

DeLillo's "Underworld": No Patria Meridionale History - No southern-Italian American Culture

Tom Verso (May 11, 2011)



"No history No future" – writes Don DeLillo. Southern-Italian Americans in DeLillo's novel "Underworld" had no history, ergo they had no future. He recreates the southern-Italian American 'Urban Village' culture, the fossilized remnant of Patria Meridionale (south-of-Rome homeland) village culture in Italy. The pre-1960s children and grandchildren of immigrants had no knowledge of their Patria Meridionale history. After moving from homogeneous Italian urban villages to the heterogeneous suburbs, they had no historical basis for a genuine southern-Italian American culture - No history No culture. They had a southern-Italian identity, but did not know what it meant to be southern-Italian. The American education system (Kindergarten-PhD) is devoid of Patria Meridionale history. Accordingly, southern-Italian Americans could only mimic roles presented to them in mass media. Abandoned by their literati, southern-Italian American youth have only mass-media producers for teachers (Sopranos, Jersey Shore, Donnie Brasco, Mario and Lydia).

Preface Literature and Reality

A hardcore empiricist who virtually never reads fiction, with the exception of a pop detective story when down with the flu; it never occurred to me to read anything like the "post-modern" novels of Don DeLillo. Not only literature challenged; but also, after concerted efforts, I gave up trying to understand what "post-modern" means.

However, when I came across a magazine excerpt from "Underworld", an absolutely brilliant rendition of 1951 Bronx 'Little Italy', I gave pause. I've read the two great cultural-anthropology studies of Boston's North End and West End 'Little Italy' neighborhoods; respectively, W. F. Whyte's "Street Corner Society, and H. J. Gans' "Urban Villagers". Yet, there seemed to be more 'reality' in DeLillo's fictional representation than these meticulous highly and rightfully acclaimed empirical studies.

Aristotle said: "Poetry is finer and more philosophical than history; for poetry expresses the universal, and history only the particular." A history student, I absolutely rejected the notion that poets (whom I could not understand) grasp a greater truth than empirical researchers.

Nevertheless, I always felt the above studies of Boston, even with all their meticulously documented Aristotelian "particulars", were missing something fundamental – the essence, if you will, of the southern-Italian American culture. I grew up in a 'Little Italy' neighborhood much like those described, but I could not relate to the anthropological representations. For example, in my youth, I 'hung-out' on street corners much like those described by Whyte, and I found his descriptions factually accurate. However, the descriptions of the street corner scenes lacked Italianita. They lacked southern-Italian American idiom and the nuances of 'street corner' conversations. Culture is conveyed best in language.

DeLillo is just the opposite. Idiom and nuance pour out of every sentence. For example, I count at least 45 Italian slang expressions in DeLillo's section on 'Little Italy', used in perfect context: Malavita, Madonn, Mannaggia l'America, Cafone, stunat, finalmente, u'gazz, tizzoons, etc. The characters in the book did not speak Italian, nor did my street corner companions and I. Nevertheless, I recognized and remembered every one of the words and how they were used on my street corner, in my Little Italy neighborhood.

Little Italy idiom was laced with Italian words, expressions, intonations and gestures. Unlike many social scientist, fiction writers are highly sensitized too the nuances of language and their cultural implications. Ultimately, culture is the reality of an ethnic group. To know an ethnic group, is to know its culture, is to know its language.

Accordingly, DeLillo's reality is not simply a sociological study in fictionalized form. DeLillo's Little Italy is not just the Bronx; his is virtually all Little Italies – Aristotle's "poetic universal". Anyone who has known a Little Italy, anywhere in the country (Boston, Chicago, Rochester, etc.), will find themselves in DeLillo's rendering. He does not simply describe; he recreates. The reader can vicariously experience people and events. Reading the dialogues in the novel is like 'listening-in'; it's like standing off to the side listening to real people talking.

Further, his southern-Italian American culture is not limit the to historic Little Italy. He takes the readers beyond Little Italy. He follows the southern-Italian American through the destruction of their 'urban villages' and the demise of their culture. Cultural demise is implied by the phrase DeLillo inserts at an incongruent narrative point that seems meaningless in the context: "No history, no future."

Southern-Italian Americans have no knowledge of their Patria Meridionale history before "Little Italy", and it's increasingly obvious there is no future for their culture beyond 'nostalgic illusions', 'media cartoons', 'Renaissance fantasies' and, of course FOOD.

Introduction

The main plot of the book is essentially a 'coming of age' story line following the protagonist (half Italian/half Irish) Nick Shay from a seventeen year old youth in 1951 Bronx until he is sixty-ish in 1990s Phoenix Arizona. But, this is an 827-page (post-modern) novel with a very complicated backwards in time plot involving many characters, subplots, nuances, etc. No summary could possible do justice this book. For purposes of this presentation, I will consider an aspect of the Nick Shay and Bronzini characters as extended metaphors representing the essence of Little Italy culture, its demise and the consequences for southern-Italian American culture.



Bronzini, to my mind, is the personification of the pre-1960s Little Italy culture, the essence of southern-Italian American culture and its demise subsequent to the suburban migration. Nick Shay becomes the personification of the culturally empty southern-Italian American in post-1960s suburbia. Both men suffer from the lost southern-Italian American culture after the Little Italy decades - once vibrant personalities in their natural physical and cultural milieu, and then psychologically emptied in post-Little Italy assimilated America.

In 1951 Bronx:

"Bronzini thought that walking was an art."

In 1990s Phoenix suburb, Nick thinks about 1951 Bronx:

"I long for the days...when I was alive on the earth...when I walked real streets..."

The pre-Ellis Island south-of-Rome Italian culture was a village culture. The southern-Italian American culture was an urban village culture, a culture of city streets. When southern-Italian Americans left their urban villages, left their city streets, they left their culture behind.

1951 - Little Italy the Bronx

Nothing differentiates the pre-1960s from the post more than the car. The car made the move to the spread out suburbs possible. Bronzini's 1951 world is the un-spread out world of:

"Compact neighborhoods... He didn't own a car, didn't want one, didn't need one, wouldn't take one if someone gave it to him. "

Bronzini is a "happy man"; a second generation Italian American high school science teacher married with a two-year old daughter. Through Bronzini's eyes we see the "compact neighborhood" of southern-Italian American urban village street life: children at play, barbers, butchers, waiters, priest, the old, the young, men, women, wives, mothers, etc. Just like the southern Italian and Sicilian villages, from which the immigrants came, every facet of life is present in the compact -urban village-neighborhoods they created.

Bronzini's Walk

"Bronzini thought that walking was an art. He was out nearly every day after school, letting the route produce a medley of sounds and forms and movements, letting the voices fall and the aromas deploy in ways that vary, but not too much, from day to day...there's a European texture of the streets, things done the old slow faithful way...this is the only art Bronzini mastered - walking these streets and letting the senses collect what is routinely here.

...card players at social club...woman buys a flounder in the market...aproned boy warp the fish in a major headline...men doing interesting jobs, day labor, painters in drop coveralls, men with sledgehammers, Sicilians with faces grained with stone dust.

...George the waiter having a smoke during a lull...George the Barber was sweeping the floor...voices from Italian radio drifting faintly out the open door...The butcher called to people walking by.

He walked across the street so he could wave to George the Barber. How children adapt, using brick walls and lampposts and fire hydrants. He watched a girl trying one end of her jump rope to a window grille and getting her little brother to turn the other end. Then she stood in the middle and jumped. No history, no future. He watched a boy playing handball against himself, hitting Chinese killers. The hi-bounce rubber ball, the pink spaldeen, rapping back from the brick facade. And the fullness of a moment in the play street...girls playing jacks and jumping double dutch...boys at boxball, marbles and ringolievio...Salugi they cried, that strange word, maybe some corruption of the Italian saluto...It's a dying practice kids playing in city streets..



Nick is a 17-year old, third generation grandchild of an Italian immigrant. He is also part of the 'streets'; but as a youth, Nick's Little Italy world is a slightly different variation of Bronzini's:

"After work he got dropped off near the zoo and walked past his brother's school...He came to the building where they lived and turned at Donato's grocery...down the narrow street...down a set of concrete steps into the network of alleyways that ran between five or six buildings...Down the yards as they were called...Close-set buildings. Laundry lines, slant light, patches of weeds, a few would-be gardens and bare ailanthus trees and the fire escapes that fixed fretwork patterns of light and shade on the walls and paved surfaces.

He's spent his childhood half in the streets and half down the yards with a little extra squeezed in for the rooftops and fire escapes."

1990 Little Italy the Bronx

Bronzini doesn't walk the streets anymore:

"He spent more time indoors when there were people in the halls. He'd seen a hypodermic syringe on the second-story landing and now there were people in the halls...He heard them breathing in the halls and knew he had food for two days easy and when the milk went sour he could open a can of peaches and dump the fruit and syrupy juice on the breakfast cereal...He heard them late at night and knew he could stretch the chopped meat, bulk up the tomato soup with macaroni, and they didn't live in the building and would find another place.

Bronzini on change and not change:

"You don't want to be shocked. You're reluctant to blame anyone. But you went to the old streets...You saw your building. The squalor around it. The empty lot with the razor wire...The men. Who are they, standing around doing nothing? Poor people. They're very shocking...And these were your streets. It's a curious rite of passage...Visit the old places. First you wonder how you lived so uncomplainingly in such cramped circumstances. The streets are narrower, the buildings smaller than you ever remembered. It's like coming back to Lilliput. And think of the rooms. Think of the tiny bathroom, shared by the family, by the grandparents, by the uncle who's slightly u'pazz..

And you want to ask me why I'm still here...I'm too rooted to leave...too narrow.

1990 Phoenix

Nick:

"Marian wanted me to tell her about the old streets, the street games, the street fights, the alley sex...some execution now and then of some wayward member of whatever organized group she imagined might be operating thereabouts...

She thought my mother's arrival might yield the basic savor she could not get from laconic Nick. But my mother only talked about the lazy grades I got in school and how I fell out of a tree when I was eight.

Just as the southern-Italian immigrants left their villages in Italy behind and moved to American cities, their southern-Italian American grandchildren left the urban villages behind and moved out of the cities to the suburbs. But, whereas the Italian immigrants brought their culture with them, recreated it in the American cities, the grandchildren left the culture of Little Italy behind - they assimilated. But, not completely! They could not completely forget their primordial Patrai Meridionale - they could not forget their Being.

Nick - "there's an Italian word for it..."

" I tell my wife there's an Italian word that explains everything. Then I tell her the word. She says,



What does this explain? And she answers, Nothing.

The word that explains nothing in this case is *lontananza*. Distance or remoteness, sure. But as I use the word, as I interpret it...it's the perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicated mobster – the made man. Once you're a made man, you don't need the constant living influence of sources outside yourself. You're all there. You're handmade. You're a sturdy Roman wall."

I tell my colleague: there's word in Italian...*Dietrologia*. It means the science of what is behind something. A suspicious event. The science of what is behind an event."

Language is culture. Nick could not forget his urban village language – the only thing left of his urban village culture. The words kept coming to mind – a haunting refrain reminding him that he is, in his Being, a *Terroni* (southern Italian).

Conclusion

No Patria Meridionale History – No Southern-Italian American Culture

With the two characters Bronzini and Nick, DeLillo captures the post WW II twentieth century southern-Italian American experience in poetry – not history.

Bronzini embodies the bygone robust urban Little Italy cultural past. Nick, the present culturally empty southern-Italian American in suburbia, left with only "the words" - linguistic shards, the remnants of a once mighty culture. Southern-Italian American culture is *lontananza* (distant and remote), and how that came to be is *dietrologica* (something behind the event).

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