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# Cosmological Metafictions: Gnosticism in Don DeLillo's *Libra*

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## **“Light in the Cave of the Ungodly”: Gnosticism in Don DeLillo’s *Libra***

Abstract: Don DeLillo appropriates elements of Gnosticism for structural and thematic use in *Libra*. He draws upon Gnosticism’s radically dualistic view of the universe in terms of Light and Darkness, where the material world is conceived as a vast cosmic prison designed by a deranged Demiurge to bar humans from divine knowledge. Gnosticism provides DeLillo with a blueprint for depicting his CIA arch-conspirators as religious fanatics with cultic devotion to a “theology of secrets.” DeLillo ultimately rejects the consolations promised by all transcendent master plans, including both the conspiracy theories surrounding the Kennedy assassination and the cosmological conspiracy theories of Gnosticism.

Don DeLillo’s *Libra* is one of the twentieth century’s great historical novels, or works of “historiographic metafiction” to use Linda Hutcheon’s apt term.<sup>1</sup> Yet the historical impulse in DeLillo is persistently mitigated by a contrary compulsion toward mystery, an elusive pursuit of some ineffable force that might transcend the material conditions of history. The tug between historical grounding and spiritual transcendence animates some of DeLillo’s most powerful fiction. As the novelist himself claims in his essay “The Power of History,” “At its root level, fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe,” adding, “Such qualities will sooner or later state their adversarial relationship with history.” This is not to say that DeLillo foreswears historical engagement in favor of ecstatic surrender. Rather, he lays bare the machinery through which he builds tension in his historiographic metafiction, enacting what John N. Duvall calls “a counterforce to the wound of history through the persistence of mystery” (3). DeLillo’s fiction is unusually bound in *Libra* by familiar and immutable details of plot and character inherited from the historical record; however, he dynamically reanimates and estranges the Kennedy assassination by recasting history in the tropes of religious fanaticism.

“There is much here that is holy” (*L* 15), observes Nicholas Branch, DeLillo’s invented CIA archivist charged to compile the Agency’s secret history of the Kennedy assassination.

Some of DeLillo's best critics have emphasized the deep religious resonance of the novel. In *American Magic and Dread*, Mark Osteen titles his chapter on *Libra* "The Theology of Secrets." He argues, "The Kennedy assassination is America's *Mysterium Magnum*; like any religious mystery, it is both radiantly overdetermined and heavily shrouded" (153). Osteen emphasizes the cultic aspects of the CIA's secret society of conspirators. DeLillo revels in hermetic conspiracy networks, but at the same time he fundamentally questions the premises on which such organizations are built. As Osteen puts it, "*Libra* both presents and parodies such mythmaking, simultaneously offering a plausible 'secret history' and a critique of secret histories. That is, the novel is both a conspiracy theory and a theory of conspiracies, at once promulgating the existence of a secret 'world inside the world' and critically analyzing the desperation that motivates the belief in such worlds" (154). David Cowart opens his *Libra* chapter in *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* with an instructive comparison to Dante's *Inferno*, where the political assassins Brutus and Cassius are condemned alongside Satan to the center of Hell. Cowart explains, "As Dante allows historical and political elements to complicate or enrich an essentially religious poem, DeLillo allows [...] a curious religious dimension to emerge in his essentially historical and political novel" (92). Cowart discerns several allusions connecting Oswald's demise to the Passion of Christ. DeLillo clearly invites religious comparison, yet he simultaneously pulls the rug out from beneath his own analogy. Cowart observes, "In his inchoate or fragmented narrative of the Passion, then, DeLillo trenchantly documents an emergent incoherence or breakdown of myths that in many ways manifests itself first and most starkly in the Kennedy assassination. The reader is teased with archetypal possibility, but the mythemes [...] refuse to coalesce in any of the familiar metanarratives of suffering, sacrifice, and redemption" (109). Cowart's reading of *Libra* supports his larger aim in the book to validate

DeLillo's postmodern credentials: "As a postmodernist committed to representing the discontinuous contemporary moment, DeLillo is resistant to the seductive appeal of totalizing theories, comprehensive accounts of the phenomenal world and the human place in it" (9).

Osteen and Cowart both advance convincing arguments that DeLillo draws upon religion in *Libra*, not from the position of a Christian apostle, but instead as a well-informed apostate. That is, like a good postmodernist, he tests out religious metanarratives for imaginative use but ultimately resists their appeal, trying them on before returning them to the rack.

DeLillo is also a devoted student of *pre-modernist* philosophy and theology, however, and as such he well knows that postmodernists do not hold the exclusive patent on a worldview framed in terms of crisis, discontinuity, disharmony, hostility, and alienation, nor are postmodernists the first to refuse swallowing the pap of metanarratives which depict a benign and orderly cosmos. Furthermore, postmodernism is not the first movement to appropriate foundational texts and teachings only to subvert, revise, critique, transpose, and parody those very sources. All of these radical principles and transgressive strategies were employed in Gnosticism, a nebulous term for various religious sects branded by the Christian Church as heretical in the second century of the Common Era. While the Church may have formally renounced Gnosticism, literary artists have long found inspiration in its anathematized tenets. Harold Bloom, the foremost champion of a Gnostic literary tradition, asserts, "Ancient Gnosticism, like Romantic and modern varieties, was a religion of the elite only, almost a literary religion. A purified Gnosticism, then and now, is truly for a relative handful only, and perhaps is as much an aesthetic as it is a spiritual discipline" (*Omens* 33). The "relative handful" of modern writers influenced by Gnosticism includes several of seminal importance to DeLillo: Herman Melville, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov,

Samuel Beckett, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and Cormac McCarthy. DeLillo's richest contribution to this sub rosa literary tradition is *Libra*, an apocryphon inscribed throughout with traces of Gnostic cosmology, its philosophical pessimism, and its dominant myths and motifs. A wealth of internal evidence suggests that DeLillo turned to Gnosticism for useful prototypes in his fictional depiction of the "religious fanatics" who conspired to kill President Kennedy.

Before advancing this argument, a few clarifications and caveats are necessary. The following essay is primarily a literary analysis, not a theological one. In other words, it is not my objective to offer a comprehensive treatment of Gnosticism, nor do I claim to advance any original theses about the religion; indeed, most of my information on the Gnostics is distilled from Hans Jonas's magisterial survey of the subject, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. My interest lies less in Gnosticism per se than in DeLillo's sustained engagement with it. The present study seeks to identify Gnostic elements interwoven into *Libra* and to examine their function. But let me be clear from the start: *Libra* is not simply a Gnostic *roman à clef* where each character and plot twist can be traced back to some scriptural antecedent. As with Cowart's intertextual reading of the Passion, I argue that DeLillo's appropriations from Gnosticism are highly selective, even idiosyncratic, and fragmentary. It is also important to stress that DeLillo himself is no Gnostic, and *Libra* should not be read as a religious testimony or validation of Gnosticism. Think of it as comparable to the "mythic method" Eliot famously deduced from Joyce's *Ulysses*: "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177). Most tantalizing with respect to *Libra*, a novel named

after Lee Harvey Oswald's astrological sign, Eliot adds, "It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious" (177-78). In turning to antiquity for an auspicious framework on which to construct his imaginative recreation of the Kennedy assassination, DeLillo borrows a page from Joyce's playbook. But whereas Eliot regards Homer as a stabilizing bulwark of classical order erected by Joyce against the chaos of modernity, DeLillo turns to Gnosticism precisely because it is a belief system founded upon disorder, a principled rejection of the elegant Hellenic cosmos that preceded it and a remorseless alternative to the benign Christian heavens that supplanted it.

### **Selective Overview of Gnosticism**

The term "Gnosticism" derives from "*gnosis*," the Greek word for "knowledge." There is considerable debate over the roots of Gnosticism. For a long time the movement was primarily characterized as a reactionary offshoot of Christianity, but subsequent scholarship, bolstered by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts in 1945,<sup>2</sup> now recognize Gnosticism as a syncretic system combining elements of Eastern thought, Zoroastrianism, Neoplatonism, Neopythagoreanism, and Jewish Kabbalah, in addition to its mutually influential relationship with early Christianity. Relatively few sects referred to themselves explicitly as Gnostics (which means "the knowing ones"), but there are several shared features of the movement. As the name suggests, "knowledge" is the paramount principle, referring not to intellectual apprehension but instead to epiphanic insights accessible only to enlightened initiates. If the chief aim of Gnostic spirituality is attaining privileged knowledge, the primary subject of Gnostic scripture is explaining how humans came to be separated from the divine source of knowledge in the first place. Gnosticism is radically dualistic, regarding all existence as divided into opposed forces of Light and Darkness, Good and Evil. Some versions of Gnosticism accept this division as having always been, while others conceive of a crisis in the divine realm that precipitated a fall into

corruption. In either case, Gnostics regard the supreme God as occupying a divine realm (the Pleroma) utterly separated from the fallen world we humans occupy, a world neither created nor governed by this highest deity. The cosmos is instead regarded as a catastrophic mistake, a perverse and insidious barrier separating the created world from the divine. Hans Jonas, the preeminent modern scholar of Gnosticism, refers to the highest power in Gnostic thought as “the Alien God.” God is alien precisely because the divine is completely antithetical to the material world: “The transcendent God Himself is hidden from all creatures and is unknowable by natural concepts. Knowledge of Him requires supranatural revelation and illumination and even then can hardly be expressed otherwise than in negative terms” (42-43).

So who did make our world? Gnostics assign that dubious achievement to the Demiurge. The term derives from the Greek “*dēmiourgos*” for “craftsman” or “artificer,” and its original usage had value neutral connotations. The first known philosophical use of the term in reference to the creator of the cosmos comes from Plato in the *Timaeus*, where the Demiurge is depicted as a positive force, the grand designer of an orderly cosmos based upon ideal forms. In the hands of the Gnostics, however, the Demiurge is twisted into the arch-villain of a cosmic battle of Good versus Evil. He created the world as a snare for the divine spark trapped in the lower realm of Darkness. Thus the universe is conceived not as the bounty of an all-powerful and all-loving deity, but as a crude prison and bewildering labyrinth. The sibling rivalry of Gnosticism with Christianity and Judaism comes through most virulently in this malicious depiction of the Creator, a derisive caricature of Jehovah from the Hebrew Bible. But it would be a mistake to assume that Gnostic beliefs derive simply from an agenda to denigrate its theological competitors. A. D. Nuttall observes that Gnosticism offers a solution to the notorious theological conundrum of how an omnipotent and benevolent God could abide evil to prosper in the world.

“If the Creator is himself corrupt there is nothing puzzling in the fact that we see corruption everywhere. Gnosticism is often thought of as a wildly mystical affair, but in this fundamental respect it is oddly realistic. In the old phrase of Proclus and Simplicius it ‘saves the appearances,’ that is, it fits the facts” (10). This shadowy worldview also “fits the facts” of the historical conditions DeLillo maps through the dark maze of the Kennedy assassination.

Gnostics account for the fallen state of the world through elaborate creation myths, and two of these are worth reviewing since DeLillo borrows several motifs from each. The two main strands of Gnosticism derived from the teachings of Mani [Manichaeism] and the teachings of Valentinus [Valentinianism]. Mani teaches that before the existence of heaven and earth there were always two separate natures, the Light governed by principles of Good, and the Darkness governed by principles of Evil. These separate realms remained in peaceful equilibrium until forces from lower realm of Darkness recognized the Light, envied it, and fomented rebellion. Recognizing this mounting threat, the Father of Greatness created Primal Man and propelled him down into the lower realm to fight off the forces of Darkness (note the comparison with both Adam and Jesus in Christianity, and *Adam Kadmon* in Kabbalah). But Primal Man was defeated and devoured by the Archons of Darkness, thus trapping part of the divine Light within the Darkness (affinities with the Greek myth of Prometheus should be clear here). The presence of the Light within the Darkness quelled the rebellion, and Primal Man was rescued back to the Light, but he left part of his Soul behind. With part of the divine Light still trapped inside the Darkness, the Father created the Messenger to rescue the remaining Light and disentangle its mixture with the Darkness, a process that was only partially successful. In a grand countermove, the King of Darkness (Mani’s figure for the Demiurge) responded by creating Adam and Eve, modeled imperfectly after the perfect form of the Messenger, as human vessels in which to trap

the immortal “*pneuma*,” the spirit of Light. Thus, Manichaeism envisions a dualistic world-drama of perpetual battle between Light and Darkness for possession of the spirits trapped in the lower realm. Another salient feature of this myth, with lingering resonance for DeLillo, is its depiction of the creative process as a series of increasingly debased corruptions and counterfeits. At each step Light and Darkness attempt to outmaneuver one another with new creations, but only end up proliferating images that add to the confusion and profane mixture. As Jonas observes, Manichaeism offers a perverse twist on the Biblical claim that humans are created in God’s image. Here image-making is coopted by Darkness as a weapon turned against the Light: “The ‘image’ has become a device of the Darkness, the copying not only a kind of blasphemy in itself but a devilish trick directed against the original” (227). As we will later see, a profound distrust of the creative process is a prime Gnostic signature in DeLillo’s treatment of the arch-conspirator demiurges featured in *Libra*.

Whereas Manichaeism posits dual natures that have always existed, Valentine taught that Darkness derived from a crisis in the initially undifferentiated realm of divine Light. The fall into error was a result of a misguided attempt in the Pleroma to emulate the Fore-Father. In the Valentinian beginning, the Fore-Father existed alone in perfect repose. Eventually he contracted inward, reflecting upon himself, and then extended outward, projecting himself externally. The result was a series of creations: multiple pairs of Aeons occupying concentric spheres that emanated outward from the central Pleroma. Although there was nothing evil or dark per se in this original creation, the precedent it set—an impulse to project an image outside oneself, in essence the creative impulse—serves as a kind of Gnostic “original sin” and provides the blueprint for the eventual downfall. The youngest and outermost Aeon was named Sophia (or Wisdom), and she wished to follow the Fore-Father’s example by creating a being of her own.

This creative leap exceeded her capacity and led to a terrible fall (note the prevalence of falling imagery throughout Gnostic myths), producing an incomplete aborted image of herself, the lower Sophia. The upper Sophia was restored to the Pleroma, but she left behind the lower Sophia as a manifestation of her error and passion (compare this with Primal Man, restored to divinity but leaving his Soul behind, and with the Orpheus myth, which likewise involves shuttling back and forth between upper and lower realms). The lower Sophia agonized in Darkness, longing to return to the Light. Her terror, fear, and grief became the substance from which she shaped the Demiurge. Following this downward pattern into further creative disaster, the Demiurge devised the material world. The Valentinian Demiurge is characterized by his ignorance (born unaware of the Pleroma), his arrogance (insisting upon his supremacy and demanding exclusive worship), and his jealousy (barring his creatures from knowledge, much as the Old Testament God places the Tree of Knowledge off limits to Adam and Eve). In *Libra* DeLillo draws upon Valentinianism's redoubled caution against counterfeit creation, its architecture of spheres within spheres, and its archetype of internal mutiny, where corruption against authority is bred from within. The latter precedent dovetails most effectively with DeLillo's fictionalized conspiracy of CIA agents against their own Commander-in-Chief.

The historical conditions that gave rise to Gnosticism were also conducive to DeLillo's purposes in *Libra*. Hans Jonas situates Gnosticism within a turbulent historical context and considers the crisis mode of its cosmology as an anxious response to the dissolution of Hellenic cultural hegemony. In *The Gnostic Religion* he argues, "The gnostic challenge was one expression of the crisis which the general culture experienced. To understand Gnosticism as such a challenge is part of its essence. To be sure, the insights which its message propounded for the first time stand in their own right. But without the Hellenic counter-position upon which it burst,

Gnosticism would not have been of that significance in the world history of ideas which it assumed as much by historical configuration as by its intrinsic content” (240). It is no coincidence that Gnosticism emerged prominently within an era of seismic cultural, political, and ideological shifts, and the Gnostic challenge played its part in exacerbating the real-world crisis so dramatically captured in its creation myths. That is to say, far from assuaging the turbulence of their world by imposing rationalizations of order, the Gnostics formulated a theory of disorder, denouncing the world as inherently evil and rebelling against the powers that prevail here below. In a later essay titled “The Gnostic Syndrome: Typology of its Thought, Imagination, and Mood,” Jonas elaborates upon the Gnostic ethos of crisis, rebellion, extremism, and violence, concluding, “We suspect that the dislocated metaphysical situation of which gnostic myth tells had its counterpart in a dislocated real situation: that the crisis-form of its symbolism reflects a historical crisis of man himself” (272). This crisis mode of Gnosticism—symptomatic of “a deeply agitated state of mind, a great tension of the soul, a disposition toward radicalism, hyperbolic expectations, and total solutions” (272)—provides a remarkably prescient anticipation of the zeitgeist DeLillo chronicles in *Libra*.

In both his fiction and nonfiction, DeLillo refers to the Kennedy assassination, “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century” (*L* 181), as a turning point in American history and as a defining moment for the postmodern condition, triggering a collective existential crisis. As he put it in his *Rolling Stone* essay “American Blood,” published prior to his work on *Libra*, “What has become unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas is not the plot, of course, not the dense mass of characters and events, but the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared. We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity” (22). When he turned to a fictional account of the assassination, DeLillo sought a method for reimagining these

historical events that was true enough to the known facts to be plausible, and yet also true to the spirit of incoherence, randomness, and ambiguity that Kennedy's murder ushered in. There was nothing particularly original in his decision to speculate a CIA conspiracy involving anti-Castro dissidents with secondary support from organized crime. What is strikingly innovative, however, is the crisis mode of "religious fanaticism" he employs as vehicle for that conspiracy. His appeal to religious models should not be misconstrued as an ahistorical escapist fantasy. Rather, by turning to Gnostic paradigms DeLillo grounds his fiction in a metaphysical drama that reflects and responds to the historical cataclysm of a world gone wrong.

### **Dualism and the CIA's Theology of Secrets**

In retrospect one can see DeLillo rehearsing and complicating his dualistic depiction of the CIA in his fiction leading up to *Libra*. J. Kinnear, a double-agent working for the government who infiltrates a terrorist network in *Players*, first exposes the sinister design behind America's labyrinthine intelligence operations: "Mazes, you're correct. Intricate techniques. Our big problem in the past, as a nation, was that we didn't give our government credit for being the totally entangling force that it was. They were even more evil than we'd imagined. More evil and much more interesting" (104). Here Kinnear characterizes the American government in Manichean terms, equating it with the forces of Darkness. Yet he also concedes, "Behind every stark fact we encounter layers of ambiguity" (104). What lends unsettling ambiguity to this portrait is Kinnear's assertion that covert operatives and government officials are merely acting out the dark fantasies of the American people. "They had too many fantasies. Right. But they were our fantasies, weren't they, ultimately? The whole assortment. Our leaders simply lived them out. Our elected representatives. It's fitting, then, no more than fitting, and we were stone blind not to guess at it. All we had to do was know our own dreams" (105). This understanding

does nothing to ameliorate the evil acknowledged by Kinnear, but it does problematize the source of culpability, suggesting that government agents are not the authors of corruption so much as a symptom of the larger disease, America's epidemic dark fantasies. DeLillo reinforces this diagnosis in *The Names*. Near the end of the novel, James Axton discovers that he has been duped by the CIA, unwittingly funneling intelligence to the Agency in his capacity as a private risk-assessment analyst. Axton's preoccupation throughout much of the novel with a murderous cult colors his perspective on the CIA, leading him to regard the Agency in mythic terms: "If America is the world's living myth, then the CIA is America's myth. All the themes are there, in tiers of silence, whole bureaucracies of silence, in conspiracies and doublings and brilliant betrayals. The agency takes on shapes and appearances, embodying whatever we need at a given time to know ourselves or unburden ourselves. It gives a classical tone to our commonly felt emotions" (317). Hans Jonas argued that the crisis-mode of Gnostic myths grew out of the real historical conditions experienced by the adherents of the religion. Similarly, DeLillo suggests in *Players* and *The Names* that America's myth of the CIA—as the citadel of duplicitous betrayals and the final repository of the world's secrets, presided over by "the knowing ones"—reflects and amplifies deep-seated American fantasies which permeate the entire culture.

The culmination of DeLillo's mythological treatment of the CIA comes in *Libra*. He draws liberally but selectively from Gnosticism, in ways that are not always theologically congenial to the religion's teachings. His CIA renegades resemble in many respects the rebellious forces of Darkness as conceived by Manichaeism, but in other respects the devotees of the Agency resemble the Gnostics themselves, a select band of initiates guided by unshakeable faith that they possess privileged insights into the deepest cosmic secrets. This paradox is on display with Larry Parmenter, one of DeLillo's invented CIA agents who conspire against the

President. Like his fellow insurrectionists, Parmenter feels betrayed by Kennedy's refusal to support the Cuban uprising against Castro at the Bay of Pigs. While his resentment against the government is boundless on this score, his ill will does not extend to the CIA. He reveres the Agency for giving him a second chance after the Bay of Pigs, and he believes that his involvement in the assassination plot, though ostensibly treasonous, is actually an act of fidelity to the organization's true spirit. "It's the job of an intelligence service to resolve a nation's obsessions," he confides to his wife Beryl. "Cuba is a fixed idea. It is prickly in a way Russia is not. More unresolved. More damaging to the psyche. And this is our job, to remove the psychic threat" (L 258). If resolving America's psychic threat entails killing the leader of Cuba, or if it entails targeting the so-called "Leader of the Free World," Parmenter is willing to do whatever he deems necessary as a warrior in the Agency's holy cause. He tells his wife Beryl, "The Agency understands. It's amazing really how deeply they understand. [...] This is the nature of the business. There are shadows, there are new lights. The deeper the ambiguity, the more we believe, the more we trust, the more we band together" (L 259). Larry's adoration smacks of religious zealotry, and although his rhetoric of camaraderie and patriotic sacrifice may be meant to echo the St. Crispin's Day speech of *Henry V*, the actions of his comrades banding together against their supreme authority is in fact more reminiscent of Lucifer's rebel band of angels or the Gnostic Archons. Beryl Parmenter recognizes her husband's religious fanaticism for what it is. She reflects on Larry's obsession, "The Agency was the one subject in his life that could never be exhausted. Central Intelligence. Beryl saw it as the best organized church in the Christian world, a mission to collect and store everything that everyone has ever said and then reduce it to a microdot and call it God" (L 260). If the CIA functions for Larry and his co-conspirators as a religion, it is a heretical one, established by fringe figures who consider

themselves the true purists, engaged in clandestine rebellion against authority perceived as illegitimate, and built upon a foundational rock of secret knowledge.

In an extensive interview for *The Paris Review*, DeLillo identified religious mystery at the heart of his recurring interest in the CIA. Asked to respond to his reputation as “the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction,”<sup>3</sup> DeLillo clarified the religious function that paranoia serves in his fiction: “The important thing about the paranoia in my characters is that it operates as a form of religious awe. It’s something old, a leftover from some forgotten part of the soul” (Begley 106). This dormant force in the soul, recalling the Gnostic pneuma, is stirred to recognition by the intelligence apparatus: “And the intelligence agencies that create and service this paranoia are not interesting to me as spy handlers or masters of espionage. They represent old mysteries and fascinations, ineffable things. Central intelligence. They’re like churches that hold the final secrets” (Begley 106). One must bear in mind, however, that DeLillo invokes a “theology of secrets” without validating it. The clearest caution against the CIA’s edifice of secrecy is sounded by Nicholas Branch in *Libra*. After years occupied in “the room of theories and dreams” (L 14) sifting through the maze of documents, artifacts, and misinformation related to the Kennedy assassination, Branch makes little progress on his secret history, but he does form some sharp conclusions about the sham religious premises on which the Agency is built: “He thought they’d build a vast theology, a formal coded body of knowledge that was basically play material, secret-keeping, one of the keener pleasures and conflicts of childhood. Now he wonders if the Agency is protecting something very much like its identity—protecting its own truth, its theology of secrets” (L 442). Branch accuses the Agency of erecting an intricate labyrinth, not to house secret truths, but to hide the fact that making and withholding secrets is its essential truth. The CIA may conceive of itself, like the ancient Gnostics, as the elite possessors

of privileged knowledge. But DeLillo depicts them instead as agents of Darkness, peddling falsehood with the earnestness of true believers, weaving webs of conspiracy that not only entangle their leader but also ensnare the rebels in the process.

This dualistic paradox—misguided forces of Darkness who actually perceive themselves to be emissaries of Light—is vividly captured by Branch when he imagines a grand mural of the arch-conspirators: “If a monumental canvas existed of the five grouped conspirators, darkly scheming men being confronted by crewcut security agents in khaki suits with natural shoulders, it might be titled ‘Light Entering the Cave of the Ungodly’” (24). This ekphrastic description of an imaginary painting is likely based upon John Trumbull’s famous *Declaration of Independence*, featuring the five co-authors of the Declaration of Independence (John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin) presenting their draft to Congress at Philadelphia’s Independence Hall. Branch parodies the pretensions of the five arch-conspirators (Win Everett, Larry Parmenter, T. J. Mackey, Raymo Benítez, and Frank Vásquez) fancying themselves as freedom fighters and patriotic reformers, redirecting a misguided America back to its true course. Tellingly, Branch sets his hypothetical portrait not in Independence Hall, or even in the conference rooms of Langley, but in “the Cave of the Ungodly.” The chiaroscuro lighting at once illuminates and obscures the shadowy scene, and the religious overtones of Light struggling against Darkness cast the ungodly cave in unmistakably dualistic terms. DeLillo also invites comparison with Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave, where the illusory shadows perceived by the imprisoned cave denizens provide only distorted intimations of the true nature of reality above in the realm of light. While Gnosticism is hostile to the orderly cosmos envisioned by Hellenic philosophy, Gnostics do share with Plato the basic belief in a transcendent ideal realm distinct from and superior to the material world below.

“Light Entering the Cave of the Ungodly” perfectly encapsulates the tension and confusion between these opposed realms in *Libra*. “There is much here that is holy,” yes, but there is also much here that is profane.

### **Astrology and Self-Knowledge in the Cosmic Prison**

On four occasions the thought “There is a world inside the world” is attributed to Oswald (*L* 13, 47, 153, 277). From his perspective, this suspicion hints at a hidden order and driving force, just outside the reaches of perception, propelling him forward toward his destiny. DeLillo’s formal construction of *Libra* lends credence to this intuition, alternating chapters between Oswald’s private world and the clandestine world of the rogue agents who eventually recruit Oswald into their dark conspiracy. The structural principle of a world inside the world is consistent with the interlocking spheres of Gnosticism, imprisoning humans in the material world and trapping the immortal pneuma inside mortal bodies. In *The Gnostic Religion* Jonas observes,

The universe, the domain of the Archons, is like a vast prison whose innermost dungeon is the earth, the scene of man’s life. Around and above it the cosmic spheres are ranged like concentric enclosing shells. [...] The religious significance of this cosmic architecture lies in the idea that everything which intervenes between here and the beyond serves to separate man from God, not merely by spatial distance but through active demonic force. Thus the vastness and multiplicity of the cosmic system express the degree to which man is removed from God. (43)

Gnosticism envisions a world designed to trap and deceive humans, barring us from knowledge of the supreme God and of the divine remnant hidden at the core of each person. Although the

mantra “There is a world inside the world” is ascribed exclusively to Oswald, the principle is equally operative within the sphere of the conspirators. Drawing upon the now notorious policy of “plausible deniability” first instituted by Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles during the Kennedy administration,<sup>4</sup> DeLillo depicts an entire government structured to suppress knowledge. The initial author of the assassination conspiracy, Win Everett, reflects, “Knowledge was a danger, ignorance a cherished asset” (L 21). The containment of knowledge involved quarantining each layer in the chain of command from specific awareness of incriminating actions being performed at subordinate levels. “Details were a form of contamination,” Win recalls, noting of his superiors, “They expected to be misled. They counted on it” (L 21). DeLillo exposes the twisted absurdity of an “intelligence” community steeped in calculated ignorance of its own information and operations, where knowledge is reckoned a liability and its absence a cherished and cultivated virtue. Installed at the top of this pyramid of suppressed intelligence were the President and his staff: “The White House was to be the summit of unknowing. It was as if an unsullied leader redeemed some ancient truth which the others were forced to admire only in the abstract, owing to their mission in the convoluted world” (22). The Gnostic sensibilities of this passage are particularly pronounced. The world is so convoluted that lies pass for truth, ignorance prevails against knowledge, and a false mythology reigns wherein “the summit of unknowing” is perversely misconstrued as a “Shining City on a Hill.” The cruelest irony of this system in *Libra* is that the very mechanisms designed to insulate “the unsullied leader” from knowledge actually end up keeping him ignorant of the plot against his life.

One of the most striking features of Gnosticism in comparison with its contemporaneous rivals is its depiction of the cosmos as an evil prison. Not only is the earth and everything in it regarded as a base-born product, but even the stars above are viewed as complicit in humanity’s

imprisonment down below. Gnosticism retains much of the Hellenic and Egyptian interest in the stars, astrology, and augury, sharing the conviction that individual and collective destiny is legible in the celestial spheres. However, as Jonas points out, Gnostic notions of universal fate (*heimarmene*) are based upon an antagonistic relationship with the stars: “This *heimarmene* is dispensed by the planets, or the stars in general, the mythical exponents of the inexorable and hostile law of the universe. The change in the emotional content of the term ‘cosmos’ is nowhere better symbolized than in this depreciation of the formerly most divine part of the visible world, the celestial spheres” (254). Gnosticism again proves to be remarkably syncretic as well as subversive, appropriating pre-established astrological practices only to undermine their original purpose. As Jonas elegantly describes it, “The starry sky—which from Plato to the Stoics was the purest embodiment of reason in the cosmic hierarchy, the paradigm of intelligibility and therefore of the divine aspect of the sensible realm—now stared man in the face with the fixed glare of alien power and necessity. Its rule is tyranny, and not providence” (254-55). The celestial spheres are still ceded great power in the Gnostic system, but that power is abusive, functioning not as a representative of divinity but as a malevolent impediment between humanity and the divine. Jonas characterizes the resulting condition much like a proto-existentialist crisis: “Under this pitiless sky, which no longer inspires worshipful confidence, man becomes conscious of his utter forlornness, of his being not so much a part of, but unaccountably placed in and exposed to, the enveloping system” (255).

As his title indicates, DeLillo makes vital use of astrology in *Libra*, and its nefarious function in the novel bespeaks much closer kinship with the Gnostic variant than with more familiar benign versions. Lee Harvey Oswald was born on October 18, 1939, which makes his zodiac sign Libra, or the scales. The handler assigned to recruit Oswald into the conspiracy is

David Ferrie, a Mephistophelean figure who diabolically manipulates cosmic logic in an effort to tip the Libran scales of Oswald's Faustian bargain. Like an augur of old, Ferrie studies the stars for premonitions of coming events: "Astrology is the language of the night sky, of starry aspect and position, the truth at the edge of human affairs" (*L* 175). He claims to have developed an acute aptitude for interpreting the hidden connections that bind seemingly coincidental events: "I've studied patterns of coincidence," Ferrie said to Lee. "Coincidence is a science waiting to be discovered. How patterns emerge outside the bounds of cause and effect" (*L* 44). DeLillo mines numerous tantalizing coincidences from the Warren Commission Report investigating President Kennedy's murder. Interviewer Kevin Connolly noted "the almost mystical presence of coincidence" in *Libra*, and DeLillo readily assented: "You used the word mystical. And that's what it is to me too. It's a kind of accidental holiness, a randomness so intense and surrounded by such violence that it takes on nearly a sacred inexplicability" (35). Ferrie fosters a climate of sacredness in his dealings with Oswald, but he sees nothing accidental, random, or inexplicable in the mounting cosmic coincidences. Rather, he claims to intuit the dark hand of fate guiding events toward a climactic confrontation between Oswald and Kennedy.

DeLillo's portrait of David Ferrie draws strongly upon Gnostic elements, but once again he employs slippage between categories, associating Ferrie on the one hand with the entangling network of Darkness, and on the other hand with those who seek gnosis via self-actualization. In one of the most frequently cited passages from *Libra*, Ferrie tries to make Oswald understand the forces leading to his collision course with the President:

"Think 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 the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across 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." (L 339)

The notion of mystical powers gaining momentum to unleash violent anarchy upon the world sounds perfectly consonant with the tyrannical cosmos envisioned by Gnosticism. But the language Ferrie uses to plead his case actually locates the source of the gathering storm internally, emanating "out of the deepest levels of the self." When Ferrie reads in the newspaper that the President's motorcade will be passing directly beneath Oswald's workplace window, he is struck with religious awe, as if reading the news in the stars: "I thought to myself, Old Leon's *looking* at this. What's he feeling right now? What were you feeling, Leon? It must have been an incredible moment. Like a vision in the sky" (L 384). But again Ferrie shifts his focus away from those external forces augured in the celestial spheres and resituates the emphasis inward. He passionately proclaims, "There's no such *thing* as coincidence. We don't know what to call it, so we say coincidence. It happens because you make it happen" (L 384).

DeLillo uses Ferrie to explore the peculiar crosscurrents between Gnosticism and modern psychology.<sup>5</sup> In *The Gnostic Gospels* Elaine Pagels establishes certain core affinities between these movements. For instance, "Both Gnosticism and psychotherapy value, above all, knowledge—the self-knowledge which is insight. They agree that, lacking this, a person experiences the sense of being driven by impulses he does not understand" (124). Ferrie tempts Oswald to eat the fruit of psychic self-knowledge, and in so doing to shape his own destiny. Pagels adds, "Many gnostics share with psychotherapy a second major premise: both agree—against orthodox Christianity—that the psyche bears *within itself* the potential for liberation or

destruction” (126). She illustrates this conviction with a passage attributed to Jesus in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*: ““If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy”” (qtd. Pagels 126). This is precisely the moral of Ferrie’s lesson to Oswald in a series of conversations that function collectively as a kind of Gnostic sermon. Of course, one must acknowledge that this Mephistophelean figure may simply be adopting the rhetoric of psycho-religious salvation as a devious strategy to mislead Oswald (and America) toward damnation. Either way, whether the fault lies in Oswald’s stars or in himself, the effect remains the same: Ferrie moves the conspiracy to kill the President forward by persuading the shooter to trust cosmic premonitions, summon up his inner resolve, take up his rifle and “make it happen.”

John A. McClure, one of the most sensitive readers of the religious dimensions in DeLillo’s oeuvre, notes that David Ferrie’s far-fetched ideas are actually granted a surprising degree of credibility within the context of *Libra*. McClure detects “something like a grand psychic conspiracy at work in what we call coincidence” (114). The romance of conspiracy is ultimately rejected in *Libra*, but nonetheless “the whole trope of conspiracy undergoes what might be called a respiritualization: we are asked to envision a world in which dark, unnameable psychic forces are in play, forces which, like those of magic and divinity, are not subject to the physical laws we think we are bound to obey” (115). The dynamic McClure accurately chronicles in *Libra*, intermingling spiritual darkness with ineffable psychic forces, is fueled by a series of metaphysical tropes incorporated and strategically adapted from Gnosticism.

### **Demiurges and the Curse of Creation**

DeLillo’s work frequently features creative figures—writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers—and draws self-conscious attention to their creative processes and by extension to

his own. His explorations never assume a self-congratulatory stance praising the noble calling of art. On the contrary, he scrutinizes the dark motives, pathological obsessions, and dangerous consequences of art. For instance, in *Mao II* and again in *Falling Man* he casts a cold eye on the fraught kinship between art and terrorism. *Libra* is one of his few novels not to feature any artists as such, yet the novel is dominated by Frankenstein-like creators and their monstrous creations. *Libra* operates not only as historiographic metafiction but also as self-referential religious fanaticism—perhaps *cosmological metafiction* describes it best—where plots and creatures devised by multiple embedded demiurges take on a deadly life of their own.

Recall that Gnosticism reserves its most virulent scorn for the Demiurge. In his essay on the Gnostic mood, Hans Jonas reflects, “This figure of an imperfect, blind, or evil creator is a gnostic symbol of the first order. In his general conception he reflects the gnostic contempt for the world; in his concrete description he often is a clearly recognizable caricature of the Old Testament God” (269). The Demiurge was himself the debased offspring of an illegitimate abortion, the lower Sophia. By perpetuating this corrupt pattern, creating an entire fallen world peopled with creatures in his own flawed image, he epitomizes the phenomenon of false imitation excoriated by the Gnostics. Jonas traces the devolution of this theme from its sources in Plato: “The copying of ideal archetypes by the demiurge was a Platonic teaching, and like the whole doctrine of ‘forms’ it meant to confer upon the ‘copy’ a measure of validity together with its necessary imperfection” (269). However, as was so often the case, Gnosticism appropriated Hellenic and later Christian ideals only to transvaluate them:

In Gnosticism, on the contrary, the motif is turned into that of illicit imitation (counterfeiting) which is at once presumptuous and bungling. Homage is turned into opprobrium. Thus when the archons say ‘Come, let us make a man after the

image we have seen,' Biblical and Platonic lore are perverted at the same time, and the resulting *imago Dei*-character of created man, far from being a straight metaphysical honor, assumes a dubious, if not outright sinister, meaning. (269-70)

From a Gnostic perspective, then, being created in the counterfeit image of this deranged God is an ontological curse. The curse is extended further by humans through our compulsion to reproduce our own images, inheriting the poisoned birthright of the Demiurge and bequeathing it to our own progeny. In *Le Mauvais D miurge*, the iconoclastic E. M. Cioran sharply charges, "the Creation is in fact a *fault*, man's famous sin thereby appearing as a minor version of a much graver one. What are we guilty of, except of having followed, more or less slavishly, the Creator's example?" (5) The Gnostic depiction of the creative impulse as a congenital disease of counterfeiting deeply informs DeLillo's depiction of creators and creatures in *Libra*.

The first creator-figure identified as initial architect of the Kennedy conspiracy is Win Everett. A disgruntled Agency man burned by the Bay of Pigs failure, Everett hatches his plot in exile. He is convinced that anti-Castro forces need an electrifying event to reinvigorate their cause and to derail Kennedy's drift toward normalization with Cuba. His plan is to stage a *failed* assassination in Miami, a pseudo-attempt on Kennedy's life, and to pin it on Castro. Everett theorizes that the American public will be so outraged that they will support any retaliatory effort to eliminate Castro. When pitching the original plan for a fake assassination to Larry Parmenter, he invokes the same rhetoric of destiny and self-realization that Ferrie later employs to recruit Oswald for the real assassination. Win coaxes, "Some things we wait for all our lives without knowing it. Then it happens and we recognize at once who we are and how we are meant to proceed. This is the idea I've always wanted. I believe you'll sense it is right. It's the high risk we need. We need an electrifying event. You've been waiting every bit as much as I have" (*L*

27). The reader's interpretation of this exchange is colored by our foreknowledge of how disastrously it will unravel. We know that the fake assassination attempt ultimately fails to fail. Therefore, Win's early confidence in the rightness of the plan and his arrogant presumption of control over the plot is invalidated from the start. "This plan has levels and variations I've only begun to explore but it is already, essentially, right," he reassures Larry. "I feel the rightness. I know what scientists mean when they talk about elegant solutions. This plan speaks to something deep inside me. It has a powerful logic. I've felt it unfolding for week, like a dream whose meaning slowly becomes apparent" (*L 28*). The reader knows otherwise, recognizing Win Everett as a mad scientist giving life to a monster he will prove incapable of mastering.

Everett's chief role in the unfolding drama is to create a shooter from scratch. "We do the whole thing with paper. Passports, drivers' licenses, address books. Our team of shooters disappears but the police find a trail. Mail-order forms, change-of-address cards, photographs. We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter" (*L 28*). The language he uses to characterize this creative process suggests more than the mere invention of a profile with which to deceive gullible reporters and investigators. "Win Everett was at work devising a general shape, a life. He would script a gunman out of ordinary dog-eared paper, the contents of a wallet. Parmenter would contrive to get document blanks from the Records Branch. Mackey would find a model for the character Everett was in the process of creating. They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world" (*L 50*). Win schemes like a latter-day Dr. Frankenstein piecing together a new human being out of scrap parts, or like a Kabbalist rabbi creating a golem to do his bidding—all kindred variants related to the Gnostic Demiurge. Most revealingly, by usurping the role of creator to fashion his own character, Win gradually experiences a metafictional epiphany that he is likewise just a character created by

someone else, a subordinate Rosencrantz to some larger scheme beyond his control. “We lead more interesting lives than we think. We are characters in plots, without the compression and numinous sheen. Our lives, examined carefully in all their affinities and links, abound with suggestive meaning, with themes and involute turnings we have not allowed ourselves to see completely. He would show the secret symmetries in a non-descript life” (*L* 78). As Mark Osteen correctly notes, “Everett’s secret life demands the exercise of imagination that permits him to be at once author and character. Thus his plot produces not only an identity, but also a private history and a community of fellows—a world inside the world” (158).

The fellow insiders who make up that secret community have demiurgic pretensions of their own, however, which soon sends the plot careening deathward out of Everett’s control. Consistent with the Gnostic mood of this cosmological metafiction, each misguided act of creation or re-creation, each concoction of a fresh hell, only adds to a bubbling cauldron of chaos, confusion, violence, and evil that boils over on November 22, 1963. Of all the demiurgic figures involved in the conspiracy, the most elusive is Oswald himself. The separate attempts by Everett, Mackey, and Ferrie to author “The Shooter” in his own image are constantly thwarted by Oswald’s own mercurial counter-efforts to create new identities for himself. Who is the real Oswald? DeLillo observes in “American Blood,” “‘Lee Harvey Oswald’ often seems a secret design worked out by men that will never surface—a procedural diagram, a course in fabricated biography. Who put him together? He is not an actor so much as he is a character, a fictional character” (24). Yet DeLillo also asserts in the same essay that “Oswald was his own double” (22), implying that he was a metafictional self-reflection, a self-authored character, a creation inside a creation. Oswald is identified early on by the plotters in *Libra* as ideally suited for the part of shooter/fall guy. But the more they investigate Oswald, the more uneasy Win Everett

becomes: “It was no longer possible to hide from the fact that Lee Oswald existed independent of the plot” (*L* 178). The independent existence of “The Shooter” poses an inconvenient distraction from Win’s ideal composition. Oswald is a perpetual work in progress constantly under revision by Oswald himself. When Mackey breaks into Oswald’s New Orleans apartment he discovers discarded drafts of potential selves—weapons, aliases, forged documents, Marxist literature.

“Lee H. Oswald was real all right. What Mackey learned about him in a brief tour of his apartment made Everett feel displaced. It produced a sensation of the eeriest panic, gave him a glimpse of the fiction he’d been devising, a fiction living prematurely in the world” (*L* 179).

Before the assassination, Oswald holes up in a series of claustrophobic rooms, crafting new identities worthy of his supposedly great destiny. Afterwards in a Dallas prison cell, his focus shifts to self-reinvention, studying his case and managing his legacy, adding the metafictional function of critic to his previous roles of author and character: “It was beginning to occur to him that he’d found his life’s work. After the crime comes the reconstruction. He will have motives to analyze, the whole rich question of truth and guilt. Time to reflect, time to turn this thing in his mind. Here is a crime that clearly yields material for deep interpretation” (*L* 434). On the level of cosmological metafiction, the language Oswald employs to define his new condition is again notable for its Gnostic inflections: “He will be able to bend the light of that heightened moment, shadows fixed on the lawn, the limousine shimmering and still. Time to grow in self-knowledge, to explore the meaning of what he’s done” (*L* 434). As with so many crucial moments in *Libra*, DeLillo bends the light and shadows of Gnosticism to fit his own purposes, in this case depicting Oswald as both a deluded Demiurge constantly engendering new corrupt self-images, and as an ascetic seeker of self-knowledge, dwelling in the cave of the ungodly but aspiring toward the light of gnosis.

The most deeply embedded creator figure in *Libra* is Nicholas Branch. Unlike all the other main characters, he was not directly involved with the conspiracy or any of the conspirators. Writing over two decades after the assassination, he alone views events from a position of historical hindsight. With his CIA access to classified information he knows more than any of the principal players and can appreciate the individual and national consequences of their actions. Branch was not involved in the plot to kill the President, but he is intimately implicated in the plot to reconstruct the narrative of those events. Peter Boxall offers a bold and compelling interpretation of *Libra*, arguing that Branch is the metafictional linchpin holding the entire narrative together: “Of all the controlling figures in the novel, Nicholas Branch is perhaps the most powerful. Branch can appear to be the novel’s uber-narrator, retrospectively choreographing the development both of Oswald’s convoluted career, and of the Everett/Parmenter/Mackey plot to implicate Oswald in the assassination. Indeed, his influence can appear so powerful, at times, as to virtually drown out the sound of Oswald’s voice, as well as those of Everett, Parmenter, and Mackey” (137). Branch may be regarded as the Wizard of Os(wald), the man behind the curtain shaping the narrative we read. He claims to have made little progress on his formal history, but that may only indicate his redirected prioritization elsewhere, toward a fictional recreation of events in terms of religious fanaticism. A number of clues point to Branch as the “central intelligence” within *Libra*.

“Nicholas Branch sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams” (14). From this first description of Branch, he is established as one of several “men in small rooms” who dominate the novel. Within the novel’s logic of historiographic and cosmological metafiction, a world where there’s no such thing as coincidence, the common setting of so many scenes begins to look suspiciously like a Demiurge

creating simulacra modeled in his own image and reflecting his own situation. Bound to his book-filled cell and compelled to imaginatively re-inhabit the minds of the conspirators, time and time again Branch projects his own experiences onto the characters he investigates. Consider for instance the opening depiction of Branch in his archive, musing on the purpose of his project: “Six point nine seconds of heat and light. Let’s call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let’s devote our lives to understanding this moment, separating the elements of each crowded second. We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams” (L 15). Note the uncanny similarities between Branch’s *raison d’être* and that of Oswald in his prison cell after shooting the President: “They will give him writing paper and books. He will fill his cell with books about the case. He will have time to educate himself in criminal law, ballistics, acoustics, photography. Whatever pertains to the case he will examine and consume. People will come to see him, the lawyers first, then psychologists, historians, biographers. His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald” (L 434-35). This passage might just as well serve as the job description for Branch, so perfectly does it mirror his assignment at the CIA. The assassin is here reconceived as a reflection of the archivist who will eventually reconstruct his story. Nicholas Branch’s *mise en abyme* is embedded in his recreations, a point more or less conceded midway through the novel: “This is the room of dreams, the room where it has taken him all these years to learn that his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms. Is he one of them now? Frustrated, stuck, self-watching, looking for a means of connection, a way to break out” (L 181). Yes, he is one of them now, and vice versa—each character a counterfeit image of his progenitor, imprisoned in his room, in the cosmos, and in *Libra*. As Boxall asserts, “the narrative is balanced and tuned in

such a way that, even as the cast of assassination characters move and speak, we can sometimes see, stirring behind the fabric of their lives, visible through the taut skin of the bright hot skies, the outline of Branch, at his computer, in his room of theories in 1988” (138).

DeLillo self-consciously embeds multiple levels of creation in the novel, and these narrative frames within frames are imbued with trademark Gnostic anxiety toward the creative process. DeLillo is neither outside the cycle of invention he depicts nor exempt from *Libra*'s Gnostic critique. He explains in the “Author’s Note” at the end of the novel, “Any novel about a major unresolved event will aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I’ve altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues and characters. Among these invented characters are all officers of intelligence agencies and all organized crime figures, except for those who are part of the book’s background” (L 458). DeLillo invents an authorial avatar in his own image, Nicholas Branch, who is fueled by similar obsessions and faces similar challenges, but who differs from his creator in that, as a CIA agent on assignment, he has privileged access to (fictionalized) information about the assassination. Branch fulfills a necessary narrative function for DeLillo, and Win Everett meets a similar need for Branch. Everett serves as author of the conspiracy plot, and he reflects many of Branch’s doubts and fears as that plot spirals out of control. Win essentially creates “The Shooter,” the protagonist of his dark plot. As discussed above, Oswald mutinies against the authorial limitations imposed upon him by his creators; yet for all his self-reinventions, evasions, and volatile unpredictability, Oswald ends up more or less faithfully playing his assigned part of fall guy just as scripted, fulfilling the needs and reflecting the images of the various demiurges who had a hand in his creation. And what of the grand fabulator of *Libra*, Don DeLillo—who invented him? Anthony DeCurtis cleverly opened his interview with

DeLillo by noting, “The Kennedy assassination seems perfectly in line with the concerns of your fiction. Do you feel you could have invented it if it hadn’t happened?” Without missing a beat DeLillo replied, “Maybe it invented me. Certainly, when it happened, I was not a fully formed writer; I had only published some short stories in small quarterlies. As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination. So it’s possible I wouldn’t have become the kind of writer I am if it weren’t for the assassination” (DeCurtis 56). Perhaps the preoccupation with creators in *Libra* is partially attributable to DeLillo’s sense that his own artistic genesis was conceived from the deaths of Kennedy and Oswald. DeLillo’s self-creation myth, founded upon violent acts that engendered an era of confusion, again proves perfectly compatible with the pessimistic cosmos and catastrophic creations myths of Gnosticism.

The single most potent distillation of the Demiurge myth and the Gnostic mood in *Libra* comes in the brief parable about Suzanne, the six-year-old daughter of Win Everett. Suzanne possesses two treasured figurines, “a clay man and a clay woman that her best friend, Missy, had given her as a birthday present” (*L* 366). For most readers the clay figures are likely to evoke God’s creation of humans from clay in Genesis. However, Suzanne’s behavior with respect to her clay man and woman does not resemble the Old Testament God so much as the Gnostic Demiurge. Suzanne stays awake at night, waiting for her parents to fall asleep so that she can hide her figures in a safer place. “Once they found the Little Figures, that was the end of Suzanne. She would have no protection left in the world” (*L* 365). On the literal level, Suzanne’s behavior is unsettling because it shows that even a six-year-old child has internalized the paranoid spirit of the age. On a cosmological level, her covetous attempt to hide her creatures away, shielding them from detection lest they be abducted, succinctly captures the relationship of

the Demiurge to his mortal vessels housing the divine spark. Suzanne essentially constructs her own little cosmos around the “Little Figures,” a microcosmic “world inside the world” that mirrors the novel’s macrocosmos. “The Little Figures were not toys. She never played with them. The whole reason for the Figures was to hide them until the time when she might need them. She had to keep them near and safe in case the people who called themselves her mother and father were really somebody else” (*L* 366). Like father, like daughter. Win believes that he is protecting Suzanne from dangerous knowledge, just as he attempts to protect his superiors in the government from incriminating information. But in fact, she enacts in miniature the same anxieties, delusions, and paranoia, cloaking her clay man and woman in darkness, ignorance, and secrecy. Suzanne Everett is a true child of her age, and Gnosticism provides DeLillo with the language, motifs, ethos, and crisis modes he needs to best capture that dark spirit.

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Asked by Maria Nadotti what he thought of Oliver Stone’s blockbuster *JFK*, DeLillo offered this revealing criticism: “Regardless of his vigorous imagination I don’t think it was anything but an example of a particular type of nostalgia: the nostalgia for a master plan, the conspiracy which explains absolutely everything” (116). DeLillo’s treatment of the same subject matter differs markedly from that of Stone. DeLillo concedes the human urge to default to a “master plan” which explains everything; in fact, he flirts with such conspiracy theories himself. As he told William Goldstein, “Believing in conspiracy is almost comforting because, in a sense, a conspiracy is a story we tell each other to ward off the dread of chaotic and random acts. Conspiracy offers coherence. [...] Perhaps we’ve invented conspiracies for our own psychic well-being, to heal ourselves” (51). The function of Gnosticism in *Libra* is to provide the framework for a grand cosmic conspiracy of Darkness against the Light, where arch-villains

design and maintain the world as a vast penal colony to incarcerate humans away from divine knowledge. However, DeLillo indulges historical and metaphysical conspiracy theories only to invalidate them in the end. In fact, once he begins pulling threads from the plot to kill Kennedy, the coherent fabric of conspiracy begins to unravel, revealing a masterless plan beset with mistakes, blindspots, miscommunications, cross purposes, betrayals, and dumb luck.

Nicholas Branch warns himself early in the novel to resist the temptation of cleaving uncritically to a tidy metanarrative where all the pieces of the assassination coalesce into the perfect crime: “There is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations. There is no need, he thinks, to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions” (*L* 58). Branch’s demiurgic impulses get the better of him, however, and he proceeds to weave a tangled web of interconnections that resemble a “grand and masterful scheme.” But by the end he steps back and soberly reassesses the gap between conspiracy fantasies and facts. The allure is for a conspiracy that makes sense out of crisis, even if it is a sense with evil intent. But after years of analyzing the Kennedy assassination and trying to discern or impose a coherent logic, Branch learns Synge’s disillusioning lesson that “there’s a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed” (169). He demurs against the allure of arch-conspiracy: “Nicholas Branch thinks he knows better. He has learned enough about the days and months preceding November 22, and enough about the twenty-second itself, to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like” (*L* 441). The metanarrative of a coherent master plan—or, in the case of Gnosticism, of a coherent anti-cosmological system—falls apart under Branch’s and DeLillo’s unsparing scrutiny.

John McClure draws a clear demarcation between postmodern conspiracy narratives and the great romance narratives of the past. He concludes, “When we romanticize conspiracy, DeLillo suggests, we misrepresent it, invest it with powers and possibilities it does not possess” (106). Those powers and possibilities, accurately identified by McClure, “posit a world alive with demonic and divine forces, and an inner world similarly profound and intense” (106). Although McClure does not list it by name, Gnosticism deserves special consideration within this context as DeLillo’s tropological exemplar for the quasi-demonic forces galvanizing the conspiracy plot of *Libra*. DeLillo retains a strong residual attraction to pre-modern myths, the spiritual quests they inspire, and the cosmological consolations they purport to provide. Yet DeLillo’s methods in *Libra* are ultimately deconstructive, using Gnosticism as his blueprint for reconstructing the Kennedy assassination on an epic scale, only to dismantle his own grand historical and cosmological edifices over the course of the novel. In Eliot’s terms, Gnosticism is instrumental in “giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177-78). In the end, however, DeLillo appropriates Gnosticism as a structural convenience rather than endorsing it as a viable system for redeeming the futility and anarchy of the post-Kennedy era. He draws upon these subversive heretical sects only to out-Gnostic the Gnostics. He hoists Gnosticism upon its own transgressive petard, demythologizing the myths he uses by depicting shabby fallen angels, self-deluded mystics, and cut-rate demiurges, demoted from positions of cosmic gravitas to postmodern exile in the cave of the ungodly.

#### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Linda Hutcheon asserts that the term “postmodern” when applied to fiction implies “fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it ‘historiographic metafiction.’” (3). She offers this influential definition: “Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts

of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature” (4). She adds, in a description particularly appropriate to DeLillo’s use of Gnosticism in *Libra*, “In the postmodern novel the conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied” (5).

<sup>2</sup> The most complete compendium of translated Gnostic scriptures is *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed), ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> This oft-quoted epithet was first applied to DeLillo by Robert Towers in his review of *Libra*, “From the Grassy Knoll,” *The New York Review of Books* (18 August 1988): [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).

<sup>4</sup> In 1975 in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the U.S. Senate formed a select committee to investigate the history, operations, protocols, and abuses of the American intelligence agencies. Chaired by Senator Frank Church, the Church Committee published fourteen reports, exposing a number of dubious and sometimes outright illegal covert activities conducted by the CIA, FBI, and NSA. The policy of “plausible denial” is defined in Section II.B (11-12) of the “Interim Report: Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders.” The policy is systematically rebuked in Section IV.C.5.a (277-79) of the same report. The Church Committee Reports are available in their entirety online at [www.aarclibrary.org](http://www.aarclibrary.org).

<sup>5</sup> Harold Bloom, a self-professed Jewish Gnostic, has devoted a lifetime to explicating Gnosticism and establishing its lasting impact on intellectual history. He has frequently posited the seminal Gnostic influence on Sigmund Freud’s psychology; see for instance Chapters Four and Five of *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982), and Section II of *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead, 1996). The other major psychological figure inarguably influenced by Gnosticism is Carl Jung, who made a concerted study of the ancient movement and wrote several essays on the subject, including a mystical treatise composed in the voice of the Gnostic teacher Basilides entitled “Seven Sermons of the Dead.” See *The Gnostic Jung*, ed. Robert Alan Segal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992).

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