

## **Don DeLillo's *Libra*: A Study of Facts and Fiction**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the twentieth century there was a boom of true crime novels. These texts were experimental and enriched with narratology. These works of art had marked a watershed in contemporary American Literature in their attempt 'to mingle factual reportage with novelistic style'. All of them became famous for the true-crime depiction after undergoing an extensive research of the criminal minds, and their backgrounds. So this essay examines the relationship between the narration of the historical and the fictional in Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), a text that foregrounds the difficulties posed by historical facts by reinventing them in fiction. The aim is to study how this novel melds historical fact and fiction.

### **KEYWORDS**

Narratology; Crime Novels; Historical Facts.

### **Introduction**

The expanding Post-World War II popularity of non-fictional literature nurtured many new talents as well as already established writers and novelists who wanted to express their worldview. Authors who had previously written fictions began writing life narratives, and the boundaries between the genres of literature and journalistic writing as well as fiction and non-fiction gradually became blurred in a number of works. The narration of real events is the building of a cohesive narrative from an enormous array of conflicting and often unreliable sources. Moreover it is concerned with pinpointing the lives of its characters and with uncovering the truth about an event or sequence of events, using data supplied

by witnesses and official sources, all of whom may or may not be reliable. Keeping this in view, this essay will examine the relationship between the narration of the historical and the fictional in Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), a text that foregrounds the difficulties posed by historical facts by reinventing them in fiction

The selected text under study being narrative, it is indispensable to give the meaning of 'narrative' before proceeding. Genette has given a model of 'story', 'narrative' and 'narrating'. To quote Genette:

Analysis of narrative discourse will thus be for me, essentially, a study of relationship between narrative and story, between narrative and

narrating, and story and narrating (Genette 29).

Gerald Prince defines narrative as “the recounting of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two or several narrators to one, two or several narratee” (Prince 58). Gerard Genette’s work focuses not only on the story itself but also on ‘how it is told’. Narrative is all but a matter of ‘what’ (content) and ‘how’ (expression). The study of narrative deals with issues like temporal and spatial arrangement of events, their narration, focalization et al. But its study always reveals more than the structure of narrative in different mediums. In case of *Libra*, the basic theme is of conspiracy in the name of crime and history. As mentioned earlier, various different elements of narratology can be used in better understanding these themes.

Don DeLillo’s novel, *Libra* deals with our prior knowledge of the events it portrays. It is named after the astrological sign symbolizing balance and harmony. Here, the author of *End Zone* and *White Noise* has created “a work of the imagination” based on the real life of Lee Harvey Oswald and the events surrounding President Kennedy’s assassination. *Libra* was Oswald’s sun-sign, and, through the author’s masterly treatment, it serves to symbolize Oswald’s precarious search for balance in American society. This novel melds historical fact (the events in Dallas in 1963) and fiction (the details of the plot to scare the President into attacking Cuba). The real-life characters intermingle with DeLillo’s own creations.

The book begins with Lee Oswald as a boy in the Bronx - a misfit, a chronic truant, sharing oppressively close quarters with his mother. Then the author enters into the book-filled, document-choked study of Nicholas Branch, who is writing a secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy. This is followed by our introduction to Win Everett, a C.I.A. man now semiretired, so-called, on account of

his overzealousness in the matter of Cuba. It is April 1963, and Everett has just begun to frame his plan for an “electrifying event” that will bring the anti-Castro movement back to life.

Oswald reappears as a high school dropout in New Orleans, as a marine at a U-2 base in Japan, as a factory worker in Russia and finally as an order filler at the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas. Win Everett reappears surrounded by more and more associates - first the two former colleagues he trusts most and then other men less predictable, less controllable, as his plan takes on a life of its own. Nicholas Branch is seen only rarely, sinking ever deeper in a morass of eyewitness accounts, hair samples, chemical analyses, then the accounts of the dreams of eyewitnesses and then 25 years of novels and plays and radio debates about the assassination. Mr. DeLillo reveals his genius by using the same source materials available to anyone else - the Warren Commission report, the usual newspaper articles and court proceedings. But he takes the stale facts and weaves them into something altogether new, largely by means of inventing, with what seems uncanny perception, the interior voice that each character might use to describe his own activities. Here, for instance, is a summary of Jack Ruby’s movements just before he killed Oswald - a matter of public record, no doubt, but the passage displays a verve all its own:

He was running late. If I don't get there in time, it's decreed I wasn't meant to do it. He drove through Dealey Plaza, slightly out of the way, to look at the wreaths again. He talked to [his dog] Sheba about was she hungry, did she want her Alpo. He parked in a lot across the street from the Western Union office. He opened the trunk, got out the dog food and a can opener and fixed the dog her meal, which he left on the front seat. He took two thousand

dollars out of the moneybag and stuffed it in his pockets because this is how a club owner walks into a room. He put the gun in his right hip pocket. His name was stamped in gold inside his hat (208).

The book is so seamlessly written that perhaps not even those people who own the copies of the Warren report could say for certain. So it can be said that *Libra* is not merely lifelike; it is also, in the best sense, novel like. It tells a story, and it tells it skillfully, with much attention to the details of the characters. For instance, a veteran C.I.A. man, Everett cannot make himself go to bed at night without checking to see that the oven is off, and then sometimes double-checking, and reminding himself as he climbs the stairs that he has in fact completed his check. DeLillo hardly draws out his portrait of Kennedy as he is aware that the readers are familiar with him. Instead he constructs a complex and convincing Oswald. One feels well acquainted with him; partly because DeLillo renders him as a “type” we’ve seen before. For instance, he wants desperately to change the world, but he can’t hold a job. He seeks a utopian society of decency and equality, yet he beats his wife.

In regard to the structure, *Libra* is divided into twenty-four chapters, of which half tell the story of Lee Harvey Oswald’s life between 1956 and 1963 and are entitled after the places where he spent these seven years. The other chapters cover the plot against Kennedy and are named after the dates that mark its development between April and November 1963. A temporal gap inevitably occurs between the two narrative strands that run parallel to each other, but is eventually bridged, as Oswald comes into contact with the conspirators, in April 1963.

In *Libra*, DeLillo seems to suggest that the events take on a life and control it and fate takes over from the chaotic intentions of all the characters involved:

Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move towards death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot is 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 death outside the body, play it off, contain it. The ancients staged mock battles to parallel the tempests in nature and reduce their fear of gods who warred against the sky. He worried about the deathward logic of his plot. (221)

There are flashes back and forth in time, and jump cuts between the conspirators and Oswald, who is growing up to become exactly the kind of person the CIA renegades had planned to invent: a malcontent and misfit with a known fondness for Castro and guns. Slowly, dimly, Oswald begins to realize that he is being watched, people have designs on his destiny.

In a novel dealing in fact and fiction, characterization transcends the conventions of traditional reporting with portrayals of people with psychological depth (Mass 13). Wolfe described this technique as

...giving the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective and emotional life of the characters (Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson 21).

Characterization is perhaps the greatest achievement of *Libra*. Where other novelists struggle to form a plot and create real characters to move it towards its conclusion, DeLillo has to pare away the multitude of plots and conspiracies and myths that surround the events of

November 1963 and form a central narrative around which Oswald's path to destiny can develop. DeLillo takes his two parallel lines and crosses between place and time, the crosswinds of history and fate that move assassin and target together.

DeLillo interweaves fact and fiction as he draws us inexorably toward Dallas, November 22. The real people (Jack Ruby, Oswald, his mother and Russian wife) are retrieved from history and made human, their stories involving and absorbing; the imagined characters are placed into history as DeLillo imagines it to have come to pass. *Libra* ultimately becomes a comment on the entire body of DeLillo's work, because of his crystal-clear, composite version of events.

Oswald is portrayed as an anti-hero who effuses an air of inevitable tragedy. More than just a victim of powerful secret forces, he personifies a larger American flaw. DeLillo follows the story through to the end, as a wave of discord ripples through the nation and the mourning of the dead president commences. He succinctly reworks the historical material, portraying the characters that investigate Oswald, such as Win Everett, Larry Parmenter, and T.J. Mackey: renegade CIA men involved in an intricate plot to kill J.F.K. The conspirators have created a "world inside the world" (*Libra* 13), which they think is more structured than "real" life. They believe that their plot is "a better-working version of the larger world...Here the plan was tighter. These were men who believed history was in their care" (127). In other words, they believe they have constructed a plot through which they can control history, a plot that has the structure of a literary narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and an end.

Win Everett, a demoted CIA agent, who, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, is forced to leave the foreground and teach at Texas Woman's University, cannot reconcile with being relegated to a petty job and searches

for a solution to make the administration go back to Cuba. He needs what he calls an "electrifying event" and he finds it, or, rather, stages it: an attempt on the President's life, in Dallas, that would point to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate: Kennedy must be scared into overthrowing Castro: "We don't hit the President. We miss him. We want a spectacular miss." (*Libra* 27-28) However, T-Jay Mackey, one of Everett's fellows, secretly alters the initial plan: he recruits Ramon Benitez and Frank Vasquez from the growing community of Cuban exiles in Miami, and Wayne Elko, a soldier of fortune, but fails to inform them that the shooting has to be a miss and not a hit. In *Libra*, both real and totally fictional people are presented. There are about 125 "characters" in the book, some making only cameo appearances, others essential for the author's idea of what occurred during the assassination, which remains at the heart of his narrative.

DeLillo has also used the tool of description very effectively. The element of description is found to be quite prominent in the following passage:

It's not just Kennedy himself," Banister was saying on the other side of the door. "It's what people see in him. It's the glowing picture we keep getting. He actually glows in most of his photographs. We're supposed to believe he's the hero of the age. Did you ever see a man in such a hurry to be great? He thinks he can make us a different kind of society. He's trying to engineer a shift. We're not smart enough for him. We're not mature, energetic, Harvard, world traveller, rich, handsome, lucky, witty. Perfect white teeth. It fucking grates on me just to look at him. Do you know what charisma means to me? It means he holds secrets. The dangerous secrets used to be held outside the government. Plots,

conspiracies, secrets of revolution, secret of the end of social order. Now it's the government that has a lock on the secrets that matter. All the danger is in the White House, from nuclear weapons on down. What's he plotting with Castro? What kind of back channel does he have working with the Soviets? He touches a phone and worlds shake. There's not the slightest doubt in mind but that a movement exists in the executive branch of the government which is totally devoted to furthering the communist cause. Strip the man of his powerful secrets. Take his secrets and he's nothing. (68)

In the above passage, a detective agent, Guy Banister is talking in detail about John F. Kennedy from his point of view, to Mackay. *Libra* shifts between historical reportage and character-centric fiction, the former the foil or setting for the latter. DeLillo's description seems to be somewhat different from the data found in Warren Report (WR). For instance, the Warren Report gives this evidence regarding the warning call made to police the night before Oswald's transfer: During the night... the local office of the FBI and the sheriff's office received telephone calls from an unidentified man who warned that a committee had decided 'to kill the man that killed the President'(WR 209).

DeLillo reinvents this as:

Then he called Russell Shively, his detective friend, at home... 'They are going to kill that bastard Oswald in the police basement tomorrow during the transfer... (*Libra* 434).

The effect is to personalize the character of Ruby and connect him to the network of fictional personnel, bringing them also into the sphere of truth. Naming Oswald is an important addition.

Likewise, the Warren Report describes superficially the moment before Oswald appears in the basement: 'Someone shouted, "Here he comes!"... and the din increased' (WR 216). DeLillo expands this to:

He heard voices saying, "Here he comes, here he comes", and at first he thought they meant him... Vault noise, voices, hollow bouncing sounds filled the areaway, car engines, clanking equipment' (*Libra* 437).

This attempt of DeLillo creates a subjective fictional unit that is more real than the 'real'. The color of Oswald's eyes seems to be the product of interpretation rather than a stable fact:

Oswald's eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right handed, he is left handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud. Branch has support for all these propositions in eyewitness testimony and commission exhibits. (*Libra* 300)

Everything is potentially true since everything is supported through eyewitness accounts or "evidence". Yet everything cannot be true. The lack of certainty regarding even basic physical qualities underscores the fact that it is not possible for the historian to "uncover" the "truth". He or she must decide which of the potential truths seem most plausible to him or her.

*Libra*, among other things, is a literary exercise on the subject of conspiracy, and the conspirators themselves are characters in a larger plot whose involutions they are unaware of. The element of conspiracy has been observed to be very strong at the starting of the novel in the chapter named '26 April'. This plan is not actually to kill the president but just to give a 'spectacular miss'. Oswald, Parmenter and Everett scheme away behind the scenes of history,

planning an event so astonishing that it will, in no way escape the clutches of history. They are the agents who actively bring about the monumental, historic event

They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extent their fiction into the world. Everett had decided he wanted one figure to be slightly more visible than the others, a man the investigation might center on, .....Mackey would find this man for Everett. They needed fingerprints, a handwriting sample, a photograph. Mackey would find the other shooters as well. We don't hit the President. We miss him. We want a spectacular miss. (50-51)

This paragraph shows a conspiracy being hatched and also shows how a plan would work. This is going on in the mind of Win Everett (*Libra* 55). Everett is surprised to find that the Oswald character he has created already exists in the real world, that the fiction he has been devising is "a fiction living prematurely in the world" (179). This character already has his own aliases and forged documents, and he ends up playing the role Everett has designed for him so well because he is the role already. As Mott points out, "there is no difference between a scripted Oswald and the 'real thing'" (139). The "real thing" is also a construct. In fact, in DeLillo's world there is no "real" Oswald as opposed to a "fake" one (145).

Branch's failure to create meaning is quite simply due to an excess of information. His astounding collection includes photographs, eyewitness accounts, baptismal records, report cards, postcards, and tax returns. These texts are his only access to the assassination, because as Hutcheon and White contend, the past is only accessible to us through its textual remains. The Warren Report, Branch thinks, "is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to

Iowa City and lived to be a hundred" (*Libra* 181). Its twenty-six accompanying volumes contain slices of personal histories, all linked by their confluence in the moment in Dallas. Branch discovers that the data he has collected cannot reveal the "truth". The texts contain innumerable contradictions, so-called "facts" that are forever changing depending on who is interpreting them. However, DeLillo is careful to point out that *Libra* is only his fictional account:

Libra is a work of the imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. I've altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters. (Author's Note in *Libra*)

The Author's Note draws attention to the constructed nature of *Libra*, emphasizing that not only does the novel not claim to be a historical account, but it also does not claim to be fiction that merely reflects reality.

As a novel, *Libra* does not serve the purpose of providing any final answers. While it deals with historical events, it does not aim to "uncover" historical "truth". Literature has a certain advantage over history in the sense that it does not need to prove anything or explain everything. Its purpose lies elsewhere. Willman asks a very relevant question in regards to *Libra*:

In what way can a work of art operating outside the world of empirical facts and established 'reality' help us to understand the JFK assassination? (623).

The purpose of literature is to create meaning that exists outside of the empirical. It can offer a kind of "truth" in that it can provide us with perspectives on the human experience. As Oswald's mother says in explanation of her son's actions,

"Your honor, I cannot state the truth of this case with simple yes and no. I have to tell a story" (*Libra* 449).

*Libra* ends with a diptych of mourning women: Marguerite Oswald, who vows at her son's graveside to pursue the meaning of his life in history, and Beryl Parmenter, the wife of one of the conspirators, who cannot tear himself away from the relentlessly rerun news footage of Jack Ruby shooting Oswald in the basement of the Dallas police building. The shock and grief of these women symbolize the violent events of Dallas entering the stream of American consciousness and history with transformative effect (Duvall 96).

The Kennedy assassination is an event that has generated an astounding amount of conspiracy theories. In many ways, it can be defined as a postmodern event, an occurrence that has defied closure by generating a mass amount of data without a narrative to structure it. The search for the "truth" has left us with a profusion of literature espousing

conflicting versions of what might have happened. In an interview, DeLillo says, "fiction rescues history from its confusions" by providing "a hint of order in the midst of all the randomness" (DeCurtis 294). In another interview, he explains that, "fiction offers patterns and symmetry that we don't find in the experience of ordinary living. Stories are consoling" (Connolly 31).

So it can be concluded that fiction can provide comfort through narrative structuring and closure. *Libra* can provide this comfort in that it has structured an event that otherwise seems to defy structuring and given an ending to an event that otherwise seems to defy endings. History, too, can provide the comfort of narrative structuring if it applies literary techniques, but it cannot provide any final answers, as it claims to do. *Libra* emphasizes the importance of narrative for making sense of historical events. At the same time, however, it questions historical narrative.

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