

2018

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Recommended Citation

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https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty/579

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Libranth: Nicholas Branch's Joycean Labyrinth in Don DeLillo's *Libra*

Graley Herren

Chapter summary: *Libra* is a metafictional labyrinth. CIA historian Nicholas Branch is not only a character in the novel but also the embedded author of the narrative. James Joyce used this autological approach in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and *Libra* (1988) replicates this metafictional structure, borrowing a number of themes and motifs from Stephen Dedalus and the mythical artificer Daedalus along the way. Although Dedalus succeeds in using his art as wings to escape his imprisonment, Branch ultimately fails. The artifice he creates becomes his metafictional prison.

L*ibra* (1988) is a labyrinth. It is modelled in part after the original Labyrinth built by Daedalus, the cunning artificer immortalized by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*. More specifically, *Libra* follows the labyrinthine blueprint of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where Joyce canonized Daedalus as the patron saint of artists by metamorphosing him into Stephen Dedalus. Don DeLillo is a literary descendent in the Daedalus-Joyce-Dedalus line. At the beginning of his first published interview, when Tom LeClair

asked why he was so reluctant to speak about himself and his work, DeLillo explained with a quote from Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait*:

Silence, exile, cunning, and so on. It's my nature to keep quiet about most things. Even the ideas in my work. When you try to unravel something you've written, you belittle it in a way. It was created as a mystery, in part ... If you're able to be straightforward and penetrating about this invention of yours, it's almost as though you're saying it wasn't altogether necessary. The sources weren't deep enough. (LeClair [1982] 2005: 4)

The present essay aims to unravel some of *Libra's* mysteries, following Ariadne's thread back to the labyrinth's source.

In his piece titled 'DeLillo's Dedalian Artists', Mark Osteen argues, 'DeLillo's artists repeatedly re-enact this pattern of seclusion and emergence, entrapment and escape, and their metamorphoses render them temporarily monstrous, malformed, or moribund before they die or emerge in a new guise. DeLillo's artists embody both the Minotaur and Daedalus, who leaves the labyrinth but loses something priceless in his flight to freedom' (Osteen 2008: 137). Osteen focuses on three of DeLillo's artistic characters: rock musician Bucky Wunderlick from *Great Jones Street* (1973), novelist Bill Gray from *Mao II* (1991) and performance artist Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist* (2001). But the DeLillo canon also includes several covert artists who surreptitiously lay claim to this same inheritance. DeLillo frequently features characters that function as creative agents of their narratives, even though they are not ostensibly artists by profession. For example, mathematician Billy Twillig (*Ratner's Star*, 1976), waste management executive Nick Shay (*Underworld*, 1997), unemployed currency analyst Benno Levin (*Cosmopolis*, 2003), documentarian Jim Finley (*Point Omega*, 2010), and compliance and ethics officer Jeff Lockhart (*Zero K*, 2016) each serve *sub rosa* as metafictional artificers; that is, as the authors, narrators, conceivers or dreamers of all or parts of the narratives in which they are embedded.

One of DeLillo's most imbricated artificers is Nicholas Branch. Overtly he is 'a retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency, hired on contract to write the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy' (DeLillo 1988: 15). Covertly he is a double agent, an insurgent novelist who has penetrated the citadel of history. Branch, in the words of Ovid, turns his mind to unknown arts; and in the process he converts his CIA historical archive into a creative writer's workshop, a 'room of theories and dreams' (14). There he conceives a labyrinthine fiction about the Kennedy assassination. The result is the book *Libra*. DeLillo cunningly

frames Nicholas Branch as the artificer of the narrative we read. DeLillo invents arch-fabulator Branch, who invents arch-conspirator Win Everett, who invents a prototype for the shooter eventually cast as Lee Harvey Oswald, who is constantly inventing aliases and imagining doubles. Branch identifies deeply with Oswald and the rogue CIA conspirators. He depicts them as his doppelgangers, his secret sharers. He abandons history in favour of fiction, which gives him creative licence to project his thoughts, experiences, and condition onto his characters.

Nicholas Branch's chief literary exemplar for this creative process is James Joyce. T. S. Eliot famously referred to Joyce's modernist technique as 'the mythical method', appropriating ancient models as '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' ([1923] 1975: 177). Branch uses Joyce's *A Portrait* as paradigm for *Libra* in much the same way that Joyce used Homer's *Odyssey* as superstructure for *Ulysses*. Like the mythical Daedalus, Branch is an exile who attempts to invent his way out of prison. Like Stephen Dedalus, Branch constructs a *Künstlerroman* and attempts to use his fiction as wings to fly past the nets cast to ensnare him. However, unlike them both, Branch ultimately fails. The fiction he constructs as counter-narrative to history does not free him. On the contrary, the book itself becomes a labyrinth, a prison-house of language from which none can escape, including the artificer who created it.

Metafictional self-portraits

Nicholas Branch explicitly invokes Joyce in relation to the Kennedy assassination. Reflecting on the Warren Report, 'Branch thinks this is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred' (DeLillo 1988: 181). Expanding his scope to encompass all the data in his Library of Babel, his room of theories about the assassination and dreams about the perpetrators, Branch reflects, 'This is the Joycean Book of America, remember – the novel in which nothing is left out' (182). It may sound as if Branch has *Ulysses* in mind as his touchstone, but he ends up channelling *A Portrait* instead, that seminal modernist chronicle of the dark arts cunningly conceived under conditions of silence and exile. Branch's Joycean Book of America is the Joycean Book of the Labyrinth.

In 1983 DeLillo wrote a *Rolling Stone* article on the assassination titled, 'American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK'. Already he was working through nascent themes that would gestate over the next five years into *Libra*. Notice, for instance, how his historical understanding

of this American assassination bleeds into the European modernist literature best suited to express it:

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, a world totally modern in the way it shades into the century's 'emptiest' literature, the study of what is uncertain and unresolved in our lives, the literature of estrangement and silence. A European body of work, largely. (1983: 22)

Taken in tandem with that telling reference to 'the Labyrinth' in the subtitle, it seems that DeLillo already has his sights on Daedalus-Joyce-Dedalus as the Orion's Belt pointing him toward *Libra*.

I am not the first critic to notice *Libra's* echoes of *A Portrait*. Jesse Kavadlo describes DeLillo's novel as 'an inverted *kunsterroman*, not a portrait of the artist as a young man but the portrait of the assassin. Oswald the would-be artist lays down the pen and picks up the sword, or worse, the gun with the telescopic sight' (2004: 69). Peter Boxall draws analogies to *A Portrait* in Oswald's struggles for a mode of expression through which to assert self-autonomy. He argues, 'Oswald, like Dedalus, attempts to forge his own consciousness. His recurrent image of himself as a man of action, walking in the night in the "rain-slick streets," is one that is driven by the idea that he might be able, through a kind of covert, personal insurrection, to forge himself in the smithy of his own revolutionary soul' (2006: 135–6). Boxall sees Oswald's plans as thwarted by other author-figures who conspire to limit his actions, thwart his agency and conscript him into their plots. He detects Branch as the authorial agency above and behind all the others: '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' (137). The term 'uber-narrator' perfectly captures Branch's role of central intelligence in the novel. Boxall adds that '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). The present essay seeks to peel away the concealing fabric and fill in Branch's authorial outline.

There is a long tradition among Joyce scholars of reading Stephen Dedalus as the uber-narrator of *A Portrait* in ways which are instructive for readers of *Libra*. For instance, in *Ulysses and the Metamorphosis of Stephen Dedalus*,

Margaret McBride reads *Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait* and *Ulysses* as 'a series of increasingly self-conscious artifices' in which Stephen – not Joyce – is the intratextual author: 'within every tale there appears a character who is, quite distinctly, a writer, and this writer-artist may be telling the tale. In essence, the three stories follow an identical paradigm: the text creates the writer who in turn creates the text' (McBride 2001: 13). McBride understands such metafiction 'not as autobiographical but as *autological*, as a sophisticated, self-reflexive system dramatizing its own conception and development' (30). My understanding of *Libra* is autological. Nicholas Branch is not merely an avatar and pseudonym for Don DeLillo. By the final lines of *A Portrait* Stephen has embarked upon the odyssey that will lead him to reconstruct his artistic genesis – *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* – the story the reader just finished reading. By the conclusion of *Libra* Nicholas Branch has likewise reached the end of his tether as historian and has made the fateful decision to reconstruct the story instead as fiction, one which not only delivers a fantastic assassination conspiracy, but which also doubles as his *Künstlerroman*, the story we just finished reading. Tim Engles argues that there are two protagonists in *Libra*: 'not only the central character in a story that is being told [Lee Harvey Oswald], but also the teller of that story, an unnamed figure who sorts through incomplete and conflicting bits of evidence in a narrative effort that becomes its own drama' (2015: 254). Engles is right about there being a second protagonist; I would argue, however, that we do know the identity of this 'unnamed figure' – and it is not the name on the book's cover. Nicholas Branch is as narratologically distinct from Don DeLillo as Stephen Dedalus is from James Joyce. An autological approach to *Libra* reveals Branch as the internal teller of the story. *A Portrait* serves as the blueprint for Branch's metafictional *künstlerroman*.

From the nightmare of history to the dreams of fiction

Both *A Portrait* and *Libra* cross the minefield from history to fiction. As a boy, however, Stephen is enthralled by history and feels destined for historic greatness. Even as a disaffected and disillusioned teenager, he privately clings to the faith that he is bound for glory: 'The hour when he too would take his part in the life of that world seemed drawing near and in secret he began to make ready for the great part which he felt awaited him the nature of which he only dimly apprehended' (Joyce [1916] 2007: 54). But Stephen's relationship to history shifts dramatically over the course of the novel. As he heeds the calling of his true artistic vocation, he comes to regard history not as the

proving ground for his future success but as an obstacle to be overcome, a fatal trap he must avoid. He tells Davin in chapter 5, 'When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets' (179). Stephen fits himself with sturdier wings and fixes his sights towards cosmopolitan Europe and a future in art. As an artist he hopes to look back on the past in his own terms, not those prescribed by his history, and finally become free 'to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race' (224).

In his 1997 essay, 'The Power of History', DeLillo pits fiction against history. He asserts, 'Against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self. Here it is, sly, mazed, mercurial, scared half-crazy. It is also free and undivided, the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality' (1997: n.p.). The 'power' of history in this sense is restrictive and coercive; history as state-sponsored institution for controlling the individual. The novelist's irrepressible weirdness and creative liberty provide the antidote. 'It is almost inevitable that the fiction writer, dealing with this reality, will violate any number of codes and contracts. He will engineer a swerve from the usual arrangements that bind a figure in history to what has been reported, rumoured, confirmed or solemnly chanted' (n.p.). DeLillo's rhetoric in 'The Power of History' is relentlessly incarcerational: history imprisons and fiction breaks free. Idiosyncratic, disobedient novelists 'will sooner or later state their adversarial relationship with history' (n.p.).

Nicholas Branch is initially identified as a CIA historian, but he gradually metamorphoses into a fiction maker. Unlike Stephen, however, Branch ultimately discovers that one can be trapped in fiction's nets as securely as those of history. Nevertheless, he does manage to assemble a compelling counter-narrative to the history he was charged to write. In the process he also chronicles his own transformation by proxy through various avatars, historical figures lured away from history by the dreamscapes of fiction. How does a CIA historian learn how to build a metafictional labyrinth? By apprenticing himself to Stephen in *A Portrait*.

From a young age, Lee Harvey Oswald, like Stephen, believes he is destined for historic greatness. He immerses himself in Marxist literature and becomes convinced that his wretchedness is historically determined by capitalism. He vows to join the struggle against this system of exploitation and thus become swept up in history. From Lee's perspective joining history entails sacrificing individuality. Lee writes in the epigraph to Part One: 'Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world and the world in general' (DeLillo 1988: 1).

At times he freely embraces self-sacrifice for a greater good. In military prison at Atsugi he reflects:

Maybe what has to happen is that the individual must allow himself to be swept along, must find himself in the stream of no-choice, the single direction ... History means to merge. The purpose of history is to climb out of your own skin. He knew what Trotsky had written, that revolution leads us out of the dark night of the isolated self. (101)

Much later, after his defection and return to America and his growing involvement in the assassination conspiracy, a part of him still clings to the romance of surrendering to history: 'Summer was building toward a vision, a history. He felt he was being swept up, swept along, done with being a pitiful individual, done with isolation' (DeLillo 1988: 322).

Lee's desire to lose himself in history is at odds with his counter-impulse to achieve personal notoriety. This individualist aspiration is expressed through dreams, fantasies, films, and fiction. The self-mythology of Stephen Hero is echoed by Oswald Hero. As an adolescent Lee dreams, 'He lay near sleep, falling into reverie, the powerful world of Oswald-hero, guns flashing in the dark. The reverie of control, perfection of rage, perfection of desire, the fantasy of night, rain-slick streets, the heightened shadows of men in dark coats, like men on movie posters. The dark had a power' (DeLillo 1988: 46). He imagines himself as hero of a spy-thriller or film noir, and this tendency to invent more interesting alter egos expands and diversifies over time. He creates multiple aliases and views his own actions from a detached perspective. As he dips his toe into real espionage by divulging secrets about the U-2 spy plane, Lee conceives of his performance like a spectator: 'He was not connected to anything here and not quite connected to himself ... He barely noticed himself talking. That was the interesting part. The more he spoke, the more he felt he was softly split in two' (89, 90). One should resist the temptation to diagnose such dissociation as a symptom of schizophrenia. Within *Libra's* world-inside-the-world this splitting impulse suggests the development of a fiction writer's frame of reference, an impulse to double the self as other, to convert first-person into third-person.

As such, it should come as no surprise that Lee eventually becomes drawn to writing fiction. Plotting an exit strategy from the Marines and from America, he fills out an application where he lists his vocational interest as '*To be a short story writer on contemporary American life*' (DeLillo 1988: 134, emphasis in original). He tries his hand at writing in the Soviet Union, producing with great effort a few essays and a longer memoir. But as his haughtily titled 'Historic Diary' suggests, Lee still regards himself as a servant of history in these early efforts. It takes the Mephistophelean David Ferrie to lead Lee (whom he calls

Leon) down a different path. One can almost see Branch peeking from behind the curtain and hear him whispering in Ferrie's ear as he counsels, 'There's something else that's generating this event. A pattern outside experience. Something that *jerks* you out of the spin of history. I think you've had it backwards all this time. You wanted to enter history. Wrong approach, Leon. What you really want is out. Get out. Jump out. Find your place and your name on another level' (384, emphasis in original).

Lee does not find his new place and name until he lands in jail after the assassination. Detained in a Dallas prison cell, he has an epiphany. His calling is not to sacrifice himself to history or to be a patsy in someone else's plot. No, he must seize control of his own story by deliberately reconstructing the assassination on his own terms: 'Lee Harvey Oswald was awake in his cell. It was beginning to occur to him that he'd found his life's work. After the crime comes the reconstruction' (DeLillo 1988: 434). He plans to use his imprisonment as an opportunity to craft a self-portrait of the assassin. The metafictional mind-merge with Branch is uncanny here. It becomes nearly impossible to distinguish where author ends and character begins: '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 . . . His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald' (434–5). Is this the *raison d'être* for Oswald or Branch? At this point that can seem a distinction without a difference.

Identical as they may appear, there are crucial differences between what Lee and Branch forge in the smithies of their respective souls. Lee is eager to start afresh: 'The more time he spent in his cell, the stronger he would get. Everybody knew who he was now. This charged him with strength. There was clearly a better time beginning, a time of deep reading in the case, of self-analysis and reconstruction. He no longer saw confinement as a lifetime curse' (DeLillo 1988: 435). Branch knows better. Prison is not Lee's Bethlehem but his Golgotha. Branch knows Lee will not live to begin 'his life's work' but will be killed the next day. He also knows that the chore of reconstruction will eventually be assigned to Branch himself. Fifteen years into that impossible historical task, and thoroughly sapped of all strength and zeal for the job, Branch turned instead to fiction, the results of which are *Libra*. There he tells the story of Oswald, the assassination conspirators, and the beleaguered CIA historian sentenced to hard labour in the archival labyrinth. Lee's ecstasy echoes that of Stephen at the end of *A Portrait*, but Branch negates such optimism through his reconstruction. *A Portrait* concludes with Stephen's flight to freedom through art, and Lee is deluded enough to think a similar fate awaits him. He is wrong. *Libra* offers instead a myth of The Fall to complement the master trope of the Labyrinth. Branch borrows *A Portrait's*

palette but turns the canvas upside down to portray a spiralling descent into exile, imprisonment, and death.

The Fall

The Labyrinth represents more than artistic ingenuity and inscrutable complexity. It is a sinister emblem steeped in secrecy, shame, and guilt. King Minos had Daedalus build the Labyrinth to conceal the Minotaur, the unholy offspring of Queen Pasiphaë's sex with a bull. The god Poseidon was responsible for making Pasiphaë desire the bull, but consummation was made possible by Daedalus, who put his cunning to perverse use by constructing a device to enable their bestiality. This was not Daedalus's first abominable act. Before his notorious exploits in Crete, he was a renowned artist in Athens. He was so envious of a rival artist, his nephew Perdix (sometimes called Talos), he hurled him off the Acropolis. In some versions of the myth, Athena saved Perdix by turning him into a partridge so he could fly to safety. Others maintain that Daedalus succeeded in murdering Perdix and was banished from Athens. Either way, he was a criminal fugitive long before he built the Labyrinth and devised those prison-break wings. Perhaps the profane Labyrinth could only have been conceived by an artificer as devious as he was inventive. No great stretch of the imagination is needed to link the criminals in *Libra* with Daedalus. They are his rightful heirs as diabolical artificers, killers, and exiles.

The rogue CIA agents who conspire against President Kennedy begin their plots in exile. Win Everett, Larry Parmenter, and T. J. Mackey are veterans of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Afterwards these anti-Castro diehards were each reprimanded and ostracized by the CIA. These outcasts were once devout worshippers of the Agency. Larry Parmenter's wife, Beryl, recognizes his devotion as religious zealotry: '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' (DeLillo 1988: 260). Even as they devise their plots against the commander-in-chief, they convince themselves that they are not traitors but purists. Win Everett foresees the day when his plot will be exposed and he will be held accountable; still, he seeks the approval of his superiors and believes he will ultimately be vindicated:

What's more, they would admire the complexity of his plan, incomplete as it was. It had art and memory. It had a sense of responsibility, or moral force. And it was a picture in the world of their own guilty wishes. He was never more surely an Agency man than in the first breathless days of dreaming up this plot. (364)

One detects the outline of Branch behind such passages. He knows what it is like to be exiled and yet remain, as Cranly puts it to Stephen, 'supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve' (Joyce [1916] 2007: 212). Branch also knows what it is like to rebel against ultimate authority: *non serviam: I will not serve*.

Branch borrows the ancient Greek prototype of Daedalus as guiding spirit from *A Portrait*, but he also borrows the Christian iconography of The Fall, associated with the revolt of Lucifer's band of rebel angels and with the sin of Adam and Eve. This foundational myth is delivered most vividly by Father Arnall in his chapter III sermon:

Lucifer, we are told, was a son of the morning, a radiant and might angel; yet he fell: he fell and there fell with him a third part of the host of heaven: he fell and was hurled with his rebellious angels into hell. What his sin was we cannot say. Theologians consider that it was the sin of pride, the sinful thought conceived in an instant: *non serviam: I will not serve*. That instant was his ruin. He offended the majesty of God by the sinful thought of one instant and God cast him out of heaven into hell forever. (Joyce [1916] 2007: 103, emphasis in original)

The rebel angels' fall into exile and imprisonment in hell is replicated by defiant humans' fall into exile from the Garden of Eden into this veil of tears called the world; a legacy inherited by us all, according to Catholic theology, in the form of original sin. Young Stephen trembles at his postlapsarian fate. He poignantly reflects:

The snares of the world were its ways of sin. He would fall. He had not yet fallen but he would fall silently, in an instant. Not to fall was too hard, too hard: and he felt the silent lapse of his soul, as it would be at some instant to come, falling, falling but not yet fallen, still unfallen but about to fall. (Joyce [1916] 2007: 142)

Soon after, however, Stephen renounces his inheritance of original sin and instead lays claim to his redemptive artistic birthright from Daedalus, innocently ignoring all the sinister elements also associated with the cunning artificer. The old dispensation guaranteed his fall, but his new artistic faith sets him soaring free. No longer fearing damnation, Stephen comes to identify with Lucifer as a kindred rebel against God's yoke. He intentionally echoes Lucifer's *non serviam* in his declaration of artistic independence to Cranly:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some

mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile and cunning. (Joyce [1916] 2007: 218)

Branch again employs the Joycean mythical method in his appropriation of falling iconography from *A Portrait*. Win Everett first introduces the theme. Contemplating the Cuban catastrophe, he echoes Lucifer's fallen angels: 'Then the long slow fall. I wanted to sanctify the failure, make it everlasting. If we couldn't have success, let's make the most of our failure' (DeLillo 1988: 27). Branch structures the chapters in such a way that several end with falling imagery and then segue directly into falling again at the beginning of the next chapter. These chapters ostensibly take place at different times and places and involve different plots. But Branch's presiding genius as uber-narrator is insinuated through his arrangement of the materials. For instance, at the end of the '26 April' chapter Win drifts off to sleep: 'It was all part of the long fall, the general sense that he was dying' (79). The next chapter, 'In Atsugi', wakes with the same imagery: 'The dark plane drifted down, sweeping out an arc of hazy sky to the east of the runway' (80). The 'dark plane' refers to the U-2 spy plane. Branch bookends 'In Atsugi' with the slow descent of an ejected pilot from a U-2 plane, the most evocative description of falling in the novel: 'He is coming down to springtime in the Urals and he finds that his privileged vision of the earth is an inducement to truth. He wants to tell the truth. He wants to live another kind of life, outside secrecy and guilt and the pull of grave events' (116). In fact, as the novel soon reminds us, ejected U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers falls into secrecy and guilt, not out of it. He lands in the Soviet Union, in prison, and in history. Defector Lee Oswald visits him there and intuits the *non serviam* camaraderie of a fellow fallen angel: 'Paid to fly a plane and incidentally to kill himself if the mission failed. Well we don't always follow orders, do we? Some orders require thought, ha ha. He wanted to call to the prisoner through the door, *You were right; good for you; disobey*' (196, emphasis in original). Branch returns to this imagery at the end of Oswald's life. Drifting into delirium after being shot by Jack Ruby, Branch equips Oswald with these dying thoughts: 'It is the white nightmare of noon, high in the sky over Russia. Me-too and you-too. He is a stranger, in a mask, falling' (440). Revealingly, Lee's dying fall transitions directly into the final Branch section of the novel. You-too and Me-too.

Libranth

Libra is a highly resonant title. Peter Boxall hears in the title 'a balanced tension between liberty and zodiacal predestination' (2006: 132). The root of 'liberty' is

the Latin 'liber', which is indeed a near cognate of 'Libra', and for that matter of 'Labyrinth', too. But 'liber' also lies at the root of the French *livre* and the Spanish *libro*, all of which might be housed in an English 'library' (or the Texas School Book Depository). I am referring to the etymology of *Book*. The 'liber' of liberty and of the labyrinth hangs in the balance of the book. A pound one way or the other can tip *Libra's* scales ('libra' is Latin for 'pound', which is why it is abbreviated 'lb').

The central conflict of the book *Libra* is between fiction and history, in Boxall's formulation a conflict between the free flux of fiction's continuous becoming and the intransigent bind of history's fixed narrative. DeLillo told interviewer Kevin Connolly:

In a theoretical sense I think fiction can be a refuge and a consolation. In *Libra* the national leader still dies, but for one thing, at least we know how it happens. Beyond that, fiction offers patterns and symmetry that we don't find in the experience of ordinary living. Stories are consoling, fiction is one of the consolation prizes for having lived in the world. (Connolly [1988] 2005: 31)

Fiction certainly allows an author to impose pattern and symmetry, which theoretically might provide refuge and consolation. Not always, however, and not successfully in *Libra*. Branch may have turned away from history toward fiction in hopes of achieving Dedalian liberty. But instead he constructs a book which itself functions as a prison – not a historical one, but a metafictional one. He and his characters are inextricably trapped inside the *Libranth*.

There are no emancipatory flights of escape as in *A Portrait*. No one gets out of *Libra* alive. The arch-conspirator Win Everett is the first to recognize the metafictional deathtrap:

Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men. The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death. A plot in fiction, he believed, is the way we localize the force of the death outside the book, play it off, contain it. (DeLillo 1988: 221)

Death is etched into the very structure of *Libra*. To a certain extent this death is historically predetermined: the real Kennedy was killed on 22 November 1963; the real Oswald was killed on 24 November 1963. But in other ways death between the covers of *Libra* is aesthetically engineered, numerologically encoded, and discreetly stamped with the authorial signature of Nicholas Branch. For instance, the Oswald chapters are titled with geographical markers

and the conspiracy chapters with temporal markers. Had those chapters been numbered as in other DeLillo novels, there would be eleven chapters in Part One and thirteen in Part Two. A reader who notices this demarcation might wonder why the novel is not divided evenly into two sections of twelve chapters each. In the chapter before '22 November', Branch slyly hints at the answer: 'It's not surprising that Branch thinks of the day and month of the assassination in strictly numerical terms – 11/22' (377). The following chapter detailing the assassination is the 11th in Part Two and the 22nd overall: 11/22, the date of Kennedy's death. The chapter detailing Oswald's assassination is the 24th overall: not only the day in November he died but also his age in years at the time. The novel begins with Lee underground in the New York subway and ends by returning him underground with his Fort Worth burial. In so many ways Branch plants secret codes and shapes perfect symmetries in his reconstruction of events.

These fictional manoeuvres are cunning, but they are not redemptive. The characters are all condemned to death within *Libra*. Everett intuits his metafictional bind: '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' (DeLillo 1988: 78). He inscribes these secret symmetries as an author, but he is also inscribed by them as a character. The same holds true for Branch himself, and he knows it. He is responsible for building this labyrinth, but he is also one of its metafictional inmates. He inserts a coy self-allusion to that effect when describing Oswald's Atsugi incarceration:

In the prison literature he'd read, Oswald was always coming across an artful old con who would advise the younger man, give him practical tips, talk in sweeping philosophical ways about the larger questions. Prison invited larger questions. It made you wish for an experienced perspective, for the knowledge of some grizzled figure with kind and tired eyes, a counselor, wise to the game. (DeLillo 1988: 99)

Branch surely has *Libra* in mind as 'prison literature', and he has himself in mind as 'the artful old con' who knows how this game is played. He might have made a wise counsellor for Lee had they been fellow prisoners in Atsugi – as opposed to fellow prisoners in *Libra*.

In 1988 DeLillo spoke to *Washington Post* reporter Jim Naughton:

'I think Nicholas Branch has reached the point he has because he is so haunted by the story itself and by the people who are part of it', DeLillo

says. 'I think he is almost immobilized by sadness, compassion, regret and by the overwhelming sense that he is never going to be able to do justice to the enormity of this story.' (Naughton 1988: n.p.)

He added, 'Once you have read in the case I think you do become trapped forever ... In fact I'm sure you do. This is certainly the most deeply haunting experience of my life, working on this book' (n.p.). He ingeniously devised a literary hall of mirrors for depicting this haunting (and haunted) trap. DeLillo created uber-narrator Nicholas Branch who, after years of studying the case as a historian, attempted to break free through fiction. He turned to an ideal model for achieving freedom through art, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and tried to use it as a skeleton key to unlock his cell. The result is endlessly fascinating for readers – but judged by Branch's own standards, *Libra* is a failure. 'He knows he can't get out. The case will haunt him to the end' (DeLillo 1988: 445). That is, to the end of his life and to the end of the novel – which for a character stuck in a book amounts to the same thing. Near the middle of *Libra* Branch has a revelation: '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' (181). This prompts him to ask, 'Is he one of them now? Frustrated, stuck, self-watching, looking for a means of connection, a way to break out' (181). The answer – obviously, pathetically, metafictionally, irrevocably – is yes. He has insinuated himself into the deadly plot and consigned himself to the conspirators' fate. He is one of them, and they are part of him, now and forever, as prisoners of the *Libranth*.

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