to grapple with the new present. In this characterisation of time at the turn of the twenty-first century, the present has spread. It occupies the past through the impulse to memorialise and intrudes on the future through the same impulse to record, remember and restrain: “through the notions of precaution and responsibility, through the acknowledgment of the irreparable and the irreversible, and through the notions of heritage and debt” (Hartog 201). Like the concept of “regimes of historicity”, the notion of “presentism” isolates the post-1989 world as a specific moment in history characterised by a crisis of narrativisation and a self-conscious and all-encompassing relationship to passing time.

With the loss of confidence in grand narratives, came the loss of a stable narrative or set of narratives to apply to the past and the future. Given this crisis in thinking about time as meaningful, Hayden White, writing in 1996, developed a characterisation of time that argued that his contemporary moment was one in which history could no longer exist. White terms the distorted moment that replaces the old historic one “the modernist event”, repeating some of

the tropes of literary modernism. In the “modernist event”, distinctions between real and imaginative discourse dissolve or break down, undermining the “founding presupposition of Western realism: the opposition between fact and fiction” (66). While conventional historic inquiry had taken facts about an event as constituting the meaning of that event, by the 1990s the facts were coming to be seen instead as a function of the meaning already assigned to the event (70). In the same way that traditional techniques of storytelling were seen as unusable after modernism, White argues that the aberrations of twentieth-century history, “events of a scope, scale, and depth unimaginable by earlier historians”, combined with “the dismantling of the concept of the event as an object of a specifically scientific kind of knowledge”, changed the nature of the historical narrative (72). According to this way of thinking, not only is the event de-realised but historicity is rejected: the historic time of the past is emptied of meaning.

White’s thought coincides with ideas propagated by other influential theorists who were considering time in the late-twentieth century, such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. The suggestion that the past has become a clone of itself, capable only of repetition and empty of meaning, recurs throughout considerations of postmodern culture alongside the idea that time has been commodified or rendered illogical. For instance, in an oft-cited comparison between Van Gogh’s painting “Peasant Shoes”, a work of high modernism, and Andy Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes”, a work of postmodernism, Jameson argues that Van Gogh’s shoes carry their history with them, as their artistry is evident. By contrast, in Warhol’s shoes he notes the “emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (1984, 60). The postmodern shoes are empty of true emotion or meaning, commodified and easily replicated; they have no clear narrative, no connection to time, past or future. In his 1998 article “The End of the Millennium or The Countdown”, Jean Baudrillard explicitly connects a crisis in time to the coming millennium, arguing that the countdown or deadline was now the only means of thinking about time left and therefore that

time was reaching its end: “When you count the seconds separating you from the end, the fact is that everything is already at an end; we are already beyond the end” (2). While Kermode reads the end as bringing meaning to what has come before, for Baudrillard the proximity of the end can only be an indication of chaos. In a similar way to that in which White and Jameson consider a crisis in understanding the past, Baudrillard describes a crisis in understanding the future, in which the only possible destiny for humanity at the turn of the millennium is entropy through the exhaustion of possibility (2). Once again, this crisis is attached to the fall of the Berlin Wall which, Baudrillard argues, was the “last great ‘historic’ event”, as, since then, history has splintered “into scattered fragments and reactivating phases of events and conflicts we had thought long gone” (3). For Baudrillard the triumph of neo-liberalism and the strength of new technology and media are the root causes of an inability to narrate time, they undermine reality and so render the apocalypse infinitely reproducible (6). And as the apocalypse is so easily copied and commodified, the world has ended already. Baudrillard’s argument about the way time is measured links to Huyssen’s ideas about how new media change our relationship to history: both specify the interlinking of social and scientific ideas at the century’s end as factors that exacerbate the era’s unsettled relationship to time.

From Hartog to White to Jameson, these theorists consider time as linear and essentially homogeneous: even Baudrillard’s contention that history has become fragmented relies on the belief that until recently – say prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall – it was a progressively moving whole. These ideas are challenged and enhanced by another tradition of thinking in which time is seen as nonlinear and heterogeneous. At the forefront of such theories is Walter Benjamin. While Benjamin himself was writing well before the 1990s, his understanding of historical narrative is a point of reference for many of the philosophies of history at this time. In particular, the image of the “angel of history”, whose face is eternally turned towards the past, that appears in his 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History” provides what Richard

Dellamora suggested in 1995 is postmodern culture's "most apocalyptic representation of human civilization" (3):

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay [...] But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him towards the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris behind him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Benjamin 249)

The continuousness of the storm, coming from nowhere and going nowhere, denies any clear divisions of beginning, middle and end and suggests an uninterrupted state of chaos and crisis. Benjamin goes on to critique the notion of progression through time, arguing that "[t]he concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time" (252). Empty homogenous time is seen as teleological, filled with consecutive facts and "infinitely extends forward and backward from an arbitrary point, is universally applicable, and is believed to be thematically and interpretively neutral". Instead, throughout "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", and elsewhere in his writing, Benjamin urges the recognition of the presence of the past in the present, often through memory (254-55). In this mode of thinking, which emphasises the nonlinearity of time, the living possess the power to redress the injustices of the past.

In a similar criticism of the way in which homogenous and linear time is passed off as natural or ideologically neutral, Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983) discusses how the classification of different experiences of time has been used to define the relationships between different individuals or groups. In particular he considers a version of time he terms "typological time" that underlies such classifications as "preliterate vs. literate, traditional vs. modern, peasant vs. industrial and a host of permutations which include pairs such as tribal vs. feudal, rural vs. urban". He notes a tendency whereby the second category in each of these two pairs has historically been given supremacy (23). Fabian demonstrates the othering process by

which different groups, identities or nationalities are somehow considered to belong to different temporal moments, structures or even speeds. These ideas have some similarity to the consideration of time in Reinhart Koselleck's *Futures Past* (1984). Koselleck considers the relationship between past, present and future, pointing out that "the more a particular time is experienced as a new temporality, as 'modernity,' the more the demands made of the future increase" (3). With new labels and identities, Koselleck suggests – echoing Hartog's "regimes of historicity" – come new relationships to time. In considering the extent to which the past intrudes upon the present, he declares the existence of a "contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneousness", which contains a "diversity of temporal strata which are of varying duration, according to the agents of circumstances in question, and which are to be measured against each other" (95). Such characterisations allow for an understanding of temporal structures that is far from universal and insists upon the coexistence of various pasts and futures in the present.

An important example of the way in which nonlinear and heterogeneous ideas of time can give greater prominence to the consideration of individuals and groups whose stories have been subjugated and untold is provided by Sadiya Hartman's "The Time of Slavery" (2002). This discusses the impact of the growing heritage industry on African Americans' sense of their own history, in particular in relation to African American tourism in Africa and the mourning for lost origins that it entails. Hartman views this fascination with origins as a kind of time travel: a process of "seizing hold of the past" in order to "illuminate the broken promises and violated contracts of the present" (763). She asks: "what does it bode for our relationship to the past when atrocity becomes a commodity for transnational consumption, and this history of defeat comes to be narrated as a story of progress and triumph?" (760). Hartman discusses the relationship between remembrance and redress, questioning how the former can inform the latter and showing the past in the present. Like Huyssen, she is wary of the turn to the past but

acknowledges the importance of approaching history from a more critical angle, recognising the differences in the ways individuals or groups experience time: “dismissal or refutation of slavery’s enduring legacy, not surprisingly, employs the language of progress, and, by doing so, establishes the remoteness and irrelevance of the past” (771). Hartman’s analysis shows how a new focus on history, based on a different understanding of time, can provide a form of political agency for marginalised groups and demonstrates a way of turning to the past that uses it to give impetus for a better future.

Eschatological Time

The sense of historical crisis felt in philosophies of history at the end of the twentieth century has strong foundations in older eschatological modes of thinking about time. While the years leading up to the millennium appeared to many, and have subsequently been characterised, to be a moment in which “the Western world is unthreatened, some people are enjoying great prosperity, and the governments are more popular than at any time in living memory”, this stability was undercut from many directions by a deeply rooted feeling of apocalyptic dread (Bull, 1999). Mary Ann Carpenter, in *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, notes that, since the mid 1960s, there had been an unprecedented increase in scholarly attention to the Christian apocalypse and Book of Revelation and a growth in the production and publication of popular prophetic and apocalyptic tracts, a trend that intensified in the final years of the twentieth century (Dellamora 108). The omnipresence of eschatological thinking in this period confounds any reading of the late-twentieth century as a purely “presentist” regime of historicity. Instead, the 1990s emerge as a time deeply affected by noncontemporaneous older, often spiritual or conspiratorial, notions about the past and, more pressingly, the near future of the millennium. While the theorists discussed in the first part of this chapter consider temporal scales that relate to human history and are often deeply

concerned by the meaning of facts or events, the predominantly religious discourses discussed in this section consider time on a more ancient, essentially ahistorical dimension.

Any system of registering or measuring the passage of time requires some kind of belief in overarching, pre-ordained structures. Human beings need markers of time beyond the daily, monthly, seasonal or annual to understand history, to tell their stories and make meaningful narratives. A millennium – unlike a day, a season or a year – bears no relation to the rotation of the Earth or any other “natural” occurrences. The use of such chronological codes to order events in time is culturally and contextually specific. Human beings are creatures in search of structures, or, as Stephen Jay Gould writes, “we give it [the year 2000] psychological significance, for whatever mysterious reason, because the human mind seems to need cycles that have meaning within a mathematical system” (Eco et al. 7). Indeed, Dominic Pettman vividly describes the millennium as:

...a blank screen on which we project our own fantasies for the future, present anxieties, and regrets about the past. Yet the images that flicker across its surface have a thematic consistency and coherence that belie the randomness of calendrical fetishism. In simpler terms, how it is represented as occurring, and with what effects, are far more significant than when it happens.

(10)

As Baudrillard suggests in his description of obsessive countdowns, there is meaning in the expectation of the end, so that the year 2000 is anticipated throughout the late 1990s and pre-empted in various representational forms. In this respect, the turning of the third millennium has symbolic relevance to any discussion of historical narrative and time in the late-twentieth century.

The millennium represents a version of the end of history and time that is eschatological, measuring 2000 years after the birth of Christ and so founded on a Christian understanding of time. Eschatology, the branch of theology concerned with the ultimate fate of humanity, is deeply enmeshed within Western culture. The central notion of the apocalypse, with its connotations of escape, chaos, judgement, redemption and revelation, has permeated

belief systems, both secular and religious. Revelation, in particular, is an inextricable part of any account of apocalyptic endings. The word “apocalypse” itself is derived from the Greek *apokalupsis* and *apo-calyptein*, which mean to “uncover,” “unveil,” or “reveal” (Pettman 15). Moreover, as Jacques Derrida discusses in depth in his 1984 essay “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)”, the apocalypse has an unusually strong social force because of its insistence on mass, rather than individual, death.⁸

Apocalyptic thinking has a wide and varied history, but the most common source for eschatological belief in Western culture is generally taken to be the Bible and more specifically the Book of Revelation. Interpretations of this Book have ranged from the literal to the highly figurative and metaphorical, depending on how time is schematised. Linear readings of Revelation, particularly popular among Christian fundamentalist groups, insist on its prophetic nature (McGinn 525). This deterministic reading follows the “triple drama” of “crisis-judgement-vindication” (McGinn 526). However, another interpretation of Revelation’s structure emphasises its cyclicity, so that the same pattern – of oppression followed by punishment for the wicked and reward for the deserving – is constantly repeated. Such accounts are often highly detailed and reliant on imaginative interpretation, paying particular attention to the pattern of the number seven, which recurs throughout the book.⁹ Independent of their linearity or cyclicity, the ideas of revelation and redemption set out in Revelation insist on the notion that times past affect how we are to be judged in the future, giving “a higher meaning to history by relating it to transcendental mythic patterns” (McGinn 527). In this way the eschatological religious tradition conveys a view of the world defined by the passage of time

⁸ Given his specifically Cold War framing, Derrida’s focus is on nuclear annihilation. Therefore, the apocalypse he imagines departs from a traditional notion of the apocalypse in that it brings about total extinction without judgement or retribution.

⁹ The first recapitulative reading of the Book of Revelation has been attributed to a Greek martyr bishop writing in Latin in around 300 CE, who chides his readers: “Do not regard the order of what is said, because the sevenfold Holy Spirit, when he has run through matters down to the last moment of time and the end, returns again to the same time and completes what he has left unsaid” (McGinn 530).

and “interwoven with hopes of individual redemption” (Niethammer 135). Furthermore, Christian eschatology has a close relationship with the coming millennium through millenarianism, a strand of eschatological thinking that has enjoyed a particularly prominent place in the culture of the United States.¹⁰

The term millenarian is often used interchangeably with references to the apocalypse or apocalypticism, yet their associations are different. While the apocalypse connotes a cataclysmic future event which brings with it epochal transformation, the millennium suggests an often utopian period of “maximal fulfilment”, whether this takes the form of divine promise or the achievement of great human potential (Barkun 237). Like most of Christian eschatology, Christian ideas of the millennium are derived from a passage in Revelation that foretells a point in time when those who are saved will “reign with Christ a thousand years” (Rev. 20:4). Thus millenarianism often depends on a linear interpretation of the apocalypse. The two ideas, of the millennium and the apocalypse, are regularly combined so that the upheavals of the apocalypse are seen as necessary prerequisites for the utopian millennium to be attained.¹¹ Millenarianism therefore comes to signify any religious vision that sees history climaxing in a mass moment of redemption on Earth, often one in which the poor and powerless gain that which has, until then, been withheld from them (Barkun 32). Subsequently, those with millenarian beliefs have often been positioned, or positioned themselves, as an alternative to the reigning orthodoxy: “Millenarians have always been people who are dissatisfied with a given state of affairs and

¹⁰ Millenarianism is often not distinguished from millennialism. However, millennialism, more specifically, refers to the 1000-year paradise of rule of Christ that will occur on Earth after the Second Coming and before the Last Judgment. As Stephen Jay Gould points out in *Questioning the Millennium: A Rationalist's Guide to a Precisely Arbitrary Countdown* (2011): “*Millennium* is from the Latin *mille*, “one thousand,” and *annus*, “year”—hence the two n’s. *Millenarian* is from the Latin *millenarius*, “containing a thousand (of anything),” hence no *annus*, and no two n’s” (130). From here on I should note that my use of the terms millenarianism/millenarian will encompass millennialism/millennial.

¹¹ This said, the chronology of the millennium – whether it comes before or after the Second Coming of Christ and/or the Last Judgment – has been a dividing line between different sects of Christianity. The post-millennial vision (in which Christ comes after a millennium of peace) has, since the Enlightenment, struggled to distinguish itself from secular myths of progress whereas the pre-millennial vision (millenarian, of the sort I am discussing in this project) has achieved greater influence given its promise of chaos and destruction before Christ’s return (Bull, 1993).

who want to change it” (Eco et al. 174). Given the connection with judgement and persecution or salvation, millenarian world views are often characterised by their binary casting of the world into light and dark, good and evil, worthy believers and unworthy nonbelievers (Barkun 18; McGinn 526). Millenarian movements are therefore often associated with notions of conspiracy and the occult and driven by versions of history and society that see it as manipulated or governed by vast and evil forces, unknown to most. Personal agency and individual responsibility are engulfed by the feeling of a wider collective cause or motion. Such movements look forward to a new version of the world which is defined by its complete dissimilarity to anything and everything that came before it.

Entwined with the nation’s stories of origin, millenarian-styled belief has been particularly popular in the United States of America. “America is a place and a story,” writes Greil Marcus in *The Shape of Things to Come: Prophecy and the American Voice* (2006) (19). The idea that America is a self-consciously invented country narrating its own story is affirmed again and again by both insiders and outsiders across cultural, social and historical accounts of the country. Notably, a revival in the linear millenarian interpretation of the Book of Revelation was led by radical Puritan groups in seventeenth-century England – of the sort that went on to “discover” America (McGinn 535). Central to the founding myth of the United States is the Puritans’ sense of themselves as God’s people, divinely separated from the sinners they have left in the Old World (Marcus 20). Much of American identity, Marcus argues, depends on the idea that the country has made a covenant with God which promises those exceptional few (or by now many) redemption when the apocalypse comes (20). Through this covenant, American national identity is inextricably tied to ideas of prophecy and doom, salvation and damnation. This strand of exceptionalism runs deep into the country’s culture, surpassing its Christian origins and can most simply be seen in secular terms as “the claim that America is [...] of a (superior) kind – and generally that that kind carries with it unique moral value and

responsibility” (Byers 86). America’s fundamental attachment to the binaries of good and bad, friend and foe, the aggrandisement of the past and trepidation about the future are a naturalised part of the national language, with origins in older spiritual versions of time.

The compelling totality and adaptability of millenarian ways of thinking have, as the case of America shows, enabled them to transcend their Christian origins. Although theologians often react to the suggestion of secular apocalypses with ambivalence, the idea of secular millenarianism is one which has enjoyed much traction with vastly different schools of thought and ideologies. Since the Enlightenment, millenarian belief has often been associated with ideas of progress and, by the nineteenth century, secular millenarianism was often tightly bound to political ideologies that strove to envisage and attain a perfect future for their followers (Barkun 32). In this way, many millenarian views of the end of the world take the form of grand narratives. For instance, in its future-facing belief that the evil of the ruling elite will be destroyed by a powerful and far-reaching revolution, which will in turn lead to the establishment of a fairer and more equal society, Marxism has often been thought of as a form of millenarianism. Therefore, while the fall of the Berlin Wall, bringing a diminished threat of nuclear annihilation and the apparent victory of liberal democracy, signalled an averted apocalypse for some, for others the end of the Cold War marked the loss of faith in a Marxist millenarian utopia.

Characterising 1990s America

Accepting the premise that periodisation can provide a fruitful way of understanding a society and its concerns, this section lays out some of the prevailing characterisations and considerations of America in the 1990s. Such an account of some of the significant events, themes and ideas cannot possibly offer a comprehensive overview of the period but tries to look at the ways in which ideas about history, time and the apocalypse were considered. In

undertaking this, I have drawn on several retrospective accounts produced in the early twenty-first century, in particular Colin Harrison's *American Culture in the 1990s* (2010). Alongside these accounts I shall make reference to statistics and speeches from the era itself.

The unusual position of the American 1990s in history was evident in the many attempts to characterise the decade before it had even begun; as if “Americans needed urgently to fix the meaning of the present before they could live in it” (Harrison 1). While some of these attempts signal an era of uncertainty – a New York Times invitation to readers to name the decade they were living in prompted such responses as the “Age of Fragmentation,” “Age of (Great and Failed) Expectations,” and “Age of Disillusion (and Dissolution)” – many characterisations of the 1990s echo the triumphalism or stability felt across the West at the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War (Chollet & Goldgeier ix).¹² Recognising that there had been a move into a distinct era, all these labels contain within them the idea of a new beginning. In this vein, there was a notable emergence of terms claiming the end of previously important political or cultural movements: “postmodernism, post-feminism, post-ethnicity, post-cinema, post-rock” (Harrison 4). These terms encompass a range of attempts to search for new forms of creative or intellectual expression within older movements that were no longer felt to be relevant or suitable. Like the eagerness with which the commentators of the 1990s rushed to name their own decade, they attest to a period transitioning from old to new, a period of self-conscious branding, of insecurity and opportunity.

These are all traits that appear throughout cultural historic accounts of America in the 1990s. The end of the Cold War, a state of affairs that many had felt to be indefinite, posed a challenge to the powers of the government or those in control who had previously been able to rally support to defend their country against a common Soviet enemy. As the quotations from

¹² For instance, historian Emma Roshchild described the era as a “postrevolutionary universe [...] more free of the fear of violent revolution than at any time since the 1790s” (Chollet & Goldgeier x).

Bush and Fukuyama in my introduction show, new narratives attempted to fill this void. Although the rise and fall of utopian ideologies in the course of the twentieth century had, for many, diminished belief in future-focused narratives of continuous progress, the decade is often distinguished by its sense of accelerated change. Politically, it was characterised by political centrism. Bill Clinton's prioritisation of electability over ideology was a clear move away from the old political assumptions of the Cold War (Prosser 2). Free-market neo-liberal thinking dominated the nation's internal politics and its global economic policy, leading to the combination of increased general levels of income and widening wealth disparities (Harrison 7). And a sense of rapid change and opportunity in science and technology added to a widespread feeling that, as the millennium drew near, the nation had lost some sense of stable pace, cohesion and direction.

Without the Cold War offering a sense of purpose that had provided national coherence since the mid-twentieth century, America was left with an "enemy crisis" (Cohen 9; Gitlin 80). In the apparent calm of the long 1990s, the country fell into the culture wars. An increased reach of voices and opinions from different communities was offset by the rise of conservative "culture warriors".¹³ Efforts to define and explain America's place in the world, its history and identity – seen in debates about issues such as gun control, abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, the environment and the relationship between church and state – caused strongly-felt ideological debates between those with conservative and those with progressive views and values (Harrison 10). The absence of an enemy outside the country led many to search for an enemy within: a demonstration of the close and longstanding relationship between the country's domestic and foreign wars. With America's attention turned inward, old moral and political battles were revived: "drastic socioeconomic re-engineering required a fresh public

¹³ A good example of one such "warrior", Pat Buchanan (who campaigned against the incumbent president George Bush Senior in the 1992 elections), gave a speech at the Republican National Convention in which he claimed: "There is a religious war going in our country for the soul of America. It is a culture war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself" (Buchanan 1992).

consensus, and a racialised view of crime and national security came in handy in separating the deserving from the undeserving” (Mishra). The redrawing of the boundaries of what it meant to be an American citizen, and how that citizen should look or act, became a central concern of the 1990s, indicating a country that veered between celebration and confusion.

In a further test to national unity and stability, the AIDS epidemic, which had first entered national consciousness in the early 1980s was, by 1992, the leading cause of death for men between the ages of 24 and 44 (Pickrell). AIDS affected millions of Americans, helping create a sense of paranoia and apocalyptic panic. AIDS further entrenched the different sides of the culture wars. The effect of the disease on already stigmatised groups drew a clear line between those who prioritised the fight against AIDS and those who did not: gay and bisexual men, African Americans and Latinos were all disproportionately affected. Thomas L. Long’s *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic* (2005) describes the close connection between the disease and accounts of the end of time in the latter part of the twentieth century. Long shows the presence of apocalyptic discourse on both sides of the discussion: both those fundamentalists claiming that AIDS was God’s judgement on homosexuals and, by the early 1990s, in the resistive discourses of those working to combat the disease and promote solidarity (8-13). While in *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1989) Susan Sontag explicitly links the apocalypticism surrounding the disease to the final moments of the Cold War: “AIDS may be extending the propensity for becoming inured to vistas of global annihilation which the stocking and brandishing of nuclear arms has already promoted” (87). She compares the two as “dystopian harbingers of the global village”, causes for international and intellectual crisis (93). By drastically shortening the horizons of possibility for so many, the AIDS epidemic offered strong premonitions of the end of time as the century drew to a close.

Such premonitions demonstrate the extent to which the end of the Cold War did not banish the fear of the end of time but created the circumstances in which it appeared in different, possibly more virulent, forms. A lack of certainty in the political, social and cultural arena and crisis in the meaning of history affected much of the dominant political discourse, giving it a decidedly apocalyptic quality. As Long suggests: “Apocalypticism is one possible response to threats to group identity and cohesion” (20). Through its establishment of a common fate, apocalyptic discourse produces a clear sense of social identity and cohesion, constructing defined subjects and objects. The quote from George Bush Senior, ushering in a “New World Order”, is rife with imagery that draws from Christian eschatology and, in particular, the binaries of post-apocalyptic millenarianism – signalling the inescapable presence of the noncontemporary in the contemporary. His reference to the “thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavour” epitomises Long’s claim that: “nothing so typifies American apocalypticism as our tendency to configure ‘normalized crises’ in terms of war” (27). As Bush ushers in a new era of “justice” on a journey towards the “elusive path to peace”, he offers a familiar secular eschatological narrative, one that posits his contemporary moment in the millennium situated after the apocalypse and before the coming era of peace. Equally Fukuyama’s “The End of History?” is undeniably post-apocalyptic in its insistence that “the end point of man’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” has been attained (1). Fukuyama picks up on the Hegelian notion of a progressive narrative in which humanity moves towards an ending and freedom is at its fullest, at which point the process of history would end (T. Heffernan 5). In his insistence on the existence of “universal man”, Fukuyama exempts many from humanity, writing “it matters very little what strange thoughts occur to people in Albania or Burkina Faso, for we are interested in what one could in some sense call the common ideological heritage of mankind” (9). Fukuyama thus provides a strong demonstration of American exceptionalism,

with a division between in-groups and out-groups at the heart of his argument. Seeing the injustices of his own society as mere imperfections, Fukuyama's neo-liberal millennium results from the defeat of the "wrong" way of thinking (essentially Communism) by the "right" way (American capitalism). In the stark bravado of their statements, both Bush and Fukuyama posit confident responses to the crisis in narrative at the end of the 1990s. Yet their statements seem detached from any practical political rhetoric: in ushering in the end of communism, both declare an event of the same scope as the Second Coming of Christ.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such language was not only the domain of the political mainstream but filtered into the worlds of belief and conspiracy. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the approaching millennium have both been connected to an increase in apocalyptic belief across the country in the late-twentieth century (Barkun 13).¹⁴ The increased channels of communication provided by recently developed forms of technology, such as the internet, enabled a greater level of dissemination for unofficial or unconventional views and ideas. Faced with collapsing ideologies, the growth in new technologies and national fragmentation, religious activities were freer to flourish as many Americans openly turned to the New Age movement, mysticism and conspiracy (Eco 178). Writing shortly after the turn of the millennium (2003), Michael Barkun declared that it had "become a commonplace that America is in the throes of an unrivalled period of millenarian activity" (31). Barkun focuses particularly on new growing forms of millenarianism that he terms "improvisational millennialism" (14). Unlike the traditional modes of millenarianism discussed earlier, "improvisational millennial" groups are wildly eclectic. They do not base their beliefs on a single narrative, system or tradition but instead borrow from unrelated sources and draw from different belief systems, so that dissimilar ideas migrate from one subculture to another (Barkun 27). Barkun notes that

¹⁴ According to a poll carried out by the American research group Gallup, in 1983 62 percent of Americans had "no doubt" that Jesus would return to Earth in their lifetimes (Boyer 2).

“improvisational millennial” groups attach mystical or conspiratorial ideas to real world events (18). For example, Bush’s 1991 “New World Order” speech instigated a number of conspiracies relating to the existence of such an Order, often thought to be a covert and imminent dictatorship in which the Antichrist would use the collaboration of global organisations and new technology to control the world (Barkun 61).¹⁵ This bizarre combination of world history and Biblical prophecy is typical of the blurring of fact and belief in “improvisational millennial” views of the world and supports the idea that eschatological thinking appeared repeatedly throughout American culture and society in the years leading up to the millennium.

Imagining the Apocalypse

The three case studies that follow offer extraordinarily ambitious and imaginative literary visions, revisions of and tentative solutions for some of the challenges set out in this chapter. Exploring themes similar to many of the postmodern critics described above, Morrison, Roth and DeLillo negotiate historical narratives without clear beginnings, middles and ends, and attempt to find meaning in the temporal complexities and increasing apocalypticism of the American 1990s. The three novels sit at an intersection between recent history and biblical prophecy, mainstream academic understandings of post-1989 time and the *fin-de-millennium* spiritualism or conspiracy of unaccredited groups. Depicting societies struggling to understand their pasts and realise their futures. *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* and *Underworld* explore heterogeneous and noncontemporaneous notions of time, the mutability of historic “fact” and the place of human agency, responsibility and hope in societies without clear processes of cause

¹⁵ Pat Robertson’s *The New World Order* (1991) is the most widely available conspiricist tract of this era. Robertson, who was a preacher, founder and leader of the grassroots organisation Christian Coalition, claimed to expose an enormously powerful Establishment that controlled American foreign policy. He went on to link the rise of this conspiracy to the impending arrival of Satan on Earth and so take it as a sign that the end of the world was coming (Barkun 241).

and effect. As distinctly literary works and, in particular, as works dealing with the past that could be classified as “historiographic metafiction”, the novels simultaneously belong to multiple temporal moments and are rootless, belonging to the readers’ imaginations. Through creative acts of interpretation, they play with “historic truths”, filling in the gaps that linear time no longer can.

All published in 1997, the three novels share the year of their release with James Cameron’s enormously successful film *Titanic*. Several post-millennium characterisations of the 1990s refer to the sinking of the *Titanic* and/or Cameron’s film. Huyssen considers the sinking ship: “a metaphor for memories of modernity gone awry” or an articulation of “the metropolis’s own anxieties about the future displaced to the past” (25). In Philip E. Wegner’s analysis of the decade, *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (2009), he proposes a specific shot from the film – in which the upended ship’s stern towers into the sky and the tiny outlines of figures jumping off are vaguely discernible – as one of several images of catastrophe in the 1990s that prefigure 9/11 (29). Slavoj Žižek, whose accounts of the mindless triumph of neoliberal society partially echo those discussed earlier by Baudrillard and Jameson, also compares these early twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century disasters and their effect in breaking up an era of complacency: “this, also, was a shock, but the space for it had already been prepared in ideological fantasizing, since the *Titanic* was the symbol of the might of nineteenth-century industrial civilization. Does the same not hold for these attacks [of 9/11]?” (231). Set in the 1910s, but with an opening scene in the 1990s, Cameron’s film *Titanic* is a demonstration of a cultural turn to historical themes and the clear self-awareness of that turn. Furthermore – as Huyssen, Wegner and Žižek remark – the fateful story of an enormous luxury boat that was too big, its engineering too ambitious to survive, epitomises the calm before the storm, the hubris before the apocalyptic moment. The timing of

the release of the film's release demonstrates the pertinence of works of art in holding together elements of the past and present and imbuing them with new aesthetic presence.

Chapter Two

“Where Proof Was Not Available She Interpreted”: The “Modernist” Apocalypse of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*

If my work is to be functional to the group (to the village, as it were) then it must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out, and it must do that not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them.

(Morrison 1984, 389)

By the late 1990s, Toni Morrison had achieved a fame that combined popularity and a strong public presence with critical acclaim and scholarly influence: she was both a Nobel Laureate and a regular guest on Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club.¹⁶ Through the 1970s and 1980s she had become, by many accounts, the most widely read African American novelist in the world, bringing new levels of attention to black women’s writing and consistently speaking out against racial discrimination in the United States (Cohen 95-96). Since her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), set in the 1940s, Morrison had often turned to historical themes and subjects. *Paradise* (1997), her seventh novel and the first following her Nobel Prize in 1993, completes a loose trilogy that aimed to write a new kind of African American history – following on from *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). Hugely ambitious, with a large cast, complicated layered chronology, changing perspectives and many unanswered questions, *Paradise* has been described as “inscrutable” (Page 648) and as the one novel by Morrison that is “probably the least suited to the restricted discussion format of [Oprah Winfrey’s] Book Club” (Harrison 37).

Despite – or perhaps because of – this inscrutability, critical scholarly interpretations of the novel abound. *Paradise* has mainly been read as a novel about gender (which it is), as a novel about race (which it certainly is) and as a novel about religion (Morrison herself claimed the novel’s subject is “love of God” (Rose Interview)). But it is also a novel about history and

¹⁶ Over the course of six years, Winfrey selected four of Morrison’s novels to appear on her show, leading to the argument that this did more for Morrison’s sales than her Nobel Prize (Berg).

identity, time and endings, themes that have been less thoroughly explored in academic discussion. Two critical articles that consider the role of history in *Paradise* inform my reading of the novel: Katrine Dalsgård's "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2001) and Peter Widdowson's "The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2001). They cover similar ground, both examining the novel's relationship to American history and its interweaving of fact and fiction. Dalsgård compares the attitudes of some of the characters to America's founding fathers, contending that "*Paradise* represents a new take on both the tradition of American exceptionalism and the African American culture tradition" (246). Widdowson argues that the novel represents "an attempt to write several concentric histories of the American experience from a distinctively African American perspective" and compares its chronology to a list of key dates in American history (316). While both these readings elucidate much of *Paradise*'s relationship with history they do not extend this discussion to consider the way Morrison uses and discusses time, or indeed different versions of history. Moreover, there does not appear to be critical work that considers the novel's apocalypticism, something that this chapter aims to redress.

Paradise can be viewed as a bid to re-inscribe the presence of African Americans into the nation's history, while calling into question the basis on which racial difference is discussed. This chapter will consider the novel as a response to the challenge to American identity posed by the end of the Cold War, with a particular focus on race and gender, and examine how such questions of identity are worked through using apocalyptic themes and ideas. In doing so, it will demonstrate *Paradise*'s interweaving of the historical and the ahistorical, between totalising views of history – now complicated by post-Cold War fragmentation – and eschatological understandings of time influenced by the looming presence

of the millennium. Morrison has expressed the belief that: “to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it [her writing] must centralize and animate information discredited by the West – discredited not because it is not true, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as ‘lore’ or ‘gossip’ or ‘magic’ or ‘sentiment’” (1984, 388). As Fabian has argued such divisions include distinctions about how different groups experience time. Implied within the statement is Morrison’s own moral purpose as a writer: to promote certain previously invalid or excluded forms of knowledge and identity and, in doing so, demonstrate an alternative truth to presiding (Western) systems of belief and, implicitly, understandings of time. It is this purpose that provides the narrative momentum for *Paradise*, with the women of the Convent (whom I shall discuss in due course) representing a systematically discredited group.

Public “History” and Private “histories”

As befits a text produced at the end of a century when future-facing ideologies appeared to be collapsing, *Paradise* examines the promise of utopia and the ways in which different groups strive to realise that promise through competing ideologies, predicated on distinct and different understandings of the past, present and future. In the course of the novel, a dichotomy emerges between those who understand the past in terms of a single accepted narrative, of the sort that Lyotard refutes, and those – often denied or rejected by the dominant ideology – whose understanding of the past is multiple and nonlinear. This can also be seen as the difference between “History”, a large and inflexible narrative propounded by those in power, and “histories”, assemblages or scatterings of small scale collective and individual narratives. These two differing approaches correspond roughly to the two main groups that are central to the narrative: that constituted by the townspeople of Ruby, Oklahoma – *Paradise*’s fictional setting, a small African American community – whose governance and hierarchy derives its

power from their own version of History; and a group of women living in an abandoned convent close by, whose narratives and trajectories form a collection of loosely connected histories. These two groups are set in opposition to each other by an event of apocalyptic violence that frames the narrative, described both at the start and at the end of the novel: the horrific massacre of the Convent women by a group of Ruby men. The subsequent chronicle revolves around a psychological question: how could they do it? “How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?” (292). Each chapter of *Paradise* is told through third-person narration and focuses on a different, female character from either Ruby or the Convent, reaching into that character’s personal past to bring them up to 1976 and successively building a rounded account of the affairs and concerns of both groups. As a demonstration of Koselleck’s argument for the presence of diverse “temporal strata” in any given moment, different characters in *Paradise* have their own sense of time, and therefore their own historicity.

Paradise explores the connection between its contemporary consideration of race, identity and nationhood and the era when many of these ideas emerged from. From her post-1989 vantage point, Morrison considers the inextricable histories of her country and her ethnic community. *Paradise* takes place during the Cold War, in the Vietnam and Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s and mostly in the year 1976: the bicentenary of the American Declaration of Independence, a connection to a wider History with echoes throughout the novel. Ideological battles are both external and internal; fought between the townspeople and other groups and between the residents of Ruby themselves. In 1976, the town’s founding fathers, often known as 8-rocks, have tight control of every facet of daily life.¹⁷ In particular, twin brothers Deacon and Steward Morgan, who have governed Ruby since its foundation in 1950, are keenly

¹⁷ 8-rock refers to the darkness of their skin: “a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them” (193).

involved in maintaining a particular vision of what kind of place the town should be, based on a proud inherited narrative of ancestral triumph, idealism and determination. As a result, many of Ruby's younger denizens are beginning to react against their elders' authoritarianism and conservatism and a large part of the novel focuses on the town's intergenerational clashes suffused by an acute sense of "us against them", anxiety and paranoia. *Paradise* serves as a reminder of the extent to which the Cold War was not just a war of ideology but also one of identity. Morrison makes use of the dissonance of the era to bring alternative voices and approaches forward on behalf of the discredited groups she champions. In particular, many of Ruby's intergenerational clashes are provoked by differing reactions to the Civil Rights Movement. Reverend Richard Misner, a rare newcomer to the town, tries to inspire young people's interest in the movement despite the protests of older relatives, who defend and protect the separatist foundations on which the town was established. The town's fathers and grandfathers are what Morrison terms "fifties men", noting that, by the time of *Paradise*'s publication in the late 1990s, most black people claimed they had always been supporters of Civil Rights, although many had been very "wary of aggressive change" at the time (Rose Interview). Morrison observes how attitudes change retrospectively, pointing to History – like histories – as something mutable, which cannot necessarily be understood through the strict divisions of "us against them".

The inhabitants of Ruby exist in a culture of Cold War "containment", both loaded with, and fearful of, an insidious ethos of conformity; they are ignorant of events outside of their bubble but living lives that are predicated on such events.¹⁸ The appearance of the Cold War in *Paradise* represents an invasion of the private by the public. In this sense, History, for the people of Ruby, is a one-way valve; it influences them but they are unable to influence it. For

¹⁸ Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (1995) includes a thorough discussion of how national policy at the height of the Cold War affected mid-twentieth-century fiction. Elements of this thesis function as an addendum to Nadel's argument, a suggestion that traits of containment culture find their way into American fiction even after the official end of the Cold War.

instance, much of the Morgan twins' authoritarianism comes from their vague panic about the need to secure power in the absence of a direct male heir. This panic is rooted in a historic narrative: while Steward has no children, Deacon's two sons have both been killed in the Vietnam War. The broader narrative of American History violates the Morgan's familial history and closed space of Ruby. Similarly, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King are represented through the self-mutilation of Seneca, one of the Convent women: "...Kennedy was killed and the whole world wept in public. She was fifteen when King was killed one spring and another Kennedy that summer. She called in sick to her baby-sitting job each time and cut short streets, lanes, alleys into her arms" (261). In a sinister conflation of the national with the intimately personal, Seneca's body bears the strangely map-like marks of History and political violence is inscribed as personal harm. Although there are plenty of otherworldly and fantastical elements within *Paradise*, it is a novel firmly rooted in a specific historical moment. It refers to well-known figures and events of that moment and so connects Morrison's characters with her readers' knowledge of a familiar, shared historical narrative.

(In)Versions of Time

Paradise takes a series of European American founding myths and subjects them to an African American revision in a reshaping of American exceptionalism (Dalsgård 234; Widdowson 316). In this way the different temporal scales of History and histories become blurred. Arguably, African American communities, in many respects the "discredited" people Morrison refers to, have not habitually been in the dominant position needed to write History. In trying to assert a new version of History that incorporates them as African Americans, the leaders of Ruby are playing a European American game. Significantly, the detailed chronology of the development of Ruby that emerges in the course of the novel can be aligned with crucial dates

in American History. Indeed, Widdowson offers his comparative timeline as “co-ordinates for reading *Paradise* as a black (in)version of American history” (316-17). Thus the community of Ruby is established on the same millenarian grounds as (white) foundation myths of the United States have been: the Rubyites are the select few, God’s chosen agents and, having overcome great hardship, they are now ready to build the perfect society.

The inhabitants of Ruby are deeply involved in this historical founding narrative. Crucial to the town’s sense of self is the “Disallowing”, a “story that explained why neither the founders of Haven [Ruby’s predecessor] nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves” (13), in which 158 freed black slaves who had left Mississippi and Louisiana in 1890 were turned away by communities of whites, Native Americans and lighter-skinned blacks before establishing their own settlement (13-17). Proving the centrality of this act of exclusion to their collective past, the Disallowing is re-enacted in Ruby’s annual Christmas pageant. In this performance, historical and spiritual narratives are merged, attesting to the townspeople’s sense of themselves as the chosen people. The story of the Disallowing lies at the heart of the political dogma perpetrated by the Morgans and other 8-rocks, allowing them to justify any level of violence for the good of the community. They believe that establishing a clear narrative of communal History is of vital importance to their claims of moral authority:

Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories talks about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers. [...] But why were there no stories to tell about themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough for the future to live by.

(161)

In this respect, the elders of Ruby are not citizens of Hartog’s “presentism” but of what could be clumsily termed “pastism”: both their present and their future are subsumed by their past. Establishing their own triumphalist view of History, defined by great historic events in which adversaries have been overcome and true liberty has been attained, Ruby’s leaders support their present and future decisions through an unwaveringly monolithic take on the past: a linear,

patriarchal grand narrative that is eroded, in true postmodern fashion, over the course of the novel. Through their exclusion of all others, and legitimised by their version of their own History, the leading families of Ruby act as though they have already established the paradise of the novel's title, a "New World Order" free from opposition, which they must protect at all costs.

A crucial part of Ruby's exceptionalism lies in the way in which it effectively functions within a closed temporal system. Since its establishment, no one has ever died in the town and this strange phenomenon sets it up as a potential version of paradise, imbuing the townspeople with an "air of immortal perfection" (Dalsgård 242). Death is therefore a distant concept, apparently only possible once you have left the town – as the deaths in the Vietnam War and in the Convent demonstrate. Additionally, Ruby is infused with a sense of sterility and stagnation: the novel is full of women who cannot conceive, miscarriages and abortions. Following Kermode's contention that the apocalypse must precede the millennium, relying on "an imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicated future" (8), Ruby's inhabitants are both post-apocalyptic and, it could be said, living eternally in a form of apocalyptic limbo: constantly revisiting the same version of their past and unable to achieve any future redemption or salvation, having already reached the end.

However, given the diverse "temporal strata" within the novel, challenges to the official History and sense of time in Ruby appear in many different forms. The "Patricia" chapter, which focuses on the character Pat Best, the self-selected local historian, presents an alternate version of Ruby's History that seems to undermine the official narrative. In compiling the history of the town's founding families, Pat pays close attention to any gaps in the town's records:

The town's official story, elaborated from pulpits in Sunday school classes and ceremonial speeches, had a sturdy public life. Any footnotes, crevices or questions to be put took keen imagination and the persistence of a mind uncomfortable with oral histories. Pat had wanted proof in documents where possible to match the

stories, and where proof wasn't available she interpreted – freely but, she thought, insightfully because she alone had the required emotional distance.

(188)

Pat acknowledges that the “official story” represents only one version of historic events. Furthermore, she displays an understanding of the close connection between interpretation and creation: while she considers her search for proof of the former rather than the latter, her readiness to interpret “freely” shows some awareness of the mutability of proof.¹⁹ However, in extrapolating backwards from the official story, she demonstrates an unwillingness to divert from it and invent unreservedly. Her project is based on a desire for facts, for closed explicatory answers, to reinforce History rather than open her mind to histories. The reasons for Pat’s unwillingness in this regard become clearer in the course of her chapter. Through her analysis of the family trees she uncovers the founding family’s unstated belief: that being blacker is better. This rule has particular salience for Pat who has lighter skin and whose family, she suspects, has never been fully accepted by the townspeople because of this. However, when faced with the outsider Richard Misner’s insistence that Africa is where black history originates, Pat reverts to the monolithic narrative and millenarian isolationism of the town’s founding fathers: “Slavery *is* our past. Nothing can change that, certainly not Africa,” to which Misner responds, “We live in the world, Pat. The whole world. Separating us, isolating us – that’s always been their weapon. Isolation kills generations. It has no future” (210). Pat, like most of the residents of Ruby, cannot escape thinking in terms of segregation, divisions and a short-term notion of History. Ultimately, she burns all her notes on the town’s history, obliterating any suggestion that the power of the 8-rock families over the town could be challenged (217). As an attempt to achieve a new or greater sense of self, Pat’s genealogy project has inevitably failed. Without knowing what sort of future she hopes for, or even

¹⁹ It seems potent to this discussion, and this thesis more generally, to note that Morrison originally based *Paradise* on a story she heard of a similar attack on a convent in Brazil. Later, she found out that the attack in Brazil had probably not happened, but was thoroughly undeterred, arguing that, “it wasn’t without truth just because it was nonfactual” (Rose Interview).

expects, Pat's endeavour is not motivated by any clear ideology or collective impulse and cannot defeat the "positivist and empiricist" assumptions that Hutcheon describes as dominating twentieth-century History (70).

Moreover, Pat's conversation with Misner demonstrates the differences between the ways in which the two characters consider time and their own "regimes of historicity". Despite her critical vision of Ruby's History, Pat's focus remains on the past; her vision of time is event-based, constrained, linear and confined to the specific geographic setting of the town. By contrast, the outsider, Misner approaches the past in the critical, redressing way that Hartman notes in her discussion of the use of history as form of political agency for marginalised groups. Misner reclaims a far older, noncontemporaneous notion of history in order to "illuminate the broken promises and violated contracts of the present" (Hartman 763). He considers a future-facing version of time that connects individuals and groups across the vast space of continents.

The most radical challenge to the historic narrative propagated by Ruby's leaders comes from the women of the Convent. In contrast to the townsfolk, who are led by men with a singular, fundamentalist, "rational" narrative, the Convent inhabitants (each of whom has a chapter dedicated to their personal history), experience a version of time which operates through complicated and otherworldly connections of a sort that are not tolerated in Ruby.²⁰ The Convent is a liminal space in which distinctions of race, gender, religion and age intersect through the coming together of different histories, very much in contrast to the racial polarisation of identity in the town. It is therefore represented by the figureheads of Ruby as a dangerous place that must be avoided, "not a convent but a coven" (276). In their disregard for conventional distinctions or differences, their acceptance of multiple different worldviews,

²⁰ In line with this contrast, Philip Page argues that the differences between the mode of thought in Ruby and that in the Convent (and more specifically Patricia's versus Connie's) is symptomatic of a "dichotomy deeply rooted in Western culture" (643). He compares the town's mode of thought to that of Plato's "thinking", Milton's "discursive reasoning", William James's nonreligious "intellectual" experience and what Ricœur terms "explanation". In contrast to Plato's "intelligence", Milton's "intuitive reasoning", James's religious "affective experience" and what Ricœur terms "understanding" (643).

their freely imaginative way of conceiving of the world and their quasi New Age spirituality, the women of the Convent – especially in the eyes of the people of Ruby – form a group not unlike the “improvisational millennial” groups that Michael Barkun discusses. The Convent women are millenarian in their opposition to the reigning orthodoxy; they operate through a rival belief system. However, unlike these “improvisational” groups, the women have no defined agenda or single unswerving vision of the past or the future.

The histories of the women of the Convent, as laid out in their individual chapters, are personal rather than collective. They have all come there for sanctuary (like the founding inhabitants of Ruby). Rather than constantly reliving their individual pasts, these women attempt to inhabit a present that engages critically and receptively with time, both past, present and future. Unlike the increasingly fractured and chaotic stories of the townspeople, the narratives of the Convent women progress from their multiple and disconnected pasts towards a form of peace and integration. They rely on connections other than shared history to give meaning to their lives. Although the Convent is far from being a utopian society, the women that live there are connected through the identities they share, without ignoring those that they do not. Through a communicative process in which they divulge and confront the events of their damaged pasts and connect their stories together, the women link themselves to each other, accepting and moving on from history to form a version of time in which: “Gradually they lost the days” (262). Just as the people of Ruby have their own sterile temporal system, so the women of the Convent begin to develop a fertile, multiple and contingent version of time. In losing a sense of structured or measured time, the Convent women appear to be moving towards the paradise that Ruby has failed to achieve.

Fractured Endings: The “Modernist” Apocalypse

However, even the accommodation with time reached by the Convent women is compromised by the ever-present apocalypse. *Paradise*'s pivotal apocalyptic scene, the attack on the Convent, starts and ends the novel with chaos, violence and judgement. The narrative's nonlinear, recapitulative structure means that the causes and explanations for the attack are revealed in the characters' individual and collective pasts and the origins of this violence are shown to be far more deeply engrained in History than the people of Ruby tell themselves. The two accounts of the attack differ. The first time it is narrated in a detached manner, in which we learn that nine nameless men (two of whom are wearing ties, two are brothers, another pair are father and son) attack fewer than half that number of women. It is unclear whether the women are killed and even more unclear why they are under attack in the first place. While this lack of clarity provides the narrative with a sense of immediacy, it also means that the story is riddled with gaps and omissions, setting up a series of questions that push the reader to anticipate answers. In particular, the novel's opening line, "They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time." (3), warns the reader that race is going to be a central issue and leaves them waiting for a white girl to appear. Despite the claims of numerous critics to the contrary, at no point in the course of *Paradise* does Morrison reveal or even suggest who the white girl is; it is a demonstration of the fluidity and the hybridity of identity in the Convent that any of its inhabitants could be white. This indeterminacy filters through to the second telling of the attack at the end of the book: while the attackers' and victims' names and motives are now to some extent revealed, it remains unclear whether all of the women have been killed and which men have attacked which women. As Pat Best glimpses during her genealogy project, there cannot be a single or straightforward account of the past. The narrative's structure runs counter to that promoted by the leaders of Ruby: events mutate, gaps are left and time fails to move in a steady linear manner but zigzags through different people's lives at different rates.

In this way, *Paradise*'s narrative operates through a non-linear version of revelation. It follows a pattern akin to those accounts of the Book of Revelation which emphasise the book's cyclicity (such as that of the Greek martyr who claimed: "the sevenfold Holy Spirit, when he has run through matters down to the last moment of time and the end, returns again to the same time and completes what he has left unsaid" (McGinn 530)). Just as the pattern of the number seven is vital to this reading of Revelation, so numbers in *Paradise* appear almost obsessively throughout the novel, attached to moments in a far from linear manner. The people of Ruby are constantly counted: there are the nine Ruby men who attack the Convent, Ruby's three ministers or the nine holy families (only seven of whom are represented in the Christmas pageant). Distances are repeatedly measured: the Convent, we are told again and again, is seventeen miles from Ruby (3), Ruby is ninety miles away from any other town (3) and a Cadillac drinks "ten gallons of gasoline every ninety miles" (29). This seemingly arbitrary measurement of every possible quantity extends to time. It becomes possible for Widdowson to create a timeline of Ruby's history because dates and lapses of time, from a few seconds to years, are endlessly recorded. But these dates never appear in order and, to set them out chronologically, Widdowson must have had to assemble and extrapolate from many disconnected facts. Numbers both unify and disperse, drawing unlikely and apparently random connections between disparate characters, places and occurrences while allowing for gaps, contradictions and diverse interpretations. Numbers become the domain of "lore" or "magic", the traditionally invalidated form of knowledge of discredited people; they are a detail that provides information which would not be conventionally important but, in this context, creates new connections, allusions and illusions.

This obscure, multiple and cyclical version of time is exemplified by the complicated afterlives of the attack on the Convent. The process of assimilating the shooting into the History

of Ruby is troubled so that there are “two editions of the official story” (296) which Pat Best, acting as pseudo-narrator, provides for Richard Misner:

One, that the nine men had gone to talk to and persuade the Convent women to leave or mend their ways; there had been a fight; the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air. And two (the Fleetwood-Jury version), that five men had gone to evict the women; that four others – the authors [of this version of events] – had gone to restrain or stop them; these four were attacked by the women but had succeeded in driving them out, and they took off in their Cadillac; but unfortunately, some of the five had lost their heads and killed the old woman. Pat left Richard to choose for himself which rendition he preferred.

(296-97)

These versions are both differentiated and connected through their insistent reliance on numbers. The first, which is the Morgan twins’ official rendition, is like most of the town’s official historic narrative, dependent on a strong sense of unity, common intention and consensus: all nine men act in the same way, as do all the Convent women. Alongside these two official stories, the attack inspires a host of other interpretations; no single version of events seems adequate. Pat again provides a tentative counter-narrative, which notably she keeps to herself: “that nine 8-rocks murdered five harmless women (*a*) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); (*b*) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most); and (*c*) because they *could* – which was what being an 8-rock meant to them...” (297). The (*a*), (*b*) and (*c*) of this version displays an alteration in Pat’s thinking about history and time. She does not provide a simple narrative predicated upon cause and effect, but a series of separate, but interlinked, explanations for the attack. Her reasoning reaches further back in history than the “two editions of the official story” she has provided to Richard, interpreting the attack as a direct consequence of the town’s exclusionary origins. Above all, in Pat’s edition of the story, the attack is not founded on any kind of rationality or reason. The men shot the women because they “*could*”.

In this sense, the attack on the Convent is a “modernist event” of the sort White describes. Its meaning as an event cannot be constituted through its facts; distinctions between

real and imaginary are broken down and it can neither be forgotten nor adequately remembered, leading to “widespread cognitive disorientation” (White 72). In White’s description of the trial of O. J. Simpson, he observes the profusion of interpretations and the intense media coverage of the judicial process and queries: “What is the inside and what the outside of this event? What the beginning and what the end?” (85). Such questions could equally be applied to the attack, which, on the one hand, has an explanation that extends throughout the whole of *Paradise* and, on the other, is never satisfactorily explained. The exact boundaries of the event are unclear. It is an aberration in sequential time and can only be understood through a wider focus on Koselleck’s notion of the “noncontemporaneous” that takes in events and ideas from outside conventional historic narrative. When some of the townspeople arrive at the Convent after the attack, they do not find the bodies of any of the women. This absence constitutes a further challenge to the Rubyites’ attempts to find any single meaning, redemption, explanation or closure. The “cognitive disorientation” of the “modernist” event of the apocalypse dovetails with the multiple, nonlinear or “magic” understanding of time previously discredited. But while White suggests that the “modernist event” signals a breakdown or absence of meaning, the fragmented interpretations of the attack are generative: as multiple and conflicting they demonstrate (at least to Pat) the limitations and redundancy of History, its necessary narrowness and exclusivity.

Thus *Paradise* offers some form of, albeit highly qualified, worldly redemption. This redemption is reliant on creative multiplicity, recycling and renewal, both working within and breaking the novel’s apocalypticism. After the attack, the Convent women reappear in moments of “positive haunting” (Peterson 97). These scenes show them returning to visit people from their past lives before they entered the Convent. But rather than emotional reunions, these encounters are off-kilter, missed or indefinable. The women show no signs of going back to their old lives, they merely observe their friends and family or pass by them

unrecognised. Their presences are undefined, occupying holes in other people's narratives, their unexplained and unexpected reappearances interweaving recent and distant past, present and future. Strikingly, this is the only scene in *Paradise* that is not set in either Ruby or the Convent and so is outside any of the novel's clear divisions of space or time. By offering the possibility of a kind of afterlife, an existence in different places at different times, the novel ends on a hopeful note, showing a pattern of loss and recovery, renewal and progression: "Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise" (318). Despite its biblical tone, the final sentence ends the novel firmly in the realm of the real "down here", and presumably right now, on Earth. Rather than a closed dialogue based on a fixed conception of the past that excludes the outer world, the ending of *Paradise* focuses both on the future and on a present that is temporary and transitory: in which "sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf" (318).

In the course of *Paradise*, Morrison uses the imaginative power of creative literature to tackle the shattering of time, the mutability of history and the achievability of individual and collective justice. In abandoning a rigid notion of sequence, the novel shows an apocalypse that has become concurrently a past, present and future event. Throughout the novel Morrison contrasts the present or pastism of History with a broader, non-contemporary, less event-based, understanding of time and histories that connects events and ideas discontinuously across vast dimensions of time. In her representation of the multiplicity of the Convent, Morrison shows a version of time that brings individuals into collectives in a way that recognises and allows for difference, she links personal scales of time to historical time to spiritual or religious time. In spite of the violent apocalyptic event of the massacre, the Convent women – through accepting difference, understanding the mutability of the past, and of time more generally – achieve some form of spiritual redemption. In defiance of a *fin-de-millennium* apocalypticism, Morrison offers some tentative new beginnings. As a writer concerned with the plight of minority groups in which the space for possible justice must be in the future, Morrison cannot completely abandon a sense of

progressive time. Despite its chaotic vision of time, *Paradise* looks hopefully to the future, and particularly the future for “discredited people”.

Chapter Three

“History, In Fact, is a Very Sudden Thing”: The “Postmodernist” Apocalypse of Philip

Roth’s *American Pastoral*

What innocence? That’s so naïve. From 1668 to 1865, we had slavery in this country. Then, from 1865 to 1955, a society marked by brutal segregation. What innocence? I don’t really know what people are talking about.

(Roth, 2002)²¹

Published some seven months before *Paradise*, Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* offers a very different writer’s treatment of a set of remarkably similar ideas. As Louis Menand points out in a 1998 review that compares the two novels: Morrison and Roth are certainly “not writers one ordinarily imagines walking hand in hand, as it were, among common themes and concerns” (80). Morrison’s clear ideological drive and foregrounding of black women’s experiences makes her an unlikely companion to Roth, whose ideology is ambiguous and whose treatment of issues such as gender and race is often perverse or provocative. Yet, like *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* makes a clear return to mid-century issues. Both novels describe the 1960s and 70s using Edenic and allegorical language. And both reflect on how the stories of America past have come to affect the present. They provide extravagant discussions of American history, depicting and entertaining rival dialogues on its nature and uses. Both are mostly rooted in a particular geographic (if, in one case, imaginary) location – for Morrison Ruby, Oklahoma, for Roth Newark, New Jersey – but they have an impressive temporal range, constantly switching between recent and distant past and present. Cohen attributes this simultaneity to a convergence of the chronologies or trajectories of the two writers’ careers, on the one hand, and the reappearance of concerns from the 1960s in the 1990s, on the other (94). In this interpretation Morrison and Roth were both reminiscing about the era that first brought their writing to critical attention (Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* was first published in 1970, Roth’s

²¹ Roth responding to an interview question about the United States’ “loss of innocence” in the wake of 9/11.

Goodbye, Columbus in 1959). Furthermore, like *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* is part of a wider historical project. While *Paradise* is the end of a trilogy, *American Pastoral* is just the beginning of what has been termed Roth's "American Trilogy".²² All of these are narrated by the same character, Nathan Zuckerman (who has been routinely described as Roth's alter ego), and detail the stories of the East Coast Jewish community he is a part of. Crucially, the shared ideas behind both *American Pastoral* and *Paradise* are derived from the particular discussions of history, time and endings that their *fin-de-millennium* moment provoke. Indeed, David Grausam posits the whole of the "American Trilogy" as "Roth's attempt to record the histories of the American century that are threatened with prosthetic replacement in a sanitized millennial culture of celebration" (630). Grausam thus suggests that Roth's trilogy constitutes a direct and conscious challenge to a culture preoccupied with commemorating the moment, Hartog's "presentism".

In the quote that opens this chapter, recording a response to the supposed "loss of innocence" as a result of the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, Roth outlines the trajectory of American history through a series of displacements. He goes back to his nation's origins and describes the history that ensued through overlapping epochs. For each epoch, he demonstrates the impossibility of insisting that the United States was, at that point, somehow an "innocent" country. This sense of reaching backwards in search of an apparently lost innocence lies at the heart of my reading of *American Pastoral*. Unlike *Paradise*, where the writer's clear ideological sympathies leave the reader in no doubt over whether to side with the unsympathetic leaders of Ruby or the women of the Convent, Roth's ideological position is highly ambiguous and much of the criticism of *American Pastoral* is embroiled in an attempt to define it.

²² *American Pastoral* was followed by *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000). Although the perimeters of the trilogy could be stretched: Roth's following works, *The Dying Animal* (2001) and *The Plot Against America* (2004), also maintain a close focus on American history.

The novel has been read by many as showing a surprising turn towards conservatism, a lament for the demise of the hardworking white American man and an exercise in trying to “blame it on the sixties” in a contrary denigration of the very period that made Roth famous (Gordon 157). Critical commentary on *American Pastoral* has tended to consider it in comparison to other works in Roth’s oeuvre and has been highly focused on his intent or ideology.²³ In particular, many have critiqued the novel’s less-than-well-rounded depiction of 1960s radicalism. For instance, in “Reading Roth’s Sixties” (2004) Laura Tenenbaum sees the character Merry, the chief exponent of such radicalism, as a “pathological characterization” (41). Similarly, in “Monsters in Newark: Philip Roth’s Apocalypse in *American Pastoral*” (2004), Gulumurthy Neelakantan argues that “Roth’s superb artistry, which lies in imagining the counterlives of his characters, is strangely absent in *American Pastoral* in that he portrays Merry, the radical ideologue, as bereft of sensitivity or intelligence” (58). This chapter will use Tanenbaum and Neelakantan’s reading of the text as useful insights into its structural and thematic consideration of time or history in the novel. In contrast to these critics, however, I argue that Roth’s handling of the stances of competing liberalism and radicalism is equivocal and is heightened by the complicated framing device of Zuckerman’s first-person narration. Attempts to read *American Pastoral* through the lens of its author’s politics are an indication of the level of moral and ideological discomfort that it provokes, but also of the complicated ideological concerns of the era in which it was produced. Roth does not exercise his post-1989 perspective to reminisce wistfully about the lost idealism of the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, he challenges the ideological certainties of the era, in particular those of anti-war protest, which he compares to the very sense of American triumphalism that they contested. *American Pastoral* is a novel that disturbs any sense of Cold War nostalgia. Indeed, it disturbs the

²³ Tanenbaum’s article contains an extensive list of journalistic and academic responses to the novel either praising or bemoaning Roth’s perceived turn to conservatism (42).

possibility of any kind of American nostalgia. At the heart of the novel lies a challenge to America's founding myths, its proclaimed innocence, its exceptionalism and its implied right to be millenarian.

Scales of History

American Pastoral can be read as a work of postmodern "historiographic metafiction", revisiting the past "with irony, not innocently" (Hutcheon 67). The novel's irony is essentially derived from two interlinked devices: its structure and the position of Nathan Zuckerman as the narrator. These two framings also create much of the apocalyptic mood of the narrative. As in *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* begins with the end: the reader therefore knows that the apocalypse will come and the rest of the narrative addresses how and why. From the start, the novel engages in a complicated game with time whereby the world it describes is retrospective and multi-layered, simultaneously pre- and post-apocalyptic. For Zuckerman, the end of the twentieth century provokes a musing on endings and a recapitulation of significant moments in that century. *American Pastoral* purports to be the story of Seymour "the Swede" Levov, Zuckerman's boyhood hero, mediated through Zuckerman's memory and, to a great extent, his imagination.²⁴ But, given this meditation, it is implicitly as much a story about Zuckerman as it is about the Swede. The narrative begins in the late-twentieth century with the ageing Zuckerman recalling his boyhood, his recent chance meeting with the Swede and the Swede's request that Zuckerman write the story of his (the Swede's) father's life, which Zuckerman acquiesces to on the hopeful grounds that "[i]t wasn't his father's life, it was his own that he wanted revealed" (21). Yet when Zuckerman meets the Swede to discuss this project, he finds his former idol disappointingly lacking in depth: "He's all being looked at. He always was.

²⁴ Although Seymour is, like Zuckerman, Jewish American and not Swedish, he is nicknamed "the Swede" at school for his blonde hair and blue eyes.

[...] This guy is the embodiment of nothing.” (39). Shortly after this, Zuckerman encounters the Swede’s brother Jerry at a school reunion and discovers that the Swede died earlier that week (64). Through this conversation with Jerry, the process of revelation begins. Zuckerman discovers that in 1968 the Swede’s daughter Merry “[b]rought the [Vietnam] war home to Lyndon Johnson by blowing up the post office in the general store” (68), killing someone and ending up on the run from the police. Merry’s bombing is framed as the central tragedy of the Swede’s life: the “total vandalization” (237) of her father’s world that abruptly calls an end to everything he has held as secure or taken for granted. This information alters the course of Zuckerman’s writing. From the moment of the school reunion onwards his voice fades away. The resulting narrative, which begins in medias res focuses on the Swede, moving in an approximately chronological fashion from Merry’s childhood in the 1950s to, presumably, the last time the Swede sees her (in 1973, the summer of the Watergate hearings). This narrative is interjected with detailed digressions that provide background for the Swede and his family. The bomb, as an early and central apocalyptic event, has the effect of projecting a vision of life that is constantly under threat. In this way, again reminiscent of *Paradise*, the early part of the novel introduces the Swede’s loss of innocence and the apocalyptic event that shatters his world, so that the remainder of the novel becomes a drama of revelation rather than of events. However, since it is mediated through Zuckerman, the sense of loss of innocence that pervades *American Pastoral* is complex and potentially ironic. The process of revelation moves backwards through successive disclosures but does not necessarily involve any complete or satisfactory moment of dramatic uncovering or complete understanding.

This multi-layering is equally a feature of the novel’s historical focus: *American Pastoral* deals with several scales of time and therefore of history. At its most intimate scale, that of a lifespan, it is apparently the story of the Swede. With the revelation of his recent death in the first part of the novel, the Swede’s life is closed off and becomes a small personal epoch

to be examined, reimagined and judged. Beyond this individual history, it is the history of the Levov family, with the Swede's parents' immigration to the U.S. and the establishment and success of their family company Newark Maid forming important background to his actions. At a further scale, the – originally Protestant – founding myths of the United States, the millenarian sense of the country as chosen or exceptional and Marcus's contention that America is both a "place and a story", are central to the characters' understandings of their own histories. And at its grandest level, *American Pastoral* deals in the ahistorical or classical narrative of the pastoral: the ancient literary mode that exalts a rustic idyll. Its notion of the pastoral is closely linked to the idea of paradise, Eden and the contrast between pre- and post-lapsarian societies: the novel is divided into three sections with the titles "Paradise Remembered" (2), "The Fall" (116) and "Paradise Lost" (284). In making these references, Roth places the novel within a wider Western tradition that interrogates the "fall of man" and attempts to understand the reasons for that fall. These temporal scales enact the same process as Roth's "what innocence?" question that opened this chapter. Moving backwards through time the novel shows a version of history in which the present continuously holds episodes from the recent past responsible for its current situation. This creates a restless structure that denies any sense of certainty or stability, given that the present is always to some extent the outcome of past failures.

However, it is events of twentieth-century American history that provide the obvious narrative force in *American Pastoral*. The ebb and flow of twentieth-century history overwhelms Roth's characters as the social, political and cultural events of the 1960s intrude dramatically on the Levovs' private lives. Most explicitly, the novel details a close relationship between the United States' foreign and domestic wars. The nation's victory in 1945 comes to secure and define national identity, as "the greatest moment of collective inebriation in American history [...] Americans were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together"

(40). Thereafter, the Vietnam War is seen as a cause for national fragmentation, social and cultural disorder, “an expression of self-loathing that ails the American psyche” (Neelakantan 58). In “bringing the war home” Merry’s bomb is a direct consequence of America’s international intervention. She relocates the violence of global events to a domestic setting and thereby fuses a historic timeline with that of her own family. This is evident in the familiarity with which the Swede treats the historic names of known members of activist groups of the era, “girls with whose lives he imagined his daughter’s to be now interlinked: Bernadine, Patricia, Judith, Cathlyn, Susan, Linda [...] Mark Rudd and Katherine Boudin and Jane Alpert – all of them in their twenties, Jewish, middle class, college-educated, violent in behalf of the antiwar cause” (255). The Swede’s understanding of his own place in history is so disturbed by his daughter’s action that the delineation between figures from public politics and his private thoughts become interlaced. In one of the novel’s more fantastical sequences, the Swede imagines that he is visited by a spectral version of Angela Davis “out of nowhere into the Levovs’ Old Rimrock kitchen at midnight every single night” (166). In this fusion of the real and fantastical (either the real Levov with the fictional Davis or the real Davis with the fictional Levov), Davis becomes both an individual and the Swede’s contemporary. The scene enacts a blurring of myth and reality which filters through into the novel’s handling of American history and national tradition more generally.

Three Different Versions of Time: The Swede, Merry and Zuckerman

Within this blurring of real and fantastical, characters in *American Pastoral* can be seen to represent different ideologies and understandings of time, corresponding to different moments in twentieth-century American history. While the Swede’s sense of time is progressive, optimistic and linear, Merry’s is disruptive, dramatic and more negative. Zuckerman, on the other hand, experiences a version of time that is both elegiac and nonlinear, partial and

fragmented. In this way, the Swede comes to stand for early-twentieth century and Merry for mid-twentieth century time, with Zuckerman bringing a set of decidedly late-twentieth century feelings about the passage of time to the novel.

American Pastoral presents a dual version of American history, one which the Swede sees, knows and understands and one that he is, at least initially, incapable of grasping. The Swede belongs to the “mass inebriation” of post-war America. From the two-word sentence that opens and introduces him, “The Swede.” (3), he is rendered wholesome, glowing in Zuckerman’s awe. He has an “unconscious oneness with America” (20) and seems to embody an effortless Americanness easily and unquestioningly, “no striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness” (20). In the Swede’s aspiration for American oneness, archaisms – for instance, his Judaism – are left behind. Pertinently, the Swede’s favourite celebration is an all-American Thanksgiving:

...when everybody gets to eat the same thing, nobody sneaking off to eat funny stuff – no kugel, no gefilte fish, no bitter herbs, just one colossal turkey for two hundred and fifty million people – one colossal turkey feeds all. A moratorium on funny foods and funny ways and religious exclusivity, a moratorium on the three-thousand-year-old nostalgia of the Jews [...] the American pastoral par excellence and it lasts twenty-four hours.

(402)

The Swede’s temporal preference is not “three thousand-year-old nostalgia” but “twenty-four hours”. He does not want to entertain a sense of historical time long enough to allow for contradictions, complications or hardship, but opts for one that can be condensed into the straightforward symbolism of a turkey and a day. Similarly, he moves out of urban Newark to rural Old Rimrock, a site of American Revolution era events. On his regular walks into the village, he gleefully imagines himself as Johnny Appleseed, a pioneer and missionary who is said to have introduced apple seeds into many of the states: “Big. Ruddy. Happy. No brains probably, but didn’t need ‘em – a great walker was all Johnny Appleseed needed to be. [...] The Swede had loved that story all of his life. Who wrote it? Nobody, as far as he could

remember” (316). As with Thanksgiving, the Swede readily embraces the founding myths of his country. His disregard for the source of the Johnny Appleseed narrative and happy acceptance of its positivity epitomises his uncritical attitude towards history. His innocence is derived from his unwillingness to think further back in time.

This version of history relies on an essentially Protestant notion of hard work and the promise of progress, entailing a fixed narrative about both the past and the future. This progressive linearity is emphasised in the many descriptions of the Swede’s job as head of the Newark Maid glove factory. Page after page of the novel relates the intricate process of glove-making from the tannery to the finished product and the pleasure that the Swede takes in it: “Hard really to make money in the glove business because it’s so labor intensive – a time-consuming process, many operations to be coordinated. Most of the glove making businesses have been family businesses. From father to son. Very traditional business” (129-30), he proudly tells a visitor to the factory. The labour-intensive industrial enterprise of glove-making represents a version of time that the Swede values: one with a direct relationship between cause and effect, in which hard work corresponds to success. The Swede invests his faith in an established notion of the American Dream in which business is central.²⁵ He believes unequivocally in his country’s singularity and remarkableness. With this certainty of past and future, the Swede puts his trust in a perpetual and exceptionalist grand narrative that dictates an undemanding relationship with time. His understanding of history is positivist and triumphalist and the version of time that follows it is therefore progressive and logical.

Throughout the novel, the Swede’s sense of time and history is tested. He displays an ardent desire to live within a particular idealised and peaceful version of American history, which the bombing disrupts: “All that normalcy interrupted by murder. [...] The disruption of

²⁵ The trajectory of Newark Maid is crucial to the shattering of the Swede’s understanding of the American Dream. With increased globalisation and declining industry in Newark, the factory establishes an outlet in Puerto Rico. And by the time Zuckerman narrates in 1995, the Swede’s “family business” manufactures “exclusively” (26) from Puerto Rico: a further challenge to the Swede’s vision of an all-American future.

the anticipated American future that was meant to have unrolled out of the solid American past, out of each generation's getting smarter..." (85). Or, as Jerry explains to Zuckerman: "He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in" (68). As a singular instance of absolute violent destruction, the bombing, the novel's central apocalyptic event, displaces the Swede's entire understanding of productive time and history: "...a bomb. A bomb. A bomb tells the whole fucking story" (341). The word, "bomb", a violent stutter (mirroring Merry's stutter), occurs again and again throughout the Swede's life, breaking his sense of steady progress.²⁶ It overrides the historical narrative that he understands. But the Swede's personal tragedy lies beyond the violence of Merry's bombing, it lies in his acceptance of a myth. He does not invent himself or create his own narrative but endeavours to fit as neatly as possible into the broader tradition laid out for him, that of "the anticipated American future". As part of a dominant group – the Swede is white, male, attractive, physically fit, well-educated, rich, intent on playing down his outsider status as a Jew – he has no sense that there could be opposition to the prevailing orthodoxy, let alone what it might look like. This creates a mismatch between the version of society that he thinks he is living in and the world around him. In his belief in eternal progression, his desire to keep things as they "should" be, the Swede's outlook on life is not at all apocalyptic. Nor, for all his belief in innate American exceptionalism, is he remotely millenarian.

By contrast, Merry's understanding of time and history is profoundly millenarian and contrary to that of her father in almost every way possible, casting the Swede "out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral – into the indigenous American

²⁶ Merry's stutter serves as an early intrusion on her father's hopes for an idyllic family. It both marks Merry as different and is a particular challenge to a smooth version of progressive time. With the intensification of Merry's radicalism, the stutter turns into "the machete with which to mow all the bastard liars down" (100), as she argues with her father or shouts at politicians on the television. The stutter serves as one of a series of potential causes the Swede and his wife Dawn consider for Merry's eventual violence. Interestingly, when living as a nonviolent fugitive, Merry loses her stutter as an act of transcendence: a "way of doing no violence to the air" (250).

beserk” (86). While the Swede’s longing for America is essentially one of assimilation into white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, Merry forces him to acknowledge an America which is “indigenous”, that comes from a scale of time and version of history that he is wilfully innocent of, that is resistant to assimilation and impossible to draw into the twenty-four-hour unity of Thanksgiving. If the Swede epitomises the triumphalism of post-war America, then Merry represents some of the ideological fracturing and fervour of the 1960s and 1970s and the height of the Cold War. While the Swede dreams of assimilation, Merry is in pursuit of purity – first of a revolutionary and then of a spiritual sort.

In pursuit of this purity, Merry sees America as reprehensible, corrupt and evil. She seeks both to detach herself from the country and to punish it, explicitly siding with those who have been systematically oppressed and maltreated. She is directly critical of the dominant narrative of American history and rejects the Swede’s passivity, engaged in a mission to “change the system and give political power to the ninety percent of the people who have little or no political control now” (174). Through violent acts, Merry attempts to take time and history, both personal and political, into her own hands. As the Swede contemplates, “the daughter at large [...] took care of their [the Levov’s] future” (163) As a revolutionary, Merry thinks in terms of a powerful forward momentum that relies on dramatic breaks in time. When contemplating a move to Cuba, Merry concludes “[s]ince she could not hope to bring about the revolution in America, her only hope was to give herself to the revolution that was. That was the end of her exile and the true beginning of her life...” (260). Although she believes in a sense of progress, she does not see this occurring through steady labour (as her father presumes it must) but through radical ruptures and “true beginnings”. Just as the apocalypse separates the deserving from the undeserving, so Merry hopes for a revolution that will enact the same. Merry’s millenarian mission facilitates a binary casting of the world into good and evil, relying heavily on notions of conspiracy or beliefs that run counter to the mainstream. She looks

forward to a new version of the world in which each are judged according to their role in the revolution.

Merry's motives are never very fully discussed and there is no clear explanation for her radicalism (as noted by the critics at the start of this chapter). As a result, her actions throughout the novel take on a quasi-religious air, as though she is driven by some higher power. Indeed, when the Swede finds Merry again, five years after the bombing, her political radicalism has been replaced by spiritual radicalism. In an extreme form of self-denial, she lives in filth and squalor. She has become a Jain, committed to a life of non-violence and without emotional or material attachments. Merry has tried to retreat from both political and personal history. But her radicalism and her spirituality are treated, in Zuckerman's narration, as roughly equivalent: both are forms of adherence to a series of rules. The trajectory of her life is accounted for bluntly by Jerry: "That was '68..." (69). Given this explanation, Merry becomes a victim of history in the same way that the Swede is: both characters are avatars for a set of beliefs rather than self-determining individuals. In a sense, despite one supporting and one attacking, father and daughter's stances are based on the same myth of American exceptionalism. Both find sanctuary in grand narratives and find meaning in life from on high. First as a political terrorist and then as a Jain, Merry seeks an existing ideology and structure to fit into. While the Swede's version of time is smoothly progressive, Merry's – despite the violent ruptures that cause it to stutter forward – also relies on a pre-ordained version of past and future that is restricted and linear. Their conflict is the result of the rigidity and irreconcilability of the structures that they both cleave to. The essential interchangeability of the two characters is demonstrated as, in the course of the novel, the Swede and Merry each move towards states that are the opposite of those they began with. Merry's violence is turned into passivity and the Swede, who has striven so hard to maintain the peace of an "America pastoral", ends in chaos.

Contrary to these characters' notions of time, the novel itself is nonlinear, backward rather than forward-facing and relies on the continual admission of contradiction. This contradiction is mediated by the brooding presence of Zuckerman. He is palpably slow and reminiscent. As a recent survivor of prostate cancer (the disease that kills the Swede), Zuckerman is painstakingly aware of his own mortality and frustrated by the turns his life has taken. Alone in rural New England, he is the embodiment of an era that is acutely aware of its own place in history, lingering over his past mistakes. Indeed, the events that propel Zuckerman to tell the Swede's story are described in meticulous detail: "emasculated, infantilized, and alone in his house in the Berkshires – [Zuckerman] frames his investigations into the fate of a man who has been for him a symbol of happy endings" (Cohen 70). Zuckerman instinctively compares himself to his childhood hero, noting the complicated relationships that both have had with their fathers, the disease they share and their parallel struggles to achieve a sense of belonging in the United States.

Given this sense of proximity, it could be argued that Zuckerman crafts the Swede's story in order to understand his own life and the *fin-de-millennium* moment that he finds himself in. He is deeply aware of the presence of the noncontemporaneous in the contemporary, inflecting the present with a postmodern sense of shallowness: "Sometimes I found myself looking at everyone as though it were still 1950, as though '1995' were merely the futuristic theme of a senior prom we'd all come to in humorous papier-mâché masks of ourselves as we might look at the close of the twentieth century" (46). By considering the faces of his fellow 1990s subjects as facades, Zuckerman pessimistically echoes Jameson or Baudrillard analysing the loss of depth or exhaustion of possibility as the twentieth century came to a close. From the start, Zuckerman's own feeling of hopelessness, of life after the end of history, colours his account of the Swede: "He [the Swede] had learned the worst lesson that life can teach – that it makes no sense. And when that happens the happiness is never spontaneous again. It is

artificial and, even then, bought at the price of an obstinate estrangement from oneself and one's history" (81). Beleaguered by his awareness of his own predicament, Zuckerman portrays the Swede's narrative as a demonstration of his personal belief in the impossibility of adhering to totalising grand narratives. In presenting the trials and flaws of his old hero, he denigrates his former innocence in looking up to the Swede. Zuckerman's presence denies the novel's readers any recourse to straightforward linearity. As the narrator, Zuckerman is everywhere in the novel, he moves backwards and forwards in time, refusing to occupy his vantage point of the 1990s and absorbing the other historical moments into this period. Unlike Roth's other characters, Zuckerman does not place himself within a comprehensive pre-existing structure of beliefs or ways of understanding time but is isolated and rapidly deteriorating. At no point are we given any suggestion of Zuckerman's future, he begins at the end.

Apocalyptic Judgement and Responsibility

This strong apocalyptic feeling created by Zuckerman's presence is particularly salient in the final scene of *American Pastoral*, which takes place just after the Swede's reunion with Merry, when he returns to a dinner party at his house. This scene represents a change of pace compared with much of the preceding novel: taking up roughly the final hundred pages, it abandons nostalgia and elegy in favour of entropy, providing what Neelakantan terms a "metacommentary on the state of human affairs in post-liberal America" (61). Through the dawning realisation that his family will never be the same after Merry's bomb, that his wife Dawn is having an affair and that he will have to leave the rural idyll he dreamed of establishing in Old Rimrock, the Swede desperately tries to make sense of things: "...it does not hang together. What does any of this ranting have to do with you, who will not even do harm to *water*? *Nothing* hangs together – *none* of it is linked up. It is only in your head that it is linked up. Nowhere else is there any logic" (368-69). The distinctions between versions of time –

recent and mythical, personal and political – have all been undone. Like Benjamin’s “angel of history”, the Swede looks back and all he sees is chaos. He concludes that he is in the grip of some deranged force and that any attempt of the kind he has previously relied upon to trace a simple relation between cause and effect in his life is impossible. *American Pastoral* ends in a moment of narrative indeterminacy. The Swede imagines Merry’s return in fantastical terms:

At an hour, in a season through a landscape that for so long has been bound up with the idea of solace, of beauty and sweetness and pleasure and peace, the ex-terrorist had come, quite on her own, back from Newark to all that she hated and did not want, to a coherent, harmonious world that she despised and that she, with her embattled youthful mischief, the strangest and most unlikely attacker, had turned upside down.

(421)

He is no longer able to deal in the exact clear-cut measured time of the “twenty-four hours” of Thanksgiving, but uses instead the indefinite “an hour”, “a season”. Despite the Swede’s desire to live in the American moment, he finds himself thinking in vague, almost religious-sounding, terms. His reveries are broken by a shout as his father, Lou Levov, is stabbed at with a fork by the drunk Jessie Orcutt – the wife of the man with whom Dawn is having an affair. The surreal and fantastical come together so that it is unclear which events are real and which are happening in the Swede’s imagination. The whole scene, with its slow descent into violent chaos, is a perversion of the Swede’s longed-for “American pastoral”, with family and friends brought together round a perfectly prepared meal. As the Swede’s father calls out in shock, Zuckerman’s narrative voice finally reappears asking: “And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?” (423). Zuckerman’s reappearance serves as a reminder that the entire account has always been one of reverie rather than realism, an indication of the novel’s status as a work of “historiographic metafiction” in its deliberate refusal “to resolve contradictions” (Hutcheon 6). Zuckerman has depicted the complexity and pitfalls of the Swede’s triumphalism and Merry’s millenarianism but, given his

own variety of cynical “postmodern” *fin-de-millennium* apocalypticism, appears to offer no solutions.

Unlike Morrison, whose civic commitment and belief that her work must be “functional” for a group gives *Paradise* a future-facing sense of hope, Roth seems to embrace the idea of temporal or historical chaos discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Indeed, if *Paradise*’s apocalypse can be termed “modernist” then perhaps *American Pastoral*’s is “postmodernist”: the characters’ lack of agency is in line with Dellamora’s argument that the “post” in “postmodern apocalypse” signifies “mere repetition, a ceaseless doing again of deeds that issue in frustration and failure” (xi). But Roth’s use of Zuckerman’s narration, arguably a postmodernist tool, provides some respite from this “ceaseless doing again”. In offering a direct question at the end of the novel, with the charged word “reprehensible”, Zuckerman both asks for and suggests the impossibility of making any moral judgement. He turns to the reader for a solution to his own apocalypticism, an answer that can provide him and the other characters with a productive future. If Grausman’s contention that Roth’s trilogy attacks the shallow substitution of critical history with uncritical celebration is correct, then this final line questions what a replacement for that substitution could possibly be. It sends the reader backwards to look for answers in Zuckerman’s narrative. It is here that the novel derives what little *fin-de-millennium* direction for the future it has to offer. In bringing together different layers and strands of time, it conjures up the possibility of a new future in which the past is understood cautiously and analytically, so that past myths and ideologies are neither uncritically accepted nor uncritically rejected. In this way *American Pastoral* warns against a version of history that relies on clean breaks, starts and ends, in which each epoch commits to ideologies that denigrate or ignore those that have come before them.

Chapter Four

“The Evening had the Slightly Scattered Air of Some Cross-Referenced Event”: The “Perpetual” Apocalypse of Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*

At its root level, fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe. Such qualities will sooner or later state their adversarial relationship with history [...] Fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance.

(DeLillo “The Power of History” 1997, 62-63)

Don DeLillo’s magnum opus *Underworld* is a novel of such scope, scale and length that even extensive contemporary works such as *Paradise* and *American Pastoral* seem modest and contained in comparison. A retrospective account of the retreating century by another writer at the height of his fame, *Underworld*, unlike the other two novels discussed in this project, does not form part of a series, although arguably its ambition is effectively as great as an entire trilogy. Unlike Roth and Morrison, who had long been exploring historical themes and issues, DeLillo’s turn to history in *Underworld* was a relatively new phenomenon (only one of his previous ten novels was explicitly historical), suggesting that *Underworld*’s historical angle was in part inspired by its *fin-de-millennium* moment.²⁷ As Michael Wood shrewdly attests, “[t]he very word ‘history’ keeps flashing through *Underworld* as if it were an omen or a mantra”. *Underworld* constitutes both a confrontation with and recreation of key events from twentieth-century American history, in which that history is shown as something shadowy, dark, violent and unpredictable. It offers an elegiac account of the apocalyptic threat of the Cold War, its ending and its aftermath. Through the merging and juxtaposition of scenes from the 1990s with those from the height of the Cold War and other moments across the late-twentieth century, DeLillo considers the role of history in his contemporary moment, taking up the same questions as many of the cultural critics and historians discussed in the first chapter:

²⁷ Nine years earlier, his novel *Libra* (1988) offered a (controversially) fictionalised take on the life of Lee Harvey Oswald and the events surrounding John F. Kennedy’s 1963 assassination.

What next? What happens after “the End”? Yet, throughout the novel, the boundaries of “the End” are confused as familiar temporal sequences or scales are alluded to arbitrarily or dismissed. Fundamentally, *Underworld* shows no single apocalypse but omnipresent apocalyptic thinking.

In many respects, DeLillo’s novel is a more obvious choice of case study for this project than either of the novels that I have looked at so far. Whereas *Paradise* has mostly been read for its engagement with race and gender and *American Pastoral* for its shattering of the “American Dream”, scholarship on *Underworld* has tended to focus on the novel as an emphatic commentary on, or even a periodisation of, the years following the Cold War. Indeed, DeLillo himself has described *Underworld* as situated “between two historical periods, the Cold War and whatever it is that follows it,” continuing, “I’m not sure that this is what follows it. This may just be the interim. I think we’re just beginning to wonder what happened, and what didn’t happen...” (1998). Given its range of historical and geographic settings, its many characters and complicated structure, academic discussions of *Underworld* have identified “connectivity” as the novel’s key theme or concern.²⁸ While critics define and interpret “connectivity” in different ways, the tendency has been to consider it as an alternative to linearity, as the constant linking of apparently disconnected ideas, objects or characters through a process that is open and equal rather than hierarchical.²⁹ Alongside this, previous academic

²⁸ The way in which this connectivity has been explored varies. Peter Knight’s “Everything is Connected: *Underworld*’s Secret History of Paranoia” (1999) identifies the portrayal of paranoia and political conspiracy as a way to link the novel’s apparently disparate narratives. Mark Osteen, in *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo’s Dialogue with Culture* (2000), argues that the novel’s depiction of waste offers the potential for artistic redemption and an escape from Cold War containment. In “A Gathering Under Words: An Introduction” Joseph Dewey (2006) compares the novel’s structure to the Internet as a “site that invites pattern making” (12). Kathryn Ludwig (2009) sees DeLillo asking the question “in light of postmodern suspicion of totalizing narratives, how do we resume the activity of making connections without going too far?” (88). Meanwhile James Annesley (2002) reads the novel’s connectivity as a representation of globalisation and challenges other critics by claiming that “[e]verything is not connected in the end. It is, as *Underworld* begins to suggest, something much more complex and contradictory” (95).

²⁹ My reading of “connectivity” in the novel is indebted to Andrew Hoskins interlinking of connectivity and time, in which he argues that “everyday continuous compulsive connectivity [...] disguises the almighty convergence of communication and archive, and makes opaque our memory’s digital dependency and accumulations” (8). While Hoskins emphasis on the digital perhaps places him in a slightly more contemporary context DeLillo’s writing, his contention that connectivity disrupts conventional narrative is very much of a piece with *Underworld*.

work has examined the position of eschatology in the novel. In “The Beautiful, Horrifying Past: Nostalgia and Apocalypse in Don DeLillo’s ‘Underworld’” (2011) Damjana Mraović-O’Hare argues that the novel’s representation of the Cold War is one tinged with nostalgia for apocalyptic fear, so that DeLillo’s characters glorify the “moment of disruption – the pressing threat of the apocalypse – and not the moment in which the crisis is resolved” (218). In “Apocalyptic Cycles in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*” (2012), Liliana M. Naydan contends that *Underworld* depicts “cycles” of apocalyptic time without any possibility of redemption (179).

My own analysis is based on a combination of those readings that emphasise *Underworld*’s (apocalyptic) temporal cyclicity, both structurally and thematically, and those that highlight its sustained connectivity. Building on Mraović-O’Hare and Naydan’s work, I will argue that *Underworld* is both a uniquely late-twentieth century novel and one that harks back to older patterns and ways of thinking. This chapter will consider the novel’s pervasive apocalypticism across and between multiple temporal dimensions, from the eschatological to the historical to the personal or individual. I will first suggest how human agents navigate time in the novel and then how the various objects in the novel transcend divisions between historical and ahistorical time. I will go on to demonstrate how different temporal dimensions are linked through repeated details, in particular looking at how connections forged between humans and objects offer the potential for some kind of revelation and renewal. Through its ability to make nonlinear connective constellations, *Underworld* suggests and reveals important links and concealed meanings, demonstrating an across the board coexistence of apparently noncontemporaneous ideas.

Eschatological, Historical and Personal Time

Underworld’s very title roots it in the realm of an ancient and mythic time. Despite the particularity of its up-to-date twentieth-century setting, these mythic undertones make

themselves apparent from the novel's celebrated prologue, dramatically titled "The Triumph of Death". The prologue takes place at a baseball game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants on 3 October 1951, famed as the game in which Bobby Thomson hit the "Shot Heard Round the World" but also as the day of the USSR's first atomic detonation. This uncanny coincidence, connecting the local and the parochial to the global, is something that recurs throughout the course of the novel. In DeLillo's representation, this game is attended by both fictional and historic characters, including the infamous head of the FBI: J. Edgar Hoover. In a moment that pre-empts the eschatological tone of much of the ensuing novel, Hoover "plucks a magazine page off his shoulder, where the thing has lighted and stuck" (41) and comes face to face with a reproduction of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Triumph of Death*. The sixteenth-century painting, replicated in *Life* magazine (which Naydan notes, with no small dose of irony, was at the time owned by TIME Inc. (186)), is a violent depiction of the end of time.³⁰ In this way, *Underworld* begins with a representation of the end. Described in vivid detail, the painting is of a chaotic landscape "of visionary havoc and ruin" (41) in which armies of the dead in the form of skeletons, using their coffins as shields, fight the living. Hoover "can't take his eyes off the page" (41). He is mesmerised, first with astonishment and then with something close to arousal: "It causes a bristling of his body hair. Skeletons with wispy dicks. The dead beating kettledrums. The sackcloth dead slitting a pilgrim's throat" (50). The language used to describe the image merges with that used to describe the chaos of the baseball game, animating a static image that might otherwise render the end of time motionless and irrelevant: "The fans pressed together at the clubhouse steps chanting the players' names. The fans having fistfights on the subway going home" (51). Furthermore, Hoover's total lack of recognition of the painting's provenance, his question "why a magazine called Life would want

³⁰ It is unclear whether *Life* magazine on 3 October 1951 really did contain a copy of the painting. But, as DeLillo has been keen to point out in several interviews, historic records confirm Hoover's presence at the Dodgers-Giants game.

to reproduce a painting of such lurid and dreadful dimensions” (41), decontextualizes and disconnects it from its sixteenth-century Flemish origins. It is a confrontation between what Peter Schneck describes as “an image whose historical and cultural context is evidently European, on the one hand, with an attitude towards images which appears emphatically American, on the other” (118). Like the geographic leap that Shneck describes, the image also makes a temporal leap from the sixteenth century to 3 October 1951. Hoover’s encounter with *The Triumph of Death* sets up a connection between the painting and the novel as two explorations of the destruction of the world, making an image of the end of time which is pertinent to both Hoover in 1951 and to DeLillo in 1997; one that is filled with the “obsession, superstition and awe” of the quote that precedes this chapter.

Much of *Underworld*’s focus on the end of the world is derived from its narrative structure. Like *Paradise* and *American Pastoral*, the novel’s events happen in reverse. However, unlike the other two texts, there is no one, single, central apocalyptic moment. The prologue is followed by a section that jumps forward to 1992 and introduces Nick Shay, the protagonist, as a middle-aged man with a hidden past. So begins a process in which time is unravelled, moving backwards: the section in 1992 is followed by one set in the mid-1980s, then by one in the spring of 1978, the summer of 1974, fragments from the 1950s and 1960s, late 1951 to summer 1952 and then the novel loops back to some unspecified time in the 1990s. To complicate matters further, the substantial sections that move in reverse through time are interspersed with three short sections that move forward. The combination of time that is intermittently regressive and progressive, fast and slow, violently detaches any clear sense of cause from effect. Instead, events are held together through almost random instances of association, reflection or repetition. Furthermore, while most of the novel is narrated in the third-person, some of the sections that revolve around Nick Shay are told through his first-person narration. *Underworld*’s narrative is not only equivocal in its chronology; in the voice

with which that narrative is told, the reader experiences a version of time that is variously individual and personal or collective and impersonal, both deeply subjective and apparently objective.

The backwards movement of the central narrative (or narratives) encourages the reader to trace lineages, seeking the origins of later events in earlier situations. Apparently arbitrary narratives concerning a huge host of disparate characters at different points in time are slowly connected to each other and often also back to the 1951 baseball game. Within this haphazard structuring such connections are rarely made obvious. Instead the reader learns about them incidentally. Images, characters and places reappear; different people have the same names; find themselves outside the same buildings; identical or matching products or cultural artefacts appear and reappear. As Wood observes, *Underworld's* narrative “relies on our hanging onto stories in our heads, being ready for their return – the effect is about as close to simultaneity, or a split-screen, as one could get on pages that run in lines and have to be turned over one after another”. Despite the complexity of its structure, however, the novel’s seemingly random events are for the most part tightly bound together and revisited across its different temporal registers.

National historic figures and events are named players in *Underworld* to a far greater degree than in *Paradise* or *American Pastoral*. Rather than simply being referred to in passing, they appear in fictionalised form. The novel carries out the process Rigney has observed in which “fiction works both together with historiography, and against it” (2009, 22). *Underworld* plays with the “facts” of history so as to render them more individual – attached to characters the reader has a personal connection to (much like the Swede’s interaction with Angela Davis) – and abstracted, removed from their conventional contexts and so imbued with new qualities. Moreover, the inclusion of historic events adds to the sense of revelation. In *Paradise* or *American Pastoral* revelation works through the introduction of a fictional (apocalyptic) event

early on which then gains detail and background in the ensuing narrative. In *Underworld*, the sense of revelation relies on both its structure and on its reader's external knowledge. By the time "Part 1" begins, the Berlin Wall has fallen. In the narrative's terms this happens well before Watergate, Kennedy's assassination or the Cuban Missile Crisis. Once the reader has discerned the narrative's backwards movement and noticed its reliance on the force of events from American Cold War history in shaping the characters' lives, they may well be able to guess some of its direction or anticipate its revelations. In the same way that *The Triumph of Death* depicts a familiar image of the apocalypse, the outcomes of the historic events in *Underworld* are well-known before they appear in the novel, rendering them apocalyptically inevitable. Echoing Kermode's claim that everything is defined by what happens at the end, *Underworld's* predetermined ending/beginning provides meaning to and creates connections between the events that follow it. Yet the reliance of this function on the reader's wider knowledge renders *Underworld's* process of revelation far more subtle than those of *Paradise* and *American Pastoral*: the reader cannot guess which events will be used, how or why they will be used. As a result, the narrative's wider direction remains mostly unpredictable.

In this vein, the Cuban Missile Crisis represents a potential rival apocalypse to Hoover's altercation with *The Triumph of Death*, offering another connection back to the Dodgers-Giants baseball match – given that it took place on the day in which the USSR first tested the atomic bomb. In *Underworld*, as in many accounts of the period, the Missile Crisis is represented as marking the height of Cold War terror: the moment at which the end was in sight. *Underworld's* "Part 5", "Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s" (499) contains five scenes that depict performances by the stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce in the week of the crisis.³¹ Throughout these performances,

³¹ Elizabeth Rosen's "Lenny Bruce and his Nuclear Shadow Marvin Lundy: Don DeLillo's Apocalyptists Extraordinaires" (2006) provides a detailed comparison between DeLillo's fictional Bruce and the comedian himself. Rosen claims that "little of his [DeLillo's] depiction is historically accurate" given that it does not contain

Lenny is portrayed as teetering on the edge of control. When the audience are not responsive to his jokes, he lapses into a cry:

“We’re all gonna die!”

Lenny loved the postexistential bent of this line. In his giddy shriek the audience can hear the obliteration of the idea of uniqueness and free choice. They can hear the replacement of human isolation by massive and unvaried ruin.

(507)

Lenny generates philosophical meaning and, rather like Hoover with *The Triumph of Death*, unlikely pleasure from the mass fear of the end of the world that the Missile Crisis provokes. His disparate audiences – in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Miami and, eventually, New York – are given a sense of unity by his cry. Along with “uniqueness and free choice”, their differences will be obliterated in death. In his first show, Lenny tries to discern a pattern in this apocalyptic moment: “Powerless. Understand, this is how they remind us of our basic state. They roll out a periodic crisis. Is it horizontal? One great power against the other? Or is it vertical, is it up and down? He seemed to lose his line of argument here” (507). Thereafter, Lenny’s attempt to find meaningful patterns and millenarian-style divisions in the Missile Crisis runs dry. The terror that connects his audiences to one another, and the perverse pleasure they derive from that terror, is strengthened by its otherworldly grounding: they are not responsive to the idea that their fear is being manipulated by the “they” of the White House or the Kremlin. By the time of his Miami performance, Lenny has come to recognise this. Chatting to his fans after the show he takes on the role of prophet, explaining the Missile Crisis in religious terms: “...the atomic bomb is Old Testament. It’s the Jewish bible in spades. We feel at home with this judgment, this punishment hanging over us. Illness and misfortune. Speak to us, sweetheart” (592). Despite Lenny’s position in a clear historic moment – indeed, all the sections that relate his performances are premised by exact dates (although Rosen does point

much authentic dialogue (98). And yet, through a comparative close reading of transcripts from Bruce’s gigs and passages from *Underworld*, she shows DeLillo’s effectiveness in bringing the comedian back to life through both mimicry of Bruce’s speech and narration describing Lenny’s internal thoughts and the audiences reactions (104-05).

out that these dates are fictional (103)) – the promise of “massive and unvaried ruin” becomes other-timely as well as other-worldly: a biblical or medieval plague of illness and misfortune.

Lenny’s status as an ancient prophet of doom is supported by the nature of his demise. At Truman Capote’s *Black and White Ball* in 1966, another event DeLillo moves from the realm of fact to that of fiction, Clyde Tolson (J. Edgar Hoover’s (nonfictional) top deputy) notes a woman in medieval dress and is reminded, first of “the sixteenth-century painting Edgar was so morbidly fond of, the Bruegel with the panoramic deathscape” and then of “the sick dopest comic – Lenny Bruce” (574). Tolson’s connection is not as arbitrary as it might seem. At this point Lenny has been dead for several months and as Tolson ghoulishly reminds himself, the comedian was found naked on his toilet floor surrounded by narcotic paraphernalia: “An 8x10 police photo of the bloated body – the picture could have been titled *The Triumph of Death* – was in the Director’s [Hoover’s] personal files. Why? The horror, the shiver, the hellish sense of religious retribution out of the Middle Ages...” (574). Lenny’s apocalypse was not, in the end, shared and public, but individual and intimately personal. While Mraović-O’Hare is astute in arguing that Lenny’s character “points out that the Cold War was defined by the threat of the apocalypse”, the apocalypse that Lenny has come to stand for, even to prophesy, is an archaic one from another darker time (226). In Tolson’s morbid imagination, Lenny becomes a figure out of Bruegel’s painting. The shiver the image gives him recalls Hoover’s “bristling [...] body hair” when looking at the painting. Apocalyptic horror is once again imbued with a medieval sense of hell.

Alongside *Underworld*’s ambitious historical narrative there is a parallel narrative that has its own temporal scale and apocalyptic moment. The trajectory of Bobby Thomson’s winning baseball shot correlates closely with the trajectory of Nick Shay, who is both the novel’s main character and the baseball’s ultimate owner. Nick’s narrative loosely traces his endeavour to find meaning and a steady sense of direction in the wake of some secret past

mistake. This mistake is hinted at by Nick from his first appearance in the novel, in which he claims jokingly: “I lived a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix. Pause. Like someone in the Witness Protection Program” (66). Nick’s personal apocalyptic event is revealed gradually during the course of the novel: as a teenager in the Bronx in the 1950s he murdered a man named George Mazra and spent an unspecified amount of time in a juvenile correctional facility. In keeping with *Underworld*’s structure, Nick’s act of “doing time” comes before any description or justification of his crime. In this way, the murder creates an absence at the heart of the narrative which is not filled in for a long time but is constantly, almost compulsively, alluded to by Nick. Well before the killing is described in any detail, a section narrated by Nick opens in medias res: “It was a gesture without a history” (509). This aloof statement is followed by a vague disembodied description of the firing of a gun which then cinematically cuts to a scene of Nick in therapy. In a conventionally ordered narrative the shooting could perhaps be a gesture without any background or history, given that it is not pre-meditated or predetermined in any way. But the fact that the reader encounters Nick first as an older man, still recovering from his past mistakes, gives his crime an intricate afterlife that the reader is aware of; for them, if not for Nick, his gesture has a history. Nick makes his claim at a point in which he is still reeling from the shock of his action, in which he has not fully taken responsibility for himself or his own history. Later he is urged by the correction facility therapist: “You have a history [...] that you are responsible to” (512). Nick’s narrative becomes that process: moving backwards in time in order to claim responsibility for his own actions. In *Underworld*, maintaining a clear sense of time – and, alongside this, the scales of time, connecting individual stories to history – provides characters with a greater level of agency.

When, in the final pages of the main section of the novel, the actual apocalyptic event of Nick’s crime is eventually described, it is strangely bathetic. Far from involving any dramatic conspiracy, violent rivalry or intricate deception, it becomes clear that Nick murdered

George Mazra by accident, pulling the trigger of a gun that he did not think was loaded. Rather than representing an apocalyptic event that becomes more intriguing and significant through the process of revelation, the meaning of this event disintegrates the closer the reader gets to it. Nick's crime is described in vague and disjointed terms:

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 him if it was loaded.

Then he felt the trigger pull and heard the gun go off and the man and chair went different ways.

And the way the man said no when he asked if it was loaded.

He asked if the thing was loaded and the man said no and now he has a weapon in his hands that has apparently just been fired.

(781)

Notably, this is one of a few sections about Nick that is not narrated in the first-person. In a similar act of depersonalisation, George has lost his name and become simply "the man". The entire passage seems to take place in a void, cut off from any of the markers of time or place that are scattered through the rest of the novel. At this point, Nick is incapable of giving his "gesture" a history: since it has not been premeditated, he is unable to claim any agency over this moment. The shooting is a far cry from White's "modernist event"; bereft of a past and with only a vague and private future, it seems unable to generate further interpretations or meanings. The details of the central apocalyptic event of Nick's life are attached to nothing else that happens in the course of *Underworld*. And yet, they are also attached to everything: given the constant allusions to Nick's crime, the power of the event lies in its potential: while it remains a secret, there is the suggestion that it could be the vital connection that links to everything else in the novel.

The "Odd Mortality" of Objects

In *Underworld*, personal, historical and eschatological time are entangled and connected, not just through people and events, but also through the circulation of objects. As one of the novel's

many characters muses to himself, “How deep is time? How far down into the life of matter do we have to go before we understand what time is?” (222). Characters’ movements through time are charted through their interactions with “matter”. This pattern is most obviously represented by the home-run-winning baseball, which reappears in many overlapping narratives, connecting unlikely characters across time and space. As Peter Knight argues, “the labyrinthine path of the Bobby Thomson baseball in *Underworld* offers DeLillo a way of shedding light on vast areas of American culture normally omitted in other inquiries” (830). While the ball in some respects represents specific and tangible matter, connecting different moments through its physical presence, it is also physically interchangeable with any other baseball. Its exceptionality comes from a leap of faith, the belief that it is the same ball Thomson hit and the idea that seeing, touching or owning that ball somehow creates a connection to that hit. This is exemplified by the ambiguities of the ball’s history. Not only does the narrative’s structure and tendency to downplay important details make it difficult to trace the ball’s trajectory (from the baseball game in the 1950s to Nick as its final owner in the 1990s) but this journey – roughly, Cotter, to Manx, to Charlie, to Chuckie, to Marvin, to Nick – is incomplete. It is unclear to the reader how the ball got from Chuckie to Marvin and, crucially, it is completely impossible for any of the characters to know how Cotter, or even Manx, got the ball in the first place. Any attempt to track the ball’s progress requires a creative act of imagination to fill in the missing links. In many respects the ball’s story provides a counter-history to that of the famous figures and known events that inform so much of the novel. *Underworld*’s objects are reminders of history: they evoke the past in the present. However, the versions of the past that they evoke are not the documented pasts of J. Edgar Hoover or Lenny Bruce but pasts which are both intimate and evasive, almost mystical. Like DeLillo’s account of fiction, the baseball signals an “adversarial relationship with history” (or, to return

to the line of argument from my chapter on *Paradise*, an “adversarial relationship with *History*”), running counter to narrow or singular accounts of the past.

Like the official history that it runs alongside, the history of objects in *Underworld* reinforces the sense of apocalypticism that hangs over the novel. In this vein it is worth noting that the Thomson baseball is not sought after by supporters of the Giants, who won the game, but by those of the Dodgers, the losers. It becomes a symbol of defeat, not victory, a reminder of the end. Similarly, the objects in the novel can be seen as harbingers of death: in the epilogue Nick passes through his house musing on “the odd mortality that clings to every object” (804). Objects symbolise lost opportunities and missed connections; often they lose all meaning and become waste. *Underworld* abounds with references to, depictions of, and musings on, waste: Nick has a complicated recycling system to deal with household waste; he also works in waste management; a mysterious ship filled with human waste circles the globe; there is the leftover nuclear waste of the arms race, etc. Even more than the baseball – which at least has a partially known chronology – waste offers the hidden story of recent history. This is made apparent through a passage that describes one of Nick’s colleagues at work, face to face with an enormous landfill:

Brian took a deep breath, he filled his lungs. This was the challenge he craved, the assault on his complacency and vague shame. To understand it all. To penetrate this secret. [...] he saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order, they were adepts and seers, crafting the future, the city planners, waste managers, the compost technicians, the landscapers who would build hanging gardens here, make a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire.

The biggest secrets are the ones spread open before us.

(185)

Helping to form an “esoteric order”, waste forges hitherto unknown connections. It is the stuff of conspiracy, the secrets right in front of us that we overlook; ancient and mythical, it belongs with “hanging gardens”. Waste is imbued with millenarian qualities, discredited and overlooked it threatens to rise up and overwhelm everything. In its steady encroachment on society, waste is caught in a constant process of circulation that erodes the definitions of what

is and is not waste. As the passage demonstrates, waste is posited both as the detritus of the past and as belonging to the future; it is the ultimate fate of everything and, for Brian, it is something to be celebrated. The cycle of waste constitutes both a beginning and an ending. Everything comes from it and will go back to it. Like the baseball, much of the journey of the waste is unknown; once again it requires an act of creative imagination to cover over the blanks.

In the artwork of the character Klara Sax, the theme of waste becomes merged with the novel's concern with historic events. In the first scene after the prologue, set in 1992, Nick goes to meet Klara somewhere in the Texan desert. It is clear that they have known each other vaguely in the past but the nature of this connection, an affair when Nick was seventeen, is not revealed until much later in the novel. Klara is making art out of salvaged B-52 bomber planes, giving them a new purpose, a beginning and an ending, and thereby redeeming them. In the scene where she meets Nick, she looks back on the Cold War nostalgically (corroborating Mraović-O'Hare's connection between the apocalypse and nostalgia in the novel):

Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don't even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. And it held us together, the Soviets and us.

(76)

Klara reflects on her country's 'enemy crisis' and in doing so joins her voice to many of the critics and theorists discussed in the first chapter. However, in her desire to create something aesthetic with those leftover objects, she endorses the statement by DeLillo that opens this chapter. Like fiction, her art gives the bombers a "second chance". In a world without clear processes of cause and effect, it gives them meaning and fills the gap in their lives in which they would otherwise have become waste.

Ultimately, the possibility for redemption in *Underworld* is highly ambivalent. The end of the Cold War and the approaching millennium does not signal a clear apocalypse, as the end of time is nothing new. Although the apocalypse is omnipresent, this is not to say that any of

the characters are despairing: “We’re all going to die!” is met with laughs; the audience know it already. This connected, recurrent and constant sense of ending is exemplified by *Underworld*’s truly odd narrative ending. In cyberspace, and possibly on Nick’s son’s computer, Sister Edgar (a stern nun from the Bronx, who at one stage teaches Nick’s brother) converges in some mysterious spiritual way with “the other Edgar” (826), the ubiquitous J. Edgar Hoover. On the one hand, cyberspace seems to offer potential transcendence or even a millenarian departure from the known world: “There is no space or time here, or in here, or wherever she is” (825). On the other, as their doubled names attest, neither Edgar can escape the stricture of labels and never-ending chance associations. Within cyberspace “There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked...” (825). They are held in cyberspace for eternity, outside time, ending in a state in which they are without individuality or agency. Like Lenny Bruce’s audiences, they are unified and truly connected but they have no “uniqueness and free choice”. This follows Hoskins’ contention that memory, so often a form of individual experience, can be “lost to the hyperconnective illusion of an open access world of the availability, accessibility, and reproduceability of the past” (5). In this situation, there is not much difference between being alive and being dead. If *Paradise* depicts a “modernist” and *American Pastoral* a “postmodernist” apocalypse, then perhaps *Underworld* suggests the presence, even at points the desirability, of a “perpetual” apocalypse. The novel seems to provide, and reject, a depiction of true millenarian fulfilment in which equality, even salvation, has been achieved. But this state, in which equality is achieved at the expense of free will and individuality, seems worse than one in which we all live with the horror and the thrill of the threat of the apocalypse.

The reader, like the novel’s characters, may only find a version of redemption, and an equivocal one at that, by imaginatively reading between the lines. *Underworld* offers a kind of break from the “perpetual” apocalypse through the processes of repetition, recurrence and

recycling, through second chances. Aesthetic production, whether Klara's or DeLillo's, imbues the B-52s or J. Edgar Hoover (both recycled from the past) with a new quality, a connection to the individual reader or viewer in the present.

Conclusion

Apocalypse is now a long-running serial: not “Apocalypse Now” but “Apocalypse From Now On.” Apocalypse has become an event that is happening and not happening. It may be that some of the most feared events, like those involving the irreparable ruin of the environment, have already happened. But we don't know it yet, because the standards have changed [...] Or simply because this is a catastrophe in slow motion. (Or feels as if it is in slow motion, because we know about it, can anticipate it; and now have to wait for it to happen, to catch up with what we think we know.)

(Sontag 88)

Eschatological thought and the particular ideological challenges of the 1990s put pressure on understandings of time. Eschatology – with its associations of death, judgement and the fate of the human soul – has traditionally been associated with the coming of the millennium, grounded in a Judeo-Christian understanding that time moves towards a dramatic ending or apocalypse. Even in those accounts of the era that do not mention the apocalypse, or even the millennium, the 1990s emerge as a decade that was hyper-aware of its place in the narrative of history. For those living during it, those looking back on it, and even for some of those looking forward – from Huyssen to Jameson, White to Hartman, Bush to Prince – the end of the twentieth century appears as a remarkable historic moment, brimming with possibility, new beginnings, dramatic endings and rapid change. This is in a large part the result of the end of the Cold War, which altered the way in which the United States considered its standing in the world. The absence of the USSR as a clear antagonist challenged American unity and identity and prompted a reevaluation of the country's history and therefore its relationship to time. But the 1990s were under pressure from endings on two sides: that marked by the historic events of 1989 and by the end of the millennium in the year 2000.

The quote from Susan Sontag at the start of this chapter discusses the relationship between the apocalypse and accountability. Sontag demonstrates the danger of a continuous state of apocalyptic panic in negating our sense of agency or feelings of responsibility to change. To refer back to Prince's words at the opening of this thesis, if we're all “out of time”

whatever we do, then why not “party like it’s nineteen ninety-nine”? Sontag suggests that perpetual apocalyptic tension erodes meaning, but so too does a complete absence of apocalyptic tension. As the ending of *Underworld* attests, if the apocalypse is always happening, it is therefore never really happening. In this respect “apocalypse from now on” is the same state of temporal and historical chaos described by many of the critics discussed in chapter one. And if linear time is in disarray, how can temporal structures bring meaning to our lives?

Each of *Paradise*, *American Pastoral* and *Underworld* tentatively offer answers to this question, exploring how human beings can make sense of time in a way that does not rely on a clear beginning or end. Across the three novels, as I have ordered them, there is a declining sense of utopianism (or at least optimism) and, as the narratives used to make sense of time become increasingly meaningless, reduced significance is given to human agency and responsibility. In this regard Morrison is in many ways the odd woman out. While Roth and DeLillo, both white and male, to some extent cynically resign themselves to a meaningless future, Morrison’s moral and political urgency – as a black woman and often speaking on behalf of black women – maintains some belief in socio-political progress and therefore has a stronger sense of the passage of time. *Paradise* gives power and status to multiple identities and promotes the civic necessity of heterogeneous considerations of time and history. Responsibility for making sense of the apocalypse – as represented by different interpretations of the apocalyptic attack on the Convent – and thereby for achieving something close to a worldly utopia is, crucially, not only a creative but also a wholly collective endeavour. The novel’s ending, the tranquil depiction of a beach decorated by re-found and recycled objects, on which one of the Convent women rests, is a depiction of progressive renewal. This final image is simultaneously of an individual woman on a particular (if unnamed) beach and, given the elevated language that describes it, an image of human redemption: it connects the intimate

historical scale of a human life to the ahistorical fate of all humanity. The novel's ending is firmly rooted in the present but it also holds out a hopeful vision of the future. *Paradise* offers an escape from "apocalypse from now on" in the suggestion that human beings can actively inhabit time, accepting the multiplicity of experience in a way which enables them to imaginatively understand the pasts of others and so have power over their presents and futures.

American Pastoral, by contrast, presents overlapping temporal scales that intimate a society in which responsibility for the present rests simultaneously with everybody and nobody. Within this structure, Merry's terrorism develops out of the Swede's uncritical relationship with the United States, which in turn is the direct result of the nation's original founding, formation and religious roots. This passing of responsibility backwards in time may even reach back to some conception of Original Sin. In the novel, the events of history consistently undermine or pervert any idealism or stability, making it impossible to construct utopias or millenarian paradises. And so human beings have very limited agency with which to achieve any particular vision of the future. However, Zuckerman's final question does something to disrupt this pattern and offer some hope. This potential is offered by the novel's literariness: in the imaginative possibilities that it presents to the reader, *American Pastoral's* final question suggests that, through awareness and critical engagement with the past, and not just the recent past, there may be the potential for reconsideration and mitigation, rather than outright repetition.

Underworld posits art as a space for such critical engagement and reconsideration. A sense of underlying and inescapable apocalypticism lies at the heart of the novel, exhibited through the way in which it continuously makes connections across spaces and between different points in time, always with some intimation of mortality and the end. These connections blur the boundaries between past, present and future so that little can be done to escape the apocalypse. In this blur, characters are swept up in wider movements and cycles

outside of their control, they become similar to the lifeless objects that circulate through the novel and turn up randomly, forming new connections. In this unpredictable version of time, characters struggle to make sense of or take responsibility for their own actions: for instance, Nick's crime becomes a "gesture without history". The novel appears to end by offering a vision of the future that is artificial and devoid of any past or future: the two Edgars mysteriously connecting in cyberspace. As millenarianism looks forward to an idealised future state in which adversaries no longer exist, so the ending of *Underworld* depicts a future so devoid of otherness, tension, even difference, that time itself ceases to exist. However, the novel does offer some assertion of agency through the process of recycling and creating the new out of the old. In acts of creation – such as Klara's in repurposing the B-52 bombers or DeLillo's in writing the novel – individuals can provide a "second chance" for objects, themselves and even moments from history. *Underworld* clearly enacts the process of recycling "structures for the accumulation, transformation, representation, and communication of social energies and practices" that Greenblatt sees at the basis for literary production (229-30).

Given its limited scope, this thesis is unable to do full justice to a topic of this complexity and sheer scale. As I have suggested at the start of the first chapter, the extent of academic writing about time and the 1990s means that the theoretical discussion set out in this project is quite narrow. It could fruitfully be deepened and challenged by the inclusion of writing on time from queer, feminist and critical race theories. In relation to my case studies, it may well be that a discussion of the three texts that worked thematically, handling them simultaneously rather than separately, would bring forward new and interesting points for discussion. Nevertheless, I hope that this thesis has shown that there is more room for research which specifically considers the cultural history, collective memory and significance of the 2000 millennium. More generally, this project urges a reassessment of the way in which we

consider our recent history and demonstrates the permanence, prevalence and importance of apocalyptic thinking.

Epilogue: Apocalypse Recycled

Just as writers, critics and theorists looking back at the Cold War from the end of the twentieth century were affected by their knowledge of what came after, so my own understanding of the 1990s cannot but be influenced by hindsight. With the benefit of such hindsight, *Underworld* has the glimmer of an alternative ending. In a capacity which DeLillo could not possibly have foreseen, the artist Klara Sax acts as a prophet of the apocalypse. In the summer of 1974, Klara watches the World Trade Center being constructed. At a party on a Manhattan rooftop, she looks over at the building works and engages in a fleeting conversation with a stranger:

“I think of it as one, not two,” she said. “Even though there are clearly two towers. It’s a single entity, isn’t it?”

“Very terrible thing but you have to look at it, I think.”

“Yes, you have to look.”

(372)

This exchange, almost exactly halfway through the novel, is typical of the way in which characters in *Underworld* talk: through half-reference to deeper feeling they constantly hint at a meaningful connection that the reader might have missed. Less easy to overlook is the novel’s original 1997 front cover of André Kertész’s grainy grey photograph of the Twin Towers emerging from the fog. In the foreground is the silhouette of a church, its crucifix dramatically fixed between the towers, and higher up in the clouds is another ominous outline: of a bird with its wings outstretched, poised to collide (fig. 1).

Four years after the publication of the novel, this image, and the scene that determines its presence on the cover, would indeed have a deeper meaning: the towers would be thought of ever more both as a “single entity” and a “terrible thing”. Just as DeLillo’s treatment of the towers’ construction eerily prefigures the events of 9/11, so reality and history live again and

are relived in fiction. Perhaps in this instance DeLillo has done almost too good a job of filling in the gaps left by history – his prophetic evocation of 9/11 suggests that the apocalypse is as permanently rooted in the present as it is in the past and future.



Figure 1. André Kertész. "New York, 1972."

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