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Schweighauser, Philipp and Adrian Wisnicki. "The End of Resolution? Reflections on the Ethics of Closure in Don DeLillo's Detective Plots." *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo*. Ed. Peter Schneck and Schweighauser. New York: Continuum, 2010. 158-70.

The published version of this essay is available here:

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/terrorism-media-and-the-ethics-of-fiction-9781441139931/>

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10. The End of Resolution? Reflections on the Ethics of Closure in Don DeLillo's

Detective Plots

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Although rather different novels, Don DeLillo's Libra (1988) and Mao II (1991) both explore the intersections between conspiracy, terrorism, and detection.<sup>1</sup> Read in succession, these novels also highlight a shift in DeLillo's creative interests from the domestic to the international spheres and from historical to contemporaneous conspiracy. What are the implications of these narrative developments? On the basis of these two novels, what broader conclusions can we draw about how DeLillo conceptualizes the existential possibilities of the detective within postmodernity and the ethics of detection in- and outside of literature?

To introduce a literary-historical dimension, we begin by considering the relation of DeLillo's Libra and Mao II to classic Victorian detective novels such as Bleak House (1852-53), The Woman in White (1860-61), and The Moonstone (1868). Using the template of Victorian detective fiction--which in many respects set the parameters of the modern detective genre as a whole--we discuss the staging of detection in the development of two of DeLillo's protagonists: Nicholas Branch in Libra and Bill Gray in Mao II. By way of these characters, DeLillo probes the ethical implications of the desire for closure that energizes both his own protagonists' quests and those of Victorian detectives. In the process, DeLillo explores both the epistemological and the moral aporias inherent in restaging the classic detective's epistemological pursuits in the postmodern era. Our essay ends with a brief discussion of how our readings of Libra and Mao II relate to DeLillo's latest novel, Falling Man (2007).

The desire for narrative closure constitutes one of the major driving forces of Victorian detective fiction. Although Arthur Conan Doyle's invention of Sherlock Holmes in 1887 in many ways created the prototype of the Victorian detective--quirky, observant, razor-sharp, almost always successful--Holmes represents only one iteration of a literary figure whose history reaches back to Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste Dupin and to British detectives like Inspector Bucket in Charles Dickens's Bleak House (1851-52), Walter Hartright and Marian Halcombe in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White (1859-60), and Inspector Cuff and the explorer Mr. Murthwaite in Collins's The Moonstone (1868), the latter of which is often cited as the first full-length detective novel. Each of these detectives, like Holmes after them, confronts a puzzling crime and, by sorting through a mass of seemingly irrelevant details, ultimately produces a solution to the

mystery. Sometimes, investigative success depends on energy and social networking, as with Inspector Bucket, who draws on knowledge gained from individuals at all levels of society; sometimes, it lies in observing and understanding minor clues, as when Inspector Cuff notices a paint smear overlooked by the other characters in The Moonstone; occasionally successful detection depends on connecting domestic British incidents with broader international developments, such as the 1848 European revolutions or British colonialism in India, as do, respectively, Walter Hartright in The Woman in White and Mr. Murthwaite in The Moonstone. Whatever the circumstances, in Victorian detective fiction the mysteries introduced at the outset of the narrative usually find resolution and closure at the end, thanks in large part to the efforts of the detectives involved.<sup>2</sup>

In some of DeLillo's novels, we encounter similar narratives of detection. In Libra, for instance, DeLillo recreates the circumstances leading up to the Kennedy assassination. Thus, this postmodern historical novel automatically engages a complex debate concerning the question of whether there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. In the process, both DeLillo himself and his character Nicholas Branch, a retired senior analyst of the CIA "hired on contract to write the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy" (1988, 15), are faced with the formidable task of making sense of the mass of data accumulated in previous investigations, most notably the Warren Report. In Libra, the narrative of Branch's investigation into the JFK assassination some twenty-five years after the event runs parallel to the central narrative of the novel, which tracks Oswald and his fellow conspirators. Much of the aesthetic power of Libra derives from the fact that the novel allows us to see conspiracy theory in the making while also letting us observe not only the assassination and the possible conspiracy that led up to it, but also the quasi-

mystical coincidences that make that conspiracy so baffling to subsequent investigators and detectives.

For the reader and for the author, Branch represents a modern-day detective who both faces and ultimately fails to disentangle the multiple plot threads that intersect in the killing of Kennedy.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast to the characters directly involved in the rapidly developing conspiratorial plots, all Branch ever does is read and write. In fact, he is immobilized by the sheer amount of documents he has accumulated:

The stacks are everywhere. The legal pads and cassette tapes are everywhere. The books fill tall shelves along three walls and cover the desk, a table and much of the floor. There is a massive file cabinet stuffed with documents so old and densely packed they may be ready to ignite spontaneously. (14)

As time passes, Branch develops a symbiotic relationship with the documents he studies--a relationship, it emerges, which has devastating psychological effects on him. Alternating between near-manic clarity and severe disorientation, Branch's sense of self becomes inextricably tied up with the irresolvable problem he faces: "There are times when he can't concentrate on the facts at hand and has to come back again and again to the page, the line, the fine-grained detail of a particular afternoon" (14). As the documents proliferate, Branch loses the ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant evidence. His investigation comes to a standstill: "The truth is he hasn't written all that much. He has extensive and overlapping notes--notes in three-foot drifts, all these years of notes. But of actual finished prose, there is precious little. It is impossible to stop

assembling data" (59). Branch's descent into paranoia is the ultimate psychological cost of his immersion in a sea of information: "[Branch] knows he can't get out. The case will haunt him to the end. Of course they've known it all along. That's why they built this room for him, the room of growing old, the room of history and dreams" (445). For Branch, in contrast to the prototypical Victorian detective, the investigative quest ends not in closure--the resolution of the case and the disclosure of truth--but in psychological deterioration.

Branch suffers from the same predicament as Thomas Pynchon's Oedipa Maas, the most famous postmodern detective of them all. Like Branch, the more Oedipa acquires new information, the more difficult it becomes to piece together this information. Revelations "come crowding in exponentially" (56), leaving Oedipa utterly confused and unable to bring her ex-lover Pierce Inverarity's "estate into pulsing, stelliferous Meaning" (Pynchon 1979, 56). As the novel ends, Oedipa is still without answers to most of her questions and is as far from achieving epistemological closure as she was at the beginning of her quest--perhaps even farther away. Moreover, like Branch, Oedipa is constantly on the brink of paranoia, as Pynchon (in tracking Oedipa's thoughts) suggests: "what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all" (21).

Brian McHale has argued that the shift from modernism to postmodernism involves a "shift of dominance from epistemology to ontology" (1992, 8), i.e., a shift from questions of knowledge ("How do I live in this world?"; "How can I interpret this world?") to questions of being ("Who am I?"; "What world is this?"). For McHale, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966) is still a modernist text because it re-works the detective genre--

the epistemological genre par excellence--to probe questions concerning the accessibility, reliability, and circulation of knowledge that are at the heart of the modernist project.<sup>4</sup> By extension, the same could be said about DeLillo's Libra, whose narrative crucially revolves around the accessibility and reliability of information on the Kennedy assassination. However, contrary to McHale, we would like to suggest here that, in both Pynchon's and DeLillo's novels, we are dealing with cases of anachronism. Oedipa and Branch are modern detectives whose quests for knowledge are bound to fail in a fundamentally indeterminate postmodern world--a world that bombards its inhabitants with amounts of information that are impossible to process in meaningful ways.<sup>5</sup> Both characters embark on the quintessentially modern quest for knowledge, but are caught up in what McHale himself identifies as the postmodern aporia of "ontological flickering" (2001, 202). Indeed, in both novels, the boundary between fact and fiction is thoroughly blurred in the minds of the characters. Branch is no longer able to disentangle the threads spun by numerous agents involved in the Kennedy assassination (Lee Harvey Oswald, a group of retired CIA operatives, an FBI agent, exiled Cubans, and the Mafia). As a result, he is left with a multiplicity of conflicting versions of the events on November 22, 1963. Likewise, Oedipa is no longer capable of deciding whether the mysterious Tristero system is a) a truly existing underground communications system, b) a figment of her imagination, c) a simulacrum set up by her former lover Pierce Inverarity, or d) a simulacrum hallucinated by Oedipa herself (Pynchon 1979, 117-18). Both characters, then, hover between a multiplicity of possible worlds that provide radically different accounts of, in Oedipa's case, the Tristero, and, in Branch's case, the Kennedy assassination. These characters can no longer fill the gaps that exist between different

accounts of the world; they fall into them--as do we, the readers of these two postmodern texts, if only vicariously. In a Rolling Stone essay, DeLillo described the effect thus:

There are jump cuts, blank spaces, an instant in which information leaps from one energy level to another. Dallas is a panorama of such things, a natural disaster in the heartland of the real, the comprehensible, the plausible. The lines that extend from the compressed event have shown such elaborate twists and convolutions that we are almost forced to question the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and to wonder further about our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, explain to waiting faces what happened. (1983, 23)

DeLillo here writes about the effects of the Kennedy assassination on the American psyche, but his description applies even better to what happens with Branch, and it also applies, though to a lesser extent, to the effect Libra has on its readers. Yet why should DeLillo stage a modern detective's epistemological quest only to let it founder on the shores of postmodern ontological indeterminacy? Does he suggest that there is something wrong with the modern quest for truth and knowledge? Are we, in other words, to welcome Branch's failure? A close look at the epistemological pursuits of some of the main characters in Mao II suggests that there may indeed be something profoundly wrong with such pursuits. Bill Gray, the protagonist of Mao II, who began his writing career by publishing two critically acclaimed novels, and has lived as a recluse



ever since, functions as a detective in two different but related senses. First and foremost, he seeks to track down a terrorist group in Beirut that holds the Swiss poet Jean-Claude Julien hostage. Gray plans to "walk into the headquarters of Abu Rashid," the head of the terrorist organization (215), and trade himself in for his fellow writer.

The group, in its configuration, in many ways echoes the configuration of similar revolutionary or terrorist groups found in nineteenth- and early to mid-twentieth-century conspiracy narratives like Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White (1859-60), Henry James's The Princess Casamassima (1890), and G. K. Chesterton's The Man Who Was Thursday (1890). Like DeLillo's work, each of these narratives tracks the plotting of a clandestine organization that, except for its central mastermind and one or two other figures, remains faceless and ill-defined or, as the group's spokesman in Mao II, George Haddad, puts it, represents "[b]arely a movement actually [...] just an underground current at this stage" (1991, 129). Gray's desire is to get to the core of this mysterious group, to locate it, engage with it, understand it, and even substitute himself for the hostage to achieve that understanding. Thus, Gray's quest is, like all detective work, an epistemological project.

Gray, however, is also a detective in a different sense. In the final analysis, his epistemological quest revolves less around others (the terrorist group) than around himself. Gray investigates himself, and his accumulative tendencies--about which more below--are rooted in an intense narcissism. Thus, Gray's inquiry into the dynamics of secrecy and cult leadership in Beirut becomes very much also an inquiry into the dynamics of his own life and the cult around him and his writings. As Gray's old editor

Charlie Everson puts it, "Through history it's the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark" (103).

Such a convergence of two types of investigations--that of a mysterious other and that of the self--are by no means atypical in the history of the detective genre. Sophocles' Oedipus the King, which is widely regarded as the world's first detective story, revolves precisely around the convergence of two such quests. Oedipus' search for his father's murderer results both in the resolution of the "case" and in a self-discovery with disastrous consequences--the realization that he himself is the murderer. Pynchon has given us a postmodern reworking of that pattern by way of Oedipa Maas, the aptly named protagonist of The Crying of Lot 49. In Mao II, DeLillo restages the same scenario by way of Bill Gray, whose detective work ultimately revolves around himself.

In the process of that double work of discovery, Gray's actions also come to resemble those of Nicolas Branch. Just as Branch locks himself up in "the room of theories and dreams" (DeLillo 1988, 14), Gray retreats to a house deep in the countryside, where he develops an accumulative obsession similar to that of Branch. Witness DeLillo's description of Gray's workspace:

There was a typewriter on a desk and sheets of oversized sketch paper taped to the walls and lower half of one of the windows. There were charts, master plans evidently, the maps of his work-in-progress, and the sheets were covered with scrawled words, boxes, lines connecting words, tiny writing boxes. There were circled numbers, crossed out names, a cluster of stick-figure drawing, a dozen other cryptic markings. (35-36)

But it is not only the similarity of their workspaces that connects Gray to Branch. For Gray, too, the will to accumulate results in paranoia: "Everything we do that isn't directly centered on work revolves around concealment, seclusion, ways of evasion. [...] It's an irrational way of life that has a powerful inner logic" (45). DeLillo here, as in Libra, stages paranoia as a symptom of both the desire for closure and coherence and the inability to realize that desire through the increasing accumulation of seemingly relevant data.

Apart from Bill Gray, DeLillo develops several additional detective figures in Mao II, all of whose activities revolve around Gray. Keenly interested in the author's work and, even more so, his life, Gray's readers develop detective instincts that border on obsession. In the fictional universe of DeLillo's novel, it is Scott Martineau who epitomizes and gives a face to these readers. After a long search, Martineau tracks down Gray, insinuates himself into the author's life, and takes control of it as Gray's live-in housekeeper. The moral quandaries of the detective's desire for closure emerge nowhere more clearly than in the figure of Martineau. Martineau initiates his relationship with Gray by writing a series of impassioned letters which he then follows up with a successful effort to discover Gray's whereabouts and to establish a bond that turns out to be too close for comfort. Martineau's project pairs the will to worship and investigate with the will to power. In fact, it is not Gray, but Martineau who refuses to publish the author's latest novel, keeping him in seclusion with the argument that its publication "would be the end of Bill as a myth, as a force" (52). Thus, Martineau holds Gray hostage in a situation whose "inner logic" follows "[t]he way disease takes over a life" (45). As

Gray himself puts it, "I talk to Scott. But it becomes less necessary all the time. He already knows. He's at my brainstem like a surgeon with a bright knife" (38).

That there is a menacing and terrorizing quality to Martineau's dedication to Gray's life and work is confirmed once Gray has disappeared in the Middle East. Although Martineau makes some effort to find him, he abandons his search in favor of inhabiting Gray's former life: "The house is paid for," Martineau tells his lover Karen Janney, "[a]nd he'd want us to live here. And I have money saved from the salary he paid me and this money goes automatically from his account to mine every month and if he didn't want me to keep getting it he would have advised the bank when he went away" (222-23). Martineau's desire to inhabit Gray's life has as much to do with his wanting to develop and sustain the cult around Gray's personality as with his wanting to be Gray. Martineau has already been grooming himself for the role of the executor of Gray's legacy by serving as his archivist: "the manuscript would sit and the world would travel, and the pictures would appear, a small and deft selection, one time only, and word would build and spread, and the novel would stay right here, collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill's legend, undyingly" (224). Mao II's narrative thus allows us to observe how withdrawal, reproduction, and circulation function in uniting and driving the admiring crowd.

Martineau's maintenance of Gray's files and his coordination of the author's evasive behavior further fuels the investigative drive in Gray's fans. Whereas Branch toils away in utter neglect, Gray's seclusion draws the public's interest--in part, DeLillo suggests, because such seclusion allows Gray to fulfill a key ideological function in American culture: "When a writer doesn't show his face, he becomes a local symptom of

God's famous reluctance to appear" (36). In a sense, Martineau's fueling of the reader's investigative desires is a success: Gray becomes a religiously venerated cult figure not so different, after all, from the dictatorial figures DeLillo parades before our eyes in Mao II--Mao himself, Khomeini, and Reverend Moon, who conducts the mass wedding at the beginning of the novel. But quite apart from the similarities between the mass dynamics that sustain totalitarian rule and those that sustain cult authorship--which DeLillo points to by way of these figures--Martineau's success comes at a heavy price. Already before Gray's disappearance, Martineau's devotion to Gray creates a not-so-golden cage around the author. Once Gray has disappeared, Martineau's usurpation of the author's place is an act of symbolic violence that makes his epistemological project of archiving Gray's materials appear less than benign. Martineau is Gray's captor, and he does not renounce that role once Gray has vanished. As such, his actions testify to the intricate connections Michel Foucault postulates between knowledge and power. Foucault's argument in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison goes much beyond a critical assessment of Sir Francis Bacon's well-known assertion that "knowledge itself is power."<sup>6</sup> For Foucault, knowledge is not just an instrument of power; the two are much more intimately related: by knowing we control, and by controlling we know.

Gray's own detective quest reaches a very different but no less dark end. He dies on the ferry that was meant to bring him to Beirut without ever getting near the terrorist leader. Thus, Gray's abandonment of a life of potentially ineffective seclusion and individuality for one of action results in neither knowledge nor closure, but in a disappearance of the self that benefits not him, the detective, but the objects of his investigation:

[The man] said a prayer and went through [Gray]'s belongings, leaving the insignificant case, the good shoes, the things in the bag, the bag itself, but feeling it was not a crime against the dead to take the man's passport and other forms of identification, anything with a name and a number, which he could sell to some militia in Beirut. (216-17)

DeLillo's narratives in Libra and Mao II, then, suggest that in the postmodern world, the act of detection does not result in desirable forms of closure, but rather in either the unraveling of desire and the disappearance of the self (as is the case with both Branch and Gray) or an oppressive form of epistemological control of others that is decidedly, if largely symbolically, violent (as is the case with Martineau).

Why is DeLillo interested in such narrative configurations in the first place? Why does he stage the desire for narrative and epistemological closure only to let it either fail or go awry? A post-structuralist reading of Libra and Mao II would suggest that DeLillo's refusal of closure is, in fact, the ethically viable choice. Many post-structuralists sharply critique the modern desire for narrative and epistemological closure, and much of that critique centers on the novel. For instance, in Writing Degree Zero, Roland Barthes writes that "[t]he Novel is a Death; it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act; duration into an oriented and meaningful time" (1968, 3). Barthes's conviction that teleological closure in narrative is ideologically suspect also informs his disdain for what he calls "readerly" literature--less open and more determinate texts that allow for easy

comprehensibility and ready assimilation to the reader's pre-existing knowledge. As he puts it in S/Z,

To depart/to travel/to arrive/to stay: the journey is saturated. To end, to fill, to join, to unify--one might say that this is the basic requirement of the readerly, as though it were prey to some obsessive fear: that of omitting a connection. [...]  
 What would be the narrative of a journey in which it was said that one stays somewhere without having arrived, that one travels without having departed--in which it was never said that, having departed, one arrives or fails to arrive? Such a narrative would be a scandal, the extenuation, by hemorrhage, of readerliness.  
 (1974, 105)

Other post-structuralists have outlined similar critiques of narrative and epistemological closure. Writing from a psychoanalytic angle and aiming at the realist literary tradition, Leo Bersani comments on the importance of temporal coherence in realist novels:

Time in realistic fiction is not merely chronological; it is shaped by a prior imagination of beginnings and ends. Dates are enormously important in realistic fiction, and the first paragraphs of countless nineteenth-century novels give us the exact year when their stories begin. The specified year not only serves the illusion of historical authenticity; it also allows us the luxury of assigning precise beginnings to experience, and of thereby making experience more accessible to

our appetite for sense-making distinctions and categories. Conclusions are of course just as important in this enterprise of adding sharper sense to life. (54)

To Bersani, realism serves ideological ends in its imposition of such strict temporal frames:

[I]n realistic fiction, the unexpected revelation or the surprising coincidence, far from being merely formal conveniences, seem almost to signify an awesome complicity of the most distant or unrelated corners of reality with the requirements of the novel's main psychological and moral structures. Reality is coerced into providing the suitable conclusion to a continuously meaningful chain of events. (55).

One could cite more examples of the post-structuralist aversion to closure--for instance, Jacques Derrida's privileging of the text and écriture over what he calls "the book" (1978, 18); J. Hillis Miller's call to replace, in discussions of narrative endings, the metaphor of the line with that of either the maze (1992, 23) or the simultaneous tying and untying of threads (1978); and D. A. Miller's preference for what he calls 'the narratable' (all those states and events that could be narrated in a story) over the actual realization of narrative closure (1981, 265-67). The post-structuralists' critique of closure is grounded in their philosophy of language, which affirms and celebrates the interminable play of language and its endless deferral of meaning and presence.



Yet it is the literary critic and theorist William V. Spanos who most explicitly brings the post-structuralist critique of closure to bear on our essay's concern with postmodern reworkings of the detective genre. Spanos draws on the existentialist philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre to read early postmodernism as a critique of the dangerous "positivistic structure of consciousness" (1995, 27) that pervades modern life and art, and which fosters our evasion of existential dread. For Spanos, the detective novel paradigmatically participates in that structure of consciousness:

According to the implications of existential philosophy, then, the problem-solution perspective of the 'straightforward' Western man of action [...] has its ground in more than merely a belief in the susceptibility of nature to rational explanation. It is based, rather on a monolithic certainty that immediate psychic or historical experience is part of a comforting, even exciting and suspenseful well-made cosmic drama or novel--more particularly, a detective story (the French term is policrière) in the manner of Poe's The Murders in the Rue Morgue or Conan Doyle's The Hound of the Baskervilles. (20-21)

For Spanos, the isomorphism between positivistic consciousness and the detective novel is grounded in shared notions of causality and finality:

For just as the form of the detective story has its source in the comforting certainty that an acute "eye," private or otherwise, can solve the crime with resounding finality by inferring causal relationships between clues which point to

it (they are "leads," suggesting the primacy of rigid linear narrative sequence), so the "form" of the well-made positivistic universe is grounded in the equally comforting certainty that the scientist and/or psychoanalyst can solve the immediate problem by the inductive method, a process involving the inference of relationships between discontinuous "facts" that point to or lead straight to an explanation of the "mystery," the "crime" of contingent existence. (21)

Ultimately, Spanos contends, the Western trust in rational solutions--which both informs and is fostered by detective stories--"demand[s] the kind of social and political organization that finds its fulfillment in the imposed certainties of the well-made world of the totalitarian state, where investigation or inquisition in behalf of the achievement of a total, that is, pre-ordained or teleologically determined structure--a final solution--is the defining activity" (25).

Spanos goes on to argue that early postmodernism forcefully challenges that modern frame of mind by evoking, in an anti-Aristotelian existentialist gesture, pity and fear rather than purging it. Along the way, early postmodernists reject the superficially comforting rationality and positivism that allow us to repress dread. For Spanos, this postmodern move, which manifests itself paradigmatically in anti-detective stories, has profoundly political implications: "[T]he postmodern absurdists interpret this obsession [...] for the rigidly causal plot of the well-made work of the humanistic tradition, as catering to and thus further hardening the expectation of--and aggravating the need for--the rational solution generated by the scientific analysis of man-in-the-world" (24). Consequently, the "most immediate task" of early postmodernists is to "undermin[e] the

detective-like expectations of the positivistic mind," to "unhom[e] Western man, by evoking rather than purging pity and terror--anxiety" because "only in the precincts of our last evasions, where 'dread strikes us dumb' [Heidegger], only in this silent realm of dreadful uncertainty, are we likely to discover the ontological and aesthetic possibilities of generosity" (38-39).

Spanos's fierce attack on the detective novel and its empirical cognitive analogs raises a number of important questions concerning both Spanos's own condemnation of the genre and DeLillo's recourse to it. First and foremost, the persuasiveness of Spanos's attack on closural ways of thinking and writing very much depends on the level of human existence on which it is brought to bear. If we remain at the psychological level and consider individual yearnings for closure--be it Bill Gray's desire to understand the dynamics of the terrorists' as well as his own cult status or Nicholas Branch's desire to pierce the fog of facts and rumors that surround the Kennedy assassination--we may be forgiven for deriving little comfort from the failure of either the literary characters' or our own epistemological projects. DeLillo's two novels poignantly draw our attention to the disastrous psychological consequences of such failures. What Gray and Branch experience is not liberation from constraining rationality but paranoia, loss of self, and, in Gray's case, death. From this perspective, we may also ask what kinds of violence the postmodernist refusal of closure and evocation of dread celebrated by Spanos actually does to us, as readers. Thus, even if we remain at the psychological or, in Martineau's case, intersubjective level, we must carefully consider to what extent the kind of critique Spanos levels at closural ways of thinking and acting is itself applicable and, indeed, ethically viable.

Admittedly, Spanos's argument functions less on either the psychological or the intersubjective plane than on the level of the politics of representation. Spanos's take on the detective novel makes most sense as an investigation of how the narrative structures of detective novels reproduce and reinforce already existing social structures and dominant ways of thinking. On that level, the straightforward trajectories of conventional detective plots, their often predictable push toward narrative and epistemological finality and resolution, their chronological coherence, and their strict adherence to the law of causality may indeed evoke and bolster a desire for closure that fuels and is fueled by the "positivistic structure of consciousness" that infuses "the problem-solution perspective of the 'straightforward' Western man of action." Furthermore, Spanos is right in arguing that that consciousness is not without its moral quandaries. Spanos does not quote Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialectic of Enlightenment--but their brilliant analysis of the catastrophic effects of perverted forms of Enlightenment rationality hovers in the background of both Spanos's essay and many a post-structuralist critique of modern Western thought. Still, even at this level--the level at which the social functions of literary forms come to the center of attention--Spanos's slippage from the detective stories' "resounding finality" to "final solution" overshoots its mark. Yes, the detective novel's closural narrative strategies may indeed be in league with modern forms of rationality and positivism whose psychological and societal effects may be less than desirable, but from here, it is a very long way to Auschwitz. Thus, if we want to probe the ethical viability of DeLillo's decision to withhold closure from his detective plots, we need to tread carefully so as to avoid hasty moral and political judgments of (the desire for) closure. Such judgments, we argue, may have their own moral and political

liabilities. DeLillo's novels teach us that the closural patterns of detective plots speak to fundamental human needs that are not--as Spanos suggests--necessarily ideologically suspect. Moreover, they make us see that it is not only the achievement of closure that may have disastrous effects, but also the failure of that achievement.

The structures of detection we charted in Libra and Mao II are by no means confined to those two texts. They are also evident in other DeLillo novels such as The Names (1982; the search for the perpetrators of the ritual murders), White Noise (1985; Jack Gladney's quest for the identity of the mysterious Mr. Gray), Underworld (1997; Marvin Lundy's quest for the baseball hit by Bobby Thompson in "the shot heard around the world"), The Body Artist (2001; Lauren Hartke's attempts to determine the identity of the strange visitor in her house), and Cosmopolis (2003; Eric Packer's obsessive tracing of data streams, his killing of his security chief, and his own impending murder). Given the pervasiveness of the detective quest in DeLillo's work, it may come as a surprise that he does not reproduce it in Falling Man, a novel about a terrorist act that cries out for explanation and closure. DeLillo's latest novel does trace the quests of a small number of 9/11 survivors for closure, and, as in his other novels, those quests are frustrated. But their quests are no investigative searches for knowledge. Rather, they are painful and often seemingly senseless probings of what is left of the traumatized self. In this novel, DeLillo delves deep into individual subjects' attempts to come to terms with traumatic experience and its devastating psychological repercussions. Along the way, he poignantly highlights the pain that the failure to achieve closure--be it in the form of psychological repression, acting out, or working through--may entail.

At the same time, however, DeLillo does not embark on a search for large-scale explanations that might provide a sense of closure to the nation from and to which he writes. In Falling Man, DeLillo refuses to deliver on the expectations of readers who demand rationalization and closure from a 9/11 novel, and U.S. reviewers have regularly taken him to task for what they considered his moral failure to do so.<sup>7</sup> What our reflections on the ethics of closure can teach us is, we believe, that DeLillo's probing of psychological wounds that do not close and his refusal to meet his readers' expectations that Falling Man provide a sense of closure on a national scale can both more adequately be judged as the result of a writer's determination to meet his moral obligations.

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Andreas Hägler for his extensive and highly useful feedback on an earlier version of this essay as well as for drawing our attention to Spanos's critique of the detective novel.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point and its relation to Libra, see Wisnicki (2008, 17-51).

<sup>3</sup> In a Paris Review interview, DeLillo compares the Warren Report to "the Joycean novel" (Begley 1993, 291).

<sup>4</sup> The principal model for these epistemological concerns is the detective novel, where the main concern is the search for hidden knowledge ("Whodunit?"; "Why was it done?"). F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1926) is not a detective story in any narrow sense, but it is a good example of this modernist search for knowledge. In this novel, the

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narrator Nick is fascinated by the fabulously rich and mysterious Gatsby and tries to find out everything about him.

<sup>5</sup> To read The Crying of Lot 49 as an anti-detective novel (Tani 1982, 24 et passim) or a detective novel in reverse (Tanner 1982, 56) are two possible conclusions that could be drawn from this observation.

<sup>6</sup> Bacon's Latin phrase is "scientia ipsa potentia est," which translates as "for also knowledge itself is power." Today, Bacon's maxim is most often abbreviated as 'knowledge is power.'

<sup>7</sup> Tom Junod's review in Esquire is but one case in point: "And so what I asked of DeLillo's Falling Man was not that it be inventive, but that it be commensurate-- commensurate to all the falling men, and the falling women, and their agony; commensurate, at the very least, to the capsule profiles that people forced themselves to read day after day, five years ago. And it's not. It's a portrait of grief, to be sure, but it puts grief in the air, as a cultural atmospheric, without giving us anything to mourn" (2007, 38). For further negative reviews of Falling Man, see Kakutani (2007) and (predictably) Yardley (2007).