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An Analysis of Don DeLillo's Powerful Imaginings: The Atmosphere of the Individual Implicated in the Postmodern Condition

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements For the degree of Master of Arts Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT
An Analysis of Don DeLillo’s Powerful Imaginings: The Atmosphere of the Individual Implicated in the Postmodern Condition

Don DeLillo distills common premises about the postmodern era - about the way public and private experience tend to be “always ready” constituted or framed by language, by the intrusions of mass media, by the subterranean ideologies of a decentered network of apocalypse and a painful awareness of the devastation of the natural world. DeLillo, accepting the self’s implication in postmodern “white noise” the residue of a “familiar” human awareness of death. More than merely working out the writer’s strategy of self, this thesis, by examining three of his novels, will make judgements about the success or failure of the strategies as convincing constructs in the context of the novels.
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Introduction

This thesis is about what I think a particular American novelist is telling us about how to survive in the contemporary era. The "self" as a literary entity is supposed to be dead, and a certain kind of self doubtlessly is—at least the kind that sees the world as a passive landscape against which he can work out his private destiny. It's more or less impossible to read anyone who believes in such a self anymore (Ayn Rand, for example)—nearly as impossible as it is to believe that real-life Randian figures like Michael Milken or Donald Trump actually roam the earth. That the postmodern—a condition in which capitalism and mass media combine to saturate physical and ideological space, leaving little or no space left for the enclaves of Nature or Free Consciousness—is an intrusive, potentially determinative force on the individual is indisputable. That words and phrases like "freedom," "unitary consciousness," "self-determination," "choice" and the like are dismissed by contemporary critical discourse as archaic delusions is equally obvious. But then again novelists—particularly American novelists—aren't as quick to jump onto theoretical bandwagons from the Continent as critics are. For better or worse, they continue to deal with phenomenological, subjective consciousness: what it feels like to operate inside a mind that experiences the world as Other. For all the talk of "intersubjectivity," "transpersonality," "circulation," etc.—the buzzwords that herald the poststructuralist revolution of consciousness—American novelists are still telling us that, except for those epiphanic moments when we feel we break free from subjectivity, we are still stuck with

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our measly, alienated selves, and that given this state of things, we need strategies to help us cope.

I chose the writer I'll discuss in this study—Don DeLillo—for two reasons. One is that he has a highly developed macrocosmic vision of the postmodern world, an intense imaginative interest not just in the local problems of the individual, family, and community, but in the massive forms of power that affect the individual in ways he senses only vaguely and mysteriously. A second reason is that he grounds his work in a passionate concern for how the individual makes out in such a world. Don DeLillo is interested, in other words, in exploring strategies of self in the postmodern era.²

I can see that some discussion of terminology is needed here, mostly because the words “postmodern” and “self” have for some time been minotaurs inside labyrinths all their own, drawing the attention of some of the weightiest thinkers of our time. Let me begin with the term “postmodern.” The literature on the nature of the postmodern is already vast, so I'd like to enter the discussion in a specialized way—in terms of how the postmodern, as a dominant cultural condition, affects the individual.³ (I will avoid, at least for now, any

² A note on usage. By “individual,” I mean simply “human being” or “person,” and mean to imply nothing about the constitution or ontological integrity of that individual. I have decided against the frequent used “subject,” mainly because it implies much too strongly that the individual is subject-to something—ideology, power, culture, language—an implication which I think is accepted too easily today. The idea that the individual is completely subject to or constituted by forces outside itself is pervasive among contemporary theorists, but novelists, even those most attuned to the postmodern era, find that the forces which influence us do so incompletely, or at any rate the extent of their influence is unknowable, and so the novelist tends to trust, much more than a theorist would, their intimations that freedom from constitution can and does exist. By the word “self,” I mean something quite different, obviously, and it really won't do to define it here (I will explore it later in this section) except to say that it does imply the possibility of origin, free agency, or “soul” that the term “subject” forecloses. I'm not going to argue here that the self in fact “exists” in the writings of Don DeLillo, that I will explore, only that this novelist wants to keep open the question of the self's existence as a way of exploring vital concerns—transcendence, spirituality, plenitude, love—that the novelist finds it impossible to ignore.

³ When I say that the postmodern is a “dominant cultural condition,” I am
description of postmodernism as an artistic style. I'm particularly interested in this since the very concept of “man,” “self,” and “transcendental ego” has been one of the central objects of attack by poststructuralist theorists. It’s common now to accept the notion of the “death of the subject” or the “death of the author,” but what Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes have called for, obviously, isn’t the death of man but the death of a particular idea of man: one which, as Foucault puts it, “gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity—which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness.”

By the term “postmodern,” then, I mean to indicate a cultural condition, beginning in the U.S. sometime in the mid-1960’s (possibly as early as the nationwide television experience of the Kennedy assassination) when discourse evolved to the point where it

using “dominant” the way Roman Jacobson used it, as an umbrella term that enables us to describe various phenomena. I don’t mean to reify the term “postmodern” in any way, especially since the novelist I will discuss here rarely if ever uses the term “postmodern” himself. (Cf. Roman Jacobson, “The Dominant,” Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971] pp. 105-110.) I am also being obviously historical here, “periodizing” a cultural moment and thus transgressing a whole range of theoretical prohibitions, but I’m convinced that there are useful and enabling historical distinctions to be made about the postmodern period, as long as one remembers, again, not to reify one’s conceptions, something I will try to remember throughout this study.

4 For postmodernism as style, I refer readers to Brian McHale’s informed inventory of postmodern fictional rhetoric, Postmodern Fiction (New York: Methuen, 1987).


6 On September 27, 1991, The BBC I broadcast a film on Don DeLillo, titled “Don DeLillo: The Word, The Image, and The Gun” which was directed by Kim
became possible to reject the self as an authentic presence. In other words, the postmodern begins when and where it has become possible to dislodge the self from the center of discourse. Not coincidentally, it is during this period that the individual began to feel so saturated by outside forces—particularly the ideological apparatus of consumer capitalism and the communication networks of the mass media—that her sense of self—of separate subjective space in which she could find or formulate a center—became dubious. By this reckoning, the collapse of humanism and the advent of poststructuralism might be described as the cultural moment when the phenomenological experience of center, of “soul,” of authenticity, no longer seemed to be enough of a shared experience that it could be defended discursively. It began to seem less an existential moment of good faith than a shrill, factitious ideological position.

The postmodern signifies for the individual a condition in which immediate or unmediated experience appears to be out of reach, where there no longer seems to be any “significant space,” as Saul Bellow calls it, in which the individual can situate herself as an autonomous being.7 I can think of no better example of this than the “most photographed barn in America” episode in Don DeLillo’s White Noise.8 Early in the novel, Jack Gladney and Murray Jay Siskind visit a “tourist attraction” noted for nothing but the fact that people take pictures of it. The barn that’s photographed has no special significance in

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itself: in fact, Murray tells us, the barn isn’t really what people come for: “They are taking pictures of taking pictures,” he says:

Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision... What was the barn like before it was photographed?... What did it look like, how was it different from other barns? We can’t answer these questions because we’ve read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can’t get outside the aura. We’re part of the aura (White Noise, p. 12-13).

The experience of the postmodern is about the feeling that we cannot get outside the aura. We can’t see the barn anymore because we have become part of the barn’s aura, just as the barn has become part of us. In this particular example, Murray “seemed immensely pleased by” this feeling of embeddedness in collective signification, in this thoroughgoing mediation by culture, and thus might be called a “postmodern man.” Other characters in DeLillo aren’t quite as happy about it, since they sense in all that signification, powerful and mysterious forces manipulating them, sometimes literally, to death.

To ask why the individual feels so mediated, so doubtful of the authenticity of her own experience, leads us to the specific features which I think comprise the postmodern condition. I’d like to discuss three of them here: the cluster of problems created by “late capitalism,” the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the worldwide ecological crisis. All of them spring from the appropriation, by capitalist and totalitarian powers alike, of extraordinary technologies which have been developed and implemented largely within the last fifty years, and in combination have been responsible for the radical shrinkage (or even elimination) of the individual’s “significant space.”

Most discussions of the postmodern as an historical category, for instance, Fredric Jameson’s and those of the Frankfurt School, are heavily informed by Marxism, and so tend to blame capitalism for all the ills brought on by a postmodern condition. But totalitarian regimes have been just as responsible for bringing on those conditions that I believe characterize the postmodern as
The first of these is brilliantly examined by Fredric Jameson. For Jameson, we now live in a period that he, borrowing from economist Ernest Mandel, calls "late capitalism," the third and most purified stage of capitalism, which is characterized by a decentered, postindustrial, multinational corporate economy which arrived with the first economical use of the computer and accelerated with the dizzying growth of worldwide networks of communication systems such as the internet. Late capitalism has gone beyond the "instrumental rationality," as Adorno called it, which depersonalized and commodified the individual in previous stages of capitalism. Now, because of capital's appropriation of new technologies—namely that of the mass media and of the computer, which produce images and information rather than products—it has found a new and more effective way to exploit and control the individual. It has managed to mobilize the charismatic power of the image and of other communication devices in order to invade the individual's private enclaves of subjectivity. "This purer capitalism of our time," Jameson says,

thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it has hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way: one is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and

their capitalist counterparts, and so I am reluctant to ascribe all the world's woes to capitalism. Still, American woes are chiefly those brought on by an economic system that openly encourages greed and the wanton abuse of nature (as opposed to totalitarian systems, which do so clandestinely), and so, in what follows I will be mostly concerned with the capitalist system.

Capitalism has reached a kind of apotheosis: in the U.S. at least, it now largely produces images and information (in the form of advertising, web site pages, computer banks of personal, credit and consumer information, software for finance industries, packaging, television shows, movies, videos, newspapers and magazines) which are sold as products, but at the same time these images are expressions of capitalist propaganda. Late capitalism, therefore, is in the curious business of selling itself, a self-reflexivity that reproduces itself in the realm of culture. In such a situation, as Jameson points out, the individual loses critical distance on her culture, becomes disaffected toward anything that isn’t reinforced by a consumer ethic, and becomes morally disoriented, even paralyzed by her implication in schemes of power so vast and ethically conflicted that the ideas of “choice” seems an existential nostalgia.

This analysis of the invasion of private space has been elaborated by Jean Baudrillard.

Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," p. 83.


A mind-wrenching example of capitalism feeding on its own images is the protracted story of Madonna’s pop video “Like A Prayer.” The video, which first of all, is an advertisement to sell a single and an album, tells the story of how a white girl saves the life of a black man unjustly jailed for rape: It is a hip, slick reworking of a favoured liberal myth which reinforces white attitudes of helping the downtrodden while celebrating the white role as savior. But this is only the beginning. Part of the video, paid for by Pepsi Co. as part of its own campaign to boost sales and name recognition, was “premiered” as an advertisement on the 1989 Academy Award show. Moreover, the fact that the video was to premiere during the Academy Awards show was advertised--on newscasts and on TV commercials--prior to the broadcast. So the video advertised not only a single and an album, a soft drink and a national awards show, but it advertised an advertisement: itself. When Christian fundamentalists objected to the video's use of religious imagery, Pepsi pulled the video and cancelled its contract with Madonna, which created a storm of ersatz controversy and provided fodder for TV celebrity shows like "Entertainment Tonight" and the tabloid press.
In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, he explains that “there is no longer any system of objects” in the contemporary world; objects have been effaced by a world saturated by commodified signs. In such a world, “our private sphere has ceased to be the stage where the drama of the subject at odd with his objects and with his image is played out: we no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks.”

“The most intimate operations of your life,” Baudrillard adds, “become the potential grazing ground of the media.” Think only of the explosion of home video technology, of the “reality” programming on American TV networks, and of the growing sense, adumbrated by Andy Warhol and now reaching critical mass, that nothing is real unless it exists on television. “Reality packaging” now saturates our cultural life. It has even become a principle feature of American politics too, so that democracy’s most vital process has become a matter of “photo ops,” “spin doctoring,” and the most cynical manipulation of political symbolism.

Baudrillard calls this packaging “obscenity” because the scene of “personal

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15 In “An Interview with Don DeLillo,” Maria Nadotti asks Don DeLillo about the use of Andy Warhol in his texts, he answered “What Warhol succeeded in achieving was to take an image and make it fluctuate freely, liberating it from history: a man who is immersed in wars and revolutions becomes a sort of icon painted on a flat surface. In the same way that soup is packaged, Warhol packages his Mao’s, his Marilyn Monroe’s and his Elvis Presley’s. He simply repeats the images.” Then he goes on to state “By that I mean that through repetition the artist obliterates distinctions: when the images are identical to each other consumerism and the mass production of art in their most explicit form take over.” *Salmaquendi* (trans. by Peggy Boyers. Fall 1993. No. 100, p. 96).


17 This is not to say that political campaigning hasn’t always been cynical and manipulative, only that the kinds of manipulations in our time are particularly flagrant because they saturate the voter with so much meaningless data that “enlightened self-interest” seems like a distant dream. If in 1858, Lincoln and Douglas could debate for three or four hours before voters who followed the
space" has been obscured, a sense of a reality "behind" the images replaced by the individual's dizzy sense of implication in a whirling array of simulacra, making him feel boundary-less, a simulacra himself, a node in a universal force field of information. Whatever the individual's response to such a condition, the world of late capitalism dislodges his sense of the primacy of his own perceptions and emotions, the very building blocks of his awareness. It becomes almost impossible for him to put any trust in an idea of a self as an autonomous and continuous historical being.  

nuances of real issues like slavery and freedom, now we are subjected to presidential debates rigidly controlled by the requirements of the cool TV medium, where it looks bad to sweat or appear intense, and where those candidates who come off best are the ones who say, with populist confidence, "Where's the beef?" "But, I did not inhale!" "Excuse me, but I paid for that microphone!" and "Well, there you go again." The news media, in fact, now forces candidates to develop "sound bites" and TV-friendly images or they don't appear on the news at all. The viewer/voter is subjected to constant distortions of a politician's position, but because the electronic media is so adept at disseminating powerful images, the arresting patriotic images and pithy "sound bites" become the reality of the campaign, and dictate the political discourse. A harrowing example can be found in Joan Didion's report on Michael Dukakis's 1988 presidential campaign. Didion reveals a strange collusion between Dukakis's handlers and the media, in which the campaign agreed to supply telegenic images if the media agreed not to tell its viewers that these images were manufactured exclusively for television consumption. Thus, night after night, Michael Dukakis was shown leisurely tossing a baseball back and forth with "friends" -- "taking a break from a strenuous campaign" as the media would put it -- when in fact he was playing catch on an airport tarmac with one of his aides so the news camera could film a "human interest" story for their viewers. According to Didion, the media never mentioned that the situations had been set up, and devoted valuable media time to these images when they could have been discussing vital issues. Joan Didion, "Insider Baseball," The New York Review of Books, October 27, 1988, pp. 19-30.  

As a final example of the way a medium--here advertising--can invade individual consciousness, here is Pauline Kael, a staunchly non-ideological movie critic, on the ways film advertising "penetrates the Unconscious," as Jameson would put it, of the viewer: "[i]n general it can be said that the public no longer discovers movies, the public no longer makes a movie [into] a hit. If the advertising for a movie doesn't build up an overwhelming desire to be part of the event, people just don't go. They don't listen to their own instincts, they don't listen to the critics--they listen to the advertising. Or, to put it more precisely, they do listen to their instincts, but their instincts are now controlled by advertising. It seeps through everything--talk shows, game shows, magazine and newspaper stories... The public relations event becomes  

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The second and third features of the postmodern which I think help explain the mediated character of postmodern experience need to be understood in light of these comments on late capitalism, because the nuclear peril and the worldwide ecological crisis have actually helped create a situation which cries out to be mediated, buffered, "massaged" (to borrow from Marshall McLuhan). Simply put, the nuclear crisis arouses a rumbling sense of horror in us, numbing us to the present and even more to the future, our own and that of our civilization and planet. The ecological crisis mediates our vital connection to the natural world. What is particularly frightening is that these mediations are further mediated by a mass communication society, which packages our fears of death and our distance from nature like it sells VCR's. It's surprising that neither Jameson nor most other commentators on the question of the postmodern have mentioned the nuclear threat or the dangers of ecological disaster as constituent features of the postmodern condition, but it's unthinkable that our era—and the literature of our era—hasn't been gravely affected by both.

The postmodern is generally regarded as a post-World War II phenomenon (that is, when it is regarded as a historical category at all; Lyotard’s formulations are another matter), but except for rare cases, the pall cast by the fact that the world suddenly, in the 1950's, had the physical capacity to destroy itself, to bring on its own literal apocalypse, has not entered into mainstream conceptualizations of postmodernism. But it needs to

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19 For Lyotard's conception of postmodernism as the avantgarde of any modernistic movement, see The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), particularly the last essay, "What Is Postmodernism?" For a "rare case" when the nuclear age has been considered an important factor in contemporary literature, see Diacritics 14, a special issue called "The Nuclear Imagination." Also see Peter Schwerger, "Writing the Unthinkable," Critical Inquiry, 13:1, Autumn 1986, pp. 33-48.
be considered, because the nuclear threat has also served to make the individual doubt the authenticity of her experience by numbing her emotional responsiveness to questions of both life and death, and making her crave an escape into the slick resolutions to overwhelming problems which the mass media promises.20

There was a time when the imminent death of a character in a novel could bring on inexorable and wholesale changes in the character's "soul" or "self." (The Death of Ivan Ilyich is the paradigmatic example.) The prospect of death, in one of humanism's cherished paradoxes, brings a character to life by reminding him of the miracle of being alive at all (Thus Kafka's cryptic remark: "The meaning of life is that it ends," which is humanism-by-a-thread). But one of the horrors of our century is that mass death and the prospect of total extinction has made it terribly difficult to look at death as one of the touchstones to arouse individual consciousness.21

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20 Earnest Becker, in his book The Denial of Death, (New York: Free Press, 1973), makes a powerful argument that the fear of death is the catalyst for all human striving, that behaviour, art, even the history of psychoanalysis can be explained in terms of how the individual tries to create a heroic narrative for himself as a means of metaphorically conquering death. Becker doesn't talk about the nuclear crisis specifically, but it's a small step to suggest that the possibility of nuclear holocaust creates in the individual an abjectness and powerlessness that numbs him to his own fear of death, and which prevents him from living a full and healthy life.

21 If this is not obvious enough, one might look at the work of psychoanalyst Robert Jay Lifton, who has spent a number of years studying the effects of the nuclear threat on individual psychology. Cf., for instance, Robert Jay Lifton and Richard Falk, Indefensible Weapons, (New York: Basic Books, 1982). Lifton begins the book by suggesting the extent to which the nuclear threat affects contemporary life: "It is true that none of our actions, problems, or symptoms is caused by nuclear weapons alone. But it is also true that nothing we do or feel--in working, playing, and loving, and in our private, family, and public lives--is free of their influence. The threat they pose has become the context of our lives, a shadow that persistently intrudes upon our mental ecology" (p. 3). Later, he summarizes the psychological effects of the crisis: "From early life on, relationships between self and world take on a fundamental insecurity, within a context of confusion around the threat of death. . . Every attitude and human tie becomes colored by a constellation of doom, which includes, in varying degrees, fear, expectation, and embrace of that fate. There is widespread resort to psychological maneuvers designed to diminish human
the looming nuclear crisis is a pervasive theme in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. The nuclear crisis as a central subject of fiction is rare—it may be too overwhelming a subject to take on directly—but it has helped set the emotional ground tone for the fiction that we consider contemporary.\(^2\)

When this fear of nuclear holocaust is combined with mass media techniques, the individual's predicament in the postmodern era becomes even more evident.\(^3\) In the film "Koyaanasqatsi" (a Hopi term for "life disintegrating, life out of balance," which I viewed in a third year sociology class at King's College, the University of Western Ontario), for example, director Gregory Ruggio shows slow-motion footage of nuclear explosions. The camera lingers on the mushroom cloud as it ascends, and the viewer is suspended between his fascination of the abomination and another emotion, clearly intended by Ruggio, which arises from the fact that slow-motion images of a nuclear explosion are eerily beautiful, especially when accompanied by a Philip Glass score: the white clouds seem to emerge organically: they really do bloom. Watching these images gives us another take on what

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feeling, but underneath that numbing are struggles with anger and rage along with every other kind of suppressed passion. Deep confusion and absence of meaning bedevil both one's emerging self-definition and one's larger aspirations toward human connection" (p. 78).

\(^2\) A number of novels in recent years have taken on nuclear war as a subject, such as Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age*, and Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace*, so it is not impossible, but I'm interested here more in the ways nuclear fear has entered postmodern consciousness, since it is something that pervades the emotional atmosphere of most novels from the late 1950's on.

\(^3\) According to DeLillo, "The news is fiction, the news is the new narrative—particularly, the dark news, the tragic news. I think that from this kind of news people find a kind of narrative with a tragic stamp which in another time they found in fiction." He goes on to state "I don't know exactly why this is. Maybe it depends on the fact that television, and its way of delivering the news, is so powerful. Or maybe it has to do simply with the spirit which has entered our consciousness, a sort of apocalyptic sense of things. I imagine people, individuals, watching their T.V. screens and having their own private apocalypses because right in front of them they have vivid images of real earthquakes and the like." Quoted from Maria Nadotti, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," p. 93.
Jameson calls the “hysterical sublime,” except that here our “hysteria” arises from a conscious awareness that what is evidently beautiful to us (and made especially so by the art of film) is simultaneously mankind’s greatest horror. Ruggio doesn’t push any response on the viewer except this vast ambivalence, one which might engender an aesthetic negative capability but which can also be baffling and politically disabling.

If the nuclear peril looms over the postmodern period, the ecological imbalances caused by unbridled industrialization have anesthetized the individual even more directly, and stands for me as the third major characteristic of the postmodern. The contamination of our air and water, the creation and dumping of toxic waste, the erosion of the ozone layer, the rapid depopulation of the rain forests, all testify to the alienation from nature that industrialized men suffer; but these catastrophes in turn intensify that alienation because new generations grow up without any attachment to the natural world, and learn to rely almost entirely on the prefabricated world of postmodern life. Aside from dramatizing the very real physical effects that the destruction of our biosphere has on our lives (a central theme in DeLillo’s works), the three books I’ll study by Don DeLillo, explore the psychic consequences created by a civilization which has systematically plundered the Earth without replenishing it. If there is an extractable political ideology in criticism of the West’s insane extension of the Protestant ethic, which sees Nature not as something we live with and in fact are, but that we use in order to prove some sense of spiritual worthiness. Thomas LeClair argues in both *The Art of Excess* and his book on Don DeLillo that underlying the explosive literary inventiveness displayed in the most ambitious American novels of the

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24 For Jameson, the hysterical sublime refers to the experience of a viewer in the presence of an art work like Nam June Paik’s stacked TV sets; the viewer allows herself to be bombarded by television imagery which won’t allow itself to be syncretized. The sublimity comes from the feeling of being overpowered, the hysteria from the scattered nature of the perceptions, which reproduce in a controlled aesthetic arena the schizophrenic environment of mass media’s image bombardments. Cf., Jameson, “Postmodernism,” pp. 75-7.
past quarter of a century is a desire for a balance with nature:

The art of excess is ultimately an art of balance, measuring and counterbalancing cultural power... The impetus for this kind of representation... lies outside literature—in our time's manifold and compelling recognitions that Earth is an ecological whole, that its survival is endangered by its large-scale human control systems... 25

The West, particularly the United States, has lost that balance, both physically—the unreconstructed natural world, which has been a source of restoration and replenishment since industrialized urban centers first sprang up in the eighteenth century, has largely disappeared for many urban and suburban dwellers—but psychically as well: many people are no longer able to respond to Nature, or are simply so uninterested that they don't care that it is being destroyed.

I believe what first drew me to Don DeLillo and his novels was his excellent examples of this anesthetization that abound in his novels, let me take up just one particularly powerful one now, especially since it examines the effects of a media culture on individual experience of an ecological disaster. In White Noise, Jack Gladney and his family endure "The Airborne Toxic Event," a cloud of toxic chemicals that hovers over the town and slowly infects some of the inhabitants. 26 What is striking about DeLillo's rendering of this

25 Thomas LeClair, The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary Fiction, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. i. LeClair's thesis is the same in his In the Loop: Don DeLillo and The Systems Novel, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. x: "I think DeLillo's work has an unusual deconstructive and reconstructive usefulness. It possesses the power to reach general readers, those mass consumers of culture, with a precise diagnosis of and affective alternative to precisely those conditions of our consumer culture that threaten to consume us, not just us professors or us readers or us Americans, but all of us members of the ecosystem, that encompassing reciprocal loop that is DeLillo's fundamental model of value."

episode is the extent to which the Gladneys are obsessed not with the poison itself, but with the language which names the situation. Radio stations keep upgrading the status of the toxic spill from a "feathery plume" of smoke to "a black billowing cloud" to, finally, "the airborne toxic event," and the Gladneys experience each semantic upgrade as a physical change in their own bodies. They pay more attention to information about the event than the event itself, checking and validating their own responses to the toxins against what the media tells them ("... the girls were complaining of sweating palms. 'There's been a correction,' Heinrich told [his stepmother Babette]. 'Tell them they ought to be throwing up'")\(^\text{27}\). Now the reason they respond in this way is complicated, but might be expressed in this way: 1) They are already so used to their experience being structured for them that even in life and death situations they appeal to authorities to mediate their own experience, and 2) The nature of postmodern ecological disasters—invisible man-made toxins, "waves and radiation"—is so hideous that an individual's response is to pounce on authorized explanations which domesticate the danger of the situation (a label gives us a sense of control) and mitigate the animal fear lying beneath the catastrophe. "The Airborne Toxic Event" section of \textbf{White Noise} is an almost paradigmatic representation of what I call the postmodern, a tragicomic situation in which the individual can trust her perceptions no more than she can trust the air she breathes, and her most intimate feelings about her own death are managed and manipulated by a media system which simultaneously strips her of personal power and offers itself as an authority she can trust.

So far, I have been careful to use the word "individual" instead of the word "self" because the former term doesn't carry the charged ideological current that "self" does. And I could continue to do this, since, at first glance, "self," as an idea we have inherited from Descartes, who placed it at the center of Western humanism, implies a number of concepts-

\(^{27}\) DeLillo, \textit{White Noise}, p. 112.
-like presence or "being," free agency, origin, sovereignty, and transcendence of cultural determination—that don't seem operable or even, to many, desirable in a postmodern era. But "individual" is a bland, almost empty concept, and can't really convey the sense of struggle with the world and the intimations of freedom, presence, even spirituality that DeLillo suggests, is sometimes very powerful, in his characters and the narrators' personae. The word "self" does. And the very embattled nature of the term may work for us here since to use it is to at once assert it and call attention to its problematic character, which, it seems to me, is exactly what our novelist does in his most serious investigations of his characters and narrators. Even a novelist as postmodern as Thomas Pynchon doesn't foreclose on the possibility that a self survives the horrors of Western history—in fact, the word "soul," a far weightier ontological term than "self," occupies an important position in his novel Gravity's Rainbow. DeLillo, like most American writers who work in a pragmatic, empirical tradition rather than say, the more theoretically-inclined French novelist, is far more willing to go with his instincts, and though these instincts have often lead him to agree in large part with the claims of theorists about the problematics of the self, he is reluctant to dispense with the concept altogether.

The concept of self that has become such a subject of contestation is the bourgeois humanist self, a self we might characterize as a discrete, impermeable, phenomenological site of freedom and sovereignty. It is ostensibly experienced as the source of one's originality of thought and feeling, independence of judgement, and responsibility and self-control. It implies the starkest of subject-object dualism: this "self" is completely in command of his experience, conscious and unconscious, and is absolutely free to choose among the options his environment presents to him. It's a kind of black-box concept of subjectivity, and philosophers and theorists have been chipping away at it for the last century and a half.
Marx may have begun it, when he gave Western thought its first persuasive theory that the "self" was created as an epiphenomenon of the rise of capitalist modes of production. Marx's analysis gave extraordinary impetus to a growing recognition that with an emerging industrial society came a powerful set of ideologies whose aim was to preserve the prevailing capitalist socioeconomic arrangements. One of these ideologies, the concept of "self," as Horkheimer and Adorno observed, actually served to intensify the individual's alienation and eventually perverted his energies so that he became an instrument of his own depersonalization—a victim of what they called "the dialectic of enlightenment." This line of thinking, important among later Frankfurt School theorists, post-Marxists and politically-engaged poststructuralists, treats the concept of self as a naive vestige of Romantic revolutionism, one that in fact has been appropriated by capitalism to assure the people that they are indeed free—though free, it turns out, only to consume this or that product, this or that image. Needless to say, when we account for the further ideological interventions of late capitalism, these formulations leave little room for any kind of freedom or sovereignty.

Nietzsche attacked the concept of self from a different direction. His most famous formulation comes in *The Genealogy of Morals*, when he writes that the concept arose

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29 Albrecht Wellmer summarizes the dialectic of enlightenment in this way: "The external destiny in which men had to become involved for the sake of emancipation from their slavery to nature is at the same time their inner destiny, a destiny which reason suffers at its own hands. In the end, the subjects for whose sake the subjection, reification, and disenchantment of nature were begun are themselves so repressed, reified, and disenchanted in their own eyes, that even their efforts at emancipation result in the opposite—in fortifying the context of delusion in which they are caught. With the overthrow of the animistic world-view, the 'dialectic of enlightenment' has already begun, a dialectic which, in capitalist industrial society, has been driven to the point where 'even man has become an anthropocentrism in the eyes of man.' " Quoted in Jurgen Haberman, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 125.
simultaneously with the concept of guilt or "bad conscience," which is really just the
interiorization of the powerful voices of the community which try to inhibit the free play of
natural instincts. The "self," for Nietzsche, is no more than a morally sanctified excuse to
evade the dictates of the will-to-power; it is a pitiful expression of the "herd instinct":

I take bad conscience to be a deep-seated malady to which man succumbed under the
pressure of the most profound transformation he ever underwent—the one that made
him once and for all a sociable and pacific creature... All instincts that are not allowed
free play turn inward. This is what I call man's interiorization: it alone provides the soil
for the growth of what is later called man's soul... [T]he generator of the greatest
and most disastrous of maladies, of which humanity has not to this day been cured: his
sickness of himself, brought on by the violent severance from his animal past, by his
sudden leap and fall into new layers and conditions of existence, by his declaration of
war against the old instincts that had hitherto been the foundations of his power, his
joy, and his awesomeness.30

The self, in other words, is a product of repression, and, as Peter Dews has pointed out,
for those who have expressed a radical anti-repression ethic in their work, like Michel
Foucault in his work on madness, prisons, and sexuality, and (I would add) theorists like
Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari in France and Norman O. Brown in America, Nietzsche's
conceptions are seminal.31 For all these writers, there may be a realm where "the human"
might best express itself—through the will to power or through the resistance to established
forms of power (though writers after Nietzsche have had enormous trouble theorizing
about this)—but it certainly won't be through the self. The self is ultimately the reification of
a fascist impulse turned inward.

Freud, while somewhat ambivalent about the notion of freedom—he maintained a
scientific determinism at the same time that he held that through analysis the patient could

30 Fredrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, trans. F. Golffing (Garden
liberate himself from the neurotic consequences of his upbringing—was, however, quite sure that the notion of sovereignty the West had inherited was specious. The "self," insofar as it was comprised of a conscious and unconscious mind, was overwhelmingly dictated to by the unconscious. And while so much else in Freud has been discredited, the "discovery" of the unconscious, with its implication that the individual has no sovereignty over herself, remains a cornerstone of psychoanalysis, particularly the poststructuralist varieties.32

A final angle of attack on the bourgeois humanist self comes from the poststructuralist camp, most daringly from Derrida, who has made it his life's work to dismantle the entire logocentric tradition—the Western metaphysics of presence—and more specifically has undone the self (as formulated in Rousseau, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger) that stood as the lynchpin for modern forms of logocentrism. For Derrida, once the presence of "self" is put "under erasure," once it is transformed into an unprivileged "trace," the entire structure of the concept collapses, making "undecidable" related concepts like origin, free agency, or transcendence of linguistic determination. The "self" loses the discrete boundaries that make any of these concepts tenable, and becomes nothing more than a very complicated sieve through which language speaks.33 This image of the sieve predominates in Baudrillard's *Ecstasy of Communication* and Foucault's *Order of Things*: the individual is not just determined by discourse (or in Foucault's case, "power") : it is constituted by them


in an ever-changing flow of significations.

These attacks on the bourgeois humanist self, considerably more interrelated than I have been able to suggest here, leave us with the question of what to make of a diminished thing. What remains when we strip the "self" of its freedom, sovereignty, originality, and autonomy, especially now, in the postmodern era, when the social pressures on individual consciousness are more imposing than ever? According to many theorists, we are left with the "subject," that is to say with a concept that conceives of the individual as completely constituted by external forces. For DeLeuze and Guattari, the individual is constituted by "capitalism," for post-Marxists by "late capitalism," for Baudrillard by "communication," for Foucault by "power," for Derrida, Lacan, and Barthes by "language" or "discourse." It's easy to understand the political motivations of theorists to define the individual in such a way: such definition strips her of an easily abused authority, teaches her to distrust the priority of her "own" passionate convictions (since they arose as an accidental confluence of forces), and serves the interests of a theoretical politics still in horror of this century's fascist legacy.

But, as Paul Smith has pointed out, the reduction of the "self" to "subject" has led to some internal contradictions for an activist poststructuralist politics, since, without a concept of human agency, it has had a great deal of trouble conceiving of ways to ground the individual's resistance to the logocentrism it finds so abhorrent. What kinds of strategies are available for the individual enmeshed in the postmodern world? Poststructuralists have come up with their own strategies, invariably strategies of radical resistance in which they lay claim to increasingly marginal ideological space (which is at

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34 Paul Smith, Discerning The Subject, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); "The main point made in these chapters is that theories in the human sciences which privilege the subjected state or status of the "subject". . . tend to foreclose upon the possibility of resistance." (p. xxxi).
least less contaminated than the mainstream) and then engage in ideological guerilla warfare with mainstream culture. In these formulations, poststructuralist guerillas aren’t “free agents,” but they can become sensitized to the range of possible responses to the way culture determines them, and the closest thing to declaring one’s freedom is to declare one’s radicalism, be it in the realm of politics, sexuality, theory, or literature.

Fortunately for those of us who can’t in good conscience (Neitzsche would say hypertrophied conscience) commit ourselves to radicalism, these are not the only strategies available. The novelist I’ll be dealing with does not run the gamut of political thinking: he is not a conservative or an anarchist. DeLillo, while powerfully engaged in the analysis of political structures, can’t seem to work up any enthusiasm at all for political action. Yet his politics is not what makes him interesting. What he does in his own way is articulate in powerfully imaginative ways the atmosphere of the individual implicated in the postmodern condition. In the course of this articulation, he explores courses of action, processes of thought, and modes of engagement with that world. He conducts these explorations through character, characters who find themselves part of the postmodern aura yet have to determine how to live in it. For DeLillo, there are realms outside the postmodern aura one has access to, and they develop strategies of self which struggle to define and inhabit those realms. For DeLillo, there is nothing outside the aura we can be sure about, and so his strategies of self take the form of blind gropings after intimations of transcendence, spirit, logos. His strategy of self entails nothing but process, a foundationless quest that hovers between intimations of soul and radical doubt.

With the novels of Don DeLillo, we move into what Jameson calls “postmodern hyperspace.” 35 There is no longer the kind of imperative self: DeLillo, from the beginning of his career, has been willing to adopt as part of his narrative strategies the

35 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” passim.
saturations of private space, as well as the severe discontinuities and dislocations that characterize postmodern life. He brings to his work a compelling sensitivity to the ways language constructs experience, and feels, with theorists of the postmodern, that “experience” has now become largely effaced by language, buried under the rubble of signs. Given such a condition, DeLillo distrusts any of language’s logocentric tendencies, including, of course, any stable formulation of self. But, on the other hand, given a world so thoroughly inscribed, DeLillo is not about to claim that language or power does in fact constitute or “subject” the individual. To make such an assertion, it’s necessary to make the assumption that language totally constitutes subjects. And DeLillo isn’t willing to make it. What DeLillo does is to take poststructuralist skepticism and turns it on one of the positions poststructuralists are rarely skeptical about: its staunchly held view that there can be no “transcendental subject.” Throughout DeLillo’s novels, amidst the mental debris and the white noise, his characters find intuitive, sometimes mystical intimations of an “inner presence” which reveals “the secret possibilities of self” and evidence of “a soul that imposes and burdens and defrauds, half mad, but free with its tribal bounty . . . .” And it’s significant that these intimations frequently occur at dramatically critical moments in his narratives. DeLillo, I think, writes as if he were waiting for such intimations to reveal themselves like a cloud of smoke rising from the heat of the words he sets down on the page.

Which is not to say that these intimations come easy, or that they are somehow reliable for DeLillo’s characters. Most of DeLillo’s characters do seem, in fact, constituted by the forces of language, media, communication, ideology. (Novels like Running Dog and Libra, in fact, are populated with nothing else but such characters.) They never seem to be able to get “outside the aura”: many enter the codes of the postmodern world willingly, or

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else because they aren’t strong enough to resist them. They find a balm for their obsessive fears and dislocations of personality by shopping in cathedral-like shopping centers (like many of the characters in *White Noise*, particularly Murray Siskind), blending the rhythms of their consciousness into the crackling hum of the New York Stock Exchange’s big board (Frank McKechnie in *Players*), yielding entirely to a vision of “a world [which] has become self-referring” (Owen Brandemas in *The Names*), and by becoming instruments in large unknowable operations which allow them to act as a node in a force field they need take no responsibility for (the CIA operatives in *Running Dog* and *Libra*). There are also characters who think they have attained a certain freedom from “the aura” but are actually subject to it in another way (cf. Lyle Wynant’s embrace of terrorism in *Players*, Lee Harvey Oswald’s schoolboy Marxism in *Libra*, the cult’s arbitrary violence in *The Names*, Glen Selby’s spy-novel existentialism in *Running Dog*). Their resistances are predictable reactions to a postmodern world they see as confining and repressive, but they are all just analogues of Pynchon’s Trystero or Counterforce, undergrounds which are circumscribed by the postmodern aura.

Yet there are a few characters (among them Pammy Wynant of *Players*, James Axton of *The Names*, and Jack Gladney of *White Noise*) who share DeLillo’s own quasi-mystical sense of language. That is, in their own play with language (and DeLillo’s novels are filled with characters who play with language in an ironic, transformative way) they sense what I will call the “familiar mysteries,” an intimate and ephemeral feeling of Immanence. It is the feeling of being embedded in something significant and awe-inspiring, and though it doesn’t help establish a point of subjective reference outside the postmodern aura—it does give these characters the sense of soul that keeps appearing over and over in his novels.

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37 See Thomas Carmichael’s article “Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo’s Libra, The Names and Mao II,” in *Notes on Contemporary Literature* (Summer 1993, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 204-218).
The strategies of self that I’ve outlined here and will fill out in the next four sections (one section pertains to the strategies of self in relation to the familiar mysteries, and one section for each novel I have chosen: End Zone, The Names, White Noise)—DeLillo’s attentiveness to “the familiar mysteries” as a way “the possibilities of self” might reveal themselves—are creative and useful models to situate the individual in the postmodern world. I have my own preferences, which will reveal themselves as we proceed, but they are less important than an acknowledgement that any reader will be attracted or repelled by certain strategies of self for reasons that have more to do with himself than with any intrinsic merit of the strategies. Finally, what I hope will become clear in the end is that this is not a call for a return to older ontological conceptions of self, not a conservative retrenchment. It is an investigation of strategies, of ways of surviving, of keeping sane, of maintaining a sense of continuity, richness, and integrity—all those things that make it possible to create, love, to remember, to speculate and dream, to—as Bob Dylan put it—“keep on keeping on.”

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The Familiar Mysteries

Something beyond this is familiar as well, some mystery. Often I feel I'm on the edge of knowing what it is. It's just beyond reach, something that touches me deeply. I can't quite get it and hold it. Does anyone know what I mean?

--Owen Brademas, *The Names* (p. 26)

These books open out onto some larger mystery. I don't know what to call it. Maybe Hermann Broch would call it "the word beyond speech."

--Don DeLillo, in an interview

Don DeLillo distills common premises about the postmodern era—about the way public and private experience tend to be "always already" constituted or framed by language, by the intrusions of mass media, by the subterranean ideologies of a decentered network of international corporate power. He also shares a fascination with the possibilities of apocalypse and a painful awareness of the devastation of the natural world.

DeLillo refuses to supply a transcendent space from which his characters can approach experience. He situates them firmly inside "the aura", as Murray Jay Siskind says in *White*

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Noise—that is, within a postmodern space which forces them to engage in a world where objects have lost their “natural” status and have become signs. In such a space, the self loses its boundaries and threatens to become no more than a sieve through which floats the world’s signs. But the lack of a transcendental self doesn’t prevent DeLillo from dramatizing strategies for a postmodern implicated self. In the introduction, I quoted from White Noise’s “The Most Photographed Barn in America” episode, but it bears going over in more detail, since it provides a clear, approachable metaphor for the “reality” that DeLillo’s characters face, and the strategies of survival it offers them.40

In White Noise readers will recall that Murray Jay Siskind drives Jack Gladney a few miles outside town one day to a “tourist attraction.” “There were meadows and apple orchards,” Jack narrates. “White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site” (White Noise: 12).41 The barn, of course, is preparing itself for viewing, framing itself for consumption as an image, and Nature, after some token references, is forgotten:

There were forty cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot. We walked along a cowpath to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards—pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book.

“No one sees the barn,” he said finally.

A long silence followed.

“Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see

40 Frank Lentricchia, in his “Libra as Postmodern Critique,” (South Atlantic Quarterly 89:2, [Spring 1990], pp.431-453) writes that “The Most Photographed Barn” episode is one of two “primal scene[s] for DeLillo’s imagination,” and, though I’m hesitant to agree with him about the other (a vaguely described conversation about television from Americana) I certainly agree with him about the Barn scene (p. 433).
41 White Noise, p. 12.
In many ways, this is an elegant figure for all postmodern experience. Signs and pictures have done away with the barn. The tourist attraction is not the barn; the attraction is the web of white noise in which we’ve cocooned the physical structure. Given this condition, which is as good as saying, as Frank Volterra does in The Names, that “The twentieth century is on film,” we have to ask ourselves, as he does, “if there’s anything about us more important than the fact that we are constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves.” When “reality” becomes nothing but a simulacral skein, what becomes of the individual who, navigating through this, is made to feel a sign herself? What strategies arise?

Murray embodies one. Being at the Barn, he says,

is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of this collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience, like all tourism . . . We can’t get outside the aura. We’re part of the aura. We’re here, we’re now.

(Jack, narrating this, adds significantly that Murray “seemed immensely pleased by this.”)

One way for the individual to survive postmodern experience, then, is to surrender the conventional boundaries of selfhood and allow oneself to become caught up in the ecstasy of communication, to swirl among an “accumulation of nameless energies” of which one becomes a part. DeLillo suggests everywhere that this surrender is prompted by a

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42 Ibid.
43 The Names, p. 200.
45 White Noise, p. 12. Bucky Wunderlick of DeLillo’s Great Jones Street, tempted by such a surrender puts it another way, though he can’t follow his own advice; “maybe that was the answer I needed, the one route back. To decide to
natural and powerful desire to overcome isolation and the fear of death. At the same time, he links such a surrender to the dangerous collectivism of fascism and cultism, so it’s impossible to make a case that DeLillo in any way endorses Murray’s position.46

Still, a number of critics are troubled that DeLillo hasn’t sufficiently aligned himself or any of his characters against Murray’s acquiescence to the postmodern “aura,” especially since that surrender is so easily co-opted by authoritarian forces.47 They fear that for all of

love the age. To stencil myself in its meager design ... I might yield to the seductions of void....” (Great Jones Street, [New York: Vintage, 1989], p. 67) Lee Harvey Oswald, fusing himself with a notion of history rather than the rock age, nonetheless echoes both Bucky and Murray in the letter to his brother that serves as the epigram for Libra: “Happiness is not based on yourself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one’s own personal world, and the world in general” (Libra, [New York: Viking, 1988], epigraph page). The point in all these strategies of self is a willing absorption by some huge force, whether it be by pop stardom, collective signification, history, religious enthusiasm, or the “mother” that so many of its agents have called the CIA.

46 Though some have tried. Eugene Goodheart (“Don DeLillo and the Cinematic Real,” South Atlantic Quarterly 89: 2, Spring 1990, pp. 359-360), for instance, suggests that Murray’s admittedly stunning insights into contemporary life—his utter receptivity to the postmodern—means DeLillo posits him as some kind of narrative spokesman, but because Murray has absolutely no emotional connection to his own death or anyone else’s—semiotics is his Dylar, (as I’ll show later) his insights have a semiotic—but never moral—value. In any case, we should remember that DeLillo keeps his distance on his characters. “My attitudes aren’t directed toward characters at all,” he said. “I don’t feel sympathetic toward some characters, unsympathetic toward others. They have attitudes, I don’t” (Thomas LeClair, “An Interview With Don DeLillo,” Contemporary Literature 23 [1982], p. 22).

47 See, for instance, Norman Bryson’s very perceptive “City of Dis: The Fiction of Don DeLillo,” (Granta 2, 1980, pp. 145-157). Bryson, whose own moral bewilderment in reading DeLillo leads him to a tightrope act of readerly response, balancing his own need for a stabilizing narrative point of view with a recognition that the novel’s own logic requires it to withhold precisely that stability, says of End Zone, (though he extends the idea to other novels in the essay): “[DeLillo] does not ... contain the competing and specialized dialects of his speakers within a stabilizing master-discourse. The voice of the narrator is only primus inter pares, and for a number of reasons his vocalization seems as subject to implicit criticism as that of the more frankly grotesque minor figures” (p. 147). Also see John Kucich’s “Postmodern Politics: Don DeLillo and the Plight of the White Male Writer,” Michigan Quarterly Review 27, (Spring 1988), pp. 328-341. Kucich complains that while DeLillo laudably
DeLillo’s incisive analysis of dehumanizing postmodern conditions, he doesn’t articulate a politically coherent response. And they are right, if by political we mean a program of moral activism, extendable into the social world, based on a priori values. In the barn episode, for example, DeLillo never describes the barn “itself,” which suggests that he made a conscious decision to implicate himself and the reader in the decentered discourse—giving the reader no anchor, no place to situate himself outside the aura.

Jack is certainly no anchor, not yet anyway. We know Murray is “immensely pleased,” but Jack stands in baffled silence throughout; he’s paralyzed before the postmodern aura, as if it spoke some astonishing mystery. We might say he’s in a state of catatonic sublimity, his consciousness wrung so tight by contradictions that he can only listen and watch but not act. (His passivity, however, is infused with a palpable sense of wonder that is practically indistinguishable from the dread of mortality.) Two strategies of self toward the postmodern world, then—surrender and paralysis—emerge from an analysis of one of DeLillo’s most representative passages. So far, hardly a fruitful search for a viable strategy of self.

“returns over and over in these novels to the insidious processes” that characterize postmodern life, “he is unwilling or unable to take the next step toward any kind of political assertion” (p. 334) which might mobilize an antagonistic response to these very conditions.

“More radical writers, such as Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault (though he reversed himself just before he died), go so far as to hope they can create such a postmodern decentered “self” who is liberated from “the terror of fixed and unified identities, and free to become dispersed and multiple” (William V. Dunning, The Roots of Postmodernism. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 228).

DeLillo connects the experience of wonder and the fear of death in an interview: “I think [the fear of death] is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is almost there. I tried to relate it in White Noise to this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions.” See Anthony DeCurtis, “An Outsider in This Society: An Interview with Don DeLillo,” South Atlantic Quarterly, 98: 2, Spring 1990, p. 301.
Critic Eugene Goodheart, disappointed with the strategies DeLillo presents, says outright that “DeLillo would endorse the view of the self as a nullity.” DeLillo’s characters “seem disembodied,” Goodheart says; they are “role players” in a cinematic culture who “have been completely emptied of substance.” Now Goodheart is right about many of DeLillo’s characters: Bobby Brand from Americana, Emmett Creed from End Zone, the rock industry types from Great Jones Street, Henrik Endor from Ratner’s Star, Lyle Kinnear in Players, James’s business associates in The Names, Murray from White Noise, Glen Selvy in Running Dog and practically everyone in Libra are indeed “nullities,” characters whose identities seem completely constituted by ideological, economic or linguistic systems. DeLillo’s novels, in fact, make as good a case as anyone’s in the last twenty-five years that the forces of the postmodern have dissolved the boundaries between self and world that were a given in earlier discourses. The appropriations and encroachments of late capitalism are the overt themes of Players, The Names, White Noise, and Libra; the nuclear terror is the major subtheme of End Zone and bubbles near the surface of Libra’s post-missile crisis America; environmental disaster, in the form of an “Airborne Toxic Event,” dominates the middle portion of White Noise, and serves as the subtext for the corroded postindustrial cityscapes in Great Jones Street and Running Dog. All DeLillo’s novels give the overwhelming sense that the individual is determined by systemic forces. Most of DeLillo’s characters are like Americana’s David

50 Goodheart, p. 356.
51 op cit.
52 Following in the wake of an existentialist philosophical tradition, many postmodern characterizations seem to argue that there is always a discrepancy between the character who acts and the character who watches him/herself acting. There is, as it were, a temporal distance between agency and self-consciousness regarding that agency, a fine example of which is Barth’s fiction, “Menelaiad” (John Barth, Lost in the Funhouse, London: Little Brown, 1968). This text enacts the continual deferral of coincidence between the narrating subject and the subject being narrated, even though these are ostensibly identical.
Bell, who calls himself the "Bell System," as if he were literally wired into the discourses criss-crossing the continent.53

But analyses like Goodheart's fit too neatly into post-structuralist theories about the death of the subject54 and its construction by discourse and power. DeLillo's characters are considerably more realistic than the ciphers of the nouveau roman which gave rise to post-structuralist notions of the subject, and I think his analysis is finally inattentive to the prevailing tensions and mysteries that run through DeLillo's fiction.55 DeLillo's

54 "Several of postmodernism's literary historians have asserted that postmodernism differs from modernist aesthetics principally in its abandonment of subjectivity: the representation of consciousness is alleged to have been forsaken with the emphasis on the fragmentation of the subject. That the self can no longer be considered a unified and stable entity has become axiomatic in the light of poststructuralism." Edmund Smyth, "Introduction" in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1991, p. 10).
55 Charles Caramello, in his *Silverless Mirror: Book Self, and Postmodern American Fiction* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1983) suggests that postmodern American fiction has been influenced by three major sources: poststructuralist critical theory, European modernism, and the American literary tradition of Melville, Whitman, and Henry James. Since the first source conflicts in important ways with the second and the third, especially in the ways they theorize the representation of the self, Carmello notes how postmodern American fiction remains a battleground in which writers enact their struggles to reconcile an American desire for selfhood with an acknowledgement of the social and epistemic breakdowns which threaten to demolish it. Carmello's book was published before DeLillo rose to prominence, and so he isn't included, but I think he would fit nicely into the paradigm. DeLillo, much more than his fellow American postmodernists Pynchon, Coover, Gass, and Barth, insists on maintaining a central consciousness, a main character through which the novel's action takes place, though these characters are hardly integrated, much less reliable. They also possess a full set of human traits—emotional, physical, intellectual—even if they squander them by novel's end. DeLillo's fiction in no way resembles the kind of fiction which poststructuralism first championed: the seminal *nouveau roman* texts of Robbe-Grillet or Claude Simon (beginning with *Conducting Bodies*) in France, and those of Abish, Federman, Borooughs (the "cut-up" books), the overtly metafictional Barth, and the surfictionists in the United States. DeLillo's fiction constitutes the kind of fiction Alan Wilde describes as "midfiction" (*Middle Grounds*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), in which a postmodern skepticism about the representational qualities of language becomes the very content for fiction which remains, in a fairly familiar way, representational.
surrendering selves are, admittedly, nullities, "spoken" by various kinds of discourse and unable or unwilling to establish any boundaries between themselves and the postmodern aura. But much more needs to be said of DeLillo's paralytics—those who resist becoming sieves for postmodern discourse, and who, because their sense of mortality cannot be obscured by discourse, refuse to define themselves as "the sum total of our data."

Characters like Gary Harkness, Bucky Wunderlick, Moll Robbins, Pammy Kinnear, James Axton, Jack and Babette Gladney and a few others struggle, despite their own powerful inclinations, to avoid co-optation by the postmodern. Some of them try to do this by literally exiling themselves from the world's influence, by becoming "men in small rooms." These paralytic exiles, significantly, all fail: their exile is a retreat into a void where they stand face to face with their own death. But because they can't face death alone, without a human community language to ease its terror, they end up, as Harkness, Wunderlick, and Kinnear do, shrunken and shriveled, banished into a self-imposed emptiness.

There are others, however—they will be the hopeful focus of the next section I will submit—whose paralysis yields to a sense of awe and wonder: whose immobility is partly compensated by flickering intimations that something ominous, significant, and redeeming—something I call the familiar mysteries—seems to reside not in some transcendental realm but within the very discourse in which they are embedded. Some "presence"—to borrow a term from White Noise (p. 155)—something "untellable," to borrow one from End Zone—seems to speak through language, whispering what Hermann Block has called the "word beyond speech." These intimations usually spring from unexpected and oblique contemplations of language, and their effect is a profound awareness of how all language


issues from mortal origins--from human beings explaining, filling the void with the connecting tissue of words to ease the terror of death.

"Something beyond" the language we use to explain experience, says Owen Brademas of The Names, "is familiar as well, some mystery. Often I feel I'm on the edge of knowing what it is. It's just beyond reach, something that touches me deeply. I can't quite get it and hold it. Does anyone know what I mean?"\(^5\)\(^8\) This, it seems to me, is the question that hovers over all DeLillo's fiction. His abiding interest in the psychology of revelation and wonder, of the moment when consciousness believes that it has reached past language into a mental space "gold-shot with looming wonder."\(^5\)\(^9\) If DeLillo were a psychologist, he could explain this experience as a replay of fulfilled childhood desires, or as some of the scientists in Ratner's Star do, as a consequence of chemistry. DeLillo will forever keep these explanations close at hand in order to balance and ironicize his own hieratic impulses--of which he seems extremely distrustful--yet they are simply too powerful to ignore. The possibility that design or purpose really do exist, and that a soul exists which recognizes it, despite his pervasive skepticism, haunts DeLillo like a ghost. In the remainder of this section, I'll explore what these familiar mysteries seem to be, and how they're linked to DeLillo's strategies of self.

Over and over, DeLillo explores his characters' persistent feeling-feeling cloaked in deep suspicion or exultation, sometimes both at once--that something ominous and invisible hovers amidst the mundane. Amidst the vast array of quotidian details that are so familiar that they no longer notice how eerie they are, there exists "over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension."\(^6\)\(^0\) It is never easy to hear this roar since it sounds very much like

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\(^{5\cdot6}\) The Names, p. 26.
\(^{5\cdot8}\) White Noise, p. 155.
\(^{6\cdot0}\) Ibid., p. 36.
the waste-noise of an electronic culture, and it is one more step to hear in the roar "some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension." Still, that "swarming life," it seems to me, deeply absorbs DeLillo's curiosity. He can't name it (DeLillo says "as of some swarming life," keeping its ontological status conditional) because language is evidently part of it, caught in the mysterious flow of its super-discourse, but it is naggingly there.

The appearances of the mystery constitute the most dramatically fraught moments in DeLillo's work, and the most illuminating moments for his characters. We see it, for instance, in the opening paragraph of *Ratner's Star*:

Little Billy Twillig stepped aboard a Sony 747 bound for a distant land. This much is known for certain. He boarded the plane. The plane was a Sony 747, labeled as such, and it was scheduled to arrive at a designated point exactly so many hours after takeoff. This much is subject to verification, pebble-rubbed (khole, calculus), real as the number one. But ahead was the somnolent horizon, pulsing in the dust and fumes, a fiction whose limits were determined by one's perspective, not unlike those imaginary quantities (the square root of minus-one, for instance) that lead to fresh dimensions.61

What we have here are two dimensions of reality: one the "real" and familiar world which we can verify, label, predict, and control; the other a mysterious "substratum" (the title of the first chapter) "pulsing in the dust and fumes," "a fiction . . . whose imaginary qualities . . . lead to fresh dimensions." But of course Little Billy Twillig, that Sony 747, and even "the number one" are also fictions, imaginary entities which belong as much to the substratum of the "real" world outside *Ratner's Star* as they do to the verifiable "real" world inside it. The mysterious "somnolent horizon" which gives rise to fresh dimensions, we soon discover, isn't a "substratum" to the real world, located under it; it is of the world—perhaps it's best to say in the world. "There is a life inside this life," Little Billy Twillig

realizes later. His dark twin in *Libra*, Lee Harvey Oswald, intones several times, in an echo that can’t help but make us feel the moral perilousness of the territory DeLillo is exploring, "There is a world inside the world." For both, the mysterious resides inside the familiar.

In *The Names*, the combining of the real and the substratum is put in terms of the “familiar” and the “mysterious.” Owen makes the link in the passage I’ve chosen as the epigraph for this section, but when he asks, “Does anyone know what I mean?” neither James nor Kathryn can help him at first. The “somnolent horizon,” however, begins to pulse in James’s mind. Newly sensitized, James begins to notice how in his domestic patter with Kathryn, something invisible and silent emerges: “This talk we were having about familiar things was itself ordinary and familiar. It seemed to yield up the mystery that is part of such things, the nameless way in which we sometimes feel our connections to the physical world. *Being here.* The mystery, then, has something to do with a "nameless" sense of being, a connectedness to the other physical beings in the world.

A few nights later, recalling the familiar intimacies of his marriage to Kathryn, James has another revelation:

Standing by the bed in my pajamas. Kathryn reading. How many nights, in our languid skin, disinclined toward talk or love, the dense hours behind us, we shared this moment, not knowing it was a matter to share. It appeared to be nothing, bedtime once more, her pillowed head in fifty watts, except that these particulars, man standing, pages turning, the details repeated almost nightly, began to take on a mysterious force. Here am I again, standing by the bed in my pajamas, acting out a memory. I recalled the moment only when I was repeating it. The mystery built around this fact, I think, that act and recollection were one. A moment of autobiography, a minimal frieze. The moment referred back to itself at the same time as it pointed forward. *Here I am.* A curious reminder that I was going to die.65

62 Ibid., p. 370, my underline.  
63 *Libra*, pp. 13, 153, 277.  
64 *The Names*, p. 32.
Clues pile up here. James links his own awareness of existential being—"a moment of autobiography"; "Here I am"—to the passage of time captured by memory and to his recognition of mortality. There's a nod to Heidegger's Being And Time—and maybe to J. Alfred Prufrock—in the passage that follows:

It was the only time in my marriage that I felt old, a specimen of oldness, a landmark, standing in those slightly oversize pajamas, a little ridiculous . . . .

Who knows what this means? The force of the moment was in what I didn't know about it, standing there, the night tides returning, the mortal gleanings that filled the space between us, un tellably, our bodies arranged for dreaming in loose-fitting clothes.  

This recognition of mortality is evanescent, a product of "mortal gleanings that filled the space between us," but we can gauge all DeLillo's characters by their ability to experience it. James, quite simply, experiences the union of the familiar and the mysterious, the awe-inspiring feeling that death lives within to give shape, definition, and significance to individual experience. A reliable sense of death, in other words, can center the individual, give him or her a reliable sense of self. The problem, of course, is that in a postmodern age, a sense of mortality is difficult to come by: the aura itself conspires to decenter death, to strip it of its finality.

Still, DeLillo's more hopeful paralytics center their consciousness by hearing the soul's fear of death in the familiar mysteries—that is their strategy of self.  

65 Ibid., pp. 81-82.
66 Ibid., p. 82.
67 DeLillo has not been reluctant to use the word "soul," "self," or "I" as a signifier of ontological identity in his work—though he has never gone to any lengths to explain what he means by them. I refer skeptical readers to, for instance, the end of Players: "... and always this brassy demanding, a soul that imposes and burdens and defrauds, half mad, but free with its tribal bounty, sized to immense design" (p. 207); the "I Am Not Just This" section from
familiar mysteries occasionally emerge from a contemplation of written language or the recognition of pattern that James Axton noted, they are usually signaled by aural phenomena—words spoken in sleep, grunts, glossolalia, the murmuring of distant crowds, radio and television broadcasts—that is, by white noise, and almost all of DeLillo's fiction might be said to be handbooks on how to listen to the familiar mysteries that speak through it. End Zone's Gary Harkness tells us that the primary "intonation" of his narrative is the "phenomenon of anti-applause—words broken into brute sound" (p. 3). We learn a lot about football in End Zone—its all-American "suck in that gut and go harder" ideology, its "assault technology motif," its attractive "illusion of order," but the "elegant gibberish" of a quarterback's signals may best evoke the significance of the game (pp. 16, 111, 112, 113):

Monsoon sweep, string-in left, ready right
Cradle-out, drill-9 shiver, ends chuff
Broadside option, flow-and-go (p. 116).

This is a language of massive gestures, hard, smug and beefy in its exhibition of power (the second line sounds like something Robert Lowell would love), and as innocently imperial as a president who once played Knute Rockne in a movie. It is not a denotative language—critics are calling it "preverbal" or "prelinguistic"—yet its evocative power, if we listen in the right way, can have the effects of a Zen koan. One finds this kind of

**Ratner's Star** (p. 370); and to numerous references in **The Names** (e.g., pp. 82, 308), **White Noise** (e.g., pp. 5, 228-229, 325) and **Libra** (e.g., pp. 13, 101, 339).


language everywhere in DeLillo’s fiction: in Bucky Wunderlick’s “pee-pee-maw-maw” lyrics, in the seer-aborigine’s mysterious communicative gestures in Ratner’s Star, in the domestic comfort-gabble of Players, in the Parthenon’s crowd noise and in Tap’s novel in The Names, in Wilder’s crying spell and Steffie’s “Toyota Celica: in White Noise. DeLillo, in using this kind of verbal material, is trying to confront nothing less, I think, than the meaning of language. He is asking, in essence, what impels utterance? What strange sounds are these we make and why do we make them? What does the fact of language say about the beings that have created and go on creating it?\(^7\)

We can approach DeLillo’s treatment of these questions by examining two of the most important scenes in his work, one from White Noise, the other from The Names. Let me take up first the enigmatic moment at the evacuation center in White Noise when Jack Gladney stoops over to hear what his daughter Steffie is whispering in her sleep:

I sat there watching her. Moments later she spoke again. Distinct syllables this time, not some dreamy murmur—but a language not quite of this world. I struggled to understand. I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning. I watched her face, waited. She uttered two words, familiar and elusive at the

\(^7\) Denotative language, as a perhaps “fallen” reconstitution of some possibly purer utterance embodied in babbling and glossolalia, is something DeLillo has considered in interviews: “[Glossolalia] is a fabricated language which seems to have a certain pattern to it. It isn’t just gibberish. It isn’t language, but it isn’t gibberish, either. And I think this is the way Axton felt about his own son’s writing. There is something there they [children] know but can’t tell us. Or there is something they remember which we’ve forgotten” (Anthony DeCurtis, “An Outsider in this Society: An Interview with Don DeLillo, p. 302). Or in another interview: “Is there something we haven’t discovered about speech? Is there more? Maybe this is why there’s so much babbling in my books. Babbling can be frustrated speech or it can be a purer form, an alternate speech. I wrote a short story that ends with two babies babbling at each other in a car. This was something I’d seen and heard, and it was a dazzling and unforgettable scene. I felt these babies knew something. They were talking, they were listening, they were commenting, and above and beyond it all they were taking an immense pleasure in the exchange. Glossolalia is interesting because it suggests there’s another way to speak, there’s a very different language lurking somewhere in the brain” (LeClair, “An Interview with Don DeLillo,” pp. 24-25).
same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

*Toyota Celica* (pp. 154-155).

Here again is the meeting of the familiar and the mysterious, of language both utterly worldly and "not quite of this world." We might dismiss Steffie’s syllables as another instance of the postmodern colonization of the unconscious, but that doesn’t begin to explain Jack’s remarkable reaction:

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child’s restless sleep make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice... Part of every child’s brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence (p. 155).

Is this just the hysterical reaction of a doomed man “ready to search anywhere for signs and hints” (p. 154)? Possibly. But there is reason to take Jack’s effusions more seriously, and to wonder whether this terrified little girl, who has watched her entire life of familial comfort and safety thrown into chaos by a poisonous cloud, isn’t saying something “beautiful and mysterious” after all. She has spoken white noise, obviously, but what is this white noise if not the language of a member of a consumer culture trying to cover up its isolation and fear of death? In pronouncing those wondrous syllables, it seems to me, Steffie is really saying, “This is the way I say I am afraid, of my own death and of my

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*I will take up this assertion in much more detail in my discussion of The Names and White Noise in the body of this work. I’ll argue that, for DeLillo, white noise, far from being the dismissible dreck of our culture, is an eloquent aural scribbling over the consciousness of death in a postmodern age that can be “read” as a tragicomic manifestation of mass psychic terror.*
family's." This may be the only language available to the first culture in human history to amass the technological means to turn the consumption of goods into a powerful death-defying religion. And in appropriating this language, DeLillo's novels may serve a homeopathic function for postmodern readers.

All language, in a way (including DeLillo's novels and this analysis of his work), is a species of white noise, the armor we put on against the mysteries of death. Before we dismiss this as a reduction, it's useful to recall Tom LeClair's report that one of the few "influences" DeLillo will acknowledge is Ernest Becker, the author of The Denial of Death, a work whose thesis is that "death is the mainspring of human activity--activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man." If DeLillo has sympathies with this view, and I think it's clear that he does, then the epiphanic ending of The Names, another of DeLillo's most powerful scenes, becomes much clearer. James Axton's narrative ends with his long-delayed journey to the Parthenon, an edifice which, at novel's beginning, is so exalting and imposing in its beauty that James doesn't feel equal to it. Feeling a participant in the madness of contemporary life, James has felt unprepared to confront something that "we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion. There are obligations attached to such a visit" that he can't face (p. 3). But after his education into the familiar mysteries he can make his approach:

It wasn't a relic species of dead Greece, but part of the living city below it. This was a surprise. I'd thought it was a separate thing, the sacred height, intact in its Doric order. I hadn't expected a human feeling to emerge from the stones but this is what I found, deeper than the art and structure, the optical exactitudes. I found a cry for pity. This is what remains of the mauld stones in their blue surround, this open cry.

What James has heard in the stones of the Parthenon is "a human feeling," more specifically "a cry for pity," an ancient one, surely, but not in any important way different from the one Steffie babbles in her troubled sleep. As James watches the visitors huddle and mass around the Acropolis, he notices that "everyone is talking"—which is another kind of white noise—and his response to these utterances yields another kind of "splendid transcendence," which tells him that if language is "the open cry, the voice which is our own," it is also what comforts and unites us in our common mortal fate: "I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant, or slaughter ram. Our offering is language" (p. 331).

Language itself, then, is the mystery's deepest testimony. Not what language says, but what DeLillo says it is: an offering we make to each other to make the terror or mortality easier to bear. The strategy of self that the luckier of DeLillo's paralyzed characters offer, then, is to live in such a way that language is always linked to the familiar mysteries—that is, to a recognition that we speak because we are afraid, and that language is both the record and the palliation of that fear. DeLillo's strategy of self is to honour the familiar mysteries by honouring the human utterances that give them life. It constitutes no morality or politics or stable epistemic center, but that's not its purpose, since DeLillo's primary value, from the beginning, has always been to sustain a sense of wonder, not truth.

In the next sections, I'll be looking at a number of representative characters from three of DeLillo's novels, and showing which strategies of self they employ. To reiterate, DeLillo presents two strategies in particular. One is to surrender to the postmodern, to become a part of the grammar of its discourse. A second strategy is to resist this surrender, which enables the individual to sense mortality but has a paralyzing effect on him or her.
Then it's necessary to discriminate between two kinds of paralysis. One is the paralysis of the retreat into small rooms, into a minimalism of affect and action that is a kind of living death. The other is a paralysis without retreat, one that leaves a character open to the familiar mysteries. Because he or she is open, and because we are dealing with mysteries here, we might consider this strategy a provisional, perhaps transitional adjustment in the history of the self, a kind of moral holding action for the individual until the larger confusions of postmodern experience become clearer.

As for the novels, I have chosen *End Zone* because I think it is the best of his novels of the 1970's, because it overtly connects the displacements of postmodern consciousness to the theme of nuclear fear, and because it illustrates DeLillo's two strategies of self before the familiar mysteries became a controlling theme of his novels. The other two novels I have selected are I believe among DeLillo's best. (DeLillo, to my relief agrees with me.) I also selected them, together with *End Zone*, because they encompass a range of deliberations about the virtues and dangers of developing a sense of self out of the familiar mysteries—*End Zone* is the most pessimistic, *The Names* the most positive, and *White Noise* is poised beautifully in between—which is representative of his work as a whole.

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73 Anthony DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo," p. 303: "The novels I've written in the 1980's—*The Names, White Noise*, and *Libra*—are stronger books than the six novels I published in the seventies." After some deliberation, I've decided not to include *Libra* in my discussion here because it seems to repeat nearly all of the dead-end strategies of self that *End Zone* explores so clearly. This is not to disparage the novel—it grows more impressive with each reading—but it doesn't offer the possibilities for the self that it is my purpose to uncover. The novel is organized in such a way that its interlocking grid of forces—power politics, conspiracy, poverty, the American ideology of success—together form a looming deterministic system which makes everyone—Oswald, Everett, Branch, Parmenter, Ferrie, Ruby, President Kennedy—its victim.
End Zone

I was one of the exiles.

--- End Zone (p. 5)

My life meant nothing without football

--- End Zone (p. 22)

In End Zone, DeLillo links football, nuclear war strategy, and logocentric language systems as protective (closed) systems which, while providing the kinds of order, symmetry, and hierarchy that his characters crave, deny the anarchic, rejuvenative energies that enable one to stave off entropy, repression, and destruction.74 These systems become metaphors for the technocratic gridlock of postmodern America. The novel presents an array of characters: some—the surrenderers—who are thankful that a system has relieved them of their loneliness, fear of death, and the responsibility to be individual "selves"; and some—the paralytics, in this novel called "exiles"—who are alienated from the system but find themselves lost and empty without it. The novel presents no hopeful paralytics; everyone is frozen—either by a confining system or by experience so depleted and chaotic that it is unendurable. DeLillo begins to develop the idea of the familiar mysteries here, but his exploration is left inchoate, a casualty of the novel's thoroughgoing cynicism. We

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encounter in *End Zone* a babbling that is familiar and mysterious, but it is as finally as dumb as that "impeccably dressed gentleman whose flesh has grown over his mouth" who haunts Gary’s consciousness (p. 230).

To varying degrees, Gary Harkness, Myna Corbett, Anatole Bloomberg, and Taft Robinson—the novel’s exiles or paralytics—struggle and fail to construct strategies to stave off the systems which threaten to engulf them, and I’d like to spend the bulk of this discussion with their struggles. But first it may help—mainly to place the above characters in relief—to discuss two characters who surrender to the rigid ideological systems of which they are a part without a conscious desire to resist them.

Emmett Creed, Logos’s football coach, embodies an American success ideology that is as old as Ben Franklin. “Famous for creating order out of chaos,” a proponent of self-denial in the name of team spirit, Creed speaks in short, inspirational speeches to his players (p. 10):

> Write home on a regular basis. Dress neatly. Be courteous. Articulate your problems. Do not drag-ass. Anything I have no use for, it's a football player who consistently drag-asses. Move swiftly from place to place, both on the field and in the corridors of buildings. Don’t ever get too proud to pray (p. 11).

This rhetoric, redolent of Boy Scout handbooks and State of the Union addresses, is the kind of pious Americana which powerfully conditions mass culture. Creed is sure that he’s right and that God is on his side. So it is a debilitating shock when, after a season’s worth of applying his philosophy and pragmatic skills, his team is soundly defeated in the one game that would have resuscitated his career on a national level.\(^75\) Unable to see outside

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\(^75\) Incidentally, two critics have suggested that the doting description of the game that comprises the middle section of the novel is incoherent and impossible to follow. LeClair, in *In the Loop*, says the game is "described in fragments, fractured point of view, and 'elegant gibberish'" (p. 63). Norman Bryson, whose early essay on DeLillo is otherwise one of the very best so far,
the system, and betrayed within it, Creed retreats into sickness and eventually disappears from the novel.

Major Staley, the ROTC instructor obsessed with nuclear strategy, is equally "spoken" or constituted by a linguistic system, that of the language of nuclear war. His obsession runs even deeper than Gary's, whose obsession, as we'll see, is at least tempered by his "exile" tendencies. Major Stanley, when not teaching his Aspects of Modern War class, invents and plays out war scenarios in a motel room, where he claims to be staying until his family, currently in Colorado, can move into their new house. Gary visits him several times, and listens to the Major's seemingly restrained speeches about the power of nuclear technology:

There's a kind of theology at work here. The bombs are a kind of god. As his power grows, our fear naturally increases. I get as apprehensive as anyone else, maybe more so. We have too many bombs. They have too many bombs. There's a kind of fear that comes out of this. We begin to capitulate to the overwhelming presence. It's so powerful. It dwarfs us so much. He's so much more powerful than we are. Let it happen, whatever he ordains... So maybe we went too far in creating a being of omnipotent power. All this hardware. Fantastic stockpiles of hardware (p. 80).

Now this sounds rational, and it could begin a useful discussion of the need to resist the
temptation to turn nuclear technology into a god. But Major Staley's problem is that the very language he uses here and elsewhere (“You’d probably need in excess of a two-meg warhead to get the kind of x-ray pulse-intensity you’re talking about” [p. 72]) gives him such a feeling of power and control over his fear, as well as the feeling that he is participating in a matter of undeniable global significance, that he does "let it happen": he succumbs utterly to the language and logic of nuclear war.\(^\text{76}\) He feels, as it were, surrounded by the glow of nuclear language, and at the end devises a dazzlingly complex war scenario he asks Gary to play out with him. But Gary senses that there is no family, no house waiting for Major Staley. He is totally absorbed by his games—his whole life is consumed in this motel room with his war games. The "theology of fear" has claimed another believer.

Creed and Major Staley both enslave themselves to Footballthink or Nuclearthink in the belief that it will save them from chaos. They are pure products of ideology, and have lost the capacity to resist. I'd like to think that the exiles who find themselves testing these ideologies are luckier, but End Zone leaves them just as susceptible to sickness, entropy, and madness as these two.\(^\text{77}\) Surrendering to the System or exiling oneself from it are

\(^{76}\) Major Staley's giddy immersion in the language of power is one of the novel's tentative approaches to something like the familiar mysteries, but Delillo isn't yet ready to do much more than deride or satirize it.

\(^{77}\) The fact that Gary, Taft, and Myna are not luckier, that Delillo comically or pathetically undermines their attempts to escape or oppose prevailing systems of power seems to be what fuels John Kucich's anger in his "Postmodern Politics." For Kucich, Delillo's inability or unwillingness to present a character or point of view which posits a moral framework and thus a solution to what Kucich believes is the postmodern dilemma is exactly what makes Delillo a failure as a novelist. I'm not at all sure that we readers have much of a right to get angry because a writer doesn't give us solutions to our dilemmas, so I side more with Norman Bryson, who asks, and would sincerely like to know, "What is Delillo's position in all this?" but acknowledges that perhaps "the text omits the moral framework only because to supply that, under the present circumstances, would be too easy: the reader must decide for himself what his attitude is toward the novel's events shall be, unassisted by authorial guidance" (pp. 154, 155).
equally dangerous in *End Zone*: inside the repression leads to outbursts of violence and obsession; outside the chaos leads to coping mechanisms and obsessions which are equally dangerous.

Anatole Bloomberg is a perfect example. A three hundred pound lineman who works vigilantly to "unjew himself"—that is, exile himself from what he considers a repressive tradition ("I thought I had to become Anatole Bloomberg, an importer-exporter from Rotterdam with a hook nose and flat feet" [p. 187]), he hides out in his room, starves himself, invents cryptic rituals to fill the vacuum of Jewish tradition (when his mother dies, he paints a stone black and leaves it in the desert; at night, he taps the walls with his fingers, hoping for some response), and ultimately devises a completely uncolloquial, deracinated speech. By the end of the novel, he has become one of DeLillo's furious monologuists, oblivious to any ideas but his own and completely separated from his peers. He supplants an oppressive outside system with an internal one just as paralyzing and severe.

Myna Corbett is more complex, but in the end she can sustain an exiled self no more than Anatole can. She begins as a funky young woman with a crazy wardrobe who ignores "the responsibilities of beauty" American culture has imposed on her—she's content to live with bad skin and a fat body. She has her own rituals—eating raw vegetables, having picnics after classes, reading science fiction novels, dreaming of an escape to Mexico with Gary and her friends—but she deplores all forms of social order. She suggests that Gary smoke marijuana before a game, for instance, and though she has a half a million dollars stashed away, thinks of money as a child would. While other people invent facades to hide the "something stuck inside them," Myna says, "inside me there's a sloppy emotional overweight girl. I'm the same, Gary, inside and out. It's hard to be beautiful. You have an obligation to people. You almost become public property," which she insists on avoiding
At first, these counterculture eccentricities suggest a successful exile strategy, but as she grows closer to Gary, her romantic insecurities compel her to accept the dominant culture’s responsibilities of beauty. She clears up her blotched face, and near the end of the novel makes love to Gary in the library stacks. Gary feels that in her nakedness she “posit[ed] herself as the knowable word, the fleshmade sign and syllable” for him to know and own (p. 218). After the Christmas Break at the college, she returns “many pounds lighter,” submitting to the responsibilities of beauty in order to capture Gary, but her explanation for the change gives Gary pause (p. 226). She claims that her former life was “a whole big thing of consumption” where she “bur[ied] [her] own reality and independentness”:

Gary, I know you liked me fat but at least with the responsibilities of beauty I’ll have a chance to learn exactly or pretty exactly what I can be, with no built-in excuses or cop-outs or anything. I’m not just here to comfort you. You can’t expect to just come searching for me for comfort. I want other things now. I’m ready to find out whether I really exist or whether I’m something that’s just been put together as a market for junk mail (pp. 228-9).

It’s a complicated speech, part come-on to Gary (I’ll be independent now—to make myself more attractive to you!), part genuine declaration of independence, but what she neglects to acknowledge is that before her weight loss there was never a question that she was “something that’s just put together as a market for junk mail.” She seemed to “really exist” then more so than now, when she’s begun talking in psychobabble. Cultural systems of beauty have infiltrated her heretofore self-protected space, and she retreats into cultural homogenization.

The dynamics of Anatole and Myna’s failed struggles to “really exist” outside the
systems which threaten to absorb them are fully developed in the person of Gary Harkness. Gary is an irreconcilable contradiction. On one hand, he is “one of the exiles,” a football player who doesn’t buy Footballthink, who knows that whatever pleasures of order and community the game gives him, it is just a game whose rigid disciplines, when applied to “life,” resemble very much the unthinkable thinking of nuclear war. On the other hand, Gary recognizes that “My life meant nothing without football (p. 22),” a statement he makes so early in the novel that one expects him to “learn” and “change,” but which remains every bit as true at the end as it does when he first utters it.

Gary grew up a victim of his father, who was the kind of cross between Ben Franklin and John Wayne that can only survive in North America. Gary’s father believed in the idea that a simple but lasting reward, something just short of a presidential handshake, awaited the extra effort, the persevering act of a tired man. Backbone, will, mental toughness, desire—these were his themes, the qualities that insured success... My father was by far the most tireless of those who tried to give me direction, to sharpen my initiative, to piece together some collective memory of hard-won land or dusty struggles in the sun (p. 16).

Yet from the beginning, Gary doesn’t so much rebel as passively resist. Given football scholarships to play college ball four different times (five, if one counts Logos College), he sabotages each one. Each time he quits, Gary retreats to his bedroom at home, where he explores the emptiness of exile (“For five months I did nothing and then repeated it” [p. 20]). Despite his failures, and because each time he leaves football he realizes he literally cannot live without football, he responds when he gets the call from Emmett Creed.

At Logos, realizing that he is running from the “the center of [his] own history”—which is empty, a void of self—Gary is determined to make it as a player this time. And being a player has its compensations. Aside from the pleasures of order and discipline, for Gary football means “Existence without anxiety. Happiness. Knowing your body.
Understanding the real needs of man. The real needs . . .” (p. 121). These real needs include “The sense of living an inner life right up against the external or tangible life. Of living close to your own skin . . . Everything. The pattern. The morality” (p. 233). The claims may seem hyperbolic, but his experience on the playing field backs him up:

I went through the motions; the motions seemed to reciprocate. I blocked, I carried the ball, I ran pass patterns. Out on a deep pattern I watched the ball spiral toward me, nose dropping now, laces spinning, my hands up and fingers spread, eyes following the ball right into my hands, here, now, and then lengthening my stride, breaking toward the middle, seeing myself on large-screen color TV as I veered into the end zone. The afternoon went by in theoretically measured stages, gliding, and I moved about not as myself but as some sequence from the idea of motion, a brief arrangement of schemes and physical laws abstracted from the whole. Everything was wonderfully automatic, in harmony, dreamed by genius. Cruising over the middle on a circle pattern, just loafing because the play was directed elsewhere, I got blasted for no reason by the free safety, Lenny Wells. I rolled over twice, enjoyed the grass, then got to my feet and patted Lenny on the rump. “How to hit, baby,” I told him (p. 62).

The “everything” here is all-encompassing. This is not just mind-body harmony, but self-other harmony and self-nature harmony. Football as a Zen state. The empty self of the exile is absorbed altogether by “the idea of motion,” which in turn becomes part of the media world, extended by cable and satellite into bars and living rooms all over the country, acquiring an enhanced meaning through its incarnation into images. It is a frictionless self, in tune with the world’s patterns. A self constituted by football and the long reach of its media arms.

Yet such feelings can’t last in men like Gary. He feels the exile’s need to “undermine my sense of harmony. It’s very complex. It has to do with the ambiguity of this whole business” (p. 128). Why feel ambiguous about a surrender to football? Because it so

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78 Gary explains his exile’s need later in the novel: “As an athlete I have serious lapses. I don’t play football as much as drift in and out of cloud banks of action and noise. I’m not a hundred-percent-in-the-American-grain football
easily slides into what Andre Gregory has called an "SS totalitarian sentimentality . . . that masculine love of a certain kind of oily muscle."79 One of Gary’s teammates feels the same harmony that Gary does, but with him it’s expressed this way: “When men vomit together, they feel joined in body and spirit” (p. 173). The promise of community and unanimity of purpose always brings with it the danger that fascism will enter the system and stipulate that anything inside the community is sacred and anything outside it an enemy to be crushed. Gary keeps a certain distance from the logical extensions of team unity, once even smoking marijuana before a game to give him a new perspective. The intoxicated Gary is amusingly out of synch, but he finally gets to see his teammates without a surrender to Footballthink:

I continued across the grass, uncranking my arms, watching the long white laces whisk lightly over my black shoes. I reached the huddle. I realized I didn’t want to be with all these people. They were all staring at me through their cages (p. 174).

The critical distance that allows him to see Footballthink as a cage explains why, I think, Gary becomes depressed after being made team captain:

I felt responsible for a vague betrayal of some local code or lore. I was now part of the apparatus. No longer did I circle and watch, content enough to be outside the center and even sufficiently cunning to plan a minor raid or two. Now I was the law’s small tin glitter. Suck in that gut, I thought (p. 202) (my underline).

This desire to remain outside the center, this healthy suspicion of the Law or the Creed of Logos emerges as well in Gary’s dealings with Major Staley. Seeing Gary’s talent for

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military strategy, the Major asks him to enter the ROTC program, but Gary balks, sensing that his own obsession with nuclear warfare will only intensify if he becomes part of a military institution. “I’m not some kind of monstrous creature who enjoys talking about the spectacle of megadeath,” Major Staley says, but Gary knows he himself is, or could be, and this awareness keeps him outside this particular circle. This becomes clearer when Gary plays the war game with the Major. While the Major is obsessed with the war game, Gary has to admit to himself that “I wasn’t feeling very involved” (p. 223).

But Gary cannot remain in exile—the order of the system is crucial to him. The emptiness and chaos outside are too much to take. Like Anatole Bloomberg and Myna Corbett, Gary establishes rituals in his exile to establish order for himself, but they fail him. Gary can only endure the open desert (a metaphor for the kingdom of the exile, the open system) by walking in circles. In order to give himself a sense of continuity, he gives himself mental tasks, like memorizing the name and dates of an American president each day. To fight off his tendency to be absorbed by the deathly romance of all-out nuclear destruction, he imagines particular scenes of horror, repeating mantras to ward off his obsessions: “Phoenix is burning.” But none of these measures work, and in the end, as in the beginning, he realizes “Without football there was nothing, really and absolutely nothing to look forward to” (p. 156). His fatal reliance on the game and its order comes home to the reader when Gary discovers that Taft Robinson, another exile whom Gary admires, has decided to abandon football for mystical study.

Taft is the only black player on the team, a loner with his own dormitory room who eats separately from the players and keeps his own counsel. Intrigued, Gary tries to befriend Taft. As the novel winds down in an inexorable entropic movement (in the last section, the football season ends, Mrs. Tom Wade dies, Emmett Creed gets ill, Larry Zapalac succumbs to paranoia, Major Staley becomes locked in his war-game mode, and
Gary’s relationship with Myna disintegrates, Gary hopes to find some solidarity with Taft that will help him through the off-season, and enters his room in the novel’s final scene.

Taft tells him, however, that he is “all through with football . . . I want to concentrate on my studies” (p. 232). “That’s impossible” replies Gary, who has come in to buttress his decision to become team captain. He tries to convince Taft to change his mind, but all he can say is “It’s football. It’s football, Taft,” as if the word has become an unassailable Logos (which it has indeed become for Gary) (p. 233). But Taft’s exile is more rudimentary than Gary’s “I’m after small things. Tiny little things. Less of white father watching me run. Prefer to sit still” (p. 233). Against Gary’s assertion that football brings “pattern,” “morality,” and a “sense of living an inner life,” Taft says “Maybe I crave the languid smoky dream . . . That’s living close to yourself too. You talk about bringing the inside close to the outside. I’m talking about taking the whole big outside and dragging it in behind me” (pp. 233-4). Again we have DeLillo’s two strategies of self: Gary now as surrenderer to Footballthink, Taft as the spiritual exile, admitting the world but transforming it by contemplation into his own, ostensibly free consciousness.

DeLillo at first seems to poise Taft as an oracle of sorts, an exemplar of the kind of character who contemplates the familiar mysteries. Taft seems a model of sanity, a man who commits himself to the development of his self and soul through contemplation after rejecting Footballthink. Gary grows enthusiastic, asking him questions about how he arrived at his new asceticism. Taft even seems to begin changing Gary’s mind about football, enabling him to find something else “to look forward to” beside the game.

However, Gary’s excitement—and the possibility that Taft’s exile will yield a viable strategy of self—is cut short when Gary asks Taft what kinds of books he reads in his

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80 See J. K. Higginbotham’s article “The ‘Queer’ in Don DeLillo’s End Zone,” in Notes on Contemporary Literature (January 1989, No. 19, pp. 5-7).
disciplined study. "I like to read about ovens," Taft replies. "Atrocities. I like to read about atrocities" (p. 240). This shatters Gary's hope. Taft's disciplines and rituals, in other words, are no different from Major Staley's or for that matter Gary's; they replace Footballthink with a surrender to Thanatophobia and a language so overwhelming in its horror that it dwarfs one's own fears of death (in this, Taft's fascination reminds us of Jack Gladney's absorption in Hitler Studies). Recognizing that neither his attempt at exile nor Taft's absorption with horror escape violence and madness, Gary shuts himself off from the world completely. His narrative peters out, and Gary has himself carted off to the hospital, so paralyzed in will that he can no longer even feed himself. What both the paralytic exile and surrenderer lack is some effective way of warding off the fear of death. The exile can only make circles in the desert, paint rocks black, or overwhelm the fear by reading about atrocity and appropriating the powerful death-defying language of mass death; the football player can huff and puff but find nothing sustaining outside the confines of the gridiron. The options seem awfully bleak. The only alternative, if it can even be called that, is "play," the kind one finds in the Bang You're Dead game (pp. 31-4) and in the football-game-in-the-snow (pp. 193-197). The games, organically-generated and fluid, are played with a minimum of rules, and, in the first case, bring the players "closer together through their perversity and fear" during wartime (the Vietnam war is in deep background in the novel), and in the second case, to move them "into elemental realms, seeking harmony with the weather and the earth" that are impossible to attain with football proper (p. 195). The harmonies aren't a matter of the self moving into the realm of the Logos and abiding by its regulations, but of something spontaneously generated in concert with others.

Generating something spontaneously in concert with others is also a property of language, and *End Zone* in tentative ways adumbrates *The Names* and its celebration of language’s capacity to reveal the familiar mysteries which might reveal a “soul’s” encounter with its mortality. *End Zone* is full of language play, of people struggling to tell the “untellable” by grunting in locker rooms, by mimicking the patter of air force pilots, by babbling terms recalled from an accounting textbook. There is a real effort here to, as the super-narrator puts it, “unbox the lexicon” (p. 113). Gary’s own dream to do just this is put beautifully:

In some form of void, freed from consciousness, the mind remakes itself. What we must know must be learned from blanked-out pages. To begin to reword the overflowing world. To subtract and disjoin. To re-recite the alphabet. To make elemental lists. To call something by its name and need no other sound (p. 89).

This is the dream of all modernist writing, all post-romantic writing perhaps, but the language here can’t carry the burden of meaning. For example, does Gary mean that there exists some “mind” that exists “free from consciousness?” If that’s so, he’s implying an almost romantic idea of self, a notion that is ridiculed in the rest of the novel. In *The Names*, DeLillo will suggest that the white noise of language itself, contemplated in the

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Much of the very funny, nonsensical patter between players as they prepare for the game is, I think, an expression of the “totalitarian sentimentality” I mentioned earlier, the extreme, possibly homoerotic fellow-feeling that arises from the anticipation of a dangerous engagement. Yet it is also, crucially, another example of the language that in future novels will call up the familiar mysteries, language stupefyingly elemental but expressive of something palpably important precisely because it is so relentless. Here’s a locker room speech:

"‘Cree-unch,’ he said softly. ‘Cree-unch. Creech. Crunch.’"

"We started to make noises.”

"You know what to do,” he said, and his voice grew louder. "You know what this means. You know where we are. You know who to get.”

"We were all making private sounds. We were getting ready. We were getting high. The noise increased in volume."

"‘Footbawl,’ George Owen shouted. ‘This footbawl. You throw it, you ketch it, you kick it. Footbawl. Footbawl. Footbawl.’” (p. 128).
context of human mortality, intimates that such a mind, such a center of consciousness, might exist. But in *End Zone*, DeLillo hasn't yet gained the confidence in his own language, perhaps, to suggest that language might reveal anything quite so powerful. At this point, he, like Taft Robinson, has to back off, muttering about his own mystical apprehensions, "Lord, I think I'm beginning to babble," not yet knowing that, with *The Names*, babbling will become the profoundest mystery of all (p. 241).

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The Names

They [the names cult] mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death.

--Owen Brademas, The Names (p. 308)

Our offering is language.

--James Axton, The Names (p. 331)

Michael Wood, in a mostly laudatory review of The Names soon after its publication in 1982, complained that it "feels like a major novel but it also feels a little blurred, its insights scattered rather than collected. . . [It] is a hard book to hold in the mind."84 I think he's right on both counts, but I'm not sure that the novel's blurriness or scatteredness diminishes it. Its evanescence seems to me inevitable, since DeLillo is using language to explore what denotative language can't express: the aura of the untellable mystery of mortality that speaks through language. In often stunning ways, The Names manages to defamiliarize and renew our very sense of what impels us toward speech. It is almost as if DeLillo were trying to regather the light from the blinding hallucinatory moment when some mythical anthropoid out of evolutionary history grunted his first grunt, and was

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End Zone is an end game, trapping characters who accept living inside systems of discourse, and immobilizing those who try to live outside them. Yet DeLillo kept writing after End Zone—in fact, over a less than six year period, he finished four novels. The artist figures in these books, Bucky Wunderlick and Fenig from Great Jones Street, Henrik Endor and the Nobel Prize novelist in Ratner's Star, and Moll Robbins from Running Dog, reveal much about what makes artists stop creating but little about what sustains them. The Names is DeLillo's belated acknowledgement to himself and his readership (tiny at the time) that language needn't just trap or immobilize us but can show forth the very life of things, the "Penetralium of mystery," as Keats once called it. It is a hieratic novel, signaling an imaginative bravery that comes from a deep, humane gaze at mortality.

As in End Zone, there are characters here who surrender to a Logos—the cult members themselves, with their submission to random murder decrees, their nihilistic devotion to an Inverted Word. The cult have reached an end-game of their own: for them, language has ceased to signify, but they mock even their own nihilism by making random words the locus for an absolute command to kill. They link the initials of towns to the initials of people who pass through them and then kill the people because of the coincidence. For cultists like Emmerich, The logic is unassailable:

[T]here is still the program... Singh has found a man. We are waiting for him to approach Hawa Mandir. Let's face it, the most interesting thing we do is kill. Only a death can complete the program. You know this. It goes deep, this recognition. Beyond words (p. 299).

But we find out later, in Owen's powerful repudiation of the cult, that the cult, in mocking

language's ability to carry meaning, has cut itself off from the only thing—besides murder—that can protect them from their own fear of death. Their turn to murder, in an insane attempt to conquer death by death, (something we will see again in *White Noise* and *Libra*), signifies a surrender to fascism.

The *Names* also has its share of paralyzed exiles, most obviously the circle of American friends and business associates who regularly meet in Athens—the Maitlands, the Kellers, the Bordens, George Rowser, and, for most of the novel, James Axton himself—literal exiles who have left their country to live out of suitcases in third world business capitals, doomed to transiency and rootlessness. But DeLillo has complicated his conception of the exile: if in *End Zone*, an exile was someone who tried to live without a system, in an open chaotic mental space that was finally unendurable, in *The Names* even that space has been absorbed by a system, in this case by international conglomerate capitalism, so that the only difference between a surrenderer and most—though crucially, not all—of the exiles is a bitter sidelong irony toward the system of which they are a part. The cult members believe, simply and insanely, in their random killing program. The exiles, on the other hand, are masters of self-deception. They are functionaries for business interests which exploit third world countries, and are therefore complicit in the endless rounds of violence that afflict these nations, but because their own personal lives are chaotic, spread out over various time zones, and because they exercise a mirthless self-mockery, they are able to deny their implication in the system. But *The Names* offers no space outside the system. Everyone is in the aura.

So those exile characters—like Owen, James, and unself-consciously, Tap—who aren't satisfied with the cynicism of their peers and glimpse the familiar mysteries, are forced to move away from traditional transcendental strategies of locating meaning in their experience towards notions of immanence. That is to say, they no longer locate the experience of
beauty or grace or religious intensity outside the mediations of language, but see them as emerging from language itself. Language, however demotic, however inscribed by ideologies of violence or oppression or deception, is the familiar mystery of The Names: it is "the fallen wonder of the world," as Tap writes at the end of his extraordinary novel-fragment (p. 339).

I'd like to trace the development of the strategies in Owen and James, and briefly in Tap, the three characters whose spiritual searches parallel the novel's own. But first I'd like to look at Kathryn Axton, who resembles neither the surrenderers of the cult, the self-deceiving business people, nor those who search for immanence. She's an exception to the paradigm I've established here: her self-trust and resistance to metaphysical speculation is a throwback to existential humanism. Her search is like Owen's and James's in its earnestness of purpose, but its differences may help clarify the more desperate quests of the men. Kathryn's archaeological studies are a means of ordering her life, and of entering into the tradition which asks what history has to tell us. Yet she doesn't ask the quarry findings to reveal the familiar mysteries; she simply wants to work, to feel useful—she neither courts danger nor craves spiritual revelations. Kathryn has left her husband and her old job to join an archaeological dig led by Owen Brademas, a decision that takes her to the Greek island of Kouras, where she lives with her son. She's a survivor, but her choice of occupation at first puzzles James:

She looked tired from her work at the excavation, physically beat, her hands full of marks and cuts, but she was also charged by it, bright with it, giving off static. There must be a type of weariness that seems a blessing of the earth. In Kathryn's case it was literally the earth she was combing so scrupulously for fire marks and artifacts. I saw nothing in it myself (p. 12).

Kathryn is a woman of proportions, who has had to learn to control her enthusiasms after a
lifetime of emotional traumas—a mother who died when she was a child, an alcoholic father, a marriage which flared into violence. She’d like to “just dig” into the earth, take care of her son, and avoid the exhausting politics of relationships (p. 74). She has trained herself not to want.

Still, Kathryn, like everyone in the novel, particularly those without religious belief, is terrified by death, and so her calm eventually explodes in the long argument, full of white noise, that follows Kathryn’s revelation to James that she and Tap are leaving Greece. James narrates:

We were discussing matters close to the center of what it meant to be a couple, to share that risk and distance. The pain of separation, the forememory of death. Moments of remembering her, Kathryn dead, odd meditations, pity the sad survivor. Everything we said denied this. We were intent on being petty. But it was there, a desperate love, the conscious hovering of things. It was part of the argument. It was the argument (p. 123) (my underline).

DeLillo is quite clear here. The putative substance of Axtons’ argument is white noise; what speaks through the argument is the “desperate love” that comes from the pity and fear they each feel at their own and the other’s death. James will hold on to such revelations, but Kathryn steers clear of deep speculations. Later, watching her in the trenches, James sees that she has made her digging her existential project, a simple and literal digging up of the earth in order to feel connected to it:

The trench was enough. A five-foot block of time abstracted from the system. Sequence, order, information. . . The trench is her medium now. It is more than the island as the island is more than the world. . . I was compelled in the end to take her literally. She was digging to find things, to learn. Objects themselves. Tools, weapons, coins. Maybe objects are consoling. . . Objects are the limits we desperately need. They show us where we end. They dispel our sadness, temporarily (p. 133).
Kathryn’s strategy of self, then, is modestly existential, to work with her hands in the trenches, with the objects that give her a sense of history, proportion, and calm, and dispelling the sadness, temporarily.

This “temporarily,” though, is something neither James nor Owen, spiritually desperate men both, can abide. Owen, the focus of Tap’s splendid novel-fragment about glossolalia, grew up in a town of Pentacostal Christians, and because he never learned to speak in tongues — was never blessed by its power to link him through a divine source with his congregation—he lives his life in subdued lonely torment. “His pain was radiant, almost otherworldly,” James says when Owen first appears in the novel. “He seemed to be in touch with grief, as if it were a layer of being he’d learned how to tap” (p. 19). Yet there is strength, passion, and intelligence in the man, some inflexible quality that sends him off onto dangerous careening journeys which he hopes will lead to some cooling of his spiritual fevers, some palliation of the extraordinary loneliness that haunts the spiritually dispossessed.

Owen, as I’ve already suggested, has constant intimations of an ungraspable mystery surrounding the mundane, and this sense of mystery seems strongest for him when he examines the inscriptions on ancient stones. Whereas his interest used to be as prosaic and academic as Kathryn’s (“At first, years ago, I think it was mainly a question of history and philology. Then the stones spoke. It was a form of conversation with an ancient people”) (p. 35), now

I’ve begun to see a mysterious importance in the letters as such, the blocks of characters... The shapes of their letters and the material they used. Fire-hardened clay, dense black basalt, marble with a ferrous content. These things I lay my hands against, feel where the words have been cut. And the eye takes in those beautiful shapes. So strange and reawakening. It goes deeper than conversations, riddles (pp. 35-6).
"These things I lay my hands against, feel where the words have been cut"—it's the strangeness of the act of communication itself, much like the tongue-speaking, that Owen wants to explore, regardless of what the words say. He wants to know what mysteries lie in the undecipherable cut of a stone, messages which come down to us uninterpreted, with no structures to help us gather up their meaning. What further mysteries lie in Pentacostal warblings, history’s white noise?

His fascination with the mystery leads him into treacherous territory, for Owen’s interest dovetails with the names cult, which is also “interested” in “The alphabet itself... in letters, written symbols, fixed in sequence” yet unattached to meaning (p. 30). His visits to the rock shelter where the cult reside, intensify his desire to find some spiritual certitude in these familiar mysteries; like a surrenderer, he craves an absorption into some body of belief. The names cult seems to him to be honing in on the mystery he’s been feeling, on some degree zero of being where the order of language, with its links between signifier and signified, is stripped away, and some blazing truth is revealed in spiritual intuition, just as it was for those in his Pentacostal church years ago.

“Owen was gravitationally bound to the cult,” James says after he finally tracks Owen down in India (p. 286). He sought a surrender to the power of religious fervor:

To be carried along, no gaps in the ranks, to move at a pace determined by the crowd itself, breathless, in and of them. This is what draws me to such things. Surrender. To burn away one’s self in the sandstone hills. To become part of the chanting wave of men, the white cities, the tents that cover the plain, the vortex in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque (p. 296).

This surrender is precisely what Owen sought in his childhood effort to speak in tongues, the feeling that the syllables coming from the mouths of the faithful all came from the same divine source. But Owen ends his journey in despair, because he discovers that the desire
of his forbears for redemption by speaking in tongues shares something with the cult's murderousness. Both are fanatical expressions of a desire to surrender to an ominous force instead of facing the loneliness of death.

But Owen, in what I think is an important moment in DeLillo's fiction, recoils from the cult's actions. While he can "bless" the people of his church-going past, whatever their propensities to surrender to Pentacostal ritual (with its derogation of rational language), he condemns the cult for surrendering to another ritual (with its derogation of rational language) as an excuse for murder. "These killings mock us," he insists. "They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death." (p. 303). His condemnation of the cult's arbitrary use of language and his simultaneous defense of language as the only means we have "to contend with death" is Owen's final act of the novel, and I think DeLillo's clearest signal that language isn't merely an instrument to "subdue and codify," as one critic has suggested, but is all we have in our efforts to communicate the loneliness of our mortal states to each other.66 Owen's strategy of self, which involves a near surrender to an extraordinary nihilistic power but then a crucial pullback from that surrender at the last moment leaves Owen in a state of exhaustion, but it is finally affirmative. Owen is almost fatally drawn to the familiar mysteries, but on the precipice he experiences a kind of humanistic impulse which, while exhausting him, gives James the strength to make his final affirmation. James comes away from his final encounter with Owen feeling "I'd been engaged in a contest of some singular and gratifying kind. Whatever [Owen had] lost in life-strength, this is what I'd won" (p. 309).

The journey James Axton takes in forging a strategy of self by attending to the familiar mysteries is less intense but no less absorbing. James begins very much like the other

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66 See Kucich.
exiles, insisting that he enjoys his entanglement with postmodern forms of power (though he is considerably more entangled than he knows), drinking heavily, and keeping up an exhausting level of ironic patter. He justifies his life to Kathryn by saying he “enjoys” his life as a risk analyst: “It’s an interesting part of the world. I feel I’m involved in events” (p. 12). He has drawn up a list of his “27 Depravities” in an attempt to pre-empt Kathryn’s complaints about him, sometimes intoning them ironically in a “vibrant liturgical voice” but not taking the list seriously enough to change (p. 18). Though possessed of a self-analytical intelligence, he is, as his own list admits, “Uncommitted,” “Willing to settle,” “Willing to sit and stare, conserving yourself for some end-of-life event, like God’s face or the squaring of the circle” (p. 16).

End of life events loom ahead in the form of the cult’s ritual murders, but seeing Kathryn and Tap in Kouras also sensitizes him to his own isolation and rootlessness. After Owen first mentions the familiar mysteries (p. 26), James begins to sense them frequently himself (e.g., pp. 32, 81): the domestic “talk” between him and Kathryn “seemed to yield up the mystery that is part of such things, the nameless way in which we are connected to the physical world. Being here” (p. 32). He later senses the same kind of mystery in the noise of a crowd on a summer evening:

This is a way of speaking that takes such pure joy in its own openness and candor that we begin to feel these people are discussing language itself. What pleasure in the simplest greeting. It’s as though one friend says to another, “How good it is to say, ‘how are you?’” The other replying, “When I answer ‘I am well and how are you’ what I really mean is that I’m delighted to have a chance to say these familiar things— they bridge the lonely distances” (pp. 52-3).

Once again, we hear DeLillo’s suggestion that the metanarrative of all speech is the desire to “bridge the lonely distances,” to “connect ourselves to the physical world” in order to feel ourselves “Being here” with one another.
When news about the cult first trickles out, James is too absorbed with his family and business to pursue it as Owen does, but after Kathryn and Tap leave for England, leaving him to dwell in his loneliness, James’ interest grows. He meets with Andahl, a cult member, who tries to persuade Jim, in language that clearly evokes Owen’s earlier intimations, that

Something in our program finds a home in your unconscious mind. A recognition, This curious recognition is not subject to conscious scrutiny. Our program evokes something that you seem to understand and find familiar, something that you cannot analyze. We are working at a preverbal level here, although we use words, of course, we use them all the time. This is a mystery (p. 208).

James is less taken in by Andahl than Andahl thinks; still, he is troubled that links in the cult’s explanation for its activities are so similar to Owen’s explanation of spiritual intimation. What’s the connection? The “something” of which Andahl speaks, though he wouldn’t admit it, is the desire to eradicate death from consciousness through an absolute will to power. And this desire to forget our own deaths also seems to be the function of language as well. But as James learns from Owen’s long monologue in India, there is a crucial difference between the two. The cult’s modus operandi is to deny the human desire to “bridge the lonely distances” by mocking the entire enterprise of communication. By using the arbitrariness of language’s basic units—the alphabet—to key its murders, the cult murders the life of language as well. Language, on the other hand, embodies and affirms the attempt to communicate the condition of human separateness, and the fact that language has emerged with no enduring Word to link us means less than that we continue to try to “build a system against the terror in our souls.”

Owen’s affirmation of language, in addition to James’s own brush with death in the assassination episode, stands behind James’ epiphany at the end of the novel. Throughout
the novel, James has been afraid to approach the Parthenon. But what he's learned from Owen has made it approachable: like all art, like all language, the Parthenon enacts the intent to communicate the perdurable human desire to conquer death, and so no longer does it seem "a relic species of dead Greece but part of the living city below it" (p. 330). For James, the Parthenon suddenly becomes audible, a voice that in the end speaks in a universal tone:

I hadn't expected a human emotion to emerge from the stones but this is what I found, deeper than the art and mathematics embodied in the structure, the optical exactitudes. I found a cry for pity. This is what remains of the mauled stones in their blue surround, this open cry, this voice we know as our own (p. 330).

No wonder, then, that in the murmur of the tourist crowd that huddles about the monument, James hears this same cry for pity which prompts him to imbue the whole scene—a scene of discourse—with religious significance:

People come through the doorway, people in streams and clusters, in mass assemblies. No one seems to be alone. This is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk. Everyone is talking. I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language (p. 331).

The novel's coda, an excerpt from Tap's "prairie epic," is I think DeLillo's generous offering to his readers, a risky but I think wholly successful attempt to show how language, in the way it uncannily slips from its discursive intents, reveals the untellable mystery of human consciousness.87 Earlier in the novel, Kathryn says that Tap "absolutely collides with language," and I think the verb is precise (p. 32). Something in

87 This is reaffirmed by Bruce Gatenby's article "A Disturbance of Memory: Language, Terror and Intimacy in Don DeLillo's The Names," in Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos (Sevilla, Espana. Spring 1996).
Tap's mind, which is not linguistic, collides with that part of it that is. Tap's Joycean narrative of Owen's boyhood attempts to speak in tongues is, like the voices at the Parthenon, "rich, harsh, mysterious, strong," and is made so because he hasn't "learned" English well enough: the text is splendidly replete with misspellings, unintended puns, and strangled syntax which enact its author's incorrigible freedom, his inability to operate within the confines of discourse. And what makes it so moving is that the story he's trying to tell is about wanting desperately to learn the language and lose the sense of isolation: it's about wanting to learn to "yedd tola" to the language of those in the Pentacostal congregation who speak in tongues. But in his very misspellings, Tap shows how his own fierce individuality resists yielding. His text is a testimony to that part of consciousness that cannot be corralled by language, that defiantly stamps its identity through the white noise of its "mistakes" and misspellings of language but paradoxically wishes for nothing more than to escape the isolation of that identity. It is a heroic story of initiation into language, finally, in which Tap's main character runs from the churchhouse into "the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world" (p. 339).

The "self" in The Names, then, is that part of consciousness which recognizes in the familiar mysteries the sign of its own ultimate end. This is a simple formulation (utterly familiar to readers of Heidegger: replace the familiar mysteries with "Time" and the equation is complete), but its simplicity is less important than the fact that DeLillo has broken the grip of pervasive irony that characterized his first six novels and which End Zone in many ways epitomized. The Names is an affirmative novel; it openly declares itself on the side of language's attempt to "bridge the lonely distances." In an almost solemn way, it refutes those who claim that language can only defer or disseminate endlessly. Yes, DeLillo says, language spreads out centripetally, but if we learn how to listen to that aura—not to the words so much as the white noise of language, with its brute desperate desire for
contact—we hear a human cry, "a cry that is our own." What DeLillo is saying in *The Names* is that white noise is human; it is the sound of consolation in the face of mortality.
White Noise

"How strange it is. We have these deep terrible lingering fears about ourselves and the people we love. Yet we walk around, talk to people, eat and drink. We manage to function. The feelings are deep and real. Shouldn't they paralyze us? How is it we can survive them, at least for a while? We drive a car, teach a class. How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we are, last night, this morning? Is it something we hide from each other, by mutual consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing it? Wear the same disguise?"

“What if death is nothing but sound?”

“Electrical Noise.”

“You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.”

“Uniform. White.”

-- White Noise (p. 198)

What we are reluctant to touch often seems the very fabric of our lives.

-- White Noise (p. 31)

White Noise is a novel about the mysterious sounds we make as we engage in the familiar rounds of daily life, about the “deep, terrible lingering fears” that somehow get expressed as we “walk around, talk to people, eat and drink.” The most misleading way to read the presence of white noise in the novel is to assume that it stands strictly for cultural detritus, and that DeLillo is merely indicting America’s enslavement to the hypertrophied...
consumerist desires instilled by a media society. Of course this is partly what he is doing, but DeLillo's contribution to this theme in American writing is unique; what's more, it's consistent with his postmodern principle that he can't assume a space outside the aura for social criticism. DeLillo is admitting that yes, the junk of media and consumer culture stifles imagination, weakens our sense of personal being and makes us diffuse our awareness of mortality, but that is now a given of postmodern culture, and there is nowhere to run from it: not to football, not to science, not to religion, and finally not even to art. The only thing left to do is to re-engage the mass culture that modernists abandoned.

"In the commonplace I find unexpected themes and intensities," says Jack (p. 184). Since *White Noise* is about a world of language, it is the commonplace of language that will lead to the novel's revelations about being and mortality.

The tone of *White Noise* is markedly different from that of *The Names*, but their attitudes toward language are identical. Written soon after DeLillo's return from Greece, whose burden of history gives *The Names* its solemn heavy rhythms, *White Noise* reads like an amazed rediscovery of America. When we read through the inventory of supplies that the students take from their parents' station wagons on the first page -- "the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints"—one is struck that *White Noise* defamiliarizes the habits and furnishings of white middle-class America more effectively than any novel since *Lolita* (*White Noise* p. 3). The tone of the

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** A negative overview of DeLillo's work through *White Noise* is Bruce Bawer's article "Don DeLillo's America," in *New Criterion* (April 1985, pp. 34-42). As Keesey puts it, he "Tends to identify DeLillo with his characters and blame him for their faults." Reprinted in a book titled *Diminishing Fictions*.

** According to Arthur M. Saltzman, "DeLillo believes that the finest novels are those which can 'absorb and incorporate culture without catering to it.'" Quoted from "The figure in the static: 'White Noise'" in *Modern Fiction Studies* (Winter 1994, Vol. 40, No. 4, p. 807). This article depicts a unique approach to the influence of culture on literature.
inventory, spoken in narrator Jack Gladney's voice, is typically ambivalent: half-baffled by
the vertiginous abundance of products that didn't even exist on the planet till groups of
food technicians and advertisers invented them just a few years earlier, and half-delighted at
the inventiveness and revelatory power the names of these products display. What are
fruit chews, anyway, and why do they exist? Isn't fruit (unchewed) enough? Why do we
have to thin our nachos? These are questions for Murray Jay Siskind and the other
professors at College-on-the-Hill, but one thing will become clear: it is important that we
attend to them, not just because they address how denatured our food has become, but
because the names we give our food, like all white noise, speak to our sense of mystery:
not for nothing is the last item on the list a Nabisco chocolate cookie called "Mystic mints."

In information theory, the term "white noise" refers to the sound of information which
a messenger sends but whose meaning is garbled because the receiver—a computer
terminal, a TV, a human being—doesn't have the necessary interface equipment—a
compatible modem, a clear cable connection, ears to hear—to process the signal. Thus, we
tend to think of white noise as marginal interference, as what we must clear away in order
to hear what the real message is. But in DeLillo, the marginal has become the message:
what can't be assimilated is exactly what we need to tune in to, because there are good
reasons why we have pushed to the margins the message of the white noise. White noise,
to reiterate, is the confused alarms that humans make (mostly unconsciously) to utter their
fear of death, and modern culture, as Tolstoy knew in "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (and
whom DeLillo invokes here), is organized precisely to suppress and marginalize the fact of
death. If we are going to hear our "cries for pity," we have to learn to listen to what the

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90 Thomas Ferraro demonstrates the extent to which the Gladney household's
behaviour is linked to the mandates of consumer capitalism, in "Whole Families
Shopping at Night," in New Essays on White Noise, ed. Frank Lentricchia (New
91 "Why can't we be intelligent about death?" Jack asks with the defiant
white noise is saying.

Unfortunately, we are not going to learn it from Murray Jay Siskind, who is this novel’s exemplar of a surrendering strategy of self. Murray is an arresting cultural analyst, but as I’ll try to show here, Murray is finally the most inhuman character in the book because death—his own or anyone else’s—has no existential meaning to him: he’s virtually abstract, a pure manipulator of signs, a man who can recommend to a desperate man religion one moment and murder the next, and not see that there is a difference between the two. Murray is what Owen Brademas might have become had he not taken his stand against the cult. Murray doesn’t take stands against anything because death doesn’t touch him: he’s obscenely innocent, a pure product of postmodern America.92

Murray Jay Siskind has come to Blacksmith to lecture on “living icons” (p. 10). This makes perfect sense, since that’s how he sees the living: as icons, simulacra. It’s in innocence that, if it is frustrating to the reader, just might be his saving grace. Murray answers, “It’s obvious.” “It is?” “Ivan Ilyich screamed for three days. That’s about as intelligent as we get. Tolstoy himself struggled to understand. He feared it terribly” (White Noise p. 282). Ivan Ilyich’s scream, then, by my reckoning, is a paradigmatic example of white noise. But DeLillo has Murray misrepresent Tolstoy, of course. Ivan Ilyich screamed for three days and then, by sympathizing with his son—by loving him—saw the light of God. "Death is over", he said to himself, 'there is no more death'” (Leo Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyich. [New York: Signet, 1981], p. 134). DeLillo’s characters, for their part, see neither love nor religion as something that can conquer death. "Do you believe love is stronger than death?" asks Murray. "Not in a million years," Jack answers (White Noise p. 284). As for religion and the “life beyond,” Murray considers it “a sweet and terribly touching idea. You can take it or leave it” (p. 286). These passages—indeed the entire “serious looping Socratic walk” that Murray and Jack take, suggest the stunning distance with which postmodern thinkers approach Tolstoy’s humanism.

92 The case of Murray’s curious “innocence” might be extended into a paper in its own right, but let me suggest what I mean by it. Murray, like the preverbal Wilder, doesn’t fear death because he claims he hasn’t “forgotten how to listen and look as children” (p. 67). But what he means by this is that adults set up defenses against the world that children don’t. Children let television, for instance, wash over them; anybody who has ever watched a two-year-old glued to the set knows how mysterious and vulnerable a moment that is. They can look positively androoidal, which I think is what Murray has in mind. For Murray, to look and listen as a child is to surrender utterly to it.
keeping with his admission to Jack that “I’m here to avoid situations;” that is, live situations that require him to treat humans as something more than fascinating behavioral data (p. 11). The key to his character is that he’s “immensely pleased” that “[w]e can’t get outside the aura” of postmodern culture (p. 13). The aura of disembodied language is what saves him; rather than language being a vivid reminder of mortality, as it is for James Axton, it is Murray’s escape from the consciousness of death, all while allowing him to talk volubly about it. Signs are his Dylar. Murray feels absolutely none of the anxiety Jack feels about death because language doesn’t represent anything to him: language defers endlessly, is nothing more. He doesn’t fear death because there is nothing in him stable enough to house such a fear.

With the fear of death vanquished, Murray is free to become a sponge of all the postmodern phenomena that, in its demotic fashion, speaks of the culture’s death fear. One of the novel’s real triumphs is the way Murray elevates the supermarket and television into the realm of the sacred. For him, the supermarket “recharges us spiritually” (p. 38); TV, which “welcomes us into the grid,” “practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust” (p. 51). Yet unlike James Axton’s epiphany before the crowd at the Parthenon, Murray’s elation isn’t connected to any existential awareness; it’s pure ecstasy of communication, a celebration of his vertiginous entanglement in the circulation of information. It’s no accident, then, that Murray latches onto figures like Elvis Presley, whose name no longer signifies a human being but a vortex of fantasy and media speculation. The dialogical

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1. Dylar is a prescription drug in White Noise, that is supposed to help alleviate anxiety about death.

minuet about Elvis and Hitler that Murray dances with Jack in the classroom is brilliant and entertaining, but Jack speaks for both of them when he says “Death was strictly a professional matter here. I was comfortable with it. I was on top of it” (p. 74). The difference between the two of them is that Jack will not remain so for long.

Murray’s remoteness from death makes him remote from life, his own and everyone else’s. In the last chapter of the “Waves and Radiation” section, Murray comes to the Gladney household to talk to the children. “He talked about the otherworldly babble of the American family. He seemed to think we were a visionary group... There were huge amounts of data flowing through the house, waiting to be analyzed” (p. 101). The Gladneys are an extraordinary group, but Murray’s relationship to them is strictly scientific. When Babette’s face suddenly appears on the TV screen, the whole family becomes disoriented, even terrified. “a two syllable cry, ba-ba, issued from the deeps of my soul,” Jack says (p. 104). “We were being shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us. Babette of electrons and photons, of whatever forces produced that gray light we took to be her face” (p. 105). The disturbance arises because Babette isn’t simply waves and radiation to the Gladneys; she is real, and her transformation reminds Jack, at least, that he and Babette are both mortal creatures, a fact that TV normally obscures: “I tried to tell myself it was only television—whatever that was, however it worked—and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation” (p. 105). But what is Murray’s reaction to all this? “Murray looked up at me, smiling in his sneaky way.” And what does he do while Wilder cries, his face inches from the TV screen? “Murray took notes.”

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**"It is only when Babette appears on TV teaching her posture class that her family pays her the reverential attention customarily accorded the wise. It is clear that the apparition of her person on that medium is the chief reason for everyone’s newfound respect." Quoted from, Mark Conroy, "From Tombstone to Tabloid: Authority Figured in White Noise," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (Winter 1994. Vol. 35, No. 2, p. 98).**
Murray sustains this remoteness throughout the book, though his speeches seem so "intelligent about death" (something Murray claims no one can be) that it's tempting to believe that he's not avoiding it but truly "on top of it" (p. 282). On their "serious looping Socratic walk," Murray's relentless rationality about death is practically ghostly.

"There is no reason to believe life is more precious because it is fleeting. Here is a statement. A person has to be told he is going to die before he can begin to live life to the fullest. True or false?"
"False. Once your death is established, it becomes impossible to live a satisfying life" (p. 285).

That Jack is wrestling with a panicky bout with the death fear doesn't deter Murray. When Jack asks "How do I get around" death, Murray's answers--three all told--suggest how far into the realm of pure discourse he has gone.

His first answer is to "Give yourself up to" technology: "Believe in it. They'll insert you in a gleaming tube, irradiate your body with the basic stuff of the universe. Light, energy, dreams. God's own goodness" (p. 285). When Jack rejects this suggestion, Murray answers: "In that case you can always get around death by concentrating on the life beyond" (p. 285). But Murray is puzzled that Jack rejects this on the grounds that he doesn't believe in the life beyond. (Belief, because it involves owning an idea rather than simply letting it circulate through the mind, is alien to Murray.) Then comes his last suggestion:

I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up (p. 290).
Murray will insist, in the next four pages, that he is talking only “in theory,” (“We’re a couple of academics taking a walk”) but he steadily goads Jack into the position where his only option seems to be murder. “Are you a killer or a dier, Jack?” (p. 292) When Murray exits the novel, he has succeeded in stripping Jack of the entire system of rituals and beliefs that have kept his life manageable to this point. Jack can do nothing else now but attempt to murder, and Murray, because his own death is just “theory” to himself, can’t understand that for others it can’t be. He leaves the novel recommending fascism because the swirl of language with which Murray is so “immensely pleased” is not linked to the fear of death. His own language, like the names cult, in the end “mocks our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls”—and he does it because there is no terror in his own.

Terror is hardly missing in Babette’s character, however, which is why it isn’t difficult to call her one of DeLillo’s paralytic characters. The real “point of Babette”—though Jack needs to hear exactly the opposite—is that the fear of death immobilizes her. Her capacity for nurturing and intimacy keep her from surrendering to implication in a death-denying media-system, but her freedom from the system enslaves her to the death fear. Nothing—not marriage, family, work, or Dylar—has the power to alleviate that fear. Babette is a deconstructed Earth-mother: though she looks and acts the part—hefty, heavy-breasted, forever tending to the young, the old, and the husband—she finds it impossible to be the life-force everyone needs her to be.

Still, her stoic immersion in the everyday makes her one of DeLillo’s most attractive characters. Her fear immobilizes her, but her life is still infused with a sense of wonder and vitality. She has made the kitchen one of the two “power haunts” of the Gladney household (the other is the bedroom), and her presence anchors many of the scenes there, scenes full of food, energetic, loopy conversation, and as much Familiengefeuhl as one could expect.
in a house whose children come from at least four different sets of parents (p. 6). One of her jobs is to teach old people “how to stand, sit and walk,” which Jack explains by saying that “We seem to believe it is possible to ward off death by following rules of good grooming” (p. 27). Her other job is to read tabloids to Old Man Treadwell, a practice which, as we learn from Murray, is an attempt to ward off Treadwell’s fear of death by other means. Constantly on the lookout for her youngest boy, Wilder, always on self-improvement diets and exercise regimens, appearing always to “say yes to things,” it’s easy to see why at the beginning of the novel Jack says that she “makes me feel sweetly rewarded, bound up with a full-souled woman, a lover of daylight and dense life” (p. 6).

Jack’s characterization, of course, is a major case of wishful thinking, for Babette, even before the beginning of Jack’s chronicle of their lives, has had her encounter with Dylar—the drug designed to repress the death fear—and Willie Mink. It takes a long while for Jack to catch on, but when he finally confronts her, Babette owns up to the familiar and mysterious truth: “I’m afraid to die” (p. 196). Not only this, “but Mr. Gray said I was extra sensitive to the terror of death” (p. 197). What ensues is a remarkable dialogue between a husband and wife who, until now, have told “each other everything... except [their] fear of death” (pp. 29-30). Now they exchange their fears, make love, scold and soothe each other, and eventually fall asleep, all talk finally useless before “the hard and heavy thing, the fact itself” (p. 203).

Babette doesn’t, however, shrink from the death fear after her failure with the Dylar, as would so many of DeLillo’s paralytics. She keeps pushing her shopping cart through the market, holds her dying husband’s head to her breasts. It is Wilder who gives her strength, that pure familiar mystery in the flesh, that wordless tearful boy. She has a Kierkegaardian resilience in the face of death. A while after their major dialogue, Jack asks her, “Are you basically feeling the same?” Her answer: “You mean am I sick unto death? The fear hasn’t
gone, Jack” (p. 263). Yet at the end of the novel, she stands with her infected husband at the spectacular sunsets that the deathly cloud has left behind. She “doesn’t know how to feel” any more than Jack does, but she is there with him, facing the mystery in a brave wondrous silence (p. 324). Is it significant that they’ve brought Wilder along? DeLillo doesn’t make much of it. Part of the reason they brought him may be because the boy can anchor the turbulence of their awe, but bringing him also suggests that Babette knows how important it is to teach her son to face the mystery as well, to help him develop a new sensibility to cope with the new kinds of postmodern experience of which Babette and Jack are only beginning to learn.

Jack is considerably more volatile than Babette—he is erratic, ambitious, and foolish in ways she never is—but his ability to face the sunset knowing what is inside his body gives his paralysis a brave, strangely elegiac quality. He does not start the novel so bravely. In fact, early in the novel Jack notes his “tendency to make a feeble presentation of self... I am the false character that follows the name around” (p. 17). He wants very much, one senses, to be a surrenderer.96 He evades, in almost everything he does, the death-terror that causes him to wake up in the middle of the night “in the grip of a death sweat” (p. 47). He loses himself in shopping:

Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested... in the sense of the replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people.

96 Mark Osteen, states that, “For Baudrillard, death is the sole condition that eludes the hyperreal, and so 'all energies aim for their own demise,'; or as Jack Gladney... puts it, 'All plots tend to move deathward,'” in his “'A Moral Form to Master Commerce': the economies of DeLillo's 'Great Jones Street.'” Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction (Spring 1994, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 160). Leonard Wilcox, in his article “Baudrillard, DeLillo’s White Noise, and the End of Heroic Narrative,” Contemporary Literature (Fall 1991, Vol. 32, No. 3) persuasively describes Baudrillard’s ideas in the context to White Noise.
who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening (p. 20).

In the prospect of becoming part of the data of a huge electronic network:

I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, my secret code, tapped out my request. This figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed through me. The system had blessed my life... we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies (p. 46).

In denial of his wife’s death-fear:

“Baba, I am the one in this family who is obsessed with death. I have always been the one.”

“You never said.”

“To protect you from worry. To keep you animated, vital and happy. You are the happy one. I am the doomed fool. That’s what I can’t forgive you for. Telling me you’re not the woman I believed you were. I’m hurt, I’m devastated” (p. 197).

And in his Hitler Studies Program, of which, as Murray tells him, “the overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death. ‘Submerge me,’ you said. ‘Absorb my fear’” (p. 287).

All these evasive strategies serve to “put [him] under a spell” of well-being (p. 287). The Airborne Toxic Event, however, puts an end to all that: “Death has entered,” Jack realizes (pp. 141-2). This echoes James Axton’s “curious reminder that I was going to die,” but matters are considerably worse in White Noise, for the sparseness of The Name’s Greek setting, which allowed James access to such elemental feelings, is here obscured by technology:
White noise—the televising of death—creates “an eerie separation between your condition [mortality] and yourself.” This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma the novel dramatizes so powerfully. “Death has entered” Jack in a palpable, technologically verifiable way, but it remains distant and strange to him. He knows that, as Winnie Richards says, “it’s a mistake to lose one’s sense of death, even one’s fear of death. Isn’t death the boundary we need? Doesn’t it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition?” (p. 228). But when he asks, “What do I do to make death less strange? How do I go about it?” Winnie answers “I don’t know” (p. 229).

The death-evasions of postmodern culture no longer work for Jack, and so the “mortal gleanings” he gathers indeed paralyze him, but Jack, like Babette, has the capacity to penetrate the familiar mysteries, and this eases his condition, gives his life a sense of miracle and wonder. This is first evident when Wilder starts his seven hour long crying fit. After going through the normal parental panic, Jack begins to hear in the sounds “nameless things... that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony. Behind that dopey countenance, a complex intelligence operated” (p. 78). He begins to find the crying strangely comforting. “It might not be so terrible, I thought, to have to sit and listen to this a while longer.” “I began to think,” he continues, “he had disappeared inside this walling noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility.” What kind of place does he mean? Jack doesn’t say, but Ernest Becker’s
The Denial of Death, which clearly influenced this novel, suggests that Wilder’s crying is an expression of complex fears whose ultimate foundation is the death fear. Jack seems to want to share Wilder’s innate death fear, enter into it with him, and he has an intimation that they could “perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility” there—perhaps recognize the vulnerability of their conditions in an atmosphere of sympathy and love. Wilder’s cry, in other words, is very much like the “cry for pity” James Axton hears at the Parthenon, a connection almost consciously reinforced when DeLillo has Jack say that

It was as though [Wilder had] just returned from a period of wandering, in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges—a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary soil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder that we reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions (p. 79).

Almost precisely the same thing happens, I would argue, at the evacuation center when Steffie utters “Toyota Celica.” If Wilder’s crying is like an “ancient dirge,” Steffie’s syllables are like “an ancient power in the sky” (p. 155). If Wilder’s crying promises “some reckless wonder of intelligibility,” Steffie’s voice is “beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder.” The words make Jack feel that “something hovered . . . a presence.” Though Jack can’t identify it, it seems evident by now that it is her own “cry for

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97 Becker, borrowing the insights of psychologists like Gregory Zilboorg and C. W. Wahl, suggests that all a child’s fears are rooted in the death fear. He writes that, in the developing child, “the fear of death ‘undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways.’ Or, as Wahl so perfectly put it, death is a complex symbol and not any particular, sharply defined thing to the child. . . We could understand, too, why children have their recurrent nightmares, their universal phobias of insects and mean dogs. In their tortured interiors radiate complex symbols of many inadmissible realities—terror of the world, the horror of one’s own wished, the fear of vengeance by the parents, the disappearance of things, one’s own lack of control over anything, really. It is too much for any animal to take, but the child has to take it, and so he wakes up screaming with almost punctual regularity during the period when his weak ego is in the process of consolidating things.” The Denial of Death, pp. 19-20.
pity" uttered through the white noise. In hearing it, Jack has "a moment of splendid transcendence" which he cannot explain, but which the argument of the rest of the novel suggests is a transcendence of white noise into the sorrowful reaches of the human death fear.

It is significant that these two epiphanies don't have any lasting effect on Jack's death terror. Growing increasingly desperate, and seeing no other alternative after Murray's not-so-subtle Socratic guidance, Jack hopes to break out of his paralysis by becoming "the killer for a change. Let someone else be the dier. Let him replace you, theoretically, in the role. You can't die if he does. He dies, you live. See how marvelously simple" (p. 291).

This strategy, of course, is exactly the same as that of the cult in The Names. Emboldened by a sense of significance that gains stature by mocking the enterprise of language—by refusing to establish a connection between language and the mortal human beings who use it—Jack shoots Willie Mink in a delirium of power: "I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic. The sound snowballed in the white room, adding on reflected waves . . . I saw beyond words" (p. 312). (The sound of the gun, incidentally, is also described in terms relating it to white noise, more evidence that it is a metaphor having to do with conquering death). But seeing "beyond words" doesn't lead him to hear the cry of pity that he has heard earlier, or that James Axton heard at the Parthenon. In fact, he shoots again before being shot himself. It is only after being shot that Jack can see Willie "for the first time as a person" (p. 313). The scene regains its mortal dimensions for Jack, and he takes Willie to the hospital.

It is while talking to Sister Hermann Marie that Jack learns what Murray will never know—that language is in fact a sacrificial offering humans make to one another to ease the burden of death. It is qualitatively different from other means of easing the death fear (like murder) because it doesn't mock the human desire to "contend with death" through speech.
but is instead infused with that desire. The nun grows angry at Jack because he at first refuses to listen to the cry for pity beneath language. He argues with her about the need for genuine belief and so forth. It is only when she starts talking white noise to him that he understands that the only belief we need is the belief in the cry of the human voice:

She was spraying me with German. A storm of words. She grew more animated as the speech went on. A gleeful vehemence entered her voice. She spoke faster, more expressively. Blood vessels flared in her eyes and face. I began to detect a cadence, a measured beat. She was reciting something, I decided. Litanies, hymns, catechisms. The mysteries of the rosary perhaps. Taunting me with scornful prayer.

The odd thing is I found it beautiful (p. 320).

Will Jack learn anything sustaining from this third epiphany? Such as the necessity to hear the fear of death in the white noise, and to act in sympathy with such knowledge? It’s impossible to tell for sure, though DeLillo provides us a clue in the novel’s last paragraph. The postmodern sunset leaves Jack and Babette in awe, we know, not knowing “how to feel about all this,” but at the postmodern shrine, the supermarket, Jack looks over the new holographic scanning equipment with its ability to decode “the binary secret of each item,” and thinks that “This is the language of waves and radiation . . .”—white noise, of course—and he glosses it for us: “. . . or how the dead speak to the living” (p. 326). It is, I think,

*German has been DeLillo’s language of choice to express the white noise for some time. Back in End Zone, Billy Mast says of a course in the “untellable” he’s taking that “I think the theory is if any words exist beyond speech, they’re probably German words, or pretty close” (End Zone, p. 181)—which provides an interesting gloss on the Hermann Bloch quote DeLillo quotes in the chapter’s epigraph.

*Thomas Peyser states that “the spectacular, ‘postmodern sunsets’ at the end of White Noise – perhaps caused by traces of the [‘]toxic event,’ perhaps by the airborne bacteria that ate the noxious cloud – seem to embody such ambiguities and serve as a screen onto which characters project their own anxieties about the future just over the horizon,” in his article a “Globalization in America: the case of Don DeLillo’s ‘White Noise.’” Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History, (Spring 1996, Vol, 25, No. 3, p. 268).
what the novel has been leading up to all along: the message of the familiar mysteries that our own fear of death speaks through language to those who have learned to listen.
Conclusion

The DeLillo "self" is one that knows it is going to die. It knows this not just from internal evidence—psychic terror, a desire to attach oneself to a body of belief—but because it has learned to hear in all the white noise which obscures death the reasons why it obscures.

The self that hears in the familiar mysteries the news that he or she is going to die doesn't have much to go on, obviously. It is in a very volatile and dangerous state, and as we have seen, is as likely to hear in the familiar mysteries a call to murder as a cry for pity. But this is where DeLillo leaves his readers, in a state of raw vulnerability toward the death fear. Which is as it should be: DeLillo owes us no more than that he should put us in such a position. As I've suggested, he hasn't given us an activist or instrumental strategy of self. It is and remains paralyzed: but it is capable of expressing an enormous range of affect, from horror to inspired awe, and that, it seems to me, is a beginning. One of the formidable achievements of DeLillo's fiction is that some of his characters withstand the punishing assaults of postmodern experience, and survive without the benefits of any soft illusions. What they have instead is language, which they have had from the beginning, of course, but now it has become for them the conscious source of revelation. A character in The Names says that "the river of language is God" (p. 152). DeLillo's hopeful paralytics wouldn't go quite that far, but for them the river of language is life—precisely because it is always speaking the fear of death.
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