FORMS OF RETREAT AND RETURN IN THE NOVELS OF DON DELILLO

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Abstract

This thesis explores themes of retreat and return within the novels of the contemporary American author Don DeLillo. While several of these forms of retreat and return are well-documented in the established body of academic work devoted to DeLillo's major novels of the 1980s and 1990s, there has been less attention paid to their prominence within his earlier writing. This thesis moves away from existing academic readings of the author's work as either being defined by a three-part structure, or being categorized into two canonical and precanonical phases, to assess DeLillo's work as one body. Within this more holistic view of DeLillo's writing, ideas of retreat and return can be seen as a uniting authorial concern that runs throughout his novels, from the earliest to the most recent.

Throughout the decades in which DeLillo has been recognised as one of the 'great' figures in American fiction, his work has featured many expressions of a fixation on forms of personal retreat. Characters in his work repeatedly withdraw from society through physical exile, self-sabotage, fasts, and periods of silence, in retreats influenced by secularised, and often vague, spiritual and religious antecedents. These forms of retreat are often followed by some form of elective or passive return, either physical or spiritual, so that a kind of ebb and flow of retreat and return becomes visible when DeLillo's novels are viewed as a complete body of work. The first chapter of this thesis establishes forms of retreat and return through an examination of DeLillo's first three novels: *Americana*, *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street*.

In addition to tracing instances of characters enacting this ebb and flow, the second chapter of this thesis demonstrates how DeLillo's work also dramatizes an engagement with society and history within a context of diminished objectivity. The second chapter argues that his historiographic novels *Libra* and *Underworld* explore a retreat from historical certainty following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, in part through the fictional rendering of historical figures and events.

The third chapter suggests that in his work since *Underworld*, DeLillo appears to have enacted his own retreat from the title of 'great American author', while returning to some of the figures and fixations of his early publications. Images of ghosts and haunting become increasingly important within this simultaneous retreat and return, as DeLillo's novels continue to be haunted by events from American history and figures and ideas from his own work. This chapter explores these ideas through its analysis of the novels *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega* and *Zero K*.

Finally, I contend that DeLillo imagines a near-future in which notions of objectivity appear to have retreated altogether, and in which individual characters retreat into a haunted state of contingency and uncertainty, which nevertheless implies the lasting possibility of return.

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Forms of Retreat and Return in the Novels of Don DeLillo

'True greatness always involves a period of complete withdrawal'

Ratner's Star

Introduction

The ebb and flow of retreat and return

In Don DeLillo's 2005 play *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005), an old man sits onstage in a diminished position. He is identified in the dramatis personae as one iteration of the character Alex, who is also portrayed in flashback scenes by a younger actor. DeLillo identifies this diminished Alex as 'Alex *in extremis*, a helpless figure attached to a feeding tube'.[1] In the sparse stage directions, DeLillo instructs that the man should remain seated on the stage throughout the duration of the performance, with the 'intravenous feeding setup'[2] to which he is attached looming over the play's action. *Love-Lies-Bleeding* is a useful companion piece to DeLillo's 2001 novella *The Body Artist* and his 2016 novel *Zero K*, both of which will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. All three texts deal with ideas of physical diminishment, death and the ethics of dying, grief and fragmented notions of time. However, the play and its haunting central figure also reflect many of the concerns that have characterised DeLillo's novels over a more prolonged period. *Love-Lies-Bleeding*'s setting, 'an old house, remotely located'[3] repeats DeLillo's interest in remote spaces and deserts. The various forms of retreat and return visible in *Love-Lies-Bleeding* recur throughout DeLillo's writing, and will form the basis for the argument of this thesis. These forms of retreat and return include dissent, asceticism and the withdrawal of the individual from society; paternal withdrawal specifically, and the resulting filial estrangement and diminishment; the father as a diminished elder statesman figure; personal and national failure and exhaustion; states of ontological and ethical uncertainty; and a preoccupation with ghosts and other metaphysical or numinous existence and return, which are equally informed by Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism. And, as the epigraph of this thesis suggests, ideas of retreat in DeLillo's work often interact with those of 'greatness', both as a characteristic of the novels' characters and of the author himself.

For the purposes of this argument, the term 'withdrawal' will be used to denote one form of retreat, that of personal, physical retreat, often to a deserted location, an end zone or omega point. 'Diminishment' refers specifically to reduction in personal status, often of the elder statesman figure, who is usually presented as a figure of retreat, a formerly 'great' man in decline. Another, separate figure of retreat and return is the ghost, which will feature prominently in the second and third chapters, and which signifies both the return of the dead and a retreat from ontological certainty. This thesis will also make the case that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 is a prominent generational ghost, an event from the 1960s that continues to

[1] DeLillo, D. *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 2
[2] Ibid. 3
[3] Ibid. 3

return (reproduced through television and other mass media) to haunt the American present.[4] The term 'dwindling' is used to refer to a sense of national retreat from moral authority and certainty of purpose, following words spoken by Jim Finlay, the narrator of *Point Omega* (2010).[5] Jim suggests that the controversial 'War on Terror' of the early 21st Century filled a national emotional need brought on by the state of contingency in which America has dwelt since the 1960s, which was exacerbated in the aftermath of 9/11.

The dominant critical view of ideas of retreat in DeLillo's work tends to read earlier texts through the frame of the later, more successful novels. Peter Boxall argues that a contemporary reader coming for the first time to DeLillo's early work must negotiate 'a confrontation between a canonical DeLillo and a precanonical DeLillo',[6] the latter iteration of DeLillo having acceded to a kind of 'greatness', incorporated into the critical context from which, as a less notable author, he was still excluded. Joseph Dewey makes the case for an ethical and spiritual evolution over the course of DeLillo's career, which can be viewed as having three discrete phases. It is 'an evolution from hip, urban existentialist…, to passionate interrogator of the writer-reader dynamic, to, ultimately, gnomic revelator of an essential spirituality'.[7] Within this model, Dewey argues, the depictions of retreat in DeLillo's first three novels are essentially satirical. The gestural retreats of DeLillo's first three protagonists (which tick all the boxes of traditional asceticism: physical withdrawal, silence and fasting) are 'misguided', 'ruinous', puerile and 'shallow' attempts by confused young male figures to escape from the messy contingencies of adult existence.[8] Dewey goes on to posit that DeLillo establishes more mature narratives of return and redemption in his later, more critically acclaimed work. While this latter point is certainly true, Dewey's slightly uncharitable reading of his early protagonists' attempts to retreat misses the potential all three characters find for the spiritual transcendence traditionally found in acts of retreat and remote spaces. Further to this, both Boxall's dual notion of precanonical and canonical DeLillo, and the three-phase narrative that Dewey imposes on DeLillo's career, risk over-simplifying a more complex picture.

It has certainly become common to read the history of DeLillo's writing as a three-stage evolution similar to the one Dewey suggests. The first stage sees early DeLillo as an interesting but

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[4] The history of JFK's death as a generational ghost is signified by the complex of images, ideas and documents that surround the traumatic event itself; the assassination in Dealey Plaza. Of course, this incorporates the seemingly infinite reproduction of images of the president and his assassin, the concept of putative conspiracy in popular consciousness, the Zapruder film, the Warren Report and the almost mythological significance the event has acquired within the history of 20th Century America.

[5] DeLillo, D. *Point Omega* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 35

[6] Boxall, P. *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 21

[7] Dewey, J. *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 13

[8] Ibid. 32-42

essentially juvenile talent in the process of finding a voice. The second stage regards DeLillo as the great novelist who has found a very distinctive voice and style, and who publishes a series of expansive and celebrated novels that do justice to his talent and elevate him to what Boxall terms canonical status. The third stage depicts DeLillo as the great canonical writer in retreat, having achieved or exhausted his potential in the middle period of his career. However, to read the earlier and later texts only through reference to the middle period ignores the more complex ebb and flow of retreat and return that have been a constant throughout his work. At times, indeed, the author's fixation with movements of retreat and return manifests in a reversal of retreat, as will be discussed in the second chapter, with specific reference to the novel *Libra* (1988). Another constant, not recognised fully by Dewey's three-part evolution, is the spiritual aspect of DeLillo's thematic treatments of retreat and return, which is present throughout his career, not just in the final third. Finally, the dominant view of DeLillo's work negates the return by DeLillo himself to the preoccupations of his early novels, even while in a putative retreat from the 'greatness' of his expansive middle-period works. This thesis revises this model by paying closer attention to themes of retreat and return across the whole of DeLillo's career, and by focusing on each stage in turn, exploring the value of the earlier and later novels in their own right, rather than just as addenda to discussions of the 'great' novels of the middle period. Therefore, Chapter One is concerned with DeLillo's first three novels *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972), and *Great Jones Street* (1973), and the themes of retreat and return established therein. Chapter Two continues a discussion of these themes and their development (and sometimes their reversal) in two of the celebrated books of the middle period, *Libra* and *Underworld* (1997). Chapter Three traces DeLillo's own retreat from the publication of weightier books in the new millennium, and his return to the ideas established in Chapter One, which are explored through reference to *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega*, and *Zero K*.

DeLillo's depiction of withdrawal, the form of retreat mentioned in the epigraph of this thesis, is predominantly physical in nature, and is often signified by a movement into some form of peripheral or desert space. These locations are often presented as end zones or omega points, spaces that are invested with a spirituality drawn from multiple unspecified sources, 'places to which, by ancient tradition, one repairs to purify and simplify'[9] before some oncoming apocalyptic event. However, the final reckoning that one might imagine would occur in these spaces never quite materialises. Mark Osteen identifies the major tropes of DeLillo's fiction as 'figures of broken exchange and failed reciprocity… the incomplete return, the unanswered question'.[10] Indeed,

[9] Cowart, D. 'The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo's Point Omega' *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2012): 31–50, 44

[10] Osteen, M. *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 2

throughout DeLillo's work, there are repeated structural manifestations of apocalyptic moments that never come, of incomplete returns and residual mysteries, often in the form of the abrupt ending that leaves many questions unanswered, as well as thematic manifestations, such as the career self-sabotage of *End Zone's* sporting hero protagonist Gary Harkness, or the failed film-makers David Bell and Jeff Lockhart in *Americana* and *Zero K* respectively. Combined, these things initiate an ebb and flow of retreat from and return to the world. This notion of ebb and flow is most prominent in the texts selected for this thesis, although certainly visible in many of DeLillo's novels. In texts such as *Great Jones Street*, *The Body Artist*, and *Underworld*, characters end up in deserted locations from which they anticipate some form of elective return at some point in an unspecified future, beyond the novel's pages. In other instances, most prominently *End Zone*, *Point Omega*, and *Zero K*, the failure of a final reckoning is accompanied by a failure in the protagonist's withdrawal, so that he (it is almost always a 'he') is returned to the world in a passive state, diminished further by his failure to live or die on his own terms.

DeLillo's depiction of desert spaces as end zones and omega points has led a number of critics to identify a sense of finality in DeLillo's writing. Peter Boxall, in particular, sees DeLillo's work as being haunted by a kind of 'endedness' peculiar to the fin-de-siècle moment in which DeLillo's major, middle-period works were published. This endedness is exemplified in the many instances of failed leftfield filmmaking in DeLillo's work of the late 20th Century, which Boxall imagines as part of 'an extended performance of a kind of critical exhaustion'. The failed and incomplete films in DeLillo's books reflect, for Boxall, the end of avant-garde possibility within a mass market in which all counter-culture is immediately co-opted and assimilated by market forces. DeLillo's writing itself becomes an example of 'the end of a writing which is able to shape the way we think and see'. Regarding the contemporary period as one of 'historical endedness', Boxall argues that DeLillo's novels articulate nevertheless the continuing possibility of fiction, a possibility intimately bound up with ideas of an 'unrevealed, immanent death'.[11] This nebulous vision of a death that never comes is certainly present in *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, which ends with 'the sitting figure in isolation', still hooked up to the feeding apparatus, even after the long discussions that have formed the bulk of the play's dialogue – and which concern the ethics of euthanising this same figure – have run dry. The exhaustion of the ethical and artistic debate, and the ironic fact of continuing life where death was expected, become further aspects of the repeated trope in which characters are returned to the world, either by choice or against their will.

Ideas of failure, exhaustion and diminishment are often attached to one of the recurring figures in DeLillo's work, that of the elder statesman. DeLillo's first three novels prominently

[11] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, 8-10

feature an interrogation of the generational divide between men of the so-called Greatest Generation and DeLillo's own. *Americana* and *End Zone* dramatize this rift through depictions of young, generic American males striving for a sense of masculine identity free from the terms under which it was defined by their father's generation. In both novels, DeLillo establishes the figure of the father as someone associated with the traditional American elder statesman. The most obvious iteration of this is the identification, common in American society, of the president as a kind of national father figure. However, as the first and third chapters of the thesis will explore, this figure evolves throughout the course of DeLillo's work from something presidential to something more akin to a tribal elder, perhaps itself a reflection of how the social conservativism of post-war America gave way to more liberalist attitudes during the 1960s and 1970s. This opposition also acknowledges the competing spiritual influences of Western Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism. The American establishment father figure moves closer to the gnomic, sacerdotal elder of Eastern religion, shedding the skin of WASPish American dominance in the process. Alongside this, the depictions in the later novels become more nuanced as DeLillo himself begins to fit the bill of an elder statesman of sorts. Where *Americana* and *End Zone* view these figures as unassailably powerful, aloof and essentially unknowable, when they return in *Point Omega* and *Zero K*, still viewed through the eyes of a younger man, there is a greater sense of intimacy between the young narrator and elder statesman figure, and a stronger focus on the diminishing effects of age and bodily decay.

A further complication of the three-part evolution of DeLillo's career that Dewey identifies has been DeLillo's own apparent retreat from the label of 'great American novelist' in his more recent work. Since 2001, he has appeared to retreat from the role of novelist as passionate interrogator of the dynamic between reader and writer. During this later period, he has returned to and recycled themes, images and figures that have remained constant in his work since the beginning. Within this overview, *Americana* can be seen as a kind of statement of intent, an early attempt at the kind of expansiveness of narrative voice that DeLillo achieved in later books. In a 1993 interview with Adam Begley, DeLillo said 'It's no accident that my first novel was called "Americana". This was a private declaration of independence, a statement of my intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture'.[12] Over the course of his career, DeLillo appears to move towards this aim before retreating from it. Such novels as *White Noise* (1985), *Mao II* (1991), *Libra* and *Underworld* seem committed to this aim in their expansiveness and broad-ranging discussion of American life.[13] However, after the publication of *Underworld* in 1997, DeLillo's tendency has

[12] Begley, A. 'Don DeLillo: The Art of Fiction No. 135' *The Paris Review*, accessed 16th February, 2021, https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1887/the-art-of-fiction-no-135-don-delillo

[13] It should be noted that, despite expressing this early intention, DeLillo's writing, while undoubtedly expansive, has never really come close to capturing 'the whole picture' of American life. For instance, the over-whelming majority

been towards slighter, more philosophical works, a reduction of form that we can read as a retreat on DeLillo's part from the 'great living author' tag. DeLillo's novels of the 21st Century have also tended to be more precisely focused on an individual protagonist in smaller-scale settings. This marks a return to the more restrained narrative forms of early novels such as *Great Jones Street* and *End Zone*. The novellas *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega* and *The Silence* (2020) echo in their formal constraints the author's works for the stage, more than they do his longer novels. Their narratives take place entirely in one or two settings, usually in remote locations, with a few characters thrown together by circumstance. These works also display a strong influence of visual media – installation art, films, television – in a further blurring of the boundaries between the novel and other art forms, part of what we might consider a retreat from the novel as a form in the late career of a major novelist. Indeed, *The Silence*, DeLillo's most recent publication, just barely qualifies as a novella, featuring as it does play-like dialogue and the narrow focus of a short story. Thus, his later novels move away from broad-ranging studies of the 'whole picture' of America to more specific philosophical concerns, such as time, grief, generational divides, and humanity's interaction with technology.

Many of the later works are in some sense 'haunted' by ideas from the early-period novels. The structure of *Great Jones Street* provides the model for *Cosmopolis* (2003): in both texts, a single, isolated and privileged male protagonist sits in a withdrawn position and is visited by a procession of secondary characters, who revolve around him like the officials, advisers and jesters in the court of a king.[14] We recall *Americana's* David Bell in failed filmmaker characters in *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, and the avant-garde artistic spirit informs characters in *Underworld*, *Falling Man* (2007) and *Zero K*. *Point Omega* also draws inspiration from the real-life installation art piece *24 Hour Psycho*, which features in the novel's ekphrastic prologue and epilogue. The asceticism of *End Zone's* Gary Harkness recurs in the behaviour of Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist* and multiple characters in *Point Omega* and *Zero K*, who fast, eschew speech, move to the desert, or make other ritualistic gestures towards asceticism, often becoming ghostly themselves or disappearing completely. DeLillo's first novels of the early 2000s, *The Body Artist* and *Cosmopolis*, act as interim texts, points of variation from those weightier works of the middle period, setting the tone for such books as *Point Omega* and *Zero K*. These later novels are also defined by a retreat from unambiguous narrative, in which a sense of contingency comes to define DeLillo's writing to such an extent that it appears to be its ultimate purpose. Story strands are left dangling and narrative reality itself collapses into

of his characters remain persistently white, male and middle class, precluding whole sections of American society and experience.

[14] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 53

a haunted state of uncertainty. As we will see, this is most aptly reflected in *The Body Artist*, which also displays a movement away from the male protagonists of almost all of DeLillo's prior novels.

A theme that will recur throughout this thesis is the numinous potential found in ambiguous language. Ideas of language have been central to the most common aspect of DeLillo scholarship to date: his place within the context of contemporary fiction and his interaction with, and retreat from, the tenets of postmodernism and post-structuralism. While Peter Boxall makes the case for DeLillo as a chronicler of postmodern belatedness, historical endedness and artistic exhaustion, David Cowart's view is that DeLillo's attitude towards postmodernist conventions is ultimately one of resistance. Cowart identifies language as the specific site of this resistance, and explores the possibility for language to create spiritual potential in DeLillo's novels. DeLillo

> does not defer to post-structuralist ideas of language as a system of signifiers that refer only to other signifiers in infinite regression. DeLillo's texts in fact undermine this postmodernist gospel. Fully aware that language is maddeningly circular, maddeningly subversive of its own supposed referentiality, the author nonetheless affirms something numinous in its mysterious properties.[15]

This numinous potential of language is sometimes seen in DeLillo's stylistic tendency to repeat phrases, lending them a certain aphoristic weight or 'poetic excess'.[16] One example of this is the repeated use of the phrase 'heat and light' in *Libra*. The words signify variously the literal muzzle flash of the rifle (or rifles) that killed Kennedy, the metaphorical scrutiny and exposure of the mass-media age and the presentation of images on electrically powered screens, and (metaphorically again) Lee Harvey Oswald's desire to step into the warmth and recognition of history, achieving something akin to a kind of spiritual grace. On other occasions, phrases spoken mysteriously, apropos of nothing, seem to take on spiritual significance, as in the esoteric use of the phrase 'gesso on linen' as Ross Lockhart's dying words in *Zero K*. The name for a method of painting appears to point towards a spiritual truth that the dying man glimpses, but which remains a mystery to the living.

The spiritual, in DeLillo's writing, is influenced both by the Catholicism of the author's upbringing, and by ideas from Tibetan Buddhism that gained prominence in 1960s New York. DeLillo, the son of Italian Catholic immigrants, grew up in the Bronx in the 1940s and 1950s, and came of age in the time of the Catholic president JFK. Amy Hungerford identifies the Latin mass as an important formative influence, claiming that DeLillo's artistic vision is one in which a version

[15] Cowart, D. *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 5
[16] Boxall, T*he Possibility of Fiction*, 16

of Catholic mysticism is transferred from a religious sphere into a literary one. In Hungerford's estimation, this is one reason for DeLillo's continuing interest in language, which becomes the site of the mystical in a worldview heavily influenced by the sounds of Latin mass intonation.[17] There are many well-documented instances of characters achieving epiphanic insights in DeLillo novels, and several critics, Hungerford included, have commented on images of Pentecostal glossolalia that recur throughout his work. These are just two of the more obvious examples of the influence of DeLillo's Catholic upbringing in his writing. However, the often-undefined spirituality that infuses many of DeLillo's narratives comes not just from the lapsed Catholicism of the author's childhood. Robert Kohn connects DeLillo's depiction of asceticism in his early work to the vogue for Westernised versions of Eastern mysticism and spirituality that was so important to the Beat movement in the 1950s and the counter-culture of the 1960s. In particular, Kohn makes the case for the specific influence on DeLillo of the works of W.Y. Evans-Wentz, whose writings on Tibetan Buddhism were reissued by the Oxford Press in the 1960s. These works gained a lasting popularity among college students, bookish drop-outs and other counter-cultural hangers on well into the mid-1970s, when Evans-Wentz published an English language translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.[18] DeLillo's images of asceticism, just one aspect of his interaction with a broad, 'anti-rational but… comforting'[19] spirituality, seem to be equally influenced by images of Christ in the desert in Matthew, and by figures from Tibetan Buddhism, who eschew worldly life in favour of meditation and devotion.

There is little doubt that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, mentioned here several times already and referred to throughout DeLillo's novels (most obviously *Libra*, which takes the event as its main subject), is as influential in DeLillo's writing as are the spiritual sources of Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism. For DeLillo, the assassination appears to have established a new interaction with notions of truth and historical subjectivity. Several critics have identified in DeLillo's work a fixation on ambiguity and contingency on a national scale as a direct consequence of the assassination. Frank Lentricchia asserts in his critique of *Libra* that the assassination rendered all Americans 'negative Librans'[20], like the fictionalised Lee Harvey Oswald in the novel, impressionable and bedevilled by the retreat of objective truth that has characterised the decades since the assassination. The arising sense of uncertainty that surrounds the event becomes one of many generational ghosts of the 1960s that have haunted all of DeLillo's writing. DeLillo's

[17] Hungerford, A. 'Don DeLillo's Latin Mass' *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2006): 348-380, 345
[18] Kohn, R. 'Tibetan Buddhism in Don DeLillo's Novels: The Street, The Word and The Soul' *College Literature*, 38, no.4 (2011): 156-80, 159
[19] Ibid, 160
[20] Lentricchia, F. (ed) '*Libra* as Postmodern Critique' *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1991), 210

treatment of the killing in the novel *Libra* also establishes a movement towards a fiction more actively concerned with history and historical figures than his earlier work. As such, its treatment of retreat complicates and reverses some of the more straightforward movements of withdrawal seen in preceding novels. Just as the novel itself marks a movement towards more active engagement with history, *Libra's* protagonist, Lee Harvey Oswald moves, over the course of the novel, from a withdrawn, fringe position, to his now legendary status within the centre of historical significance. Published in 1988, Libra set the tone for an engagement with history that would go on to shape the 1997 novel *Underworld*. Read now in conjunction with this later novel, *Libra* can be seen as a movement towards both the stylistic grandeur of *Underworld* and a measure of the extent to which DeLillo's work has come to interact with the history of the 20th Century. Alongside *Libra's* immediate predecessor, *White Noise* – the novel that won the 1985 American Book Award and piqued the interest of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, initiating the now very developed body of academic work devoted to DeLillo's writing – *Libra* is often cited as one of the canonical texts of what might now be considered the 'high postmodernism' of the 1970s and 1980s.[21] This thesis's interest in DeLillo's engagement with history makes *Libra* and *Underworld*, the two novels that will form the focus of the second chapter, more appropriate choices for detailed discussion than the already-much-discussed *White Noise*. However, these three novels (alongside *Mao II* and *The Names*) have secured DeLillo's lasting reputation as one of the 'great' living authors, and certainly form the second phase of Dewey's three-stage evolution.

DeLillo's own comments on the Kennedy killing appear also to suggest both a leaning towards the insights of New Historicism and a sense that a textualist view of history is in some way redemptive or therapeutic. In a 1989 interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo discusses the importance of the assassination in destabilising more traditional ideas about historical empiricism, as well as its importance within his own artistic development. When asked about the need, given the inconsistencies and absences in the official historical record, to invent certain aspects of the JFK story, DeLillo replied:

> Maybe it invented me. Certainly, when it happened, I was not a fully formed writer; I had only published some short stories in small quarterlies. As I was working on *Libra,* it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination… I think we've all come to feel that what's

[21] Many of the contributors to Brian McHale and Len Platt's authoritative *Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2016) place *Libra* alongside such other novels as *Midnight's Children*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Sexing the Cherry*, *Slaughterhouse 5*, *Flaubert's Parrot*, *The Counterlife*, *Beloved*, and *If on a winter's night a traveller*, within their lists of exemplary postmodern novels.

> been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of a manageable reality. Much of that feeling can be traced to that one moment in Dallas. We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then.[22]

In acknowledging the randomness, ambiguity and chaos that are now accepted aspects of the postmodern interpretation of current events and history, DeLillo's words here might reflect a kind of national moral dwindling – what David Cowart has termed an 'unmooring of national purpose'[23] – in the development of American domestic and foreign policy following the 1960s, which persisted into the 21st century with some of the less edifying practices of the War on Terror. If all Americans are 'negative Librans', then the America of DeLillo's novels becomes a place of diminished moral authority. This dwindling is best exemplified in the aging elder statesman figures who appear in *Point Omega* and *Zero K*, and who are discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. The elder statesmen of these two novels are great men brought low, morally adrift and rendered strange by age to the people who know them, men whose quixotic attempts to escape time and death become pitiful in their failure. Like the man attached to the feeding tubes in *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, the characters that fit this model in *Point Omega* and *Zero K* are ultimately defined not by unassailable power but by passivity. They are passively sustained and returned against their will to the world, reversing the retreat they attempted.

The first chapter of this thesis applies Peter Boxall's assessment of David Bell in *Americana* – as a generic young man, a kind of cipher – to DeLillo's first three protagonists: David Bell himself, *End Zone's* Gary Harkness, and Bucky Wunderlick from *Great Jones Street*. All three begin from a position of existential diminishment, caused in part by a generational tension in American masculinity, in which the son feels dwarfed by the father. The chapter also details the early iterations of DeLillo's ongoing depiction of an unspecified spirituality, informed by Catholicism, Tibetan Buddhism, and other vaguely outlined systems of belief. This trio of novels best exemplifies how, often in DeLillo's writing, a kind of transcendence is found through failure and artistic exhaustion, retreat to a deserted location, ascetic posturing, and physical commitment. In the case of *Americana* and *End Zone*, this physical commitment takes the form of sporting exertion, whereas in *Great Jones Street*, a similar form of transcendence is found through a retreat into silence, establishing the importance of language in DeLillo's work, as a subject as well as a medium. In *End Zone* an aspect of self-sabotage is also added as part of the elective retreat of the main character, which culminates

[22] DeCurtis, A. 'An Outsider in this Society: An Interview with Don DeLillo', *Introducing Don DeLillo*, Lentricchia, F. (ed.) (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1991), 47-8
[23] Cowart, 'The Lady Vanishes', 2012, 46

in deleterious fasting. The discussion of *Great Jones Street* establishes the necessity of retreat when other avenues of dissent have been exhausted. The chapter establishes the trope of the failed filmmaker and DeLillo's interest in distorted or epiphanic perceptions of time, both of which will return later on in his work.

The second chapter identifies the generational ghost – a remnant of the 1960s that continues to haunt the American present – as an ongoing concern within DeLillo's work. *Libra* and *Underworld*, the two novels this chapter focuses on in detail, are the middle-period works that most prominently exemplify DeLillo's engagement with history. They are also the two texts that complicate, and at times reverse, the movements of retreat depicted in DeLillo's earlier novels, while also establishing the ideas of hauntedness that will be explored further in the final chapter. By focusing on two more protagonists – *Libra's* Lee Harvey Oswald and *Underworld's* Nick Shay – the second chapter continues to explore the ideas of retreat established in Chapter One, while also focusing on forms of return and reversals of retreat that become more prevalent as DeLillo's writing career develops. Lee in *Libra* moves from a withdrawn anonymity at the fringes of society towards historical notoriety in a reversal of Bucky's retreat from fame in *Great Jones Street*. More complex ideas of retreat emerge; despite Lee's reversal of Bucky's more simplistic retreat, he retains a withdrawn anonymity, even within his historic notoriety. The chapter's discussion of *Underworld's* Nick Shay charts the development of forms of retreat informed by spiritual fallenness and forsakenness. Among the ideas of return that are explored here, the figure of the ghost emerges as a prominent symbol.

Chapter Three details DeLillo's own retreat from the 'greatness' that such novels as *Libra* and *Underworld* helped to establish as part of the received appreciation of the author's work, and the chapter explores the diminishment of form that has been a feature of DeLillo's writing since the expansive 1997 novel *Underworld*. This is most prominently exemplified in the post-2000 novels *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega* and *Zero K*. All three of these texts also feature ideas related to distorted notions of time and space, resulting in states of diminished ontological certainty, and therefore best exemplify the ongoing importance of those ideas of contingency and uncertainty that DeLillo himself referred to in his interview with Begley. Ideas of ghosts, generational and otherwise, continue to be an important aspect of the themes of return that DeLillo explores, and the chapter details DeLillo's return to, and recycling of, figures and preoccupations from his early career. Within these themes of return, however, there remains an echo of the assertion from *Ratner's Star*, that true greatness can be achieved only through withdrawal. Alongside the reduction of form, there emerges a thematic retreat from notions of textual verisimilitude within the later novels. Having tasted a kind of 'greatness' in the plaudits for his work in the 1980s and 1990s, DeLillo

makes a movement towards ambiguity and questionable notions of authorial 'truth' as a means of achieving a truer transcendence of his own.

Chapter One

Self-absorption, self-effacement, failure: retreat as transcendence in *Americana, End Zone* and *Great Jones Street*

This chapter explores the early interest in ideas of retreat that DeLillo establishes in his first three novels. In each work, a generic young man seeks a vaguely defined spiritual or artistic authenticity through a variety of forms of retreat, including physical withdrawal, self-sabotage, fasting, the eschewing of speech and other gestural ascetic behaviours. Though largely unsuccessful, these forms of retreat allow the protagonists to glimpse at least a part of the transcendence they sought before returning, either under duress or electively, to the world. *Americana*, *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street* also establish the importance of return as part of the ebb and flow mentioned in the introduction, even if that return is only one that the protagonist anticipates at some point beyond the end of the novel's narrative.

Americana's protagonist David Bell establishes an archetype that will recur frequently in DeLillo's later work: the figure of the generic young man, flailing for definition within the context of a similarly nebulous American identity. David Bell is really two men; twenty-eight-year-old TV executive of much of the novel's action, and a much older iteration, who comments on the narrative from the distance of decades and thousands of miles, isolated on an island somewhere off the coast of an unnamed African country. Joseph Dewey is among several critics who have commented on David Bell's non-specific nature, opining that the WASPish, corporate David Bell 'functions less as a character… and more of a premise… Tanned, athletic, blue-eyed, handsome, wealthy… [Bell] is not somebody – he looks like somebody, a convincing simulation of an authentic person'.[24] David Cowart makes the similar observation that, throughout the novel, Bell 'remains for the reader a slippery, insubstantial personality', someone who drifts through the pages of his own story, looking for something to redefine his sense of self.[25] At one point, Bell believes that he might have found in avant-garde filmmaking a means to reassert his diminished sense of identity. However, he never finishes the film project that begins in the second part of the novel, and his crisis of identity remains unresolved. The closing page of the novel sees him boarding an aeroplane home to New York, after a trip around the country, the film that was ostensibly the purpose of this trip a forgotten failure. The final sentence implies that his shifting identity has not crystallised along the way, as a fellow passenger asks for his autograph, presumably because she

[24] Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 17
[25] Cowart, D. 'For Whom the Bell Tolls: Don DeLillo's *Americana*' (Contemporary Literature, vol. 37, no. 4, 1996, pp. 602–619), 602

has mistaken him for a celebrity.[26] Indeed, Bell is not somebody, he just looks like somebody. And Bell's status as a cipher becomes central to his Americanness. Like his forebears and successors, Bell's ungraspable nature is perhaps one of the things that defines him as an American. He is a kind of Model T human being, one among millions, a peculiarly American creation forged on the production line of white male privilege and upper middle-class aspiration.

Bell's existential vagueness is partly the result of his father's withdrawal from his life, and the consequent estrangement between the two men. In a scene in which David meets his father Clinton in a New York restaurant, the protagonist is confused by his father, and rails against the paternal oppression that Clinton represents. The scene captures a generational disconnection that DeLillo repeats in later novels; the communicational gulf between family members joins the figure of the generic young man as a pet theme that repeats and resurfaces throughout DeLillo's later works. This disconnect becomes so prevalent in DeLillo's novels that it might even be considered one aspect of the American identity that the author has sought to define in his work. Born of the massive generational rupture created by the 1960s, it becomes one of the generational ghosts mentioned in the introduction to this thesis.

Clinton Bell is, in David's eyes, a once magnificent figure who, now that the son has reached adulthood, appears diminished, if still possessing an intimidating power. Later in the novel, an analepsis provides a childhood memory in which David rushes to meet his father coming in from work on a winter's day: 'Soon my father came home and I ran to greet him. He stood in the hallway, big and pink, shaking off snow, clapping his gloves together, breathing smoke'.[27] While to David the boy, his father was something large and powerful (almost mythical even in the implication of dragon-like fire breathing), to the adult David, who views him unseen across a busy New York restaurant, he is a 'stocky figure' with 'thinning hair', someone who has 'transformed… virtually overnight, into… an elder statesman'. David compares his father to two actual elder statesmen: former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and the 1950s manager of the New York Yankees baseball team, Casey Stengel. Dulles, a prominent figure within the Eisenhower government, helped to establish the anti-communist stance that defined much American foreign policy during the Cold War. As such, he could be said to represent an aspect of American masculinity that dominated political discourse in the USA during the 1950s, one rooted in Protestant conservatism and hawkishness, defining itself against the supposed effeteness of European socialism. Casey Stengel appears to reflect a similar masculine ideal, also from the 1950s; following a successful career as a player, Stengel managed the New York Yankees

[26] DeLillo, D. *Americana* (London: Penguin, 2011), 377
[27] DeLillo, *Americana*, 132

team throughout the decade. These comparisons go some way to illustrating the extent to which David still feels intimidated by his father, who remains a towering figure, just as Dulles and Stengel tower over their respective fields of politics and baseball. David tells us that Clinton's body 'seemed to dominate' the part of the restaurant in which he is sitting, and there remains in his eyes 'a blunt authority… which could not be ignored'. David does not totally recognise his connection to his father, telling us at the end of the paragraph: 'We did not look alike'.[28]

However, while the son may not recognise his own father, we recognise their kinship instantly. There are a number of important similarities between them beyond their pedigree as members of an aspirational and moneyed American upper middle class. Their shared name evokes the Liberty Bell of American lore, as well as the trade name of one of the USA's largest communications companies, doubly appropriate and ironic given their parallel careers in corporate Manhattan and their inability to communicate effectively with one another. Throughout the scene, David puzzles over Clinton's body language, and the esoteric gestures he makes while the two men sit, side by side at the restaurant's bar:

> When he spoke he would pivot on the barstool and lean toward me with both elbows flung out and up like delta wings. At other times, head hanging loosely over his drink, he would raise his right index finger and then use it to tap his left elbow, which lay bent on the bar. He did this only when making an important point and I wondered whether the significance of his remark might be fully uncovered only by opening up the elbow and picking with a surgical instrument among its connective tissue.[29]

David's whimsical thought that to understand his father properly he might need to dissect his body hints at a generational animosity. The act of dissection implies Clinton's death, and David imagines himself conducting a dispassionate, exploratory autopsy on the older man as a means of understanding and containing his father. This desire, which David fully verbalises only at the end of the scene, seems to occur to David unemotionally, almost casually, as the conversation between father and son develops. David's sense of disconnection from his father, accompanied by the feelings of oppression that are tied up in Clinton's 'blunt authority', culminate in the realisation that closes the scene for the reader. In a typically detached narrative tone, David tells us: 'I wished he were dead. It was the first honest thought which had entered my mind all day. My freedom depended on his death'.[30]

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[28] Ibid. 82
[29] Ibid. 82
[30] Ibid. 85

In the second part of the novel, which relates events earlier to the scene in the restaurant with his father, David begins the spiritual journey to which the rest of the novel will be devoted. The impetus to set off around America, making an avant-garde documentary film, comes from a moment of spiritual doubt and awakening that David experiences at 18. Yearning for escape from the confinements of his parents as he moves into adulthood, the David of this section begins his spiritual quest by considering the possibilities of accession to wisdom through withdrawal and diminishment. In thrall to parental expectations of his bright future, David entertains whimsical daydreams of opting out, withdrawing into a kind of asceticism that he initially calls a 'European species of nothingness', but which he later decides might actually be 'Asian or North African'. The vagueness of this reinforces its superficiality and pretentiousness. David is play-acting a generic asceticism, rather than devoting himself to any specific mode of thought or behaviour. However, as the novel progresses, the desire to escape parental scrutiny and control becomes a yearning for a larger, more convincing, transcendence. Initially, David conceives it in humorous terms, picturing himself doing nothing but sitting in his mother's chair for the decades that lie ahead of him, which he must now attempt to shape. The figure of the elder statesman returns as an ideal to which David must aspire, but from which he feels alienated. Instead of attempting to move towards the grandeur of the elder statesman embodied by his father, David wonders whether sitting still might bring that figure to him.

> It seemed a valuable thing to do. Sit still for years on end and eventually things will begin to revolve around you, ideas and people and wars, depending for their folly and brilliance on the source of light which is human inertia. If you stay in one spot long enough, generals and statesmen will come to you and ask for your opinion… sitting in exile through wolf-lean winters as governments fell and men made fools of themselves. Then finally a knock at the door. Word has reached us that you have been sitting here doing nothing. You must be a very wise man. Come to the capital and help us sort things out.[31]

For now, this remains the whimsy of a young man who feels that opting out might be easier than attempting to live up to the expectations of a wealthy, white American upbringing. However, David's desire to sit in his mother's chair and avoid the pressures of American masculinity becomes a possible path to transcendence from more than just this earthly concern.

The summer in which David turns 18 is a 'dry season' in which David longs for release from a kind of spiritual desiccation. This is ironically apt, in a novel in which an old man narrates

[31] Ibid. 182

his younger self moving, in retrospect, towards the revelation that attends the accession to masculinity. In scenes replete with echoes of T.S. Eliot, David sits on the porch of his parents' house in a state of lusty torpor, waiting for rain: 'There was nothing to do. All afternoon I sat on the porch, motionless, thinking of the wet bodies of women. It was getting hotter. The stillness was almost absolute. There was a taste of water in the air, warm salt biting the lips. I felt heavy. I wished it would rain'.[32] From this point David is presented with two routes out of this torpor, which occur consecutively in the narrative. The first falsely offers escape through transgressive sexual contact, while the second sees David attaining the spiritual ascension he has sought through a different means. The significance of David's mother's chair as the site of possible awakening becomes clearer later, when David thinks he might attain spiritual enlightenment through a moment of incestuous sexual desire. In one of the analeptic passages that establish the extent to which Bell remains haunted by his own memories, DeLillo depicts a scene during a party that marks David's accession to manhood. At the end of the party, during which his mother has behaved erratically, the young David and his mother find themselves alone in a confined space, the small pantry of the family's kitchen:

> 'It was only a matter of time,' she said… 'There is nothing but time. Time is the only thing that happens of itself. We should learn to let it take us along'…
>
> I did not move. I felt close to some overwhelming moment… I knew what was happening and I did not care to argue with the doctors of that knowledge. Let it be. Inside her was something splintered and bright, something that might have been left by the spiral passage of my own body. She was before me now, looking up, her hands on my shoulders. The sense of tightness I had felt in my room was beginning to yield to a promise of fantastic release. It was going to happen. Whatever would happen. The cage would open, the mad bird soar, and I would cry in epic joy and pain at the freeing of a single moment, the beginning of time. Then I heard my father's bare feet on the stairs. That was all.[33]

The sexual tension that DeLillo captures in this passage remains unconsummated due to the interruption of the father. The 'fantastic release' that David seems to yearn for is never granted. Of course, the interruption itself is significant; the enacting of Oedipal desire is cut short by the father's presence. This moment, which David Cowart calls an 'epiphany' for the dark understanding it unleashes in DeLillo's narrator, comes to haunt the rest of the novel.[34] The

[32] Ibid. 185
[33] Ibid. 196-7
[34] Cowart, 'For Whom the Bell Tolls', 614

Freudian implications of this scene are clearly very prominent. However, if taken as the scene's final implication, they are something of a red herring, a distraction from an implication that is more pertinent to the study of this text within the context of DeLillo's later writing. The true revelation comes in what David's mother says about time and the extent to which David attains the spiritual release he has been searching for throughout the summer.

Cowart's notion of the scene as a moment of epiphany leads us towards a motif that is far more prominent in DeLillo's later novels than ideas of Oedipal transgression: that of the epiphanic revelation that appears to offer a kind of spiritual transcendence amid an otherwise arid spiritual landscape. David feels himself to be close to an understanding hitherto concealed from him, something 'splintered and bright' that resides inside his mother's body. He imagines his own passage down the birth canal, and the cry he imagines releasing echoes his own as a new-born baby. In this compression of the time of his own life (microcosmic of the compression of time that takes place in the novel more generally), he glimpses a moment of epiphanic potential. Immediately before this scene, David experiences a kind of dislocation in which 'Nothing connected', in which, coming out of a dreamless sleep, David feels himself carried away on the 'treacherous river … which is language without thought'. This dislocation leads to a kind of revelation when David tells us that, at the moment immediately before he encounters his mother in the family kitchen, 'It was [his] body that was awake but not [his] mind'.[35] Transcendence, for the lapsed Catholic DeLillo, requires the disconnection of body and mind. The result is a diminishment of the self, without recourse to language, which is treacherous in that it obfuscates rather than clarifies. However, DeLillo appears to find potential for transcendence in activities rooted firmly in the physical realm, namely the dissolution of selfhood and the vagaries of language found in sporting activity.

The 'epiphany' David thought himself close to in the pantry with his mother was a false one. The true moment of transcendence occurs, as it will in more grandiose style in the opening of *Underworld*, during a game of baseball. The simple sentence that closes the scene in the pantry, 'That was all', implies a failure to complete the action David and his mother have started when it is interrupted by David's father. When the same sentence is repeated in a scene that follows a few pages later, the repetition connects the scenes implicitly, with the latter offering an answer to the questions raised in the former. The transcendence of the self, which might have been possible through an incestuous transgression between David and his mother, but which was halted by paternal interruption, seems possible now in sporting activity conducted in a deserted landscape. David tells us that 'About a week after the party', he went with his friend Tommy Valerio 'to a

[35] DeLillo, *Americana*, 195-196

deserted ballfield on the edge of town'. The field represents a deserted fringe location, an omega point. Careworn and diminished, it shows 'only the bare outlines of a pitcher's mound' and an infield that is 'covered with weeds'. Given baseball's status as American's national sport, the diminishment of the field is also an early iteration in DeLillo's writing of the 'dwindling of national purpose' that Cowart identifies as a theme in the later novel *Point Omega*, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. It is on this field that David completes the process of understanding the nature of time that he began while sitting in his mother's chair, and continued in the moment in the pantry.

Pitching an old baseball for Tommy to hit, David begins to appreciate a transcendent notion of time and space beyond normal human cognition. David feels that 'something was coming to an end, not just summer but something like the idea of what I was, the time I occupied like space, the private time in which one moves and thinks and knows the questions'.[36] In the movement of ball and bat, David experiences an accompanying hollowing out of the self and dislocation from physical time, finally achieved through dissolution of the self into sporting activity. While Tommy, swinging the bat, tires and suggests a change, David, somewhere on the fringes of the field, persists in throwing the ball and catching the returns, losing himself in repetitive action that takes on a tone of spiritual awakening and ascendance:

> I stayed out there for a long time… I didn't want to stop. The ball would rise from the bat and I would hear the light crack of contact and it would go up into the cloudless sky, almost vanishing, black at its apogee… Ball in the air, I would break quickly, watching just the first second of its flight, and then run head-down to the spot where I knew it would land, the spot dictated by the memory of that first second and a knowledge of the wind and Tommy's power and the sound of ball on bat. Ball caught, I would fire it back as hard and straight as I could, as if a runner had been tagging from third… It went on like this. I was nobody. I was instinct and speed and a memory that extended back for no more than seconds. That was all. I could have gone on all day.[37]

That was all. Here, the sentence suggests that David has attained the state he could not attain in the pantry with his mother. The ambiguity of the sentence captures the inexpressible truth, whatever it might be, that David has glimpsed. At the close of the novel's second part, David appears to find the release he thought he might find in the pantry, through the throwing and catching of a ball. The summer ends and he oils his baseball glove, before putting it away 'for the

[36] Ibid. 198
[37] Ibid. 198-9

winter'.[38] There is a sense that, for now at least, the moment of physical transcendence he achieved on the baseball field is enough, and David appears to have escaped from the spiritual desert in a collapse of time and space into the simple actions of throwing, running and catching.

In the third part of the novel, David attempts to enact his new understanding by setting off across America and producing a film that captures the essence of the country and of himself. While fleeing from his parents he simultaneously attempts to recreate them in film. The camera becomes, for Peter Boxall, a means of forcing the lost moment in the pantry to a crisis, if only in the form of a mediated representation: 'David's strange, dark, and terrifying idea is that the capacity of the camera to annihilate time and distance… might allow him to revisit that moment of Oedipal desire and prohibition'. Just as the moment in the pantry was interrupted by his father Clinton's approach, the film remains an abortive, unfinishable project, remaining dormant, in much the same way as his transgressive lust for his mother.[39] The film stands for the wider failure of American ideals that lies at the heart of *Americana*. David's unfinished film, itself a failed project, points towards this wider sense of dwindling within David's life and American society more broadly. This notion of a national dwindling is an important aspect of DeLillo's works from this point onwards.

The structure of *Americana*, with its dual narrators, the young David and the old, reflects Boxall's view that the reader of early DeLillo must work through a 'confrontation between a canonical DeLillo and a precanonical DeLillo'. Just as the two iterations of David Bell view their shared story from different vantages in time in *Americana*, the two DeLillos compete for our attention as we consider the novelist's early work. The result is an awareness that many of the themes and tropes that DeLillo establishes in *Americana*, which he will return to and recycle with more success throughout his career, point towards a future diminishment at the end of the 20th Century. DeLillo's early work begins a movement towards what Boxall calls a 'millennial revelation, a moment projected… as the end of history'.[40] Thus, David's film reflects an attempt to find an end zone or omega point within the American landscape, 'some mystical religious centre, some modal point around which space, and objects in space, can be reorganised, cast like bronze, into a final, transcendent space… *Americana* turns around the potential for art objects to transform, to transmogrify, to find in the trampled chaos of things a new centre, a new auratic depth'.[41] Of course, this is in many ways the artistic spirit that informs 1997's *Underworld*, in which

[38] Ibid. 199
[39] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, 49-50
[40] Ibid. 21-2
[41] Ibid. 27-33

waste products take on almost religious significance for the characters in the narrative, and point towards numinous revelation somewhere in the ether above consumerist society.

David's own attitude towards his film seems to bear this out, although this auratic depth remains unquestionably beyond his grasp. While it is still a work in progress, David glibly imagines the film as the reflection of a collapsed temporal history, a document out of time that will attest to some final truth by being both ancient and modern: 'Perhaps it wasn't a movie I was creating so much as a scroll, a delicate bit of papyrus that feared discovery. Veterans of the film industry would swear the whole thing pre-dated Edison's kinetoscope. My answer to them is simple. It takes centuries to invent the primitive.'[42] David's now familiar shallowness of thought results, appropriately, in a shallow final truth, an aphorism that could have been lifted from an advertising hoarding, an unconscious indication perhaps that the film will never be finished and that the depth David seeks will never be plumbed. In a novel that many consider the juvenilia of a still nascent talent, this is an appropriate expression by the generic protagonist David Bell that further depth and success are to be found in later DeLillo novels. While adding to the list of authorial preoccupations with which DeLillo has become synonymous (language, spirituality, technology, media representations etc.), *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street* also expand the ideas of retreat that *Americana* initiates.

DeLillo's next two novels continue to dramatize retreats enacted by WASPish young men. Gary Harkness, the American football player prone to existential meanderings, and Bucky Wunderlick, the rock star who vanishes mid-tour, combine with David Bell to form a trio of fundamentally compromised young men, each representing a neutered version of an American masculine ideal. A failed filmmaker, a failed sportsman, and a failed rock star, the three characters establish between them a thread of artistic failure and unfulfilled potential. The three protagonists also reflect the failure, in the latter part of the 20th Century, of a certain aspect of American masculinity. David, Gary and Bucky reflect a cultural archetype of the diminished übermensch, a portrait of traditional American masculinity exhausted, which will recur throughout DeLillo's work.

Joseph Dewey argues that *End Zone* protagonist Gary Harkness effectively begins where David Bell left off, a young man faced with instability, 'determined to make sense of the grief in the world by withdrawing from it.' However, unlike David Bell, who Dewey argues wants to redefine himself through art, Gary instead wants to dispense with the self altogether.[43] Gary aims to achieve this eradication through parallel strategies of self-sabotage and withdrawal. We learn

[42] DeLillo, *Americana*, 238
[43] Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 26-7

early on in *End Zone* that Gary's fledgling career in the competitive world of college football, traditionally a precursor to sports stardom in the NFL, has already been a story of retreat and failure. Referring to himself repeatedly as an 'exile', Gary details the route by which he has ended up at Logos College, a small institution in the literal and metaphorical wilderness of the Texas desert (another end zone or omega point), following his expulsion from a list of other, more prestigious universities. Gary initially receives a glut of offers of athletic scholarships complete with all the expected perks: 'tuition, books, room and board, fifteen dollars a month'.[44] He accepts his first placement at Syracuse University, before transferring to Penn State, then to the University of Miami, then Michigan State, and finally to Logos College, located in the fictional small town of Rooster, Texas. Initially he drops out for reasons that seem arbitrary or spurious, such as his spiral into superstitious doubt after he trips three times on the same step on a staircase. However, as the failures pile up, Gary's reasons for opting out grow weightier – depression apparently brought on by obsession with the aftermath of a nuclear attack; an individualistic resistance to assimilation into the norms of the institution – before culminating in the accidental killing of a rival player during a match. Throughout the precis of these events that Gary gives the reader, the theme of withdrawal grows increasingly persistent. Echoing David Bell's vaguely defined spiritual posturing, Gary 'stop[s] going to practice' or 'stay[s] in [his] room', in a bid to 'establish… some lowly form of American sainthood'[45] that runs counter to his father's expectations of him.

The notion of paternal disappointment is implied throughout the chapter. Gary begins his account of the failures detailed above by mentioning a favourite saying of his father's, which the older man uses to advise his son throughout their time together:

> 'Suck in that gut and go harder.'
> He never suggested that this saying of his ranked with the maxims of Teddy Roosevelt. Still, he was dedicated to it. He 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. He was a pharmaceutical salesman with a lazy son… He put a sign in my room. WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH THE TOUGH GET GOING.[46]

[44] DeLillo, D. *End Zone* (London: Picador, 2011), 18
[45] Ibid. 19
[46] Ibid. 16

Clearly, Gary has failed to suck in his gut and go harder. He has not been tough enough to get going when the going got tough. By fleeing institutions in turn, moving down the hierarchy of football playing colleges as he does so, Gary has not shown any of the qualities he lists as being in some way implied by his father's motto. The reference to Roosevelt and the idea of a presidential handshake are also illustrative of some larger failure in Gary's attempts to live up to an ideal of American masculinity, the American father figure that Roosevelt embodies, the elder statesman. The passage establishes two ideals of masculinity that are beyond Gary. Theodore Roosevelt has legendary status as a polymath statesman in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin, and (elected in 1901) was the president who defined the start of the 20th Century. Neither of these facts would be lost on Gary, who memorises the dates and achievements of presidential service.[47] Secondly, the listing of Gary's father's values is redolent of notions of Depression-era grit, and the muscular vulgarity of the maxim itself suggests something similar to the dominant stockiness that cowed David Bell when he regarded his father in *Americana*. Again, DeLillo riffs on a masculine identity idealised by the figure of the elder statesman, one forged in the many ordeals of the 'Greatest Generation'. For the generation that followed, unable or unwilling to live up to this ideal, the only recourse is withdrawal and the ironic detachment (itself tinged with a certain shamefacedness) that imbues Gary's acknowledgement of his own indolence. Gary the prodigal son appears to scorn his father's banal profession, while simultaneously acknowledging the main reason for his own profligacy. Indeed, the simplistic naivety of his father's motto, the clichéd sign and the idealisation of the presidential handshake as the greatest imaginable aspiration, point towards a larger generational gulf between Gary and his father. Gary, who will spend much of the novel that follows in existential reverie of one form or another, appears to withdraw from a parochial American manhood that reveres determination and presidential handshakes, and which will blithely commit its intellectual energies to the sale of pharmaceuticals. Gary does not escape entirely, however, from the thrall of elder statesmen. His head coach, the aptly named Creed, fulfils this role from afar. And, throughout his time at Logos College, Gary continues the practice, presumably initiated at the behest of his father, of considering the achievements of former presidents on a daily basis. Having memorised names and dates, part of Gary's devotion to American wholesomeness is to think about one president per day, a secular version of daily contemplation of the lives of the saints in religious observation. However, he completes this observance with the same routine thoughtlessness as the actions he performs on the football field, and it becomes an empty gesture,

[47] The aspirations to polymathy are apt within the context of the American liberal arts education system in which Gary is institutionalised. Gary studies a number of cross-disciplinary modules that range across the social sciences and arts, from the realistic to the fanciful. At one point he declares himself to be minoring in a course called 'The Untellable'.

a quotidian duty without real meaning: 'I remembered then to think of Rutherford B. Hayes, nineteenth president, 1877-1881. That took care of that for the day'.[48]

Gary also withdraws from the guidance of other father figures, who offer similarly bland advice to the kind his father offered. He is too bright or sensitive or spiritually inclined for the prosaic institutions in which he finds himself, and Gary makes an arch critique of the advice he is given by the Penn State freshman coach, which ends up being as insufficient as his father's hackneyed aphorisms:

> [The coach] and I had a long earnest discussion. Much was made of my talent and my potential value to the varsity squad. Oneness was stressed – the oneness necessary for a winning team. It was a good concept, oneness, but I suggested that, to me at least, it could not be truly attractive unless it meant oneness with God or the universe or some equally redoubtable superphenomenon. What he meant by oneness was in fact elevenness or twenty-twoness. He told me that my attitude was all wrong. People don't go to football games to see patterns run by theologians. He told me, in effect, that I would have to suck in my gut and go harder. (1) A team sport. (2) The need for sacrifice. (3) Preparation for the future. (4) Microcosm of life.
>
> 'You're saying that what I learn on the gridiron about sacrifice and oneness will be of inestimable value later on in life. In other words, if I give up now I'll almost surely give up on the more important contests of the future.'
>
> 'That's it exactly, Gary.'
>
> 'I'm giving up,' I said.[49]

It is not only traditional notions of American masculinity that Gary finds no longer applicable. The equally antiquated concepts of self-sacrifice for the good of the team, of the prioritising of institutional success over individual will – concepts bound up in the initiating American myths of conquest against the odds, and reiterated in the Depression-era and wartime experiences of the 'Greatest Generation' – seem similarly redundant for a generation anticipating imminent nuclear destruction. The instability of Gary's condition is also shaped by a particular brand of generational, pedagogical doublethink in the assertion of the team's 'oneness', which can only ever be a contradiction in terms. The ironic numbering of trite life lessons supposedly learned from team sport points towards the ultimate meaninglessness of sporting endeavour, when set against the larger spiritual questions that, for Gary, are far more significant.

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[48] DeLillo, *End Zone*, 40
[49] Ibid. 19

In one of the lectures that Gary attends, the Science professor Alan Zapalac gives a neat summation of the insufficiency of old ideas of American survivalism in the face of the terrors of the late 20th Century. In a harrowing vision of the future (which is now recognisable in the present), Zapalac urges his students to 'See artificial nitrates run off into the rivers and oceans. See carbon dioxide melt the polar ice caps. See the world's mineral reserves dwindle. See war, famine and plague.' And Zapalac's speech culminates in an ironic measure of the impotence of the old American ideals to offer any comfort against these contemporary concerns: 'But I keep smiling. I keep telling myself there's nothing to worry about as long as the youth of America knows what's going on. Brains, brawn, good teeth, tallness'.[50] Faith in the wholesomeness of the next generation, which may once have been a comfort to Americans facing contingency, is shown now to be misplaced in an America whose founding principles are dwindling. The irony of this centres on DeLillo's protagonist, Gary Harkness. A young man who should embody all the points on Zapalac's list, and therefore suggest a brighter future for tomorrow, finds that he cannot live within the institutions and expectations of his time.

Gary remains among DeLillo's most ironic creations. Embodying in one sense an American übermensch, an able sportsman, Gary appears to subvert the cliché of the knuckleheaded athlete. Despite his health, good looks and intelligence, and despite daily immersion in the brutal training and matches of the college football season, Gary spends most of his downtime from the sport in a philosophical contemplation that is beyond both the requirements and capabilities of his male role models.[51] He also embodies the exhaustion of just the ideals of masculinity that revere the physical (contact sports; 'backbone'; guts; the handshake) above the intellectual. Gary's failure, then, is in fact an opting out, a retreat from the more traditional ideals by which his father's generation defined itself, and which, for Gary's generation, seem no longer possible or desirable. Faced also with the analogue impossibility of meaningful political dissent, within a period of neutered counternarrative,[52] Gary's only option is to retreat.

Thus, Gary will spend the rest of the novel withdrawing, and in doing so, he establishes more firmly than David Bell did the figure of the ascetic recluse, which DeLillo will revisit in *Great Jones Street*, and which will reappear in some form in all his novels to follow. Although Gary shares with David Bell a desire to achieve self-effacement and transcendence through athletic movement, unlike David – who is locked into a loop of revisiting his past, reframing it on film in order to neutralise it – Gary withdraws, first from paternal expectation, then from established masculine roles, and finally from society itself. The novel ends with an impromptu ascetic fast, as Gary tells

[50] Ibid. 154
[51] Cowart, *The Physics of Language,* 19
[52] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, 8

us, apropos of nothing: 'I drank half a cup of lukewarm water. It was the last food or drink I would take for many days… In the end they had to carry me to the infirmary and feed me through plastic tubes.'[53] For David Cowart, Gary's withdrawal appears to anticipate the apocalyptic moment that Peter Boxall has identified as the destination of all DeLillo's earlier work. Gary is 'the exemplary ascetic' and his career in self-sabotage is part of an ascetic's quest for purification in preparation for death. For, while he may have rejected his father's attitudes about male aspiration, he fully embraces an equally aged ideal of asceticism:

> He ruins one chance after another to distinguish himself at the major football colleges through an inchoate instinct for reduction, simplification, and exile. In retreating to the godforsaken landscape of Rooster, Texas, he obeys the imperative of ascetics in every age: go to the desert, simplify, purify, prepare for the end… he half-consciously seeks ritual purification, even progressing… to an absolute, death-wish fast from which he can only be rescued by nutrition delivered in the plastic tubes that provide the novel's portentous closing image.[54]

The 'end' for which Gary prepares throughout the novel is nuclear apocalypse, and the image of the plastic feeding tubes that closes the novel (anticipating *Love-Lies-Bleeding*) reflects a common late-cold war anxiety: the queasy confluence of the human body and invasive technology in the shadow of nuclear fallout. His obsession with mutually assured destruction begins at the University of Miami, where he studies a course in 'modes of disaster technology' and continues in the more informal tutelage he receives from Major Staley, the college's ROTC officer and professor of military strategy. Throughout the novel, DeLillo deploys his signature style to detail, in parallel, the intricacies of match plays and the likely statistical outcomes of atomic attacks on American soil. The sense of contingency encapsulated in the binary success or failure of sporting events reflects a wider global contingency in the late 20th Century. The violent sport of American football becomes an analogy for the larger threat of violence in nuclear war.

Indications appear, in the way in which DeLillo writes about both war and sport in *End Zone*, of one of the ideas that has characterised much of the critical discourse on DeLillo's work as a whole. In his essay 'DeLillo and the Power of Language', David Cowart identifies 'a thematics of language' that appears as a 'constant or given'[55] throughout DeLillo's writing. Indeed, in an interview that DeLillo gave to Tom LeClair in 1982, the author stated that, when writing *End Zone*

[53] DeLillo, *End Zone*, 231
[54] Cowart, *The Physics of Language*, 29
[55] Duvall, J. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 151

he 'began to suspect that language was a subject as well as instrument' in his work.[56] Read together, *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street* form a meditation on language, its manifold uses within the contemporary moment, its application as a means of attempting to manage instability, and its ultimate failure to do so. For Joseph Dewey, language in *End Zone* offers 'perhaps the most seductive strategy of control',[57] and Dewey cites the constant foregrounding of language throughout the novel as a comment on the contemporary uses of language to wrangle into order those aspects of existence that seem increasingly unmanageable. Thus, the reader is confronted with a range of 'language technologies' within the novel. These include the insufficient listing of statistics to describe a nuclear attack in Part 1 of the novel, and in Part 2, the long and esoteric passage that only appears to describe a match between Logos College and West Centrex Biotechnical Institute. This latter example, in its relentless play-by-play jargonese, serves only to obfuscate the action, becoming 'a deliberately impenetrable scrim of language' in which the reader is 'in effect denied the experience of the football game'.[58] Within the context of a novel in which linguistic attempts to define complex actions or situations flounder, Gary's father's attempted use of cliché to define the self seems even more quixotic. Gary comments explicitly on the human impulse to use cliché to contain the uncontainable after a teammate dies suddenly in a car accident. Here it is death, and not identity that cliché helps to contain, becoming part of a seductive strategy against the fearsome silence that accompanies grief. In an ironic reference to the guidance his father attempted to give him via the use of cliché, Gary begins chapter 14 of the novel, in which he tells us of the death of his teammate:

> Most lives are guided by cliché. They have a soothing effect on the mind and they express the kind of widely accepted sentiment that, when peeled back, is seen to be a denial of silence. Their menace is hidden with the darker crimes of thought and language. In the face of death, this menace vanishes altogether. Death is the best soil for cliché. The trite saying is never more comforting, more restful, as in times of mourning. Flowers are set about the room; we stand very close to the walls, uttering the lush banalities.[59]

This likening of cliché to funeral flowers is one example of the novel's dramatization of attempts to contain death. Others include the Camus-inspired painting of a single stone with black paint after the death of a character's mother. Actions of this nature, along with cliché, become a comfort of sorts, as grievers fall back on trite and hackneyed language in the same way that they take comfort

[56] LeClair, T. 'An Interview with Don DeLillo' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1982, 19-35, 21
[57] Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 28
[58] Ibid. 30
[59] DeLillo, *End Zone*, 65

from traditional obsequies. Gary's ear for 'triteness' seems to suggest a disconnection from his father's maxims. However, he also seems to validate cliché as a linguistic means of managing contingency, part of a natural human impulse to seek comfort through language against the silence that accompanies death.

In the novel's final scene, Gary finally speaks in depth to his enigmatic teammate Taft Robinson, the running back and (as the novel's opening sentence tells us) first black student at Logos College. Taft Robinson effectively bookends Gary's narrative, with much of the opening chapter devoted to his prodigious sporting abilities, and the final chapter giving an insight into his philosophical and intellectual prowess. In Chapter One, Gary explains that Taft has transferred to Logos College from Columbia, before listing the impressive sporting attributes that rumour has brought Gary's way:

> The word on [Taft] was good all the way. (1) He ran the hundred in 9.3 seconds. (2) He had good moves and good hands. (3) He was strong and rarely fumbled. (4) He broke tackles like a man pushing through a turnstile. (5) He could pass block—when in the mood.
>
> But mostly he could fly—a 9.3 clocking for the hundred. Speed.[60]

Here Gary establishes the importance of language ('the word') in the rest of the novel, which will take in rumour, jargon, cliché, and dialogue, with language the subject itself, as well as its means of communication. The name of the college where Gary's career ends up of course is not coincidental. And 'speed' is the word that best encapsulates Taft's character at the start of the book, better even perhaps than the piece of sporting jargon 'pass block' or the visual simile that describes how Taft breaks tackles, which seems to suggest that Taft's approach to football is more in keeping with Gary's father's working-man values in its conjuring of the honest American commuter. Indeed, Taft might be a kind of generational anomaly; an 'elder statesman' of Gary's own generation, unapproachable and elusive for the same reasons that David Bell could not parse his father's gestures.

At the end of the novel, Gary seeks out Taft for a final attempt to find comfort in language before his withdrawal into silence and fast in the novel's closing sentences. Gary's final retreat might even be partly inspired by Taft's own retreat, as he announces during their dialogue that he intends to give up playing football in favour of a life of study and quiet contemplation. This, of course, is something Gary has been threatening to do since the novel began, and he appears slightly

[60] Ibid. 5

in awe of Taft's strength of will to achieve it. As Cowart suggests, Gary's will to reduce and simplify is merely 'inchoate'. However, Taft's is more fully formed. Where Gary has been (like David Bell) merely aping the behaviours of the ascetic – mimicking meditation poses and committing himself to acts of personal discipline such as learning the names of presidents[61] – Taft, who is actually named after a president (the 27th; William Howard Taft), is the character who ends up actually embodying the spirit of asceticism to which Gary aspires. Appropriately, as their final dialogue continues, Taft comes to sound more and more like a monk, or seer, or similar sacerdotal figure, to whom Gary has come seeking wisdom. Taft tells Gary enigmatically that he is instructing himself in 'certain disciplines'. He recalls David Bell's idea of inaction as a path to enlightenment in his announcement that, having forsaken a career as a football star, he now seeks 'small things. Tiny little things… Prefer to sit still'.[62] The dialogue peters out when Taft, now weary of a conversation that is becoming circular, decides abruptly to stop talking. After saying several times that it is time for him to 'turn toward Mecca', an allusion of course to his intention to follow a spiritual path, Taft says: 'The black stone of Abraham sits in that shrine in old Mecca, the name of which I'll have to look up because I keep forgetting it. Not that it matters. A name's a name. A place could just as easily be another place. Abraham was black. Did you know that?... Lord, I think I'm beginning to babble'.[63] Taft's forgetting the name of the Kaaba and his final acknowledgment of the disintegrating meaning of his own words implies the exhaustion of language. Appropriately, it is also Gary's final discussion with another character in the novel. Gary leaves Taft, who has retreated into silence, 'preparing in his own way for whatever religious act was scheduled to follow'. He makes his way downstairs from Taft's room, still in search of linguistic encounter, trying to 'find out about the rumour concerning new uniforms'. Finding nobody to talk to, Gary decides to walk to his professor Alan Zapalac's office, but he is once again disappointed. While the room's walls are emblazoned with the written word – 'printed slogans, various symbols' – Zapalac is out: 'His scarf was there but he wasn't'. And in the anti-climactic final paragraph that ends the novel, and points again to the failure and the exhaustion of words, Gary describes the beginning of his own ritual withdrawal, the fast that eventually sees him hooked up to plastic feeding tubes in the college infirmary. Gary's retreat is never fully achieved; the reference to feeding tubes in his final sentence points toward the medical intervention against suicide by self-starvation that is the logical endpoint of his fast. However, DeLillo establishes the connection that will continue to exist within his novels between the exhaustion of linguistic meaning, spiritual awakening and ascetic retreat.

[61] Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing,* 28
[62] DeLillo, *End Zone*, 222-7
[63] Ibid. 230

This aspect of DeLillo's fiction is fully realised for the first time in his third novel, *Great Jones Street*, in which the rock star Bucky Wunderlick disappears mid-tour to hole up in a squat in the down-at-heel titular street, a section of New York City characterised, at the time of the novel's publication, by dereliction and the blight of heroin abuse. First, Bucky withdraws from his own star status, before ultimately withdrawing from language altogether, after being administered with an experimental drug that silences the language functions of his brain. Bucky is the third in the trio of diminished WASPish übermenschen in DeLillo's first three novels. Like David and Gary, he is bland, vacant and generic. Indeed, his star persona (encapsulated in language by the ludicrousness of his name) renders him almost completely devoid of a self in the first instance. As Joseph Dewey writes, 'If David Bell struggles to recover a self and Gary Harkness struggles to dispense with it, Bucky ... has no self at all – he is a pure confection'.[64] Bucky's name certainly seems to suggest as much, and several critics have identified likenesses to real-life rock stars, both contemporaneous and arriving later. Joseph Dewey views Bucky as a kind of amalgam of such figures as Mick Jagger, Jim Morrison, John Lennon, and Jimi Hendrix, with his name suggesting a likeness to one of David Bowie's more outré alter-egos. The career that is documented in a section of non-narrative content at the centre of the novel appears to point towards a three-phase progression in Bucky's fictional career, which also incorporates Paul Simon, Tim Hardin and other earnest singer-songwriters of the 1970s.[65] Peter Boxall characterises Bucky anachronistically as 'Cobainesque' for his reticence and desire for a kind of counter-intuitive anonymous fame.[66] While these analyses are sound, more useful critical views emerge from David Cowart and Mark Osteen, both of whom look further back than the 1970s for sources of Bucky's inception. Bucky is possibly a 'postmodern Faust', for the deal he has struck with corporate forces that will not be happy until they possess his soul;[67] or possibly he is a 'sulking parody-Achilles of the entertainment world',[68] refusing to engage in the world that was his destiny; or he is a prophet in the wilderness, fending off the advances of a series of tempters, reimagining the Passion of the Christ as 'tawdry rock tragicomedy'.[69] Perhaps most compellingly, the structure of the novel can be said to echo that of the Renaissance masque, with Bucky the sedentary baroque king, visited by a series of characters similar to courtiers, many of them 'masking' their true intentions from him.[70]

[64] Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 34
[65] Ibid. 34-6
[66] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, 36
[67] Cowart, *The Physics of Language*, 34
[68] Ibid. 36
[69] Ibid. 33
[70] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 53-6

However, more than all of these, DeLillo initially presents Bucky as a figure of artistic exhaustion, picking up the motif of artistic failure he established with David Bell's film in *Americana*. Bucky tells us in the first chapter that, during his final tour, he has been confronted by the limits of his chosen art form, rock music. The fans have been falling silent at his gigs, an eerie foreshadowing of the linguistic silence that will follow in the novel, and this silence seems to mark the end of rock music's potential:

> It's possible the culture had reached its limit, a point of severe tension. There was less sense of visceral abandon at our concerts during these last weeks… As we performed they would jump, dance, collapse, clutch each other, wave their arms, all the while making absolutely no sound. We would stand in the incandescent pit of a huge stadium filled with wildly rippling bodies, all totally silent. Our recent music, deprived of other people's screams, was next to meaningless, and there would have been no choice but to stop playing. A profound joke it would have been. A lesson in something or other.[71]

As a 'confection' of this exhausted artform, Bucky sees this new silence as an instruction that his own death is the only artistic recourse that remains available. Significantly, he leaves the band 'saying nothing', withdrawing into silence in New York City, itself a return to the city of his birth. The ebb and flow of retreat and return is visible here, since ideas of return pervade Bucky's retreat. Bucky imagines two possible outcomes of his withdrawal, as far as his fans are concerned: 'For my closest followers, all it foreshadowed was a period of waiting. Either I'd return with a new language for them to speak or they'd seek a divine silence attendant to my own'. DeLillo himself will return to this notion of a new language as a sign of transcendence in later works, specifically in *Zero K*. For now, the silence Bucky speaks of is, to the noisy rock star, a kind of suicide, a death that Bucky imagines to be more 'authentic' than the 'murderous' love of his fans, because it is 'self-willed'. For a character who is a confection of his art, which is itself predicated on noise, silence equals suicide. From the first time the reader meets Bucky, therefore, he is a character anticipating death at his own hands, the ultimate withdrawal, as a kind of artistic gesture, through which he would attain the immortality of actual rock stars who have died young, either by their own hands or other means. He declares himself to be 'interested in ending, in how to survive a dead idea'.[72]

Of course, rock music is traditionally a dissenting artform, counter-cultural by nature. However, the exhaustion Bucky sees in the form appears to stem from rock's incorporation into a consumerist hegemony. The 'visceral abandon' of previous gigs has gone. There are fewer cases of

[71] DeLillo, D. *Great Jones Street* (London: Picador, 2011), 4
[72] Ibid. 5

'arson and vandalism… No smoke bombs or threats of worse explosives.'[73] The dangerous spirit of rock music seems to have evaporated in the corporate spaces, the 'huge stadium[s]' in which Bucky performs. Perhaps in validation of his decision to withdraw, this dangerous spirit seems to return the night immediately after Bucky's disappearance, when the band he has fronted appears again in a different city, under the assumed leadership of another member, Azarian. This gig, sans-Bucky, descends into a chaos that more closely resembles mass protest than music concert, complete with an authoritarian counter-assault and clampdown:

> Azarian's stature was vast but nothing on that first night could have broken the crowd's bleak mood. They turned against the structure itself, smashing whatever was smashable, trying to rip up the artificial turf, attacking the very plumbing. The gates were opened and the police entered, blank-looking… They made their patented charges, cracking arms and legs in an effort to protect the concept of regulated temperature. In one of the worst public statements of the year, by anyone, my manager Globke referred to the police operation as an example of mini-genocide.[74]

This appears to support Boxall's idea that DeLillo dramatizes the impossibility of dissent within the consumer hegemony of the postmodern moment.[75] Cultural homogeneity is represented here by the sanitised, ersatz sameness of large American music and sporting arenas, with their 'artificial grass' and 'regulated temperature.'[76] The crowd's displeasure at Bucky's disappearance seems to rekindle some of the rebellious fervour it has lost in recent silent concerts, and of course this moment recalls legendarily chaotic rock concerts of the later 1960s and 1970s.[77] Whether or not Bucky's disappearance is enough to fully reinstate his band's counter-cultural potential is unclear. The manager Globke, who will become one of the antagonists of the novel, goes on to represent the total (global) dominance of corporate interests, which are able to neutralise and incorporate rebellion and even death into their own market economy. This moment is merely the first in which Globke reduces dissent to a callous soundbite, which is spoken in the same spirit with which, later, he will try to encourage Bucky to commit suicide so as to increase demand for his as yet unreleased

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[73] Ibid. 4
[74] Ibid. 5
[75] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, 8
[76] *End Zone* also appears to move against the sanitisation of sport by corporate interests. The narrative of the important match between Logos College and West Centrex Biotechnical Institute, on the artificial grass of a stadium field, becomes impenetrable, while accounts of the more casual pick-up games that Gary plays with his teammates outside of regulated practice hours capture more adroitly the purity of movement that David found in throwing a baseball in *Americana*.
[77] In particular, DeLillo appears to have in mind the notorious Rolling Stones and Grateful Dead concert at Altamont Speedway in 1969. The Rolling Stones will reappear as an influence later; *Underworld's* 'Cocksucker Blues' section takes its name from the unreleased Rolling Stones tour documentary of 1972.

musical recordings. The media soundbite takes on in *Great Jones Street* a similar role to that performed by cliché in *End Zone*: the use of language as a method of containment.

Thus, an idea first critiqued in *Great Jones Street* is the potential power of suicidal death as a form of dissent. Bucky considers it throughout the novel as an 'authentic' means of escape from corporate pressures, despite the comments of his manager. Great Jones Street, another omega point or end zone, is presented throughout as an apt place for this tension to be enacted. The deserted location to which Bucky withdraws, lying within an abandoned region of New York City, represents the nexus between the public and private. It is an isolated spot within a sprawling metropolis. As such, it reflects Bucky's own predicament, the rock star dilemma that is, by now, infamous in the stories of numerous real-life musicians, and theorised thus by pop-culture sociologist Dick Hebdige: 'It is... difficult to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures.'[78] When confronted with artistic staleness, a dissenting artist who can no longer effectively dissent must decide whether, in the words of Neil Young, it is 'better to burn out than to fade away.' Similarly, Mark Osteen identifies the novel's titular location as 'the crossroad between public sacrifice and private self-immolation.'[79] This idea of the dissenting figure made more powerful via death by fire remains metaphorical for now. However, in later novels, the figure of the self-immolator reappears several times, an expression of the last possible act of dissent in an otherwise homogenized culture[80].

Just as Gary Harkness's withdrawal was achieved gradually, over the course of *End Zone,* so Bucky's withdrawal into silence is signposted as a gradual process throughout *Great Jones Street.* However, where *End Zone* is replete with uses of language to manage the silence that accompanies death, this silence is the very thing Bucky seeks throughout his story. The plot of *Great Jones Street* concerns Bucky's attempts to stave off the advances of his manager Globke, the sinister record company Transparanoia, and members of the mysterious and ironically named terrorist group Happy Valley Farm Commune. All parties have shrouded intentions, which have something to do with wanting to exploit Bucky's unreleased 'Mountain Tapes,'[81] and the testing of an experimental new drug that shuts down language function. Both of these items appear to be hidden in Bucky's apartment at some point during the text, within identical packages, and each of them represents an

[78] Hebdige, D. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London & New York: Routledge, 1979), 95
[79] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 46
[80] The notorious and oft-reproduced photograph of the actual self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc at a Saigon crossroads in 1963 can be seen as another generational ghost from the 1960s that haunts DeLillo's novels and modern America more generally.
[81] Another nod to a real-life rock star in their echoing of Bob Dylan's similarly sought after 1975 'Basement Tapes' recordings.

endpoint of language.[82] Bucky considers the former to be the pinnacle of his artistic achievements, the tapes seem to encapsulate both the 'new language' and the 'divine silence' that his disappearance was supposed to initiate. As such, he wishes to suppress their release, maintaining their purity.

The tapes were recorded some time before Bucky's disappearance, at another omega point, a purpose-built studio that becomes a shrine to silence in a remote mountainous location. The studio contains an 'anechoic chamber, absolutely sound proof and free of vibrations. The whole room was bedded on springs and lined with fibreglass baffles that absorbed all echo'. Although just as unnaturally maintained as the stadiums in which he has played live, Bucky records in his chamber a 'frighteningly immaculate… pure music', suggesting that the potential for clarity of expression is greater within this context. Again, DeLillo's protagonist develops a new appreciation of time through sexual contact and self-expression, just as David did in *Americana*. Sitting in his studio, 'wedged in a block of silence', after listening back to the music he has recorded, Bucky starts to see a version of time as 'stretchable'. He asks 'If you could stretch a given minute, what would you find between its unstuck components? Probably some kind of astral madness. A bleak comprehension of the final size of things.'[83] Later, Bucky narrates the one time that he and his girlfriend Opel had sex in the anechoic chamber, during which encounter he believes he might have touched transcendence: 'What were we like then, in that time and space, unburdened of the weight of outer sound? We were like angels harbouring the weight of each other in the notion of desirelessness, dazed in our acquiescence to this drift through subatomic matter.' Again, there are hints at a blank state of being that is conducive to transcendence, a state of acquiescence without hope or desire, a state that could feasibly have its origins in Catholicism or Tibetan Buddhism. However, by the end of the paragraph, Bucky implies in a characteristic DeLillo deadpan that this moment of epiphany was a false one, since Opel's experience was more prosaic. After the encounter, she imagines not angels but a winged being of more sinister associations: 'Opel never returned to the chamber because the wedge-shaped baffles made her think of bats hanging in a cave.'[84] Just as David almost experienced epiphany in the pantry with his mother in *Americana*, Bucky only glimpses transcendence here; 'the room,' he tells us 'yielded no real secrets… and provided no more than a hint of the nature of silence itself. There was always something to hear, even in that shaved air'.[85] Again, corporate control, even of the air itself, becomes a sign of artificiality. An expensive studio built with record company money can never expose Bucky to the

[82] Cowart, *The Physics of Language*, 39
[83] DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*, 117
[84] Ibid. 172
[85] Ibid. 117

authentic silence, the 'real secrets' he hopes to find in the scuzzy environs of Great Jones Street, and so his withdrawal to his tenement squat is still necessary.

In the novel's second section of non-narrative content, the lyrics of the Mountain Tapes are published. The words that accompanied the music Bucky recorded in his anechoic chamber are suitably sparse, part of a move towards silence, and also perhaps an attempt to establish a new language form. They reflect a trend in DeLillo's work generally for babbling and nonsense words, the lexis of babies and madmen, to signify a pure form of language that has its own sense of holiness.[86] Examples of this 'babbling' appear to segue with Pentecostal glossolalia in DeLillo's imagination.[87] DeLillo himself has said of this babbling talk that it can represent 'a purer form, an alternate speech.'[88] Bucky's lyrics, printed on several occasions throughout the novel, appear to reflect an attempt to retreat from heuristic meaning towards a purity of speech, which takes on the qualities of babbling: 'Pee-pee-maw-maw', 'Baba/Baba/Baba/Gadung gadung gadung.'[89] Clearly, there is an attempt here to capture the pure speech of childhood. A sense of the failure of language is suggested in the phrase 'Least is best.'[90] The lyrics also explicitly identify themselves as such: 'I was born with all languages in my mouth', and finally point towards a withdrawal into silence: 'I close my mouth'. However, this attempt to withdraw to a spiritually transformative silence is ultimately as fruitless as the time Bucky spent recording the tapes in the anechoic chamber. The Mountain Tapes' lyrics are prefaced by a title page complete with fictional legal boilerplate. The implication is that Bucky's retreat has failed; he has lost the battle to keep the tapes out of the public realm, to keep them 'silent'. Ownership of the words is attributed not to Bucky but to the sinister sounding 'Pulse Redactor Co.' a division of the shadowy Transparanoia corporation.[91]

Eventually, members of the Happy Valley Farm Commune catch up with Bucky and administer the drug that will render him temporarily mute, completing a passive withdrawal into silence that is not enacted on his terms. The silence the drug brings about is an acquiescence to the market, since Bucky will not be able to return to the spotlight and so his cultural caché will increase. But it is also an acquiescence to death. Before he is injected Bucky is asked if he has 'Any last words'. His response reflects the self-absorption of the rock star, while also continuing the use of babbling nonsense words as a waypoint to total silence. Bucky quotes one of his own nonsense lyrics: 'Pee-pee-maw-maw.'[92] The drug's effects are not permanent however, and the novel ends

[86] Nel, P. 'DeLillo and Modernism' *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* John Duvall (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 21-5.
[87] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 122
[88] LeClair, 'An Interview with Don DeLillo', 24
[89] DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*, 114-5
[90] Nel, 'DeLillo and Modernism', 14
[91] DeLillo, *Great Jones Street,* 193-8
[92] Ibid. 243

with Bucky anticipating a return to the land of the living and speaking. His mute phase, an ascetic withdrawal that recalls Gary Harkness's abortive fast, appears to have stalled prematurely. Bucky glimpses the pure form of sound he has been seeking, but fails to remain within it. He mingles with the destitute and down-and-out in a desert landscape of 'dock areas' and 'packing houses', wearing several sweaters at once, the layered uniform of the local vagrants. While mute, Bucky encounters others' silence and non-linguistic noise in several forms, appreciating pure forms of communication that are either earthly or approaching divinity. Wandering the streets, he sees 'Two deaf men [having] an argument … using their hands to curse each other, finally picking up boards and taking turns attacking'. The turn-taking mimics speech, but the violence expresses the men's mutual animosity in a purer form, just as Bucky's raging fans expressed their disquiet at his disappearance by attempting to destroy the stadium at the start of the novel. Later, Bucky encounters another homeless man, yelling at a fruit stand: 'He bellowed into the wind, one of nature's raw warriors, flapping around in unbuckled galoshes… It was a religious cry he produced, evocative of mosques and quaking sunsets.'[93] Just as Taft Robinson did at the end of *End Zone*, the vagrant appears to look East, to mosques and Mecca in an apocalyptic vision of transcendence witnessed by DeLillo's narrator. And, similar to Gary, whose ascetic quest fails when he is attached to feeding tubes at the end of his story, Bucky considers himself doubly defeated. He has failed in both the 'chance not taken' to make a miraculous reappearance on his own terms, and in his inability to live forever in wordlessness. When his muteness abruptly ends, Bucky realises that he cannot achieve 'permanent withdrawal to that unimprinted level where all sound is silken and nothing erodes in the mad weather of language'.

The muteness, then, is a temporary hiatus, 'several weeks of immense serenity', in which Bucky can make babbling noises, but not form words, a return to the 'pure form' of language that DeLillo sees in the babbling of babies. This ends when Bucky looks into a mirror and speaks the name for the organ that produces speech: 'When I opened my mouth out came the word for that part, word instead of sound, startling me'. *Great Jones Street* ends with a consideration of the same language form that engaged Gary towards the end of *End Zone*; rumour. Lending credence to Cowart's view of Bucky as a kind of 'tawdry' Christ, Bucky decides to delay his return from the wilderness. He echoes Ecclesiastes[94] when he informs us

> When the season is right I'll return… It's just a question of what sound to make or fake. Meanwhile the rumours accumulate. Kidnap, exile, torture, self-mutilation and death. The

[93] Ibid. 244-5

[94] And perhaps, 'Turn! Turn! Turn!', the 1965 hit by the band The Byrds, which itself features lyrics lifted from Ecclesiastes.

> most beguiling of the rumours has me living among beggars and syphilitics, performing good works, patron saint of all those men who hear the river whistles sing the mysteries and who return to sleep in wine by the south wheel of the city.[95]

This, the book's final passage, hints at a profane balancing of religious consideration with the power of rumour to nudge market forces in the right direction. Bucky considers the sounds he will make on his return not to be pure ones, but 'fake'. He also echoes the callousness of Globke's early comment on genocide in his listing of the things rumoured to have befallen him since his disappearance. The acquiescence to the market, the artistic death he has been denying and hiding from, is apparently complete. Bucky ends his story in a serene calm and in characteristic self-absorption, when he recounts the rumour that he finds most 'beguiling'. But it is only a rumour, and the 'mysteries' he speaks of remain out of his reach.

In his first three novels, DeLillo establishes an interest in forms of retreat through depictions of personal withdrawal, often involving a vaguely defined asceticism. Later novels will complicate these withdrawals and explore larger themes of retreat within the wider contexts of historical subjectivity and the writer's authority over his texts. The withdrawals explored in this chapter reach for a kind of transcendence that is never fully achieved, developing further the theme of failure that reflects another aspect of retreat in these early narratives. However, there are also the beginnings of wider concerns regarding language, historical forces and generational divides, which will be fleshed out in more complex terms, within more complex narratives, in the middle period that marks DeLillo's accession to 'greatness', that of elder statesman of American fiction. Chapter Two of this thesis will examine the growing complexity of DeLillo's depictions of retreat and return in *Libra* and *Underworld*.

[95] DeLillo *Great Jones Street*, 250

Chapter Two

'The man who stands in the blank space'

Retreat, return and history in *Libra* and *Underworld*

Of DeLillo's middle-period novels, *Libra* and *Underworld* best exemplify a multi-faceted complication of the ideas of retreat hitherto discussed. While *Americana*, *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street* tended to depict unidirectional withdrawals from public life, institutions, notions of American masculinity and American 'greatness', and even language itself, narratives of return and redemption appear more prominently in *Libra* and *Underworld*.[96] *Libra* exemplifies this growing complexity in its partial reversal of Bucky's retreat in *Great Jones Street* within the context of a wider retreat from historical certainty, while also developing in its depiction of Lee Harvey Oswald a young male figure who remains far more diminished and enigmatic than Bucky. *Underworld* also complicates previous ideas of retreat in its depiction of return, as a part of the larger theme of recycling old materials, objects and memories, and revisiting prior experiences. Both novels add nuance and complexity to the arguably superficial fascination that the less mature writer had with ascetic figures, ascetic withdrawal, and failure. In the two later (and unquestionably more accomplished) novels, the retreating figures of Lee Harvey Oswald and Nick Shay enact in slightly different ways a more complex action, of which the retreats enacted by David Bell, Bucky Wunderlick and Gary Harkness are merely the first part. In the case of *Libra*, the protagonist moves from a withdrawn anonymity at the fringes of society towards historical notoriety, while still remaining essentially a mysterious figure. Nick Shay in *Underworld* revisits and recycles his personal history, having previously been in flight and retreat from it, and becomes himself a kind of revenant figure, returning to haunt his past life. These two novels also mark a complex two-directional movement in DeLillo's more mature writing, both towards and away from historical detail. While both novels engage with history as core subject matter more fully than DeLillo's previous work, they explore in their discussions of this history a more general retreat from historical objectivity in the wake of such events as the assassination of JFK.

When read alongside DeLillo's first three novels, looking back on his career up to this point, *Libra* is illustrative of a new complexity in the author's work generally. David Cowart has argued that *White Noise* and *Libra* between them represent the work of an author finding a mature voice, one unhampered by the tentativeness that characterised DeLillo's novels up to and including 1978's *Running Dog*.[97] Indeed, with these two novels, DeLillo appears to have come several steps

[96] Joseph Dewey considers both texts, alongside *The Names* and *Mao II*, in a chapter entitled 'Narratives of Redemption', *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 92

[97] Cowart, *The Physics of Language*, 6

closer to the goal of capturing 'the whole picture, the whole culture' of American life in the 20th Century. In the same interview in which he identifies this as his earliest aim, DeLillo also informs us that, while writing *Libra*, he hit upon the authorial method of typing out single paragraphs on single sheets of paper – rather than in one continuous document; a kind of anti-Kerouacian artistic process – for the purposes of more considered revising and editing.[98] Whether this deliberate attention to the minutiae of individual paragraphs is, ironically, what has helped DeLillo capture a more macrocosmic view of America is impossible to say (perhaps even for the novelist himself). However, it seems somehow apt to the postmodern moment that DeLillo should attempt something very similar to Jack Kerouac (capturing the entirety of America in fiction), not by directly aping the now-famous museum piece, the original 'scroll' of *On the Road*, but by composing a novel by bricolage, one patched together from disparate fragments.

Indeed, it is fragments that DeLillo is concerned with in both *Libra* and *Underworld* – fragments of identity, of memory, of narrative, of bone, brain and other human tissue – but primarily, the fragmentation of historical cohesiveness and empiricism that has been a primary feature of life in the developed west, and America in particular, in the latter part of the 20th Century. This fragmentation exemplifies a retreat from certainty in the American mind. The breaking apart of beliefs and orthodoxies that were previously cohesive and axiomatic started, for DeLillo at least, with the assassination of JFK, the historical subject matter that inspired *Libra*. Discussing what his novel brings to the ongoing discourse about the Kennedy assassination, DeLillo retreats from any suggestion that *Libra* offers anything other than artistic interpretation:

> If I make an extended argument in the book it's not that the assassination necessarily happened this way. The argument is that this is an interesting way to write fiction about a significant event that happens to have these general contours and these agreed-upon characters. It's my feeling that readers will accept or reject my own variations on the story based on whether these things work as fiction, not whether they coincide with the reader's own theories or the reader's own memories. So this is the path I had to drive through common memory and common history to fiction.[99]

DeLillo's discussion here of historical figures as 'characters' suggests a textualist view of history in keeping with New Historicism. The identification of historical figures in this way suggests that DeLillo's primary concern as a writer is the production of compelling fiction, rather than a political comment on the conspiracy to murder the president. It would be naïve to think that a novel about

[98] Begley, A. 'Don DeLillo: The Art of Fiction', 2
[99] Ibid. 50

the JFK assassination could ever be entirely free of political or ideological intention. However, DeLillo prioritises its aesthetic features as a work of literary fiction. This can be seen in the liberties the author of fiction permits himself to take with 'variations on the story', especially his fictional development of the characters of historical figures, fictional scenes in which these figures act, and the novel's ruminations on the nature of plots (both in terms of fictional narrative and political conspiracy).

Libra and *Underworld* both contain many characters, some of whom just happen also to be historical figures. While Kennedy himself never really appears as a character in *Libra* – he remains a presence hovering over the text, described in accounts of news footage or as the topic of dialogue that shows the obsessive grievances of the men plotting the attack against him – the book features a long list of actual historical figures besides its protagonist, Lee Harvey Oswald. Further supporting arguments for *Libra* as an example of what Linda Hutcheon termed historiographic metafiction[100] is the fact that historic characters such as Oswald, his mother Marguerite, Jack Ruby, David Ferrie, Guy Bannister and General Walker rub shoulders and interact with fictional characters, such as imagined original plotter Walter Everett, Oswald crony Bobby Dupard, and (perhaps most controversially) Cuban exile and Grassy Knoll gunman Raymo.[101] Of course, this pattern will repeat in *Underworld*, in which J. Edgar Hoover, Jackie Gleeson, Frank Sinatra, and Lenny Bruce will appear alongside fictional protagonists Nick Shay, Klara Sax and Sister Edgar. This juxtaposition is partly what Stuart Hutchinson has in mind when he comments that both *Libra* and *Underworld* 'press us with what might be said about the real' in a century in which reality, both historic and current, must be acknowledged as subjective.[102] Brian Nicol also identifies the absence of any unified theory in *Libra*, writing that the novel's real interest lies in 'the degree to which American reality and history are dependent upon representations rather than the real.'[103] DeLillo himself acknowledged this subjectivity in his interview with Anthony DeCurtis, and he does so again in 'Assassination Aura', his introduction to the 2006 Penguin Modern Classics reprint of *Libra*. DeLillo implies the crux of his own engagement with history in his comments on his character Raymo, a minor character in the novel but a figure that haunts the endless historical debate about the assassination:

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[100] Hutcheon, L. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1

[101] Located within the history of the Cold War, *Libra* of course also features detailed references to such events as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the capture of the pilot Francis Gary Powers. The novel's first engagement with real history is a moment of historiographic whimsy, in which a woman hands the young Lee Harvey Oswald a leaflet protesting against the execution of the Rosenbergs. In an authorial nod to the historical significance Lee will have achieved by the novel's close, he pockets the leaflet 'to save it for later' (*Libra*, 13)

[102] Hutchinson, S. 'DeLillo's *Libra* and the Real' *The Cambridge Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2001): 117-31, 121

[103] Nicol, B. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009) 195

> In *Libra* there he is, the second shooter, a man with a name, a face and a nationality. This is how lost history becomes the free weave of fiction. He stands behind the stockade fence on the grassy knoll, weapon in hand, watching the limousine approach. He is not the answer to the question that investigators, scientists, historians, government officials and countless others have been asking through the decades. He is simply the man who stands in the blank space.[104]

A history that is 'lost' or fallen, perhaps irredeemable in its ambiguity, can find some redemption in the 'free weave of fiction'. The novelist suggests here that fictional treatments of history help to weave it back, ambiguity and all, into the rich tapestry of postmodern discourse, in which the fiction writer is free to play with historical record and authorise new interpretations. DeLillo's metaphor of weaving threads is central to his treatment of history in both *Libra* and *Underworld*. Of course, the final description of the second gunman here, that of the man who stands in the blank space, could just as easily be applied to Lee Harvey Oswald himself, the real protagonist of DeLillo's version of the JFK story. And, in the way in which *Underworld* develops the interaction with history initiated in *Libra*, this description will also describe the later novel's protagonist, Nick Shay.

The epigraph to Part 1 of *Libra* quotes a letter Lee Harvey Oswald wrote to his brother, in which he expressed his view that 'Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general.'[105] DeLillo's selection of this quotation as an epigraph suggests the desire of his protagonist to engage with 'the struggle' of his time, with 'the world'. This nebulous latter term seems to incorporate both the American institutions of Oswald's time and history itself, with 'the struggle' signifying the historic class struggle of the Marxist ideology that informed Oswald's political leanings.[106] As well as guiding his readers' interpretation of the narrative to follow, the use of this quotation might be seen as a statement of intent by DeLillo, pointing towards a change in narrative direction. From its epigraph onwards, *Libra* reverses the movement of several preceding novels. Stephen Baker sees in *Libra* a 'reverse mirror image' of the plot of *White Noise*, *Libra's* immediate predecessor. Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise*, retreats from the centre of American institutional life (a liberal arts professorship, a suburban home, middle class consumption) to the radical fringe in which a gonzo chemist is developing a drug that cures the fear of death. *Libra's* plot details Oswald's transition

[104] DeLillo, D. *Libra* (London: Penguin, 2006), vii
[105] DeLillo, *Libra*, 1
[106] 'The world' was also of course a euphemistic term used by Vietnam veterans for the USA as a geographical location, as in 'back in the world', a slang expression for returning to the USA on leave from fighting in Vietnam, or following discharge from the military altogether. Given Oswald's history as a US Marine, this interpretation of 'the world' seems a feasible one.

from impressionable and anonymous young man at the fringes of society, into notorious historical figure responsible for the president's assassination.[107] While this is an engaging analysis, it negates the return to middle class family life that ends *White Noise*, when Jack Gladney goes back to his home to watch his children sleep. For Oswald, the movement is not so reversible. A more apt comparison therefore is with the earlier novel *Great Jones Street*. As discussed in Chapter One, Bucky Wunderlick is a public figure in retreat from the confection of his public persona, into an arguably more authentic obscurity, ending his story still considering a return. *Libra*, by contrast, details the ascendancy of an obscure character to the status of the well-known historical figure, which is itself a confection. It remains the case that very little is known of Lee Harvey Oswald's actual life, or of his motivations in assassinating the president. His own famous claim that he was just a 'patsy' in a wider plot suggests a diminished agency in the unfolding story of the killing. DeLillo's fictionalising of Lee's life in *Libra* does little to dispel the air of mystery that surrounds the 'real' Lee Harvey Oswald. Thus, the character achieves a kind of paradoxical triumph of simultaneous historical notoriety and personal withdrawal, which Bucky gestures towards in the final passages of *Great Jones Street*. Lee Harvey Oswald begins life as an anonymous fringe figure and eventually succeeds in stepping into historical notoriety, while the essence of his identity remains diminished and enigmatic. This depiction is central to the novel's treatment of history generally. By returning to the events that, in DeLillo's own estimation, began the period of contingency and uncertainty that forms his authorial context, DeLillo explores textualist attitudes towards history and ontological subjectivity in a narrative that complicates the more simplistic ideas of retreat in his earlier novels.

This process begins at the novel's opening, with a depiction of Lee on the New York subway, which establishes the movement towards a kind of triumph that the rest of the novel will dramatize. Where Bucky Wunderlick searched in *Great Jones Street* for something pure, casting off his rock star status in order to find it, and exiling himself to the warehouse district of New York, Lee actually does find his own searched-for purity while riding on trains that travel underneath the city.[108] Thus, *Libra* continues the development of a pet idea, which DeLillo will go on to flesh out more fully in later work. Recycling another figure from early work, Lee is often referred to in *Libra* as a kind of martyr or ascetic figure, which in this novel becomes an apt metaphor for his lone gunman, outsider status. In this sense he has already achieved, even in the early stages of the novel, the status that David Bell and Gary Harkness aspired to in *Americana* and *End Zone*. As will be discussed later on in this chapter, DeLillo also riffs on the real Oswald's own claim, made to news

[107] Baker, S. *The Fiction of Postmodernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP), 89

[108] The 'underground' that both these characters inhabit as a means to attain meaning of course anticipates the many 'underworlds' of *Underworld*.

cameras after his arrest, that he was just a 'patsy', and not the arch plotter and expert marksman of official record. Lee's anonymity, exile and ascetic withdrawal are thematic precursors to this claim.

The subway holds for the young Lee of the novel's opening chapter, 'In the Bronx', a similar appeal to whatever it was that Bucky sought in his tenement on Great Jones Street; a numinous purity of thought or sound that becomes almost tangible in those bits of New York normally ignored. Lee savours the harsh noise the subway trains make, and the baggage and human detritus they carry:

> At Forty-second Street, after a curve that held a scream right out to the edge, came the heaviest push of all, briefcases, shopping bags, blind people, pickpockets, drunks. It did not seem strange to him that the subway held more compelling things than the famous city above. There was nothing important out there, in the broad afternoon, that he could not find in purer form in these tunnels beneath the streets.[109]

Lee, anonymous here on the subway, is a kind of seer in his own urban underworld, developing the trope of insight in anonymity that was dramatized in the novels discussed in Chapter One. Lee is a chronic school truant (another form of retreat), and a refusal to adhere to institutional expectations continues to characterise him in those passages in the novel that depict his early life. After a move to New Orleans with his mother, Lee, now 15, is beaten up for riding 'in the back of a bus with the Negroes'. The idea of Lee as a spiritual seer continues in a suggestion that his decision to ride in the back seats of the bus reflects a kind of idealistic, spiritual self-sacrifice. The extent to which it is also a rebellion against institutional edict is uncertain, but the point appears to lie in a refusal to be drawn on a specific motive, perhaps in an anticipation of the enigmatic reasons for his later crimes: 'Whether [he did it] out of ignorance or principle, Lee refused to say. This was also like him, to be a misplaced martyr and let you think he was just a fool, or exactly the reverse, as long as he knew the truth and you didn't.'[110] Much later, Wayne Elko (a fictional conspirator tasked with killing Oswald as the final gambit of the assassination plot) will reflect on the truculence and silence of the man he knows as Leon, who appears integral to the plot but whose specific role is uncertain:

> This was the first time Wayne had heard Leon say more than two words. He didn't know where Leon fit in, except it was obvious he was some kind of special component with his

[109] DeLillo, *Libra*, 4
[110] Ibid. 33

> own little spin. He came and he went, carrying the Italian carbine. The others seemed to leave some space around him, like he was holy or diseased.[111]

Throughout then, Lee/Leon is a withdrawn loner figure, somewhere between holy fool and holy leper, of clear significance but enigmatic to his peers. The metaphors here also prefigure Lee's role as the patsy, the marked man, the one singled out to take the fall.

In the marines, Lee remains enigmatic. Appropriately, for a character that others find hard to define, Lee continues to accrue aliases, pseudonyms and alter-egos. A passage depicting Lee's time as a military radar operator connects his anonymity to personal data about the real Lee Harvey Oswald that has been obscured by the inconsistencies in the historical record. At the radar base, two fellow marines watch 'someone heading towards them across the fuming tarmac, a slightish man who walked with his head tilted and one shoulder drooping.'[112] From the perspective of these two minor characters, there is nothing special about Lee, certainly nothing of obvious historic note. We are told that the other marines in his platoon

> called him Ozzie the Rabbit for his pursed lips and dimples and for his swiftness of foot, as they saw it, when there was a scuffle in the barracks or one of the bars off-base. He was five feet nine, blue-eyed, weighed a hundred and thirty five, would soon be eighteen years old, had conduct and proficiency ratings that climbed for a while, then fell, then climbed and fell again, and his scores on the rifle range were inconsistent.[113]

The uncertainty with which he is viewed by others will reach its ultimate expression after the assassination. Lee, preparing to go on the run, appears to take some solace in his non-descript appearance. 'What do I look like?' he asks himself, before defining himself in the language of a police radio dispatch: 'Unknown white male. Slender build.'[114] This moment of self-scrutiny recalls the many similar moments of self-scrutiny that David Bell, Gary Harkness and Bucky Wunderlick indulge in. However, those earlier protagonists were all, in some sense, in retreat from a public version of themselves that was often confected or mediated. By contrast, this point in *Libra* marks a moment at which Lee steps closer to the final historical version of himself that has become so notorious. This is of course itself a confection, a legendary version of the real Lee Harvey Oswald, who has all but vanished, absorbed now into his status as an historical figure. And, where his predecessors' retreat narratives were defined by failure, Lee's ends in a kind of triumph, as he

[111] Ibid. 293
[112] Ibid. 81
[113] Ibid. 82
[114] Ibid. 407

accedes to this legendary status. However, all the while, he remains in a kind of withdrawal, since so little about him is objectively known. The specific details about his physical appearance are perhaps authorial comments on what might now be called the legend of Lee Harvey Oswald. His height and eye colour will be mentioned later by Nicholas Branch, the authorial stand-in charged with writing the secret history of JFK, as just two of the indeterminate personal facts that have become obscured by contradictions in police reports and medical records. The characterisation of Oswald as a decidedly average marine and marksman is also central to the later depiction of him firing at the presidential motorcade, and missing with several of his shots. This, in turn, appears to validate the famous claim that he was not the primary assassin, but a mere 'patsy', a figure to stand for a much larger, but unknown, conspiracy, a man to fill the blank space.[115]

DeLillo's focus on names and identity also plays on the name by which we now know Kennedy's assassin. The full name Lee Harvey Oswald is not used until the final pages of the novel. Indeed, in the final scene, after Oswald's death and anonymous burial in a grave marked William Bobo, his mother Marguerite hears two youths near his grave site using the full, three-part name. The failure of the authorities' attempts not to lionise or canonise his memory is signified in the way the boys whisper the name 'like a secret they'd keep forever'. The reference to the idea of a secret reflects the paradoxical fame and anonymity mentioned above. Lee himself becomes a kind of open secret, known but unknown, much like the bigger conspiracy to kill JFK, which has been largely accepted as a reasonable interpretation of history, even if the official historical record still specifies a lone gunman. Marguerite reflects on her son's final victory over the authorities that 'this was the one thing they could not take away – the true and lasting power of his name. It belonged to her now, and to history.'[116] Thus, Lee accedes to the status of the historical figure and is anointed with an historic name different to that under which he lived,[117] having been otherwise completely diminished by the authorities, who have 'taken away' everything else, including (in Marguerite's view) his life. Throughout the novel, he has had many names and aliases, existing as a man without a fixed identity, a withdrawn, retreating figure. Initially, as a boy truant in New Orleans, he is simply Lee; later he adopts Leon; his marine buddies call him Ozzie; in Russia, he instructs his wife's friends to call him Alek; he famously buys his bolt-action Carbine rifle under the alias of Alex Hidell; and is ultimately buried as William Bobo. Given the context of *Libra's* action in the 1960s, his penchant for acquiring new names also chimes with the very public adoption of new names by

[115] Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* also makes much of Oswald's purported ineptitude as a rifleman. This film also features a montage in which several 'Oswalds', played by different actors, announce themselves in Dallas in the days before the shooting, in both an implication of larger conspiracy and a more literalistic interpretation of the character's vagueness.
[116] DeLillo *Libra*, 456
[117] Hutchinson 'DeLillo's *Libra* and the Real', 131

such contemporary figures as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. However, where these two men adopted names supposedly redolent of a more authentic personal identity, without the imposed identity of white America, Lee's new names serve only to obfuscate further any sense of a true or authentic self.

The importance of names and their place within history is established in the first part of the novel, initiating also the significance of important names, historic or revolutionary names, being whispered, as if they carry a symbolic or dangerous weight.[118] Visiting the neo-classical public library that once stood on Lee Circle in New Orleans (a coincidence of nomenclature totally apt in a novel that dwells so much on names, history and chance), the young Lee reads the political writings of Lenin, Trotsky and others, and reflects on the importance of the names of revolutionary leaders:

> Trotsky was not his real name. Lenin's name was not really Lenin. Stalin's name was Dzhugashvili. Historic names, pen names, names of war, party names, revolutionary names. These were men who lived in isolation for long periods, lived close to death through long winters in exile or prison, feeling history in the room, waiting for the moment when it would surge through the walls, taking them with it. History was a force to these men, a presence in the room. They felt it and waited.[119]

Like his revolutionary forebears, Lee is an isolated figure engaging with history, waiting for its force to pick him up and carry him away, into noteworthiness or notoriety. As well as identifying with the figures mentioned here politically and historically, Lee associates geographically with Leon Trotsky (whose forename he will later borrow): 'He learned that Trotsky had once lived, in exile, in a working-class area of the Bronx, not far from the places Lee had lived with his mother.'[120] Lee, himself exiled from New York to New Orleans, again appears as a more complex Bucky Wunderlick, who was a self-imposed exile in a different kind of isolation, fleeing the force of history rather than waiting for it to collect him. Aptly, where Bucky's name is a parodic wink at names and pseudonyms of actual rock stars of the 1960s and 1970s, Lee learns throughout *Libra* that accession to historical or legendary status requires the adoption of a suitably historic or legendary name.

Lee comes to this understanding about the historic importance of names (and specifically a three-part name) when he hears of the capture by the USSR of the CIA U2 pilot Francis Gary Powers in 1960. DeLillo anticipates the final page of the novel, in which Marguerite first hears the

[118] Of course, the name of the Kennedy dynasty was already imbued with a well-established historical resonance in the 1960s, even before the assassinations of John and his brother Robert.
[119] DeLillo, *Libra*, 34
[120] Ibid. 34

name Lee Harvey Oswald whispered by strangers, in his depiction of how Oswald reacts to the news of Powers' capture:

> It occurred to Oswald that everyone called the prisoner by his full name. The Soviet press, local TV, the BBC, the Voice of America, the interrogators, etc. Once you did something notorious, they tagged you with an extra name, a middle name that was ordinarily never used. You were officially marked, a chapter in the imagination of the state. Francis Gary Powers. In just these few days the name had taken on a resonance, a sense of fateful event. It already sounded historic.[121]

This realisation initiates the theme of coincidental connections between Lee and the other major historical figure in this story with a three-part name, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. For Frank Lentricchia, the tripling of names is also part of a larger structural feature of the novel, which effectively has three endings. The ending the reader anticipates is the assassination of the president. The ending of Lee's life concludes the bildungsroman aspect of the story. Finally, the novel's closing page concludes its thematic treatment of the past and the protagonist's desire to attain historical significance.[122] Oswald's many aliases and self-reinventions point towards the sense of contingency that defines the postmodern moment. The novel's title refers of course to the protagonist's star sign; in astrology, the 'negative Libran' is impressionable, easily influenced, lacking a firm sense of self.

The retreat that *Libra* dramatizes therefore further complicates that depicted in *Americana, End Zone* and *Great Jones Street*. Where those earlier characters retreated from American society within their narratives, *Libra* is itself a retreat from fact and historic specificity. This would appear to support Lentricchia's assertion that JFK's assassination rendered every American a 'negative Libran', capable at once of believing and disbelieving the official narrative of the Kennedy assassination and of viewing themselves at once in the first and third person, just as Lee did when preparing to go on the run. Lentricchia goes on to assert that even the narrator of *Libra* is not in fact DeLillo but 'DeLillo', a persona contrived, just as Lee Harvey Oswald's persona was contrived, to shift from first to third person, fading into the voices of his characters where this becomes aesthetically necessary. The process by which DeLillo ventriloquizes multiple characters and adopts numerous narrative voices (where previous novels have had only one) is another aspect in which *Libra* increases the range of authorial ambition and anticipates the immense complexity of *Underworld*. For Lentricchia, it is an aspect of the author's own retreat from notions of objective

[121] Ibid. 198
[122] Lentricchia, *Introducing Don DeLillo*, 207

historical fact, as he repeatedly undercuts the author's traditional role in navigating the reader 'through the maze' of the novel.[123] Of course, the maze of the JFK assassination is interminable and impossible to navigate, and DeLillo does not really attempt to do so. Instead, his authorial retreat from this traditional role into a stance determined by contingency mirrors the retreat from interpretation that Lee practices in the novel.

Contingency and Lee's impressionable nature are central to the book's title, and the horoscope symbol of the scales, which might tilt in either direction. The character David Ferrie apparently understands Lee better than the other people he meets. Aptly, Ferrie is a character from the fringes, like Lee, a withdrawn oddball survivalist characterised by a condition that renders him totally hairless and thus socially repulsive: 'His body was one hundred percent bald. It looked like something pulled from the earth.'[124] A 'real' member of the JFK plot who becomes in *Libra* its spiritual and intellectual centre, Ferrie dons an air of shamanic or sacerdotal grandeur to explicate a thesis on Lee's importance within history, and here *Libra* develops the sense of spiritual mystery central to the novels discussed in Chapter One. Again, this complicates the narratives of earlier novels. Spiritual mystery and chance are not the aim of Lee's retreat (as they were the aim of the respective retreats of the trio of earlier protagonists), but part of his accession to historical status.

Having deduced that Lee is behind the failed assassination attempt on General Edwin Walker that predated the assassination of JFK, Ferrie talks to Lee about his application to work for ex-FBI man, gun-runner and private detective Guy Bannister. He tells Lee of the speech he has prepared to convince the cautious Bannister to allow Lee into his inner circle:

> I would say to Guy… '[Lee] believes in his heart that he's a dedicated leftist. But he's also a Libran. He is capable of seeing the other side. He is a man who harbours contradictions.' I was ready to say to Guy, 'Here's a Marine recruit who reads Karl Marx.' I was ready to say, 'This boy is sitting on the scales, ready to be tilted either way.'[125]

In fact, this speech is part of the shadow play of second-guessing, double bluff and manipulation via which Lee is recruited as the patsy of the plot. Elsewhere in the novel, Ferrie refers to Lee's impressionable nature much less charitably, and appears to be in on the plotters' aim to do away with Oswald as well as Kennedy. But Ferrie, who claims he has a 'psychic bond' with Oswald, appears to foresee Lee's historic significance as a man who defines contingency and harbours many

[123] Ibid. 210
[124] DeLillo, *Libra*, 29
[125] Ibid. 319

contradictions. Later on, Ferrie fleshes out his thesis to suggest that it is Oswald's destiny to kill JFK, and that this destiny has a numinous, rather than causal origin:

> 'Think of two parallel lines,' [Ferrie] said. 'One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes the connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny.'[126]

DeLillo develops the spiritual aspects of his earlier novels by suggesting a numinous force that guides historical events, as well as personal lives. Ferrie, the seer of the novel, here points towards the ultimate outcome of the assassination: a history that can't be fully understood. However, in Ferrie's estimation, it is not intentional obfuscation or documentary inconsistency that renders the history unknowable, but the spiritual mystery that drives the history on in the first place. It is also apposite that, in the quotation above, Ferrie comes close to using the full version of Lee's name, which will only be used when the 'lines' that he mentions finally meet.

What Ferrie doesn't mention, in his list of things that this mysterious force 'comes out of', is coincidence. Later on, Ferrie will say that there is no such thing as coincidence, believing, or claiming to believe, in a 'power' that generates events, a 'pattern outside experience.'[127] However, as DeLillo suggests elsewhere in the novel, coincidence is central to the way in which *Libra* interprets history. Ferrie, despite himself, at one point refers to Lee himself as 'a coincidence' for the seamless way the latter fits into the 'space' created by the original plotters, who were looking for a real man to take the place of the 'cardboard cutout' created in the earliest iteration of the plot.[128] Lee goes on to dwell on Ferrie's notions of destiny by considering the many coincidences that seem to be accruing around him, connecting him once again to names of historical figures, larger events of the period, and ultimately to the president himself:

> Coincidence. [Lee] learned in the bayou, from Raymo, that Castro's guerrilla name was Alex, derived from his middle name, Alejandro. Lee used to be known as Alek.

[126] Ibid. 339
[127] Ibid. 384
[128] Ibid. 330

> Coincidence. Bannister was trying to find him, not knowing what city or state or country he was in, and he walked in the door at [Bannister's office] and asked for an undercover job.
>
> Coincidence. He ordered a revolver and the carbine six weeks apart. They arrived on the same day.
>
> Coincidence. Lee was always reading two or three books, like Kennedy. Did military service in the Pacific, like Kennedy. Poor handwriting, terrible speller, like Kennedy. Wives pregnant at the same time. Brothers named Robert.[129]

Coincidence, then, while being the aspect that Ferrie left out of his list, appears to be the 'pattern', the thing pushing Lee on towards what Ferrie claims is his destiny, his movement from anonymity to notoriety. A more rationalistic perspective on the force that pushes history is given by the novel's historian Nicholas Branch, who makes the ultimate assessment that 'the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance.'[130] In characteristically evasive style, DeLillo's stance here is itself a withdrawn one, uncertain and further supporting the notions of contingency and ambiguity that run throughout *Libra*. It is possible to read this accruing of coincidence as evidence of a view of history as something decided largely by a mysterious spiritual plan (or plot), not by the actions of 'great men' (as in more traditional notions of history), nor by revolutionary figures such as Trotsky, Stalin and Oswald, who hide in exile and wait for their moment to step into history. It is equally possible to read this all as merely the delusions of a diminished and impressionable young man, a 'negative Libran' who could be pushed either way, manipulated into being a patsy by an older conspirator. Ferrie's eccentric quasi-sage persona might be just another part of this manipulation. DeLillo's point seems to be contingency itself and a retreat from historical objectivity, totally apt in his story of Oswald, a man at once notorious and unknown. *Libra's* depiction of a secret history leading up to a well-known endpoint anticipates a famous line that characterises historical contingency in *Underworld*: 'everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does.'[131]

Indeed, in *Underworld*, Ferrie's metaphor of parallel lines develops into threads that connect objects, events and individuals through history. One of these is the footage shot by Abraham Zapruder of the moment in which the plot of *Libra* came to its fruition, the moment that, in DeLillo's estimation, broke the back of the century.[132] This footage becomes a central facet of the most prominent of DeLillo's generational ghosts, an echo of the 1960s that goes on to haunt

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[129] Ibid. 336
[130] Ibid. 441
[131] DeLillo, D. *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1997), 465
[132] Gross, T. 'Seven Seconds that Broke the Back of the Century', WHYY, 'Fresh Air', 9th August, 1988

America in the following decades. A passage in *Underworld* set in 1974 sees sculptor Klara Sax visiting a studio in which the Zapruder film, the primary lasting document of the Kennedy assassination, has been repurposed as an art installation, which plays the footage simultaneously at different rates on an unspecified number of television sets in separate rooms of a New York apartment. In the description of the work, the history of the event becomes both fictionalised and over-whelming, as if the history has become a text that the viewer cannot escape. The now famous film, appearing in the text as a bootleg of the original eight-millimetre footage, is still supressed at the time the scene takes place, and Klara sees it for the first time. The third-person narrative voice informs us that 'almost no one outside the government had seen it'. Initially, DeLillo's concern appears to be capturing the shocking power of the amateur footage when it was first seen by the public, and its implications for the veracity of the official narrative of the killing. The restaging (or recycling) of the film as part of an art installation detaches it further from notions of historical veracity or contiguity. DeLillo's ekphrasis specifies that the footage plays in disjointed fashion, in several rooms at once, but with each room's playback out of sync with the others:

> The footage started rolling in one room but not in the others and it was filled with slurs and jostles… the limousine came down the street, muddied by sunglint, and the head dipped out of the frame and reappeared and then the force of the shot that killed him, unexpectedly, the headshot, and people in the room went ohh, and then the next ohh, and five seconds later the room at the back went ohh, the same release of breath every time, like blurts of disbelief, and a woman on the floor spun away and covered her face because it was completely new you see supressed all these years, this was the famous headshot and they had to contend with the impact…
>
> And oh shit, oh god it came from the front didn't it?[133]

The tone of the narrative here, breathless and conversational, captures the initial shock of watching the film and 'contending with the impact' of its most significant revelation, that the head-shot bullet that killed the president 'came from the front'. This, of course, contradicts the official record that all the shots were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald from his sniper's nest in the Texas School Book Depository building, to the rear of the motorcade. The repetition of the same moments of the film, in which the crowd in each room reacts, only for their reaction to be repeated by people in other rooms, suggests the extent to which the film has become the dominant means by which the JFK

[133] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 488

killing is remembered, repeating ad infinitum in the years since its disclosure by the authorities, to the extent that it takes on the quality of personal memory.

Later in the same passage, the film evolves a step further to become an ever-present document, as if the event it captured continues to repeat, haunting America in the decades that follow. It takes on a totemic power, similar to that imbued in other objects in the novel. Viewers of the installation become 'tourists walking through the rooms of some small, private collection, the Zapruder Museum, one item on permanent display'. They watch the footage with an 'acquired sort of awe'. Ultimately, the footage begins to signify a death larger than that captured in its frames. Klara's view of the film recalls David Ferrie's view that the mysterious force of history 'comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers', and suggests the extent to which the film has become central to the public imagination of the killing. She ponders that, beyond Kennedy's death, there lingers a

> sharable darkness – this was a death that seemed to rise from the streamy debris of the deep mind… She thought to wonder if this home movie was some crude living likeness of the mind's own technology, the sort of death plot that runs in the mind, because it seemed so familiar, the footage did – it seemed a thing we might see, not see but know, a model of the nights when we are intimate with our own dying.[134]

The Zapruder film, then, becomes part of the subconscious of late-century America, representing a kind of dark night of the soul, and signifying not just the president's death, but the eventual deaths of all the film's viewers, even of a particular idea of what America stands for. We are repeatedly told in these pages that it 'ran continuously', just as the aftershocks of the event have resounded continuously since. The history of the event, therefore, is ever-present, continuing to repeat as a manifestation of dark shared fears, a generational ghost.

Klara's former lover Nick Shay is arguably the most prominent of *Underworld*'s several protagonists, and is someone very much wrapped up in a conflict with his own history. Like Lee, he is a man who stands in a blank space. In Nick's case, the blank space is the Arizona desert, after Nick (another boy from the Bronx) moves to Phoenix to escape from the turbulence of his youth as an urban tearaway, abandoned son of a vanished father. This retreat into the desert of course recalls Gary's in *End Zone*. However, Gary moves to the desert with no thought of return, ending his narrative in a state that signifies a kind of death, a literal end zone of his own creation (an ascetic fast that sees him diminished even beyond personal decision making as he is hooked up to feeding tubes). Nick, on the other hand, is persistently haunted by his past and drawn back towards it,

[134] Ibid. 496

developing a movement of return and hoped-for redemption that was established in *Libra*. *Underworld* continues to develop *Libra*'s textualist treatment of history with its stylistic fictionalisation of other historical figures, events and documents, which combine to create what DeLillo has called 'the free weave of fiction'. Examples of this are the invented 'lost' Sergei Eisenstein film 'Unterwelt' (one of the many underworlds of the novel); invented stand-up skits by the real comedian Lenny Bruce; and the reinvention of the actual airplane 'boneyard' at the Davis-Monthan Air Force base in the Arizona desert, which becomes Klara's fictional artwork. This is of course to say nothing of the many other historical characters who appear in fictional scenes in the novel.

Nick, a withdrawn and fallen figure, sits at the heart of this sense of historical ambiguity, and Nick's story recalls aspects of Lee Harvey Oswald's. Both men are sons of absent fathers. Both are held to be responsible for a killing that may or may not have been their sole responsibility. In Nick's case, this is his shooting as a teenager of the local waiter and heroin addict George Manza. True blame for this crime – for which the young Nick is exiled from his home in the Bronx and sent to a Jesuit reform school, beginning his narrative of retreat – is never fully established. It may have been Nick's fault or that of Manza himself, with Nick merely a useful patsy helping a desperate man to commit suicide. Like Lee then, Nick is another kind of 'negative Libran', someone who's life, identity and history have been defined by a sense of uncertainty and contingency. However, where Lee sought a movement from personal obscurity into public historical noteworthiness, Nick is haunted by a personal history that is all too noteworthy already, defined by the mysterious disappearance of his father Jimmy Constanza and his killing of George Manza. The rhyming quality of the two names accentuates their thematic connection.

Our first introduction to Nick sees him driving across a blank space rather than standing in it. The reader first meets Nick in 1992, paying a visit to Klara Sax, with whom he had a short affair as a young man. Nick drives out into the desert to the site where Klara is working on a sculpture that recycles old US Air Force planes. On their initial meeting, Nick replays the moment from *Libra*, in which Lee saw himself in the third person, on the run from the authorities. However, the judgement Nick fears is less forensic and more personal. Acknowledging how Klara must see him now after all these years, as a kind of ghost, a withdrawn and diminished version of his former self, Nick narrates: 'She was looking at me, openly evaluating… I had that half dread you feel when someone studies you after a long separation and makes you think that you've done badly to reach this point so altered and drawn. Unknown to yourself.'[135] As the conversation develops, Nick's 'dread' subsides and he tells us that he 'wanted her to see' him. The first topic of their discussion

[135] Ibid. 72

beyond the small-talk platitudes of marriage and family life takes the past as its theme. Understandably, for two people who used to know each other, they discuss their shared history, and once again the idea of history as text crops up. Klara says: 'Sometimes I think that everything I've done since those years, everything around me in fact, I don't know if you feel this way but everything is vaguely – *what* – fictitious.'[136] The syntax of Klara's sentence, awkward and halting, points towards a deep sense of uncertainty. Even the personal history of Americans appears to be rendered fictitious by the 'randomness, ambiguity and chaos' of the second half of the 20th Century.

Despite its depiction of ambiguity (the novel is littered with conversations between many characters that come back to similar ideas as the one Klara expresses to Nick here), *Underworld* in fact acts against randomness and chaos. The connecting threads that unite the fragmented elements of *Underworld*, and the repeated sentiment throughout the novel that 'everything connects', provide both the primary organising principle of the book and its central comment on American identity in the Cold War era. Nick's narrative is just one way in which *Underworld* dramatizes narratives of retreat and incomplete return, which culminate with the novel's closing word, 'Peace.'[137] For Mark Osteen, the many narrative threads of the novel connect via the shared sense of disconnection and dislocation that characterised late 20th Century American identity, fuelled by the loss, alienation and confusion that, in DeLillo's estimation, began in the early 1960s with the assassination of JFK. Connections are created between characters by such 'quasi-magical' objects as the Thomson/Branca baseball and the Zapruder film; the number 13 recurs as a symbol of superstition and mysterious metaphysical influence; thematic connections occur through repeated references to waste and weapons; rhyming or shared names create further connections, as in Manza/Constanza and J. Edgar Hoover/Sister Edgar. However, 'precisely because of its mosaic-like structure and the insurmountable isolation of its major characters, *Underworld* stops short of conclusively affirming a communal salvation. Its final, pacific word is offered hopefully but tentatively as an ideal that may nonetheless remain out of reach.'[138] Of all the characters in the novel, Nick Shay is the one who best embodies this sense of incomplete return, and the withheld salvation that Osteen mentions here is central to his analysis of Nick as a kind of fallen angel figure. Osteen posits that the novel's title hints at the metaphorical place of residence of Lucifer, who like Nick, was a once bright star who 'begins in glory, but ends in the darkness of self-imposed damnation'. Osteen goes as far as to suggest a connection between Nick's name and the colloquial name for Satan, 'old Nick.'[139]

[136] Ibid. 73
[137] Ibid. 827
[138] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 217
[139] Ibid. 222-3.

This analysis provides an interesting, albeit flawed, classical referent for the movement from 'greatness' to fallenness and obscurity that has previously defined many of DeLillo's protagonists. Nick's putative fallenness recalls David Bell's in *Americana*. However, where Bell found a kind of redemption in the throwing and catching of a baseball, Nick Shay (who regularly holds a baseball in his hand) appears on occasion to have given up on redemption altogether. At times, Nick expresses a revelling in exile that recalls Milton's Satan and the famous declaration that it is better to reign in hell than serve in heaven. However, Nick's life in Phoenix resembles more a kind of limbo than the hell in which Milton's Satan dwells, undermining the connection Osteen makes. Despite this, Nick's exile is certainly based on an active choice, similar to the one expressed in the famous Milton quotation. Nick states at the beginning of the section entitled 'The Cloud of Unknowing': 'I've always been a country of one. There's a certain distance in my makeup, a measured separation like my old man's, I guess, that I've worked at times to reduce, or thought of working, or said the hell with it'. Nick's exile is a deliberate and elective one, a 'measured separation' rather than an excommunication, but without the aspect of self-destruction and self-sabotage that characterised Gary Harkness's personal history of failure. In Nick's estimation, his measured separation ends up being a mark of success. He goes on to compare his isolation to the 'perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicate mobster – the made man'. This figure (another iteration of 'great' masculinity to rank alongside the adman, the rock star, the football player, the historic or metaphysical rebel) is, Nick tells us, free to live without 'the constant living influence of sources outside yourself. You're all there. You're made. You're handmade.'[140] Nick, then, appears to find a liberation in isolation that other previous protagonists have not found. By playing on the familiar mafia euphemism of being 'made', Nick suggests that he has achieved a state of completeness, of being 'all there'. He has 'made it' by achieving a desired status, and this in turn allows him to 'make' or 'handmake' himself – to self-determine in a way that Lee Harvey Oswald, with all his phoney aliases and leftist political posturing, only ever grasped at. However, like Lee, Nick also reverses previous characters' movements. Where David, Bucky and Gary start as übermensch figures who have all in some sense 'made it', Nick starts out like Lee, an exiled teenage delinquent, another son of an absent father, who moves towards a kind of triumph, albeit one that requires a retreat.

What Nick has 'made' or achieved is no less than the American Dream. The poor boy from a broken home in the Bronx has become a successful corporate executive with a large house in an affluent suburb. In his conversation with Klara he says he wants her to know that he has 'come out okay.'[141] This sentiment is repeated towards the end of the novel, when Nick reflects that he

[140] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 275
[141] Ibid. 73

has 'done it and come out okay, done it and won, gone in weak and come out strong' in a triumph that echoes Lee's symbolic triumph at the end of *Libra*. However, Nick's apparent success is problematized by the deep sense of loss that pervades both his narrative and the whole of *Underworld*. Any sense of being able to successfully 'make' oneself is undermined by Nick's countervailing (and deeper) loss of self as a result of his father's absence and his own lost youth. The persona Nick has 'made' is a sham, just like the recurring figure of the 'made man' gangster, a fiction which might owe more to Hollywood films than it does to actual underworld gangland history. The closest Nick can get to it in his later years is his residual Bronx accent, which allows him to 'do [his] imitation gangster for the elevator guy.'[142] It is a similarly fictionalised media presentation of gangsterism that inflects Nick's childhood earlier in the novel. Nick's brother Matty remembers him reading aloud from comic books as a child, developing 'a voice for the villains… and an airy stabbing screech for gangster cars cornering tightly in the night.'[143] The 'triumph' is, as the novel's prologue suggests, that of death and submission. Nick remains haunted by his past to such an extent that his present is almost a ghostly existence. At the start of the novel, Nick was a revenant from Klara Sax's past, visiting her in the desert, and his narrative ends with a similar foregrounding of the haunted and ghostly.

Nick begins the final passage of his narrative[144] with a reflection that middle-class success does not bring with it a sense of fulfilment: 'Most of our longings go unfulfilled. This is the word's wistful implication – a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach.'[145] In the passage that follows, DeLillo depicts the trappings of late-century American affluence as a kind of limbo or living death.[146] It is a life spent fastidiously separating rubbish into recyclables or rearranging books on bookshelves. At times, the omega point of Phoenix (the name of the city of course suggests a rebirth, a return that is yet to occur) is reminiscent of an otherworldly limbo landscape that is washed out and faded; in one of Nick's many noncommittal, throwaway observations, tree trunks on the side of a drainage canal are described as 'limed white'. Even the objects he and his wife Marian own are imbued with a 'kind of sadness', and Nick tells us several times that ghosts walk the halls of his house.[147]

Appropriately, the sections of the novel that depict Nick's later life in Phoenix in the early 1990s are often characterised by a reserved prose style, punctuated by bursts of more colourful writing when Nick remembers the old days, returning to his lost youth in the Bronx. When Nick's

[142] Ibid. 803
[143] Ibid. 210
[144] Like *Libra*, *Underworld* is a book with many endings.
[145] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 803
[146] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 222
[147] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 803-10

mother moves in with him and his wife Marian, the impression DeLillo gives of this family unit is one still haunted by paternal absence. Nick re-enacts his father's literal disappearance by withdrawing from his family, vanishing into the insipid landscape of the Phoenix suburbs. By his own admission, he is 'laconic' and evasive,[148] reluctant to tell his wife about his own background. The implication is that his evasiveness with Marian is just the most recent manifestation of the fact that he has been running from his history throughout his adult life. Running seems to be how Nick spends much of his leisure time. A paragraph in which Nick details the disappearance of his father falls, apropos of nothing, between two paragraphs that depict the half-life he now lives, the first of which details the functions of the pedometer he wears while running, the second the specifics of his household's recycling regime:

> The device weighed only three and a half ounces and it showed the distance I ran and the calories I burned and even the length of the strides I took – clipped to the waistband of my trunks.
>
> I was eleven years old when he went out for cigarettes, a warm evening with men playing pinochle inside a storefront club and radio voices everywhere in the street, someone's always playing a radio… There's always a radio and someone playing cards.
>
> At home we wanted clean safe healthy garbage. We rinsed out old bottles and put them in their proper bins.[149]

The central paragraph here is a rare moment of colour and life, despite the fact that it signifies a death, the moment Jimmy 'went out for cigarettes' and never came back. As Nick describes the old neighbourhood in the faraway, long-ago Bronx, DeLillo's usual gift for evocative description reasserts itself, before it is buried once more in blank, ironic detail of household ephemera. Moments such as these exemplify the 'damnation' Mark Osteen sees as Nick's endpoint.

Another indication of this is the disengagement Nick displays from his own marriage. His wife Marian (who Nick knows – and we will later learn – is having an affair with Nick's friend and colleague Brian Glassic) is hungry for details of the colourful life he led in New York as a young man, both before and after the disappearance of his father. When Nick's mother moves in, Marian finds another possible source of this knowledge:

> They talked about the things I did not talk about with Marian, the things I shrugged off when Marian asked, early girlfriends or maybe how I got along with my brother… They

[148] Ibid. 86
[149] Ibid. 118

> also talked about my father. That's the other thing they talked about in the deep lull after dinner.

However, Nick implies that the late-night conversations between Marian and Nick's mother, to which he listens 'fitfully' from the next room, yield little of satisfaction for Marian. Again, DeLillo's customary poetic styling bursts forth whenever the old neighbourhood is mentioned, as if Nick cannot help the urgency and colour of life in the historical Bronx from returning, spilling out into the nondescript Phoenix present.

> Marian wanted me to tell her about the old streets, the street games, the street fights, the alley sex, the petty theft… She wanted to hear about the execution now and then of some wayward member of whatever organized group she imagined might be operating thereabouts, the projectile entering the back of the head and making a pathway to the brain. She thought my mother's arrival might yield the basic savor she could not get from laconic Nick. But my mother only talked about the lazy grades I got in school and how I fell out of a tree when I was eight.
>
> And I liked the way history did not run loose here. [150]

Nick is relieved that his history has not been permitted to 'run loose', but the colourful history that his wife imagines (again reminiscent of the tropes of gangster thrillers) is only a few steps away from Nick's own repressed experiences. He would much rather tell us about his own running loose from his home and marriage on his jogging jaunts, but the images that haunt Nick's adult life are his father's disappearance and his killing of George Manza. In fact, Nick shot Manza, not in the back of the head, but in the face, apparently having been manipulated into the act by the victim. This image repeatedly recurs to Nick and disrupts the narrative of the present. Towards the end of the section entitled 'Long Tall Sally', in which DeLillo establishes Nick's retreat from history and simultaneous yearning to return to it, Nick wakes up in the middle of the night (DeLillo perhaps recycling another Hollywood cliché of the haunted man):

> I heard my mother in the next room getting up to go to the toilet. I listened to her come out of the room. I waited and listened, nearly breathless. I waited for the shuffle of slippers along the hall, for the pace, the familiar rate and pace of the shuffle, and then I listened for the sound of water flushing – fully intent, listening in the fiercest kind of concentrated stillness until she was safely back in bed.

[150] Ibid. 85-6

> I hefted the weapon and pointed it and saw an interested smile fall across his face, the slyest kind of shit-eating grin.
>
> Maybe that was the dream – I wasn't sure.[151]

A muted and familiar domestic scene, that of an old woman getting up in the night and her son listening to ensure she gets back to bed safely, is interrupted by a traumatic and haunting memory from Nick's past. This memory encapsulates the hauntedness of Nick generally, and the ambiguity of the expression on Manza's face suggests the extent to which history remains an impossible unknown.[152] Nick's strategy for coping with his trauma is to sit in an armchair and fondle the legendary baseball, another thread that connects him to the past, after which he tells us 'I felt calmer now. I felt all right.'[153] The ball represents throughout the novel the desire to connect oneself to history, even to the point of merging with it.[154] This section of the novel ends with Nick imagining the Polo Grounds, the now-demolished stadium where the ball was struck, 'now gone to black and white in the film fade of memory.'[155] Despite his desire for history not to 'run loose', Nick finds himself drawn back to his own history after the arrival of his mother. The history from which he has tried to retreat continues to return.

Therefore, in the ghostly landscape of his later years, Nick is both the ghost and the haunted. The memory of killing Manza replays and repeats throughout passages detailing Nick's older life, similar to the constantly repeating Zapruder footage. The older Nick and the young Nick are separated by another 'blank space', a distance of time and geography that, according to Peter Boxall, contains a death within it, just as the Zapruder footage did: 'the death that inhabits and destroys history at every moment of its telling, the death that has to be denied or repressed in order to maintain the fiction of history.'[156] This death is also, of course, the literal death of the man Nick killed. Nick is central to *Underworld*'s textualist treatment of the past, in which history is constantly recycled and rendered fictional in the process. The result is a culture that is, like Nick, detached from its actual history and haunted by representations of it. While the novel's final word acknowledges the end of the Cold War not in mutually assured destruction but in peace, DeLillo depicts a late-century America that remains haunted by generational ghosts and the turbulence of earlier decades.

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[151] Ibid. 132
[152] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, 206
[153] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 133
[154] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 233
[155] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 134
[156] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, 193

Drifting without purpose through the damned and diminished half-life of his affluent existence, Nick is himself haunted by the ghosts of his missing father and his own youthful self. References to his father continue to crop up often in Nick's first-person narrative, usually abruptly in passages otherwise devoted to other topics, suggesting a fixation that the character cannot escape, and Nick repeats (or recycles) his father's absence by disengaging from his own family. At the novel's close, Nick appears to have given up on running away from his history. He ends his narrative actively longing for his past. The unfulfilled longing that started the passage is finally named in the last paragraph narrated by Nick, in which he expresses his desire to return to his own history:

> I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself.[157]

The full extent of Nick's loss is captured in this final paragraph, not just in the obvious impossibility of returning to a previous time, of having those days back again, but also in the irony of his final yearning for disarray and a breach of the peace that is the closing word of the novel. Where *Underworld* generally captures a narrative of the Cold War that ends in peace, Nick can never be fully at peace. A ghost from that earlier time, Nick longs for his days of being 'alive on the earth', feeling the urgency and physicality of his own skin. The blandness of Nick's ghost state captures a similar diminishment in late-century America, in the imagination of a writer born in 1936 and coming of age during the Cold War. The America of the late 1990s, when *Underworld* was published, is more concerned with correctly sorting its rubbish than with imminent nuclear Armageddon. Several years before the more contemporary shock of 9/11 and the threat of global terrorism that has haunted it since, America is safer and cleaner, but arguably lacking the urgency and colour of that earlier, more tumultuous time of Nick Shay's (and DeLillo's) youth. The uncertainty and dislocation that were engendered by the JFK assassination continue to haunt the remnants of the 20th Century. In DeLillo's novels of the 21st Century, this sense of hauntedness will be foregrounded as a primary artistic concern, as the final chapter of this thesis will elucidate.

As this chapter has shown, *Libra* and Underworld are the two novels of DeLillo's middle period that best exemplify DeLillo's textualist treatment of the history of 20th Century America.

[157] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 810

DeLillo's commentary on forms of retreat expands from the personal to the public, while also complicating the more straightforward movements of retreat and return that were discussed in Chapter One.

Chapter Three

The Haunted Present

Retreat and return in *The Body Artist, Point Omega* and *Zero K*

The haunted existence of Nick Shay at the end of *Underworld* initiates a thematic preoccupation that has been a feature of DeLillo's work since the beginning of the 21st Century. His novels since *Underworld* have all, in some sense or another, contained narratives concerning ghostly or haunted characters and strange events. These often play on uncanny compressions of or disruptions to the flow of time, in a return to near-transcendental moments in *Americana* and *Great Jones Street*, in which David and Bucky respectively glimpsed a kind of collapsed time. Much of DeLillo's later writing is imbued with an eerie strangeness that develops the author's pre-existing concern with dislocation and disorientation. In the current moment, these sentiments appear to have taken on a new resonance, as the increasing influence of technology in the lives of the characters leads to further states of uncertainty. The figure of the ghost becomes an important part of DeLillo's presentation of this sense of eerie strangeness. The ghostly figure is also another manifestation of the themes of retreat and return that have haunted his work since the beginning. DeLillo's wider depiction of America in these later novels is one of a country and a people haunted by its recent past and disoriented by new technology, with the ghosts of the 20th Century continually returning to haunt the present. Some critics have applied a Freudian reading to later DeLillo novels, seeing their depictions of ghostly figures and eerie events as examples of a Freudian 'return of the repressed.'[158] However, many of the 'ghosts' in DeLillo's 21st Century novels are images of major 20th Century events. Rather than being repressed, these images have been reproduced and pastiched ad infinitum in the internet age.

There is also a sense, in the reproduction of images and ideas that have long haunted DeLillo's work, that some of the ghosts that haunt the American present are specific to DeLillo's generation. The murder of JFK is, of course, one of these generational ghosts. Indeed, the American 1960s generally, with its upheavals, turmoil and massive social change, continues to define DeLillo's work well into the current century. Added to this is a continuing and developed sense of uncertainty or contingency, which extends beyond the rabbit's warren of plots, counter-plots and conspiracy theories that defined *Libra*. In DeLillo's more recent work, the subjectivity that characterised the treatment of history in *Libra* and *Underworld* becomes a central thematic and

[158] In particular, Laura Barrett's essay '[R]Adiance in Dailiness' applies a Freudian model to the 2016 novel *Zero K*. This essay will be discussed later on in the chapter.

structural concern, to the extent that the very existence of characters within their own narratives, and even the events of the narratives themselves, are defined by a ghostly sense of uncertainty.

Peter Boxall identifies three recurrent preoccupations in the contemporary novel more generally, all of which are clearly visible in the 21st Century work of Don DeLillo. The fin-de-siècle mood generated by the movement from one epoch into another, combined with unprecedented globalism and technological dependency, have first resulted, in Boxall's estimation, in 'a persistent fascination' with time, and especially with compressed or otherwise distorted notions of time. The second recurrent thematic concern is a 'strikingly new attention to the nature of … reality – its materiality, its relation to touch, to narrative and to visuality', which, Boxall posits, has created new forms of realism. Finally, contemporary novelists display a fascination with the human body, and particularly a 'certain estrangement' in the ways in which fictional characters experience their own bodies.[159] All three of these concerns are present in DeLillo's 2001 novella *The Body Artist*. The narrative of this short work concerns the newly bereaved Lauren Hartke, the body artist of the title, who experiences a kind of hiatus from linear time after the suicide of her husband,[160] while rigorously preparing her body, through a series of distancing or estranging exercises, for the performance of a new avant-garde performance artwork. Lauren occupies an unstable narrative temporal reality, cohabiting both the story and her remote, rented holiday home with the mysterious Mr Tuttle, a pale white, 'smallish and fine-bodied'[161] character of uncertain origin and ontology, who the narrative variously suggests may be an escapee from a local institution, an imagined manifestation of Lauren's grief, a ghost, or none of these.

Other critics have also sought to place *The Body Artist* within a broader set of contemporary literary concerns. The novella is one that captures aspects of 'the contemporary extreme', a term used by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel to describe literature that dramatizes realities both similar to and different from our own, often 'permeated by technology and dominated by destruction'. Durand and Mandel place *The Body Artist* alongside a host of other works of the late 20th and early 21st Century, which often use surrealist juxtapositions of traditional realism, technology and fantastical elements to force a 'confrontation between irreconcilable differences, most notably the difference between reality and art.'[162] They go on to suggest a development from the manifestation of these ideas within postmodernism, which is visible in texts in depictions of new hi-tech innovations and 'new emanations from beyond the grave.'[163]

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[159] Boxall, P. *Twenty-First Century Fiction*: *A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 9-11
[160] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, 216
[161] DeLillo, D. *The Body Artist* (London: Picador, 2001), 40
[162] Durand, A. & Mandel, N. (eds) *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), 1
[163] Ibid, 31

There is certainly evidence for both these views. The novella establishes an interest in perceptions of time in the opening sentence: 'Time seems to pass.'[164] It contrasts Lauren's corporal interactions with the world – captured in passages detailing both her sensory experiences and the processes by which she prepares her body for performance – with the vagueness of Mr Tuttle's physical form and the absence after the first chapter of the body of Lauren's husband, whose suicide takes place elsewhere and is reported to us via a newspaper obituary rather than Lauren's lived experience. The novella also presents us with a narrative premise defined by a slightly altered realism. It incorporates technology in the form of voice recording equipment and webcams, the lived experience of characters we identify as 'real people', and Mr Tuttle, who may be a 'real person', a kind of ghost, or a kind of human voice recorder, apparently existing at all times simultaneously. However, just as prominent in *The Body Artist* is a continuation of the themes of retreat that have characterised all DeLillo's writing. This finds a further iteration in figures and metaphors connected to ghosts and haunting, a development of the presentation of *Underworld's* Nick Shay as a kind of ghost. In the ontological uncertainty of figures more ghostly than Nick, who are themselves diminished human forms returning to haunt the living, DeLillo finds another means to express the ideas of retreat, return and contingency that have been discussed thus far. *The Body Artist's* Lauren Hartke, who pulls off her own act of elusiveness and vanishing by walking out of a journalistic interview in the latter part of the book, also refreshes DeLillo's familiar tropes of retreat by casting a woman as the retreating figure. Where the male ascetic is now a well-established figure in his work, this is the first instance of a female figure undergoing a similar journey. And, as this chapter will elucidate, where the elder statesman figures of *Point Omega* and *Zero K* are returned to the world passively, against their will, in the latter instance only to conduct a Lear-like crawl toward death, Lauren's ultimate return is one of liberation, self-determination and self-renewal. In their own depictions of return, *Zero K* and *Point Omega* partially reverse the plot of *Libra*. Where Lee Harvey Oswald strove throughout *Libra* to become an historical figure and appear in history, while retaining a withdrawn, almost mythical status, the protagonists of the two later novels are in flight from history, attempting a retreat from their status as historical figures, in a return to the narratives of *Americana*, *End Zone*, and *Great Jones Street*.

As well as signalling a fascination with the nature of time, the opening sentence of *The Body Artist* establishes a tone of narrative uncertainty that will continue to colour the rest of the work. Time only 'seems' to pass. From here, the opening paragraph develops the theme of physical interaction with the world, with a lingering uncertainty about which world it is that we inhabit.

[164] DeLillo, *The Body Artist,* 3

> Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely and streaks of running luster on the bay. You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness. The wind makes a sound in the pines and the world comes into being, irreversibly, and the spider rides the wind-swayed web.[165]

There is a clear focus on the sensory here: the play of light on water, the image of a spider on a web, the sound of wind in trees. However, the individual elements of this sensory experience are not located anywhere in the real, tangible world that exists outside the text. 'The bay' appears to be a generic one in an unspecified location; 'the pines' are similarly non-specific. Indeed, the only real place mentioned in the text is the town of Kotka in Finland, and Lauren's only interaction with that place is via the surreal and dislocating medium of webcam footage that she watches at night. The description of the footage heightens the sense of Lauren being divorced from her own time, since the digital time display and the firm margins of the screen provide a sense of 'organization' and 'realness' that her own lived experience lacks.[166] The use of the second person pronoun to start a story is by now a familiar device at the beginning of DeLillo novels. *Underworld,* of course, begins: 'He speaks in your voice, American'. However, the 'he' and 'you' of *Underworld's* opening sentence were clearly defined, with the former being Cotter Martin and the latter the every-person American citizen, who speaks in Cotter's voice and has more in common with Cotter than he or she might wish to admit. The 'you' of *The Body Artist's* opening is vague. It is unclear whether this is a description of the protagonist Lauren's interactions with nature, or if we are to read ourselves into the text here. Certainly, the idea of a 'world [coming] into being' suggests the world of the novella, one that DeLillo and the reader bring into being between them, by writing and reading respectively. It is ironic that this opening paragraph asserts that 'You know more surely who you are' when the exact identity of the 'you' is so uncertain.

The significance of the word 'seems' will be established later in the text. In a passage that slips back into this second-person narrative, DeLillo describes another generic and ubiquitous experience, that of driving in a car: 'Everything is slow and hazy and drained and it all happens around the word *seem*. All the cars including yours seem to flow in dissociated motion, giving the impression of or presenting the appearance of, and the highway runs in a white hum.'[167] There is more ambiguity in the unfinished clauses; exactly what we are given the impression or appearance

[165] Ibid. 3
[166] Ibid. 37
[167] Ibid. 29

of is never named. This technique recurs later, when Lauren reads a newspaper article 'about a child abandoned in some godforsaken', the incompleteness suggesting an uncertainty of time and place. However, this passage in turn is connected by the word 'flow' to the final sentence of the novel, which identifies the references to cars as a metaphor for the illusion that time passes in a linear fashion. Lauren's experiences after Rey's death will elucidate this common human fallacy as grief casts her into a state somehow outside the flow of time.

Given the novella's interest in the notion that time need not, in fact, 'flow' in a linear fashion, it is apt that the magazine obituary of Lauren's husband Rey Robles, which forms a non-narrative intermission between the novella's first and second chapters, is replete with uncertainties. Rey echoes *Libra* and anticipates *Point Omega* and *Zero K* in the sense that he appears, on death, to have retreated from his own historical status. The obituary tells us that accounts of Rey's childhood and early life are 'inconsistent', and that even his age at death is a matter of conjecture, with 'the most persuasive independent versions' merely 'suggest[ing] he was 64'. Originally born Alejandro Alquezar in Barcelona, he adopted the name Rey Robles 'after a minor character he played in an obscure film noir.'[168] As we will see, the tentativeness of the narrative voice in these instances establishes contingency as a central thematic concern. And contingency pervades the entirety of the novella's plot, in which Lauren will experience an uncanny timelessness in the presence of a character who is never satisfactorily defined either temporally or ontologically.

After Rey commits suicide, Lauren stays on in the coastal holiday home they have rented together. She mourns her husband in isolation, avoiding answering the telephone when it rings. She commits to a strategy of dealing with grief by managing time: 'The plan was to organize time until she could live again.'[169] However, this quixotic attempt to manage the chaos of grief quickly comes unstuck with the entrance of a strange, pale-skinned character who appears unbidden in the house, and whom she names Mr Tuttle, after one of her old high-school teachers. Mr Tuttle, then, is the primary 'ghost' of the text. However, Rey and Lauren herself will also appear in ghostly forms on occasion. Shortly before her first encounter with Mr Tuttle, Lauren experiences Rey as a ghostly presence, 'the smoke… the thing in the air, vaporous… unshaped, but with a face that was somehow part of the presence.'[170] This vaporous ghost is then displaced by a more tangible one when, walking through the rooms of the dilapidated cottage, Lauren meets the character first described as 'him': 'She found him the next day in a small bedroom off the large empty room at the far end of the hall on the third floor. He was smallish and fine-bodied and at first she thought

[168] Ibid. 25-6
[169] Ibid. 36
[170] Ibid. 31

he was a kid, sandy-haired and roused from deep sleep, or medicated maybe.'[171] The uncertainty of this first description sets the tone for the way in which the character of Mr Tuttle will be described throughout the rest of the text. A character who stands as an embodiment of contingency, he is introduced apropos of nothing, with no sense of narrative motivation or origin. Indeed, he doesn't yet even possess a name, since Lauren will only call him Mr Tuttle later on.

This first encounter with the character who will soon be named Mr Tuttle occurs at the end of a chapter, as if aping a cliff-hanger chapter ending in a conventional thriller or ghost story. However, while the next chapter continues the same scene, we are told that Lauren 'felt no fear' at the confrontation with the strange being in the house. Instead of fearing the ghostly figure, Lauren appears to feel responsible for him: 'He had a foundling quality – lost and found – and she was, she guessed, the finder'. As Mark Shuster has suggested, Mr Tuttle continues the trope seen in earlier DeLillo novels of the child savant.[172] He is presented as being in some way gifted, despite his 'foundling quality', possessing an insight beyond normal human experience, while the instability of Mr Tuttle's state is made clear immediately. As soon as Lauren engages with him, her perception of him changes. Where she had initially thought he was a child, she next sees that he 'seemed older now, the scant act of head-raising, a simple tilt of chin and eyes that was minutely crucial to his transformation.'[173] The conversation between Lauren and Mr Tuttle is itself diminished, lexically sparse and characterised by a failure of engagement, with Mr Tuttle either misunderstanding her questions about where he came from or lacking suitable answers. Thus, DeLillo establishes the importance of language in determining Mr Tuttle's nondescript strangeness. His first utterance, which he repeats after his first attempt is too quiet for Lauren to hear, is the arcane and grammatically awkward sentence 'It is not able'. This sentence, along with other similarly awkward utterances later on, negate his existence in the present tense occupied by Lauren[174] and suggest his inability to express the true nature of his existence. And, as further encounters between Lauren and Mr Tuttle occur in short, broken scenes, the full extent to which uncertainty defines him emerges:

> He moved uneasily in space, indoors and out, as if the air had bends and warps. She watched him sidle into the house, walking with a slight shuffle. He feared levitation maybe. She could not stop watching him.

[171] Ibid. 40
[172] Shuster, M. *DeLillo, Baudrillard and the Consumer Conundrum* (Youngstown: Cambria Press, 2008), 192
[173] Ibid. 43
[174] Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 135

> It was always as if. He did this or that as if. She needed a reference elsewhere to get him placed.[175]

No such reference is forthcoming, and Lauren is forced to live with the 'as if' that defines Mr Tuttle's character, even while she repeatedly asks him, without success, to tell her where he came from. She ponders whether he might be a runaway from a local psychiatric ward, or someone from one of the rundown trailer homes at the edge of the nearby woods.[176] There is a temptation to offer a straightforward interpretation of what Mr Tuttle is precisely, and Mikko Keskinen offers three possible options: either he is a 'real', if not realistic person within the narrative, just like Lauren herself, or he is Lauren's grief-stricken hallucination, or he is a ghost.[177] However, such a reductive approach risks missing the larger point that Mr Tuttle stands for wider uncertainty and contingency, while also appearing to be an entity who somehow exists outside time. When he begins talking to Lauren in her own voice, apparently replaying conversations she had with Rey before the latter's suicide, Lauren starts to understand that his odd inflections of grammatical tense point towards a larger mystery beyond normal human experience. It is suggested that Mr Tuttle experiences all time simultaneously, something he attempts to explain in one of the few extended speeches in the novella: 'Coming and going I am leaving. I will go and come. Leaving has come to me…And I will go or not or never. And I have seen what I will see.'[178]

Lauren (and the narrative itself) vacillates between rationalistic explanations for Mr Tuttle's presence and a sense that his origins are more numinous. At times he appears ghostly, at other times he is tangibly, physically real. He often vanishes, like a ghost or a figment of Lauren's imagination, so that Lauren is confused by his sudden absence and stands in the hallway of the house calling for him.[179] She finds that naming him Mr Tuttle somehow makes him 'easier to see.'[180] On other occasions she engages with him physically and is confronted by his visceral 'realness', most notably when she straps him into the car for a trip to the supermarket and returns from her shopping to find him sitting in a pool of his own excrement.[181] Ultimately, Lauren begins to understand that Mr Tuttle is a man out of time, experiencing many time periods simultaneously:

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[175] DeLillo, *The Body Artist*. 45
[176] Ibid. 50
[177] Kesinen, M. 'Posthumous Voice and Residual Presence in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*' *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, 32
[178] DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, 78-9
[179] Ibid. 63
[180] Ibid. 48
[181] Ibid. 68

> Maybe this man experiences another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after, and he moves from one to the other shatteringly, in a state of collapse, minus an identity, a language, a way to enjoy the savor of the honey-coated toast she watches him eat.
>
> She thought maybe he lived in a kind of time that had no narrative quality. What else did she think? She sat in the nearly bare office on the second floor and didn't know what else she thought.[182]

Again, everything concerning Mr Tuttle is merely a 'maybe', and Lauren's uncertainty influences the whole of the third-person narrative, which suffers its own 'state of collapse', finding itself no more able than Lauren is to describe what she thought, and perhaps bring meaning to Mr Tuttle's esoteric utterance earlier on.

As has been the case in many previous DeLillo novels, this failure of expression finds its eventual reversal not in language but in the movements of a physical artform. Art provides, for Lauren, a means to redeem her existence from the chaotic uncertainty of grief.[183] Interposed with the passages describing Lauren's uncanny experiences with Mr Tuttle are short descriptive sections that detail the process of physical diminishment that Lauren goes through to prepare her body for performance. She ritualistically bleaches, scrapes and sands her body in a process of ascetic self-effacement that has much more purpose and fervour than the faux asceticism of *Americana's* David Bell, which was informed by vague continental exoticism. However, like Bell, Lauren experiences a kind of revelation through physical effort. Lauren finds this not through baseball but through preparation for body art performance, through 'the poses she assumed and held for prolonged periods, the gyrate exaggerations, the snake shapes and flower bends, the prayerful spans of systematic breathing', all of which bring her to a state where she emerges 'in a kind of pristine light, feeling what it means to be alive.'[184] Eventually, she undertakes to 'depigment herself' with a 'fade cream', becoming ghostly herself, 'a spook,'[185] all the while moving closer to the composition of the artwork that will mark her transition out of the suspended non-time of grief, returning her to the living world.

A second journalistic passage makes up *The Body Artist's* penultimate chapter, and serves, with the obituary of Rey Robles seen earlier, as a kind of bookend to the narrative of the novella. This time, the piece is a review of Lauren's performance by her friend Mariella Chapman, who is shocked by the transformation that Lauren's body has undergone during her period of withdrawal.

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[182] Ibid. 68
[183] Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 136
[184] DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, 60
[185] Ibid. 89-90

In Mariella's estimation the artist looks 'wasted… colorless, bloodless and ageless… raw-boned and slightly bug-eyed.'[186] Mark Osteen sees in this appearance a sense of Lauren being reborn after Rey's death. She is prepared now, after the process of grief has ended, to forge a new identity in the world.[187] Perhaps more obviously, Lauren has transformed herself, during her time with Mr Tuttle, into a ghostly figure for the purposes of performance. The performance itself appears to owe a similar debt to the strange character who she has been living with on and off in the remote cottage. Mariella's article describes a long and esoteric work in which Lauren assumes different physical personas, even adapting her voice to speak in other tongues, just as Mr Tuttle has replayed other characters' words like a human tape recorder or answering machine.[188] Lauren's work, Mariella thinks, is 'obscure, slow, difficult', an artwork in which the audience will 'feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully.'[189] The version of Lauren presented to us via Mariella's journalistic article is not dissimilar to Mr Tuttle in its resistance to interpretation. Tellingly, the article ends with a description of Lauren's disappearance from Mariella's company. The journalist tells us that, after meeting Lauren over lunch for an interview, she waits for the artist to return from the toilet. However, Lauren vanishes, just as Mr Tuttle did: 'I sit and wait for Hartke but she doesn't come back.'[190] Lauren, then has more in common with the retreating male figures than the more consistent and less interesting female characters of previous works. The act of retreat as an expression of independence and self-determination is no longer the preserve of such testosterone-driven figures as the football player or rock star. And the novel becomes a story of Lauren's liberation from an uxorial role, and her emergence from wifely grief, into a new sense of vitality, defined by her achievements as an artist.

As we see in a final narrative passage, Lauren does in fact 'come back', returning to the 'flow of time' from which grief has jolted her. Further echoes of David Bell occur in a final life-affirming action. Where David Bell drove through Dealey Plaza sounding the horn of his car, Lauren walks into an empty room and throws open a window, having looked for Mr Tuttle, knowing that she would not find him, as if she has exorcised the ghost that was haunting her. And there is a spiritual aspect to the description that reminds us of the epiphany David Bell experienced playing baseball, in which he also experienced a kind of compression of time:

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[186] Ibid. 109
[187] Osteen, M. 'DeLillo's Dedalian Artists' *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* John Duvall (ed) Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008, 148
[188] Keskinen, 'Posthumous Voice', 34-6
[189] DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, 110-6
[190] Ibid. 116

> The room was empty when she looked. No one was there. The light was so vibrant she could see the true colors of the walls and floor. She'd never seen the walls before. The bed was empty. She'd known it was empty all along but was only catching up…
>
> She walked into the room and went to the window. She opened it. She threw the window open. She didn't know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was.[191]

The vibrancy of the light reminds us of both the play of light on water in the novel's opening, and the 'pristine light' that Lauren experienced after completing her breathing and contortion exercises, and comes close to describing something like spiritual grace. This vibrant light also appears to elucidate things that have been unclear before now. Lauren sees the tangible materials of the house and comes to terms with the absence in the room, the empty bed that is devoid both of Mr Tuttle and Rey, suggesting a movement beyond grief. She 'catches up' with herself in time and feels greater certainty about her physical place within the world and the reasons for her actions, returning to the 'flow of time' in a tangible, sensory way. This final passage suggests a resolution of the uncertainty that has haunted the text, as Lauren's ghostly retreat in grief comes to a close with a return to something more akin to our daily reality.

A disorienting manipulation of time is also central to the 2010 novella *Point Omega*. The work's primary narrative is bookended by ekphrastic descriptions of the 1993 installation art piece *24 Hour Psycho* by the Scottish video artist Douglas Gordon. In a short passage entitled 'Anonymity: *September 3*', the narrator describes a man watching *24 Hour Psycho* in New York's Museum of Modern Art.[192] Gordon's piece slows down the original running time of Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho* to a text time of 24 hours, and silences the soundtrack so that only the decelerated image remains. The description of the work in *Point Omega* captures how this super-slow-motion version of one of the most renowned movies of the 1960s (a filmic generational ghost, similar to the Zapruder footage, which has also been slowed down, sped up, paused, rewound and otherwise manipulated constantly since the 1960s) creates a different sense of eeriness to that depicted in *The Body Artist*. Where the strangeness of Lauren's encounter with Mr Tuttle leads to a glimpse of a perception of time beyond our normal ken, *Point Omega* describes how an already famously disturbing and eerie horror film can be rendered stranger still in slow-motion. The work is also described by several characters in the novella, who regard it variously as 'like watching the

[191] Ibid. 132

[192] The work was actually exhibited at MOMA as part of a retrospective exhibition of Gordon's work entitled 'Douglas Gordon: Timeline', which ran from the 11th of June to the 4th of September, 2006.

contraction of the universe,'[193] and 'stillborn images, collapsing time.'[194] Unlike *The Body Artist*, it is not the appearance of a strange figure but the movements onscreen of familiar characters played by Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh that become disorienting, almost ghostly in their monochrome slowness and silence. However, like Lauren, the anonymous 'man at the wall', the watcher of the installation, experiences physical discomfort and privation as a means to a heightened understanding. He is in fact one of two 'men at the wall' in this work. The young filmmaker Jim Finley, who narrates the main body of the novella, plans to film Richard Elster against a bare wall for his film project. The phrase 'man at the wall', then, comes to signify a retreating character in an isolated and diminished fringe position.[195]

The eerie strangeness of *24 Hour Psycho* of course echoes *Underworld's* treatment of the Zapruder film. David Cowart identifies the use of the work in DeLillo's writing as part of a 'postmodern declension' of the massive social upheaval of the 1960s. The original *Psycho*, which had its first release in 1960 and remains one of the most important films in the American horror and suspense genre, becomes an early stage in the 'evolving grammar of dread' that has characterised American identity and foreign policy in the decades since. This includes of course 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' which are important backdrops for the book's primary narrative. The film becomes reoriented within a 'millennial musing on time' via DeLillo's ekphrastic description of Douglas Gordon's artwork.[196] However, this macroscopic reading of the evolution of American fears overlooks a more redemptive reading of the influence of *Psycho*, which is very much in keeping with earlier DeLillo work.

The narrator informs us that the slow-motion nature of the installation artwork highlights in a truer form the nature of the movements that the actors make, such as the 'slow transit' of Anthony Perkins's eyes, or how he 'turns his head in five incremental movements, rather than one continuous motion'. Such is the revelatory effect of the work that 'The slightest camera movement [is] a profound shift in space and time.'[197] However, it is only the 'closest watching that yielded this perception', and the work demands a 'degree of intensity' from the viewer to be understood. We are told that the man at the wall has 'been standing for more than three hours' watching the installation, and that he has returned to the gallery for five consecutive days to watch the piece.

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[193] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 47
[194] Ibid. 53
[195] 'The Triumph of Death', which later became the prologue of *Underworld*, was originally published as 'Pafko at the Wall' within the October 1992 edition of *Harper's Magazine*. In 2001 Scribner published it as a standalone novella. The original title is a reference to a famous photograph of baseball player Andy Pafko standing under the wall at the outfield of the Polo Grounds stadium, watching Bobby Thomson's home run sailing over his head, powerless to stop it, signifying again a sense of failure, loss and isolation.
[196] Cowart, 'The Lady Vanishes', 36 – Mark Osteen also builds his analysis of DeLillo's work around notions of millennial dread.
[197] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 5-7

Elsewhere, the man is described as knowing 'that he would stay until the museum closed, two and a half hours from now, then come back in the morning.'[198] This level of commitment appears to be essential for a true appreciation of the artwork, in a variation on Lauren's physical commitment to creating her art in *The Body Artist*. To the viewer who commits, as the unnamed man does, to watching for extended periods, the film transcends to the status of 'pure time', becoming something revelatory, far from the creeping dread that Cowart sees as its thematic purpose in the text. The unnamed man understands that the purpose of the artwork is to 'feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion'. Again, DeLillo depicts a character experiencing a purity of vision through physical effort, here the determined and uncomfortable act of standing still for hours on end. Like David Bell did in catching and throwing a baseball, and Lauren Hartke did in physical preparation for body art, the unnamed man seems to experience in the ghostly movements of the actors in the film 'something outside conscious grasp until now,'[199] a numinous truth beyond the veil of normal existence.

The main narrative of the novella details narrator Jim Finley's extended visit to the ramshackle desert hideaway of Richard Elster, for the purpose of making a single-take film of the older man talking about his experiences as a foreign policy adviser during the War on Terror. The visit and the film project are disrupted by the arrival and subsequent disappearance of Elster's daughter Jessie. The work features further returns to ideas, figures and stock characters that had their first outings in *Americana* and *End Zone*.[200] As he did in earlier work, DeLillo adopts the voice of a young man as his narrator. Jim Finley is an aspirational but unsuccessful young filmmaker, similar to David Bell. Like Bell he becomes a viewer of a diminished and inscrutable elder statesman figure, here the exiled Richard Elster. Elster has retreated into the desert after a series of failures, much as Gary Harkness did in *End Zone* and Nick Shay did in *Underworld*. Richard Elster's retreat is not predicated by self-sabotage; he loses his position in government against his will. But, similar to Gary and Bucky in *Great Jones Street*, Elster's withdrawal has a naïve spiritual intention, which supports Mark Osteen's claim that DeLillo's characters' attempts to retreat from the world are usually misguided, driven by folly, and eventually doomed to fail.[201] Therefore, while *Point Omega* is a philosophical meditation on such metaphysical concerns as time and death – thematically very much in keeping with *The Body Artist* – the book displays the return of a number of figures from DeLillo's early period, 'ghosts' from the novelist's early career.

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[198] Ibid. 6-7
[199] Ibid. 14
[200] The titles of *End Zone* and *Point Omega* are of course suggestive of similar thematic concerns. Aptly, both feature the notion of the desert as an endpoint beyond space and time.
[201] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 31

Just as the images of the 1960s have become unmoored in the current moment, David Cowart sees in *Point Omega* the dramatization of a further diminishment in American identity since 2001, 'the unmooring of American purpose' in the legacy of 9/11.[202] The narrator Jim Finley refers to a sense of national 'dwindling' that may have necessitated some of the more controversial aspects of the War on Terror.[203] Richard Elster seems to embody this specifically. Originally an academic, Elster provided an intellectual viewpoint on the War on Terror after publishing a paper on the ethically questionable practices of extraordinary rendition, acceding to a privileged position at the centre of American government action before retreating into the desert. Jim Finley's first-person narrative tells us that Elster

> was an outsider, a scholar with an approval rating but no experience in government. He sat at a table in a secure conference room with the strategic planners and military analysts. He was there to conceptualize, his word, in quotes, to apply overarching ideas and principles to such matters as troop deployment and counter-insurgency. He was cleared to read classified cables and restricted transcripts, he said, and he listened to the chatter of the resident experts, the metaphysicians in the intelligence agencies, the fantasists in the Pentagon.
>
> The third floor of the E ring at the Pentagon. Bulk and swagger, he said.
>
> He'd exchanged all that for space and time.[204]

The depiction of the esoteric workings of high government, while being reminiscent of the depiction of plots and counter-plots in *Libra*, also supports Cowart's analysis of an unmooring of purpose in its depiction of an America that seems to have lost its way. The listing of jargonistic phrases suggests an overburdening excess or decadence of institutional and administrative arcana. The undermining of extremely powerful people, who here become dismissively labelled as 'metaphysicians' and 'fantasists', all 'bulk and swagger', heightens the sense of pompous grandeur in which they dress themselves. And, in the end, Elster exchanges his access to that sought-after world for simple space and time, which are both conceptually and linguistically untainted, their monosyllabic purity contrasting the clunky jargon seen earlier in the passage.

David Cowart sees many of Elster's 'gnomic pronouncements' as being undermined by 'whiffs from the sewer of pretension', and identifies similarities between Elster and the novelist himself.[205] The depiction of Elster is reminiscent of David Bell's description of his father in the

[202] Cowart, 'The Lady Vanishes', 46
[203] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 35
[204] Ibid. 19
[205] Cowart, 'The Lady Vanishes', 31

New York restaurant, discussed in Chapter One. Again, we see a formidable male figure gone slightly to seed, an older man (his age is given as 73)[206] rendered mysterious when viewed through the lens of a younger man's perception of him. However, the intervening years between *Americana* and *Point Omega* add a new dimension to this depiction of the elder statesman. Now, of course, DeLillo himself also qualifies as a kind of elder statesman, and at times the author appears to nod towards his own mystique in the character of Richard Elster.[207] Richard is the kind of 'great man' that DeLillo (whose middle name is also Richard) is often perceived to be: an intellectual, a man of note within his field, an irascible interviewee, a person sought after but often evasive. In a descriptive passage that presages a discussion between Jim and Richard, the latter is shown to be a diminished but still formidable figure, much like Clinton Bell in *Americana*:

> He sat on the deck, a tall man in wrinkled cotton trousers of landmark status. He went barechested much of the day, slathered in sunblock even in the shade, and his silvery hair, as always, was braided down into a short ponytail… His face was long and florid, flesh drooping slightly at the sides of the jaw. He had a large pocked nose, eyes maybe grayish green, brows flaring. The braided hair should have seemed incongruous but didn't. It wasn't styled in sections but only woven into broad strands at the back of the head and it gave him a kind of cultural identity, a flair of distinction, the intellectual as tribal leader.[208]

Elster, then, is a barechested and slightly drooping tribal leader, an appropriate one perhaps for a tribe that has, as Cowart suggests, lost its sense of purpose. In the description of Elster's braided hair, the character dovetails with another stock figure from DeLillo's writing: that of the mysterious sacerdotal elder. This latter figure will reappear in the final novel to be discussed in this chapter, *Zero K*, which also features a depiction of another diminished elder statesman, viewed, once more, through the perception of a younger man.

Elster's exile in the desert bears a number of similarities to Lauren's hiatus in the holiday cottage after Rey's suicide. Like the cottage, the place of Elster's exile is an 'old house, underfurnished' in a location that is pointedly unspecified. Thus, Elster's claim to have exchanged power and influence for space and time is undermined by the extent to which his exile appears to remove him from both specific place and measurable time. Jim Finley describes the location of

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[206] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 20

[207] While the character's surname bears phonetic similarities to the phrase 'elder statesman', it appears to have been inspired by the surname of the veiled antagonist who confounds James Stewart's character in *Vertigo*. This itself might be a self-reflexive reference on DeLillo's part, suggesting perhaps (in a manner reminiscent of *Libra*) an association with the man who comes up with the plot.

[208] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 23

Elster's house as 'somewhere south of nowhere in the Sonoran Desert or maybe it was the Mojave Desert or another desert altogether.'[209] This ambiguity of place seems to be an important feature of retreat into the desert, just as *End Zone's* Gary Harkness ended up in an 'unfed place,'[210] somewhere near a fictional town in the Texas desert. This dislocation of place is accompanied, as it was in *The Body Artist*, by a disruption of, or retreat from, measurable time. Elster tells Jim that time in the desert is 'enormous' and that it 'precedes and survives us.'[211] Against the ancient and timeless backdrop of the desert, time as experienced by human beings diminishes to nothing. Consequently, Elster feels removed from time when in the desert. He says 'I never know what day it is. I never know if a minute has passed or an hour. I don't get old here.'[212]

However, Elster's retreat from time is also an escape from what he calls 'the usual terror' that lies beneath the way people experience time in normal society, which appears to be another part of the 'grammar of dread' that Cowart and Osteen have identified in DeLillo's work generally. When Jim asks what this terror is, Elster responds with a long and gnomic explication of the 'minute-by-minute reckoning' that reminds us of how quickly our lives are ending, and appears to take in notions of physical movement through space as well as time:

> It's all embedded, the hours and minutes, words and numbers everywhere, he said, train stations, bus routes, taxi meters, surveillance cameras. It's all about time, dimwit time, inferior time, people checking watches and other devices, other reminders. This is time draining out of our lives. Cities were built to measure time, to remove time from nature. There's an endless counting down, he said. When you strip away all the surfaces, when you see into it, what's left is terror.[213]

Elster's aim appears not just to be an escape from time but an escape from communication ('words and numbers') and from quotidian movement ('train stations, bus routes, taxi meters'). Of course, these things are all time-dependent, and perhaps what Elster seeks in the desert is a nirvana-like status similar to that of Mr Tuttle in *The Body Artist,* one in which he can be liberated from linear time, achieving the omega point of the novella's title. The final word here also of course suggests an historical retreat in that it reminds us of Elster's small role in the War in Terror, an arguably ill-conceived and naïve project that culminated in failure, driven, as Cowart suggests, by a loss of national purpose. By the end of the novel, we will see Elster's retreat in a similar light. Elster, then,

[209] Ibid. 20
[210] DeLillo, *End Zone*, 4
[211] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 44
[212] Ibid. 24
[213] Ibid. 44-5

is one of two 'ghosts' in *Point Omega*, a man who wants to accede to the status of the ghost, who seeks freedom from normal notions of time so that he can be free of the terror of death, of time running out. However, the folly of this wish is highlighted by the actual disappearance of the other 'ghost' in the story, Richard's daughter Jessie. The influence of Hitchcock continues in both the nature of the character itself, and the uncertainty that surrounds her disappearance, which may or may not have something to do with the shadowy figure in the art gallery in the novella's prologue and epilogue.[214] David Cowart suggests that Jessie displays the brittle mystique of the doomed Hitchcock heroine,[215] more akin to Kim Novak in *Vertigo* (1958) than *Psycho*'s Janet Leigh. However, as well as being haunted, as the classic Hitchcock heroine is, Jessie is herself a ghostly figure, even before her own vanishing.

Like Lauren Hartke, Jessie is 'pale and thin', and she is haunted by 'some interior presence' from which she 'heard words.'[216] Jim describes his conversations with her as 'eerie,'[217] and he finds her hard to quantify. In a possible nod to *Vertigo*, we are told in passing that Jessie struggles to navigate escalators, and cannot drive a car 'because she couldn't do commands with her hands and feet,'[218] although the inability to ascend, descend or determine her own lateral direction might also imply a limbo in which she floats like a lost soul, recalling *Underworld*'s Nick Shay. Aptly, Jessie is a person who makes little impression on the spaces she occupies. Jim tells us that they shared a bathroom, 'but she rarely seemed to be in there. A small airline kit, the only trace of her presence, was tucked into a corner of the windowsill'. Indeed, where Mr Tuttle experienced all times simultaneously, Jessie seems to have a similarly ghostly relationship with physical space:

> She was sylphlike, her element was air. She gave the impression that nothing about this place was different from any other, this south and west, latitude and longitude. She moved through places in a soft glide, feeling the same things everywhere, this is what there was, the space within.[219]

If her element is air, the airline washbag is doubly appropriate. As well as having a lexical association, the 'airline kit', presumably a freebie from a prior flight, is generic and borrowed, lacking a stamp of ownership. A potentially intimate item becomes another signifier of ghostliness

[214] Cowart, 'The Lady Vanishes', 44
[215] Ibid. 34
[216] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 39
[217] Ibid. 42
[218] Ibid. 41
[219] Ibid. 49

in its absence of a distinctive character. And Jessie's sylphlike glide from one place to another further suggests a vapidity, as of a ghost or a soul in limbo.

Jessie's disappearance in the third chapter of the novella is explicated with a simple statement of fact. Jim and Richard drive to the supermarket for food and 'When [they] got back to the house she was gone.'[220] Later, Jim's narrative returns to the notion of air being her element when he begins a chapter: 'Passing into air, it seemed this is what she was meant to do, what she was made for'. There is a sense that her vanishing was inevitable, to be expected, 'the only deviation' from her normal routine airiness.[221] However, Jim and Richard's vain searching and fraught calls to the local sheriff precipitate a further diminishment in the older man. Even immediately before Jessie vanishes, Elster appears to have lost what vigour he still retained earlier in the book, appearing as a parodic figure of an old man, as if he eerily anticipates the disappearance of his daughter: 'He came out shuffling and moved past me, pyjamas smelling old, body old… his dependable stink trailing the man to his chair.'[222] This process of further diminishment continues after the disappearance, even as the fallacy of Elster's initial retreat into the desert is revealed. Far from being liberated, as he suggested earlier, in fact he is restricted and diminished, both physically and mentally, by the eternity of desert time. He also appears to be haunted, in a slight and appropriately minor-key way, by his ghost daughter. We are told that he 'began to see things out of the corner of his eye. He'd walk into a room and catch a glimpse of something, a colour, a movement. When he turned his head, nothing. It happened once or twice a day… Someone was there but then she wasn't.'[223] The 'flair of distinction' that Elster had earlier on appears to have vanished with Jessie, to the extent that he starts to look like a stock figure of retreat from television or film:

> He began to resemble a recluse who might live in a shack on an abandoned mining site, unwashed old man, shaky, stubbled, caution in his eyes, a fear from one step to the next that someone or something is waiting… The desert was clairvoyant, this is what he'd always believed, that the landscape unravels and reveals, it knows future as well as past. But now it made him enclosed and I understood this, hemmed in, pressed tight.[224]

Unlike Jessie, whose disappearance is a kind of liberation, a self-determining act of removing herself from the scrutiny of the two male characters, Elster remains stuck with time and place,

[220] Ibid. 75
[221] Ibid. 81
[222] Ibid. 70
[223] Ibid. 86
[224] Ibid. 87

hemmed in by his own temporality and spatiality. Elster has claimed on numerous occasions in dialogue that the desert's timelessness reveals to us our omega point, something we fear but long for, a spiralling towards oblivion, to 'pass completely out of being.'[225] However, this gnomic pronouncement, like all Elster's similar comments on the nature of human existence, is ultimately dwarfed by his grief at Jessie's disappearance. In a late passage that establishes the crux of the work, Jim expresses his ultimate realisation that the man he went to interview for his film had no meaningful answers after all. For all Elster's claims that we seek death as an omega point, when confronted with his daughter's uncertain fate, her actual omega point, the philosophy is exposed as hopelessly naïve, and falls away in the visceral reality of grief and loss.

> I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not.[226]

The certainty with which Elster spoke vanishes with Jessie. And the uncertainty of her disappearance seems too much for Elster to bear. The violent image of a knife entering a body suggests Jessie's possible fate, and the 'one body' is Jessie's, a missing body that may or may not be 'out there somewhere', in the desert or the rest of the world. The sense of contingency and uncertainty that has defined the lives of many of DeLillo's characters comes to define Jessie's death. Jim's film project ends in failure, just as David Bell's did. He tells us for certain that the film 'would never happen now, not a single frame,'[227] in a contrast to the uncertainty that characterises the rest of *Point Omega*'s ending.

Ultimately, Elster himself diminishes almost to the point of vanishing. Where he was 'half-smashed' in drunkenness on the deck, he will end up a mere outline of himself by the novella's close. *Point Omega* repeats the final movement of *Great Jones Street*, with the suggestion that the two available endpoints for the retreating figure are death or return. Unlike Bucky, who ends *Great Jones Street* considering a return, Elster is returned to the world by Jim, who drives him back to New York. His passiveness is captured in the image of Jim fastening his seatbelt for him (as Lauren Hartke did for Mr Tuttle in *The Body Arist*) and giving Elster a handkerchief to wipe mucus from

[225] Ibid. 73
[226] Ibid. 98
[227] Ibid. 99

his hand.[228] On the way back to New York Jim notices that 'there was nearly no one to talk to now. He seemed beyond memory and its skein of regret, a man drawn down to sparest outline, weightless.'[229] Thus, Elster's diminishment from formidable tribal elder is complete, and contains an aspect of emasculation. As a frail dependent, he resembles Nick Shay's mother in *Underworld*, and he has become ghostly and vapid, almost vanishing like his daughter. Elster's misguided attempt to retreat from time and space in the desert becomes a much more devastating diminishment that he had not foreseen, so that he has lost entirely the 'cultural identity' and 'flair of distinction' he previously enjoyed. Now, he is sylph-like, like Jessie, returned as a ghost against his will to the clockwork cage of the city and the human experience of time that, in his prior estimation, it was built to measure.

DeLillo's 2016 novel, *Zero K*, dramatizes the continuing diminishment of the elder statesman figure to the point of his ultimate dissolution. Again, a 'great man' from DeLillo's own generation appears to seek a retreat from history. In this work, the figure reaches the actual omega point of death. However, there remains the possibility of return, provided here by the conceit of cryogenic freezing, through which Ross Lockhart hopes to cheat death and transcend to a new plain of existence. As is the case in other novels of DeLillo's later period, *Zero K* captures an eerie, alienating strangeness in the lives and experiences of its characters. It also features the notion that a retreat from time and space is a fool's errand, doomed to fail.

Zero K is a haunted novel in several senses. First, it is haunted, in a now very familiar way, by the ghosts of the 1960s. In her essay on *Zero K*, Laura Barrett echoes David Cowart's assertion that the sense of eerie strangeness and haunting that permeates so much of DeLillo's work stems from the same historical event of the early 1960s that has been such a prominent literal influence on his writing. America, Barrett argues, is haunted by a 'skepticism that infiltrated American culture after the JFK assassination and by a concomitant yearning for something clearer, purer, truer behind the world we see everyday.'[230] This impulse towards a purer reality has already informed many of the experiences of DeLillo's characters, from David Bell and Bucky Wunderlick to Klara Sax and Lauren Hartke. Now, this same impulse appears to be part of the motivation of Ross Lockhart, the elder statesman figure in *Zero K*. The novel is also haunted by literary heritage. Barrett sees in *Zero K* an influence of the traditions of ghost stories and gothic writing that was also palpable in *The Body Artist*. However, where that earlier book made much, thematically, of ontological uncertainty, Barrett makes a case for *Zero K*'s placement within the genre of the

[228] Ibid. 97
[229] Ibid. 98
[230] Barrett, L. '[R]Adiance in Dailiness: The Uncanny Ordinary in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*' (*Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2018, 106-123), 107

American Gothic, for its 'reliance on realistic rather than supernatural explanation.'[231] More pertinent to this thesis however is the extent to which *Zero K* (DeLillo's longest work since *Underworld*) is haunted by DeLillo's earlier novels, repeating and recycling too many of the tropes and images of previous books to be discussed in detail here. The list of familiar DeLillo fixations that crop up in *Zero K* includes (but is not limited to) such things as the ambiguous ascetic recluse; contemporary variations of the übermensch and the idiot savant; spookily wise, well-spoken and well-informed children; the corporate world's neutering of linguistic meaning; the moving image's power to disorient and bewilder; New York and its mysterious underbelly; limousines and taxi-cabs; the dehumanising effects of our interactions with technology; and the image of self-immolation as the ultimate act of resistance.

Zero K also completes a return towards a preoccupation central to DeLillo's first novel *Americana*, the relationship between father and son, and especially the awkward reunification of the two after a long period of estrangement. It also repeats the narrative of *Underworld* and Nick Shay's disorientation after his father's vanishing. In *Zero K*, just as in *Underworld*, the son remains haunted by his father's disappearance. The story concerns narrator Jeff Lockhart's reconnection with his estranged father Ross, after the latter summons him to the mysterious Convergence, the cryogenic freezing facility in Kazakhstan, where Ross the tech/finance billionaire requires his son's presence as a witness to the death of Jeff's terminally ill stepmother, Artis. As Jeff later learns, Ross also plans to make his own dignified exit from this life, submitting his body to the same freezing process to await his resurrection as soon as the technology allows. Jeff, then, also repeats both *Point Omega's* Jim Finley and *Americana's* David Bell, reporting from a distance of estrangement on the diminishment of an elder statesman figure. Ross appears as an amalgam of Clinton Bell, Richard Elster and DeLillo's other recent übermensch of finance, *Cosmopolis's* Eric Packer, as if the author were imagining in *Zero K* what might have become of Packer had he been permitted to mature beyond his tender 28 years and live to be an old man. *Zero K* takes the trope of the diminished elder statesman to its logical endpoint, imagining not just the dwindling of the tribal elder's powers, but the total dissolution of the 'great man'. Where David Bell expressed his longing for his father's death, Jeff Lockhart lives out the earlier narrator's desire and presents in his narrative of his father's final days a vision of the omega point of DeLillo's generation.

Like David Bell, Jeff is characterised by a sense of vagueness, uncertain of his own identity and the manner of its intersection with the wider world. On his first visit to the Convergence, Jeff relates how he 'spent time walking the halls… I tried to inject meaning, make the place coherent

[231] Ibid. 121

or at least locate myself within the place, to confirm my uneasy presence.'[232] This uncertainty of self and location seems to stem, in another recycling of a familiar DeLillo idea, from paternal abandonment.[233] The first part of the novel is replete with unanswered questions relating to Jeff's relationship with his father, amplifying the extent to which, like David and Clinton Bell, the father remains a mystery to the son: 'Why did my father ask me to come here?'; 'Why did my father leave my mother?'; 'Was I sure that this man was my father?'[234] After many years of estrangement, seeing his father again in person does not bring any clarity, only more intriguing mysteries. Some of these mysteries point towards the larger enigmatic scientific endeavours of the Convergence facility: 'Was this the beard a man grows who is eager to enter a new dimension or belief?'[235] Jeff's disorientation is heightened by Ross Lockhart's status as a 'great man' of global finance, which lends this now familiar estrangement between father and son an eerie inflection very much in keeping with the sense of strangeness found elsewhere in DeLillo's more recent work. A passage in which Jeff recounts his adolescent attempts to piece together the details of their life before his father left takes a turn towards the uncanny with a description of Ross's face appearing unexpectedly on the television:

> He was a man shaped by money. He'd made an early reputation by analyzing the profit impact of natural disasters. He liked to talk to me about money... The language of money was complicated. He defined terms, drew diagrams, seemed to be living in a state of emergency, planted in the office most days for ten or twelve hours, or rushing to airports, or preparing for conferences. At home he stood before a full-length mirror reciting from memory speeches he was working on about risk appetites and offshore jurisdictions, refining his gestures and facial expressions… He left when I was thirteen… Years later I lived in a room-and-a-half rental in upper Manhattan. One evening there was my father on TV, an obscure channel, poor reception, Ross in Geneva, sort of double-imaged, speaking French. Did I know that my father spoke French?[236]

The sense of disorientation Jeff feels seems to stem directly from his father's initial aloofness, attachment to his work and corresponding detachment from his paternal role, which is heightened by his departure while Jeff is at a tender age,[237] and his subsequent reappearance through the

[232] DeLillo, D. *Zero K* (London: Picador, 2016), 10
[233] Barrett, '[R]Adiance in Dailiness', 112
[234] DeLillo, *Zero K,* 13-14
[235] Ibid. 7
[236] Ibid. 14
[237] Jeff's age at the time of Ross's vanishing reminds the reader of one of Nick Shay's preoccupations in *Underworld*, a superstitious fixation on the number 13. Shay of course was also a victim of paternal abandonment during his teenage years.

alienating medium of the television screen. DeLillo continues another thread from *Libra* and *Underworld*; the disorientating impact of images related to the self, when these images are viewed on television. In *Zero K* this experience repeats again when, later in the novel, Jeff catches sight of his father's face on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine, the occurrence of similar events suggesting that he is haunted by images of his absent father. In that later passage, Ross Lockhart is pictured with 'other godheads of world finance,'[238] as if in his absence he has taken on metaphysical power and form. The sense of disorientation that these events create in Jeff's life is ongoing; a kind of eerie haunting by a higher power who happens to be his father, in a development on from the estrangement David Bell described in *Americana*.

After his Olympian father summons him to the Convergence, Jeff notices that this place too is haunted by ghosts, doubles and eerie representations of the human form. On his first arrival at the facility, he follows a 'stone path to a broad portal', as if stepping into the underworld of ancient Greek myth, with his father, the fearsome 'godhead' who summoned him there, presiding over this realm like the Olympian Hades. He also describes two ghostly figures (which are later revealed to be mannequins) guarding the portal: 'Off to one side, at the far edge of the entranceway, strangely, two other figures, in chadors, shrouded women standing motionless.'[239] The eeriness of this moment is just the first in a long sequence of strange encounters within the Convergence. Inside the facility, he stumbles upon more eerie mannequins in recesses in the walls of corridors. These objects are imbued with a sense of contingency, so that Jeff is uncertain whether they are real or not. He feels a similar uncertainty about the images that play out on screens that drop, unbidden from the ceiling, images that may be real, or computer generated, or a combination of both. At one point, an image of a person running breaks free from its screen and the figure, suddenly made flesh, sprints past Jeff down the hallway in a moment of total destabilisation between tangible reality and the 'visual fiction' of the screen.[240] This, of course, parallels Jeff's own sense of mutability, and feeds into the sense of the Convergence as the 'prototypical uncanny space', which disorientates and confounds, merges humanity and technology, and conflates the living and the dead.[241] Read against the context of DeLillo's earlier work, Jeff's experience at the Convergence also seems to reflect a hauntedness that draws on all the haunted characters and events from previous works. The threads of ghostliness, contingency and dislocation that have haunted DeLillo's work since the 1990s converge in *Zero K* in a setting in which nothing can be trusted, where the very fabric of time and space seem to have been altered.

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[238] DeLillo, *Zero K,* 109
[239] Ibid. 5
[240] Ibid. 152
[241] Barrett, '[R]Adiance in Dailiness', 109

The mannequins Jeff saw at the start of his sojourn at the Convergence anticipate the imagery, later in the novel, of human bodies cryogenically frozen in capsules, awaiting their reanimation at some unspecified future time. Jeff's encounters with these bodies provide perhaps the most eerily chilling descriptive passages in the novel, and connect the bodies, one of which may once have been Jeff's stepmother, with mannequin figures or statues:

> There were several… figures, some female, and the bodies were clearly on display, as in a museum corridor, all without heads. I assumed that the brains were in chilled storage and that the headless motif was a reference to pre-classical statuary dug up from ruins… it occurred to me that there was a prediction implied in this exhibit. Human bodies, saturated with advanced preservatives, serving as mainstays in the art markets of the future. Stunted monoliths of once-living flesh placed in the showrooms of auction houses or set in the windows of an elite antiquarian shop along the stylish stretch of Madison Avenue.[242]

While undoubtedly supporting Barrett's notion of the Convergence as the prototypical uncanny space, this passage also points towards the real purpose of the Convergence, at least from Ross Lockhart's perspective: an escape from linear time. The bodies become timeless artefacts, at once ancient statuary and future artworks. The suggestion of objects crudely 'dug up from ruins' jars with that of 'advanced preservatives', which implies the marvels of contemporary science. And the objects are cast into the future as 'mainstays' of a future art market, propping up investments by wealthy New Yorkers like the caryatids who support the roof of the Erechtheion.

As he spends more time at the Convergence, Jeff discovers that its true purpose, for Ross at least, might not be to say goodbye to his dying wife, but to transcend time. Ross reveals that he plans to accompany Artis on her journey into the cryogenic afterlife, although, unlike his wife, he is not terminally ill. At first, Jeff struggles to accept the apparent absurdity of this revelation, given Ross's fabulous wealth and influence:

> A man of his resources choosing to be a frozen specimen in a capsule in a storage facility twenty years ahead of his natural time.
>
> "Aren't you the man who lectured me on the shortness of the human life span? Our lives measured in seconds. And now you cut it even shorter, by choice."

[242] DeLillo, *Zero K*, 232

"I'm ending one version of my life to enter another and far more permanent version."[243]

There is something of the 'gnomic pronouncement' in Ross's comment on attaining a kind of permanence. We are reminded, of course, of Elster's comments on time in the desert in *Point Omega*. However, while Elster sought release from a putative historical guilt, Ross's motivation appears to be more Ozymandian in nature: the desire of a rich and powerful man to cheat death and human impermanence. Later in the text, Jeff encounters a character that he names the Monk, a strange ascetic who occupies the Convergence, presumably to provide spiritual counsel to the dying and bereaved. The Monk seems to confirm Jeff's (and our) suspicions about Ross's true motives. In a number of gnomic pronouncements of his own, the Monk elucidates his vision of what the Convergence offers to men of Ross's stature and 'resources'. As the narrative voice slips from the Monk's direct speech into Jeff's own inner monologue, it becomes clear that what has enticed Ross is not just the offer of permanence, but a possible transcendence into an entirely new and timeless state of being, complete with its own language:

"Those who eventually emerge from the capsules will be ahistorical humans. They will be free of the flatlines of the past, the attenuated minute and hour."

"And they will speak another language, according to Ross."

"A language isolate, beyond all affiliation with other languages," he said…

A system that will offer new meanings, entire levels of perception.

It will expand our reality, deepen the reach of our intellect.

It will remake us, he said.

We will know ourselves as never before, blood, brain and skin.

We will approximate the logic and beauty of pure mathematics in everyday speech…

The universe, what it was, what it is, where it is going.[244]

The sense of timelessness here seems to be accompanied by an end of one kind of contingency. Elsewhere in the same passage, the Monk suggests that this new language will be free of the ambiguities of metaphor and double meaning, a language that approximates mathematics. While this might be enticing to Ross, ultimately he decides not to 'go with' Artis into the beyond. The decision appears not to have been informed by philosophical concerns, such as an

[243] Ibid. 111
[244] Ibid. 129-30

acknowledgement of the folly of Ozymandias, or of the quixotic nature of attempting to found a language that functions like mathematics. Instead, it seems driven by a more homely notion of responsibility, which Ross appears to have realised in another instance in DeLillo's writing of a dark night of the soul. This responsibility may be parental in nature, ironic given Ross's previous abandonment of his son. It may also be a nod towards the contemporary pressure on men of Ross's wealth, influence and generation to acknowledge the privileges via which they have attained their 'greatness'. Ross tells Jeff: "'I told myself, dead of night, that I had a responsibility to keep living…To go with her would have been the wrong kind of surrender. I had no right. It was an abuse of privilege.'"[245] Exactly what the right kind of surrender would be is not stated. However, the remainder of Ross's life is a surrender to time and a diminished state within it, a reversal of the gnomic pronouncements made at the Convergence, a shedding of philosophical certainties, a passive return to the world (all reminiscent of Elster in *Point Omega*), and ultimately a surrender to death.

Ross and Jeff return to New York, after Ross's decision not to accompany Artis into death. Return to the city is a return to the flow of time, and Jeff appears to take some glee in telling his father that their return places them 'back in history'. Like Elster, Ross is an older man, diminished by grief, cast back against his will into the normal flow of time, and Jeff's description of their return seems to support Elster's notion of the city of New York existing as a means of measuring time. Alongside this, the younger man revels in New York as a known and predictable space, after the uncanniness and disorientation of the Convergence: 'Days have names and numbers, a discernible sequence, and there is an aggregate of past events, both immediate and long gone, that we can attempt to understand. Certain things are predictable…We walk on paved surfaces and stand on a corner to hail a cab. Taxicabs are yellow, fire trucks red, bikes mostly blue.'[246] However, the return to New York does not return Ross's enthusiasm for life or the sense of responsibility he mentioned in explaining his decision not to die with his wife. Like Elster in *Point Omega* he returns to the world as a diminished figure, an old man growing increasingly withdrawn and decrepit:

> It turned out that my father was not interested in history or technology or hailing a cab. He let his hair grow wild and walked everywhere he cared to go, which was nearly nowhere. He was slow and a little stooped… His hands sometimes trembled. He looked at his hands, I looked at his face, seeing only an arid indifference. When I gripped his hands once to stop the shaking, he simply closed his eyes… He is remembering or imagining and I'm not sure if he is aware of my presence but I know

[245] Ibid. 143
[246] Ibid, 167

> that his mind is tunnelling back to the dead lands where the bodies are banked and waiting.[247]

Ross's return to the world, like Richard Elster's, is characterised by diminishment, indifference and passivity. However, Ross's grief has an extra dimension in that he passed up an opportunity to avoid it. His clear regret at leaving Artis's body at the Convergence while he returned to New York suggests a surrender to, even a longing for, death that goes beyond any previous DeLillo character's desire for ultimate self-diminishment.

This diminishment continues throughout the final third of the novel. Ross appears increasingly unconcerned with the world, or his own status as a 'great man' within it: 'Ross had become a blue-denim'd man. He wore the pants every day, same pair, a casual blue shirt, grey running shoes without socks…All his privileges and comforts, drained of meaning now.'[248] Ultimately, Ross's diminishment goes a step further than Richard Elster's, making the final movement towards the longed-for annihilation of death. In this sense, Ross ultimately succeeds where Elster, as well as Gary Harkness and Bucky Wunderlick, failed. After his initial failure to die with Artis, Ross returns a final time to the Convergence, the place he has been 'tunnelling back to' since Artis's death. As Jeff acknowledges, 'This visit was different. A deathwatch.'[249] This time, Ross undergoes the process of medical euthanasia and preparation for the capsule in which he, too, will be frozen. By witnessing his father's death Jeff lives out the longing that David Bell expressed in *Americana*, when faced with his father's inscrutability and 'greatness'. Ross's final appearance in the novel is one of near total diminishment, reduced to one of the 'shaved' bodies in the facility, described by his son with something of the detached interest that David Bell showed when regarding his father across a New York restaurant. We are also reminded, in Jeff's description, of *The Body Artist* and the bleached, shaved appearance of both Mr Tuttle and Lauren Hartke, as well as the sense of contingency created by the use of the verb 'seem':

> He was naked on a slab, not a hair on his body. It was hard to connect the life and times of my father to this remote semblance…my father's body, stripped of everything that might mark it as an individual life… He was alive, hovering at some level of anesthetic calm, and he said something, or maybe something was said, a word or two seeming to rise out of the body spontaneously…
>
> "*Gesso on linen.*"

[247] Ibid, 168
[248] Ibid, 224
[249] Ibid 247

> I think this is what I heard, then other slurred fragments that were not comprehensible…I knew only that *gesso* was a term used in art, a surface or medium. Gesso on linen.
>
> I was allowed a moment alone, which I spent staring into space, then others came to prepare Ross for his long slow sabbatical in the capsule.[250]

The ambiguity of Ross's dying words seems appropriate, given DeLillo's well-documented interest in the numinous potential of language. If Artis was the female artist figure in *Zero K*, it is appropriate that, in reunion with her, Ross should mutter a term for an artistic technique. The words perhaps signify a final understanding of the world's essential artifice, a sense of drawing back the veil to see what lies beyond. As such, Ross might be experiencing a final epiphany at the moment of his death. Alternatively, the words are another haunting ambiguity, which Jeff the surviving son must take forward with him into his own future. The father, a mystery to the son throughout, remains a mystery even in his death. Of course, there is a final irony in the fact that a combination of technological advancement and Ross's immense wealth has rendered death itself diminished and impermanent. Ross's death is merely a 'sabbatical'. He dies in the same way that Bucky Wunderlick ended his narrative in *Great Jones Street*: anticipating a return.

[250] Ibid. 251

Conclusion: 'Relativity, uncertainty, incompleteness'

Don DeLillo's most recent publication, 2020's *The Silence*, provides a logical conclusion for the ideas of retreat and return explored in this thesis. A far slimmer text even than the slight novellas *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, *The Silence* continues the diminishment of form almost to its logical conclusion at the end zone, the omega point, the zero. Alongside this ebbing retreat, the short novella features a sort of flow, a continuation of the return to earlier authorial preoccupations. This ebb and flow of retreat and return have been prominent in DeLillo's writing throughout his career. The forms of retreat and return identified in the introduction were initiated in the early novels *Americana*, *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street*. They were developed, problematised and sometimes reversed in the more critically acclaimed *Libra* and *Underworld*. Finally, ideas of retreat and return have become a guiding formal principle in DeLillo's work of the 21st Century, exemplified here in discussion of *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega* and *Zero K*. DeLillo has enacted his own simultaneous retreat from his status as a 'great' author or elder statesman, and a return to the figures and preoccupations of his earliest work. *The Silence* continues many of the trends in DeLillo's 21st Century texts for eerie and ambiguous narrative. On the day of the Superbowl (the event that perhaps best exemplifies the American collective, and another return by DeLillo to sporting events as a narrative preoccupation) the screens on which the big match is to be shown abruptly malfunction and go blank. No explanation is offered and the novella's characters are left in a bewildering state of contingency.

Like *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, *The Silence* ends with the haunting image of a man sitting in a chair. This man, Max Stenner, is another diminished elder statesman. He is a gambler, like Nick Shay's father in *Underworld* or Ross Lockhart in *Zero K*. Max's elucidation of his gambling 'system' also echoes the certainty with which Richard Elster spoke in *Point Omega*, before he was cruelly confronted by the folly of this certainty. Unlike *Love-Lies-Bleeding's* Alex 'in extremis', or *End Zone's* Gary Harkness, Max Stenner is not attached to feeding tubes, but sits staring into a blank television screen, in a slightly different iteration of this repeating figure of passivity. This variation feels completely at home within DeLillo's many depictions of people interacting with screens, several of which have been discussed here. The feeding tubes that sustained Gary and Alex are replaced by the singular 'tube', the television, which initiated and sustained the age that DeLillo has chronicled. TV has of course fed DeLillo with so many of the images and stylistic tropes that have characterised his work, from the JFK assassination as depicted in the Zapruder film (which DeLillo posited might have 'invented' him as a writer), to the snappy turns of phrase that have defined the prose style of the erstwhile New York advertising executive. When, in *The Silence*, all the screens

(TVs, computers, smartphones) suddenly go blank, DeLillo's characters and readers are left to wonder what becomes of modern America when the sustenance these particular feeding tubes provide abruptly stops.

Shortly before the final image of Max sitting in his chair, the character re-enacts the trope of physical effort as an aspect of retreat, like David Bell, Gary Harkness, Nick Shay, Lauren Hartke or the unnamed man watching *Psycho* in *Point Omega*. Max retreats from the crowds that have gathered in the streets of New York and climbs eight flights of stairs, the apparently global and permanent technological breakdown having rendered the elevator in his building useless. Much like those earlier DeLillo protagonists, the effort of climbing diminishes his sense of self. His mind is 'more or less blank'. The world as he understands it shrinks down to 'Just the stairs and the numbers, third floor, fourth floor, fifth floor, up and up and up.'[251] It is an ascendancy that apparently offers little in the way of spiritual enlightenment or access to higher meaning, and the echoes continue of earlier DeLillo characters who eschew speech in the ultimate retreat Max makes from ideas of meaning and communication altogether. As Max says, either to another character or directly to the reader, he feels no need to explain or excuse the 'long dumb' description of his climb. The technological collapse that left the screens blank and ended the communication age has apparently had the last word, so that now there is 'nothing else to say except what comes into our heads, which none of us will remember anyway.'[252] The book ends with another character asking if Max and others understand that the blank screens signify the end of the age of individualism, a return to the kind of 'prehistoric context' implied by the novella's epigraph, Einstein's famous quotation that the next world war will be so devastating that the one after that will be fought with sticks and stones. By way of a response, this final short passage appears on an otherwise blank page: 'Max is not listening. He understands nothing. He sits in front of the TV set with his hands folded behind his neck, elbows jutting. Then he stares into the blank screen.'[253] Like *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, the text ends with blankness and silence, and the figure of a man in a chair, somehow persisting passively, continuing in a state of diminishment despite the assertions of those around him, when all language and meaning have been exhausted.

The Silence, then, also feels like an apt endpoint for many of the broader ideas that have surrounded DeLillo's work since the beginning of his career. Just as Peter Boxall argued that DeLillo's writing generally dramatized the continuing possibility of fiction in spite of the 'endedness' of contemporary artistic expression, the final image of Max in his chair (like Bucky Wunderlick's closing statements in *Great Jones Street*, or the dying sentiments of Ross Lockhart in

[251] DeLillo, D. *The Silence* (London: Picador, 2020), 110
[252] Ibid. 110-1
[253] Ibid. 115-6

Zero K) suggests an ongoing presence and the potential for a return that may or may not occur, even within the context of societal breakdown, when communication itself has lapsed into silence. The work and theories of Albert Einstein are explicitly discussed by characters throughout *The Silence*, providing another appropriate endpoint, this time to the considerations of space and time that have haunted all DeLillo's novels. DeLillo overtly connects Einstein's most famous and esoteric contribution to theoretical physics to the unfinished TV broadcast of the Superbowl and the state of contingency in which the characters find themselves when the screens die. At one point, a character verbalises the state of contingency that has been discussed throughout this thesis – the status of the 'negative Libran' in Frank Lentricchia's analysis, the retreat of ontological certainty – with direct reference to Einstein. The character uses a list to capture the ambiguity of contemporary existence: 'Relativity, uncertainty, incompleteness.'[254] The list, of course, echoes DeLillo's own estimation (expressed in his interview with Begley) of the 'randomness and ambiguity and chaos' that were engendered by the JFK assassination. The 'sense of a manageable reality' has diminished. This retreat, the subject of so much of DeLillo's work, finds its final expression in his own retreat from authorial 'greatness.'[255] The manageable reality of television screens and prose fiction ends in blank silence. At the time of writing, DeLillo is 85 years old. *The Silence* is his most recent novel, but it is uncertain whether it will be his last, and a return is possible at some point in an unspecified future.

[254] Ibid. 29

[255] *The Silence* is the slimmest prose text DeLillo has published. True to form, and unlike most of his peers in the age of the celebrity writer, he has offered precious little comment on the book, beyond a few interviews for the literary supplements of major global newspapers.

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