

DeLillo's *Libra* and the Subjunctive Mood as Fictionalization¹

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Abstract: Don DeLillo's *Libra* is often considered a postmodernist rendition of history, but there exist temporal distortions in his fiction that must be parsed into the subjunctive mood instead of the simple past tense. The fictive transformation from the temporal tense to the mood of potentiality underlies DeLillo's fictionalization of history that attempts to problematize the ironclad facts. This *would* to power manifests the point that fiction is a poetic and emotive alternative to actualized reality. What is *Real* to fiction lies in its virtual reality.

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Sir Walter Scott, especially in his historical novel *Waverley* which embodies 19th-century realism, shares Hegel's historicism, even though the writer himself had no idea of this idealist's philosophical doctrine (Lukács 30). Georg Lukács's ideological investigation of literature highlights two types of characters: firstly, real historical figures like Cromwell and Napoléon, and secondly, fictional figures who frequent the novels of Scott and Balzac. The greatness of Scott's historical novel results from "the 'middle way' between the extremes and endeavors to demonstrate artistically the historical reality of this way by means of his portrayal of the great crises in English history" (33). Lukács's surmise, following Hegelian idealism, inevitably connects fictional characters to *Geistesgeschichte* (the history of the Spirit). The age-long feud between history and fiction is seemingly reconciled by Lukács's strong support for Scott's realist writing which gives history priority over fiction by commingling his imaginary characters with a grand historical context. From an anti-Hegelian perspective, Nietzsche argues this is "the *malady of history*" in which the "[e]xcess of history has attacked the plastic power of life that no more understands how to use the past as a means of strength and nourishment" (*Use* 69; emphasis original). Or in Martin Heidegger's words, "[w]ith all our correct representations we would get nowhere" (51).

If Hegel's historicism is an idealist inheritance from Plato who denigrates poets out of political consideration, it is Aristotle who exorcises the Platonic ghost of the Ideal and re-evaluates the antagonistic relation between poetry and history. In *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes poetry from history where the former is universal and the latter particular (35). Although Aristotle maintains that a poet should write in accordance with necessity and probability and he "should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities" (95), Linda Hutcheon's postmodern poetics favors a mixed genre—"historiographic metafiction" including John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, to name only a few—which is "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[s] claim to historical events and personages" (5). Aesthetically, Hutcheon has pushed further, even radicalized, Aristotelian poetics in a postmodern condition which treats historical materials as fiction's brick and mortar, which, as it were, occupies the other pole in opposition to Lukács's stand on realism. However, Hutcheon's postmodernist synthesis stands no further from Lukács's realist position than she imagines in view of the fact that both of them have acknowledged a state of priority—whether belonging to fiction or history—that takes the gambit in the appropriation of the other.

Considering the above theoretical imbroglio, Don DeLillo's synthesis appears symptomatic. In *Libra* (1988), DeLillo mixes fiction-writing with historiography² while sustaining an ethical demarcation line between them. Being a supposed postmodernist, DeLillo is subsumed by Hutcheon's poetics whose postmodern theory intends "to address and to subvert that fragmentation through their pluralizing recourse to the discourses of history, sociology, theology, political science, economics, philosophy, semiotics, literature, literary criticism, and so on" (21). It is feasible to read and evaluate *Libra* in light of postmodernist poetics since there exist a number of clues to support Hutcheon's argument. Despite DeLillo's claim that "[t]he narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative" ("In the Ruins"), one should also consider another remark in which DeLillo makes clear that novelists should have faith in "the power of history" under whose influence "[a] fiction writer feels the nearly palpable lure of large events and it can make him want to enter the narrative" ("Power of History"). DeLillo confesses that he would like to bury himself in documentary material to dig out a sense of history ("Power of History"). The postmodernist aura can hardly be retained in DeLillo's fictive treatment of history at least regarding Hutcheon's teaching.

It appears that DeLillo's synthesis of fiction and history pushes him towards Lukács's historical novel where both are aligned with realism in the matter of history, although DeLillo's realist writing turns out to be a traitor of historical novels since his synthesis is symptomatic in that his adumbration of history is diminished relative to his detailed characterization. In DeLillo's symptomatic synthesis of history and fiction, the personal story becomes more important than the course of history. DeLillo has betrayed historiographic realism because being a traitor is a prerequisite of being an experimenter in his writing as Gilles Deleuze believes that "it is difficult to be a traitor; it is to create" (Deleuze and Parnet 45). DeLillo neither blurs the distinction between history and fiction (as Hutcheon does)

nor usurping the priority of history to legitimize fiction (as Lukács argues). Instead, there are two narrative lines in DeLillo's novels—two asymptotes: history and fiction—that come infinitesimally close to each other to an illusory extent where they grow delusively identical. They are, after all, two parallels, but fiction and history, from perspectivism, are two symptomatic asymptotes that uncannily share the same vanishing point where the actual line (historiography) and the virtual line (fiction writing) come across at one point that turns out to be, in Jacques Lacan's sense, the impossible Real. DeLillo's fictionalization must be “mad out of duty [... because this] madness hangs on a fundamental question: what permits us to say whether a book is true or false?” (Rancière 87-88). Jacques Rancière's answer shows that “[t]here is thus a very specific weaving of this other truth into the book's path of fictional truth” (114), though *amour fou* (“mad love”) demands *foi* (“faith” or “fidelity”) as Samuel Taylor Coleridge persists in arguing a “willing suspense of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (6)³ or as Kant in his “Preface to the Second Edition” of the *Critique of Pure Reason* contends that “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (117). The clash between fiction and history, then, is transcribed by DeLillo's fictive creation. DeLillo's symptomatic synthesis of fiction and history proffers such mad fidelity, quasi-religious and pseudo-mysterious, which makes his fictionalization of *Libra* resemble what M. H. Abrams calls “redemptive imagination” that is “a Nietzschean act of heroic self-forgiveness and self-redemption” (*Natural* 122). The antidotes to the malady of history will be the “unhistorical” and the “super-historical” fiction which, in DeLillo's writing, is to “employ history for the purpose of *life*” (Nietzsche, *Untimely* 66), a “life-enhancing sense” (67), and is a literary product of sympathy and imagination. DeLillo's fiction in *Libra*, entangled with actual history, becomes virtual history which, being the virtue of fiction, is essentially subjunctive and affective in respect of its poetic possibilities.

A Fictive Alternative to Make History Alternative

Libra is, unarguably, one of DeLillo's most successful novels that shows his long obsession with the assassination of President Kennedy. This seemingly historical novel is woven through two narrative threads that are both in the third-person point of view. One of the narrative threads is marked by locations while the other by dates. The spatial thread of the narrative follows DeLillo's literary imagination of Lee Harvey Oswald's biographical story from his early youth to his untimely death while the temporal alternative is a semi-documentary chronicle of the Kennedy assassination. Oswald's story is embroidered by pure contingency which makes readers unable to foresee the historical event of the assassination until the end is unraveled. The chronicle of history, however, interlaced with the temporal thread of the narrative, indicates that the conspiracy throughout the novel is programmed for a deathward end. John Johnston argues that *Libra* can be viewed as a “true life novel” (320) because DeLillo's fictionalization of Oswald is based on a real piece of history: the Kennedy assassination. If history is formed by conspiracy, DeLillo's story as fiction is plotted by contingency. Nevertheless, the publication of *Libra* rarely draws applause from critics.

Patently, DeLillo has transferred the American tragedy from President Kennedy to a personal one of the Marxist Oswald, but DeLillo's symptomatic emplotment still goes astray. Frank Lentricchia questions a DeLillo who has shaken off the Aristotelian fetters of plot by relentlessly rendering his "story" or "narrative" as "utterly episodic" — "a plotless tale of an aimless life propelled by the agonies of inconsistent and contradictory motivation, a life without coherent form" (200-201). Lentricchia, in a similar vein, through the narrative deconstruction of plot, shows that DeLillo's problem is the contingent personal story that disturbs and problematizes the historical conspiracy of necessity, where the existing facts or official history become unstable in relation to DeLillo's fictional intervention. On the one hand, Christopher M. Mott finds a DeLillo bogged down "in a postmodern dilemma" who is "facing a chaotic mass of data on the Kennedy assassination, a mass of data that he believes represents our time of information overload" (132). Andrew Radford, on the other hand, reveals that this "novel fails to maintain productive tensions between causality and perplexing patterns of coincidence." Other critics, from the postmodern perspective, especially according to Hutcheon's poetics of the historiographical metafiction in which postmodern culture reworks ideological identities in contemporary society, argue that DeLillo's narrative re-evaluates the relationship between fiction and history by toying with the delicate tension between "indeterminacy and dispute" (Thomas 107) and that DeLillo's conspiracy and contingency theories perform the same ideological function shared by the social reality which intends to "explain the failure of society to constitute itself as a harmonious whole" (Willman 408). *Libra's* fictionalization of the political drama and trauma is impugned as cultural paranoia and "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship" (Will) despite the undeniable fact that this page-turner sells fairly well.

Critical unanimity, unfavorable to *Libra* in general, caters to the aesthetic standards of postmodernists, though this novel cannot simply be labeled as postmodern regardless of its apparent postmodern features. It is DeLillo's fictionalization that makes *Libra* fail to fulfil the criteria of Lukács's definition of the historical novel, even though it is underpinned by historical facts. *Libra* also has not been geared towards Hutcheon's historiographical metafiction for it is much more intricate than intertextual in relation to the cultural invention of ideological interrogation and is as immanent as a text-in-itself rather than a metafictional one because Oswald's story is not narratively embedded in the grand history. As Wendy Steiner notes, "[b]y the mid-1990s, metafiction had declined in favor of the dramatization of personal voices in confessional mode" (535). In DeLillo's fictionalization of the historical event, story and history are two asymptotes where his text desires to gain its productive independence and autonomy from its context. DeLillo's symptomatic synthesis of fiction and history has reached another level of fictionalization in his novel writing, ranging from his *Libra* to *Underworld* and *Falling Man*, by renouncing the representative regime of traditional realism and by declining the postmodern invitation into nomadic multiplicities. Instead, through history, DeLillo's fascination with history becomes literary treason of history to make his fictionalization an alternative by tapping into what is real:

You wanted to enter history. Wrong approach, Leon. What you really want is out. Get out.

Jump out. Find your place and your name on another level. (*Libra* 384)

DeLillo sees history as the “necessity” that “compel[s] men to act” (68) where “the individual must allow himself to be swept along, must find himself in the stream of no choice, the single direction. This is what makes thing inevitable” (101). *Libra* establishes an aesthetic regime, detached from representation, which accordingly, plots on the authority of and against history with artistic volition to engender existential and aesthetical meaning for insignificant historical agents.⁴

As to historicism, Oswald remains as immaterial as “a zero in the system” (40, 106, 151, 357), even if he has wrested (inter)national attention from President Kennedy. Before the assassination, Oswald was “a tool of the system. A workable part” (106). Reading history in dossiers and archives is to read through a “perfect capitalist handbook” (106) — “the manual” (106) from which not one iota of truth can be retrieved and where readers are required to memorize the given facts by rote learning. What appeals to DeLillo in this careless piece of history is that Oswald has been dehumanized and dis-individualized, although he has become a notorious usurper and traumatizing creator of history and has been recorded with an unfortunate American president. No one delves deeper into his personal life, private past, or individual motive simply because he is a capitalized zero (O) in the capitalist handbook in terms of the Grand History:

They'd been rigging the things for years, watching him, using him, creating a chain of evidence with the innocent facts of his life. Or he could say he was only partly guilty, set up to take the blame for the real conspirators. Okay, he fired some shots from the window. (418)

The horrendous event of history exposes the existential crisis of the individual who is reduced to a position or merely a function and who has almost lost his voluntary choice and is immaterially pulverized as a pawn on other careless players' chessboard, a strategic sacrifice. In an interview, DeLillo, speaking of Oswald, perceives his life as “the attempt to find that place. But he never could. [...] He never was able to merge with the world in general or with history in particular” (DeCurtis and DeLillo). Hence, *Libra* must be read as a fictive alternative that generates a personal life story from historical data through DeLillo's sympathetic imagination.

In Nietzsche's statement, “[h]istorical study is only fruitful for the future if it follows a powerful life-giving influence” (*Use* 12), which confirms a particular mode of life as the “will to power” (*Will* 148) that serves as “the fundamental basis of the real and of becoming, to replace concepts such as substance, atoms, mechanical conceptions of force or cause and effect, and psychological notions of will or motive” (Burnham 341). In Nietzsche's view, “if we could only learn better to study history as a means of life” (*Use* 11), the will to power would then become capable of redirecting the actual use (or abuse) of history to the immanence of an individual's life. DeLillo's fictionalization, neither being a historical novel nor a historiographical metafiction, jumps out of the teleological loop of history and the trap of the art of lying. It is Deleuze who sees the will to power as the force of differentiation and who argues that the eternal return “is

originary, pure, synthetic and in-itself" (*Difference* 125). DeLillo's fictionalization, in essence, is of repetition which, presumably, derives from the Nietzschean repetition that results from difference. Replaying a historical event, *Libra* is undeniably literary vandalism, but this incentive towards repetition differs in the act of repeating, even in its self-repeating. DeLillo makes his text a looking glass of the context. By repetition and difference, *Libra* remains no longer an imitation or representation because DeLillo's productive fictionalization makes his text distinct from the context and his story dissociated from the the grand history. It seems that in DeLillo's symptomatic synthesis fiction and history merge, but this deceptive simplicity proves to be a vanishing point—a purely visual delusion—for two narrative parallels. In this literary perspectivism, fictionalization merely makes parallels asymptotes in his differentiating mirror of sympathetic imagination.

Libra becomes, then, an ideal trope of repetition and difference. In *Americana*, DeLillo declares that "you can start with nothing but your own mirror reality and end with an approximation of art" (263). A mirror cannot reflect nothing if there exists a model *a priori*, but it is in reflection/repetition that difference reoccurs. Even in "American Blood," DeLillo argues that "Oswald was his own double" (qtd. in Herren 44) as reflecting is ontologically connected with doubling, in which a mirror image by no means equals a true-to-life copy of the original but a centrifugal movement of differentiation disengaging from its origin. Therefore, one cannot simply follow DeLillo's superstitious interpretation of *Libra* that Oswald is a Libran,⁵ which, through contingency in narration, eradicates the ontological and aesthetic discrepancies between fiction and history. Contingency and conspiracy are, in fact, not enough to make fiction possible; the fictionalization of *Libra*, only through betraying history, becomes possible. "Libra" figuratively displays a mirror play in Oswald's own name as the horoscopic sign of Libra is a capitalized omega (Ω) with an underline ().⁶ In ancient Greek, "omega" means "O mega" whose lower case is "ω," "o micron," which inadvertently or deliberately corresponds to Oswald, the man who contains two zeros in his name and occupies a symbolic zero place in the system—a true repetition with difference. This mirror effect, which has made Oswald and *Libra* possible through repetition and difference, again, points towards the immanence in which "every image in every mirror is only virtual, even when you expect to see yourself" (DeLillo, *Body* 141). What is *Real* in DeLillo's fictionalization, realized by the differentiating and mirroring of history, is tantamount to the virtual that has not yet been actualized in reality, or in actual life, because the Nietzschean philosophical and revolutionary will to power becomes a DeLilleian literary and productive *would* to power whose *mood*, grammatically speaking, is not indicative but subjunctive,⁷ and, emotionally speaking, is affective.

The Power of the Subjunctive Mood

The past tense is one of the most widely used default coordinates in charting a novel; it helps a narrator recount an event or weave several events into a chronological order. Cindy Weinstein has

made a distinction between two different modes of story: a chronological one in which “tempo(e)rality is embedded both in cultural discourse, which is specific to a historical referent” and a literary one “in which tempo(e)rality is embedded in the verbal minutiae of a novel’s prose” (5). According to Weinstein’s differentiation, there co-exist two temporal structures of a story—one between the text (fiction) and context (history) and the other within the text-in-itself exclusively (fictionality). Regarding history, the fictionalization of *Libra* makes Weinstein’s distinction even more pronounced especially when DeLillo reminds his readers to

“[t]hink of two *parallel lines*,” he said. “One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a *third line*. *It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of self*. It’s not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It’s a line that cuts across the causality, cuts across time. *It has no history that we can recognize or understand*. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny.” (339; my emphasis)

Libra is skillfully interwoven from two narrative parallel threads: the contingency of Lee Oswald’s life and the conspiracy of the JFK assassination. The Oswald chapters are introduced by locations (from “In the Bronx” to “In Dallas”) while the conspiracy chapters are chronologized by dates (from “17 April” to “22 November”⁸). Indeed, in the matter of plot, these two narratives inevitably become entangled. However, in respect of the narration, they are two distinctive parallels if one considers the shared plot as a perspective vanishing point, as Peter Boxall argues that “Oswald’s secret, deathly becoming threatens to derail the tightly plotted narrative, the gradual convergence of factors” (146). This distinction, as it were, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is the real distinction. The history and conspiracy (the temporal narrative), hinging upon the past, is plotted in the past tense. To set the conspiracy in parallel with the temporal narrative underscores its chronological linearity which is mapped out by existing facts and actual events like a documentary chronicle. The past tense, with the indicative mood in narration, hence assures its readers of its credibility in the unalterable order of time. The other line of the parallel about Oswald undergirds DeLillo’s fictionalization. Even though the preterite, with little doubt, manipulates the whole narrative either on Oswald’s part or on the conspiracy part which is related to the past—the very narrative framework of history—Oswald’s location-narrative or spatial narrative differs from the conspiracy’s temporal narrative because its preterite, being temporal distortions and contingency, stays dissimilar to the past tense. The fact that the nomenclature of Oswald’s chapters follows the spatial trajectory of his life story suggests that this thread of narrative knowingly avoids applying temporal markers to formulate his personal history where a planetary aberrance creeps into Oswald’s orbit whose life is not narrativized through the history of the past but through the story brought forth by the power of the subjunctive mood.

The real distinction between the past tense and the subjunctive mood makes the preterite differ

from the indicative mood as Deleuze and Guattari argue that “this real distinction is quite special; it is only formal since the two forms compose or shape a single thing, a single stratified subject. [...] As a result, the entire distribution between content and expression is different” (56).⁹ The real distinction in Deleuze’s definition is merely formal because the substance (preterite) never keeps itself identical to its qualities (the past tense). Levi R. Bryant in his interpretation of this distinction explains that “the formal distinction between substances and their qualities is not *symmetrical* but rather *asymmetrical* [...] because] substances can exist unactualized or without producing any events” (77). Consequently, the symptomatic and asymmetrical preterite may lead to the other virtual image of history—a Real story of the subjunctive mood which should be interpreted as the Real defined by Jacques Lacan in his psychoanalytic theory and could, accordingly, provide a fictional foundation for DeLillo’s fiction writing. If DeLillo’s fictionalization confirms that there exists “the deathward-tending logic of a plot” (*Libra* 363) which turns out to be a (perspective) vanishing point for the two narrative parallels, his fiction will overlap with history at the point where the two narrative lines end up at the (literal) vanishing point as the *end* of Oswald’s death that occurs as the *telos* for both narratives. This subscribes to what Weinstein calls a chronological mode of narrative in which the fictional text remains identical to the historical context and serves as the baseline for Lukács to configure his realist theory of the historical novel, namely a representative regime. The problem is that there also appears another literary mode of non-temporality, say the subjunctive mood of fictionalization, that originates from the text’s own figment—a meta-text, or what Hutcheon calls historiographical metafiction, in which historical figures and figures of figment come into interplay, which, in the case of *Libra*, manifests DeLillo’s literary appropriation of *Report of the President’s Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, *Hearings Before the President’s Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, and other archival materials such as six postcards (93, 94, 113, 119, 204, 335) and a cassette tape of recorded voice (376). These two parallel lines merge at the vanishing point of DeLillo’s fictionalization where the past tense is altered into the subjunctive mood. As a consequence, the subjunctive story of Oswald has not tampered with history to the extent where *Libra* is immoral in accordance with George F. Will’s scathing review in which he satirically lambastes DeLillo as “a good writer and a bad influence.” With due respect, *Libra* is not a postmodern subjective story of metafiction as Hutcheon champions. Rather, it is the suspension of context and history that on no condition yields historical nihilism:

But he didn’t kill anyone. He never meant to fire a fatal shot. It was never his intention to cause an actual fatality. He was only trying to make a political point. Other people were responsible for the actual killing. They fixed it so he would seem the lone gunman. They superimposed his head on someone else’s body. Forged his name on documents. Made him a dupe of history. (DeLillo, *Libra* 418)

The subjunctive mood brings about a sense of suspension¹⁰—the suspension of history, fact, causality, and authority; DeLillo’s fictionalization in the manner of historiography shows its poetic

ethics, or *poethics*, towards a very lone individual in a very humane story.

Libra is, consequently, not a historical novel nor a historiographical metafiction. It intends neither to reduce fiction to history through subjective representation nor to intervene in the historical narrative through postmodern cultural strategies. Instead, according to the historical event of the Kennedy assassination, *Libra* is symptomatic, asymmetrical, and asymptotic since its synthesis is realized through the subjunctive mood with no actualized subject—a subjunctive “would” rather than a temporal “would” of the indicative preterite, which shows that the language of DeLillo’s writing has been transported from the referential (fiction being reduced to history, cf. *ab extra*) to the emotive (fiction as sympathetic imagination of being *moved out* [e-motive] from history, cf. *ab intra*).¹¹ Weinstein, accordingly, reveals that “would” is, essentially, a tricky word:

It can signify an event that has already happened (“the three would settle on a quilt” happened in the past); it can signify something that might or might not happen in the future (“when there would be better water”); it can do both (“when Stamford would see the crows fall dead” is an event that already took place in the past and will take place in his future). This last is called the anterior future tense, less technically explained as talking about the past in the future. (109)

Weinstein concludes that the word “would” breeds “a great deal of grammatical and existential potentiality—past/future; certainty/ambiguity—a potentiality” (109-110). It must make a reader stunned in interpreting *Libra* as a literary piece of work as the reader would encounter the fictional potentiality from its past tense. This potentiality of *would* to power, again, disturbs the novel’s narrative tense and breaks the tension between history and fiction by setting several symptomatic hiatuses into DeLillo’s plot to make his story different from history:

Take the double-*e* from Lee.
Hide the double-*l* in Hidell.
Hidell means hide the L.
Don’t tell. (*Libra* 90)

Hidell means don’t tell.
The id is hell.
Jerkle and Hide in their little cell. (101)

Hide the *L* in Lee
No one will see. (341)

If history, “which keeps piling upon wreckage upon wreckage,” is a “pile of debris” (Benjamin 257-258) that consists of an unrelenting bombardment of factual information, DeLillo, in narrating Oswald’s personal life story, makes his narrative spasmodically as poetic as a compact haiku.¹²

DeLillo, drawing upon history, seems to have abandoned history for the pure figment of fragment since a poem itself indicates “to make” (as in *poiesis*). The intermittent *intra*-textual fractures of tense (from simple past tense to simple present tense), as it were temporal distortions, flout the laws of representation, reproduction, and reduction (the historical novel) and the rule of thumb of the *intertextuality* (the historiographical metafiction) by embracing the poetic potentiality and the virtuality of the subjunctive mood to afford immanent possibilities to DeLillo’s fictionalization. DeLillo steps into the scene of the assassination, but his presentation distorts the verisimilar representation of history:

FLASH

SSSSSSSSSS

BLOOD STAINEZAAC

KENNEDY SERIOSTY WOUNDED

SSSSSSSSSS

MAKE THAT PERHAPS PERHAPS

SERIOUSLY WOUNDED (*Libra* 402)¹³

DeLillo is doubtlessly capable of offering a facsimile of this shocking scene through literal imitation and literary representation, but he prefers to deliver the shock to his readers in a surprisingly startling manner where fiction is not reduced to bare history. This poetic block is symptomatic in assembling capital letters, onomatopoeia, wrong spellings, poor grammar, tautology, and fragmented expression into an effect of unreadability that rebels against the represented and symbolized reality as a textual trauma which leaves an open wound in its readers’ cognition and on the Grand History. The emotive, gushing out from DeLillo’s poetic fictionalization, grows into the reality effect (*l’effet de réel*) of the subjunctive mood. Oswald, being “a zero in the system,” is “becoming as pure fiction, as a form of invention without rule” (Boxall 136), especially without grammatical and typological shackles. DeLillo’s writing relies on the power of the subjunctive mood that proposes to “turn a stranger’s scant life into lavish fiction” (*Zero K* 188). This is not an existing story curated by history or a text extracted from context, but a story out of history—a symptomatic text—which is becoming all the more real in readers’ sympathetic imagination.

DeLillo’s Text and Marguerite’s Testament

DeLillo’s Oswald keeps repeating that “[he] want[s] to write short stories on contemporary American life” (*Libra* 134, 160), but Oswald’s authorial ambition goes bankrupt. Oswald fails to write a book himself, but his story is repeated by his mother. Back to America from the USSR, Oswald met his mother Marguerite in the “In Fort Worth” chapter when his mother told him “[she] was writing a book [...] about his defection” (227). Discrepancy ensues in their conversation:

“But no book, Mother.”

“I went to see President Kennedy. I have done my research. I had a lot of extenuating circumstances because of your defection.”

“Mother, you are not going to write a book.”

“It is my life as I was forced to live it because of not knowing if you were alive or dead. I can write what’s mine, Lee.” [...]

“That is a different book” [...]

“It is a different book.” [...]

“I have a right to my book,” she said. [...]

“It is only an article, not a book.” (227-228)

Ironically, it is Marguerite who at length finishes the last chapter of *Libra*— “25 November.” The temporal narrative originally belonged to the conspiracy that manipulates Oswald as a cog in a wheel in the plot of the assassination, but Marguerite’s narrative intrusion writes “a different book” for her son.

As the concluding chapter of *Libra*, Marguerite’s “different book,” or more precisely her testament, is a becoming-story orchestrated by DeLillo’s subjunctive mood. During her retelling of Oswald’s story, Marguerite keeps repeating her litany “I have to tell a story” (449, 453, 455) where her testament is formulated in the simple present tense and first-person point of view (except in the last paragraph where the narrative returns to the third-person point of view in the simple past tense). Being poetic and emotive, Marguerite’s testament ensues from the subjunctive mood of DeLillo’s fictionalization which can be read as the reality effect where a becoming-story is generated at last to engender a different version of Oswald who “looks like everybody” as “multiple Oswald reappears” (300). Marguerite’s becoming-story gives birth to Oswald from womb to tomb—a poor son of a caring mother, which, here again, reminds DeLillo’s familiar readers of Jack Gladney’s study of Hitler as his mother’s beloved son in *White Noise*. By concluding *Libra* with a familial text, DeLillo expresses his uncooperative determination of submitting the individual story to familiar ideological and cultural narratives. The becoming-story of Marguerite is emotionally and poetically productive by being immune to the insidious voyeurism of the reproduction and recreation of ideological paranoia and cultural revelries. It is pathos that is proliferated in Marguerite’s testament—a sense of love, care, and pity, and the story of *pathosformel* (“pathos formula”) becomes the origin of affect.

In 2013, the contemporary Irish novelist Colm Tóibín wrote a similar novel, *The Testament of Mary*, which is a subversive readaptation of the New Testament from Mary’s point of view. Both DeLillo and Tóibín probably noticed the semantic ambiguity of The New Testament: its lexical definition is a work of Christian literature, history, and a covenant, meaning a legal document to show one’s posthumous will, tangible evidence or testimony, and one’s statement of belief or confession. These two feminine texts, both split from the masculine inoperative discourse, reveal a painful belief in and a sincere practice of maternal love; both of them have borrowed

some experimental features from postmodernism, but their presentation cannot be described as postmodern in that the overwhelming impression readers may receive from their reading is the sense of sincerity (not reality) which encourages them to perceive these stories as real emotionally, not factually or logically. Through their deconstruction of phallo(go)centric narration, these testaments, being what DeLillo terms counternarrative, are capable of affirming love and being ethical to the stigmatized other through an emotive (m)other. In her narration, DeLillo's Marguerite declares that "[if] you research the life of Jesus, you can see that Mary mother of Jesus disappears from the record once he is crucified and risen" (*Libra* 453). Jesus and Oswald, in both orthodox hermeneutics, whether it is a text of Christianity or a text of ideology, are victims of some sacrosanct cause. In the Other's nefarious narration, Jesus and Oswald have suffered from their passion for being "a zero in the system" whose existence is strategically replaceable. Only in these maternal *pathosformel*, Marguerite and Mary, being the emotive (M)other, could reincarnate their sons through their stories. Marguerite in her testament questions "*Who arranged the life of Lee Harvey Oswald?*" (455) and "How tall is Lee? What are his scars?" (453). The Oswald in recorded history is as abstract as a figment, whereas the Oswald in Marguerite's story is as affectively palpable as a man of flesh and blood. History makes Oswald into a corpse and corpus while his mother gives him birth and reincarnates him with love in her narrative womb.

In Marguerite's affective story, the *would* to power evolves into another *will* to power. The preterite does not grammatically grow back to the present tense but affectively leaps into the future. Nietzsche, in his *Will to Power*, argues this will to power is "not a being, not a becoming, but a *pathos*—the most elemental fact from which a becoming and effecting first emerge" (339) and is "the primitive form of affect" (336). Marguerite's becoming-story emerges from the history towards a future-to-come (*avenir* as *à venir*) in which Oswald's past changes along with his mother's testament. Branch, who is designated to explore the history of Oswald, also notices this instability in the re-narrativization of historical materials once they are parsed through the lens of the personal story:

He takes refuge in his notes. The notes are becoming an end in themselves. Branch has decided it is premature *to make a serious effort to turn these notes into coherent history*. Maybe it will always be premature. Because the data keeps coming. Because new lives enter the record all the time. *The past is changing as he writes*. (DeLillo, *Libra* 301; my emphasis)

Marguerite wants her testament to contribute to re-figuring Lee Harvey Oswald and keeps repeating "[t]here are stories inside stories" (450, 452). Her becoming-story within DeLillo's story makes *Libra* a recursive text (*mise-en-abîme*) instead of a rectilinear piece of history. This is what Deleuze calls a *lifé*, the pure immanence that is "the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss" (*Pure* 27), which greatly differs from meta-fictional postmodernism. DeLillo believes that "[t]here is a story, a flow of consciousness and possibility. The future comes into being" (*Body* 125). These possibilities, which promise a future-to-come, belong to the "*powerful projective sympathy*" (Abrams, *Mirror* 247; emphasis original) spinning off from the sympathetic imagination

of an alternative reality-to-be. Jacques Derrida claims that this “affirmation of the future *to come*” is “the condition of all promises or of all hope, of all awaiting, of all performativity, of all opening toward the future, whatever it may be, for science or for religion” (68). In terms of Christianity, Marguerite echoes Mary in that the maternal love expressed in their testaments announces an “*amor venturi*, a love or affirmation of what is to come” (John D. Caputo qtd. in Sandbeck 31) which, patently, cannot accommodate what has happened in historical documents as Walter Benjamin sees that what the past has a claim in is “a *weak* Messianic power” (254). DeLillo, through Marguerite’s insistence on the necessity of re-telling a story, also insists upon the act of writing as the budding faith pregnant with redemptive power to alter the existing world by fabricating it with fictional alterity as Tóibín in *The Testament of Mary* affirms:


What is being written down, they say, will change the world.
 “The world?” I [Mary] asked. “All of it?”
 “Yes,” the man who had been my guide said, “all of it.” (99)

Libra is also DeLillo’s testament to contemporary history. It remains no longer a matter of history germane to the Spirit of History. What matters is his betrayal of history in which the *would* to power becomes the novelist’s power of fictionalization. Accordingly, DeLillo’s fictionalization enables his testament to supplant the regime of representation. Although both DeLillo’s aesthetic regime and the representative regime come from the belated repetition of the same grisly event, his testament as Nietzschean eternal return (repetition with difference) is a symptom of the representation (bare and mechanical repetition). As Harold Bloom argues in *The Anxiety of Influence*, there exist “strong poets” who are the “major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors” (5). DeLillo’s storytelling makes him a strong Realist whose literary testament differs from the actual representation in that his aesthetic fictionalization remains virtual, immanent, and performative, hence open to all possibilities and a future as his *revisionary* visions. It is a literary quest of becoming that poetically undermines the referential system shored up by the grand history, whose *insistence* on story-telling, not on historical representation, brings an alternative reality into *existence*.

Notes

1. Grant: Social Science Funds of Hunan Province “A Study of British and American New Realism through Medical Humanities” (No. 22YBQ034).
2. DeLillo has been long writing *against* history through his political plots, but his attitude towards history is more skeptical than hostile. Fiction and history in DeLillo’s fictionalization are two arguably narrative rivals: both of them compete to gain convincing currency in readers’ favor. According to Boxall’s observation, in the early stage of DeLillo’s writing, *Players* and *Running Dog* can be read as his political thrillers of counter-histories in the 1970s which work as “a form of historical experience contrary to that which is ordained by

any of the official spokespersons” (52). Even his plotting of *Mao II* and *Underworld* cannot be torn apart from historical events. In his response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, DeLillo explicitly calls for a counternarrative in producing personal stories out of the authoritative precinct of noxious propaganda and mass media.

3. A similar remark has been made by DeLillo that “[n]othing you can believe is not coming true” (*Underworld* 802). Or one may be reminded of the myth of Orpheus in which the musician’s disbelief has to be suspended because the power of promise always remains as virtual as *ignis fatuus*. Once the disbelief is released, what is real, that which is maintained by the lease of promise, expires. Literary promise requires of one his mad fidelity.
4. Facing the 9/11 terrorist attacks, DeLillo argues that in this national disaster it is time to make a counternarrative. The counternarrative, DeLillo believes, can dig out “human beauty in the crush of meshed steel” by hogging the limelight unto “100,000 stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world” instead of being wreathed in the vindictive and belligerent miasma of authoritative propaganda and sensational mass media (DeLillo, “In the Ruins”).
5. Because DeLillo’s *Libra* has set great store in contingency, this melodramatic re-narrativization of history reads exactly like a fantasy story: “It was the time of year. October was his birthday. It was the month he enlisted in the Marines. He shot himself in the arm, in Japan, in October. October and November were times of decision and grave event. He arrived in Russia in October. It was the month he tried to kill himself. He’d last seen his mother one year ago October. October was the missile crisis. Marina left him and returned last November. November was the month he’d decided with Dupard to take a shot at General Walker. He’d last seen his brother Robert in November” (370). One has reason to call the JFK assassination a *disaster* (etymologically *ill-starred*) in relation to the zodiacal Libra where the stars, out of order, predict mischance. DeLillo has also underlined “[a]nother from of double [... —] the day and month of the assassination in strictly numerical terms—11/22” (*Libra* 377). The mischief of it is that contingency only remains as an appealing and revealing snare for readers.
6. , source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Libra.svg, accessed on 5 May, 2021. This horoscopic sign, as the frontispiece, embellishes every part’s title at its front page. See DeLillo, *Libra*, Penguin Books, 1988, pp. 1, 215.
7. Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* have distinguished the real and the virtual from the actual by equating the real with the virtual: “‘Potential’ and ‘virtual’ are not at all in opposition to ‘real’; on the contrary, the reality of the creative, or the placing-in-continuous variation of variables, is in opposition only to the actual determination of their constant relations. But the abstract machine of language is not universal, or even general, but singular; it is not actual, but virtual-real; it has not invariable or obligatory rules, but optional rules that ceaselessly vary with the variation itself, as in a game in which each move changes the rules” (99-100). In his introduction, Brian Massumi argues that Nietzsche’s will to power comes closer to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of *puissance* (potential) as the virtual/real in the plane of consistency while *pouvoir* (power) consists in the actual of the plane of organization (xvii). Besides, Aristotle in his *Poetics* has made a similar comment that “it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened [the actual, history], but what may happen [the virtual/real, poetry and fiction], —what is possible [potential] according to the law of probability or necessity” (35). It is fair to say that Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between the real/virtual and the actual corresponds to what Lacan has done in his psychoanalytic theory—the Real and the Symbolic (reality). The Real for Lacan is an experience of the virtual that cannot be actualized in reality. Back to the textual analysis of *Libra*, given the relation between fiction and history, DeLillo’s fictionalization is Real because of being virtual. That is to say, the indicative mood grammatically falters in narrating the actual history-related story of *Libra* since the fictionalization steers away from history in repeating the actual history. The grammatically definite representative preterite of tense has to be transcoded into the aesthetic and ontological virtuality of fiction—the subjunctive mood of possibility, indefiniteness, and uncertainty gives rise to the literary imagination of what is Real.
8. Actually, the concluding chapter of this novel is marked as “25 November,” but this chapter is special for it consists of Oswald’s mother Marguerite’s testament to the court—her affective confession and story of her

son's history. Hence, it cannot wedge itself into the Other's discourse and conspiracy but becomes the affective effect of the subjunctive mood—a becoming-story in both fiction and history. Detailed analysis of this issue will be presented in the following discussion.

9. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze further illustrates the reason why the real distinction is formal in relation to substance (molecular content) and quality (molar expression) with concrete examples: "We can conceive that names and propositions do not have the same sense even while they designate exactly the same things (as in the case of the celebrated examples: morning star—evening star, Israel—Jacob, *plan-blanc*). This distinction between these senses is indeed a real distinction [*distinctio realis*], but there is nothing numerical—much less ontological—about it: it is a formal, qualitative or semiological distinction" (35). To understand this real-formal distinction, one should bear in mind that for Deleuze repetition is a movement of differentiation. Difference, from the outset, is self-differentiated. The difference-in-itself serves for Deleuze as his dynamic ontology or what he advocates—schizo-analysis. Echoing in the examples put forward by Deleuze in the above block quotation, the obsessive wordplay shown in DeLillo's texts can be seen as the real distinction, for instance: the eponymous initial-related murders in *The Names*, Jack as J. A. K in *White Noise*, "Meg or Peg" (*Falling Man* 171) and "Gale or Gail" (*Zero K* 56). In *Falling Man*, the terrorist Hammed is harassed by the formal conversion between kilos and pounds, meters and feet (171-172).
10. In light of a phenomenological definition, this literary suspension can be seen as a "bracket." DeLillo suspends/brackets the grand history to make an alternative story available. In the suspension/bracket, the grand history meets doubts and grows uncertain, indefinite, and open to other possibilities. These virtual possibilities are real yet require of nothing actualized. Fictionalization is a moment of suspension for DeLillo in regard to his symptomatic retouch of historical materials, which takes the subjunctive mood, not the past tense, as his creative momentum. Fiction, in turn, is an accessible alternative to history and alters history so as to make fiction Real, in the light of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, which remains no longer in the register of the Symbolic.
11. Abrams quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge that "in life 'the unity ... is produced *ab intra*,' but in mechanism, '*ab extra*'" (*Mirror* 172). Moreover, the distinction between the referential and the emotive responses to another differentiation was made by I. A. Richards—"the truth of science" and "the truth of poetry." A. R. Biswas further explains that "'Troth' means faithfulness, good faith, honesty, loyalty, while 'truth' is 'conformity with fact, agreement with reality.' Troth is thus a variable concept of 'truth' with implicit semantic shifts" (334).
12. In *Libra*, the violent scene of assassination is versified into a haiku-like expression: similarly, in *Point Omega*, another novel by DeLillo, Richard Elster, the former defensive intellectual, recommends replacing real war with "haiku war." Versification appears to be a poetic tool for DeLillo to tackle the cruel truth of reality which is tormented by misery and misfortune. In *Falling Man*, Lianne ponders an anonymous haiku of Matsuo Bashō (松尾 芭蕉), though DeLillo deliberately makes Lianne's recitation blunder at the second line (actually it is the third line). Lianne abandons the original line for a new one of her own: "*Even in New York—I long for New York*" (*Falling Man* 32, 34). Bashō's original haiku goes "Even in Kyoto / Longing for Kyoto / Hearing the Cuckoo" (「京にても 京なつかしや 時鳥」; see matsuo bashohaiku.home.blog/2020/07/11/even-in-kyoto/, accessed on 8 May, 2021). What Lianne has picked up from Bashō is the immanent differentiation in self-repetition. When "New York" is repeated in both clauses or mirrored in the main clause, they are not identical. The subordinate clause of this haiku does not incorporate a condition clause, but a subjunctive one, because "New York" is a location that has been transferred from geographical actuality to poetic virtuality in its reciter's desire or wish that remains as Real as virtual, far from being actualized into reality. Haiku seems to be an agreeable rendition of the Real which, according to Roland Barthes, is "an anaphoric gesture without significative content, a kind of gash from which meaning (the desire for meaning) is expunged" (50). Taken in this sense, haiku does not "belong to today's politics, although it is *already* part of tomorrow's" (50). As a result, in Bashō's and Lianne's haikus, the poetic language has lost its referential function and it is no longer possible to evoke representation where the real New York/Kyoto that exists is no longer important. What matters is the Real New York/Kyoto becomes virtual.

13. Similar passages in presenting the assassination are frequent in *Libra* from page 404 to page 405.

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