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**Poetic Justice, Symmetry, and the Problem of the Postmodern
in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis***

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Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon have written that critical arguments over a cultural phenomenon's proper characteristics are a sure sign that the concept is alive and well, actively resisting its own definition.¹ While their comments are generalizable, they were speaking of postmodernism in particular. Literary postmodernism is of course notoriously difficult to pin down. The term itself, as Brian McHale writes, seems to be at best contradictory, meaning both “more-than-modern” (or “beyond modern”) and “anti-modern.” McHale further points out what should be obvious but merits restatement: postmodernism does not, in fact, exist. It is a theoretical construct that is used variously to include, exclude, classify, evaluate, explain away and otherwise do violence to things that do exist, in the world.

Ihab Hassan has summarized his definition of postmodernism as a drift towards the seemingly contradictory poles of indeterminacy and immanence², and in further declining the different forms of indeterminacy, he identifies a more overarching postmodern “will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche – the entire realm of discourse in the West.”³

On one level, it would be difficult to imagine a better practitioner of unmaking than Don DeLillo. The vast majority of his fourteen novels feature men of power and influence who drop out of the political, social, artistic, or linguistic systems that they have perhaps helped create; they are the stories, quite literally, of the unmaking of made men. To give just a few examples: *Americana's* (1971) successful adman David

Bell exiles himself to a desert island to watch his autobiographical film in a loop; *End Zone's* (1972) football star falls mute and goes on a hunger strike; *Running Dog's* (1978) CIA veteran Glen Selvy acquiesces to his own decapitation in the desert; *Mao II's* (1992) cult author Bill Gray stops writing and dies anonymously on a ferry boat; in *Falling Man* (2007) a World Trade Center financial advisor and 9-11 survivor becomes an anonymous and ghostly poker-playing presence in sterilized Las Vegas casinos.

From his early faux genre pieces to recent fictional treatises on memory, language, and technology, all of DeLillo's books seem to satisfy a number of criteria on the postmodern critic's check-list.⁴ Indeed certain of his novels, such as *White Noise*, have found their way onto college survey course reading lists alongside of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as a quintessential postmodern text.⁵ Yet DeLillo goes to lengths to distance himself from this label. As he says in a 1998 interview with *The Guardian's* Richard Williams on the subject of his thirteenth novel *Underworld*:

Post-modern seems to mean different things in regard to different disciplines [...]. In architecture and art it means one or two different things. In fiction it seems to mean another. When people say *White Noise* is post-modern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself. But I don't see *Underworld* as post-modern. Maybe it's the last modernist gasp. I don't know.⁶

Cosmopolis (2003) is also a novel, in many ways, about postmodern unmaking. Eric Packer, a young, ruthless multi-billionaire currency analyst and head of an investment fund, is speculating heavily against the yen, which is rising beyond expectations. Eric seems to be undergoing some sort of existential crisis at the beginning of the novel, and has apparently not slept for weeks. On the morning of the novel's action, Eric resolves to cross Manhattan in order to have a haircut in a particular barber shop where his late father used to take him as a boy. But in a larger sense, the "haircut" he desires is that of investor slang: a devastating loss of capital, a loss that Eric hopes will be spiritually liberating and will help reify his world. As the yen rises, and Eric's fortune correspondingly evaporates and all of capitalism is brought to its knees, he is drawn mysteriously westward towards a confrontation with a stalker,

and therefore towards his own death in an abandoned building. Like Bill Grey in *Mao II*, Eric also becomes stripped down and anonymous; as he crosses the city, he loses or abandons pieces of clothing and his wallet containing his identification, he dismisses or kills his own bodyguards, and confronts his stalker as an equal – that is to say a nameless derelict in a tenement.

Eric's universe, like that of most DeLillo protagonists, is a resolutely postmodern media-saturated world of decadent self-referential capitalism, abstract language, and failing metanarratives. In *Cosmopolis*, even those metanarratives that are themselves destabilizing, like Einstein's special theory of relativity (Eric's current bedside book), fail to describe the world of ephemeral capital and market hysteria. As Eric quips coldly, "Freud is finished, Einstein's next" (p. 6).

The sums Eric earns and loses are so astronomical that their mere signifier overshadows the reality of the transaction, which has become fully symbolic. Like the numbers that race around the stock tickers in Times Square, information has become "pure spectacle" (p. 80). To quote his chief of theory:

Property is no longer about power, personality and command. It's not about vulgar display or tasteful display. Because it no longer has weight or shape. The only thing that matters is the price you pay. (p. 78)

In fact most of Eric's transactions, financial, emotional and other, are abstracted, detached and as he says repeatedly throughout the novel, "touchless." This disincarnation extends into all aspects of his life. Not only can he place and cancel currency orders by voice command or by a wave of his hand, his sexuality is also "touchless": at one point in the novel he has a simultaneous orgasm with an advisor in his limousine, with no other stimulation than some cerebral meta-talk.

All of these considerations surface at different times, but the novel's fundamental crisis is one of predictability. The motor of the plot of the novel, as well as its controlling metaphor, is the inexorable and inexplicable rise of the yen. Eric's fortune has been built upon his uncanny ability to predict market dynamics. He is a seer in the most literal sense, one who sees. By being sensitive to the harmonies that exist between the flow of capital and natural processes and forms, Eric is able to out-

speculate all rivals. In the case of the yen, however, his models no longer apply and his fortune unravels as surely as the yen's value increases. The yen, which in the novel is almost a sentient character in its own right, is not obeying its own nature, not following the script.

[Eric] knew the yen could not go any higher. He explained that there were levels it could not reach. The market knew this. There were oscillations and shocks that the market tolerated to a certain point but not beyond. The yen itself knew it could not go higher. But it did go higher, time and again. (p. 84)

His "chief of theory" sees in his refusal to pull out of his speculation spree an ill-placed faith in a higher order, invisible but acting on events with ruthless power.

To pull back now would not be authentic. It would be a quotation from other people's lives. A paraphrase of a sensible text that wants you to believe there are plausible realities, okay, that can be traced and analyzed. That wants you to believe there are foreseeable trends and forces. When in fact it's all random phenomena. You apply mathematics and other disciplines, yes. But in the end you're dealing with a system that's out of control. (p. 85)

The mantra that echoes throughout the novel is a blunt statement of incomprehension on the part of Eric's collaborators: "What is happening doesn't chart" (p. 21). To which Eric responds stubbornly, "it charts."

Yet *Cosmopolis* is not an ode to (nor a lamentation of) chaos, unpredictability, moral decay, decadence, and anti-form. On the contrary, underlying this dystopian vision of pre-millennial society is a strong formalist tendency on DeLillo's part, and on the part of his characters, a not unfounded belief in a moral universe structured according to narrative principles. Despite DeLillo's serious engagements of postmodern problems, which have been extensively commented upon, his novels, and especially more recent ones like *Cosmopolis*, have a unity and wholeness that is uncharacteristic of "strict" postmodern texts, and in which the dénouement is more of a controlled un-knotting than an unraveling and dissipation.

Firstly, there are structural similarities to certain of DeLillo's more recent novels, notably *Libra*, *Underworld*, *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*, that reveal a formalistic

desire on the author's part to provide a self-contained and harmonious narrative whole.⁷ All four novels contain two overlapping timelines, one dominant, one dormant but resurfacing periodically for a few pages. In the case of *Cosmopolis*, Eric's killer Beno Levin, who we learn is a disgruntled former employee, is the narrator of his own chapters which divide the novel into three parts, and which run forward from the moment of Eric's death. The overlapping timelines mirror, on the narrative level, a sort of psychic prolepsis that Eric experiences on the diegetic level: as he crosses Manhattan he begins to see moments from his own immediate future projected on the screens and monitors that equip his stretch limousine, including, in the final moments of the novel, a vision of an unidentified body that Eric understands to be his own. The effect of this looping structure⁸ is to provide a text that is in a sense both open and closed. The resolution (the actual moment of death) is outside the scope of the narrative, before one story thread but after another.

Furthermore, in *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo's references to classical and pre-classical models are explicit. Specifically, the narrative of Eric Packer's crosstown trip seems to follow rather closely, even conspicuously, the Aristotelian conception of tragedy. Briefly, Aristotle considers proper tragedy to be a representation of "an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude" (Part VII), involving a protagonist that is "highly renowned and prosperous", and who "by some error or frailty" (Part XIII) undergoes "the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad" (Part VII), and this change of fortunes inspires "pity and fear" (Part XIII) in the listener, and "a change from ignorance to knowledge" (Part XI) on the part of the protagonist. The specific plot events Aristotle describes as being central to the construction of such a tragedy are "Reversal of the Situation", "Recognition" and "Scenes of Suffering" (Part XI).

The parallels between Aristotle's conception of tragedy and the narrative of *Cosmopolis* should be evident. Eric is an absurdly rich media darling who dines with presidents, a predator capitalist who becomes himself hunted by a former employee, who makes the mistake of placing a colossal losing bet against the yen and thereby singlehandedly causes the fall of western capitalism during the course of the day,

coming to understand in the process that he is part of the very system he secretly wishes to destroy, before suicidally tracking down, confronting, and allowing himself to be shot by the very man who is hunting him.

The notion of poetic justice in such a tragedy appears when the action is not only narratively satisfying but morally satisfying. Richard Tyre, in his article “Versions of Poetic Justice in the Early Eighteenth Century” has distinguished between two complementary visions of poetic justice. On the one hand he speaks of a “literal” or “strict” poetic justice,

[A] didactical-ethical concept in which poetic justice is understood as the artificial manipulation by the writer, especially in tragedy, of the plot so that virtue is rewarded and vice punished in an almost one-to-one relationship. There is not only an almost mathematical distribution according to levels of worthiness, but a distribution gratifyingly concrete. All departures from the actualities of life or logic are condoned in the name of the moral lesson to be taught.⁹

On the other hand, Tyre identifies a more liberal conception of poetic justice underlying the first, which he defines as “fundamentally predicated on a moral universe. It is dedicated to the idea that life has meaning, order and coherence which may be totally incomprehensible to the earth-bound observer [...] which we must take on faith”.¹⁰ Under this second, more general conception, what we call poetic justice in literature is not artificial at all but mimetic, mimetic of a normally invisible higher moral order, the poet’s job being to make this order visible on the reduced scale of a single literary work.

If *Cosmopolis*’ protagonist is a sort of mystic able to read the murky intentions of currencies, as a shaman examining the bowels of a chicken or goat, his understanding of events is strongly shaped by a certain narrative sensibility, that is to say he brings to the world an interpretive grid that is largely literary. As the novel progresses, however, and the yen proves distressingly unknowable to this disciple of knowledge, and perhaps in fact long before the novel begins, Eric loses faith in the epic-heroic narrative model that has guided his life. The loss of readability of the yen seems not to plunge Eric into aporia, however. On the contrary, he retains his belief in a hidden logic to events.

He knew there was something no one had detected, a pattern latent in nature itself, a leap of pictorial language that went beyond the standard models of technical analysis and out-predicted even the arcane charting of his own followers in the field. There had to be a way to explain the yen. (p. 63)

This “pattern latent in nature itself” in fact gradually reveals itself to Eric as he is delayed by construction work, a presidential motorcade, an anti-globalization riot, a funeral procession for an admired rap star, a film shoot, a rave party, and various meals and sexual encounters along the way. It appears slowly, though certain echoes and motifs become more insistent throughout the novel: rats, the opening words of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, Eric’s repeated and unexpected meetings with his own wife, the continual interruption of his limousine ride west, but most of all by the improbable series of untimely deaths of a number of powerful men. First, in the morning, the director of the IMF is stabbed to death by a deranged and unidentified attacker “live on the Money Channel” (p. 33). There is a threat against the president’s life. A Russian media mogul and personal friend of Eric’s, is found shot to death (p. 81). A Sufi rap star that Eric admires and also knows personally dies of heart failure and his funeral procession traverses the city (p. 131), crossing the path of Eric’s own trip, which resembles a funeral procession a little more closely each page. The logical continuation to the series, Eric begins to understand, as does the reader, is Eric’s own death. As he says: “This was the day, was it not, for influential men to come to sudden messy ends” (p. 132).

These psychic intrusions into Eric’s day do not pollute his consciousness and frustrate his attempts to read the text of the world, unlike the snatches of television slogans in *White Noise* or Nicholas Branch’s endless and recursive research on the Kennedy assassination in *Libra*. Here these random bits of data become a unifying force, revealing the underlying logic of narrative tragedy that is at work in Eric’s universe.

In beginning to understand this shift, Eric’s powers of perception are restored. He becomes sensitive again, this time not to the “hidden rhythms in the fluctuations of a given currency” (p. 76) but to the hidden rhythms in reality itself, revealed in

literature (in this case the coalescing narrative of his own tragic death). At this point, somewhere near the moment when he witnesses an anti-globalization protester immolate himself, he begins to actively participate in the fleshing out of this nascent narrative, first rhetorically, then physically.

In the second half of the novel, *Cosmopolis*' discourse subtly shifts from a discourse of unpredictability to a discourse of inevitability. The mantra "it doesn't chart" is first replaced with another mantra, originally uttered by Eric's doctor, in reference to a benign skin irritation: "Let it express itself" (p. 45), along with its variations such as "whatever would happen would happen," (p. 147) or with reference to his stalker: "whoever it is, that's who it is" (p. 130). The "it" in the phrase "let it express itself," that which should be allowed to play out, is the narrative model of the reversal of fortune of a powerful man brought to self-realization and tragic suffering. This phrase, however, is not a statement of resignation, but one of resolve and belief in the power of narrative models to structure reality, or in Eric's own words, a belief in "the presence of some hereditary script available to those who could decode it" (p. 38). Eric's visions of the near future, which are not narrative tricks on DeLillo's part but actual tears in the temporal fiber of reality, perceptible not only to Eric but to others around him, are proof to him both that he is one of the sensitives able to decode the "hereditary script," and that God has chosen today to make his design explicit. As a colleague remarks: "maybe today is the day when everything happens, for better or worse, ka-boom, like that" (p. 106).

In the final portion of his trip Eric begins to explicitly note and evaluate the dramatic quality of his environment and of his actions. In particular, the repeated comments on the weather and darkness, with their echoes of the Book of Genesis, and their meta-commentary about suspense, drama, and the unfolding of fate, read somewhat like stage directions:

The rain was fine. The rain was dramatically right. But the threat was even better. (p. 106)

The rats were good. The rats were fine and right, thematically sound. (p. 183)

The yen showed renewed strength [...] this was good. This was fine and right [...] The stock ticker was also good. (p. 106)

[An] unknown man had set fire to himself. This was grave and haunting. It was right for the moment and the day. (ibid.)

The rain had stopped. This was good. This was clearly what it should have done. The street carried a shimmer of sodium lamps and a mood of slowly unfolding suspense. (p. 128)

The rain on his face was good and the sour reek was fine and right, the fug of urine maturing on the body of his car, and there was trembling pleasure to be found, and joy at all misfortune, in the swift pitch of markets down. But it was the threat of death at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he'd always known would come clear in time. (p. 107)

They covered the burnt body and wheeled it away, semi-upright, with rats in the streets and the first drops of rain [came] down and the light [changed] radically in the preternatural way that's completely natural, of course, all the electric premonition that rides the sky being a drama of human devising. (p. 103)

The conflation of preternatural and natural is revealing. Despite the apparent contradiction, it is possible in literature, as well as in life – if literature is one's interpretive grid – for events (such as abrupt rainstorm, a darkening sky, repeated coincidences) to be at once unexpected and improbable yet satisfying and harmonious. As Aristotle puts it:

The effect of [pity and fear] is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect. The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design.¹¹

In the above quotes from *Cosmopolis*, the insistence on what is “good,” “right” and what “should” be happening are all markers that Eric is no longer behaving according to rational models, under which he should be fleeing danger, distressed by his financial debacle, and frightened by foreboding weather. He has on the contrary separated from himself and become both a spectator and a participant in his story, in the same way that his limousine's displays show him images of himself from the future that he can not physically see from inside his body.

There is a name, of course, that we give to this phenomenon of a character leaving his bounded existence and recognizing and participating in the narrative that contains him: metafiction. But it is here that DeLillo's ambivalence towards the stock

and trade of many postmodernist texts is most striking. Eric's comments, although clearly metafictional, appear decreasingly, not increasingly ironic. He is seeking not a pastiche of a tragic death, but a true, first-degree, bona fide tragic death of cosmic proportions.

Eric participates in the unfolding of his own fate by precipitating the emergence of this narrative order to events. He pursues his crosstown trip against the advice of his security guards, even killing one in order to facilitate the confrontation with his murderer, whom he trusts will materialize, as if by magic, if Eric continues to follow 47th Street to its western extremity: "[...] he wanted whatever would happen to happen. [...] He wanted to trust the power of predetermined events" (p. 147). Later: "He was alert, eager for action, for resolution. Something had to happen soon, a dispelling of doubt and the emergence of some design, the subject's plan of action, visible and distinct" (p. 172).

Eric's behavior is suicidal but also moral; as all suicides (as all murders, assassination, and acts of terrorism), it is motivated by the belief that one's death (or the president's death, or the death of a plane full of civilians), will reestablish moral equilibrium and forcibly introduce justice into a world where it does not seem to occur naturally, or if it occurs, where it is visible only in art. Eric's insomnia, we come to understand, is a symptom of his realization that, unlike the admired rap star Brutha Fez whose epic funeral procession he attends, Eric's hyper-technological and abstracted existence has made him (for lack of a better term) post-human, a "true futurist" who has already left behind the compassion and physicality that constitutes humanity. The novel is ultimately about remorse over irrevocable acts, over lives — and cultures — gone wrong.

The balance to be found in Eric's day is not the return of the yen to predictable behavior, but the larger cosmic balance between the yen's rise and Eric's fall. His death becomes a necessity, demanded not by cause/effect (the novel's narrative is episodic and therefore practically devoid of causality) but by the laws of narrative harmony and poetic justice. As Beno puts it before shooting Eric:

“You need to die no matter what [...] You have to die for how you think and act. For your apartment and what you paid for it. For your daily medical checkups. This alone. [...] For how much you had and how much you lost, equally. No less for losing it than making it. For the limousine that displaces the air that people need to breathe in Bangladesh. This alone [...] the air you breathe. This alone. The thoughts you have.” (p. 203)

Levin’s actions are clearly not motivated by particular grievances, but by a desire for balance on a cosmic scale. All of the characters demand a resolution that is both narratively and morally satisfying.

About *Underworld*, another novel laden with echoes, leitmotifs, and uncanny resemblances, DeLillo has said:

Maybe I felt, in a novel so long, that I needed more overt structure, more connections, than I would normally have ventured toward. I’ve done things, perhaps, the way a painter does. I’ve tried to create patterns that don’t necessarily have a logical connection, or even a truly meaningful one, the way a bending tree on one end of a canvas echoes the posture of an individual in a crowd at the other side.

He continues:

[T]here are curious connections between the characters that I would say are bits of artistic stitching more than anything else. They are also somewhat natural. That is, they are much more striking in a piece of fiction than they would be if we took them out of that narrow context and saw them as part of life’s natural progression.[...] In life, one says, well, so what? Two people who knew each other once went to the same place in Los Angeles. It really doesn’t mean very much. It’s part of the book’s pattern of repetition, which gives it a certain structural unity. And it becomes, to me, fairly important. This is what art makes of life, I suppose.¹²

The language here is curious for a so-called postmodernist: “overt structure,” “formal pattern,” “patterns of repetition,” “structural unity,” the structuring power of art when faced with a chaotic reality. These are, to a postmodernist, dirty words. *Cosmopolis* is not nearly as long a novel as *Underworld*, of course, less than a fourth of *Underworld*’s length, and so the tendency towards “structural unity” does not seem to be a mere mnemonic device, designed to help the reader reconstruct the timelines.

In both of the quotes above, DeLillo insists upon the meaninglessness of the connections, but he is employing “meaning” in its most restrictive sense, that of signifier-signified-referent or cause-effect. The stitching he speaks of, in both *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*, is purely formal, creating a network of significance that is no less real because it defies explanation. The paranoid and overwhelming sentiment that “everything is connected” common in many postmodern novels, is not here a centrifugal impulse, forging a labyrinth of false leads and empty signifiers. The connections and echoes in *Cosmopolis* have the cumulative effect not of disorienting the reader (or Eric) but of convincing them that there is immanent design visible to those who are sensitive to the world’s desire to be read.

DeLillo’s books seem increasingly to want to cohere, simultaneously displaying a strong will to *making* as well as *unmaking*, and it is unclear, in the final analysis, which force prevails. Aristotle speaks of a human “instinct of imitation,” and an “instinct for harmony and narrative” (part IV) at the origin of poetry. DeLillo has spoken in practically the same terms, and it seems to be a common theme in his work that language, particularly in its literary and narrative forms, has a power to provide coherence to an incoherent world, or as the author puts it when speaking of *Libra*:

Fiction rescues history from its confusions. It provides the balance and rhythm we don’t experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it— correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don’t encounter elsewhere.¹³

Beno tells Eric moments before his death that the answer to the yen’s riddle was in his asymmetrical prostate the whole time. Eric has neglected, according to Beno:

The importance of the lopsided, the thing that’s skewed a little. You were looking for balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides. I know this. I know you. But you should have been tracking the yen in its tics and quirks. The little quirk. The misshape. (p. 200)

In other words, that which at once jars and satisfies the senses, that which is not predictable but which is nonetheless natural and inevitable. One of the ultimate ob-

servations that the novel makes is that chance does not always create unpredictability and disorder, that by the same token unpredictable phenomena do not of necessity lack form and beauty, and that language and literature survive where all else fails.

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Notes

¹ *A Postmodern Reader*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, vii.

² “[...] as an artistic, philosophical, and social phenomenon, postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a “white ideology” of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences. Postmodernism veers toward all these yet implies a different, if not antithetical, movement toward pervasive procedures, ubiquitous interactions, immanent codes, media, languages.” (Hassan, 96)

³ “By indeterminacy, or better still, indeterminacies, I mean a complex referent that these diverse concepts help to delineate: ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation. The latter alone subsumes a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimization – let alone more technical terms referring to the rhetoric of irony, rupture, silence. Through all these signs moves a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche – the entire realm of discourse in the West.” (Hassan, 95)

⁴ It would not necessarily be useful to demonstrate by a sort of algorithmic procedure that Hassan’s (or any other theoretician of the postmodern’s) concepts apply or do not apply to the novel, thereby illustrating DeLillo’s degree of postmodernity. This may have been necessary in much early criticism of DeLillo and his contemporaries because the novels accompanied (and participated in) the development of the theories that now illuminate them. At present DeLillo’s postmodern credentials seem well-established. Rather, I intend to focus on the increasingly equivocal manner in which DeLillo’s recent novels, as illustrated by *Cosmopolis*, engage these concepts.

⁵ Interestingly, McHale does not consider *The Crying of Lot 49* to be a postmodernist text at all, but rather a late modernist text, as its primary preoccupations are epistemological in nature, rather than ontological. The only DeLillo novel mentioned by McHale as being “postmodernist” in nature, *Ratner’s Star*, is arguably the least representative of DeLillo’s work. McHale almost certainly would not consider *White Noise* to be a postmodernist text in a literary sense, even though it depicts a postmodern reality in the socio-cultural sense.

⁶ “Everything under the Bomb”. *The Guardian*. January 10, 1998.

⁷ *Libra*’s main timeline is the life of Lee Oswald, from boyhood to death, with a parallel but distinct timeline of the CIA plot to kill Kennedy beginning in the early months of 1963, the point of intersection of the two plotlines being JFK’s death at the end of the novel. In *Underworld*, the dominant timeline is that of all of cold war history from 1951 to the present, with a *petite histoire* subplot about the sale of a coveted baseball dividing the larger sections, the point of convergence being Bobby Thomson’s game-winning home run in the 1951 pennant game, before a crowd of thousands including, ominously, J. Edgar Hoover, who learns of the Soviet Union’s first successful nuclear test during the post-game celebration. *Falling Man*’s double timeline concerns a 9-11 survivor and one of the hijackers, the point of intersection between the two lives being the moment of impact of the airliner against the World Trade Center, where a single sentence seems to be literally thrown from the cabin of the airliner, through the glass of the tower and into the office of the protagonist.

⁸ This looping structure has been largely commented on by Tom Le Clair in his full-length study of DeLillo's earlier novels, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1988).

⁹ *Studies in Philology* 54 (1957): 29-44 (30).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹ Trans. S.H. Butcher, New York: Hill and Wang, 1961 (Part ix).

¹² "Everything under the Bomb". *The Guardian*, January 10, 1998.

¹³ "An Outsider in This Society," in Frank Lentriccia, *Introducing Don DeLillo*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 56.