

Chapter 7

Living and Writing on the Edge in Don DeLillo's *Libra*

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In 1988, a quarter of a century after John F. Kennedy was murdered, Don DeLillo published his ninth novel, *Libra*. In his alternative account of the event, its causes and aftermath, DeLillo brought together three parallel, eventually converging stories: a biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, a CIA plot meant to result in the near assassination of president Kennedy and the actual assassination of Castro, and the efforts made by a retired secret service agent to write a secret history of the assassination for the CIA.

Libra is divided into twenty-four chapters, of which half tell the story of Lee Harvey Oswald's life between 1956 and 1963 and are entitled after the places where he spent these seven years. The other chapters cover the plot against Kennedy and are named after the dates that mark its development between April and November 1963. A temporal gap inevitably occurs between the two narrative strands that run parallel to each other, but is eventually bridged, as Oswald comes into contact with the conspirators, in April 1963.

The first two chapters and the titles they bear are significant for both the content and the narrative strategy of the book. Content wise, the first chapter, *In the Bronx*, clearly points to Lee Harvey Oswald as the protagonist of the novel and to his status of a misfit, a figure of the underworld, riding the subway daily, in an attempt to meet other lonely frustrated people. The second chapter, *17April*, offers the reader a clue early in the novel about the main reason why, in this fictional world, Kennedy was killed: it was Kennedy's failure to make amends for the Bay of Pigs Invasion of April 17th, 1961, which resulted in what was probably one of the greatest embarrassments of US foreign policy. As far as the narrative strategy is concerned, the two chapters seem to make of *Libra* another novel with multiple beginnings in the tradition inaugurated by Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. However, as the reading advances and the plot, in both senses of the word, unfolds, the two beginnings converge, toward the end, in a story that defies ultimate closure and invites the reader to re-visit a world made of words.

Both Oswald's biography and the conspiracy narrative are subordinated to Nicholas Branch's account, meant to provide the CIA with satisfactory answers to the questions raised by the Kennedy assassination. The function of this character, which is ontologically superior to all the characters in the novel, whether they are based on real people or they are invented, is to endorse a small-scale conspiracy.

In *Libra*, the original plot is directed against Castro and not against Kennedy. Win Everett, a demoted CIA agent, who, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, is forced to leave the

foreground and teach at Texas Woman's University, cannot reconcile with being relegated to a petty job and searches for a solution to make the administration go back to Cuba. He needs what he calls an "electrifying event" and he finds it, or, rather, stages it: an attempt on the President's life, in Dallas, that would point to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate: Kennedy must be scared into overthrowing Castro: "We don't hit the President. We miss him. We want a spectacular miss."¹ However, T-Jay Mackey, one of Everett's fellows, secretly alters the initial plan: he recruits Ramon Benitez and Frank Vasquez from the growing community of Cuban exiles in Miami, and Wayne Elko, a soldier of fortune, but fails to inform them that the shooting has to be a miss and not a hit.

The conspirators need a scapegoat and when Win Everett has devised a profile for him, by a lucky coincidence, George de Mohrenschildt, a CIA-related businessman and Guy Banister, former FBI agent, come up with Lee Harvey Oswald, a Marine who defected to the Soviet Union, lived in Minsk, married a Russian woman and, back in the United States, distributes "Hands off Cuba" leaflets and makes no secret of being a leftist.

In the scenario advanced by DeLillo in *Libra*, the first bullet, which hit Kennedy in the throat, is fired by Oswald from the Texas School Book Depository. His second bullet misses Kennedy, but hits Governor Connally. He then aims for the third time, shoots, and, as he fails again, he has time to see Kennedy's head blow off and is struck by the idea that he might have been set up. It was the Cuban exile, Ramon, who, from behind the fence on the Grassy Knoll, fired the fatal bullet. From here on, *Libra* follows the official version of the Warren Report Commission: Oswald kills Tippit then is apprehended by the police in the Texas Theater. Finally, he is shot by Jack Ruby, in the basement of the Dallas police headquarters, in front of a national TV audience.

David T. Courtwright is of the opinion that *Libra's* plot, both the story and the conspiracy, complied with the cardinal military rule of KISS: Keep IT Simple, Stupid! and, as such, evolves within plausible boundaries. The critic argues that, even if DeLillo's novel revises the Warren Report with fictional tools, it is, nevertheless, a piece of "minimalist revisionism." Upper-case Conspiracy would have been at odds with the realistic context described in *Libra*. By the same token, Oswald had to miss; otherwise, he would have contradicted himself and the novel would have lacked in thematic coherence.²

Don DeLillo corroborates Courtwright's interpretation when he points out that Oswald's final miss is yet another failure in the long range of failures that make up his life. In the end, even if he wished so much to become a historical figure and a constitutive part of his times, that is, to take his life into his own hands, Oswald lends himself to the circumstances that created him and, ultimately, to chance: "He misses because he is Oswald... the antihero can't even be a hero himself. Oswald has to know he has not killed the president. Another failure. It is the overwhelming theme of his life... Oswald

¹ Don DeLillo, *Libra*, Penguin Books, 1991, 27-28.

² David T. Courtwright, *Why Oswald Missed: Don DeLillo's Libra*, in Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Novel History*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2001, 84-85.

would not have walked two blocks to shoot at the president. But the president came to him.”³

In what might be interpreted as one of several ways of debunking the Camelot myth, DeLillo chose Lee Harvey Oswald as the thematic center of the novel, rather than President John F. Kennedy. Oswald undergoes an identity crisis and needs to project it on the nameless, faceless people he sees everyday in the subway. He has to check his troubles against a group of people because by transferring his fear and discontent with society, he is reassured to belong, to be a cog in the wheel. He needs to experience anger within a framework which he creates and of which he then becomes part. Ironically, when he finds himself in Minsk and has the chance to be just a brick in the wall, as he has wished, he suddenly realizes he wants to dream the American dream: “He is a loner seeking connection in the United States, and he is a ‘comrade’ seeking individuality in the Soviet Union.”⁴ An excerpt from one of Oswald’s letters to his brother, which DeLillo chose as an opening to the novel, suggests that Oswald’s need to become integrated in the larger flow of History is a key theme of the story: “Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one’s own personal world and the world in general.”⁵

If life could be compared to a circle, then Oswald could be pictured as the center and the circumference of his own circle. He is the lead character of the stories he himself has devised. His obsession with making projects of his self and trying to enact them reaches its climax toward the end of the novel, when Oswald is satisfied to have become part of History and to have found his goal, i.e., to analyze his assassination of the president. But Oswald did not live to enjoy self-discovery. The way he died, though, was consistent with the way he lived: he died watching himself die, he was actor and witness to his own assassination by Jack Ruby: “He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV (...) through the pain, through the losing of sensation except where it hurt, Lee watched himself react to the angering heat of the bullet.”⁶ The same uncanny effect is aimed at when another character, the wife of a CIA agent, suddenly realizes that Oswald can actually see himself die, and, thus, makes everyone watching his accomplice to the murder of the President:

There was something in Oswald’s face, a glance at the camera before he was being shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us, sleepless in our homes— a glance, a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations into his sense of the crime. (...) He is commenting on the documentary footage even as it is being

³ Don DeLillo, *The Fictional Man*, in *Carnes*, 92.

⁴ Christopher M. Mott, *Libra and the subject of History*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 35, 1994.

⁵ Don DeLillo, *Libra*, 1

⁶ DeLillo, *Libra*, 439.

shot. Then he himself is shot, and shot, and shot, and the look becomes another kind of knowledge. But he has made us part of his dying.⁷

This brief moment of communion in violent death, has been termed by Cain “a sinister vision of American oneness” and probably best explains DeLillo’s description of the Kennedy assassination as “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century.”

In Timothy L. Parish’s words, “he goes from a writer of a plot he cannot complete to being an actor in a plot he did not write.”⁸ The critic believes that Oswald’s validity as a character is guaranteed by his writer persona. This was most apparent in his so-called “historic diary”, a piece of writing DeLillo found “enormously chaotic and almost childlike”, unlike a surprisingly “intelligent and articulate” radio appearance he made in 1963.⁹ To call Oswald a writer, even a “failed” one, based on a number of letters and some reading notes on Marx, Lenin and Trotsky is too much, unless the word is used in a broader sense to designate the notion of “plotter.” However, in DeLillo’s scenario, he ends up being just a pawn and a scapegoat.

It is a common narrative strategy, especially in the case of novels with a metafictional propensity, for an author to insert a representative of his own in the text, in order to orient or, as the case may be, disorient the reader with respect to which interpretive path he or she should follow. Usually, the delegate of the author is an artist, particularly a writer. Timothy L. Parish believes that “Oswald is the writer in *Libra* who compels and ultimately best represents DeLillo’s own authorial interest in the story” more so than two other characters: Win Everett, the demoted CIA agent who initiated the whole shoot-but-don’t-kill-the-President plan, or Nicholas Branch, whom the CIA authorized to go through all the evidence and write the secret story of the assassination. I would argue that a novel like *Libra* does not encourage such a reading simply because even as it advances an alternative explanation of the assassinate, it does so within a fictional framework that challenges closure: to intimate that Oswald is the delegate of the author in the text is to force the reader within an interpretive enclosure, which goes against the inner logic of the novel and is dangerous because of the nature of the association. Rather, I would argue that it is Nicholas Branch who echoes DeLillo’s “voice” in the text and his modernist take on historiography.

Parish concludes that: “In the fictional world of *Libra*, Don DeLillo, not Lee Harvey Oswald or the conspiracy theories, is the author of November 22nd, 1963 and its subsequent narrative possibilities.”¹⁰ This statement is rather superfluous to those who have no difficulty in discriminating between a factual and a fictional account. Surprisingly enough, there still are such people among well-read readers. The inability or

⁷ DeLillo, *Libra*, 447.

⁸ Timothy L. Parish, *The Lesson of History: Don DeLillo’s Texas School Book, Libra*, in *Clio*, Vol.: 30, issue 1, 2000.

⁹ Anthony DeCurtis, *Interview with Don DeLillo*, in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, edited by Frank Lentricchia, Duke University Press, 1991.

¹⁰ See Parish.

unwillingness to accept the aforementioned difference underlies George F. Will's "Shallow Look at the Mind of an Assassin" review of *Libra*, published in Washington Post, on September 22nd, 1988.

George Will characterized Don DeLillo's *Libra* as "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship," an "exercise in blaming America for Oswald's act of derangement," "valuable only as a reminder of the toll that ideological virulence takes on literary talent."¹¹ Will accuses DeLillo of inconsistency because on the one hand he stated in the final Author's Note that he had not tried to provide "factual answers" and, on the other hand, in an interview claimed to have developed "the most obvious theory" that "does justice to historical likelihood."¹² One doesn't need a second reading to conclude that the two statements buttress and not at all subvert each other. Will misread the phrase "historical likelihood," because he focused on the word "historical," whereas DeLillo's argument centers on the concept of "likelihood," the understanding of which is the key to the whole debate. The "as if" logic of fiction is the issue at stake and George Will failed to read *Libra* for what it is: a novel. Here is the Author's Note that DeLillo placed at the very end of the novel to create and maintain the suspense effect:

This is a book of imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. Any novel about a major unresolved event will aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I've altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues and characters. Among these invented characters are all officers of intelligence agencies and all organized crime figures, except for those who are part of the book's background. In a case in which rumors, facts, suspicions, official subterfuge, conflicting sets of evidence and a dozen labyrinthine theories all mingle, sometimes indistinguishably, it may seem to some that a work of fiction is one more gloom in a chronicle of unknowing. But because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here_ a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years.¹³

Although this statement leaves no room for an interpretation of the nature of the account Will read *Libra* as a piece of historical writing. His critique takes a moralizing turn when he argues that novelists drawing on historical events should be true to life: they should be "constrained by concern to truthfulness, by respect for the record and a judicious weighing of probabilities."¹⁴ And when self-censorship does not work, George Will feels that it is his duty to warn the reading public against the harm a book like *Libra* might do. Based on a character's definition of "history" as "the sum total of what they

¹¹ George F. Will, *Shallow Look at the Mind of an Assassin* in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, edited by Frank Lentricchia, Duke University Press, 1991, 56.

¹² George Will, 56.

¹³ DeLillo, *Libra*, 458.

¹⁴ George Will, 56.

aren't telling us," Will counts DeLillo among the "paranoiacs" and "conspiracy addicts." But again, he fails to realize that this is a conviction of a character, i.e., a paper being living in an imaginary universe more or less tangential to the real world, and that a character's thoughts and feelings should not be attributed to the author. A one-to-one character-author correspondence is counterproductive first of all because an author cannot be identified with each and every character and second, because an author is ontologically superior to the figments of his or her imagination.

Will goes on to say that DeLillo, as the representative of the American left, saw the Kennedy assassination as "the turning point in consciousness" for Americans and the event that fueled Americans' skepticism about historical objectivity. The President was killed— sad, but true. The President is dead— long live the President. Oswald was killed— justice was done. Oswald is dead— long live America! The Warren Commission Report came out and questioning an officially established truth is an unpatriotic act. This, in short, is George Will's argument. His major criticism is that DeLillo pictured America as a sick society that breeds extremism and conspiracies" and Oswald as "a national type, a product of the culture."¹⁵ It is true that DeLillo placed Oswald within a social and political context, which could not be but America in the late fifties and early sixties— interesting times, to paraphrase the Chinese curse— but he did not portray Oswald as a national type— that is too far-fetched. Will goes as far as to suggest that DeLillo's definition of a writer as "the person who stands outside society, independent of affiliations (...) the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government" almost associates a writer with an assassin. A parenthetical note— "Henry James, Jane Austen, George Eliot and others were hardly outsiders." – comes down to saying: either you are with us, or you are out of the canon. It is Will's belief that DeLillo's political affiliations make him "a good writer and a bad influence."¹⁶

In an interview which appeared in Rolling Stone magazine one month after George Will's review, Don DeLillo emphasized the purely fictional nature of the scenario he advanced in *Libra*. However, he made it clear that the fictional scaffolding he raised was undeniably steeped in facts:

If I make an extended argument in the book it's not that the assassination necessarily happened this way. The argument is that this is an interesting way to write fiction about a significant event that happens to have these general contours and these agreed-upon characters. It's my feeling that readers will accept or reject my own variations on the story based on whether these things work as fiction, not whether they coincide with the reader's own theories or the reader's own memories (...) I wanted a clear historical center on which I could work my own fictional variations.¹⁷

¹⁵ George Will, 57.

¹⁶ See 15.

¹⁷ Anthony DeCurtis, *Interview with Don DeLillo*, 50.

If there is an ideal reader for the Warren Commission Report, then that is Don DeLillo, because he actually read the twenty-six volume report before he set to write what he called “a work of imagination.” Someone who has done so much research work, as DeLillo has done, must have his own opinion about the Kennedy assassination, although *Libra* makes no claim to historical objectivity. Without denying the importance of history as a discipline or the validity of historical writing, DeLillo’s endeavor proves that novelists do have a say not only in universal matters of the heart, but also in historical matters. Asked what fiction offers to people that history denies them, DeLillo answered that “fiction rescues history from its confusions (...) providing the balance and rhythm we don’t experience in our everyday lives, in our real lives (...) finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don’t encounter elsewhere.”¹⁸

The Kennedy assassination has given rise to a great number of conspiracy theories and continues to challenge the minds of people looking for an answer, or, rather, the answer. DeLillo argued that this event has left an indelible stamp on the American collective psyche which has never recovered from the shock: “We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then (...) we’ve developed a much more unsettled feeling about our grip on reality.”¹⁹ Moreover, due to the extensive media coverage of this tragedy, Americans have become aware of what DeLillo calls “a sense of performance.” This has been taken to the extreme by such people like Arthur Bremer and John Hinckley who “have a sense of the way in which their acts will be perceived by the rest of us, even as they commit the acts.”²⁰

Such an explanation cannot be conceived by people like George Will simply because it is an attack on the American way of life and the values it entails, such as the ideas of objectivity, justice, truth and progress; it is equal to saying that something is rotten in the United States and that would violate the City-upon-a Hill-dearly-held myth. The same way of reasoning accounts for the “lone gunman” explanation, which is rooted in the archetype of the individual, and overrules the possibility of a plot or conspiracy in the case of the Kennedy assassination. To accept that more than one person can be held accountable for the murder is to admit that America has degenerated to the level of the European way of solving conflicts. No wonder that George Will perceives a work of fiction like *Libra* as a threat and that he favors the banishment of the artist from the perfect State, so much like in Plato’s fashion.

The blatant ignorance of or refusal to distinguish between historical and fictional modes of reference reiterates the old Plato/Aristotle conflict over the concept of “mimesis.” In the last book of *The Republic*, Socrates, the creditable character in Plato’s dialogues, gives his reasons for having banished “imitative poetry” and the “imitative tribe” from the ideal state. Taking a bed as an example, Socrates describes the three levels discernible in the structure of each and every object: the original level is that of the ideal bed, created by God, the second level is represented by an actual bed made by the carpenter, who imitates God, and on the last level stands the poet or painter’s bed,

¹⁸ DeCurtis, *Interview with Don DeLillo*, 56.

¹⁹ DeCurtis, *Interview with Don DeLillo*, 48.

²⁰ DeCurtis, *Interview with Don DeLillo*, 49.

which is nothing but a second-rate copy. In Socrates' view, an artist doesn't have full knowledge of the object he tries to reproduce and the artistic product has no value in itself because it is two times separated from the truth. Imitation is not a serious activity because it draws upon the "rebellious principle" or the irrational part of the soul and impresses undesirable emotions upon the audience. The immediate consequence is that the audience will identify with and imitate what it sees. The only poetry that Socrates will allow in the State is "hymns to the gods and prayers to famous men." He concludes that "the imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior springs."²¹

Aristotle's point of view, on the other hand, is quite different from that of Plato. He believes that "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of the historian Herodotus might be put into verse and it will still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen."²² As far as tragedy is concerned, if it produces within the audience such feelings as fear and pity, it also turns them to good account, in the sense that these feelings also produce a purgation and thus an elevation of the soul during the aesthetic experience or what Aristotle calls "catharsis."

George Will's fallacy is that he dismisses fiction drawing on the historical record as a threat to common sense and denies the novelist the right to address controversial issues. Contrary to Will's belief, a novel like *Libra* rejects any claim to objectivity, without arguing against the idea of historiography. As DeLillo himself has explained, the novel might offer the reader a stay against the confusion raised by the assassination at least for the actual time of reading. But it can also prompt him or her to read history.

Apart from the morally and politically-oriented conflict that it raised, *Libra* became an object of dispute between literary critics that consider it to be another example of postmodernist fiction, more precisely of what Linda Hutcheon termed "historiographic metafiction", and those who argue in favor of it being a modernist novel.

As the very name points out, "historiographic metafiction" displays a hybrid nature due to its double orientation: it represents the meeting point of two opposite notions: art for life's sake and "art for art's sake." On the one hand, it is concerned with history and with the way in which the past has come down to us, and, on the other, it feeds on itself, due to its metafictional bias. Linda Hutcheon argues that such a narrative reconsiders the relationship between historiography and fiction, and concludes that they do not stand apart, due to the former's claim to objectivity and the latter's tendency to depart from and distort reality. On the contrary, historiography and fiction come together on account of their being mere discourses and, as such, prone to subjectivity. Since they are both products of the human mind, which is time-, space- and ideology-conditioned, neither can escape the personal touch inherent in any form of discourse. The fact that historiography sets forth with the end in view to offer an objective, credible picture of

²¹ <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>

²² <http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Aristotle/Poetics.html>

“what really happened” does not exempt it from participating to a discursive experience. It only establishes degrees of fictionality among forms of discourse. After all, the very notion of picture cannot be conceived of independently of a beholder and a certain point of view, hence its built-in subjectivity. Fiction and historiography have a common intention. Broadly speaking, they are attempts to nibble at the strangeness of the past. They both endeavor to render coherent a chaotic reality, by translating it into a familiar language. Because they both use language as a means of expression, their communicative effectiveness is one of degree.²³

In what follows I will briefly analyze this process of relativization so as to provide the theoretical background the type of novel called “historiographic metafiction” is steeped in. The debate over the legitimacy of historical discourse and of history as a discipline is far from having been resolved. One might say that the blurring of the distinction between historical and fictional writing began with the so-called “linguistic turn” of the late sixties, which has brought about a reconsideration of the subject/object relationship in the process of representation. The idea that language is not a transparent medium and that our apprehension of reality is to a great extent linguistically determined underlies the skepticism about the possibility of mapping the past and acquiring historical knowledge. The relationship between history and art and that between history and science have been under debate and continue to be challenged. Such intellectual historians like Hayden White, Keith Jenkins or Frank Ankersmit, to name but three of the radical postmodernist vanguard, deny the validity of historical objectivity and the idea of history as a discipline. In his fairly recent book *Refiguring History. New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* Jenkins denounces historians’ attempt to be objective, arguing that their admittance of the element of subjectivity in the process of representation is hypocritical because they still try to be objective and thus, provide ultimate truths. This goal is unattainable in itself because of the impossibility of any kind of discourse to achieve any kind of closure and because the past— “the before now”— lends itself to revisionist interpretations and re-interpretations time and time again.²⁴

Jenkins rejoices in the infinite openness of representation and considers it the basis of experiencing otherness to the fullest, but what he fails to realize is that this radical mistrust of even trying to be objective ultimately leads to the state of being happy about being happy, or, in other words, being happy about nothing. While ridiculing the lament over the loss of an objective perspective and the death of historical discourse, Jenkins recommends ‘favorable dispositions’ to alternative modes of representations or what he calls “new ways of imaginings”: “a relaxed attitude towards creative failure”, “an attitude of radical and critical disobedience that... seeks no resolution or agreement about historical problematizations but celebrates the failure of each and every one of them”, “an attitude which disregards convention, disobeys the authoritative voice and replaces any definitive closure with an interminable openness, any exhaustive ending with an et cetera, and any full stop with an ellipsis...”²⁵ Despite claiming that postmodernism defies the very idea of a paradigm, which is in itself an enclosure, Jenkins strongly recommends

²³ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*, 41.

²⁴ Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History. New Thoughts on an Old Discipline*, Routledge, 2003, 3.

²⁵ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, 6.

“attitudes”, as if he were writing a prescription or preaching to agnostics hopefully convertible to atheism.

Preaching is not exactly the kind of discourse sanctioned by “happy” postmodernists and the either/or logic of argumentation is theoretically foreign to postmodernism. Yet Jenkins uses it precisely in relation to historians whom, he argues, ought to have abandoned it and become “happy relativists.” Instead, they persist in writing well-documented, thoroughly researched books on the modernist premise that there is something out there that can be rendered objectively.²⁶ To admit that there are more points of view on a past event is not enough, it is veiled search for what Jenkins terms “history narrator as nobody effect.” What is required is radical relativization in order to be admitted among the elitist caste of postmodernists. Bernd Engler, too, complains about academic historians being reluctant to admit that what they produce is fictional accounts of a reality that can never be experienced immediately, but only through already acquired screens.²⁷ Jenkins maintains that historians, even the “enlightened” ones, need to understand that the new cultural paradigm revised the notion of representation by calling into question not the content of historical writing, but its form and the structural device that it uses.

Drawing on Hayden White’s argument that historical writing is no different from fiction because both the historian and the novelist are inescapably ideologically biased and use the same means of emplotment and argumentation, radical postmodernist theorists overemphasize the role of the imagination in relation to historiography. White claims that, since history uses the same narrative strategies that fiction relies on, no historical event can be inherently tragic, comic, romantic or ironic, to use Northrop Frye’s terminology. It is presented as such according to the point of view and the narrative pattern that a historian chooses before he or she sets out to elaborate what he or she believes to be a self-sufficient, objective account.²⁸ I would argue that an event such as the Kennedy assassination can only be tragic, irrespective of the cultural background or ideological leanings of the historian that deals with it. A novelist, on the other hand, can give the whole matter a comical or farsical twist in presenting Kennedy in heaven, confessing of his affairs, personal and public, in an attempt to atone for having led a “fake” life, as it is the case in Robert Mayer’s novel *I, JFK*.²⁹

Richard J. Evans took a stance on the champions of relativization when he compared historical research with a jigsaw puzzle: even if some pieces are missing and the historian has to reconstruct them from the actual remains at hand, he or she is still working within clearly defined boundaries and his or her imagination is held in check by verifiable data.³⁰

²⁶ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, 5.

²⁷ Bernd Engler, *The Dismemberment of Clio: Fictionality, Narrativity, and the Construction of Historical Reality in historiographic Metafiction* in Bernd Engler, Kurt Muller, Eds., *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature*, Ferdinand Schoningh, 1994, 17.

²⁸ Hayden White, cited in Engler, 24-25.

²⁹ John Hellman, *The Kennedy Obsession. The American Myth of JFK*, Columbia, New York, 1997, 162.

³⁰ Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History*, Granta Books, 1997, 89.

John Lewis Gaddis's concepts of "actual replicability" and "virtual replicability" contribute to the same debate over the objectivity of historical knowledge. The difference between history and art can be drawn with respect to sources, real or invented, reliable or questionable. This is not to say that history is a science, as the historian cannot replicate the past in the same way as the scientist would make the same experiment several times with the same result.³¹

Keith Jenkins and other radical postmodernists find being different liberating, but they ignore the fact that something has to be different from something else, and that the "other" always has a counterpart. Diversity cannot be liberating in the abstract, it has to have a stable ground against which to assert its own identity. The solution radical postmodernists advance is self-undermining because on the one hand they foreground the necessity to abolish past systems of thought and the very idea of a system, and on the other hand they try to establish a paradoxical unparadigmatic paradigm which assumes ascendancy over all preceding theoretical structures.

Radical postmodernists or intellectual historians, as they sometimes refer to themselves, claim that all accounts about the past are fictional. However, for something to be fiction, there must be a counterpart that doesn't necessarily have to be objective according to nineteenth-century standards of empiricism, but that is closer to facts than the figments of one's imagination. I believe that one can still differentiate between a factual and a fictional account and I will try to prove my point by resorting to a set of concepts coined by Samuel Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*, in 1817, namely: "suspension of disbelief", "fancy" and "imagination." The first one, "suspension of disbelief", specifies the dichotomy as far as the reader is concerned and has been defined as the postponement or cancellation of critical judgment required of the reader of a work of fiction in order for him or her to enjoy the reading process. Conversely, a reader of a historical account should maintain his or her critical judgment awake and alert and not take anything for granted. As far as the author is concerned, a historian makes use of "fancy," i.e., a kind of mechanical or logical faculty to associate materials already provided, whereas a writer of fiction uses his or her "imagination," i.e., a poetic faculty, which not only gives shape and order to a given world, but also creates new worlds.³² When the historian uses his or her imagination, especially in the case of virtual history, his or her imagination is no more than a methodological tool and not a constitutive or structural quality, as in the case of fiction. Needless to say that historical fiction requires of its readers a considerably greater amount of cooperation and suspension of critical thinking. However, Coleridge's theoretical distinction is, I believe, still valid and useful in grappling with this sensitive issue.

At first glance conservative critics like George F. Will and intellectual historians such as Keith Jenkins seem poles-apart with respect to the difference between literary and historical discourses, since the former draw a clear line between them on moral and political grounds, and the latter blur the difference between them on grounds I can only

³¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History. How Historians Map the Past*, Oxford University Press, 2002, 43.

³² <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/biographia.html>

describe as radically postmodernist. However, they share one thing: the virulence with which they understand to engage in a debate. I believe that some tolerance on both sides would not go amiss.

Although less acrimonious than intellectual historians, postmodernist literary critics share their basic assumptions. They term *Libra* a postmodernist novel because it draws on what they consider to be the first postmodern event in American history and because it uses postmodernist techniques to deal with it. Dallas, November 22nd, 1963, had often been referred to not only as a turning point in the twentieth-century, but also as the event that ushered in the postmodern era. It is the point in time and space that engendered a culture of violence and, at the same time, a nostalgic longing for lost innocence.³³ Norman Mailer reads the Kennedy assassination as the moment since which “we have been marooned in two equally intolerable spiritual states, apathy or paranoia,” while Frederic Jameson interprets it as having raised the curtain on what he calls “a collective communicational festival.”³⁴ Drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s distinction between “events” and “facts,” that is, the real, historically accountable happenings and the historicized recording of them, which is time-, space-, and ideology-conditioned, Jameson suggests that the assassination established what had before been only a tendency, namely, the ascendancy of facts over events, as the media, especially television, gained more and more importance and influence in society.³⁵

Carmichael argues that *Libra* plays upon this cultural phenomenon extensively and that it dramatizes this crisis of representation that history writing continues to undergo. Furthermore, the critic maintains that DeLillo illustrates the shift from the modernist to the postmodernist paradigm most clearly in the narrative strand dedicated to Nicholas Branch and his efforts to write a secret history of the Kennedy assassination for the CIA. The retired agent characterized the Warren Report as “the Joycean Book of America” and “the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred” and the event that prompted it as having generated “an aberration into the heartland of the real.”³⁶ One of the paradigmatic features of postmodernism is the crisis of the subject and, consequently, of language. In this respect, Oswald’s own writings reproduced in the Warren Commission Exhibits, with their broken syntax, misspellings and malapropisms, are, in Carmichael’s view, additional proof that *Libra* draws on the postmodernist thematic repertoire.

Other literary critics, prominent among them Glen Thomas, insist on the postmodernist quality of narrative and character construction in *Libra*. For example, Win Everett’s plot rebels against its author, assumes its own life and ultimately kills him; the plan is challenged by Mackey retaliatory urge and by historical fact, since the initial miss turns into a hit. At the character-level, Oswald is the one most extensively analyzed

³³ Thomas Carmichael, Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo’s “*Libra*”, “*The Names*”, and “*Mao II*”, in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol., 34, No., 2, Summer, 1993.

³⁴ Norman Mailer and Frederic Jameson cited in Carmichael, 207

³⁵ See Carmichael, 208.

³⁶ DeLillo, *Libra*, 72.

within postmodernist parameters: he is the marginal, de-centered figure, who lives his life in claustrophobia inducing spaces, struggles to become part of capitalized history and writes his way into a framework more coherent than the one he experiences daily, even though his texts are inarticulate and, at times, incomprehensible. Oswald's divided personality is most apparent at the end of the novel, when he is killed by Jack Ruby. The uncanny effect of his death is that he is portrayed as subject of and simultaneously witness to his own dying.³⁷ It is noteworthy that Glen Thomas's theoretical and interpretive leanings transcend the content and penetrate the language of his critical discourse. For example, he refers to Oswald's troubled character in terms of a "dispersed, split and fragmented sign," obviously drawing on the jargon of poststructuralist linguistics.³⁸

N.H. Reeve too admits that the aftermath of November 22nd, 1963, displays characteristics of postmodernism: inconclusiveness, skepticism about all-encompassing narratives and the proliferation of such questions as: who actually shot Kennedy? Was it from the Texas School Book Depository or from behind the fence on the Grassy Knoll? Was there a lone gunman or a conspiracy that should be held accountable for the murder?³⁹ Notwithstanding these features partaking of the postmodernist paradigm, Reeve makes an even stronger case for the modernist bias that underlies even the most paranoid of theories: the belief in and the craving for "the pure and the uncontaminated"—this appears to be the driving force behind the plotters in *Libra*, as well as behind all those who still try to solve the Kennedy mystery.⁴⁰

Rather than considering *Libra* a piece of postmodernist fiction, and, more specifically, another example of the flourishing genre of "historiographic metafiction," Reeve believes that DeLillo's alternative account of the Kennedy assassination shares in the humanist, modernist endeavor to deal efficiently with chaos and to set the individual and collective consciousness at rest. By definition, "historiographic metafiction" purposely blurs the difference between history and fiction and questions authoritative and authorized historical truth. *Libra* goes beyond this rationale because, on the one hand, DeLillo uses historical evidence quite substantially, even as he draws attention to the fictionality of his account, and, on the other hand, there has never existed an undisputed explanation of the Kennedy assassination: the Warren Report raised question marks and suspicion from the very day of its release. Therefore, it would be fair to say that *Libra* is modernist in content and message, but postmodernist in technique and treatment.⁴¹

The modernist vs. postmodernist debate is ultimately a purely theoretical dispute that can never be resolved, simply because different critics use different criteria by which they label literary works as belonging to one or the other aesthetic code. Whether one favors the content or the narrative strategies in deciding where to place a work of fiction is another reason why this technical conflict cannot be settled.

³⁷ Glen Thomas, *History, Biography and Narrative in Don DeLillo's Libra*, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol.: 43, No., 1, Spring, 1997.

³⁸ See Thomas.

³⁹ N.H. Reeve, *Oswald our Contemporary: Don DeLillo's Libra*, in Rod Mengham, ed., *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000, 135.

⁴⁰ N.H. Reeve, *Oswald our Contemporary*, 138.

⁴¹ See Parish.

Although the distinction between form and content is possible only for methodological and analytical reasons, I believe that the return to thematic criticism in recent years can partly be accounted for by works like *Libra*, which, far from neglecting the formal aspect and far from serving a propagandistic purpose either, do have a powerful message that cannot be overlooked.

In the case of *Libra*, the subliminal message has to do with the relationship between history and fiction. DeLillo's novel draws on the historical record and, what is more important, on a controversial event. As a "work of imagination," it is both world-reflecting and self-reflexive in a well-balanced proportion. Rather than endorsing an attitude of skepticism and distrust about the possibility of reaching a satisfactory explanation or about the use of undertaking such an endeavor, *Libra* reflects the individual's hope for and belief in a world that makes sense. Fiction and historiography, DeLillo implies, complement each other in the attempt to give shape and order to the world we live in.