

## Lee Harvey Oswald: history as myth



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**Libra**  
by Don DeLillo

New York: Viking; Toronto: Lester & Orpen  
Dennys, 1988, 456 pp.

I could be wrong, I could be right.

— Johnny Rotten

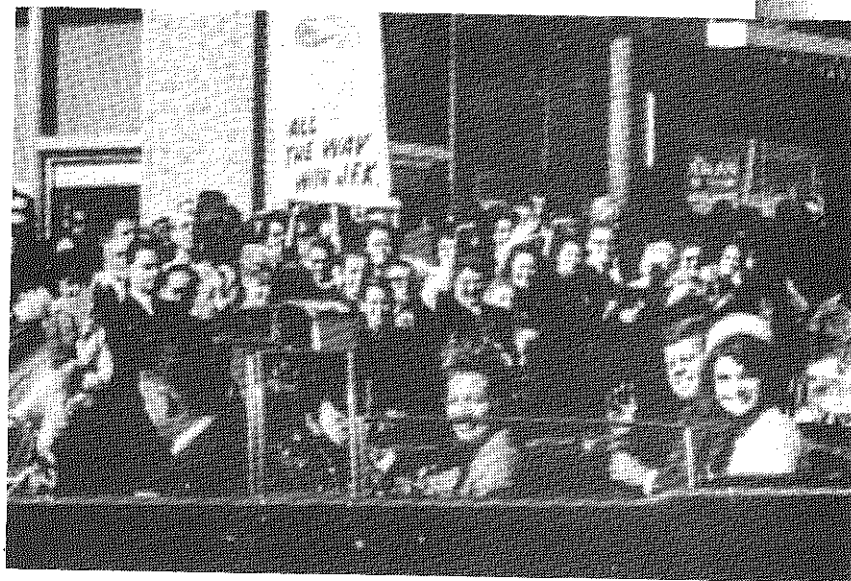
One thing is certain. Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald as he was emerging from the Dallas County Jail and the murder was televised live. It is arguably this incident, even more than the assassination of Kennedy, that gave rise to endless "theorising": the single gun theory, the Cuban exile theory, the 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 quasi-global village prompted a host of narratives that were riddled with "theory," a category not so 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 grainy 8-millimetre Zapruder film documenting the shooting at Dealey Plaza was screened again and again, in slow motion and real time; folksy 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 provided filler. Dan Rather had been the C.B.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 and 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-

ipated. 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 the not so new — right. Pundit after pundit scoffed at DeLillo's attempt to imagine a C.I.A. operative's plot to stage an assassination attempt of 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 chiefly 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 looked out a window, watched the President ride by, and shot him dead." In this scenario, only the 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-

derstanding of how 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 recognise that when one strips away one simulacrum one discovers still another, behind which there stand less the facts themselves than the raw materials of contradiction.

"Design" might be singled out as the major 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 spectre 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 acknowledgement 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 no less than of 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. "Natures spelled backwards," the T.V. intones, at one moment in *Libra*, to promote the now obsolete "Serutan." 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 distinctly pre-*glasnost* dogma encountered by Oswald on his sojourn to the Soviet Union. The two rhetorics blend in the telegraphic style of the postcards that an unknown voice transcribes from snapshots of Oswald, postcards that periodically arrest the narrative even as they try to make sense of it. And they blend too in the language of Lee Harvey Oswald himself, who is caught in the middle of the strict but violent opposition between capitalism and communism. Yet this opposition collapses within Oswald 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 Oswald, 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 nature that is spelled backwards: the logic of the plot revolves around the attempt of C.I.A. operatives to assassinate — or fake an assassination of — Kennedy and make it look like a Cuban initiative. All this as retroactive face-saving for the American anti-Castro forces humiliated by the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In this impossibly possible world, ideological oppositions which, in one register, are starkly opposed come to be, in yet another register, as blurred as any frame of the Zapruder film. As the narrative voice says at a key moment of Oswald's intersection with some C.I.A. operatives: "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 categories of social and political analysis, which is to say, it forces one to think, period.

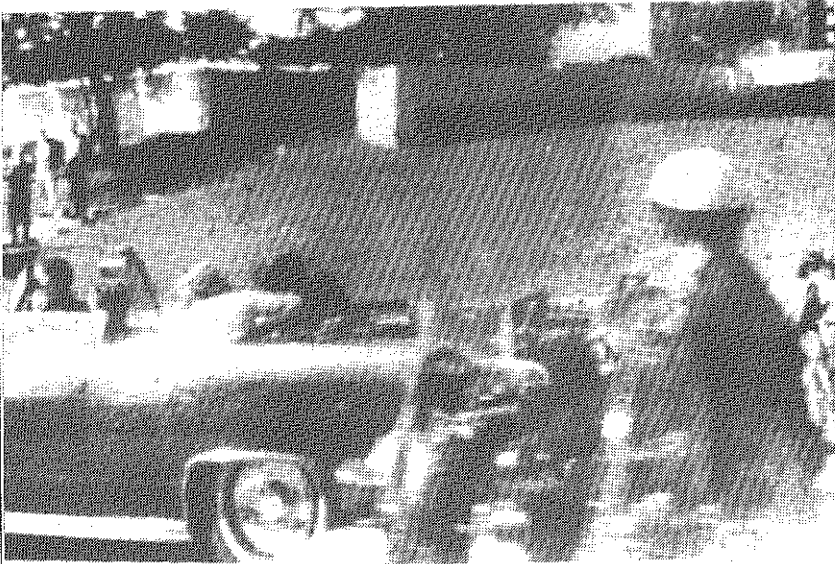
The archivist Nicholas Branch sees his unwritten text as "the Joycean Book of America," a novel in which nothing would be left out. *Libra* is not quite that, though it draws on the most powerful myths of American culture: the integrity of the individual, the boundless future of technology, myths so inclusive that, in theory, it seems everyone should be engaged in and by this story. The most striking similarity between *Libra* and *Ulysses* is the emergence in the end of the voice of a woman — here Oswald'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, addresses a plea to a judge recounting and explaining 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 Bloom's outpouring of words but its mythic dimension is more modest, more pedestrian. One thing her intervention does is to trouble the seemingly 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 taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general." No borderlines: such is the extreme thesis of *Libra*. But is there a language without borderlines? The language of *Libra* may erode the distinction between public and private in its demonstration that the innermost thoughts of an individual are endlessly citational, 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 causes in the

"private" lives of historical actors. But even with a displacement like the one *Libra* effects — where it is impossible to say what is simply "private" or "public" in Lee Harvey Oswald — some other language, with other terms, takes its place and sets up certain borders, however temporary, of its own.

*Libra* is far more than a period piece: it functions as allegory as well as documentary history, for it is marked as a product of the Reagan era and the return to the bordered rhetoric of the cold war. It's not certain that the U.S. can do without the dichotomous geo-political vision, which is why, when faced with the spectre of *glasnost* 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 "historical novel": it functions also as an allegory of the more current moment of its production and reception. There are striking passages in *Libra* when we suddenly realise that a certain moment of the past is still very much with us: Oswald's mother, for example, writes a letter to none other than John Tower to plead on his behalf, the same John Tower who helped whitewash the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra escapades, the same John Tower who almost became Secretary of Defense for the Bush League of Nations. Is "our" plot 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* seems to resonate with the words "book" and "free" in the Spanish of the Cubans who shadow the actions of Oswald and company. But freedom and the fate prescribed by astrological signs should strike us as more at odds than they were thought to be in the Reagan White House. Perhaps one thing DeLillo demonstrates is that it is precisely in the book, the medium displaced but not dismantled by T.V., that freedom and fate co-exist so uneasily. And it is that conjunction in and of the book that makes "plotting" inescapable. Though DeLillo offers an eerily plausible version of the real story behind the Kennedy assassination, there is little arrogance implicit in the text's claim to historical knowledge. The tendency to present its story as *the* story is countered by a certain Joycean banality that insists on the haphazard, provisional character of its everyday subject and subjects. With its irony, its play with history and fiction, its panoply of competing voices, *Libra* could no doubt be shelved conveniently under the rubric of postmodernism. But the novel exploits a less historically specific programme for fiction as well: the almost primordial sense that fiction moves in the realm not of the real but, as that eminent philosopher of the postmodern, Aristotle, put it, of the possible. To say this is not to suspend this fiction above the realm of politics and history, for what is politics but the impossible as well as necessary negotiation of the possible? ■

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...and moments after.