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# **Apocalypse and Elegy in Contemporary American Fiction**

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SCKMIC004

**A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
award of the degree of Master of Arts in American Studies in English**

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2004

## **COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## Contents

**Abstract**

**Acknowledgements**

**Introduction:** Welcoming the American Century **1**

**1.** Joyce Carol Oates: *Blonde* **13**

**2.** Don DeLillo: *Underworld* **41**

**3.** Philip Roth: *American Pastoral* **68**

**Conclusion:** Rise and Fall, Rise and Fall **95**

**Bibliography** **101**

## Abstract

In this dissertation, the use of apocalypse and elegy in contemporary American literature has been explored in an attempt to draw some conclusions about America's complex twenty-first century consciousness. I have selected the millennial novels of Joyce Carol Oates (*Blonde*), Don DeLillo (*Underworld*), and Philip Roth (*American Pastoral*), since all three, written at the century's end, are at once apocalyptic and elegiac in tone, and comprise a useful trilogy for giving voice to the fracturedness of the American experience.

My analysis of the texts traces apocalyptic moments in the novels -- moments of destruction and rebirth, endings, new beginnings, and great revelations -- against some of the most turbulent and often despairing twentieth-century events, in an attempt to show the connection between public and private history. While contemporary apocalypse differs from its biblical origins, the desire for regeneration and renewal persists despite its necessary deferment -- and, even, failure. Yet the apocalyptic impulse persists, and it is this determined future-looking and repeated self-reinvention that I discuss.

In terms of the elegy, I argue that the overwhelming sense of loss and mourning that permeates the novels is reflective of a much larger national sense of disillusionment and disappointment at the failure of the American Dream and the dissolution of the America conceived of in the imagination of its first European settlers. While the traditional elegy moves towards consolation, the contemporary elegy often denies the mourner such release from grief. Consequently, in the contemporary novels discussed, consolation is to

be found elsewhere. Indeed, I conclude that despite the melancholia of novels that deal so intensely with death, suffering, and tragedy, the act of writing an apocalyptic novel -- of presenting an image of the apocalypse, even if not an apocalypse that gives way to rebirth -- is itself an act of hope, and a call for change.

University of Cape Town

## **Acknowledgements**

I am enormously indebted to my supervisor, Lesley Marx, who has provided me with a constant source of energy, expertise, and inspiration -- not simply for this dissertation, but throughout my years at the University of Cape Town. Thank you for teaching with such passion, for listening with such an open mind, and for treating your students with such care.

For my parents, Avril and Norman, who taught me that the possibilities are endless, who make me believe in my dreams, and who offer me abundant unconditional love and support to reach them, I dedicate this to you, with infinite thanks. I love and cherish you both, and I feel immensely privileged and blessed to have you in my life.

University of Cape Town

**America is always on the move.**

**She may be going to Hell, of course,**

**but at least she isn't standing still**

ee cummings

**I have no further use for America.**

**I wouldn't go back there if**

**Jesus Christ was President**

Charlie Chaplin

University of Cape Town

## Introduction: Welcoming the American Century

Understanding the meaning of America and the complex state of Americanness is no simple task, for there are not many countries that share America's intricate history of inception, formation, and rise to world superpower, the particularities of its ideologies past and present, its increasingly diverse population, and the fracturedness of its contemporary identity. Yet, in an age of globalization, where the world is getting smaller and smaller at a rapidly increasing pace, America is *everywhere*. Millennial America is no longer a single country; it is instead an *omnipresence*, a political, social, economic, and cultural force whose reach is penetrating into all corners of the world. If America's first settlers managed to conquer a country, its twentieth century leaders have a different vision altogether -- one in which America's influence extends way beyond its own borders. Yet how does one begin to understand America the place and America the psychic space, when past, present, and future have not been reconciled?

In order to locate America's present, it is necessary to speak of its past, for many of the country's most enduring -- and endearing -- ideologies have their roots in America's earliest beginnings. Billed from its inception as the New World, the new beginning of history, the last great chance for the human race, and "the Western site of the millennium," America's destiny has, in terms of Western history, been linked to God's plan for the world (Robinson, 1985: xi). With a vast landscape of remote and unspoiled terrain, America's aesthetic appeal as virgin land hearkened back to biblical ideas of Eden. "The new continent looked...the way the world might have been supposed to look

before the beginning of civilisation" (Marx, 1964: 36). In breaking away from the past and pioneering the future, America's first European settlers were able to imagine the New World as a utopia, and indeed, "utopianism was a part of the American national character from the founding of the country" (Bleich, 1984: 41). The notion of rebirth and regeneration in this New World was inherently apocalyptic in tone, for America was the return of an earthly paradise long since disappeared from the corrupt and decadent European world of old. America was about endings and new beginnings -- and its promise of apocalyptic renewal is a myth that prevails even today, where the freedom to create and re-create an identity seems to a certain part of the community to be both a privilege and a right.

But the consequence of being a self-parenting nation means that although America may have done away with the oppressive burden of history, it has also most problematically given up the luxury of connection. Possessing instead only a deeply fractured past, America is always in search of itself, forever yearning, seeking, and longing for something that can't quite be defined, but which exists nonetheless as a profound absence. In its ongoing quest for the future, America has failed to come to terms with loss and grief, and the consequence is a society that is at odds with its history. "Since its origins in a Puritan society marked by the severe repression and rationalisation of grief, and partly owing to its schooling in the almost exclusively forward-looking orientation of a long pioneer experience, American culture seems to have had particular difficulty in accommodating genuine mourning" (Sacks, 1985: 313).

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the reality of America proves to be an incongruous match for the idyllic paradise imagined so many centuries ago. The American Dream of a new life in a new world is at best a failed dream, and at worst, a veritable nightmare; but either way, the Eden of the millenarian settlers' imaginations does not exist. And arguably never did, since "the dream of the New Jerusalem was always tinged with the reality of its flawed nature" (Grant, 1978: 67). In place of the lost dream lies a country haunted by despair and disillusionment, by a sense of failure and loss that a century of war, violence, hatred, and betrayal has intensified all the more. As the future appears to be increasingly bleak, and the country increasingly divided socially, politically, and economically, America itself seems to be an increasingly intangible concept. The America that existed in the imagination, in the deepest longings for a New World, is repeatedly being revealed as the illusion it is -- as a utopian fantasy that fails to materialise because it *cannot*, because utopia itself is doomed to non-existence. As such, both America and the American Dream have experienced a form of existential 'death.'

With the illusions shattered, the reality overwhelmingly melancholic, and the dream no longer credible in a twenty-first century context, the failure of America's millenarian aspirations has become a subject worthy of mourning. At the same time, however, the hope for the future turns once again to apocalyptic renewal. For what else but an apocalypse can give birth to a new and infinitely better world? At the close of one millennium, and the beginning of another, America's literature attempts to give voice to this complex twentieth-century consciousness -- this split between hope and loss -- and my argument in this thesis is that it is the apocalyptic and the elegiac that are the two

modes most explicitly prevalent. Using the millennial novels of three major American writers -- Joyce Carol Oates (*Blonde*), Don DeLillo (*Underworld*), and Philip Roth (*American Pastoral*) -- I will explore the themes of apocalypse and elegy, analysing the ways they are used both to describe profound loss and offer consolation of renewal. Though the apocalyptic mode established itself as "a literary genre in the century preceding the birth of Christ," it has long since transcended its biblical origins to become a mythic and symbolic topos in both American thought and American literature (Zamora, 1989: 1). Denoting on the one hand violent destruction and upheaval, and on the other, rebirth and renewal, the apocalypse "is not merely a vision of doom: for its original audience it was, on the contrary, a luminous vision of the fulfilment of God's promise of Justice and communal salvation" (Zamora, 1989: 2). In Douglas Robinson's words:

American thought, from its inception in European thought, is characteristically millennial... As the European dream of America gradually congealed into the American Dream, the millennialism of that dream increasingly took on national, or perhaps nationalistic, shape. America was no longer simply the place of the millennium, but God's millennial agent, the Redeemer Nation chosen to lead the human race into eternal felicity -- and... to convert or destroy the stragglers.

(1985: 64)

Thus, although associated with violence, crisis, and terror, the apocalypse also leaves room for hope -- for the promise of revelation and regeneration. If the apocalypse is about endings, it is also implicitly linked to new beginnings, for it is out of chaos that great

visions emerge. It is precisely the revelatory potential of the apocalypse that renders it both powerful and affirming, for to reveal is also to disclose valuable -- and even divine -- knowledge. Consequently, the apocalypse is a concept central to the ideology of America itself, since it is "an ideology very much concerned with the end of old eras and the beginning of new eras, with the transition in space and time from an Old to a New World, from the Age of Europe (decadence, decay, death) to the Age of America (rebirth, return to primal innocence), in which America becomes the messianic model for the world" (Robinson, 1985: 2). Founded upon apocalyptic hope, the American Dream is an apocalyptic dream, and conversely, "American apocalypses... are American dreams" -- for both are intrinsically linked to new beginnings and divine fulfilment (Robinson, 1985: 62). At the close of the twentieth-century, the apocalypse does not only resurface, it seems to proliferate. And in a century of chaos, violence, and upheaval of an unimaginable kind, there is possibly no better mode to describe the American psyche than the apocalyptic. Lee Quinby notes:

The frequency and extent of warfare throughout the twentieth century, as well as urban decay, economic decline, and increasing levels of personal violence, strike many as manifestations of an end-time. The Americanness of modern apocalypse is particularly pronounced because of the United States' use of the atomic bomb, worldwide nuclear arms sites, and extensive satellite surveillance systems.

(1994: xx)

In the contemporary world, apocalyptic imagery and symbolism provide us with an aesthetic and emotive way to describe "deep fear and widespread misery in the world today" (Quinby, 1994: xiii). But "apocalyptic prophesy is also the most resonant discourse in the United States today for expressions of hope and a sense of urgency about necessary changes in attitudes and behaviour, for apocalypse is about celebration as well as destruction" (Quinby, 1994: xiii). Thus, the apocalyptic mode promises both universal crisis and mythical renewal -- destruction and rebirth, the end and the beginning. The potential for revelation is equally crucial to apocalyptic thought, since the process of uncovering, unveiling, or disclosure are all focused on bettering the present through the value of what is revealed -- be it knowledge, truth, art, or divine intervention.

Apocalyptic fiction "strives to make connections between past, present, and future, between the individual and the community, between the real and the ideal" (Zamora, 1989: 176). Yet, in the overwhelming destructiveness of the twentieth century, the tenor of apocalyptic thought adjusts in order to accommodate its era. With an abundance of man-made catastrophes as proof, God is no longer considered the exclusive source of the apocalypse. Instead, twentieth century apocalypse is characterised by a single crucial difference: "humanity's capacity to end the world" (Quinby, 1994: xx). The sense of man-made apocalypse that looms over this century is also intrinsically linked to the fact that we live in an age of simulacra and simulation, "in which there is no longer any God to recognise his own, nor any last judgement to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance" (Baudrillard,

1994: 6). Indeed, in an era of postmodernity, the blessing of progress is matched with a curse of equal intensity, and the sense of the future is one of catastrophe and cataclysm. Hyper-real America, Jameson argues, is characterised by "the disappearance of a sense of history," by "historical amnesia" which the news media facilitates by helping us forget recent history, and relegating it to the past (Jameson, 1983: 125). The disappearance of linear history "creates a void that deprives both time and space of significant shape," and the result is a society that is caught in a state of unsettling presentness (Marx, 1997: 22). "Our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve" (Jameson, 1983: 125). What is more, in a society wherein the separation of public and private spaces ceases to exist, the loss of the spectacle and the resultant obscenity -- "when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication" -- creates a dangerously vulnerable world (Baudrillard, 1983: 130).

The postmodern world exists in a state of terror in which there is no longer any distinction between inner and outer worlds, between reality and image, between truth and fiction. It is a world without boundaries, and a world without defence. "No more hysteria, no more projective paranoia... but this state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore" (Baudrillard, 1983: 132).

In all three of the works discussed, apocalypses occur in the realm of both the private and the public. While individuals slough off identities, histories, and memories in the attempt to start over, on a larger scale, it is clear that the times they are living through are also inherently apocalyptic. From the Depression, the Second World War, and the rise of a consumer society, to Vietnam, the Cold War, and the Sixties, to the emergence of a network society, and the dawning of a new millennium in the Nineties, the sense of an end-time mounts with each new era -- and the destructiveness of the present seems a sure sign of an ever-nearer apocalypse. But at the same time as the pending apocalypse promises chaos and upheaval, it also stimulates the hope for a better future -- for the uncovering of a new and perfect world. The duality of fear and faith may be characteristic of the modern world, but it is also inherently American, and explicitly linked to notions of America as Redeemer nation, for "the poetry of the Americans lies not in the past but in the future" (Tuveson, 1968: 156).

If the apocalyptic mode is one way of expressing the American consciousness at the close of the twentieth century, the elegiac is another. While traditionally the elegy is characterised by a formal movement from lament to praise to consolation, the elegiac mood, "distinguished by nostalgia for a shattered past, and the drive to reconstruct," is perhaps a more suitable description for the twentieth century's use of the term (Dowling, 1986: 1). If the elegy is associated with the mourning of the dead, the elegiac mood deals with loss and sorrows not necessarily connected to the deceased. Strangely similar to the apocalypse, the elegiac experience is an enriching one -- for death leads to a place of rebirth. Thus, the elegy follows a particular pattern, moving from loss to consolation. The

"elegiac form or movement consists of a descending action, brought about by a death, and an ascending action, brought about by a rebirth" (Dowling, 1986: 6). Elegies, traditionally, seek to heal the wounds of loss, following "the ancient rites in the basic passage through grief or darkness to consolation and renewal" (Sacks, 1985: 20). While the movement is from despair to joy, the elegy is also always characterised by a longing: looking back to the lost past, it also looks hopefully forward to the future. Consequently, "in the final phase of an elegy, the elegist triumphs over the death that has occurred by finding a way of rejoicing in it" (Dowling, 1986: 153). While the elegy mourns lost eras and laments the dead, it also engages profoundly with the complexity of loss itself. Thus, the mourner's journey is a journey towards meaning, to a "state of acceptance, understanding, and joy that amounts to a spiritual release for the traveller" (Dowling, 1986: 165).

In our often despairing contemporary world, the mood of the elegy seems to provide an appropriate enough tone for our times. Indeed, "the elegy stands as the most sadly fitting twentieth-century genre... taking on the lunacy of mechanised death, to say nothing of the other kinds of discontinuity that frame human obliquity, about which the modern age, for once, has no historical precedence" (Rigsbee, 1999: 150). In the American context specifically, the melancholia of the elegy speaks of a society in mourning over the failure and loss of hopes and dreams. And at the close of a violent, brutal, and despairing century, America is a complex place indeed. Although from its inception, America has been split between image and reality, between the America of the imagination and the America that *is* America, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, those illusions are

increasingly being revealed as insubstantial and inadequate. For does an ideal America exist at all outside the imagination? The utopian fantasy of renewal and rebirth in the New World has given way to the reality of an often unwelcoming, hostile, and violent country. The American Dream translates many times into an American nightmare, and the myth of the melting pot is repeatedly de-mystified by despairing examples of oppression and hatred. Perhaps then, what American writers most commonly eulogize at the turn of the century is America itself -- the America of a collective dream for Paradise regained. The pastoral dream of America is indeed lost, but twentieth-century elegies seem to trace the origins of this loss only to find that no reality for the dream ever existed. The contemporary elegiac form "seeks to pose the question of what it is like to live in a condition of metaphysical and historical loss," a condition that is almost a prerequisite in the contemporary world, where loss has been incorporated into daily life (Rigsbee, 1999: 7).

Jahan Ramazani speaks of the modern elegy as being both elegiac and anti-elegiac: a combination of the consolatory (that offers solace) and the melancholic (that denies consolation), and such a description certainly pertains to the novels discussed. Indeed, although in *Blonde*, *Underworld*, and *American Pastoral*, the mood of elegy permeates throughout, each author's response to loss is dealt with differently. Whether in the form of lost innocence, lost dreams, or actual deaths, all three novels deal with fundamental losses. America in each case is the subject of much meditation, for ultimately, all three novelists engage intensely with the loss of the America of their dreams. The overwhelming sense is one of deep regret and deep sadness for a country that has failed

to deliver on its promises. In each of the novels, America's present is expressed in terms of its past, and whether using an icon (*Blonde*), an array of historical and fictional characters (*Underworld*), or a single American family (*American Pastoral*), all three point towards an America that is unequivocally Fallen. And yet, that said, the novels themselves seem to offer some sense of recovery, some consoling effect -- whether their individual overriding theme is that of apocalypse or that of elegy. For, in writing an apocalyptic novel, each novelist is engaged as much with the future as with the past, as much with destruction as with rebirth and renewal. Through the art form, Oates, DeLillo, and Roth are able to construct images of the apocalypse, and by implication, create apocalypses of their own:

The contemporary artist seeks to repeat the divine gesture, to speak the word that brings the world into being, conscious always that he can but repeat, that his authority is tenuous, not absolute; but conscious at the same time that his imagination is a making one, a poeticising one, a powerful and enabling one and that, while language lies, it also tells its own kind of truth that consoles in its ability to shape ends and beginnings that imply each other. (Marx, 1997: 30)

Similarly, if the works are elegiac in tone, they are also determinedly in search of new ways to restore the losses and console the grieving. If America is "excessive, foolish and foredoomed," it is also a place of potential -- if only that potential can be realised (Tanner, 2001: 195). The history of America may be "a story of progress, of movement, of unfolding," but its future is similarly forward-looking (Babcock, 1965: 19). Eden may

be a long forgotten dream, but for the writers of America's contemporary fiction, the absence of Eden need not guarantee the absence of the American Dream -- it simply needs to become a dream of a different kind. While Oates, DeLillo, and Roth have millennial visions of their own, the America they dream of is a place constantly checked by reality, a place that offers no pastoral retreat and no escape from history -- but a place in which the past *can* be used to build a future. And for Americans past and present, the hope for the future is hope enough.

If it is during times of great change and great upheaval that the most apocalyptic impulses surface, such moments in history also provide an opportunity for the elegising of loss in various forms. Ultimately, both apocalypse and elegy deal with loss and destruction, both traditionally promise renewal and consolation, and both are somehow ideally suited to discussions of millennial America. Understandably, the dawn of the twenty-first century provides writers with myriad themes to explore, and the likes of Oates, DeLillo, and Roth most certainly do justice to giving expression to the strange and fascinating place that is America.

## Joyce Carol Oates: *Blonde*

Joyce Carol Oates has certainly chosen well in making Marilyn Monroe the subject of her ambitious millennial novel, *Blonde*. For who better to give expression to the dreams, the despairs, and the contradictions of contemporary America than an icon who was both created and consumed? Marilyn Monroe, in life as in death, epitomises the tragedy of American excess, and exemplifies the best and the worst of Americanness: the dream and the nightmare, the success and the failure. The strange duality that was Monroe's life is the same duality that characterises the American experience, and for this reason, the novel provides an immensely powerful summation of millennial America's complex consciousness. Part apocalyptic and part elegiac, *Blonde* reads as a devastating indictment of the century's overt self-destructiveness. Tracing apocalyptic moments in American history (the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis), against Norma Jeane's own apocalyptic experiences (her mother's failed desire to murder her, her numerous re-inventions of self, her multiple suicide attempts, and ultimate murder/suicide), Oates describes an America deeply ruptured by chaos, but ever in search of renewal. If *Blonde* is Oates's elegy to the twentieth century, it is not simply the condition of loss with which she engages. Rather, using the fragmented life of Monroe to give voice to the fracturedness of contemporary America itself, Oates laments a society that seems to have run out of the ability to sustain its dreams.

Oates's fiction has long been associated with violence, with an "unladylike intrigue with mayhem, injury and murder" (Reynolds, 1999: 185), and in *Blonde*, such themes continue

to dominate. Oates's vision of America is that of a modern wasteland, a nightmare world of wrecked, unfulfilled, and unhappy human lives. Her novels explore the social dysfunction inherent in modern America, the "underside of the American culture of success," and the tragedy of self-destructive human behaviour (Reynolds, 1999: 187). Oates's milieu is gothic suburbia -- her cities are not spaces for nurturing communities, but home to an existence that is isolated, dislocated, and artificial. "The cities of Oates's fiction are the antithesis of earthly Edens; they are the settings for deadly power struggles between people, between classes, between races. And most tragically, they are the place of the death of the human spirit" (Grant, 1978: 68). The horror of Oates's dystopic images lies in the disturbing fact that "everyday reality *is* modern gothic;" that the violence, abuse, anguish, defeat, and self-abasement that characterises the American experience is proof that American reality is stranger than fiction (Reynolds, 1999: 192). In the words of Mary Grant:

Oates's portrait of the city is thoroughly consistent with the American experience. Hopeful expectation yields to crippling despair. The city harbours brutal men and dashes dreams to nothingness. It brings out the worst in men. Cities are dark, dirty, menacing. Only those too simple or too strong to be destroyed by it can survive; the sensitive, the gentle, the weak are destroyed. (1978: 80)

Repeated again and again in Oates's fiction is the motif of the destructive woman: mad, suicidal characters who have never grown up, and who are ultimately "looking for fathers rather than husbands" (Grant, 1978: 27). These women have failed lives and failed

dreams; they are "cunning, jealous, suicidal, petty, fawning, miserable women who want comfort, sex, money, and men" (Grant, 1978: 29). Yet the pitiful lives of unhappy characters, the abundance of unliberated women, and the lack of happy endings in her novels is Oates's way of addressing her greatest concerns. "For Oates there could be no more powerful way to speak to the need than by focusing on its absence" (Grant, 1978: 29). An artist with a clear vision, Oates seeks to raise the consciousness of her reader through the power of her art. And her aspirations are by no means small. "Blake, Whitman, Lawrence and others... have had a vision of a transformation of the human spirit. I agree with it strongly myself. I think it's coming... I don't think I'll live to see it. But I want to do what little I can to bring it nearer" (Grant, 1978: 7).

Oates's faith in the human spirit, and in the redemption of society, is far from overt in her overwhelmingly pessimistic narratives, but the fact that it does ultimately exist confirms her vision as undeniably apocalyptic. She *does* envisage a new Eden, a future society transformed, and it is through her violent fiction that she expresses this. "The pages of her novels are filled with the inchoate, the 'fantastically real' -- murder, suicide, riot, rape, loss of identity, loss of community -- yet out of this violence a tragic affirmation struggles to emerge, the hope of a hope" (Grant, 1978: 3). Thus, in her fiction, violence can be key to redemption -- of one form or another. And from the wreckage of human lives, there is always the possibility, the chance, to make it better. Violence itself is not exclusively negative, and when one deals with the apocalyptic mode, it is often only *through* violence that rebirth is possible. "Violence or destructiveness may also spring from an effort to 'transcend the triviality of human life... to seek adventure, to look

beyond and even to cross the limiting frontier of human existence'... Violence can bring man to the brink of self-discovery and often serves as an affirmation of his humanity" (Grant, 1978: 35). In many instances, the act of violence is a protest against the lack of cohesion between the American Dream and its reality; a reaction to the fact that the American Dream remains "irrecoverable, incommunicable, inarticulate... lost" (Tanner, 2001: 190). Engaged as she is with such themes, Oates follows in a long line of American writers who explore both the concept and its contradictions.

Oates's subject matter is ideally suited to her mode, for "there is no better metaphor to express this duality of fear and hope [in the American Dream] than that of apocalypse: while we do not always remember it, the true meaning of the term includes not only destruction, but also rebirth into a new and infinitely better world" (Lewicki, 1984: xii). The American Dream is indeed "the umbrella covering the entire range of American apocalypses," because like the American Dream, the American apocalypse is an ideological construct that has taken on similarly mythic qualities of regeneration and rebirth (Robinson, 1985: 28). But, since the American experience is "constantly revealed as characterised by tragic gaps between word and act, ideal and reality," both concepts ultimately feature more in the imagination than in the real world (Waller, 1973: 30).

Even at their most mythic, American apocalypses are neither puerile escapism... destroying the world in order to escape into another, nor the cheery optimism of teleological idealism, in which the ultimate millennial synthesis is always just around the corner. Instead, American apocalypses seem to be acutely

aware of both their own impossibility and their imaginative necessity; they build into their imagistic structures their own negation, but by so building preserve what is negated. (Robinson, 1985: 9)

Such an inevitable and inherent necessary failure is what Oates elegises; it is the loss which can never be restored, but which we nonetheless continue to mourn as though it once existed. If it is against "the initial apocalyptic promise of America that we often measure our present and assess our future," it is clear that renewal and rebirth in the New World is yet another illusion that has failed to materialise (Zamora, 1989: 9). "Oates acknowledges from the start that we seek an absolute dream: a dream we admit is attainable even as we indulge in it" (Grant, 1978: 129). The apocalypse, after all, is "always deferred," ever out of reach and in the distance (Robinson, 1985: 29). At the same time, however, the only hope for the new millennium and the surest guarantee of the future still rests upon apocalyptic ideas of destruction and rebirth into newness. For without endings, there can be no new beginnings.

If the myth of apocalypse "insists on the inevitable link between individual and collective fate," Oates's tragic portrayal of Marilyn Monroe must be viewed on a much greater scale -- not simply as the perverse fairytale life of one of America's most recognisable icons, but as the metaphor for a society that "manufactures fantasies and nourishes greed, conspiracies, and violence" (Zamora, 1989: 190). It is the profound disunity between Monroe's outer and inner worlds, the complex splitting off of image from reality, from her screen persona to her daily life, that makes the story of Marilyn Monroe both

enormously fascinating and undeniably American. Consequently, at the same time as *Blonde* deconstructs the myth of Marilyn, so too does Oates draw critical attention to many more American myths that prove to be as lacking in substance as Monroe's image.

The Hollywood setting of Monroe's life and Oates's millennial novel could not be more befitting an exploration of twentieth-century America, for there is something inherently American about Hollywood, about all that it promises, and all the illusions it engenders. Movies promise us "another world to live in," they are the ultimate place to lose oneself in, and perhaps the closest we can ever get to the fulfilment of the American Dream (*Blonde*, 11). On screen, as in the America conceived of by its first settlers, anything is possible. In darkened theatres, the larger-than-life reality projected onto the screen is magical and captivating; it is a parallel world wherein the myths and ideologies that characterise America can be played out again and again by all-American boys and girls. This world really is utopia, for it is both the ideal and the 'no place.' The filmic medium is the perfect location to bring dreams to life, for on screen, the only reality is *unreality*. If the New World failed to deliver on its promise of regeneration and rebirth, the screen world takes on such a responsibility with renewed vigour. In mid-twentieth century America, Hollywood has come to replace the frontiers of the West. It is the new Promised Land, the place of dreams, the site for success, and the escape from all things unbearable. Hollywood is where you go to make it big; it is a melting pot of European émigrés and North American hopefuls, an industry in the business of marketing dreams and manufacturing stars. If America was founded on ideas of apocalyptic renewal, Hollywood follows suit with its own promise of spiritual and material wealth.

Hollywood promotes worship of a different kind, for it is youth, beauty, and money that become the Holy Trinity. At the same time, the cult of celebrity engenders mythical heroes and American fairytales for the modern world. It is such a world that Norma Jeane is born into, and such a world that will eventually destroy her, for Hollywood ultimately devours what it creates. In clear reference to Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, Oates's fiction imagines Hollywood as a catalyst for violent destruction. If the Hollywood machine churns out dreams, these dreams must eventually be revealed as the frauds that they are, and when this happens, "apocalyptic violence is the one remaining dream" (Reid, 1967: 149).

Norma Jeane's life story is the stuff of American legend: an orphan child who becomes one of the most famous -- and marketable -- faces of the twentieth century. It is a fairytale life, complete with allusions to the transformation of the Beggar Maid into the Fair Princess, but there is certainly no happy ending for Norma Jeane. In a novel that uses the figure of Marilyn Monroe as a vehicle for symbolic comparisons with America, it is not surprising that Norma Jeane's rise and fall slots in perfectly with United States history. From her post-war rise to stardom, to her Cold War decline, depression and paranoia, to her death in the moments preceding the multiple socio-political crises of the Sixties, her life is an apt indication of America's own twentieth-century transformation. And in the same way that Norma Jeane desires to disown her past, selectively erasing and re-writing portions of her history, so too has America re-invented itself over time. But repeated fragmenting of the self comes at a high price, and the fact that Norma Jeane's life ends the

way it does leaves little room to doubt the future Oates envisions for an America that does not pay heed to the warning signs.

*Blonde's* posthumous narration by its subject is not simply a gesture of postmodern wit, it also provides an essential insight into a world where images endure exceedingly better than the lives behind them. Thus, although the flesh-and-bones woman who was Norma Jeane Baker lies dead and buried, the myriad reproducible images of 'Marilyn Monroe' have immortalised America's icon. The narrative that is both fragmented and cyclical mirrors Oates's interpretation of Monroe's life: a disconnected, fractured, and often alienating existence, doomed from the start to repeat and repeat the tragedies of the past. Such a sense of "endings [turning] back on themselves" is deeply connected to the apocalypse, and the novel's resistance to linear history is a clear sign that the cycle of destruction will not easily end (Marx, 1997: 187).

American elegies very often involve a return to the origins of loss itself, and in *Blonde*, Oates has endeavoured to trace Norma Jeane's troubled journey towards a premature and tragic death from its earliest beginnings. From her traumatic, unstable, and violent childhood to her equally harrowing womanhood, Norma Jeane's life is more American nightmare than American Dream -- a life filled with irreconcilable contradictions, repeated disillusionment, and both physical and emotional agony. Given that Norma Jeane is named in memoriam to Norma Talmadge and Jean Harlow, her legacy is not one of success, but one of failure; her life not full of promise, but full of doom. Her mother's hope for some form of continuation, a rebirth of greatness, can only end in

disappointment, for Gladys has chosen to shape her daughter's future upon Hollywood images and not women of substance. Thus, although Norma Jeane is the apocalyptic rebirth of two Hollywood icons, from birth, her own fate is already determined. "In a rare moment of maternal intimacy, Gladys informed Norma Jeane that her name was a special name: 'Norma is for the great Norma Talmadge, and Jeane is -- who else -- Harlow... You, Norma Jeane, will combine the two, d'you see? In your own special destiny'"(28). This sense that fate is inescapable, that one moves toward an inevitable destiny, is also closely linked to ideas of apocalypse, and in the novel, there is little doubt that Norma Jeane's life is doomed from the start to a violent and tragic end.

Although brittle, cold, and distant for the most part, there is another side to Gladys that draws her daughter in. For when she is in an 'up' mood, she is seductively mysterious, captivating, and enchanting. Though she fears her temperamental mother, Norma Jeane is undeniably under her spell, finding their time together "urgent, highly charged and mysterious, to make your pulse beat hard as with a drug" (19). It is such a high that Norma Jeane will try to recapture throughout her life - always yearning to find her way back to her mother, to the moment before the Fall. "*Like amphetamine it was, that charge. As through my life I would seek it. Making my way like a sleepwalker out of my life back to La Mesa to the Hacienda as to the place on Highland Avenue where I was a child again, in her charge again, under her spell again, and the nightmare had not yet happened*" (19). While Norma Jeane's nostalgia for her childhood seems misplaced -- there was in fact very little that was ideal about her earlier years -- the desire to go back in time is one form of the apocalyptic impulse. "The apocalyptic path to happiness, one

might say, lies either backward, to a lost childhood world of 'freshness' and 'newness,' or forward to a future utopia, a technologically advanced society that is as unlike the barbarism of the distant past as day is unlike night" (Robinson, 1985: 69). The desire to return to the past, to youth and innocence, is also an elegiac impulse that mourns the 'death' of the child-self. Ironically enough, although Norma Jeane's childhood is far from idyllic, her desperation to return to the past that she has made sacred steadily increases throughout her adult life. The more she tries to escape her past by continually reconstructing herself and her history, the deeper her longing to return to that past grows. Yet for Norma Jeane, childhood is a time of constant fear and violence -- either pending or actual. Even before she was born, the threat of fatal violence hangs over Norma Jeane's head, "because the very father of the child had wished it not to be born," (76). Born three weeks earlier than expected, Norma Jeane becomes, like her mother, a Gemini, and thus one of "the tragic twins" (58). For Gladys then, it is all in the stars, and she is certain that her daughter is "accursed as she," and doomed to be unloved (76).

The love that Gladys feels (but seldom expresses) for her daughter is of a disturbing and decidedly discomfoting kind, but it is the sort which Oates engages with most frequently. "Oates defines two kinds of love: one which creates the other person and one which destroys. Her fiction deals mainly with the latter: 'a bizarre mysterious, anti-social' emotion which instead of being life-giving is really 'murderous'" (Grant, 1978: 25). And Gladys's love is indeed murderous. Although she had refused to terminate the pregnancy, she nonetheless fluctuates between rejecting and desiring Norma Jeane as her child. Keeping Norma Jeane "was a daily decision. It was not permanent," and even then based

only on the fact that "this kid isn't half bad-looking, is she?" (35). The mother of two other rejected daughters, Gladys's life is entirely unsuited to motherhood. Oblivious to or unconcerned about men who marvel lasciviously at the fact that it's "*like a silk purse down there. Smoooooth,*" Gladys's maternal instincts are as absent as Norma Jeane's father (35). Gladys shrilly reminds Norma Jeane that she slept in the top drawer of the pine bureau, not thinking the child will remember that "*someone shoved the drawer shut, to muffle her crying*" (31). The reality of such potential and actual abuse is horrific, but really only a forewarning of what Norma Jeane will experience later on, when even 'kindly' men like "Uncle Clive" will take advantage of the lost and abandoned Norma Jeane, "'playing' piano up and down her shivery body," (85).

But Gladys's greatest injury to her daughter is surely her deceptive promise of a father that will one day claim them both. In involving her daughter in her own world of fantasy and dream, Gladys is guaranteeing Norma Jeane a lifetime of failure, a lifetime of searching and yearning for a 'Daddy' that does not exist and will never return.

Reinventing the self and re-writing history may be fundamentally American practices, but the price is always great. For without history, and without connection, Norma Jeane will always be lost in a personal limbo, in an endless quest for roots that can never be satisfied, and whose lack can never allow her to move forward.

As Gladys falls deeper and deeper into a state of depression, she talks constantly (and inappropriately to her six-year-old daughter) about death. Terrifying to Norma Jeane are her mother's references to the "voices of the dead," (37) and the "poor dead souls wanting

to push in," but Gladys has little interest in comforting her daughter (38). It is Gladys's mantra that "when your number's up, you go," and it is this fatalistic philosophy she wishes to impart to Norma Jeane (42). Gladys's own sense of pending doom is fuelled by her reading matter. She has practically memorised two of the most prophetic texts of chaos and apocalypse: *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, and seems confident that such writings offer accurate predictions for the world's fate. Yet it is not just Gladys's own life that is heading toward chaos and destruction. The rest of America, and indeed the western world, are similarly poised for disaster -- social, economic, political, and moral. "You would not want to know the alarming statistics pertaining to American unemployment, evicted and homeless families across the country, or the suicides of bankrupts and of World War I veterans who were disabled and without jobs and 'hope.' You would not want to read about news in Europe. In Germany" (62).

While Gladys scorns God, she nevertheless believes in the need for purification, to redeem her sins, absolve her guilt, and cleanse her soul. Bathing with Norma Jeane in a bath of scalding hot water, Gladys insists, "yes, it has to be hot, there's so much dirt. Outside us, and *in*" (39). Gladys's wish to burn, to be scorched, is overwhelming, and during the dangerous southern California fire season, she becomes consumed by her apocalyptic desires. "That's what God is - *fire*. Put your faith in Him and you'll be burnt to a cinder" (43). Convinced that the fires are a sign of biblical apocalypse, "fit punishments" for sin, she is filled not with fear but with anticipation (61). "You would think, the mother told her frightened daughter, that this was the end of the world promised in the Book of Revelation in the Bible: 'And men were scorched with great

heat, and blasphemed the name of God.' But it's God who has blasphemed us" (43). For Gladys, the fires are "a clear summons and a sign... to cleanse herself and the afflicted child" and she responds with great enthusiasm (76). Having ceased menstruation, Gladys's awareness of the onset of menopause and the vanishing of her youth is enough of a signal to her that the end is near. ("And she would no longer be a woman desired by any man" [75]). For if she is no longer young, beautiful, and desired, she must die.

Gladys believes that, like Los Angeles, her time has run out. "This is a city of sand and nothing will long endure" (48). Gladys tells her daughter, "'Remember Norma Jeane - *die at the right time*'" and it is clear that she believes the right time for her to be now (69).

Thus, it soon becomes apparent that Gladys is looking to be consumed, to be destroyed -- it is not what she fears, but what she desires, because for her, it will be a way out, the end of a despairing, painful, and degraded era.

Driving herself and her child to the site of the chaos -- which for Gladys is the site of the 'apocalypse' -- she charges not away from, but towards "the stinging suffocating smoke" of the raging fires (45). "I want to see Hell up close. A preview " (49). Determined to include Norma Jeane in her plans, she believes she must cleanse the unwanted child whom she sees as "her own secret self, exposed" (76). Thus, to kill herself is not enough, she must kill them both: the self and the twin. Preparing another bath filled with boiling water, Gladys's goal is not so much suffering as it is cleansing. She wishes to destroy the flesh that has betrayed her (by growing old); she wishes to obliterate the sickness that courses through her veins (from the chemicals she works with); and she wishes to be reborn into innocence once she is cleansed. It is this realisation that her mother wished

her dead that will govern the remainder of Norma Jeane's life, because although Gladys does not kill her, the incident will signify her first spiritual death, and she will be suspended forever more in the moment of her shame. No matter how many years may pass, Norma Jeane can never grow beyond the horror of the incident. "Twelve years old. Yet in her heart hardly more than eight or nine, as if her true growth ceased at the time she'd been expelled from Gladys's bedroom to run naked screaming for help from strangers. Running from steam and scalding water and a burning bed meant to be her funeral pyre" (108).

Norma Jeane's loss of childhood and loss of innocence is what prompts her creation of a second self, a mirror image/double that can be everything she herself is not. In creating her Magic Friend, Norma Jeane is actively reinventing herself, and making it possible to cast off the trauma of her past and the burden of her history. With her entire sense of self shattered forever at age eight, Norma Jeane's only hope for survival is through this other, ideal self, the girl who will be loved and desired. "Always there was Norma Jeane's Magic Friend in the mirror. Peeking at her from a corner of the mirror or staring boldly, full-faced. The mirror could be like a movie; maybe the mirror *was* a movie. And that pretty little curly-haired girl who was *her*" (85). The splitting off of selves mirrors an apocalyptic desire to cast off the old, and make way for the new. Norma Jeane's old self is the rejected self, the daughter who was wished dead, the child who symbolically, if not physically, was consumed by fire. Her new self then, reborn out of the destruction, holds the key to new beginnings and a new life altogether. Thus divided between a dual

existence, Norma Jeane is able to 'expel' history to the degree that she becomes less and less of her former self.

Norma Jeane's whole life is rooted in her belief that "*much of memory is dreams, I think. Improvising. Returning to the past, to change it*" and thus for her it is only natural to review and 're-script' her life story (613). Without hesitating, she can speak with conviction of a personal history that is wholly fictitious, and with the death of each self -- the child, the orphan, the wife, the model, and so forth -- she abandons one past for another. "*I have put myself into the very centre of imaginary circumstances, I exist at the heart of an imaginary life, in a world of imaginary things and this is my redemption*" (146). In each and every one of her relationships, this disjunction between the real and the invented self will be the cause of its breakdown, for ultimately, no one -- not even Norma Jeane -- will ever be able to reconcile the two.

In *Blonde*, Oates's perversion of heterosexual relationships is thoroughly disturbing, not simply because they are more often than not coupled with violence, degradation, exploitation, and *un*-pleasure, but even more disquietingly, because each and every one of them is wholly destructive. Beginning with her first marriage to Bucky Glazer, and ending with her dehumanising affair with the President, all of Norma Jeane's marriages and affairs end in failure -- and of course, violence. Norma Jeane's body, devotedly described by Oates to the extent that it becomes a character in and of itself, is what draws men to her, but it is also what essentially drives them away, and drives Norma Jeane to violent self-abuse or attempted suicide. The body that is beautiful, dreamy, and the

incarnation of every male fantasy about a woman who "welcomes sex as natural," ultimately does not fit the girl who longs only to be loved, and it is upon discovery of the contradiction between Norma Jeane's outer and inner being -- between the illusion of her blonde female beauty and the reality of her complex, fractured self -- that every man she becomes intimate with proves to be incapable of continuing a relationship with her (Dyer, 1986: 36). From Bucky to the Ex-Athlete, to the Playwright, all three husbands discover soon enough that the woman they have married is no one they thought she was. "It was like there were two of her, like twins" (183).

Her first marriage to Bucky will be the metaphorical death of Norma Jeane the child, but it will be only one of many 'deaths' in her life. Repeating Gladys's fatalistic philosophy, and at the same time predicting a future that will mark the end rather than the beginning, Norma Jeane tells her foster mother, "I guess if my number's up, Aunt Elsie, it's up" (168). Indeed, with the loss of her birth name, Norma Jeane is reborn. "No 'Baker' remaining. Soon there would be no memory" (179). In Norma Jeane's mind, if there is no memory, there is no past: she can start her life over as Norma Jeane Glazer; she can discard her terrible childhood along with her maiden name. For Norma Jeane, marriage is the ultimate way to restore the balance in her life, for she becomes "*a married woman. A girl who is loved*" (181). The rejection suffered in childhood is erased, because at last she is wanted. In calling Bucky 'Daddy,' it is evident that Norma Jeane believes her 'father' has finally come to claim her. But despite Norma Jeane's optimism, the marriage is destined to fail -- to be destructive rather than redemptive. For starters, the fact that Bucky works as both an embalmer -- restoring the dead -- and in a factory that

manufactures B-17 bombers provides an ominous and somewhat prophetic clue to the future. Similarly, in 1942, the climate of world chaos is only a taste of what is still to come. "It was a time of things-happening-fast. Ever since the shock of Pearl Harbor. Every day now was like an earthquake day you wake up wondering what's next. Headline news, radio bulletins" (174). Embroiled in a war more horrific than can be imagined, the world appears to be nearing the end, and Norma Jeane's own suicide attempt reflects this almost desperate desire to bring it closer, to end the cataclysm that life has become. When Bucky recreates Norma Jeane in the image of his fantasy wife using the same make-up he uses to embalm the dead, he unwittingly gives life -- and certain death -- to Norma Jeane's 'Marilyn' self. This self is comfortable in the body Norma Jeane finds alien, she knows that "*when a man wants you, you're safe,*" and thus works constantly at being desired (191). "Your body is for others to admire and to pet; your body is to be used by others, not used by you; your body is a luscious fruit for others to bite into and to savor; your body is for others, not for *you*"(53).

Norma Jeane's body, she imagines, can become her salvation, for she believes in the power of her beauty to make others love her. But even this hope for life through love is soon overwhelmed by her fear of failing at it, of turning into her mother. "She was in terror of becoming the dishevelled woman who'd once been her mother. She was in terror of failing at the simplest task" (240). As a model, Norma Jeane is constantly being watched, scrutinised, and judged for her beauty, and the possibility that she might be rejected at any moment is unbearable. "She had dared to step out of the mirror and now everyone was watching" (241). Although to the outside world, Norma Jeane appears to be

delighted with the turn her life has taken, her inner being is in constant turmoil at the thought of being cast aside as quickly as she has been discovered, of being scorned by "the eye of the other with its cruel power to laugh at her, jeer at her, reject her, fire her, send her back like a kicked dog into the oblivion from which she'd only just emerged" (252). For Norma Jeane, her birth as an actress is the ultimate wish-fulfilment.

"September 1947 every dream of Norma Jeane Baker's realized & every hope of every orphan girl gazing out over the roof of the orphanage at the RKO tower & the lights of Hollywood miles away" (273). Again, the new role marks the end of another chapter in her life, and the 'true' beginning. "*My new life! My new life has begun! Today it began! It's only now beginning!*" (274). Acting is indeed the perfect outlet for Norma Jeane's Magic Friend, for the dream-girl 'Marilyn' can exist in no other realm besides the utopia of the screen. But, as with her marriage, the dream career does not deliver on its promises. At once confident that her birth as an actress will mark the beginning of a new life -- "I WILL INVENT MYSELF LIKE THIS CITY INVENTING MYSELF" -- and stricken with grief at the great loss that entry into this new world demands (... oh God the life behind me I have lost..."), Norma Jeane is well aware that her life will never be the same (260).

As an actress, Norma Jeane wants perfection or nothing. She repeats scenes over and over again, striving endlessly for the perfect take, because in every scene, and in every film, she is "fighting for her life" (371). Every role is thus quite literally the role of a lifetime, because without the adoration, Norma Jeane feels unable to justify her life, unworthy of an existence. If she cannot act, and cannot act well, if she loses her beauty and her

admirers, she will die, unloved and unworthy. Thus, every moment of every day is spent obsessively deliberating, and helplessly trying to delay the inevitable. "*Maybe I'm not a failure. No reason to give up. To punish myself*" (615). Because Norma Jeane so lacks an inner core of identity, she finds that acting is the ideal way to compensate. Dependent entirely on other people for her conception of herself, Norma Jeane will need to spend her life acting, allowing other people to live out their fantasies through the fantastical 'Marilyn.' For if Norma Jeane is not the beautiful and beloved Blonde Actress, she is the worthless and unwanted child who does not deserve to live. Each new role that Norma Jeane 'inhabits' sees the death of her former character and her rebirth into the next. "She would recall it, this season of Nell, as the true birth of her life as an actress" (374); and as Rose in *Niagara*, she rejoices in "this season of new beginnings" (409). Constantly being reborn as both a woman and as an actress, Norma Jeane wipes her history away each time, so that she is being fully serious when she makes a comment like "I told you... I don't have any past. 'Marilyn' was born yesterday" (403).

But the consequences of investing so much in each performance, each fight for more life, is that Norma Jeane has difficulty differentiating between the real world and the screen world. The boundary between the real self and the ideal self that Norma Jeane first created in the form of her Magic Friend and Hollywood transformed into 'Marilyn' is no longer distinguishable in any form. The reality of Norma Jeane and the image of 'Marilyn' fuse into a woman both bewildered and frightened by a body that does not seem to belong to her in any real sense: "*I am trapped in this blond mannequin with the face*" (783).

Many times, Norma Jeane uses her double as an escape, a stand-in for the self that does

not wish to be degraded and humiliated. Literally prostituting herself for roles in pre-casting 'transactions,' Norma Jeane has no choice in the matter: if she wants to act (and Norma Jeane needs to act) she must allow her body to be used and abused by men with the money, power, and connections to keep her begging for more. While Norma Jeane abhors the humiliation of such encounters, she is able to distance her real self from the performing self to such an extent that she does not consider such moments anything but scenes in a movie. Similarly mistreated by The President who marvels at his "*dirty girl. Dirty cunt,*" Norma Jeane can justify her degradation as just another movie scene to be performed (902). "*Any scene (so long as it's a scene and not life) can be played. Whether well or badly it can be played. And it won't last more than a few minutes*" (902).

Baudrillard understands such an inability to distinguish between the real and the mirror image to be a condition of postmodernity's era of hyperreality, wherein public space is no longer a spectacle, and private space "no longer a secret" (Baudrillard, 1983: 130). The result -- "the extroversion of all interiority" and the "forced injection of all exteriority" -- is the precise state of terror at the proximity of everything that renders Norma Jeane both paranoid and delusional (Baudrillard, 1983: 132). Of course, for Norma Jeane, it is the simulation she finds infinitely more appealing. "*Hey I love to act. Truly, acting is my life! Never so happy as when I'm acting, not living*" (889). For her, there is no separation of work and life, and no part of life that is 'unscripted': "*It was my real life. But yes it was a performance*" (861); "*Her entire life's an act, like breathing*" (371).

*Blonde's* overt critique of such a disappearance of the real in modern America is also an elegy for a time when reality counted for more than the image, and not the reverse. However, in the post-war prosperity of fifties America, the urge to overcompensate for the dark Depression and War years results in a society all-consumed by the consumable -- and Norma Jeane has been made into a product to be consumed. America's growing tendency towards excess belies a generation that is rapidly becoming depthless, soulless, and superficial. And it is to such tastes that 'Marilyn' so perfectly caters. "Out of the rubble of Europe and the demolished cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the booming heartbeat of a new world. The Blonde Actress known as Marilyn Monroe was of this new world. The Blonde Actress was perpetually smiling, yet without warmth or sentiment or that complexity of the spirit called 'depth'" (542).

Throughout her short career, Norma Jeane's repeated failure to fulfil her wish of being 'normal' -- a wife, a mother -- translates on screen into a hugely successful film. The illusion is stronger than the reality, and so although Norma Jeane is wracked by loss, grief, and unbearable physical pain, on screen her characters remain beautiful, bubbly, and blonde -- just the girl the public wants her to be, the sex object who "was not only untroublesome, vulnerable, but also seemed to enjoy and promote her own objectification... the Playboy playmate who wanted to be one" (Dyer, 1986: 50).

Incredulous at such irony, Norma Jeane has difficulty making sense of this disunity.

"Why *Some Like It Hot* a masterpiece? why Monroe's masterpiece? why Monroe's most commercial movie? why did they love her? why when her life was in shreds like clawed silk? why when her life was in pieces like smashed glass? why when her insides bled out?

why when her insides had been scooped out? why when she carried poison in her womb?" (780).

For Norma Jeane, her hope for redemption lies not only in acting, but also in motherhood, in the prospect of giving life and receiving the unconditional love of a child: "What faith she had in the redeeming power of 'being a mother,' though her own mother was a certified nut who'd abandoned her and (the rumor circulated through Hollywood) had once tried to kill her" (445). Norma Jeane's desperation to recreate and reinvent her own tragic childhood through the life of her own child -- a child she would love and cherish as she herself had not been -- reflects her desire for apocalyptic rebirth of the most literal kind. Yet her failure to produce a child becomes a failure to regenerate in any way: she can neither give birth physically, nor can she metaphorically give life to a new and innocent self in the form of a child. Her abortion(s) she will regret forever; the act of murder something she will never forget, but her subsequent inability to carry a baby to term can be read as the betrayal of her body, the refusal of the 'Marilyn' self to comply with the most desperate yearnings of Norma Jeane. Certain that her failed pregnancies are a sign of her body's physical and spiritual decay, Norma Jeane grows closer and closer to the apocalyptic urge to self-destruct that her own mother experienced. "She knew the truth of it: her womb was poisoned, and her soul. She knew she did not deserve life as others deserve life and though she had tried, she had failed to justify her life; yet must continue to try, for her heart was hopeful, she meant to be good!" (794).

Norma Jeane's growing paranoia -- no doubt aided by the fistfuls of prescription drugs she is fed -- is a fatal sign of her descent into madness. If turning into her mother is what Norma Jeane fears most, it is also what she has least control over, and the sense of pending doom, of time running out, madness taking over and death waiting to claim her is overwhelming. As with Gladys, the allusion to the insubstantiality of the Los Angeles desert speaks of apocalyptic doom that is not confined to one woman alone. "Where her heart had been, an hourglass of sand, sifting downward" (560). Indeed, the paranoia and confusion Norma Jean experiences during such moments is a reflection of a greater American context wherein Communists "boasted of a bloody apocalypse to come" the threat of nuclear war aroused visions of the end of the world, and the violence and brutality of Communist witch-hunts pointed to a frightening self-destructiveness within society (661). Cold War paranoia has made America a suspicious, fearful, and threatening place, within and without, and in Hollywood, the frequency of betrayal is equally alarming.

While Norma Jeane rapidly declines in physical and emotional health, 'Marilyn' becomes more and more of a success. A guaranteed money-maker, 'Marilyn' goes from being a sad, sick cow to a cash-cow, and all of Hollywood wants a chance to milk her for all she's worth. The sheer lack of humanity and dignity that is extended to Norma Jeane is horrifying: she is nothing more than a product to be marketed, a lucrative Blonde doll that can be reproduced in varying forms. Her delicate emotional state is kept in check by the Studio doctor who is always on hand to dish out prescription drugs -- "Benzedrine ... to 'lighten a dark mood,'... Nembutal... to 'calm the nerves'" -- but that is the sum total of the

'support' Norma Jeane is offered (529). With every personal tragedy and tumultuous affair, Norma Jeane grows increasingly out of touch with reality -- and with herself. Consequently, her Magic Friend/'Marilyn' requires more and more effort "to summon... out of the mirror" and more and more laborious and time-consuming construction when she does appear (707). Terrified of losing the self that is adored, of being left alone, Norma Jeane pleads, "*Please come. Please! Don't abandon me. Please!*" The very one she'd scorned. This 'Marilyn' she despised," because although she herself has grown to loathe this self, she knows that the rest of America loves only the image of 'Marilyn,' and not the real woman who is Norma Jeane (708).

Norma Jeane's poem, *The Kingdom By The Sea*, is a fitting allegory for her life, and a revealing glimpse at the fears that dominate it. The fact that she cannot complete the rhyme -- 'I am not a Fair Princess/I am but a Beggar Maid/Would you love me if you knew?'/The Prince smiled at her, and said...' -- speaks of her constant fear of rejection. No matter how famous, loved, celebrated, and successful she becomes, the terror of discovery -- the revelation of 'Marilyn' as artifice -- will never abate. "*What is this spell? How long can it last? Who has done this to me? ... The Beggar Maid in disguise as the Fair Princess*" (355). Norma Jeane, conscious of the fact that she is a self divided in two, is convinced that if ever any of her 'Dark Princes' had to find out the truth of her life -- the fact that it is all an illusion, and that she is no Princess after all -- they would not be able to love her. And sadly, far too many examples of unsuccessful relationships prove her correct.

Yet Norma Jeane's relationship with the Playwright is an interesting one, and one that is especially interestingly handled by Oates. Of all of the men in Norma Jeane's life, the Playwright is undoubtedly the most sympathetic, the man closest to understanding his wife, and most capable of 'rescuing' her, if he were only allowed. Clearly, Oates's own agenda is tied to her treatment of the Playwright, for both writers attempt to expose a different side to the figure of Norma Jeane. In finding each other, both Norma Jeane and the Playwright are filled with renewed hope for an infinitely better life. As always, Norma Jeane's discovery of a new Daddy facilitates a rebirth into a new self: "*Oh, Daddy. Before you I wasn't anyone. I wasn't born!*" (739). References to biblical imagery explain the degree of faith Norma Jeane has in the Playwright's ability to rescue her from a life that has long since spiralled out of control. Indeed, having fled the shallowness of Hollywood and The Studio in favour of a 'real' existence in the real world of New York, Norma Jeane is desperate to focus her life in a new direction, and who better than the Playwright to be "her Abraham" who "would lead her into the Promised Land?" (677).

A master of words as Norma Jeane is master of the screen, The Playwright is equally confident that he can rescue Norma Jeane from her life -- "*I would rewrite her story. That was in my power*" (657); "*I would rewrite the story of both our lives. Not tragic but American epic! I believed I had the strength*" (688). For the Playwright, Norma Jeane holds the promise of similar renewal, of a return to innocence and symbolic 'boyhood.' "*My life would begin again with her... A boy again to whom the world is new. Before history and the Holocaust, new*" (659). With the horror of the Holocaust always fresh in the minds of Jews throughout the world, the desire to get back to a time before such

devastatingly violent persecution is immense. Traumatized by, among other things, *images* of victims and survivors, it is understandable that a man such as the Playwright who "maybe in fact... was a Holocaust survivor," would choose to immerse himself in an image of a different sort: in a Blonde actress who seems to promise fulfilment of every kind -- mostly in that she can become the Magda of his pastoral youth (687).

The Playwright is Norma Jeane's promise of apocalyptic renewal, but with the death of Baby, it is clear that there will be no rebirth after all. The life that is doomed can only move in the direction of violence and destruction, and for Norma Jeane, any moment of happiness is always fleeting, and always surpassed by grief and loss. There is such profound sadness in the failure of the marriage between the Playwright and Norma Jeane, because ultimately, there was such tremendous hope for both of them. But again, Oates is making her point about human relationships, lamenting the sadness of such an inability to hold onto the love that heals instead of succumbing to the love that destroys. "If redemption is withheld in Oates's world, it is because she cannot lie; she cannot compromise because she knows too well that redemption, if it is reached at all, is not easily reached" (Grant, 1978: 16).

Prophetically, the final stages of Norma Jeane's life take place in her small Hollywood home appropriately adorned with a sign that reads CURSUM PERFICIO ('I am finished my journey'). If her entire life has been a fruitless quest for the missing father, the death of Norma Jeane following the revelation of the 'death' of her father is not surprising. The sense of the apocalyptic that looms over the nature of Norma Jeane's death is no doubt

compounded by the presence of the Sharpshooter. As a man "in the hire of Justice, Decency, Morality. You could say *in the hire of God*," the Sharpshooter's involvement in Norma Jeane's death is merely the fulfilment of the destiny of the 'tragic twin' who manages to die at more or less the same age as Gladys attempted, but failed to (401).

The ambiguity of Norma Jeane's suicide/murder leaves her death as great a mystery to fathom as her life, but its lack of closure also disallows any sense of finality. For ultimately, Norma Jeane's death is not the end, but the beginning -- the Blonde Actress is reborn anew in the afterlife as an American icon that will endure. The apocalyptic revelation has indeed uncovered something, but it is only another image, another illusion. America's obsession with and glorification of youth means that the young, beautiful, and enigmatic icons of the twentieth century become more sacred in death than in life, despite the irony of their tragic self-destruction. The American Dream for such adored icons -- Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, James Dean -- is always flawed, always a fairytale with no happy ending. But "love gods die young to realise the ideal synthesis of *eros* and *thanatos* -- love and death, as two complementary aspects of the same life process: regeneration and degeneration, procreation and destruction," and there is no better space for this than Hollywood (Sinclair, 1979: 19). Always what is left behind is the image, and no matter what the reality, it is always this image that is re-inscribed in popular culture as a testimony to legends of an undeniably American kind.

If *Blonde* is Oates's swan song to the twentieth century, it is possible to deduce -- gingerly and hesitantly -- that her vision for the future, for the next millennium, is one of

muted hopefulness and optimism. Her elegy to the turbulent twentieth century is ultimately an elegy for loss itself, for the sad and tragic and painful losses that have made America a mere image of something it once promised to be. The American Dream, as too the American Apocalypse -- the tragic twins that are doomed to fail as much as they are guaranteed to endure -- are denied to Norma Jeane and America both, and must remain forever the wishes that can never be granted. For Oates, it is "the storm of emotion [that] constitutes our human tragedy, if anything does. It's our constant battle with nature (Nature), trying to subdue chaos outside and inside ourselves, occasionally winning small victories, then being swept along by some cataclysmic event of our own making" (Bellamy, 1974: 25). Consequently, the true site for any apocalyptic yearning to take place lies first and foremost within ourselves, within the individual who does not succumb to the tragic mystery of life, but who explores it through the birth of a new consciousness.

## **Don DeLillo: *Underworld***

*Underworld* is an apt title indeed for a novel that delves deep below the surface and the image of twentieth century America to deliver a historical fiction of tremendous proportions. Chronicling the definitive and defining moments of the century in a narrative that darts effortlessly between continents and decades, *Underworld* is both a celebration and a condemnation of a country and a culture. DeLillo's America is a place of contradictions -- a place of despair, brutality, and devastation, but also a setting for hope, redemption, and healing. Heavily burdened by history, yet hopefully holding out for the future, the America DeLillo imagines is characterised by a mood of both the apocalyptic and elegiac. If the twentieth century has been plagued by unimaginable wars, devastating corruption, paranoia and fear, and the emergence of a disconcertingly postmodern consumer society, the hope for the new millennium relies on apocalyptic renewal. And yet, at the cusp of a new beginning, a new point in history, the novel as a whole works as an elegy for a lost time and a lost idea. Thus, at the same time as it is to be left behind, the American past is something to be mourned. For DeLillo, then, it would seem that the America of our dreams lies neither ahead of nor behind us; instead, it remains forever a dream, a product of our deepest desires and greatest longings.

American literature has been described as the "profound poetry of disorder," and a writer of DeLillo's calibre certainly adds weight to such a summation, for his interest lies in the America that Richard Chase describes as both dark and darkly comic (1957: 2). DeLillo's characters are complex and alienated, sometimes downright bizarre, but always

immensely fascinating. Almost all "aspire to the condition of anonymity," and are thus presented as voices rather than characters -- alienated, remote, and often dehumanised American voices that collectively express DeLillo's most profound observations about American life (Tanner, 2000: 211). In nearly every one of his novels to date, DeLillo's fiction reveals an eagerness to "sense out moments in which existence begins to turn mysterious" (Tanner, 2000: 217). Consequently, ordinary Americans become extraordinary -- their lives move from 'normalcy' to the inexplicable and the unimaginable. If DeLillo is "in some ways... some kind of latter-day American urban Transcendentalist," his vision is also implicitly apocalyptic (Tanner, 2000: 217). For the America he imagines is one in which faith ultimately -- albeit unconventionally -- prevails. While the source of reverence and the site of the sacred may be anything from a supermarket to a highway, the twenty-first century is not entirely devoid of the desire to believe in *something* after all.

And yet, in a postmodern society that focuses intensely on what Baudrillard terms the society of the simulacrum, "an abstract nonsociety devoid of cohesive relations, shared meaning, political struggle, or significant change," faith, like anything else, may well be as simulated as everything else (Best & Kellner, 1997: 95). In a society in which even the real is fake, it is little wonder that human relationships are as profoundly disturbing as they are. As such, DeLillo's novels are permeated by a devastating sense of disconnection -- the disconnection of individuals from each other, from themselves, from their society, from their dreams and their realities, from their pasts and their futures. During one of his shows, Lenny Bruce takes out a condom which he ceremoniously rubs and licks, and his

revelation that "this is what the twentieth century feels like" is indeed an acute observation about the plasticity, artificiality, and loss of the real in postmodern America, where not only sex, but love, life, and even death feel simulated (584). In a society of simulation, the lack of distinction between the real and the simulacrum is deeply apocalyptic, and DeLillo's novels often explore both the moment when the two split apart -- when the characters can no longer hold reality and image together -- and the consequences that result. Deeply disturbed by the fact that "the media threaten to create a world where 'everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation,' where 'images chosen and constructed by someone else' have everywhere become the individual's principal connection to the world formerly observed for himself," DeLillo's novels provide caustic glimpses into a world of impoverished experience and reduced dimensionality (Keesey, 1993: 4).

As an apocalyptic writer fighting against a nightmarish future world, DeLillo's fiction serves "to warn us that the technological mediation of the world threatens to turn it into a lifeless copy and us into mere facsimiles of our former selves, products of our denatured experience" (Keesey, 1993: 198). And indeed, in *Underworld's* "America -- or Americana... what kind of 'real' life people can shape for themselves in a mediated, consumer culture swamped in images and information, is an abiding concern" (Tanner, 2000: 203). If the apocalypse is about uncovering, DeLillo's intention in *Underworld* is to do plenty unveiling of his own in his epic summation of twentieth-century America. Triumphantly excavating a society of façade and surface reality, DeLillo forces his reader to confront the underside of American life, and the literal 'underworld' of America's

unofficial history. Against the tempestuous socio-political backdrop of a century of crises, DeLillo scatters an array of real and historical characters that filter in and out of the narrative, and in and out of each other's lives. If *Underworld* is a chronicle of America's worst twentieth-century news -- war, nuclear explosion, murder, disease, poverty -- it is also very much concerned with merging both public and private history to show how everything connects in the end: past, present, and future. While Nick's transformation and redemption are catalysed by the realisation of the importance of history -- private, public, and unwanted all -- DeLillo's Cold War novel is motivated by a similar desire to uncover and excavate the past, layer by layer, and piece by piece. In accepting the fact that "in our age, what we excrete comes back to consume us," Nick discovers the ultimate path to renewal -- which is also the route DeLillo advocates for America itself (791).

The sense of apocalypse hanging over such a violent century is palpable -- death, violence, and annihilation are not merely threats, they are also real possibilities in the context of nuclear warfare. While underground nuclear experiments take place in the desert, people's private lives are kept equally concealed in the surface propriety of mid-century America. Ultimately, whether in the realm of public or private history, *Underworld* draws attention to the degree of our own destructiveness. The novel makes explicit the fact that in the crises of the twentieth century, God no longer provides the exclusive source of the apocalypse -- instead, catastrophe, in our age, is man-made. "Our modern sense of apocalypse is less religious than historical: The word is used again and again to refer to the events of recent history, whether nuclear or ecological or

demographic, which suggests all too clearly our ample capacities for self-destruction" (Zamora, 1989: 1).

While the sense of apocalypse is great, *Underworld's* tone is also inherently elegiac, reading as a work of mourning for both a century and a country. The elegist "records the collision of fact (history, death) with value (language)," and *Underworld* is precisely such a narration (Rigsbee, 1999: xiii). The condition of loss -- in various forms -- is indeed of central concern, and lost youth, lost innocence, lost loved ones, absent fathers, missing keepsakes, the disappearance of the real, and the end of a century are all elegised in the context of the novel. Yet so too is the lost idea of America itself -- the great American Dream that proves time and again to be little more than an illusion. Filled with lonely, dying, diseased, and utterly alienated individuals, the America of *Underworld* is no Promised Land. Instead, it is a thoroughly dystopic modern world, where fathers betray their sons, suburban housewives shoot up, and twelve-year-old girls are raped and murdered. The daily trauma and violence, the decaying fabric of society, and the reality of an America that is truly dark is worthy of lament: DeLillo's novel captures the mood of the elegy perfectly.

For a novel centred on mid-twentieth century history, the influence of America's counter-culture cannot be overestimated. And indeed, in terms of apocalypse and elegy, the dynamism of the Cold War and Vietnam War eras -- and the concurrent emergence of an eclectic counter-culture -- play a large part in both *Underworld's* sense of catastrophe and its overarching mood of loss. In Cold War America, an apocalyptic threat looms

ominously over the nation's paranoid and fearful population, deception is a daily occurrence, and the fate of the Western world lies in the hands of a dangerous few, since "the state controlled the means of apocalypse" (563). The Soviet's explosion of the first atomic test bomb has marked the end of innocence and the promise of a violent future to come -- and the reality of nuclear war is no longer the stuff of science fiction. "All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction" (28).

Yet, while the world's superpowers bring the West closer and closer to chaos, the picture-perfectness of fifties America creates another reality altogether. In the postwar boom, America has become a nation of consumers, and it is behind the safety of objects and brand names that its citizens convince themselves of their future: "Johnson & Johnson and Quaker State and RCA Victor and Burlington Mills and Bristol-Myers and General Motors. These are the venerated emblems of the burgeoning economy, easier to identify than the names of battlefields or dead presidents" (39). It is a time of conspiracies, secrets, and outright lies, and beneath the façade of normalcy there is a dangerous and destructive underworld of unsavoury politics, of spy trials and communist executions, of bomb research and testing. "The placid nineteen-fifties. Everybody dressed and spoke the same way. It was all kitchens and cars and TV sets. Where's the Pepsodent Mom... Dad's in the breezeway washing the car. Meanwhile way out here they were putting troops in trenches for nuclear war games" (410). Catastrophe is in the air, and all across America, schoolchildren are required to wear tags "designed to help rescue workers identify

children who were lost, missing, injured, maimed, mutilated, unconscious or dead in the hours following the onset of atomic war" (717). At the historic Giants vs. Dodgers game, a picture of Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* falls on to J Edgar Hoover and captivates him with the images of the dead overtaking the living. There can surely be no more prophetic image than this, and in the realm of both the public and the private, disaster seems to be the only certainty. Lenny Bruce's favourite line, "we're all gonna die!" is less comedy than potential reality, and the whole of America is waiting (507).

Consequently, although Nick insists "it was a gesture without a history," shooting George Manza is anything but -- because as an American and a fatherless son, the emotions behind his act of violence are of an intensity very particular to this precise moment in history (509). And what is revealed is the fact that it is not simply the power of America to destroy and be destroyed by other nations -- the threat also lies with Americans destroying each other. Beginning on the crucial date in history -- the day America lost its innocence, the Dodgers lost the game, and Nick lost his faith -- the build-up to the shooting is symptomatic of a life and a nation geared unstoppably towards destruction. And yet the apocalypse fails. There is no end, and no new beginning; only another deferred apocalypse. What is more, the mass of human casualties that suffer "disfigurations, leukaemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function" (*Underworld*, 800), exist only in the margins, and on the periphery of society -- discarded as waste, and only uncovered by Nick/DeLillo's apocalyptic "investigations into the edge, the boundary, the interface between radically different realms" (Robinson, 1985: xii).

If the threat of the Cold War looms over the consciousness of Fifties America, it is a vastly different war that dominates that of the Sixties. Yet the Vietnam War, "the project of a nation bristling with confidence -- empowered by its economic strength, its liberal ideals, its Cold War mission -- and determined to show that it could deal as forcefully with wars of national liberation as it had fought German and Japanese aggression," is as fundamental a factor in understanding the latter half of twentieth century America (Dickstein, 1997: xvii). The nature of the war itself, the emergence of a strong resistance to mainstream politics, and the social and political implications that stemmed from America's involvement in a foreign country, all work towards shaping a dramatically different America in the decades to follow. The Vietnam War itself may not initially be an indication of a pending American apocalypse, but as the war becomes more and more of a presence, its promise of doom becomes harder to ignore. If the mass destruction of people and bodies and landscapes, the use of nuclear weaponry to fight an invisible enemy, and the sheer horror of such total lack of humanity could at first be justified in terms of the fight between Good and Evil, Us and Them, the threat of Communism soon takes on a new face: the napalm-bombed and burned child victims of war. The violence of the war is both indiscriminate and far-reaching:

The bombs fluttered down on the NVA and the ARVN ... on the Vietcong, the Viet Minh, the French, the Laotians, the Cambodians, the Pathet Lao, the Khmer Rouge, the Montagnards, the Hmong, the Maoists, the Taoists, the Buddhists, the monks, the nuns, the rice farmers, the pig farmers, the student protesters and war

resisters and flower people, the Chicago 7, the Chicago 8, the Catonsville 9 -- they were all, pretty much, the enemy. (612)

While the emergence of a counter-culture in the Sixties is not exclusively a result of the Vietnam War, it is an accumulation of discontent and dissent regarding uncontrolled technology, the destruction of the environment, poverty, the decline of democracy, the excessive corruption and hypocrisy in politics, the gross commercialism of society, the artificiality of work and culture, the absence of community, and the alienation and loss of self in modern America (Reich, 1970). Yet, "of all the forms of impoverishment that can be seen or felt in America, loss of self, or death in life, is surely the most devastating. It is, even more than the draft and the Vietnam War, the source of discontent and rage in the new generation" (Reich, 1970: 9). Thus disenchanted with the status quo, the counter-culture goes in search of a New Jerusalem, a utopian society to accommodate their ideals.

Echoing the revolutionary enthusiasm of their Puritan forefathers, the generation of disenchanted Americans protest the failed dream of their country, the fact that "the American people, who fled the monarchies of Europe, had only a few decades of freedom before they were conquered by a set of autocrats wielding, if anything, greater power than the old" (Reich, 1970: 34). Seeking if not a New World then a New World order, the counter-culture have a vision of an alternative existence not unlike that of their forebears, who had claimed to be "the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours" (Tuveson, 1968: 157).

Mirroring the first settlers' apocalyptic desire for renewal, the new generation of pioneers depends as much upon violence to achieve their goals. "The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (Slotkin, 1973: 5). From Black Consciousness to student protests, the atmosphere of the time is filled with violent foreboding, with the constant threat of one kind of eruption or another -- for "apocalyptic yearnings... beset [America's] young" (Roszak, 1970: 45). Even the blackouts of 1965 seem an ominous precursor to the disruption of the social order, evoking, as they do, "the always seeping suspicion... the thing implicit in the push-button city, that it will stop cold, leaving us helpless in the rat-eye dark, and then we begin to wonder... how the whole thing works anyway" (*Underworld*, 635).

For America's leaders, the resistance is both a threat and a nuisance. The counter-culture of hippies and bohemians, "a culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all, but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion," threaten the very fabric of society (Roszak, 1970: 42). And for the likes of J. Edgar Hoover, "it's all linked. The war protesters, the garbage thieves, the rock bands, the promiscuity, the drugs, the hair" (*Underworld*, 577). Indeed, the conflict between the state and "the anarchists, terrorists, assassins and revolutionaries who [try] to bring about apocalyptic change" is a constant battle of wills, an ongoing fight for control and power and domination (563). While

garbage thieves, protesters, and so-called subversive entertainers attempt to alter America's consciousness, the reality of various forms of 'censorship' renders free speech yet another American myth.

Interestingly, at the same time as such eras are overwhelmingly apocalyptic, the ends of such eras evoke a tremendous sense of both loss and nostalgia. For, as one decade gives way to the next, the energy and the spirit of the past seem lost to history. The utopian idealism of the counter-culture may have been nothing more than the stuff of youthful fantasy, yet the extent of its faith and hope and determination is something that appears, at the close of the century, to be mournfully absent. If, by the novel's end, Nick has learned to accept his past for what it was, and what it contained, he also feels an aching loss for something that no longer exists. "I'll tell you what I long for, the days of disarray, when I didn't give a damn or a fuck or a farthing" (806); "I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real... dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself" (810). Ultimately, what DeLillo is showing us, is that the yearning for utopia is ongoing; a somewhat melancholy yearning to be somewhere else that follows us around, that makes us imagine either the future or the past as the answer to our longings. Thus, the journey towards spiritual, emotional, or physical Edens is a lifelong enterprise, a constant search for more, and for better. It is a doomed quest in itself, for it never ends, it can never be fully realised, it can only ever, necessarily, remain the idealised utopic nowhere of our dreams. "Most of our

longings go unfulfilled. This is the world's wistful implication -- a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach" (803). This indeed is the fundamental truth of Americans, and the fundamental truth of humanity.

The sense of perpetual yearning and the quest for utopia are deeply linked to the immigrant experience, and by implication, with New York. Since with very few exceptions, almost every character in the novel is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, New York represents the first place to call home in the New World. New York is full of promise, full of prospects and opportunity, and most of all, the future. It is the first glimpse of the Promised Land for those just off the boat, a generation of immigrants desperately and determinedly searching for a new life, "away from themselves...away from everything they are and have been" (Lawrence, 1923: 9). Yet these same immigrants find that the America of their dreams is a far cry from the America of their realities. And what price America? A new country in which they are a hybrid mix of New World and Old, of the country they have fled to, and the country they leave behind; a place that will never truly be home, but only a substitute. While Lenny Bruce's acerbic indictment of America reflects his own general dissatisfaction, it also provides useful insight into the dark side of the American experience: "New York, New York. We say it twice. Once to entice them to leave Kansas. And once more over their grave... New York, New York. Like a priest doing his Latin gig. Mumbo jumbo, mumbo jumbo. He says it twice because he's talking about shit, piss and corruption and he wants to be sure you understand" (624). Thus, such a place is both the beginning and the end,

and for the characters of *Underworld*, all roads lead back to the "endless inspired catastrophe of New York" (494).

For the immigrants of the novel, life in America presents numerous challenges to their sense of self. How does one live in a country that is and is not your own, where you belong only in the sense that you happen to live there? For so many, the only choice is a complete splitting off of selves, a shedding of one identity and an appropriation of another. The New World becomes new in every way, and in order to prosper -- and sometimes simply to survive at all -- it is necessary to disavow one's past. For although America professes to be the great melting pot of the world, the reality of violent and inhumane discrimination makes any form of Otherness a tremendous liability. DeLillo, himself the son of immigrants, details the complexity of forging an American identity out of a non-American history. Indeed, there is a deep sadness that goes along with the process of breaking away, and it is the loss of tradition and heritage that DeLillo mourns through characters whose desire to discard everything that came before them ultimately makes them *less* and not more. As first and second generation Americans, the children and grandchildren of immigrants do interesting things with their identities. Just as for the immigrants the East Coast represented their future, for another generation, New York represents their past, the origins they must leave behind in order to become something new, and someone else. For them, New York is not the New World, but the Old, and this cycle of migration is necessary in order to define one's place in history -- to conquer new frontiers and discover new Edens. East is what you were; West is what you can become. Thus, for Nick, 'back east' is the place of childhood; the place of lost innocence and lost

parents. It is not somewhere geographical, but temporal, a place of the past, of the memories he has abandoned, of the life he will not speak about, of the murder he committed. Back east is 'before' time, "a statement about time, about all the densities of being and experience... a back-east term, stemming from the place where the wagons were made" (333).

In moving out West, Nick believes he has been able to redefine and reinvent himself. Everything he once was, everything he once believed in remains behind him, back in New York. There, his past lies buried; here he is a man unencumbered by history, or at least a man trying to live outside of history. "He was shaped and made. First unmade and then reimagined and strongly shaped and made again" (416). In Phoenix, Nick is able to "live a quiet life in an unassuming house... like someone in the Witness Protection Program" as he likes to quip (66). He is able to disentangle himself from his history, living suitably far away from "that place, that word... rude, blunt... crunching... like talking through broken teeth" (73). The West, "lightward and westward, where people came to escape the hard-luck past with its gray streets and crowded flats and cabbage smells in the hallway," has become the new image of utopia, full of promise and full of a sense of invigoration. New York, decaying and violent, is no longer the beginning, but the end; no longer the start of history, but the place individuals leave history behind to ferment. In contrast to the rawness of New York, Phoenix is all brightness and cheer. History is neatly ordered in designated spaces, "segregated... caged, funded, bronzed... enshrined carefully in museums and plazas and memorial parks," instead of seeping into every street and every home and every subway (86). History here is

confinable; in New York, it is everywhere, and for those like Nick who have not reconciled past and present, the only protection from their history is escape. "How could you have a private life in a place where all your isolated feelings are out in the open, where the tension in your heart, the thing you've been able to restrict to small closed rooms is everywhere exposed to the whitish light and grown so large and firmly fixed that you can't separate it from the landscape and sky?" (341). For Nick, the past is simply too traumatic to deal with, and the only way he can get by is to shut himself off completely. The murder, the loss of his father, and the loss of his faith are not subjects he wishes to discuss, and for those nearest and dearest, Nick's past must remain a mystery. "He erased it... because what else was he supposed to do?" (220).

Nick sees himself as "a country of one," a man without attachments who somehow finds himself a husband and a father, and it is this immense split between how he imagines himself to be and how he finds himself that poses the greatest threat to his happiness (275). Life for Nick has a feeling of unreality, as though the distance he has crossed between past and present has carried him into another world altogether. And indeed, his responsible, middle-class, All-American, suburban life in Phoenix is light-years away from a childhood spent on the streets and rooftops of New York's immigrant communities. Nick the husband and father and corporate executive is not the Nick Shay he was in New York, not even close, and in his determination to erase the past, Nick has somehow erased too much. His existence does not fit, his life is a substitute, and he is haunted by a sense of both displacement and misplacement: "How close I am, some of

the time, I sometimes think, as much as I love them all, to feeling like an impostor.

Because it has not fucking, ever, been something I am comfortable with" (339).

As an executive for Waste Containment, Nick makes it his business to dispose of waste, and it is a fitting job indeed for a man whose own past has been so effectively discarded. Yet, while Nick is full of facts on waste -- "waste is an interesting word that you can trace through Old English and Old Norse back to the Latin, finding such derivatives as empty, void, vanish, and devastate" -- he fails to acknowledge the consequences of having voided his own history (120). In being "selfish about the past, selfish and protective" Nick is denying himself and those around him the very history that has shaped him into the man he is, but he is also preventing himself from being whole (345). His life is emptier because of it -- filled with shallow relationships, empty dialogue, and love without connection. In dreams and fragments of memory and conversations with strangers, the past frequently surfaces, but it is always only briefly and fleetingly.

Of course, Nick's history contains much that is unspeakable, for murder is a severe cross to bear. While the act itself is an ambiguous mix of desire and deception ("Why would the man say no if it was loaded? But first why would he point the gun at the man's head?" [781]), Nick's loss of innocence in fact *precedes* the shooting. If Jimmy had been the absent presence, "the heartbeat, the missing heartbeat" holding the Shay family together for so long, the shattering of his myth and the myth surrounding his disappearance is a predictable precursor to the chaos that erupts (700). Yet in spite of the ensuing violence, there is a profound sense of sadness that goes along with the disclosure of Jimmy's

voluntary disappearance, because for Nick, the death of his father's image marks the metaphorical death of both his real father and the part of himself that could believe in something. DeLillo elegises such devastating collapse of faith, marking this point as the exact moment when we begin to lose part of our humanity. Such moments are 'little deaths,' deaths that do not kill us, but register as tremendously profound losses.

[American elegies] hold open a space for mourning the less grand deaths and losses that each of us must face, while also inscribing the larger dislocations of modern death. They directly attest to our consciousness of genocide and technological war, ecocide and mass starvation when they expose the lasting wounds of private grief; for these modern catastrophes have helped to make poetic salves for even personal loss seem easy, suspect, sometimes dishonest. (Ramazani, 1994: 226)

The consequences of Nick's apocalyptic gesture are indeed life-changing, for the old self, the innocent, child-self must be replaced by a man who will forever carry a burden of history and guilt. But Nick finds his period of correction both purgative and redemptive; it is the first step in cleansing himself of his former identity, of the weight of his father's absence, and his own subconscious act of vengeance upon a father-substitute. "I believed in the stern logic of correction... good riddance to bad beginnings, blood beginnings, and I was ready for this... feeling the dead soul slowly drain out of me, the sedimentary stuff of who I was, gone in the dancing air of insects and pollen" (502).

Yet Nick is only one of many characters in the novel who try to reinvent their fractured selves in an apocalyptic sloughing off of former identities. Matt's "old dark difficult history" is, like his brother's, "suppressed forever," and in fact, his entire existence is centred on doing the exact opposite to his father (413). Serving in Vietnam is in many respects Matt's way of divorcing himself from his father's legacy, of creating substantial distance between his past and his present: "He'd wanted to come to Vietnam. He could not evade the sense of responsibility. It was there to be confronted. He did not want to slip away, sneak through, get off cheap, dodge, desert, resist, chicken out, turn tail, flee to Canada, Sweden or San Francisco, as his old man had done" (463). Similarly intent on distancing Matt's past from his present is Janet, who calls him Matthew as a way of "separating him from family history, the whole dense endeavour of Mattiness, the little brother and abandoned son and chessboard whiz and whatever else was in the homemade soup" (454). While Klara Sax may have abandoned both husband and child, her new life is no less strange and estranging to her, and she continues to feel "she was in alien space, in dreamspace still" (479). Marian too, has acted out against her Big Ten upbringing, and lives now wondering "what she would say in the movie version" of her life (260).

J. Edgar -- "Mother Hoover's cuddled runt" -- lives a paranoid and repressed existence, ever in denial of his desires, and ever determined to persecute others for theirs (564). In an attempt to move "towards the invisible middle," Leonard Schneider becomes Lenny Bruce, "just like you, mister" (592); a boy who has been Alfonse for sixteen years and multiple generations of ancestors suddenly decides "I'm not them... Call me Alan" (705); and Rosemary Shay lives in an Italian neighbourhood without the Italian husband, being

called a name that isn't hers, and determined always to "conceal, conceal" her real self from others (698). The Texas Highway Killer may be a cold-blooded murderer, but he is also a man dramatically burdened by his parents, whose only escape -- and only means of feeling alive and real -- is through his acts of violence, and their later re-enactment on screen. With such a cast of re-made and repressed characters, it is little surprise that the "wastelings of the lost world, the lost country that exists right here in America" are as profoundly dislocated as they are (628).

The fact that Nick is the owner of the historic baseball indicates that a part of himself still yearns for some physical connection to his history. The safety that is to be found in objects, and particularly objects that contain a sense of history and pastness, is a powerful force indeed, and for Nick, the baseball provides a mysterious and inexplicable comfort. The winning ball was Nick's *losing* ball, and all the attendant feelings of failure and grief that followed from the Dodgers' defeat were linked to a much larger and infinitely more harrowing degree of personal loss. Thus the ball itself is Nick's elegy to his childhood and to his innocence; to the 'before' time that preceded his traumatic passage into adulthood. "I didn't buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it... it's all about losing... It's about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss... to commemorate failure" (97). In the waste business, Nick observes "maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard," but as the novel repeatedly draws links between waste and history, it is clear that there is much redemption to be found in the recovery of history also (809). In a used magazine store, Marvin Lundy observes individuals with similar yearnings, with the desire to return to an imagined utopia that

lies in an imagined past. "Marvin did not think these men were interested in photos of wolf packs on the tundra at sunset. It was something else they sought, a forgotten human murmur, maybe, a sense of families in little heartland houses with a spaniel flop-eared on the rug, a sense of snug innocence and the undiscovered world outside" (320).

Ironically involved in a different form of waste disposal to Nick, Klara Sax has realised both the healing and the creative potential that is to be found in discarded objects. In making art out of the B-52 bombers that caused such widespread devastation and destruction, Klara is at once acknowledging history and seeking an alternative future. The planes are born anew; no longer objects of ruin, they are transformed into objects of beauty, wonder, and contemplation. It is indeed "necessary to respect what we discard," for ultimately, all of our waste is all of our history (88). As a fellow artist, DeLillo in fact allows Klara to create art in a way that mirrors his own endeavour in *Underworld*. While Klara images art out of waste products, DeLillo creates his novel by excavating and bringing to life America's twentieth century history. Similarly, *Underworld* is both a work of nostalgic reflection and a novel that criticises and protests some of the most damning and damaging facts of America's past and present alike. For DeLillo, in fact, waste can be "epiphanic... the manifestation of Christ... and by extension any manifestation of a god or demigod" (Tanner, 2000: 216). Thus, the discarded parts of ourselves and our histories that we call waste have the power to transform, to reveal, and to enlighten.

If apocalypses are about endings, they are also intrinsically linked to beginnings, and one of the aspects of history that DeLillo repeatedly draws our attention to, is the endless and unending cycle of destruction and renewal that seems to characterise twentieth century America. One war gives way to the next, one crisis precedes another, and various forms of disorder continue to occur. Thus, Vietnam comes to an end, but America is left shattered, and new threats, as always, are on the horizon. New York itself is crumbling, decaying under the forces of violence and poverty that are everywhere. No longer a place to live if you can help it, Nick takes the final step in severing all ties with New York by taking his mother "out of the daily drama of violence and lament and tabloid atrocity and matching redemption" and bringing her to Phoenix (86). For those who are left behind, New York as it was is mourned as though dead, some long gone place of history that has been replaced by a dirty, chaotic, and uninviting city.

Marvin, one of the novel's many sickly and dying old men, wears latex gloves to the city where "the humans walked by looking touchy and unbeloved" (187). Sister Edgar is permanently latexed during her sojourns to the Bronx, for "latex was necessary here. Protection against the spurt of blood or pus and the viral entities hidden within, submicroscopic parasites in their soviet socialist protein coats" (241). While the passengers aboard the South Bronx Surreal are tragedy-seeking tourists, searching "not for museums and sunsets but for ruins, bombed-out terrain, for the moss-grown memory of torture and war," Ismael, Esmeralda, and the similarly dispossessed inhabitants of the Wall are permanent residents. A routine tour of this "tuck of land adrift from the social order," speaks volumes about the state of affairs in late twentieth century America, where

poverty, violence, disease, drugs, and the breakdown of basic human rights leave millions of people to rot and die in society's margins:

[The nuns] spoke to two blind women who lived together and shared a seeing-eye dog. They saw a man with epilepsy. They saw children with oxygen tanks next to their beds. They saw a woman in a wheelchair who wore a Fuck New York T-shirt... They talked to a man with cancer who tried to kiss the latexed hands of Sister Edgar... They saw five small children being minded by a ten-year-old, all of them bunched on a bed, and two infants in a crib nearby... They saw a prostitute whose silicone breasts had leaked, ruptured and finally exploded one day... They saw a man who'd cut his eyeball out of its socket because it contained a satanic symbol, a five-pointed star... They watched children walk home from school, eating coconut ices. Two tables on the sidewalk -- free condoms at one, free needles at the other. (246)

While Tanner calls DeLillo's exercises in "atrocious tourism" both opportunistic and distasteful, such meditations on the abundance of suffering and decay in contemporary America are arguably less voyeuristic than confrontational (Tanner, 2000: 206). The 'atrocious tourism' is not superfluous, it is necessary; a way of acknowledging the inherently apocalyptic times we inhabit. Using the apocalyptic mode as a platform for both social criticism and social change, DeLillo holds nothing back in his attack on contemporary America. "The news DeLillo bears is often grim, but we should resist the temptation to kill the messenger or to ignore his warning... truly disturbing fiction is

ultimately the most rewarding because it can provoke the changes necessary for survival" (Keeseey, 1993: 199).

With the Cold War over, violence is of a different kind, and Americans have turned to destroying themselves: "We are a civilisation sunk in an unshakeable commitment to genocide, gambling madly with the universal extermination of our species" (Roszak, 1970: 47). The paranoia of the Cold War years has been replaced by a new paranoia about disease -- and especially AIDS. While "it may be claimed that paranoia is as American as violence and apple pie," the paranoia rife in the last decade of the century may well have a lot to do with millennial fears of the apocalypse (Tanner, 2000: 209).

What is more, the rampant spread of new technologies, and the fine-tuning of the Internet has elevated the conspiracy theories of the past to new levels altogether. "Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?" (826). The dramatic transformation of society, technology, politics, humanity, violence, seems to veer towards an upheaval of drastic proportions. If ever there was a century that was going to end in apocalypse, that needed the promise of regeneration to go on, it must be the twentieth century, and if ever there was a fitting site for the apocalypse in this century, it must be cyberspace, where "everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked... a world without end, amen" (825). Paradoxically, the Internet works as both a way to connect people, and a way to force them apart. Life on screen becomes interchangeable with life in the real world, and the vast expanse of cyberspace has the power to disconnect people even further.

Consequently, although the miracle of Esmeralda's 'rebirth' is a powerfully moving story of human faith, there is something deeply lacking in the fact of its reproduction on a screen. To be sure, the death of Esmeralda is perhaps the ultimate integration of the apocalyptic and the elegiac in the novel. Being young, beautiful, and elusive in life, Esmeralda's death is the epitome of twentieth century violence: senseless, excessive, and brutal. Because even before her death, Esmeralda is imagined as a figure of somewhat mythic proportions -- "run is what she does... it is her beauty and her safety both, her melodious hope, a thing of special merit, a cleansing, the fleet leaf-fall of something godly blowing through the world" -- her horrific death is rendered all the more tragic (813). Though, as the abandoned daughter of a junkie mother living alone in the violent streets of New York, Esmeralda's death is less shocking than commonplace, the fact that in life she appeared to be in possession of some 'otherworldly' ability to appear and disappear at will positions her as extraordinary.

Yet, if her life is doomed from the start to a tragic end, Esmeralda's death will be something else entirely, as she is transported out of the misery of the real and into the mysterious realm of miracles. In such moments, DeLillo is at his articulate best, writing miracles for modern America in an effort to prove that despite our age of mediation and media-saturation, "life is still full of mystery" (Keeseey, 1993: 9). To be sure, Esmeralda's rebirth onto the billboard attracts enormous attention from Americans yearning for a sign, for something -- anything -- to believe in. Alive again, if only for a while, Esmeralda's presence becomes sacred proof of God and miracles and wonderment. She is the Messiah delivering the message -- that the holy exists, that God is not dead, and humankind not

doomed. If her death is apocalyptic, her rebirth is a testament to the wonderful renewal that follows. The masses flock to the billboard "to weep, to believe," and even Edgar finds the resurrected image of the dead girl to be a long-awaited sign (819). Esmeralda's transformation from anonymous child victim to myth is the result of the power of the image. As a mode of signification, myth "organises a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves" (Barthes, 1973: 143). For Edgar, as for so many others, Esmeralda's resurrection provides an opportunity to unite, to be one with a nation of diverse populations, all gathered and all in raptures over a messianic sign that need not do anything other than *appear* for people to feel its power. She feels "inseparable from the shakers and mourners... nameless for a moment, lost to the details of personal history, a disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd;" her latex gloves come off, and for the first time in a long while, she is able to really touch people (823).

Yet even this supposed miracle cannot remain untouched by the tenor of the twentieth century, for everything, including (especially?) the sacred, is marketable. "Vendors move along the lines of stalled traffic selling flowers, soft drinks and live kittens. They sell laminated images of Esmeralda printed on prayer cards. They sell pinwheels that never stop spinning" (823). Almost as quickly as the dead girl becomes a symbol of hope for a new millennium, the ever-present demands of a capitalist society replace Esmeralda's hallowed site with an advertisement. This miracle, like so many others, is lost in the great tide of turnover, and Esmeralda disappears. In the twentieth century, images compete for

attention and space, and Esmeralda is after all, only another image -- replaceable, removable, and temporary. "What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it," writes Baudrillard (1994: 23). Of equal concern is the fact that in postmodern America, even God has lost any sense of depth of meaning. "If God himself can be simulated... reduced to the signs which attest his existence... then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (Baudrillard, 1994: 5).

If DeLillo is interested in the mysterious, he is also intent on being both mysterious and ambiguous with his own messages. Consequently, Esmeralda's apocalyptic rebirth "both is-and-isn't-but-might-be an epiphany" (Tanner, 2000: 219). The mysterious then, remains mysterious, and instead of closure, DeLillo leaves us with a sense of melancholy about our yearnings for "something holy... a sign to stand against doubt" (*Underworld*, 824). *Underworld's* ending blends an abundance of loss, regret, and remorse with a sense of possibility, and the promise of apocalyptic renewal and redemption. Nick may long for the lost past, but his allegorically named granddaughter Sunny provides him with the consolation he needs for the shaping of a future. Similarly, the glimmer of hope, fleetingly and tentatively offered by Esmeralda, points to a potential collective American consolation at the century's end. The final word of the final page reveals DeLillo's own dream for utopia, his own wistful longing for the next millennium. But if peace is what he calls for, his heartfelt cry for the twenty-first century does not come without a history of

its own -- eight hundred and twenty-seven pages of history to be precise. And as an incisive chronicle of decades of strange times, these pages make clear the fact that the path to peace is a long and convoluted and difficult journey indeed.

If, as the novel seems to suggest, it is apocalyptic change and rebirth that will be America's saviour, DeLillo is also fully aware that "at the heart of apocalypse lies the contradictory proposition that we will never be satisfied, that historical transformation will never be definitely resolved" (Zamora, 1989: 16). For in the twentieth-century, the hope of apocalypse comes burdened by a history of *failed* apocalypses. Destruction ceases to give way to rebirth, only more destruction; one war leads to another, and a nation founded upon apocalyptic hope sinks deeper and deeper into a state of crisis. Yet although the apocalypse as a way to rebirth can never deliver on all its promises, it remains a powerful concept to hold onto to -- for without hope, there is only despair. "Utopia always eludes our grasp, but we still need it as a regulative idea, a goal that spurs us to think beyond the framework of our everyday lives" (Dickstein, 1977: xix). DeLillo's novel, ultimately, is not entirely devoid of a sense of hope, nor is the revelatory power of the apocalypse wholly denied. While *Underworld's* apocalypse may not enable rebirth, it certainly provides revelation. And it is in the unlikeliest of places: in the very history America seeks to unmake.

## Philip Roth: *American Pastoral*

Philip Roth's millennial offering, *American Pastoral*, is what Terry Gifford terms anti-pastoral, exposing as it does the distance between reality and the pastoral ideal -- that natural dreamscape of retreat and redemption (Gifford, 1999). Yet, as the pastoral ideal of the virgin continent is what America was founded upon, the anti-pastoral must also be read as an elegy for the lost dream of America itself -- a dream that can be realised neither within society nor within the undefiled natural landscape. *American Pastoral* then, is American Anti-Pastoral, an America in which there is no escape, in which no utopia exists to which to flee, and where no Eden can endure the ravages of history and change. In his raging and infinitely moving narration of one man's tragic fall, Roth manages to evoke a potent sense of national despair at the close of a brutal century. For if the Swede cannot succeed in achieving the utopian dream America promises, what chance do the rest of us have? As a "work of mourning," *American Pastoral* fits the criteria for an elegy, for "to elegise is to sing about the ends of things, apocalyptic matters both global and local, even as it is about memory and legacy" (Rigsbee, 1999: xi). Roth's novel is indeed as focused on endings as on new beginnings, and much of *American Pastoral's* lyrical beauty lies in the fact that it is so obviously an elegy for the profound losses and failures of twentieth-century America.

If the elegiac mode is used to give voice to the despair of contemporary America, it is the apocalyptic mode that demonstrates Roth's greatest concerns regarding where America has been, and where it is moving at the dawn of the new millennium. For the Swede, the

moment of apocalyptic upheaval marks the beginning of the end -- the collapse of his dream-world, the disappearance of his carefully constructed Eden, and the loss of his daughter -- yet Roth uses this individual story to address the world-wide shifts in consciousness catalysed by the revolutionary movements of the Sixties. *American Pastoral* then, is no small-scale account of the rise and fall of one man's dream; it is instead, a novel of profound depth and reach, which speaks of the loss of American innocence and the loss of the American Dream, but which ultimately cannot quite pinpoint the origins of either.

As a Jewish-American writer, it is no surprise that the bulk of Roth's oeuvre is centred on Jewish characters that struggle to come to terms with their identity and heritage in an American environment, for "as a history-ridden people in a history-less land, [Jews] stand in a different relationship to the past and to Europe than any other American group" (Fiedler, 1972: 205). Focused in particular on marriage and family, Roth's "main subject is the moral issues, dilemmas, and conflicts in contemporary American life," the failures in American society, and the complexity of what lies beneath the surface of everyday reality (Halio, 1992: 203). Indeed, for Roth, much of twentieth-century reality appears to be better suited to the realm of fiction than to the realm of fact; the strangeness and foreignness of everyday America is indeed often beyond the wildest imagining of the country's greatest writers of fiction:

The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the

American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (Grant, 1978: 6)

And Swede Levov -- "it rhymes with... 'The Love'!" -- is one such character (*American Pastoral*, 5). A local legend not simply because of his immense talents on the sports field, but also because he is a Jew who has somehow managed to transcend his Jewishness -- "a boy as close to a goy as we were going to get," "a genetic oddity among the faces in our streets" -- the Swede is the incarnation of all his immigrant forebears' deepest longings (10). There is apparently no immigrant left in Swede; he is the product of two generations of hard-working men whose only focus in the New World has been the achievement of this goal: the son who is as American as they come (and blond and blue-eyed to boot). For his parents and his grandparents, the Swede is the blessed reward for all of their own sacrifices, their apocalyptic sloughing off of former identities in order that they should give birth to this prodigal son of American origins and an American future. With "his unconscious oneness with America," the Swede is revered in the neighbourhood for attaining this ultimate goal (20). He is the poster-child for the new New World, no longer a place of suffering and hardship, but a place for success and fulfilment. For the Newark Jewish community, the Swede is proof that the American Dream is available to Jews as well, him being "only another of the neighbourhood Seymours whose forebears had been Solomons and Sauls and who would themselves beget Stephens who would in turn beget Shawns. Where was the Jew in him? You couldn't find it and yet you knew it was there"

(20). The Swede is "at home here the way the Wasps were at home here, an American not by sheer striving, not by being a Jew who invents a famous vaccine or a Jew on the Supreme Court, not by being the most brilliant or the most eminent or the best," but instead, "by virtue of his isomorphism to the Wasp world -- he does it the ordinary way, the natural way, the regular American-guy way" (89). Such an ability to integrate his otherness into a world of 'regular' Americans untainted by the prefix of a hybridised immigrant past, is an impressive achievement, and a sign of a prosperous future.

In leaving the cramped tenements for the relative luxury of Keer Avenue, where the Jews "with their finished basements, their screened-in porches, their flagstone front-steps, seemed to be at the forefront, laying claim like audacious pioneers to the normalising American amenities," the Levovs make the transition -- in space and psyche -- from the past to the future (10). They are indeed pioneers, for the success Lou Levov is able to achieve during and after the war as a result of a burgeoning consumer culture is a sure sign that the times are changing, that there are new frontiers to be conquered, and new Edens to explore. The Second World War may have been the apocalyptic sign of the end, but its violence gives birth to a whole new world, and it is of such a world that Swede Levov is a part. In the mid-twentieth century, the American future is laden with promise. Postwar America is the new paradise; brimming with hope and potential, the postwar world guarantees a new beginning and a new life altogether. "Everything was in motion. The lid was off. Americans were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together... the clock of history reset and a whole people's aims limited no longer by the past" (40). In R.W.B. Lewis's terms, the Swede is the American Adam of the modern

world, "a figure of heroic innocence and potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (1955: 1). Indeed, if the Adamic hero of the New World is "an individual emancipated from history... self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaits him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources," the Swede fits the bill (Lewis, 1955: 5). What is more, the novel's tripartite structure -- Paradise Remembered, The Fall, and Paradise Lost -- hearkens back to both biblical fables, and guiding American myths of the birth into innocence.

As Newark's own American hero, the Swede is aware of his good fortune and seemingly divine physical attributes. Life for a golden boy as blessed as the Swede appears to move in one direction only: closer and closer to the utopia of the perfected life -- to the realisation of the American Dream. For the Swede, America is all that it promises to be -- it *is* the place of dreams, of material and spiritual wealth; it *is* a melting pot in which his inconspicuously Jewish self can mix with ease. His "old American nickname... he carried with him like an invisible passport, all the while wandering deeper and deeper into an American's life, forthrightly evolving into a large, smooth, optimistic American such as his conspicuously raw forebears... couldn't have dreamed of as one of their own" (207). For the Swede, an American life is a life without discrimination, a life without poverty, a life without limits -- the culmination of everything his father and his grandfather have fought so hard to obtain. The devastation of the war has been a preliminary to prolific regeneration, and in the Swede's mind, the America that has emerged is a place of harmony, unity, and wholeness: "Nobody dominates anybody anymore. That's what the

war was about... people can live in harmony, all sorts of people side by side no matter what their origins" (311).

*American Pastoral* is deeply interested in tracing the rise and fall of immigrant generations, and as such, the Swede's triumphs are devotedly described. In marrying Dawn Dwyer, "he'd done it," made the ultimate break with the heavily burdened Jewish past, and secured himself a future with none other than a Miss America hopeful (15). By breaking away from tradition, and family, and religion, the Swede is effectively casting off his history in the naïve belief that the further away he takes himself from the life of his forebears, the closer he will get to living out their dreams. Taking his family "out of human confusion and into Old Rimrock," the Swede creates an idyll of "quaint Americana" (68). In the pastoral setting, the landscape becomes what Leo Marx calls "the symbolic repository of value of all kinds -- economic, political, aesthetic, religious" (1964: 228). His pastoral retreat allows him to live as "a short-range pioneer living on a hundred-acre farm on a back road in the sparsely habitated hills beyond Morristown, in wealthy, rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey, a long way from the tannery floor where Grandfather Levov had begun in America" (14). Living in a hundred-and-seventy-year-old stone house that "looked indestructible, an impregnable house that could never burn to the ground and that had probably been standing there since the country began," the Swede seems confident that his will be a predictable and entirely unruffled life (190). Out in Old Rimrock, alongside Middle America's long-established gentry, the Swede is pioneering a New World for future generations of Levovs. For here, "out on the frontier" he owns "a hundred acres of America;" he has finally managed to cross over from past to

present, from immigrant roots to bourgeois American identity -- which for the Swede is as good as it gets (307). That he associates himself with the American Everyman of the Johnny Appleseed fable is both a telling indication of the Swede's intense love of country, and a clue to his overwhelmingly utopian desires: "Whom he felt like out in Old Rimrock was Johnny Appleseed... Wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian -- nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American... All physical joy. Had a big stride and a bag of seeds and a huge, spontaneous affection for the landscape, and everywhere he went he scattered the seeds" (316).

In the pastoral paradise that the Swede creates, there is, on the surface, no reason not to "[make] love to his life," for there is nothing to disrupt the picture-perfect family in their charmingly Old World milieu (319). Except that history always intrudes, and reality ultimately always interrupts. The pastoral dream is only a fantasy of escape and withdrawal; in reality, this utopia is like any other: a nowhere place that exists only in the imagination. The harmonious paradise of the ideal landscape is always threatened by the world of power and complexity, by the history that does not cease to occur and can never be avoided. In the twentieth-century, pastoralism becomes complex pastoralism, a mode in which "the fantasy of pleasure is checked by the facts of history" (Marx, 1964: 363), and Roth makes sure that his novel is injected with a powerful acknowledgement of the latter. Thus, try as he might to live outside of the chaos of the real world, the Swede's attempts to insulate his perfect life and perfect family from outside forces ultimately ends in failure, for "history, American history, the stuff you read about in books and study in

school, had made its way out to tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock, New Jersey" (87).

And once it does, it is indeed a case of "good-bye, Americana; hello, real time" (69).

In the picturesque locale of Old Rimrock, both its ominous past and the increasingly threatening present cast an apocalyptic shadow over the Swede's idyll. "Did the Swede know that before the war there'd been a swastika scrawled on the golf-course sign at the edge of Mt. Freedom? Did he know the Klan held meetings in Boonton and Dover, rural people, working-class people, members of the Klan? Did he know that crosses were burned on people's lawns not five miles from the Morristown green?" (314). While the town's dark history of racism and anti-Semitism may well have been suppressed, the sentiments remain dangerously intact, and following Merry's act of terrorism, Old Rimrock's response thwarts all the Swede's ideas of cultural integration: "What can you expect? They have no business being out here to begin with" (168). *This* is the real America, and despite the Swede's best efforts to flee from, deny, and avoid the realities of violence, hatred, and discrimination, ultimately, there is no escape. While the Swede's increasing upward mobility has enabled him to create a pastoral retreat, it also makes him a target for the passionately angry counter-culture.

If the revolution of the Sixties is a reaction against failure and loss and the betrayal of the American Dream -- marking the end of the post-war era of over-confidence and over-compensation -- it is also very much concerned with the destruction of some of bourgeois America's longest-established values: "The something that's demented, honky, is American history! It's the American empire! It's Chase Manhattan and General Motors

and Standard Oil and Newark Maid Leatherware! Welcome aboard, capitalist dog! Welcome to the fucked-over-by-America human race!" (257). Ironically, it is the privileged and pampered children of middle-class America who take up the plight of the dispossessed, aligning themselves with causes as remote from their own lives as struggle and hardship, and "the bourgeoisie, instead of discovering the class enemy in its factories, finds it across the breakfast table in the person of its own pampered children" (Roszak, 1970: 34). However, since "postwar prosperity had provided them with the freedom to protest, the freedom to run wild, and the luxury of dropping out without worrying about a job," this new generation of liberals can only afford to denounce their country *because* of their country (Dickstein, 1977: xvi).

Whereas America was the incarnation of their parents' deepest longings for the future, in the Sixties, the generation of middle-class youth see the destruction of America as it stands to be the answer to their own desire for revolution. Roth writes of "the revenge of the have-nots upon those who have and own. All the self-styled have-nots... seeking to associate themselves with their parents' worst enemies, modelling themselves on whatever was most loathsome to those who most loved them" (251). America's counter-culture is as intent on apocalyptic renewal as the Puritan settlers who dreamed of the virgin continent were, their discourse equally punctuated with references to apocalyptic regeneration and renewal: "We have all known the loneliness, the emptiness, the plastic isolation of contemporary America. Our forebears came thousands of miles for the promise of a better life. Now there is a new promise. Shall we not seize it? Shall we not be pioneers once more, since luck and fortune have given us a vision of hope?" (Reich,

1970: 394). Thus, the reality of Merry's dissent is related as much to a larger global atmosphere of protest and disorder as to her being the daughter of two perfect parents. While the Swede "loved America. Loved being an *American*" (206), Merry loathes the very country that has afforded her family such opportunity for self-improvement. "Vehemently she renounced the appearance and the allegiances of the good little girl who had tried so hard to be adorable and loveable like all the other good little Rimrock girls -- renounced her meaningless manners, her petty social concerns, her family's 'bourgeois' values" (101).

For Merry, it is the Vietnam War that sets in motion her desire to change the world, and act out against violence with a violence of a different kind. The imagery of the Vietnam War -- the first television war, and therefore the first war that could enter the home as spectacle night after night -- is brutal, horrific, and abhorrently violent. Self-immolating monks are Merry's first glimpse at the war that will change her life, but despite the initial trauma of witnessing burning human flesh, the televised footage of protesting monks eventually becomes something Merry can't bear to *miss* watching. Later coverage of the war in Vietnam brings the sense of the apocalypse closer still: images of bombs and flaming landscapes and charred and bloodied human beings all contribute to an atmosphere of impending doom and irreparable destruction -- not only continents away, but at home in America as well. While the rhetoric of revolution cries for a new world order, the images of Vietnam provide the aesthetic proof of a world in ruin. Left-wing terrorist groups are no more violent in their cause than the American troops in Vietnam are sanctioned to be; the threat is only a threat because it is on home ground.

Determinedly intent on shattering society's complacency and compliance in "capitalist America's imperialist involvement in a peasant war of national liberation," the Weathermen's desires -- and *modi operandi* -- are apocalyptic in nature: "We are against everything that is good and decent in honky America. We will loot and burn and destroy. We are the incubation of your mother's nightmares" (252). Since the counter-culture is motivated by, among other things, "the loss of confidence in paternal authority figures"(Dittmar and Michaud, 1990: 7), it is not surprising that Merry's rebellion against her country is so linked to her rejection of her father. Similarly, while war is traditionally viewed as a masculine enterprise, Merry's active role in protesting the war through violence and murder is also a denial of the notion that women are "associated with life, and men with death" (Jeffords, 1990: 203).

Since the Swede's world *is* 'honky America,' his faith that Merry's involvement in the resistance movement is only a passing phase is pathetically -- and tragically -- naïve. In encouraging his daughter to focus her efforts on Old Rimrock, the Swede is essentially bringing the site of apocalypse directly into his pastoral paradise: "You want to be in opposition? Be in opposition here... Bring the war home. Isn't that the slogan? So do it -- bring the war home to your town" (112); "Start in your hometown, Merry. That's the way to end the war" (113). The headstrong daughter listens to his advice, but the consequence is not the end of Merry's vehement opposition to everything the Swede loves and cherishes, it is the end of *everything*. That "his life was blown up by that bomb" is no understatement, for Merry's act of political protest marks the end of the Swede's innocence and the dissolution of the American Dream that has sustained him for so long:

"He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in" (68). The moment of apocalyptic violence creates a rupture that can never be repaired. The utopian existence is shattered, and there is no going back, for "a sliver off the comet of the American chaos had come loose and spun all the way out to Old Rimrock and him" (83).

Merry initiates the Swede "into the displacement of another America entirely, the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone" (86). The pastoral perfection of the Swede's existence is obliterated; the violence of terrorism and murder has intruded upon Old Rimrock and the dream-life the Swede has constructed. Merry, cherished and beloved becomes "the daughter who transports him 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 berserk" (86). The startling rupture between the America the Swede knows and loves and the America his daughter recognises and despises is immense, and the discontinuity between father and daughter's utopian and dystopian visions renders the circumstances all the more tragic. The moment of catastrophe then, transforms immediately into a moment of elegy for the collapse and ruin of the Levov family. The irony of generations of persecuted and exiled Levovs -- who reach America and endure more struggle, who raise themselves up from nothing to succeed and prosper, who produce the gloriously Americanised son and heir, who in turn produces the daughter that has the world at her feet -- having it all annihilated by the very child who had the American Dream resplendently before her, is a despairing indictment of modern

America. The Swede may well be blindly patriotic -- to the detriment of a critically aware consciousness -- but his life has nevertheless been shaped by an immigrant will to achieve that his daughter and her contemporaries interpret not as the success of the self-made man, but as the deplorable pursuits of the capitalist bourgeoisie. The failure of the dream is devastating, for the hopes and ambitions of so many generations "to go the limit in America... rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes... to live unapologetically as an equal among equals" simply go to waste (85).

Yet the chaos Merry brings into the Swede's paradise is by no means an isolated incident, for Newark itself falls prey to the overwhelming spirit of revolution. The Newark of the mid-Sixties is light-years away from the Newark of the Swede's childhood. Ongoing riots create chaos, disorder, and catastrophe from which the city cannot recover, and left in the wake of the apocalyptic violence is no longer anything that resembles the Newark of before. The city in which Lou Levov makes his fortune and secures his children and grandchildren a legacy becomes "the worst city in the world" (268); not even a city any longer, but "a carcass" (235). "The old ways of suffering are burning away in the flames, never again to be resurrected, instead to be superseded... by suffering that will be so gruesome, so monstrous, so unrelenting and abundant, that its abatement will take the next five hundred years. The fire this time -- and next? After the fire? Nothing. Nothing in Newark ever again" (268-9).

The apocalypse in the case of Newark does not give way to rebirth; instead, there is only more violence and ruin. Symptomatic of the modern apocalypse, it is an end without end,

an apocalypse that uncovers nothing but more devastation: "People in abandoned buildings. *Fires* in abandoned buildings. Unemployment. Filth. Poverty. More filth. More poverty. Schooling nonexistent. Schools a disaster. On every street corner dropouts. Dropouts doing nothing. Dropouts dealing drugs... Police on the take. Every kind of disease known to man" (345). Himself Newark born and raised, Roth's novel can thus be read as a private elegy to his own place of childhood, "all but obliterated now by the disruptions of ethnic and other kinds of change" (Halio, 1992: 1).

As "a privileged kid from paradise," Merry's childhood and womanhood are irreconcilably divergent (262). In the lengthy and lyrical prose that describes Merry's idyllic childhood -- at one with her rural surroundings, adored by her parents, indulged in all her desires -- Roth's tone is powerfully evocative and elegiac. Before the Fall is paradise itself, rendered all the more nostalgic by how abruptly it is shattered. For the Swede, Merry before and Merry after are two different people, the former the idealised product of his imagination, and the latter the child who 'fits' neither Dawn nor himself. Because, in Rigsbee's words, "the elegiac complexion can spread from the occasions of specific deaths and be put to use manifesting more abstract, and yet nearer, facts of absence," the symbolic death of the daughter the Swede imagined, is mourned along with a broader national condition of loss (1999: 8). The end of American innocence, the loss of the Edenic pastoral, and the death of the dream itself are not specific to the Swede's story; they are instead the culminating effects of a century in which the rupture between the image and the real has catalysed revolution, violence, and upheaval of an unimaginable kind. If the Fifties were about creating an image, the Sixties, it seems, are

about shattering that image -- the America that is all about surface and illusion, a mere simulacrum for which no original ever existed. The sense of loss is profound, not least because Merry's was a life three generations in the making: "from slave-driven great-grandfather to self-driven grandfather to self-confident, accomplished, independent father to the highest high flier of them all, the fourth-generation child for whom America was to be heaven itself" (122). The Jewish dream for assimilation and ordinariness -- a legacy of centuries of oppression and persecution and exile -- is as complex and problematic as the American Dream itself. The desire to be like everyone else, at the same time as being successfully distinct from the masses, presents a conflict of interest that the Swede has attempted to reconcile with blandness, but that Merry has taken to the other extreme. Generations of Jews who have fought stigmas and suffering in order to provide their children with the benefits of an unburdened existence have instead, in the mid-twentieth century, given birth to a generation that is dissatisfied and disgruntled for opposing reasons. Rebelling now against their good fortune, Merry's generation of American Jews find it necessary to actively reject and deny their lives of privilege in order to re-shape identities of their own. "Once Jews ran away from oppression; now they run away from no-oppression. Once they ran away from being poor; now they run away from being rich. It's crazy. They have parents they can't hate anymore because their parents are so good to them, so they hate America instead" (255).

The Swede's response to his daughter's act of radicalism is a retreat of another kind, into the dream world of 'before,' and the fantasy of Merry's innocence and Merry's return. Because the Swede's life is one of surface perfection, he can only deal with tragedy by

denying its impact on his outer reality. "And in the everyday world, nothing to be done but respectfully carry on the huge pretence of living as himself, with all the shame of masquerading as the ideal man" (174). Doing the right thing, remaining the perfect citizen despite the monster daughter he somehow -- inexplicably -- brought into the world, the Swede miraculously manages to maintain a façade. Yet not even a man as resolutely indestructible as the Swede can split himself off from reality without suffering the consequences of a hopelessly divided self. Thus, while "the outer life... is conducted just as it used to be... it is accompanied by an inner life, a gruesome inner life of tyrannical obsessions, stifled inclinations, superstitious expectations, horrible imaginings, fantasy conversations, unanswerable questions. Sleeplessness and self-castigation... Enormous loneliness. Unflagging remorse" (174). Life for the Swede is a constant battle of wills, between the part of himself that is the outer image, and the part that is the inner being. Overwhelmed by the explosion that has left his sacred family devastated, the Swede teeters dangerously close to the edge, to succumbing to the impending apocalypse hanging over his head: "This is called living and the other is called dying and this is called madness and this is called mourning and this is called hell, pure hell, and you have to have strong ties to be able to stick it out, this is called trying-to-go-on-as-though-nothing-has-happened and this is called paying-the-full-price-but-in-God's-name-for-what" (130).

The Swede's realisation that his American Dream has been an insubstantial façade relates to a much larger-scale sense of despair at the close of the twentieth century, as the American notion of the Promised Land becomes increasingly problematic. The desire to

be American, to have a real American life, does not necessarily mean what it used to, for America, the Swede discovers too late in life, is no longer what it once was -- or what it was imagined to be. In the twentieth century, America is Eden no more; it is instead "America amok," a place where chaos and dissent have intruded upon everyday life to become the new American reality (277). While the war has devastated the Swede's existence, it has, on a national scale, deeply divided the population and brought about a crisis of the most profound kind. Because, "for Americans, the legacy of the Vietnam War is a legacy of lies, errors, and impotence. It is a legacy of futile sacrifice and glaring inequalities, of ideals coming up short against reality, and of defeat that is so unacceptable that it cannot be named" (Dittmar and Michaud, 1990: 6).

In such a context, the superficial perfection of the Swede's all-American life and all-American family cannot hold together, and the shattering of the image, the harsh onslaught of reality, is the inevitable consequence of a life that is "all façade and subterfuge" (382). While Jerry's brotherly instincts are sorely lacking, his position as the novel's voice of (raging) reason is perfectly cast, and the multiple home truths he delivers to the Swede are at once scathing and apt:

You wanted Miss America? Well, you've got her, with a vengeance -- she's your daughter! You wanted to be a real American jock, a real American marine, a real American hotshot with a beautiful Gentile babe on your arm? You longed to belong like everybody else to the United States of America? Well, you do now, big boy, thanks to your daughter. The reality of this place is right up in your kisser

now. With the help of your daughter you're as deep in the shit as a man can get, the real American crazy shit. America amok! America amuck! (277)

Dawn's depression and attempted suicides reflect her own desire to go under, to bring the end closer, in order that she may enjoy the freedom of release from the painful reality that has overtaken their lives. If her urge to self-destruct is a violent symptom of apocalypse, her subsequent reinvention is the sign of her rebirth. The facelift is indeed a "heroic renewal" of a woman who wanted to die, for in erasing the marks of time and experience -- of history -- Dawn is creating a tabula rasa upon which a new history and a new future may be written (187). Rejoicing in being given "a new life. Both from within and from the outside," Dawn is confident that her new face will betray none of her secret shame at having birthed the Rimrock bomber (188). "'He did do a great job'... 'Erased all that suffering. He gave her back her face.' No longer does she have to look in the mirror at the record of her misery. It had been a brilliant stroke: she had got the thing out from directly in front of her" (298).

By abandoning "the face assaulted by the child," Dawn abandons the burden of that terrible history at the same time as she separates her new self off from the wife and mother she once was (299). But perhaps even more than guaranteeing her a future, the facelift also marks a return to a before time of Dawn's own youth and innocence and freedom from tragedy. In making herself appear younger, Dawn is taking herself out of the present and back to the idyllic past in an act of elegy for the Dawn Dwyer she was before she became Mrs Levov, wife of a Jew, mother of a murderess. In a similar vein,

having an affair with a man as arrogantly secure in his American heritage as Orcutt is, Dawn aligns herself with the least complex of American identities: a full-blown Protestant, uncomplicated by the intricacies of being Jewish, Catholic, immigrant, poor, or newly rich. Even the Swede can acknowledge that "teamed up with Orcutt she'll be back on the track... rid of the stain of our child, the stain on her credentials, rid of the stain of the destruction of the store, she can begin to resume the uncontaminated life" (385).

Merry's return to Newark coincides with the revelations of betrayal regarding Watergate, and for her father, the combination of public and private deception is a shocking realisation that nothing in American life is what it seems. In the political arena, the loss of faith in the country's leaders marks a crucial turning point in American history. For what can be the fate of America's future if the country's leaders have deceived their own people? "Beginning with the civil rights movement and continuing through the Watergate scandals and beyond, the credibility of the icons by which American nationalism and a mythical 'American way of life' had traditionally been expressed was shattered" (Dittmar and Michaud, 1990: 6). Discovering the terrible truth of the country he so fiercely loves, the Swede's world is collapsed again and again as his innocence is destroyed. The sense that the world is conspiring against his happiness is devastating enough for the Swede, yet even more intolerable is his realisation of his own failure to understand people. "Was he the only one unable to see what people were up to? ... Was it stupidity deforming him, the simpleton son of a simpleton father, or was life just one big deception that everyone was on to except him?" (356). Confronted with the harsh reality of multiple betrayals by

the people closest to him, the Swede's American Dream becomes even more of a nightmare than before. "Yes, at the age of forty-six, in 1973, almost three-quarters of the way through the century that with no regard for the niceties of burial had strewn the corpses of mutilated children and their mutilated parents everywhere, the Swede found out that we are all in the power of something demented. It's just a matter of time, honky. We all are!" (256).

As a Jain, Merry's new violence is a violence against herself, against her decaying and deprived body. As a believer in total non-violence, Merry's life has come full circle, but her new identity is as pitiful (if not more so) as her former one as an activist. Living in the most appalling filth and squalor, Merry "lived even worse than her greenhorn great-grandparents had, fresh from steerage, in their Prince Street tenement" (237). Her life has turned into everything it was not meant to be as the daughter of the perfected Jewish-American Swede. The destroyer of all things good, of all the hard work and history and progress of both her family and a collective family of similarly striving immigrant Jews, Merry has committed her crimes not only against the victims of her terrorism, but against three generations of forebears. "Three generations. All of them growing. The working. The saving. The success. Three generations in raptures over America. Three generations of becoming one with a people. And now with the fourth it had all come to nothing. The total vandalization of their world" (237). Determined to discard every remnant of her family history and family legacy, Merry's conversion to Jainism is the final step in severing ties with the past. Literally and metaphorically a shadow of her former self, the little which remains of Merry is frail and insubstantial. Actively involved in bringing

herself closer to death -- in pre-empting the end -- for Merry, the ultimate apocalyptic moment will be the re-incarnation of her soul, her crossing over from this life into the next. "Always pretending to be somebody else" is how the Swede sees his daughter, and thus, Merry the Jain is simply another of Merry's experimentations with identities (242). Only this identity, like most of the others, is destructive rather than constructive, and Merry's life can only end in wreckage, for "her determination to leave behind her, in ruin, her parents' contemptible life had driven her to the disaster of destroying herself" (263). The appalling state of his daughter is enough to override any joy the Swede might feel to be reunited with her. Physically repulsed by the sight and smell of his daughter's body, the Swede finds Merry "disgusting... a human mess stinking of human waste. Her smell is the smell of everything organic breaking down. It is the smell of no coherence. It is the smell of all she's become" -- and indeed, it is the smell of death (265). The horror of Merry's existence contrasted against the Swede's lovingly described details of the child-Merry's perfect form works as an elegy for this childhood state of wholeness, for "her body in the crib... Her bare feet... her grasping toes... the stinky legs... the implausible belly button... the face... eyes unclouded... the dried apricots that are her ears..." (270). But the Swede's celebration of all that his daughter was before is only a fleeting diversion from the reality of who she now is, and what she has done. Consequently, such moments of elegiac mourning, as befitting modern elegies, offer little consolation at all -- only a reminder of loss.

The Swede's "second shot at a unified life controlled by good sense and the classic restraints" is a determined attempt to leave the pain and shame of his past behind ( 81).

With a new wife and a new family, the Swede's life can continue in his preferred vein of ordinariness. No terrorist daughter, no mentally unsound wife, and no mention of the lost child -- this is how the Swede rebuilds and remakes his life out of the fragments of its former ruin. Casting that particular history aside, the Swede takes an active step in forging a second life, a counter-life that will void the destructiveness of the past. In such terms, the apocalypse really is the Swede's second chance to make things right, to live the life and the dream that is both his birthright and his reward. Splitting off from everything undesirable and potentially uncontrollable, the Swede is intent on living his new life free from the forces that destroyed his former existence. "It was as though he had abolished from his world everything that didn't suit him -- not only deceit, violence, mockery, and ruthlessness but anything remotely coarse-grained, any threat of contingency, that dreadful harbinger of helplessness" (34). As a consequence, this life is as much of a façade as the previous one -- a life lived "behind a mask. A lifetime experiment in endurance. A performance over a ruin" (81).

Desperate to compensate for the tragedy of Merry's actions and his own role in creating the 'monster daughter,' the Swede's rebirth is possible only if he denies the suffering. Thus, "what he has instead of a being... is blandness -- the guy's radiant with it. He has devised for himself an incognito, and the incognito has become him" (23). Yet in his desire to live outside of history, the Swede's incognito offers the world a pathetic and insubstantial man, a man who appears to have it all, but whose entire life is a mere front - - "unnatural, all artificial, all of it" (277). The Swede's mode of survival then, is not in life, but in death -- the death of the real self, which in any case was only ever a façade,

and the slow and painful death-while-alive of a man living a lie. "He 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).

A theme crucial to *American Pastoral* is that of seeing -- for ultimately, both Roth and Merry are concerned with the apocalyptic unveiling of realities that are unwelcome and discomforting intrusions into the preferred American existence. Merry's protest is directly aimed at her country, yet indirectly linked to her parents and the lives they lead. For living in the oblivion of pastoral paradise, the Swede and Dawn are consciously removing themselves from the chaos of the real, isolating their family from the poor, the dispossessed, the marginalised -- the Americans who are not white, middle-class and privileged like themselves, whose presence in America can be ignored so long as they remain on the outside, apart, and safely contained. The America the Levovs are living in is *unreal* America, a utopia that can remain intact only if it can remain entirely insulated against the forces that threaten it -- which is to say, an increasingly powerful and provocative resistance that is "supplanting everything commonplace that people love about this country" (347). Even as a Jewish man married to a Catholic woman, raising a child who flirts with both her maternal grandmother's Catholic beliefs, and her paternal grandfather's Jewishness, the Swede refuses to confront the complexity of Merry's hybridised identity. For the Swede, being an American is the beginning and the end; this fact is the definitive mark of identity, because in his Johnny Appleseed fantasy-world, all Americans live in peace and harmony. For the Swede, every day is Thanksgiving, "the

American pastoral par excellence," during which the whole of America is in unified celebration of their country (402). For the Swede, a man so concerned with appearances, with superficially ordinary Americanness, there is nothing of substance below the surface; his whole life is "unrevealed," (276). Thus, for "the boy who never breaks the code," a violent and horrifically real bomb is the only way for Merry to get her father to see. Again, it is Jerry who seems to be the Levov most adept at penetrating the surface, most determined to shatter the image his father and his brother have so carefully maintained. Recognising Merry's actions for what they are, he implores his brother to *see*: "That's what she's been blasting away at -- that façade. All your fucking *norms*. Take a good look at what she did to your *norms*" (274). Yet, if the reality of the bomb and the fugitive daughter uncovers anything, it is only *more* façade, more carefully constructed outer worlds that conceal the real. Still, the Swede does not see, does not *want* to see the America his daughter hates, or the daughter he cannot bring himself to hate.

The novel's end is itself an end without end, a conclusion that reveals only more chaos, and an apocalypse that fails. The pastoral setting and the genteel civility of a dinner party unravel rapidly into a scene of violence and disorder. While the Swede's life veers increasingly out of his control with each of the day's startling revelations, the dinner table conversation reveals that the whole of Middle America is involved in upheaval of equal force. From Black Consciousness to feminism, from riots to war, America is in the midst of social, political, and moral revolution, and there is no escape. The sense of doom that pervades is palpably apocalyptic -- America's end is near, and the forces of destruction can be held off no longer: "The outlaws are everywhere. They're inside the gates" (366).

The Swede's existence in Old Rimrock -- "Out there playing at being Wasps, a little Mick girl from the Elizabeth docks and a Jewboy from Weequahic High. The cows. Cow society. Colonial old America" -- has been violently disrupted and then rebuilt, but on this night, it seems destined to end (280).

The novel's climactic scene is again focused on vision -- this time, perhaps the origins of flawed vision. In stabbing Lou dangerously close to his eye -- her drunken state possibly the only reason for her poor aim -- Jessie attacks a man who will not see, a man whose dream of America has not only clouded his vision, but obscured it completely. The gesture is symbolically apocalyptic, yet the apocalypse fails once more to offer profound revelation and hopeful renewal. The attack on Lou may be a sign that everything conventional and traditional in 'honky' America is about to change, but such a moment is also characteristic of Robinson's definition of American apocalypses as apocalypses without apocalypse. While the nature of the Levov's parting is never made explicit, the Swede and Dawn do carve out different lives and new beginnings. Yet the façade remains as outwardly impenetrable as before, as much of an illusion as pastoral idyll of Old Rimrock. America too, changes, evolves, and overcomes one history for another, but like the Swede, there is no dramatic death and rebirth into newness -- only sameness. With the final image of Marcia's bitter laughter at the Levov's "going rapidly under," the novel also refuses to offer consolation (423).

Yet consolation is perhaps best sought elsewhere -- not through the Swede's story, but through the narrator of the Swede's story. The Swede's lifestory is, after all, Zuckerman's

fantasy of his childhood idol -- a fantasy and a fiction. While Zuckerman appears as a character in the novel's first section, he is soon entirely absent from the narration, never to reappear. Yet, given Zuckerman's determination to tell the Swede's story, to penetrate the substratum of the Newark legend's life, *American Pastoral* is ultimately as much the story of Nathan Zuckerman as it is the story of Swede Levov.

Ageing, incontinent, and impotent, without family, and living in a state of self-imposed 'exile,' Zuckerman's life is bleak -- or at least bland. "Live without dinner, live without pussy," he tells those who ask, and at his school reunion, his lifestory boils down to a bypass: "I have neither child nor grandchild, but I did, ten years ago, have a quintuple bypass operation of which I am very proud" (62). Zuckerman's life, it would seem, is the antithesis of the American Dream. Granted, he may be a successful writer, but his personal life leaves much to be desired. With a slowly decaying body, the dual shame and emasculation of impotence, and an almost total lack of human interaction, it is Zuckerman's world that is diminishing before his eyes. In re-writing the Swede's story, then, he is re-writing his own -- using the art form and the act of writing as a cathartic step to coming to terms with his own losses, failures, and tragedies. And, since his novel is centred on the apocalypse, it is also indirectly a novel about hope -- for in offering the image of apocalypse, the writer performs an act of regeneration. Writing itself creates order and pattern, the chaos of the world is mediated through language, and the result is a consolatory alternative to catastrophe:

Instead of the experience of apocalyptic catastrophe with its dubious promise of renewal, the writer offers the *image* of apocalypse, the writing itself as 'iconically mediatory.' The text may then present cataclysm to us, but its authority as sustaining fiction will lie in the alternative it offers to despair, even if that alternative is the self-reflexive meditation on the staying power of the art form itself. (Marx, 1997: 28)

Peter Sacks writes that we are living in a "distinctly elegiac age," but we are also living in an age where apocalyptic yearnings for America are as prolific as they were when the country was first settled (Sacks, 1985: 325). Thus combined, the yearning for apocalypse and the profound state of loss in the twentieth century, gives voice to a country painfully in conflict between the desire for a future and the desire for consolation for the past. If American apocalypses are destined to be apocalypses without renewal and regeneration, only rebirth into new cycles of the same form, Roth's millennial novel is not simply an elegy for lost dreams, innocence and ideas of Americanness -- it is also an elegy for the failure of the apocalypse to deliver on its promise. Yet if the image of the apocalypse can be redemptive in and of itself, all, surely, is not lost.

## Conclusion: Rise and Fall, Rise and Fall

The intricacies of 'Americanness' disallow and disavow any simple reading of the term, and I do not in any way propose to have cracked the code. Yet it seems clear that regarding the American psyche at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the apocalyptic and the elegiac moods offer profound insight into the state of that very complex consciousness. For at the dawn of the twenty-first century, and at present, a mere four years into that century, America is a place of intense disunity and discontent -- both from within and from without. The devastation of 9/11, the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the continual threat of acts of terrorism -- not to mention contentious foreign policies and controversial internal affairs -- have rendered America a country deeply in conflict with itself, and deeply paranoid. It is perhaps befitting then, that at such a point in history, American literature responds with its own contradictory form. While individually, *Blonde*, *Underworld*, and *American Pastoral* read as distinct narratives with distinguishing styles, collectively, the three novels comprise a useful oeuvre for the exploration of millennial America -- a peculiar blend of loss and promise that is artistically expressed through the use of the elegiac and the apocalyptic modes.

Apocalyptic thought, centred as much on destruction as on rebirth, is appropriate to the close of a century and a millennium, for at such times, the sense of an ending is particularly pronounced. While the apocalypse forms a central part of American history, its place in America today is equally crucial. The rhetoric of America as the saviour nation still finds a place in contemporary culture, despite the increasing secularisation of

the Western world. If the Puritans settled America with the firm belief in its powers of redemption, modern America's social, political, and economic policies suggest a similar faith in the nation's ability to lead the world to salvation. "America still insists upon seeing itself as the world's policeman, as somehow ordained by God to bear an awesome responsibility in the millennial purification of the nations" (Robinson, 1985: 64).

Furthermore, in our age of both man-made and environmental catastrophe --biological, nuclear, and religious warfare, increasing environmental disasters, worldwide holocaust, widespread disease and poverty, the breakdown of the family, and the birth of a technocracy, to name but a few -- we are continuously being bombarded with images of destruction that are easily interpretable as signs of the end. Indeed, a state of global crisis, the sense of the apocalyptic continues to dominate, continues to hold its original appeal, and evoke its original terror.

In the novels discussed, apocalyptic renewal takes on multiple forms -- from the creation of a second self (*Blonde*), to the abandonment of personal history (*Underworld*), to the splitting off from unwanted reality (*American Pastoral*). American identities are revealed as fluid and malleable, exchanged, negated, or re-imagined. Reborn anew after splitting off from the old, characters perform the ultimate American apocalypse in their quest for the American Dream. Yet American apocalypses, we know, are apocalypses *without* apocalypse -- a hopeful dream of historical apocalypse, "a dream of transformation *of* history *in* history," that ultimately fails (Robinson, 1985: 2).

Consequently, although the ideology of the apocalypse may offer the promise of rebirth and regeneration, the cost is always too great. In *Blonde*, the result of Norma Jeane's split

selves is a woman doomed to self-destruction and despair, for she can never hold together the image self and the real self. *Underworld's* Nick Shay is similarly fated to an unreal existence, for in his determination to bury his history as efficiently as he buries toxic waste, he has become deeply estranged from life itself. In *American Pastoral*, the triumphantly all-American Swede finds that maintaining a façade is as painful as it is soul-destroying. Thus, the apocalyptic hopes of Norma Jeane, Nick, and the Swede may offer them the hope of reinvention, but that is where it begins and ends: dramatic revelations lead nowhere, there is no rebirth into innocence, and no way to disentangle from the past. Instead, history -- both private and public -- proves to be inescapable, and the utopian dream of apocalypse wholly unattainable. And yet, despite their necessary failure -- and perhaps even because of it -- American apocalypses, like American Dreams, are fundamental to the American experience. Fundamentally impossible, yet ever-enduring and ever-hopeful, both the American apocalypse and the American Dream have dominated American ideology since its inception, and no doubt will continue to do so in the centuries to follow, for "we are continually tempted to predict, even when these predictions are continually disconfirmed by the impartial onward movement of time" (Marx, 1997: 25).

If the American elegy is a journey through loss, and a search for consolation, *Blonde*, *Underworld*, and *American Pastoral* certainly endeavour to do just that. Yet, as with American apocalypses, the modern elegy often "tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (Ramazani, 1994: xi). While *Blonde's* conclusion follows the traditional elegy's

movement towards consolation, it is consolation of a somewhat distressing kind.

'Marilyn's' posthumous rebirth into the world of myth is after all, only repeating the many transformations of self she endured during her life -- and each and every one sees the reproduction of the image, and not the real. Indeed, Norma Jeane's America is a place where the real and the simulacra are dangerously close, and the consequent loss of the real is both a symptom and a product of twentieth-century America. Yearning always for a before-time that never existed, Norma Jeane's life is a fitting allegory for modern America's state of being. What *Blonde* eulogises most explicitly, is not only the loss of the real, but also the shattered image of the real that had the potential to offer consolation.

*Underworld's* sense of consolation is similarly diminished by the fact that miracles now take place in cyberspace -- and in fact, Esmeralda's rebirth is an ironic reconstruction of Monroe's. Yet overall, *Underworld's* elegiac mood is felt most expressly in terms of a national loss of connection. Again, life for many of the characters takes on the appearance of fiction, but the most harrowing losses are to be found in the realm of personal loss: dying men, abused children, abandoned sons, alienated relationships. In DeLillo's America, the past -- a combination of both the wonderful and the tragic -- is a subject worthy of elegy, for it is only through uncovering the past, remembering it, writing it, re-imagining it, that the present can be adequately understood. The past is at once lamented and praised and condemned, but the novel's final pages work towards consolation of some kind, and as such, seem to offer a sense of muted hopefulness for the future.

*American Pastoral* is decidedly less consolatory, for its characters fail to find the consolation they require. And in fact, consolation seems to be denied altogether. But then Roth is engaged with the modern elegy, and "modern elegists tend to enact the work... of 'melancholic' mourning -- mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent... Scorning recovery and transcendence, modern elegists neither abandon the dead nor heal the living" (Ramazani, 1994: 4). Yet, in its very nature as a work of mourning, the novel offers an elegy for the Swede's lost family and a wrenching account of a nation's failure to deliver on its promises, the image of the apocalypse that ultimately prevails does offer a degree of hope for the future.

While the contemporary elegy is fundamentally about coming to terms with loss in the modern world, it is also inherently about *remembering*. Recent news about the building of the Freedom Tower upon the site of the fallen World Trade Centre reminds us that the need and the desire to mourn, to console, and to remember, forms as vital a part of the American present as of the American future. "Memorials are powerful refusals of the modern taboo on death and grief -- imaginative acts that may finally be prodding our society beyond denial and embarrassment and toward reaffirmation of the human work of mourning" (Ramazani, 1994: 365). Consequently, as responses to catastrophic destruction, the novels of Oates, DeLillo, and Roth are as focused on mourning the death of the twentieth century as they are on offering consolation -- for the novels in and of themselves perform some sort of 'memorial' function. The fact that these writers engage with the apocalyptic mode is equally reassuring, for crucial to the apocalypse is *change*. If the contemporary America which Oates, DeLillo, and Roth describe is very bleak --

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