Lee Harvey Oswald: 
history as myth

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Libra
by Don DeLillo

The time is certain. Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald as he was emerging from the Dallas County Jail and the murder was televised live. It is an incident, even more than the assassination of Kennedy, that gave rise to endless "then-rising": the single gun theory, the Cuban exile theory, the Mafia theory, the C.I.A. theory, the F.B.I. theory. How could the man who should have been the most carefully guarded person in America be gunned down in broad daylight while in the custody of the police? The need to explain a series of events that stunned a nation and a world at the end of the century prompted a host of narratives that were riddled with "theory," a category no less distinct from fiction. Twenty-five years after the "fact," Don DeLillo, has produced a remarkable novel that presents one possible version of the real story.

The publication of Libra coincided with the 25th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. T.V. was flooded with many and extensive commemorations: the gruelling 8-kilometre Zapuider film documenting the shooting at Dealey Plaza was screened again and again, in slow motion and real time; folklore interviews prompted people to recall where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news; vacuous commentaries on the state of the American psyche overflowed the airwaves. Dan Rather had been the U.S. correspondent on site in Dallas in 1963 and his marathon three-hour retrospective 25 years later was equally a commentary on television's coming of age. The death of Kennedy became the birth of a television nation. Kennedy—who had narrowly defeated Nixon because he looked better during their debate—was the first real T.V. president: America was fascinated with its own image. In end of Kennedy. The assassination, the shooting of Oswald and the state funeral at Arlington offered images of history in the making, events so monumental that their future memory was already being anti-
cipated. If time and the media have now hacked away at that image, another—that of the lone gunman—remains sacrosanct for a certain segment of the media. Libra's publication was greeted with a flurry of commentary from the new—and not so new—right. Pandit after pundit scoffed at DeLillo's attempt to imagine a C.I.A. operative's plot to stage an assassination attempt on Kennedy: indeed, they scoffed at DeLillo's attempt to imagine much at all. The right, new and old, cannot admit any "theory" other than the single gun, for what could a presidential assassination be if not an aberration? Jonathan Yardley, writing in the Washington Post's Book World complained about DeLillo's " ideological fiction," claiming that good fiction—that is, non-ideological fiction—should have a "private address." But the very notion of the private is one myth Libra explodes beyond recognition. Fiction writers may have unlisted phone numbers, but no fiction and no fictional character, DeLillo implicitly claims, can have a private "address." Neo-conservative ideologues, like the ubiquitous George Will, took exception to the supposedly left-wing paranoia of DeLillo's novel, but the middle-of-the-road media reaction was perhaps most disturbing of all. Paul Gray reviewing Libra for Time is incapable of even thinking outside the paradigm of the lone individual. He concludes his review: "Its argument, that the plot to kill the President was even wider, even more sinister than previously imagined, will seem credible only to the already converted, among whom are surely people who also believe that Martians are sending them messages through the fillings in their teeth. There is a single possibility that Libra inventively skirts: a frustrated, angry man locked out a window, watched the President ride by, and shot him dead." In this scenario, the only word "frustrated" suggests anything of a history: there is no sense of anything outside an individual's contingent, even random, act. One writer for the New Criterion accuses DeLillo of "turning modern Americans into Xerox copies," when all DeLillo really does is to write fiction in categories other and more encompassing than those of character, personality, subjectivity. That the "subject" appears at times as something of an optical illusion is partly a product of DeLillo's un-

Understanding of language works and partly a product of his anatomy of contemporary spectacle/techno-culture with its hypermediation of all activity and all representation. Even the "real" story that is DeLillo's partial object in Libra was infiltrated by fiction to begin with, for the Kennedy presidency was thoroughly enmeshed in the production of simulacra, and only somewhat by design. DeLillo and his fictional agent, Nicholas Branch (hired by the C.I.A. to write a secret history of the assassination), both seem to recognize that when one strips away one simulacrum one discovers still another, behind which there lies the facts themselves than the raw materials of contradiction. "Design" might be singled out as the more prominent preoccupation of DeLillo's text and his characters. The title Libra refers primarily to Oswald's astrological sign, but also to fate and more generally to "plotting" in the twin registers of politics and narrative. Many characters in the novel are haunted by the specter of a plot that they must but cannot quite control. "People make history," Marx wrote, "but not in circumstances of their choosing." Some of the most striking passages in Libra are those in which Oswald describes his sense of being caught up in the alternating current of history. The burden of Oswald's life is to somehow coordinate his "personal" itinerary with the plot of nothing less than world history. But what sort of integral story can be composed from the life of a U.S. Marine whose main inspiration is Lenin, and a character whose time is spent charting the similarities between himself, Kennedy and Trotsky? (When applying as a Marine to study abroad, Oswald lists among his special interests: "ideology.") Not only are there immense difficulties in plotting Oswald's life, his story gets enmeshed in a proliferation of competing stories, all of which culminate in the "event" of Kennedy's assassination, an event for which no one is able to provide the true story. The upshot is less a deep cynicism about history and the rendering of it in language than an acknowledgment of the complexities of the stories.

Dallas, Texas, November 22, 1963.
The Kennedy motorcade moments before the assassination...
...and whatever it is that resists narrative — that we try to gather under the single word history. Even the word history is only apparently single, for it is invested with a number of incompatible senses: "history," one C.I.A. type tells us, is "the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us." Or: "The purpose of history." Oswald muses thinking of Trotsky, "is to crawl out of your own skin."

The grand outlines of Libra's story are framed by the opposition between capitalism and communism, as if, in the world of Eisenhower less no less than in Bush, there were only two possibilities. Libra is not only "about" a certain struggle between capitalism and communism in the fifties and sixties; it performs that struggle at the level of the sentence, the paragraph, and the narrative generally. The arch-DeLillo sentence brands itself as a product of late consumer capitalism. "Nature's spelled backwards," the T.V. intones, at one moment in Libra, to promote the new obses- sive "Senation." Here, as in his earlier White Noise, the television is one character among others: its voice mingles with those we tend to call human. Typically, the DeLillo signature sentence is less a sentence than a sub-grammatical sequence of words or brand names culled from the networks of advertising, a sentence that no one could quite sign. These phrases — characteristic of, but not limited to, consumer capitalism — are matched by the blunt instruments that are the sentences of a distinctively pro-glamour dogma encountered by Oswald on his sojourn to the Sovi- et Union. The two rhetorics blend in the telegraphic style of the postcard that an unknown voice transcribes from snapshots of Oswald, postcards that periodically ar- rest the narrative even as they try to make sense of it. And they blend too in the lan- guage of Lee Harvey Oswald himself, who is caught in the middle of the street but violent opposition between capitalism and communism. Yet this opposition collapses within Oswald's and the violence of this "merger" — Oswald tells us, "History tends to merge" — surfaces in his very language. And "language" is not a matter of indiffer-

ence for Lee Harvey Oswald, since he, like Trotsky, like Kennedy, and like Marina Os- wald, is a writer, a writer who analyses, records, and synthesizes the contradictory "experience" all around him.

In the world of Libra it is not only na- ture that is spelled backwards: the logic of the plot revolves around the attempt of C.I.A. operatives to assassinate — or take an assassination of — Kennedy and make it look like a Cuban initiative. All this is retroactive face-saving for the American anti-Castro forces humiliated by the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In this impossible possible world, ideological oppositions in which, in one register, are starkly opposed come to be, in yet another register, as blurred as any frame of the Zapdnder film. As the narra- tive voice says at a key moment of Oswald's presentation of some C.I.A. opera- tives: "left is right and right is left."

This no doubt causes consternation for DeLillo's incensed neo-conservative readers who have shown little capacity or desire to think outside the cold war paradigm. A principal virtue of DeLillo's novel is the way it forces one to rethink the very cate- gories of social and political analysis, which is to say, it forces one to think, as the novelist says of his work: the "plot is still somehow the tangled one of Lee Harvey Oswald."

In this novel of characteristically black humour, DeLillo indulges in little word- play, yet the title Libra is serious for the year 2000. Libra is not quite that, though it draws on the most powerful myths of American culture: the integrity of the indi- vidual, the boundless future of technology, myths to incline us toward, in theory, to think everyone should be engaged in a this story. The most striking similarity between Libra and Ulysses is the emergence in the end of the voice of a woman — here Os- wald's mother — to provide the closing to a book almost entirely dominated by men. The mother's voice, which had "interrupted" the narrative at various points, address- es a plea to a judge reconquering and ex- plaining the details of her son's life that may or may not have some bearing on his actions. This one-sided dialogue is no less lyrical than Molly Boley's outpouring of words but its mythic dimension is more modest, more pedestrian. One thing her intervention does is to trouble the seem- ingly distinct notions of public and private and to make that very vocabulary seem inadequate. This goes hand in hand with the epigraph for Libra, drawn from a letter from Lee Harvey Oswald to his brother: "Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is parting in the strug- gle, where there is no borderline be- tween one's own personal world, and the world in general." No borders are such: is the extreme thesis of Libra. But is there a language without borders? The lan- guage of Libra may erode the distinction between public and private in its demon- stration that the innermost thought of an individual are endlessly chatted, riddled with fragments of advertising, principles of this or that political program, phrases from books, and that, on the other hand, the most public of world-historical events have peculiar resonances and even cases in the "private" lives of historical actors. Even with a displacement like the one Libra ef- fects — where it is impossible to say what is simply "private" or "public" in Lee Har- rvey Oswald — some other language, with other terms, takes its place and sets up cer- tain borders, however temporary, of its own. Libra is far more than a period piece: it functions as allegory as well as documenta- ry history, for it is marked as a product of the Reagan era and the return to the bor- dered rhetoric of the cold war. It's not cer- tain that the U.S. can do without the di- chotomous geo-political vision, which is why, when faced with the spectre of glas- nost and perestroika, some elements of the government want to maintain the cold war at all costs. So Libra works not just as one more example of the "history in the nation," but its functions also as an allegory of the more current moment of its production and re- ception. There are striking passages in Libra when we suddenly realize that a cer- tain mood has given way. And it is this conjunction with us: Oswald's mother, for example, writes a letter to none other than John Douglass to plead for his behalf, the same John Douglass who helped whitewash the Rehnquist administration's Iran-Contra es- capades, the same John Douglass who almost became Secretary of Defense for the Bush League of Nations. Is "our" plot still somehow the tangled one of Lee Harvey Oswald.?