DeLillo in Greece Eluding the Name

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"I think fiction rescues history from its confusions." This tentative assertion in one of the rare interviews with Don DeLillo could draw a hail of objections from historians, as it insinuates, with confident and serious nonchalance (DeLillo's characteristic style), that history is confused. Elaborating, the novelist goes on to attribute to the writing of fiction a capacity of historical insight that the writing of history cannot possibly possess, a clarity of perception into history's own *things*: "[Fiction] can operate in a deeper way: providing 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."[1]

This hardly means that literature has triumphed over history. Quite the contrary, since according to this formulation the insight of fiction is achieved only as historical insight, as the alleviation of history's confusions on its own behalf. After all, history, not fiction, is being rescued. On the one hand, this rescue operation ensures fiction's implication in things historical, which goes far towards dispelling the classic notions about literature's self-referential nature at one time so dear to literary critics. On the other hand, however, DeLillo's remark also implies a particular and indeed unique quality in literature's relation to knowledge, to what makes knowledge possible *in history*, and this is the larger issue framing the discussion here.

DeLillo insists that, unlike the work of Beckett or Kafka (which he identifies as placeless and abstract and therefore more explicitly theoretical), his work is attached "to real places, to color and texture, to names, to roots and pigments and rough surfaces."[2] For him, fiction must have a locus in a literal, not merely metaphorical, sense—if for no other reason than to subvert fiction's tendency toward self-absorption. And yet, DeLillo has accomplished an exemplary body of theoretical literature in the very tradition of the great modernist experimentation he cites, which engages with great subtlety the elusive mysteries of the contemporary world, a literature of unique performative contemplation.[3] Despite easy-handed pronouncements on DeLillo's postmodern techniques (which sometimes locate his work in a tradition of alleged antiliterature), his entire

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mode of interrogation points to a refined confidence in literature's capacity to theorize the mystery of the world, the elemental historical *thingness*.[4]

Since the 1980s particularly, Don DeLillo's work exhibits striking cohesion as an overall theoretical project, despite a consistently multifaceted approach to subject matter and narrative locus. Next to the extraordinary textures of *Libra* (1988)—to whose literary sophistication it serves as a precursor—*The Names* (1982) exemplifies literature's theoretical capacity with stunning richness. In this work, the capacity of fiction to abolish history's confusions is tested against the background of a foundational desire in human society to harness the power of the proper name. Therefore, the mythical undercurrent of this encounter between the world of a late twentieth-century novel and an archaic desire is none other than the transgressive legacy of the Tower of Babel: "Western" culture's generative lapse into confusion. In general, the novel derives its energy from an intersection between history's mythological core and its dissolution in the contemporary market of politics and culture. In a constant rejuvenation of the Babel experience, which is no longer simply the proliferation of languages but the negotiation of cultural rates of exchange in a globalized market, to make history may involve the struggle between naming and being named, or even more so, the chance to elude the name altogether. To render this struggle or this elusion palpable, to register it as an act in the world, requires poetic thought—in other words, the transformative contemplation of history's confused present by means of (re)staging history's mythological core.

DeLillo's strict standards of narrative locus situate this historical and philosophical crossroads in the contemporary conditions of the eastern Mediterranean basin (or what is commonly called, in terribly vague terms, the Middle East), with Greece as the central referential space and India as the outer boundary. This territorial point of reference is hardly a matter of literary convenience; it is the internal necessity of the work. *The Names* puts forth a particular geographical element as its very method of contemplation. To understand how this novel *thinks* is to recognize a certain primacy in geography, to remind oneself that the foundational questions that still animate the imaginary of today's world are associated with a specific terrain on the globe, and not merely the actual presence of this terrain but its many histories, its many names. Thus, placenames in this novel are particularly significant. They carry a critical logic: an inventory of myths, an archaeological record, but also a distinct modernity.

Though the terrain named is vast, Greece is evidently central, not merely in the narrative frame but in methodological weight. To assume that something is central is to inhabit a characteristic ambiguity, to reside simultaneously at the core and in between, at the base of things and in the interstices of things. In this respect, to be in Greece is to be simultaneously grounded and suspended—an acrobatic condition that informs both the author's own motivation (DeLillo spent four years in Greece as a "research base" for the novel) and the novel's horizon. Keeping this ambiguity in mind as a point of departure, let us consider DeLillo's own words:

> In *The Names,* I spent a lot of time searching for the kind of sun-cut precision I found in Greek light and in the Greek landscape. I wanted a prose which would have the clarity and the accuracy which the natural environment at its best in that part of the world seems to inspire in our own senses. I mean, there were periods in Greece when I tasted and saw and heard with much more sharpness and clarity than I'd ever done before or since. And I wanted to discover a sentence, a way of writing sentences that would be the prose counterpart to that clarity—that sensuous clarity of the Aegean experience.[5]

Surely, one does not easily take an author's words about himself for granted, which is hardly to say that a critic's words about an author are by rule any more trustworthy. Yet, in reading this confession, one cannot help being struck by a rather folkloric representation of the Greek landscape, akin, let us say, to the manner of Odysseus Elytis in one of his own slanted references to the Aegean quality of his verse, or even more so, to a critic of Elytis enamored, if not necessarily with the poet, then surely with the words that construct the poet. Nonetheless, when we traverse this terrain of suspicion and look at the passage again, we may be struck by the same *coup de foudre* that strikes DeLillo: "the sun-cut precision." Indeed, for a Greek reading this passage, the experience is even more arresting. Precision isn't quite what a Greek would usually associate with absorbing from the sun, yet the feeling one gets from DeLillo's sketching of this space tantalizes because it succeeds at evoking something mysterious, intangible, familiar.

Having ascertained that these remarks are not in fact the remarks of a Greek praising his cultural genius or the fortitude of his distinct nature, the likely response to such perplexed reception is to invoke the memory of the next best figure to the proud Hellene: the Philhellene. Suddenly, the lyric turmoil of a Byron or a Hölderlin, the rapture of a Shelley or a Humboldt, comes pouring down on the cultural memory cells with all of its implications: Philhellenism's punitive damages. From Chateaubriand's necrophilic gaze to the antiquarian chastity in the philological and archaeological laboratory to the latter-day tourist invasion, it has always been a matter of a sun-drenched, clear-cut, postcard Greece.

So, what is there to say about one more such reiteration that underlines the notorious clarity of the Hellenic cultural landscape, that recognizes Greece as the source of sensual accuracy? What do such remarks reveal anew about the eye surveying the landscape, the beneficiary (and indeed the privileged object) of this solar surgery of the psyche? And how might this figure in the eyes of those populating the landscape, those purveyors of a specific historical and geographical element that seem to—dare I say it?—abandon themselves to the surveying gaze in what is a dangerous game of mutual seduction? The answers to such questions must retrace the multivalent trails that make the history of the region so "confusing" and, as DeLillo told us at the outset, can only reside in fiction.

The Names is remarkable for the uncanny exactitude with which it weaves together the designs of multinational capitalism with the compulsive desire of ar-

chaeology; the inanities of tourism with the genuine longing to shake loose the American cultural malaise; the writing of fiction in a world that has turned the word into a technological command with the murderous force invoked by an ancient calling for the primacy of the proper name; the abyssal and traumatic quest for one's identity with the resigned loneliness of contemporary married life. But what makes this novel even more remarkable for a Greek reading it is its capacity to actualize contemporary Greek reality (and particularly urban reality) in a way that, to my mind, is unprecedented in accounts of Greek life by expatriated cultural observers, artists or otherwise. To read DeLillo's descriptions of the Greek way of doing things is to realize instantly the artistic poverty of a Henry Miller or a Lawrence Durrell.

On the other hand, this sort of comparison can be misleading for it confines DeLillo to the quarters of those twentieth-century "lovers of Greece" whose aesthetics, unwitting in their dilettantish or adventurist pleasures, were serving the imperialist apparatus. It isn't appropriate because, for one, Don DeLillo is a novelist of international magnitude as yet incalculable in its ultimate ramifications, a writer with the keenest focus on the predicament of the present. Nonetheless, should he in this case be located (and that is a question) in the context of Western culture's psychic investment in the eastern Mediterranean world, then he cannot but inherit the weight of the vast Orientalist and Philhellenist legacy in the region.

When the novel's protagonist, John Axton, a risk-analyst working in Greece for the benefit of multinational banking (a firm selling political risk insurance), opens the narrative by confessing he has been dissuading himself from visiting the Acropolis while living in Athens, DeLillo's fiction takes on precisely that weight: "The weight and moment of those worked stones promised to make the business of seeing them a complicated one," Axton announces.[6] To see the worked stones means precisely to cross the chasm between cultural fantasy and reality and look at civilization's phantoms face to face. Freud spoke succinctly of the experience of this nearly impossible passage, an experience he identified as derealization. For him, like myriad others, climbing the Acropolis hill was and is a ritual dictated by an ultimately incomprehensible pulsion, an archaic (meaning also an *archic*—originary, compelled) sense of security in civilization. The realization of such a drive can be quite monstrous. Freud had likened the shock of seeing the Acropolis in reality to the shock of seeing the perfectly unreal Loch Ness monster. John Axton, risk analyst, knows the risk of this encounter quite well: "It looms. It's so powerful there. It almost forces us to ignore it. Or at least to resist it" (TN 5).

Surely, the terrifying power that the Acropolis exerts beneath the customary ritual of confirming the fact that it exists is rarely perceptible as such. Having been burdened so long with the task of being Western Civilization's constitutive object of fantasy, the Acropolis does not speak. It operates by means of silent coercion, exemplified in the tourist's compulsive effort to meet it face to face without quite understanding the nature of his gesture—this same coercion recognized by Axton (the antitourist) as the source of his equally incomprehensible denial: "What ambiguity there is in exalted things. We despise them a little" (TN 3).

Axton's psychic universe is constituted around the profoundly estranged observer position that his work demands. In his field of vision, objects and gestures take on distinct and disembodied qualities, casting themselves in the foreground as the coordinating agents of life, perfectly animate. Familiar cultural signposts fade. Suddenly, to be in Greece has nothing to do with what is expectantly Hellenic. One senses the animation of everything around. Culture takes place in the flux sustained by the barrage of conversation, the inordinate exchange of cut-up phrases, exclamations, and incidental sounds, all orchestrated by an array of gestures:

> People everywhere are absorbed in conversation. . . . Conversation is life, language is the deepest thing. We see the patterns repeat, the gestures drive the words. It is the sound and picture of humans communicating. It is talk as a definition of itself. . . . Every conversation is a shared narrative, a thing that surges forward, too dense to allow space for the unspoken, the sterile. The talk is unconditional, the participants drawn in completely. (TN 52)

In this whirlwind, John Axton, risk analyst, realizes instinctively that, from the point of view of granting insurance for multinational investment (economic but also cultural), Greece is high-risk territory. Hence his sensitivity to the defamiliarizing (derealizing) undercurrent of the culture and his resistance/denial of its projected signposts. This condition accounts for Axton's twofold consciousness: on the one hand, his extraordinary insight into which elements of the surveyed culture slip right through the net of the surveying gaze, and on the other (in a contradictory simultaneity that does not abolish either term), his absolute blocking of the significance inherent in the sort of work that brings him to Greece in the first place, the network of power that feeds on cultural surveillance. Axton is baffled when he discovers eventually that his firm is an informant front for the CIA. Breaking down the rules of the surveying gaze does not mean breaking down the identity (always autonomously alien) of the surveying subject. But Axton's irresolute cultural displacement makes certain his failure as a CIA informant (emblematic of the general failure of the CIA to ever really understand what goes on in that part of the world—the narrative takes place in the wake of the Iran hostage crisis). At the same time, however, his personal alienated condition as cosmopolitan observer, as private citizen of the world, ensures his decoding of both the psychological shards of contemporary culture as well as the psychotic patterns of a murderous cult.

Paradoxically—or perhaps not—the alertness and sensitivity generated by Axton's displacement breaks open the cultural mystery of Greece and thus opens up the long text of the West's psychic investment in the region (Philhellenism, Orientalism, etc.) so that the West's own inscriptions on the social-cultural landscape can be read. This runs counter to—indeed replaces—archaeology's incessant need to extract the traces of Greece's ancestry, to excavate (or exhume) the buried inscriptions of the past. The novel makes this clash central to its perspective. Axton's resistance to "seeing the stones" is countered by archaeology's eagerness not merely to see them but to read them. The untenability of this latter desire in a *modern* Greek world where the barrage of fragmented or unfinished

discourses reigns, where inscriptions cannot be read in any final sense, is exemplified by the novel's other protagonist, Owen Brademas, the brilliant epigraphologist from Kansas and closest presence to the novel's traumatic core, who is brought into the picture having already abandoned the aims of his vocation and taken up the trail of a nomadic murderous cult.

A wide-ranging geographical mutability is interwoven in the exclusive sense of modernity that "Western culture" fosters and protects. Brademas's archaeological obsession has its geographical parallel in Axton's information gathering for multinational capitalist politics, which is why the two characters converge in their compulsive attraction to the cult. They are plugged into the same trajectory, both acting as contemporary surveyors of the ancient routes of culture, the territory that has been circumscribed as Indo-European culture. Axton's work involves deciphering the cultural inscriptions of the present. But this work also produces the traces of today's bookkeeping. It leaves behind a trail of coded inscriptions, complex accounts of an economic and cultural war whose politics is inevitably geographical. These inscriptions burning at the heart of telex machines have their own instant epigraphologists to match, which is to say that present-day culture leaves nothing to future interpreters. Today's accounting is itself subjected to the geographical mutability it serves. Perhaps its aim is to leave nothing in its wake (at least, this would be the ideal CIA mode of operation). Or rather, it signifies a form of culture that aspires to render itself and its territory unaccountable, like the occasional traveller who doesn't even take pictures. The myriad agents of capitalist politics in the region conduct their lives and business like tourists. Axton has no trouble admitting this for himself: "I began to think of myself as a perennial tourist. There was something agreeable about this. To be a tourist is to escape accountability. Errors and failings don't cling to you the way they do at home. You're able to drift across continents and languages suspending the operation of sound thought. Tourism is the march of stupidity" (TN 43).

A future epigraphologist would find it hard to distinguish between the traces of stupidity and intelligence. Not merely because the mass cultivation of stupidity has proven to be one of capitalism's most intelligent weapons, but also because the intelligence of a culture set on devouring the territory of the other (including the territory of its recorded past) has something incomparably brutal about it, a method of unaccountable obliteration, crude emptiness. One might consider that Brademas begins to seek the self-referential in ancient epigraphy because his own existence is determined by an increasingly self-referential world. It is as if the cost of globalization in the late twentieth century is a kind of cultural imploding, a deeper and deeper self-enclosure that must seek its historical alibi in the elemental, the original dissociation within language that led from hieroglyph to alphabet. The late twentieth-century epigraphologist who wants to go beyond cultural accounting to the purest traces of an archaic language is ultimately unconcerned with any other culture than his own. In an admittedly seductive way—for he is no doubt a rebel—Brademas exemplifies the bankrupt ideology of classical archaeology in the eastern Mediterranean. No matter what

the force of loyalty to the discipline might dictate, the excessive and elusive inscriptions of present life overshadow the silent signposts of the glorious past. Classical archaeology particularly falters when the exhumation of a dead language revealed as an apparatus for a kind of archaic accounting takes place in a world where the living language reigns as a guiltless end-in-itself, a celebration of unaccounted repetition: "A Greek will never say anything he hasn't already said a thousand times" (TN 4). This discrepancy, the unaccountability that lies between the language of the past and the language of the present, holds the key to the novel's obsession with naming.

Behind the desire to name, to couple together word and thing, there is a secret desire to embrace the order of the particular. In a world whose *archē* is the interruption of the Babel project, such desire would be a response to the *aporia* generated before the gaze of the universal that arrives as a kind of nameless aggregate of many names, never reducible to any one except its own. There is a categorical multiplicity hidden in every expression of the universal, a necessary appropriation and taming of the fearful energy of the untotalized particular. The desire to permeate the manythingness of the world, the elusive boundaries of the post-Babelian word, propels and holds intact the universal. And yet, what sustains the regime of the proper name, what justifies the act of naming in the last instance (at least in what is termed the Western tradition), is the most absolute of universal signs, the monadic order itself, the last instance of the Name (which is, of course, unnameable): God.

This paradoxical condition accounts for the double demand posed by the proper name, the simultaneous necessity of readability and unreadability, translatability and untranslatability, pure reference and substantive essence. In his repeated meditations on this condition, Jacques Derrida has insisted on the double bind of God himself, the double bind of the monadic institution.[7] According to Derrida, the Tower of Babel myth is resolved with an impossible command, a gift that is also an injunction. In a war of proper names, God interrupts the work of the tribe that still holds intact the power to name (the traditional Hebrew name of the tribe, Shem, means "name") by forcing upon it his own name, which is Babel and which means "confusion": the one name for all names that can never be reproduced. God interrupts the work on the Tower by the force of his name, which plunges all work into confusion. Though it is beyond all particulars, it traverses each and every particular; though it must be no one's name, it is the name of the One. Suddenly, the work is bound to a new object: in the confusion of tongues, the work becomes the work of translation. Derrida identifies the *arche* of this new labor as God's own double bind produced by an inaccessible gift: the untranslatable name presented with the order that it be translated—an order produced out of a new order of things, a new order between words and things. This is an *archic* division within the proper name: "it divides God himself. . . . God himself is in the double bind, God as the deconstructor of the Tower of Babel. He interrupts a construction. . . . He interrupts the construction in his name: he interrupts himself in order to impose his name."[8]

There is a double edge to this condition to whose contradictory essence we

shall later return: the Babelian performance is both myth and deconstruction. For the moment, let us consider this performance as the origin of a desire that has scattered its traces all over history, a diasporic desire that has plunged history into confusion—after all, Babel is also the mythical *arche*, the governing principle, of diaspora. If fiction is to rescue this scattered history, it is because it (re)enacts both the myth and the deconstruction.

DeLillo infuses his characterization of globalized estrangement in *The Names* with a fanatic figure that extends the antinomic logic of the Babelian performance (from both ends: to name, to be named) to its utmost violence. The world of investment bankers and risk analysts, terrorists and tourists, foreign archaeologists and modern Athenians, is suddenly permeated by the Babelian logic of a murderous cult. This cult consists of a loose structure of small cells strewn throughout Greece and the Middle East and driven by a desire to merge with the most elemental terrain of culture. What binds them together is a fanatic interest in ancient alphabets, hence their geographical orientation.

The cult members travel—or more accurately, they drift—according to an instinctively mapped circuitous pattern that retraces the trajectory of the first instances of post-Babelian culture. They hover around the geographical patterns of the initial dispersal, as if magnetized by the gravitational loops of matter that follow the first explosion. This is the dispersal, the multiple (re)staging, of the original act of culture: carving out of the blank matter of nature the first sign of symbolic representation (writing) and attributing to nature's henceforth broken elements the first sign of identity (naming). Owen Brademas is able to get close to the cult because the cultists are themselves immersed in the contemplation of language and they value his knowledge.

When they address him with the question, "How many languages do you speak?" they are merely issuing their calling card, offering him their password, certain, of course, that he will respond:

> They wanted to hear about ancient alphabets. We discussed the evolution of letters. The praying man shape of the Sinai. The ox pictograph. Aleph, alpha. From nature, you see. The ox, the house, the camel, the palm of hand, the water, the fish. From the external world. What men saw, the simplest things. Everyday objects, animals, parts of the body. It's interesting to me, how these marks, these signs that appear so pure and abstract to us, began as objects in the world, living things in many cases. (TN 116)

Brademas recognizes that epigraphology runs into a dead end as a simple device of mapping ancient cultures. Risking the danger of fetishizing the object, he becomes a reader not of the content of inscriptions but of the actual existence of inscriptions as the content of human toil, the work of culture in its most elemental sense. He only wants to know languages in order to get even closer to the material energy of the human trace on the stone. And of course, the more languages one knows the more inclusive and more proximate is the encounter. It seems to be the work of civilization in reverse, a sort of time-travel, to the point where ancient inscriptions assume presence and need not be deciphered. To know many languages may be a desire to reverse Babel from the inside, to resume work

on the Tower against the name. The cultists recognize in Brademas a kindred soul, at least to a certain extent. Says Andahl, the apostate member (who is in this respect even closer to Brademas, the almost member, the fellow traveller): "A man who knows languages. A calm man, very humane. He has a wide and tolerant understanding, a capacity for civilized thought. He is not hurried, he is not grasping for satisfactions. This is what it means to know languages" (TN 207).

In a Babelian universe, to know languages—to know more than one language—means simultaneously to be further immersed in the work of translation and to be increasingly free of translation. The space-time dimension of this simultaneity makes its paradox more comprehensible. Translation is metaphorically linked to the crossing of boundaries, the traversing of places, geographical movement (*translatio* literally means to cross lands). In this sense, to know languages means to travel, as much as it also means, with equal force, to have a sense of place (in each place, in many places). Temporally, it means to have access to many time frames, to work against time's linear construction, against the distance between past and present. But it also means, by the same token, to have an ample sense of time, to belong to time. Brademas, who is sketched as an aging but timeless figure, reciprocates Andahl's characterization when he recognizes the cult's enormous patience, its endless stalking of time and place, its final denial of the dynamics of space-time. Axton also reaches the same conclusions by simple observation when he runs across a cell of the cult at a remote village café in Mani: "They looked like people who came from nowhere. They'd escaped all the usual associations. . . . They were in no hurry to find another place to sit, another place to live. They were people who found almost any place as good as almost any other. They didn't make distinctions" (TN 190).

But, of course, they do make distinctions; at the very least, they aspire to an act whose arbitrary violence is based on absolute distinction. The cult survives on the obsession that the sublime violence inherent in the originary instances of writing and naming—the shattering of nature's undifferentiated whole by culture's unbounded abstract representation (what in another context we could call humanity's entrance into history)—is in fact possible to (re)enact, to live it through as pure contemporary experience. This originary violence holds over them an enchanting allure and they set out to merge with it by pursuing a series of arbitrary murders: staking out a remote territory and pouncing on the unfortunate passerby whose initials match the initials of the place. The logic is inexorable and has no other implicit or encrypted suggestion. An event forms out of nowhere, goes nowhere, just happens, all because simply "the letters matched" (TN 169, 208).

The cult insists on carrying out its arbitrary killings using the most primitive instruments: hammers, chisels, sharp stones—the archaic (*archic*) instruments of writing. Like good philologists, the cult members become perfectly versed in the media of the culture they seek to understand; they appropriate its methods, its attitudes and visions, its language. They begin to measure each act, each thought, by its corresponding philological anatomy. In this they merely follow the steps of Ernest Renan, arguably the quintessential philologist of the nine-

teenth century, who identified the work of philology as a "vivisection . . . , treat[ing] the living as we ordinarily treat the dead."[9] But with a crucial exception: the cult takes its act out of the laboratory and into the world, and it does so explicitly, taking the matter to its epistemological limit. It chooses to perform this vivisection in actual terms, demonstrating that the epistemic or the cultural body is indeed made out of flesh and blood. The experience has a sort of catalytic terror, a hysterical frenzy, precisely because the murderer's brutal contact with the flesh confirms the absolute finality of his own existence, but also because in another sense the flesh remains irreversibly alien, nonresistant, noncomplicit: "We hit harder because we could not stand the sound of the hammers on her face and head. How Emmerich used the cleft end of the hammerhead. Anything to change the sound. . . . Or how little blood, not at all what we expected, the blood. We looked at each other, amazed at this paucity of blood. It made us feel we had missed a step along the way" (TN 211).

As Brademas recognizes from the outset, the psychological condition of the cult is a denial of their humanity by total submission to the most elemental, desexualized, dehumanized flesh, flesh as organic dirt: "Dirt was their medium" (TN 29) or "They were involved in the most painstaking denial . . . intent on ritualizing a denial of our elemental nature. To eat, to expel waste, to sense things, to survive . . . to satisfy what is animal in us, to be organic, meat-eating, all blood-sense and digestion" (TN 175). The result is a collective autism, a totally self-enclosed universe whose invented meaning appears as perfect nature and whose teleological commitment is absolute and beyond justification: "The murder has become part of the dream pool of his self-analysis. The victim and the act are theory now. They form the philosophical base he relies on for his sense of self. They are what he uses to live" (TN 291). From the point of view of society, this condition exemplifies the dissociation of thought from the world—despite the cult's strict adherence (almost collapse) between object and word—and therefore demonstrates a deep psychosis. Of course, all cults make such behavior necessary: the psychotic clarity of a unified vision, untouched by the inconsistencies of everyday life, unburdened by the demands of the other. But here the dissociation is so profound that no apparent tradition, as cults go, can even contain their behavior as reference. This cult has nothing to do with repeating or emulating ancient rituals, which is why the discourse of human sacrifice, as it pertains to ancient cultures in the region from Babylonian to Minoan times, is altogether irrelevant. The contemporary discourse of arbitrary murders (serial killers, mass shootings, Manson-type rituals) is closer in significance but still not a matter of direct emulation, of exporting. The affinity is deeper and I will return to it shortly. For now, it is important to understand that the cultural groundwork for the ritual of murder in America—"men firing from highway overpasses, attic rooms, unconnected to the earth"—and its various pathological obsessions is alien here. "There is a different signature here, a deeper and austere calculation. We barely consider the victims except as elements in the pattern" (TN 171).[10] Like tourists passing through an alien territory untouched, the cult passes through the terrain of murder with an empty psyche: "Nothing clings to the act. No hovering stuff. It's a blunt recital of the facts" (TN 302).

The ideology of the cult's violence excludes any contemplation of what is human. The kill is just initials, letters of the alphabet. Whatever human element registers, if at all, it does at the ultimate moment of murderous violence, during the actual experience of violating helpless and unresisting flesh. Only such radical self-denial, which necessarily culminates in the denial of whatever connects them to their own death (witness the final stage of some members dying out of simple indifference to life, out of simply turning themselves off), could produce such violence empty of human signification. "The final denial of our base reality, in this schematic, is to produce a death. . . . A needless death. A death by system, by machine-intellect" (TN 175). In this respect, the indisputable madness that underlines the cult's cohesion recedes before the madness of its method, its strict structuralist madness: "Madness has a structure. We might say madness is all structure. We might say structure is inherent in madness. There is not the one without the other" (TN 210).

As with any cult, membership means absolute synchronization with the shared imaginary and the rituals it demands. In all cases, a unique idiom develops, a private language that ultimately reaches beyond its evident signification, beyond even its cultural makeup, to something vertical and practically telepathic, a self-referential symbolism. But here is the most extreme case. Language itself is dissolved to its smallest material particles: letters themselves, emancipated from communicative function, separated, fixed in sequence. Self-referential symbolism undoes any sort of recognizable symbolic order in the sense that language functions without representation. These "zealots of the alphabet" (TN 75) operate by their own admission at a preverbal level. They seek recognition at an unconscious level, an unconscious method, intuitive knowledge. Preverbal is in this sense "prelinguistic" insofar as whatever is shared exists in a space beyond or before language as such; although words are used, they are deemed worthless beyond the arbitrary letters that signify their sound.[11]

The orality associated with sound would be disturbing to the mindset of the cult. Witness the hysterical response to the sound of beating flesh to a pulp. The cult's logic originates in writing and specifically in nonrepresentational writing. What obsesses them is the strange leap from the communicative desire to represent the elements of nature to the invention of arbitrary signs that condense representation to the point of obliteration (from the ox pictograph to aleph to alpha), where communication becomes solely a matter of social convention. The cult's further obsession with a multiplicity of languages, particularly ancient "dead" languages, is owed less to a kind of linguistic fetishism than a desire to delve further into the alphabetic arbitrariness that cuts across linguistic convention between different societies and cultures. As Andahl puts it, "We are here to carry out the pattern. . . . Abecedarian. Learners of the alphabet. Beginners" (TN 210). Although the pattern refers to the alphabetic coincidence of the final act, the confession itself reveals it to stand for the desire to return to the *archē* of Babel, the violence of the first interruption by the name. The violent nature of the final act reciprocates the violence of the beginning. The cult aspires to live this violent beginning on a daily basis, drifting around between arbitrary alphabetic spaces, between initials in different languages. Living this absurd hete-

rochronicity is what turns the archaic into the *archic*. The performance that brings each occupation of a place to an end, the death that demonstrates the life of the pattern, is the justification for the categorically determinant beginning: the alpha and the omega.

Such performance draws its energy from the originary act of social institution inherent in the advent of writing, the violent obliteration of nature by culture upon which the constitution of human society is based. But we are no longer at such a state; at least, what we recognize as our modernity is predicated on an understanding of culture as a technology of taming violence. Civilization has imposed its rule by relegating the *archic* violence of writing to the realm of collective (cultural) sublimation, and in the process holding intact (even if repressed) its universalist/monotheistic propensity. The fact that the cult is caught in this heterochronous dislocation is what accounts both for its absurdity (e.g., conducting their daily communication in Sanskrit or Aramaic) and its psychotic relation to the world. Yet, the cult's murderous performance also makes evident (as forensic proof) the foundations of contemporary culture. Something of civilization's monstrous experience is inherent in the cult's project, albeit dressed up and projected as turning ritual inside-out and sinking further into the sphere of the archaic and the elemental. Were we to strip the cult of this self-projection, it would appear in the light that distinguishes the terrorist logic of late capitalism, whether in the form of clandestine urban warfare (guerrilla groups with myriad secret cells) or the CIA's global operations with its multiple tentacles resembling points of electronic stimulus reception in a vast computer network.[12]

The cult lives and kills by naming. It lives and kills by translating names into pure signs, by denuding them of their acquired ontology and restoring their arbitrariness. The act is based on a perversely mystical materialism of language. The alphabet is elemental representation, so absolutely elemental, however, as to be itself the element that does not represent and is not representable. It becomes itself a name. Inevitably, the moment of murdering is a moment of naming. Michalis Kalliabetsos becomes Mikro Kamini and vice versa. Death becomes a means of identity; it occupies a place. The cult delegates over matters of life and death—this is what it means to name. Thus, despite Owen Brademas's objections, the cult enacts a religious order. I would argue that it is impossible to conceptualize any collective condition that bears the remotest traces of cult life outside a religious imagination. All cults are religious (even if explicitly secular) and all religion has at its basis, whether fully exercised or not, the elements of a cult community. However, because of his profound ambivalence toward religion, Brademas tries to convince himself that these are not "god-haunted people" since no god would dictate and accept such an act devoid of ritual, devoid of tradition. On the other hand, Frank Volterra, the maverick filmmaker who entertains the absurd idea of filming the cult in action, characterizes them as "secular monks" who "want to vault into eternity" (TN 203). Brademas underestimates the signifying range of religious order; Volterra over-aestheticizes an imaginary that disdains representation. Both of them never quite consider what it means to live up to an obsession with a self-referring world and the perverse desire to indulge in its ultimate consequences.

The tortured explanation of cult leader Avtar Singh is perfectly articulate and worth considering at length:

> The world has become self-referring. . . . This thing has seeped into the texture of the world. The world for thousands of years was our escape, our refuge. Men hid from themselves in the world. We hid from God or death. The world was where we lived, the self was where we went mad and died. But now the world has made a self of its own. Why, how, never mind. What happens to us now that the world has a self? How do we say the simplest thing without falling into a trap? Where do we go, how do we live, who do we believe? This is my vision, a self-referring world, a world in which there is no escape. (TN 297)[13]

To some extent all cults experience everything as an interiority. The outer boundary collapses and a profound solipsism sets in. Objective reality as an external supposition disappears, hence the radical inward devotion and impenetrable separation from all otherness. It is perfectly logical that the culmination of such conditions is often ritualized mass suicide. But here the logic has been turned inside out, although the radical self-reference is kept intact. Singh paints the picture of a world that exists in permanent cult conditions. But instead of having lost its objectivity, it has gained a self, an absolute subjectivity. Therefore, the world can no longer escape from itself; it has no space to put aside its obsessions in order perhaps to imagine itself differently, to alter itself. The language of the world has become finite and palindromic. No more words, no new words, no new meanings, no otherness, no alteration. In this total paranoid collapse of signification, Singh and his followers devise a "program" of externalizing fully, of making concrete, the implications of pure self-reference. They turn reality into an alphabetic equation between proper names. While there may be actual inscriptions with the 99 names of God—culture keeping count, accounting—the endless name of God is the alphabet itself (TN 92). So, like the ancient God who gave his endless name to a place he effectively destroyed, the cult baptizes by killing. Like the God whose self-given name was Babel, the cult seeks to inhabit the insides of language, before its outward proliferation, the radioactive fallout, before translation became the necessary resolution of its arbitrariness. These survivors of Babel gather again to seek the name, the utmost self-referent, the beginning which is complete unto itself. They seek the secrets of the name, the secret power of naming that created culture out of fissuring language and made it possible to doubt the association between word and thing: "A secret name is a way of escaping the world. It is an opening into the self" (TN 210). But what happens now that the world has a self? A way out of where? Opening to where?

The cult members kill with the blunt instruments of society's first writers; their victims are their original texts.[14] In other words, they aspire precisely to the instituting power of mythical action. But given the cult's historical and cultural dislocation in space-time, this mythological aspiration to write as if the world is tabula rasa produces an empty set of signification. The cult's act of writing is also an act of erasing; its orthographic naming is literally an *obliteration*. Driven by an anxiety to resist the regime of the universal (in their mind, exemplified in today's

global culture) by taking on, like a new Adam, the act of naming, the cult becomes victim to its own logic. To name is also to obliterate. It is an act that erases an object's historically contingent characteristics by inscribing upon it a final identity. In this sense, a nomadic inscription returns head-on to the void of the monadic: the Name itself.

No cult can exist before the Tower of Babel is condemned to permanent ruin, before it acquires its name at the moment of its death. The Shem tribe embarked on this project in order to achieve the permanence of name through the permanence of place. "Let us make ourselves a name, so that we not be scattered over the face of all the earth," is the Biblical verse. In this desire for *autonymy* lies the desire for autonomy. To give oneself the name, to name oneself, is to give oneself the law. In this very fundamental way—and the matter is by no means exhausted there—the Tower of Babel incident is humanity's most profound mythical representation of heteronomy. To give oneself a name, just as much as to give oneself the law, is staged here as the first and final transgression, the very essence of transgression. This essence is grounded on a paradox. The originary desire for the name (which is also the law) reveals, by the punishment it incurs, an *archē* before the origin, an unwritten and unknown name, a law before the law is made, which turns this foundational desire for autonymy/autonomy into foundational transgression.

This transgression is foundational in a literal sense and twofold. Not only does it institute a select people insofar as God himself gives these people his Name (an other name) but in addition, because God's name is Babel ("confusion"—of tongues, of languages, of names), his response to the transgression institutes/names all others, all those who will not actually bear his name but will bear the effect of his naming. As a mythical narrative, the Babelian performance stages the story of everyone being the effect of a naming that comes from elsewhere, from an elsewhere name that retains *by law* its mysterious status as an elsewhere that cannot be named. The Babel incident is the mythical performance of heteronymy/heteronomy, of being named by the Other, which is to say, of bearing the name of the Other's law.

What is particularly relevant here is that the Babel incident also signifies an act of another naming: the totalizing submission of world culture to a monotheistic point of view of history. It is a myth of heteronymy that makes the name of the One the one and only worthy name of history. Although global history is surely composed of multiple points of view—the points of view of many different religions or even nonreligions, which is another way of saying, the confusion of names and laws of worship—to participate in global history (at least since the Crusades) requires that everyone recognize their multiplicity of names in the round mirror of a prevalent monotheistic imaginary.

This is perfectly compatible with the cult's avowed desire to exit from history, if only because its actions aspire to a reversal of humanity's *archic* historical act, an alphabetic relation to life: "This is precisely the opposite of history. An alphabet of utter stillness. We track static letters when we read . . . a logical paradox" (TN 291–92). Yet, in order to really obliterate the Name, you must obliterate it

in history. Consider here the importance of stealing your enemy's name in animist societies. The existence of the cult is a clue as to what happens when this animist relation to history is infused with the weapons of a monotheistic psyche. It is tantamount to society's infantile regression, regression always being a reenactment taken as a return. For the cult is by no means primitive; its operations put into practice the tenets of computer logic.[15] The members know this and recognize it when they speak of their mode of existence (whose culmination is the murders) as "the program."

The cult provides a unique occasion for philological practice, a different sort of reading/erasing, as it involves the paradoxical condition of an archaeological epigraphy of culture's shifting present. When Owen Brademas abandons the reading of stones, he does not in fact abandon the pursuit of epigraphic history. His shadowing of the mysterious cult through its various incarnations in the expanse between Greece, the Jordanian desert, and India involves the attempt to decipher this other sort of inscription—a nomadic inscription that cuts across histories and cultures, hence ever-shifting in space and time, heterochronous and heterotopic. Reading such an inscription means traversing the space-time of its fantasy, which more or less means subscribing to the signifying demands of its project. That Brademas ultimately becomes, for all practical purposes, a member of the cult—or at least, complicit in its murderous action by virtue of deciphering their innermost signifying frame and yet remaining a passive observer—is perfectly consistent with his training as an epigraphologist, a man versed in the denuding of names. Intellectual (theoretical) curiosity is satisfied at the price of complicity to the practice.

Yet, though "gravitationally bound to the cult" (TN 286), Brademas does not entirely collapse into its mass density. He achieves the closest possible orbit at a distance decided by a mutual resistance toward being named. The cult's name continues to elude him, as he says, because he serves the purpose of the cult's first and final real interlocutor, "observer and tacit critic," an indication of the cult's demise (TN 299). By refusing to reveal its name, the cult refuses to be named, refuses to relinquish its obsessive self-enclosure. But Owen Brademas himself responds by an act of uncanny mirroring. When Emmerich asks him point blank to reveal his identity, Owen answers "No one" (TN 292). Owen ↔ No one. A curious sonoric matching, a skewed anagram of sound. Is this Odyssean inscription the magic gesture of deconstructing the cult's Babelian violence? Instead of matching the initials face to face, Owen matches them in a sonic mirror. He scrambles the sound of the syllables—the oral insides of the name—to show the void of the name: No one. He reaches behind the alphabetic stillness, behind the death of the sacred script, to utter the erasure of the name, which is subliminally inscribed in the name. The cost of this negative naming is the realization of a lost self. At this final proximity to the world of the cult, Owen realizes he is irretrievably torn from the core of his psyche—the hysteric evangelism of the plains community in Kansas—even though he also realizes that his pursuit of the cult was fueled by the desire to overcome this lack. In other words, the internal chasm is unbridgeable. It is precisely what turns Owen—so obviously closer to One—to No one.

The cult, on the other hand, names itself according to the strict idiom of its identity: *Ta Onómata*, The Names. As absurd reenactment of the long obliterated tribe Shem, the cult invokes its being in its name without qualifications. Like everything else that characterizes it, its name obeys an identitarean logic. The cult can bear no self-reflection in the sense of critique, which is why the only occasion of revealing its name is the desperate gesture of the apostate Andahl, itself actualized by the deciphering eyes of risk analyst Axton. Brademas recognizes finally the tautological nature of the cult's relation to the culture it wishes to destroy: "The killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death" (TN 308). This is why Owen's Odyssean autonymy consists not only in the refusal to reveal his actual name but in the denuding of the cult's monotheistic propensity, whether it be the ideological service of the Name or the binary computer logic that ties zero to one.

The novel's obsession with the philosophical problem of naming is supported by two other less explicit obsessions (central, however, to DeLillo's work overall): religion and contemporary violence.[16] On the face of it, there seems to be a geographical distinction between the two. Upon his arrival to India, Brademas will recognize himself as a Christian, not as a matter of faith but as a framework of definition. The suggestion is that in Eastern societies religion becomes the language of identity, with India being the epitome of multiplicity in this respect, a veritable documentation of the post-Babelian instance. On the other hand, contemporary violence seems the sole privilege of Americans, a characteristic that has become almost natural, like consumerism. DeLillo himself has been quite explicit: "I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America"[17] to elaborate in another context: "The consequence of not having the power to consume is that you end up living in the streets."[18] Axton echoes him in the novel: ". . . killing in America [is] a form of consumerism. It's the logical extension of consumer fantasy. People shooting from overpasses, barricaded houses. Pure image" (TN 115).

The Names is predicated on the internationalization of this geographical distinction. Thus, the consequences of mirroring American consumer culture and the violence it entails are retraced in a region generally characterized by a deep-seated anti-Americanism, while conversely, religion is revealed as a fundamental obsession of the Western secular mind, whether in the example of the repressed evangelical chaos of Brademas's childhood or the psychotic ruminations of a murderous cult. This chiasmic translation makes it possible to reach the realist groundwork beneath the philosophical concerns of the novel. An American author has situated the demands of his fiction in the mythological present of multinational capital, international politics, and nationalist idiom. If "America is the world's living myth" and possesses "a certain mythical quality that terrorists find attractive" (TN 114), then its literature should perform at this level of mythistorical clarity, the clarity of mythical, not quotidian, violence. On the other hand, societies that bear the brunt of such mythical violence in their daily lives

encounter the American present at this same level: "The Mideast societies are at a particular pitch right now. There is no doubt or ambiguity. They burn with a clear vision. There must be times when a society feels the purest virtue lies in killing" (TN 115).

No need to underline the wisdom of this last statement, nor the many times it would be applicable to American society itself. But at the narrative's specific historical juncture, to bear the cultural name *American* in the territory of the Other means more or less to stand on the other side of a gun. For it is a name that speaks the authority of one of late twentieth century's most powerful divinities: the CIA. It is consistent with the novel's unblemished theoretical mind that the CIA occupies the position of the god who destroyed the Tower of Babel by bequeathing it his name. For all those who struggle to translate the significance of American capital, culture, and politics into their own national language (as they experience the multivalent occupation of their actual and virtual territory), the acronymic reference holds all the terrible secrets. The killing of Americans abroad throughout the 1970s and 1980s was in many ways symptomatic of the failure to deconstruct the acronymic power of this contemporary myth. The CIA disseminated everywhere an image of pure and impenetrable self-reference, essentially the Yahwist logic of the untranslatable and unpronouncable name: "I am that I am."[19] Axton's failure to detect himself in the language of this name testifies to its mythological power to confuse the world and particularly the people who allegedly speak its own language: "If America is the world's living myth, then the CIA is America's myth" (TN 317).

It is interesting that DeLillo chooses to stage a terrorist shooting, which targets American capitalist politics, in Greece and not in Jordan, Israel, or India—the other geographical sites of the narrative. The novel documents with considerable precision how, subsequent to the Iranian revolution, Greece became the landing strip of various operatives of multinational capitalism and American politics during their bailing out process, the most significant such retreat since Vietnam. Likewise, the Greek popular sentiment reflected at this time the full militant extent of Greece's disengagement from direct American intervention in its social and political present, following the guidelines of the Truman doctrine (1947) and culminating in the CIA-supported military government (1967–74). As a country with strong Leftist traditions and given the antiimperialist tenets of post–'68 European youth culture, Greece also witnessed the rise of various urban guerrilla groups, the most notorious of which—still active and literally legendary, as no members have ever been identified since it began operations in 1976!—is the group *November 17*. The novel insinuates that the attempted shooting at Lycabettus may have borne this group's signature, one more occasion of DeLillo's subtle interweaving of the boundaries between history and fiction.[20]

The shot fired in broad daylight against the comic target of Americans jogging in one of the few wooded spaces in Athens—whether the intended victim was Axton or the banker David Keller is appropriately left ambiguous (they are interchangeable names: Americans and agents of multinational capital)—cannot but resound against "the sun-cut precision" DeLillo had mentioned at the outset.

After the circuitous adventure has run its course and the narrative of nomadic inscriptions has used up its alphabet, the text has returned to the *archē* of a gestural space, the centrality of which suggests that it lies both at the core and in the interstices of language. We are told early on that "the Greek specific" is a characteristic that "pits the sensuous against the elemental," a space whose abundant light brings attention to the smallest thing, to "correctness of detail" (TN 26). The microworld of the elemental encounters the boundless expanse of the sensual in the kind of embrace that requires utmost precision, otherwise the content of the world is lost. By the same dialectical attention to radical specificity Axton may conclude: "Life is different here. We must be equal to the largeness of things" (TN 89). The Greek landscape, a nature which is fundamentally social, induces a sensual clarity that seems to occupy the entire sensory apparatus of body and soul, a curious materiality of the intangible. Though paradoxical in terms of rational logic, it nonetheless registers with the uncanny precision of already incorporated knowledge. As Brademas reflects in one of his dreamlike speculative moments, one experiences in Greece a residual memory, as in a *metempsychosis*, which is hardly translated by its quotidian notion of reincarnation and is rendered instead through its etymological ground: "not only *transfer-of-soul* but reach[ing] the Indo-European root *to breathe*. . . . We are breathing again" (TN 113).

In Greece, you breathe the elemental. This seems to be what the novel argues for, what sums up its geographical mode of contemplation. The elemental was precisely what the cult also sought, as we know, but its program enforced the strictest singularity possible—no transfer-of-soul, no breathing of history, just one arbitrary shot in the desert of mind, literal alphabetic translation. The cult perceives Mani as "a place where it is possible for men to stop making history . . . [to] invent a way out" (TN 209) because it misreads its cultural reticence as tabula rasa for alphabetic inscription, while Axton recognizes the silence of Mani, though opposed to the polyglot nature of Athens, to be of the same order of precision, "a pure right of seeing" (TN 182). The cult never dares enter the space of Athens—nor any other urban space, which is where whatever psychological similarity it shares with urban guerrilla groups categorically ends—because it is terrified of the stray excess of multiple orders of language. In Athens one enters a whirlwind of language modes, which exist as if untouched by the fallout from the Babelian performance. Axton experiences collective intoxication because "the air is filled with words" (TN 79) and, as we have seen, "gestures drive the words." The gestural world exceeds the alphabetic, which is why the cult is terrified of it. The gestural, which slices the air with interruption and punctuation, eludes the deathly blows of writing instruments. This is why the cult must invent a way out. Because the intangible flux of history is contained in the gesture and in Greece, Axton reiterates with characteristic variance, "history is in the air" (TN 97).

In the everyday realm, Greek life has broken away from the regime of naming, having opted for the broken phrase, the gesture, the incidental sound, the barrage of conversing/contesting voices, the pointless and guiltless repetition.[21] It cannot be reduced to any philological grid because it has long incorporated, ac-

cording to its imposed classical heritage and the conceptual rifts it entails (to which the contemporary presence of the Acropolis fragments bears material witness), a ruined logos, which is why in (modern) Greece "the ruin is managed differently" (TN 179). The book makes this enigmatic proposition one of its theoretical projects. Axton's ultimate reconciliation with the Greek element, whose symptom is to visit finally the Acropolis, is based on the realization that these "mauled stones" are not "a relic species of dead Greece but part of the living city below" (TN 330). This worldly last instance liberates the ruin from the archaeological ideal, reenters it into the flux of time, restores its historical essence. The Acropolis in ruins remains still the emblem of the city below, Athens in the modern world, a world characterized by the fact that the polis, as a social entity, is in ruins. This language of ruin spells out all the more the necessity that the play of history be elucidated by the act of fiction, which is precisely to say that history cannot be eluded. If the cult ("The Names")—or whatever agency aspires to the categorical privilege of naming—seeks to occupy "a place where it is possible for men to stop making history," eluding the name may be just that no-place where history is in the making.[22]

Such different senses of space mean that the performance of Babel would need to be reread, which means that it would need to be given a different language. Derrida suggests this path when he recognizes that Babel spells out "the need for figuration, of myth" and may be deemed "the myth of the origin of myth," while also testifying to "an internal limit to [the] formalization" that human society engages in since time immemorial, a limit that becomes the mobilizing force behind the need for myth, the need for figuration.[23] The Babelian instance is thus not an Ur-structure in symbolic time but a Möbius strip sort of figure, which is also uniquely intertwined: intertwining itself with itself. Derrida sees there—in the irreducible multiplicity of language, the incompletion of language—the groundwork of myth. Insofar as he has repeatedly presented the Babelian performance as an exemplary instance of deconstruction, he thus draws implicitly (and without ever elaborating) a *co-incidence* between deconstruction and myth.

DeLillo's novel provides precisely the theoretical elaboration of the interstitial spaces of this *co-incidence* by drawing the Babelian performance into the reality of the late twentieth-century world. This novel teaches us to perceive behind the deconstructive double bind of God's interruption of culture its other side. The other side of the double bind is the total command. To face a double bind, we know from real life, is to feel surrounded. To be the double bind, as is God's own life in this mythological instance, means to exhaust the position of deconstruction at the moment it occurs. The deconstructive command of Babel ("confusion") is itself undeconstructible. In this respect, only God can deconstruct. After him, all deconstruction becomes obedience to his double bind. There is thus only one way to disobey God: to elude his Name. This is, to my mind, the distilled significance of the *co-incidence* between deconstruction and myth in the Babelian instance.

It might also be said that this disobedience to the regime of the name is what enables us to resume the work of culture, after the scattering of languages, from

the inside of history's fragmented course, from the inside of contingent action. In this respect, fiction makes history possible in a continuous sense. Or to put it otherwise, fiction provides a continuum between the realm of making history (social action) and the realm of imaginative alterity (social imagination). In an essay that might be said to preface his novel *Underworld*, Don DeLillo returns to the heart of this problem: "The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its brutal confinements. . . . Lost history becomes the detailed weave of novels. Fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance."[24] Our second chance at Babel after the irreversible chasm opened by the imposition of the Name, the chasm that has opened language (and culture) to interminable multiplicity, is to recognize in this multiplicity the force that enables societies to dare imagine themselves otherwise, beyond the Name.

Notes

1. Anthony de Curtis, " 'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo," in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 56.

2. Thomas Le Clair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," *Contemporary Literature* 23(1), 1982, p. 31.

3. DeLillo's affinities with a modernist conceptualization are recognized in the better readings of his work. See, notably, Thomas Le Clair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), who sees in *The Names*, among other things, the tradition of the Jamesian international novel.

4. Of the slew of such postmodern readings of DeLillo, I would single out Peter Baker's "The Terrorist as Interpreter: *Mao II* in Postmodern Context" (*Postmodern Culture* 4(2), 1994. But it is indicative of the destabilizing character of DeLillo's work that he can also be read, from a postmodernist point of view, to embody a traditional romantic metaphysics. (See Paul Maltby, "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo," *Contemporary Literature* 37(2), 1996.) The vehemence of such critiques demonstrates the strain of allegedly postmodernist categories against the uncategorizable flux, the undercurrent of poetic thought, that distinguishes literature as a unique mode of negotiation between history and knowledge. In contrast, consider the admirable readings of John McClure, particularly "Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality" *Modern Fiction Studies* 41(1), Spring 1995, pp. 141–63.

5. de Curtis, "An Outsider in This Society," p. 60.

6. Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 3. Henceforth cited in the text as TN followed by page number.

7. See particularly Derrida's ruminations on the Tower of Babel myth in "Des Tours de Babel" (Joseph F. Graham trans.) in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 165–207, and also in *The Ear of the Other* (New York: Schocken, 1985). Derrida's conceptualization of the double bind is drawn from Gregory Bateson's pioneering formulation: the condition of being caught between two commands, whose contradiction never tends toward the term's mutual exclusion or abolition. See G. Bateson, D. D. Jackson, J. Haley, and J. H. Weakland, "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia" *Behavioral Science* 1 (1956), pp. 251–64.

8. Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p. 102.

9. Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?," in *Discours et conférences* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1922), p. 278 (my translation).

10. The words belong to Brademas, and Matthew Morris is correct in recognizing a series of misreadings on Brademas's part that serve to distance himself ideologically from the cult. Morris's characterization of Brademas is on the whole insightful, but I still believe it is important to hold on to this idea of the cult bearing a different signature, or at least, a different way of signing a pattern of destructive activity in a region whose tradition of destruction goes back centuries. The distinction is crucial, otherwise the cult, as a theoretical figure in the mythistorical staging of the novel, becomes reduced to a bunch of psychotic leftover hippies. See Matthew Morris, "Murdering Words: Language in Action in Don DeLillo's *The Names*," *Contemporary Literature* 30:1 (1989), pp. 118–20.

11. See also Dennis A Foster, "Alphabetic Pleasures: *The Names*" in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, Lentricchia, ed., p. 159.

12. "In one sense, we barely exist. It's a difficult life. There are many setbacks. The cells lose touch with each other. Differences arise of theory and practice. For months nothing happens. We lose purpose, get sick. Some have died, some have wandered off. Who are we, what are we doing here?" (TN 208). Andahl's desperate self-description is repeated as a refrain by Emmerich in India. It could easily be the weary confession of clandestine life from a member of the Italian Red Brigades or the German Red Army Faction while in ideological defeat and on the run at more or less the same historical time frame as the narrative. Again, although DeLillo constructs the cult in strict formalism, his realist sensibility endows it with a concrete historical language.

13. This point of view is echoed by Frank Volterra's stunning summation of the twentieth century:

> "Film is much more than the twentieth-century art. It's another part of the twentieth-century mind. It's the world seen from the inside. . . . This is where we are. The twentieth century is *on film*. It is the filmed century. You have to ask yourself if there is anything about us more important than the fact that we are constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves. The whole world is on film, all the time. Spy satellites, microscopic scanners, pictures of the uterus, embryos, sex, war, assassinations, everything." (TN 200)

It is indicative of Volterra's own self-enclosure that he doesn't realize the incompatibility of two tautological universes. How could the cult agree to become part of this total scopic self-reference, when its entire existence is based on exorcising historical totality by reproducing in practice its totalizing logic?

14. See Le Clair, *In the Loop*, p. 192.

15. Le Clair develops this point convincingly and connects it to the imperialism of print language. See ibid., 193–94.

16. The two may be substantially intertwined. Violence has always been a primary component of religion (certainly monotheistic religion), while the spectacle of contemporary violence assumes at times an essentially religious frenzy. Says DeLillo: "I am interested in religion as a discipline and a spectacle, as something that drives people to extreme behavior" in Le Clair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," p. 26.

17. Anthony de Curtis, "'An Outsider in this Society,'" p. 57.

18. Maria Nadotti, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," *Salmagundi* 100, Fall 1993, p. 93.

19. This observation initially belongs to Dennis A. Foster, "Alphabetic Pleasures: *The Names*," pp. 159–60.

20. The extraordinary story of *November 17* is unique by all standards of so-called urban guerrilla warfare. Its history has unfolded like a grand serial novel within the neo-Hellenic imagination, spanning nearly three decades, and is by all accounts still unfinished. (The stunning developments in July 2002, which brought about the sudden arrest of seventeen members and has effectively led to the group's demise, figures as the serial's most recent, but hardly final, chapter). *November 17* became legendary if for no other reason than that, since 1976, when it appeared on the scene with the assassination of the CIA chief operative in Athens, no member had ever been discovered and its composition was shrouded in mystery and rumor. The legend was nurtured, not merely by the longevity of its mysterious existence, but by multipage declarations accompanying the "terrorist" actions, whose authorial erudition, incisive sarcasm, and sometimes impressive economic analysis made them alluring commodities to the mainstream press, which continued publishing them despite the fact that for a time they were considered documents of high treason and their publication a criminal act. The paradoxical complicity (almost erotic attraction) between the most visible mass media and the most phantom political entity in the country—the unbreachable mystery surrounding the identity of the group had in its heyday (the 1980s) granted them metaphysical cult status—was itself a mythistorical project on a collective scale, a huge Balzacian enterprise that implicated the imaginary of the entire nation. I elaborated on the logic of this self-fictionalization and its national(ist) values in "*Nea Taxe Thymaton*" [New Order of Victims], *Planodion* 17 (December 1992), pp. 615–24. Since the 1990s, however, the group's increasing ideological confusion (which, to no surprise, coincided with its loss of irony and subversive humor) made for rather boring fiction. This degeneration was also fed by contributions from the State Department and major American media, who, in a blatant gesture of harassment and political blackmail, kept using the mystery of *November 17* to declare Greece a terrorist haven (including the ridiculous charges that the group had links to the governing socialist party). The recent events have gone a long way to dispel both the U.S. imperialist fantasy and the Left's imaginary investment in the urban guerrilla romance. Yet the torrent of self-examination these events have brought out throughout Greek society, ranging from serious analyses to idiotic bravado in an unprecedented barrage of mass media images, suggests that the grand serial of national self-fictionalization remains unfazed.

21. Presumably, this is why DeLillo returns to Athens in *Mao II*. Athens becomes again the interstitial space where an American writer (who is such a total recluse that he has become only a name) and an Arab political radical meet in an obvious gesture of cultural negotiation. From a certain point of view, both embody a terrorist logic in respect to the culture they inherit. But their encounter can only be effectively staged in modern Athens, in the midst of a culture that takes place (actualizes itself) in the form of unaccountable street noise, a flux of "nameless things."

22. As extreme or sophistic as it might sound, this meditation could have taken place from the point of view of "DeLillo in India," although I am not the appropriate person to undertake it beyond a mere hint. Contrary to Brademas's distinction between Greece and India as spaces of precision of detail and lack of common measure respectively, the novel demonstrates a capacity to weave the two spaces together in one overarching theoretical language. It is the extraordinary talent of Don DeLillo that makes possible in the same novel, in the same framework, such different conceptualizations.

23. Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," pp. 165–66.

24. Don DeLillo, "The Power of History" *New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 7, 1997), pp. 60–63.