

CLASSIC TEXTS

Don DeLillo's *Libra*: History as Text, History as Trauma

Leonard Wilcox

*This article discusses Don DeLillo's *Libra* as historiographic metafiction in terms of the novel's exploration of the relation between historical events and narrative, and its sense that there is no access to the past that would be unmediated by language. Yet *Libra* grapples with issues that cannot be fully explained by a model that stresses the 'already written', textual nature of the historical referent. Drawing upon Slavoj Žižek's reading of Lacan and the Lacanian concept of 'the real', I explore the novel's depiction of the Kennedy assassination as a traumatic historical event, one that eludes symbolization and poses questions about the limits of representation. I argue that DeLillo's exploration of the relation between trauma and representation gives us a powerful metaphor of the historical project itself.*

Keywords: History; Metafiction; Trauma; Symbolic; Real; Žižek

I

When Don DeLillo's *Libra* was published in 1988 it was initially met in some quarters with an astonishing degree of venom. In part, this was due to the culturally traumatic and contentious subject the novel tackled—the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In no small degree it was also because DeLillo's fictional speculations ran counter to the 'lone gunman' theory endorsed by the Warren Commission. Conservative columnist George F. Will condemned the novel for its 'lunatic conspiracy theory', and famously declared that the novel was 'an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship' (Will 2000, p. 56). Another columnist, Jonathan Yardley,

heaped scorn on DeLillo's 'ostentatiously gloomy view of American life and culture', and declared that the novel's treatment of such a crucial moment in American history, merging, as it did, fact and fiction, was 'beneath contempt' (Lentricchia 1991a, p. 4). The flurry of criticism suggested that DeLillo's novel touched public pain about the Kennedy assassination, and, in academic circles, challenged the very nature of historical fiction. Some of the concerns I recall hearing in conversation harkened back to earlier critiques of the non-fiction novel such as those voiced by critic Gerald Graff, who complained that the genre indicated 'a loss of belief in external reality' (1973, p. 403).

Despite the early furor, *Libra* is now taught in university courses, and is written about extensively by scholars. What happened in the interim? For one thing, new studies have emerged on the nature of contemporary historical fiction that help us to understand more fully DeLillo's challenging novel. One such was Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), published the same year that *Libra* appeared. Hutcheon applied poststructuralist and postmodern theory to what she viewed as a new mode of historical fiction (Barth, Doctorow, Coover, Pynchon and Sukenick are a few of the many writers she examines).

Hutcheon termed this new fiction 'historiographic metafiction': 'historiographic' because such fiction demonstrates a self-reflexive awareness of the constructive act of writing history; 'metafiction' because texts of this order interrogate the very conditions and possibilities of their own acts of representation. Influenced by poststructuralism's rejection of the sovereignty of individual consciousness, characters in historiographic metafiction are often depicted as constructed in networks of language and ideology. The quest for some privileged centre of meaning is constantly displaced and dispersed, as well as the traditional notion of history as a non-contradictory continuity. Such novels, observed Hutcheon, strongly resonate with developments in postmodern history. They take on board, for example, Hayden White's sense that both 'novelists and historians constitute their subjects as possible objects of narrative representation', as well as acknowledging 'that there is no direct access to the past that would be unmediated by the structures of our various discourses about it' (Hutcheon 1988, pp. 111, 146). Hutcheon's textual model emphasizes the way contemporary historical fiction contests, through irony and parody, the idea of the past as a transcendental signified; it stresses the way such fiction calls attention to the inherent instability of signification, and to the way discourse is always inscribed with ideology and power.

Although DeLillo is absent from Hutcheon's discussion, her book is important for an understanding of *Libra*, for in many ways her textual

model aptly describes the concerns of the novel, as I will suggest below. As well as Hutcheon's book, critical commentary directed specifically at *Libra* provided theoretical tools that enabled readers to grapple with its challenging material. One of the earliest and most important was an essay by Frank Lentricchia that suggested DeLillo viewed the Kennedy assassination as the first postmodern historical event. Lentricchia took on Will and Yardley, and their charges that DeLillo's novel replaced historical 'reality' with gloom and paranoia. For Lentricchia, *Libra* is not about 'fingering a conspiracy' but about the advent of postmodern America, where the 'charismatic environment of the image' prevails, where a president takes on an aura conferred by photographs, and where a killer seeks his ten minutes of fame. *Libra* depicted an emerging postwar society of spectacle, a "world gone inside out", of life lived totally inside the representations generated in print and visual media' (Lentricchia 1991b, p. 206).

Lentricchia's article argued that DeLillo was a novelist writing in a new episteme, a writer who had absorbed certain aspects of contemporary theory, and who depicted the world in these terms. His article contributed to a shift in the critical discourse surrounding DeLillo's novels, since it suggested that they demanded a poststructuralist and postmodern theoretical understanding. Moreover, the implications of Lentricchia's analysis suggested (although he did not explore them) that *Libra* demands some knowledge of theories of postmodern history. When a historical figure such as Lee Harvey Oswald is not a stable identity but an incomplete, fragmented self looking for completion in a grab bag of media voices (as Lentricchia suggests), or when Oswald turns out to be less a historical agent than a function of discursive and ideological positions (as other critics have suggested¹), then the historical referent becomes considerably problematized. Similarly, when events fail to reveal origins, but rather their own textual nature or their inherent resistance to any interpretive system (as *Libra* suggests), then the problem of the relation of events and historical narrative becomes critical. Indeed, as critic Timothy Melley argues, *Libra* indicates that Kennedy's death produced a crisis of knowledge, 'a crisis epitomizing the condition of knowledge and history in postmodernity because it turns on an unbridgeable gap between historical events and historical narrative' (2000, p. 196).

Initially, I would like to explore *Libra*'s depiction of this crisis of historical agency in the postmodern context. Perhaps more than any other American novel *Libra* addresses the problems of historical representation in an age of image, sign and textuality. But while *Libra* is concerned on one level with the textual nature of the historical referent, it is a complex and multidimensional novel, one that vastly outstrips models of textuality such as Hutcheon's. Ultimately DeLillo explores areas that, while related to

textuality, probe the limits of representation. In *Libra*, I want to argue, DeLillo explores the relation between the traumatic event and representation, and in so doing gives us a metaphor of the historical project itself. His exploration of traumatic alterity suggests that in one sense the historical enterprise is impossible, that it must always fail, that any attempt to close on the historical signified will miss its mark, that such an attempt will simply produce further questions, further 'mystery'. On the other hand, DeLillo's writing of *Libra* is itself a testament to his idea that the historical enterprise is utterly valuable, that the past must be continually represented in order to open it to speculation in the present.

II

As historiographic metafiction, *Libra* exhibits a postmodern turn from validation to signification, a turn to a concern with the way language and textuality constitute a horizon of knowledge and truth. 'Before history and politics', DeLillo remarked in an interview, 'there's language' (Coward 2002, p. 92). For DeLillo, language is not merely a medium to convey meaning, but the matrix of meaning. Language and narrative produce meaning by imparting significance and narrative logic to raw events that have no meaning in themselves. Like poststructuralist thinkers, DeLillo is pre-occupied by the ineluctable gap between events and language, how events and language constitute (as a character puts it in his novel *Cosmopolis*) 'two separate systems that we miserably try to link' (DeLillo 2003, p. 55). DeLillo's novels convey a sense of the impossibility of language ever being able to grasp the non-linguistic, the historical referent in its pristine reality. This gap between language and historical events is inscribed in the double-narrative structure of *Libra*: one narrative concerns Oswald's life in the 1950s and early 1960s and its haphazard movement towards the grim events in Dealey Plaza in Dallas on 22 November 1963. The other concerns Nicholas Branch, a figure of the traditional or 'normal' historian within the novel, whose futile attempt to 'retrieve' historical facts and to write a definitive account of the assassination challenges conventional views of writing history.

One of the chief difficulties Branch faces is that his study of the evidence surrounding the assassination fails to converge on some transcendental signified or to provide some stable meaning to historical events. A retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency, Branch works on a project given him by the CIA: writing a 'secret history' of the Kennedy assassination for the Company's 'closed collection' (DeLillo 1988, p. 442).² Assigned the task in 1973, Branch pursues it doggedly over the

course several administrations: 'he had seen Schlesinger, Colby, Bush, Turner, Casey and Webster occupy the Director's chair' (p. 60). Yet after fifteen years of work Branch has accomplished less than he had hoped: 'the truth is he hasn't written all that much' (p. 59). Branch assumes the myth of the given, that events are a field of lambent facts merely waiting to be captured and conveyed. Yet rather than self-evident facts that glow with the light of truth, he is inundated by words, texts, documents of every description:

The stacks [of folders] are everywhere. The legal pads and cassette tapes are everywhere. The books fill tall shelves along three walls and cover the desk, a table, and much of the floor. There is a massive file cabinet stuffed with documents so old and densely packed they may be ready to ignite spontaneously. (p. 14)

Branch is increasingly confounded by the problem that historical events are inevitably textual, and as such they are unstable, 'combustible', subject to the play of difference; their significance 'branches' in multiple directions. And if historical evidence is textual, historical study can hardly be distinguished from literary study. The most definitive account of the assassination is the Warren Report, 'with its twenty-six accompanying volumes of testimony and exhibits, its millions of words' (p. 181). Yet increasingly Branch finds it difficult to differentiate this report from fiction or poetry: 'Branch thinks this is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred'. The Warren Report is 'a poetry of lives muddled and dripping in language' (p. 181).

Branch's initial hope of uncovering an empirical bedrock of historical fact is further challenged by the primary subject of his enquiry, Lee Harvey Oswald, who is a historical character 'dripping in language' already written in a chain of prior representations. Branch attempts to answer the questions: Who is Lee Harvey Oswald? What were his motivations for killing Kennedy? Yet his access to Oswald is through a plethora of texts: the Warren Commission's official governmental report, articles from newspapers and magazines, military and FBI documents, photographs and so on. But Branch finds Oswald is already written in another sense: as a character in a 'plot', a kind of fiction constructed by a group of disgruntled ex-CIA operatives to fit into their plan to stage an assassination attempt, described as a 'surgical miss' (p. 219), on Kennedy and to blame it on Castro. Win Everett, who originally hatches the plan, wants a shooter at the centre of the plot, and a paper trail that would convince the authorities the gunman is a Castro operative. Indeed the construction of this plot is

analogous to a literary creation; Win Everett, the instigator, sees it as fiction or a play with a protagonist, and a coherent thread of action. What is required is to get someone to play the part in a pre-existing script:

Win Everett was at work devising a general shape, a life. He would script a gunman out of ordinary dog-eared paper, the contents of a wallet. Parmenter would contrive to get document blanks from the Records Branch. Mackey would find a model for the character Everett was in the process of creating. They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world. (p. 50)

Oswald, of course, turns out to be ideal for the starring role in this plot. He has a chequered past in the military; for a time he defects to the Soviet Union, and his erratic and self-contradictory behaviour marks him as suspicious. Yet any real Oswald ultimately becomes irrelevant to the conspirators' design. When Oswald disappears (for a time he leaves the USA for Mexico City in the hope of obtaining permission to enter Cuba) the conspirators are not overly concerned, for by this time there is a paper trail and a string of clues, and Oswald has, in effect, become a fictional character in a plot that has taken on a life of its own. Should Oswald fail to return from Mexico, Guy Banister proposes: 'We create our own Oswald. A second, a third, a fourth. This plan goes into effect no matter what he does after Mexico City. Mackey wants Oswalds all over Texas' (p. 354).

DeLillo's Oswald is 'scripted' in still other ways, not the least of which is by the culture in which he lives. He is replete with contradictions, struggling with his own sense of incompleteness, looking for a part in some larger design: 'He wanted to carry himself with a clear sense of role' (p. 248). Initially drawn to the grand narrative of history (he reads Marx and Trotsky) as a force field in which to insert himself ('The purpose of history is to climb out of our own skin' (p. 101)), Oswald ultimately looks to what American media culture has to offer: a field of images and media voices. He experiences a *frisson* when John Wayne visits the marine base at Corregidor, and later, when practising with his rifle, he hears Wayne's voice saying '*take 'em to Missouri, Matt*' (p. 94). Oswald aspires to a role, and what better than the iconographic embodiment of the self-reliant individual, the 'lone gunman', a quintessentially American archetype relentlessly recycled in Hollywood film? After his attempt on the life of the southern racist General Walker, Oswald poses as Marxist revolutionary and lone gunman, while his wife Mariana obligingly takes his snapshot. The result is a kind of postmodern bricolage: rifle in hand, revolver in pocket, Oswald looks

towards the camera, holding copies of the *Militant* and *Worker*. His dream is that the photograph be published on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Libra's Oswald, then, emerges not so much as a historical subject in the traditional sense but as a postmodern subject, a nodal point in a series of endlessly dispersed images and media voices. Oswald believes that 'there is a world inside a world', that a secret life may provide some core or essence of self. Yet his secret life is a set of continually mutating and self-cancelling identities. Having arrived in the Soviet Union, he imagines himself to be 'a real defector posing as a false defector posing as a real defector' (p. 162). His self-construction emerges in slippages of language, displacements, misspellings and dyslexic inversions (Hidell, Hideel, O.H. Lee). Writing in his Moscow diary, he adopts the melodramatic rhetoric of romance novels: 'My fondes [*sic*] dreams are shattered' (p. 152). The instability of the language by which Oswald constructs himself makes access to any coherent, self-present or 'real' Oswald highly problematic.³

Moreover, Oswald's shifting, ambiguous, 'textual' and already represented identity, DeLillo suggests, is an aspect of the contemporary world with which the historian must grapple. For Branch, Oswald's constructions of himself and the 'Oswald' fabricated by the plotters take on a kind of intertextual relation, relaying, refracting and deferring any potentially recoverable core of stable intentions, motives or commitments on Oswald's part. Similarly, the possibility of uncovering an unproblematic set of intentions or an originating 'central intelligence' behind the conspiracy to murder Kennedy is next to impossible. Unlike the totalizing theories advanced in assassination films (such as Oliver Stone's *JFK*), DeLillo's novel presents the conspiracy as a product of unstable and interlocking forces. In the first instance, Everett's plan calls for a bogus assassination attempt that would leave Kennedy alive, and, at worst, wound one of Kennedy's personal assistants in the entourage, thus shocking the nation into renewed fear of Castro's communist regime. But plots in themselves take on momentum and an internal logic. Everett's Bay of Pigs veterans 'were five men who could not let go of Cuba. But they were also an outlawed group. This gave their meetings a self-referring character. Things turned inward' (p. 23). And as things turn inward, the conspiracy takes on an autonomous and self-referring dynamic, a logic of inevitability all of its own. As Everett realizes,

Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men. The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death. (p. 221)

The plot becomes a self-organizing system, its gravitational pull warping the ether of intentionality. The deathward trajectory of the plot coalesces, and, as it does, it becomes a kind of 'great attractor' in the midst of haphazard events, exerting a force on them, making them, in an eerie way, 'textual'. And as historical event and textuality become increasingly indistinguishable, the idea that behind the event lies some prior moment of pure, self-authorized meaning is further confounded.

Branch faces other difficulties in making sense of the past. As a traditional historian, Branch looks to self-evident and self-identical facts: he 'wants a thing to be what it is' (p. 379). He wants an absolute correspondence between the structure of events and the organizational structure of his account. As an empiricist, he believes that all the evidence must be taken into account, that he 'must study everything' (p. 59). Yet evidence provided by the Curator proliferates: 'It is impossible to stop assembling data. The stuff keeps coming' (p. 59). And as data piles up, it begins to mock the distinction between empirical data and text, for among the material the Curator supplies, Branch finds 'twenty-five years of novels and plays about the assassination' as well as 'feature films and documentaries... transcripts of panel discussions and radio debates' (p. 442). Branch wants documents to point unproblematically to their source. Yet each document contains 'endless suggestiveness' (p. 57). Branch's empiricism ultimately falters and folds back on itself, leading to a radical scepticism about ordinary claims to knowledge, and he begins to question 'everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, be able to say what happened' (pp. 300–301).

Branch's crisis of historical agency is that of the 'normal' historian attempting to grapple with a postmodern world characterized by a profusion of prior representations that circulate in the culture and constitute the historical subject, by the self-referring character of language and 'plot', by the fact that history is text 'all the way down'. In spite of his desire to contain and control historical data, Branch finds no solid ground that will stop the interpretive flux. Moreover, no 'grand narrative' such as Branch proposes to write can contain the play of meaning that is inherent in the textual nature of supposedly referential facts. Branch is therefore left stranded in an 'endless fact-rubble' of his investigation (p. 300).

Branch's conundrum suggests, by negative example, DeLillo's postmodern view of history. History never exists independently of its representations. History is constituted rather than found. It is about

creating meaning from the scattered, contradictory and meaningless debris we find around us. Indeed, the purpose of *Libra* is not to write some definitive account of the assassination in the name of truth. The novel, says DeLillo, 'makes no claim to literal truth', but rather provides 'a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens over the years'.⁴ Insofar as this suggests that history must be about imparting meaning through language and narrative, and giving shape and coherence to events, DeLillo's view of the historical enterprise seems similar to that of poststructuralists like Roland Barthes: 'The historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series' (Barthes 1997, p. 121).

III

On one level, *Libra* addresses the inevitable textual and representational nature of the historical object. Yet the metaphorical richness of the novel provides another way of envisioning the conundrums of historiography, another problematic related to the historical referent. For *Libra* grapples with that which resists symbolization, totalization, and symbolic integration—alterity in the form of trauma.

Libra focuses on a moment of intense national trauma—'the seven seconds that broke the back of the American Century' (p. 181)—and probes the relationship between the trauma and representation. For DeLillo, the psychic confusion the assassination produced in American life was 'absolutely ... where my work all began' (Coward 2002, p. 96). In Lacan's psychoanalytic terms, the traumatic experience is one of radical alterity; it produces a hole or empty place in representation. It is a kind of absent cause, an unapproachable void that Lacan calls 'the real'. The traumatic real eludes signification; as Slovenj Žižek puts it, the real is 'that which resists symbolization: the traumatic point which is always missed but none the less always returns, although we try—through a set of different strategies—to neutralize it, to integrate it into the symbolic order' (1989, p. 69). Having never been properly symbolized, it is an 'origin' that cannot be re-presented. The traumatic experience is impenetrable, and can only be constructed retrospectively. And because it 'resists symbolization absolutely' (Lacan 1988, p. 66) the real is detectable only in its effects, in symptoms and unsatisfied desire, in distortions and deformations of the symbolic order, in the tendency at the heart of all rational systems to

deviate from their intended course. As Nicholas Branch finds, all efforts to integrate traumatic historical events into a totalizing system result in a leftover, a troubling remainder. Sifting through the evidence in the hope of writing his secret history, he admits to himself that there is ‘enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations’ (p. 58).

Because the real is inherently unrepresentable, it creates an unbridgeable gap between events and historical narrative. This gap is suggested in the inability of the American judicial system—or for that matter the Warren Report—to align event and narrative, motives and acts, let alone to make a convincing case for the one-gunman theory.⁵ Nicholas Branch’s impossible project is to bridge this gap. Early in the narrative, Branch grasps the traumatic content of the events surrounding the assassination, as well as the difficulty of integrating them into some coherent scheme or symbolic framework:

We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams. Elm Street. A woman wonders why she is sitting on the grass, bloodspray all around. Tenth Street. A witness leaves her shoes on the hood of a bleeding policeman’s car. A strangeness, Branch feels, that is almost holy. There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the heartland of the real. (p. 15)

The traumatic events are described in surrealistic and religious terms suggesting their resistance to any conceptual scheme. The ‘heartland of the real’ is almost the opposite of the Lacanian real; it is a fantasy life of normality in which middle America shelters from the terrors of the real. Indeed, the real is the *aberration* in the heartland, the traumatic kernel that cannot be integrated into imaginary and symbolic constructions.

Branch must ‘follow the bullet trajectories backwards’ to reconstruct events, but he will never arrive at a fully present origin, since the traumatic experience is ‘non-original’, an inaccessible void. Yet he imagines he can break through to the thing itself, to grasp a fully present traumatic kernel at the heart of his investigation. At one point the curator sends autopsy photographs of Oswald:

There are the open eyes, the large wound in the left side, the two ridges of heavy stitching that meet beneath the clavicle and descend in one line to the genital area, forming the letter Y. The left eye is swiveled toward the camera, watching. (pp. 298–299)

This photograph, together with other photographs of ballistic tests done on human skulls and goat carcasses, suddenly seems to release Branch from the prison house of language and textuality, to provide substrata of stark particulars and sensory data that might form a bedrock of historical investigation: 'We are on another level here, Branch thinks. Beyond documents now. They want me to *touch* and *smell*' (p. 299). The autopsy photographs seem to provide a way of assimilating the traumatic material by direct apprehension. They suggest Roland Barthes' notion of the punctum, 'a sting ... cut, little hole' in representation (Barthes 1993, p. 27) through which an uncanny starkness and absolute otherness seems to protrude—in short, a sudden glimpse of the historical real:

[The photographs] are saying 'Look, touch, this is the true nature of the event. Not your beautiful ambiguities, your lives of the major players, your compassions and sadnesses. Not your roomful of theories, your museum of contradictory facts. There are no contradictions here. Your history is simple. See, the man on the slab. The open eye staring. The goat head oozing rudimentary matter.' (pp. 299–300)

Yet as Branch begins to understand, history is not so simple. The Barthesian punctum is a repetition of trauma, itself traumatic and destabilizing; it is not so much an encounter with the real as a 'missed encounter', since it remains uncoded and, as such, resists articulation. As Barthes notes, the punctum 'does not find its sign, its name . . . it cries out in silence' (pp. 52–53). The body on the slab is a traumatic point, a muteness that resists being signified, an absence around which symbolic structures must be retrospectively woven. The traumatic kernel shows up negatively only in its after-effects, as disturbances and distortions in discourse, as points at which representations falter, crack and fail:⁶

How can Branch forget the contradictions and discrepancies? These are the soul of the wayward tale. One of the first documents he examined was the medical report on Pfc. Oswald's self-inflicted gunshot wound. In one sentence the weapon is described as 45-caliber. In the next sentence it is 22-caliber. Facts are lonely things. Branch has seen how a pathos comes to cling to the firmest fact. (p. 300)

The 'soul of the wayward tale' is the kernel of the real that generates a string of unintended transformations, which keeps symbolic representations perpetually out of kilter. As Branch contemplates the eye-witness accounts, even the most basic facts run amok:

Oswald's eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right-handed, he is left-handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud. Branch has support for all these propositions... (p. 300)

Photographs of Oswald are little better, representing little more than the pure contingency and metonymic play of signification, the void and surplus of the real: 'Oswald even looks like different people from one photograph to the next. He is solid, frail, thin-lipped, broad-featured, extroverted, shy and bank-clerkish, all, with the columned neck of a fullback. He looks like everybody' (p. 300). The metonymic dance of the evidence, with its self-cancelling dynamic, points mockingly to the elusiveness of the historical signified, the degree to which any encounter with the real is a missed encounter.

In this sense history constantly excludes that which it tries to grasp. Any signifying frame misses its historical referent; any attempt at totalizing explanation generates its own ambiguities, produces an unassimilable residue. In spite of official explanations such as the Warren Report, America remains haunted by this troubling remainder. Although an inside job, Branch's 'secret history' is another attempt at an official explanation. As the narrator explains, Branch was 'writing a history, not a study of the ways in which people succumb to paranoia' (p. 57). Yet his efforts to write his history result in 'endless suggestiveness' (p. 57), a surplus or residue that haunts all official explanations of the assassination, and manifests itself in what DeLillo calls 'nonhistorical forces like dreams, coincidences, intuitions, the alignment of the heavenly bodies, all these things' (Coward 2002, pp. 102–103). David Ferrie, hairless ex-pilot and one of the operatives involved in the plot against Kennedy's life, subscribes to a paranoid view of history (history is 'the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us' (p. 321)), and ultimately to a kind of pantheistic grab bag of popular explanatory strategies. When Oswald asks Ferrie if he believes in astrology, Ferrie replies: 'I believe in everything' (p. 315). Indeed, the title of the novel suggests astrology as a metaphor for the unassimilable real and its metonymic play, what veteran CIA operative Larry Parmenter calls 'a vast and rhythmic coincidence, a daisy chain of rumor, suspicion and secret wish' (p. 57).

Yet the workings of metonymy—the endless substitution of signifiers—never restore the lost object in its pristine reality. Desire is this perpetual displacement in search of the elusive and traumatic lost object. Moreover, as a symbolic function, language constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive, creating a remainder of unsatisfied desire that derails

intention and distorts symbolic systems. Indeed the plot to kill Kennedy exhibits this dynamic. The plot as originally hatched by Win Everett—to miss Kennedy—turns out to be the very design that generates the real of desire—to murder Kennedy. Win Everett's plan to stage a 'spectacular miss' is shared, in the first instance, by a small coterie of veterans of the Bay of Pigs who blame Kennedy for the failure of the operation, and their shared antipathy towards Kennedy is inscribed in the plot from the outset. The plot fans out to encompass Cuban exiles and their 'Alfa 66' group who are convinced that Kennedy betrayed them, and includes a Mafia boss who wants his gambling interests restored, and Havana, once a 'fucking paradise' (p. 173) returned to its former glory. It includes such operatives as T.J. Mackey who are convinced that 'someone has to pay for Cuba', 'someone has to die'. (p. 303). The plot takes on a deathward trajectory, and its unsaid element, its 'textual unconscious', is murderous desire. And the 'defiles of the signifier', the detours and swerves of signification mark the eruption of this unconscious desire. T.J. Mackey intuits this, grasps the idea that a convoluted design such as Everett's is a kind of rationalization, an elaborate and compensatory web woven around the real of desire. Mackey has as gut-level understanding that the plan for the 'surgical miss' is a kind of displacement, a Freudian slip revealing a not so obscure object of desire—Kennedy's assassination:

They had to take it one more step. Everett's obsession was scattered in technique. The plan grew too twisty and deep. Everett wanted mazes that extended to infinity. The plan was anxious, self-absorbed. It lacked the full heat of feeling. They had to take it all the way. It was a revelation to him that in the moment he saw what had to be done, feeling the crash of air on the hood of the car, he felt the oddest goddamn sympathy for President Jack. (p. 220)

In staging an assassination attempt on Kennedy, the plotters wish to stage an 'electrifying event' (p. 27), a media spectacle. And in a postmodern society of image and spectacle, as Frank Lentricchia maintains, 'assassination is one of the extreme but logical expressions of the course of daily life' (1991b, p. 205). Indeed, the traumatic impact of the assassination is registered in an effort to revisit and replay the primal scene, the primal trauma, through images and electronic representation. A central piece of evidence that Branch is asked to examine is the Zapruder film, 'the 8mm home movie made by a dress manufacturer who stood on a concrete abutment above Elm street as the shots were fired' (p. 441). The film has been computer enhanced, and viewed repeatedly by experts who have 'scrutinized every murky nuance of the Zapruder film' (p. 441) in an

attempt to reassemble the events and locate a moment of origin. As part of the attempt to come to terms with the events surrounding the assassination, continual replays of Ruby shooting Oswald are watched by the nation. Baryl Parmenter sits before her television in an effort to get ever closer to the originary moment of trauma and death: 'She felt mortally bound to watch. They kept on showing it and she kept watching' (p. 446). The collective repetition compulsion that DeLillo depicts suggests an attempt to capture an ever-receding moment of origin, a futile effort to call forth a missing or lacking reality, an absence that cannot produce itself except through repetition.⁷ These endlessly repeated screenings suggest a deathly compulsion to return to origins: 'After some hours the horror became mechanical ... It was a process that drained life from the men in the picture, sealed them in the frame' (p. 447). The televised images of Ruby killing Oswald seem to promise contact with a real that is guaranteed by contact with death:⁸ 'All you had to do was see TV. Arm over his chest, mouth in a knowing oh' (p. 440). Yet both the film and televised images are freighted with the inaccessibility of the primal moment. The residue of traumatic alterity haunts the faded, grainy and shaky images of the Zapruder film. Rather than delivering up the event in its presence and transparency, the Zapruder film becomes 'a major emblem of uncertainty and chaos' (p. 441), another example of the troubling remainder that haunts all representations of a traumatic 'non-origin'.

Indeed, all roads to the real remain closed; the real is the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter, the lost object. The real, always missed, always returns, persists through a variety of symbolizations, and cannot be reduced to the illusory play of meaning (Žižek 1989, p. 50). The real thwarts all efforts to capture its full presence in representation, generating a surplus of 'suggestiveness', of unsatisfied desire, or a death-driven repetition compulsion that lies beyond the pleasure principle.

Lacan's notion of the traumatic real as a historical paradigm is, of course, linked with the notion of an 'original' trauma as an aspect of *la condition humaine*: the traumatic kernel produced when humans cut their umbilical cord from nature, from animal homeostasis, and enter the symbolic order. (Žižek 1989, p. 5). This 'fall' from the natural into the symbolic order means that human subjects never quite cohere, they are never identical to themselves. In a larger sense, this suggests, as Terry Eagleton comments, that there is a 'deviation at the heart of things without which they would not work' (2003, p. 205). This applies to human subjects, constituted in language, as well as their representations. For human symbolic systems always carry the traces of trauma, bending signifiers from their intended course, marking the limits of discourse and representation. The traumatic

real figures the elusiveness of ‘the thing in itself’, that which was lost, that which came before. In a larger sense, all this applies to history, for history is inherently ‘traumatic’, an absent cause that can only be constructed retrospectively, a deadlock, a constitutive antagonism that both generates and thwarts desire. As Fredric Jameson puts it, history ‘is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its “ruses” turn into grizzly and ironic reversals of their overt intention’ (1981, p. 102).

How might this view of an ‘impossible’ history account for the compelling quality of DeLillo’s novel? How might it account for the lasting quality of the novel in the face of counter-arguments that Oswald acted alone, or a recent BBC documentary that uses three-dimensional computer simulations to verify the one-gunman theory of the assassination?⁹ As Edith Wyschograd points out, postmodernism’s information revolution has reduced signifiers (both language and images) to codes. She concludes that the ‘extreme abstraction and total actualization reflect the telos of the information culture: the effort to reduce uncertainty to near zero’ (1998, p. 109). Or, as Jean Baudrillard would have it, the simulation guarantees the real: ‘present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation’ (1994, p. 2). In this sense, the fact that Branch must examine a computer-enhanced version of the Zapruder film seems remarkably prescient, since it looks ahead to the increasingly technologized examinations of the Kennedy assassination. Indeed, documentaries of Kennedy’s assassination, coming out every few years, seem to be repeated attempts to capture the impossible real of a national trauma. The recent simulational analysis seems another repetition compulsion, an attempt to obliterate the gap between events and representation, to deliver up the thing in itself by producing the real.

Libra, of course, traces the contours and after-effects of a radically different ‘real’ from that ‘verified’ in computer simulation, one which constitutes a critique of this virtual and coded elimination of uncertainty. *Libra* implies that otherness, ‘mystery’, can never be expunged from the historical account, which is to say that there is no final guarantee of the field of meaning. The novel suggests a negativity, a traumatic limit which prevents closure of a symbolic, representational frame. *Libra* suggests a view similar to that embraced by what Edith Wyschograd calls the heterological historian—that is, the historian who recognizes the ‘claims of alterity’ (1998, p. 145). Such a historian recognizes an intractable antagonism in the historical enterprise, realizes that every solution is provisional and temporary, that ‘there is always some condition that threatens her narrative, calls it into question’ (Wyschograd 1998, p. 144). Moreover,

Libra implies that a recognition of an alterity that inhabits all representational systems, including language itself, may deliver us from historical accounts which claim to be final and definitive, and which would include those hyperreal accounts that seek to reduce uncertainty to the zero degree. This seems to be precisely DeLillo's view. As he puts it,

language lives in everything it touches and can be an agent of redemption, the thing that delivers us, paradoxically, from history's flat, thin, tight, and relentless designs, its arrangement of stark pages, and that allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate. (Coward 2002, p. 92)

If the real always gives language the slip, it also inhabits language from within, generating a surplus of meaning, and a void of unanswered, unresolved questions.

It is an antagonism that is also a kind of opening, an 'unconstraining otherness', that resists finalities and thwarts totalization. If the 'free veer' of alterity can never be contained by our symbolic systems, it none the less maintains, as *Libra* so vividly reminds us, a space for speculation, for reconsideration, for the writing and rewriting that is the historical project itself.

Notes

- [1] See Christopher M. Mott (2000), pp. 229–244.
- [2] All subsequent quotes from *Libra* will be indicated parenthetically in the text.
- [3] Here I am indebted to Thomas Carmichael (1993, p. 208).
- [4] This quote is from the 'Author's Note' to the Viking edition of the novel (1988). Quoted in Mott (2000, p. 243).
- [5] This point is suggested in Melley (2000, p. 194).
- [6] Here I am indebted to Terry Eagleton (2003, p. 197).
- [7] For an extended discussion of the relation between repetition and the Lacanian real, see Taylor (1987, pp. 92–93).
- [8] On this point I am indebted to Mary Anne Doane (1990).
- [9] *The Kennedy Assassination: Beyond Conspiracy* BBC co-production. Screened in New Zealand on 23 November 2004, Television One.

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