

T H O M A S C A R M I C H A E L

Evanescence, Language, and Dread:
Reading Don DeLillo

David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2002. xi + 257 pp. \$45.00.

Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. Penn Studies in Contemporary American Fiction ser. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. 299 pp. \$42.50.

It sometimes seems that what makes Don DeLillo's fiction such a compelling chronicle of contemporary lived experience is precisely its slightly archaic quality, or what we might otherwise describe as its success in demonstrating how residual impulses function within the cultural dominant of the present. In essays and interviews, DeLillo continues to speak of the novel in terms of the "idiosyncratic self" and the sweep and awe of public history, of the "solitary writer" and the "teeming center of events," even as his own fiction is so often celebrated for detailing the depthless euphoria and free-floating irony of the late-capitalist side of the long twentieth century.¹ Language, DeLillo has recently observed, "is inseparable from the world that provokes it," and we might regard this observation as crucial for any understanding of the logic that draws together DeLillo's fictional project, an understanding that is eloquently set out for us in the readings pursued by David Cowart and Mark Osteen.²

1. Don DeLillo, "The Power of History," *New York Times Magazine* 7 Sept. 1997: 62.

2. Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," *Harper's* Dec. 2001: 39.

As his title suggests, David Cowart's *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* focuses on what Cowart calls "DeLillo's career-long exploration of language as cultural index, as 'deepest being,' as *numinosum*" (2). Through his successive considerations of each of DeLillo's major fictions from *Americana* (1971) to *The Body Artist* (2001), Cowart argues that what an older vocabulary might describe as the thematic preoccupations of DeLillo's fiction are inextricably caught up with thinking about language, and that DeLillo's thinking about language points in the last instance to his adversarial relationship to the postmodern. DeLillo, Cowart suggests, is not theoretically inclined, nor is he versed in the canon of contemporary literary or cultural theory; however, as Cowart argues with respect to *The Names* (1982) and its restless reflections on language, power, and self-reflexivity, DeLillo often arrives independently at the insights of theory and typically by a route that does not pass so clearly through the discourse of the usual postmodern subjects. It is, as Cowart effectively shows, the work of Wittgenstein and not Derrida, for example, that informs the meditations on language in the pre-poststructuralist cultural climate of DeLillo's second novel, *End Zone* (1972), and *End Zone* is representative in Cowart's reading of the ways in which philosophical allusions and linguistic reflections in DeLillo's work mark his affiliation with and distance from canonical poststructural arguments about language and representation. On the one hand, DeLillo properly "has taken his place among the postmodern masters, the writers who recognize, more or less instinctively, that language commonly represents only itself" (2), but, on the other hand, as Cowart observes, DeLillo's fiction "does not defer to the poststructuralist view of language as a system of signifiers that refer only to other signifiers in infinite regression" (5). For DeLillo, language is "maddeningly circular," and yet it also "affirms something numinous in its mysterious properties," a doubled view of language that Cowart finds repeated throughout DeLillo's fiction. In his reading of *Ratner's Star* (1976), for example, Cowart suggests that DeLillo's narrative measures Frege's insistence on a language that might be precisely grounded against a loosely poststructural repudiation of that view, even as the novel concludes by holding out the possibility of a third way in which language "harbors some unrecognized richness"

(161). Many of the other figures and preoccupations in DeLillo's fiction may also be said to line up behind this doubled reading of language. As Cowart demonstrates in his discussions of *Running Dog* (1978) and *Libra* (1988), DeLillo's fiction embraces the thoroughly constructed subject of desire, while pursuing at the same time a sustained defense of "the validity of individual perceptions" and the traditional subject, the latter emerging most emphatically, Cowart argues, in *Mao II* (1991). Similarly, Cowart shows how games are an important part of the representational fabric of DeLillo's earlier novels, where they are at once signs of self-referentiality and, at least in *End Zone*, fully adequate representations of the world's complexity (24). Cowart's discussion of Michel Serres and DeLillo, and the latter's hopeful projecting of a "linguistic sublime" in the context of *White Noise* (1985), is a particularly rich and nuanced consideration of this structural logic at work in the fiction, and we might confirm Cowart's argument by mapping onto this list the dynamic that governs DeLillo's preoccupation with secrets and even with history itself.

At the close of his productive reading of DeLillo's fiction, Cowart is careful to downplay any gesturing toward traditional notions of transcendence in these novels. For Cowart, DeLillo sees language as "the defining gift of human existence," a "great model of discrimination and difference" (162), even the "supreme criterion of human value" (72), but as *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* richly demonstrates, DeLillo's language is also and at last an all-too-human sign system, inescapably part of "the fallen wonder of the world."³

In *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*, Mark Osteen anticipates to some extent Cowart's insistence upon the importance of language for DeLillo, or what Osteen describes as DeLillo's emphasis on "the power of language to shape identity and society" (1). But Osteen's focus is not on the centrality of language in DeLillo's work; instead, he seeks to trace the logic of DeLillo's narrative forms, their intertextual relations, and their appropriation of and resistance to the dominant codes of contemporary culture. There is much in Osteen's reading of DeLillo's work

3. Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Vintage, 1982) 339.

from *Americana* to *Underworld* (1997) that is to be admired, including his spirited analysis of the informing presence of the films of Jean-Luc Godard (*Breathless*, *Masculin féminin*, and *Weekend*) in DeLillo's early short stories. (An early version of this discussion appeared in *Contemporary Literature*.) Osteen further demonstrates how moments in these early stories return in DeLillo's subsequent novels, and how both Godard's work and Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* are major points of reference in *Americana*. Osteen's work of identifying these allusions and traces is also very much part of his larger argument with respect to the ways in which DeLillo's texts pose a critique of origins and final ends, even as they do not reject the longing for origins and ends that this critique sweeps away, a longing often represented in DeLillo's fiction by a resistance to the commodification of the cultural artifact.

This interest in representation and resistance is sustained throughout Osteen's readings, often ingeniously so, as in his demonstration of how the ascetic ideal and consumerism are very much part of the preoccupation with nuclear annihilation in *End Zone*, or in his consideration of Bucky Wunderlick in *Great Jones Street* (1973) as emblematic of the postmodern condition, even as the novel presents a critique of the ways in which aesthetic distance and withdrawal "may easily be transformed into apologies for violence, consumer numbness, and exploitation" (59). A similar argumentative strategy may be said to inform Osteen's discussion of *Players* (1977) and *Libra*, particularly his consideration of the function of secrecy in the latter novel, in which the cultivation of secrets is both mimetic of the institutional practices that stand over against the individual subject and a means by which that subject carves out a provisional or illusory space of autonomy and agency. Osteen's reading of *Ratner's Star* provides an admirable chapter in his book, and here he takes up another major thread of his argument in his consideration of DeLillo's repeated thematic preoccupation with mystery and terror. Osteen shows how *Ratner's Star* is concerned with the ways in which representational categories construct what we take to be the case, but his discussion equally emphasizes how science in this novel is represented as "a form of magic designed to quell our terror of mortality" (63). In its links to mystery and absence, fear and longing, science in *Ratner's Star* anticipates what

Osteen describes as the “American magic and dread” that shape the thematic structures of DeLillo’s fictions, particularly his later novels. *White Noise* (1985) is perhaps the strongest example of this thematic orientation, with its dramatization of how, as Osteen puts it, “the yearning for mystery and meaning hasn’t gone away” (191), but *Libra* and *The Names* also participate fully in this thematic logic.

In the final chapter of his book, Osteen reads *Underworld* as in many ways the culmination of and a response to the thematic pattern that he has traced in his discussion of DeLillo’s earlier fiction. For Osteen, *Underworld* is an act “of resistance and redemption, submerging us in the culture of weapons and waste so that we may reemerge transformed” (216). In its presentation of a resolute critique of a historical system from the inside, a critique that enacts and represents at the same time the possibilities for an oppositional art, DeLillo’s novel, Osteen argues, guides its reader dialectically toward “synthetic fusion” across a text that ultimately advances a tentative belief in renewal and a hope for achieved grace (216, 246, 259). These are expansive claims made, admittedly, on behalf of a large and ambitious novel, and in many respects, Osteen’s assertions are simply accurate translations of the way in which DeLillo himself has written about this novel and its engagement with history. But it would be dishonest not to observe here that the explicit content of these redemptive or transformative aspirations is difficult to discern in this reading, even though Osteen is certainly accurate in his account of the novel’s thematic unfolding.

Osteen’s largely thematic and generic discussion of the novels broadly converges with Cowart’s account of language in DeLillo’s fiction, in that each argues, and argues successfully, for the ways in which DeLillo’s narratives, to twist a phrase, install postmodernism seemingly in order to subvert it, or, perhaps more accurately, point to the persistence in the lived experience of the contemporary of older intensities that would seem properly to belong to now discarded orders of subjectivity and economies of meaning. In their separate accounts of the presence of this narrative logic in DeLillo’s successive fiction, these complementary discussions are utterly persuasive, even as they leave room for the much that still remains to be said about the signified of mystery in DeLillo’s work.

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