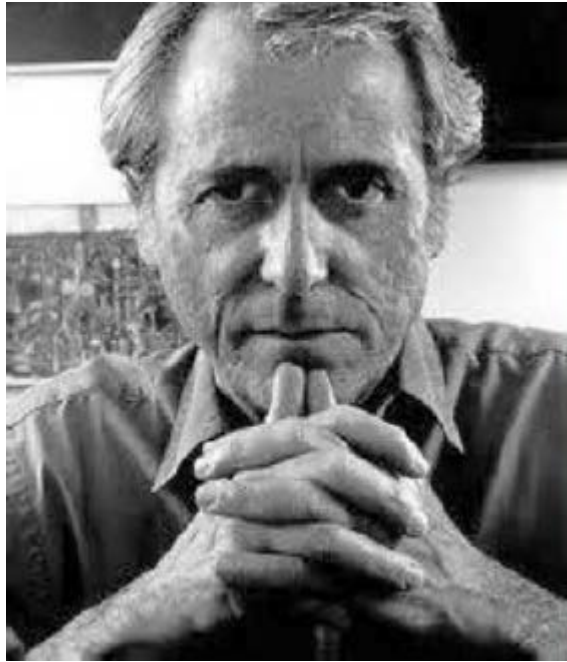


ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

White Noise (1985)



Don DeLillo

(1936-)

Waves and Radiation

1

The novel opens with an image that evokes a line of covered wagons coursing west in the 19th century, a traditional mythic image of the progress of civilization: “The station wagons” are in a direct line from the covered wagons--“a long shining line that coursed through the west campus.” The analogy gives historical depth to the narrative and makes the “College-on-the-Hill” a metaphor of America, recalling the 17th-century Puritan ideal of building a utopia they called a “City on a Hill,” their version on earth of the Celestial City of God. Today their affluent descendants, the parents of these students, feel “spiritually akin, a people, a nation.”

As a metaphor of all America the college is not located geographically. When the narrative camera moves in close the college becomes more specifically a representation of American higher education in 1985. Conformity is implied by the parents all driving station wagons and their linear movement in single file, year after year. Passive acquiescence to dehumanizing Postmodern taste is represented by the “orange I-beam sculpture.” Orange today is the color of prison inmate jumpsuits. The emphasis in the long catalogue of “objects” is upon materialistic consumption, a parody of Walt Whitman’s ecstatic catalogues in “Song of Myself.” Academic critics inclined to Marxism have seen this opening catalogue as a critique of “capitalism” rather than as evidence of abundance and a high standard of living in the capitalist American economy in contrast to Marxist economies. Nor do Marxists acknowledge that DeLillo is criticizing materialism, because Marxists are materialists.

The theme introduced in the first paragraph is the materialism that is manifest in such an overabundance of *things*—“objects”—mostly luxuries, toys and junk food. The tone becomes ironic in reference to their “controlled substances, their birth control pills and devices,” for their substances are clearly not controlled, except for those unwanted in the womb. The denial of Nature through technology becomes another major theme in the novel. The vagueness of their “devices” leaves what their “criminal pleasures” may be to the imagination of the reader. These privileged kids have “Dum-Dum pops”—conformist fathers—and the only thing spiritual or sweet about them is their “Mystic mints.”

In the second paragraph sentences begin to break into fragments, a characteristic of Postmodern style. The disintegration of prose expresses a dis-integration of consciousness. The dum-dum dads stand around their station wagons with “something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage.” DeLillo here resembles Sinclair Lewis in his ridicule of the comfortable bourgeoisie, a traditional target in literature. Massive insurance coverage introduces the fear of death as a major theme. In the third paragraph the narrator refers to “Babette and I and our children by previous marriages.” Divorces and remarriages have fragmented biological families in the Postmodern period. This family lives where a woods once grew, an example of lost Nature. Behind and beneath them out of sight is an expressway where the sound of incessant traffic is a kind of white noise in the background made by “dead souls.” Postmodernists do not believe in a soul. This reference to souls identifies DeLillo with the Modernist tradition. That the souls are dead specifically suggests a spiritual wasteland, the most influential literary symbol of the 20th century, originated in “The Waste Land” (1922) by T. S. Eliot.

The novel pops from Realism into hyperbole when the narrator identifies himself as chairman of the department of *Hitler studies!* A whole department? This is either a preposterous joke or an outrage. It tests the limits of Realism. Hitler is the most iconic incarnation of evil in the 20th century. The narrator might as well be teaching Satan studies. He is hilariously unreliable and becomes a focus as well as a medium of irony. Everything he says hereafter is suspect. The invention of Hitler studies is dated 1968, at the violent peak of the anti-Vietnam War movement, when the fuse of the radical Feminist explosion got lit, the year Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated—when all that contributed to turning liberal idealism into the cynical pursuit of power. Colleges and universities did the opposite of what King had preached. They divided students against each other by gender and race. The favored were taught to see themselves as victims, to feel entitled, to blame scapegoats, to aggressively pursue self-interest, and to believe the end justifies the means, the rationale for fascism. The more the reader knows about American higher education after the 1960s the more Hitler studies seems plausible.

After all, colleges and universities around the country glorify Karl Marx, whose ideology has led to the murder of over 100 million people worldwide, more than the number killed by Hitler. About 17% of professors are self-identified Marxists, whose exemplar Josef Stalin signed a pact with Hitler. One of the major literary theorists most often cited in publications by politically correct professors is Paul de Mann, who supported Hitler during World War II and wrote propaganda for the Nazis.

During the Vietnam War the radical left led marches with banners and slogans and chants, resorted to riots, arsons, bombings, bank robberies, and murders. The parallel between the rise of the radical Left in the 1960s and the rise of Nazism in the 1930s is also a theme of Saul Bellow in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970). Hitler is a role model of leftist political revolution. He was a secular liberal, a poor painter who founded the Socialist party in Germany. Like many American liberals he felt victimized and dedicated his life to achieving his version of social justice. He epitomizes righteous politics, big government, and other values prevailing in American higher education: Hitler advocated identity politics, political correctness, environmentalism, Feminism, and race-based admissions. He censored books, silenced critics, and incited hatred. It is no wonder that so many liberal academic critics of *White Noise* miss the joke on them and treat the notion of Hitler studies as legitimate “cultural studies.”

The last paragraph returns to the commonplace, details that reestablish the illusion of real life that is the basis of literary Realism, ending with “signs concerning lost dogs and cats, sometimes in the writing of a child”—repeating the sad theme of lost Nature. The tension between the ordinary and the shocking is sustained throughout the novel. The fact that the narrator has still not named himself suggests that his invention of Hitler studies may be overcompensation for a weak ego.

Babette is “ample” rather than fashionably slender and her hair is a “mop,” connoting a housewife. She is “tousled” and “too preoccupied with serious matters to know or care what she looks like.” Lacking guile,” she is honest, modest, and natural. She embodies Nature, in contrast to the college people. To Babette the “serious matters” are not a career, money or looking smart. “She gathers and tends the children, teaches a course in an adult education program, belongs to a group of volunteers who read to the blind.” She has family values and represents traditional female virtues of the heart--childrearing, nurturing, and charity. Babette is a “full-souled woman,” in contrast to the “dead souls” on the expressway of modern life and “unlike my former wives, who had a tendency to feel estranged from the objective world—a self-absorbed and high-strung bunch, with ties to the intelligence community.”

Here the traditional wife Babette is contrasted to his former wives—a “bunch” of career women who are “self-absorbed” and “high-strung” (bitchy). Their “tendency to feel estranged from the objective world” suggests that they are estranged from reality and Nature. Academic critics have ignored this contrast so as not to offend Feminist career women. This is an example of how Political Correctness suppresses the truth. Failing to note that Babette is “full-souled” also suppresses the spirituality in the novel, as is common to Postmodern critics. By implication the former wives are intelligent, but their “ties to the intelligence community” implicate them in the evils of the prevailing male value system represented in DeLillo by the CIA, as in *The Names* (1981), poisonous values symbolized later by the airborne toxic event. His former wives and divorces help to explain his overcompensation for a weakened ego.

Although she is otherwise traditional, Babette does not volunteer at a church and does not seem religious, making her vulnerable to fear of death. Likewise the narrator feels the angst of the materialist when he sees objects as having a “sorrowful weight.” Without spirituality, only things have value, but because mere things are not fulfilling they make him sad: “They make me wary not of personal failure and defeat but of something more general, something large in scope and content.” The underlying cause of the psychological problems dramatized in *White Noise* is loss of faith in God.

Babette says of her husband, “it was my nature to shelter loved ones from the truth.” That applies to his presentation of Hitler as well, as he does not mention the concentration camps or the Holocaust. He is selective in his perception, a propagandist just as academics are about Marxism. The chapter ends with a smoke alarm going off from a dead battery or in response to a fire, another contrast between the ordinary and the shocking, a contrapuntal pattern in the novel.

Hitler studies is located in the same building with the popular culture department staffed partly by Jews! This ironic juxtaposition implies that these professors are dissociated from the real world. “The teaching staff is composed almost solely of New York emigres, smart, thuggish, movie-mad, trivia-crazed...an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles.” These professors are childishly trivial—they are mad like the professors in *Gulliver’s Travels*. And yet DeLillo’s depiction of how low “higher” education has sunk is understated.

The pop culture and Hitler studies departments are examples of “cultural studies,” a catch-all field for leftist radicals used throughout higher education during the 1980s to wedge into departments and replace traditional subjects of study with political advocacy, originated by Frederic Jameson, a Marxist professor at Duke. DeLillo is satirizing professors for fetishizing objects and glorifying materialistic consumerism by elevating products and advertising to a higher level than Shakespeare. The pop culture department head is “thuggish” Alfonse (Fast Food) Stompanato, the name of a gangster, a comment on the radicals who took over higher education using intimidation and other gang tactics. The faculty reflects the vulgarity of their field: “All his teachers are male, wear rumpled clothes, need haircuts, cough into their armpits. Together they look like teamster officials assembled to identify the body of a mutilated colleague. The impression is one of pervasive bitterness, suspicion and intrigue.”

Where are the women? Discretely missing from this representation of cultural studies is the most notorious example--Women's Studies, all staffed by one gender like male pop culture and even more known for "bitterness, suspicion and intrigue." Women's Studies is implied by parallelism. Hitler studies parallels Women's Studies in being a male form of fascist overcompensation for low self-esteem. In 1978 John Irving's bestselling satire of radical Feminism *The World According to Garp* used the name Garp to evoke how Feminists feel about men—like vomiting. In *White Noise* DeLillo uses Hitler to represent how Feminists portray men. Adopting the Feminist stereotype of men as fascists, Gladney gladly conforms to their beliefs by trying to emulate the worst fascist of them all.

DeLillo had to be indirect. While he was writing *White Noise* in 1984 the 17th novel of Kingsley Amis was censored by Feminists in 13 publishing houses in New York. This sent a message to male writers that Feminists now had the power to censor even the leading British novelist. The same year *White Noise* was published, Feminist editors censored the last novel of Ernest Hemingway, stole parts of it and rewrote the manuscript to express their values rather than his. According to John Baker, Editor-in-Chief of *Publishers Weekly*, "A lot of editors in publishing are women... Bookbanning certainly comes into play with political things from the sex point of view." William Noble, *Bookbanning in America* (1990) According to two former instructors of Women's Studies, "Today, separatism in Women's Studies is...illustrated by the widespread exclusion of male authors from course syllabi, assigned reading lists, and citations in scholarly papers...a systematic refusal to read or respond to male authors." Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism* (1994).

Murray Jay Siskind (*sis-kind*) is a male counterpart of women dissociated from Nature and entirely devoid of good taste--a lecturer on entertainers, just as Feminist professors teach divas. Ironically, Murray is a culture snob about other pop culture specialties: "There are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes." The dumbing down of higher education catering to popular taste is accompanied by the replacement of art with junk like the orange I-beam sculpture out in front: "It's the only avant-garde we've got." Murray is a representative Postmodernist, an alienated urban "intellectual," a secular liberal Atheist. His major theme is entropy, like Thomas Pynchon, the most influential Postmodern novelist: "The eventual heat death of the universe that scientists love to talk about is already well underway and you can feel it happening all around you in any large or medium-sized city." The apocalyptic tone also sounds like Pynchon and is a general characteristic of Postmodernism.

Murray is another unreliable professor, just how unreliable is suggested by his living in a "crumbling house near the insane asylum." Yet he represents the best the pop culture department has to offer. He defines himself as "the Jew" and yet he declares, "You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler.... The college is internationally known as a result of Hitler studies. It has an identity, a sense of achievement" Ironically this is what Hitler did for Germany in starting World War II. "It's what I want to do with Elvis." The equation of Elvis with Hitler, a popular entertainer with a monster, demolishes all moral distinctions, exposing the spiritual bankruptcy of Postmodernism. Murray and Gladney drive out into the pastoral countryside around Farmington not to relate to Nature, but to dissociate from it. Nature is merely the setting for something that illustrates Murray's theory. Murray is a "Theorist." During the 1980s "Theory" is mostly what male professors did while females did Feminist theory. "Theory" was a front for radicals who did not understand or care about literature.

They venture off campus to look at an artificial structure, "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA." Murray maintains that "No one sees the barn... Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn." That is, signs or language dissociate us (Murray) from reality. Looking at the barn is a metaphor of Murray looking at the world. For Murray this dissociation from reality through artifice is his only possibility of transcending his ego, the artificial transcendence of an Atheist—looking not at Nature but at artificial *things* like a celebrity barn or TV. Murray is the ideal consumer of pop culture. For him looking at a famous barn is "A religious experience in a way, like all tourism." He believes in the "aura" of artificial spectacles rather than God. He refers to religious experience he does not have himself. Although he claims to be participating in a "collective perception" he gives no evidence of seeing anything except an illustration of his Theory. He never describes the barn, he never even looks at it. He "watched the photographers" taking pictures of the barn. Many academics have

published articles on *White Noise* that are examples of Murray “looking at the barn.” They do not look at the barn as much as they look at other critics looking at the barn.

4

The professor of Hitler describes common people with the aloof sense of superiority characteristic of professors and Nazis. As if inspired by documentaries of massed Hitler youth doing calisthenics in unison, the professor is disgusted in particular by the obese who “walk down the street with food in their faces.” Food consumerism is making the peasants fat.

Gladney finds Babette running up the steps of the high school stadium to lose weight and fend off death, though he likes her “ample.” Babette is the handy man in the family, Gladney takes out the garbage. She runs, he walks—and jumps in “idiotic fright” when startled by passing joggers. Babette is part of Nature. She gave birth to Wilder and plays with him, she talks to dogs and cats. Gladney is only able to see colored spots out the corner of his right eye. Babette is his Nature.

Watching her run up and down the steps he stops thinking and feels attracted physically, “putting my hands inside the sweatband of her gray cotton pants.” As they watch thirty girls come running past them around the track, a list of three hotels interrupts the narrative flow. Hotels evoke rootless movement as the girls run around the track. This becomes pertinent as soon as we learn that Gladney’s daughter Bee from a previous marriage will be visiting at Christmas and can stay with their daughter Steffie in her room: “Do they know each other?” worries Babette. He answers, “They met at Disney World.” His optimism about this arrangement is implicitly compared to the unreality of a Disney movie. Bee is “having trouble readjusting to life in the States after two years in South Korea,” where she ate ketchup sandwiches with Trix sticks. The uprooted girl is disturbed.

Babette wants to make watching television a wholesome family activity, so that “Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced.” Television is a kind of monster that may be tamed by family values. Family is all she has, in the absence of God. However, the ritual does not redeem Gladney, whose custom was, “after an evening in front of the TV set, to read deeply in Hitler well into the night.” As if Hitler is deep. The Gladneys have replaced the traditional custom in America of the father reading a passage from the Bible aloud to the family gathered at bedtime with the professor up late reading Hitler while Babette reads erotica aloud in bed.

The year 1968 is repeated to place the story more firmly in historical context: the rise of politically correct fascism in American higher education symbolized by the beginning of Hitler studies. Gladney is warned by the chancellor of the college “against what he called my tendency to make a feeble presentation of self.... He wanted me to ‘grow out’ into Hitler.... If I could become more ugly, he seemed to be suggesting, it would help my career immensely.” His “feeble presentation of self” is more evidence that his getting into Hitler was overcompensation for a weak ego. Though he is the narrator, he does not even name himself. Eventually he is named by Murray and the chancellor. In Postmodern higher education, as in politics and business, people are taught to act strong and assertive and to seek power, especially evangelical Feminists crusading for “empowerment.” During the 1980s when *White Noise* was written, Feminists were taking over higher education in a nationwide blitzkrieg. “So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward.” This is irony as rich as in *Huckleberry Finn*.

5

At breakfast Babette reads horoscopes of the family, hoping for transcendent knowledge. After dinner the authoritative TV reduces spirituality to the physical: “Let’s sit half lotus and think about our spines.” This juxtaposition suggests that technology debases the spirit. That night Jack experiences a contraction that sets him to anticipating death. Juxtaposed, the isolated sentence “Blue jeans tumbled in the dryer”—mundane and meaningless—evokes an Existential sense of absurdity comparable to Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a fly buzz when I died.”

In the supermarket they encounter Murray, whose taste for generic food and drink is consistent with his preference for pop over high culture. He mocked a colleague who only reads cereal boxes, yet his own reading consists only of TV listings and ads. Like pop culture, he is crude and intrusive, “picking up items from our cart and smelling them.” Sticking his nose in. Murray thinks in buying only generic goods he is “contributing to some kind of spiritual consensus.” As when “looking at the barn,” in looking at everything else he has “agreed to be part of a collective perception.” Collective perception is superficial, no deeper than appearances. Like the masses, Murray is a sucker for packaging. He loves the outside more than the inside. He calls Postmodern pop culture “the last avant-garde.” That is, a dead end. “Bold new forms. The power to shock.” Shock replaces meaning, as in Postmodern novels about psycho killers and paintings of a crucifix immersed in urine and dung flung on the Virgin Mary.

Jack has the illusion that in buying so many groceries “we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less...” Gladney’s abundant groceries are comparable to Gatsby’s abundant shirts in epitomizing materialism and consumption as a surrogate religious faith. Whereas Jack is cultivating a fake persona of Hitler, lustful Murray is cultivating a fake persona of vulnerability in order to seduce women—more unsuccessful investment in the physical. Both of these Postmodern males have developed personas that invert their true natures. Murray is so crude and indifferent to good taste and the feelings of others that acting vulnerable and “sneaky” he flirts with Babette right in front of Jack, who is unconcerned because Murray is so unattractive. The chapter ends with Murray walking toward a man in a rocker staring into space, prefiguring his own empty future.

6

Jack suspects pollution may be causing his son Heinrich to already have a receding hairline at age 14. Technology is “the daily seeping falsehearted death”—sometimes literally. Just as he is prematurely balding, Heinrich is prematurely Postmodern: (1) He comes from a broken home, his biological mother lives far away in an ashram in Tubb, Montana, and (2) now his only faith is in technology. He trusts the radio more than his father even when it is obvious that rain is falling. (3) He is so alienated he wears a camouflage cap and plays chess with a convicted killer in prison. (4) He is incapable of objectivity; (5) a solipsist who believes that nothing exists outside his own mind; (6) that reality is a dubious concept; (7) that truth is relative and “means nothing; (8) that everything is unstable, uncertain, random and chaotic. (9) He is noncommittal even when he can see it is raining. Intellectually and technically Heinrich is brilliant, while at the same time he does not know enough to come in out of the rain. To a large extent, Heinrich embodies the world view of Vonnegut, Barth and other Postmodern novelists.

Babette fears her stepson will become one of those boys who turns into a mass murderer, Heinrich the Nazi (perhaps inspired to act out the Hitlerism of his father). His self-absorbed mother would get the news in her ashram. It is no wonder Heinrich is so alienated. According to Christina Hoff Sommers in *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* (2000), “boys are under siege; ‘Boys feel continually attacked for who they are. We have created a sense in school that masculinity is something bad’.” In reaction, beginning in the 1980s a succession of alienated white boys have indeed become mass murderers, killing their Feminist teachers, classmates, and strangers.

There are Hitler majors in the college now, watching propaganda movies and studying “the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny.” The original Hitler Youth were disciplined. “He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future.” (Adolph Hitler, 1935) Gladney’s Hitler majors are disciplined enough to study German, in contrast to the radicals who disrupted campuses all over America in the 1960s. American radicals were immature barbarians by comparison. By the 1980s the radicals controlled higher education yet were still marching with their signs, calling names, shouting down speakers, and throwing food like the cultural studies faculty in *White Noise*. Hitler studies is implicitly a parallel not only to Women’s Studies but to all the radical “studies” programs established in higher education that were essentially hate groups that fostered the cultural fascism of Political Correctness. The ultimate message is “All plots tend to move deathward.” No longer so glad, Gladney has become a prophet of doom.

Babette goes to church not to worship but to lecture on good posture—how to stand, sit and walk. She exemplifies what ought to be natural and basic, hence she teaches in the basement of the church, in the earth actually. At home, “We believed something lived in the basement.” Perhaps a spirit. They do not go down there, they do not mention the spirit. Babette is a guru of the physical dimension. Her students place their faith in her to “redeem” them “from a lifetime of bad posture,” rather than placing their faith in God to redeem them from a lifetime of bad behavior. “Nothing is too doubtful to be of use to them as they seek to redeem their bodies”—not their souls. Postmodernists believe in anything but God. They have lost the ability to act naturally, like Jack and Babette in bed.

Jack and Babette have lost the natural spontaneity of lovemaking. They talk about having sex instead of having it. Their conversation reveals extreme inhibition by the political correctness being imposed during the 1980s: “As the male partner I think it’s my responsibility to please.” Babette replies, “I’m not sure whether that’s a sensitive caring statement or a sexist remark.” Jack defines his gender role using the Feminist term “partner.” Even so, he is suspected of being sexist—even though all he wants is to please her. Babette has absorbed the airborne toxicity of political correctness. Feminism has made her uncertain and suspicious of her husband, while at the same time she wants to please him. The Feminist paradigm of gender roles is contrary to her nature. She wants to be his wife not his “partner.” Although she is a natural leader, Jack calls her “Baba” as if she is a sheep getting herded into the women’s movement, like him in following Hitler. Postmodernism has made them both followers of an unnatural ideology, uncertain about their gender roles as well as their spirituality. After three successive divorces, Jack may be feeling some performance anxiety. His “feeble presentation of self” in bed is pathetic.

The Gladneys have become so deferential they are paralyzed by hypersensitivity: “I get the feeling a burden is being shifted back and forth. The burden of being the one who is pleased.” They are so inhibited from what is natural, rather than make love they talk about it. Then they read pornography and talk about that. After Babette ridicules trashy porn, Jack goes looking for a trashy porn magazine “that features letters from readers detailing their sexual experiences.” Instead he comes back nostalgic, with family albums detailing wholesome experiences. “We spent hours going through them, sitting up in bed...as if the past possessed some quality of light we no longer experience, a Sunday dazzle that caused people in their churchgoing clothes to tighten their faces...” They have lost “the light” of religious faith that spiritualized and strengthened people and held marriages and families together.

They never do make love.

The head of Hitler studies cannot even speak German, which shows how little he actually knows about Hitler and his culture, a comment on the shallowness of “Cultural Studies” academics in general, especially their pretense of “Multiculturalism.” Gladney knows less about German than most of his students. His colleague Murray illustrates the arrogance and prejudice common to liberal academics: “People who can fix things are usually bigots.” This amounts to saying that he, Murray the intellectual, cannot fix anything, yet he is superior to the capable working man who is useful to society. His bigotry is ironic because Murray is a Jew, so often a victim of bigotry.

Heinrich is overheard on the telephone questioning whether incest is unnatural, since animals do it. “So how unnatural can it be?” Amoralism has become increasingly pervasive during the Postmodern period. Although he is smart, as a relativist Heinrich is inclined to be a barbarian, to behave like an animal. He does not understand or care about the consequences of incest to others, for example that it may cause birth deformities. Is Heinrich lusting after his sister?

In contrast Babette behaves responsibly as a mother, attentive and affectionate to Wilder, acting from the heart. Heinrich thinks in the abstract while talking on the telephone—completely into his head, into science and technology, detached from humanity. The metaphors of head and heart in opposition are as systematic here as they are in Hawthorne. Heinrich is comparable to Hawthorne’s villains with heads dissociated from their hearts: Chillingworth, Westervelt, Rappaccini and others. Babette ends this chapter

with a succession of affirmations responding from the heart to Wilder, and to Nature—“Yes yes yes”—like Molly Bloom at the end of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922).

9

The catalogue of possible causes of kids getting sick at the grade school calls attention to previously unnoticed “white noise” in the environment—perhaps “closely woven into the basic state of things.” Government workers in Mylex suits and masks investigate, but “Because Mylex is itself a suspect material, the results tended to be ambiguous.” To most people Government is like Mylex, a protective cover insulating itself from dangers while potentially toxic to the people.

At the supermarket Murray clutches Babette like a commercial that grabs you and “sidled around her, appearing to smell her hair.” Babette is kind to Murray even though he is a sexist creep. She tolerates what comes naturally. She counters the artificial environment of modern society that is suppressing Nature and stunting her children. For example, Wilder, who embodies Nature, appears to be arrested in development like a plant exposed to pollution. They shop amid the material abundance epitomized by the supermarket. “And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension”—white noise.

Jack learns from his daughter Steffie that Mama Baba is using a drug--a sinister revelation. Baba is in danger of becoming a sheep to addiction. Murray is already addicted. He calls the green visor Denise has taken to wearing “her interface with the world” and he sees the supermarket as “full of psychic data” that “recharges us spiritually.” As if people are computers, the world is data and the soul is a battery. Murray is a priest, or rabbi, of materialism in contrast to the authentic spirituality of “the Tibetans.” The supermarket is Murray’s temple, his escape from death. “This is not Tibet.... Here we don’t die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think.” Babette interrupts Murray’s theorizing about death and responds to the immediate realities of life: “Where is Wilder?” Murray is the dissociated head, Babette the responsible heart, the one responsive to Nature.

Steffie is like her mother when she takes her father’s hand to reassure him, “A firm grip that would help me restore confidence in myself.” Again there is a similarity to Hawthorne in the dependence of the male upon the female for nurturing and salvation, an echo of the lost tradition of Victorianism. Again in contrast Murray invites the Gladneys over to his place for dinner, yet he is such a relativist disinclined to observe standards of any kind that he does not seem to care whether they show up or not: “You’ll show up or you won’t.” As if they are as impolite as he is, a lecher sticking his nose in, grabbing Babette and smelling her hair. Murray has the standards of the advertising industry. The college thinks so highly of him they are rehiring him “to teach a course on the cinema of car crashes.” The term “cinema” is pretentious because Postmodern movies replace meaningful content with sensationalism.

Jack and Babette fail in their own bed and have instead a brief erotic moment in the checkout line of the supermarket. Nature is frustrated again, however, when they learn that one of the workers in a Mylex suit collapsed and died in a classroom while inspecting the school, evidence that their children might be in danger. Instead of worrying about which of them will die first, Jack and Babette are now faced with the horrible possibility that their children might die first.

10

Dumbed down by technology, the young identify themselves only by their phone numbers—“a race of people with a seven-bit consciousness.” Now that their little minds know everything, Steffie and Denise act like the parents of their mother, even telling her what to chew. They are products of a politically correct educational system that teaches them to dictate to other people--budding liberals. Postmodernism inverted authority in the family, elevating youth in accord with popular culture and promoting an adolescent view of life. As Murray says, “This is a society of kids. I tell my students they’re already too old to figure importantly in the making of society.” (They will by 2008 and 2012). While the girls chew trivia the alienated Heinrich is playing chess with an alienated inmate who killed six people including a state trooper because TV encouraged him to “go down in history.”

Heinrich does not know what he wants to do in life because, according to Postmodernism, everything is indeterminate: “You don’t know what’s you as a person and what’s some neuron that just happens to fire of just happens to misfire.” This is reductive materialism used as a Postmodern alibi replacing “The Devil made me do it.” Heinrich is so disabled by liberal theorizing he is unable to hold a murderer accountable. After all, society does not really hold the murderer accountable. Liberals execute the innocent unborn but not mass murderers. They let the Hitlers get away with it. Perhaps Heinrich will decide to “go down in history.” Postmodern liberal education—“the system”—fosters righteous aggression, turning girls into politically correct dictators (automated tellers) and boys into sociopaths. Meanwhile, the head of Hitler studies has a transcendent experience with an automated teller machine and feels that “The system had blessed my life.” Nazis love efficiency. Jack’s sanity is called into question by juxtaposition in the last image of the chapter: “A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards.”

11

Jack asks Murray if he gets any “noise” from the nearby insane asylum. The whole Postmodern society is insane in the sense of failing to adapt to reality. Nature is the ultimate reality. Steffie is so alienated from her natural mother, Dana Breedlove, that she does not even know her age. The name Dana is gender neutral, that and the fact that she is a contact agent for the CIA suggests that she is a strong woman, perhaps more masculine than Jack. “She liked to plot.” And like the CIA she is “Playing certain friends against other friends.” That makes her disloyal. DeLillo saw the CIA as betraying American ideals. Her last name *Breed-love* is ironic since she apparently has no love for Steffie and consequently Steffie has no love for her. The career woman does not breed love. Yet the gullible Jack married her *twice!*

The father of Wilder is not weak Jack, but a researcher in the outback of Australia—studying Nature. He has another son with him, “a sort of wild child, a savage plucked from the bush... The boy is growing up without television...which may make him worth talking to, Murray.” Murray is the opposite of the father in the wild outback, far from Nature. His students call television “just another name for junk mail,” but Murray exalts television as “close to mystical” if we can “get past our irritation, weariness and disgust.” Technology is divine because it “offers incredible amounts of data.” How does Murray know so much? “I’m from New York.” Once a sportswriter, the adolescent Murray is parodied by rhyme: “I was covering the Jets, the Mets and the Nets.” The similarity of the names conveys the numbing sameness of sports, with all their incredible amounts of meaningless data that fans like Murray see as scripture.

The adolescent crudity of pop culture is evoked again when Murray tells Babette he yearns for a woman to visit him in the night with a slit skirt and sex toys, as if hinting that she might fulfill his fantasy. His lurid false hope is synthetic like the technological environment: “Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex.” Babette worries she may be losing her memory, perhaps due to some pollutant with another artificial name that nobody understands. Jack replies that “It’s something that’s just been happening, more or less to everyone.” Postmodernist education rejects the past and tries to reshape the collective memory of it, as by replacing American literary classics with “Cultural Studies.” America like Babette is having memory lapses. This is Fall, the season of death. It is Halloween, when witches and devils run free.

12

The German tutor is another Postmodernist who has lost faith in God. His surrogate religion is weather: “I realized weather was something I’d been looking for all my life.” As if he had never noticed Nature before. “It brought me a sense of peace and security I’d never experienced... I’ve taught meteorology in church basements...” The later secular religion of “global warming” is apocalyptic, promising security only if people surrender their liberties to global government.

Bob Pardee the father of Denise is a male counterpart of the self-absorbed former wives. DeLillo is an egalitarian who balances his criticism of the genders, unlike Feminists. *Par-dee* stops by to see Denise while “driving through” but he is so preoccupied with practicing his golf swing he does not want to talk to her: “Don’t pester me, Denise.” A putt is more important than his daughter. And his belly. He’s hungry. Bob bobs around in life, a rootless golf bum who changes jobs a lot and is trying to raise funds. Currently he is working for the Nuclear Accident Readiness Foundation, ironic since he lacks a foundation in his

personal life and was not ready to sustain a nuclear family. Denise cannot pin him down or get to know him. Her confused feelings are expressed by the voice from upstairs saying, "There are forms of vertigo that do not include spinning."

In contrast to her blindly selfish former husband, Babette takes time to read to the blind, then finds that old man Treadwell is missing. The family gathers at the Dinky Donut where Jack reads *Mein Kampf*, a setting appropriate to his sweetened version of Hitler, and Babette is genuinely sweet enough to forgive Bob for his drinking, gambling, car wrecks and betrayal of her with a prostitute.

13

Blacksmith is a college town of "dry cleaners and opticians," its name evoking obsolete traditions. By the late 20th century the small town had been replaced as a center of American life by the shopping mall, a metaphor of urban material abundance, complexity, and magnitude. The Treadwells, the blind old man and his sister, get lost in "a vast shopping center out on the interstate," wander treading around for two days and finally "take refuge" in an abandoned cookie kiosk, a structure resembling a hut in Africa. "Possibly their grandniece had dropped them off in her car and then forgotten to pick them up. The grandniece could not be reached." The mall is like a modern City. The irony is that, to the Treadwells, civilization has inverted into a Wilderness where you cannot even rely on your relatives.

The Treadwells' unsuccessful search for a way out of the vast mall of materialism is contrasted to the spirituality of the psychic search for them as lost souls. "The police had consulted Adele T. on a number of occasions and she had led them to two bludgeoned bodies, a Syrian in a refrigerator and a cache of marked bills to totaling six hundred thousand dollars, although in each instance, the report concluded, the police had been looking for something else. The American mystery deepens." The mystery here is the relationship between the material and the spiritual dimensions. When consulting the spirit, we do not always get what we are looking for. Many psychics throughout the country, for decades now, have been finding exactly what law enforcement was looking for and more. The secular media have been able to suppress such news until the advent of cable television. DeLillo states as fact that this psychic is authentic, citing instances of her knowing where to find things helpful to the police whether they were looking for them or not. She is correct in telling them to forget the river and "concentrate on dry land with a moonscape look about it"—like the mall with its vast parking lots.

14

In avoiding the "ominous" sunset, Heinrich isolates himself from the family. The TV refers to "other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio." For example, Baba seems to be losing her memory from taking Dylar (*die-lar*) and Jack is in denial: "Everybody takes something." His own health problems require "Blood pressure pills, stress pills, allergy pills, eye drops, aspirin. Run of the mill."

One of Jack's former wives called him "bland." Heinrich was born "shortly after" he started Hitler studies. Lacking authority in his marriages, Jack chose the name Heinrich to give his son "authority... I thought it was forceful... I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid." Liberal parents were giving boys the names of girls. Jack compensates for his culture and for his own feelings of emasculation: "Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It's in this area that my obsessions dwell." He is parallel to Feminists in seeking "empowerment." Also like the Feminists, he believes his good cause transcends conventional morality: "It's not a question of good and evil." Concentration camps, genocide, world war? To liberal cultural studies faculty the end justifies the means. DeLillo exploits the ironic fact that Hitler is in effect the unrecognized model in PC higher education.

"We had two closet doors that opened by themselves." This ambiguous hint of spirits in their closets has been preceded by references to "dead souls," something living in their basement, and the psychic medium with perception in the spiritual dimension. All this suggests the possibility that by "growing into" Hitler, either Jack or Heinrich may become possessed by the demonic spirit of Hitler.

The family is addicted to watching disasters happening to other people: "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping." Various studies have shown that humans are

sadistic by nature. Technology facilitates their sadism. The Gladneys enjoy watching people suffer and die in “floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes.” They face the realities of “calamity and death” to other people in the safety of their living room, where anything can be turned off, or switched to another channel. Babette tries “to switch to a comedy series about a group of racially mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was startled by the force of our objection.” Their backlash is because the politically correct narrative is unreal—a tedious lie. Look at the news. Postmodernists rejected the traditional “melting pot” ideal of a racially mixed society and divided Americans into competing identity groups, privileging some and blaming others, fostering hatred. Anybody who pretends that the races in America are cooperating well enough to build a communications satellite together, let alone a harmonious racially mixed society, is already out in space.

Murray establishes “an Elvis Presley power base in the department of American environments.” Like establishing a beachhead in the invasion of Normandy. Power is what motivates professors in 1985, not serious learning. The generality of the department name satirizes the lack of scholarly focus and relativism in decadent higher education. Anything goes, unless it is politically incorrect. The department head is named after a gangster, Alfonse Stompanato. Another instructor is a former bodyguard for rock bands. “The air was full of rage and complaint”—groups demanding their rights. “People had no tolerance for your particular hardship unless you knew how to entertain them with it.” Stompanato has “the closed logic of a religious zealot, one who kills for his beliefs.” Stompanato stomps on people. He is a caricature of Political Correctness, rules enforced by gangs.

The cultural theory of Stompanato is vindictive and sadistic: that people enjoy watching other people suffer because we need stimulation: “We’re suffering from brain fade... Only a catastrophe gets our attention.... We can relax and enjoy these disasters because in our hearts we feel that California deserves what it gets... We all feel bad. But we can enjoy it on that level.” Postmodern technology has inverted values and priorities: “In the psychic sense a forest fire on TV is on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for Automatic Dishwasher All...we have reversed the relative significance of these things.” Specializing in “the culture of public toilets,” Professor Grappa is full of crappa. The adolescent triviality of “Cultural Studies” is further satirized as the professors share precious detailed memories of brushing their teeth with a finger—giving themselves the finger.

Murray the former sportswriter remembers “the southernmost point I’ve ever brushed my teeth with my finger at.” Grappa also set a memorable record: “I pissed in a sink in Utah when it was twenty-two below. That’s the coldest I’ve ever pissed in a sink in.” Professor Grappa is an encyclopedia of trivia about movie stars and is “the jerk-off king of the Bronx.” Like the others, he traffics in “his own childhood.” He and Professor Lasher throw food and Professor Cotsakis recalls the day when a woman peeled flaky skin off his back at the beach: “It was very tremendous. The second or third greatest experience of my life.” One can only guess what his greater experiences might be—finding bubble gum under a seat?

15

Jack is hip in dark glasses: “I stood against the wall, attempting to loom,” with a “professional aura of power.” Murray’s lecture is so popular there are students sitting on the floor. Murray represents “Cultural Studies,” including Women’s Studies, in being (1) subjective: “I have a feeling about mothers. Mothers really do know”; (2) professing cultural determinism: “Isn’t the life structured to cut you down early?”; (3) relying on speculations rather than facts: “Did his mother know that Elvis would die young? She talked about assassins”; (4) claiming somebody is a victim—even Elvis; (5) indulging in sentimental falsehoods: “If you don’t have the wit to die early, you are forced to vanish, to hide as if in shame and apology”; Elvis did not hide, he went on performing in Las Vegas; (6) concealing and misdirecting: “She worried about his sleepwalking. She thought he might go out a window.” Elvis overdosed on drugs, food, booze, and fame. Jack, Murray and the Feminists idealize their subjects.

Murray’s idolizing of Elvis is deconstructed by Jack’s parallel: “Hitler adored his mother.” This is a “convergence of silliness.” Adoring his mother does not make Elvis any better than Hitler. Nor does writing poetry make a professor any better than Hitler, who wrote a poem to his mother and also painted. The parallelisms in this scene include the one of Jack to Hitler: “There’s not much doubt that Hitler was

what we call a mama's boy... He cooked and cleaned." Lo and behold! Hitler was a sensitive male like Jack, virtually a New Man. Jack never mentions that his sensitive role model murdered millions of people. Murray argues that the self-indulgence that killed Elvis was unavoidable and even praiseworthy because he "fulfilled the terms of the contract" that supposedly required him to get fat and overdose. His faults are no more important than Hitler's because "His place in legend is secure."

Elvis and Hitler both had power. Moral distinctions are irrelevant in "Cultural Studies." They both attracted crowds that "came to be hypnotized." The Postmodern "good place" is no longer in Nature but in the City. The goal is no longer attaining wholeness as an individual, but losing personal identity in merging with a gang, or sisterhood, worshipping popular icons instead of God. "To become a crowd is to keep out death." Jack and Murray are keeping out death by reducing it to an abstraction in their Theories. "Death was strictly a professional matter here. I was comfortable with it, I was on top of it."

16

The youngest child in the family is the closest to Nature, as indicated by his age, his name Wilder, his father in the wilderness, and his responses, as on the day he does not stop crying for seven hours. Why he cries and why he stops are the questions posed in this chapter. He starts crying while "looking through the oven window." In a carefully written novel giving so much emphasis to Hitler, the word "oven" pops out. Jack Gladney suppresses the worst in his studies of Hitler, just as Marxists do about Marxism, whereas Wilder is a medium of truth. Regardless of what he knows, Wilder looking into an oven and crying is an historical allusion to the ovens Hitler used to burn gassed bodies, one of the most familiar images of evil in world history. Wilder cries as if he is seeing the truth that his father ignores. Jack is so caught up in his Theory of Hitler he is like Murray "looking at the barn."

DeLillo goes further, suggesting that Wilder has inherited awareness from the collective unconscious of the human race: "These were expressions of Mideastern lament... There was something permanent and soul-struck in this crying. It was a sound of inbred desolation... This was an ancient dirge." Further, since there may be a spirit in the house, it may be informing Wilder with imagery. In the car, rather than take Wilder to the hospital, Jack is moved to take the child into his lap and let him steer: "Again he responded, crying as he steered, as we turned corners, as I brought the car to a halt back at the Congregational church." Wilder is steering but the sentence is ambiguous, suggesting that both Wilder and his father are responsible for arriving back at the church. Wilder (Nature) steers Jack to the spiritual truth symbolized by a church. On the way home from the church, the child stops crying.

Now the family watches Wilder "with something like awe." Now he is comparable to Christ returning from the wilderness bringing the word of God: "It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges—a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions." Secular academics publishing criticism of *White Noise* have missed the significance of the diction: "awe," "holy," "reverence," "sublime." As Postmodernists, they do not see evidence of spirituality.

17

Babette is happy to be a mother, the opposite of Jack's former wives: "Isn't it great having all these kids around?" And she welcomes another, hearing Bee will be coming to visit. She embraces all the kids despite the confusion that is increased in a broken natural family merged with other broken families: "The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation." Denise confuses tsunamis (tidal waves) with origamis (folded paper art) and Heinrich confuses the playwright Tennessee Williams with the popular singer Tennessee Ernie Ford. Murray the loner criticizes "family solidarity"—one of the major values affirmed in the novel—by claiming he is more objective than people in families. Murray speaks for the many single and divorced people who feel superior and subvert respect for marriage and childrearing: "The family is strongest where objective reality is most likely to be misinterpreted." This from a professor so subjective he does not look at a barn but only at people photographing the barn because his Theory is that nobody can

see the barn. Objectivity is essential to a sense of proportion, to judging the relative importance of events. Murray thinks it is important to remember everywhere he pees.

At the mall, Jack is driven by a “desire to buy.... I shopped with reckless abandon.... I shopped for its own sake.” He is like Henderson in Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) who hears an inner voice saying “*I want, I want, I want!*” Jack sets an example to his children of acquisitive consumerism, investing in *things* to attain “endless well-being”—an artificial Heaven. Like Babette he has absorbed the toxic values in the air everywhere and has joined the parents in their station wagons after having ridiculed them at the beginning of the novel. “I began to grow in value and self-regard.” Gladney reflects the prevailing materialism of the secular society: “I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface.” Materialism is living with Murray on the surface of life, where “A band played live Muzak.” Live Muzak is an oxymoron, an illusion like the Mall.

The illusion of Gladney family solidarity ends outside the Mall, apart from the crowd that “keeps out death.” The crowd is an escape like TV: “We drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone.” Alone like Murray. The chapter ends with Jack reflected in Steffie watching TV, moving her lips in conformity, “attempting to match the words as they were spoken.” What else does she have to believe in? She is the opposite of Wilder looking into the oven.

18

Iron City is an obvious example of social decay, whereas the college on the hill—higher education in general—has thus far escaped public recognition “as an emblem of ruinous influence.” Tweedy embodies current values prevailing in colleges. Jack goes to the airport to meet his daughter Bee but instead is faced with her mother, his former wife Tweedy Browner. Tweedy is wearing a tweed skirt, a sweater, knee socks and penny loafers. Her clothes and the name Tweedy identify her with college, as if she never grew up. Tweedy Browner is the type who attended Brown, Wellesley, Vassar, Smith, or Bryn Mawr—upper-class, pretentious, hypocritical, and petty. She reminisces with Jack, “We told each other everything, within the limits of one’s preoccupation with breeding and tact.”

Jack has to ask three times where Bee might be, because Tweedy keeps talking about herself: “She’s flying in later today. That’s why I’m here. To spend some time with her. I have to go to Boston tomorrow. Family business.” Tweedy is self-absorbed like Bob the golf bum and former husband of Babette. By “spend some time” she means a few hours with Bee at best. When she finally gets around to answering his question, she says “Indonesia, more or less.” More or less? That is like saying, Asia more or less. Tweedy does not know where her daughter is. She is too busy to keep track.

When Jack reminds Tweedy that he is Bee’s father, she calls him “stupid,” then she asks him if he still loves her. He marvels, “We get a divorce, you take all my money, you marry a well-to-do, well-connected, well-tailored diplomat...” Tweedy is unhappy, nevertheless. She sees even less of her current husband than Jack saw of her when they were married. Tweedy married a CIA agent. How intelligent can that be. “I don’t know which half of Malcolm’s life is real, which half is intelligent.” So-called “intelligence” makes us unreal. Tweedy “married up” socially but down morally: She is wed to a CIA agent sponsoring “a Communist revival” to topple Castro. That is, the CIA adopts values to overthrow evil that result in the same evil. Feminism is parallel to the CIA. When Tweedy asks Jack “How is Hitler?” his response amounts to an ironic contrast to her: “Fine, solid, dependable.”

Tweedy is so intolerant and out of touch with other people she wears gloves to bed and is “ultrasensitive to many things.” Jack cites revealing examples: “Sunlight, air, food, water, sex.” Tweedy sees everything as carcinogenic, yet she chain-smokes extra-longs, “shooting exasperated streams of smoke in every direction.” Though she flies all over the world, she is afraid of life. She rationalizes her neglect of her daughter by advocating premature independence: “‘Every child ought to have the opportunity to travel thousands of miles alone,’ Tweedy said, ‘for the sake of her self-esteem and independence of mind, with clothes and toiletries of her own choosing... Too many parents ignore this phase of a child’s development’.” Tweedy is a typical liberal in presuming that what may be good for one should be required of all. Bee may be able to survive such a life, but other children would get lost, depressed, and molested. Tweedy ignores

the fact that every day around the world young girls are kidnapped and sold into the international sex trade. Tweedy is preoccupied with clothes and toiletries.

Ironically, though she wants her daughter to be independent, Tweedy herself cannot tolerate being left alone by her husband and depends on a romantic illusion of love. She gushes like a soap opera: "God, Tuck, we were good together." She sees herself as so eternally loveable she says to Jack, "I thought you'd love me forever, frankly. I depend on you for that. Malcolm's away so much." When she herself is away so much Tweedy has no concern for Bee's feelings. Bee has no one to depend on and must buzz from place to place around the world alone, subservient to a queen but with no family hive to return to.

Still, Bee seems to be doing just fine. In fact, she is a Feminist success, having developed into just what her mother Tweedy wants her to be: independent, strong, "worldly," self-absorbed, insincere, making everyone explain themselves and "calling the very meaning of our lives into question." She causes Babette to "stare into her cupped hands, aghast." Bee is "quietly disdainful" of "family business"—like Murray. Jack cannot trust her, seeing in the busy Bee begotten by Tweedy "a nameless threat." He suspects that like her "cultivated distress" over her mother, her compassion for him "had little to do with pity or love or sadness. I recognized it in fact as something else completely, "The adolescent female's tenderest form of condescension."

The plane that almost crashed refutes the unconcern of Tweedy for the safety of Bee with horrific intensity. A passenger recounts the terror for three pages of the chapter about Bee, implying that this or worse could happen to her. Suddenly a voice from the flight deck was heard on the intercom: "We are falling out of the sky! We're going down!" The pilot and co-pilot of the falling plane are implicitly a gay couple—"I love you, Lance." We are left to imagine what had been going on in the cockpit.

19

After taking Bee to the airport Jack visits the old Blacksmith cemetery, where the names on headstones are strong and simple, "suggesting a moral rigor" long gone now in society. He speculates, "Is there a level of energy composed solely of the dead?" Is there a spirit in his basement? This is a step of his mind beyond materialism toward spirituality. "May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan." His affirmation of Nature, going with the flow and pastoral spontaneity is more like Thoreau than like Hitler.

20

Lost and confused, Mrs. Treadwell dies of "lingering dread" or angst--the fear of death. She represents the common loss of religious orientation in the secular modern world represented by the Mall. Jack still has an Existentialist view of life: "We are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die." As to animals this is a dubious speculation. Dogs see more than most people think. At least Jack still wonders about the *possibility* of God: "Who decides these things? What is out there? Who are you?" Though she too is afraid of death, Babette is "full-souled" enough in the natural order to counter his sadness: "Life is good, Jack."

What frightens Babette is being left alone: "The emptiness, the sense of cosmic darkness." This is why she is drawn into crowds. To fill the void materialism offers us "MasterCard, Visa, American Express." Babette goes out to teach her class in posture in the church basement wearing a coat that looks "designed for the ocean floor." Babette is deep in soul, though shallow in mind. She keeps going to that church basement without ever climbing into faith in what goes on upstairs. The rest of the family goes upstairs, but only to watch TV, the Postmodern replacement for a church. Murray comes over to collect data on "the society of kids" but he remains dissociated from them "taking notes." Murray's efficient dissociation from humanity is comparable to the Nazis conducting experiments on inmates of their concentration camps, an ironic attitude for a Jew. Murray looks at kids the way he looked at the barn.

Even more dissociated, Heinrich is as tightly wound as the clock on a bomb: "Whatever relaxes you is dangerous." He is arrogant and contemptuous of anyone who disagrees with him, including his father: "If you don't know that, I might as well be talking to the wall." It is easy to imagine Heinrich in uniform with

a monocle in one eyesocket, pointing a swagger stick at you. Heinrich is even more dictatorial than his sister Denise, a “pint-sized commissar.” He is a parody of the efficiency expert whose reference to “cyanide poisoning” connects him thematically to the gas chambers of Hitler.

Babette surprises the family by suddenly appearing on the TV like an apparition: “Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit...?” Jack cries out to her “from the deeps of my soul.” Babette is what he has instead of God. Like a guardian angel, Babette is “shining a light on us.” Ironically, only when she appears on TV does she become a manifestation of the divine. On the verge of religious faith, Jack “tried to tell himself it was only television.” Wilder looks at his mother on TV in an echo of looking into the oven, “crying softly.” He senses that his mother will be consumed.

The Airborne Toxic Event

21

Ominously poised for action, Heinrich crouches on an icy ledge of the roof clad in camouflage, looking east through binoculars like a forward observer in combat. Ominously also, Heinrich feels compelled to prove himself to his father the Hitler idolater: “He thinks you underestimate him,” Babette tells Jack. “If you tell me it worries you,” Heinrich defies his father, “I’ll do it all the time.”

A train has derailed and is smoking in the distance. The railroad is the traditional cultural symbol of Progress. The dark cloud of Nyodene D is the “toxic waste” of Progress—both a literal danger from current industry and a metaphor of Postmodernism. The emphasis here is upon the artificiality of the poison as a product of technology and Theory rather than Nature. Jack Gladney is such a complacent Progressive liberal he can teach Hitler without any sense of contradiction. He denies repeatedly that there is any danger from the literal poisonous byproducts of Progress, any more than he sees any danger in fascism by liberals: “Nothing is going to happen.”

After the air-raid sirens begin to scream Professor Gladney still feels superior and above it all: “I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event.” The Gladneys go on eating, ignoring the sirens, with a “sheepish” hope—*ba-ba*—that they will not be affected, an “episode of decorous hysteria.” Heinrich is so excited by the sirens he runs to the front door and opens it to all the delirious wailing sounds of chaos.

Optimistic Babette is slow to respond: “I’m sure there’s plenty of time.” Jack is amazed by her aplomb: “I think it’s interesting that you regard a possible disaster for yourself, your family and thousands of other people as an opportunity to cut down on fatty foods.” In contrast, the daughters believe in whatever is broadcast, are tricked by their own “suggestibility” and mimic symptoms of contamination, then have to change their act: “‘There’s been a correction,’ Heinrich [said]. ‘Tell them they ought to be throwing up.’” On the contrary Heinrich finds the catastrophe “brilliantly stimulating” and is “happily in disaster.” Now rather than just watching disasters on TV, he gets to participate in one. Jack marvels at his son: “I’d never heard him go on about something with such spirited enjoyment. He was practically giddy. He must have known we could all die.... His voice betrayed a craving for terrible things.” Like Heinrich, Postmodern novelists such as Vonnegut and Pynchon revel in coming apocalyptic doom as if as the surrogate for a religious Judgment Day. “The enormous black cloud moved like some death ship in a Norse legend... Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious.” Throughout the novel, Jack is bordering on the religious.

On the highway two school buses carrying the insane enter the “mainstream of traffic.” Insanity is now in the mainstream. The procession of refugees passes a sign for the most photographed barn in America and later hope theirs will be the most photographed disaster in America on the evening news. Facts blend with falsehoods in the information overload until “No one thing was either more or less plausible than any other thing”—as when the mainstream media cover an election. This indeterminacy and the corruption of information was a major theme in Postmodernism after the 1960s, notably in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) by Pynchon and in literary Theory, particularly Deconstruction in the 1980s. “The general consensus seems to be that we don’t know enough at this time to be sure of anything.” While male critics propagated their

nihilistic Theories, in the same departments Feminists imposed dogmatic political correctness with the zeal of Socialists in German higher education during the 1930s—airborne toxicity.

At age 14 Heinrich is accepted by the refugee crowd as an expert on disaster, speaking with authority in a tone of “enthusiasm for runaway calamity” and “taking morbid delight in the very sound” of the words Nyodene Derivative. Heinrich the ghoul is a human derivative of the poison. It is easy to imagine him dropping cyanide pellets into a packed gas chamber. Jack is proud of him: “Let him bloom, if that’s what he was doing, in the name of mischance, dread and random disaster.” Heinrich thinks the way to dispel the spreading toxic cloud is to bombard it with soda ash, the common name for sodium carbonate, which is used in bicarbonate of soda. As if the deadly cloud spreading wider over the landscape is like an upset tummy, though Heinrich admits it will kill “everything.”

In a novel populated by white people called *White Noise* a black family stands out as a contrast, especially because they believe in God. They have no angst, they have family solidarity and they seem to be happy. They see accumulating disasters in the world as evidence that “God’s kingdom is coming.” The friendly black man’s generalization about the spreading toxic waste enlarges the literal event into a metaphor of worldwide social death: “It’s happening everywhere, isn’t it?” Jack envies him his faith, this black evangelist in a suit and running shoes. “He was ready to run into the next world.” Atheists will find it easy to dismiss his religious faith in part because he is a Jehovah’s Witness, one of the least respectable denominations among secular liberals. But the point of his fundamentalism is that he believes in the fundamentals—God and an afterlife: “You’re either among the wicked or among the saved.” As in Eliot’s “The Waste Land” it is simple faith that matters, not one theology or another. The black preacher is a challenge to the secular liberal prejudice against religious faith.

Jack is exposed to a rain of toxic waste while filling his gas tank. The man in khaki from SIMUVAC is similar to Heinrich in his efficient dissociation, his pride in expertise and his welcoming as a technical achievement “A whole new generation of toxic waste. What we call state of the art.” The art of waste. SIMUVAC is overbearing wasteful Big Government, satirical hyperbole in 1985 that has turned out to be an accurate prediction of the massive surveillance by the National Security Agency exposed in 2013: “I have tapped into your history.” Big Government turns people into ciphers: “You are the sum of your data.” Jack may die, but Big Government can do nothing for him: “We’ll know in fifteen years.” SIMUVAC simulates sympathy by advising Jack to be a materialist like Murray: “I wouldn’t worry about what I can’t see or feel.” Big Government has the same attitude toward the People. It does not worry about them as individual human beings any more than does the toxic cloud.

Jack amuses himself by listening to Babette read aloud from the tabloids to four blind people and others and compares what she reads to fairy tales. In his classroom he is acting out his own fairy tale of Hitler to gullible students, yet he is surprised that Babette’s listeners are so unquestioning: “The tabloid future, with its mechanism of a hopeful twist to apocalyptic events, was perhaps not so very remote from our own immediate experience.” Sixteen years after *White Noise* was published an apocalyptic even occurred that makes the tabloid prediction DeLillo satirizes seem close to the truth after all: “Members of an air-crash cult will hijack a jumbo jet and crash it into the White House in an act of blind devotion to their mysterious and reclusive leader, known only as Uncle Bob.” The attack on 9/11 has made the mocking tone of this prediction facile, but it illustrates DeLillo’s point that these days almost anything might happen, however unlikely it may seem.

One theme of this satire of the tabloids is that commerce has exploited people’s fear of death, vulgarized spirituality, and stolen from religion the hope of an afterlife: “Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons,” including “personalized resurrection through stream-of-consciousness computer techniques.” This is salvation by computer with no moral accountability and no God—a liberal’s dream. The tabloids illustrate that “Out of some persistent sense of large-scale ruin, we kept inventing hope.” Scientists at Princeton’s famed Institute of Advanced Studies claim to have found proof of life after death in hundreds of personal accounts of living past lives as “pyramid builders, exchange students and extraterrestrials.” The comical unlikely inclusion of “exchange students” calls attention to the fact that, as a rule, the previous lives of claimants are a lot more interesting and exotic than their present lives. The claimants who were

exchange students in a previous life are probably adjuncts in this one. The gullibility of the Princeton “scientists” reflects the subjectivity of Postmodern professors in general.

Living past lives recalls the feeling of *déjà vu* experienced by Denise and Steffie during the airborne toxic event and expresses the theme of recurrence in history due to fixed characteristics of human nature. One woman recalls her life “as a hunter-gatherer in the Mesolithic era ten thousand years ago”: “It was remarkable to hear this tiny senior citizen in polyester slacks describe her life as a hulking male chieftain whose band inhabited a peat bog and hunted wild boar with primitive bow and arrow.” She speaks phrases in German, associating her life as a primitive with the ethnic origin of Hitler. How real can a reincarnation be, DeLillo asks in effect, if the person reincarnated is *totally* different in the second life?

“Dr. Shiv Chatterjee, fitness guru and high-energy physicist” believes the story of two women claiming to be twins who lived in “the lost city of Atlantis fifty thousand years ago” and are now “food stylists for NASA.” Why the 50,000-year delay? In real life a top NASA scientist, James Hansen, was exposed in the early 21st century as a liar who falsified data to promote the fraud of “global warming.” Chatterjee also bases his faith on the case of Patti Weaver, age 5, who claims to have been a KGB assassin responsible for the murder of celebrities to acquire the famous Holy Shroud of Turin for the executive committee of the Communist Party, professed Atheists so afraid of death they are hoping the Shroud has curative powers. The modest psychic who told the police where to look for the missing Treadwells was authentic and proven correct. In contrast, the tabloid psychics--supposedly “the country’s leading psychics”--are grandstanding frauds. Of their 13 predictions, 7 pertain to celebrities and 4 to UFOs. In this satire psychic hucksters and people who claim to be reincarnated distract from true spirituality. It goes to show how Postmodernists will believe in nearly anything but God.

Jack transcends materialism through love: “Watching children sleep makes me feel devout, part of a spiritual system. It is the closest I can come to God.” The “spiritual system” in general is Nature, as opposed to artificial technological society. His particular feeling is the natural love and devotion of a father for his children, “Girls especially.” God is manifest in children and Jack’s distance from God is evident in his difficulty getting close to his children, especially Bee and Heinrich. Murray has no children, no wife, no family, and no God. He takes notes.

In contrast, “We began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe.” Now that he is facing death, Jack feels religious: “A feeling of desperate piety swept over me. It was cosmic in nature, full of yearnings and reachings.” While watching Steffie sleep, he hears her speak in “a language not quite of this world.” Then she utters two words “that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*.” Jack is hoping for a spiritual revelation and gets instead a product advertised on TV: “Part of every child’s brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe.” *Toyota Celica* is an artificial name, yet it “was like the name of an ancient power in the sky”—like a god. Materialists worship things, like Daisy Buchanan weeping in ecstasy over Gatsby’s expensive shirts. Jack is moved by his daughter’s materialism, even though it is only a simulated religion: “Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. I depended on my children for that.”

The toxic cloud alters course and now it is coming toward the refugees. They must evacuate the Boy Scout camp immediately. Jack takes time to brush his teeth with his finger, identifying him with Murray and the other adolescent professors earlier who gave themselves the finger. Now that his family is in imminent danger of death, Jack converts—temporarily—from liberal to conservative: “In situations such as this, you want to stick close to people in right-wing fringe groups. They’ve practiced staying alive.” The rest of the time, implicitly, Jack would support strict gun control laws that would prevent citizens from defending themselves. At this point DeLillo is giving Jack the finger.

Now following the “right-wingers” who know how to stay alive, Jack drives off the road into Nature. In contrast, the synthetic toxic cloud “resembled a national promotion for death.” Suffering from the spiritual death of Postmodernism, Jack feels “sick at several levels.” He recalls that due to his exposure “I was technically dead.... Self-pity oozed through my soul. I tried to relax and enjoy it.” Finally he is able to get back onto the parkway with other vehicles, “Like wagon trains converging on the Santa Fe trail.” This simile recalls the station wagons converging on the campus in the first sentence of the novel. Their

adventure has made the Gladney family feel glutted “as after a junk food spree.” As if living through a disaster was even more satisfying than watching disasters happen to other people. However, Babette as the principle of Nature has become doubtful about Progress: “Every advance is worse than the one before because it makes me more scared.”

Dylarama

22

Jack’s psychological dissociation from Nature is manifest in his reductive perception and abstract style. In the supermarket he describes Wilder as attracted to items “whose shape and radiance excited his system of sensory analysis.” There is a lot more to such items than shape and radiance—smell, color, imagery, size, and so on—and the phrase “system of sensory analysis” reduces the boy to a computer program. Jack “envied and admired” Wilder’s ability to be natural and enjoy life.

Murray likewise displays a dissociated lack of humanity. At the supermarket when he tells Jack that Cotsakis has died, Murray sees his colleague as a rival and nothing more: “I don’t know what to say either. Except better him than me.... It’s better not knowing them when they die. It’s better them than us.” Since everyone dies, this suggests that Murray has no friends. He is not really close to Jack, he is simulating friendship. After all, he is trying to seduce his wife.

Jack and Babette watch the sunset not in a natural setting but on the parkway overpass. Nor is this a normal sunset. Historically sunsets have been intensified by natural particles in the air such as after a storm or a volcanic eruption. Since the airborne toxic event, the “new sunsets” have become far more spectacular—“almost unbearably beautiful”—and last much longer. This change suggests that indeed “Nyodene Derivative (added to the everyday drift of effluents, pollutants, contaminants and delirians) had caused this aesthetic leap...” The sunset is a tragic metaphor of Postmodern life: Progress has produced more beautiful things like the new sunset and the things in the Mall at the cost of making the environment more confusing, disruptive, scary, oppressive and toxic.

23

Heinrich the fascist takes pleasure in the likelihood of a Big Government coverup of continuing danger from toxic waste and in the prospect of “demonstrations, panic, violence and social disorder”—the 1960s, *déjà vu*. In contrast, while taking a new drug Babette has become docile: “Every day on the news there’s another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants. How serious can it be if it happens all the time?” *Ba-ba*. Dylar appears to be the ideal drug for a totalitarian government to add to water supplies nationwide in order to reduce the population to sheep. Like the mainstream media. Heinrich is eagerly apocalyptic about the threat from “radiation that surrounds us every day... It’s the electrical and magnetic fields.” Living in a small college town, Jack the urbanite is lonely for life in a “polestar metropolis,” where such pollution is greatest.

24

The main plot of *White Noise* is the corruption of Babette (Nature). Dylar is a synthetic in a plastic bottle, amber like a warning light. It represents all the questionable drugs that Americans are taking. Babette has hidden her drug from the family—a warning signal. As soon as Jack finds the hidden bottle he goes straight to Denise and she takes over, more evidence of his deference to females. She proves her greater competence by being well ahead of him as a detective.

Jack calls Babette’s doctor to avoid the health care bureaucracy. “The doctor’s name was Hookstratten. It sounded sort of German.” The German motif in the novel associates Hookstratten with the personality of Hitler. Dr. Hookstratten is overbearing, bullying, unsympathetic, arrogant, and mocking. Meanwhile the alienated Heinrich is doing chinning exercises in the closet. Currently he is hanging around with Mercator, a name identified with navigation—“the Mercator projection.” Heinrich has played chess with a mass murderer and now is being guided by the priorities of size and strength and consorting with deadly killers embodied in Mercator (and Hitler). These priorities are as dumb as Mercator: “He’s almost nineteen and he’s still in high school.” He aspires to set a world record for sitting in a cage with the most venomous of

snakes. He wants to be famous for stupidity. Such a record would be as meaningless as Murray's for "the southernmost point I've ever brushed my teeth with my finger at."

25

Babette is becoming estranged from her family. Worried about her Dylar addiction, Jack consults a colleague, a neurochemist "whose work was said to be brilliant." Winnie Richards studies brains. As soon as Jack starts to question Babette about Dylar she distracts him with an invitation to the bedroom. In contrast Winnie Richards, an opposite to Babette in build and personality and otherwise, tells Jack the facts. She has concluded from her analysis of Dylar that it is an unknown technologically advanced synthetic. The complexity of the brain makes Winnie "proud to be an American" because "We still lead the world in stimuli." She is comically reductive like Murray and Heinrich, but at the same time, unlike them she believes in ideals beyond herself—the evolving brain and her country. Despite her brilliance as a scientist, because of her ideals Winnie is a loser in higher education, where pride in being an American has been politically incorrect since the 1960s. This is why Winnie Richards hides and sneaks around. Intimidated by the fascist educational environment, Winnie is a satirical personification of truth and patriotism depicted as difficult to find on campus.

26

Jack urges Babette to confess to her addiction, pleading his own weakness: "As you well know, I don't have the temperament to hound people." Such lines are comical throughout the novel because of the disparity between the real Jack, timid and confused, and his pose as a professor of Hitler. Professors are known for posturing in the classroom, but unlike Jack, many academic radicals are dead serious—former terrorists and murderers—as documented by David Horowitz in *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (2006).

Dylar has corrupted Babette. She has become self-absorbed like Jack's former wives: "The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it." She reveals to Jack that she has been deceiving him for months with another man. "I thought it was my former wives who practiced guile. Sweet deceivers." In order to get her drug, Babette has been sleeping with the product manager of the experimental drug Dylar "on a continuing basis for some months." One corruption led to another and now Babette is among the many in America who sell their bodies for drugs. "It was a capitalist transaction." She calls the project manager Mr. Gray, connoting moral ambiguity and death: "I could die." Gray the ambitious experimental scientist resembles the scientists in "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "The Birthmark" by Hawthorne. "He was eager to use me," says Babette. Gray's project is perverted by lust, materialism and greed: "He would be acclaimed for a medical breakthrough."

Jack has no emotional reaction upon hearing that Babette has betrayed him with another man. His lack of affect here seems pathological. It helps to explain how he could teach Hitler. Of course, he may be accustomed to adulterous wives by now. Blandly he offers to get Babette some jello, inquires about the radio, volunteers to take it to get fixed. Then he questions her academically, as Murray or Heinrich might, collecting data: "Did you enjoy having sex with him?... I spoke to her as one of those reclining philosophers might address a younger member of the academy..." Ironically, he asks, "Don't you see the enormity of what you've done?" He does not react emotionally until he realizes that her problem is fear of death: "For the first time I began to get an inkling of what she'd been talking about all along. My body went cold. I felt hollow inside."

He and Babette talk about their mutual fear of death without ever mentioning religion or God, despite the fact that she regularly goes to the church. This scene dramatizes the destructive effects of Atheism. "You are the happy one," Jack tells her. "I am the doomed fool." Now both of them are doomed fools who may die of poisoning literally as well as spiritually. They speculate about death and identify it with "electrical noise." Jack describes it as "Uniform, white." To him white noise is the ambience of death that is audible in electrical fields. Listen to New York City.

Jack identifies Babette with Nature, when he calls her "my strength, my life-force." But now they are both dissociated from reality in Nature, unable to accept, let alone transcend death. They have tried the

“projects” of Existentialism—Hitler studies, teaching and all the other activities of Babette. Still they remain terrified of death. They try “to reach agreement on our fear, to advance our competition, to assert our root desires against the chaos in our souls. Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded.” These gasolines fuel the Toyota Celica and the other gods of materialism, including the station wagons converging on the college. “We lay naked after love.” Cars, drugs and sex—they are “like adolescents.” The phrase “advance our competition” implies that they are each competing to die first.

Atheism and materialism function as “inhibitors” like Dylar, killing the capacity for holistic thought: “The left side of my brain could die but the right side could live,” says Babette. Jack now agrees with the inhumane Heinrich in a reductive scientism characteristic of Nazism and Communism: “We’re the sum of our chemical impulses.” But he recognizes the moral implications: “What happens to good and evil in this system?” The answer is Hitler, Marx, Stalin, Mao. Secular liberal Postmodernism is a cultural force that destroys morality and justice by inhibiting the heart and soul. In the end Dylar fails, like Hitler. There is no salvation in drugs. They are like “the comforter over her head.”

27

As a Postmodern academic, Jack does not know he is spiritually dead: “This death was still too deep to be glimpsed.” Now he is in both the “exposure swath” and the “ingestion swath” of toxicity, contaminated both outside and inside: “It means you’re dead,” declares the man from SIMUVAC. Dylar is “the benign counterpart of the Nyodene menace... Technology with a human face.”

A fake like her father, Steffie is already a little feminist, volunteering to simulate victimization: “Is this how she thinks of herself at the age of nine—already a victim, trying to polish her skills?” DeLillo is so discrete, or censored, he does not even use the word *feminist* in an academic novel set during the Feminist takeover of higher education in the 1980s. Nevertheless his diction implies that Feminism became a political surrogate for religion: Steffie “had a history of being devout in her victimhood.”

Big Government is becoming more powerful by causing disasters both real and simulated, creating more victims and increasing control by scaring people. Obamacare in 2009 is an example of a disaster planned by Big Government as a way to impose socialized medicine, contrary to the will of the majority of Americans. SIMUVAC broadcasts orders to the population and to “thousands of hand-picked evacuees” declaring that “We are not here to mend broken bones or put out real fires. We are here to simulate.” That is, Big Government is not here to help all the people, only to pretend. In fact, SIMUVAC has a vested interest in ever bigger disasters: “Save your tender loving care for the nuclear fireball in June.” The current equivalent of SIMUVAC is the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, an armed force.

In his reflector vest and camouflage cap, Heinrich looks forward to the next disaster. On a personal level Jack tries to dissuade, or arrest, Orest Mercator in his plan to sit in a cage with toxic snakes. “Do you understand that you are risking death for a couple of lines in a paperback book?” Jack wonders what race Mercator may be. “It was getting hard to know what you couldn’t say to people.” Political Correctness is an “inhibitor” of free speech, communication and common sense. Mercator is too immature to conceive of his own death and is on the verge of violence: “I’m looking to punch somebody in the face. Bare-fisted. Hard as I can. To find out what it feels like.” Perhaps he and Heinrich will decide instead to find out what it feels like to shoot as many teachers and students as possible at the high school.

Nature in the person of Mercator is a destructive form of Wilderness. In contrast innocent little Wilder embodies values of the pastoral Garden—the heart and the family. Jack says “I always feel good when I’m with Wilder.” His son gratifies the natural father in him. He sees the boy as “selfish in a totally unbounded and natural way.” Wilder exemplifies the Adamic transcendence of innocent childhood. Babette sees more in him: “There’s something else about him that gives me a lift. Something bigger, grander, that I can’t quite put my finger on.” Something that makes Jack feel “closest to God” when he watches his children sleep. However, such experiences never lead Jack to any spiritual conviction. He reveals himself to be still a doomed fool when he says “Remind me to ask Murray.”

Disillusioned by Dylar, her sordid guru Gray and her prostitution at the Grayview Motel, Babette has become affirmative again and is nurturing Wilder: “Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes” To Jack she says, “Let’s just resume our lives. Let’s tell each other we’ll do the best we can. Yes yes yes yes yes.” Twice she sounds like the earth mother Molly Bloom whose famous interior monologue concludes *Ulysses* (1922) by Joyce becomes coherent through the device of increasingly repeating the word *yes*.

28

Steffie was conceived on a romantic night in Barbadoes, where her mother Dana Breedlove went to bribe an official. Now she is invited to visit her devious mother in Mexico City for Easter, but not for any religious purpose. Steffie is not as comfortable with air travel as Bee: “The enormity of the mission, of flying to a foreign country, at nearly supersonic speed, at thirty thousand feet, alone, in a humped container of titanium and steel, caused her to grow momentarily silent.” Having simulated being a victim so much, Steffie is now too afraid of becoming a real victim to fly. “I signed up to be a victim again.” Feminists preaching that women are victims victimizes rather than empowers girls.

Dana Breedlove reviews fiction for the CIA, “mainly long serious novels with coded structures.” This is a satirical reference to Postmodern fiction by writers such as Pynchon and Barth: “The work left her tired and irritable, rarely able to enjoy food, sex or conversation.” Postmodernism drains the pleasure out of life. That the CIA would be interested in the long complicated fantasy novels of writers such as Pynchon and Barth is a comical suggestion that Postmodernism is a subversive threat to America. This notion is funny because it calls attention to their unimportance in the real world.

When Jack thinks of the lecherous Mr. Gray his image of him is “literally gray” and limited largely to his “pendulous member.” Likewise he thinks the longings of his New York cultural studies colleagues are dominated by “extremes of postwar urban gray.” Professors Lasher and Grappa, still adolescents, recall favorite movies, adventures in spitting, getting erections at the dentist, biting dead skin off their thumbs and closing their eyes while driving with other people in their cars. They throw napkins and flip matches. All the conversation about movies in *White Noise* conveys that higher education now resembles Hollywood in promoting adolescent foolishness and dangerous illusions.

Murray has watched so many movies he thinks car crashes are “positive events” like Thanksgiving and the Fourth: “It’s a high-spirited moment like old-fashioned stunt flying, walking on wings.” Or like sitting in a cage with deadly snakes. Driving drunk is a great adventure. “Look past the violence, Jack. There is a wonderful brimming spirit of innocence and fun.” Murray can look past the mangled bodies and grieving loved ones because he has no loved ones. Jack has no excuse. His perversity is of a much greater magnitude since he can look past the horrors of Hitler and World War II, just as Marxist professors look past over 100 million murders by Marxists in the 20th century.

29

As a natural woman, Babette is the cautionary equivalent of a canary in a mine. “She is strong, healthy, outgoing, affirmative. She says yes to things. That is the point of Babette.” But now she is losing her memory, just as society is losing its memories of traditions and sustaining values such as faith in God. Without faith, Babette is afraid to be alone even in the supermarket. “I’m just going to aisle five,” says Jack. For his part Jack is seeing illusory lights before his eyes. “Stop wearing those dark glasses,” says Babette sensibly. Jack hides his true self behind his dark glasses: “I can’t teach Hitler without them.” This dark glasses metaphor of Postmodernism is like the minister’s black veil of Calvinism in the famous tale by Hawthorne. Both are artificial obstructions to seeing the truth, both dissociate the head from the heart, both foster harmful authoritarianism, and both are self-destructive.

People are already forgetting the airborne toxic event just as they have forgotten the lessons of history. The German tutor is living in a place like Hitler’s bunker with his windows “totally blocked.” He has *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* on display near his door—“A best-seller in Germany.” That night the Gladney family enjoys another disaster unfolding on TV, some bodies discovered buried in a backyard. The reporter is eager for more and assures the public that digging would continue through the night. “He made it sound

like a lover's promise." Heinrich follows the story on the TV in his room wearing a hoody like a thug. Everyone is disappointed when no more bodies are found. "The sense of failed expectations was total." The reporter is apologetic for "the absence of mass graves." This ghoulish eagerness to see mass death is parallel to the mood in Germany that led to the mass graves under Hitler.

30

Jack wants access to Mr. Gray not to beat him up for sleeping with his wife but to get some Dylar for himself. Babette warns him against it. At the college he chases Winnie Richards all over the campus to the top of the hill where they watch "Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery." Winnie tells him that some scientists think the toxic residue is not from the cloud but from "the microorganisms that ate the cloud." If so, Big Government has made the disaster worse—perhaps releasing deadly organisms that will wipe out the human race.

The red sunset is "like a heart," beautiful but polluted like Rappaccini's daughter in Hawthorne. Winnie tells Jack philosophically that "it's a mistake to lose one's sense of death, even one's fear of death. Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life...? Fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level.... There is no medicine, obviously." Winnie the objective scientist represents the reality principle, whereas Postmodernists are inclined to romantic fantasy rather than Realism and some like Barth even deny that there is any objective reality. Jack knows "She was right," but he does not want to believe her, he needs to feel there is some escape from the angst of Atheism: "I said, 'You're more than a fair-weather friend—you're a true enemy'." Winnie blushes when someone makes a joke. "She turned exceedingly red"—like the sunset, both beautiful in character and destructive to his faith in technology: "Brilliant people never think of the lives they smash, being brilliant." Science is limited, however, for Winnie cannot advise Jack on how to cope with his fear of death.

31

Postmodern consciousness on a daily basis is evoked by the list of a dozen requirements for simply paying one bill. The paper work alone that is required in modern society dissociates people from what is natural. Urbanization and affluence have further separated people from Nature. Most people in developed countries spend their lives in artificial environments. Today most Americans relate to Nature through deodorants, power lawnmowers, and "CABLE NATURE."

The Gladneys go out for dinner because no one wants to cook. They drive "out to the commercial strip in the no man's land beyond the town boundary. The never-ending neon." Commerce has added to the dehumanization of modern life. The Gladneys are so much into themselves—solipsistic—they do not want to eat around other people—even relatives. They eat in the car. They eat in their heavy coats and hats and do not look at each other. They reduce their scope of vision and simply want to satisfy their appetites. "We didn't need light and space." They are crowded together like animals in a cage who would rather be in separate cages. They rip off skin, devour chicken parts and suck bones. "The interior of the car smelled of grease and licked flesh. We traded parts and gnawed." In the tradition of Naturalist fiction, people behave like animals because they are poor, whereas here in Postmodern America affluent people behave this way because they have reduced themselves to animals.

Heinrich summarizes the effects of materialism in a metaphor: "Everything's a car." Not everything is Nature, or God—everything's a car. The family chatters on about scientific questions, entirely materialistic in their answers. To the metaphysical question "What is there?" Heinrich reduces the meaning of life to "Heavy molecules. The whole point of space is to give molecules a chance to cool down after they come shooting off the surface of giant stars." Heinrich has no interest in a spiritual dimension, only in "awesome" cosmic explosions—like Murray's car crashes on a larger scale.

The reference to psychics introduces the spiritual dimension to their conversation, but inner space is immediately replaced by aliens from outer space. There is credible authority for believing in UFOs as exemplified by the eyewitness testimony of "Officer Walker, a Vietnam vet," but he may be suffering from post-traumatic shock. Today people want to believe in space aliens in order to be "lifted out of death."

Postmodernists who believe in transcendence through technology rather than God see space aliens as surrogate divinities offering the possibility of eternal life through more technology.

Jack and Babette are so disconnected from their children they fear them: “Would they attack us...?” It seems a reasonable fear in the case of Heinrich. Most of the mountain ranges in the United States run north and south yet Jack is not able to evaluate Denise’s nonsense that mountains are always “upstate.” He is not even able to be relevant: “I tried to name state capitals, governors.” Jack knows as little about the geography of his own country as he knows about German. He represents the many American professors today who know nothing about America. Many “Cultural Studies” professors are even hostile to America and falsify and ignore the national cultural heritage. Jack’s distance from his own natural environment and from Nature is contrasted to his oldest daughter Mary Alice, who is working with whales far away in Hawaii. Babette tells Jack she wants to die first and that she wants Wilder to “stay the way he is forever.” She does not pray. Of course, Jack is already dead and Wilder is not invulnerable to change, especially when riding his tricycle onto the expressway.

32

The two cultural theorists Jack and Murray walk closely side by side “in our European manner.” Their European manner is evidence of their lack of any authentic identity as Americans. They are pop culture adolescents posturing as sophisticated. Postmodernism as a force in cultural history originated in Europe —“Theory” in particular. Jack is trying to learn enough German to pretend to know it and Murray lives “under the same roof” with the isolated German tutor. Murray thinks the German is perversely in love with death, yet he himself loves crashes that kill people. The politically correct are hypocrites, also exemplified by Murray’s crude sexism, the male counterpart of Feminist sexism. Murray has an aversion to “soft skin in general. Baby skin.” Murray has aversions to babies and women, a parallel to Feminists with aversions to babies and men. He uses prostitutes. At his last German lesson Jack agrees with Murray that the tutor has a “grim lasciviousness,” as if to the German death is an aphrodisiac. Jack does not see his celebration of Hitler as evidence of his own perverse attraction to death.

Jack ends his German lessons on the same day that the German shepherds and government inspectors end their investigation--the same day “the insane asylum burned down.” The insane, seen in buses during the toxic event, are now wandering loose, and not all of them are from the asylum. Paranoia and madness are major themes in Postmodern fiction, from Nathanael West through Pynchon, Kesey, and others. Jack and Heinrich go to watch the disaster with “other men at the scene with their adolescent boys.” They are all adolescent sociopaths. This is live action disaster, better entertainment than TV. A mad woman goes “down in a white burst, like a teacup breaking.” The males are detached. Heinrich watches as if it’s “Just like a fire in the fireplace.” Hitler enjoyed viewing combat footage of his horrific firebombings of London without having to smell the bodies.

This crowd feels “betrayed” by a bad odor. The situation stinks. The entertaining spectacle is ruined. “An ancient, spacious and terrible drama was being compromised by something unnatural.” On the contrary, the irony is that their unnatural distance from death is being compromised by Nature—by reality. Literally the stench is coming from “insulation” or some other artificial substance produced by technology. “The odor drove us away” and back to TV.

Afterward at home, Jack and Heinrich do not mention any burn victims. They drink warm milk and Heinrich appreciates “the nice fire.” Obsessed by death, Jack sits up late thinking of Mr. Gray, sometimes as a composite of scientists—a “hazy gray seducer.” As in Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark,” science seduces humanity with promises of improvement through technology: “I felt his mastery and control.” In this story Babette is humanity, in the position of the traditional maiden in jeopardy, addicted to a drug—to high-tech: “Dependent, submissive, emotionally captive.”

Jack himself is seduced by Gray, or science corrupted by self-interest: “He was taking over my mind.” In his nightmarish fantasy, Gray has taken over Babette. His fantasy is the *objective correlative* of Jack’s disgust and revulsion, previously suppressed by dissociation. Gray is the gloom of spiritual death moving in around the motel bed in “a circle slowly closing.” The last word of the chapter, “Panasonic,” is (1) a reference to wide sound—or ambient noise—advanced technology connoting the comprehensive scope of

the Postmodern situation represented by Babette (Nature) in bed with Gray (corrupted science); (2) an example of Jack's dissociation from feeling—a psychological technique and a symptom of his spiritual death as he “grows into” Hitler; and (3) another example of technology taking over Nature, as the first syllable *Pan* in Panasonic is the name of an ancient god of Nature.

33

One morning when he sees an old man sitting in his backyard, Jack thinks of him as an “allegorical” personification or representative of Death—in the form of a “technician.” Death has white hair and “I felt myself getting whiter by the second.” Ironically, the old man turns out to be the opposite of death, his father-in-law Vernon, Babette's father, a natural man defiant of death. Whereas comfortable affluent Jack worries about every little thing and thinks he is dying all the time, Vernon is not worried at all about dying, money, insomnia, shakes, coughing, limping, weight loss, failing eyesight, loose teeth, wives, women, or making love: “We rent a cassette and have some sex.”

Vernon has no money but he is a generous spontaneous happy man who acts from the heart. Heinrich said “Everything is a car.” Vernon gives Jack his car. He works with his hands. He is down to earth. He can fix things, unlike Jack. “He saw my shakiness in such matters as a sign of some deeper incompetence or stupidity.” Jack never fixes anything. Living in the concrete, Vernon makes Jack feel like a betrayer of “fundamental principles.” The professor lives so much in the abstract he must remind himself of “the nature and being of real things.” Significantly, though he is a rogue, the old man is traditionally religious. He would not marry a woman who goes to church in a mobile home.

Like DeLillo, Vernon has a deadpan sense of humor. He has one question for Jack: “Were people this dumb before television?” Obviously not, or they could not have survived. They could not have defeated Hitler and the Germans. Vernon gives Jack a handgun, “German-made.” But Jack is one of the dumb: “We don't want guns in our little town.” Vernon retorts, “It's not what you want that matters.” Jack wants peace while teaching fascism. If there is a war, Jack will hide behind the “right-wingers,” whereas Vernon is the type of man who built the country and won its wars. Vernon is vital, in every sense, whereas Jack is more than dispensable. He is a secular liberal “growing into” Hitler. He even suspects that his children will not miss him when he dies.

34

That Murray is a male feminist—ironically a sexist pig—is evident when he disapproves of “the sexual assault motif of front-to-back parking.” As a Postmodernist he is (1) rootless and “homesick” because he has no real home; (2) divorced from the past and traditions—“Nostalgia is the product of dissatisfaction and rage”; (3) blaming traditionalists for wars—“War is the form nostalgia takes”; (4) projecting his own negative feelings onto others; (5) subjective and despotic in his attitude that everyone has or should have the same feelings as he has; (6) solipsistic—“I don't trust anybody's nostalgia but my own”; and (7) coldly detached from the humanity of others.

Jack has his head in the cold when he looks into his freezer and hears “An eerie static, insistent but near subliminal, that made me think of wintering souls, some form of dormant life approaching the threshold of perception.” This suggests hope for Jack, that his dead soul may only be “wintering” and will revive. His perception is “bordering on religious.” First, however, he sticks his head into the garbage searching for an escape, the Dylar tablets Denise threw away. The contents of the stinking bag of garbage are detailed to elicit disgust and revulsion at the trashy professor stooping so low. Such drugs are garbage. When he fails to find the escape he is looking for, he accepts that he will have to face reality. He works up the courage to go to his doctor again, to find out how soon he might die.

Dr. Chakravarty is another Postmodern scientist whose faith is invested in technicians and technical advances. His name gives a global scope to the theme of science worship. He exemplifies the arrogance of elites and the power of Big Government years before Obamacare: “The less you know, the better.” Test results indicate that Jack might in fact die at any time—the premise of Existentialism. He lies to his doctor but it is another hopeful sign that he goes home and starts throwing possessions away, feeling burdened by too many *things*. “There was an immensity of things, an overburdening weight, a connection, a mortality.”

This is the mood of Thoreau in *Walden*. This is hopeful, but only medicinal, as implied by the woman passing on the street who is virtually the author calling Jack's reduction of possessions a treatment rather than a cure: "A decongestant, an antihistamine, a cough suppressant, a pain reliever."

35

Babette wears a gray sweatsuit "almost all the time." She is gray now. She has absorbed the toxicity of Postmodern relativism, as is evident when she sounds like Heinrich: "What is truth?" Her only corrective is Nature: "I'm spending more time with Wilder. Wilder helps me get by." But her head misleads her. She rationalizes exposing herself to the sun without sunscreen with the Theory—this novel is full of stupid self-deluded Postmodern theories—that runners are less vulnerable to damaging rays than less mobile people and the faster they run the less vulnerable they are. This is a comical variation on the common imperative to get ahead in society without getting burned. "It's all a corporate-tie-in," Babette said in summary. "The sunscreen, the marketing, the fear, the disease. You can't have one without the other." Babette's version of salvation is skin deep—running and not using sunscreen. Her Theory is false, it will not work any more than Dylar, and it could do her serious harm as Denise well knows.

Jack questions young Orest Mercator the aspiring snake charmer about whether he fears death: "I guess I admired him too. He was creating an imperial self out of some tabloid aspiration." Jack the weakling with a tabloid mind admires any boob who creates an "imperial self," even Hitler. Figuratively, in teaching Hitler—the most poisonous of snakes—he is doing something like what Mercator plans to do. He buys the young fanatic lunch and when he calls for the check he gets flashes of Mr. Gray. He is paying for his faith in Babette when he envisions her in the motel mirror "like a sophomore leading cheers at an orgy." By taking the dangerous experimental drug Dylar, Babette likewise did something as stupid as sitting with poisonous snakes. She mirrors Jack's own dissociation when she dismisses her adultery and belittles his feelings of betrayal as "childish dopey injured male pride." Babette in gray makes a feminist response, absolving herself of blame with a sexist insult, as if she is the injured party.

Steffie has decided to visit her distant mother in Mexico City after all, continuing the theme of broken families: "How do I know I'll recognize my mother?" Jack reassures her, "You saw her last year.... You liked her." Steffie has practiced being a victim. Her insecurity is evident in her concern about whether her father will care enough about her to come and get her back: "What if she keeps me?" The sad irony is that her mother would never want to keep her, as Denise knows. In contrast, Babette holds on tight to Wilder: "Yes yes." The next day SIMUVAC conducts a simulated toxic event response to a bad odor. "Three days later an actual noxious odor drifted across the river." Some people develop symptoms, but SIMUVAC does not show up for the real thing. Bureaucrats in Big Government are like Murray "looking at the barn." The people have no choice but to accept this. "As time passed, the will to do nothing seemed to deepen, to fix itself firmly." Now everybody, not only Jack, has reason to be concerned about dying.

36

Jack accepts a collect call from his former wife Janet, or Mother Devi, out in Montana. He agrees to let Heinrich visit her this summer on the stipulation that, "I don't want him getting involved in something personal and intense, like religion." Of course, something personal and intense like religion might do the boy some good. Jack worries instead that the Swami will be a better father to Heinrich than he is. Well, your "growing into Hitler" doesn't help your case, Jack. How is Hitler better than a pacifist religion? However artificial the ashram may be, it represents an opportunity for Heinrich to escape airborne toxicity and individuate into humanity and atonement with Nature. The pastoral ashram (Garden) in Montana (alpine Wilderness) is set in thematic opposition to Jack and Murray's college on a hill (City).

Jack's conference attracts "about ninety" Hitler scholars, a number comically huge—more than a conference on Shakespeare would have attracted in 1985. It is hard to believe that a liberal would teach Hitler in an American university, just as it is hard for liberals to believe that their enforcement of Political Correctness is a fascist parallel to the rise of Nazism in Germany. Ironically, Jack welcomes the gathering of Atheists in a "starkly modern chapel." What exactly is Jack teaching about Hitler? "I talked mainly about Hitler's mother, brother and dog." As a cultural studies professor, he also talks about "jazz, beer and

baseball. Of course there was Hitler himself.” This satirizes the “contextualism” of cultural studies professors like Jack, Murray and the Feminists, who avoid studying the *text* itself—in this case Hitler. Jack’s ignorance of German is a measure of how little he is teaching about his subject. Here DeLillo mocks the liberal pretense of “Multiculturalism” in higher education: “I tried to avoid the Germans in the group.... I spent a lot of time in my office, hiding.”

DeLillo makes another satirical thrust at the long “coded” novels by prolific Postmodernists such as Pynchon and Barth: “Dana was getting big thick novels every day [every day!], writing reviews which she microfilmed and sent to a secret archive. She complained of jangled nerves, periods of deep spiritual fatigue.” As if such novels require decoding by intelligence agents and will gather dust in libraries and archives unread by anyone but spies, as if anyone cares, let alone the CIA.

The name of the medical testing lab, Autumn Harvest Farms, is pastoral and part of Nature, whereas the lab in fact is the opposite of pastoral—artificial, sterile and detached from Nature. “People crossed the hall like wandering souls.” The socialistic health care system is dehumanizing: “Always a new technician. Always faceless fellow patients in the mazelike halls, crossing from room to room, identically gowned.” The technicians are tools of their technology. Ironically, one tells Jack, “We can see more deeply.” But the politically correct professor does not like “delving.” Jack the liberal is so afraid to face the truth he lies repeatedly: “I get high just walking in the woods.” On the contrary, he avoids Nature because it is truth and he is false: “I’ve spent my life on a college campus.” When he lies in denying he knows anything about the toxicity in the air, the technician tells him “There are traces in your bloodstream.”

The satire of liberal professors afraid of the truth peaks when Jack finally asks what effect his exposure might have and the impersonal technician answers “Cause a person to die.” Jack’s fear ignites into anger: “Speak English, for God’s sake. I despise this modern jargon.” This outburst is ironic because (1) liberal professors like Jack are notorious for jargon; and (2) Jack the Atheist invokes the authority of God. The chapter ends with the contrast of Postmodernism to the traditional values evoked by televised grandparents who dote upon their grandson. The boy aspires to a career bagging groceries: “It’s like Zen, grampa.” This identifies the boy with spirituality and transcendence, like the ashram where Heinrich may visit his mother. The opposite of Hitler, bagging groceries is “totally unthreatening.” The boy is like Vernon in representing values antithetical to Jack’s. They are warm people, whereas Jack still has his head in his freezer, “going deeper into winter stillness, a landscape of silence and ice.” The last sentence calls attention to the difference between signs and symbols. Doctors know *signs*, fiction writers like DeLillo know *symbols*, which are spiritual in transcending the literal and material and uniting opposites.

The professor of fascism describes this walk with the professor of materialism as “Socratic,” then refers to Murray’s “car crash seminar” in a displacement of classic philosophy by adolescent sensationalism. Some unforeseen consequences of political correctness are illustrated by the condominiums “blending so well with the environment that birds kept flying into the plate-glass windows.” On a much larger scale today, PC windmills are killing many thousands of birds all over the country including bald eagles.

Jack anticipates his death as totally physical, with no spiritual dimension. “I’m technically dead. My body is growing a nebulous mass.” He is poisoned by a byproduct of insecticide, reduced to an insect like the man in “The Metamorphosis” by Kafka. He feels “There’s something artificial about my death. It’s shallow, unfulfilling.... They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone.” When there is no spiritual dimension to consciousness, death reduces life to no more significance than a burst of bug spray.

Murray is so dissociated he responds to Jack’s confrontation with death by comparing his situation to a movie, as if Jack’s anguish is simulated. He sees Jack’s dying as a career break: “You’re growing in prestige even as we speak.” In his arrogance Murray believes that “Nothing is stronger than death” and that religious people—those who “claim otherwise”—are “shallow people.” Jack subjectively projects his own angst on everyone in response to the notion that death makes life precious: “What good is preciousness based on fear and anxiety?” Well, it is good for Vernon and for the boy who loves bagging groceries. But for Jack, death makes it “impossible to live a satisfying life.” Murray advises lying to yourself—“we can

pretend it isn't there." Jack wants to "get around" death. "You could put your faith in technology," says Murray. "It got you here, it can get you out." That is what Babette hoped to get from Dylar. "This is the whole point of technology," Murray goes on. "It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is just removed from nature."

A professor of materialism, Murray calls technology "God's own goodness" though he does not believe in God. He is simulating. Atheists consider themselves an enlightened minority, smarter than the masses. "Millions of people have believed for thousands of years. Throw in with them," Murray tells Jack. "Belief in a second birth, a second life, is practically universal. This must mean something." It does not mean believers are right, though. Jack says: "But you make it sound like a convenient fantasy, the worst kind of self-delusion." Murray offers Jack alternative beliefs like brands of baloney in a supermarket, equating simple faith in an afterlife with "reincarnation, transmigration, hyperspace, the resurrection of the dead and so on... I'll tell you what the afterlife is. It's a sweet and terribly touching idea. You can take it or leave it." Actually, Murray, in the end it is you who are either taken or left.

Murray exalts pop culture, yet condescends to the populace: "Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom." He also condescends to Jack: "On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength." This is exactly what Murray is trying to do with Elvis by establishing a "power base." Hitler became what Feminists call a role model to the "helpless and fearful" Jack. Murray admires "the attempt even as I see how totally dumb it was." Though he teaches Elvis and car crashes, Murray feels superior to Jack, who is in fact dumb enough to agree with Murray and look up to him. "Fear is unnatural," proclaims Murray. In fact, of course, fear is about as natural as emotions get. It is a good thing Murray has not reproduced. "Aren't you going too far?" Jack finally wonders, but Murray has the ultimate Postmodern credential: "I'm from New York."

A polarizing theorist common in higher education, Murray divides people into competing groups. His combative philosophy is essentially no different than that of a military commander: "Think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation." The politically correct "Theories" ascendant in higher education during the 1980s were used as weapons to kill the careers of perceived enemies and to shout down all dissenters in direct confrontation. "The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions." It also explains how radicals increased their power over higher education administrators during the 1980s. "I'm talking theory," says Murray, as in Marxism. "In theory, violence is a form of rebirth." This is the theory that brought Hitler to power in Germany, leading to World War and the Holocaust, here justified by Murray the Jew. "Nothingness is staring you in the face. Utter permanent oblivion. You will cease to be." Atheists think they have nothing to lose. Why not murder millions of people you hate if you have the power? "The killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others." Heinrich might take a course from Murray and decide to "Be the killer." Jack adds that some people kill others "on a small intimate scale" and some (Feminists for example) kill in groups—"to watch the bastard bleed."

Murray claims to be Jack's friend yet says again, when it comes to dying, "Better you than me." Every man for himself. Murray has no heart and claims that nobody else has either. He is a cynical liberal who takes consolation in crashes that hurt other people. After talking to Murray, Jack has another compulsion to throw away *things*: "Somehow they'd put me in this fix." Materialism, Jack. Starting to transcend his ego, he discards "diplomas, certificates, awards and citations." He is doing what the Puritans called "weaning himself from this world" of material things in preparation for death, but without the religious faith of a Puritan. The Postmodern culture and the socioeconomic "system" have replaced God. The notice from his bank conveys the necessity of concealing secrets to be accepted in society, a lesson learned by Huckleberry Finn. The system has grown more complicated since Huck's day and imposes a new form of slavery: "Only your code allows you to enter the system."

Jack is in a deepening crisis. For the first time, in desperation, he is seen cuddling with Babette: "My head was between her breasts." Murray advised him to *repress* his feelings, ironic advice from a Freudian, but consistent with his own dissociation from humanity. Babette naturally counters Murray: "We're not

supposed to deny our nature.” On the contrary, “It’s natural to deny our nature, according to Murray.” Of course Babette thinks Murray is crazy. Yet Jack agrees with Murray: “‘It’s the only way to survive,’ I said from her breasts.” Ironically, in that position, he rejects Nature. All the talk about repression prepares for Jack’s transformation into a killer, precipitated by jealousy now so overwhelming that he cannot repress it and identifies himself with Mr. Gray entering his wife: “It was his pleasure I experienced, his hold over Babette, his cheap and sleazy power.” Both he and Babette are becoming Gray.

The professor of fascism starts carrying the revolver Vernon gave him—“German-made.” He even takes it to school: “It was a reality I could control, secretly dominate.” No longer for strict gun control, he has become a paranoid gun fanatic: “How stupid these people were, coming into my office unarmed.” The growth inside him, the nebulous mass caused by exposure to ambient toxicity, is a metaphor of his growing compulsion toward violence. Jack is both poisoned and poisonous like a snake. He learns from Heinrich that Orest Mercator lasted just four minutes with only three snakes that were not even poisonous. “So Orest got bit for nothing. The jerk.” Murray would merely say “Better him than me,” whereas Heinrich the growing fanatic has contempt for Orest because he did not die for his cause.

Winnie Richards tells Jack more sordid details about his wife and Mr. Gray, whose real name is Willie Mink, a sneaky promiscuous animal. Willie is slang for penis, an image that tortures Jack. Like a criminal, Babette wore a ski mask to her motel prostitutions in Germantown. A ski mask, worn to avoid being kissed by slick Willie, also evokes her coldness to him. Babette is losing her memory like the American educational system and she is inverting the truth, a symptom of poisoning by Postmodernism, or Dylar: “What is dark? It’s just another name for light.” This satirizes the sophistry characteristic of the nihilistic “Theorists” in higher education during the 1980s and parallels it to the corruption of German culture by the Nazis, who subverted belief in objective truth like Postmodernist literary critics such as Paul de Mann, who wrote propaganda supporting Hitler.

Jack and Babette are going separate ways now, she to the stadium to run, he to Germantown. He lies to her, now that she has lied to him. Wearing a mask of deceit he tells he does not want the car. There is a “chill in the air” and they are cold to each other. “‘Wear your ski mask,’ I told her. The thermostat began to buzz.” His reference to her mask is bitter and the thermostat is a metaphor of his emotional temperature. He takes the car, runs a red light, does not yield entering the expressway and drives through a toll gate without paying. “Simply stop obeying,” he tells himself.

The technological phrase “Random Access Memory” is followed by AIDS, which is spread by random access, then “Mutual Assured Destruction,” evoking data, random access, deadly contagion, and the balance of nuclear power during the Cold War. This suggests the sequence by which Jack has come to this cold polarization from Babette and to his deadly confrontation in Germantown. Willie’s random access to Babette might have given her AIDS, another possible deadly threat. Jack feels “lighter than air, colorless, odorless, invisible.” This makes him like the airborne toxic cloud. He is already a menace for teaching and growing into Hitler and now he seems intent on shooting Willie Mink, driven by a “surge, a will, an agitation of the passions.” The final line of the chapter, “Void where prohibited,” is ambiguous. It could indicate that Jack will lose his will to kill because it is prohibited and he is too conformist and timid to “Stop obeying.” He is detached enough to notice the irony, which might indicate a weakened resolve. Or it could suggest that he will void the prohibition.

Jack has been motivated by jealousy, but he is also focused on acquiring Dylar as an escape, an example of how drugs can destroy basic human emotions and bonds. He repeats his plan in his head with variations several times in the chapter, dramatizing his intense fixation yet also the possibility that he may change his plan again. At the Roadway Motel he finds Willie sprawled in a Hawaiian shirt watching a TV that is “floating in the air” like a technological God. In the background “I heard a noise, faint, monotonous, white.” Throughout the chapter Willie throws handfuls of white pills at his mouth with abandon, randomly scattering them all around, a composite drug pusher, a social type identified with various different races. He is a careless, heartless, destructive addict “going mad in a dead motel.” Dylar has turned Willie into a cartoon of acute Postmodernism: alienated, solipsistic, dissociated, fragmented, and incoherent. He makes statements out of context with no relevance to present reality. He is a careless, heartless, destructive pusher

of poison. “The drug not only caused the user to confuse words with the things they referred to; it made him act in a somewhat stylized way.” By now he is “too far gone to have a viewpoint.”

Like Willie but not as far gone, both Jack and Babette are experiencing “brain fade.” She is turning gray, Jack is turning white: “You are very white, you know that?” Postmodernists who push its theories are nearly all white people. “White noise everywhere.” In a white room Willie gorges himself on white tablets and hides behind a white toilet. “His face appeared at the end of the white room, a white buzz... The sound snowballed in the white room.” He does not even remember Babette’s name: “I barely forget the times I had in this room.” Now “seeking to loom,” Jack coldly shoots Willie three times and the eyes of the victim roll up “totally white.” However, Willie does not die. He surprises Jack—he pulls out a gun and shoots him back. “The world collapsed inward.” After Jack gets shot in the wrist, “I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person.”

Jack feels virtuous for shooting and then for helping Willie, though he forgets what point he intended to make, losing his memory too. “Compassion, remorse, mercy.” Jack has a heart, as has been evident in his love of Babette and his children. Unlike Murray or Willie, he also has a soul and is capable of remorse. Now he sees that his shooting Willie is morally ambiguous: “It was no longer possible to tell whether the blood on my hands and clothes was his or mine.” In addition to revenge and Dylar, Jack was seeking redemption: “It hadn’t occurred to me that a man’s attempts to redeem himself might prolong the elation he felt when he committed the crime he now sought to make up for.”

The episode of the nuns is a climax to the theme of lost faith. By chance Jack ends up taking Willie to a Catholic hospital. DeLillo is a Catholic and these nuns are not intended to represent all nuns, they are very specifically German. It is important to notice that these nuns are German and are speaking German, a language Jack considers ugly. DeLillo uses German as a motif representing Postmodern tendencies in character and culture because German Nazis recently carried them to such extremes during World War II. Germantown is an extension of Germany, a country now depopulating due to Socialism and Postmodern values. Ironically, one of the German nuns refers to America as “Such a violent country.” Ironically also, Jack “felt much more at ease in this German-speaking company than I had with the Hitler scholars.”

These are Postmodern nuns, Atheists simulating faith. “As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe... Hell is when no one believes.” That nuns should be Atheists reflects the extreme decadence of postmodern culture. These nuns recall the bawdy nuns of 13th-century Italy in Boccaccio and those nuns who recently rebelled against the Pope. Nuns are normally kind, respectful and polite, whereas Atheism has made these German nuns coarse and callous. Jack asks one what they pray for: “For the world, dumb head.” They pray for the world instead of God: “She was spraying me with German.” The phrase “for the world” is ambiguous here and may connote acquisitiveness rather than altruism. Faith in God is affirmed by implication throughout this chapter, for even the Atheist nuns believe that “To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die.”

Wilder is an archetypal child representing innocence, hope, and redemptive Nature. In contrast, his tricycle is a toy made of plastic, an artificial means of transport produced by technology. He does not walk into the woods, he rides into traffic. Wilder crossing the expressway evokes the anxieties and terrors of everyone at times, but especially parents, trying to survive and protect loved ones in the Postmodern world. He is “mystically charged,” but also “lame-brained.” He crosses the expressway perpendicular to the traffic. A child is by nature wilder and hence at cross purposes with adult society, the “dead souls” on the expressway. He pedals from one narrow swath of grass to the next across the wide asphalt through traffic until he “seemed to lose his balance” and falls over into a water furrow beside the expressway. This is a metaphor of the “fall” of the innocent into knowledge, assuming Wilder learns something. The episode dramatizes the vulnerability of children, Nature, and the values of the heart in mechanized Postmodern society. Is Wilder just playing with his tricycle, or is he running away from home?

At the end, looking west, what is left of the Gladney family watches sunsets from the overpass without knowing what they mean. Looking west has been a major theme in American literature since the Puritans,

as at the end of *The Prairie* (1827) by Cooper and the end of *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Twain. Looking west is looking optimistically toward the future in America. By now, however, the whole country is urbanized and the future is ominous, as imaged in toxic clouds and polluted sunsets. It turns out that the culmination of American history and the westward movement is the supermarket, a materialist Heaven—for those who can afford it. Shoppers are as disoriented by a rearrangement of the shelves as if scripture had been changed. “Only the generic food is where it was, white packages plainly labeled.” (In real life there are white generic paperbacks in some supermarkets with generic titles such as *Western* and *Mystery*.) Jack says “The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living.” God is replaced by “infallible” machines, spirit by technology and literature by tabloids.

Michael Hollister (2013)