

POSTMODERNISM: SURVIVING THE APOCALYPSE

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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses how key American writers take the tragic narrative beyond personal disappointment into an arena of political catastrophe, with the following aims: 1. to throw more light on the discourse content and structure of post-war novels by writers such as Don DeLillo and John Edgar Wideman; 2. to identify the place of apocalyptic thought in their work. Postcolonial theory and discourse analysis provide the theoretical framework for this study of the wider implications of American imperialism to the society at large as shown in key works by these writers. In the case of Wideman, that instability is mirrored by his narrative techniques, which undermine traditional modes of narrativity as the societal monolith is undermined. Don DeLillo's text also presents a society in flux, by presenting events which undermine stability and uniformity. Neither of these writers searches for the means of imposing singularity on the extremes they depict, but seek to embrace the heterogeneity they face. These writers show an America home-front undermined and threatened by dissolution, imperial hegemony gradually evolving into an imposed and permanent state of exception. In their writings can be seen a larger project, which takes as its subject the prospect of an American imperialism at war with its own people, a process whereby imperialism develops into domestic totalitarianism. The end of civilization is considered as the prospect of an American imperialism unable to differentiate between internal and external enemies.

KEY WORDS: Apocalypse, postcolonial, totalitarianism, state of exception, hegemony

The echoes of 20th century war can be heard in narratives of late century American fiction by John Edgar Wideman and Don DeLillo. This paper will show how accounts of urban collapse employ imagery from the First and Second World Wars to express the authors' contention that the types of political disorder seen earlier in the century can be found today in America. These two writers depict varying degrees of civic collapse, overshadowed by the spectre of apocalypse. Depictions of urban collapse are juxtaposed with scenes of the absence of authority or the abuse of power in the hands of those whose authority lacks legitimacy. The society is shown to be under assault. Problems of social class are addressed, but the authors are more concerned with the emergence of the American mass, ill-defined, undifferentiated, but equally helpless in the face of abuse and neglect.

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These writers come to the same conclusion: authoritarian government cannot protect its citizens and, more provocatively, has no intention of doing so. Wideman and DeLillo describe failed systems in which citizens in the face of civil disorder are left on their own. The authoritarian government that proves able to wage foreign wars resorts to abuse of power domestically in desperation to maintain order but finally collapses; in moments of crises government fails to govern. These narratives show scenes of modern society *in extremis*. These writers can be said to participate in a rigorous interrogation of the American myth of imperial innocence. Each author offers through his analysis of contemporary and historical events an interpretive revision of American power and how that power has been used domestically and internationally.

Visions of the apocalypse frame our age. Cold War preoccupations with nuclear war and its prophesied aftermath maintain a secure position in the popular imagination (Shaw, 2001: 59-76). One's ability to clearly conceive of victors in a global war has been undermined, replaced by the even more difficult problem of imagining what it might be like to survive a nuclear holocaust. Harlan Ellison's classic *A Boy and His Dog* (1951) juxtaposes the devastated world with a utopian remnant, in this case surviving below ground (Ellison, 1985: 332-373). What these utopian visionaries seek is not the world immediately prior to the imagined Third World War, but one before the twentieth century, that is, before 1914: "The best time in the world had been just before the First War, and they figured if they could keep it like that, they could live quiet lives and survive" (Ellison, 1985: 356). Nostalgia for an idyllic past can be found in inform apocalyptic imaginings to understand McCarthy's terrifying landscape. The historic roots of pulp fictional representations of the genre have been succinctly described by Mike Davis as "doom" literature, "rooted in racial anxiety" (Davis, 1999: 281). This anxiety, although partially expressive of an existential insecurity, can be found as a bridge linking the imperial and the apocalyptic imaginations.

Confinement and disillusion can be found in contemporary literature, but there can also be seen a sustained if frustrated impulse toward emancipation. For the most part, however, especially among prominent American novelists, the search for liberation often devolves into an escape for a chosen few. Key works envision modes of survival in the context of worldly destruction. The literary response to our age has in turn lacked coherence, reinforcing the turmoil rather than giving it form. As George Steiner nicely summarized this cultural impasse,

A common formlessness or search for new forms has all but undermined classic age-lines, sexual divisions, class structures, and hierarchic gradients of mind and power. We are caught in a Brownian movement of every vital, molecular level of

individuation and society. And I may carry the analogy one step further, the membranes through which social energies are current are now permeable and nonselective (Steiner, 1971: 83).

Wideman and DeLillo make an effort to understand the motivations of their protagonists' vision. They have in common the recognition that a healthy, sane, human life can no longer be guaranteed to the race, that pockets of civilization contain defensive, beleaguered remnants which maintain themselves precariously, if at all, and that it is vital for the survival of human kind that alternative visions of human life be realized so as to preserve the best within us as destruction and corruption feed on themselves.

If we compare DeLillo's college campus to the spiritually focused compound of Wideman, what emerges is a vision of a small world seeking to act out dreams of survival in a hostile environment. This too can be said of the Jewish ghetto which drew on centuries of tradition to find its organizing principle. As long as the ghetto existed or was allowed to exist, the possibility of a future survived with it, as its members nurtured continuity through their celebration of the past and their stubborn faith in its power to inform present action.

Wideman takes pains to defend the decency and the ultimate humility of his saviour, an African-American named King, whose vision is informed by a realization that salvation would never come from the promises made to consumers. Wideman attributes to King an insight into the workings of contemporary society that Sheldon Wolin (2004) has articulated, namely, that consumerism and the spread of capitalism have replaced the territorial ambitions of the Nazi regime as depicted by Hannah Arendt (1964) (Wolin, 1969).

The American regime of oppression may resemble superficially the high-handedness of the Nazis, especially those like King and his followers, residents of an inner-city ghetto, but the organizing principles of the societies are different. King's insight informs his radical rejection of the trappings of material comfort and his call for an intense struggle to remain true to and disciplined for an alternative way of life. Wideman's characters are very alert to entertainment and consumerism as part of the regime's hold on power. As in DeLillo's *White Noise* the process of turning citizens into shoppers instead of corpses is seen finally as what differentiates the American government from the Nazis (DeLillo, 1985).

Part of the radicalization of the society, part of the corruption, and a large part of the increasing coarsening of the society are due to the militarized ethos on the domestic front. The writer's contention is that the moment of the firebombing of a Philadelphia city block by the city police can be seen as a declaration of war made by the local government against its own people. More generally, it is in fact Wideman's understanding that

American imperialism abroad is making life more unbearable at home. Much of the anger has arisen from a sense among the people that their sacrifices have been ignored. It is, according to Wideman, an increasingly embattled environment, with the veterans of foreign wars bearing the brunt of injustice and neglect:

They say this Republic's built to last, blood of twenty million slaves mixed into the cement of its foundations, make it strong brother, plenty, plenty strong. They say there are veterans' benefits available. J. B.'s not a vet, his name not scratched on some goddamn cold-ass black-marble slab in DC, but half his crew who went to war killed over there in the jungle and half the survivors came home juiced, junkied, armless, legless, crazy as bedbugs... *Casualties just as heavy here in the streets as cross the pond in Nam* (my emphasis) (DeLillo, 1985; also McCarthy, 2006: 181 on his identification of shopping and the apocalypse).

Wideman's insight is not limited to the notion that those who participated in foreign wars were brutalized by their experiences (Wideman, 2005: 178). The traumatizing experiences left them maimed and wounded emotionally and physically, to be sure, but his argument is that the children of the veterans have been brutalized, that they have taken on the identities of their fathers. In the words of Jerry Varsava, "The untamed violence of A Clockwork Orange has taken over the city" (Varsava, 2000: 425). An urban army has emerged that is at war with its surroundings and spares no one:

My army stuffs them chumps. Right up the gut. Down to the bone. Jam city. They squeal and scatter like they the rack, we the cue... The hard black fist. Hit them hard, real hard. Knock some on the ground. Take everything they got. Wave your piece in the faces of the ones on the ground. Stand shoulder to shoulder. Hard black brothers. Swoop in like Apaches, like Vietcong, hit for the middle. Grab a few. Knock a few down (Wideman, 2005:165).

The attempt to build an alternative community within and surrounded by an indifferent or hostile society required on the part of King and his followers a commitment beyond the trappings and promises of a materialist society. It was not enough just to reject society's definition of progress and the means of acquiring the rewards of subordinating the self to the "good life". King required a total and absolute break from one's own past, as if to suggest that the reward for casting off success was the promise of a new life, a second chance:

... when you went to live with King... he said, give it up, give up that other life and come unto me naked as the day you were born. He meant it too... Oh, so happy. Happy it finally came down to this. Nothing to hide no more. Come unto me and leave the world behind. Like a new-born child (Wideman, 2005: 18).

The condemnation of society is total as is King's demand that his followers break with their past. The irony is that one of the central grievances of the community is its sense of having been forgotten. His rage at the conflagration set by the security police literally to smoke out the commune expresses only a part of his sustained anger, chiefly directed at those he feels have forgotten their pasts. Amnesia, as Harold Pinter has pointed out (Harold Pinter, 2006: 815), is part of the American hold on power from the massacre of native-Americans to the Philadelphia's grand jury's willed forgetfulness shown by their refusal to bring charges against those who bombed the city block where members of MOVE resided:

This Black Camelot and its cracked Liberty Bell burn, lit by the same match ignited two blocks of Osage Avenue. Street named for an Indian tribe. Haunted by Indian ghosts—Schuylkill, Manayunk, Wissahickon, Susquehanna, Moyamensing, Wingohocking, Tioga—the rivers bronzed in memory of their copper, flame-colored bodies, the tinsel of their names gilding the ruined city (Wideman, 2005: 159).

The massacre of Native Americans, slavery, police brutality: memories of past genocides play on the mind and animate contemporary urban unrest; the sense of continuity is vital to urban unrest. Names of places and incidents of unrest and injustice preoccupy. History and current events merge into a single incident; past and present are barely distinguished.

The purification urge derives from the leader-theoretician's belief that his community exists as a kind of divine remnant whose very existence is in peril. The life urge is activated by a vision of total annihilation awaiting those who stray. Wideman presents the link between the massacres of the American West and the genocidal ambitions of the Third Reich. From his point of view the moment has arisen when the imperial ambitions of the American empire have turned against its own people, while employing the mechanism of destruction employed in the recent past by the Germans.

Wideman's protagonist Cudjoe, the writer who returns to his old neighbourhood to make sense of what had happened, has paranoid delusions about the forces aligned against his community. His fantasies, however, draw from historical precedent:

Cops herd them with cattle prods into the holds of unmarked vans. Black Marias with fake shower heads in their airtight rear compartments, a secret button under the dash. Zyklon B drifts down quietly, casually as the net. Don't know what hit you till you're coughing and gagging and puking and everybody in a funky black stew rolling round on the floor (Wideman, 2005: 177).

The reference to Zyklon B, the gas used in the German extermination camps, maintains a hold on Cudjoe's imagination, as does the image of Nazi

storm troopers, despite the fact that a different form of tyranny has taken control of his old neighbourhood on the west side of Philadelphia. But the imagery of Nazis is interspersed with images of a more distant past, of a genocide beyond the memory of any of Wideman's city dwellers. Still, they identify with historical victims of genocide. The identification with past victims of American expansionism formed part of the inner-city ethos, the sensibility of the ghetto, but another part, and an even greater part, was the increasing awareness among many that their existence consisted mainly of watching others. They were victims but they were also spectators of their own demise. They were not being attacked, just forgotten.

This new form of power, a tyranny of indifference, although every bit as threatening and perhaps as destructive as the more familiar forms, was to a large degree what King and his followers in the Move organization were fighting against (Neal, 2007; Wolin, 2004). Wideman's theory of imperial power rejects the claim that the American empire is to be distinguished from its predecessors, chiefly the British. He seeks to explode the myth of American exceptionalism, whereby American power expanded without conquest and dispossession. Instead, he argues that those dispossessed by its power are the American people themselves.

Neglect has the power to brutalize. The author's descriptions of local and federal power structures and their indifference confirm Hannah Arendt's chilling descriptions of the Nazi state which, she argues, was not to be characterized as one of traditional despotism but of bureaucratic inhumanity: "And one can debate long and profitably on the rule of Nobody, which is what the political form known as bureaucracy truly is" (Arendt, 2005: 117). The remnant King sought to invite into his dream made itself vulnerable to the society it sought to escape. Wideman sees them historically as part of a long line of victims of conformity and powerlessness. His claim is that social misfits incite an urge to punish through exclusion. Deportation, imprisonment and punishment await those whose 'disease' of nonconformity can be externalized or marginalized or just identified, but when that threat becomes too close to be so easily eliminated, then, he suggests, it must be destroyed completely—erased (Mbembe, 2003: 11-40). According to Wideman, the unusual degree of antipathy is saved for those whose memory itself poses a threat.

DeLillo is less committed to the explication of the visionary's impulse than he is to the anti-utopian nightmare which surrounds and engulfs an increasingly isolated community. He shows that the consequence of such destruction has wider implications for our culture than those attributed to mere brutality:

Devastation does not just mean a slow sinking into the sands. Devastation is the high velocity expulsion of Mnemosyne... [D]evastation is the expulsion of memo-

ry, the historically weighted spiritual and useful objects which made up the traditions and material culture of western man (DeLillo, 1985: 177).

This is why remembrance, revision, and regeneration become crucial to preventing the annihilation of culture. The acknowledgement and recording of past events function as a crucial part of a restorative process. The restoration of what has been forgotten is itself a political act.

DeLillo envisions a spiritual desolation set in motion by the destruction of memory itself. *White Noise*, while not functioning as an act of historical recovery, as *Philadelphia Fire* aspires to do, nonetheless is concerned with the annihilating forces of contemporary culture. The white noise of which DeLillo speaks consists of the lulling distractions, enhancements, and obsessions that erase memory. DeLillo fashions a disaster narrative that sets into motion the kind of societal dislocation that mirrors the fragmentation of community that left the Jews of Eastern Europe so vulnerable. The image of fleeing crowds, parents desperately seeking lost children, terrified, once prominent individuals suddenly thrown in with the anonymous mass: this dislocation of the commonplace occasioned by the chemical spill of Nyodene D. left people without any sense of being part an organised society. Suddenly, as was seen in the slums of Philadelphia where King's followers were fire-bombed, Jack Gladney and his family find themselves on the run. Their plight is described by DeLillo in the following evacuation scene:

It was still dark. A heavy rain fell. Before us lay a scene of panoramic disorder. Cars trapped in mud, cars stalled, cars crawling along the one-lane escape route, cars taking shortcuts through the woods, cars hemmed in by trees, boulders, other cars. Sirens called and faded, horns blared in desperation and protest. There were running men, tents wind-blown into trees, whole families abandoning their vehicles to head on foot for the parkway. From deep in the woods we heard motorcycles revving, voices raising incoherent cries. It was like the fall of a colonial capital to dedicated rebels (DeLillo, 1985: 157).

Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies at College-On-The-Hill, finds himself a nobody and, as such, experiences the vulnerability made so terrifyingly part of modern life. He believed that he was invulnerable, protected from the chaos by his social status. Gladney intuits the connection between the loss of privilege and the threat of annihilation. The erasure of social distinction and the emergence of the mass lead to the potential for abuse, perhaps trivial at first, but gradually small inconveniences and indignities can develop into humiliations and violence. There is little standing between the mass and the power of the state.

Gladney's family and all the others left stranded and uninformed also experience one of the vital characteristics of being part of the mass: they are

utterly helpless. Rather than fearing the brutality of a disciplined, occupying army, DeLillo's characters face chaos. Nobody answers when they call 911. But what DeLillo imagines comes quickly to resemble Wideman's prophecy. None of us will escape the total collapse that is coming. The chaos that engulfs the isolated, impotent people resembles totalitarianism as understood by both Wolin and Arendt by its being a crucial part of what gives power to the regime. The tyranny is not familiar; it is a new form of control: "Its danger", according to Hannah Arendt, "is that it threatened to ravage the world as we know it—a world which everywhere seems to have come to an end—before a new beginning rising from this end has had time to assert itself" (Arendt, 1964: 476). And, indeed, the ineffective, nonresponsive nature of the modern bureaucratic state, as described here and in the work of DeLillo and Wideman, is by no means unique to the United States. Wideman is especially alert to the consequences of such neglect.

In this connection, *Philadelphia Fire* and *White Noise*, the two novels set in the United States, share a common vision of our collective political passivity and isolation. Both authors see the community under threat, both articulate a general spiritual malaise, and both find literal and metaphorical embodiments for one's sense of physical intrusion, dispossession and isolation. They do not see physical annihilation through political action as the threat; instead they imagine a spiritual death. What King's group and the panicky evacuees have in common is the fear of obliteration, of their lives coming to nothing. The link between these novels is their concern for the possibility of human survival in an increasingly dangerous world. In *White Noise* the dual-world theme is drawn less concretely in that there is no utopian remnant experimenting with an alternative life style as in *Philadelphia Fire*, but the choice of a college campus shows how one world survives when set apart from what surrounds it. There is a palpable sense of menace surrounding and encroaching on the parenthetical lives of the students and faculty. Theirs is a world organised for self-sufficiency and designed for self-satisfaction: "The students tend to stick close to campus. There is nothing for them to do in Blacksmith proper, no natural haunt or attraction. They have their own food, movies, music, theatre, sports, conversation, sex" (DeLillo, 1985: 59).

DeLillo fashions a world, however, that takes the shape of a centre encircled by concentric rings of turmoil and menace, all the way to the outer boundary beyond which death awaits. In such conditions, as Wolin has pointed out, the political inactivity of the consumer society is more easily manipulated. The regime is able to adopt extra-legal measures about what becomes a state permanently in a state of emergency (Andrew Neal, 2007). Whether it is dealing with an urban police action, or to the ensuing chaos set in motion by a threatening toxic plume, the government convinces itself

that it must be on a permanent footing. In other words, government responds to the world described by Wideman and DeLillo by reshaping itself. It is a view of life that the author of *Politics and Vision* argues is manufactured by a form of government that believes itself in the post-911 era strengthened by a fearful populace:

A government controlled, color-coded climate of fear existing side by side with officially sanctioned consumer hedonism appears paradoxical, but the reality is that a nervous subject has displaced the citizen (Wolin, 2004: 593).

Wolin and Agamben find in the contemporary political state what some argue can be found in key modernists at the beginning of the century (Tony Simoes da Silva, 2005: 1-11). Edward Said argues, for example, that there is in the postmodern political order a powerlessness and paralysis that can be traced back to the early twentieth century (Said, 2000: 313).

This is in substance Wideman's conclusion, too, from his contact with the survivors of MOVE and those who remember King's vision. DeLillo gives this prophetic power of seeing to Murray Suskind, professor of popular culture, whose occasionally authoritative voice often speaks for the author. Boehmer shows how Mbembe's conception of a "necropolis" comes close to describing the world Wideman's and DeLillo's characters inhabit (Boehmer, 2009: 141-159, and 2005: 254). The American people have become colonized by their own government:

Terror according to this logic can be defined, in terms taken from Achille Mbembe's exposition of the necropolitical, as a politics exercised through the imposition of death and near-death. For Mbembe, whose work in this respect is interestingly informed by Franz Fanon's concept of colonial violence, imperial and post-imperial sovereignty depends on the right to kill or, more precisely, to hold the subject in a state of continual confrontation with death: "the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law... and where 'peace' is more likely to take on the face of a 'war without end'" (Boehmer, 2005: 145).

In such a world, we become Comanches or Jews. Extinction discourse is turned upon itself. DeLillo wants to draw a kind of parallel between the television watching public in the United States and the Nuremburg crowds of the Third Reich by locating within the centre of his quiet campus town a Hitler studies program and by linking it with the broader fascination of Hitler to our society at large. By positing the notion that advanced societies possess weakened family units, Murray implicitly characterizes our modern society as one of atomized individuals whose knowledge of the world is undermined by loneliness. Alone, we attend to the rituals of community by viewing television, "where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret

desires...” These rituals can be reduced, metaphysically, to a depiction of the death-world, which was the *raison d’être* of the Nazi assemblies:

Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead... Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone (DeLillo, 1985: 73).

In this connection, it is understandable that DeLillo would see the modern American shopping mall as a mausoleum. People find it as difficult to resist commodification as they do consumerism. The mall is the one place people feel safe, virtually guaranteed to enjoy their loneliness among strangers. It is, according to him, the closest thing to attending one’s own funeral.

The symbolic connection, ironically made, between television and Hitler parallels the earlier link between shopping and death. Consumption is made to serve as a confirmation of life in a one-dimensional society, depoliticized and apathetic, except when it comes to shopping. DeLillo through Murray subverts this ideology through parody and irony, but the critique emerges, namely, that our denial of death imperils our lives. DeLillo’s vision springs precisely from that sense of life as a construct of perception, hence the double meaning of the world “seeing” itself, whereby a life depicted by television impedes vital contact.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have proposed that patterns of oppression identified earlier as belonging to imperialist powers can be found in contemporary America. The three writers analyzed here place their narratives in the broader context of the dissolution of civic order in contemporary American society. These authors consider issues of gender, class, and race, which are of central concern to Wideman, but in fact the broader issue of the powerlessness and the citizen’s loss of control are taken up with vigour. I have tried to bolster and particularize that political interpretation by embedding it in a context of the modern state as it has transformed itself. I also hope to have clarified the odd dynamic of political overreach, oppression and neglect. As this synopsis indicates, the chapter also participates in my effort to consider issues of responsibility and accountability in the context of the emerging social mass.

Theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Elleke Boehmer, Achille Mbembe, and Sheldon Wolin have been used to make my case for understanding American imperialism and its domestic ramifications in the context of 20th century totalitarianism. The rise of state lawlessness is of central concern to Agamben. The two key novels under analysis participate in and contribute to an unmasking of American claims of innocence. The issue of accountabil-

ity relates to American myths of equality and denials of imperial intent. An unmasking of purported innocence plays a part in the narrative intent of these works by Wideman and DeLillo. These authors themselves make connections between the past and present in an attempt to understand better America's emerging and until recently unchallenged hegemony.

What I do hope to have formulated freshly, however, is the unique relationship each writer develops between the politics of race and class and that of imperialism. The two key writers studied here—Wideman and DeLillo—represent a spectrum of ideological strategies rather than a unified outlook. Stark as these writers' differences on imperialism may have been, their efforts to revise understanding of domestic conflicts in the context of American expansion of power deserve attention. Both writers address the ways personal and cultural dissolution can be traced to America's political liabilities, its expansionism, and its corruption. Their writings contribute to our understanding of the relationship between cultural hegemony and cultural debasement. Wideman and DeLillo can in the end be said to address America's self-definition and by doing so participate in a redefinition of its identity. Through recovery and revision these writers can be read as participants in a project aimed at undermining hegemonic structures.

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