Understanding Don DeLillo

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CHAPTER 3

Opacity and Transparency

White Noise and Mao II

White Noise

Don DeLillo’s eighth novel, White Noise, was the first of his books to be issued by the Viking Press, the largest publishing firm with which he had worked until that time. (Viking released the first edition under the imprint of Elizabeth Sifton Books; Sifton had been an editor for the press.) Published in 1985, it was considered by readers to be DeLillo’s “breakthrough” work. The novel’s publication history and critical reception confirm that status: it was his first novel to receive extensive and nearly unanimous critical praise, the first to be the focus of a collection of scholarly essays (edited by DeLillo scholar Frank Lentricchia and published in 1991), the first to receive a critical edition (edited by DeLillo scholar Mark Osteen and published in 1998), and the first to be reissued in an anniversary edition (published in December 2009, with a new cover design by the illustrator Michael Cho). Viking published all three editions of the novel. To put it simply, in DeLillo’s career there is before and after White Noise.

Just as DeLillo’s career is transformed by the successful publication of White Noise, Jack Gladney, the novel’s narrator and protagonist, faces a similar “before and after” situation. Jack and his family are exposed together with everyone else in the suburban college town of Blacksmith to the poisonous fumes of a chemical compound named Nyodene Derivative, or Nyodene D. The chemical is released when a tanker car carrying the chemical spills its contents from a nearby railroad line, an event that occurs in the middle of the novel. Fatality does not immediately ensue; rather, Jack learns that the
chemical is likely to kill him, that it is already killing him, and that his death will precipitate slowly from “nebulous masses” that are taking form in his body. A causal relationship between the toxin and the masses is never established, however, and there is the possibility that the masses existed prior to the spill. After the fact of contamination and pursuant to medical examination, Jack realizes that Nyodene D resembles everything else (foods, television ads, facts without context, invisible energies emitted by technology) insofar as consumer society thoroughly saturates its participants with the forces—both visible and otherwise—of its influence. In this way the novel implies that it too is immersed in the endless flow of information that permeates every atom of contemporary American life. As such, there is before Nyodene D. and after. Or is there? Like the chemical in question, *White Noise* has an amorphous ability to reshape readers’ estimations of all of DeLillo’s writings. When considering the writings that precede *White Noise*, readers seem implicitly to ask: “Was DeLillo always this comic, or satirical, or perceptive, or dramatic a writer?” The same is true, perhaps more so (and perhaps unfairly), of the standards to which his later writings are held. Critics often find “trends” in a writer’s oeuvre that flatten or disregard certain distinctions. (For instance, look up “DeLillo and Technology,” and you will find dozens of publications on the subject.) In any case, the anachronistic “*White Noise*” effect that I describe here is perhaps a common consequence of any outstanding book to which a writer’s other achievements are compared. The curious feature of *White Noise* is that the very effect of which I speak in the criticism is built into the novel itself.

In a letter dated January 7, 2001, DeLillo explained the novel’s title to its Chinese translator Zhu Ye in the following terms: “The title. There are white noise devices that produce a kind of humming sound in which the intensity is the same at all frequencies. Such a device is designed to protect a person from other distracting or annoying sounds—street noises, aircraft, etc. ‘Uniform and white,’ as the text says. Jack and other characters associate this phenomenon with the experience of dying. A state in which things are in a perfect balance, perhaps. The title also refers generally to all the unheard (or ‘white’) noises and other kinds of information routinely engulfing the characters in the book—radio, TV, microwave transmissions, ultrasonic appliances, etc.”

DeLillo’s letter suggests a different orientation to the materials at hand. The earlier works seem to be structured almost deductively, with characters and dialogue strapped into the novels’ obtuse narrative design. In those cases, cinema, genre, or sociolinguistics function as a framework whose details are to be inserted after the fact. *White Noise* opens a new trajectory with respect to the narrative structure of DeLillo’s works: the narrative scaffolding does not
so much vanish as it is internalized by the characters. After all, how can one
dramatize “frequencies” and “sounds” and “nebulous masses”? How does
one depict the synesthesia of a “noise” being “white?” A poet might answer
these questions in verse. A novelist must dramatize events in the form of a plot
along which the development of ideas takes narrative form in description, dia-
logue, and affect. What if the plot itself were to internalize its materials, de-
velop the ominous notion, present from the novel’s first words, that all objects
were in some way connected into a single field of relations for which “white
noise” functions as the figural phrasing? A field of relations that has also the
uncanny capacity to enter and reconfigure the reader’s thoughts? What if the
commodity form of the novel were a way of internalizing those very notions
in the reader’s mind—a sort of literary contamination, as it were?

The novel begins with a description of parents delivering students to
school at the beginning of the college year. The prose is dominated by nouns;
lists of commodities, accumulating by way of the passive voice, initially crowd
out the actors: “The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with care-
fully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets,
boots and shoes, stationery and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up
rucksacks and sleeping bags” (3). Jack Gladney reveals himself to be the nar-
rator after he suspends his viewing of this avalanche of student amenities.
The viewing never truly ends; as we shall see, one of the novel’s distinguish-
ing narrative features is its subterranean style of discourse: its conversations,
meditations, and descriptions never break off. They travel instead along inac-
cessible channels only to resurface suddenly at some later point. Like Jack,
*White Noise* internalizes things as if it too were alive.

Such a complicated and clever style of narration poses obvious challenges
to the reader as well as the reviewer and critic. They are welcome challenges,
of course, in that they result from the novel’s formidably amorphous narrative
design. Jack Gladney and the family of which he is a part constitute its most
tangible dramatic elements. Their presentation in the novel provides contrast
to DeLillo’s earlier writings; the family itself embodies the dispersed, numi-
nous qualities of the novel’s title; and critics of the novel have much to say
about the family and its individual characters. As such, the family offers an
obvious starting point for discussion, as it is the filter through which Jack’s
narration is largely refined.

The Gladney family brings family melodrama to mind. In many ways
*White Noise* was the first major work of American literary postmodernism
to consider a family as central to its design in some way. For decades Ameri-
can novelists had more often than not denied genealogy (see the opening
lines of Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*), or illustrated how historical forces had
broken families apart (Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*), or portrayed characters escaping from families (Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*). Domesticity, if it appeared in any way, was fraught with terror and shame, or it was a homebound biographical premise from which to flee into America. (DeLillo’s *Americana* entertains the latter notion, if only to complicate it.) In addition, the damaging consequence of a family’s absence was also the subject of great novels (see, for example, Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*). Considered in relation to the institution of the American novel, the families in the majority of postmodern literary narratives clashed against or drifted away from the great genealogical lines that ran through the writings of Faulkner and Steinbeck. Restoration of a mythical American family is not, however, the goal of *White Noise*. DeLillo’s previous novels offered only glimpses of families. In those moments, the family was either a memory (David’s in *Americana* is the most extensive) or a domestic premise to be displaced, for the sake of contrast, by a larger plot (Lyle and Pammy’s marriage in DeLillo’s 1977 novel *Players*). Until *White Noise* DeLillo’s characters had inhabited the postgenealogical culture of Holden Caulfield rather than the patrilineal (and later matrilineal) culture of Tom Joad.

The Gladneys of *White Noise* are in effect a composite made from parts of several different marriages. Their genealogies are fragile and difficult to trace across the book. The character playing the role of husband is Jack, and the one playing the role of wife is Babette. Husband and wife are not synonymous with the biological roles of mother and father vis-à-vis every child who lives with them, of whom there are four. Wilder, the youngest, is Babette’s son by birth. Wilder’s father is an anonymous man who lives in the Australian outback with a second, older son named Eugene. Steffie, the second youngest child, is Jack’s daughter from his second marriage to a woman named Dana Breedlove. Wilder and Steffie are followed in age by two teenagers. Denise, who is eleven years old, is Babette’s child from her first husband, Jack Pardee (a hustler of sorts who makes a brief visit to the home). Heinrich, the oldest, is Jack’s son from his second marriage to his first wife, Janet Savory, who “has taken the name Mother Devi” and who lives and works in an ashram “located on the outskirts of the former copper-smelting town of Tubb, Montana, now called Dharamsalapur” (24). In addition to the aforementioned Eugene, who is Babette’s son (and Wilder’s older brother), there are two other siblings living afar: Heinrich’s sister lives with his mother, and Jack also has a second daughter, Bee, from his third wife, Tweedy Browner. In total, Jack has been married five times to four women and Babette has been married three times to three men. Combined, they have seven children, four of whom live in Blacksmith with Jack and Babette.
In a very useful article that he published during the first wave of scholarly writings about *White Noise*, Thomas Ferraro noted the following about this family structure: “Not a single child whom Babette has mothered or whom Jack has fathered, whether in their custody or not, is living with both parents or even a full brother or sister. Above all, the current assemblage has not been together longer than Wilder’s two years of age, and in all probability less than that.” Ferraro proceeds to show how DeLillo’s novel does not align with the social theories of intellectuals such as Christopher Lasch or Allan Bloom, figures who scowled in their respective ways about the dissolution of the American family. (In an important section of the article, Ferraro illustrates how consumerism replaces biological bonds so as to sustain the Gladney kinship.)

Similar patterns of relations shape the criticism of the novel. Ferraro’s article appeared in a 1991 volume entitled *New Essays on White Noise*, edited by Ferraro’s Duke University colleague Frank Lentricchia, who in that same year edited a collection of essays entitled *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Although the two books were released in the same year, the “new” in the former volume’s title refers to the fact that the latter volume contained writings on *White Noise* and that most of that volume’s essays had already been printed in 1990 in a special issue of the journal *South Atlantic Quarterly*. In those volumes, critics such as Anthony DeCurtis, John McClure, Lentricchia, Daniel Aaron, and others would shape much of the criticism devoted to DeLillo’s writings. As we saw in the previous chapter, McClure devoted early writings to DeLillo’s use of genre in his novels. (In the present case, Ferraro devotes attention to sociological matters such as the family and the role of technology in society.) Some of those critics continued to write about DeLillo over the decades that followed, while others departed to other critical formations. For instance, DeCurtis and McClure continued to publish important writings about DeLillo, and it should be noted that McClure was the first to write on the question of the secular in DeLillo’s writings. They were joined by other figures in DeLillo criticism such as Mark Osteen, Tom LeClair, and John N. Duvall, and many of them followed DeLillo’s career and continue writing about it to the present day. As the Gladneys gather in ad hoc familial relations around consumption, intellectuals also gravitate in comparable formations to the object of their scientific study. One might call it coincidental mimesis.

Experts from other areas of literary scholarship have also contributed to the understanding of DeLillo’s writings. (Linda S. Kauffman’s fine recent essays on *Falling Man* are an excellent example of the habit.) Their contributions have come in many valuable forms. Leonard Orr, a renowned scholar of modern literatures, offered one such contribution in a concise 2003 volume entitled *Don DeLillo’s White Noise*, remarking upon the novel’s presentation
of the Gladney family. He writes that “information about the dispersed Gladney family . . . is not given in any one long passage of exposition, but is spread throughout the novel, so the first appearance makes the family seem more solid and home-centered than it is.”

Returning to my earlier comment regarding the novel’s narrative structure, we might consider the Gladney family structure a microcosm, or better still a microclimate, within the novel. The family absorbs and metabolizes information from the larger atmosphere. (In Jack’s case, it also metastasizes.) As it does so, it generates facts about itself in the manner in which the media transmits news of the toxic event: in a form that is “dispersed,” to borrow Orr’s term, like the toxic cloud.

The novel’s dispersion of genealogical information serves another function that is central to the debates surrounding White Noise: the question of characterization. The Body Artist (2001), a book that is arguably the most attentive to the development of character among those DeLillo has published to date, adopts a similar narrative technique. The narration of that book’s first scene weaves description of birds that fly about the yard outside the kitchen window. There is no parody about nature there, no cue that would make the reader think for a single moment that the fragmented descriptive passages are meant to focus on anything but the sober and poignant scene unfolding in the room. There too the description is “dispersed” over the course of the text. I discuss that scene in the following chapter but would apply its logic here so as to compare it with the narrative structure of White Noise, which is organized in a similar manner with respect to the Gladney family, and with considerable consequence for individual characters.

Characterization and affect have divided critical opinion of DeLillo’s writing more than any other question. The point of debate is this: how does one evaluate characters that are claimed not to resemble “real” people in that they lack the capacity to convey feeling? Take, for instance, chapter 7 of White Noise. It is divided by two distinct moods. In the first, Jack and Babette are in their bedroom, where they discuss the prospect of sex in the most absurd, comic fashion imaginable, exchanging seriocomic banter that displaces the erotic premise. Despite its banality (or perhaps because of it), Jack becomes sexually aroused. The couple resolves to read an erotic publication; Jack offers a brief discourse on irony, noting that it is “the means by which we rescue ourselves from the past” (30). He leaves the room to obtain “a trashy magazine” but returns with a family photo album. The emotional momentum of the narration turns on a dime, and the chapter closes with a poignant rumination in which the family looks through the scrapbooks and photographs. In the chapter’s paratactic final sentence, the narration poses a question that has been creeping into Jack’s mind in earlier chapters, and it resurfaces here
as if it had suddenly entered the room to join the reminiscing family: “Who will die first?” In this chapter, two moods are juxtaposed to a dramatic affective result, and then a final line of narration that had temporarily submerged suddenly reappears.

It is not the only passage or even chapter of this kind in the novel. Babette asserts her autonomy in a later chapter when she reveals her infidelity to Jack, and there too the mood shifts from comedic delirium to somber reflection. The same might be said for the scene when the Gladneys return from a shopping spree and each one of them wishes “to be left alone” (84). My point is that it is difficult, even impossible, to reduce the Gladneys to a one-dimensional parody of the American family. I admit the anachronism, in that I have used DeLillo’s later novel as evidence. But when looking back upon his earlier writings with the more recent fiction in mind, we see the clear precedent: the sincerity of the passage derives from the “dispersed” narrative organization. One effect is to provide proof of DeLillo’s ability to write substantial dramatic characters with and through an inventive telling of the plot; another is that the narration requires that readers recalibrate their understanding of character so as to recognize an integral relation between characterization and narrative design. In a novel such as this one, which is very much committed to depicting how mass media inflects characterization, it is useful to remember Marshall McLuhan’s slogan “The medium is the message.” This is not to say that the novel’s characters are indistinct or simple media effects; rather, distinguishing elements of character—such as emotion—are also “dispersed” over the narration, and inseparable from it.

Many of DeLillo’s reviewers of this period nonetheless assailed his characters for their lack of “substance.” The charges against DeLillo came from various quarters. Fellow novelists such as John Updike pilloried his style (Updike once early in DeLillo’s career and then again a quarter century later). DeLillo has also been taken to task by intellectuals of the academy who regard him as a representative of an obsolete brand of disaffected postmodernism. Bitter invective came also from conservative intellectual journalists. In a 1985 review-essay originally published in the New Criterion, literary critic Bruce Bawer wrote: “There should be profound emotions at work here, but White Noise is, like its predecessors, so masterfully contrived a piece of argumentation that believable human actions and feelings are few and far between.” Bawer proceeded to note that for DeLillo “life seems to exist so that we can theorize about it.” Bawer considers White Noise an essay masquerading as a novel, littered with bits of “rapidly aging nihilistic clichés” about contemporary American life. Curiously, Bawer’s argument resembles similar claims about DeLillo’s characters posed by critics from the academic left (yet without
the resentment regarding DeLillo’s alleged bleak vision of America). In a later review, the influential conservative columnist George F. Will adopted a line of argument similar to Bower’s when he reviewed DeLillo’s 1988 novel *Libra*. Will described DeLillo’s writing as “an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship” insofar as “DeLillo’s attempt to ‘follow the bullets’ trajectories’ back into the minds of Lee Harvey Oswald and others becomes yet another exercise in blaming America for Oswald’s act of derangement.”

Scholars and champions of DeLillo’s writing have responded to such negative evaluations in a number of different ways. Eugene Goodheart appealed to precedent to justify DeLillo’s characters. In “Don DeLillo and the Cinematic Real,” Goodheart argued that “the deliberate insubstantiality of DeLillo’s characters is compensated for by an extraordinary and eloquent plenitude of speech.” Goodheart alludes here to DeLillo’s oft-stated admission that characterization, or the criticism of his characterizations, does not bother him. In explaining dialogue, scholars have also deferred to artistic influence when explaining the discursive inclinations of DeLillo’s characters, as Mark Osteen has done in noting the influence of Jean-Luc Godard’s cinematic “essays” on DeLillo’s fiction (an influence that DeLillo readily admits).

Describing his writing of characters, and indirectly justifying Goodheart’s claim, DeLillo noted in a later interview that “I want to give pleasure through language, through the architecture of a book or sentence and through characters who may be funny, nasty, violent, or all of these. But I’m not the kind of writer who dotes on certain characters to the degree that he’s able to work out their existence.” In addition, reviewers might have noted that DeLillo varies the depth of characterization from novel to novel: “I think about dialogue differently from book to book. In *The Names* I raised the level of intelligence and perception. In *Libra* I flattened things out. The characters are bigger and broader, the dialogue is flatter.”

Justifications such as these are very useful, but they also unnecessarily concede ground to critics who, for the most part, had not bothered to study DeLillo very carefully before attacking his work. (In accusing DeLillo of pandering to conspiracy and paranoia about the Kennedy assassination, George F. Will conveniently ignored an interview, published in *Vogue* several weeks prior to Will’s review, in which DeLillo stated that “to my knowledge, there was no specific cover-up [in the Warren Commission Report].”)

Frank Lentricchia’s essay “The American Writer as Bad Citizen” provides a memorable and devastating exception. In that essay, Lentricchia argued on the one hand against literary critics who, in dismissing DeLillo’s novels, implicitly advocate the “the comforts of our [American] stability [that] require a minor, apolitical domestic fiction of the triumphs and agonies of autonomous
private individuals.”

In this line of argument, according to Lentricchia, DeLillo’s ambitions are regarded as “pretentious in the setting of the new regionalism,” the latter being a homespun, semiautobiographical fiction. Lentricchia concludes that “unlike these new regionalists of and for the Reagan eighties, DeLillo (or Joan Didion, or Toni Morrison, or Cynthia Ozick, or Norman Mailer) offers us no myth of political virginity preserved, no ‘individuals’ who are not expressions of—and responses to—specific historical processes.” In Lentricchia’s view, terms such as “provincialism” and “regionalism” are synonymous with the conservatism of artists and intellectuals inhabiting the left wing of the critical spectrum.

Lentricchia proceeds to address the conservatism exemplified by Bawer and Will. He begins by noting that DeLillo’s recent success (beginning with the award he received in 1984 from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and through the publication of White Noise and Libra) indicates “the best sign of [DeLillo’s] cultural relevance in our day: the media political right has begun to take an active interest in DeLillo.” Lentricchia then responds primarily to Will’s attack against Libra. (He also cites Bawer’s criticism of White Noise in its appeal to implicit American virtues, though, admittedly, Bawer’s view is more literary and lacks the virulent, ad hominem insults that characterize Will’s invective.) Lentricchia notes a common thread among the reviewers: that they cannot explain DeLillo without appealing to a false notion that fiction must be solely populated by characters who conform to common-sense notions of literary realism or, more precisely, a distorted notion of literary realism. Having exposed the false literary assumptions and criteria of their arguments, Lentricchia furthermore concludes that “the media right has nevertheless said, in so many words . . . that fiction does not have a private address and that DeLillo does to Oswald what we, for good or ill, do every day to our friends, lovers, and enemies: he interprets him, he creates a character.”

Lentricchia’s polemic is as relevant today as when it was written twenty years ago. In addition, he defends DeLillo’s characterizations. Nevertheless, both DeLillo’s detractors and defenders lose sight of a rather important fact along the way: that DeLillo’s characters are harnessed to the narration of his novels. To some degree, it is simply impossible to defend or attack DeLillo’s fiction on ideological grounds or on the grounds of “realism” without first addressing how the novelist assembles words on the page. This is not to make the case for an abstract and empty formalism or the type of analysis that would reduce DeLillo’s novels to something resembling architectural blueprints. Rather, I would take the long view and argue that the essayistic discursions offered by characters in DeLillo’s novels (a habit to which both Bawer
and Will forcefully object, and which Goodheart and Osteen defend) are the dramatic surface effects of an artful series of narrative experiments that can be traced over the course of DeLillo’s career. Beginning with the faux–Jean-Luc Godard narrative/cinematic experiments of *Americana* and continuing through his experiments with genre during the 1970s, DeLillo’s fiction develops a centripetal narrative motion to match the centrifugal and wide-ranging subjects of his novels, or what Lentricchia calls in writers like DeLillo “an effort to represent their culture in its totality.”

*White Noise* marks a turning point in this arc of narrative development because while on its surface it appears to experiment with genre and its broad cultural framework, the novel’s primary orientation is introspective. As I noted, the novel contains the base elements of a family melodrama. As with his second novel, *End Zone*, *White Noise* also doubles as a campus novel. Jack Gladney is chair of the Department of Hitler Studies at College on the Hill. During the course of a lecture (he teaches one class, once a week), Jack delivers a monologue that was for many years a touchstone for DeLillo’s critics. Jack describes the scene and recounts the speech: “When the showing ended, someone asked about the plot to kill Hitler. The discussion moved to plots in general. I found myself saying to the assembled heads: ‘All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children’s games. We edge near death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are targets of the plot’” (26). The sentence fragment that begins with “Political plots” typifies a type of construction well-known to DeLillo’s readers: the “list.”

DeLillo includes such lists in the majority of his writings. They often appear as sequences of nouns; we find them, for example, in *Americana* when Sullivan says, “neon, fiberglass, plexiglass” (127) to David. They also take lyrical form as the sing-song babble of Bucky’s song lyrics in *Great Jones Street* or as the ritualized pregame exercises of the football team in *End Zone*, described by the narrator as “frantic breathing with elements of chant” (106). In these earlier instances the chanting or repetition of lists often functions as an accent to stress a relevant point: the football players’ chants reinforce Gary’s faux-anthropological view of the locker room. In *White Noise* the lists serve to blur the line between character and milieu (whereas in the case of *End Zone*, the lists create a narrative distance). The first such list appears in chapter 10 of *White Noise*. The narration cuts abruptly from Jack’s conversation with his colleague Murray Siskind to Jack and Babette walking through town. There is no indication of who is speaking, as pronouns render the actors opaque. Jack asks Babette about her recent amnesia as they pass an
optics store. The words “Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex” (52) interrupt the narration. They are the names of synthetic textiles, but they are not spoken as dialogue. They might be words that Jack or Babette sees in advertisements as they pass windows, or associations that one of the characters’ makes after passing a clothing store.

In a later scene, Jack watches his daughter Steffie as she sleeps on a cot in the evacuation center where the Gladneys seek refuge from the toxic cloud. Jack hears her mumble something in her sleep. He waits, then hears, “Toyota Celica.” Jack reflects upon the “near-nonsense words,” describing them as “supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child’s brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence” (155). The last effect may be induced by the chemicals in the air (an effect comparable to the citizens’ newfound sensitivity to the post-spill sunsets), but the narrative voicing must also be noted. DeLillo had already used scrolling lists of commodities to set the stage in the novel’s first paragraph. In all three scenes mentioned above—the “plot” speech, the conversation, and this one—the mantra-like lists erupt from the narration without warning or a specific cause. DeLillo had already set the stage in the opening novel’s first paragraph, as the lists of commodities scroll by without any hint that we see them from Jack’s point of view. In all three of the scenes mentioned above—the “plot” speech, the conversation, and this one—the mantra-like lists appear without warning or any clear causation. Even if we can attribute them to the context of a character’s action, as in the case of Jack’s speech, the grammatical constructions themselves often seem like media sound bites that DeLillo has inserted into the dialogue. Over time, the chanted noun-lists become an elemental, linguistic analog to the multi-form “white noise” of a consumer society that blurs distinctions between inanimate objects and sentient ones. Certain characters in the novel, such as Murray, seem to be already aware of the phenomenon, while others respond to it by seeking refuge from it or lashing out against it with violence. Confused and terrorized by its mystery, Babette turns to experimental drug treatments, while Jack lashes out against Mr. Gray, the man who provides the drugs (which ultimately fail) to Babette. Their conjoined responses only make matters worse. In the end Jack returns to the passive state of the novel’s opening paragraph, as the final paragraph begins, “The supermarket shelves have been arranged,” and the descriptions of things accumulate to the novel’s famous closing fragments: “The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead” (326).
DeLillo’s expert readers have generally focused on the implication rather than the means of the novel’s fusion of objects with characters. As we have seen, his champions regard *White Noise* as an elevated form of cultural criticism, and his opponents treat it as an impoverished or even immoral one. These are largely ideological positions (what is not?), yet the fact of the matter is that they also put the cart before the proverbial horse by primarily treating the novel as a political tract rather than as an object of art. When regarded in the latter view, one would be honest to admit that Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*—one of the most celebrated political novels in modern human history—is likely the only American novel of the Cold War to fuse narrator with narration to greater effect.

As noted earlier, *White Noise* attracted a host of commentators to DeLillo’s writings for the first time. Many have offered explanations of various aspects of the work, and some commentators focus on the chants, mantras, and lists that recur throughout DeLillo’s fiction. One of the first to do so was Daniel Aaron, who commented at length on the speech of DeLillo’s characters (and in its defense). Aaron’s experimental essay mixes commentary with quotation; he imitates DeLillo’s style, using sentence fragments to add emphasis to his comments on DeLillo’s style. (Aaron had clearly read all of DeLillo’s novels.) Aaron devotes a long section of the essay to the “concise observations [often in the form of aphorisms]” made by DeLillo’s characters and how those observations “can often lengthen into little essays.”19 Aaron discusses the “crazies,” obsessives, narrators, and novelists who are “quick,” in Aaron’s view, “[to] spot the extraordinary in the commonplace” because they are “sensitive to shades and nuances, sounds and colors and . . . they read the language of movements and gestures.”20 At one point, Aaron uses the example of Dr. Pepper in *Great Jones Street* to introduce the question of “glossolalia,” or speaking in tongues. Together with repetitive chanting and aphasia, or speechlessness, glossolalia is a common subject of commentary on DeLillo’s fiction.

In interviews DeLillo has often described his interest in linguistic forms of liminal or spiritual experience, a category that includes glossolalia, aphasia, and chant. In a 1982 interview, he defined it as a concern with the “‘untellable’ points to the limitations of language,” elements that include childlike “babbling” (exemplified by Wilder’s communication in *White Noise*) and glossolalia that suggests “there’s another way to speak . . . a different language lurking somewhere in the brain.”21 DeLillo returned to the subject of chanting in a 1993 interview, where he discusses the scene in which Steffie repeats a brand name in her sleep: “There’s something nearly mystical about certain words and phrases that float through our lives. . . . When you detach one of
these words from the product it was designed to serve, the word acquires a chantlike quality. . . . If you concentrate on the sound, if you dissociate the words from the object they denote, and if you say the words over and over, they become a kind of higher Esperanto. This is how Toyota Celica began its life. It was pure chant at the beginning."  

Nearly every major critical study of DeLillo’s writings published during the past quarter century has addressed the matter of language in DeLillo’s prose, and often with emphasis on the alternate counterlanguages described above. In his book American Magic and Dread (2000), Mark Osteen discusses glossolalia as a form of revelatory spiritual experience (in his example, that of Pentecostal Christianity). Summarizing DeLillo scholar Tom LeClair’s earlier writings on the subject, Osteen argues that DeLillo’s novels expose readers to heteroglossia, by which “we cannot read words as obsessive trackers of univocal meaning” and begin to perceive them instead as “the marriage of oppositions, including that of orality and literacy.” In a more recent discussion of glossolalia in DeLillo’s fiction, Peter Boxall notes that heteroglossia takes a punitive form in DeLillo’s Underworld (1997). In his view, the global ascent of consumerism and the universalist aspirations of its linguistic shorthand (the “higher Esperanto,” as DeLillo called it) result in exclusion rather than revelation. Aligning the novel with precedents in Milton and Hawthorne, Boxall argues that “the entire narrative wheels away from that opening half-line, discovering, despite itself, all those forms of cultural experience and memory that cannot be articulated by an American voice, that remain unknown, untranslatable, unnameable.” Glossolalia becomes in this view a rather secular matter: it is the linguistic waste of an empire.

An even more recent essay, published by renowned DeLillo scholar David Cowart, includes discussion of the character of Mr. Tuttle in DeLillo’s The Body Artist (2001), a character who mimics the speech of others. Other critics have begun to consider DeLillo’s rendering of language and Alzheimer’s disease in Falling Man (2007), and in more general terms, critical writings on DeLillo’s recent fiction have consistently offered compelling and thoughtful discussions of the inventive, idiosyncratic, and quasi-mystical languages that appear in his fiction. Cowart summarizes the matter nicely in the opening lines of his essay when he writes, “One cannot, in any event, overemphasize the centrality of the language theme in any and all of DeLillo’s novels, stories, plays and essays.”

As such, the discussion of dialogue, language, linguistic divergence, liminality, and even silence (Bucky Wunderlick’s feigned aphasia) informs much of the critical writing that celebrates DeLillo’s contributions to the American novel. Nearly all the major schools of poststructuralist literary studies (chief
among them deconstruction and semiotics) have engaged its role in his fiction; those critical modes inclined to the social sciences (chief among them ethnic studies and women’s studies) have commented upon it; and scholars from film studies and cultural studies, as well as performance studies, disability studies, and eco-criticism, have contributed to a diverse and vibrant discussion of DeLillo’s literary language.

Language is by no means the only interesting focus of discussion in the long dialogues that have shaped understanding of DeLillo’s fiction. Its high standing in the study of DeLillo’s work results in part from the fact that it is the duty of literary critics to regard language as the primary material of literary artistic labor. It is also the necessary consequence of reading the novels, not only to generate professional criticism but simply because DeLillo’s novels offer an elevated and extraordinarily refined view of American English and its variants. I have regarded the aesthetic role that DeLillo affords to nouns vis-à-vis narration and characterization in White Noise. In this view, that novel represents a turn away from his earlier techniques but also an extension of them into new moods and modes. I have also stressed the matter so as to emphasize that while “language” remains a constant emphasis in his work, the means of its delivery changes. If it were a form of state-sponsored political propaganda, one might say the “deep state” that delivers White Noise had come to power through a coup d’état that displaced a previous narrative regime in his fiction.

Never one to avoid shocking his audience, however, DeLillo crafted his novel Mao II (1991) so as to portray a novelist whose language and trade are besieged by a new form of discourse that speaks in images rather than words. The result is an explicitly political work of literary fiction that ventured even to experiment with mixed media, as it integrated photographs and paintings into its narrative design.

Mao II

Twenty years had passed since the Houghton Mifflin Company of Boston published Don DeLillo’s first novel, Americana, in 1971. DeLillo changed publishers for his fourth novel, Ratner’s Star (1976), moving to Alfred A. Knopf, the famed New York publishing firm. With White Noise he switched again to the prestigious Viking Press, which in the mid-1970s had become a subsidiary of the Penguin Publishing Group, the world’s largest publisher of literary fiction. Viking made White Noise a success, and the novel’s successor, Libra, became DeLillo’s first best-seller. Copies of DeLillo’s subsequent novels were printed by the hundreds of thousands.

The curious reader who stumbled upon a rare copy of DeLillo’s first novel in chapter 2, and who perhaps followed DeLillo’s career, would no longer
have to seek out stray copies. This was partly because of DeLillo’s success, but it was also because of how the business of book publishing had changed during those twenty years. DeLillo made that change a central concern of his ninth novel, *Mao II* (1991). The novel’s first chapter depicts a character named Scott, the younger personal assistant to the reclusive novelist Bill Gray, in a large New York City bookstore. Scott walks through the store from one level to another scrutinizing the commerce of books. He notes their significant placement in the store, how they are “stacked on tables and set in clusters near the cash terminals,” how the stacks are “arranged in artful fanning patterns” and “step terraces and Lucite wall-shelves” (19). Distinctions are made between hardcover books, with Scott “fitting hand over sleek spine, seeing lines of type jitter past his thumb,” and paperbacks, whose “covers were lacquered and gilded.” The scene describes the heyday of the large retail bookseller, that class of national bookstores that adopted the franchise model of corporate development during the 1970s and thereby dominated the retail book business.

Book-selling and the business of literary publishing vex Bill Gray throughout the novel. Indeed the novel’s premise is that Bill progressively rejects them. The novel proceeds in later chapters to describe Bill’s working habits, Scott’s management of his papers, Bill’s aversion to publicity and biography, and the harrowing expectations of an unpredictable audience. In the middle of a conversation regarding the novel’s central political conflict, Bill interrupts his editor to ask, “Remember literature, Charlie? It involved being drunk and getting laid” (122).

The political conflict in question resembles in many ways what came to be known as the “Rushdie Affair,” a story in which DeLillo’s publisher played an important role. In the fall of 1988, Viking-Penguin published Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in England. Literary critics largely praised the book, but Indian Muslims (Rushdie was born one)—journalists, clerics, and politicians—objected to characters and events that seemed to allude to the Prophet Mohammed. British Muslims responded in outrage to the news, burning copies of Rushdie’s books and organizing mass protests. Protestors demanded the book be banned and withdrawn and that Rushdie be prosecuted for blasphemy. British booksellers were bombed. In February 1989, the Iranian cleric Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a death sentence against Rushdie that included a multimillion-dollar reward to the Iranian who might kill the writer (the reward being one million dollars for a non-Iranian). Salman Rushdie and his wife, novelist Marianne Wiggins, were quickly placed under the protection of the British Secret Services and forced into hiding. British journalist William J. Weatherby consulted Columbia University literary scholar

While Rushdie was the primary target, protestors also targeted booksellers, publishers, and translators. Under siege by constant bomb threats, the headquarters of Viking-Penguin was forced in several countries to hire security for its staff. American writers found themselves faced with a choice: to defend Rushdie and the principle of freedom of artistic expression, to criticize him (as some British authors had done), or to avoid controversy. The New York Times published writers in support of Rushdie. They included Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, Elie Wiesel, and Ralph Ellison. In addition to Ellison, other American authors, including Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, James Michener, and Stephen King, defended Rushdie. Yet publishers and booksellers continued to fret over the American edition of Rushdie’s novel. They had good reason to do so. As Weatherby notes, “Early in March, too, the office of the Riverdale Press, a New York City weekly newspaper, was fire bombed and all but destroyed” because the paper had published an editorial defending “the right to publish, to distribute and to sell The Satanic Verses.”

DeLillo’s novels had always engaged contemporary events with inventive, indirect artfulness. They often represented the great countercultural themes of the era: Vietnam (Americana, End Zone, Running Dog), psychedelia (Great Jones Street), and conspiracy culture (Players, The Names, White Noise, and Libra). DeLillo has also attuned fiction to the intersection where terrorism converged with capital (in Players, as well as in the later Cosmopolis). Mao II is certainly among those books, and much of it confirms that DeLillo followed the Rushdie Affair with interest and concern. The novel’s language even escaped into his other statements and writings of that period. Philip Nel described it as follows: “In a 1991 interview, DeLillo repeated one of [Bill] Grey’s speeches without acknowledging he was doing so. The Rushdie Defense Pamphlet, which DeLillo co-wrote with Paul Auster, borrows a phrase from Gray when it says ‘the principle of free expression, the democratic shout, is far less audible than it was five years ago.’” And so the reader who follows Scott into the large bookstore portrayed in Mao II to purchase a copy of the novel is faced with an immediate question: does one read the novel as an allegory of the Rushdie Affair?

It is useful to step back and take the long view so as to approach the matter from a different angle. Certain novels can fairly be said to define a writer’s legacy. More precisely, teachers, critics, students, curators, and varied audiences of readers, as well as other artists, succeed in persuading generations of
readers to regard certain literary works as “definitive.” A writer is thus defined in relation to a single work, the obstinacy of which pervades our literary memory. Associate a novel with the following names: Fitzgerald. Hawthorne. Kerouac. Hurston. Melville. Steinbeck. Lists of this sort can suggest associations as well as obscure them. They become hypnotic.

White Noise is often considered the “breakthrough” work of DeLillo’s literary career. It is admittedly very much unlike the novels that preceded it. DeLillo has himself noted the difference but without specifying a particular novel. Generally speaking, he regards his novels of the 1980s—The Names, White Noise, and Libra—as marking a shift in his work. Each of those novels was more distinct with respect to its predecessors, and one might date a slightly different cluster—White Noise, Libra, and Mao II—as definitive in a collective rather than individual sense. White Noise closes the door on the narrative experiments with genre in the first period of DeLillo’s career as a novelist, but it also opens another door onto the more introspective, character-driven fiction of the period that follows. While sharing many of the traits of this later period, Mao II is also a different animal, a sort of wild card to remind readers that DeLillo’s career has been as unpredictable as it has been consistent.

Mao II has two main parts, each consisting of several chapters. DeLillo included two additional parts that function as kinds of bookends to the novel. The first, entitled “At Yankee Stadium,” focuses primarily on the point of view of Karen Janney, a young American woman who is at that moment a bride in the mass wedding ritual described in that part of the book; the second bookend, entitled “In Beirut,” focuses on Brita Nillson, a Scandinavian photographer working on assignment during the civil war in Lebanon. DeLillo populates the novel with an ensemble cast. It includes primarily Bill, Brita, Scott, and Karen, but also Charlie, Bill’s editor, George Haddad, a spokesman for a group of militant Lebanese Maoists, and Jean-Claude Julien, an unknown Swiss poet who has been kidnapped by the aforementioned terrorists. Karen begins the novel and Brita ends it, and their stories are intertwined with others so that the reader can never lose sight of the fact that the narration favors their points of view. Maria Nadotti interviewed DeLillo in 1993, and her questions turned to the women characters in Mao II. Nadotti asked, “Has Brita, who is hired to photograph Bill Gray in Mao II, perhaps found a way to escape invisibility by reversing the terms and becoming herself a perceiving subject rather than a perceived object?” And DeLillo responded to her, “Reversing the terms? In a sense, yes. She is in this way exercising a certain control over people. In the case of the book, moreover, she is photographing a man.”
DeLillo has always taken a sophisticated view of the dynamics of perception, and while his recent novels had become more “literary,” *Mao II* is, as some have called it, a work of “mixed media” insofar as the book itself integrates the very images to which it refers. In the first place, the novel offers a running commentary on the paintings that adorn its original dust jacket: Andy Warhol’s *Mao* series (1972–74). The title page of each of *Mao II*’s four parts features a photograph. In the first case, the reader sees a reproduction of a black and white photograph of a mass wedding. The brides and grooms file past a religious figure. In the second image, which precedes part 1, a crowd of spectators at a sporting event are crushed against a fence, their faces distorted, panicked, or lifeless. In the third photograph, which precedes part 2, a crowd is gathered beneath a massive photograph from which the Iranian cleric Ayatollah Khomeini scowls back at the viewer; the photo depicts the scene at the Ayatollah’s funeral. Finally, there is a photograph of three boys crouching in what appear to be the cement ruins of a building. One of them is raising two fingers in a “V” sign and smiling at his hand, one stares out of the frame, and the third returns the viewer’s gaze through what appears to be a viewfinder.

In the novel Brita and Karen actually view these images or participate in the scenes they depict: Karen watches the riots at the soccer game and funeral on television and also takes part in the wedding; Brita is present in Beirut. Karen and Brita have differing relations to visual media. Brita is a participant who creates it, where Karen is defined more by her perception and consumption of it. Throughout the novel, Karen plays the role of participant-observer. Laura Barrett perfectly described that role in a recent essay on the novel’s mixed-media design when she noted, “Shading into the image, Karen simultaneously observes the scene and participates in it.”

Synesthesia is the bridge over which Karen crosses to the streets of lower Manhattan, looking for Bill, in part 2 of the novel. The sounds and smells heighten her sensitivity to color and light, triggering an effect comparable to what Warhol had achieved in coloring the portrait of Chairman Mao. She spends her days among the homeless denizens of a public park, following a teenager named Omar as he sells and delivers narcotics. At night she watches broadcasts of Chinese troops and Iranian mourners on a television at Brita’s apartment. She reverts to her former spiritualism (she had been a follower of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, whom she calls “Master,” and her deprogramming from the cult was not complete) and wanders the park, speaking in broken English as she tries to find “someone who might listen. She had the Master’s total voice in her head” (194).

Returning to the earlier matter of how to read the novel vis-à-vis its context, one might ask: is Karen a prototype of the cult member, an American
Christian equivalent to the frenzied Iranian mourners whom she watches on television as men pull down a helicopter so as to prevent it from taking their spiritual leader to his grave? *Mao II* is littered with such figures; even Bill Gray has fanatical readers (one sends him a severed finger in the mail). DeLillo has complicated this reductive view in interviews by noting of Karen that “I felt enormous sympathy toward Karen Janney, sympathy, understanding, kinship. I was able to enter her consciousness quickly and easily. And I tried to show this sympathy and kinship when writing from her viewpoint—a free-flowing, non-sequitur ramble that’s completely different from the other characters’ viewpoints. Karen is not especially likable. But once I’d given her a life independent of my own will, I had no choice but to like her—although it’s simplistic to put it that way—and it shows in the sentences I wrote, which are free of the usual restraints that bind words to sentences in a certain way.”

One could cite a number of instances of Karen’s antipathy (for instance, her initially defensive treatment of Brita). In most instances, however, the matter of perspective can be framed in terms of the Rushdie Affair. There is the matter of cultural sensitivity, for instance. In the opening pages, Karen recalls speaking in broken English to her Korean fellow cult members, assuming that they will understand her as a result. DeLillo is not a writer who allows political correctness to obstruct character development. (One could cite any number of Bill Gray’s statements, or even the Lebanese terrorists’ patronizing treatment of Brita in the final pages, as other examples.) A reader might forgive these by invoking the cultural conflict of the Rushdie Affair and claim DeLillo was asserting a rather abstract (and one might say puerile) notion of free speech. Such an assertion—or its other, which would be to dismiss the novel as racist, sexist, and the like—would approximate the manner in which Rushdie’s critics and would-be assassins treated *The Satanic Verses*: as an orthodox screed rather than as a work of art. And in this case, a work of art that never allows the reader to step entirely away from either Karen’s or Brita’s point of view, either by way of the narration or the presence of the various paintings and photographs that are on and inside the book itself. In this other view, then, not only does DeLillo portray Karen’s glossolalia, her desperately luminous perception of American urban life, and her fraught attraction to domineering patriarchal figures as more sensitive to the human complexity of history than not, but he also places the reader in a physical position through which to regard the world through Karen’s eyes. When we “read” the novel from that perspective, we are placed in an abject relation similar to that in which tyrants place followers and victims when those tyrants use mass media to distort and deform the human sensorium. As noted in chapter 1, that abjection is a position that Susan Sontag criticized in her famous essay on Leni
Riefenstahl. In *Mao II*, however, Karen prevails over it by her own devices, the assumption being that the careful reader, viewing the novel through Karen’s eyes, will do the same. As such, Karen returns to the world through art rather than against it. This is one perspective by which the novel regards its own designs and may fairly be said to reply to the Rushdie Affair.

The other perspective is that of Brita, a photographer working with a small grant to complete her project of photographing the world’s great living writers. Bill Gray is the ultimate prize, as it had been decades since he was last seen in public or photographed. Brita’s character appears to be partly inspired by Fay Godwin, whom William Weatherby describes in his 1990 book on the Rushdie Affair as a “professional photographer who specialized in portraits of writers, [and who] first photographed Salman Rushdie” in 1975 and again later as he was writing *The Satanic Verses.* Just as Karen cannot be reduced to an easy allegory (rather, she complicates allegorical readings of the book), Brita’s photographs of Bill Gray complicate any notion that he is an allegorical rendering of Salman Rushdie (or J. D. Salinger, the recluse who DeLillo claimed partly inspired the character) or even DeLillo himself. In this reading Brita’s view of Bill Gray forms a part of what Peter Knight has described as the “repeated building up and undermining of equivalency in the novel.”

We arrive then at the heart of *Mao II*: having complicated any quick allegory of it, we can begin to see that it is a mixed-media work made primarily of literary narrative but also with indispensable visual elements. As such it does not depict in some allegorical way the Rushdie Affair, or a cultural conflict, or a specific writer or crisis. Rather, it portrays the institution of the novel as it functions in an age in which it must compete with other media. Laura Barrett contends that *Mao II* “repeatedly affirms that no medium has a patent on truth or bears sole responsibility for the weightlessness of modern experience. Nor, for that matter, is any single medium capable of restoring order, a sentiment common to writers in the past half century.” One might take exception to the notion that the novel takes such a relative view of the matter, but every fiber of the novel’s being, from its jacket design to its photographs and words, shakes with the burden of speaking for various media (understood in this sense, as the arts of literature, painting, and photography). In this view the novel’s ensemble cast, most of whose perspectives the reader eventually inhabits, act as filters for the various channels by which artistic media point towards the truth. While that is the relative view, the novel is far more transparent with regard to another figure who stands in the way of that process: the modern terrorist.

Perhaps to reinforce the threat, DeLillo simplified the narration and sentences of *Mao II*. Genre is unclear. When brand names appear, they have a
source, context, and a knowing observer, as when Scott regards the signs along Broadway. Gone also are the nominal “lists” of White Noise; so as to reinforce the point that Bill Gray is not a stand-in for DeLillo, Scott notes that “Bill was not a list-making novelist” (140). Certain lines (such as “just like Beirut”) recur over the course of the novel, but they are scarce and emanate from random crowds.

The focus turns instead to the famed “speechiness” of DeLillo’s characters to that end. Even in such cases when they offer discursions, the elaborate narrative apparatus of other novels is simplified so as to stress the common speech of characters in dialogue. The primary discursions involve the novelist Bill Gray’s conversations with other characters. Bill discusses his seclusion when he first meets Brita to have his photos taken, invoking “doubt” (38) about it and his work (“doubt” being a term that also often appears in Weatherby’s discussion of Rushdie’s novel). In one of the most commonly cited passages from the novel, Bill describes “a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence. Do you ask writers how they feel about this? Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated” (41). The novel elaborates this line of thought in several different ways. There is the obvious allusion to the status of images in Islam. (At one point in the same scene Bill says, “In a mosque, no images.”) Brita and Karen will each discuss aspects of Bill’s ruminations on the novel, as well as his own photograph being taken, and they do so with each other, with others, or in the individual ways they think about photographs and paintings.

Scott will focus most closely on the relationship between the author’s image (literal and figural) when organizing Bill’s papers later in the novel (during the course of which he offers a short biography of the writer). Bill’s persistence after the topic is prompted perhaps by his gradual realization that a mere image will not suffice. He will discuss his options later with his friend and editor, Charlie Everson, after Bill agrees to meet with him in London to assist in the liberation of the Swiss poet.

Bill embarks on a journey that brings him closer to the prisoner, Julien. Bill abandons Karen and Scott, and he departs from his daughter. He leaves Charlie in London before the scheduled press conference and travels to Greece, where he meets again with George Haddad. Haddad, a professor of political science, is also a spokesman for the terrorist group that holds the poet hostage and the likely source of the leak that permitted the group to plant a bomb that explodes near Bill and Charlie in London (a scene that brings to
mind bombings of British bookstores during the Rushdie Affair). As intellectual and also informant, Haddad represents the terrorists (who are not shown as such until the end of the novel, when their leader explains his cruel ideals to Brita and then watches serenely as his own son assaults her). In his exchange with Haddad in Greece, Haddad suggests that Bill might take his place—a possibility that has already been on Bill’s mind. It is suggested that Bill may be taken involuntarily but for the problem of his transit across the Mediterranean, which is obstructed by the Lebanese civil war’s disruption of sea routes. Meanwhile, Bill and George meet several times to discuss their ideas, their positions, and their options. During their conversations, George matches Bill’s wit with his own intelligence and devotion to an ideal. What divides them, however, is their means. When Bill and George discuss the exchange, they talk about the fate of the prisoner and also his significance. For George his imprisonment is a poetic act designed to precipitate a coming political state. Responding to Bill’s depiction of the imprisonment, George notes, “There are different ways in which words are sacred” (161). In George’s view, people, and particularly the young, are vulnerable to the influence of words. The leader of a political movement must embody certain ideas and words so as to provide the young with a being to admire. George invokes Chairman Mao as the most relevant and admirable example. Bill responds: “Incantations. People chanting formulas and slogans” (162). By contrast, the young poet’s mind represents a possibility to Bill, and a possibility that George’s group, and every terrorist for that matter, would seek to annihilate along its dystopian march. In Bill’s view, a “hostage is the miniaturized form” of “every closed state” (163). Their conversation is interrupted by small explosions in the city below, and then George offers his ultimatum: if Bill leaves Greece and returns to New York, George’s group will kill the hostage poet.

In one of the novel’s final chapters, Bill abandons George and leaves Greece for Cyprus with the intention of traveling by sea to Beirut. An old man who cleans the ship finds his corpse on the docked ship. To the man, Bill’s papers may be valuable—not because he is a writer (the man does not know this) but because he is an American. He steals his papers to sell to militias who might use them, and Bill, who has died anonymously, vanishes from the book. The hostage poet’s fate is also never revealed. There is no heroic death scene (the moments prior to Bill’s death have a certain comedy about them, in fact), no final speech. A reader expecting a neat conclusion to Bill’s story will perhaps be disappointed, as will the reader looking for some final allusion to the Rushdie Affair. Karen and Scott reunite and proceed with their caretaking of Bill’s things, and Brita witnesses a wedding celebration during her final night while she is on assignment in Beirut, unaware of Bill’s fate. Her photographs
of Bill are not published. Placing the reader in a position to regard Bill through Karen’s and Brita’s eyes, DeLillo illuminates the novelist in the way that Warhol had illuminated the propaganda portrait of Chairman Mao; yet there is no literal effigy or portrait, apart from the words, the sentences, the novel.

A growing body of literary criticism has engaged DeLillo’s depiction of artists and art. In a recent essay Peter Boxall concisely summarized the matter when he wrote, “In DeLillo’s work, it might be argued, there is a refusal to distinguish between media culture and high culture, a refusal to discriminate, or exclude.” Boxall paraphrases the two points of view on the matter. In the first DeLillo appears to be an elemental postmodernist who has written his way into a corner in which literary fiction is trapped by its inability to do anything more than portray an inexorable and homogenous consumer culture. In the second view DeLillo’s literary experiments result in exciting new ways to experience and reflect upon aesthetics within consumer culture while avoiding being entirely subsumed into that very same culture. Boxall concludes that there lies at the core of all the perceived commentary about DeLillo’s work “a continued investment in David Bell’s silence and darkness, by its location of a still point that cannot be brought into expression but from which his fiction emerges and toward which it is heading.” Referring to David Bell (the narrator of DeLillo’s first novel Americana) in this way, Boxall describes the strange continuities of DeLillo’s prose, continuities that vanish like the subterranean storylines of White Noise, only to reemerge again in some new context or form. If this is true, then Mao II is not perhaps so unique as I have made it to seem by comparison to DeLillo’s other novels. It offers instead the most vivid glimpse of what Boxall describes as that “still point,” at which, like Karen gazing upon the city, our sight translates into sound and what Bill Gray calls a “democratic shout” (159). That is the famous line, the sound bite, the sales pitch.

What do we miss in our selective readings of DeLillo’s novels, as we trace patterns and lines, ferret for the proof of some idea? In the line that follows that famous phrase, Bill says, “Anybody can write a great novel, one great novel, almost any amateur off the street.” The word “amateur” seems incongruous, a bad Francophone note wedged into Bill’s wry American vernacular. “Amateur,” signifying one who pursues an activity for pleasure rather than profit and who, as the root of the noun suggests, is motivated by love. An “amatore,” or one who loves. Love—it is not a word often associated with DeLillo or his novels.