The Economics of Fantasy

Stockton, Sharon

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One of the central projects of postmodernism has been the gradual but relentless dismantling of the white masculine subject, and that dissemination, as I have attempted to show, is commonly embodied in the victimized bodies of girls and women. The violently penetrated female body speaks to the cultural formations that uncomfortably link late capitalism and white masculinity; it articulates the difficult association of masculinity with consumer fetishism and with productive agency, and it finally reveals the vulnerability of the masculine body itself within a global system that is both self-organizing and yet given to a frightening tendency toward entropic decay. At the same time, however, as I hope to argue here, rape narrative is also employed within postmodern fiction to resuscitate the white male subject. There are texts that suggest—precisely through heterosexual violence—a regrouping, or a reemergence of the father amidst post–cold war consumer glut, finance capitalism, and waste management. Ironically, the white masculinity reestablished in this type of postmodern rape narrative is defined in sharp contrast to sexual violence and is actually dependent on the repeated and emphatic casting out of the desire to rape. One is tempted to claim that the essence of the shift is the emergence of compassion, an installation of the kindness so explicitly and self-consciously absent from Thomas Pynchon’s texts. There is an overarching grief in the texts of Don DeLillo and John Irving, the two writers I will take up here—grief for a lost masculinity, and grief for the raped girl or woman. That grief, however, as (massively) sympathetically rendered as it is, is predicated on the presence of a victim for whom to feel grief. The rapist is thus preserved as he is scapegoated, and he remains to haunt the borders and underground of the text; his violence necessarily continues to operate, denounced and yet crucial for masculine (anti)definition.
The rapist’s (outcast) presence thus powers the post-masculinist white masculinity that redeems the new wasteland. In a skewed sense, he is a travestied return of the muscled, blue-collar laborer under advanced capitalism, “producing” the ultimate consumer item, one which not only effaces its own violent production and material existence but which ends up circulating within what Joseph Tabbi calls “the placeless, selfless sphere of electronic transcendence” (206). The rape victim, herself heavily fetishized, becomes a holy martyr in what would otherwise be a morally withered universe—a narrative development that contrasts starkly with the representation of rape victims in the feminist texts I discuss in the final chapter. DeLillo’s *Underworld*, itself a reworking of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, achieves narrative epiphany in the saintly, post-death apparition of Esmeralda Lopez, the twelve-year-old raped and murdered in the wastelands of the Bronx. John Irving’s protagonists achieve mature masculinity when they acknowledge that a rape victim is “holy” (*Hotel New Hampshire* 441). The sexually victimized female body is thus defined both as vulnerable to the touch of displaced masculine violence and yet untouchable to the average man. Rape becomes the occasion to reflect on the “redemptive quality” of the flows and recirculations of late capitalism, the miraculous fact that the compromised masculine self has been rendered invisible but has not been obliterated (*Underworld* 809). In a significant way, abstract value is thus ideologically produced in a way that nullifies and condemns the laborer (the rapist) while building up the consumer/investor—s/he who watches and witnesses and grieves. This masculine regret and disavowal—in the midst of claiming ownership—is a part of a new vision of subjectivity, a vision explicitly celebrated in the novel as “real” finally, outside the fantastical illusions of late capitalism.

*Underworld* is most centrally about waste: the massive waste accumulated, underground or not, figuratively or actually, through the combined forces of cold war–era military industrial production and post–World War II domestic consumerism. Jesse Kavadlo makes the apt point that the *Underworlds* “excess and sheer length” alone “seem an aesthetic reflection of the world described within the novel” (387). The fact that Nick Shay, the central character to the extent that there is a central character, is a waste manager is only a reflection of a larger theme:

[T]he novel’s explicit subject is waste, literal and figurative: landfills and recycled junk; excrement; nuclear waste; wasted lives, wasted time, the best minds of a generation devoted to waste; burying waste, unearthing waste; civilizations built and ended on account of waste; getting wasted, in terms of both drugs and murder as made emblematic in Nick’s murder of George the waiter, the junkie who
uses heroin (junk, shit) and gets wasted (killed) for it. Underworld shows it all, while self-consciously acknowledging that any excess, even literary, is a kind of waste product. (387)

To inhabit the late twentieth century, then, the perspective from which or toward which the events of the novel spiral, is inevitably to have entered the postmodern scene, an overdetermined space, the clutter of which disavows the heroic engineering myths of earlier forms of capitalism. In this sense, the novel echoes the way Fredric Jameson pictures the “modern age” as “a period in which . . . the deep underlying materiality of all things has finally risen dripping and convulsive into the light of day” (Postmodernism 67). In fact, the burgeoning waste—in its sheer material (convulsive) excess—is figured as that which has come to supplant human/masculine agency. The connections that emerge among the scattered scraps of waste do not originate in anything that would suggest human intention—nor do they link up in rational chains of cause and effect; they are self-organizing.

The novel thus charts the evolution of late capitalism from a seemingly coherent and clean system of production and use/consumption to an incoherent process of random accumulation. “The cold war is your friend” because it stands in for a bygone belief in the reasonable interconnections between production, consumption, politics, and morality (Underworld 170). Peter Knight argues that the novel’s self-conscious shift from cold war–era fear to contemporary conspiracy theory articulates an important ideological development in American culture, from “an inflexible and monolithic belief structure in a personalized cabal, to contradictory, ironic, and self-reflexive appropriation of the language of conspiracy theory,” an appropriation that addresses “the bewildering complexities of the current world in which everything is connected but nothing adds up” (821–22)—or, as Kathleen Stewart puts it, where “the more you know, the less you know” (13). In a post–cold war era, accumulation stands in for coherence: “[T]he hidden story of recent history is not to be found buried in government files, waiting to be pieced together into a coherent story of shadowy conspirators. Instead it is to be found in the daily ephemera and vast entanglements of multinational consumer capitalism, both more obvious because it is omnipresent, and less detectable because it is so much taken for granted” (Knight 820). “Self-reflexive” paranoia denies the (seemingly) secure identity available through narratives of us and them, stories in which the “other” is comfortably psychologized, if put beyond the pale of civilized behavior. Like the random taping of the highway killer, the new paranoia “[says] terrible things about forces beyond your control, lines of intersection that cut through history and logic and every reasonable layer of human expectation” (157). As in Gravity’s Rainbow, the lack
of control over experience results finally in the dissemination of the self, a quality well suited to the excesses and motility of consumer capitalism, where “it is the camera that puts [you] in the tale” (157).

Cold war nostalgia thus suggests a desire for the imagined days of secure, human- and plot-centered paranoia, the days when (so the collective memory goes) a self could still think itself as a unified (if threatened) subject through imagined alliance and identification with the phallic power of unchecked weapons production. Knight argues that it is specifically the productive aspect of the cold war that is appealing for some of the characters of Underworld—their desire “might . . . be read . . . as a displaced and timely nostalgia for the older—though no less scary—secure paranoia of Fordism” (825). The massive-scale uniformity of military industrial production in the 1950s can appear almost to cover over the simultaneous shift toward the massive wastage of consumer economy and identity, a point DeLillo makes clear in part 5 of Underworld, “Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry,” the slogan for Dow Chemical. The section includes a heavily satirical portrayal of the stereotypical white suburban family of the 1950s—vaguely terrified of the Soviet Union, image-conscious, and consumerist. As Molly Wallace points out, “What is immediately apparent here is the prevalence of commodities and the ways in which these characters are defined (and define themselves) in relation to commodity culture” (370). The consumerism, however, is covered over with fantasies of association with the productive forces of the cold war so that both dynamics appear ludicrously connected. While Mom industriously makes Jell-O in her two-tone kitchen and Dad simonizes the two-tone Fairlane in the breezeway, for example, young Eric “sat in his room, behind drawn fiberglass curtains, jerking off into a condom. He liked using a condom because it had a sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system, the Honest John, a surface-to-surface missile with a warhead that carried yields of up to forty kilotons” (514). This he does while eying a photograph of Jayne Mansfield, focusing first on the breasts and then on “the facial Jayne,” “put together out of a thousand thermoplastic things” (515). In fact, the constructed-product quality of “the facial Jayne” is precisely what is unconsciously appealing to young Eric: “it was the masking waxes, liners, glosses and creams that became the soft moist mechanism of release” (515).

What remains hidden from Tyrone Slothrop throughout much of Gravity’s Rainbow is the fact that his erections mark not his identification with the rocket but his vulnerability to it. And what remains hidden to Eric in the midst of this erotic objectification of Mansfield is the absurdity of the comparison of his penis to a missile, the vulnerability of the body encased in weapons-like material (“This [the condom] was technology they
wanted to wrap around my dick”; Brian Glassic points out in another con- 
text; “[t]his was mass-produced latex they used to paint battleships” [110]), 
and the extent to which his sexuality (like his masculinity) is circumscribed 
by 1950s consumerism. The powerful identification with weapons technol-
ogy—the “Honest John,” ironically enough—covers over these things; this 
is precisely the mechanism that motivates cold war nostalgia for characters 
in the 1980s and 1990s sections of the book: “They put thermal pads on 
the Honest John to heat the solid fuel in preparation for firing. Then they 
remove the pads and launch the missile from a girderlike launch rail in a 
grassy somewhere in the Free World. And the missile’s infallible flight, the 
way it seeps out precise volumes of mathematical pace, it’s so saintly and 
sun-tipped, swinging out of its apex to dive to earth, and the way the fire-
ball haloes out above its column of smoke and roar, like some nameless face-
less whatever. It made him want to be a Catholic” (514–15). Jiwei Ci argues 
that “it is a measure of capitalism’s remarkable social and economic 
resourcefulness” that it can retain the transcendent promise underlying the 
Protestant work ethic at a time when the imperative for profit maximization 
is realized much more crucially through consumption than through pro-
duction (315). Eric’s fantastical association with the productive might of 
the military lends his (highly consumerist) masturbation a sense of mystical 
meaning and/or release (“meaning and release,” Ci points out, have become 
“increasingly indistinguishable” under consumer capitalism [315]). The 
novel itself obviously puts this promise of “meaning” into question. The 
masturbation scene, as Philip Nel points out, “sends out waves of satire in 
many directions at once, rippling toward not only patriarchy but mili-
tarism, conspicuous consumption, and the vocabulary of advertisements” 
(421). Selfhood—and masculinity—are no longer to be thought in relation 
to either large-scale, volitional production or heterosexual violence. Rather, 
late-twentieth-century subjectivity generally and masculinity most particu-
larly are developed in relationship to waste management, grappling with the 
reckage generated as an effect of an earlier era of pointless productivity. 
“All those decades,” Viktor muses toward the end of the novel, “when we 
thought about weapons all the time and never thought about the dark mul-
tiplying byproduct.” With the cold war over, the American can respond, 
“And in this case . . . In our case, in our age. What we excrete comes back 
to consume us” (791).

Thus, for characters in the 1990s frame of Underworld, young Eric’s 
erotic identification with “the nameless faceless whatever” of weapons tech-
nology has become largely unthinkable. Klara Sax articulates the sense that 
with the end of the cold war, “power” and “greatness” have gone the way 
of secure paranoia—they have cut themselves loose from a human—or 
even a comprehensible—center:
Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don’t even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction. Not that I want to bring it back. It’s gone, good riddance. But the fact is. (76)

That “all technology leads to the bomb” (467) is no longer a reason for nationalist pride—a pride in which one might personally share—but is rather an epiphany about “the bewildering complexities of the current world in which everything is connected but nothing adds up” (Knight 822). Eric himself, now grown up and working as a weapons scientist in the nineties, makes himself felt in the narrative almost exclusively through his repeated and repeatedly graphic descriptions of the effects of radiation, the tests deliberately conducted on humans. In an affectation reminiscent of Tyrone Slothrop, he assumes a stutter to deliver the horrifying details, an affectation that reinforces the peripheral nature—and secondary, constructed quality—of the masculine voice in the face of post-human production. As does the rocket in Gravity’s Rainbow, the bomb becomes its own prime mover, and the ultimate representative of the enduring, lethal waste inevitably connected to technological production.

The decenteredness of the human (masculine) subject in the face of the production/waste of the past (and present) speaks to what Mark Osteen terms “a motif of male absence and failure” (230). As Cormaroff and Cormaroff point out more generally, “gone is the deus ex machina, a figure altogether too concrete, too industrial for . . . the post-Fordist era” (294): “In the upshot, production appears to have been superseded, as the fons et origo of wealth, by less tangible ways of generating value: by control over such things as the provision of services, the means of communication, and above all, the flow of finance capital. In short, by the market and by speculation” (295). Yet in Underworld this “absence” is a particularly haunting one, full of suggestion. In a variety of ways, for example, Nick Shay toys with the fantastical resuscitation of his father, Jimmy Costanza—a man who was always, ironically enough, removed from the purely productive role by being by profession a numbers runner, a man defined by the market and by speculation. His disappearance has been shrouded in mystery, a fog that serves Nick well, as he can imagine any number of coherent gangster plots with which to replace that unknown (“they took him out near Orchard Beach . . . , and they dropped him into
the lower world, his body suspended above the rockweed, in the soft organic murk” ([119])—like the stories he tells neighbor children, appropriately enough, while sitting on the toilet. Ultimately, it becomes clear that his father’s absence will no more be contained in a securely paranoid narrative than it will be replaced by his return; it will become its own burgeoning presence, as lethal, enduring, and without boundary as the nuclear waste with which Nick works as an adult. Like the waste he deals in, his father has become a thing of the underworld, the “lower world,” “the soft organic murk,” as Ruth Helyer has pointed out (992); he is one of those who might “live unknown to us in the crawlspace of the . . . infrastructure, down the tunnels and under the bridge approaches” (Underworld 323).

In short, Jimmy Constanza has entered the flow of the underworld, has begun circulating like the mysterious ship of human waste, appearing in memory, dreams, fantasies, and mutually contradictory narratives, and while on the one hand he has left Nick nothing but a second-hand affected gangster voice, on the other hand he is explicitly associated with great riches, both mythical and actual, as is the waste itself: “We built pyramids of waste above and below the earth. The more hazardous the waste, the deeper we tried to sink it. The word plutonium comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld. They took him out to the marshes and wasted him as we say today, or used to say until it got changed to something else” (106). The legacy of a lost world of power is multi-billion-dollar business, in one way of looking at it—the lucrative business of waste management. It is a business that distills the motive force of a new economy—the vertiginous circulation of finance capital—while downplaying the production and the accumulation both so central within earlier forms of capitalism. The wealth itself as a physical manifestation is nowhere to be found except within these strangely inflated metaphors of pyramid, god, and ruler—figures of speech that lack the mimetic persuasiveness of the cold war narrative of us and them. Even words keep changing—“wasted . . . as we say today, or used to say until it got changed to something else”—as if implicated in the novel’s constant movement of shit, radioactive waste, the baseball, and the missing father. In Underworld everything—“the leftovers, all the leftovers”—is “indefinitely recyclable” (Baudrillard, Illusion of the End, 26, 27).

The circulation and recirculation of waste—even (particularly) lethal waste—thus promises anew that fabulous wealth and power are to be had. Jesse Kavadlo argues that in his role as waste manager Nick Shay parallels not only DeLillo himself specifically but a hope for the postmodern authorial function generally. For both (for all three), what is left at the present time is the possibility inherent in recycling:
DeLillo’s author is alive and a kind of waste manager himself, not unlike Nick Shay, sifting and sorting through the physical, metaphysical, and spiritual excesses, contaminants, and wastes of our modernity. [Like Barthes’s bricolage, Kristeva’s intertextuality, Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, and Bloom’s anxiety of influence, Underworld] suggests the mode of DeLillo’s metaphorical waste manager—reusing, reappropriating, recycling, and ultimately redeeming language. Barthes’s lower-case “a” author (scripteur) draws on, reuses, and remakes the textual “tissue,” as DeLillo’s waste manager turns societal detritus into art, but for DeLillo, the mystery and solemn power of waste turns authorial custodial work into a near mystical experience. (385–86)

Thus it is not surprising that the word “create” eventually works its way into Kavadlo’s argument, suggesting a certain (temporary) stability in the recycling/recirculation process, a moment when boundaries are established and a product is created that signifies something outside itself—something above or below itself. (One thinks of the retired bombers that Klara Sax arranges in the desert and paints a concrete and relatively enduring art work that signifies the cold war.) Kavadlo’s reading also reopens the question of agency, a question that other postmodern theorists of the collage/pastiche either exclude or diminish. For Jameson, for example, pastiche is problematic precisely because it disallows a sense of either linguistic ground or history.

Kavadlo’s reading thus suggests that DeLillo’s novel pulls against itself—conjures the life of the missing father out of his own “soft organic murk.” On one hand, the novel is scathing toward a middle-class cold war era in which penis and warhead together signify masculinity. Further, it explicitly puts into question the coherent cold war narrative that accompanied such an identification and that enabled a certain stable picture of aggressive subjectivity. On the other hand, Nick Shay’s nostalgia for the masculine violence of his own Bronx working class 1950s is narrated seemingly without irony: “I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was 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). The sad straightforwardness of the passage suggests that for Nick, the winter of our discontent has indeed turned to sullen spring. Nick recognizes the cold war as a personal friend. This lost winter before “the breach of peace” created a space for legitimate masculine physical power and violence; it was
a time when manhood was about acting. The physical, hard irreducibility of this imagined past—verified by the repetition of “real,” the word “dumb-muscled”—persists within the boundarylessness and the murk inherent in the circulation of memory, waste, and capital. At the same time, in spite of the presumably necessary “breach of peace,” this portrayal of “real” masculinity disavows complicity with the paranoia or consumerism of the cold war; the “real” man acts with volition and for “mysterious” reasons, uncontained by ideology or external pattern: he “[does] things slap-bang.” Nick’s adolescence is thus set in counterpoint to young Eric’s; Nick’s youth was not spent masturbating into condoms while fantasizing about surface-to-surface missiles, fixating on the creams and waxes on Jayne Mansfield’s photographed face. It is rather Nick’s middle age that feels scripted and unreal, “phony”: “None of it ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms” (796).

Nick’s nostalgia for his “real” youth is echoed by brief and disorienting flashbacks to his random adolescent acts of (fetishistically masculine) violence, which are interjected suddenly and without context throughout the novel. The interjections escalate, becoming slightly more aggressive, slightly more violent—most suggesting the hypermasculinity of the stereotypical James Dean–styled street thug. He “punches a guy to his knees” simply because “he’d never seen the guy before,” and then casually “shoots a game” of pool (714–15). He sleeps with his girlfriend’s best friend in a gesture of aggressive heterosexuality so extreme as to suggest the exuberance of drag:

“You’re a cunt, Gloria.”
“What do you want?”
“You’re a cunt, Gloria.”
“Say something nice, Nicky.”
She was smiling, he wasn’t.
[. . .]
“You’re a cunt in and out and up and down. You’re an all-over cunt through and through.” (773)

He offers advice to Muzz when another driver bumps the back of their 7-Up truck: “‘Get mad,’ Nick told him. ‘Tell him you’ll ram your tire iron up his ass’” (774). The interjections culminate in the narration of Nick’s killing of George Manza, an event that haunts the novel, and yet is not clearly told until the very end of the penultimate section, the final chapter before the epilogue. The killing is clearly a “mystery” to him, as he claims later in life he was to himself, and his “slap-bang” firing of the sawed-off shotgun at George’s head is clearly the “heedless and real” act of “dumb-muscled” “danger” about which he later waxes nostalgic.
Yet the event is at the same time not as “real” as Nick would hope—it is not simply a clean act of a muscular body, without thought, without pre-packaged fantasy and pre-packaged gender scripting. Nick remembers that he “posed with the gun”: “He posed with it, Nick did, a pirate’s pistol or an old Kentucky flintlock if that’s the word. It was more natural two hands than one, the left hand under the forepart to steady and point” (781, 780). Nick imagines himself a swashbuckling Daniel Boone, blending the characteristics of two highly stereotypical (if not clichéd) male figures—the criminal pirate on the high seas and the honorable adventurer, clearing the American path into new land—yet in ways that make the role playing appear “natural”—not role playing at all. Thus, Eric’s erotic association with the violence of missiles is castigated, while Nick’s attraction to the “pirate’s pistol” is identified as “natural.” Young Eric serves as a decoy—his masculinity is not real; Nick’s is real. Eric’s violent fantasies are embarrassingly scripted and clearly serve the ends of capitalism and the state; Nick’s violence is natural and cannot be channeled into a larger sociopolitical, economic, or ideological plan. By the same token, Nick’s inner violence is repressed—for the most part by choice; Eric’s inner violence, on the other hand, has never truly been “inner”—has always been a function of weapons production and cold war economics—and is thus “lost” when Eric stops telling himself stories about missile trajectories and begins telling stories about radiation sickness, human testing, and mutation. Nick’s masculine violence thus remains a real thing, a “natural” entity to put away and cover over; Eric’s masculine violence is not “real” in the same romantic sense, does not bubble up from some underground source but is rather a function of a consumer-driven discursive field that is explicitly shown to generate certain affectations of phallic violence (“the power of the automobile, the horsepower, the decibel rumble of the dual exhausts, the pedal tension of Ford-O-Matic drive . . . eating up the landscape,” “the bumper bullets on a Cadillac”; 516, 517). In short, the fact of the repressed “natural” violence contributes to the notion that Nick is a centered, unified subject who is in every way immune to the effects of (or at least redemptively self-conscious about) the scripted lifestyling of consumerism—the novel makes repeatedly clear that when Nick does make purchases it is always with an eye to discarding them, turning them into neatly packaged recyclables. He denies himself the pleasure of consuming and remains instead rooted in the circulations and flows of the underworld, the same place where repressed violence goes. Eric—young or adult—is just the opposite; he is the “switching center” in precisely the posthumanist sense that Baudrillard seems to intend.

As much as Underworld is about waste, then, it is just as much about the repression—and thus the preservation—of what is naturalized as “real”
masculine violence. The violence doesn’t leave the text or the late twentieth century; it goes underground, in the same sense that Nick’s father goes underground. “I think he wanted to go under” (809), Nick says of Jimmy Constanza. Of his own rage over Brian Glassic’s affair with his (Nick’s) wife, Nick says: “I felt something drain out of me. Some old opposition, a capacity to resist” (801). The violent desire will be allowed to drain off, flow out, seep underground: Nick stares at Brian’s sleeping “old-fashioned face, narrow and boyish, that I could probably crush with five earnest blows. I imagine this with some satisfaction. Dealing a serious blow. But we don’t do that anymore, do we? This is a thing we’ve left behind. Five dealt blows to the pinkish face with the paling hair. But I sit there and watch him, you know, and I’m not sure I want to hit him” (796). What one might be tempted to call the violent core of the novel or of Nick Shay himself would thus more accurately be termed the violent underground stream. Like the increasingly dematerialized (and deterritorialized) movement of global investment capitalism itself, the violence in *Underworld* is always almost (but not quite) visible, always untrackable, but always “real,” flowing directly beneath the scripted domestic lifestyle in which nothing “ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms” (796). One is tempted to argue that the violence forms the type of self-organizing system Tom LeClair argues is descriptive of DeLillo’s novels—the type that is outside of and opposed to the “power of large closed systems, their fake and therefore punishing ‘certitudes’” (27)—because as dark as that underground is, it breeds a certain glinting life. The duality brings to mind Baudrillard’s sometimes vertiginous and sometimes toxic vision of the recirculation of the image or the signifier: “everywhere today one must recycle waste, and the dreams, the phantasms, the historical fairylike legendary imaginary of children and adults is a waste product, the first great toxic excrement of a hyperreal civilization” (*Simulacra* 12).

The novel in its epic whole represses/preserves violence in similar ways; it seeps into the flashbacks, flows into the outskirts, and is recycled into the unsympathetic characters who haunt the margins of the text. The Texas Highway Killer, for example, who inadvertently supplies the missing link in the baseball’s chain of ownership, is for the most part unrelated to the central narratives of the novel and is relatively undeveloped as a character. The randomness of his being the one to uncover the (randomly) missing link is echoed by his random presence in the novel. It is thus not coincidental that his appearance, as Timothy Parrish has pointed out, “marks the point at which the centrifugal energies of the Cold War dissipate” (709).

No one thinks that Richard Henry Gilkey is a part of a plot—it is clear, as it is not in the cold war mythology surrounding Lee Harvey Oswald, that he acts alone, for reasons unknown—or for no particular reason, per se, at
all: “there is no conspiracy to explain Gilkey, no obvious social or political context in which to understand his actions” (Parrish 712).

If alone and inexplicable, however, he is not distinct. Unsure “of the knowledge that he was real,” blending into other copycat voices and killings, dependent on an unknown anchorwoman to give “him the feeling he was taking shape as himself, coming into the shape he’d always been intended to take, the thing of who he really was,” he is evidence nonetheless to the raw possibility of violent agency (Underworld 269): “he is able to achieve a particularly charged identity while remaining, literally, faceless” (J. Green 576). In fact, his actuality and strength are paradoxically dependent on the extent to which he is outside all plots, uninspired by logical narrative chains of cause and effect. Like Jimmy Costanza, Richard Henry Gilkey has entered “the soft organic murk,” has increasingly lost a sense of personal boundary and yet has seemingly gained power through this very dissolution: “He came alive in [his victims’ survivors]. He lived in their histories, in the photographs in the newspaper, he survived in the memories of the family, lived with the victims, lived on, merged, twinned, quadrupled, continued into double figures” (271). The agency born of Gilkey’s dissipation into this network of text, image, mind, and life is not reduced by the fact that he is not in control of the dispersion—rather, that agency is mystified and enlarged. Gilkey thus embodies in a significant way the “human flows” that constitute a central fiscal mechanism of global capitalism: his boundarylessness increasingly diffuses anything that might be said to constitute a sovereign state, and his underworld circulation makes him invulnerable to surveillance or capture. In this way the novel preserves him—as it castigates him—as untrammeled potential for masculinized violence. This potential is the value that endures, the profit motive that mobilizes his murky dissemination “into double figures.” He paradoxically resists even as he is defined by the homogeneity that DeLillo presents as born of all of the forces of “Kapital”: “Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that’s electronic and sex that’s cyberspaced, untouched money and computersafe sex, the convergence of consumer desire” (785).

This oddly inhuman violence preserved somehow within the system itself—distinctly masculine and yet removed from the sympathetic masculine characters—is arguably the central driving force of Delillo’s novel. Its haunting semipresence grows in force and in visibility throughout the novel and is finally incarnated in the realm of present-tense reality in the novel’s climactic sequence—not in any final revelation about the missing father, but in the post-death apparition of Esmeralda Lopez, the twelve-year-old who is raped and murdered in the wastelands of the South Bronx.
The vision itself occurs near the end of the final chapter, the epilogue, “Das Kapital,” a narrative position inevitably central. The occurrence is even more so because it is loaded with mystical and compassionate weight and seems to nullify or at least offer a counterbalance to the revelation of Nick’s murderous core and the deformed bodies that are the shadow twin of the bomb. The ghostly face on the billboard seems tentatively to suggest that beneath, above, or beyond the wreckage and poverty of a post–cold war world of consumer glut, waste management, and gross social inequity is something else, something of inestimable value: “And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and wishful sillhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?” (824). The echoes of T. S. Eliot are strong in the passage, as they are throughout the end of “Das Kapital.” The passage is a call to reflect on personal salvation, and it invokes the shaky promise of transcendence offered by Eliot’s raped women.

Esmeralda has from the beginning been a castoff child with an otherworldly aura. She is described as a feral animal, a runner, too wild to contact. The nuns throw her food from a distance, as if she is a skittish wolf or coyote. Esmeralda is thus suggestive of prelapsarian innocence in a post-apocalyptic world. In this sense she calls to mind Nick Shay’s nostalgia for a time of innocence in the young (in his case, violent and “dumb-muscled”) body: “She lives wild in the inner ghetto, a slice of the South Bronx called the Wall—a girl who forages in empty lots for discarded clothes, plucks spoiled fruit from garbage bags behind bodegas, who is sometimes seen running through the trees and weeds, a shadow on the rubbled walls of demolished structures, unstumbling, a tactful runner with the sweet and easy stride of some creature of sylvan myth” (810). Like Nick, Esmeralda is represented as being cut off from the consumer world inhabited by most of the other characters; she circulates in the underworld accumulations and devastations of late capitalism (like Nick, she is a recycler, eating, in this case, from garbage cans). She thus reserves, as does Nick, a space one is encouraged to think of not so much as the underside of a productive mega-system run amok but rather as natural, in inevitable and romantic opposition to the type of “phony” (796) lifestyle that Nick feels has been scripted for himself. As with Nick, however, whose “natural” core is described in ways that are explicitly social, Esmeralda’s wildness is a thing not entirely natural at all; it is heavily laden with narrative allusion. The “creature of sylvan myth” to which she is
likened, for example, draws her toward classical association—probably for most readers (particularly in retrospect, given Esmeralda’s fate) to the story of Daphne.

Yet there is no Apollo in this story to whom the girl can appeal, not even the Christian god Sister Edgar feels can redeem her, “save her from danger, bring her to candelas and ashes and palms, to belief in the mystical body” (811). It is not in her trajectory to enter into a more coherent plot; she is “too wild to be captured or to live,” as Parrish puts it (720). She is a life that flows anarchically and ceaselessly outside the sanctioned boundaries, motivated by no discernible cause: Esmeralda is “a quintessential ‘subaltern’ figure,” Molly Wallace argues, “utterly outside the symbolic order, voiceless, a missing figure, a ‘shadow on the nibbled walls of demolished structures’ of the inner city” (379). Just as young Nick is “a distant mystery to myself,” it is her unconscious, unknowable physicality that defines her and that makes her valuable: “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” (813). Esmeralda suggests “something godly” only to the extent that she remains unaware of that suggestion. Like Nick’s nostalgically recalled youth—the longing for which is proclaimed immediately before the long, ultimate, Esmeralda section—her value has to do with “the days of disorder [. . .] when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real” (810). What is longed for and heavily aestheticized to the point of either nostalgia or transcendent suggestion is the life of the restless, “dumb,” young body.

In spite of the similarity, the novel cuts a very careful incision between Nick’s violence and Esmeralda’s rape and murder. Nick’s longed-for youth distills the naturalized essence of masculine violence, and Esmeralda’s running/raped body distills the naturalized essence of feminine and youthful vulnerability to that violence, but one does not bleed into the other, in spite of the fact that in terms of actual structure the Esmeralda sequence appears as if in answer to Nick’s finally articulated desire to return to the violence of youth. Nick himself is excised from contact with Esmeralda throughout the novel, and the tone with which the rape/murder is narrated is far more horrific than any tone used in association with Nick. The rape and murder themselves are narrated without the aestheticized language that otherwise marks Esmeralda, and it is almost easy to miss the echoes of Nick’s youth—self-portrayed or otherwise—with the nostalgia drained out:

Nick’s memory of his youth: I want them back, the days when I was

. . . heedless 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. (810)

Esmeralda’s rapist: He’s up there wandering, . . . a man who drifts. . . . He’s on her like that. (817)

Nick’s memory of his youth: I was dumb-muscled and angry and real . . . and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself. (810)

Esmeralda’s rapist: He comes across the sleeping girl and feels a familiar anger rising and knows he will need to do something to make her pay. . . . She fights and whisper-cries in a voice that makes him angrier, like who the fuck she think she is. (817)

Nick’s youth: He’d never seen the guy before and this is why he was punching him. . . . Nick crouched and set himself and threw a punch. He knew it was not necessary to throw this punch but he’d hit the guy only glancing blows to the face and he wanted to hit him solid. It was a chance to hit someone solid that he didn’t want to miss. (714)

Esmeralda’s rapist: He beats her with the end of his fist, sending hammerblows to the head. Struggle bitch get hit. . . . Either way he’s gonna hit her, she struggle or not. (818)

Nick’s youth: She was smiling, he wasn’t.

[. . .]

“You’re a cunt in and out and up and down. You’re an all-over cunt through and through.” (773)

Esmeralda’s rapist: “No eye contact, cunt.” (818)

The violence of the rape speaks to Nick’s longing (in spite of the fact that the Nick sections are softer for a variety of reasons, including not only the actual content but also context, point of view, and our relationship to the character). The connection, however, is deeply repressed. Esmeralda’s raped and murdered body, as vulnerable as it is to random inner-city masculine violence, has been and continues to be untouchable to the hero/protagonist of the novel—the gracefully, poignantly aging James Dean. Nick is only vaguely made aware of Esmeralda’s rape and murder, and time has safely removed him from the violence of his past. The novel thus accomplishes an almost surgical removal of violence from masculinity, while nonetheless preserving that connection in grimly epic proportions.

It is significant that Nick (vaguely) learns about Esmeralda’s rape and murder only after she has been “transfigured.” He learns at a distance, from his son, via, in turn, the Internet that a “young girl was the victim of a terrible crime,” that her body was found “amid dense debris,” that witnesses report the “miracle” of her image on the orange juice billboard (808). He
remains vague about the physical details, removed from them. Instead, the apparition is cause for the narrative to shift quickly to Nick’s introspection about things he feels are “the real miracle[s]”: (1) the Internet, “where everybody is everywhere at once, and [his son] is there among them, unseen”; (2) the fact that his father simply disappeared: “the earth opened up and he stepped inside”; (3) and the “redemptive” garbage we recycle, which “come[s] back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging” (808–9). Esmeralda’s rape and death thus become the occasion to reflect on the “redemptive qualit[y]” of the flows and recirculations of late capitalism, the miraculous fact that the compromised masculine self has been rendered invisible but has not been obliterated (809). Nick’s father is the link, his mythic, underground presence somehow guaranteeing the value unstably preserved in these circulations—a value no longer sustained through industrial military production.

Esmeralda, on the other hand, who cannot speak, and certainly not in an affected gangster voice, is thus in death as in life subjected to a late-capitalist “logic of consumption” (M. Wallace 379): her material body is metamorphosed for the observer into a sign of the transformative potential of recycling. In this sense Esmeralda suggests a return of Eliot’s and Pound’s high modernist Philomela. Silenced (“dumb”), naturalized, and brutally raped by a figure disassociated from the narrative point of view, Philomela is shown at her moment of “change,” a transformation of the material body “by the barbarous king / So rudely forced” to the more ethereal nightingale of “inviolable voice” (“A Game of Chess,” Eliot, Collected Poems, 56). Esmeralda also is metamorphosed into the sign of transcendence; her victimization enabling the inhuman message of the billboard, as Philomela’s suffering is transformed into birdsong. The message is no longer, however, one of submission per se, whether defined in human, religious, political, or economic terms. She is not, as are the Thames sisters and the Chorus of Murder in the Cathedral, a receptacle for a static higher power. No larger organizing schema seems on the horizon, hovering over the wasteland in an opaque promise of redemption. Rather, Esmeralda’s apparition, significantly interwoven with an advertisement, is a testimony to the unseen flows of the late twentieth century and the extent to which other-worldly value seems to be generated through these very recirculations. The raped and subsequently “reborn” (Parrish 721) woman in this way ratifies the seemingly self-organizing power of the waste of late capitalism even as it paradoxically preserves the haunting effectivity of masculine violence/power/agency. The power of the lost (but not quite lost) father is a kind of buzz in the background.

Comaroff and Comaroff argue that there has been within the last few years an extraordinary intensification of interest in the occult throughout
the world, a development they attribute to the increasingly dematerialized and deterritorialized nature of global investment capitalism. The recent obsession with the occult suggests, they argue, “the allure of accruing wealth from nothing,” an allure clearly central to the “casino capitalism” of a global economy (313). DeLillo’s work has for some time turned toward a certain opaque mysticism, in ways that clearly do suggest postnational, consumer capitalism (one thinks in particular of *The Names*, *Mao II*, and *White Noise*). Before *Underworld*, however, these occult suggestions are tempered with irony and distance. The German nun in *White Noise* is a case in point: “dumb head,” she calls Jack Gladney, “If we did not pretend to believe these things [the devil, angels, heaven, hell], the world would collapse” (318). Sister Edgar’s epiphany before the Minute Maid billboard is strikingly different; the ironic valence here is very low, surprisingly so given the extent to which she is elsewhere a parody of the classically styled “mean Catholic nun.” Sister Grace’s doubts do not outweigh the “reality” of Edgar’s vision: “[Sister Edgar] sees Esmeralda’s face take shape under the rainbow of bounteous juice and above the little suburban lake and there is a sense of someone living in the image, an animating spirit—less than a tender second of life, less than half a second and the spot is dark again” (822). DeLillo here illustrates the mechanics of the fetishized commodity and its relationship to the alienated consumer. As Wallace, following Baudrillard, argues of fetishism in the novel generally, “commodity fetishism is not only the reification of an object, not simply the effacement of its production, but also the effacement of the object itself in favor of its signifier, its image” (373). As the “real” object orange juice is lost to the clichéd representation of the “bounteous” plenitude of American suburbia, which signifier is eclipsed in turn by Esmeralda’s effigy, so is Esmeralda herself sacrificed to the salvific, ephemeral image. Thus, although Mark Osteen is to some extent right to argue that the scene undermines the workings of commodity fetishism by suggesting “that the same forces and conditions that create bad faith and rampant waste may also germinate effective counterfaiths” (257), it is perhaps more accurate to say that the apparition replaces one fetishized object (orange juice) with another (the raped and murdered girl).

And what the image of the raped and murdered girl offers the alienated consumer—as does the recycling plant to which Nick takes his granddaughter—is a “reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard” (809). Waste is the very stuff of transcendence and awe—it is not what must be “repressed,” as Arthur Saltzman argues, in order to achieve “ecstasy” (“Awful Symmetries” 305). In the clutches of such ecstasy, Sister Edgar strips off her gloves to come into contact with the human detritus of capitalism—the crowded bodies that she has up until
this point thought of with distaste—if not horror—as the debased embodiment of sin and mortality: “She feels something break upon her. An angelus of clearest joy. . . . Everything feels near at hand, breaking upon her, sadness and loss and glory and an old mother’s bleak pity and a force at some deep level of lament that makes her feel inseparable from the shakers and mourners, the awestruck who stand in tidal traffic—she is nameless for a moment, lost to the details of personal history, a disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd” (822–23). The billboard delivers more than has been intended by the corporate technological will—the promise of suburban safety, health, and well-being through product consumption. It has fallen into the volatile stream of the underworld, where things die and are reborn (babies are held up to the juice, to be “bathe[d. . . . ] in baptismal balsam and oil” [821]) and where the airtight boundaries of self and place are put into question. Sister Edgar herself is “transubstantiated,” as Osteen puts it, “into the ‘living juice,’ the blood of a new covenant that promises universal connection and even redemption” (258). Edgar’s “transubstantiation” echoes that of Esmeralda herself, so that subject and object become one: both women live out the novel’s nightmarish fears of permeability in the face of random, self-organizing force. Thus, as she has been for centuries, the violently penetrated woman is still the ultimate signifier of broken boundaries, whether defined in ecstatic or fearsome terms.

Clare Hansen makes the persuasive case that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari figure the little girl generally in terms of the “dispersed libidinal energies (‘molecular energies’)” she deploys to destabilize those energies “which strive to aggregate into totalities (‘molar’ energies’): “Molar energies attempt to form and stabilize identities through divisions of classes, sexes and races, whereas molecular energies, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, ‘traverse, create a path, destabilize, enable energy seepage within and through these molar unities’” (qtd. in Hanson 187–88). The beatific image of Esmeralda reconstitutes Sister Edgar herself as a body less cleanly divided, and it is in echo of the rape/murder victim’s “haecceity”—permeability and restless dispersion—that Sister Edgar should enter cyberspace when she dies (Deleuze and Guattari, One Thousand Plateaus, 276). Organizing as it does the fiscal mechanics of the world economy, the Internet is at once a vast well of accumulated waste and the non-site where postnational capital quietly circulates, “virtual money and commodities . . . exchanged instantly via an unregulated world network of computers” (Comaroff and Comaroff 320). In the Internet, Sister Edgar “is open—exposed to every connection you can make on the world wide web” (824)—open also to the fifty-eight-megaton Soviet bomb, “the largest yield in history,” the detonation of which is “preserved in the computer
that helped to build it” (826). If the rhetoric clearly denotes Baudrillard’s “switching center,” it also suggests female saint; Edgar, like the humanity she now represents, is left “vague, drained, docile, soft in [her] inner discourse” from the shock of the explosion (826). The femininity of the latter association is denied in the narrative, despite the fact that when her gloves are still on, Sister feels “masculinized, . . . condomed ten times over” (241); now stripped of those gloves as well as “pull [ed . . .] apart,” Edgar is shown her essential unity with her “brother,” J. Edgar Hoover, her union with all: “Sister and Brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than with difference itself, all argument, all conflict programmed out” (826). Her final and ecstatic entry into “the lunar milk of the data stream” (826)—embraced by her fellow man, penetrated by the largest bomb in history—allows DeLillo to recapture the ending of Eliot’s *Waste Land*, which, for all its obscurity, nonetheless offers “shantih,” the peace which passeth all understanding (Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 69). If the novel ends on that same word “Peace,” however, *Underworld*’s thunder does not suggest what Eliot’s does: the positive impact of surrender to a higher power; its “Peace” will be derived from the active dissolution of boundaries and distinctions: “Fasten, fit closely, bind together” (827). The new god of the market requires less an acknowledgment of one’s material emptiness and a faith in pure (if distant) value than an ecstatic leap into “the ephemeral and discontinuous,” the “great decentred network of desire of which individuals seem the mere fleeting effects” (Eagleton 132).

For all the explicit surrender of the mythos of epic-scale production, consumerism, and accumulation, however, the vision that redeems the new wasteland is dependent on familiar images of violent force and penetration, images that finally serve to cordon off a shadowy and motile space for a masculinity defined in terms of its penetrative power. The reader is on the surface of things allowed the moral high ground—the rapists are those not like us; they are outside our moral city, haunting the outskirts. The rapist is a scapegoat—a debased figure who is distanced from the reader and protagonist and onto whom the violence of classic masculinity can be projected. In the case of *Underworld*, his (outcast) presence powers the epiphany that redeems the wasteland. In a skewed sense, he is thus a travestied return of the muscled, blue-collar laborer under advanced capitalism, “producing” the ultimate consumer item, one that not only effaces its own violent production and material existence but that circulates within “the placeless, selfless sphere of electronic transcendence” (Tabbi 206). And Esmeralda is the ultimate throw-away commodity—she gains value in being thrown, literally, from a building and, figuratively, into the Internet; her rape is the underbelly of consumerist fetishism in an age of waste crisis.
Thus, to the extent that the sacrifice of Esmeralda satisfactorily invests the underground circulations of advanced capitalism with transcendent value, we are revealed as entangled, complicit in the blind workings of “waste management” and displaced labor. DeLillo makes our collusion clear in the recording of Esmeralda’s rape and murder, both of which are narrated as if on the Internet, website http://blk.www/dd.com/miraculum (810). The words “Keystroke 1” and “Searching” sandwich the scene, and what they suggest is that the description has been deliberately accessed by the Internet user—by us. Agency and will are thus seemingly preserved—and highlighted—in the late-twentieth-century non-place that courts fantasies of boundlessness and invisibility, where “one thing leads to another, always another link leading you deeper into no thing and no place” (Stewart 18). Further, that voyeuristic agency identifies itself with the rapist’s point of view. If, then, the prerogative to rape has been renounced, the desire to do so has been reterritorialized, allowed to seep down into the “soft organic murk,” the underground stream “leading you deeper into no thing and no place” that is the circulatory system of Underworld. Here the father and “the killer [live] on,” having accumulated “life-credit.” It is in this way, Murray Siskind tells Jack Gladney in White Noise, that “violence is a form of rebirth” (290).

The Murray Siskind role is filled in part in Underworld by Lenny Bruce, whose “comedy” skits punctuate the novel and who seems able (up to a certain tragic point) to survive without mythologizing the flows of late capitalism. There are no buried riches for Lenny—no transcendent moments, no fellowship with the bomb, no nostalgia for the “dumb-muscled” violence of youth, no grief for a lost father (or for “all that old industrial muscle” [818]), no ecstasy in cyberspace. There are not, in fact, even punch lines, at least not in the bits that DeLillo narrates in full. What there is is a relentless movement toward the specifics of material existence, the possible details, in fact, of Esmeralda’s life. Lenny’s story of Esmeralda begins in the “illiterate sad-eyed virgin [who] lives in a whorehouse in a slum district of San Juan” and who blows “gorgeous smoke rings” from her vagina (630). Her “gift,” Lenny continues, is by some interpreted “in a religious manner”: “They think it’s an omen, a sign from heaven that the world is about to end. God has selected a poor illiterate undernourished orphan girl to convey a profound message to the world” (630). A rich American widower buys her from the madame, brings her to his “hilltop mansion overlooking the Hudson River,” and civilizes her into “a healthy young woman who speaks four languages and shows a talent for the oboe” (631). At this point of inevitable punch line, Lenny changes direction: “No, yes, wait. We’ve got it backwards”; the man regrets his actions, believes he has “destroyed a strange, crude, beautiful and eerie perversion”;
and “he longs to see smoke rings come out of her puss, her nook” (631). Lenny changes directions again: “Wait, listen, no. The millionaire is a myth, isn’t he? . . . We made him up. Let’s tell the truth this time” (632). In spite of audience discontent, Lenny plunges on: “Let’s make her human. She’s real like us” (632). The “us,” of course, denies the rendering of masculinity preserved in the earlier bits, the subject constructed in relation to the woman-object. The girl lives in the South Bronx “with her junkie mother” who “comes and goes”; the phone is disconnected, and the apartment is dispossessed; “the girl’s hiding in the empty lots, down the maze of back alleys” (632–33). And this is where Lenny’s story ends. He wants to give her a name, but “couldn’t think of a name. Not a real name” (633). After retreating to mother-in-law jokes with punch lines DeLillo does not narrate, Lenny leaves the stage, “remorseful” (633).

Lenny’s stunted story resists the version the larger novel relates. While the Esmeralda of “Das Kapital” moves quickly from the concrete to the mythic, thus finally enabling a classic—albeit kindly and sympathetic—pose of voyeuristic distance, the nameless girl of Lenny’s self-dismantling story leaves the mythic for the (finally unknowable) concrete. In this sense Lenny almost achieves what Joseph Tabbi argues of DeLillo himself: a clear vision “of the embodied reality beneath the information grid” (207). The audience for Lenny’s story—unlike the audience for Esmeralda’s (reader, Internet user, crowd in front of the billboard)—is left dissatisfied, denied not only the closure of an ending (let alone the haunting chill of a ghost story) but a quick and voyeuristic dip into the rivulet of raw, phallic violence that flows silently through the plot.

The novel does not end with Lenny, however; the novel ends with the transformation of Esmeralda, and the affective quality of that ending is anything but dissatisfying. In the city known more than any other for its radical twentieth-century transformation from industrial to financial center, from steel to electronic communication, we are given a vision of the ephemeral that promises itself amidst the material excess and decay of that “old industrial muscle.” The pathos Esmeralda generates is large scale and cathartic, and as such it contributes to the solidity and sympathetic quality of the non-raping men of the novel, even as it underwrites the continued underground existence of violent productivity perceived as masculine. In this sense, the novels of John Irving are similar to DeLillo’s Underworld. Irving again and again reserves a central and heart-wrenching space for the redemptive young rape victim. In fact, in Irving the “integrity” of her rape (Hotel New Hampshire) is often directly related to the protagonist; to recoil in horror as a young man from the spectacle of a rape is to be on the path of a coming-of-age epiphany. To help the victim recover from her trauma is to reclaim masculinity from a fatherless past—or to forge an alliance
with a father from whom one has been temporarily disconnected. A self-consciously feminist, postindustrial white masculinity is thus defined in sharp contrast to sexual violence, is actually dependent on the repeated and emphatic casting out of the desire to rape. As in DeLillo’s novel, the rapist is thus preserved as he is scapegoated, and he remains to haunt the borders and underground of the text; his violence necessarily continues to operate, denounced and yet crucial for masculine (anti)definition. The rape victim herself is heavily fetishized, becomes a holy martyr in what would otherwise be a morally withered universe. She is the muse of grief, self-examination, and finally agency.

Like _Underworld_, Irving’s novels are haunted by the (actually or figuratively) missing father. Garp’s father is nothing more than an erect penis and a surname at the moment of Garp’s conception and dies immediately after (The World According to Garp); Homer Wells’s father has presumably abandoned his mother before his birth (Cider House Rules); Fred “Bogus” Trumper’s father has disinherited him (The Water-Method Man); John Berry’s father is dreamy and removed throughout most of Hotel New Hampshire. Generally, the son is left to navigate in a world that has already lost (or is in the process of losing) its gleam (only the fathers are or were idealists), in postwar establishments and locales that have passed their moments of success and glory. More precisely, the sons have been left with a vague sense of guilt for the masculinity of the father and without a blueprint for a new, morally acceptable masculinity. The Water-Method Man opens with (and is dominated by) a central image for this disconnection: Bogus Trumper’s painfully “narrow, winding” urethra, which birth defect his father, a urologist, has been unable to diagnose (12). The deformed, inadequate penis of the son is not only unfixed but unrecognized by the father.

Evidence of the absent father’s irresponsible productivity, on the other hand, survives in the scores of damaged orphans and in the wasted bodies of girls and women—the dying prostitutes, the victims of homemade abortions, the abandoned wives and girlfriends, the women who cut out their own tongues, the victims of rape. Vienna, for example, seems to embody the wasteland created by the World War II–era father: Vienna is a “dead bitch,” a “cadaver,” “a museum housing a dead city,” where there are few young people because the only babies born between the Nazi and Soviet occupations were the result of rapes, and where many of Irving’s young protagonists are initiated to prostitution (Garp 164–65, 122–23). The hospital/orphanage in Cider House Rules is similarly constructed—is reminiscent of the waste management business in Underworld, as Dr. Larch is the grim equivalent of Nick Shay. Denying himself the pleasure of (re)production (as Nick denies himself the pleasure of consumption),
Wilbur Larch devotes himself to the management of what are clearly represented as the hidden waste products of reproduction (and sexual consumerism) under patriarchy. Early in his career he performs a Caesarian (of a “stillborn child”) on a prostitute whom he has himself visited and finds that her internal organs have disintegrated from ingestion of an illegal aborticide: “when he tried to sew up Mrs. Eames’s uterus, his stitches simply pulled through the tissue, which he noticed was the texture of a soft cheese. . . . when he sponged the blood away, he perforated the intestine, which he had hardly touched, and when he lifted up the injured loop to close the hole, his fingers passed as easily through the intestine as through gelatin” (45–46). A nightmare of permeability and broken boundary, Mrs. Eames resists the portrayal of female body as matter (mater), blank material open to the form, order, and organization of the father. She is rather matter that has literally dissolved, refusing (or incapable of taking) the imprint of the father (the biological father of the dead baby, the internal surgical reorganization of the male doctor). In economic terms she is equally lethal: her doubly suggestive role as consumer item (she is a prostitute) and as producer (she is pregnant) is cut short because of her inability to contain, let alone to hold order or value. She is simply the end of things—she enters the whirlpool beyond profit and loss—like the mysterious and oddly frightening waste ship in Underworld.

As Nick feels in part responsible for the waste that envelopes the late twentieth century, so too does Dr. Larch feel complicitous in the dissolution of Mrs. Eames, and his dreams of vulnerability reinforce the sense that a part of the horror of the image of Mrs. Eames disintegrating on the operating table is based in the extent to which she suggests the impotence of the masculine, idealist inscription: “The night she died, Larch had a nightmare—his penis fell off in his hands; he tried to sew it back on but it kept disintegrating; then his fingers gave way in a similar fashion. How like a surgeon! he thought. Fingers are valued above penises. How like Wilbur Larch!” (46). If Jean-Joseph Goux is correct to argue that genetic effectiveness “has come to be signified by the indestructible, ever-renascent penis” (232), then reproductive failure bespeaks not only the destructibility of the penis but the bankruptcy of productive action—the hands also cannot build, reconstruct, or otherwise manufacture a product that can be sent out into circulation (again). Further, the disintegrating body Dr. Larch dreams suggests the antithesis of masculinity as it has been defined in the white, Western tradition. As Anthony Easthope puts it, “The most important meanings that can attach to the idea of the masculine body are unity and permanence. . . . Very clear in outline and firm in definition, the masculine image of the body appears to give a stronger sense of identity” (53). They are thus feelings of guilt, impotence, and horror that are inspired by
the death of Mrs. Eames and her daughter and which propel Larch into a
determinedly celibate life in the backwater of St. Cloud’s hospital and
orphanage. There Larch will extol the virtues of “work”—“aren’t we put on
this earth to work?” (188)—while, seemingly single-handedly, not only
performing the only safe abortions in Maine but also fixing all of the bun-
gled or incomplete abortions in the same state. Thus, while the waste mat-
ter of Underworld seems almost self-organizing, the waste management
business in Irving’s work is more taxing.

The destructive creation enables the return of the work ethic in a post-
productive era; it similarly reinvests the potency of the father, but in ways
that sidestep the explicitly patriarchal systems of white Western tradition.
If production has shifted to waste management, then the role of white
father/heterosexual husband within the nuclear family has been similarly
displaced to a variety of forms of recycling. Dr. Larch, for example, is
“father” to the orphans he delivers. He recycles what has been discarded
by the biological parents. Even here, the fatherhood is vaguely homoero-
tic and incestuous, ever so slightly resistant to the paternal script, as his kiss
(on the lips) of adolescent Homer Wells suggests: “He couldn’t even think,
he was so agitated from kissing Homer Wells. If Homer Wells had received
his first fatherly kisses, Dr. Larch had given the first kisses he had ever
given—fatherly or otherwise—since the day in the Portland boarding-
house when he caught the clap from Mrs. Eames” (136). The “father-
hood” of Dr. Larch is skewed in ways typical of Irving’s novels; Alison
Booth points out that “The best-laid plans for chastity, exogamy, and the
transfer of property through patriarchal, heterosexual generation oft go
awry” in Irving’s work (288–89). With the old productive/accumulating
father of high industrial capitalism removed from the scene, the son who
would be father is released from the old paternal laws against incest,
homosexuality, and monogamy. Non-participant in systems of exchange
(including the exogamy which “makes women the objects of exchange by
male subjects” [Goux 217]), fatherhood (like sex) becomes a matter of
unbounded and generally non-(re)productive association, submersion in
Eagleton’s “great decentred network of desire” (132) in which the prime
directive is, as it finally is in Underworld, to “fasten, fit closely, bind
together” (827). Thus John Berry (Hotel New Hampshire) has an incestu-
ous relationship with his sister, marries his sister’s lesbian lover, and adopts
his sister’s child; Homer Wells (Cider House Rules) sleeps with his best
friend’s wife, pretends his own son is his best friend’s, and lives for years
in a three-way marriage.

This reterritorialization of masculinity and familial relationship is
marked by anxiety in Irving’s work—an anxiety, however, that is inevitably
resolved by novel’s end. Garp is made particularly articulate concerning
this generalized unease—Irving has him wrestle self-consciously and emotionally with the problematic status of (white, middle-class) masculinity after (white, middle-class) feminism. Invariably Garp struggles with what he feels is contemporary feminism’s association of masculinity in general with the propensity to rape (contemporary: the novel was published in 1976). His long-standing rage at the Ellen Jamesians, for example, a crucial theme in the novel since it leads to his death, is based in what he feels to be the injustice of his being held culpable: in answer to his mother’s claim that “rape is every woman’s problem,” Garp replies, “It’s every man’s problem, too, mom. The next time there’s a rape, suppose I cut my prick off and hang it around my neck” (192). Sarcasm aside, the offer of the penis to the mother in a gesture of sacrificial castration in solidarity with women suggests that the new order of masculinity will take away what was only threatened under the law of the old father. Like the detached penis and fingers of Dr. Larch’s dream, the new castration suggests not only feminization but disintegration of the sort embodied in the “soft organic murk” of Mrs. Eames and the underground flows of late capitalism (waste accumulation included). Garp’s ambivalence about disassociating himself from the rapist is thus based in anxiety about just what it might mean not to be a rapist: “Perhaps rape’s offensiveness to Garp was that it was an act that disgusted him with himself—with his own very male instincts, which were otherwise so unassailable. He never felt like raping anyone; but rape, Garp thought, made men feel guilt by association” (209). He both is and is not anything like a rapist. To the extent that there is in fact an association, it is by virtue of “very male instincts,” immutable evidence of a natural state of masculinity residing deep below surface constructions. As in Underworld, then, the “real” masculinity is the violent one, buried deep in the past or deep in the psyche, but not allowed expression in the narrative now of the sympathetic protagonist’s actions—because another aspect of “real” masculinity, presumably, would be the repression of precisely that underground volatility (For Nick Shay, violence “drain[s] out” [801], “go[es] under” with the missing father [809]).

And as in Underworld, one’s eye is not allowed to rest on the repressed violence and possible misogyny of the hero. In both novels, these qualities are displaced onto a rapist scapegoat, a figure constructed to be completely without readerly appeal. Irving, however, goes further than DeLillo, who removes Nick from the rape itself. Irving resolves Garp’s anxieties not only by displacing the violence of “his own very male instincts” but by making him not a rapist but a hunter of rapists, the two figures haunting the same underworld. Thus it is Garp, not the police officers, who discovers the identity of the rapist of the ten-year-old girl in the park and delivers him to justice (although we later learn that the rapist has been released; the danger of
the violent underworld will never be eliminated). Significantly, Garp hunts for the rapist like an animal, relying on "instinct" and his sense of smell: he accosts an "elderly gentleman" and forces him to submit to Garp's sniffing his genitals for "the smell of sex" (200–201); later, he recognizes the real rapist by the smell of aftershave.

The intensity of Garp's search through the park and attempts to comfort the girl is marked, and it shows up again later in the figure of Arden Bensenhaver, a character in Garp's novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*. Irving's inclusion of so much of Garp's novel is odd—the plot does not necessarily speak to the plot of *The World According to Garp*, except in terms of the representation of rape, and in that sense the inclusion reinforces several aspects of the larger novel: the horrific quality of the experience; the utterly depraved—other—nature of men who rape; the inestimable value of a good man's sympathy toward rape victims; the almost ethereal strength and innocence of the rape victim. The rapist in the story is put well beyond the pale; his animal life and animal death serve as an easy focus for moral outrage and disgust. Inspector Arden Bensenhaver, on the other hand, "who knew a good deal about rape" (418), is a man of uncommon sympathy for the rape victim: "It was Arden Bensenhaver's experience that husbands and other people did not always take a rape in the right way" (440). There is little sense, however, that those "other people" can be taught: Bensenhaver himself is the lone and alienated protector, "a lurker at the last edge of light—a retired enforcer, barely alive on the rim of darkness" (445). The first chapter of *Bensenhaver* thus enacts very sharply what *Underworld* and Irving's rape novels work out at great length: the splitting off of sexual violence from the sympathetic, sad male character while still retaining that violence as a "natural" core of animal man.

The rape victim of Garp's novel is named, significantly enough, Hope, and she is "recognized" by others after her rape in a way that is reminiscent of Esmeralda's apparition:

A car came along, but Hope was unaware of it. . . . The bloody, praying woman, naked and caked with grit, took no notice of him driving past her. The driver had a vision of an angel on a trip back from Hell. . . .

"Help!" he cried. The vision of the woman had so terrified him that he feared there might be more like her around. (432)

A vision of transcendence in a post-religious world, the rape victim in both novels serves as an image of saintly beauty and "hope" precisely at the moment when she is metamorphosed into the emblem of permeability.
and fluid boundaries (Hope herself is bathed in the rapist’s blood and bowels). That Esmeralda is actually thrown away, her soon-to-be-dead body visually becoming refuse, is matched by Hope’s being raped, finally, by a dead man: even after having his throat cut, his kidney impaled, and another knife wound to his back, “his penis, still moving, still attached himself to Hope” (429). It is thus unsurprising that the passing motorist presumes that Hope is an angel just arrived from Hell, as opposed to Heaven, the customary habitat for “angels”; like Esmeralda, Hope is a sign of grace to the extent that she redeems the underworld of non-productive waste and violence. (It is worth noting that, in the same non-productive sense that fatherhood and sex are often incestuous in Irving, the rapist in Garp’s novel has in the past only had intercourse with farm animals, whom he has killed afterward just as he intends to murder Hope).

Debra Shostak has examined the role of repetition in Irving’s fiction, paying particular attention to the embedded stories written by the characters themselves. She argues that plotted repetition contributes substantially to the uncanny streak that runs through Irving’s work, and it highlights Irving’s concern with faith and the sacred. Certainly it is true that Garp’s return to the idea of rape lends the larger novel a transcendent, sacred aura that emanates precisely from that nucleus of the raped female body. In Hotel New Hampshire, similarly, the iterations of Franny’s rape—Frank’s sexual abuse does not “repeat” in the same way and does not achieve the same central status—culminate in a recognition of the “holy” (441). After a lifetime of regret for not being man enough to fight off Franny’s rapists, John Berry at last achieves the “fairy-tale hotel” of which his father has always dreamed—but that hotel is in actuality a “rape crisis center” (450). There rape survivors come to recover—to be, in a sense, recycled. Significantly, and bearing out Susan Jeffords’s claim that rape can (in popular film) serve as “an occasion for the reform and reproduction of masculinity” (112), the caretaking role in the “fairy-tale hotel” has fallen to the returned father, at least in cases of great despair (“When someone’s really fucked up” [442]): Wyn Berry, literally and figuratively blind, explicitly out-of-touch with his children and their needs throughout the bulk of the novel, now waves his murderous baseball bat over the psychically wounded as if it is a “magic wand,” “as if he were a holy man blessing some other holy person” (441). This, says Susie—John’s wife and ex-lover of his sister Franny, rape survivor and director of “the real rape crisis center in our unreal hotel”—“is how you should treat a rape victim . . . ; they are holy” (442, 441). The father is thus rehabilitated as “the best counselor” of raped women (441), accruing cultural capital through presiding over the salvation of the damaged and cast aside. One is reminded of Nick Shay at the end of Underworld, when he takes his granddaughter with him to the waste
recycling plant, to show her, from the vantage point of a catwalk, the “redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a brave kind of aging” (809).

In fact this is the classic happy ending of an Irving novel: the male protagonist has at last come of age, and in so doing he has redirected masculine characterizations to include caretaking responsibility for children and women—particularly for those who have been produced and damaged by what is presented as the tatters of an old form of patriarchy. John Berry will adopt the child of his movie-star sister Franny, whose rape he has at last helped to avenge: “you look after everybody,” Franny said, sweetly. . . . “it’s kind of like your role. You’re a perfect father.” “Or a mother, man,” Junior added (443). John Berry’s desire to “take care” of a baby (the word “adopt” is not actually used) is the final and mature outgrowth of his lifetime obsession with Franny’s rape—that original violence thus has the eventual effect of shifting the traditionally feminine attribute of domestic nurturing to the sphere of masculine authority and power. Garp is also a stay-at-home dad, a role that complements (repeats, following Shostak) his concern with rape and his desire to protect the victims of rape; he goes so far as to informally adopt Ellen James, the young woman whose rape and mutilation have initiated the organization of the Ellen Jamesians. Similarly, after the shock of discovering that Rose Rose’s baby is the result of incestuous rape—evidence of a break in the new domestic contract—Homer Wells assumes responsibility for providing abortions and deliveries for the women who come in desperation to St. Cloud’s. Thus Rose Rose’s rape is the impetus for and validation of “the reform and reproduction of masculinity” (Jeffords 112); it is her permeable and helplessly excessive body that compels Homer to heed at last the words of Dr. Larch, his “father”: “Women are trapped. Women are victims. . . . HOW CAN YOU FEEL FREE TO CHOOSE NOT TO HELP PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT FREE TO GET OTHER HELP?” (518). As Alison Booth points out, it thus “turns out that abortion, and even rape and father-daughter incest, are about a man’s [ . . . —a white, straight man’s—. . . ] right to choose” (289). Homer’s final status as a (good, white, straight) man with the power to choose a destiny is wholly dependent on the establishment of a human detritus—“trapped,” “victim[ized],” “not free”—as vehicle for portraying the power and emotional sensitivity of the new, non-productive father. This accumulation of faceless, permeable flesh is defined as distanced from volition, even from consciousness (the helplessly uncontrollable excesses of these bodies are dealt with surgically when the nervous systems are anesthetized); it provides a “gelatin[ous]” contrast to the sharp outlines of masculine prerogative.

Irving’s rape stories within rape stories, similarly, provide therapeutic
work for his male protagonists. Garp writes *The World According to Bensenhaver* when recovering from the faithlessness of his wife and death of his son. By the same token, it is the translation of the Low Old Norse epic “Akthelt and Gunnell” that enables Bogus Trumper to come of age and return to the baby his girlfriend has tricked him into fathering and the son being raised by his ex-wife and best friend. Before taking this step into what is clearly portrayed as a positive renovation of classic white masculinity, Bogus has been unable to complete the violent epic, has in fact actually begun to cheat in the translation. At the point, however, when his life becomes particularly directionless and painful—painful enough at a physical level to undergo the surgery to have his urethra straightened and widened—Bogus makes the difficult decision to translate the violent epic accurately, narrating truthfully the faithlessness and childishness of the traditional male hero and the rape of the heroine. In this new period of commitment to textual accuracy, Bogus takes particular pains on the subject of rape. In the case of Sprog, “Whatever he did, he didn’t do it fast enough. The text reports that Gunnel was ‘nearly humbled by him.’ Nearly” (274). Hrothrund, on the other hand, is a “father-murderer, wife-raper” bent on “sport”; Bogus takes care to provide an academic note: “In Old Low Norse, *sport* means rape” (353, 351). Gunnel is in fact raped by him, repeatedly, until she kills him, stuffing eels in his severed head. (Her maidservants are also raped, and killed—points only mentioned in passing.) When her husband later kills the child born of the rape of Hrothrund, she kills him as well, also stuffing eels in his severed head and presenting it to the Council of Elders. The only poetic license Bogus allows himself in the translation is to allow Gunnel to castrate her rapists: “It fit, after all. It suited the story, it certainly suited Gunnel, and most of all, it suited Bogus” (354).

The “bogus” man’s induction into a reformed version of classic masculinity is thus dependent on a clear translation of an ancient (albeit presumably fictional) rape. What is crucial is the preservation of the integrity of the original rape text; the only elaboration allowed is one that does not detract from the rape itself but rather heightens the sexual violence while contributing a moral valence to the event: the new man is one who is the violent defender of raped, brutalized women—the author, in this case and in Garp, who places the castrating knife in the victim’s hands. Significantly, Bogus Trumper’s reclamation of Gunnel’s rape from the obscurity of Old Low Norse and the animalistic men who sexually abuse women is accompanied by his being awarded knighthood, by virtue of his “Phallic Phortitude” in enduring the urethrectomy, in “The Brotherhood of the Golden Prick” (318). The new masochistic “knighthood” is thus associated not with the defense or rupture of the virgin’s purity as in older forms of patriarchal mythology but with defense of the integrity of the rape itself.
In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Susie tells John that every rape has its own “integrity” and that he has “robbed [Franny’s] rape of *its* integrity by running off to find the hero instead of staying on the scene and dealing with it yourself” (241).

In *The World According to Garp*, the hero does not run off, and the “integrity” of the rape is preserved. Garp dies protecting—literally—the integrity of Ellen James, her status as “the real Ellen James” (511), “the real thing” (538), in a world of pretenders; “Ellen James is not a symbol,” Garp wrote” (553). Garp’s hatred of the Ellen Jamesians, on the other hand, those “sour imitators” who finally kill him, is based first in their retreat to symbols in the face of “real” violation and second in the self-inflictedness of their wounds, which self-generation denies the very vulnerability to others (to men) that defines “The Ellen James”: “She struck him as one of those doomed children he had read about: the ones who have no antibodies—they have no natural immunities to disease. If they don’t live their lives in plastic bags, they die of their first common cold. Here was Ellen James of Illinois, out of her sack” (192, 538, 507, 508–9). “The Ellen James” is thus a kind of walking miracle—the quintessence of vulnerability and yet alive, “real,” she embodies the late-twentieth-century subject of consumer capitalism. At the same time, the pathos she generates carves out a different kind of space for the man who would take her side—who would defend not only her but the “integrity” of her penetrability. The story her raped body tells is that male violence and effectivity are intact; that the man who would protect her is not a rapist. Like Esmeralda, she offers “Hope” and validation through her vulnerability, but only to the extent that it is betrayed. Garp’s status as a man of the new era and as a writer—a new kind of worker, one who arranges and circulates information while “producing” very little—is ratified only when Ellen James tells him that *The World According to Bensenhaver* is “The best rape story I have ever read” (508).

It is interesting to note that in her physical appearance Ellen James suggests the underworld of decay and waste from which Esmeralda emerges: “Oddly at the fringe of their group, but seeming to have no connection with them, was a wraithlike girl, or barely grown-up child; she was a dirty blond-headed girl with piercing eyes the color of coffee-stained saucers—like a drug-user’s eyes, or someone long involved in hard tears” (502). Like Esmeralda, “wraithlike” Ellen James is otherworldly, set apart from the social order, and yet that idealization is dependent on markers of corruption. Ellen is by nature “dirty blond,” her eyes the color of stains. She seems thus to have everything to do with the kind of seepage that dominates *Underworld*, born with the look of something open to the generally unseen flows of dark waste. She looks like a drug user, like someone accus-
tomed to ingesting dangerous, possibly infected substances in a space outside the order of law (Esmeralda, daughter of a crack addict, eats from garbage cans). This look of permeability is further reinforced through the association with moisture—old coffee and hard tears. Like the abject itself as Julia Kristeva describes it in *Powers of Horror*, the raped Ellen/Esmeralda is the abolishment of boundary and difference; her body “confus[es] inside and outside” (160). Her/their abjection demands and ratifies the existence of a “third party, the doctor”—more powerfully yet, the “writer”—who will “[provide] the lay counterpart of religious abominations, excisions, and purifications” (160–61). Writer and adoptive father, Garp presides over the sacrificial purification, casting out demons of feminism and rape alike, and in so doing formulating a new masculine contract. He is also, of course, a writing teacher—Ellen has come to him because she wants him to teach her. Thus, he presides as well over the transformation of yet another Philomela; it is he who out of kindness will give words to the body mutilated and rendered voiceless by a cruel, other, man. Upon his death, then, which is clearly sacrificial, Garp stands to be remembered not for his productive writing life, which the narrative has carefully understated, but for the reworking of what had—through neither fault nor agency of his own—been broken.

What Garp also achieves, of course, as do Irving and DeLillo, is the narrative legitimacy of “men like me” (212). Self-consciously feminist and paternalistic at the same time, the postindustrial educated white man “like me” is everything the rapist is not. Having relinquished the agency of capitalist desire—the desire to produce, the desire to consume—the masculine protagonist is defined also by his distance from sexual violence. That violence—along with the agency it signifies—is displaced onto a rapist scapegoat, a figure constructed to be completely without readerly appeal. The rapist is thus preserved as he is scapegoated, and he remains to haunt the borders and underground of the text; his violence necessarily continues to operate, denounced and yet crucial for masculine (anti)definition. Yet because that violence is precisely so visibly displaced, it is also given as belonging somehow originally within a natural masculine core. It is thus unsurprising that this reterritorialization of masculinity is figured—often explicitly—as sacrificial self-castration, suggesting that the prerogative to rape is in fact just that, a natural right self-denied, immutable evidence of a natural state of masculinity residing deep below surface constructions. The “real” masculinity is the violent one, buried deep in the past, deep in the text, or deep in the psyche, but not allowed expression in the narrative now of the sympathetic protagonist’s actions—because another aspect of “real” masculinity, presumably, would be the repression of precisely that underground volatility, where “natural” heterosexual violence joins the
“soft organic murk” of the underground flows of late capitalism. Covering over this displacement is the glowing apparition of the holy rape victim. Heavily fetishized, the raped woman or girl becomes sacred, and her protection or worship the one gesture capable of recuperating masculine subjectivity. She is the one true thing, and the new man, like Garp’s Bensenhaer, is the lone and alienated protector, “a lurker at the last edge of light—a retired enforcer, barely alive on the rim of darkness” (445). Alive nonetheless.