

2017

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Graley Herren
Xavier University

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Recommended Citation

Herren, Graley, "Love-Lies-Bleeding: Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Dying Man" (2017). *Faculty Scholarship*. 567.
http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty/567

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Chapter 6

Love-Lies-Bleeding

Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Dying Man

Graley Herren

Reviewing the Steppenwolf Theatre's premiere of *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, Thomas Adler of the *Chicago Reader* stated a view of DeLillo's drama shared by many: "As a playwright, Don DeLillo makes an excellent novelist."¹ The indictment against novelists attempting to translate their literary success to the stage is so familiar that one could almost write the review before seeing the play: the pace is slow, the action static, the exposition excessive, there's too much telling and not enough showing. According to Adler's bill of particulars, "*Love-Lies-Bleeding* is essentially a fiction in dialogue form. You can close your eyes, listen, and never feel as if you missed anything important. Indeed, you may find your eyes closing against your will. With nothing crucial to feed on despite highly competent acting and beautiful stage pictures, the optic orb all too easily opts out."² Unquestionably, there are enough bad plays already being written and produced without novelists quitting their day jobs to exacerbate the problem. But in the case of DeLillo's third produced play and first of the new millennium, critics and spectators have too hastily opted out with their optic orbs, because there is much more to the play than meets the inattentive eye.

Given its contemporaneity with the notorious Terri Schiavo case, *Love-Lies-Bleeding* is typically pigeonholed as a "euthanasia play." To be sure, much of the main action revolves around the looming death of artist Alex Macklin (who is bound to a wheelchair in a permanent vegetative state after two massive strokes) and the efforts of his son Sean and second wife Toinette (with reluctant cooperation from his current wife Lia) to hasten his death by administering morphine. Judged purely in terms of its contributions to the national debate spurred by the Schiavo case—issues concerning the quality of life, the right to die, and the controversy over who should make those ultimate decisions when the patient has lost the ability to reason or

communicate—*Love-Lies-Bleeding* is a thoughtful but otherwise unremarkable drama. DeLillo has no aspiration to become Ibsen or Shaw, however, let alone a Lifetime Movie hack. The realist standards of the social problem play are the wrong criteria for taking the full measure of *Love-Lies-Bleeding*.

The euthanasia plot is a MacGuffin, a narrative contrivance which partially obscures DeLillo's deeper interests. Instead of replicating the popular paradigm for approaching this topic, DeLillo begins from an alternative premise: what might these ethically provocative and personally wrenching end-of-life decisions look like filtered through the perspective of a dying artist? What goes on in the mind of a creator at the end of life? To adapt the Elton John/Bernie Taupin line, we might think of the drama as "Love Lies Bleeding in My Head." The play dramatizes the dying reveries of Alex Macklin, a seventy-year-old man who is physically immobilized and incommunicative. Yet Alex is still lucid enough to be aware of his dilemma and curious enough to meditate upon his own mortality, to remember previous encounters that have shaped his attitudes toward death, to enact debates and fantasize potential scenarios whereby an ensemble cast of his loved ones collaborate to enact his end. In an interview promoting his first produced play, *The Day Room*, DeLillo reflected upon the intrinsic connection between the craft of acting and the human propensity for denying death:

I began to sense a connection, almost a metaphysical connection, between the craft of acting and the fear we all have of dying. It seemed to me that actors are a kind of model for the ways in which we hide from the knowledge we inevitably possess of our final extinction. There's a sense in which actors teach us how to hide. There's something about the necessary shift in identity which actors make in the ordinary course of their work that seems almost a guide to concealing what we know about ourselves.³

By the time DeLillo progresses to *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, he interrogates the links between acting and mortality with increased precision, sophistication, and metatheatrical self-awareness—as a playwright, that is, and not merely as a moonlighting novelist. Furthermore, the later play extends DeLillo's initial interests, exploring how theatrical performance can serve as a vehicle for confronting death, not just avoiding it, and doing so in ways that acknowledge both the fear and the allure of death under conditions *in extremis*.

From the moment the dim lights rise on *Love-Lies-Bleeding* it is apparent that we are not witnessing a traditional realist play. The opening stage directions explain, "Two actors appear as Alex. One plays the character in three episodes that precede the main action. The other plays Alex *in extremis*, a helpless figure attached to a feeding tube."⁴ Aside from the "three episodes that precede the main action," *Love-Lies-Bleeding* may seem like

a straightforward drama about family-assisted suicide. However, those three crucial episodes establish the hermeneutic codes by which the entire play should be understood. The present study will focus primarily upon the interpretive implications of those scenes at the beginning, middle, and end of the play. There is nothing unusual in casting separate actors to play a character at different stages of his life. However, the opening scene and its continuation in Act Three, Scene Nine feature both incarnations of Alex on stage at once, occupying the same boards but located in entirely distinct spatiotemporal dimensions from one another within the drama's narrative. The classical unities of time, place, and action are blatantly violated from the start. Act One, Scene One features "*Alex and Lia, one year before the main action of the play.*" In this scene Alex, debilitated by a first stroke but still fully communicative, recalls a childhood memory of seeing a dead man on the subway. Meanwhile, throughout the first scene, "*Across the stage, in scant light, barely visible, there is the sitting figure of a man*"—that is, the elder catatonic Alex; for clarity's sake, think of him as Alex-70.⁵ The sitting figure's dusky lighting sets him apart from the action. Furthermore, his placement vis-à-vis the scene between Lia and his younger self (call him Alex-69) suggests a play-within-the-play framework. Alex-70 is the Claudius-like spectator of a mousetrap commenting portentously upon his own condition; or even the Prospero-like author/director presiding over a scene he himself conjures and choreographs. Alex-70 has an overtly spectral, other-worldly demeanor, but the more mundane scene between Alex-69 and Lia is also staged on a "spare and semi-abstract" set that subtly undercuts its realism.⁶ All of these dramaturgical techniques conspire from the start to expose the artifice of the performance and to demarcate the various zones of the stage as separate planes of consciousness.

The agency behind that consciousness belongs unmistakably to Alex Macklin. The opening scene is drawn specifically from Alex's past, and it is selected for restaging precisely because of its relevance to his present condition. "I saw a dead man on the subway once. I was ten or eleven, riding with my father. [...] He sits there, and I'm the only one that sees him. I see him so clearly now I could almost tell you things about his life."⁷ Were it not for Alex-70's faintly visible wheelchair and feeding tube, the audience might easily mistake the sitting figure on stage as a representation of the dead man on the subway. And for all practical purposes they are the same, or soon will be. Alex is dying, and he knows it. This recognition prompts him to recall his first encounter with a dead person, a sitting figure who now serves as a mirror of his own pending death. As a human, the clock started ticking on Alex's death the moment he was born. But he seems to have come into full possession of this cursed human birthright—the foreknowledge of his own mortality—that day on the train as a child. Alex-10 boarded the train

bound for death when he saw a premonition of his future condition, and now Alex-70 is nearing the end of the line where the prophecy will be fulfilled. It is interesting, however, that DeLillo chooses not to stage the foundational encounter on the subway, but instead stages Alex-69 struggling to recount details of that distant memory to his wife. The point of this convolution is to foreground the slippery mechanics of memory, of calling back distant events to the mind's eye, of converting experience to narrative, of spectatorship (as a boy he watched the dead man as he now watches his previous self, and as Lia watches his former self, and as the audience watches them all), and of imagination (as a boy he imagined details of the dead man's life, much as the audience is preparing to view details of Alex's death). Far from the amateur bumbblings of a novelist who should stick to his typewriter and stay out of the theater, DeLillo's opening scene is the work of a mature dramatic technician at the height of his powers. Act One, Scene One is a marvel of complexity, economy, and highly sophisticated theatricality, establishing not only the key themes that will dominate the rest of the play, but also demonstrating how the entire play should be viewed as refracted through the prism of Alex Macklin's dying perspective.

Love-Lies-Bleeding should also be viewed within the broader theatrical context, particularly rich in American drama, of the "memory play" subgenre. When Tom Wingfield announced "[t]he play is memory" at the beginning of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, he sounded the clarion call for a distinct new brand of American theater.⁸ A "memory play" is not simply a remembrance of things past but is fundamentally a meditation upon memory itself. Memory plays are extended dramaturgical experiments in how to capture the mercurial, distorted, biased, unreliable, and mutinous nature of individual memory within the restrictive material conditions of live performance on a fixed stage. Many prominent playwrights have taken up this challenge, creating a vibrant tradition which is as innovative as it is venerable. Diverse variations of the American memory play in recent decades include David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*, Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, and Margaret Edson's *Wit*. The greatest of them all remains Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. *Love-Lies-Bleeding* traces its theatrical lineage most directly from Miller's standard-bearer, which haunts DeLillo's memory play with acute poignancy.⁹

Both Miller's and DeLillo's protagonists are men facing the end of their dwindling lives with regrets about their professional accomplishments and guilt over the personal wreckage they caused their loved ones. In Willy Loman's end-of-life drama he is surrounded by his wife and two sons, all trying ineffectually to prevent his death. On the other hand, Alex Macklin is surrounded by a son and two wives, all ultimately cooperating to precipitate his death. Needless to say, the story of a post-World War II salesman's

death differs markedly from a post-millennial artist's death. Nonetheless, Miller's models for opening up the spatiotemporal capacities of the stage, for carving out a space for the enactment of memories and fantasies, and for allowing the audience privileged access into the mind of the protagonist are all influential prototypes for DeLillo in *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. Miller originally planned on titling his play *Inside His Head*, actually envisioning the stage as an open cranium. Although he ultimately abandoned that idea, *Death of a Salesman* retains the front apron of the stage as a distinct space for the free play of Willy's reveries. DeLillo borrows this concept, specifying that "[i]n several scenes a limited sector of the stage functions as playing area," including the memory scenes in both the first and third acts.¹⁰ Another integral factor in Miller's play that can scarcely be overstated is the unreliability of Willy Loman's perspective and the ramifications this has for the entire play. The audience is granted admission into the inner workings of his mind; no one but Willy and the spectators see these scenes from the past reenacted in the present. However, Willy has proven elsewhere to be so deceptive, self-deluded, and senile that we have little cause to trust the veracity of his flashbacks. Nor can we ever be sure that the seemingly realistic scenes in the present are untainted by Willy's warped perspective. After all, Miller draws attention to the artifice of his set ["The entire setting is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent"], and he remarks at the beginning, "An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality."¹¹ Just because Miller dispensed with the skull motif on stage does not mean that he entirely abandoned the expressionist premise of filtering everything through Willy's perspective, as if set inside his head. In short, as with so many works in the memory play tradition, categorical boundaries become blurred between present and past, between reality and illusion, between reliable memory, speculative recreation, wishful thinking, and paranoid delusion.

The other abiding theatrical figure casting a long shadow over *Love-Lies-Bleeding* is Samuel Beckett. DeLillo has acknowledged admiration for Beckett throughout his career. However, he has also been careful to distinguish his own artistic approach from that of Beckett, and he has resisted critical attributions of direct influence. DeLillo told Tom LeClair in 1979, "So much modern fiction is located precisely nowhere. This is Beckett and Kafka insinuating themselves onto the page. Their work is so woven into the material of modern life that it's not surprising so many writers choose to live there, or choose to have their characters live there." DeLillo concedes his attraction to this kind of fiction, but adds, "I can't write that way myself. I'm too interested in what real places look like and what names they have."¹² DeLillo's literary sensibilities have evolved significantly since 1979, and I doubt that he would still fully ascribe to the disclaimer above. Consider for instance his post-millennial *The Body Artist*, with its spare, remorseless, Beckettian prose as verbal vehicle

for the Kafkaesque "hunger artist" Lauren Hartke. DeLillo's late fiction has increasingly reclaimed Beckett and Kafka as viable models. More to the point, and without getting sidetracked into discussing either writer's fiction, DeLillo's earlier assessment was patently inaccurate with respect to Beckett's drama. Beckett's plays are always located quite precisely *somewhere*: on the stage and in the theater. He persistently incorporates the material conditions of performance on stage and the phenomenological effects of spectatorship in the theater, making them the recurrent subjects of his plays. Beckett's plays are doggedly epistemological in their reflexive interrogation of form: how can we know what we think we know from theatrical performance and spectatorship? DeLillo may downplay Beckett's influence in interviews, but internal evidence from *Love-Lies-Bleeding* suggests that he has learned important dramaturgical lessons from Beckett and begun developing them in his own mature drama.

The predominance of "sitting figures" alone makes Beckett an inescapable reference point. No fewer than eight Beckett dramas for various media conclude, as does *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, with silent seated figures: *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Film*, *Eh Joe... but the clouds ... Rockaby*, *Ohio Impromptu*, and *Nacht und Träume*. As a novelist turned playwright, Beckett was susceptible to the usual complaints about static action and sluggish pace. However, rather than bending to conventional expectations, he responded with austere minimalism, frequently grinding his action down to near paralysis and slowing the pace to seemingly glacial duration. The silent sitting figure is the epitome of this aesthetic, but Beckett's purpose was not merely (or at least not entirely) to defy his critics and torture his actors and audiences. The enduring appeal of this figure is metatheatrical, for it serves as a reflection of the individual spectator, similarly rooted in his or her seat, gazing silently from the darkness at this avatar or mirror-image double on stage, engaged in the same (in)action. Beckett's characters tend to be abject failures, more like passive spectators of their own lives than active agents. They are mentally proficient at reliving their experiences through compulsive memories and repeated fantasies, but utterly inept at actually living and loving outside the confines of their inner sanctums. In the interests of brevity, let us consider only two representative Beckettian sitting figures, Hamm and Krapp. "Do you believe in the life to come?" asks Clov in *Endgame*; Hamm replies, "Mine was always that."¹³ Hamm, who is blind and can no longer stand, has retreated into his refuge, withdrawn into his mind, where he sits and presides as unassailable tyrant over his own solipsistic world of endless repetition. The other characters who populate this mindscape—his servant/foster-son Clov, who can neither sit nor leave, and his parents, Nagg and Nell, who are confined to ashbins—are played by separate actors, but as characters they all function essentially as mental projections upon a

mindscape. Hamm is a storyteller who likens his creative process to "the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark."¹⁴ Krapp is a failed author who essentially sacrificed his chances at love and happiness in exchange for an artistic career that never panned out. So he holes up in his hovel, listening to tapes of his own voice commenting upon his past—Krapp-69 listens to Krapp-39 who reflects upon listening to Krapp-29.¹⁵ The washed up, alcoholic, lecherous, and constipated Krapp spends each birthday in sedentary contemplation of a life well documented but not well lived. Nevertheless, like Hamm, bounded in a nutshell yet a king of infinite space, he exercises considerable control over his vicarious reenactments of the past, selecting reels of memory, forwarding and rewinding at whim, recording a new tape to revise and critique the views of his former selves.

Along with being mentally dexterous while physically confined, Beckett's moribund protagonists share with Alex Macklin an acute awareness of their imminent deaths. Krapp's play dramatizes his *last* tape after all. And yet, close as they are to achieving the cherished end of their agonized existences, there remains a counter-impulse to go on, just a little farther, just a bit longer. "Enough, it's time it ended, in the refuge too," Hamm announces in his opening speech. "And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to ... to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to—[he yawns]—to end."¹⁶ Thus, in a play where the central sitting figure and all of his so-called "creatures" seemingly agree that the elusive end is near at hand and should be hastened by any means available, the "endgame" has only just begun. In terms of his treatment of memory and fantasy, his metatheatrical self-awareness of performance and reception conditions, his exploitation of the auditorium as a mutable mindscape, his ruthless examination of the human costs associated with a life devoted to art, and his coopting of the stage as a rehearsal space for preparing the protagonist's end, Beckett's influence is pervasive throughout DeLillo's play.

Resituating *Love-Lies-Bleeding* within the memory play and Beckettian traditions yields a drama very different than the one damned with faint praise by drowsy reviewers. Rather than playing the sacrificial victim of unwarranted family intervention or the beneficiary of a serene reprieve from suffering—the only two roles available to Alex *in extremis* within the topical euthanasia paradigm—Alex imaginatively shapes the entire performance through his ubiquitous consciousness. It is unclear whether Alex invents the main action entirely as a fantasized prelude to his death (*à la* Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"), or whether the euthanasia plot unfolds independent of him but is filtered through his dying perspective (*à la* Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"). Either way, Alex exerts a vital degree of control over the staged performances, not

only in the opening and closing memory scenes, but also in the main action. This parallax view of *Love-Lies-Bleeding* through Alex-tinted glasses reveals rich new levels of meaning in almost every scene. For instance, Toinette's speech to Lia in Act One, Scene Six sparkles with a glint of metatheatrical humor when held up to this new interpretive light. Ostensibly the scene depicts an older ex-wife trying to convince the younger current wife to participate in euthanizing her husband. But refracted through the prism of Alex, who recognizes both the urgency and the farce of these staged proceedings, the exchange sounds more like one weary character complaining to another about the tedious plot device in which they're both stuck.

Why are we clustered around him? Not because he's a loving husband and father whose lifelong devotion. Not because he's the patriarch of a teeming family. Look at us. The three survivors. Bare bones in triplicate. Not because we feel indebted in any way—I don't. Or morally, somehow, obligated—I'm not. Or need his final blessing—too late for that. It's much more elemental, isn't it? We're here to help him die.¹⁷

Why are we here? We're waiting for Godot, waiting upon Alex, per usual. We're pawns in someone else's game, expedient tools to advance the plot, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stuck in Hamlet's play. Toinette's self-reflexive lines recall *Endgame*'s Clov, likewise one of three survivors waiting upon a dying patriarch. Clov continues serving against his will because that is what "creatures" do, that is his part in the play:

Clov: I'll leave you.

Hamm: No!

Clov: What is there to keep me here?

Hamm: The dialogue.¹⁸

Lia for her part responds in kind, acknowledging the theatrical artifice in which they are both bound by retorting, "He's not ready yet. Go home and work on your speech."¹⁹ These lines and their embedded metatheatrical subtext were always there lying close to the surface in *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, it just requires digging with the right tool to churn them up.

Interpreting the main action as projected from Alex's consciousness also helps illuminate the two monologue scenes. The first monologue (Act One, Scene Seven) features Sean at a lectern addressing an arts conference. The second (Act Three, Scene Five) features Lia at the lectern eulogizing Alex at his memorial service (mind you, this is three scenes before his death is staged in the play's main action). By any interpretive standard, these monologues must be regarded as non-diegetic, taking place outside the main action, if not

fantasized entirely. They are explicitly metatheatrical since they are delivered across the footlights, through the so-called fourth wall, and directed straight at the audience. These are not soliloquies, however, since there is no pretense of solitude. Not only are the spectators addressed as such, but the audience is even given a part to play: in the first we are treated as a crowd of artists and academics, in the second we are fellow mourners. Truth be told, from the start the audience has been addressed as more than an anonymous collection of spectators; we are also a sequestered jury of peers. Yes, a jury charged to weigh the ethical merits of euthanasia, but more importantly to evaluate the life decisions and judge the character of Alex Macklin. Within this context, Sean effectively offers an opening statement for the prosecution against Alex the artist and father, while Lia offers a closing statement for the defense in favor of Alex the husband and man.

It is one thing for a bitter son to rail against his deadbeat dad, but quite another for the father to imagine all the indictments his abandoned son would charge him with if he only had the opportunity. Sean's statement for the prosecution begins to look more like a guilty confession and fantasy of self-persecution, reminiscent of "the 27 depravities" in DeLillo's novel *The Names*.²⁰ "He was an artist. Look at his work. The work's what matters, isn't it?" Sean asks rhetorically, knowing that the imaginary assemblage of art snobs value the work above the life, since they didn't have to endure Alex Macklin as a father. There is grim justice, however, in the limitations of Alex's artistic success: "But he wasn't great and he wasn't famous. And we share, somewhere lurking, some of us, a small, dismal pleasure in this knowledge. Don't we? I think we do."²¹ His argument is the reverse of Linda Loman's famous speech defending her husband despite his lack of fame: "I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog."²² Sean rates Alex as an artist about the same as Biff rates Willy as a salesman: a dime a dozen. Or so Alex assumes. Motives of self-persecution and self-denigration lurk behind this fantasized monologue. "He absorbed certain people, consumed and absorbed them. You know this. Those he didn't consume he left standing in the street somewhere. Say nothing good of the dead."²³ The verdict: Alex Macklin was a mediocre artist and a lousy man; he knows it and uses Sean as a mouthpiece to condemn himself.

Elsewhere, as in Lia's rousing defense in the third act, Alex is defended against slander and vindicated. If Sean's monologue echoes the heated Loman debates over the value of Willy's life choices, then Lia's eulogy resonates with Linda's requiem speech, likewise directed across the footlights directly at the audience. Both Linda and Lia find themselves in posthumous

possession of a house with no husband left to share it. Linda marvels that, even in death, no one respects Willy, he is not properly mourned, and no attention is paid. Lia accuses those assembled of misunderstanding, gathering for the wrong motives to memorialize the wrong person: "People tell stories, exchange stories. I don't know any stories. You know things about him that I never knew. This means nothing to me. There are no stories. You're here for the wrong reason. If you're here to honor his memory, it's not his memory, it's your memory, and it's false."²⁴ Lia's eulogy suggests that the deep heart's core of Alex can be found in his art, particularly his unfinished magnum opus in the mountains outside their home. "I'll go back home and climb into the burning hills, where he worked, and scatter his ashes there. He goes nowhere now, into nothing. That powerful work he had it in mind to make. Untitled, unfinished. But not nothing."²⁵ Unlike Sean's monologue, which disparages Alex's artistic underachievement, Lia's monologue valorizes Alex's artistic reach, if not his grasp. His inchoate power is best represented by his enigmatic abandoned project.

We learn about this ambitious artwork in Act Two, the most revealing memory scene of the entire play. It is literally "revealing" in the sense that it is the only brightly lit scene in the play: "*The room is open to late-afternoon light, a sense of blazing sky, revealing colors and objects not clearly visible in the dimmer setting of Act One.*"²⁶ This flashback is also enormously revealing in terms of Alex's character. For the only time in the play we see him healthy, mobile, articulate, passionate, and seductive—in short, we see the man that four different women wanted to marry. The scene features Alex-64 and Toinette reminiscing, flirting, accusing, explaining, and getting drunk for the first time in years. Like Nick Shay's journey into the desert to reunite with Klara Sax at the site of *Long Tall Sally* in DeLillo's epic *Underworld*, Toinette is motivated to visit Alex partially out of curiosity about his latest art project in the remote West. Alex haltingly describes his plans, explaining why he has a crew blasting through a mountain: "A room, a cube. I don't have a name for it. First we cut a passage in. A tough narrow entranceway, cramped, with jutting rock. [...] A chamber, a cubical room. Fashioned out of solid rock. Precise dimensions. A large empty room. Six congruent square surfaces. Painted. Ocher and amber. Old colors. Burnt brick. Lampblack. All six surfaces, every square inch."²⁷ He seems utterly absorbed in the project, but he is also racked by self-doubt. "You understand this will never happen. It'll never get that far. I don't want to describe the paintings anyway. Wouldn't be able to."²⁸ He assumes that Toinette will dismiss the plan as deranged, but she actually reminds him that he had mentioned this idea to her years earlier while talking in bed: "Art that's hidden in a mountain. An incredible, you said, sort of stone enclosure that you would drench with paintings of your dreams."²⁹ But Alex is as changeable in his artistic vision as he is in his love life. No sooner does

Toinette give voice to his dreamscape vision than he launches into a crisis of self-effacing scruples, second-guessing, disavowing, revising, and dismissing his previous plans:

Should the room be painted at all? I have my doubts. I always have my doubts. The paint's a mistake. The paint is excess. A bare room inside a mountain. I trust what's real. Rock. You can't socialize it. But why do I think there's something sad and frail in this work? You think I'm crazy but I'm not crazy enough. I want to throw off doubt, stop thinking, stop caring, just be, just work. Throw off who I am, goddamn it. A bare room without a signature. Just there. Except it won't be there.³⁰

And indeed, judging by Lia's eulogy, Alex never did follow through with the project: "What powerful work he had it in mind to make. Untitled, unfinished. But not nothing."³¹

Alex may not have finished his perfectly proportioned room in the middle of a stone mountain, but the vision itself is highly suggestive of primal drives. Within the context of a play about his pending death, it is impossible to ignore the artwork's resemblance to a tomb, more specifically a passage tomb (e.g., Newgrange in Ireland). Alex-64 could not have known then that he would be rendered catatonic only six years later, but Alex-70 knows it now. By restaging this memory at the center of the play, Alex ruminates on the possibility that he had been subconsciously planning and constructing his own grave for years, a project which necessarily remained incomplete until he was finally prepared to cross the threshold and inhabit it. But there are other evocations buried here. The vivid features Alex envisions for his personal mausoleum—a perfect room, perhaps animated by dreams or perhaps a sedate sensory deprivation chamber, accessed by a cramped passageway, where one might escape the world and one's identity—simultaneously conjures up a related set of associations, namely the primal fantasy of regression back to the womb. Freud first diagnosed the uncanny psychological connection between tombs and wombs in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he observes,

It was not for a long time that I learned to appreciate the importance of phantasies and unconscious thoughts about life in the womb. They contain an explanation of the remarkable dread that many people have of being buried alive; and they also afford the deepest unconscious basis for the belief in survival after death, which merely represents a projection into the future of this uncanny life before birth.³²

Freud's protégé Otto Rank later developed this line of thought into the most extensive study of regression fantasies, *The Trauma of Birth*. Rank identifies the biological attachment of the fetus to the mother in the womb as the

primal libidinal attachment. The forcible detachment of that life-sustaining attachment amounts to an eviction from paradise, the "trauma of birth." One way or another, Rank argues, every human longs to reverse that process and restore the idealized conditions of perfect security and unity which once pertained in the womb. As Rank puts it, "just as the anxiety at birth forms the basis of every anxiety or fear, so every pleasure has as its final aim the re-establishment of the intrauterine primal pleasure."³³

DeLillo has frequently indulged in regression fantasies in his fiction, depicting characters who seek "re-establishment of the intrauterine primal pleasure" diagnosed by Rank. David Bell, the mother-haunted protagonist of DeLillo's first novel *Americana*, is driven throughout the novel to restore his libidinal connection to his dead mother, acting out his desires for reunification with an artist and mother-substitute named Sullivan. In a particularly memorable scene, David curls up and falls asleep in Sully's dark and membranous art studio known as "the Cocoon." He awakes in the middle of the night as if reinstalled in the womb: "The loft seemed endless, a scene lifted from the sandy bottom of a dream. A shape in the shape of my mother was forming in the doorway."³⁴ *Ratner's Star* offers multiple variations on the regression trope, including Henrik Endor's hole-inside-a-hole, Maurice Wu's cave, Billy Twillig's dark room and blanket-draped table, and the antrum which houses the Logicon project beneath the cycloid of Field Experiment One. Wu practically quotes Otto Rank when he observes, "The birth of a baby equals the death of a fetus. This experience recreates itself throughout our lives."³⁵ At one point Billy Twillig, the fourteen-year-old math genius at the center of *Ratner's Star*, explicitly fantasizes about delivery from and regression back into the womb:

Billy tried to imagine the birth of Cyril's wife's baby. It would happen in grim lights violently. A dripping thing trying to clutch to its hole. Dredged up and beaten. Blood and drool and womb mud. How cute, this neon shrieker made to plunge upward, odd-headed blob, this marginal electric glow-thing. Dressed and powdered now. Engineered to abstract design. Cling, suck and cry. Follow with the eye. Gloom and drought of unprotected sleep. Had there been a light in her belly, dim briny light in that pillowing womb, dusk enough to light a page, bacterial smear of light, an amniotic gleam that I could taste, old, deep, wet and warm? Return, return to negative unity.³⁶

DeLillo's diverse treatments of the theme also include considerations of rebirth, where the womb serves as a way station on the journey out of one life and into the next. In *Americana* Carol Deming informs David Bell, "I can talk myself into almost anything. When I die I'll talk myself into another womb and start all over. That's what they do in Tibet—people who couldn't even get into Princeton entering fresh wombs like crazy." David responds, "Through a womb-door," and she agrees: "'That's right,' she said. 'And

there are good wombs and bad wombs."³⁷ Murray Jay Siskind makes a similar point in *White Noise*, identifying the American supermarket as a rejuvenating good womb: "Tibetans believe there is a transitional state between death and rebirth. Death is a waiting period, basically. Soon a fresh womb will receive the soul. In the meantime the soul restores to itself some of the divinity lost at birth. [...] This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway."³⁸

Murray's identification of the supermarket as an express lane for metempsychosis is dubious, but DeLillo finds a viable artistic vehicle for regression, transmigration, and reincarnation in the theater itself. Again, Beckett sets the standard for exploiting theater's capacity as a "wombscape." The best example is his play *Not I*, featuring the rapid speech of a spotlighted Mouth shrouded in the insulating darkness of the auditorium. Mouth begins with a description of the birth trauma: "... out ... into this world ... this world ... tiny little thing ... before its time."³⁹ On one level she is describing her expulsion from the womb and the semiotic chora of chaotic infancy in an unwelcoming external world. On another level, however, she is describing with phenomenological precision the conditions of being reborn, night after night, out of the darkness and into the light, as an entity onstage—out into *this world*, namely the hermetically sealed womb-world of the theater. The theater not only constitutes a sanctuary from the outer world but also an escape from selfhood, a negation or suspension of the "I" in favor of free play in the various guises of "Not-I." Note that this regressive ideal is exactly what Alex seeks in his unfinished artwork: "I want to throw off doubt, stop thinking, stop caring, just be, just work. Throw off who I am, goddamn it. A bare room without a signature. Just there. Except it won't be there."⁴⁰ Maybe it won't be *there*, carved into a mountain, but might it be *here*—in the theater itself. Within the solipsistic parameters DeLillo establishes in *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, Alex-70 succeeds where Alex-64 failed by carving out a perfect room—not in a desert mountain, but in his mind, in his fantasized womblike tomb and tomblike womb, and above all in the concrete material world of the theater.

Love-Lies-Bleeding also activates another dormant fantasy that Alex has harbored for years. Alex-64 confides to Toinette, "I always thought I'd kill someone. I don't know why it didn't happen. I think I wanted it to happen." He never acted on this sadistic urge, but adds ruefully, "I ought to feel lucky it didn't happen. But here I am, paying for it anyway."⁴¹ DeLillo's fascination with killers and would-be killers has remained constant throughout his career. He is one of the most astute chroniclers of the murderer's mindset, from domestic terrorists in *Great Jones Street* and *Players* and international terrorists in *Mao II* and *Falling Man* and a murderous cult in *The Names*, to the genocidal Adolf Hitler in *Running Dog* and *White Noise* and the serial killer Richard Henry Gilkey in *Underworld*, and including several character studies

of central protagonists who were killers—Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*, Nick Shay in *Underworld*, and Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis*—not to mention characters who longed to become killers but never followed through, like Jack Gladney in *White Noise* and Alex Macklin in *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. Monet had his water lilies, and DeLillo has his murderous men in small rooms. In *White Noise* Murray draws a bright line between “killers” and “diers.” “I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don’t have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it’s like to be a killer.”⁴² *Carpe mortem*. A killer is someone who seizes the reins of death: “It’s a way of controlling death. A way of gaining the ultimate upper hand. Be the killer for a change. Let someone else be the diers.”⁴³ Alex-64 claims never to have killed a man, but can Alex-70 say the same? By staging his own death in *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, appropriating the stage as a fantasy forum for (re)imagining his own euthanasia, Alex *in extremis* effectively operates as both killer and diers. For that matter, if we regard the entire play as a performance staged in Alex’s mind, he is not only the killer and the diers but also the very scene of the crime.

One might normally expect a euthanasia play to culminate in the death of the patient. *Love-Lies-Bleeding* does stage Alex’s death in Act Three, Scene Eight. However, the play then continues onward with two more scenes. As in several of his novels, DeLillo favors a narrative trajectory that bends back on itself, connecting the end with the beginning. Scene Nine continues that pattern by returning to the opening exchange between Alex and Lia. Once again Alex-69 reflects upon the dead sitting figure on the subway, while the dimly lit Alex *in extremis* sits apart on the periphery. DeLillo does note “feeding tubes not visible” for the sitting figure, which potentially indicates that Alex-70 is now dead.⁴⁴ This interpretation jives with Alex’s reported death in Scene Eight, yet it is difficult to reconcile his death with the continuation of his memory in Scene Nine. An alternative is that the sitting figure occupies some shadowy zone between life and death—“No longer and not yet,” as Sean once put it, a quotation from Hermann Broch’s *The Death of Virgil*.⁴⁵ Perhaps the most harrowing possibility is that, as in Beckett’s *Play*, physical death does not mark the end of consciousness but only the beginning of a new phase, where the body wastes away but the mind motors on unabated, ceaselessly revolving laps around the remembered past life.

The Cartesian split of mind and body, and the widening chasm separating them, emerges as one of Alex-69’s chief preoccupations after his first stroke. Lia persistently tries to reassure her husband, insisting “Your mind is strong” and “Your mind is alive.”⁴⁶ She also continues to stimulate him sensually, reminding him “You can feel my hand on your body” and “My breath on your face. That’s what you feel and who you are, now, this instant. You

need to hold hard.”⁴⁷ But Alex feels increasingly unmoored from the present, alienated from his body and pulled irresistibly backwards in his mind. He tells Lia, “Everything’s collapsing backwards. I can’t feel what’s here. [...] Everything’s running backwards now. This is what consciousness is beginning to mean. Objects in rooms in dying light. I live in old objects, things turned gray.”⁴⁸ This reflection echoes his description from the first scene of the dead man on the subway: “Gray like an animal. He belonged to a different order of nature. The first dead man I’d ever seen and there’s never been anyone since who has looked more finally and absolutely dead.”⁴⁹ Now the “gray animal” of death is devolving further down the order of nature, down to gray “[o]bjects in rooms in dying light.” In short, Alex is becoming divested of his humanity, following his death drive back to the inorganic state, becoming less a man and more a lifeless object—less a character and more a prop. As he bluntly puts it to Lia, “I’m carrying around a corpse and we both smell him.”⁵⁰

Alex-69’s premonition of what he will become is followed by a stark depiction of what Alex-70 is now. The script for the final Scene Ten reads in its entirety: “*The sitting figure in isolation. / Black.*”⁵¹ For all its simplicity and silence, this closing image is rich with suggestive possibility. The directions do not specify if the sitting figure is alive or dead, presumably leaving that choice to the discretion of each production. Playing him as alive would lend credence to the interpretation that Alex is the source and site of the preceding action, although playing him as dead certainly does not negate that interpretation. Even if the production sends signals that Alex is deceased, this still leaves open the question of how best to understand that death. To the extent that Alex longed for release, longed to be unfastened from the dying animal of his body and relieved from physical and mental suffering, he seems to have gotten his wish: his life—and the play—have reached the end. From the standpoint of his abiding fantasy of regression into a womb-tomb of perfect solitude and silence, the final image would seem to represent an ideal consummation of both his life and his art.

However, such definitive resolutions ring false. Had DeLillo wanted to tie up the loose ends of the dramatic conflict so tidily, he could have proceeded straight from the report of Alex’s death in Scene Eight to the closing vignette of the sitting figure in perfect repose. Instead, he inserts Scene Nine, a fretful scene that highlights the growing disconnect between the mind and body, implying that relief to one by no means guarantees relief to the other. Furthermore, the backward propelled inertia of the scene suggests less the end of a line, a terminal destination, and more a cyclical orbit, a return to the beginning for another circuit. Indeed, this latter trajectory is far more consistent with the metatheatrical paradigm DeLillo establishes from the start and applies rigorously throughout *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. For no ending is truly “the end” in theater. Beckett notoriously draws attention to this bedrock principle

in *Play* by inserting my favorite stage direction of all time at the end of the script: “[Repeat play.]”⁵² And they do! The “dead” characters (performed by live actors buried up to their necks in urns) start from the top and launch into a second performance of the entire play. For unprepared spectators, the gradual realization that they have heard these words before, that this bizarre play has rewound to the beginning and started over, is both startling and horrifying. How long will this go on? How many times will the play be repeated? Will I be stuck in my chair, as the characters are stuck in their urns, mutually bewildered and disoriented forever? In theory Beckett’s *Play* forms a Möbius strip that could go on *ad infinitum*, or at least until the actual deaths of the actors playing the characters. In practice, however, the play is only repeated once—enough to make its point that plays never really end in the theater. Tonight’s performance may have ended, but the play itself remains frozen in suspension, reset and ready to be activated again. Come back tomorrow night, and we’ll do it all over again. All plays share this inherent cyclical nature, but few draw reflexive attention and exploit this fact as much as Beckett’s *Play*—or Don DeLillo’s *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. The closing image of Alex as a sitting figure in solitude, fading into black, is essentially the same position and condition he occupied from the start. Indeed, if the entire play has represented an interior drama playing out in his mind, he may have been sitting physically undisturbed the whole time. The audience enters tonight’s performance through Alex, and perhaps the final vignette points the way toward exiting Alex before we exit the auditorium. In any case, like Hamm at the close of *Endgame*, the sitting figure returns full circle to a resting position, prepared effectively for tomorrow night’s performance, where he will revolve through all his memories, fears, and fantasies again, ineluctably reliving his life and death before a new audience.

DeLillo published *Love-Lies-Bleeding* in 2005, the same year his friend and fellow writer David Foster Wallace delivered the commencement address at Kenyon College. Wallace’s address was published posthumously under the title *This Is Water*, and the centerpiece of the speech is a joke that DeLillo also uses in his play. Here is DeLillo’s version, told by Sean to his catatonic father: “All right, here’s a joke. It’s a philosophical joke. I told it to my seniors in geophysics. Goes like this. Two tiny young fish are swimming in the sea. They come upon an older fish. He says to them, Hey, fellas, how’s the water? The two young fish swim on past. They swim for many miles. Finally one fish says to the other, What the fuck is water?”⁵³ Wallace explains, “The immediate point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.”⁵⁴ Wallace uses the story in an effort to expose the unconscious “default settings” with which most contemporary Americans are hard-wired, settings which train us to worship ourselves and put our own interests above all others, instincts that

Wallace urges us to become conscious of so that we can resist and reprogram them. I wonder if Wallace had read *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, or if he had discussed the solipsistic tendencies of Alex Macklin with his mentor Don DeLillo. It is certainly tempting to think Wallace was inspired by his reactions to Alex when he counseled the graduating seniors of Kenyon College against the temptations of false freedom, “The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation.”⁵⁵ It is likewise tempting to hear echoes of Alex in Wallace’s peroration, where he proclaims, “None of this is about morality, or religion, or dogma, or big fancy questions of life after death. The capital-T Truth is about life *before* death.”⁵⁶ The good life before death, one well lived in humility and empathy and kindness to others instead of narcissistic self-absorption, requires vigilance, “awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: ‘This is water.’”⁵⁷ Perhaps Alex Macklin could have benefited from the wisdom of David Foster Wallace, rather than withdrawing from the world and his loved ones into his art and his mind, his skull-sized kingdom where he sits at the center of his creations. Critics and audiences of *Love-Lies-Bleeding* could also learn a lesson from the joke about the fish. We are so accustomed to realism as the default mode of American theater, so accustomed to viewing social problem plays and family dramas through limited conventional paradigms, that *Love-Lies-Bleeding* might easily be misperceived as just another topical play debating the merits and repercussions of euthanasia. However, if one sets aside these conventional blinders and examines the play with more careful scrutiny, one can appreciate *Love-Lies-Bleeding* for what it really is: a subjective distillation of death from Alex Macklin’s perspective, a metatheatrical self-portrait of the artist as a dying man.

NOTES

1. Don DeLillo, *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (New York: Scribner, 2005); Tony Adler, “DeLillo Off the Page,” *Chicago Reader*, May 11, 2006, www.chicagoreader.com, accessed June 21, 2013.
2. Tony Adler, “Off the Page.”
3. Don DeLillo, *The Day Room* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Mervyn Rothstein, “A Novelist Faces His Themes on New Ground,” in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 21.
4. Don DeLillo, *L-L-B*, 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 7.
8. Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, ed. Robert Bray (New York: New Directions, 1999), 4.

9. Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem* (New York: Penguin, 1998).
10. *Ibid.*, 3.
11. *Ibid.*, 1.
12. Don DeLillo, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," Interview by Thomas LeClair, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 15.
13. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 116.
14. *Ibid.*, 126.
15. Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 213–24.
16. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, 93.
17. Don DeLillo, *L-L-B*, 23–24.
18. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, 120–121.
19. Don DeLillo, *L-L-B*, 24.
20. Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 16–17.
21. Don DeLillo, *L-L-B*, 25.
22. Arthur Miller, *Salesman*, 40.
23. Don DeLillo, *L-L-B*, 25.
24. *Ibid.*, 82.
25. *Ibid.*, 83.
26. *Ibid.*, 51.
27. *Ibid.*, 59.
28. *Ibid.*, 60.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 61.
31. *Ibid.*, 83.
32. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey. Volume V. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 401–2, n3.
33. Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*. (London: Kegan Paul, 1929), 17. Rank's emphasis.
34. Don DeLillo, *Americana* (New York: Penguin, 1971), 110.
35. Don DeLillo, *Ratner's Star* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 356.
36. *Ibid.*, 36.
37. Don DeLillo, *Americana*, 312.
38. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York, Viking, 1985), 37.
39. Samuel Beckett, *Not I*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 376.
40. Don DeLillo, *L-L-B*, 61.
41. *Ibid.*, 58.
42. Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 277.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Don DeLillo, *L-L-B*, 92.
45. *Ibid.*, 48.
46. *Ibid.*, 94, 95.

47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, 94.
49. *Ibid.*, 8.
50. *Ibid.*, 94.
51. *Ibid.*, 97.
52. Samuel Beckett, *Play*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 317.
53. Don DeLillo, *L-L-B*, 77.
54. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 8.
55. *Ibid.*, 117.
56. *Ibid.*, 129.
57. *Ibid.*, 131–132.

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