Understanding Don DeLillo

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When literary critics refer to “authorship” today, the term no longer carries with it the assumption of a personal “style.” I refer here to the argument that a literary work such as a novel or poem communicates a writer’s biography, intentions, or selfhood in any transparent manner to the reader. The matter applies to the most impersonal writers as well as the most confessional and autobiographical. DeLillo would seem to belong with the former group of writers whose literature appears immune to biographical interpretation. Furthermore, in interviews he has consistently evaded extensive commentary on his own life and also avoided writing about his own life in any explicit way, in fiction or elsewhere. It would seem that both DeLillo and some of his more influential readers and critics, the latter group reinforced by the tremendously influential twentieth-century theories of language, mind, and literature that reconfigured all our assumptions about how we can experience art, have obstructed possible discussions of DeLillo’s biography. This is not to suggest they conspired to do so: it simply works out that DeLillo’s fiction does not explicitly disclose personal information about the writer’s life. Curiously, however, DeLillo writes often about biography (if not his own). In addition, critical studies of DeLillo’s career often contain important observations on the relationship between his life, career, and art, observations that would seem to contradict the premise of much critical writing about DeLillo. It is a curious, and rather productive, series of contradictions.

Contemporary critics begin from the position that the study of literature cannot presume any easy relationship between the artist’s life and the art. Some take this position as the starting point for a discussion of the cultural
forces that shape literary works; literature, they argue, is to be read as a “so-
cial text,” something determined by forces a writer cannot control: class,
race, gender, language, and so on. Literature becomes in this view a catch
basin into which language is diverted by external social forces. There is little
if any agency afforded to the writer in such treatments of literature, wherein
the work is generally regarded as a sort of passive commodity that suddenly
appears as the result of predetermined social pressures. In another, less cur-
rent view, we might still regard the literary work as an artifact also without
any relation to the author’s life or experience, and one whose relationship to
that life is furthermore immaterial. In this view, we study literature accord-
ing to certain rules that govern the evaluation of literary works. What are its
rhetorical properties? Is it ironic? Paradoxical? Is it a generic work? How so?
Where might it be categorized? Literature is thus severed from biography and
history, these being modes of reading that formal literary analysis regards as
extraneous to literary experience. While both views have their legitimate sci-
entific models and merits, both also eliminate biography or reduce it to the
status of an unwelcome guest in the house of literary criticism and cultural
analysis.

It does not require much thought to admit that these views defy the laws
of physics. A writer must sit down somewhere and write for hours and days
and weeks and even years. In doing so, he or she chooses words and as-
sembles literary artifice, labors through genres, modes, and styles, reflects (or
deflects) personal predilections and takes positions with respect to widely rec-
ognized traditions and debates. Biographical criticism therefore works from
the reasonable assumption that there exists a significant relationship between
a writer’s life and the writer’s art. Rather than view the writer as an unwel-
come guest in the house of criticism, the literary biographer views the writer
as a reluctant host. Critics visit, eat the appetizers, and move on to ruin some-
one else’s carpets. The biographer stays behind trying to coax the writer’s life
out from a room that it refuses to leave. The writer may very well become
available, but the life is always somewhere else.

And so while the great modern theories and critics have made the literary
art of biography a rather difficult one, there may also be opportunity for it in
that chaos. After all, longing for prior modes of expression is widely accepted
as a defining feature of postmodern literature such as that written by DeLillo.
Who is to say that the art of biography is not the expression of a postmod-
ern longing to describe a “life,” even if that previous notion of individual life
(the romantic hero, the fragmented modern subject, and so forth) was itself a
myth—and a useful one at that? A postmodern biography of DeLillo’s life and
career would require accounting in some way for the artifice of biography.
For example, it might very well resemble what DeLillo composed when he wrote *Libra* (1988), a novel depicting the “life” of Lee Harvey Oswald. After one reads *Libra* it is difficult to avoid noticing DeLillo’s career-long habit of depicting characters who are concerned with recounting the lives of others or even setting out to recount their own lives. (For example, the latter is the central dilemma of DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana*, published in 1971.) Understood in this way, the writing of a fictional biography (or obituary, or fictional interview about an artist’s work) appears as an evasive, difficult, yet entirely worthwhile endeavor insofar as DeLillo treats it as a literary genre rather than as a statement of fact designed to reduce art to the evidence or alleged facts of a life.

For the present purpose it is necessary simply to acknowledge that DeLillo often writes from the intersection where life and fiction collide. Granted that life is not his own, but reading the sections of *Libra* that are set in DeLillo’s childhood neighborhood in the Bronx, one cannot help but sense a certain sympathy between writer and milieu. I would borrow from an early work by the late Edward W. Said to explain briefly that effect in a manner that does not reduce a novel to biography but rather sustains a relationship between the two. In a shrewd book entitled *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, Said argued that Conrad’s seafaring fictions were effective because their author diminished his own maritime experience in those writings, thereby making room for literary characterization and event. In Said’s words, Conrad “economized himself.”¹ The relationship between DeLillo’s fiction and life may be said to do the same. In addition, he has often admitted his debt to modernist narrative techniques (if not Conrad) that are circumspect regarding their authors’ personal lives. (Joyce’s fiction would seem significant in this respect.) More important, DeLillo’s fiction often makes that same circumspection into the subject of a novel. The result is a literary fiction wherein characters or narrators dissolve into art. DeLillo’s beautiful and moving short novel *The Body Artist* (2001) exemplifies the process. We might say that as DeLillo “economizes himself” by withholding autobiography from his fiction, his fiction does something more in that it makes self-effacement into literary art.

And so we are precluded by much of a century of argument that prohibits reconstructing life from art. Further still, even if such a thing were possible, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reverse engineer DeLillo’s biography from his art, even if certain critics I will later mention have made persuasive cases for it. Readers can nonetheless keep in mind that life and biography play a constant role in his work even when the life or biography in question is not necessarily his own, or when a life is being artfully immersed in fiction rather than substantiated off the page.
One biographical fact about DeLillo has remained constant, however, through the clamor and debate: in interviews, readings, and public conversation, DeLillo prefers to discuss his art, and art in general, rather than his life. If an interviewer asks a question of a biographical nature, DeLillo may briefly entertain it only to direct his answer to other discussions of writing, art, and culture. This much can be said with certainty: DeLillo loves to discuss the relationship between art and life, but he does so at times by avoiding the very questions that would offer perspective on their relationship to his own life and art. If one were to write a biography of DeLillo based only upon DeLillo the public figure, his would appear to be a life thoroughly preoccupied with writing, art, and thoughtful consideration of the role of literature in the world. Regarded in this way, his career seems less enigmatic. Perhaps it would appear “selfless” in some other, more important or more substantive way.

The situation is complicated by the lack of verifiable “facts.” Until recently the only information available about DeLillo’s life came from his interviews or a scant public record. Over the past decade, however, the accumulation of interviews he has given, paired with the digitization and public dissemination of U.S. government records, provides a more thorough account. One cannot say it is comprehensive, or that one might say to the writer as the government operative says to Jack Gladney in White Noise (1985), that “you are the sum total of your data” (181). In addition to the available materials, a biography of DeLillo’s life and career might even one day use DeLillo’s papers and correspondence, which he recently gave to the archives of the Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin. Transcripts, records, and archives do not, however, speak for themselves; rather, the biographer speaks through them, distorting or clarifying them in order to tell a story of a life. This process is complicated by the migration of facts to new technological platforms. For most of modern history, nameless clerks compiled forms, filed them, and kept the archives we refer to as “historical record.” Today that information becomes the aforementioned “data,” a metastatic body of information that is not so much kept as it is sorted, stored by, and accessed through powerful computer servers. On memorable occasions, as when Jack Gladney of White Noise learns from a computer of the statistical probability of his own death following a spill of toxic waste, DeLillo describes how we encounter and react to such things—in rather comical ways, in this case. It is also useful to approach the material in the way that the CIA archivist/historian Nicholas Branch considers the computerized archive of “facts” about Lee Harvey Oswald in DeLillo’s 1988 novel Libra: with an eye for how information betrays patterns and connections. As is often the case in DeLillo’s fiction, orders emerge from such patterns, orders that suggest other
ways of apprehending a writer’s life or work, but also in ways that may never amount to any absolute truth. Biography, in this sense, is a form of speculation that proceeds by a self-effacement comparable to that of DeLillo’s most evasive characterizations.

Biography

Donald Richard DeLillo was born on November 20, 1936, in New York City. His parents were Italian immigrants. His paternal name, “DeLillo,” is not uncommon in the Apennine Mountains that bisect the “boot” of Southern Italy. The Ellis Island passenger records of debarked immigrants list a total of forty-eight entries with the last name DeLillo between 1893 and 1922, the majority being from that region. Of those forty-eight names, two claimed the United States as residence (suggesting a return from a trip to Italy), and three others are unintelligible or list no place of origin. Of the forty-three remaining names, eighteen are from the town of Savignano, a small municipality in the Apennine range, to the north and west of the city of Avellino. Another ten names declare Grumo, presumably the Grumo in the province of Naples (there are at least four other Italian towns with the name, three of those in the south, one in the north). Nine towns (including Caivano, Montagano, Irsona, Matrice, Montecalto, Modugno, and Vitadazio) account for the fifteen remaining DeLillo names on the Ellis Island registers during that period. In sum, nearly one third of the Italian immigrants named DeLillo who came to the United States near or after the turn of the last century hailed from a small town (Savignano) located in the Apennine mountain range, and the rest emigrated from similar towns in the region. Emigration from these towns reflects a broader pattern: the immigrants departed in clusters. There are four entries from Savignano from 1900 to 1901, and five entries from there in 1906 alone.

In a 1991 interview Don DeLillo told the British journalist Gordon Burn that his family immigrated to the United States in 1916. There is, however, no entry for the name DeLillo in the Ellis Island rolls for that year. But there are two names, those of Rocco and Nicola DeLillo, who emigrated from Modugno, a town close to the Adriatic city of Bari, in the year 1915. One of the immigrants is listed as being three years of age, the other thirty—likely a father and his son. No other persons by the name of DeLillo are recorded as having entered the United States during World War I (1914–1918). The decline in Italian emigration was a direct result of Italy’s involvement in the war, during which time the young republic fought to drive the Habsburgs out from its northern provinces and finally unify the nation. The nation’s fathers and sons were thus sent to war and therefore could not emigrate. For mothers,
wives, children, and daughters who wanted to leave, there were also German U-Boats to consider.

Thus the official immigration record seems a dead end. Yet history never ends in DeLillo’s fiction; a new path is sure to open at some point. We have a clue to it from DeLillo himself, and it is the matriarchal possibility noted above. In the same interview in which he provided the date 1916, DeLillo described his family’s immigration to America as follows: “There was my grandmother, my father and his brothers and sisters. There was a total of about seven people, including a dwarf, and a child my grandmother picked up in Naples along the way.” Naples, on the Tyrrhenian Sea, is on the opposite coast from Bari. Rocco and Nicholas are thereby eliminated as likely ancestors. We can surmise that DeLillo’s family likely boarded a ship from the port of Naples or passed through Naples in transit to the larger port of Genoa. More important, it also raises the possibility that his grandmother was a widow; if that is true, then she likely gave her maiden name, according to Italian custom. Perhaps the family crossed in 1916, after all, through the Rubicon of submarine death and against the American war machine that was moving in the other direction across the sea, ultimately to give a name we do not know. Another dead end.

In the 1980s DeLillo offered yet another account of his family history, this time to the Italian writer and literary critic Fernanda Pivano. In her book Amici Scrittori: Quarant’ Anni di Incontri e Scoperte con gli Autori Americani, Pivano devotes a long section of one chapter to DeLillo. There she describes his telling of a more thorough account—possibly the most thorough one—of his family history. Here is my translation:

I had seen DeLillo often but always in New York because he obstinately refused Piront’s invitation to visit Naples. I slowly drew out an account of his father whom DeLillo had taken to Italy before he [his father] became ill. He accompanied his father to the village of Mongano, near Campobasso, in the Abruzzi. DeLillo told me: “It was a beautiful experience for him to revisit his hometown for the last time. He went to America in 1917, at the age of nine, and began working for a large insurance company. My mother was born in the same town, not only the same town, but the same house, at a distance of four years. I learned of it only when we visited, as my father had never told me. Of Italian, little had stayed with him. My education was entirely American, as was his: he quickly learned English, and grew up on the West Side of Manhattan, until he moved to the Bronx.”
If we look at a map, we find Montagano (not “Mongano,” which is likely a misprint), a small town just north and east of the slightly larger town of Matrice in the province of Campobasso. If we return to our original list of DeLillos who emigrated to America, we find two names from the region on the Ellis Island rolls: a Giuseppe DeLillo from Matrice (a town near Montagano) arrived in America in 1898, and a Gennaro DeLillo arrived in America from Montagano in 1901. The dead ends, probabilities, and accumulated errors of fact (including those in DeLillo’s accounts), all point to a likely point of origin: Montagano was the town from which his family emigrated. We have the probable “where.” We also have probable distant relatives (Gennaro and Giuseppe). The persons and places do not, however, align with any year; like chronological glitches, when narrative time skips like the needle on a vinyl record in DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis*, the names or persons in DeLillo’s published family anecdotes do not precisely align in memory or time. We have possibilities that conform to a pattern of immigration history, but the most important narrative—the specific family story—largely evades us.

The two DeLillo quotations above are the most substantial he has given to interviewers. The first, with its matrilineal persistence and Faulknerian dwarf, suggests a fable. It is gregarious and unexpected, transforming the ordinary into something remarkable. The second suggests instead the delicate pathos of immigrant memory. Sixty years removed from experiences that are not his own (yet seemingly no less intimate), DeLillo abruptly shifts from the tender moment of a father’s revelations and turns instead to the business of America. Conjoin the tone of the two quotes, and you have a glimpse of the dramatic moods of DeLillo’s prose. The fragments of history are significant after all: the record speaks even as it skips. The ambiguity of technology (the misprint), impossible chronologies, errors of memory that conceal stories yet also result in new narrative possibilities, the elusive shape of mystery as a narrative form, historical patterns of movement and countermovement as individuals and peoples move around the world—these count among the most recognizable elements of DeLillo’s fiction.

Don DeLillo was not a physical part of that immigration history. Rather, he was born into it as a New Yorker and raised the child of immigrants. The trail of his actual biography resumes, after his birth record, at the age of three with the sixteenth United States census. It does not resume in New York, as one might expect, but in southeastern Pennsylvania. Conducted in 1940 by the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, its information was collected then, as now, by seasonal employees knocking on the doors of American homes and asking a series of questions of those who answered. The
responses were entered into a standardized form published by the U.S. Government Print Office. And so from sheet number twelve of the “Population Schedule” survey form conducted on April 15, 1940, by a census employee named James Golamis in the town of Pottsville City, Pennsylvania, we learn that DeLillo’s mother opened the door.

The form itself lists the names of Peter, Lina, and Donald DeLillo, ages thirty-three, twenty-nine, and three, respectively. The parents, Lina and Peter, list their country of residence as Italy while young Donald is listed as a resident of New York. Peter is listed as having been at work when the survey was conducted, that he worked forty hours that previous week as a “clerk” in a shirt factory, where he earned “$1200” dollars during the period beginning twelve months prior to the survey date. The information sheet confirms that Lina DeLillo was proficient in English and communicated these facts and others to the surveyor.⁵

We might reasonably assume that DeLillo’s childhood was shaped in profound ways by the experience of being raised in a family of immigrants. The writer Gay Talese, who was also the son of Italian immigrants and also a young boy during World War Two, memorably described the affect and alienation of his own childhood in Unto the Sons when he wrote: “I saw myself as an alien, an outsider, a drifter who . . . had arrived by accident. I felt different from my young friends in almost every way, different in the cut of my clothes, the food in my lunchbox, the music I heard at home on the record player, the ideas and inner thoughts I revealed on those rare occasions when I was open and honest. . . . I was olive-skinned in a freckle-faced town.”⁶

In its context Talese’s description describes his childhood in a town on the New Jersey coast, a place populated by Methodists and Irish immigrants who had been assimilating successfully for a longer time. Talese appears by contrast as a reserved and lonely child, very close to his family yet also sensitive to that which he (and they) were not. It is a common American experience: a child of Arab immigrants might write the same of a Michigan childhood; a son of Koreans might describe it after growing up in Boston; or a daughter of Mexicans might tell the same of her Georgia youth. The drama of the immigrant child is as familiar, difficult, and benign as any American cliché. Would it function to explain the detached, reserved characters who inhabit and narrate DeLillo’s novels? Perhaps. If one were to attempt it, however, the more important question might be: at what expense? In using the biography to interpret the fiction, the biography becomes a different sort of fiction—a dishonest one posing as fact. It is at this level of inquiry that DeLillo’s novels tend to work, where history becomes difficult and opaque, and only the
peculiar reality effect of a novel that deflects biographical interpretation can effectively dramatize its workings.

Conversely, one might recognize in DeLillo’s fiction the traits of a person and writer who has made the elemental materials gathered by a first-generation child of immigrants into a rich and powerful source for his art. For instance, DeLillo’s fiction often features resourceful women as protagonists who negotiate cultural adversity or who come to points of view that expose some alien quality of a place. Karen in *Mao II* is the perfect example of the latter. As for the former category, critics who accuse DeLillo of being a novelist who writes only about men for an audience of primarily male readers might recall his dramatic characterizations of Babette Gladney (*White Noise*), Brita Nilsson (*Mao II*), Lauren Hartke (*The Body Artist*), and Lianne (*Falling Man*) so as to reconsider that claim’s veracity.

After characterization, one might also consider milieu. For example, DeLillo writes often about American mass culture. It contains all those things that the immigrant normally cannot attain but to which the immigrants’ children may aspire: baseball, rock and roll, television and radio, fortune. Yet in attaining those things, DeLillo’s characters and narrators travel through mass culture in quixotic, often estranged moods. Alienation, loneliness, and anonymity form an existential holy trinity in his prose. DeLillo has often noted modern European authors such as James Joyce or film directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni, artists whose works explore similar emotions, as inspiration for these moods. DeLillo’s fiction may be said to translate them to an American idiom and setting. And what if those influences—or one’s claiming them—were also a form of assimilation, and of the kind that compensates precisely for the early and difficult feelings that linger from the memory of one’s “different” childhood? What if cultural or family influences, considered alone, together, or in combination with others, can help us understand and appreciate the value of a writer’s achievement? In this way the traces of DeLillo’s status as the son of immigrants might help us understand the relationship between the outsiders who populate his novels but also the role he plays as an artist and observer of American life.

In a 1993 interview, Adam Begley asked DeLillo whether his Italian American roots defined his fiction in some way. DeLillo replied:

> It showed up in early short stories. I think it translates to the novels only in the sense that it gave me a perspective from which to see the larger environment. 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. America was and is the immigrant’s dream, and as the son of two immigrants I was attracted by the sense of possibility that had drawn my parents and grandparents. This was a subject that would allow me to develop a range I hadn’t shown in those early stories—a range and a freedom. And I was well into my twenties by this point and had long since left the streets where I’d grown up. Not left them forever—I do want to write about those years. It’s just a question of finding the right frame.7

“The right frame” would seem to refer to a period in time. It may also invoke a cinema, ekphrastic literature, or paintings that “frame” a subject. We can see here also how DeLillo uses contrast to define the role of autobiography in his fiction: it is something from which to escape, not knowing that you can or will succeed. We might think of it as the immigrant’s version of the poet John Keats’ concept of negative capability, whereby the poet writes from uncertainty. As the narrator of Bertolt Brecht’s “Life Story of the Boxer Samson-Körner” remarks in the opening line of that story, “When they ask you to write something about your own life it isn’t all that easy to get it together.”8

Biographical Criticism

It may come as a surprise that critics are constantly speculating over biographical matters pertinent to DeLillo’s writings. Vigorous debate characterizes critical discussions of the relationship between the writer’s fiction and what is known of his biography. Some would not concede a relationship at all. There are those, such as Daniel Aaron, who admire DeLillo for avoiding the religious or sociological trappings of ethnic fiction. According to Aaron, those trappings would make DeLillo into a writer incapable of writing about anything more than sectarian matters of identity. “I think it’s worth noting,” Aaron wrote, “that nothing in his novels suggests a suppressed ‘Italian foundation’; hardly a vibration betrays an ethnic consciousness.”9 Without diminishing the role of the writer’s ethnicity, Frank Lentricchia makes the case for DeLillo’s “American” (as opposed to ethno-provincial) ambitions.10

By contrast, there are critics who persuasively argue that DeLillo’s prose explicitly alludes to his ethnic, urban milieu, and that his Italian American biography underscores a powerful sense of ethnicity in his writings (even if it may not provide direct sources for that sense). In his landmark study Italian Signs, American Streets (1996), Fred Gardaphé persuasively counters Aaron’s argument that DeLillo’s fiction avoids the trappings of an ethnic writer. Gardaphé instead notes that DeLillo’s Italian American family history and the ethnic, urban milieu of his youth converge in a “masquerade” that confirms
his fiction’s roots in American ethnic experience. Addressing perhaps Aaron’s refusal to admit the import of Catholicism in DeLillo’s fiction, Amy Hungerford has recently argued that DeLillo’s prose is structured upon a profound sense of Catholic ritual. Working from the ritual narrative structures in DeLillo’s fiction, Hungerford describes how DeLillo’s novels refract secular and religious shifts in late-twentieth-century American culture. It is interesting to note that while DeLillo’s readers are divided in rather complicated ways concerning his Catholicism, critics of Catholic-American literature do not include Don DeLillo (or Toni Morrison) in the interesting minor field of literary criticism devoted to Catholic writers who write or have written in the United States.

Whereas Gardaphé refers to sociological and linguistic frameworks of ethnicity in his critical reading of DeLillo and Hungerford refers to theology in her work, other critics have written about DeLillo’s rendering of ethnicity in a way other than in a specific form (that is, “Italian”). Critic Biman Basu has paired the general problematic of ethnicity with the role of technology in DeLillo’s fiction. Technology plays important roles in DeLillo’s fiction, and it is, together with ethnicity, also one of the more popular critical categories used to discuss his work (though it is not as divisive as the latter category). In his article Basu reviews how DeLillo’s *White Noise* offers a subtle parody of the Taylor-Fordist model of industrial labor management in which immigrants are coded as prosthetic extensions of industrial machinery. Basu does not narrow the field to any particular ethnicity but insightfully (and correctly) regards the category in more general terms so as to appreciate how *White Noise* distinguishes what we might describe as ethnic European, blue-collar labor from the Caucasian professional class of Anglo-Saxon descent in American society.

Other critics have been more forceful in claiming the relationships between DeLillo’s ethnicity and his fiction, and with some success. I have noted the examples of Basu, Hungerford, and Gardaphé, however, because they are careful to avoid reducing DeLillo’s fiction to an ethnic or ethno-religious identity. The fact that critics generally admit this caveat confirms the hazards of using DeLillo’s biography as a key to interpreting his fiction. Yet the traces of ethnic language identified by Gardaphé, the ethno-religious features revealed by Hungerford, or the broader problematic of “techno-ethnicity” discussed by Basu suggest that despite DeLillo’s ambitions to be considered an “American” (as opposed to Italian American) writer, his life, family history, and experience as the child of immigrants coexist with what Lentricchia and Aaron call the “American” ambitions of his novels. One might say the two are inseparable. For instance, DeLillo has a remarkable ear for ethnic dialects, and
not only Italian American habits of speech; the nuns who speak in a German American dialect in the penultimate chapter of *White Noise* (1985) exemplify the point. In this sense DeLillo’s “ethnicity” appears as a cosmopolitan awareness of the different ethnic groups who in their sum made up the American population during the twentieth century. More broadly, ethnicity (whether specific or cosmopolitan) indicates a social process of assimilation typical across American history. It is a process subject to postmodern rendering in that it often takes form as a yearning for a lost identity that is manifest, counterintuitively, as an escape from it. In certain moments in DeLillo’s fiction (one thinks of the Jewish football player Anatole Bloomberg in his 1973 novel *End Zone*), it appears as a parody of that very process. Who is to say the ethnic experience is not all these things, and more, in DeLillo’s America?

In sum, biographical criticism of DeLillo’s writings constitutes a consistent, insightful line of thinking about his fiction. The line is more difficult and developed than it may at first appear, and more compelling than readers who resist such arguments would have one believe. DeLillo’s biography does indeed suggest settings, languages, histories, figures, and moods that are unlike those found in his fiction. We may think of them as disconnected, even antagonistic, but perhaps it is in recognizing the murmurs of the largely inaccessible conversation between them that we begin to hear the America of DeLillo’s later fiction after all. Without the mystery and mise-en-scène of his biography, it would be more difficult to appreciate the montage of his literary career.

Given the suggestive inconsistencies of the official record, we can assign the DeLillo family history and the writer’s childhood to experiences that typify European, and specifically Italian, immigration and assimilation to the United States during the early twentieth century. It is not a narrative lost to history but one that belongs to its silent crowd. The occasional critic has bid it speak. The crowd does not always oblige.

Don DeLillo’s family returned to New York City at some point following its Pennsylvania sojourn. There he lived in the borough of the Bronx, in the Italian American neighborhood that lines Arthur Avenue. It is today, as it was then, both a neighborhood and a world. As was typical of many historic ethnic communities in the United States, many of its youth eventually left and moved out of the city, settling in the growing suburbs and the provinces of mass culture.

DeLillo belongs to a generation of major American writers who were born during the Great Depression. As such they came of age during the novel’s alleged high-water mark in American history and successfully carried its tradition to the future. In DeLillo’s case the past is often a densely populated space, one from which to flee (often to the sparse landscapes of the American
Southwest). Whether in centrifugal flight from them or centripetal fall into them, DeLillo’s fiction is particularly attuned to “crowds,” a major theme of his work. DeLillo does not belong to the generation born after World War II, the so-called baby boomers. Yet because he was raised primarily in New York City, a cultural capital that hosts the art, wealth, excitement, and generations of that population explosion, it is no wonder that DeLillo developed an early and consistent interest in describing the moods and movements of great masses of people. (One also finds different versions of migrations in the writers named above.) DeLillo has commented at times on the cultural influences offered to him by New York City during the 1950s. He counts among them the jazz music scene of Greenwich Village, institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, and the city’s postwar sports culture, particularly that of its three baseball teams (the Giants, Dodgers, and Yankees).15

As noted earlier, DeLillo’s career begins at the tail end of the novel’s cultural dominance but also at the moment when its broadest readership was concentrated in (and also beginning to leave) urban spaces that defined American life and culture at the height of its global influence. Perched at a vantage slightly ahead of that later crowd, DeLillo’s career self-consciously enters the tradition of American literary fiction at precisely that point—1960—when critics mark its initial decline. In retrospect, as one looks over a half century of his work, his fiction as a whole offers something of an allegory of that generational movement (a point that I believe resonates with baby boomers, who are his primary audience).

As he uses the novel to narrate the moods and movements of that crowd, DeLillo innovates the novel’s subjects, characters, narration, language, and dialogue. Are his innovations a form of nostalgia for a dying art? Like the crowd, nostalgia is a frequent subject in DeLillo’s novels, but nostalgia never appears in his work as naïve sentiment. DeLillo’s fiction instead offers history as comedy and terror, anxiety and wonder, visions and words. If there is nostalgia, the reader is generally made to feel that nostalgia performs some other work by asking us to consider how we experience history, language, and life in aesthetic forms. Why retreat into sentimental convention and cliché, his fiction seems to ask, when the novel can offer so much more?

After the novel and the crowd, there is the market. It is the common ground of exchange on which they meet. With more than a half century of fiction to his credit, DeLillo’s career currently finds itself in the midst of one of the more interesting periods in the history of the novel, when digital technologies tempt literary writers to find new modes of expression. DeLillo composes his novels in an age when, for the first time in human history, we do not only print them on paper, but write (and read) them in light. Suspended
as the novel is between debates over “old” print and broadcast media on the one hand and the “new” digital media on the other, this transitional moment would seem the perfect match for one of DeLillo’s favorite moods. I refer here to those scenes in which he balances characters between solitude and something that has not yet occurred or begun to register in a character, narrator, or reader’s mind: in *Libra* one man enters a Dallas building and waits with a rifle, while in *Falling Man* another man exits bleeding from a New York City skyscraper during a terrorist attack; in *Mao II* a woman photographs a glowing Lebanese battlefield at night, while in *The Body Artist* another prepares her body for imminent performance in a (seemingly) empty house on the New England coast. Here we find the antithesis to “the crowd”—a profoundly individual sense of being outside yet somehow within the moment, as artists work with care at its fraying edges and characters watch murderers try to disrupt it with their violence. Implicitly and explicitly, this mood slows literary narration down to a pace that resembles slow motion (as in the final lines of his 1985 novel *White Noise*). In doing so, DeLillo makes a case for the novel’s capacity to articulate philosophical questions about how readers experience time and thereby affirm the philosophical as well as aesthetic import of the novel, while also preventing it from being reduced to an easy commodity.

One might say DeLillo’s fiction performs a high-wire act that moves between individuals and crowds; one might also say there are only individuals on the wire, and the crowded marketplace waits to catch them when they fall.

In these ways and others, post–World War II America has a special status in DeLillo’s fiction. Indeed, his novels rarely venture into historical territory prior to World War II. (Those parts of *Libra* devoted to Lee Harvey Oswald’s childhood are the exception.) The Cold War, the *Pax Americana*, and the economic “boom” of postwar mass culture are DeLillo’s home turf; and he devotes substantial parts or entire novels to its cities, small towns, and suburbs. Sprawling cities, and New York in particular, appear in other works where the riptides of mass culture, driven by media and money, carry characters through neon-lit and liquid-crystal aggregations of recent historical time. This is particularly true of the historical novel *Underworld* (1997) as well as the more contemporary novels *Mao II* (1991) and *Cosmopolis* (2003).

Two figures appear exceptional in the late-twentieth-century milieu of DeLillo’s fiction. They are the tyrant and the crowd. If we were to consider that era in terms of a great chain of being, wherein certain life forms are arranged into hierarchies, we would find the political tyrant at the top of the chain and the crowd near the bottom. Dictators, tyrants, and prophets often haunt DeLillo’s fiction. They include secular political figures such as Chairman Mao (*Mao II*), Colonel Qaddafi (*White Noise*), and Adolf Hitler (*Running Dog,*
White Noise), religious figures such as the Ayatollah Khomeini (Mao II), and terrorists with theologically rooted political aspirations such as “Bill Lawton” (a child’s name for Usama bin Laden in Falling Man). Their desire to shape history and to control people takes suicidal form for their subjects and genocidal form for their enemies. A disturbing man in DeLillo’s short story “Baader-Meinhof” makes the point in this way when he interrupts a woman contemplating paintings of dead terrorists: “When they’re not killing other people, they are killing themselves.” In another recent short story entitled “Hammer and Sickle,” DeLillo’s narrator (an imprisoned investor) notes that the names of Communist leaders being recited in a faux newscast by his daughters “were immense footprints on history.” The latter, mythic proportion may be said to facilitate the former murderous effect. DeLillo’s fiction often depicts the two along interwoven trajectories: how characters perceive terrorists as well as the way in which the mass media magnify terrorists (and also shape characters’ perceptions). In the first short story quoted above, for example, the discussion turns to whether the German authorities killed the terrorists in their jail cells and whether the paintings imply or refuse such interpretations. In DeLillo’s fiction art has the unique capacity to complicate the way we regard such figures, resisting any reductive interpretation. Unlike the mass media, fiction functions as antimedia in such moments.

DeLillo has written on murderous tyrants and their acolytes in modes other than fiction, composing essays on the topic at certain times. One would not suggest that DeLillo is a public intellectual in the manner of a professor or politician but rather that his forays into the essay (it is a literary form, after all) transpose his art (though never entirely) into the more discursive forums and debates of the public sphere. As in his fiction, the historical fascination with tyrants and terrorists is a recurrent theme in the few essays he has published. I use the word “fascination” here to invoke Susan Sontag’s famous essay, first published in 1975, on the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, entitled “Fascinating Fascism.” Sontag’s essay argued that the staging of fascist politics involves carefully choreographed displays of control; through the media, those assemblies subjugate audiences to the will of another entity (the state, embodied by a dictator). Sontag noted that the audience derives a certain masochistic pleasure from the experience of being rendered powerless. In this way she criticized audiences and intellectuals who contributed to the “de-Nazification” of Riefenstahl’s films and also the revival of interest in early-to mid-twentieth-century fascist aesthetics (especially in cinema) that was taking place in the 1970s.

DeLillo also regarded the cultural dynamics of fascism in a rare critical essay entitled “Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson and the Millennium” (1989).
In that essay he extended elements of Sontag’s argument in another direction: to the future. Using Norman Cohn’s 1957 *Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements*, DeLillo reviews a shift in American culture: he claims that assassins, crazed with apocalyptic fantasies, share a territory with cults (such as the Manson Family) and extremist groups (primarily neo-Nazis) who endorse similar eschatological beliefs. DeLillo writes: “The barricaded gunman is a lyrical fixture of our time. He is what remains of the wilderness and he feels a pulse in his brain that beats for desolation. Bring it all down” (350). DeLillo elaborates here the “mountain” characters of Riefenstahl’s cinema in this passage, but he adds a new twist: they do not represent effective, popular political movements sprung from an individual or folk imaginary. Rather, they populate the media, which in turn use them to colonize the imagination of viewers with apocalyptic visual allegories of mass death, economic disaster, industrial accident, natural catastrophe, and, perhaps most distressing of all, a world without information or electronic media.

The figures that DeLillo described in “Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson and the Millennium” had already a prominent place in his fiction (and the millennium would appear to be an important end, and also new beginning, in his later fiction). We find those characters in the utopian splinter group that seeks the mysterious “product” in *Great Jones Street* (1973), the collectors who seek the lost film shot in Hitler’s bunker in *Running Dog* (1978), and the convicted gunman who corresponds with Jack Gladney’s son Heinrich in *White Noise* (1985); indeed, the compelling *Libra*, a novel about the assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, would seem to exploit that very same fascination, yet to some less salacious and more thoughtful end. (DeLillo never entirely judges these fringe characters and seems more interested in their media effect, satiric potential, or their actual biographies, thereby avoiding Sontag’s moralisms.) DeLillo’s breakthrough novel *White Noise* is itself an extended rumination on some of the questions raised by Sontag and recast by DeLillo into a media-fueled frenzy of chemical disasters (both pharmaceutical and environmental). Who can read the passages in that novel describing Jack Gladney’s attempts to speak the German language and not think of Riefenstahl’s deliberate close-up shots of Hitler’s or Himmler’s bizarre and contorted elocations in *Triumph of the Will*? Like artists, these apocalyptic figures shape the way we perceive, think about, and experience the world; unlike artists, no good ever comes from their ambitions to divert the will of the masses away from history. Try as murderers and tyrants might to control and deform a people, they never conquer it. “The future,” DeLillo writes in *Mao II*, “belongs to crowds.” One might read the sentence as the admission of the individual’s
historical defeat. In another sense, it suggests the amorphous intelligence of populations who will sooner or later figure out that some prophetic criminal deceives them.

There is a third and all-important figure that occupies the lowest and most vulnerable point of this hierarchy. It is the individual imagination. Imagination communicates the moral authority of art, the power of wit, and the capacity for love. It navigates trauma and grief. Ambiguous at times, it can also display a quality that critics sometimes refer to as the “paranoid” element of postmodern fiction. The term is sometimes mistakenly used to attribute falsehood and a frivolous sense of history to DeLillo and other writers. When individual characters seek out alternate explanations for events in their lives, they behave like crazy biographers reorganizing the facts and phenomena of their lives into new arrangements. Fancy then gets the best of them. In the worst cases they become enchanted by a brutal ideology or a cult. In the best cases they attain an understanding of their relationship to the world that might be described as clear, calm, or confident. (The character Lianne in the 2007 novel Falling Man exemplifies all three states.) What begins with crowds and tyrants often ends in DeLillo’s fiction with serene detachment, a movement often represented in geographic terms. For example, his characters often travel from the crowded American Northeast to the open spaces of the American Southwest, where they look for solace in the latter’s ascetic spaces. They do not always find it there. We see this when Keith Neudecker, Lianne’s estranged husband, dissolves into the Nevada casinos in the aforementioned Falling Man, in what seems a failed attempt to escape the memory of the terrorist attack that destroyed his office building and killed his friends and colleagues on September 11, 2001. By contrast, Lianne remains in the city, her life, memory, and imagination invincible.

Artists appear with regularity as fictional characters in his novels, and DeLillo affords to them a unique if somewhat turbulent status. The novelist Bill Gray in Mao II (1991) is the most widely discussed of the lot. Bill Gray stands in that book as a figure for the institution of the modern novel. It is a figure under siege by theological orthodoxy, ideological fanaticism, and their terrorist acolytes. According to Bill Gray, the novel and novelist are not in decline: they and the freedom of expression they represent are diminished by proportion to the physical violence and media spectacle of contemporary terrorism. “What terrorists gain, novelists lose” (157), says Bill while meeting with George, an intellectual and spokesperson for the Lebanese Maoist terrorists who have kidnapped a young and completely unknown Swiss poet. Bill is trying to arrange a prisoner swap in which he would become a hostage in exchange for the young poet’s freedom. The reader unfamiliar with DeLillo’s
writings should not expect a simple or sentimental resolution of Bill Gray’s situation; such is always the case in DeLillo’s fiction. DeLillo often depicts novelists and other artists as characters negotiating public scrutiny, commercial pressure, or ethical questions to conserve a private space for individual creativity (or, in Bill Gray’s case, to selflessly abandon that privacy in the interest of protecting the rights of another writer). Readers have devoted increased attention to this aspect of DeLillo’s fiction in recent years. For example, DeLillo scholar Mark Osteen has perceptively noted that these characters exist in a contradiction wherein they “must both engage their society and maintain a critical distance from its blinding glare and deafening buzz.”

In his depictions of crowds, tyrants, and artists, DeLillo would seem a representative of a specific generation who watched post–World War II America develop (and its population move) into new forms and habits during that era. One must include technology among those forms. As noted in the preface and earlier in the present chapter, American writers have always written with American media in mind. Just as Hawthorne eventually contended with the railroad and the daguerreotype in The House of the Seven Gables (1851), later American writers had to contend with new technologies and emergent communications media in particular. DeLillo’s American education in the 1950s and his early career as a writer coincided after all with a remarkable era of economic prosperity, a prosperity that entirely transformed American mass media culture. Inexpensive paperbacks began to displace hardbound books, glossy color magazines competed with black-and-white newspapers, and television replaced radio as the most popular form of broadcasting. Older media forms such as cinema won a new cultural prestige as art forms. All of these were integrated into new transportation systems: air travel, for instance, allowed a traveler to access all these media in an airport that was also a hub of transit for information as well as people. In addition, new computing technologies—IBM punch-card machines, Apple personal computers, the World Wide Web, the touchscreen smart phone—appeared with increasing frequency. DeLillo’s later writings, and particularly the novel Cosmopolis (2003), depict the so-called New Media, but his 1998 play Valparaiso offers perhaps the most comprehensive view, as it connects the mid-century geographic disorientation of air travel with late-twentieth-century media technologies.

Over the course of more than a half century of writing, Don DeLillo’s fiction has communicated how characters, readers, and art experience media both old and new, doing so in ways that many consider to be unique in the history of American literary writing. DeLillo works through the implications of those technologies. As noted above, DeLillo was old enough during the 1950s to observe these early changes and later to capture them in his art.
Perhaps this is the historical vantage afforded to those who remember times
in which such things did not yet exist, but who also have the sensibility never
to accept change at face value.

DeLillo gathers all these interests into his novels. He notes that he first
began thinking of writing while he was a student in high school (1950–1954)
and that his first inspirations included the great modern authors such as
Faulkner, Joyce, Hemingway, and others. American mass culture was in as-
cent at that time, complicating the notions of modernity held by a prior gen-
eration of writers. The old lines between high culture and mass low culture
become unclear as forms mingled in new and astounding ways. In the second
half of the twentieth century, we find artists mixing media, challenging no-
tions of cultural superiority as they repossessed and reinvented older artistic
forms and other media. In literary fiction, writers incorporate the radio (see
Norman Mailer, Ishmael Reed), combine journalism with literary narrative
(Truman Capote, Joan Didion), mix comic strips with the literary novel (Jay
Cantor, Art Spiegelman), and revise and integrate historical materials into
their fiction (Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, E. L. Doctorow). Literary tradition
also becomes a source for the recycling of older materials: Kathy Acker revises
Charles Dickens, Joyce Carol Oates rewrites Henry James, and so on. (One
might say there are also analogous impulses in literary criticism of the era.)
In his own career, DeLillo used elements of the sports novel (End Zone), the
spy thriller (Running Dog), and the biography (Libra), and also appropriated
nongeneric modes of writing, such as the novel of psychological realism (The
Body Artist), for his fiction. He has used government documents as source
materials (The Warren Report was a source for Libra), and his novels some-
times integrate visual materials into their layout and design (the press release
in Great Jones Street, the newspaper front page in Pafko at the Wall, news
photographs in Mao II).

After literature, cinema is the most important source of narrative tech-
nique, as well as affect, in DeLillo’s fiction. Like the novel, it is a popular art
form, but also one whose ambitions and achievements were recognized as
prestigious, “important,” during the great wave of foreign films and “great
directors” (the so-called auteurs) who gained unprecedented success in the
United States after World War II. Watching cinema—an obvious influence on
his work, and one he proclaims as formative—DeLillo adopted to his fiction
cinematic techniques used by modern directors. (He has named Antonioni,
Kubrick, Godard, Fellini, Bergman, and Hawks as being among his favorite
directors.)

In his use of cinema, we find the visual analog to the democratic impulse
that shapes DeLillo’s aesthetic. He will at times combine literary language
with visual-cinematic narrative technique in his fiction, and to spectacular effect. Consider the opening scene of his novel *Underworld* (1997), when the teenager Cotter Martin waits for his chance to jump the turnstiles and enter the Polo Grounds to watch a baseball game. He is watching and also “part of an assembling crowd” (11). He makes his move, avoids the rush of security guards, and enters the stadium. The game begins. The narration pans across the grandstands like a motion picture camera. We see a close-up shot of “Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason and Toots Shor” (17), the titans of music, television and nightclub entertainment, sitting near FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Banter. The perspective cuts to the outfield and back to young Cotter watching the game. The setting is popular, the staging cinematic; the boy is wide-eyed and happy. We might recall when the narrator of Albert Camus’s novel *The Fall* (1956) says, “Even now, the Sunday matches in an overflowing stadium, and the theater, which I loved with great passion, are the only places in the world where I feel innocent.” As Cotter enjoys the game, a man named Rafferty—Special Agent Rafferty—kneels beside Director Hoover. Hoover leaves his seat and the two men ascend the stairs, where Rafferty informs the director that “the Soviet Union has conducted an atomic test at a secret location” (23). When the narrative returns to Cotter a few pages later, a man named Bill tells him that, in baseball, “You do what they did before you” (31). The reader, who is privy to information to which Cotter is not, senses a change in the mood, a break with the past. Something unprecedented has happened on the other side of the world, and something more is about to happen in the game. The innocence of Camus’s narrator is shattered by the panoramic scope of DeLillo’s narration. The reader enters history. Lines we assume to divide observer from participant, or character from reader—a sort of literary fourth wall—are erased. We might say that whereas Camus’s narrator plays a solo, DeLillo, in his narration, conducts a symphony, and it is the crowd that plays the instruments.

An ethnic and primarily urban childhood during the Great Depression and the Second World War, followed by teenage life in high school (Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx) and college (Fordham, also in the Bronx) during the Eisenhower decade: these are the prelude to Don DeLillo’s career. Following the symphonic motif (or, if you prefer, the four-part suite of Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*), this book divides DeLillo’s writing career into four periods. The first is that from 1960 to 1971, during which he published only short stories. The second is from 1971 to 1985, during which he published his first seven novels, his first essays, and his first play. The third is from 1985 to 1997, the period of his greatest popularity, during which four novels were published, as well as a second play. (This is also the period of his involvement
in the “Rushdie Affair” and his first explicit advocacy of free speech.) Finally, there is the period from 2000 to the present time, during which he published four short novels, wrote a screenplay that was made into a feature film, published numerous new stories, a third play, and several essays.

The frequency of DeLillo’s early publications should not obscure a very important point about his career. While DeLillo composed seven novels during the second period of his career (1971–85), he only reached a broad readership, and its attendant commercial success and critical acclaim, with the publication of White Noise in 1985. From 1960 to 1985, he worked in relative anonymity, devoted “like a donut-maker, only slower” to the craft of writing: a quarter century, 25 years, 300 months, 9,125 days (give or take a few, depending on where the leap years fall), 21,900 hours, 1,314,000 minutes, nearly 86 billion seconds. Here is a possible source for another feature of DeLillo’s writing: his interest in writing about human time and memory as if it moved at a glacial pace. His own career developed, after all, with a geological patience. One can assume that Don DeLillo was always a renowned and recognizable writer. To do so, however, is to ignore the fact that the first half of his career was relatively unheralded. DeLillo’s evaluation of those early stories and novels is that they were “undeveloped.”23 If we take his view to be a credible one—and the work is admittedly uneven in quality—it also affirms the intelligence of his readership: greater numbers of readers embraced his books when DeLillo’s fiction achieved the style for which he is now praised.

Conversely, the precedent can also tarnish the later achievement. It is easy to look back at DeLillo’s early writings and recognize elements that would become more pronounced in the later, more famous, or “developed,” works. Fate, it would seem. Yet DeLillo’s novels published between 1985 and 1997 mark a run matched by few American writers. DeLillo succeeded in reaching an extraordinarily large international audience and sustaining it. His readership in the United States was equally broad and diverse. Critical acclaim and commercial success followed, and his writings won nearly every national and international literary award. Fate is rarely so generous; one might again consider the role that twenty-five years of solitary labor played in this later success.

The period in question spans four novels. Beginning with White Noise (1985), it includes Libra (1988), Mao II (1991), and Underworld (1997). Frank Lentricchia offers a useful summary of the awards DeLillo received during the 1980s, but it is necessary to extend the list to include the later books.24 During the dozen years that constitute the period in question, DeLillo won the National Book Award for White Noise and the Pen/Faulkner Award for Mao II. Had he won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (both Mao II and Underworld were finalists), he would have gained the triple crown of American
literary awards. Internationally, his writings of that period won the *Irish Times* Aer Lingus Prize for International Fiction, the Jerusalem Prize, and the Bachelli Prize for International Fiction. In 1995 he won the Lilla Wallace Reader’s Digest Award for his work among patients of Alzheimer’s disease (an experience that may have provided source material for the character Lianne Glenn in his 2007 novel *Falling Man*). The run concluded with the prestigious William Dean Howells Medal for *Underworld*. Readers may think that the prizes are no guarantee of literary merit. This is true. But one must also remember that most of the prizes are judged and awarded by fellow writers, and no single prize ever features the same jury. Plus, the prizes DeLillo earned involve not only awards for literary merit but for ancillary activities, including service to his community and advocacy on behalf of free speech.

In addition to earning the recognition of his peers, the period 1985–97 constitutes a remarkable period in the printing and sale of DeLillo’s works. A cynic might say the prizes he won are merely the effect of this surge in printed copies. This may also be true. It does not, however, dismiss the quality of books that were printed, or reprinted, or that DeLillo—who had been until that time a rather obscure writer of postmodern genre fiction—had popularized postmodern fiction on an unprecedented scale. *Americana*, DeLillo’s first novel, had a first printing of 4,500 copies. *White Noise* had a first printing of 25,000, and *Libra* 75,000. Various sources note that the first printing of *Underworld* was 450,000 copies. Beginning in the mid-1980s after the success of *White Noise*, Penguin Books reissued DeLillo’s first three novels (*Americana*, *End Zone*, and *Great Jones Street*) in new paperback editions; these were followed, beginning in 1989, by new Vintage paperback editions of *Ratner’s Star*, *Players*, *Running Dog*, and *The Names* (the four novels immediately prior to *White Noise*). It is reasonable to estimate that by the mid-1990s the number of copies of DeLillo’s novels made available to readers numbered in the millions.

Capable reviewers and critics discovered DeLillo’s fiction during this time and fueled the rush of interest. (Again, one can take the cynical view.) They emerged from a critical readership that first formed during the 1970s. In a very useful survey of the early criticism of DeLillo’s work, Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles divide that early readership into distinct parts: “The first begins with *Americana* in 1971 and extends through *The Names* in 1982. During this phase reviewers began to recognize DeLillo’s abilities as a novelist, his interest in ‘ideas,’ and skill with language and humor.” Prominent reviewers included novelists such as Joyce Carol Oates, Anthony Burgess, and John Updike (not all of whom were kind in assessing DeLillo’s novels). A second group emerges during the mid- to late 1980s as scholars such as Tom LeClair,
Frank Lentricchia, David Cowart, John McClure, and others published books, edited collections of essays, and wrote articles and book chapters devoted to DeLillo’s writings. (LeClair was also one of DeLillo’s first interviewers, in 1982.) Special issues of major scholarly journals collected articles devoted to DeLillo’s writings, conferences were held to discuss his work, and a Don DeLillo Society was formed. Online forums, reader’s guides, and websites devoted to DeLillo began to appear during the 1990s. Journalists and fellow writers continue to write about and explain DeLillo to the new audiences that gather to read his works, and by the 2000s these varied readerships came to constitute a diverse and compelling international readership. DeLillo has warmly acknowledged its representatives in industry and culture on occasion by commemorating an editor (Nan Graham, December 2012) or a fellow writer (David Foster Wallace, October 2008). At a symposium in April 2013, he read an excerpt from *Underworld* at Duke University on the occasion of Frank Lentricchia’s retirement.

I do not present the scale of DeLillo’s acclaim and success to justify the literary merits of his novels. Rather, I would like to think that we continue to live in a culture capable of recognizing and rewarding a writer’s imagination and achievement. Literary writers rarely achieve such status; yet when they do it would seem necessary to consider that status in honest terms. This, I believe, is also the role of criticism. Nonetheless, I would also caution that regarding DeLillo’s astonishing accomplishments and success of the period 1985–97 one can also become distracted by their “aura,” to invoke Murray Siskind’s famous discussion of “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA” from the novel *White Noise*. Perhaps the scale of DeLillo’s success has made it difficult to appreciate dispassionately the four novels of this period. We see their glory and praise, but not their words. This problem reminds us that the scale of that success does not confirm the value of the novels in question. Rather, the novels belittle that success—“economize it”—so that readers might adjust their focus and perspective to the printed page. Can one admit success without precluding literary accomplishment? Is the fiction a key to the biography or vice versa? Do we see the barn or only the photo of the barn? Can a reader enjoy *White Noise* without considering everything that has been written on it? Or must we read in light of such histories, negotiating their habits and conflicts? If so, what autonomy remains for us, as readers, to decide how to read, enjoy, or discuss a novel? If we take the negative view, we appear in the grim “dead end” situation of the character of Gary Harkness in DeLillo’s early novel *End Zone*, trapped by languages and forces we cannot control or comprehend. If we take the optimistic view, which is more common yet also more delicate in DeLillo’s later fiction, we affirm that it is
only by entering into dialogue with history, art, and language art that we may ultimately become free.

A forgotten photograph, lost in the data deluge of American print, serves to bring this preliminary discussion to an appropriate conclusion. On September 16, 1997, DeLillo became the first writer to have his photograph printed in color in the New York Times. “The Grey Lady” had always preferred the documentary sobriety of black-and-white images, but had finally relented to new technologies for newspaper print, technologies that made the color printing process less difficult and costly. There were also competitors who had already made the change, and were gaining ground, to consider. In addition to technology and market share, there was a third factor: advertising. Long the pillar of revenue in print journalism, advertising was also a highly aestheticized visual form of commercial capitalism. Who better than Don DeLillo, a writer who had written a great deal about American advertising and consumer culture, to stand before the window of a small business in his old Bronx neighborhood and have his photo taken to represent the paradox and anachronism of the moment? DeLillo, who has written consistently and beautifully about business and advertising, seemed a perfect choice for this combination of the mundane and the extraordinary. After all, his fiction had turned the flow of that data back upon itself in ways that make us aware of its bidirectional flow, as if to remind us that as it speaks to us, we also speak to it. This too is the role of the novel and the novelist.

Unbeknownst to readers holding that newspaper in 1997, the American publishing industry would be a much different place in less than a decade’s time. DeLillo’s America had long been a wonderland of radio signals, print advertisement, television commercials, movie theaters, and pop songs, with an occasional computer screen. They were the machines of the messengers. Today, they are all absorbed and absorbing the digital revolution that was then in its infancy. The color photograph (reproduced in black and white on the cover of this book), ironically showing DeLillo at his old haunts, appeared at a threshold: writing and writers would never be the same. We see it creeping into his fiction already with his next novel, The Body Artist, in which the protagonist Lauren Hartke sits at her computer screen for hours, transfixed by a camera that broadcasts a dark Finnish highway over the Internet, cars traveling on the road. She is hypnotized by this new thing. She wonders what to make of it.

At the same time, even as it communicates wonder before the violence and comedy of contemporary life, DeLillo’s fiction also prepared us for what art and artists would become in a new and rapidly emerging world. It described its pleasure as well as suspicion, and it combined nostalgia with regret. His
fiction always depicted America moving from the industrial age into the age of data and information, images and simulation. By the 1990s, when the Cold War ended and the Internet made its public debut, DeLillo was in a position to make art and sense of it all. This was not his paranoia, or prophecy, or hindsight, or good fortune. It was instead a matter of simply paying attention, and using both his practiced techniques and those others shared among modern artists, so as to describe the change with imagination. There is in this sense little mystery, and only hard work, to credit for his achievement. But even then, when looking upon that color photograph printed near to the close of the twentieth century, we are reminded of how and when the old world of print pages, binding, and ink began its confused migration to bits of data and pulses of light. Two worlds, one more permanent and tangible, the other ephemeral and numinous, converge on that threshold. Through the camera lens does the writer stare into our world, or do we spy into his?