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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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'Let's regain our grip on things': Metaphysics and the Ordinary in DeLillo and Wittgenstein

SUMMARY

This thesis is a reading of five Don DeLillo novels in relation to the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, beginning with *Falling Man*, and working backwards to *The Names*. It is an attempt to think about the philosophical aspects of DeLillo's work; in particular, the various ways in which it is engaged with the possibility of metaphysics and its relation to the ordinary. It examines the ambiguous status of metaphysics, and the nature of transcendence and the ordinary in his fiction, arguing that they form a dialectical relation, which guides, structures and informs many of the pressing spiritual, existential, aesthetic, ontological and epistemological concerns of his writing. This dialectic is illuminated by a parallel dialectic at work in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Wittgenstein's thought is useful for a number of reasons: it is a method or style of seeing rather than a systematic, substantive theory; though critical of metaphysics it is profoundly engaged with the inescapability of the metaphysical impulse, and the way metaphysical problems seem embedded in everyday language; and it is committed to the ordinary, but not in any reductive sense – it is not a defence of common sense or conventional beliefs. Understanding DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics as part of a dialectic with the ordinary, and viewing it through an encounter with Wittgenstein, will prevent recourse to traditionalist conceptions of language and meaning while at the same time resisting and critiquing the postmodern scepticism frequently invoked in DeLillo criticism. The thesis consists of a series of comparative readings that aim to further our understanding of DeLillo's novels and Wittgenstein's philosophy; readings centred around a set of closely related concerns that reflect different aspects of the dialectic between the ordinary and the transcendent: the paradox of the ordinary; the limits of language; looking at the overlooked; spiritual yearning; and the logical sublime.

'Let's regain our grip on things': Metaphysics and the Ordinary in DeLillo and Wittgenstein

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Candidate for the Degree of DPhil in English Literature at the University of Sussex

September 2011

STATEMENT

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:………………………………

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BA   Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, London: Picador, 2001

FM   Don DeLillo, *Falling Man,* London: Picador, 2007

L   Don DeLillo, *Libra*, London: Penguin, 1988

N   Don DeLillo, *The Names*, London: Picador, 1982

WN   Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, London: Picador, 1984

U   Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, New York: Scribner, 1997

CV   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, G. H. Wright (ed.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980

OC   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, G.E.M Anscombe and G. H. Wright (eds.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969

PI   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M Anscombe, R. Rhees and G. H. Wright (eds.), 2nd edn., Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958

PO   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions, 1912-1951*, James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (eds.), Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993

TLP   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ted Honderich (ed.), London: Routledge, 1961

INTRODUCTION

We hang like clouds between heaven and earth,

Between something and nothing.

Charles Wright[1]

PART 1

I. AIMS AND METHOD

This thesis examines the ambiguous status of metaphysics and, in particular, the nature of and relation between the transcendent and the ordinary, in the novels of Don DeLillo through a comparative reading with Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy. It attempts to show that there is a dialectical tension between the transcendent and the ordinary that guides, structures and informs many of the pressing spiritual, existential, aesthetic, ontological and epistemological concerns of DeLillo's novels, which can be illuminated by exploring a parallel tension at work in Wittgenstein's later thought. It is an attempt to provide a mode of thinking about significant, though somewhat overlooked, aspects of DeLillo's work, at the same time as offering a way out of the bind of arguing either for or against a postmodern DeLillo. It seeks to provide an alternative approach that challenges not only postmodern readings but also recourse to the kind of traditional, foundationalist or essentialist modes of reading typically found in the case against postmodern readings of DeLillo. The advantages of this approach are not only to illuminate apparently problematic yet vital elements of DeLillo's novels, but to illustrate the value of a Wittgensteinian approach to literature and literary theory more generally.

There are, broadly speaking, two ways in which Wittgenstein's work functions in this thesis. Firstly, it provides a means of illuminating the tension between the transcendent

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[1] *Black Zodiac*, New York: Noonday, 1997, p. 24

and the ordinary in DeLillo's novels, and secondly, it helps us move beyond the contested terrain of most DeLillo criticism, to challenge both metaphysical and postmodern readings of his work and provide an alternative approach that avoids slipping into orthodoxies, whether romantic, poststructuralist or humanist. I argue that by understanding DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics as part of a dialectic we can avoid recourse to traditionalist, logocentric conceptions of language and meaning while at the same time resisting and critiquing the postmodern scepticism frequently invoked in DeLillo criticism.

On initial reflection, DeLillo and Wittgenstein may seem an unlikely pairing. DeLillo is a living American writer whose work has consistently addressed some of the most significant concerns of contemporary culture. It has been informed by, and engaged with, many of the radical social, political and cultural changes associated with postmodernism and, in particular, with the impact of modern electronic media, capitalist consumerism, rampant commodification and the rise of international terrorism. Wittgenstein's work, on the other hand, features negligible engagement with social, political or cultural concerns. Indeed, Wittgenstein was notoriously disengaged from the spirit and culture of his times.[2] His work, explicitly at least, is mostly concerned with the philosophy of logic, language, and the mind, and is considered to belong to the tradition of analytic philosophy. He wrote very little on literary or aesthetic matters, and was largely conservative in his aesthetic tastes.

Despite these ostensible differences, there are many advantages to reading DeLillo with Wittgenstein. Both are profoundly engaged with thinking about language, with its richness and mystery, ambiguity and wonder, as well as its ability to lead us into metaphysical temptation and yet provide clarifying illumination. Both repeatedly invoke notions of vision and clarity, and the importance of changing the way we see things. Both explore the human urge to metaphysics, to transcend human finitude, and the cultural and individual consequences of this apparent need for metaphysical meaning. Both frequently use colloquial expressions to demystify excessive theorizing, combine high seriousness with irony and comedy, and both convey a significant sense of spiritual

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[2] For example, Marjorie Perloff notes how he 'refused to listen to Mahler and Schonberg and paid little attention to the great art movements of his day', 'From Theory to Grammar: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetic of the Ordinary', *New Literary History*, 25, 1994, p. 909

fervour and struggle in their writing. And neither attempt to establish any kind of privileged, external standpoint in relation to that which they subject to critique. Both compel readers of their work to reflect on their own textual practice and pursuit of meaning. They use humour, irony, textual subversion, and non-linear, fragmentary structures to critically engage and create active readers. And both are, in David Cowart's words, 'relatively easy to read but not so easy to sort out'.[3] 'There is a studied indirection'[4] in DeLillo's work, claims Cowart, and a similar kind of writing around his subjects can be felt in Wittgenstein.

Though DeLillo makes reference to Wittgenstein in an early novel, *End Zone*, and speaks favourably of his work in an early interview – 'I like the way he uses the language', says DeLillo, 'even in translation, it is very evocative'[5] – I do not claim nor wish to claim that there is necessarily any sense in which DeLillo is influenced by, or seriously engaging with, Wittgenstein's work (though neither do I wish to deny this). The aim of this thesis is not to trace DeLillo's thinking to any particular philosophical sources. Neither is it to apply Wittgenstein's philosophy to an interpretation of DeLillo's novels, for as we will see, one of the significant aspects of a Wittgensteinian approach is that it brings such a model of reading into question; his later philosophy questions basic assumptions about the nature of interpretation. The intention, rather, is to establish a form of dialogue between DeLillo and Wittgenstein, to draw parallels and analogies, to establish connections and points of contact. I hope that the reading of DeLillo will illuminate our understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy, especially the nature and significance of its literary qualities, at the same time as showing that Wittgenstein's philosophy can enrich our understanding of DeLillo. Furthermore, I hope that reading Wittgenstein's work in relation to DeLillo will illuminate its value for literary and critical thinking, more generally, and at the same time provide a different way of thinking about his philosophy.

To date there has been negligible sustained or in-depth work on possible connections between Wittgenstein and DeLillo. Wittgenstein is, however, alluded to a number of times in DeLillo criticism and his importance for understanding DeLillo's work has

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[3] Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002, p. 8
[4] Cowart, *Physics of Language,* p. 9
[5] DeLillo, cited in Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 243, ft. 2

been suggested by both Cowart and Peter Boxall. Cowart claims that 'one can with considerable profit read [DeLillo's] books against the insights afforded by a select group of philosophers, especially Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Benjamin',[6] while Boxall writes that 'DeLillo's writing strikes a rich resonance with [...] Wittgenstein'.[7] Both Cowart and Boxall produce illuminating readings of this resonance but are mostly concerned with the relation between early Wittgenstein and early DeLillo, and in particular Wittgenstein's famous remark that 'what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (*TLP* 7). Cowart's reading examines the significance of DeLillo's reference to Wittgenstein in his early novel *End Zone*, the way the protagonist is engaged with Wittgenstein's early ideas on the limitations of language and mystical claims concerning 'the realities beyond language that silence harbours'.[8] Boxall examines Wittgenstein's relevance to our understanding of *End Zone,* how the novel is engaged with a Wittgensteinian 'poetic silence' outside of language,[9] but also examines how his thought is central to the concerns of *Ratner's Star*. He suggests that the character Edna Lown embodies the contradiction between early and late Wittgenstein: that despite her belief that everything can be expressed, she remains 'in the thrall of the *Tractatus*' and the lure of the inexpressible. 'Wittgenstein's famous paean to silence', he claims, seems to 'offer the guiding spirit to her notes'.[10]

The only instance of a substantive piece of work on later Wittgenstein and DeLillo remains Stuart Johnson's 'Extraphilosophical Instigations in Don DeLillo's *Running Dog*'. The essay explores the consequences of Wittgenstein's anti-foundationalism, that is, his argument against the appeal to general principles for a grounding of human understanding and knowledge. Johnson's focus is DeLillo's early novel *Running Dog* and the way it examines the question: 'If we cannot transcend our immediate determining and defining contexts, what is left to us that is importantly human?' Johnson argues that, 'DeLillo is a student of the limitations of what can be thought or coherently conceived, and his novels imagine the severe implications of these limitations for our vision of the condition of, and conditions on, human life'.[11] Though

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[6] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 11
[7] Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 15
[8] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 28
[9] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction,* p. 42
[10] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction,* p. 67
[11] Stuart Johnson, 'Extraphilosophical Instigations in Don DeLillo's "Running Dog"', *Contemporary Literature*, 26, 1985, pp. 75, 74

the essay is illuminating and a compelling reading of the novel it contains very little engagement with Wittgenstein's work, featuring only a limited number of citations and a very brief account of Wittgenstein's thinking on the limits of understanding.

The main focus of my comparison between DeLillo and Wittgenstein, and the main argument of the thesis, is an exploration of the relation between metaphysics and the ordinary in their work. This will involve demonstrating a number of things: that DeLillo's novels are, in various ways, philosophical or at least, raise philosophical questions, particularly in the way in which they are engaged with metaphysics and the possibility of transcendence; that this engagement is not only deeply ambiguous, but is connected, and needs to be seen in relation, to an equally ambiguous engagement with the ordinary; and that Wittgenstein's later philosophy can illuminate these features of DeLillo's work, since it too is engaged in various comparable ways with a dialectic between metaphysics and the ordinary.

In order to show how Wittgenstein's philosophy can illuminate these aspects of DeLillo's novels (and in the process, how DeLillo's novels can illuminate aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy) I will illustrate the way and sense in which this engagement with metaphysics and the ordinary is manifested in their work, and how and why they are engaged with them. This will involve examining not only the nature of their engagement with both metaphysics and the ordinary but, more importantly, with the relation between metaphysics and the ordinary, how it functions and its significance, in particular its significance for questions of, and our understanding of, language, perception and meaning.

Though the thesis examines different aspects of the relation between metaphysics and the ordinary – the aesthetic paradox of the ordinary, the limits of language, the hidden and the importance of clear vision, spiritual yearning, and the logical sublime – there are a number of unifying threads. The issues are examined in the context of particular examples using close textual reading of the different texts, but themes are returned to again and again, approached from different angles. These themes – the familiar and hidden, exile and home, looking at the overlooked, loss and longing – are all closely related, they interlink or 'criss-cross' (*PI* p. vii). The thesis repeatedly returns to these themes partly in order to show the way in which DeLillo's work is engaged with a

recurring set of concerns, how his novels consistently return to and rework certain philosophical and aesthetic ideas. However, this approach is mostly a result of the nature of Wittgenstein's work, which also repeatedly returns to core subjects. In describing his method he notes how 'the same or almost the same points were always being approached from fresh directions' (*PI* p. vii). As we will examine in detail in the second part of this introduction, Wittgenstein's later philosophy is highly anti-systematic, anti-schematic and critical of theorizing, and thus puts a strong emphasis on 'seeing connections', noticing aspects, illuminating concepts and problems, and drawing comparisons and analogies. He does not attempt to define, explain or uncover the essence of things but suggests we look for 'family resemblances'. More importantly, Wittgenstein's thought is enacted on a formal level. Subsequently, in order to develop a Wittgensteinian reading it is necessary to adopt key features of his method. This is not to say that I will adopt a mock Wittgensteinian structure or form simply that the focus will be less on explaining and theorizing than on illustrating and illuminating aspects of DeLillo's work.

II. STRUCTURE

Following an extended introduction to the themes and approaches of my argument, the main body of the thesis consists of individual readings of five DeLillo novels: *Falling Man*, *The Body Artist*, *Underworld*, *Libra* and *The Names*. All five novels are examined in relation to aspects of Wittgenstein's thought and method. I have chosen to concentrate on these particular novels for a number of reasons. To date, DeLillo is the author of fourteen novels, as well as three plays and numerous short stories. In order to produce detailed, close readings of the novels it was necessary to be selective. However, it was important to cover a broad span of DeLillo's work in order to trace the continuities in his work and also address the apparent shift that occurred after *Underworld*. The five novels were chosen because they illustrate a number of important thematic, conceptual and aesthetic links between different periods of DeLillo's work in relation to the temptations of metaphysics and the significance of the ordinary.

There are several compelling reasons for venturing no earlier into DeLillo's oeuvre than *The Names* and for concentrating on more recent work. *The Names* is widely considered

to mark an important shift in DeLillo's work. Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engels, for example, write: 'the general critical consensus regarding *The Names*, is that it represents an advance to a higher level of authorial maturity.'[12] And DeLillo himself concurs with this idea when he says in an interview that *The Names* 'marks the beginning of a new dedication'.[13] Furthermore, *The Names* has been a somewhat neglected text, overshadowed by the prodigious interest in *White Noise* – Anne Longmuir notes that, 'of the novels that Don DeLillo wrote in the 1980s, *The Names* has received the least attention'.[14]

There has been a considerable amount of critical work addressing DeLillo's early career, most of the major books on DeLillo examine his early novels. To date, however, there has been little work on his more recent output, which may be simply a question of time, but may also be because it seems less engaged with the broader social, cultural and theoretical concerns on which his critical reputation is largely based. Indeed, such is its difference in both style and content from earlier work that his post-*Underworld* work can be seen to indicate another significant shift in DeLillo's writing. Both *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*, the novels considered in the thesis, are notable for their pared down prose; slim, elliptical plots; fragmented, discordant narratives; and close focus on the minutiae of daily life.

The thesis will not only attempt to examine the nature and significance of these novels in themselves, but also reassess DeLillo's earlier novels in light these readings. The thesis is structured to reflect this by reading his oeuvre retrospectively, and asking to what extent a retrospective reading of DeLillo's work alters the way we perceive it? I intend to show that the elements foregrounded in his more recent novels are not radically new, but part of a continued investigation into his most central concerns.

The first chapter is on *Falling Man* as it is the most recent of DeLillo's novels with which I had sufficient time to critically engage. By looking closely at the role still life painting plays in *Falling Man* and by drawing parallels with Wittgenstein's conception

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[12] Ruppersburg and Engels, 'Introduction', *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, Hugh Ruppersberg & Tim Engels (eds.), New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 2000, p. 18

[13] DeLillo, cited in Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 6

[14] Anne Longmuir, 'The Language of History: Don DeLillo's *The Names* and the Iranian Hostage Crisis', *Critique*, 46, 2005, p. 105

of the ordinary, the chapter explores the paradoxical nature of DeLillo's aesthetic and philosophical engagement with the ordinary. It looks at aesthetic issues as a way of examining why a novel concerned with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 – a public, dramatic event of enormous social and political significance – would turn away from the social and political and retreat to the domestic. I examine the possible meaning and significance of this retreat.

Chapter Two draws a series of comparisons between the *Philosophical Investigations* and *The Body Artist*, in order to explore their shared engagement with an insistence upon, and yet recognition of the temptation to transcend or doubt, the ordinary. In particular, I will show how the treatment of the protagonist's grief can be read as analogous with Wittgenstein's struggle against scepticism and metaphysics. *The Body Artist* is important to the thesis not only because it marks the beginning of a significant shift in DeLillo's writing, but because of its significant philosophical engagement with language.

The third chapter concerns *Underworld* and focuses on the paradoxical status of the hidden in DeLillo and Wittgenstein. *Underworld* is pivotal for not only is it DeLillo's most comprehensive and critically successful novel, it marks an important change of direction in his oeuvre. *Underworld*, despite or because of its completeness, its reach and scope, marks a transition between work more explicitly engaged with the social and political, with a broad sweep of concerns, and work engaged with the private and domestic.

The final two chapters look further back through DeLillo's oeuvre to *Libra* and *The Names*, both published in the 1980s. Though not without his trademark flashes of dry humour and ironic regard both novels reveal a commitment to the exploration of complex ideas concerning solipsism, metaphysical striving and the tension between transcendence and the ordinary. By reading both novels in the light of DeLillo's later fiction I challenge the dominant postmodern reception of his earlier work.

The *Libra* chapter explores the novel's paradoxical depiction of religious striving and draws a parallel between DeLillo's ironic and ambiguous portrayal of the protagonists' metaphysical outlook and his critique of the metaphysics underlying conspiracy theory.

The reading focuses on solipsism and the ambiguity of the way both DeLillo and Wittgenstein engage with religious ways of seeing. It examines Wittgenstein's critique of the modern philosophy of the self-conscious individual – how he demolishes Platonic and Cartesian ideas of autonomy and the 'inner' – as a way of illuminating DeLillo's treatment of Lee Harvey Oswald.

The last chapter looks back not only to early DeLillo, but also to early Wittgenstein, arguing that the shift from Wittgenstein's early approach to language to his later one can illuminate a similar shift that occurs in *The Names*. The chapter explores the relation between logic and language, and the attraction and dangers of the sublime, by looking at how the novel traces a spiritual quest for transcendent meaning that takes place in thinking about language: a journey towards the logical sublime which ends with a return to the ordinary, marked by the kind of transformation of vision that Wittgenstein calls for in his philosophy.

PART 2

I. THE TENSION BETWEEN METAPHYSICS AND THE ORDINARY IN DELILLO AND WITTGENSTEIN

Given the Wittgensteinian approach adopted in the thesis, there will be no attempt to define or explain transcendence or the ordinary, rather I will attempt to illustrate the various ways in which they feature or function in both Wittgenstein's and DeLillo's work. In order to provide an initial sense and picture of how the tension between metaphysics and the ordinary is at work in DeLillo's fiction, and the way in which it relates to Wittgenstein, this next section will examine a number of emblematic illustrations from both writers.

In DeLillo's 2005 play *Love-Lies-Bleeding* there is a conversation, an act of literary translation, which exemplifies a tension between metaphysics and the ordinary that can be felt throughout his work. The play concerns a land artist, Alex Macklin, who has suffered a stroke and is in a persistent vegetative state. During one of the play's flashbacks to an earlier period when Alex was still active he is visited by his ex-wife,

Toinette, and they discuss his current project, an empty space inside a mountain in the desert, near where he lives. In response to Toinette's question as to why he has left New York to live in the desert Alex cites an Italian poem, *Mattina* (morning), by the Italian poet, Ungaretti, though the author and title are not revealed in the play. Alex and Toni attempt to translate it:

ALEX

M'illumino d'immenso. I glow, I shine, I bathe myself in light. I turn luminous in this vast space. *D'immenso*. This vast space, this immensity. Fairly literal translation.

TOINETTE

Needs work.

ALEX

Okay, what?

TOINETTE

M'illumino d'immenso. I bathe myself. That's not bad. But vast space, vast space.

ALEX

D'immenso.

TOINETTE

Do we want space in the physical sense? Or spiritual immensity? Something unnameable.

ALEX

Let's not get too ambitious. We'll keep it local. This space and this light.[15]

The scene illustrates a vital feature of the nature of DeLillo's engagement with the transcendent, revealing an attraction to it, but also a reservation, a sense of limits and limitations. At the very moment when profound, significant questions are posed

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[15] DeLillo, *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, London: Picador, 2005, pp. 64-65

concerning the possibility of metaphysical meaning there is a jocular, modest return to the specific. Alex's self-deprecating, colloquial rejoinder, with its sense of humility and emphasis on the particular, is typical of the way DeLillo draws back at the very moment he seems to be moving towards 'something unnameable'; typical of the way he frames or locates moments or the idea of transcendence in concrete, specific situations.

Throughout DeLillo's work there exists a tension between this movement towards, and yearning for, 'spiritual immensity' and a return to the local or particular. This continual pull between an ineffable, mysterious 'something else'[16] and the material, ordinary, physical nature of things, manifests itself in numerous ways. We can see it in the image of the falling shirt, 'arms waving like nothing in this life', that bookends *Falling Man* (*FM* 246); in the ambiguous appearance of Esmeralda in *Underworld* – a vision or a play of light; in the totemic baseball in *Underworld* celebrated for its mysterious aura and 'irreducible thingness';[17] in Axton's ambivalent attitude to the Parthenon in *The Names*; or in the language of Mr. Tuttle in *The Body Artist*. In relation to the last example, Philip Nel writes: the 'novel holds out the possibility of pure speech and then withdraws it again'.[18] This gesture of offering and withdrawing, suggesting and subverting, is central to DeLillo's equivocal engagement with the transcendent. Again and again in his work, DeLillo holds out the possibility of some form of transcendence – something pure, sublime, rapturous, sacred, deeper – and then withdraws it, either through irony, ambiguity, or humour; through some form of return to the ordinary or everyday. Within this tension or movement, between the ordinary and transcendent, between the 'thick lived tenor of things' (*U* 827) and what is frequently referred to as 'something else', we can locate a crucial element of DeLillo's unique aesthetic achievement.

The scene in *Love-Lies-Bleeding* is typical not only for the tension it embodies between the transcendent and the ordinary, between spiritual immensity and the local, but also for the location and the language used to express it. The desert is recurring site in

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[16] The phrase 'something else' – which can have a mundane, colloquial meaning as well as express the transcendent or mysterious – acts like a leitmotif in DeLillo's work, it is first used in *Americana* and recurs repeatedly in a variety of contexts in his novels. It takes on particular significance in *Falling Man* and *The Body Artist*.

[17] David H. Evans 'Taking Out the Trash': Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 2006, p. 122

[18] Nel, 'DeLillo's Return to Form: The Modernist Poetics of *The Body Artist*', *Contemporary Literature*, 43, 2002, p. 746

DeLillo's work: a place of exile or retreat, of ascetic spiritual purification, it acts as a metaphysical frontier where a sense of transcendent meaning can be intimated. It features in almost all of his novels, from his first, *Americana*, to his most recent, *Point Omega*.[19]

The tone and sentiment of Alex's 'let's not get too ambitious', and the way it is juxtaposed with intimations of transcendence, echoes right through DeLillo's oeuvre: Harkness imploring 'let's keep things simple' in the opening of *End Zone* (*EZ* 4); *Underworld's* Brian Glassic exhorting 'let's eat fast and get out of here and go sit in the stands like real people' (*U* 92); or Ann Maitland in *The Names* joking, 'let's not have metaphysics this evening. I'm a plain girl from a Mill Town' (*N* 57). These playful, colloquial statements frequently appear after a passage of metaphysical lyricism or philosophical speculation, or in response to a sense of abstract disconnection or spiritual longing. They mark some form of return to the ordinary, a return from the suggestion of metaphysical possibility. In a different, less playful vein, such lyricism, and sudden shift of tonal register, can also be seen in DeLillo's later work, such as in *Falling Man* when Lianne muses on her son's statement that 'the sun is a star', a possible allusion to the final sentence of Thoreau's *Walden*, 'the sun is but a morning star'[20]:

> The sun is a star. It seemed a revelation, a fresh way to think about being who we are, the purest way and only finally unfolding, a kind of mystical shiver, an awakening. Maybe she was just tired. It was time to go home, eat something, drink something. (*FM* 187)

The 'maybe' here conveys the ambiguity of these typical DeLillian moments, but this return home, to the body, to ordinary and everyday matters powerfully symbolises a resistance to, and debunking of, unequivocal metaphysical reflection. And this return is

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[19] *Point Omega*, published in 2010, is, like *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*, another slim elliptical text in which nothing much happens, characterised by a heightened focus on the ordinary. As with all of DeLillo's post-*Underworld* novels, the critical response, apart from some notable exceptions, was muted at best and largely one of disappointment. Nevertheless, the novel itself is a clear indication of the shift in his work from an expansive style and scope to a minimalist register, discussed in detail in the first two chapters of this thesis.

[20] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1997, p. 297. DeLillo's work is full of literary allusions, including at least one other allusion to Thoreau. In *Libra* he alludes to Thoreau's claim that 'the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation'.

reflected in the idiomatic simplicity and straightforwardness of the prose, in the brusqueness of 'just' and the repetition of 'something'.

Perhaps the most powerful or most dramatic illustration of this movement from metaphysics to the ordinary, this shift of register, occurs in *Libra* during Branch's initial reflections on the Kennedy Assassination:

> We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams. Elm street. A woman wonders why she is sitting on the grass, bloodspray all around. Tenth street. A witness leaves her shoes on the hood of a bleeding policeman's car. A strangeness, Branch feels, that is almost holy. There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the heartland of the real. Let's regain our grip on things. (*L* 15)

This sudden call to 'regain our grip on things' marks a return to the physical and ordinary, it indicates the drawing of limits. It is a colloquial expression, but rich and ambiguous, as the phrase, though figurative, highlights the importance of touch and materiality. 'Things' refers to the abstract concept of the issue at hand, suggests actual events, but also Branch's need to stay grounded, to reconnect, and the importance as well as the elusiveness of the concrete and real.

This movement from the metaphysical to the ordinary is enacted not only on a linguistic level, or in particular instances of ambiguous visionary experiences or reflections on works of art, but also in the way in which DeLillo's novels are structured as quests. From David Bell's quest in *Americana* to explore 'America in the screaming night'[21] to Jim Finley's quest to make a film in *Point Omega,* in almost of all of DeLillo's novels the protagonists are involved, in one way or another, in some kind of spiritual quest. Though the nature of these quests varies considerably – from Jack Gladney's or Lee Harvey Oswald's quests for identity and a sense of meaning in *White Noise* and *Libra* to Axton's quest to find the murder cult in *The Names* – they are all, to a greater or lesser extent, characterised by a yearning for transcendence, or longing to exceed the human, and result in a return of some kind to the ordinary. The one possible exception is *Falling*

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[21] Don DeLillo, *Americana*, London: Penguin, 1971, p. 10

Man, which, though it features a significant return to the ordinary, may be seen as something of an anti-quest novel; as an examination of stasis and stillness.

This tension between metaphysics and the ordinary, this idea of the sense of limits and the need to return home, to the body and the everyday, as well as the importance of quests, can be felt in certain crucial respects in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. A lyrical passage from the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein describes the intolerable conflict between metaphysical theorizing and ordinary life, encapsulates these elements:

> The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. – We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground! (*PI* 107)

This passage illustrates a tension that Wittgenstein explores in his later work between our metaphysical needs and impulses (and the dangers of trying to satisfy them), and an attempt to return to the ordinary, which is never wholly successful. It also highlights central features of his later thought: the sense of a journey or return, and the idea of the ordinary as a destination, the object of an 'ongoing quest';[22] the stylistic importance of colloquial and ordinary language; the use of figurative speech and metaphor; the emphasis on practical, everyday activity – 'walking'; and the complex significance of 'rough ground', the fact that the ordinary is a place of indeterminacy and ambiguity, a place where we are susceptible to feel lost, a potential wilderness.

The passage also reveals certain important parallels with DeLillo. Both contrast metaphysics, which they refer to in terms of its luminescent qualities – 'gleaming theories' or 'crystalline logic' – with the ordinary and the concrete, with the importance of contact – 'friction' or 'grip'. Like DeLillo, Wittgenstein frequently uses colloquial

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[22] Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*, Cambridge: Polity, 2002, p. xiii

expressions, puts a significant emphasis on humility, and on paying attention to particular concrete details. But equally, like DeLillo, Wittgenstein recognises the urge to metaphysics, the human desire for 'spiritual immensity' and 'something unnameable'. Naomi Scheman notes that Wittgenstein's return to the rough ground fails 'to still the urges that sent us off in search of the perfection of ice' and that 'an inability to stay on the rough ground manifests itself as an inability to feel at home there'.[23] Scheman cites Terry Eagleton's poetic reimagining of the above citation in which he envisages Wittgenstein, having dug up the ice to uncover the rough ground, being 'homesick for the ice, where everything was radiant and absolute,' and so, unable to live on the rough ground, ending up 'marooned between earth and ice, at home in neither'.[24]

This conflict between a longing for transcendence, for metaphysical purity, and a need to return to the ordinary, which Espen Hammer describes as 'an inescapable dialectic [...] between metaphysics and the difficult peace of the ordinary',[25] is, I argue, at the heart of both DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics and Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Though in significantly different ways, both DeLillo and Wittgenstein explore this sense of homelessness; of striving to transcend the ordinary, and yet returning to it; of longing for, and yet, resisting absolute radiance and crystalline perfection; of both the temptations and dangers of metaphysical yearning.

Before turning to Wittgenstein and an account of the features of his thought most relevant to this thesis, I will now provide an overview of the critical background in DeLillo studies. This critical review aims to cover the principal ways in which DeLillo has been read, but is particularly concerned with the critical approach to the metaphysical aspects of DeLillo's work, and will also serve to demonstrate the benefits of reading his work through a Wittgensteinian lens.

III. CRITICAL APPROACHES TO DELILLO

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[23] Scheman, 'Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground', *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, Hans Sluga & David G. Stern (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 384
[24] Scheman, 'Forms of Life', p. 383
[25] Hammer, *Stanley Cavell,* p. xii

From the beginning, DeLillo's work has been engaged with philosophical concerns. His work is full of aphorisms, philosophical dialogue and speculation, and contains a certain amount of implicit and explicit engagement with specific thinkers, such as, St. Augustine, Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Theilard De Chardin. Critics of his work have frequently viewed his novels as philosophical or metaphysical, or at least as more concerned with ideas than conventional narrative aims. Louis Menand, for example, writes that DeLillo seems 'indifferent to most of the textbook principles of storytelling – things like character development, plots that reward expectation, verisimilitude to ordinary experience', adding that his characters seem as little more than mouthpieces for his ideas, or 'authorial meditations'; their speech loaded up with 'metaphysical speculation'.[26] He is consistently branded a novelist of ideas – David Foster Wallace, for example, describes him as a 'conceptual novelist'[27] – but any clear and distinct idea of a DeLillian philosophy is very hard to grasp. Nevertheless, the philosophical nature of DeLillo's novels, the way they engage with and raise epistemological, ontological and existential questions; their examination of the limits and meaning of language; and the spiritual or religious fervour animating them seems to call for a philosophical reading of his work, one that is attuned to its ambiguity and questioning nature, and avoids any attempt to reduce it to a particular philosophical position.

Not surprisingly, DeLillo's work has provoked numerous references to philosophy and philosophers in the critical response. Most commonly found are references to thinkers such as Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard and Jameson, usually in support of postmodern readings of his work. But there are also references to thinkers as varied as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Kristeva, Deleuze, Bergson, Kant, Burke, Benjamin, Barthes, and Serres. Indeed, DeLillo's work has provoked an incredibly broad array of critical readings, encompassing a range of theoretical perspectives. Even a brief survey of the critical literature reveals political, cultural, psychological, linguistic, historical and cinematic readings. But though much of the existing work on DeLillo includes philosophical reflection, or emphasises important philosophical aspects of his work, and makes reference to a wide range of thinkers, there has been little sustained work on the relation between DeLillo's novels and philosophy. This bold claim depends, of course,

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[26] Menand, 'Market Report', *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, p. 71

[27] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction', *a supposedly fun thing I'll never do again*, London, Abacus, 1997, p. 47

on the assumption that philosophy is a different kind of practice, discipline or discourse than theory, for there is no question that there is a great deal of work aligning DeLillo and theory. Indeed, it is precisely the prevalence of this pairing of DeLillo and theory that has, I will argue, hindered the development of alternative approaches. I will also argue that Wittgenstein's philosophy is significantly different from theory.

Although it is impossible to provide a schematic account of the different ways DeLillo's work has been critically interpreted, it is not too bold a claim to suggest that there are, broadly speaking, two dominant approaches. One approach is to view his work in relation to, or as an example of, postmodern scepticism: as an ironic, critical account of contemporary culture and capital that undermines traditional, logocentric, foundational forms of discourse and epistemology. This approach typically adopts the work of seminal postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard, Jameson, and to a lesser extent Derrida, as a means of thinking through many of the issues DeLillo's novels raise.[28] The other approach challenges this earlier, more orthodox reading with the view that his work bears greater resemblance to either modernist or romantic works of literature, and is animated by either a religious or metaphysical impulse. Such readings emphasise the various ways transcendence features in DeLillo's oeuvre and some go as far as to argue that certain key aspects of his work presume or suggest some kind of metaphysical foundation underpinning his aesthetics. Support for such readings is found in a variety of sources, ranging from Heidegger and Romanticism to Catholic theology and Georges Bataille.[29]

It should be noted that very few critics adopt the extreme of either approach, and a majority acknowledge, in varying degrees, the sense in which DeLillo's novels incorporate elements of both postmodern scepticism and metaphysical possibility. They do so, for the most part, however, without pursuing or further investigating the apparent ambiguity at the heart of DeLillo's work. As we will examine further, one of the central aims of this thesis will be precisely to examine this ambiguity, which will not only bring

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[28] For leading examples of this approach see Frank Lentricchia's 'Introduction' and '*Libra* as postmodern critique' in *Introducing Don DeLillo*', Lentricchia, Frank (ed.), Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991, and Leonard Wilcox's 'Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative', in *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*.

[29] See, for example, Cornel Bonca 'Being, Time and Death in DeLillo's *The Body Artist*', *Pacific Coast Philology,* 37, 2002; Paul Maltby, 'The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo', *Contemporary Literature*, 37, 1996; Amy Hungerford 'Don DeLillo's Latin Mass', *Contemporary Literature*, 27, 2006; or Daniel Born 'Sacred Noise in Don DeLillo's Fiction', *Literature and Theology*, 13, 1999.

the central concerns of DeLillo work into coherence but also challenge both sides of the critical divide.

There are many highly persuasive reasons for the prevalence of postmodern theory in readings of DeLillo's work. Above all, there is the dominance of postmodern theory in the study of literature generally, but there is also the fact that DeLillo's novels, or at least significant elements of them, seem to address the very same concerns as postmodern theory. To such an extent, indeed, that his work has been seen by many critics as embodying theories of the postmodern. John N. Duvall, for example, in an introduction to a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted to DeLillo's fiction, notes how DeLillo's novels have been read as 'portraying a world that frequently resembles the totalizing picture of postmodernity that Fredric Jameson paints' and as capturing 'crystallizing examples of what Baudrillard identifies as the hyperreal and the simulacrum'.[30] However, this picture of DeLillo as a postmodern novelist, and the importance of Baudrillard and Jameson in reading him, owes a great deal to the critical and commercial success of *White Noise*.

White Noise marked DeLillo's entry into the critical mainstream. Ruppersburg and Engels write that only with the publication of *White Noise* in 1984 'did scholarly interest in DeLillo's fiction begin to simmer'.[31] The fact that it was this novel – his most comic, most ostensibly postmodern, and in many ways, least characteristic – that established DeLillo as a major literary figure is not without significance. It would to a large extent determine the critical framework and theoretical reference points for interpreting his work more generally, at least until the appearance of *Underworld*. *White Noise* was celebrated, writes Cornel Bonca, because it seemed to 'illuminate reigning theories of postmodernism, as if it were written as an example of what Frederic Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, or Jean Baudrillard have been saying about our socio-cultural condition: *White Noise* as postmodern prototype.'[32] The academic success of *White Noise* ensured that DeLillo became perceived as a postmodern novelist and that a great deal of critical discussion focused on the nature of his postmodern engagement.

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[30] John N. Duvall, 'Introduction: From Valparaiso to Jerusalem: DeLillo and the Moment of Canonization', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45, 1999, pp. 562-3
[31] Ruppersbug and Engels, 'Introduction', *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, p. 12
[32] Bonca, 'Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The natural language of the species', *College Literature*, 23, 1996, p. 26

As Boxall notes, 'debate in DeLillo criticism has been organised around DeLillo's response to postmodernity'.[33] To such an extent that many of the arguments that suggest an alternative to the dominant postmodern approach remain framed around questions of postmodernism. So, for example, readings that emphasise DeLillo's modernism do so by making a case against the idea of his work being postmodernist.[34] At the same time, however, even one of the most sustained, substantial and influential postmodern readings of DeLillo, Leonard Wilcox's essay 'Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative', concludes by pointing out significant differences between DeLillo and postmodern theory.

Looked at in the context of his work as a whole, however, *White Noise* seems more like the exception rather than the rule or, at least, as the culmination of a certain comic and ironic mode, characteristic of his early output. All of DeLillo's subsequent novels are marked by their lack of comic register. Though there are flashes of humour and comedy in novels such as *Underworld*, *Mao II* and even *The Body Artist*, the dominant narrative mode can hardly said to be that of comedy. Indeed, one way in which we might want to trace the development of DeLillo's oeuvre is precisely as moving away from the archly ironic and comic. David H. Evans, for example, sees *Underworld* as representing 'the culmination of a movement in DeLillo's oeuvre away from a style whose deadpan ironies and post-nostalgic cool made his works seem to many the latest word in the discrediting of realist novel'. For Evans, *Underworld* is 'less an example of artistic postmodernism than an assault on its premises and implications'.[35]

With the publication of *Underworld* and the novels that followed it – *The Body Artist*, *Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man* and *Point Omega* – the central concerns of postmodernism have come to seem less relevant to our understanding and appreciation of DeLillo's work. Furthermore, his more recent output suggests that perhaps DeLillo was a different kind of novelist all along, and that the massive wave of critical work on *White Noise* determined the critical engagement with his work to such an extent that many elements

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[33] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, p. 12
[34] See, for example, Philip Nel's article, '"A Small Incisive Shock": Modern Forms, Postmodern Politics, and the Role of the Avant-Garde in *Underworld*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45, 1999, as well as his chapter entitled 'DeLillo and Modernism' in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, John N. Duvall, (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008
[35] David H. Evans, 'Taking Out the Trash', p. 104

of his work that didn't seem to obviously fit in with theories of postmodernism were overlooked.

This shift in DeLillo's work, that itself marks a broader cultural shift away from the postmodern,[36] has not surprisingly produced a shift in the critical reception of his work. That is, there has been a notable shift in both the nature of DeLillo's novels and in the critical reception and understanding of his work, which evidently reflect one another. Amy Hungerford, for example, traces the shift in the critical reception of DeLillo's work in terms of the increased engagement with religious concerns. She writes that '*Underworld* has started many critics thinking about religion in DeLillo's work in a sustained way',[37] noting in relation to an essay collection on *Underworld*, that 'nine out of the fourteen essays in the volume make an argument that bears upon religion, whereas religion was only an occasional subject in DeLillo criticism before the novel's appearance'.[38]

There has also been considerable and increasing recognition of the ways in which DeLillo's work resists postmodern readings and far from embodying postmodern theory, in fact critiques it. According to Paul Maltby, for example, 'to postmodernize DeLillo is to risk losing sight of the (conspicuously unpostmodern) metaphysical impulse that animates his work'.[39] While Thomas Carmichael writes:

> DeLillo's narratives, to twist a phrase, install postmodernism seemingly in order to subvert it, or, perhaps more accurately, point to the persistence in the lived experience of the contemporary of older intensities that would seem properly to belong to now discarded orders of subjectivity and economies of meaning.[40]

In the last decade, it has become more or less orthodox to note the way in which postmodern readings of DeLillo are unpersuasive or fail to account for significant features of his work. Cowart, Boxall and Jesse Kavadlo, authors of book length studies

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[36] The appearance, and content, of titles such as Hal Foster's *Return of the Real*, Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*, and a special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* entitled *After Postmodernism* is surely a strong indication of the slow turn away from postmodernism and attendant theories.
[37] Hungerford, 'Latin Mass', p. 344
[38] Hungerford, 'Latin Mass', p. 344, footnote 2
[39] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', p. 260
[40] Carmichael, 'Evanescence, Language, and Dread: Reading Don DeLillo', *Contemporary Literature*, 44, 2003, p. 180

on his work, all argue against postmodern readings of DeLillo. Kavadlo argues that the prevailing postmodern lens through which DeLillo is read is 'shortsighted';[41] Boxall observes that 'the tendency to read him with or against the grain of postmodernism and of poststructuralism has skewed his critical reception';[42] and Cowart claims that, 'to read DeLillo [...] is to encounter radical thinking that – specifically vis-a-vis the conceptualisation of language – proves healthily resistant to certain of the more reductive elements in deconstruction and its theoretical congeners.'[43] For Cowart, 'it is the task of criticism to gauge the extra dimensions of DeLillo's thinking about language'.[44] DeLillo's fiction, he argues, 'does not defer to the poststructuralist view of language as a system of signifiers that refer only to other signifiers in infinite regression. DeLillo's texts in fact undermine this postmodern gospel'.[45] Indeed, concludes Cowart, 'DeLillo's engagement with the postmodern [...] is or has come to be adversarial.'[46]

A recurring argument in readings that argue against the idea of DeLillo as a postmodern novelist or against the use of postmodern theories to examine his novels, is that such approaches overlook the important ways in which DeLillo is engaged with metaphysics and forms of transcendence. One example of such an approach, which is also one of the few critical texts to produce a philosophical reading of DeLillo, is an essay by Cornel Bonca entitled 'Being, Time and Death in DeLillo's *The Body Artist*'. The essay makes a trenchant case for the importance of Heidegger's philosophy for a critical reading of DeLillo's work, it aims to show how Heidegger's thought 'illuminates DeLillo's most urgent and vulnerable spiritual yearnings better than anyone else'.[47] Bonca seeks to rescue DeLillo's work from the dominant critical reception of his work that locates it within a predominately postmodern context and either uses theories of the postmodern to analyse it or views the novels as in some way illustrative of certain postmodern theories. Like Cowart, Bonca acknowledges that there is a great deal in DeLillo's work that invites postmodern readings. However, he believes that a postmodern reading will inevitably fail to address some of the core features of DeLillo's work, as it cannot help

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[41] Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief*, New York: Peter Lang, 2004, p. 4
[42] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, p. 15
[43] Cowart, *Physics of Language* pp. 11-12
[44] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 2
[45] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 5
[46] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 210
[47] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 60

but overlook the importance of DeLillo's engagement with immanence. He writes: 'there is too great a yearning for, and too great a noticing of, immanence in his work' for DeLillo to be considered or treated as a postmodernist. By immanence, he means, 'a kind of ontological indwelling or presence – God for many, Being for Heidegger – which is hidden but inherent in the physical world'.[48]

This approach of critiquing postmodern readings because of their failure to engage with a significant metaphysical or transcendent element of DeLillo's work can be seen in numerous guises in the critical literature. Indeed, a great deal of the readings that challenge postmodern theory or theory in general do so by arguing for the significance of metaphysical features of DeLillo's work. The main difference between these readings lies in the specific metaphysical feature focussed on. Where Bonca, for example, points to immanence, others point to mystery, the miraculous or the sacred as elements possibly overlooked because of a postmodern approach. Duvall, for example, notes that, 'as much as the frames of Benjamin and Baudrillard allow us to see, they may deflect attention from the persistence of the miraculous in DeLillo'.[49] While Daniel Born writes that:

> unfortunately, the totalising theoretical insistence we find in Jameson informs much of the writing about DeLillo. The result—astute in its apprehension of predictable post-modern themes including endless commodification and knowledge as power—has played down DeLillo's fascination with the sacred.[50]

These claims concerning the importance of the sacred, the miraculous or immanence can be seen as aspects of a more general sense in which critics have acknowledged the metaphysical features of DeLillo's oeuvre: Ruppersburg and Engels, for example, refer to DeLillo's 'quasi-religious mysticism';[51] Kavadlo claims 'DeLillo does not explain as much as explore mystery'[52]; while for Mark Osteen 'the unfulfilled yearning for transcendence' is one of the major themes in DeLillo's work, DeLillo's characters, he argues, seek 'forms of magic – quasi-religious rituals, pseudodivine authorities,

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[48] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 59
[49] Duvall, 'Introduction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, pp. 564-5
[50] Born, 'Sacred Noise', p. 212
[51] Ruppersberg and Engels, 'Introduction', *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, p.12
[52] Kavadlo, *Balance at the Edge of Belief*, p.7

miraculous transformations';[53] Cowart states that DeLillo is 'deeply sympathetic to [...] spiritual yearning';[54] Vince Passaro claims that a 'subdued religious element [...] runs through all his work';[55] and John A. McClure observes that DeLillo's work makes 'all sorts of room for religious or spiritual discourses and styles of seeing' – he 'repeatedly constructs contemporary Americans as a people driven by homeless spiritual impulses'.[56] Finally, Pankaj Mishra argues that even the more political features of DeLillo's work are mostly metaphysical, in his view: 'the resonant views on terror, conspiracy, mass society and art [DeLillo] articulated through his characters are metaphysical, even religious, rather than political'.[57]

Furthermore, there is a growing sense of how important this metaphysical element is for an appreciation of DeLillo's fiction. For Duvall,

> DeLillo's final significance may lie in the way that [...] he insists on the novel as a counterforce to the wound of history through the persistence of mystery. Beyond the play of plots and plotlessness, determinism and chance, there lurks in DeLillo's writing the possibility – never overtly confirmed – of spiritual transcendence.[58]

As this brief survey shows, readings of DeLillo that examine the importance of the transcendent in his work are as varied as readings concerned with his relation to the postmodern. There is considerable consensus on the existence and importance of an engagement with transcendence in his work, but little concerning its nature, although most critical readings acknowledge that DeLillo resists traditional notions of transcendence. Few of these readings, however, are explicitly or primarily concerned with DeLillo's engagement with transcendence. The notable exception is Maltby's 'The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo', which argues that DeLillo's novels reveal and endorse highly traditional notions of transcendence. Though significant for bringing attention to the way DeLillo is engaged with the possibility of metaphysical experience

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[53] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, pp. 2, 1
[54] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 194
[55] Passaro, cited in Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 195
[56] McClure, 'Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41, 1995, pp. 143, 142
[57] Mishra, 'The End of Innocence', *The Guardian*, Review, 19 May 1997, p. 6
[58] Duvall, 'Introduction: the Power of History and the Persistence of Mystery' *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, p. 4

in a commodified world, critics have noted that Maltby dismisses the significance of irony, humour and subversion in his novels, and so fails to appreciate the ambiguity of DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics. Cowart, for example, writes that Maltby 'seems to underestimate the degree of irony with which DeLillo occasionally invokes visionary or sublime experience.'[59] A glaring example of this can be seen in Maltby's reading of the Toyota Celica passage in *White Noise*. For Maltby, the 'tenor of this passage is not parodic; the reader is prompted by the analytical cast and searching tone of Gladney's narration to listen in earnest,'[60] but, I would argue, the analytical cast and searching tone of Gladney's narration is one of the most evident elements of irony in the novel.

It must be acknowledged, however, that there is a strong temptation to read DeLillo as an unequivocally metaphysical writer. DeLillo himself has mentioned the possible influence of Catholicism on his writing, stating that 'there's a sense of last things in my work';[61] that 'a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision […] is something that has been the background of my work'; and that his work 'has been informed by mystery'.[62] His work is full of references to depth, secrets, and hidden meanings – to 'deeper connections and second meanings' (*U* 88); it contains descriptions of miracles, visionary moments, and religious ways of seeing; and features a succession of idealist, solipsistic protagonists, obsessed with the pursuit of transcendent meaning, who embody the kind of 'modernist thematic of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation and isolation' that Jameson argues is dependent on the metaphysical distinction of inside and outside.[63]

But all this has to be seen in conjunction with the vital strain of irony, subversion and demystification running through his work, and the importance of the colloquial, material, concrete, and the ordinary. Though it is evident that the idea of some larger significance – a sense of 'something unnameable' or mysterious – is a marked feature of DeLillo's work, his treatment of, and approach to, this 'something else' is deeply and

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[59] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 212. Other critical views on Maltby's reading can be found in Born's 'Sacred Noise' and Nel's 'Return to Form'.
[60] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', p. 261
[61] DeLillo, cited in Douglas Keesey, *Don DeLillo*, New York: Twayne, 1993, p. 2
[62] DeLillo, cited in Anthony DeCurtis, '"An Outsider in this society": An interview with Don DeLillo', *Introducing Don DeLillo*, p. 55
[63] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 11

significantly ambivalent. His work explores the human need or urge to believe in 'spiritual immensity' or 'something unnameable', and the different ways it is manifested in culture. It looks at the craving for generality, for something bigger, but doesn't necessarily assert or endorse the existence of some transcendental realm. DeLillo addresses spiritual, mystical and religious themes without advancing a spiritual, mystical or religious position, and, as Cowart notes, to 'transcribe a social and psychological reality is not to endorse' one.[64] Indeed, it is vital to recognise that DeLillo both celebrates and criticises the way these themes are manifest in contemporary culture.

The dominance of postmodern readings of DeLillo, and the way in which they are mostly challenged by readings focused on metaphysical or transcendent elements in his work, has prevented a clear view of DeLillo's concern with the materiality of daily life, with the importance of engaging with and seeing ordinary things. In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo talks of his 'sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments,' adding: 'there is something that we tend to miss'.[65] Critics' overriding concern with image culture, the apparent loss of the real, and the commodification of materiality, has prevented any serious engagement with the role of the ordinary in DeLillo's work, with what John Lanchester calls his 'feel for ordinary life'.[66]

There is, however, a small but significant body of work that more closely examines DeLillo's engagement with the ordinary. Rather than look to metaphysics as a way of challenging postmodern readings of DeLillo's work, and 'postmodernism's disavowal of reality',[67] these critics look to the ordinary and real. What's more, their work shares significant points of contact with a Wittgensteinian orientation. These readings: David H. Evans' 'Taking Out the Trash: Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage' and Jacqueline A. Zubeck's '"The Surge and Pelt of Daily Life": Rediscovery of the Prosaic in Don DeLillo's *The Names*' focus on the importance of the ordinary and the real, and draw attention to the sense in which DeLillo's work is not

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[64] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 12
[65] DeLillo, cited in DeCurtis, 'An Outsider in this society', p. 63
[66] Lanchester, 'Oh my oh my oh my', review of *Mao II* and *Introducing Don DeLillo*, *London Review of Books*, 12 September 1991, p. 14
[67] Stuart Hutchinson, "DeLillo's *Libra* and the Real", *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 30, 2001, p. 119

only resistant to postmodern theory but to theory in general, or a certain kind of theoretical approach.

Zubeck's essay is predominately concerned with ethics, but in the attempt to trace the moral journey of the principal characters in *The Names* 'from postmodern abstraction to prosaic actuality',[68] she points to the novel's emphasis on the significance of the ordinary and the everyday. The novel, she argues, 'redresses the postmodern virtuality that has replaced prosaic virtue and discovers the strength weighted in the quotidian'.[69] Zubeck argues that the quests undertaken by the novel's protagonists are 'exercises in self-awareness' that reveal their 'emerging respect for prosaic detail and regard for the actual embodied particularity of human existence'.[70]

In 'Taking Out the Trash', Evans argues that *Underworld* rejects 'the appeals of postmodern scepticism and paranoid systems theory', claiming that 'the novel's ultimate dedication is to a restoration of access to the real'.[71] The essay is largely concerned with the significance of garbage in the novel, which he relates to the novel's realism and engagement with the ordinary. Evans examines the way DeLillo emphasises 'the unpredictable and singular elements of ordinary life', and 'makes space for everyday things'.[72] Furthermore, the essay provides a critique of metaphysical and overly theoretical readings of DeLillo, specifically in relation to the occurrence of miracles in his work. He writes:

> miracles are not exceptions to the ordinary; they are simply the ordinary, attended to for itself, in its uniqueness, uselessness, and non-identity. There is nothing mystical or spiritual in this claim; on the contrary, it is the dream of converting ordinary individual things into the connected elements of an integrated and comprehensive system, of denying space to the singular [...] that makes the world immaterial and unreal.[73]

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[68] Zubeck, '"The Surge and Pelt of Daily Life": Rediscovery of the Prosaic in Don DeLillo's *The Names*' *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 18, 2007, p. 356
[69] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 373
[70] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', pp. 356, 355
[71] Evans, 'Taking Out the Trash', p. 104
[72] Evans, 'Taking Out the Trash', pp. 129, 131
[73] Evans, 'Taking Out the Trash', p. 131

The resonance between Zubeck's and Evans' arguments and Wittgenstein's philosophy will be explored in much greater detail in the respective chapters on *Underworld* and *The Names*, but as we will now see, the rejection of both scepticism and systematic theory, an emphasis on raising self-awareness, and the importance of prosaic detail and ordinary individual things are central to Wittgenstein's thought. In the following section I will provide a rough sketch of the aspects of Wittgenstein's later thought most relevant for reading DeLillo's work, and a brief overview of his relation to literary theory more generally.

IV. WITTGENSTEIN

Wittgenstein is widely considered to be one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century. His influence can be felt in an impressively broad range of disciplines and practices, and artists of all kinds continue to be deeply engaged by his writing. 'Wittgenstein', claims Eagleton, 'is the philosopher of poets and composers, playwrights and novelists'.[74] In order to get a sense of the value of reading literature through Wittgenstein we need an idea of his methods and the nature of his philosophical enterprise, for, as Wolfgang Huemer writes: 'the significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for our theoretical understanding of literature is not so much based on his occasional remarks on aesthetics, [...] but on his general philosophical position'.[75] And yet, as introductions to Wittgenstein frequently point out, his work is almost impossible to summarize or get a firm grip on, and 'notoriously difficult to understand'.[76]

Though his writing is notably lucid it lacks many of the features expected, if not required, in a work of philosophy. Wittgenstein, writes Beth Savickey, 'does not engage in philosophy in the terms established and used by the discipline of philosophy'.[77] Wittgenstein's first philosophical text, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, though unconventional, does have a very clear structure. It consists of very specifically numbered propositions, in which the numbering system indicates the logical importance

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[74] Eagleton, cited in Wolfgang Huemer, 'Introduction: Wittgenstein, Language and the Philosophy of Literature', *The Literary Wittgenstein*, John Gibson & Wolfgang Huemer (eds.), London: Routledge, 2004, p. 2
[75] Huemer, 'Introduction', *The Literary Wittgenstein*, 2004, p. 3
[76] Duncan Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word*, London: Continuum, 2004, p . 9
[77] Savicky, *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 44

of the proposition. But in his later work, which is the main focus here, Wittgenstein rejected, to a large extent, both the method and the arguments of the *Tractatus*, and developed a radically new approach, which can best be seen in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Though not published during his lifetime, the *Investigations* was prepared for publication by Wittgenstein and remains the primary source of his later thought. In the preface, which puts a strong emphasis on the artistic element of his enterprise, Wittgenstein describes the text as an 'album', consisting of 'a number of sketches of landscapes' made in the course of 'long and involved journeyings' (*PI* vii). The result, notes Austen E. Quigley, 'is a peculiar aggregate of loosely related paragraphs which offers no detailed statement of intended goals, no sustained elaboration of a narrative thread, and no triumphant summary of achieved conclusions'.[78]

It is this novel approach of his later work that accounts for its difficulty. Marie McGinn comments:

> It is Wittgenstein's unique way of treating the topics he deals with that makes the *Investigations* so difficult to understand. It is not that his style is technical or abstract, rather it is just not possible to see, in the style of the book, what Wittgenstein's method is or how it is supposed to work.[79]

In other words, as Duncan Richter notes, 'it is not so much what he says but why he says it' that is difficult to grasp.[80] 'The *Investigations*', claims Eagleton, 'reads [...] like an assemblage of ironic fables or fragments of a novel, deceptively lucid in their language but teasingly enigmatic in their thought.'[81] Not surprisingly, this difficulty and enigmatic quality has led to wildly varying interpretations and accounts of his work. Indeed, one of the few things on which critics of his work agree is the extent to which no-one agrees: 'neither his critics nor supporters', writes Richter, 'agree on what his work means';[82] while for Hans Sluga, 'there is no consensus among the interpreters on how Wittgenstein's work should be approached and what is of lasting significance in

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[78] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing and Literary Theorizing', *New Literary History*, 19, 1988, p. 209
[79] McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 10
[80] Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word*, p. 9
[81] Cited in Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p. 910
[82] Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word*, p. 1

it'.[83] This lack of consensus, however, is perhaps understandable given the radical nature of his method and what he was aiming to achieve. According to Quigley,

> Wittgenstein's aim is to reconceive the nature of philosophy and of theory. His interest is in philosophizing as a form of philosophy, in learning how to move around rather than in how to arrive, in showing how to continue an intellectual journey rather than how to end it prematurely.[84]

Wittgenstein subverts philosophical expectations, he is not trying to change people's opinions, theories or beliefs, but their whole approach – 'what has to be overcome', he suggests, 'is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect' (*CV* 17). His aim, argues Perloff, is to provoke us to 'question the generalisations and abstractions we have hitherto accepted as normative';[85] it 'is to bring about a change in our attitude, or in how we see things, that goes against the grain of our natural inclinations' and so, concurs McGinn, inevitably provokes a great deal of resistance and misunderstanding.[86] Our normative approach and natural inclination, in philosophy, but also in literary criticism, it would seem, is to theorise, to seek explanations.

Rather than provide explanations – something he explicitly warns against – Wittgenstein offers descriptions and does so as a means of clearing up confusion, confusion caused by an abstract, theoretical approach. This at first sight may seem paradoxical, since the aim of theory is to simplify multiple phenomena into a coherent schema for the sake of clear understanding. But, Wittgenstein argues, such an approach in fact prevents a clear view of things. Looking at reality or language through the limited blinders of a logical or theoretical construct leads to misunderstanding and confusion, and to metaphysical illusions. 'The constraints imposed by any theoretical orientation', writes Susan B. Brill, 'may serve to impair our actual view'.[87]

Wittgenstein believes we are led to theorize not because this is the only way philosophical questions can be answered but because we misunderstand the logic of our

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[83] Sluga, 'Ludwig Wittgenstein: Life and work, an Introduction', *Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, p. 26

[84] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', p. 218

[85] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p. 912

[86] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 31

[87] Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory,* Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995, p. 12

language. Wittgenstein's target is not just the philosophical tradition but deeply embedded, seemingly natural ideas of language and meaning. To overcome these ideas he offers a close, detailed look at the kind of statements we make about things in concrete cases. His aim is to solve philosophical problems by 'looking into the workings of our language […] in such a way as to make us recognise those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them' (*PI* 109). This urge to misunderstand is a result of certain metaphysical assumptions about how language works, which prevent us from commanding a clear view of the use of words. For Wittgenstein, the difficulty of philosophy lies in relinquishing a picture that holds us 'captive' (*PI* 115): the picture central to a metaphysical outlook underlying our conceptions of language and meaning that leads us to 'feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena' (*PI* 90). We are led to think that in order to understand a thing properly we need to get *beneath* the surface and use analysis to dig out the truth. We think there is some mysterious process at work because the forms and logic of our language 'seduce us into thinking that something extraordinary, something unique, must be achieved by propositions' (*PI* 93). But Wittgenstein shows that 'nothing out of the ordinary is involved' at all (*PI* 94), and rather than construct a theory of understanding, what Wittgenstein proposes is therapy.

Wittgenstein aims to engage his readers in an active process of working on the way they see things. He writes: 'I ought to be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all his deformities so that helped in this way, he can put it right' (*CV* 18). Wittgenstein attempts to cure his readers of the metaphysical or theorizing urge by luring them into seemingly natural modes of thought only to demonstrate their absurdity or untenablility. The *Investigations* thus in part consists of an ironic portrayal of our false picture of the world that reveals the dangers inherent in such a picture. The irony is used as a means of enabling readers to free themselves from seemingly natural but misleading ways of thinking; we are forced to question the uses and expressions of our language and realise the philosophical dead-ends they can lead us into. 'The success of his writing', notes Alice Crary, 'depends on its leading us to identify, successively, with the images of ourselves expressed by the different voices at play in it and on its thereby bringing us to the recognition that certain words we are tempted to utter in philosophy are nonsense'.[88]

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[88] Crary, 'Introduction', *The New Wittgenstein*, Alice Crary & Rupert Read (eds.), Oxford: Routledge, 2000, p. 7

Though Wittgenstein's writing has a great deal to offer to literary studies he still remains a marginal figure in the field and only a limited amount of the critical work on Wittgenstein is concerned with literature. Given the amount of interest in Wittgenstein found in literature and the arts, and the fact that the fundamental concerns of his thought – 'the concepts of meaning, of understanding', 'states of consciousness' (*PI* vii), the use and practice of language – are central to an understanding of literature, this is perhaps surprising. Both his marginal status and the artistic interest in him might, however, be due to the very nature of his work; to its highly unconventional, non-systematic, oddly poetic style, and its radical critique of both philosophy and theory. Due above all to the fact that, as K. T. Fann notes, Wittgenstein's 'method cannot be followed as a recipe or formula, it is rather an *art*. Wittgenstein was above all an artist who created a new style of thinking, a new way of looking at things'.[89]

There are also more prosaic reasons for his marginal status. His work is largely perceived to belong to the disciplines of analytical philosophy and the philosophy of language, and contains little that is explicitly concerned with literary or aesthetic matters. More important, however, is the fact that his work 'does not advance any kind of theory' (*PI* 109); it makes no substantial assertions about the nature of things, about reality, knowledge or being. Savickey writes: 'as a form of investigation which leads to clarity rather than progress and construction, his method [...] does not result in theories, arguments or explanations'.[90] And this is compounded by the highly unsystematic nature of its form, by what Quigley describes as 'his constant wanderings from point to point, from paragraph to paragraph, and from image to image'. Indeed, the lack of theory, the seemingly fragmentary and diffuse nature of the form, and his unique, idiosyncratic method have led many, claims Quigley, 'to question whether Wittgenstein actually has a philosophical position to offer us, whether he has indeed a summarizable set of philosophical beliefs, and whether there is or could be a Wittgensteinian approach to things in general.'[91]

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[89] Cited in Savicky, *Wittgenstein's Art*, p. 101
[90] Savicky, *Wittgenstein's Art*, p. 44
[91] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing, p. 210

Wittgenstein, argues W.J.T. Mitchell, 'does not give us what we think we want when we go to philosophy for answers to literary problems.'[92] His philosophy is not a means of interpretation; it cannot be used as a set of concepts for analysing thematic issues or explaining the meaning of a text. According to Quigley, this is because

> Wittgenstein offers us no clearly defined system of analysis, no elaborate set of theoretical distinctions, and (apart from a sprinkling of characteristic metaphors) no highly developed technical vocabulary. [...] There is no elaborate jargon [...], no set of presuppositions to be posited and illustrated, no characteristic goals that pronounce themselves in advance.[93]

What at first sight may seem problematic in the attempt to use Wittgenstein's thought in literary theory or textual practice may, however, be one of its main advantages. 'Perhaps', suggests Mitchell, Wittgenstein 'can cure us of our infatuation with systematic philosophy, and dispel our fantasy that philosophy exists to provide a secure foundation of theories and methods for us to follow.'[94] It is precisely the fact that it is not a means of interpretation, that it lacks jargon, that it is an account, and initiation, of a process rather than a theory, wherein lies its value. A Wittgenstein approach, writes Brill, enables us to work with 'texts rather than forcing them to fit into preconceived networks of criticism'.[95]

More importantly, Wittgenstein's work is itself literary, and in certain crucial respects: it is an account of a journey or series of journeys, that Stanley Cavell, for example, reads as resonant with the spiritual quests of Dante and Thoreau, a journey from being lost to finding oneself, from darkness to light; and, in a similar vein, Perloff notes that 'Wittgensteinian "thought" is charged with drama: we witness its continuous unfolding'.[96] Furthermore, Wittgenstein's grammatical investigation is a reading of language, of how words are used: it is attentive to the nuances and varieties of everyday communication, to distinctive patterns of use; it consists of description rather than explanation, the use of metaphor, striking imagery, 'objects of comparison' (*PI* 130),

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[92] Mitchell, 'Wittgenstein's Imagery and What It Tells Us', *New Literary History*, 19, 1988, p. 361
[93] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', pp. 210-211
[94] Mitchell, 'Wittgenstein's Imagery', p. 361
[95] Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory*, p. 4
[96] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p. 920

dialogue, and the invention of characters and scenarios; and it is alive to the power and wonder of words.

My reading of Wittgenstein is largely supported by a growing body of work that argues in a variety of ways that a more literary reading is truer to the spirit and aims of Wittgenstein's work, or that, as McGinn argues, 'understanding Wittgenstein's method and its connection with the form of the text is the key to understanding the *Investigations*'.[97] Increasingly, we are seeing work either explicitly concerned with Wittgenstein's art or that engages in significant ways with the more formal and literary elements of his writing. That is to say, there has been a notable shift away from thinking about what Wittgenstein said, the content of his work, to the way he said it, the form.

In a recent book on Wittgenstein, Richter makes a distinction between two main approaches to Wittgenstein's work, in his attempt to give an 'overview of the interpretative battleground'. He describes the orthodox, traditional interpretations as concentrating on what Wittgenstein said, or is taken to have said, and so concerned with issues such as what is required to follow a rule, or whether a private language is possible. Against this approach stand the 'new Wittgensteinians', who, writes Richter, 'insist that we should take Wittgenstein at his word when he claims not to be putting forward theses or arguments'. What Wittgenstein offers is not new theories, or any theory of any kind, but therapy: 'he offers a method, or perhaps a set of methods, for getting rid of problems, not novel or significant ideas about this or that issue'.[98] Richter is referring here, in part, to an important collection of critical writings entitled *The New Wittgenstein*, writings which share fundamental and 'quite unorthodox assumptions' about Wittgenstein's conception of the aim of philosophy. In the introduction, Crary argues that the papers in the collection 'have in common an understanding of Wittgenstein as aspiring, not to advance metaphysical theories, but rather to help us work ourselves out of confusions we become entangled in when philosophizing'.[99]

The second, and related, key point of agreement between 'the new Wittgensteinians' is the emphasis on the importance of Wittgenstein's style or form, the fact that, as Cavell

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[97] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 10
[98] Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word*, pp. 1-2
[99] Crary, 'Introduction', *New Wittgenstein*, p. 1

puts it, 'Wittgenstein's writing is essential to his philosophizing'.[100] A pioneer in this regard is Perloff. All of her writings on Wittgenstein display an illuminating attentiveness to his use of language. But we can also see a shift in approach in more explicitly philosophical readings of his work. Texts as varied as Beth Savickey's *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, Alessandra Tanesini's *Wittgenstein: A Feminist Interpretation* and Stephen Mulhall's *Inheritance and Originality* and *Wittgenstein's Private Language* all focus in different ways on both the therapeutic aspect and the significant formal and literary elements of Wittgenstein's writing. Tanesini argues that 'we must read his work in ways that bear some similarity to how we interpret poems';[101] Savickey explores in considerable depth the sense in which his method is an art, how his writings are 'creative', 'imaginative', 'playful' and 'provocative', and argues that we must take 'his methodological claims and practices seriously';[102] and Mulhall writes that the sense that 'what is said is not sharply distinguishable from how it is said' puts 'an unusually high premium on the exploitation of what one might call the more literary dimensions of language (especially the resources of figurations, imagery, and metaphor, often deployed in the telling of imaginative tales)'.[103]

A great deal of credit for this approach is surely owed to Stanley Cavell. Cavell is one of the few notable Wittgensteinians who, from the beginning of his career, has not only been engaged with critical thinking about the arts (and the relation between philosophy and the arts), but also with emphasising the importance of Wittgenstein's form. Crary acknowledges Cavell's importance for establishing a new approach to Wittgenstein: 'Cavell was one of the first philosophers to develop a therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein's later thought',[104] and both Mulhall and David G. Stern, among others, note the significance of the ways in which 'Cavell emphasises the importance of Wittgenstein's style'.[105] Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein has its detractors,[106] but for anyone engaged with the more literary aspects of Wittgenstein's thought, or with the relation between Wittgenstein and literary questions, Cavell's oeuvre is an invaluable, if

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[100] Cavell, 'The *Investigations*' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself', *The Literary Wittgenstein*, p. 21
[101] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein: A Feminist Interpretation*, Cambridge: Polity, 2004, p. 32
[102] Savickey, *Wittgenstein's Art*, pp. 102, 6
[103] Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's Private Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 13-14
[104] Crary, 'Introduction', *New Wittgenstein*, p. 8
[105] Stern, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Philosophy', *Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, p. 443
[106] See, for example, Malcolm Turvey's 'Is scepticism a "natural possibility" of language? Reasons to be sceptical of Cavell's Wittgenstein', in *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, Richard Allen & Malcolm Turvey (eds.), London: Routledge, 2001

not essential, resource. Timothy Gould states that, 'I still have not found any commentator who comes close to Cavell's persistent and methodical (if somewhat intermittent) pursuit of the actual structure of Wittgenstein's words and paragraphs'.[107]

For the purposes of this thesis, however, Cavell is most significant for his ability to tease out the way in which Wittgenstein's thought is dialectical, for his emphasis on the areas of tension in Wittgenstein's later thought: between scepticism and metaphysics, the ordinary and transcendent, confusion and peace, illusion and clarity, nonsense and sense. Cavell draws attention to the 'spiritual struggle' in Wittgenstein's work, which he figures as an ongoing journey from the darkness of confusion to the light of clear vision. This struggle is most evident in the recurring conflict between the two dominant voices of the *Investigations*. The following summary by Stern encapsulates this crucial feature of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein:

> Cavell characterises Wittgenstein's writing as a dialogue between "the voice of temptation," the voice that tempts the reader to theorise, and the "voice of correctness", which aims to return the reader to ordinary life. [...] On Cavell's reading, neither the voice that tempts us [...] nor the voice that returns us [...] sets out Wittgenstein's real views. Instead, he construes them as two opposing voices [...]. On this reading, the aim of Wittgenstein's dialogues is not to lead his reader to any philosophical view, neither an idealized, frictionless, theory of language, nor a pragmatic theory of ordinary language, but rather to help us see through such ways of speaking and looking.[108]

This picture of Wittgenstein as veering between the slippery ice of an ideal world of abstract, theoretical purity and the rough ground of ordinary language is full of literary resonance, and can be seen as almost an inversion of the Romantic and Modernist despair at ordinary language, our mortality and the banality of everyday reality. Wittgenstein is not yearning for the ideal world of perfection but the ambiguous, rough world of indeterminacy and 'difficult peace'. Unlike Keats, say, for whom 'heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter'[109] and who despairs at the contrast between his paltry existence and the immortal beauty embodied in a Grecian Urn, or

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[107] Gould, 'Restlessness and the achievement of peace: writing and method in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*', *The Literary Wittgenstein*, p. 78
[108] Stern, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Philosophy', *Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, p. 444
[109] Keats, 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', *Poetical Works*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 209

Proust, who denigrates materiality and laments the inadequacy of ordinary forms of expression, the 'whole heap of verbal concepts and practical goals which we falsely call life',[110] Wittgenstein's aim is to silence the desire for transcendence and yearning for the ideal. He calls for a return to the ordinary: 'what we do', he writes, 'is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (*PI* 116). And this return is embodied in his writing. Wittgenstein, notes Savickey, 'begins with ordinary language and everyday events. His writings are filled with ordinary (everyday) objects like chairs, tables, apples and tools. In his writings we find ordinary people who engage in ordinary activities like playing, reading, building and shopping'.[111]

For Wittgenstein, it is metaphysics or the theorizing attitude that creates despair, or philosophical headaches and confusion, not the apparent inadequacy of everyday life or our finitude. Wittgenstein is attuned to the frustration and disappointment felt at the apparent limitations of language. He recognizes the importance and power of the desire to transcend the ordinary, to find deeper meanings, but finds that this desire leads to,

> that dead-end in philosophy, where one believes that the difficulty of the task consists in our having to describe phenomena that are hard to get hold of […] where we find ordinary language too crude, and it looks as if we were having to do, not with the phenomena of everyday, but with ones that "easily elude us". (*PI* 436)

For Wittgenstein, it is precisely when philosophers are most in search of light, when they attempt to 'penetrate phenomena' (*PI* 90) or construct a theory that will enlighten or elucidate a problem, that they are most in the dark. It is when they seek to transcend the concrete, to reach the higher climes of pure thought, that they actually descend into pits of confusion. His solution is apparently simple and yet surprisingly difficult: it is to not take off, but stay grounded and take a proper look around, or rather, since taking off is seemingly inevitable, it is to come back down, down to the 'rough ground' of ordinary language and everyday forms of life. His solution is to change what to look for, and how and where to look. With this different point of view the ordinary will be seen with clarity and purpose, and will provide precisely the kind of luminescent sense of awe and wonder sought for in metaphysics.

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[110] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, London: Penguin, 1983, vol. 3, p. 932
[111] Savickey, *Wittgenstein's Art*, p. 63

Curiously, given his profoundly metaphysical outlook, Proust can provide an insight into Wittgenstein's inversion of metaphysical despair, for in an essay on Chardin we find an approach to the everyday that resonates with Wittgenstein's. Chardin's still life paintings, writes Proust, have 'some wonder to make shine, some mystery to reveal; everyday life will delight'. Chardin, he concludes, initiates us into 'the neglected life' of things and brings us out from a 'false ideal […] by opening the real world to us'.[112] In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein states that we are 'dazzled by the ideal' and thus fail to see the actual (*PI* 100): the ideal, he writes, 'is like a pair of glasses on our noses through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off' (*PI* 103). Wittgenstein illustrates how and why we are tempted by this false ideal and attempts to prevent us from succumbing to it. In the process he provides a way of seeing neglected things. Like a still life painter, 'his writings reflect details which might otherwise escape our attention', notes Savickey, and so 'we are able to see numerous different angles, details and perspectives'.[113] By taking off the glasses we can see the simple and familiar. And it is in these details, in the simple and familiar, that we can see the wonder of ordinary language – the remarkable fact of its existence – and everyday life. Wittgenstein does not demystify language, merely metaphysical illusions. The ordinary for Wittgenstein does not indicate the banal or a state of disenchantment. On the contrary, he deconstructs metaphysical illusion precisely to enable a clear vision and understanding of the remarkable state of ordinary things. He rejects theory and metaphysics because they diminish wonder rather than draw our attention to it. Fergus Kerr writes: 'Wittgenstein's work puts an end to metaphysics by inviting us to renew and expand our sense of wonder'.[114]

This process of reawakening wonder reveals what Cavell sees as the 'moral and religious fervour' of the *Investigations,* how its 'moral work is not separate from its philosophical work',[115] and also the way in which Wittgenstein's task is closer to that of an artist than of a traditional philosopher. Indeed, the process can be viewed from an artistic, critical as well as religious perspective. Baker, for example, emphasises the artistic or creative nature of Wittgenstein's enterprise. In arguing against the idea that

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[112] Marcel Proust, *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*, London: Penguin, 1988, pp.124, 129
[113] Savickey, *Wittgenstein's Art*, p. 31
[114] Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 141
[115] Cavell, 'The *Investigations'* Everyday Aesthetics of Itself', *The Literary Wittgenstein*, p. 21

there can be a perspicuous representation of *all aspects* of 'the use of our words', he writes:

> in respect of each particular aspect, it is a creative achievement (not a mechanical procedure) to find a means for bringing it to another's notice, and it is a task of persuasion (not a demonstrative proof) to bring it about that another *sees* things differently.[116]

Louis A. Sass, however, looks at this process in terms of his critical project, his case against theory and explanation:

> Wittgenstein criticizes explanation in order to make way for wonder. Clarity for him was largely in the service of awe: his critical energies were directed at unmasking what he saw as the pseudo-explanations that tend to come between us and the world, blinding us to the sheer wonder of its existence.[117]

While Philip R. Shields sees it in religious terms: Wittgenstein 'is trying to shift our perspective from the mundane to the religious, and to recapture the special sense of wonder and awe he felt was extinguished by the prevailing scientific *Weltanshauung*'.[118]

Crucially, however, it is only when we return from the sublime heights of metaphysical speculation or theorizing that the ordinary can be seen clearly: its importance can only be fully understood in relation to the desire to transcend it. Furthermore, the ordinary in Wittgenstein is never fully or finally attained: the urge to metaphysics has to be repeatedly confronted, and this has important consequences for it makes Wittgenstein's work a continual process rather than a fixed theory. Quigley writes:

> Though Wittgenstein warns us against our "craving for generality" and our "contemptuous attitude towards the particular case," his aim is not to substitute the

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[116] Baker, '*Philosophical Investigations* section 122: neglected aspects', *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: Text and Context*, Robert L. Arrington & Hans-Johann Glock , (eds.), London: Routledge, 1991, p. 61

[117] Sass, 'Wittgenstein, Freud and the nature of psychoanalytic explanation', *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, p, 285

[118] Cited in Duncan Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word,* London: Continuum, 2004, p. 30

particular for the general but to locate a relationship between the two that prevents them or us from coming to a final and definitive resting point.[119]

This relationship between the particular and general, between metaphysics and the ordinary, is not only relevant for the way it alters the way we see things, but also for the way Wittgenstein's thought enables us to avoid both scepticism and foundationalism, and thus some of the problems commonly associated with postmodern theory, as we will now examine in more detail.

V. WITTGENSTEIN AND POSTMODERN THEORY

A Wittgensteinian approach to DeLillo implies some form of challenge to other theoretical or philosophical modes of reading and, in particular, to the kind of postmodern and metaphysical readings of his novels outlined above. Wittgenstein's thought has radical consequences for how we perceive and think about language, and how we perceive and think about literature. An important point of contact between DeLillo and Wittgenstein in this thesis is a complex but somewhat suspicious attitude towards theory, an attitude that in itself poses a challenge to certain ways of reading DeLillo's work.

Cowart notes that 'DeLillo is resistant to the seductive appeal of totalizing theories'.[120] One of the aims of this thesis is not only to show that this is indeed the case, but to examine the significant ways in which both DeLillo and Wittgenstein explore the nature of this appeal and modes of resistance to it. For though, as Quigley argues, Wittgenstein displays significant resistance to the 'temptation to offer any kind of totalizing, all-embracing theory'[121] he also explores this temptation; he is alert to it, and recognises its force and importance.

By reading DeLillo's work through Wittgenstein we can overcome the divide that seems to exist between the critical reception and treatment of DeLillo as either a

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[119] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', p. 212
[120] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 9
[121] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', p. 212

postmodern sceptic or a romantic metaphysician, which reflects a broader divide between postmodernist and traditional ways of reading literature. Though the thesis only intermittently engages with the different sides of this divide and the broader critical debate, these debates form the background and context to my reading. And it is partly in relation to this background that the significance of a Wittgensteinian approach can be seen. This aspect of my reading is largely implicit because a 'refusal to engage in adversarial criticism' is, notes Savickey, an essential part of Wittgenstein's method, which eschews argumentation and criticism.[122] Wittgenstein does not attempt to combat any particular philosophical theories, he teaches a descriptive method by example and makes no philosophical assertions or claims. Following this, rather than attempt to explicitly challenge any particular theoretical positions in critical readings of DeLillo, and thereby risk becoming embroiled in problematic theorisation or an explanatory mode, I offer an alternative mode of reading his work, elaborated and illustrated throughout the thesis.

Brill argues that Wittgenstein can provide a mediation between the opposing camps in literary and critical theory who struggle 'to either maintain the supposed stability of an earlier logocentric foundationalism or to subvert such absolutist discursive structures'. She adds that, in relation to

> the problematic of being caught within a particular theoretical or explanatory mode such that the only apparent alternatives seem to be either an acceptance of the set theoretic or a reactive overturning of that theoretic (a response that is just as dependent upon the original – rejected – orientation as is the initial stance), the Wittgensteinian response would not engage in the endless repetition of antithesis, but would avoid the problem altogether by choosing to play a different game.[123]

Wittgenstein, writes Brill, enables us to 'move forward beyond the dialectical pulls of our contemporary modern/postmodern aporia'. [124] As we have seen, such a modern/postmodern aporia, or division between traditional and sceptical approaches, is much in evidence in critical work on DeLillo. Wittgenstein can help us overcome this apparent divide between viewing him as either a postmodern sceptic concerned with

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[122] Savickey, *Wittgenstein's Art*, p. 96
[123] Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory* pp. 7-8
[124] Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory,* p. 2

depthless image culture and free-floating irony or as a romantic, modernist or humanist whose work presumes traditional, metaphysical conceptions of visionary insight, language and the self. By appealing to Wittgenstein we can think through the ways in which DeLillo is engaged with both metaphysics and scepticism, is deeply ironic and yet serious, and how a rejection of traditional paradigms does not lead to an unstable world of endless free play and empty simulacra. We will be able to read the metaphysical aspects of his work without recourse to metaphysical paradigms and accept the anti-theoretical thrust of postmodernism, while avoiding the reductive and problematic elements of its scepticism.

It is thus important to clarify the sense in which Wittgenstein is critical of theory, and the significant ways in which his critique differs from postmodernist accounts. Brill argues that Wittgenstein 'is rejecting one specific usage of the term "theory"', that is, theory as 'a preconceived hypothesis (generally abstract and systematic) against which the world is measured, evaluated, and explained'. It is rejected for 'being static and unresponsive to the actual contingent realities of our world'.[125] Wittgenstein's critique is thus, in this respect, not dissimilar to the kind of postmodernism exemplified in thinkers such as Baudrillard, Foucault, Derrida, or Lyotard, all of whom, argues Brill, are critical of theoretical approaches that are 'discursively limiting and hegemonically elitist'.[126] Wittgenstein and postmodernists both reject the totalizing imperative of theory and, argues Eagleton, both have an 'allergy to depth'.[127] There are indeed significant points of contact between Wittgenstein and certain strains of postmodern theory – Eagleton cites Wittgenstein's claim that 'nothing we do can be defended absolutely and finally' (*CV*, p. 16), as 'a keynote of much modern thought', arguing that 'this sense of the provisional nature of all our ideas is [...] central to post-structuralism and postmodernism'[128] – but there are also crucial differences.

There exist a whole series of debates on the possible links between Wittgenstein and postmodernism, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address these debates in

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[125] Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory*, pp.9-10
[126] Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory,* p. 11
[127] Eagleton, *After Theory*, London: Penguin, 2003, p. 191
[128] Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 190

detail.[129] However, though the arguments are dense and complex certain key points arise from a number of these discussions, namely, the way in which Wittgenstein avoids problems of both foundationalism and scepticism.

Postmodernism, it is argued, at least by Wittgensteinians such as Quigley, Martin Stone and Charles Altieri, is largely a form of scepticism: it is an attack on all forms of essentialism and foundationalism, rejecting notions of reason and truth, in favour of a socially-constructed linguistic account of reality and the self. But, argues Horace L. Fairlamb, 'postmodern positions continue to be shaped by the foundationist conception they are trying to subvert'.[130] Fairlamb argues that critics of foundations are infected with a reductive ideal of epistemology and are thus subject to theoretical constraints and embroiled in problematic contradictions. The main problem for these critics lies in trying to critique foundationist theory while establishing the legitimacy of their own theoretical ground.

Unlike a great deal of postmodern theory, Wittgenstein's position is not shaped by the foundationist or metaphysical conception he is trying to subvert. Perloff writes:

> Wittgenstein gets around a problem that has beset deconstruction, the problem of denouncing a metaphysic of presence in a metalanguage in which presence is inevitably reinscribed. [...] For Wittgenstein, there need be no metalanguage, for each of us has access to the "language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one)," the language that is given to us.[131]

Wittgenstein's alternative to theory is reflected in the style and method of the *Investigations*. He does not make a theoretical argument against theory. Quigley writes:

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[129] The beginnings of these debates can perhaps be traced to essays by Newton Garver, Marjorie Green and Charles Altieri in the 1970s. In the 1980s Henry Staten published a book entitled *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, and there are a number of dissenting reactions to it in the *New Literary History* special issue devoted to Wittgenstein and Literary Theory. In addition to these debates there are a number of discussions concerning Richard Rorty's use of Wittgenstein or whether Stanley Fish is Wittgensteinian. More recently, there have been significant interventions on Wittgenstein and Deconstrction by, among others, Martin Stone, Stephen Mulhall and Nicholas F. Gier.

[130] Fairlamb, *Critical Conditions: Postmodernity and the Question of Foundations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. x

[131] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', pp. 913-4

> Wittgenstein's alternative to existing theory is not an anti-theory, any more than his alternative to existing philosophy is an anti-philosophy. It is instead a philosophical procedure displayed in action, a philosophical technique variously exemplified, a philosophical process that refuses to become a reified product.[132]

For Wittgenstein, any attempt at a theoretical account of meaning or language will distort the complexity and vast entanglements involved in how language actually functions. We are unable to find a core essence of meaning or language because, he writes, 'all that we call language' has 'no one thing in common [… but] are all related to each other in many different ways' (*PI* 65); Wittgenstein's argument against the tendency to theorise and in favour of what he calls 'family resemblances' rests on an instruction to observe whether or not things share an essence. He compares language to games:

> Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'" – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that; [...] a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing. (*PI* 66, 67)

Wittgenstein demonstrates his method in the description of various examples and he repeatedly emphasises that none of these examples are definitive. He 'offers us examples of many kinds', explains Quigley, 'so that we can see by the light of their variety and thus resist the tendency to absorb the multiplicity of language into some reductive explanatory schema.'[133] This emphasis on multiplicity and the anti-foundational thrust of his writing has, argues Quigley, led some critics to view Wittgenstein as a sceptic and place him alongside postmodern thinkers such as Derrida. Quigley notes possible reasons for the association of Wittgenstein with Derrida and scepticism, notably the brilliance with which Wittgenstein displays the multiplicity and contingency of language, but argues that such parallels overlook the strong anti-sceptical strain in his work. According to Altieri, Wittgenstein 'recognises that scepticism is only the reverse demonic side of essentialist thinking'.[134] For both

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[132] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', p. 212
[133] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', p. 217
[134] Altieri, 'Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language', *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, p. 238

Wittgenstein and Derrida there is no necessary relation between language and reality or word and thing, but for Wittgenstein, the impossibility of connecting language to reality is irrelevant for language to function meaningfully. And whereas Derrida, for example, at least in his early work, 'makes the rejection of essences the cornerstone of his scepticism', leaving only free play or an endless process of signifiers, 'Wittgenstein seeks to establish grounds for knowledge in a new, less problematic way'.[135] He rethinks the concept of essence in terms of grammar and human social behaviour, and avoids any abstract ontology. Quigley writes:

> Seduced by the siren-song of continuous contingency, deconstructionists have a great deal of difficulty locating any clear goal beyond it. But Wittgenstein's exploration of contingency is designedly therapeutic – it refuses us one kind of closure while opening up access to others. Wittgenstein's technique of positioning does not imply the endless deferral of locating a position.[136]

Wittgenstein provides a picture of knowledge and the meaning of language as based on a provisional and historical form of stability, in which things 'stand fast' (*OC* 151), but not permanently. This can most clearly be seen in his image of the river-bed from *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein argues that the background against which anything we say makes sense is like a river-bed. It shifts slowly over time and there is no sharp division between it and the river – language use – running through it. Quigley shows that these images of continuity, such as 'family resemblances' or the 'river-bed', illustrate stability – of meaning, rules, criteria – without an essentialist foundation, a stability, which 'is neither feeble nor foundational but provisional and historical'.[137]

Broadly speaking, what distinguishes Wittgenstein from postmodern theory is the importance of the ordinary in his later work. Though metaphysical philosophy is a primary target for Wittgenstein, as it is for postmodern theory, he sees a way out from the seeming inescapability of scepticism resulting from the rejection of essentialist foundations. Stone claims that

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[135] Altieri, 'Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language', *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, p. 238
[136] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', pp. 218-9
[137] Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', p. 220

a central aim of Wittgenstein's discussion [of rule-following] is to suggest that if (1) a certain metaphysical idea of meaning and (2) the deconstruction of that idea seem to exhaust the philosophical options, that is owing to our failure to see another possibility – namely, a return to the ordinary or everyday.[138]

This return to the ordinary is anything but simple. Mulhall writes: 'what Wittgenstein means by "the ordinary" – whether with respect to language or to life – is not necessarily either obvious or ordinary'.[139] It does not indicate common sense or conventional modes of thought; it is not a 'network of commonsense certainties and unproblematized practices'.[140] Wittgenstein's ordinary, argues Perloff, 'is best understood as quite simply *that which is*, the language we do actually use when we communicate with one another'.[141] The fact that the ordinary lacks a specific, abstract, technical definition is in itself of considerable significance to Wittgenstein's thought.

But, as we have shown above, the ordinary has to be seen in relation to the urge to metaphysics; it is not part of a pragmatic theory of language. Wittgenstein does not try to establish exactly what the ordinary is as this would amount to the very kind of metaphysical gesture he is attempting to overcome; he attempts to return to and look at it. For Cavell, 'the ordinary occurs essentially in the *Philosophical Investigations* as what scepticism denies, and metaphysics transcends',[142] and thus the ordinary is a site of struggle; it is in tension with both scepticism and metaphysics and can only be understood in relation to both.

These concerns are not only relevant to indicating the significant differences between Wittgenstein and postmodern theory, but also for how to adopt a Wittgensteinian approach to reading literature. One of the principal aims of this thesis is not only to demonstrate the way in which both Wittgenstein and DeLillo challenge and undermine certain theorizing attitudes, impulses and modes of reading, but to challenge such attitudes in readings of their work. Wittgenstein's emphasis on the tension between the

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[138] Stone, 'Wittgenstein on Deconstruction', *New Wittgenstein*, p. 84
[139] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 46
[140] Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, p. xiii
[141] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p. 903
[142] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', *Philosophy the day after tomorrow*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2005, p. 195

ordinary and metaphysics, on looking and seeing, on the therapeutic quality of contingency and on 'overlapping and criss-crossing' similarities is therefore crucial to both the method and main arguments of the thesis.

CHAPTER 1

Falling Man, Still Life and the paradox of the ordinary

Just look. You have to look.

Don DeLillo[1]

The everyday, or the commonplace, is the most basic and richest artistic category. Although it seems familiar, it is always surprising and new.

Jeff Wall[2]

DeLillo's 2007 novel, *Falling Man*, is an elliptical account of the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks that focuses on an estranged couple living in New York. This chapter begins by briefly reviewing the novel's negative critical reception and sets out to challenge the idea that DeLillo's narrow focus on the ordinary indicates some kind of failure. It does so by considering the significance of two still life paintings by Giorgio Morandi described in the novel, arguing that they illustrate the novel's formal and thematic concerns, as well as its dominant mood. And moreover that, as still lifes, they represent an aesthetic form central to DeLillo's aesthetic and philosophical engagement with the ordinary more generally. The chapter draws on Norman Bryson's book on still life, *Looking at the Overlooked*, in order to illuminate the aesthetic and philosophical features of the novel's treatment of still life, and then analyses the significance of these features in light of Wittgenstein's engagement with the ordinary.

Though still life is a branch of painting that covers works of art from diverse historical and cultural contexts, there are nevertheless, according to Bryson, certain key 'family resemblances' that make it a 'coherent category'.[3] I will argue that the elements Bryson identifies and scrutinises − a non-linear structure and turn away from narrative and spectacle; the importance of gesture, ritual and repetition; the intimate spatial quality;

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[1] "Looking at Meinhof", *The Guardian,* 17 August, 2002, p. 28
[2] Cited in Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Never Before*, London: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 64
[3] Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, London: Reaktion, 1990, p.14

and, above all, the close focus on and paradoxical transfiguration of the ordinary – are central to *Falling Man's* formal and aesthetic qualities. I will also examine the significant parallels between Bryson's account of still life and later Wittgenstein.[4] Like still life, the *Philosophical Investigations* is concerned with drawing our attention to what is familiar or apparently insignificant, with demystifying the illusory importance of grand narratives, and it repeatedly emphasises the importance of looking and seeing things clearly. In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein states: 'the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes)' (*PI* 129). In a similar fashion, Bryson describes the way still life 'forces the subject, both painter and viewer, to attend closely to the preterite objects in the world which, exactly because they are so familiar, elude normal attention'.[5] And for still life painting, as for Wittgenstein, 'the enemy is a mode of seeing which thinks it knows in advance what is worth looking at and what is not.'[6]

A Wittgensteinian focus on still life painting will enable us to examine the broader significance of the role of Morandi's still life paintings in the narrative and provide a mode of thinking about the paradoxical nature of DeLillo's aesthetic and philosophical engagement with the ordinary – the way the ordinary can be transfigured by a different way of 'seeing', and things can be simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary.

I. RETREAT

In a *Guardian* article discussing 9/11 fiction Pankaj Mishra argues that *Falling Man* shows 'DeLillo [...] retreating to the domestic life'. The overall thrust of his argument is that DeLillo's narrow scope signifies a failure of some kind. The word 'retreat' suggests a giving up, or backing away; a withdrawal. For Mishra the fact that 'DeLillo confines himself to recording the emotional and existential struggles of 9/11 survivors'[7] is

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[4] These parallels may in part be linked to Wittgenstein's influence on Bryson's critical approach. Though Bryson does not cite Wittgenstein in this work, in an earlier work, *Vision and Painting*, he writes in some detail about Wittgenstein's significance for critical thinking on art. See *Vision and Painting: the logic of the gaze*, London: MacMillan, 1983

[5] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 87

[6] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 65

[7] Mishra, 'The End of Innocence', *The Guardian*, Review, 19 May, 2007, p. 6

indicative of a lack of ambition and political nerve. Mishra is not alone in viewing *Falling Man* as a failure. Andrew O'Hagan, Michiko Kakutani and other critics consider the novel to have failed, above all it would seem, for not matching the kind of panoramic and incisive depiction of social and political life characteristic of DeLillo's earlier fiction.

The initial reception of *Falling Man*, however, has to be seen in light of the tremendous sense of expectation created by the apparent similarities between core features of DeLillo's earlier fiction and the events of 9/11. For, as Sam Anderson notes:

> all of DeLillo's signature obsessions clearly intersect in the chaos of that morning—a secret plot leading to a spectacular mass disaster that's immediately absorbed into the permanent impermanence of the 24-hour news cycle. It's like the JFK assassination magnified exponentially and, just as a bonus, imported to the city he grew up in and writes best about.[8]

Indeed, the resonance between key aspects of DeLillo's previous fiction and the events of September 11 was perceived to be so striking that not only did barely a single review of *Falling Man* fail to mention the apparent parallels between them, but they did so in the most hyperbolic of terms. Tom Junod, for example, writes: 'It was a day he himself might have authored. The man has been writing the post-9/11 novel for the better part of four decades';[9] John Leonard claims: 'It wasn't a question of whether Don DeLillo would write a 9/11 novel, or even when. He has been writing it all along';[10] and, according to O'Hagan, 'DeLillo's been on the road to having September 11 as his subject long before the events of that day happened'.[11]

It is not surprising therefore that for many reviewers *Falling Man* was something of a disappointment, if not a failure. Its main focus – the private, ordinary, domestic world of an estranged couple, brought back together in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist

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[8] Anderson, 'Code Red', *New York Magazine*, 7 May, 2007,
 < http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/31521>
[9] Junod, 'The Man Who Invented 9/11', *Esquire*, May 2007,
<http://www.esquire.com/fiction/book-review/delillo>
[10] Leonard, 'Dread Zone', *The Nation*, May 28, 2007,
 <http://www.thenation.com/article/dread-zone>
[11] O'Hagan, 'Racing against Reality', *The New York Review of Books*, June 28, 2007,
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2007/jun/28/racing-against-reality>

attack – is far removed from the kind of acute reflections on consumer capitalism, image culture, spectacle and terror found in DeLillo's previous novels.

Falling Man is notable for its lack of typical DeLillian features: it lacks the epic scope and blistering prose of *Underworld*, and the sober, straight-laced dialogue is far removed from the witty banter of *White Noise* or edgy gravity of *Libra*. Furthermore, there is very little engagement with forms of electronic media or consumer culture. Though the novel begins and ends with the protagonist Keith Neudecker leaving the North Tower of the World Trade Centre moments before it collapses, the narrative account of such a spectacular event lacks the kind of charged, dramatic tension that DeLillo has produced in previous novels. In *Libra* and *Underworld*, for example, he masterfully recreates the awe and intensity of historical events. In *Libra*, the build up to and moment of Kennedy's assassination is thrillingly wrought. DeLillo uses a tight narrative structure that moves ever more rapidly to the cataclysmic event of Kennedy's murder. Similarly, in the prologue to *Underworld*, which recounts the winning of the play-offs by the New York Giants, the historical moment of collective euphoria is so powerfully rendered that the reader feels a visceral thrill. But in *Falling Man* such DeLillian narrative displays are almost entirely absent, even the one dramatic event in the text – the moment of impact – is oddly muted; it is depicted from inside the tower and inside the plane, creating a feeling of enclosed space and close-up intimacy. The event is portrayed on a small scale, seen from the perspective of the characters' inner lives and not as a spectacular image or in terms of its social and political significance.

The novel chronicles the lives of a fractured, somewhat dysfunctional family in the days, months and years following the September 11 terrorist attack. The main narrative is made up of three parts: the first and second parts deal with the first thirty-six days after the attack, while the third takes place several years later. The different parts are divided by three short sections tracing the sinister progress of one of the terrorists, Haddad. The novel opens as protagonist Keith Neudecker has just escaped from the World Trade Centre and makes his way to the house of his estranged wife Lianne. The narrative then roughly alternates between Keith and Lianne's respective points of view and charts the renewal of their marriage as they both learn to cope with life 'after the planes' (*FM* 8). The novel's main focus is not the development of a series of events, but the everyday 'ordinary thoughts' (*FM* 22), and seemingly inconsequential activities of

its somewhat anonymous principal characters. Though we learn about the fact that Keith has a brief affair with a woman who also escaped from the towers and the fact that his wife Lianne is an editor and runs a workshop for Alzheimer sufferers, these features are no more or less significant than the things they see or do more generally.

Why, we might ask, does a novel that is ostensibly concerned with so public and historical an event limit its focus to the intensely private and domestic? Why, when dealing with such a dramatic, cataclysmic event, does DeLillo – who has written about cataclysmic, historical, highly mediatised events so successfully in the past – choose to remain within the confines of the seemingly uneventful, routine, everyday concerns of ordinary people?

One of the possible reasons for the lack of socio-political analysis in the novel could be linked to the ethical issues surrounding 9/11. The magnitude of what happened, the sheer unthinkable human loss and tragedy, as well as the oversaturated media coverage of the event, make the artistic representation of it both ethically and aesthetically problematic (and to a certain extent, the figure of the performance artist, Falling Man, embodies this problematic). It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that DeLillo adopts such an oblique approach, that he avoids the subjects presumed to be most worth addressing, just as he avoids 9/11 idiom in favour of ordinary language – referring to seemingly neutral, abstract terms like 'the planes', 'the towers' and 'that day', rather than 9/11 or Ground Zero or the Twin Towers.[12] When discussing the issue of writing about the holocaust, the German writer W.G. Sebald explained in an interview that, 'you would have to approach it from an angle, and by intimating to the reader that these subjects are constant company; their presence shades every inflection of every sentence one writes'.[13] Sebald's novel *The Emigrants* is implicitly about the holocaust and yet explicitly concerned with the everyday minutiae of its characters' lives. Similarly, we can read *Falling Man* as a profound meditation on the aftermath of September 11 precisely in the detailed way it focuses on individual lives involved in domestic, ordinary routine. Even though in many significant ways *Falling Man* doesn't seem to be about September 11 at all, its emotional and poetic force derives from its angled

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[12] For a cultural study of the 'rhetorical and political work performed by the event's loomingly proper names,' see Marc Redfield, 'Virtual Trauma: The Idiom of 9/11', *Diacritics*, 37, 2007, pp. 55-80

[13] W.G. Sebald, *The Guardian*, 21 December 2001,
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/dec/21/artsandhumanities.highereducation>

approach: the way, as Linda S. Kauffman observes, everything in the novel 'seems contaminated by September 11'.[14]

However, in order to understand more fully why DeLillo turns away from painting the kind of broad, historical and political canvases seen in novels such as *Libra* or *Underworld* towards the kind of still life intimacy evinced in *Falling Man*, we need to view DeLillo's focus on the domestic and the ordinary not merely as a reaction to 9/11,[15] but in relation to the broader concerns of his work. We need to examine his significant aesthetic and philosophical engagement with the ordinary.

The incorporation in the novel of two still life paintings by Giorgio Morandi can be seen as indicative of the significance of this engagement in DeLillo's work. Morandi, who DeChirico called 'the painter of the metaphysics of common objects',[16] was unaffected by the vagaries of the cultural and political landscape of his time and his work lacks the kind of postmodern cultural commentary on the image and image culture with which DeLillo is commonly associated. Morandi devoted himself almost exclusively and obsessively to still life and landscape painting, and his monastic lifestyle and aesthetic practice – a rigour of 'self-imposed restrictions'[17] – has strong parallels with many DeLillo characters, including Keith Neudecker.

Morandi's modest and intimate paintings, characterised by their 'austere formalism',[18] are an important part of *Falling Man's* aesthetic; they are emblematic of the novel's formal and thematic concerns and a visual expression of the novel's dominant mood and narrative structure. Prior to the publication of *Falling Man*, excerpts of the novel were published in the *New Yorker* under the title 'Still Life', an indication of the way that each scene of the novel functions in a sense like a still life – lost moments frozen in time, isolated and imbued with melancholy, but also a serenity and meditative

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[14] Kauffman, 'The Wake of Terror: Don DeLillo's "In the Ruins of the Future", "Baader-Meinhof" and *Falling Man', Modern Fiction Studies*, 54, 2008, p. 365

[15] An interesting parallel might be drawn here between DeLillo and the Belgian artist Luc Tuymans, who in 2002 was asked to present a piece of work at the Documenta art exhibition. The exhibition's theme was social and political engagement and Tuymans was expected to present paintings of images relating to 9/11. Instead, Tuymans presented a still life.

[16] Giorgio DeChirico, cited in Matthew Gale, 'white bottle – red earth', *Giorgio Morandi,* Matthew Gale & Donna de Salvo, (eds.), London: Tate Gallery, 2001, p. 92

[17] Karen Wilkin, *Morandi*, http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/morandi.html

[18] Matthew Gale, 'white bottle – red earth', *Giorgio Morandi*, p. 87

musicality. As Michael Wood notes, the novel is 'less a narrative than a series of takes on a condition. [...] Its paragraphs vivid variants on the phrase "This was the world now."'[19] The novel's fragmentary structure and narrow focus ensures that these 'series of takes' are thrown into relief, and maintain an elusive, haunting quality. Like the Morandi paintings, each scene (and the novel as a whole) has an 'odd, spare power' (*FM* 49).

Morandi's paintings are not only significant in themselves, however, but also for the fact that they are still lifes, and thus representative of an aesthetic form that has considerable resonance for the aesthetics of *Falling Man* and DeLillo's work in general. In *The Body Artist* DeLillo seems to suggest a way of thinking about this resonance when he offers an analysis of Lauren Hartke's performance piece: 'Maybe the idea is to think of time differently [...]. Stop time, or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that's living, not painted' (*BA* 107). Though DeLillo is referring here to a work of performance art it is also functions as a description of his own late style of writing. In general, the works of art in his novels, especially those in *The Body Artist*, *Falling Man* and his latest novel, *Point Omega*, are used to reflect upon and embody key aesthetic questions and features with which the novels themselves are engaged. They are not merely decorative or used to illustrate a specific point.

In order to examine this claim further, and to investigate DeLillo's significant treatment of the ordinary I will begin by tracing DeLillo's engagement with still life back to the final paragraph of *Underworld*, which I will read in relation to the aesthetics of *Falling Man*. I will then draw a parallel between the different paintings described in *Underworld* and *Falling Man*, before going on to examine the significance of the Morandi still lifes to *Falling Man* more generally.

II. STILL LIFE

Despite the differences between the late style of *Falling Man* and the expansive, complex, multi-layered aesthetic of *Underworld*, we can perhaps see an indication of

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[19] Wood, 'Picture of a Gone World', *Bookforum* , June, 2007,
<http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/200703/244>

the future direction of DeLillo's writing, in particular the significance of still life, in *Underworld's* final paragraph where the narrator turns to look at:

> things in the room, offscreen, unwebbed, the tissued grain of deskwood alive in light, the thick lived tenor of things, the argument of things to be seen and eaten, the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray, and the dense measures of experience in a random glance […] and the chipped rim of the mug that holds your yellow pencils, skewed all crazy, and the plied lives of the simplest surface, the slabbed butter melting on the crumbled bun, and the yellow of the yellow of the pencils. (*U* 827)

The emphasis on light, tenor, colour, and the very content of this passage evokes the image of a still life painting. It reveals a profound engagement with the material of daily life or what a character refers to as 'the depth and reach of the commonplace', and seems to announce the formal and thematic concerns of DeLillo's later work (*U* 542). The attention to detail, the Hemingwayesque prose, the concern with ordinary things, with looking at the overlooked, and the extraordinary nature of these things when looked at closely, are all elements foregrounded in his later novels.

In *Looking at the Overlooked* Bryson provides a definition of still life by contrasting it with history painting. He writes: 'while history painting is constructed around narrative, still life is the world minus its narrative, or, better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest.'[20] Bryson elaborates this contrast by drawing on the distinction made by Charles Sterling between "megalography" and "rhopography". He writes:

> megalography is the depiction of those things in the world which are great – the legends of the gods, the battles of heroes, the crises of history. Rhopography (from *rhopos*, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks.[21]

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[20] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 60
[21] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 61

This distinction is one way of reading the shift from *Underworld* to DeLillo's later novels and indeed, from the opening of *Underworld* to its ending. We can thus read the contrast between the novel's undramatic, unpeopled, serene ending and its dynamic, multi-perspectival, heavily populated prologue as symbolic of a shift in DeLillo's work. The prologue is a clear example of megalography – a narrative-driven portrayal of a legendary baseball game used to illustrate the historical crisis of the Cold War, featuring heroes, villains and modern-day gods like Frank Sinatra and J. Edgar Hoover. Whereas the novel's final paragraph, with its emphasis on ordinary things that ostensibly lack importance, has the characteristics of rhopography. This shift can also be seen in the difference between two paintings that DeLillo refers to at these different stages in the novel: Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death* and Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black*. A reproduction of the Brueghel painting is scrutinised by J. Edgar Hoover while he is at the baseball game: it is described as dramatic, violent, eventful, as a 'visionary landscape of havoc and ruin' (*U* 41). The Whistler painting, on the other hand, embodies a certain stillness and serenity. The painting, which Klara Sax owns a small print of, plays a significant role in the novel's final chapter, providing its title and the following piece of art appreciation:

> [Klara] hung it in a corner of the spare room because she thought it was generally unlooked at and because she liked the formal balances and truthful muted colours and because the picture was so clashingly modern [...] but Klara also liked looking right through the tonal components, the high theory of colour, the theory of paint itself, perhaps – looking into the depths of the picture, at the mother, the woman, the mother herself, the anecdotal aspect of a woman in a chair, thinking, and immensely interesting she was, so Quaker-prim and still. (*U* 748)

Even though the painting is a portrait it has many of the hallmarks of a still life, as indicated by the abstract title, *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, which highlights the importance of the painting's formal qualities, or what DeLillo refers to as Whistler's 'doctrinal priorities' (*U* 748). Its subject matter is ordinary and concrete yet the depiction is moving towards the abstract: the emphasis in the painting is on rhythm, balance and tonal composition. Its mood is calm, meditative, subdued and, as in a still life, very little of apparent significance takes place.

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo once again makes use of specific, though less well known, works of art[22] in the body of the text, which not only inspire a series of illuminating descriptions of and reflections on painting, but also provide an aesthetic model rich in resonance for the novel as a whole. The paintings described in the novel are two still lifes by Morandi, hanging on the wall in the apartment of Lianne's mother, Nina Bartos, an art historian. The paintings were given to her by her lover, Martin Ridnour, who, on looking at one of them, thinks he can see the twin towers:

> The painting in question showed seven or eight objects, the taller ones set against a brushy slate background. The other items were huddled boxes and biscuit tins, grouped before a darker background. The full array, in unfixed perspective and mostly muted colors, carried an odd, spare power. [...] Two of the taller items were dark and sombre, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to. (*FM* 49)

The significance of this painting, which, like Whistler's *Arrangement in Gray and Black*, is characterised by its emphasis on rhythm, balance and subtle shifts of colour and tone, goes beyond the resemblance that Martin sees between these objects and the Twin Towers. Its significance also goes beyond the importance of the contrast between Morandi's work and that of the performance artist 'Falling Man'. As Kauffman notes, 'the pleasures of the text in DeLillo's […] novel revolve, to an unprecedented degree, around visual art'.[23]

DeLillo's description is a wonderfully sober, contained evocation of the painting: the restrained, understated prose, which captures what Lance Esplund describes as the 'elegiac-yet-unassuming, almost-seismic weight'[24] of Morandi's objects, makes an illuminating contrast with the single sentence paragraph detailing Klara's reaction to the Whistler. The passage from *Underworld* is of Proustian length, full of multiple sub-clauses, repetition and shifts of register; is expansive and vibrant, contains description as well as analysis, and reflects a personal, individual response to the painting. In

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[22] Though it is not possible to be certain, judging by DeLillo's description, the Morandi painting discussed would appear to be one of several still lifes titled *Natura Morta 1956*
[23] Kauffman, 'The Wake of Terror', p. 370
[24] Lance Esplund, 'Morandi's Subtle Spectacle', *The New York Sun*, September 18, 2008, http://www.nysun.com/arts/morandis-subtle-spectacle/86073/

Falling Man there is no analysis – of technique, theory or significance – and only the faintest value judgement is betrayed in the appreciation of its 'odd, spare power'. Rather, the description reflects the painting itself: it is plain-spoken and economical, vague yet precise, and the short, uncomplicated sentences convey the painting's mood of 'disquietude and anxiety'.[25] The passage is not simply a description but a literary embodiment of the painting's rhythm and tonal register.

Though the passage is quite prosaic, DeLillo nevertheless manages to express the enigmatic poetry of Morandi's painting in the tautological simplicity of the phrase 'the bottle was a bottle, white'. This odd use of repetition recalls the 'yellow of the yellow of the pencils' from *Underworld's* final paragraph and also Mr. Tuttle's 'the word for moonlight is moonlight' from *The Body Artist* (*BA* 82). These zen-like phrases, which economically emphasise the 'thingness' of things at the same time as expressing a curious sense of mystery, mirror the operation at work in a still life. They isolate the words in a similar way in which still life isolates aesthetic space, and in the act of isolation suggest further, deeper meanings.

Though Morandi paints ordinary, everyday objects – bottles, boxes, bowls – these objects are transformed in the painting into 'something else', something elemental or transcendent. As DeLillo notes, the paintings depict 'kitchen objects but removed from the kitchen, free of the kitchen, the house, everything practical and functioning' and 'take you inward, down and in', conveying 'something deeper than things or the shape of things' (*FM* 49, 111). Morandi's still lifes share not only a mood and tonal register with *Falling Man*, but also a similar engagement with the ordinary and the transformation of the ordinary, a similar combination of austerity and depth, apparent insignificance and heightened meaning.

Morandi's still lifes, writes Esplund, portray 'a middle ground — an arena, in both substance and space, somewhere between the everyday and the eternal.'[26] The importance of this 'middle ground' in DeLillo's reading of Morandi is made apparent in the first appearance of the paintings in the novel. The description occurs in one of the

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[25] Esplund, 'Morandi's Subtle Spectacle'

[26] Esplund, 'Morandi's Subtle Spectacle'

opening scenes, while Lianne is describing her mother's 'serenely self-possessed' apartment, in which

> what she loved most were the two still lifes on the north wall, by Giorgio Morandi, a painter her mother had studied and written about. These were groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins, that was all, but there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name, or in the irregular edges of vases and jars, some reconnoitre inward, human and obscure, away from the very light and color of the paintings. (*FM* 12)

This passage, contrasting the humble, seemingly insignificant content – emphasised by the idiomatic phrase 'that was all' – with the unnameable 'mystery' of the brushstrokes or irregular edges, demonstrates a tension embodied in the paintings that is central to the novel's own aesthetic: between the ordinary and extraordinary, plain and mysterious, between the way something can be both seemingly unremarkable and yet highly significant.

The phrase 'that was all' is typical of the way the novel engages with the ordinary – it is a colloquial, plain-speaking mode of address, used to indicate something that seems ordinary and without significance. Indeed, the same colloquial tone and almost exact wording is used in the previous scene when Lianne is reflecting on a postcard she has received, the face of which is a reproduction of the cover of Shelley's poem *Revolt of Islam*. Lianne is struck by the card and the uncanny timing of its arrival 'three days after the planes'. She thinks: 'it was a matter of simple coincidence, or not so simple' before concluding, 'this was all' (*FM* 8). Though the expression and tone are somewhat dismissive, paradoxically, it is precisely in this moment that the possible significance is emphasised. The passage, like the one describing the still life, reveals that, equally typical and important to the novel is the way this emphasis on the ordinary is contrasted with, and yet tied to, a concern, expressed in ordinary terms, with 'something else', something 'not so simple'.

Again and again in the narrative Lianne and Keith reflect on the ordinariness or apparent insignificance of the everyday sights and events in their lives; the way 'things were ordinary in all the ways they were always ordinary' (*FM* 67). And yet these

seeming non-events are, like Morandi's objects, imbued with a nameless mystery. As with the many recurring gestures and rituals in the novel, these small moments, when looked at more closely suggest 'something else', some mystery or 'something deeper'. The novel is full of such moments: Keith correcting the spelling on his mail or 'checking the running time of rented movies before he took them out of the store' (*FM* 31/32, 121); Lianne pressing 'herself naked to the full-length mirror,' leaving 'the fogged marks of her face, hands, breasts and thighs stamped on the mirror' (*FM* 106); or their son, Justin, sharpening his pencils, described as a 'ritual more thorough and righteous than the formal signing of some document of state' (*FM* 39). Though seemingly insignificant, such moments are nonetheless central to the mood, rhythm and meaning of the novel, to the way it conveys the 'off moments of living the lives others think we are living' (*FM* 121).

The next section will examine in detail the various ways in which *Falling Man* can be seen to embody an aesthetics of still life, by looking at its form, structure and use of language and imagery. And will then consider the significance of this aesthetics for understanding the novel's engagement with the ordinary.

III. STILLNESS

Falling Man is on the surface a simple narrative. Like still life, the novel is pitched 'at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs'[27] – a world of 'sitting alone in still rooms', where 'pretty much everything seemed to be unremarkable' (*FM* 20, 187). But it is in this unremarkable, intimate stillness that the novel's aesthetic interest lies. In its engagement with the everyday *Falling Man's* point of focus is strikingly similar to that of still life painting, which Bryson describes as 'the everyday world of routine and repetition, at a level of existence where events are [...] the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance'.[28] The parallel with still life can also be felt in the novel's quiet, meditative and understated tone – 'an intimacy of clean, physical detail' (*FM* 30).

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[27] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 61
[28] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 14

Rather than drama, DeLillo emphasises stillness and slow time, and rather than linear perspective, the novel, like still life, 'proposes a much closer space',[29] the characters are portrayed, like Morandi's objects, in 'unfixed perspective', disconnected from the strictures of plot; they are shown 'outside the tide of voices and faces, God and country, sitting alone in still rooms' (*FM* 49, 20). The novel is claustrophobically intimate: almost everything is seen from either Lianne's or Keith's perspective, and both of them are withdrawn, isolated and trapped in 'self hell' (*FM* 182). The emphasis is less on linear development than on recurring acts of 'bodily survival and self-maintenance', which can be seen most clearly in the frequent descriptions of idiosyncratic rituals and gestures. This focus on the gestural and ritualistic is found throughout the novel: in the account of the rules in Keith's weekly poker game; in Rumsey's habit of counting toes; in Lianne's communication with her son, Justin, through body language; and, perhaps most strikingly, in Keith's 'wrist exercises' and Lianne's retrogressive counting. Keith continues to perform these exercises, 'that resembled prayer in some remote northern province', even once the wrist has fully recovered (*FM* 59, 106, 235-6), and Lianne's counting is described as 'her form of lyric verse [...] a little songlike but with a rigor, a tradition of fixed order' (*FM* 188). These rituals and gestures function like recurring motifs in the novel: they are given such weight that they seem to be imbued with deep significance, which, as the reference to prayer and lyric verse suggests, can be seen as both aesthetic and spiritual.[30]

This emphasis on rituals and gestures is closely linked to the intimate space and circularity of the narrative, and reflects the characters' disorientation in space and time. This disorientation can be seen most dramatically in the novel's opening pages: 'It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night' (*FM* 3). This apocalyptic world is, in a sense, the world of the novel as a whole. It is a world full of 'otherworldly things' in which time is no longer the same and space, or at least the perception of things within it, has radically altered. This world, in which 'nothing seemed familiar', is both the setting for and expression of the main characters' liminal condition (*FM* 65). The characters exist in a kind of suspended present, belief in the past has been shattered: they are left with posthumous experience, 'everything now is

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[29] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 71
[30] The combination of banal functionality and spiritual ritual recalls Nick Shay's milking of the Bobby Thompson baseball in *Underworld* (*U* 131)

measured by after' (*FM* 137). This experience of time is exemplified by Keith's visits to Las Vegas, an unreal place, which exists in a permanent present, 'where there was nothing outside, no flash of history or memory' (*FM* 225).

Lianne reflects on her family's new situation that 'their lives were in transition' (*FM* 67). All her family members seem to be on some kind of threshold, exemplified most strikingly by the image of Keith, ash-covered, 'up from the dead' and standing in the doorway to her apartment (*FM* 8). They are in a state of abeyance or spiritual retreat:[31] Keith is a 'dim figure', a 'hovering presence', 'not quite returned to his body yet', 'it was like he was dead' (*FM* 23, 59, 104); Justin intentionally speaks solely in monosyllables; Nina, Lianne's mother, is 'entering a kind of withdrawal' and Nina's lover, Martin, lives in constant transit, 'coming from a distant city on [his] way to another distant city and neither place has shape or form' (*FM* 43, 42). Lianne herself seems to be on a philosophical or religious threshold as she struggles with and resists the idea of God and veers between spiritual yearning and pragmatic scepticism, neither believing nor disbelieving.

This condition of stasis or suspension is also embodied in the figure of the performance artist, Falling Man, who carries out dramatic stunts around the City, jumping from a high point and remaining suspended in a pose that resembles the people who jumped from the Twin Towers. Although this gesture brings back the memory and image of those jumpers, it can also be seen to symbolise the novel's characters' suspended condition.

In order to reflect this liminal state and disorientating change in space and time, the novel as a whole is made up of elliptical fragments which appear to have 'no seeming connection' to each other or to the development of a plot (*FM* 30): they are attempts to capture what are referred to in the novel as 'lost moment(s)', or 'moments frozen in the run of routine hours' (*FM* 8, 127). The narrative regularly loops back on itself, often returning to certain powerful motifs, and the chronology is sometimes out of sequence such as when Lianne reflects on Martin's advice 'to be equal to the situation', twenty

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[31]This is a recurring predicament of DeLillo's protagonists which can be seen, for example, in Nick Shay's 'Lontananza' in *Underworld*, Bill Gray's reclusive isolation in *Mao II*, or Owen Brademas desert exile in *The Names*. It will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

pages before we hear Martin give the actual advice (*FM* 23, 42). This sense of recurrence and circularity hints at the musical element of *Falling Man* (an element that can also be felt in Morandi's paintings): its structure recalls, for example, Bach's *Goldberg Variations* – short, taut passages that return to themes and scenes with subtle changes in mood and tempo. In the novel's final scene the text loops back to the moment leading up to the beginning of the narrative, thereby subverting the notion of narrative progress. This undermining of linearity has the effect of disorientating the reader and tightening the focus on a given scene irrespective of any consequences for the overall narrative. The passing of narrative time ceases to be important with regards to plot and only has importance with regards to the distance from 'that day'.

The discontinuity of the temporal sequence, in conjunction with the pared-down prose, slows the narrative down. Justin's attempt to speak solely in monosyllables, as a way of framing 'clear thoughts', since 'it helps [him] go slow when [he] think[s]', can be read as a self-reflective expression of the novel's own method (*FM* 66). Despite the lucid, uncluttered nature of the prose and the straightforward plot it is a slow, dense read. It shares what Cornel Bonca sees as *The Body Artist's* 'austere refusal to offer the easy pleasures of narrative.'[32] DeLillo has stripped the narrative of momentum and the reader is forced to go slow, compelled to focus on each specific scene, as if it is a still life.

The poetic economy of *Falling Man's* short, frequently monosyllabic sentences exemplifies its minimalist aesthetics and the deceptive simplicity of its focus on the ordinary. The simplicity is deceptive because though the novel's narrative style, as well as many of the domestic scenes, may, for example, resemble Raymond Carver's minimalist stories with their short, simple sentences, characterised by monosyllabic words and repetition, detailing the pain of fraught human relationships, there are significant differences. The parallels – for example the incessant repetition of the personal pronoun – can clearly be seen in the following excerpts from Carver and *Falling Man*:

> My husband eats with a good appetite. But I don't think he's really hungry. He chews, arms on the table, and stares at something across the room. He looks at me

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[32] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 60

and looks away. He wipes his mouth on the napkin. He shrugs, and goes on eating.[33]

They slept in the same bed because she could not tell him to use the sofa and because she liked having him here next to her. He didn't seem to sleep. He lay on his back and talked but mostly listened and this was all right. She didn't need to know a man's feelings and not this man. She liked the spaces he made. She liked dressing in front of him. (*FM* 18)

Unlike Carver, DeLillo's adoption of this style is not a means of reflecting a particular American social class or an attempt at gritty realism. Though the parallels indicate the extent to which DeLillo has indeed retreated 'to the domestic' there are nevertheless significant ways in which his late work shares core concerns with his earlier work and differs from novels whose principal subject matter is the everyday, domestic concerns of American life. What distinguishes *Falling Man* from works by writers such as Carver, who champion the ordinary, is its formal, aesthetic and philosophical focus on the ordinary.

Bryson observes how, in still life painting it is precisely because certain features are 'so ordinary, [that] the quality of attention brought to bear on the objects stands quite outside normal experience and the normal domestic round'.[34] Similarly, in *Falling Man* the focus is of such intensity and narrow range that what seems ordinary no longer is. The very frequency with which the word ordinary is used in the novel is itself an example of the way the ordinary ceases to be ordinary. The unfussiness of the prose, its plain ordinariness, is pitched at such a level that it ceases to be ordinary at all and becomes poetic and elegiac. The narrative technique and the taut prose draw attention to the extraordinary features of the ordinary, and the tight focus serves to emphasise both the concrete and the numinous nature of ordinary things. The apparent plainness is deceptive because the focus on the ordinary simultaneously masks and reveals DeLillo's ambiguous and complex engagement with the possibility of transcendent meaning.

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[33] Raymond Carver, 'So much water so close to home', *The Stories of Raymond Carver*, London: Pan, 1985, p. 235
[34] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p.87

This sense of the simultaneously concrete and numinous nature of ordinary things is perhaps best exemplified in the recurring image of the falling shirt that Keith sees and is captivated by when leaving the North Tower. On walking away from the Tower Keith's senses are bombarded by the terrifying noise, stench and shocking sights: he observes 'otherworldly things' speeding past, people running frantically, and the horror of figures 'dropping into free space' (*FM* 4). Yet it is not this that arrests his attention, but something that seems disconnected from the mass destruction taking place:

> There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river. (*FM* 4)

The first sentence emphasises the transcendent nature of the image: each of the short clauses stresses the fact that it is different, that the drifting shirt does not correspond to the madness and otherworldly horror of everything else around him. Yet the fact that it is different from something so otherworldly suggests that, paradoxically, perhaps it is somehow more real or ordinary. It is something he can see clearly.

The description of the shirt ends after these three short sentences, without developing into what Philip Nel calls 'typical DeLilloesque exegesis'.[35] Rather, DeLillo lets 'the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment' (*FM* 12). It is left isolated, one of many unexamined but striking moments, images or gestures that occur throughout the novel. The reader can only infer the possible significance or metaphorical qualities of the shirt. DeLillo merely describes a physical event, an ordinary object falling through the sky, and there is no attempt made to develop it into a metaphor. As we have seen, the novel is full of such understated poetic tropes – apparently ordinary, physical events, moments or gestures described in pared down prose that, despite their literality, within the structure and tenor of the narrative are heightened to a pitch of suggestive significance. The most obvious example of such a trope is the very title of the novel, which on one level refers quite simply to the

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[35] Nel, 'DeLillo's Return to Form', p. 739

performance artist known as Falling Man, but which is also full of religious and literary resonance and connotations.[36]

Although DeLillo does not examine or analyse Keith's sight of the falling shirt, its importance is emphasised by its recurrence at the end of the novel in the final paragraph: 'then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life' (*FM* 246) and by the fact that when he returns to Lianne's house after escaping from the Towers, one of the first things he says to her is: 'there was a shirt coming down out of the sky' (*FM* 88). The image of the falling shirt seems to relate in some way both to the title and the performance artist 'Falling Man'. The most obvious association is perhaps its metonymic function, symbolising the men and women who jumped from the burning towers. However, though it inevitably symbolises the terrible loss of life, in some ways it is a hopeful, uplifting image with a powerful, transcendent element. For, despite the fact that it is falling towards the river, there is a beauty and magical quality to the shirt's ethereal drifting: the shirt is 'aloft', separate from the carnage. And yet there is an equally strong sense in which the power of the image is derived from its literal quality: the fact that, in itself, the image of a shirt falling from the sky is relatively quite banal. It is a very ordinary, very human object, but in extraordinary, inhuman circumstances, and it is this juxtaposition that makes it shocking and horrifying, yet beautiful and peaceful. The shirt's ambiguous ordinariness recalls the pair of shoes left on 'the hood of a bleeding policeman's car' in *Libra*, described as a 'strangeness [...] that is almost holy' (*L* 15). Both are metonymic objects that in their haunting emptiness symbolise loss and death at the same time as being banal, functional things.

This combination of the physical and metaphysical, this emphasis on the 'thingness' of things and the paradoxical way these things transcend their physicality, or how the actuality of what is portrayed is transfigured 'in order to show something else',[37] are major characteristics of still life. But in DeLillo, as in still life, this transfiguration or transcendence is intrinsically related to a change in the way things are seen and not in

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[36] See, for example, Peter Boxall's reading of DeLillo's novel in relation to Bellow's *Dangling Man*, Coetzee's *Slow Man* and Beckett in *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism,* London: Continuum, 2009

[37] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 86

the object itself. Thus it does not imply the existence of a metaphysical or transcendent realm; merely a different mode of seeing.

In the next section we will pursue this relation between the ordinary and extraordinary by looking at the ambiguity of the ordinary and the importance of point of view in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. We will make a series of connections between *Falling Man*, still life and Wittgenstein that will illuminate the paradoxical status of seeing the ordinary, particularly in relation to the 'strangeness hidden in the familiar',[38] and will show how a mode of seeing can transform ordinary objects, making them seem strange, unfamiliar, even uncanny, but also wonderful.

IV. WITTGENSTEIN AND STILL LIFE

In a celebrated passage from *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein imagines the possibility of observing everyday life from an aesthetic point of view.[39] His reflections on this imagined scenario address a number of important issues for our discussion, especially with regards to the paradox at the heart of seeing the ordinary. He writes:

> Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity [...] – surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted on stage: Life itself. But then we do see this every day without its making the slightest impression on us! True enough but we do not see it from *that* point of view. (*CV* p.4)

Though the passage does not concern still life it nevertheless draws attention to a crucial question surrounding the aesthetics of the ordinary, which is central to *Falling Man*, still life and features of Wittgenstein's own philosophy; the question of point of view. Further on in the passage Wittgenstein explains that this point of view is akin to that experienced when confronted by a work of art. 'A work of art forces us', he writes, 'to

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[38] David Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "imperfect garden": the ladders and labyrinths of philosophy as *Dichtung'*, *The Literary Wittgenstein*, p. 64

[39] Celebrated above all by Michael Fried who describes it as 'arguably Wittgenstein's most original and sustained contribution to aesthetic thought', Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 77

see it in the right perspective' (*CV* p. 4). With regards to seeing the ordinary, however, such a perspective would mean that things are no longer seen as one would ordinarily see them and thus they no longer would seem ordinary; they would seem uncanny – both familiar and unfamiliar, normal and strange, ordinary and extraordinary.

This paradox is at the heart of the aesthetics of the ordinary, and also of a vital tension in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. A tension between being at home and yet lost, situated and yet restless, seeking a clear view of things, yet also needing to be grounded, to see things in their dense, complex forms of life. In 'Wittgenstein's "Imperfect Garden"', an avowedly 'more "literary" reading of the *Investigations* than is traditionally offered, open to the philosophical force of metaphor and form,'[40] David Schalkwyk explores this tension in Wittgenstein's later work and draws on Freud's reading of the uncanny as having 'deep roots in the idea of the strangeness hidden in the familiar' in order to illuminate the paradoxical status of the idea of home in the *Investigations.* Schalkwyk writes:

> the home to which Wittgenstein wishes to restore language so that it will cease to exercise its uncanny bewitchment of our intelligence has precisely the character of home in the Freudian and (double) German sense: a place of great familiarity in which we dwell without reflection, where everything is "open to view", but which is at the same time and in the same place unknown, unfamiliar, even terrifying.[41]

Schalkwyk's essay examines Wittgenstein's turn away 'from the search for an unsituated – we might say "philosophical" – perspective, to the insight that language can be defined only in terms of its situation'.[42] In the process he teases out a tension in the later work between Wittgenstein's idea of the importance of a 'perspicuous representation', of commanding 'a clear view of the use of our words' (*PI* 122), and the need for language to be 'described in all its dense, intractable, living "hurly-burly"'.[43] The problem is that when we are entangled in this 'hurly-burly that constitutes living in a language' we do not have a clear view. And this is why, analogously, for the most part, everyday life or the ordinary strikes us as neither wonderful nor uncanny. It does

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[40] Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "imperfect garden"' , p. 55
[41] Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "imperfect garden"', p. 64
[42] Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "imperfect garden"', p. 55
[43] Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "imperfect garden"', p. 59

not, in fact, make the 'slightest impression on us, for we do not see it from *that* point of view'. Despite the fact that 'everything lies open to view', what is most important for us is hidden because of its simplicity and familiarity; hidden, that is, because we are not looking or have forgotten how to look. 'Don't think, but look' implores Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* (*PI* 66), implying that it is our apparent need to theorise, to explain, to build complex intellectual explanatory constructions that blinds us to 'what is most striking and most powerful' (*PI* 129). This need to theorise, however, is embedded in our language. Schalkwyk writes: 'both the forms of our language and our own homogenizing myopia prevent us from seeing' things clearly.[44]

This homogenizing myopia can be compared to what, in relation to still life, Bryson describes as 'the blurs and entropies of vision that screen out everything in creation except what the world presents as spectacular'.[45] In philosophy the spectacular can be seen as the grand narrative, the all-encompassing theory of things, which Wittgenstein's philosophy is directed against. Indeed, in its turn against the spectacular, in its overriding concern with the everyday, with the 'unassuming material base of life', the *Investigations* may appear, notes Perloff, as 'an almost simple-minded discussion of the everyday use of language'.[46] Wittgenstein is aware that his approach may provoke a certain consternation or disappointment. He asks: 'where does our investigation get its importance from, since it only seems to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important' (*PI* 118)? Traditional philosophy, the philosophy that Wittgenstein attempts to cure, is concerned with big, important questions, with the essential nature of things: time, God, meaning, existence. But for Wittgenstein the attempt to answer such questions, or to uncover the essence of things, results in nothing but houses of cards, a series of grand illusions that his focus on the apparently trivial or unimportant, on the use of such supposedly philosophical words in everyday language, will clear up. He writes: 'if the words "language", "experience", "world", have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door"' (*PI* 97).

Like still life, Wittgenstein's later thought is anti-narrative. In the kind of philosophising Wittgenstein's thought is directed against the attempt to give an account

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[44] Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "imperfect garden"', p.59
[45] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p.64
[46] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p. 911

of the essential nature of things is normally expressed in a narrative of some kind, albeit a theoretical one. The *Investigations*, on the other hand, marks a turn against narrative. Not only does it lack 'conventional narrative coherence',[47] but it challenges the idea of narrative in philosophy, of a systematic, theoretical account of how things are. Indeed, this turn is due to the very nature of, and is essential to, his investigation, which, writes Wittgenstein, 'compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction' (*PI* p. vii). Perloff explains how Wittgenstein 'understands that his mode of "investigation" cannot have a beginning, middle, and end, [...] cannot have organic unity, a causal, logical, or sequential structure, an underlying theme or masterplot'.[48] Instead, 'the same points or almost the same points [are] always being approached afresh from different directions' (*PI* v). Themes are returned to from different angles. Like Morandi, with whom he shares an obsessive, repetitive approach to material, Wittgenstein 'repeatedly draws on the same corpus, revising and adjusting his examples'.[49]

The *Investigations* is concerned with showing how ordinary language functions in ordinary circumstances, primarily as a means of dispelling certain metaphysical confusions brought about by philosophy being misled by a misuse of language. This misuse, however, is due to ordinary language itself, which bewitches our intelligence and sends 'us in pursuit of chimeras' (*PI* 94). 'Our ordinary forms of language', writes Wittgenstein, 'easily make us overlook' important distinctions; 'our forms of expression prevents us in all sorts of ways from seeing that nothing out of the ordinary is involved' in how language functions (*PI* 132, 94). The capacity of ordinary language to mislead lies deeply embedded within our grammar and so it is unlikely that this capacity and the resultant problems can be cleared up once and for all. Rather they need to be returned to again and again, and it is for this reason that Wittgenstein writes in the preface to the *Investigations* of his 'long and involved journeyings' and in the text itself of the philosopher's work as that of 'assembling reminders', which may prevent us from taking false steps (*PI* p. vii, 127). 'Truth', argues Perloff, 'is not something that can be discovered; it can only be rediscovered, day after day'.[50] For Wittgenstein, we need to

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[47] Austin E. Quigley, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophizing', p. 209
[48] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p. 909
[49] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p. 909
[50] Perloff, '"But isn't *the same* at least the same?" Wittgenstein and the question of poetic translatability', *The Literary Wittgenstein*, p. 40

be constantly striving to get a clear view of things for we are liable to get lost or 'entangled in our own rules' (*PI* 125), and thus, observes Schalkwyk, we are 'condemned to trace and retrace, over and over again a landscape where we are both at home and do not know our way about'.[51]

This need to return repeatedly to the struggle to achieve perspicuity is mostly due to the ambiguous status of ordinary language; due, that is, to the fact that it is not possible to step outside language, to gain a vantage point from where we can survey language whole, and so are compelled to use ordinary language itself to clear up problems caused by language. Cavell writes: 'Wittgenstein's insight is that the ordinary has, and alone has, the power to move the ordinary, to leave the human habit habitable, the same transfigured'.[52] The *Investigations* thus uses examples, imagery and situations that are concerned with or derived from the ordinary and the everyday. Wittgenstein writes: 'we must stick to the subjects of our everyday thinking' (*PI* 106), and adds: 'When I talk about language [...] I must speak the language of every day' (*PI* 120). This use of ordinary language and focus on the ordinary are crucial features of the way Wittgenstein attempts to get his readers to look at the ordinary and in the process change the way they see things.

Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophy, argues Gordon Baker, can be seen as a 'kind of homeopathy', in which philosophical problems are dissolved by 'effecting changes of *aspect*'.[53] The lack of clarity in our grammar can be remedied by 'representations' of grammar that make things clearer. Things can be made clearer through a concentration on 'particular concrete cases' or 'concrete details', through the adoption of a narrow focus: 'In order to see more clearly', notes Wittgenstein, 'we must focus on the details of what goes on; must look at them *from close to*' (*PI* 51). Such narrow focus however is not meant to be an accurate description of the way things are or must be, rather these 'representations' function as '*objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities' (*PI* 130). Wittgenstein's task, claims Baker, is to 'break our bondage to analogies absorbed

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[51] Schalwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "imperfect garden"', p. 60
[52] Stanley Cavell, 'Declining Decline', *The Cavell Reader*, Stephen Mulhall (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 332
[53] Gordon Baker, '*Philosophical Investigations* section 122: neglected aspects', *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: Text and Context*, Robert L. Arrington & Hans-Johann Glock , (eds.), London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 48-49

into the forms of our language', which he does by exposing new aspects of systems of expression. 'Wittgenstein', explains Baker, in what can be seen as ethical or even religious terms, 'tried to liberate our thinking from enslavement to particular analogies by bringing to light other analogies'.[54]

Paradoxically, however, when things are seen clearly, when the familiar is revealed to us through this intense, narrow focus and the light provided by objects of comparison, it can seem strange, even uncanny: it is 'striking' and 'powerful'. Indeed, as in the case of still life, in which 'the departure from the habitual blurs and entropies of vision can be so drastic that the objects seem unreal, unfamiliar',[55] so in the *Investigations* the ordinary can appear strange, but also wonderful or even magical. The change in the way we see things can be radical and thus may seem metaphysical, but it isn't. We are seeing what is always there, but as with the case of Wittgenstein's example of the duck-rabbit diagram, the sudden change of aspect may have the appearance of being magical and feed the need for a metaphysical explanation.

As in still life, for Wittgenstein this strange and alienating experience is related to the idea of home or the homely. It is precisely because we are seeing things that are normally overlooked, but which lie open to view, that the experience is so profound. We are not seeing something new, but something *anew*, and it is precisely the fact that we are seeing something familiar and ordinary yet normally unnoticed that can make the experience both uncanny and wonderful.

In *Falling Man*, the equivocal status of the ordinary is intimately linked to the question of vision. The novel repeatedly emphasises the experience and importance of looking, and not solely in its detailed attention to the material of everyday life. Keith and Lianne are regularly struck by things normally overlooked, things usually hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. DeLillo writes:

> Prior to the attack Keith lived with the narrowest of purviews, that of not noticing.
> But now he looked. (*FM* 26)

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[54] Baker, 'section 122: neglected aspects', pp. 45, 49
[55] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 87

> He began to think into the day, into the minute […] things seemed still, they
> seemed clearer to the eye […]. He began to see what he was doing. He noticed
> things, all the small lost strokes of a day. (*FM* 65)

> The ordinariness, so normally unnoticeable, fell upon him oddly, with almost
> dreamlike effect. (*FM* 51)

> Something is always happening, even on the quietest days and deep into night, if
> you stand awhile and look. (*FM* 66)

This focused attention, this experience of 'looking at the overlooked', is closely connected to a sense of alienation. Both Lianne and Keith are removed or detached from things, from society at large, 'staying down, keeping out'. Lianne feels a 'separation, a distance' (*FM* 182) and Keith is 'away from routine stimulus [...] alone in time', and thus 'nothing seemed familiar, [...] he felt strange to himself' (*FM* 65). And Keith's estrangement is intimately connected to his returning home, to being 'in a family again' (*FM* 65).

Schalkwyk observes how Wittgenstein repeatedly stresses the importance of keeping words 'safely and properly at home' so that they no longer bewitch our intelligence, but also how Wittgenstein recognises the ease with which 'the domestic may become strange'. The *Investigations*, notes Schalkwyk, regularly returns to the idea of being lost, to the 'bewilderment of discovering that what you thought you knew well has become strange, the familiar alien'.[56] Thus, though Wittgenstein writes of bringing 'words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use', of looking at a word in 'the language game which is its original home' (*PI* 116); this does not necessarily provide the sought after clarity. For, paradoxically, though a metaphysical use of words is ultimately misleading, causing the understanding to run up against the limits of language, it *seems* clear: a metaphysical picture of things is captivating and has the 'crystalline purity of logic' (*PI* 107). The return from these 'ideal conditions' is to the 'rough ground' or the complex hurly-burly of ordinary language, which Schalkwyk, adapting Wittgenstein's metaphor, describes as returning to 'the frightening alienation

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[56] Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "Imperfect Garden"' pp. 63-64

of a "wilderness"'.[57] It is a wilderness precisely because it lacks logical purity, because things don't necessarily fit it into neat and tidy schema. It is for this reason that Wittgenstein writes: 'language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about' (*PI* 203).

The paradoxical status of home and ordinary language in Wittgenstein's later work is related to the problem of point of view, for, explains Schalkwyk, 'it is not as if some actual transformation occurs in the object: it is the same object viewed under different aspects'.[58] And it is here that we can most clearly draw a parallel with still life, which, notes Bryson, 'estranges what is familiar and everyday'.[59] In still life, the close attention, or narrow focus, on ordinary, normally neglected objects transforms them, and this, Bryson argues, 'isolates the viewer from the lazy visual field the subject normally inhabits'. He adds, 'by bringing into consciousness and into visibility things that perception normally overlooks, the visual field can come to appear radically unfamiliar and estranged'.[60]

Crucially, however, this sense of isolation from the ordinary, in both still life and Wittgenstein, can lead not only to a sense of estrangement, but to a sense of wonder. In still life, observes Bryson, 'attention itself gains the power to transfigure the commonplace' and 'the intensity of the perception at work makes for such an excess of brilliance and focus that the image and its objects seem not quite of this world'.[61] Similarly, Wittgenstein's therapeutic demystification and close, narrow focus, is not intended to make things seem banal. On the contrary, by 'arranging what we have always known', his aim is to clear away the confusion that hinders clear vision, and in the process to reawaken a sense of wonder (*PI* 109). Philip R. Shields writes:

> When [...] Wittgenstein shows us the strangeness of the familiar, he is trying to
> shift our perspective from the mundane to the religious, and to recapture the special

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[57] Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "Imperfect Garden"', p. 62
[58] Schalkwyk, 'Wittgenstein's "Imperfect Garden"', p. 64
[59] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 76
[60] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, pp. 89, 87
[61] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, pp. 64, 87

sense of wonder and awe he felt was extinguished by the prevailing scientific Weltanshauung.[62]

In *Falling Man* this sense of the simultaneously insignificant and remarkable, the mundane and religious, and the strangeness of the familiar is implicit throughout the novel: in the image of the shirt, in Morandi still lifes, in the emphasis on rituals and gestures. However, it is made explicit when, on noticing the banal fact that Keith stopped shaving for a time, Lianne is provoked to a series of reflections on meaning and the ordinary that provide a direct expression of the novel's engagement with the paradoxical status of the ordinary. 'Everything seemed to mean something', she thinks, before adding: 'but things were ordinary as well' (*FM* 67). The crucial word here is 'seemed', a frequently recurring word in DeLillo's work when intimations of significance are in play, not only because it stresses the ambiguity of the possible meaning, but above all because it reveals the importance of perception or, more specifically, the point of view from which things are seen. Things seem to mean something, in part, because Lianne 'looked for signs' (*FM* 67).

The importance of Lianne's equivocation – the way things can be simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary – is indicated by the recurrence and progression of Lianne's reflection on this issue in the narrative. Several scenes later, in a montage of different events and thoughts, Lianne reflects that 'what was ordinary was not more ordinary than usual, or less,' before concluding: 'but then she might be wrong about what was ordinary. Maybe nothing was. Maybe there was a deep fold in the grain of things, the way things pass through the mind' (*FM* 105). This short passage is remarkable for the subtle, understated way it suggests ambiguous yet profound meaning that, in its ambiguity, resonates throughout the novel and DeLillo's work in general. In the space of this 'maybe', of this possibility of transcendent meaning, lies the aesthetic core of the novel, if not DeLillo's aesthetics more generally.

The purpose of this chapter was to show that DeLillo's apparent 'retreat' to the domestic is not quite how it may seem on initial viewing; that DeLillo's treatment of and engagement with the ordinary is far from straightforward, since the ordinary turns out to be anything but ordinary. Indeed, as we will see, DeLillo's engagement with the

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[62] Cited in Duncan Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word*, p. 30

ordinary is part of a career long engagement with the possibility of transcendent meaning and the philosophical question of 'looking at the overlooked'. For, although his apparent retreat to the domestic indicates a shift of tone, the concern with awakening to the wonder of ordinary things, when clearly seen, can be felt throughout his work. By looking at the significance of Morandi's still life paintings in the narrative and comparing this with the way the ordinary features in Wittgenstein's later writings has considerable literary and artistic resonance I have sought to illuminate significant aesthetic and philosophical elements of DeLillo's engagement with the ordinary. These elements – looking at the ordinary; the transfiguration of the ordinary; seeing hidden, familiar things; the tension between the ordinary and transcendent; and the significance of home and exile – will be further examined, from different angles, throughout the rest of the thesis.

In the next chapter we will explore in greater detail the tension between the transcendent and the ordinary as we turn to *The Body Artist*. Like *Falling Man*, *The Body Artist* displays a profound engagement with the ordinary and everyday, examines the strangeness of the familiar, and the wonder of ordinary things when clearly seen. Both novels concern mourning, life – specifically, ordinary, everyday experience – after a tragic event, and examine it by making a subtle analogy with aesthetic experience, that is, the experience of grief is expressed in aesthetic terms, or as analogous to the experience of looking at a work of art. Both novels explore a shift in the way their characters see things and how their sense of time and space are radically altered. The next chapter will focus on the protagonist's form of spiritual journey: how she goes from, in Lianne's words, 'dreaming toward something unreachable' to returning to 'the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat' (*FM* 232, 236).

CHAPTER 2

'The Limits of the Human': The Temptations of Scepticism and Metaphysics in *The Body Artist*

> what challenges one's humanity in philosophy, tempts one to excessive despair or
> to false hope, is named scepticism.
>
> *Stanley Cavell*[1]

In this chapter we shift our focus onto language and the temptation of metaphysics and threat of scepticism. If *Falling Man* explores aspects of a retreat to the ordinary, and the paradoxical nature of ordinary things when clearly seen, *The Body Artist* explores the desire to transcend the ordinary, but also a return to it. Both novels are concerned with grief, spiritual exile, and the importance of art, but in *The Body Artist* there is a significant philosophical element to the protagonist's grieving. This philosophical aspect of the novel will be explored by drawing a parallel between the protagonist's struggle with grief and Wittgenstein's philosophical struggle with scepticism and metaphysics, and the importance of the ordinary in this struggle.

The Body Artist is a short, and on the surface, simple tale of a woman's bereavement. In relation to DeLillo's previous novels, in particular the novel that directly precedes it, *Underworld*, which features a host of interconnected characters in a variety of settings and time frames, *The Body Artist* can be viewed as a straightforward narrative in which not much happens, and also as the starting point of a marked shift in DeLillo's writing. The contrast between *The Body Artist* and *Underworld* could hardly be greater, as we can see from Anne Longmuir's useful summary of some of the superficial differences:

> Whereas *Underworld* is over eight hundred pages long, *The Body Artist* manages
> just over one hundred pages. *Underworld's* countless characters live through five
> decades of American history, while *The Body Artist* depicts the life of one woman

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[1] 'Declining Decline', p. 327

over a period of a few months. *Underworld* makes specific reference to many actual historical figures and events, while *The Body Artist* gestures vaguely and only occasionally to 'certain stories in the newspaper'. *Underworld's* depiction of the cold war and its aftermath is overtly political; *The Body Artist* seems to Michael Gorra, at least, to be 'DeLillo with the politics left out, without conspiracies and secret histories, with no bomb and no environment—no world situation—to worry over.'[2]

The Body Artist is characterised by its intense, philosophical focus on the nature of perception, time and the ordinary. The action mostly takes place in an isolated rental home in New England, in a single time span and predominately concerns the thoughts and emotions of a grieving widow, Lauren Hartke, the body artist of the title. There are two minor but important digressions from this central point of focus – an obituary marking the death of Lauren's husband, Rey Robles, and a newspaper feature that is both an interview and an account of Lauren's work of performance art, 'Body Time'. In between these two sections Lauren discovers Mr. Tuttle, a mysterious figure who seems to be incapable of using language properly and with whom she becomes obsessively preoccupied.

The apparent simplicity of *The Body Artist* both masks and enables a level of conceptual complexity that, with the possible exception of *Ratner's Star*, makes it DeLillo's most philosophical and intellectually demanding novel to date. Like Lauren's performance art, it is 'obscure, slow, difficult' (*BA* 109). There seems to be a consensus in the critical response to the text regarding the challenging nature of its minimalist, but conceptually dense, aesthetic. It is 'a more difficult and less accessible text than *Underworld*',[3] writes Longmuir, while Bonca notes that it refuses 'the easy pleasures of narrative'.[4] The novel is, in Cowart's elegant phrase, 'a miracle of thematic economy', incorporating 'a lot of conceptual and thematic material'.[5] It raises complex questions on the nature of time, language and the creative process, and, unlike *Ratner's Star*, its complexity is related to the simplicity of its subject matter. Within the straightforward narrative framework DeLillo has produced a poetic meditation on death, isolation, and the mystery of

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[2] Longmuir, 'Performing the Body in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53, 2007, p. 529
[3] Longmuir, 'Performing the Body', p. 528
[4] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 60
[5] Cowart, 'DeLillo and the Power of Language', *Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, p. 156

communication, in which ordinary, mundane activity and experience is punctuated by strange events of elusive meaning and moments of heightened awareness and sudden insight.

The philosophical nature of the novel and, in particular, Lauren's philosophical approach to her suffering – the way in which she channels her grief not only through her body work but through intense speculation on fundamental questions of time, reality and the nature of existence – seems to demand a philosophical reading of the text. Bonca has shown the need for, and value of, such an approach in his paper on *The Body Artist* and Heidegger. Bonca reads the novel as a further exploration of DeLillo's engagement with the fear and fact of death. For Bonca, DeLillo's work reveals 'a concentrated focus, even reliance, on death as epistemological and ontological mooring'; and *The Body Artist* is DeLillo's 'most explicit exploration' of the vital concepts of being, time and death.[6] The novel, he concludes, is about the 'drama and difficulty of uncovering Being's astonishment in death's presence'.[7] Though Bonca's reading is illuminating, and demonstrates the importance of avoiding postmodern paradigms for reading DeLillo, it only touches on the significance of language in the novel. Moreover, the attempt to say what such an elusive novel is about and the use of abstruse terminology such as, *Dasein, Lichtung* and *aletheia*, strikes me as problematic. In this chapter I will, like Bonca, pursue a philosophical reading, but will do so in relation to the *Philosophical Investigations*, a text that enables us to avoid the use of complex terminology. I will show how Wittgenstein's engagement with ordinary language as part of a struggle against the related claims of scepticism and metaphysical yearning can illuminate the novel's significant focus on language and exploration of the possibility of 'language outside language games'.

Like *The Body Artist*, Wittgenstein's later work, notably the *Philosophical Investigations*, is characterised by an apparent simplicity simultaneously masking and producing profound complexity. 'What we say will be easy', notes Wittgenstein, 'but to know why we say it will be very difficult'.[8] The *Investigations* is in part concerned with showing how ordinary language functions in ordinary circumstances. It uses examples,

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[6] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 60
[7] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 66
[8] Wittgenstein, cited in Duncan Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word*, p. 9

imagery and situations, and asks questions, that are concerned with or derived from the ordinary and everyday. It can at times seem as if it is merely dealing with banalities and uncontroversial truths, full of what Perloff describes as 'deceptively simple' language games and '"homely" metaphors'.[9] This focus on the ordinary gets its significance, in part, from the way it is in tension with the metaphysical.

This chapter will draw a series of analogies between the *Philosophical Investigations* and *The Body Artist* in order to explore the ways in which both are engaged with the ordinary and the way it functions as a site of return following the temptation to transcend or doubt it. The novel, like the philosophy of early and late Wittgenstein, explores the 'limits of the human' and the apparent human need to exceed those limits. This idea of excess can be seen in Lauren's commitment to solitude, her grief-addled imagination and in the way she treats her body: in her desire to alter its visible form, writes DeLillo, 'she calculated all the plausible requirements. Then she exceeded them' (*BA* 97). Above all, however, this excess can be seen in Mr. Tuttle, in the way 'he violates the limits of the human', and bares Lauren 'to things that were outside her experience' (*BA* 100, 63).

Cavell claims that 'the ordinary occurs essentially in the *Philosophical Investigations* as what scepticism denies, and metaphysics transcends',[10] and I will explore this claim in relation to the philosophical nature of Lauren's struggle to come to terms with her husband's death. I will show the ways in which Lauren is led to both sceptical doubt as well as metaphysical yearning as a result of her grief and her contact with Mr. Tuttle. I will suggest ways of reading Tuttle in Wittgensteinian terms, and above all, argue that Lauren's grief can be read as analogous to Wittgenstein's struggle against scepticism and metaphysics.

Much of the novel's complexity, mystery and philosophical nature stems from Lauren's interaction with Tuttle, whose use of language leads Lauren to both sceptical and metaphysical ideas about time, existence and epistemology. A Wittgensteinian reading of *The Body Artist* will illuminate the way in which Lauren's own philosophical investigations are provoked by and centred on issues of language. Cowart argues that

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[9] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p.911
[10] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 195

Lauren 'comes to a better understanding […] of "who she was" as a result of her unsought immersion, through interaction with the strange Mr. Tuttle, in language',[11] and this immersion in language will be the central focus of this chapter. Tuttle's use of language will be viewed as analogous with the kind of misleading philosophical uses of language that Wittgenstein thinks bewitch our intelligence. In particular, we will view an aspect of Tuttle's mode of speech as an example of what Cavell calls 'language outside language games', the attempt to say things that cannot be said, and thus as a species of the sublime. In doing so, we'll be able to illustrate the way in which Lauren's communication with Tuttle and her temptation to both doubt and transcendence enable her to return to herself and the ordinary with renewed self-understanding and clarity of vision. By looking at Cavell's reading of the *Investigations*, and in particular James Noggle's use of this reading in *The Wittgensteinian Sublime*, we can identify the sense in which it is only by attempting to doubt or transcend the ordinary that we can understand it.[12] Viewing Lauren's grief as a spiritual struggle and Tuttle as a facilitator in this struggle – serving as a kind of Wittgensteinian ladder – will not only serve to illuminate DeLillo's novel but also illustrate Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein.

I. RETURN

The Body Artist ends on an affirmative note of return – a return from the lure of the metaphysical and the threat of scepticism to the time-governed world of physical space and to a strong sense of self. In this first section I will explore how the novel traces Lauren's grieving process as a form of spiritual journey, how her experience of loss leads to a series of sceptical doubts, about perception, the nature of reality and time, but also to the temptations of metaphysics, to a yearning to transcend time. I will examine Lauren's return from a sense of loss in light of Cavell's reading of the significance of loss and exile in the *Investigations*.

Lauren's 'return to life',[13] as Osteen describes it, is enacted in a dramatic scene in the final chapter that encapsulates and completes the journey she undergoes through the

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[11] Cowart, 'DeLillo and the Power of Language', p. 157
[12] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 612
[13] Osteen, 'Echo Chamber', p. 66

novel. Lauren is once again alone in the large house she has rented. She has completed her work of performance art and spends her days walking or cleaning. Her yearning for metaphysical escape leads her to tell herself stories that seem to 'come from a deeper source […] a thing that was overtaking her' and she feels an increasingly fragile sense of identity, 'I'm Lauren. But less and less' (*BA* 115, 117). She longs to see Tuttle again and occasionally continues to perform him, believing that maybe 'she could deliver herself into his reality' (*BA* 114). This hope seems to be connected with the possibility of transcending time and finding 'a way to place [Rey] within reach' (*BA* 116). Rey and Tuttle are possibly becoming one person in her mind, or rather, as J. Heath Atchley notes, her desire to see Tuttle again 'intermingles with a desire to be again in Rey's presence until the two desires themselves become indistinguishable'.[14] This is illustrated by the fact that when she imagines she sees Rey, he is sitting in the exact posture in which she first found Tuttle, 'on the edge of the bed in his underwear', though unlike Tuttle he is 'lighting the last cigarette of the day' (*BA* 122).

Lauren's desperate hope that she can somehow recuperate Rey is intrinsically related to the despair, the 'lurid ruin', she implores herself to give in to. 'Let death bring you down', she urges, 'sink lower […] go where it takes you' (*BA* 116). In her desire, caused in part by her extreme isolation and loneliness, she imagines that first Tuttle then Rey is in the bedroom. As she walks towards the room she is 'fitting herself to a body in the process of becoming hers'; she is disembodied, alienated from herself (*BA* 121). In this state, in which she seems to transcend time or enter 'into his time', she can see and touch Rey, before it actually happens (*BA* 115). Finally, however, Lauren does not find Rey in the bedroom. The room is empty, an emptiness that can be seen to symbolise Lauren's return to the ordinary. Lauren is not surprised to find the room empty, 'she'd known it was empty all along but was only catching up', suggesting that her mind and body are unified again, that she has returned (*BA* 124). To make the return complete:

> She walked into the room and went to the window. She opened it. She threw the window open. She didn't know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was. (*BA* 124)

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[14] J. Heath Atchley, 'The Loss of Language, The Language of Loss: Thinking with DeLillo on Terror and Mourning', *Janus Head*, 7, 2004, p. 344

To fully understand this affirmative ending and the idea of Lauren returning to herself and the time-bound world we need to explore Lauren's loss, both the loss of her husband and the accompanying sense of a loss of self. Lauren's affirmative return to herself also marks a structural return to the novel's opening paragraph, which features a similar emphasis on time, the experience of nature and self-knowledge, as we can see from the aphoristic phrase, 'you know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm' (*BA* 7). The way the novel loops back to its beginning suggests that the opening chapter can only fully be understood retrospectively. The act of reading it a second time is not only informed by the haunting knowledge of Rey's death, but by an awareness of the philosophical significance of the focus on ordinary life.

The novel begins with a depiction of Lauren and Rey's ordinary breakfast routine and in it we can see the very kind of transfiguration of the commonplace through intensity of perception exemplified in still life painting. As in *Falling Man*, time is transformed – they're 'off the calendar' (*BA* 21) – and the everyday scene is rendered with such close attention to detail that the ordinary is transformed; it is *so* ordinary that the banal is infused with a sense of mystery and wonder. But this focus on the ordinary is cut short by Rey's sudden death and Lauren's subsequent drift into the fantastical, into the 'prospect of wonders' (*BA* 123).

In the second chapter of the novel we find Lauren in self-imposed exile following her husband's suicide. She has decided to carry on staying in the ramshackle country house by the sea that she had hired with Rey. Her plan is 'to organise time until she could live again' (*BA* 37). The very size of the house, its location and its haunting emptiness all serve to vividly emphasise and enhance Lauren's physical and spiritual isolation, she is 'alone in a large house on an empty coast', quietly suffering in a landscape of estrangement (*BA* 36).

Rey's death is announced in an obituary punctuating the first and second chapters that dramatically disrupts the fabric and structure of the narrative so far, powerfully illustrating the tragic disruption to Lauren's life. Lauren's isolation is emphasised not only by this sudden and unexpected shift in the narrative but also by the content of the obituary itself. The obituary contains a pithy assessment of Robles' work as a

filmmaker, which also serves to indicate the novel's central themes:

> His subject is people in landscapes of estrangement. He found a spiritual knife-edge in the poetry of alien places, where extreme situations become inevitable and characters are forced toward life-defining moments. (*BA* 29)

This description foreshadows and comments upon the novel itself, for it concerns Lauren's journey towards a life-defining moment brought about by an extreme situation in which she finds herself on a spiritual knife-edge.

In order to explore the philosophical and spiritual aspects of Lauren's journey, her loss and return, we shall now turn to Cavell's literary reading of the *Investigations*. In a late essay on Wittgenstein entitled *Declining Decline*, Cavell looks at the way the ideas of exile, loss and return figure in the *Investigations*. By carrying out a close reading of Wittgenstein's use of language – his metaphors, his range of examples and illustrations – Cavell is able to examine what Mulhall, in his introduction to Cavell's essay, calls 'the air of spiritual fervour that pervades Wittgenstein's philosophy'.[15] In particular, Cavell illuminates his sense that the *Philosophical Investigations* is a 'work of continuous spiritual struggle'[16] and reveals the important link in the text between problems of language and the question of the self.

Cavell argues that Wittgenstein exhibits 'philosophizing as a spiritual struggle, specifically a struggle with contrary depths of oneself, which in the modern world will present themselves in touches of madness'.[17] Cavell sees this as a struggle against the temptation to scepticism and the lure of metaphysical illusion, a struggle he sees as inevitable, without end and essential to being human. He writes, 'The *Investigations* at every point confronts this temptation and finds its victory exactly in never claiming a final victory over (the temptation to) scepticism, which would mean a victory over the human'.[18] The way the *Investigations* carries out this confrontation is through an unceasing return to the everyday or ordinary, 'in the particular and repeated humility of

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[15] Mulhall, 'Introduction to Declining Decline', *The Cavell Reader*, p. 322
[16] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 326
[17] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', pp. 325-326
[18] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 326

remembering and tracking the uses of humble words'.[19] For Cavell, Wittgenstein's insistence upon the ordinary can only be understood in relation to the apparently inevitable desire to transcend the ordinary; what James Noggle calls, 'our characteristic desire to escape ordinary human limits'.[20]

Wittgenstein argues that philosophical problems occur when language is 'like an engine idling', when a word is no longer used 'in the language game which is its original home' (*PI* 132, 116). Thus there is a sense, argues Cavell, that in philosophy 'words are somehow "away", as if in exile'.[21] Cavell holds that this condition is caused by the users of language, not by something in language, and so 'it is up to us to seek their return'.[22] In his use of the terms home, exile, and return Wittgenstein is predominantly talking about words, but by examining the implications of Wittgenstein's claims, Cavell is able to emphasise the important role of the subject that uses words. He shows how the 'exile of words […] is exile from oneself',[23] how a misuse of language can lead to exile, to a loss of self, but crucially how it is through words, through ordinary language, that the return to the self is made. It is to 'ordinary language', writes Cavell, that Wittgenstein 'entrusts the health of the human spirit.'[24] Thus, when Cavell reads Wittgenstein's statement that, 'what *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (*PI* 116) he argues that this return involves the speaker of the words returning as much as the words themselves. He writes, 'the behaviour of words is not something separate from our lives […] the lives themselves have to return'.[25]

Cavell pursues the literary echoes of these ideas of exile and return by connecting them to the notion of loss. The idea of loss is central to Wittgenstein's conception of the problems of philosophy, as is evident when he writes that 'a philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about"' (*PI* 123). Cavell notes that in the original German – *Ich kenn mich nicht aus* – there is an implication that 'the issue is one of a loss of self-knowledge; of being, so to speak, at a loss'.[26] This leads him to consider the identification of spiritual darkness as loss in the work of Dante and Thoreau, recalling

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[19] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 323
[20] James Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', *New Literary History*, 27, 1996, p. 613
[21] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 323
[22] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 324
[23] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 326
[24] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 323
[25] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 324
[26] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 325

the famous opening line to *The Divine Comedy*, 'In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost', and Thoreau's claim in *Walden* that, 'not till we are lost […] not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves'.[27]

In *The Body Artist* the spectral Mr. Tuttle acts as Virgil to Lauren's Dante, guiding her out of the darkness of her loss to the light of a more secure self-identity. Prior to her discovery of Mr. Tuttle we read that 'the world was lost inside her' (*BA* 37); she is alone, isolated, and alienated from the world and from herself, Bonca writes that, 'all the phenomena around her […] alienate herself from herself'.[28] She is even alienated from her body, experiencing a kind of Cartesian split between mind and body, 'her body felt different to her in ways she did not understand […] slightly foreign and unfamiliar' (*BA* 33).

Her husband's death causes Lauren to experience a perceptual, epistemological and spiritual crisis that manifests itself in profound scepticism, but also in metaphysical temptation. She is led either to question what she sees, to doubt or question the nature of reality, or to experience things metaphysically, 'things she saw seemed doubtful – not doubtful but ever changing, plunged into metamorphosis, something that is also something else' (*BA* 36). This crisis is first shown when Lauren is driving back to the house after Rey's funeral, 'everything is slow and hazy and drained and it all happens around the word *seem*. All the cars including yours seem to flow in dissociated motion' (*BA* 31). According to Bonca, the abrupt shift 'from the third person indirect narrative voice to a distancing second person'[29] accentuates Lauren's disconnectedness; it also dramatically illustrates Lauren's sense of disembodiment and feeling of separation from herself. The rupture in Lauren's perception of reality marked in this moment produces a blurred distinction between what is imagined and real that lasts for most of the novel, such as, the way she inhabits the stories she reads; sees a man and reads his entire life before realising it is only a paint can; or she sees a dead squirrel that turns out to be burlap.

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[27] Cited in Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 325
[28] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 63
[29] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 63

Lauren's altered perception of things is in part an expression of, and perhaps caused by, her grief, her experience of 'excessive despair and false hope'[30], which in turn is related to her scepticism and metaphysical yearning. The 'spiritual fervour' of Lauren's process can be seen in the fanatical, ascetic, self-eradicating work she carries out on her body – work that can be read as analogous with sceptical doubt. Lauren literally enacts on her body a form of radical denial that Descartes attempts hypothetically in his meditations, she attempts to 'become a blankness, a body slate erased of every past resemblance'; she 'tries to shake off the body' (*BA* 84, 104). The body leads her to a sense of alienation – in the various moments of disembodiment – but also 'restores a sense of self,'[31] such as when a 'raging crap' makes 'mind and body one' (*BA* 35). The dark fog of Lauren's grief is interspersed with moments of brilliant, spiritual light, moments that possess, according to Longmuir, 'a kind of visionary quality'.[32] Lauren 'recovers herself', argues Longmuir, 'by performing her body'[33] – an experience that, paradoxically, is deeply spiritual: 'her bodywork made everything transparent. […] She came out the other end in a kind of pristine light' (*BA* 57-58).

II. MR. TUTTLE

Lauren's recovery, her journey from darkness to light, is also enacted through, and mirrored by, a profound engagement with language, provoked by her interaction with Mr. Tuttle. Like her body work, Lauren's linguistic journeying both leads her astray and returns her home; Tuttle leads her to clarity but only once he has plunged her deeper into darkness. Tuttle helps Lauren by making her think about language. He does this by the way he speaks, 'shadow-inching through a sentence, showing a word in its facets and aspects' as well as by the elusive things he says (*BA* 48). Initially, Mr. Tuttle merely serves to exacerbate Lauren's sense of alienation. His use of language, the way he acts and his very presence in the house leads Lauren to an experience of profound and alienating sceptical doubt, but also to the belief in the possibility of transcendence.

Lauren discovers Tuttle living in the house upon her return from Rey's funeral

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[30] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 327
[31] Longmuir, 'Performing the Body', p 532
[32] Longmuir, 'Performing the Body', p. 532
[33] Longmuir, 'Performing the Body', p. 533

(suggesting the possibility of reading Tuttle as a ghostly embodiment of Rey in purgatory). It seems he has been in the house for some time, but who he is, and how and why he has come to live there, are questions that remain unanswered. His sudden disappearance is equally mysterious. Most mysterious and troubling of all are his curious use of language and apparent capacity to experience the future, 'I have seen what I will see', he says, and at one point in the narrative repeats a phrase of Lauren's that she has not yet uttered (*BA* 74-75).

Osteen describes Tuttle as a 'visitor who may or may not be an incarnate ghost'[34] and it could be argued that, if he is viewed as some kind of ghost, Tuttle's very existence is the result of Lauren's predisposition to scepticism and metaphysics. But, regardless of whether he is viewed as a ghost or an actual physical presence in Lauren's life, we can see that her interpretation and understanding of Tuttle is determined by her scepticism and metaphysical yearning. Tuttle provokes and embodies scepticism through his use of language and the way he brings into question fundamental notions of time, space and knowledge. Similarly, he embodies metaphysics – the possibility of transcendent meaning – through his other-worldliness, mysteriousness and the sense that he is possibly in tune with a 'deeper source' (*BA* 115). In Cowart's words, he 'seems like a modern version of what in primitive societies is taken as a figure of great mystery – a being in touch [...] with what ordinary people cannot see, hear, experience'.[35] And again it is his language – his transcendental chant – that is crucial here. By reflecting on Tuttle's language Lauren imagines she can exceed the limits of belief and transcend time, 'maybe she believed she could deliver herself in his reality, working out the logistics of word and thought' (*BA* 114).

Mr. Tuttle seems unable to use language properly, 'he is impaired in matters of articulation and comprehension' (*BA* 97), and his apparent inability to distinguish between past, present and future tenses – the fact that 'their talks had no time sense' (*BA* 66) – forces Lauren to think about the relation between time and language, and to question the very nature of time. One of Lauren and Tuttle's first exchanges is about the rain, in which Lauren thinks that Tuttle must be making a grammatical mistake. 'It rained very much', says Tuttle, and Lauren replies, 'it will rain. It is going to rain' (*BA*

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[34] Osteen, 'Echo Chamber', p. 65
[35] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 203

44). She then becomes insistent, saying 'it did not rain. It *will* rain' (*BA* 45), as if it is not simply a question of grammar but epistemologically important or perhaps even a question of sanity; as if what Tuttle says is a sceptical challenge to the nature of reality, which will in fact prove to be the case.

In her didactic appeal to grammar and common sense Lauren's attitude here recalls that of Jack Gladney, and her conversation with Tuttle about the rain recalls the comical exchange in *White Noise* between Gladney and his son, Heinrich, on the same subject. The Gladneys' argument begins when Heinrich states that, 'the radio says it's going to rain tonight', to which Gladney responds, 'it's raining now' (*WN* 22). The argument proceeds with Gladney attempting, somewhat desperately, to prove that it is raining while Heinrich illustrates some of the ambiguities in the relation between language and time – 'how can I say it's raining now', he argues, 'if your so-called "now" becomes then as soon as I say it?' (*WN* 23)

Like Gladney, Lauren is forced to confront similar problematic issues of language and time. She is confronted by the disturbing fact that Tuttle 'is a man who remembers the future' (*BA* 100); that his 'future is not under construction. It is already there' (*BA* 98). At first, as in the conversation about the rain, she tries to see it as a language problem, thinking 'he hasn't learnt the language' (*BA* 99), but this fails to satisfy her probing mind. Tuttle's failure to distinguish between past, present and future, she realises, may be due to the way he experiences reality rather than a failure to have mastered grammar. And this realisation offers a radical challenge to her own conception and experience of reality, causing her to experience profound, sceptical doubt. Cavell writes that 'to confront the threat of or temptation to scepticism is to risk madness'[36] and it is evident that Tuttle's behaviour and very existence leads Lauren not only to radical scepticism but also to 'touches of madness'.[37]

There are various ways in which Mr. Tuttle can be shown to illustrate some of the major themes of the *Investigations*, in particular, with regards to language and its relation to the wider cultural context, what Cowart identifies as, 'revelations about language as

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[36] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 326
[37] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 326

environment'.[38] Tuttle can be seen as a demonstration of Wittgenstein's argument that language is a cultural construction – language is a form of life – and that without belonging to a culture it is impossible to use language properly. The fact, for example, that Tuttle's language is separated from his body, that 'all the references at the unspoken level, the things a man speaking Dutch might share with a man speaking Chinese' are missing from his body language illustrates Wittgenstein's emphasis on the way in which physical activity – the body – lies at the bottom of linguistic meaning (*BA* 66). In the *Investigations* he writes, 'the common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language' (*PI* 206).

Tuttle, 'marooned between earth and ice, at home in neither',[39] might even be viewed as resembling a character from the *Investigations*. Cowart seems to be alluding to Wittgenstein when he describes Tuttle as a 'moon-addled language-gamer' and hints at the possibility of a Wittgensteinian reading by arguing that Tuttle 'embodies a primitive idea of language'.[40] This idea relates primarily to the way Tuttle seems to suffer from echolalia – he repeats words that are said to him. This is roughly the conception of language learning put forth by St Augustine, with which Wittgenstein opens the *Investigations* – words name things, and, by hearing and repeating the sounds made as a teacher points to a thing, language is acquired. Tuttle seems not to have taken the leap from learning how to say a word and applying it in the appropriate context. Osteen writes, 'lacking a strong grip on pragmatic conventions, Tuttle dwells in language like an unwelcome guest'[41], an idea rich in Wittgensteinian connotations. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses several metaphors to describe Augustine's picture of a child learning language as being similar to a stranger in a foreign land or an outsider in an alien tribe trying to learn a language, and he writes, 'one has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing's name' (*PI* 130).

Furthermore, some of Tuttle's utterances can be read in Wittgensteinian terms. For example, his statement that 'the word for moonlight is moonlight', which Lauren describes as 'logically complex and oddly moving and circularly beautiful and true', is replete with Wittgensteinian resonance (*BA* 82). Its poetic functionality, its dismissive

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[38] Cowart, 'DeLillo and the Power of Language', p. 157
[39] Terry Eagleton, cited in Scheman, 'Forms of life', p. 384
[40] Cowart, 'DeLillo and the Power of Language', pp. 156-7
[41] Osteen, 'Echo Chamber', p. 71

tone and the way it challenges the idea that word and thing, or word and meaning, can somehow be separated in discourse is characteristic of Wittgenstein's method in the *Investigations*. Wittgenstein notes that, 'when I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of every day. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say?' Does the word moonlight somehow fail to express moonlight? Wittgenstein reveals the absurdity of trying to get outside language when he continues, 'You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and you think of meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning' (*PI* 120). In the same passage he writes, 'your questions refer to words; so I have to talk about words' a phrase that can be heard echoing in Tuttle's inadvertent mocking and challenging of Lauren when he says, 'say some words to say some words' (*BA* 55).

Cowart also suggests, perhaps inadvertently, an alternative way of viewing Tuttle through a Wittgensteinian lens when he describes him as an 'emissary from beyond', who is a 'vehicle of insight into the mysteries of language and temporality',[42] for this points to the sublime or transcendent aspects of Tuttle's language, which we can compare with what Cavell calls 'Wittgenstein's sense of philosophy's drive to speak outside language games'.[43] Tuttle's apparently transcendent experience of reality challenges Lauren's sense of being human, and thereby plays a crucial role in Lauren's spiritual journey. Osteen writes that Tuttle teaches 'Lauren to stand outside of herself and, eventually, to return to herself'.[44] Tuttle acts as a kind of facilitator who both embodies and intensifies Lauren's temptation to both radical scepticism and the possibility of transcendence, but ultimately enables Lauren to return to the everyday or ordinary. He does this by leading Lauren astray, by bewitching her with his gnomic phrases and uncanny mimicking skills.

Tuttle's remarkable capacity to mimic other people's voices, most notably, Rey's, is what first leads Lauren towards transcendence. The mimicry initially seems merely child-like or a form of echolalia; he repeats or partially repeats words Lauren says to him. And yet as the novel progresses it becomes evident that there may be more to his

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[42] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 204
[43] Cavell. 'The Wittgensteinian Event, p. 195
[44] Osteen, 'Echo Chamber: Undertaking *The Body Artist*', *Studies in the Novel*, 37, 2005, p.70

apparently simple or meaningless phrases. Although at times frustrated by his repeated failure to answer her questions or use the correct verb tense, Lauren soon becomes bewitched by his utterances. She is both exasperated and enraptured by Tuttle's mode of speaking.

The first time she hears him imitating her voice she finds it 'unearthly almost' and 'deeply disturbing' (*BA* 50). She gets angry with him, asking him how he knows all these things she has said, calling him 'a little creep', and finally telling him to 'shut up' (*BA* 55/56). When she hears him speak as Rey, however, she is captivated, awestruck, unsure 'how to think about' it (*BA* 62). The experience 'bared her to things that were outside her experience but desperately central, somehow, at the same time' (*BA* 63). She yearns for Tuttle to repeat this feat, 'talk like him. Say some words' (*BA* 65), she implores, and in a later episode becomes quite desperate, begging with a sense of sexual urgency, 'talk like him. I want you to do this for me. I know you are able to do it. Do it for me. Talk like him. […] talk like him. Do like him. Speak in his voice. Do Rey. Make me hear him' (*BA* 71).

When he does finally do it for her this sexual element comes to the fore, further exacerbating her divided self and sense of disembodiment. She has a near out of body experience:

> Rey is alive now in this man's mind, in his mouth and body and cock. Her skin was electric. She saw herself, she sees herself crawling towards him. The image is there in front of her. She is crawling across the floor and it is nearly real to her. She feels something has separated. (*BA* 87/88)

Lauren's interest in Mr. Tuttle becomes obsessive – she records him speaking on a tape recorder so that she can listen repeatedly to his utterances – and she reflects with increasing intensity upon the possible consequences of his use of language and experience of reality. Tuttle's effect on Lauren is similar to what Noggle sees as the bewitching effect characteristic of the 'aesthetic power' of certain literary utterances. Noggle explains, 'the bewitchment of such utterances derives from their capacity to get

us to see all ordinary reality as illusory, or at least radically questionable'.[45] Noggle sees this power as operating on a linguistic level 'along the lines of the philosophical bewitchment that Wittgenstein admires and decries', claiming that it causes us to 'get caught up in language not ordinarily our own, which warps, for as long as it bewitches us, our attitude toward all ordinary life'.[46] It is evident that Lauren is bewitched by Mr. Tuttle, 'she was always looking' at him, 'she could not get enough' (*BA* 85). There is, though, an ambiguity here for although Tuttle clearly warps Lauren's attitude to ordinary life, it may be precisely because her attitude toward ordinary life is already warped that she is so bewitched by Mr. Tuttle. This ambiguity can be seen to parallel one that is at work in Wittgenstein: we are bewitched by metaphysics because of our failure to look at how ordinary language works, but we are unable to look at the ordinary or 'see the actual' because we are 'dazzled by the ideal' of metaphysics (*PI* 100).

More than the mimicry, however, Lauren is most bewitched by the moments when Tuttle's language seems to suggest the sublime. He produces a poetic mode of speech that suggests a profound insight into something deeper. As Osteen notes, 'not all of Tuttle's utterances are mere echolalia […]. He sometimes chants an instinctive, almost Heideggerian poetry'.[47] This point is elaborated by Philip Nel, who writes: 'Tuttle's language may be a more pure form of communication, so transcendent that it transmits echoes of a dead man's memory'.[48] Osteen and Nel are referring in particular to the occasion when Tuttle produces a 'pure chant' of 'sensuous and empty' words leading Lauren to experience ecstasy or the 'stir of true amazement', 'some displacement of self' (*BA* 75):

> Being here has come to me. I am with the moment, I will leave the moment. Chair, table, wall, hall, all for the moment, in the moment. It has come to me. Here and near. From the moment I am gone, am left, am leaving. (*BA* 75)

Although the phrase 'being here' has obvious Heideggerian associations, it is perhaps the prose of late Beckett that we can hear in Tuttle's chant. Compare the obsessive

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[45] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 612
[46] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 612
[47] Osteen, 'Echo Chamber', p. 72
[48] Nel, 'DeLillo's Return to Form', p. 745

repetition that evokes the coming and going in *Stirrings Still* – 'rise and go in the same place as ever. Disappear and reappear in another where never'[49] – or the play of tenses and short staccato sentences of *Worstward Ho* – 'all of old. Nothing else ever. But never so failed. Worse failed.'[50] – with the second half of Tuttle's chant:

> Coming and going I am leaving. I will go and come. Leaving has come to me. We all, shall all, will all be left. Because I am here and where. And I will go or not or never. (*BA* 75)

Just as in *Worstward Ho* the language itself is a reflection on the failure of language – 'fail again. Fail better' – so we can see Tuttle's chant in terms of what Noggle calls the Wittgensteinian sublime. According to Noggle, Cavell associates Wittgenstein's idea of philosophical or logical sublimity with the Kantian sublime. The sublime for Kant is not 'a true image of absolute power of the infinite universe but rather an instance of our failure to grasp such things'. Likewise, for Wittgenstein, 'philosophical utterances "sublime the logic of our language" not because they gesture outward toward some ineffable but metaphysically significant realm beyond the ordinary. Rather, they are an effect of language's failure to do so'. Tuttle's utterances function in a similar fashion; they are a 'sublime failure to capture meaning beyond language's capacities'.[51]

Nel makes the important point in relation to Tuttle's chant that 'if Tuttle speaks the language of God, if his utterances have some connection with Truth, we don't understand him. […] Whatever it is, Lauren can't translate it'.[52] Tuttle is like Wittgenstein's lion: 'if a lion could speak', he writes, 'we could not understand him' (*PI* p. 223e). We cannot understand the lion because a lion has a radically different form of life. Critics such as Osteen and Nel view Tuttle as an example of a DeLillian 'babbler', similar in certain respects to Micklewight in *Great Jones Street*, Tap in *The Names* and Wilder in *White Noise*. 'Tuttle is the latest – and one of the most significant – in a long line of childlike figures who populate DeLillo's novels',[53] writes Osteen. For Maltby, these characters illustrate DeLillo's engagement with the 'romantic myth of some

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[49] Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, New York: Grove, 1995, p. 261
[50] Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, London: Calder, 1983, p. 9
[51] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', pp. 608-9
[52] Nel, 'DeLillo's Return to Form', p. 746
[53] Osteen, 'Echo Chamber', p.70

primal, pre-abstract level of language';[54] their use of language indicates DeLillo's endorsement of the 'idea of a prelapsarian tongue that connects directly to the world'.[55] But, as discussed in the introduction, Maltby overlooks the ambiguity of DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics. Nel argues that DeLillo 'will never confirm' the possibility of transcendent meaning, but 'prefers to suggest that Tuttle, through the power of his childlike innocence and wonder, can mediate between physical and metaphysical worlds, accidentally bridging natural and supernatural'.[56]

Rather than viewing Tuttle, Wilder or Tap as pointing towards an actual deeper meaning or metaphysical reality, it is perhaps less problematic to view them as illustrating our apparent need for it. They can be seen to represent our yearning for some 'ineffable but metaphysically significant realm beyond the ordinary',[57] but not the existence of one. Such characters in DeLillo's novels reveal the extent to which ordinary experience is mediated, but they also show that this mediation is necessary. They experience reality and language differently because they are free from social, cultural or linguistic conventions. But this merely serves to illustrate the importance of social, cultural and linguistic conventions and not that these conventions somehow block access to a less mediated, purer truth.

For Wittgenstein, babbling is characteristic of language use outside of a language game, which can be both utter nonsense and highly profound. Noggle writes: 'Wittgenstein insists that expressions outside language games from one perspective seem as deep and powerful as anything could be and from another nonsensical'.[58] Significantly, however, this sublime language, this failure, is necessary for a clear-sighted understanding of ordinary language. 'Language outside language games is an outward venture that leads us nowhere but backward', explains Noggle, 'to the untranscendental conditions of ordinary language'.[59]

III. CLARITY

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[54] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', p. 265
[55] Nel, 'DeLillo's Return to Form', p. 745
[56] Nel, 'DeLillo's Return to Form', pp. 745-746
[57] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 608
[58] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 612
[59] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 611

According to Noggle, 'linguistic alienation's value lies in its capacity to purge us of itself, to bring us back to the language games in which we live and breathe'; 'to purge us of the philosophical desire to cling to the illusions of sublime transcendence'.[60] Lauren's engagement with Tuttle, both the alienation and yearning he produced or exacerbated in her, ultimately purges her of the desire for transcendence. In the novel's closing scene Lauren enters the bedroom in which she'd hoped to find Rey only to find that it is empty. Lauren has been spellbound by the idea that Rey is alive and in their bedroom – she has desperately tried to believe it is possible to transcend or go back in time, but at the final moment her fantasy comes to an end and she is faced with an empty room, the simple and familiar. This does not lead to disappointment but rather is experienced as a release. As Lauren's crisis ends and she returns to herself, she seems to perceive things with the same intensity, clarity and insight as she does in the novel's opening chapter, 'the light was so vibrant she could see the true colors of the walls and floor. She'd never seen the walls before' (*BA* 124). Both the experience and the language used to describe her return recall the 'spiritual fervour' with which Lauren sees the Jay outside the kitchen window in the novel's first chapter, 'she thought she'd somehow only now learned how to look. She'd never seen a thing so clearly'; 'this must be what it means to see if you've been blind all your life' (*BA* 21, 22).

As we've already shown, her return from her bewitchment is marked by a return to the ordinary, something akin to Wittgenstein's 'rough ground', where she can see and breathe. In a defiant gesture of renewal, and belief in the physical here and now, she throws open the window of her bedroom. She opens the window 'because she wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was' (*BA* 124). We can now see the extent to which, by affirming that time, nature and the body are essential for her sense of self, the ending can be read as an impassioned response to her earlier scepticism and yearning for transcendence.

Lauren's return to herself has an important philosophical parallel. Noggle argues that philosophical bewitchment can lead to a return to the ordinary, a return marked by fresh insight and a clearing away of the clutter of metaphysical thought processes. However,

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[60] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', pp. 614, 616

it is only through this process of being led astray and returning that the ordinary can be fully understood; 'only by departing from language games', argues Noggle, 'can we grasp their significance'.[61] For Cavell, the philosophical or literary misuse of language paradoxically enables a clear sight of ordinary language. He writes:

> the philosophically pertinent griefs to which language comes are not disorders, if that means they hinder its working; but are essential to what we know as the learning or sharing of language, to our attachment to our language; they are functions of its *order*.[62]

Noggle's reading of Cavell leads him to make an important connection between late and early Wittgenstein. He argues that linguistic alienation serves a similar purpose to that of the *Tractatus*, whose propositions Wittgenstein claims 'are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder after he has climbed up on it)' (*TLP* 6.54). Noggle claims that although Wittgenstein is averse to metaphysical language his work is also deeply invested in it. The value of metaphysical language, argues Noggle, 'lies in its power to throw us clear of itself when we perceive it rightly'.[63]

There is an evident spiritual or religious tenor to these ideas of clarity and returning, and both Wittgenstein and DeLillo seem to suggest the link between new ways of seeing or spiritual awakening with achieving a sense of peace. Such spiritual fervour is much in evidence in the *Investigations*, for example in the importance Wittgenstein gives to changing our '*way of looking at things*' (*PI* 144). He writes that,

> The clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that give philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. (*PI* 133)

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[61] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 607
[62] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 337
[63] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 617

There is nothing metaphysical about this experience for Wittgenstein, clarity of vision is not the privileged insight into 'the bottom of things', into 'something that lies *beneath* the surface' (*PI* 89, 92). Rather it is a question of not being 'dazzled by the ideal', but looking at the 'actual use' of words 'clearly' (*PI* 100). We can see a parallel between this mode of vision and the clarity with which Lauren sees things when she is not blinded by grief or bewitched by the temptations of Mr. Tuttle. The ordinariness of what Lauren sees – walls and floors, tap water, a blue jay – is contrasted with the blurred, somewhat fantastical vision Lauren experiences in the midst of her suffering. Ultimately, the novel suggests that if there is a possibility of transcendent meaning it is to be experienced in the material and activities of daily life, in 'all the shadow-dappled stuff of an undividable moment on a normal morning going crazy in ways so humanly routine you can't even stop and take note' (*BA* 24).

CHAPTER 3

From the 'numinous glow' to 'gut squalor' – *Underworld's* Dialectic of Transcendence and the Ordinary

She'd summon a moment that struck me with enormous force, any moment, something ordinary but bearing power with it - ordinary only if you haven't lived it.

Don DeLillo[1]

God grant the philosopher insight into what lies in front of everyone's eyes.
Ludwig Wittgenstein[2]

This chapter will be informed by the first two chapters of the thesis but also look forward to the last two. It will return to *Falling Man* by further examining aspects of 'looking at the overlooked' from a Wittgensteinian perspective, and will look to *The Body Artist* in terms of the significance of language, loss, and a sense of movement from the transcendent to the ordinary. However, in its concern with a disengaged, solipsistic protagonist and the possibility of transcendent meaning we will see connections with earlier novels and thus with the concerns of the last two chapters. The last chapter ended with the suggestion that if transcendence is to be found anywhere it is in 'all the shadow-dappled stuff of an undividable moment on a normal morning' (*BA* 24). This chapter will argue that *Underworld* is characterized by a similar dialectic between the transcendent and the ordinary; that, ultimately, transcendent meaning, if it exists at all, exists in the material of daily life; that, for all the suggestions of mysterious connections or miraculous visions, it is to the wonder of everyday things that the novel ultimately appeals. By looking at *Underworld* in the light of the novels that appeared after its publication we may gain a deeper insight into both the novel itself and its role

[1] *Underworld*, p. 101
[2] *Culture and Value*, p. 63

in DeLillo's work as a whole. In particular, I intend to show that by examining *Underworld* in the light of my reading of *Falling Man* and *The Body Artist* we can get a clearer sense of DeLillo's equivocal engagement with the transcendent and its dialectical relation to the ordinary.

That the novel is engaged on various levels with the transcendent – things 'outside the limits of experience' – is unquestionable (*U* 509). Arthur Saltzman observes that '*Underworld* displays a particular, consistent concern with what may lie beyond. By interrogating the accessibility and the merit of transcendental moments, *Underworld* focuses and extends an interest that appears throughout DeLillo's fiction'.[3] *Underworld* is shot through with moments of, and reflections upon, transcendence: from an atomic test blast to the mysterious appearance of a dead girl's face on a billboard; a historic baseball game to the traumatic shock of shooting someone; epic landscape sculpture to numinous landfill sites. The novel is in part an attempt to re-imagine the forms that transcendence, or rather the craving for transcendence, take in a postmodern, secular culture. The novel is engaged with the question of the possibility of metaphysical experience in a commodified world.

This chapter will attempt to address the nature and significance of this mystery or transcendence by arguing that it should be read as part of a dialectic with the ordinary. It will examine the way in which the ordinary and transcendent are intrinsically linked in the novel; how, in each case, the 'moments of possible transcendence'[4] are related in some way to a material object. They are immersed in the ordinary or, as Saltzman observes, 'transcendence is tethered'.[5] The argument will be informed by an engagement with Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's work as an 'inescapable dialectic' between the metaphysical and the ordinary. I will argue that *Underworld* enacts an inversion of the metaphysical and the ordinary, and is ultimately marked by a return to the contingent and particular, to the 'thick lived tenor of things' (*U* 827). I will show how Wittgenstein's thought can help us think philosophically about the function of the various metaphysical features of the novel, particularly in relation to the importance and nature of the hidden. By reading *Underworld* through a Wittgensteinian lens we will be

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[3] Arthur Saltzman, 'Awful Symmetries in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*', *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo,* p. 304

[4] John N. Duvall, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, p. 4

[5] Saltzman, 'Awful Symmetries', p. 304

able to see the transcendent moments not as endorsements or examples of a metaphysical or essentialist conception of things, but as part of a dialectic between the drive to metaphysics and a return to the ordinary or everyday; a dialectic that inverts metaphysics by seeing wonder in the ordinary and seeing the ordinary in the seemingly transcendent. *Underworld's* engagement with ordinary things and the everyday is not only central to understanding the way, and sense in which, the transcendent figures in the novel, but is also significant in itself. The concern with the ordinary pervades the novel, ranging from the obsessive interest in waste to the role and nature of the artists and works of art featured in it. The novel is animated by an interest in daily ephemera, in the unseen elements of everyday life; it unearths the forgotten, overlooked or neglected elements of culture and history.

It might be argued that the novel's metaphysical engagement is less equivocal than I am suggesting, as there is a great deal in the novel that may seem to illustrate what Maltby calls DeLillo's 'metaphysical cast of mind'.[6] From the title, with its implication of a division between depth and surface – between a world 'under the surface of ordinary things' (*U* 761) and a world with 'a rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look' (*U* 157) – to the repeated distinctions between real and fake, we might assume that the novel is underpinned by the kind of romantic metaphysics that Maltby, in reference to earlier novels, argues is central to DeLillo's work. Especially if, following Maltby, we were to see the various moments of transcendence as 'premised on metaphysical assumptions of supernal truth',[7] as moments of insight into reality or hidden truth. The novel's preoccupation with conspiracy and the accompanying notion of *dietrologia* – 'the science of dark forces […] the science of what is behind something' (*U* 280) – might also be read in such metaphysical or Platonic terms, for, as McClure writes: 'conspiracy theory explains the world […] by positing the existence of hidden forces which permeate and transcend the realm of ordinary life'.[8]

By reading DeLillo's novel in relation to Wittgenstein's philosophy, which challenges this Platonic idea that reality, or the real, true nature of things lies hidden, we can show that *Underworld*'s concern with conspiracy, paranoia and the hidden, with secrets and

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[6] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', p. 275
[7] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics' p. 259
[8] McClure, 'Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy', *Introducing Don DeLillo*, p. 103

the loss of the real, is not an endorsement of an unequivocal metaphysics but part of an engagement with understanding what Cavell calls 'the essential and implacable restlessness of the human' in the striving to find meaning.[9]

By turning to Wittgenstein I hope to show that we can make sense of and illuminate the novel's paradoxical engagement with the hidden and the ordinary without recourse to problematic metaphysical paradigms or the suggestion that DeLillo is an unequivocally metaphysical novelist. I will show that what is hidden does not refer to some inaccessible metaphysical realm of truth or essence but to ordinary things not normally seen. And I will show that, by looking at the ordinary in a certain way, we can be cured of a metaphysical yearning that for Wittgenstein, though inevitable, leads to confusion, nonsense, a sense of loss and exile, and that for DeLillo leads to, among other things, paranoia, alienation, and solipsism. Wittgenstein's radical approach to 'what is hidden', and the way in which he engages with the metaphysical, neither rejecting nor accepting it, can help illuminate the complexity of DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics and show that notions of depth or the real are not the result of a privileged insight into the true nature of things, but simply of ordinary things seen clearly.

I. THE ORDINARY AND TRANSCENDENT

Underworld ends with a single word paragraph, a word that seems to hover ambiguously between suggesting possible transcendence and acceptance of the ordinary: 'Peace'. It is a word that 'spreads a longing' and yet marks serenity and contentment; that represents both an unattainable ideal and the physicality of 'binding touch' (*U* 827). Osteen reads this 'final, pacific word' as being 'offered hopefully but tentatively as an ideal that may nonetheless remain out of reach',[10] while Saltzman picks up on the term's ambiguity as a conclusion to the novel: 'it is hard to tell whether "peace" results from the contention that "everything connects in the end" or whether it is just a wish for a release from that sentence.'[11] There is added ambiguity from the sense in which it is possible to hear 'peace' as a goodbye in hippy slang.

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[9] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 195
[10] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread'*, p. 217
[11] Saltzman, 'Awful Symmetries', p. 313

The tension embodied in this powerful, single word – between longing and acceptance, between the ideal and the actual – and the equivocal conclusion it provides for the novel encapsulates DeLillo's ambiguous and complex engagement with the transcendent. This final word comes at the end of a series of endings, all of which are marked by a similar tension or dialectic between the transcendent and the ordinary. The Epilogue seems to reach its climax with the apparently miraculous appearance of a recently murdered young girl's face on a billboard. The girl, Esmeralda, was a homeless child who lived and roamed around 'the Wall', a run-down area of the South Bronx. She is brutally raped and murdered, and a few days later rumours start to spread of her face appearing on an advertising hoarding for Minute Maid. People start to congregate at the spot hoping to see this possible miracle, including Sisters Edgar and Gracie, who have been trying to rescue Esmeralda. Gracie is sceptical, but Edgar is keen, ready to believe that it is the sign she needs to keep her faith intact. The face seems to appear, fleetingly, as the headlights of 'an ordinary commuter train' illuminate the billboard. For Sister Edgar the experience is a revelation. She feels 'an angelus of clearest joy' (*U* 822) and experiences the rapture of communal bliss, as she lets go of a lifetime's lack of contact and embraces her fellow, rapt believers.

The experience of 'how a crowd brings things to a single consciousness', how a single fleeting event produces a 'holler of unstopped belief' and 'swaying soulclap raptures' (*U* 821, 824) connects this event with the novel's beginning; with the account of Bobby Thompson's homerun – the fact that 'what could not happen actually happened' (*U* 57-8). In DeLillo's depiction of the legendary baseball game between the New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers we can see a significant emphasis on its transcendent nature. According to Todd McGowan, for example, Thompson's home run 'is a transcendent event'; it has 'an aura surrounding it, as if it were a sacred event'. McGowan adds that DeLillo's narration 'further establishes this aura, as he slowly builds up a sense of anticipation and inevitability'.[12] DeLillo conveys the transcendent aspects of the ball game not only at the moment of Thompson's dramatic homer and the euphoric eruption that follows, but from the start, from Cotter's slow motion leap over the turnstile and his

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[12] McGowan, 'The Obsolescence of Mystery and the Accumulation of Waste in Don DeLillo's *Underworld', Critique,* 46, 2005, p. 125

first sight of the field: 'that unfolding vision of the grass that […] seems to mean he has stepped outside his life' (*U* 14).

This sense of the transcendent, however, is given its weight and force by the way it contrasts with, and is embedded in, a deeply textured account of all the ordinary elements that constitute the event; elements of lived experience or what Klara Sax calls 'felt life' (*U* 77). DeLillo's rendering of the baseball game is as remarkable for its ordinariness – for the local, American, and historically specific features – as it is for its transcendent aspect. The prologue is notable, as is the novel as a whole, for the way DeLillo immerses us in the ordinary – in the 'gut squalor' of the event, from the 'reek and mold' of the toilet or the 'sweaty meat and grease bubbles' of a hot dog (*U* 21, 13), to the vomit on Frank Sinatra's shoes. The prologue's most transcendent image – the falling pocket litter that rains down onto the field, described by David H. Evans as an 'eruption of countless particulars'[13] – is itself marked by its ordinariness:

> Paper is falling again, crushed traffic tickets and field-stripped cigarettes and work from the office and scorecards in the shape of airplanes, windblown and mostly white. (*U* 37)

> It is coming down from all points, laundry tickets, envelopes swiped from the office, there are crushed cigarette packs and sticky wrap from ice-cream sandwiches, pages from memo pads and pocket calendars […] rolls of toilet tissue unbolting lyrically in streamers. (*U* 45)

This conjunction of the transcendent and the ordinary in an inextricable dialectic is also manifest in DeLillo's depiction of the Bobby Thompson ball that is hit out of the stands and eventually into the hands of Nick Shay, as well as in the sport of Baseball itself. Baseball is symbolic of an innocent past. It functions as an ideal, part of American mythology, but also represents the grounded and homely; the 'real'. In a later scene Big Sims evokes the ordinariness of baseball as a way of rebuffing Nick's conspiratorial invocation of '*dietrologia*' when he replies that he doesn't need this science: 'I'm an American', he says, 'I go to ball games' (*U* 280).

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[13] Evans, 'Taking Out the Trash', p. 117

As for the Bobby Thompson ball, which plays such a pivotal symbolic and structural role in the novel, it can be seen as both a 'magical object'[14] and a useless thing, 'junk' – celebrated as both a transcendental, 'high aura'd' emblem and for its 'irreducible thingness'.[15] Nick's attachment to the baseball is in part for its symbolic value, but the importance of its physicality and ordinariness is also emphasised, as we can see from the way Nick delights in the materiality and sensuality of such a lived but inanimate object, in the friction between hand and ball, and sense of human contact with things:

> You squeeze a baseball. You kind of juice it or milk it. The resistance of the packed material makes you want to press harder. There's an equilibrium, an agreeable animal tension between the hard leather object and the sort of clawed hand. Veins stretching with the effort. And the feel of raised seams across the fingertips […]. The ball was deep sepia, veneered with dirt and turf and generational sweat – it was old, bunged up, it was bashed and tobacco-juiced and stained by natural processes and by the lives behind it. (*U* 131)

Cowart notes that the ball 'may or may not retain a special meaning'[16] and this ambiguous status, this sense in which an ordinary thing can suggest transcendent possibilities, is also a marked characteristic of Esmeralda's appearance on the billboard. The billboard is illuminated by the headlights of 'an ordinary commuter train' and is itself a banal advertising device. In discussing this scene, Peter Knight points out that 'the source of mystery' is located

> not in an uncorrupted zone outside the iron cage of capitalism but within the system itself: the moment of collective religious wonder comes not by traditional divine or artistic revelation but through the medium of advertising, the very soul of consumer capitalism.[17]

Not only does the miracle appear through the medium of advertising, but it is soon incorporated into the market: 'just as the exhilaration of the baseball game's incredible conclusion is followed by a sordid struggle over the possession of the ball', observes Evans, 'so the site of Esmeralda's manifestation quickly becomes a makeshift strip

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[14] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 229
[15] Evans, 'Taking Out the Trash', p. 122
[16] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 193
[17] Knight 'DeLillo, postmodernism, postmodernity', p. 38

mall'.[18] The billboard miracle is corrupted by 'Manhattan money and glut' (*U* 818) – vendors selling 'laminated images of Esmeralda' and the tabloid sensation of Esmeralda's junkie mother being taken away in 'an ambulance that is followed by a number of TV trucks' (*U* 823). Esmeralda ends up, notes Molly Wallace, subjected to 'the logic of consumption'.[19]

Similarly, it does not take long before a sense of loss or disappointment undermines the personal experience of transcendent bliss. Just as Cotter 'feels the little bringdown' brought about by 'the sour air of his building' and the 'pain from the seat leg' (*U* 58) so Edgar is brought back to her body by the 'pain in her joints, the old body deep in routine pain' (*U* 824). Cowart writes: 'although DeLillo affirms that […] Sister Edgar experiences a moment of exaltation, he simultaneously denies its ultimate validity',[20] for just as Cotter is unable to keep hold of his possession so Edgar struggles to maintain her belief in the vision. She 'holds the image tight in her mind' but, she seems to acknowledge, the image is a result of her yearning: it is 'the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt' (*U* 824).

Following this episode, however, the novel seems once again to suggest the possibility of transcendence as we experience Sister Edgar's life-after-death:

> There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password – world without end, amen. (*U* 825)

Philip Nel writes that 'though this passage seems to posit the Internet as a means of transcending the material world, the very next paragraph quickly disabuses us of that notion: "But she is in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems. This is why she's so uneasy (*U* 825)."'[21] DeLillo emphasizes this turn from the transcendent to the material with a wry and amusing interjection of the narrative voice: 'she sees God. No, wait, sorry. It is a Soviet bomb she sees' (*U* 826).

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[18] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash' p. 130
[19] Cited in McGowan, 'The Obsolescence of Mystery', p. 379
[20] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 194
[21] Nel, '"A Small Incisive Shock": Modern Forms, Postmodern Politics, and the Role of the Avant-Garde in *Underworld'*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45, 1999, p. 743

Nel concludes his essay with the claim that DeLillo's work 'challenges us to reconnect' to the 'material world'.[22] Curiously, however, Nel doesn't actually examine the way DeLillo does this in the novel's final paragraph. Nel claims that it is 'significant that the novel ends in the Internet',[23] but is it not more significant that the novel finally ends with a concrete reconnection to the material world? With an escape from the 'grip of systems' (*U* 825), a shift from the immateriality of cyberspace – a place of 'easy retreats, half beliefs' and the 'false faith' of paranoia (*U* 826, 825) – to the world of ordinary things:

> You look at the things in the room, offscreen, unwebbed, the tissued grain of deskwood alive in light, the thick lived tenor of things, the argument of things to be seen and eaten, the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray, and the dense measures of experience in a random glance […] and the chipped rim of the mug that holds your yellow pencils, skewed all crazy, and the plied lives of the simplest surface, the slabbed butter melting on the crumbled bun, and the yellow of the yellow of the pencils. (*U* 827)

This rich, sensuous passage, which, like Nick's description of the baseball, is 'extraordinary in it assiduous specificity',[24] depicts the power, resonance and beauty of ordinary things and everyday life. By turning away from the false promise of cyberspace and ambiguous visions to the 'thick lived tenor of things' – things seen clearly and in illuminated detail – DeLillo seems to suggest that it is in 'the depth and reach of the commonplace' that we can see what is extraordinary (*U* 542). By showing the extraordinariness of the ordinary, this passage reveals that the significance of the transcendent in DeLillo does not lie in the fact that it offers a means of escape or retreat from contemporary culture and existence. Transcendence in DeLillo is not a reactionary mode of religious hope or promise of the infinite; it is not, claims Knight, to be found in 'some inaccessible and outmoded otherworldly realm'.[25] Rather, the transcendent in DeLillo consists of a deeper engagement in material, temporal culture, and it is the result of an increased or intensified clarity of vision.

[22] Nel, 'A Small Incisive Shock', p. 744
[23] Nel, 'A Small Incisive Shock', p. 742
[24] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 122
[25] Knight, 'DeLillo, postmodernism, postmodernity', pp. 38-39

The passage exemplifies the inversion of the metaphysical and the ordinary that is at work throughout the novel. The focus is on ordinary things – things overlooked because of their 'simplicity and familiarity', things 'always before one's eyes' (*PI* 129) – yet these things are imbued with a kind of wonder; there is an attempt to convey what George Steiner, citing Heidegger, calls the 'luminous "thereness of what is"'.[26] And, as we have shown in Chapter One, the emphasis on light, colour and tone – the 'tenor of things' – and the fact the things 'are simply the ordinary, attended to'[27] in their uniqueness, calls to mind a certain mode of still life painting.

II. 'NOTHING IS HIDDEN'

'Nothing is hidden', writes Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI* 435). A radical claim that seems in direct contrast to the prevailing mood and theme of *Underworld*, in which secrets, hidden connections, and 'second meanings' play such a vital role (*U* 88). Of course any attempt to extract a truth claim or any kind of theory or generalisable point from Wittgenstein's work is fraught with difficulties. The *Investigations*, writes Perloff, 'is neither a book of proverbs nor a systematic argument', but a trip through a 'network of fragments'.[28] It is in large part a series of dialogical exchanges between different illocutionary voices, and there is no attempt to make substantive propositions on any subject. As discussed in the introduction, the purpose of the text is to demonstrate a method or style of thought, not to express doctrines. Nevertheless, it can be safely asserted that the idea that nothing is hidden is a recurring theme in the text and forms part of Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysics. It is part of his attempt to demystify our sense that something 'out of the ordinary is involved' (*PI* 94) in the workings of language, and by extension in the meaning of things generally. In particular, it is, according to David Finklestein, part of his attempt to show 'why we ought to be dissatisfied with a Platonistic account of meaning and understanding'.[29]

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[26] Steiner, *Heidegger*, London: Fontana, 1992, p. xix
[27] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 131
[28] Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 68-69
[29] Finklestein, 'Wittgenstein on rules and platonism', *The New Wittgenstein*, p. 55

Wittgenstein fully recognises the force and pull of the metaphysical urge, of the extent to which a metaphysical attitude lies embedded in our language and consciousness. He writes: 'we feel as if we had to penetrate phenomena […] as if there were something hidden […] that had to be brought to light' (*PI* 90, 91). Wittgenstein shows why we are led to think that the essence of things, or meaning, lies hidden – for example, because of the 'fascination which forms of expression exert on us' (*BB* p. 27) or because of 'certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language' (*PI* 90) – but also why the temptation to think in such a way leads to philosophical grief. The idea that something is hidden – truth, essence, meaning, God – something that can be discovered or found or that philosophy can give an account of, is precisely the kind of misleading belief that Wittgenstein thinks leads to philosophical confusion, but one which he recognises as having a profound grip on us. It is a picture of things that holds 'us captive' (*PI* 115) and its 'roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and [its] significance is as great as the importance of our language' (*PI* 111). He writes:

> People are deeply embedded in philosophical, i.e. grammatical confusions. And to free them from these presupposes pulling them out of the immensely manifold connections they are caught up in. One must so to speak regroup their entire language. – But this language came about // developed // as it did because people had – and have – the inclination to think in this way. (*PO* 185)

Wittgenstein acknowledges and explores the urge or apparent need to seek metaphysical answers – to uncover what lies hidden – because an important part of his work is concerned with showing the false paths we seem naturally inclined to take. He writes, 'one must start out with error and convert it into truth. That is, one must reveal the source of error, otherwise hearing the truth won't do any good […] one must find the path from error to truth' (*PO* 119). Thus a great deal of the *Investigations* is taken up by diagnosis, by showing the way philosophical confusion arose in the first place. Cavell claims that 'the first step of a philosophical answer to a philosophical problem is to demonstrate to us that we are indeed lost, confused'.[30] It is this acknowledgement of, and engagement with, metaphysical yearning or 'the philosophical, or say the human, craving for the metaphysical'[31] that leads Cavell to claim that Wittgenstein's later

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[30] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 201
[31] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 195

thought 'can be regarded as providing a theory of the drive to metaphysics'; that it is 'as much a philosophy of metaphysics as it is a philosophy of the ordinary'.[32]

What is important about Wittgenstein's writing in this area for thinking about DeLillo is that he doesn't simply reject metaphysics or the drive to metaphysics, but seems to invert it. Wittgenstein recognises that metaphysics attempts to satisfy a deep need within us and rather than reject this need he turns the issue on its head, 'by turning our whole examination round. (One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need)' (*PI* 108). Wittgenstein attempts to show that the satisfaction or answers we seek from metaphysical questions can be provided by a turn or return to the ordinary, but seen in a specific way – by 'seeing connections' and 'arranging what we have always known' (*PI* 122, 109). And, paradoxically, this way of seeing may seem metaphysical. This paradox can be illuminated by a passage from Wittgenstein's notebooks for *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, in which he talks of 'metaphysics as a kind of magic'. He writes 'I must not make a case for magic nor may I make fun of it. The depth of magic should be preserved. Indeed, here the elimination of magic has itself the character of magic' (*PO* 116).

The steps Wittgenstein advocates for a return to the ordinary frequently have the appearance and magical effect of a metaphysical insight, in which the sudden changed 'way of looking at things' (*PI* 144) brought about by his method has the air of religious revelation. He writes: 'the solution of philosophical problems can be compared with a gift in a fairy tale: in the magic castle it appears enchanted and if you look at it outside in daylight it is nothing but an ordinary bit of iron (or something of the sort)' (*CV* 11). Furthermore, his highly figurative use of language, frequent use of similes, metaphors and analogies, and recurring use of light imagery, also has strong metaphysical and religious connotations. Cavell argues that the 'idea of philosophical progress in the *Philosophical Investigations* is from the darkness of confusion to enlightened understanding, or from illusion to clarity';[33] it is not from 'ignorance to knowledge' but

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[32] Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 78

[33] Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap, 2004, p. 328

from 'being lost to finding ourselves'.[34] Along with religious imagery Wittgenstein thus also invokes the religious idea of a journey or quest, a movement from darkness to light – a journey in which language plays a central role. He writes, 'the choice of our words is so important, because the point is to hit upon the physiognomy of the thing exactly, because only the exactly aimed thought can lead to the correct track' (*PO* 165). Wittgenstein writes of finding 'the liberating word', and this word functions not by unlocking a secret or revealing hidden truths, but by making problems disappear (*PO* 165). The liberation is not an insight into true reality or an otherworldly realm; it is the liberation of 'peace' (*PI* 137). 'The problems are dissolved', claims Wittgenstein, 'in the actual sense of the word – like a lump of sugar in water' (*PO* 183).

By viewing things in this way we can better understand the apparent contradiction in the *Investigations* between two closely related, almost consecutive statements on 'what is hidden'. In remark 126 Wittgenstein states that, 'since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us'. This is closely followed in remark 129 by the claim that 'the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes)'.

There is no real contradiction here because Wittgenstein is making two separate though related points, but the use of the word 'hidden' does reveal the way Wittgenstein shows that the seemingly metaphysical is ordinary and that the ordinary can seem metaphysical. The first statement – that what is hidden is of no interest – is an argument against the temptation to metaphysics; against the misleading but powerful belief that 'the essence is hidden from us, […] lies beneath the surface' and that 'analysis can dig it out' (*PI* 92). The second statement concerns the ordinary or everyday workings and uses of language that we overlook or can't see precisely because we are looking for something hidden. It is precisely because we are misled or bewitched by the role of the ideal in our language that we are unable to see 'what we have always known' (*PI* 109). Instead, 'we are dazzled by the ideal' (*PI* 100) and thus fail to see the actual workings of our language in 'ordinary life'. The ideal functions 'like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off' (*PI*

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[34] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 201

103), and Wittgenstein brings us out from this false ideal by opening the ordinary world to us. By taking off the glasses through which we were trying to find what is hidden – the metaphysical - we can see the simple and familiar, which was previously unseen, but is in fact ordinary. In other words, the aspect of things that seems hidden and which is of vital importance for Wittgenstein is the 'everyday use' of words or 'the language of everyday' (*PI* 116, 120). He writes: 'a main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words' (*PI* 122).

The issue of sight or clarity of vision is central to Wittgenstein's thinking here. The answers to philosophical difficulties, he argues, 'must be homespun and ordinary. But one must look at them in the proper spirit' (*PO* 169). The dazzling ideal prevents us from seeing clearly. What Wittgenstein wants to do is 'to bring words back from the metaphysical to their everyday use' (*PI* 116), which Cavell argues is a return to 'the actual language of life in a life momentarily freed of an illusion'.[35] This relation between language and vision, the everyday and the metaphysical, is explicitly addressed in *Underworld* during Nick Shay's discussion with Father Paulus, which will be discussed shortly, and it is central to the novel's concerns as a whole. The 'illusion' that Cavell refers to is a metaphysical, systematic, totalizing paradigm that prevents us from seeing the singular and ordinary. By showing that the novel's concern with the hidden aspect of things is primarily a concern with neglected everyday things that are unseen, we can suggest a Wittgensteinian approach to the way paranoia functions in the novel and show that the novel carries out a subtle critique of a metaphysical or paranoid conception of the hidden.

III. 'OVERLOOKED KNOWLEDGE'

In *Underworld* the hidden refers not so much to some kind of Platonic realm – there is no suggestion of finding some essential core of truth – but to things not normally seen. The novel's concern with seeing what we don't ordinarily see – what Father Paulus refers to as the 'overlooked knowledge' of 'everyday things' (*U* 542), things which exist in concrete, material reality and not in some abstract or ideological realm – has

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[35] Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990, p. 21

political, aesthetic as well as philosophical consequences. In a scene that can be said to illustrate Wittgenstein's claim that 'One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes' (*PI* 129), Klara Sax experiences an aesthetic revelation when she starts to see things previously unseen or from revealing new perspectives:

> she realized how rare it was to see what stands before you, and what a novelty of basic sensation in the grinding life of the city – to look across a measured space and be undistracted by signs and streetlights and taxis and scaffolding, by your own bespattered mind. (*U* 379)

Wittgenstein's words are also echoed by Marvin Lundy who states that 'People sense things that are invisible. But when something's staring you right in the face that's when you miss it completely' (*U* 173). Knight reads the idiosyncratic Lundy's conspiratorial musings as indicative of the novel's general conception of counter-history. He writes:

> For both Marvin and the novel as a whole the hidden story of recent history is not to be found buried in government files, waiting to be pieced together into a coherent story of shadowy conspirators. Instead it is to be found in the daily ephemera and vast entanglement of multinational consumer capitalism, both more obvious because it is omnipresent, and less detectable because it is so much taken for granted.[36]

For Lundy, this conception of things involves looking at the map of Greenland or shape of Gorbachev's birthmark for telling signs, but for the novel as a whole it indicates the general importance of the ordinary or everyday, of the way beauty and wonder lie hidden in everyday life. In the same essay, Knight draws a parallel between *Libra* and *Underworld* and cites an interview with DeLillo that suggests a Wittgensteinian way of thinking about the unseen:

> In the New York Times interview, DeLillo explains how the true meaning of the Warren Commission Report […] was not its revelations about any conspiracy plot, significant though they were, but the accidental insight it affords into the otherwise invisible interweavings of the vast social – and textual – fabric of America: "[…] the assassination […] cast a strong light on a part of the culture that nobody was

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[36] Knight, 'Everything is Connected', p. 289

aware of". […] In a parallel fashion, the labyrinthine path of the Bobby Thomson baseball in *Underworld* offers DeLillo a way of shedding light on vast areas of American culture normally omitted in other inquiries.[37]

Both the language used and the ideas embodied in this citation have strong Wittgensteinian resonance. Wittgenstein is preoccupied in his later work with areas normally omitted in other inquiries; what we might call the invisible interweaving of the vast fabric of language, and the social and cultural forms of life that are integral to its function and meaning. These areas are invisible not because they are transcendent or somehow behind or beneath phenomena, but because they are unseen. 'Wittgenstein's grammatical enquiry', notes McGinn, 'aims to produce a kind of understanding which consists in seeing a pattern or form in what is there before our eyes, but which we had previously neglected or overlooked.'[38]

Wittgenstein's preoccupation with the particular and specific, with the ordinary, is thus part of his attempt to demystify our metaphysical preconceptions of language and meaning; our sense of an apparent mystery or hidden essence that lies behind or beneath language and meaning, and thus behind the existence of things generally. But in doing so, Wittgenstein is not diminishing the power or wonder of language, meaning or existence. On the contrary, by exposing the emptiness of metaphysical explanations, Wittgenstein shows that the 'satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself'.[39] According to Cavell, Wittgenstein questions 'how it is that philosophy, in its craving for explanation, seeks to explain so little, that is to say, that it conceives so little to be mysterious'.[40] Ultimately, Wittgenstein's aim is to reawaken a sense of wonder at the sheer remarkable fact of existence: 'man has to awaken to wonder', he writes in *Culture and Value* (*CV* p. 5). And in the *Tractatus* he states: 'it is not *how* things are in the world that it is mystical, but *that* it exists' (*TLP* 6.44), which Cavell reads as Wittgenstein 'redressing philosophy's disparagement of the things of sense.'[41] Cavell argues that 'the specificity of the clauses in Wittgenstein's mythology of the ordinary produces the sense of a continuing effort to recognize the

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[37] Knight, 'Everything is Connected', p. 297
[38] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 26
[39] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough,* R. Rhess (ed.), Swansea: Brynmill, 1979, p. 2
[40] Cavell, 'The World as Things', *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow*, p. 240
[41] Cavell, 'The World as Things', p. 240

extraordinariness within the ordinariness of our lives'.[42] This effort involves a radical challenge to our seemingly natural tendency to theorisation, and a concentration instead on 'particular concrete cases' or 'concrete details'.[43] 'In order to see more clearly' writes Wittgenstein, 'we must focus on the details of what goes on; must look at them from close to' (*PI* 51).

This effort to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, or what DeLillo calls the 'radiance in dailiness',[44] is a defining feature of *Underworld*. It is achieved through a remarkable attention to specificity, what Evans describes as *Underworld's* 'meticulous respect for the insistently in/significant trivia of ordinary life over half a century',[45] which can perhaps most clearly be seen in the novel's concern with different forms of waste. DeLillo's treatment of waste in the novel is another illustration of the tension between the transcendent and the ordinary in the novel. Waste is characterised both by its 'numinous glow' and its 'gut squalor' (*U* 809-810); by its 'aspect of untouchability' (*U* 88) and the 'menacing heft and breadth of the material, the actual pulsing thing' (*U* 805). Waste is both 'a religious thing' with 'a solemn aura' (*U* 88) and the 'real stuff of the world' (*U* 99). In his essay on the significance of waste in the novel, Evans suggests that there is a direct connection between waste and the 'overlooked everyday things' in which DeLillo finds such beauty and mystery. He writes: 'another word for those forgotten quotidian things might be garbage – which, according to Lenny Bruce, "is just another name for ordinary life"'.[46]

IV. CONNECTIONS

To suggest that the novel is concerned with the particular and contingent, with 'the unpredictable and singular elements of ordinary life',[47] is not, however, to deny the importance of connections or overlook the manifold connections that the novel makes. For both DeLillo and Wittgenstein the idea of seeing connections is of pivotal

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[42] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 202
[43] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 26
[44] DeLillo, cited in Anthony DeCurtis, '"An Outsider in this society": An interview with Don DeLillo', *Introducing Don DeLillo*, p. 63
[45] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 105
[46] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 132
[47] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 129

importance. At the core of Wittgenstein's method lies the 'concept of a perspicuous representation'. It is of 'fundamental significance', he claims, since it 'earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things'. 'A perspicuous representation', observes Wittgenstein, 'produces just that understanding which consists in "seeing connections"' (*PI* 122). Likewise, *Underworld* contains a dizzying array of connections – of people, themes, objects, places – and the recurring phrase "everything is connected" can be said to be the novel's 'operating maxim'.[48] But these connections should not be seen as revealing some deeper truth or representing an attempt at a totalized, systematic account of things; rather they should be viewed as 'family resemblances'.

Knight points out that, 'although *Underworld* is structured by the principle that everything is connected, what is striking about the novel is how confusing and fragmented its narrative is',[49] and Evans observes that 'DeLillo's history is offered as a seemingly arbitrary array of cultural moments and disconnected episodes'.[50] This narrative fragmentation and confusion – for example the frequent jumps from one subject to another seemingly unrelated one – is central to the way, as Catherine Morley argues, the novel forces the reader to 'participate in the formation of meaning'.[51] *Underworld* provides a vast, non-systematic survey of a variety of lives and events that criss-cross and overlap in a complex network of connections. It is these connections that enable us to see things differently. The novel's concern with 'revealing otherwise ignored connections',[52] with casting light on the unseen, is not metaphysical, but part of an attempt to show the wonder of ordinary things. The connections are not metaphysical or essentialist, but similar to arrangements. They point to things that already lie 'open to view', which are 'surveyable by a rearrangement' (*PI* 92). Furthermore, there remain important unconnected spaces in the novel. Evans mentions the Bronx streets Bronzini strolls through, full of playing children, as an example of 'spaces of the unconnected and real'[53]; while Knight claims that 'though some of the connections in *Underworld* can be inserted into a coherent narrative of the quasi-conspiratorial collusion of

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[48] Knight, 'Everything is Connected', p. 298
[49] Knight, 'Everything is Connected', p. 298
[50] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 105
[51] Morley, 'Don DeLillo's Transatlantic Dialogue with Sergei Eisenstein', *Journal of American Studies* 40, 2006, p. 20
[52] Nel, "A Small Incisive Shock", p. 735
[53] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash, p.129

hegemonic interests in the globalized economy, there are many others that refuse to be assimilated so easily'.[54]

The significance of the narrative's fragmented structure is perhaps best understood by considering it in relation to the importance of DeLillo's use of montage in the novel.[55] In an essay on DeLillo's adoption of avant-garde techniques, Nel analyses the use of montage in *Underworld* and reveals the way in which it forms part of his critical engagement and, most importantly, changes the way we think and see. Crucially, Nel illustrates the way in which DeLillo's use of montage is related to the novel's concern with the hidden. Montage, writes Nel, 'is able to create analogies and suggest connections that might otherwise go unseen'.[56] These connections enable us to see 'things differently', they don't demonstrate a theory of how things are (*U* 443). In a similar vein, Wittgenstein's work, observes Alessandra Tanesini, frequently makes use of a 'striking image in order to bring about a change in perspective'; his use of 'new comparisons or similes', she argues, is 'intended to free us from pictures that hold us captive'.[57]

Ultimately, the significance of DeLillo's use of montage and a fragmented, non-linear narrative lies with the reader. And here we can draw a significant parallel with Wittgenstein's method in the *Investigations*. Both DeLillo and Wittgenstein force the reader to critically, or self-critically, engage with questions of meaning or, more precisely, to overcome the desire for a certain kind of meaning – Wittgenstein writes that 'I ought to be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right' (*CV* 18). What's more, they do this through making connections, or producing an understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. Osteen observes that '*Underworld* presents a series of fragments […] that dialectically guide the reader', adding that the novel 'challenges the reader to discover links, [...] encourages us to read actively'.[58] DeLillo never allows his readers to feel 'washed in a blowing wind that tells [them] everything' (*U* 757). Rather, the ambiguity of the novel's engagement with metaphysics, and the density and

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[54] Knight 'Everything is Connected', p. 294
[55] For an alternative in-depth analysis of DeLillo's montage technique in *Underworld*, see Catherine Morley's essay 'Don DeLillo's Transatlantic Dialogue with Sergei Eisenstein', pp. 17-34
[56] Nel, "A Small Incisive Shock", p 730
[57] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, pp. 31, 48
[58] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, pp. 216, 231

complexity of the narrative method, leaves the reader in a state of uncertainty, longing perhaps for unambiguous meaning.

Wittgenstein's philosophy is an attempt to cure his readers of this kind of longing for unequivocal certainty and meaning; 'to cure us of the impulse to transcendence'.[59] This involves work on oneself. Marie McGinn writes:

> Wittgenstein wants to work on us (or better, he wants us to work on ourselves) in such a way that a whole style of thought which we find natural - the theoretical attitude - is gradually replaced by a recognition that it is by "arranging what we have always known" (*PI* 109) that we both overcome our philosophical illusions and achieve the understanding we seek. The aim is to bring about a change in [...] how we see things.[60]

One of the key ways in which Wittgenstein tries to bring about this change in the way we see things is to 'draw our attention towards the neglected details of our concrete practice of using language';[61] by leading us 'back to the rough ground', away from the 'crystalline purity of logic' (*PI* 107). The desire to find certainty and the essence of things, this '*striving after* an ideal' (*PI* 98), results in an 'intolerable conflict' between our need – for an ideal order – and the actuality of everyday language. Wittgenstein pictures this ideal realm in the following poetic image: 'We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk. So we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!' (*PI* 107)

Such a concern with 'neglected details' and the importance of friction – Nick alludes to 'the tensile whisper of friction he counted on to carry him through life' (*U* 253) – is a central part of Nick's short lesson with Father Paulus, a priest at the correctional school Nick is sent to as part of his punishment for shooting George the Waiter. In a strikingly Wittgensteinian gesture, Paulus, who wants to teach Nick a 'form of respect for other ways of thinking and believing' (*U* 538), argues against the teaching of abstract ideas in favour of a detailed focus on concrete things and the importance of everyday language.

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[59] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 71
[60] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 31
[61] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p 22

Evans observes how, in words that echo Wittgenstein, 'the priest shifts abruptly back to Earth, directing Nick's attention to the ordinary objects that connect him with the ground'.[62] After a quip about 'eternal verities left and right' Paulus advises Nick that, 'you'd be better served looking at your shoe and naming the parts' (*U* 540). This attention to an ordinary object, and the act of naming simple things, 'the physics of language', is a powerful, Wittgensteinian embodiment of a return to the everyday.

Significantly, there is nothing banal about this return to the everyday. On the contrary, Nick is awestruck by these ordinary words and things. 'I'm going out of my mind', he says (*U* 542). Paulus shows how these words and things, seen in a certain way, are extraordinary. Like Wittgenstein, Paulus has an apparently metaphysical or 'arcane' way of seeing the everyday: 'everyday things lie hidden', he tells Nick; they 'represent the most overlooked knowledge' (*U* 541, 542). Like Wittgenstein, Paulus also sees the problem in terms of a lack of clarity in language. He says to Nick: 'you didn't see the thing because you don't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names' (*U* 540).

This inversion of the metaphysical and the ordinary – seeing the everyday as arcane or as 'overlooked knowledge' with the power to produce wonder and awe, and seeing the metaphysical as created by particular, local needs or longings – can be seen in Evans' reading of the novel. Evans concludes his essay with an account of Nick's dialogue with Father Paulus in order to support his claim that the ultimate thrust of the novel is away from the fantastic towards the ordinary, towards overlooked, everyday things. He thinks that '*Underworld* finally seems to want to guide us' to the everyday things that Paulus reveals, concluding that

> the ultimate thrust of the novel is to direct our gaze away from the freakish and fantastic spectacle that comprises the preferred subject matter of postmodern fiction. For DeLillo, the ordinary and contingent, the merely real, is equally marvellous – and more mysterious to the extent that it lies neglected beneath the mesmerising parade of media-generated effects and virtual images that holds in thrall both consumers and cultural theorists.[63]

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[62] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 132
[63] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 132

This 'mesmerising parade' can be compared with Wittgenstein's dazzling ideal. Evans maintains, along strong though unexplored Wittgensteinian lines, that the novel is 'concerned with preserving and representing the stubbornly particular "offscreen, unwebbed" elements of ordinary life'.[64] He views the novel's significant focus on the ordinary as a rejection of the 'appeals of postmodern scepticism and paranoid systems theory'[65] – a line of argument that has strong parallels with the reading of *The Body Artist* in the previous chapter, in particular with Cavell's claim that 'the ordinary occurs essentially in the *Philosophical Investigations* as what scepticism denies, and metaphysics transcends'.[66]

V. LOSS

By thinking about the function of the ordinary in this way we can gain a deeper insight into the role of paranoia in the novel and its connection to Nick's nostalgic yearning for the real. And by returning briefly to the ideas discussed in the previous chapter we can draw a parallel between Nick's 'feelings of loneliness, loss and confusion'[67] and Wittgenstein's sense of the homelessness and loss caused by philosophy, and the need to return to the ordinary.

Loss is a central theme in both *Underworld* and the *Investigations*. As we have seen, for Wittgenstein, the condition of philosophy is one of loss, of being lost, or at a loss. He writes: 'a philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about"' (*PI* 123). Paradoxically, philosophy is both the cause and cure of this loss. In Tanesini's words: 'philosophy generates a sense of estrangement or uprooting from one's community'.[68] It is this estrangement that leads to Wittgenstein's treatment of philosophical problems being figured as an act of return, of returning home.

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[64] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 131
[65] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 104
[66] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 195
[67] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 189
[68] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 48

Towards the beginning of *Underworld*, Nick visits Klara Sax, his ex-lover from the Bronx. Klara laments with Nick that 'we're a long way from home' (*U* 73); a throwaway but deeply resonant comment. It hints at the importance of homelessness and estrangement in the novel, which is further strengthened by Nick's revealing joke about being 'lost and wandering' (*U* 79) and his loaded statement which ends the chapter: 'I looked for a sign that would point me home' (*U* 84). Boxall notes that 'Nick's very name, Shay, with its phonic reference to the French *chez*, gestures towards this [...] Homeric returning home of and to oneself'.[69] In fact, Nick's very visit to Klara seems born out of some impulse to reconnect, to get back to the 'one set of streets' he keeps returning to in his dreams (*U* 74).

During their brief discussion Klara reflects on the 'unreal turn' life has taken; how everything since those years in the Bronx when things were 'so strong and real [...] is – vaguely – fictitious' (*U* 73). At first Nick is reluctant to share Klara's views – he claims to 'live responsibly in the real' (*U* 82) – but by the end of the novel it is evident that Nick shares this sense of estrangement, loss, and longing for the real. For Klara this sense of unreality and estrangement is not merely a personal issue, but also cultural, and the novel explores this cultural shift in a number of ways, which are central to the sense of unreality experienced by many of the novel's characters.[70] For Nick, however, his loss, estrangement and longing for the real can be seen to result from his paranoid outlook and the solipsism linked to or caused by it. Nick is a 'slave to connection'; one of several characters in the novel 'who cannot stop making sense'.[71] He 'examines things for second meanings and deeper connections' (*U* 88) and thus, notes Evans, has a 'tendency to see nothing for itself but only as a part of larger whole'.[72] He seems to suffer from precisely the kind of philosophical impulse that, according to Wittgenstein, leads to solipsism. Tanesini summarises Wittgenstein's position:

> Wittgenstein shows that a certain conception of subjectivity, which we find hard to resist, leads to the creation of a gulf between ourselves and reality. We are drawn

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[69] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, p. 191
[70] Knight sees it as a shift from 'modernist solidity' to 'postmodern simulation', while Evans reads it in terms of Zygmunt Bauman's categories of heavy and liquid modernity. Both trace the 'process of dematerialisation' leading to a more 'immaterial and cerebral' era. Knight, 'Everything is Connected' and Evans, 'Taking out the Trash'.
[71] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 127
[72] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 128

to this conception because we feel that the only way to safeguard meaning for our lives is to make them safe from the vagaries of the world. […] Once we conceive of ourselves as radically separate from contingent empirical reality, we become prey to a kind of loneliness which finds its expression in the philosophical problems of solipsism and scepticism.[73]

'Nick's life', writes Evans, 'has become an effort to insulate himself by means of various containers from the accidental, the contingent, the lucky'.[74] He is enclosed, fenced off; he has secured himself from risk and made things safe for himself. In the process he has made things sterile: he lives in 'a state of quiet separation' (*U* 796), at 'several removes from contact with anything solid or material'.[75] He has made himself like a 'made man', a 'country of one', and lives without 'the constant living influence of sources outside' himself (*U* 275). This attitude, his '*lontananza*', is a means of protecting himself from loss, but also from the very things which give life sense. Nick refuses to accept that his father abandoned his family and clings to the idea that he was murdered. He holds on to this idea in order to make sense of things, or to safeguard meaning for his life, since 'what Nick cannot accept about Jimmy Costanza's inexplicable erasure is that it is an example of "the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss"'.[76]

Ultimately, what Nick cannot accept is human finitude, and thus he is drawn to the life lived 'under the surface of ordinary things [...] organised so that it makes more sense in a way [...]. It makes more sense than the horseshit life the rest of us live' (*U* 761). As we have shown, for Wittgenstein there is nothing under the surface of ordinary things. And the desire to find such things is indicative precisely of the desire to make life have more sense. This desire, thinks Wittgenstein, is what causes philosophical problems, problems for which there are no answers. Paranoia and conspiracy can be seen as an extreme manifestation of this desire, of the kind of metaphysical approach to things, the 'striving after an ideal' (*PI* 98), which Wittgenstein attempts to both diagnose and cure. Paranoia and conspiracy theories are examples of what Cavell calls the 'search for an order or system or a language that would secure human settlement with the world that

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[73] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 56
[74] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 128
[75] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 119
[76] Evans, 'Taking out the Trash', p. 128

goes beyond human sense and certainty.'[77] And, ultimately, both can be seen as a result of the 'impulse to transcend human finitude'[78] that is such a central preoccupation for Wittgenstein and DeLillo.

Both Wittgenstein and DeLillo explore the seemingly inevitable need that this metaphysical searching is a manifestation of, and how it looks to what lies hidden, or beneath or behind things, to account for things; and both reveal the contradictions or dead-ends it leads to. McGowan notes that, 'by depicting the paranoia of characters such as Marvin and Nick, DeLillo allows the contradictions of this paranoia to become evident;' he '*exposes* the logic of paranoia', rather than subscribes to it.[79] DeLillo investigates the need that paranoia attempts to satisfy but shows that the satisfaction sought can be found in other realms.

As we saw earlier, for Wittgenstein this 'striving after an ideal' results in the immaterial and unreal conditions of slippery ice and a similar sense of immateriality can also be seen to result from paranoia – 'the faith of suspicion and unreality' (*U* 251). Evans argues that 'it is the dream of converting ordinary individual things into the connected elements of an integrated and comprehensive system, of denying space to the singular [...] that makes the world immaterial and unreal.'[80]

Paradoxically, *Underworld* reveals that it is 'the horseshit life' that has most meaning or sense, precisely because it is not organised so as to have meaning. Nick's despair at the end of a novel, his desire to escape his immaterial and unreal condition, can be read as a longing for the ordinary, for all that is not 'caged' or 'enshrined', but is allowed to 'run loose' (*U* 86). Nick's final words are an uncharacteristic, but highly revealing, cry of unrestrained yearning:

> I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets. (*U* 810)

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[77] Cavell, *Cities of words*, p. 4
[78] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 54
[79] McGowan, 'The Obsolescence of Mystery', p. 133
[80] McGowan, 'The Obsolescence of Mystery', p. 131

Nick's nostalgia for the past is not metaphysical – it is not a desire to transcend the physical conditions of the present, rather it is a yearning to escape the quasi-metaphysical condition of the postmodern and the paranoid, to return to the solid ground of material things. Nick has no desire to transcend reality or the ordinary; he wants to experience it. In an interview, DeLillo comments that Nick 'ultimately expresses his regret and longing for the days when he felt physically connected to the earth'.[81]

What Nick longs for is friction, 'the rough ground'. This idea of a return to the real or ordinary highlights the significance of the novel's final paragraph in which the narrative turns towards the 'things in the room'. Tanesini notes that the philosopher's striving to return home, to 'find herself and her community, [...] can be read in either Faustian terms as the desire to be at home everywhere because one has overcome human limitations, or as the desire to return to what is homely, ordinary'.[82] Throughout *Underworld* – and, as we shall see, *Libra* and *The Names* – DeLillo explores this Faustian desire: in paranoid fantasises; the notion that everything is connected; and in the idea of cyberspace, a world 'where everybody is everywhere at once' (*U* 808). Like Wittgenstein, he explores our inclinations towards this Faustian attitude, this 'search or demand for the absolute',[83] but ultimately, despite the temptations of miracles or solipsism or the absolute, DeLillo returns us to the 'thick lived tenor of things'.

In the final two chapters of this thesis we will examine the issues raised above in greater detail. Nick's loss and longing, and his solipsistic mindset point back to DeLillo's early work, especially *Libra* and *The Names*. In both *Libra* and *The Names* the protagonists exemplify the conception of subjectivity that according to Wittgenstein leads to solipsism and a longing for transcendent meaning. In particular, both Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* and James Axton in *The Names* share with Nick Shay the same kind of '*lontananza*' (*U* 275), disengagement and existential solitude, and Faustian longing, and are similarly susceptible to the lure of secrets, paranoia and conspiracy. In the next chapter, we will explore how DeLillo exposes the logic of conspiracy theory and looks

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[81] Cited in Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 190
[82] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 48
[83] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 4

at the links between solipsism and the impulse to transcendence, as well as the temptations and dangers of this impulse or metaphysical yearning.

In the first two chapters the focus was mostly on the significance of the ordinary, and the way transcendence can be found in the ordinary. But, by turning to DeLillo's earlier novels, the focus will shift somewhat. Though we will see a number of parallels, notably between *The Body Artist* and *The Names*, we will mostly be concerned with the way DeLillo examines metaphysical striving and the significant ways Wittgenstein's philosophy can help illuminate this aspect of DeLillo's work.

CHAPTER 4

Exile on Elm Street: *Libra* and Religious Yearning

Not finitude, but the denial of finitude, is the mark of tragedy.

Stanley Cavell[1]

One of the main aims of this thesis is to show some of the ways in which the nature of DeLillo's later work − both with regards to its formal developments and its primary concerns − sheds a revealing and possibly transformative light on the earlier novels; how a certain mode of reading the later work − one informed by Wittgenstein's philosophy and philosophical methods − provides new ways of thinking about the earlier novels and enables us to reassess the way his novels and writing in general were initially received.

Perhaps the two most dominant and significant ways of reading DeLillo at mid-career were as a novelist of conspiracies, when, as Skip Willman notes, 'the equation of DeLillo and paranoia [...] gained widespread acceptance'[2] or, above all, as a postmodern novelist. Bonca, for example, observes that DeLillo's 'work has been studied primarily under the rubric of postmodernism ever since [... his] emergence as a major literary presence in 1985 with the publication of *White Noise*';[3] while Knight notes that DeLillo has come 'to be engulfed by the aura of postmodernism' and 'is seen as representing the turn to postmodernism in American literature.'[4] It was largely from either or both of these perspectives that *Libra*, DeLillo's ninth novel, was initially perceived.

Libra, DeLillo's fictional account of the Kennedy assassination and the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, features many of the themes that have been explored in the thesis so

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[1] *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy,* Oxford: Clarendon, 1979, p. 455
[2] Skip Willman, 'Traversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination: Conspiracy and Contingency in Don DeLillo's *Libra*', *Contemporary Literature*, 34, 1998, p. 405
[3] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 58
[4] Knight, 'DeLillo, postmodernism, postmodernity', pp. 39, 27

far. Though the novel is based on historical events and real-life figures, it is not an attempt to produce an historically accurate version of these events. DeLillo does not aim to explain "what really happened" on November 22nd or establish an unequivocally true account of the assassination conspiracy. The novel, DeLillo writes in the author's note, aims to 'provide ways of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities'. This is not to say that it is necessarily untrue, merely that the question of truth or falsity is not relevant to our understanding or appreciation of the novel. It is a work of fiction and, as such, it should come as no surprise that DeLillo's engagement with, and account of, these figures and events should bear so many of the hallmarks of his work in general.

This chapter is an attempt to provide an alternative to the dominant postmodern readings of *Libra*, though it is not an in-depth or explicit argument against these readings. It looks briefly at the initial critical reception of the novel which concentrated on its postmodern features, and suggests that a different approach might enable us to better illuminate the novel's philosophical and religious features. Using both Maltby and Bonca's different, though curiously related, arguments against postmodern readings as a starting point, it looks at the ways in which the novel is engaged with metaphysics. I adopt Matlby's argument to highlight the importance of a focus on metaphysics for understanding certain aspects of the novel, but resist his claim that DeLillo endorses or presupposes the existence of a transcendental realm. Following Bonca, I suggest that, although DeLillo explores metaphysical yearnings there is a significant element of irony and critical reflection in these explorations. Again, as we have shown in relation to his other novels, *Libra* reveals the way in which DeLillo explores both the temptations and dangers of metaphysical longing.

The chapter looks at how the metaphysical is manifested in the idea of conspiracy as well as in the main characters' spiritual quests and religiously-inflected, solipsistic senses of self. I argue that the metaphysics of conspiracy mirrors the metaphysical conceptions of the self embodied in characters such as Oswald and Win Everett and that both are based on the same underlying conception of meaning – meaning as an essentially occult state. Thus I argue that this idea of meaning, which is fundamental to conspiracy theory, is parallel to, and can lead to, or stem from, the idea that the self is concealed inside the body. Moreover, I argue that there are deep theological and

religious roots to these parallel ideas. Finally, I suggest that, just as it is evident that DeLillo is critical of conspiracy theory, so too we can see the critical nature of the novel's portrayal of solipsism and the impulse to transcendence.

In order to illuminate the ambiguity and complexity of how metaphysics and religious yearning functions in *Libra*, a series of comparisons will be made with Wittgenstein's similarly complex engagement with metaphysics and religious perspectives. On the one hand, Wittgenstein's thought is profoundly critical of the metaphysical prejudices underlying Western theology and religion, and equally critical of the religious conceptions at the root of many of our seemingly natural modes of thought. Yet, on the other hand, Wittgenstein maintains what can be described as a religious way of seeing things, such as in the way he tries 'to recapture [a] special sense of wonder and awe'[5] from looking at the ordinary with clear vision. And, as we have shown at various points in the thesis, his aim of finding peace and 'achieving perspicuity'[6] also has strong religious connotations. This chapter will explore and tease out this tension in Wittgenstein's work – how it is seemingly both religious and anti-religious, anti-metaphysical yet profoundly engaged with what Cavell calls the 'craving for the metaphysical'[7] – in an attempt to shed light on a parallel tension that can be felt in *Libra*.

Both Wittgenstein and DeLillo's religious perspective are bound up with the issue of the self. In *Theology after Wittgenstein*, Fergus Kerr examines Wittgenstein's critique of the deep-rooted theological prejudices that underlie Western conceptions of the self and language. Kerr reads Wittgenstein's later philosophy as an anti-metaphysical crusade against misleading but seemingly intuitive paradigms of thought. These paradigms appear in a number of guises and affect how we think about meaning, language, understanding and the self, among other things. At the root of these misleading thought processes and preconceptions lies the dualist idea that meaning exists in the mind – 'nothing is more wrong-headed than calling meaning a mental activity', claims Wittgenstein (*PI* 693) – and the body is animated by the soul. The soul is then figured as being in exile in this world, trapped in the prison cell of the body, desperately,

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[5] Philip R. Shields, cited in Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word*, p. 30
[6] Richter, *Wittgenstein at his Word*, p. 5
[7] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 195

essentially solitary and unable to know others except through ambiguous, densely material signs.

A Wittgensteinian critique of the problems of the 'modern philosophy of the self-conscious individual'[8] can help illuminate the philosophical aspects of DeLillo's account of Oswald and the conspirators. 'Modern man's quest for autonomy and self-sufficiency', and the resultant impulse to transcendence, is, argues Tanesini, a central feature of the philosophical disease that Wittgenstein's writing is intended to cure.[9] The impulse to transcendence is caused by the fact that this quest 'leads us to conceive of human finitude as a cage from which we strive to, but cannot, break free'.[10] In Wittgenstein's work this quest 'is shown to generate loneliness and separation from other human beings,'[11] since the need for autonomy results in a metaphysical distinction between two realms – the inner realm of the mind and the outer realm of the body – and thus a sense of the 'self as an intangible and private object'.[12] I will argue that Oswald, whose life is characterised by his confinement in various cells, is an example of the kind of isolated, autonomous self characteristic of the 'modern philosophy' that Wittgenstein's work is directed against. This argument will be mirrored by the claim that DeLillo's nuanced critique of conspiracy theory can be illustrated by Wittgenstein's argument against explanation and his injunction to return to the ordinary.

As in previous chapters, this comparison between DeLillo and Wittgenstein will, in part, take place around the rhetorical figures of home and exile. I will draw a parallel between Oswald's metaphysical exile and quest to find a home, and Wittgenstein's figurative depiction of a philosopher's exile and striving to return home; between Oswald's misguided sense of self and yearning for knowledge and transformation, and Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the struggle of philosophy caused by its distrust of the everyday and the misleading temptations of metaphysical longing.

By adopting a Wittgensteinian approach we can show that *Libra's* concern with conspiracy, the hidden, secrets and the solipsistic self is not an endorsement of an

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[8] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 74
[9] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 4
[10] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 55
[11] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p 1
[12] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein,* p. 100

unequivocal romantic metaphysics, but is part of DeLillo's on-going exploration of what Cavell calls 'the essential and implacable restlessness of the human' in the striving to find meaning and the yearning to transcend the limits of finitude.[13] By reading *Libra* in the light of Wittgenstein's later thought we can understand the novel's religious or metaphysical leanings: the way it explores the desire to transcend social and human limitations, without the need to presume a broader metaphysical outlook; and how, on one level, the novel is critical of an underlying metaphysics. Furthermore, we can shed light on the appeal to and significance of the ordinary in *Libra*; the way in which the novel contrasts metaphysical yearning with a call to 'regain our grip on things' (*L* 15).

I. METAPHYSICS AND POSTMODERNISM

In 'DeLillo's *Libra* and the Real', Stuart Hutchinson provides a brief inventory of the critical reception of *Libra* as 'one more enactment of postmodernism', ranging from its inclusion in Stephen Baker's *The Fiction of Postmodernity* to Frank Lentricchia's 'seminal postmodernist reading' of it. Lentricchia's reading, writes Hutchinson, ascribes 'an entire environment of the image' to the novel based on the fact that there are numerous indications in it that 'our reality may be so indistinguishable from images of ourselves that we become actors in our own lives and incapable of authenticity'.[14] But, argues Hutchinson, these moments in the novel are part of DeLillo's 'realisation of America': disguise, counterfeit and simulacra are integral elements of American reality, not indicators of a lack of reality. Hutchinson attempts to challenge postmodern readings by arguing for the importance of 'the real' in the novel, both in terms of its narrative realism and its historical actuality, arguing that 'a complicated, even contradictory, sense of reality is hardly postmodernist, and it still leaves us with the assassination as a culminating and plotted event according to DeLillo, and as an actual event according to history'.[15]

Perhaps the most strident critique of *Libra* as a postmodern novel and the idea of DeLillo as a postmodern novelist comes from Paul Maltby. Indeed, far from suggesting

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[13] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 195
[14] Hutchinson, 'DeLillo's *Libra* and the Real', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 30, 2001, p. 117
[15] Hutchinson, 'DeLillo's *Libra* and the Real', p. 119

parallels between DeLillo and postmodernism, Maltby uses postmodern theory to support a critical assessment of what he argues is DeLillo's romantic metaphysics and accompanying political conservatism. The resolutely anti-metaphysical nature of postmodern theory, he claims, leaves no space for the elements in DeLillo's work that could be perceived as being underpinned by a metaphysical conception of things: the 'insightfulness of childhood perception'; the possibility of a 'primal, visionary language'; and, above all, 'the status of the visionary moment'.[16] Maltby writes: 'the metaphysical foundations of traditional conceptions of the visionary moment cannot survive the deconstructive thrust of postmodern thinking.'[17]

In his analysis of *Libra*, Maltby draws attention to the 'repeated invocations of invisible, transhistorical forces', which he argues is the 'stuff of metaphysics, not to say the occult'. Maltby argues that the novel is animated by a romantic metaphysics: a current of thinking in the novel that appeals to 'transcendent realities' and conforms with 'Romanticism's depth model of subjectivity'. He claims: *Libra* 'appeals to the truth and sovereignty of the "deepest levels of the self"' and so critical readings 'must reckon with the book's insistent focus on "another level [...] a deeper kind of truth"'. He cites an interview in which DeLillo mentions 'the possible impact of astrology on the way men act' as evidence that 'DeLillo is more likely to endorse his characters' beliefs in transcendent realities than to dismiss them'.[18]

Though Maltby points to an important aspect of DeLillo's novel – its engagement with metaphysical yearning – and challenges the dominance of postmodern readings, he somewhat overstates the case and overlooks the ambiguity and complexity of DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics. Maltby is right to suggest that DeLillo 'recognizes our need for' or 'our impulses towards the transcendental',[19] but this recognition does not imply that DeLillo believes in, or attempts to demonstrate, the actual existence of a transcendental realm. As I have attempted to show at various points throughout this thesis, and will also demonstrate in this chapter, it is by no means evident that DeLillo has a traditional conception of the visionary moment or an underlying metaphysical outlook. In addition to the questionable claim concerning DeLillo's traditional

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[16] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', pp. 267, 263, 260
[17] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', pp. 259-260
[18] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', pp. 272-3
[19] Maltby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', p. 268

metaphysical outlook, Maltby's reading is also problematic because of his unquestioning identification of DeLillo with his characters and the openly acknowledged 'schematic' comparisons he makes between highly selective citations from *Libra* and Romantic literature. Maltby does not engage with the full complexity of the novel or acknowledge the deeply flawed or idiosyncratic nature of the characters, whose opinions he reads as if they are the author's.

It is above all the 'spiritual advisor' in the novel, David Ferrie, who expresses the kind of ideas that Maltby identifies as indicative of a belief in transcendent realities, which can be seen in this highly significant passage:

> Think of two parallel lines. One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny. (*L* 339)

Though this passage is clearly an important moment in the novel's reflection on itself – on its structure and the way in which it rejects both an iron-clad conspiracy theory and the contingency theory suggested by the Warren commission report – its apparent metaphysical meaning needs to be seen in the context of Ferrie's highly idiosyncratic view of things and the series of motivational conversations he has with Oswald. The speech is the dramatic conclusion to Ferrie's attempt to persuade Oswald to assassinate the President. It is thus part of a series of 'talks', which employ spiritualist rhetoric and manipulative actions – that include smoking marijuana, sexual molestation and visiting an astrologer – appealing to the 'easily influenced' Oswald's romantic sense of destiny and desperate desire to mean something (*L* 172).

As I will examine, the apparently metaphysical aspects of the novel that Maltby highlights are embedded within complex layers of critical or ironic distance; they are indicative of a character's particular set of concerns and mode of seeing, which in the case of Ferrie, 'strange even to himself', is very particular indeed (*L* 45). Though it may

seem evident that DeLillo is sympathetic to his characters' metaphysical yearnings, this does not prevent a critical account of them.

Bonca also argues against the idea of reading DeLillo as a postmodern novelist. Even though there are clear parallels between Maltby's and Bonca's arguments, the latter's differs in certain crucial respects. For where Maltby sees DeLillo's metaphysics as reactionary and his lack of postmodern scepticism in negative terms, Bonca sees the apparently metaphysical elements in DeLillo's novels as vital to our understanding of their value and power. Furthermore, though not explicitly or directly, Bonca challenges Maltby's claim that DeLillo adopts a 'traditional conception of the visionary moment'. For Bonca, neither postmodern theories nor modernist or romantic paradigms can adequately illuminate the key features of DeLillo's fiction.

Bonca acknowledges a certain engagement with the metaphysical in DeLillo but is attuned to the subtlety and ambiguity of this engagement. He writes:

> DeLillo doesn't make for a very reliable postmodernist. To get right to the point, there is too great a yearning for, and too great a noticing of, immanence in his work. This yearning doesn't take the form of nostalgia, however, as it does for the modernists mourning a God who's dead [...]. No, this yearning – and one must stress that it is a yearning, not a belief – has little to do with the past, but much to do with sudden, compelling emergences of the numinous in the present.[20]

While these ideas of 'immanence' and 'emergences of the numinous' clearly resemble Maltby's sense of the 'visionary moment' in DeLillo, they do not imply the kind of underlying, unequivocal romantic metaphysics that is central to Maltby's argument. Bonca argues that immanence 'indicates a kind of indwelling or ontological presence – God for many, Being for Heidegger – which is hidden but inherent in the physical world'.[21] Even though Bonca seems to reiterate here precisely the kind of metaphysical paradigm Maltby rightly views as problematic – real meaning lies hidden beneath the surface of things; there exists some kind of pre-linguistic realm of deeper meaning – in fact Bonca's conception of this meaning is quite specific and all too human. For Bonca,

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[20] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p.59
[21] Bonca, 'Being, Time and Death', p. 59

the 'epiphanic moments' in DeLillo reveal not so much a glimpse of transcendent reality as the fear and fact of death. Bonca argues that, for DeLillo, language 'is the organized utterance of mortals connecting themselves to other mortals.'[22] Thus, far from being based on a mysterious, unknowable transcendental foundation, this conception can be seen as comparable to Cavellian ideas of community, acknowledgment, and the acceptance of finitude.

The fear of death can be felt throughout *Libra* – a sense of mortality haunts Nicholas Branch, for example, and both David Ferrie and Win Everett are death-obsessed – but Bonca's approach is most significant for its stress on yearning. Yearning plays a crucial role in the religious dimension of *Libra*. This is not to say that the characters' yearning in *Libra* is not related, at least indirectly, to a fear of death, for as DeLillo illustrated in *White Noise* a fear of death can be brought to the surface by a sense of meaninglessness and a misguided conception of an autonomous self.

Although they are in many respects radically different novels, this is one example of a significant parallel between *White Noise* and *Libra*. Both novels explore the spiritual and identity crises of men who experience a profound sense of exile and loss in contemporary America; and who cling to a metaphysical or theological idea of the self and existential meaning. This can be seen most clearly in the striking similarities between Everett and Jack Gladney. Like Gladney, Everett is a melancholy college professor with a strong sense of his own detachment and an unhealthy attachment to the well-being of his wife; both are 'anxious, self-absorbed' and lack 'the full heat of feeling' (*L* 219); both like to visit hardware stores; and both have a shared belief in the 'deathward […] nature of plots' (*WN* 26).

A further parallel can be drawn in the way the two novels are implicitly critical of theory or the impulse to theorisation. In *White Noise*, DeLillo satirises the tendency to theorisation through the absurd comedy of Gladney's desperate quest for meaning and Murray Jay Siskind's outlandish theoretical posturing. For example, in one instance Murray says 'think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person' (*WN* 290). *Libra* reveals both the temptations and dangers of a theorising attitude not only in the

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[22] Bonca, 'The natural language of the species', p. 30

portrayal of deeply misguided idealists like Oswald and Win Everett, but in the way it recognises yet subverts the appeal of conspiracy theory.

II. DIALECTICAL TENSION

Libra is characterised by a dialectical tension; a tension between conspiracy and contingency, the spatial and temporal, but also between the transcendent and ordinary, exile and home, loss and longing. The importance of this dialectical tension is suggested by the astrological reference of the title, in which, observes Peter Boxall, 'it is possible to hear a balanced tension between liberty and zodiacal predestination'.[23] This tension is central to the structure, rhythm and meaning of the novel and manifests itself in a variety of significant ways. It is nowhere more apparent than in the guiding structural tension of the novel's dual narrative; the way it alternates between the 'spatial' chapters, those marked by a place, detailing the life of Oswald, and the 'temporal' chapters, those marked by a date, outlining the unfolding of the conspirators' plot to assassinate Kennedy.

The tension between the dual narratives is central to what Willman describes as DeLillo's accomplishment in *Libra* of 'holding conspiracy and contingency in dialectical tension and examining the ways in which each undermines the other'.[24] The tension is further emphasised by the significant differences in the nature of the two narratives. Lentricchia argues that the temporal chapters outlining the development of the conspiracy form a 'perfectly shaped, intention-driven narrative', while the spatial chapters form an 'imagined biography of Oswald, a plotless tale of an aimless life propelled by the agonies of inconsistent and contradictory motivation'.[25]

This narrative complexity is furthered by the fact that the novel functions on two levels; as a work of fiction and also as a commentary on the historical event of Kennedy's assassination; since it is based on historical figures and events, and known source material, it necessarily comments on these things – both implicitly and explicitly – for

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[23] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, p. 132
[24] Willman, 'Traversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination', p. 407
[25] Lentricchia, '*Libra* as Postmodern Critique', *Introducing Don DeLillo*, p. 201

the novel consists not only of the parallel narratives of Oswald's life and the development of the conspiracy to assassinate JFK, but also of the sections detailing the research activities and thoughts of Nicholas Branch.

Branch is a retired CIA analyst who has been hired to write the secret history of the assassination, and as such functions as an authorial double. The Branch sections act as a frame for the dual narrative outlined above and enable DeLillo to reflect on the novel's own process. Branch provides the novel with a kind of metacommentary or what Jeremy Green describes as 'an element of historiographic self-reflection'.[26] The Branch sections are partly a means of addressing the way the novel engages with the historical material, but his analysis of the event and its history is not only a comment on the source material, it also addresses the broader cultural question of the need to know what happened, both historically *and* philosophically. Branch's analysis is epistemological and religious as much as it is historical or political.

As with so much of DeLillo's work, *Libra* is suffused with a certain philosophical and religious inflection. Cowart notes that 'DeLillo allows [...] a curious religious dimension to emerge in his essentially historical and political novel'.[27] This religious dimension can be perceived from a number of different perspectives. The novel can be seen as religious in the sense in which it confronts a problem DeLillo explicitly raises in *Mao II*: 'when the old God leaves the world, what happens to the unexpended faith?'[28] The main characters in *Libra*, 'serious men deprived of an outlet' (*L* 63), 'true believers' (*L* 22), strive to find religious meaning and structure in their lives and look to various secular, yet church-like, organisations to help them, such as communism, 'the one true religion' (*L* 100), or the CIA, 'the best organised church in the Christian world' (*L* 260). The role of the assassination in the novel is closely related to this religious striving, but can be viewed as religious in a dual sense. For the conspirators and Oswald it is the goal of a metaphysical quest that transcends politics. Although originally conceived as a means to an end – to eradicate Castro from Cuba and regain control of the island – this practical goal seems to have only limited importance for the conspirators and has none for Oswald. Win Everett, who initiates the original plan of an assassination attempt on

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[26] Green, 'Libra', p. 98
[27] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 92
[28] DeLillo, *Mao II*, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 7

the President, explains that the 'plan speaks to something deep inside' him; it is 'the condition we've always wanted to reach. It's the life-insight, the life-secret' (*L* 28). And for Oswald it is the culminating event of a lifetime attempting to find his place and name 'on another level' (*L* 384).

For Branch, on the other hand, the assassination is like an American biblical episode – 'six point nine seconds of heat and light' that illuminate America's soul (*L* 15). It is a mysterious, explosive event that 'sheds a powerful and lasting light', full of eerie coincidence and inexplicably strange occurrences (*L* 58). The fact that the truth of the assassination is not known, that 'simple facts elude authentication', is crucial to its power and to the 'ensuing ritual of a search for patterns and links' (*L* 300, 371).

III. 'MEN IN SMALL ROOMS'

The religious and philosophical aspects of the novel can perhaps most clearly be seen, however, in the solipsistic features of its protagonists, particularly Oswald and Everett. The novel portrays them as isolated 'self-watchers', 'at the mercy of [their] own detachment', symbolically separated from everyday reality by their confinement in small rooms (*L* 18). The rooms symbolise their solipsism; the way in which they are isolated, self-enclosed, like a mind trapped inside a body – symbolic of the ancient myth of the soul in exile, which, argues Kerr, has 'deep religious roots'.[29] The characters are imprisoned, desperate to break out, but incapable of properly engaging with the 'outside world', a place they find too 'eerie and real' (*L* 17). As William E. Cain notes, they are 'intense, yearning, detached figures [...] uncomfortable residents of private worlds outside history'.[30] Thus they can only envision an escape in metaphysical or transcendent terms.

Oswald's detachment and solipsism are dramatically portrayed in the novel's opening scene: a description of Oswald riding the subway as a young boy, which immediately draws attention to his isolation and sense of exile from the ordinary world. The scene is

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[29] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 72
[30] William E. Cain, 'Making Meaningful Worlds: Self and History in *Libra*', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 29, 1990, p. 275

rich in symbolic resonance, not least in the image of the tracks, which the later reference to the 'two parallel lines' of Oswald's life and the assassination of JFK subtly echoes. Oswald's journeying on the subway is not to any particular destination, he is 'riding just to ride' (*L* 3), highlighting his disengagement from everyday, practical reality and his somewhat aimless life. The subway ride suggests Oswald's struggle to feel free, to escape and transcend his limiting circumstances, but also a sense of a blind trajectory to his life, of being driven by an unknown and powerful force; it symbolises Oswald's thought that an 'individual must allow himself to be swept along, must find himself in the stream of no-choice, the single direction' (*L* 101).

Oswald's experience on the subway also reveals his metaphysical yearnings, his impulse to transcendence. The subway acts as an inverted version of Plato's cave. In the darkness of the underground, thinks Oswald, things can be seen in 'purer form', and he can feel an 'inner power', the 'secret force of the soul' (*L* 4, 13). Green writes that Oswald 'identifies with the image of a secret world, an alternative to the everyday reality that surrounds and demeans him.'[31] Oswald rejects the ordinary world – 'there was nothing important out there', he thinks (*L* 4) – preferring this metaphysical journey in the darkness, which, argues Hutchinson, provides him with a 'sense of exaltation'.[32]

Like Oswald, Everett identifies with the idea of a secret world. Indeed, there are a number of significant parallels between Oswald and Everett, who are both, notes Cain, 'outcasts from meaningfulness'.[33] Everett is a former CIA intelligence agent forced into semi-retirement, sent 'into exile', for his suspected involvement with anti-Castro groups keen to redress the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion (*L* 19). Like Oswald, Everett feels angry and resentful towards authority. He spends much of his time alone, in various private spaces, where he works 'patiently on his bitterness, honing and refining', reflecting on 'what they'd done to him' (*L* 178, 180). Like Oswald, Everett prefers underground spaces, at the university where he works he is 'grateful for the gloom of the basement nook' (*L* 178); he needs 'to live in small dusty rooms, layered safely in, out of the reach of dizzying things, of heat and light' (*L* 260). He is disengaged from the reality around him, which he thinks of as 'the other life, the eerie realness of living with

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[31] Green, 'Libra', p. 104
[32] Hutchinson, 'DeLillo's *Libra* and the Real', p. 124
[33] Cain, 'Making Meaningful Worlds', p. 277

people who do not keep secrets as a profession or duty' (*L* 17). And like Oswald, Everett is full of religious longing: 'There was a burning faith in this man, a sense of cause'; he is 'all principle, all zeal' (*L* 18).

The recurring reference in the novel to men in small rooms evokes both the figure and thought of Descartes, whose 'conception of the self', notes Kerr, 'sprang from explicitly theological concerns'[34]. Branch's drift into Cartesian solipsism, for example, is such that he 'sometimes wonders if he is becoming bodiless' (*L* 14). Like Descartes, he 'questions everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds' (*L* 300). And yet partly he feels this epistemological solitude has been imposed on him by outside forces; it is somewhat against his will and pragmatic inclinations. He is trapped in this 'room of growing old', which 'they built' for him (*L* 14, 445).

Branch feels condemned to a lifetime of thinking about the case, overwhelmed by the amount of data, 'horrified by the weight of it all' (*L* 14). He sits in his book-filled room and thinks through the manifold aspects and complexities of the case, studying 'everything' (*L* 59). And though, as Green notes, he 'has a sense of something deeply mysterious and inexplicable about the events of Dallas',[35] he maintains a desire to return to the world of things, 'he wants a thing to be what it is' (*L* 379). He finds that he 'has to come back again and again to the page, the line, the fine-grained detail of a particular afternoon' (*L* 14), as if he is wary of the 'endless suggestiveness' of the case and the temptations of theory-building and speculation (*L* 57). He has to remind himself that 'he is writing a history, not a study of the ways people succumb to paranoia' (*L* 57).

Branch thus finds himself in the paradoxical position of being like the Cartesian solipsists whose histories he is investigating, even though he seems strongly resistant to the kind of idealism and religious yearning underpinning their solipsistic outlook. He can be seen to personify conflicting positions and thus to embody an element of the dialectical tension structuring the novel. On the one hand, he seems to reject the theorising impulse, the quest for certainty and the kind of solipsistic madness of the characters his research is focused on. On the other hand, however, as a disembodied

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[34] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 3
[35] Green, 'Libra', p. 99

man who spends his life in a small room ruminating obsessively on seemingly unanswerable questions, who 'has abandoned his life to understanding that moment in Dallas', he comes to resemble these characters himself (*L* 181). Branch is aware of this:

> This is the room of dreams, the room where it has taken him all these years to learn that his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms.
>
> Is he one of them now? Frustrated, stuck, self-watching, looking for a means of connection, a way to break out. (*L* 181)

In his later philosophy Wittgenstein shows that such a solipsistic conception of the self manifests itself in a whole series of subtle and unassuming ways. Though not necessarily as extreme as the kind of solipsism on display in *Libra*, the kind of entrenched ways of seeing and thinking that Wittgenstein aims to root out are nevertheless on the same spectrum. Hans Sluga, for example, argues that his philosophy reveals 'an enduring hostility to the idea of an individuated, substantive self' and is deeply infused with anti-Cartesianism.[36] One of the main targets of Wittgenstein's thought, especially in his later work, is what Perloff calls the 'entire romantic and postromantic faith in inwardness, in the hidden depths of the unique, individual consciousness'[37]: the idea that the mind lies hidden in the body, that 'meaning is a mental activity' and thus that the meaning of things lies behind or beyond appearance and needs to uncovered. These ideas can be traced to a metaphysically generated picture of things, but the depth of their roots is such that they seem intuitive or natural, like common sense notions. They are deeply embedded in our language and culture, and in part stem from the religious picture of the soul in exile in this world.

An illuminating, if complex, parallel can be drawn between Wittgenstein's critique of the enduring myth of 'the inner' and the religious element of *Libra.* Both Wittgenstein and DeLillo reveal the temptations and dangers of what Kerr calls the 'narcissistic metaphysics of the self'; both give 'voice to our deepest metaphysical inclinations'.[38] *Libra* explores religious yearning, albeit of a warped kind, and asks what it might mean in a secular, commodified, mediatised society. The object of this yearning is not God or

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[36] Sluga, '"Whose house is that?" Wittgenstein on the self', *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, p. 321

[37] Perloff, 'From Theory to Grammar', p. 914

[38] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, pp. 73, 76

spiritual enlightenment, at least not directly, but it is, in a sense, to be God-like. Both Oswald and Everett seek power and control, and long for transcendence of some kind – to escape the limitations and confines of an alienating reality.

Their metaphysical yearning, their impulse to transcendence, is intrinsically related to their solipsism. The Faustian desire to overcome human limitations, writes Tanesini, 'proposes that we overcome any feelings of fragility or isolation by striving for more power, and more freedom'.[39] This striving leads to a 'drive to knowledge' which solipsists assume will end their isolation. For Oswald and the conspirators this is a drive to secret knowledge; they are driven by a metaphysical desire to both believe in and uncover secrets and hidden truths. Osteen notes that '*Libra* links secrecy with the sacred, analysing two conflicting needs: the powerful craving for belief in mystery, and the need to penetrate such mysteries'.[40] Oswald, like the conspirators, views secrets as a source and form of power, and also as a source of religious fascination. According to Hutchinson, they 'relish the seeming potency of secret knowledge which, by seeming to place them at the pitch and limit of things, "the edge of no control", nourishes the self-aggrandisement and metaphysical intimations their desperation yearns for.'[41]

The fact that these yearnings are so warped, so far removed from traditional religious objects of devotion and striving, is not without significance for it suggests the ironic and critical stance DeLillo adopts towards the metaphysical urge. *Libra*, writes Osteen, 'critically analyses the desperation that motivates the belief in a "world inside the world"'.[42] Though the novel is clearly engaged with metaphysics, it nevertheless brings into question the motives, and psychological and cultural conditioning, underlying a metaphysical conception of things.

IV. OSWALD'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

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[39] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 48
[40] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread,* p.154
[41] Hutchinson, 'DeLillo's *Libra* and the Real', p. 123
[42] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 154

In a conversation with M. O'C Drury, Wittgenstein is reported to have remarked that he 'cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view'.[43] Given his radical critique of the basic thought structures that underlie Western theology and metaphysics this is a striking but not necessarily inconsistent claim – indeed, it is precisely the nature and method of this critique that can be said to have a religious element. Wittgenstein writes: 'all that philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not creating a new one, as in "absence of an idol"' (*PO* 171). He is not proposing a Nietzschean re-evaluation of all values based on the death of God. For even though his later philosophy is almost entirely critical, even though it seems to 'destroy everything interesting', there is no loss. He writes in the *Investigation*s: 'what we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand' (*PI* 118). Wittgenstein is not trying to disabuse religious yearning but merely the metaphysical illusions it has a tendency to focus on; the 'longing for the supra-natural' (*PO* 187), which he believes can be satisfied in other ways than trying to get beyond the limits of language.

Wittgenstein deconstructs the theological prejudices behind, and religious roots of, our apparently natural ways of thinking, but his comment to Drury points towards what Cavell calls the 'sense of moral or religious fervour' in his work;[44] the emphasis on philosophising as a 'spiritual struggle'.[45] As we have previously explored, for Cavell the 'idea of philosophical progress in the *Philosophical Investigations* is from the darkness of confusion to enlightened understanding, or from illusion to clarity';[46] from 'being lost to finding ourselves'.[47] But this progress is not an ascent, or form of transcendence, rather it is like a form of inverted religious spirituality, not away from, but towards the human, the body, the social and communal – the ordinary.

Wittgenstein's work is not concerned with explicitly religious questions, such as the existence of God; he has no general doctrines to offer on religion. But although Wittgenstein's philosophy seems to be mostly concerned with topics in the philosophy of logic, language and the mind, 'he discusses these issues', writes Tanesini, 'because of

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[43] Cited in Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 33
[44] Cavell, 'The *Investigations'* Everyday Aesthetics of Itself', *The Literary Wittgenstein*, p. 21
[45] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 325
[46] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 328
[47] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 201

the therapeutic effect that getting clear on these matters has on him and [...] his readers'.[48] She adds: 'what Wittgenstein seeks from philosophy is nothing less than the redemption of his body and soul.'[49] But it is important to be clear about just what this redemption might be. For although Wittgenstein speaks of the 'liberating word', 'peace' as a philosophical goal, and establishing a clarity of vision, the peace, clarity and liberation he seeks is from the lure of the transcendent, not ascent to it. Cavell writes: 'the direction out from illusion is not up [...], but down [...]. Philosophy [...] is a refusal of, say disobedient to, (a false ascent), or transcendence'.[50] And as we have seen at various points throughout this thesis, this downwards direction marks an act of returning, as if from exile. It is not a question of seeing or knowing anything new, but of seeing what was always there; it is a question returning home, to the ordinary.

Tanesini, developing Cavell's sense of the importance of the ideas of loss and home in the *Investigations*, describes the two ways in which, in Wittgenstein's account of things, the philosopher strives to return home. Her description resonates with many of the issues already examined in this thesis and can shed light on Oswald's condition in *Libra*. She writes:

> Philosophy begins with a sense of loss, of being in exile. One is lost to oneself, or has lost the ability to find oneself with others. The philosopher is a stranger in her homeland, or alternatively she is exiled to an unknown territory. At the same time the philosopher also strives to return home, to find herself and her community. Such striving can be read in either Faustian terms as the desire to be at home everywhere because one has overcome human limitations, or as the desire to return to what is homely, ordinary.[51]

Oswald experiences a sense of loss, exile and confinement from the beginning to the end of his life. He is condemned to a lifetime of 'stunted rooms', solitary cells, all representations of the solitary cell of his mind (*L* 100). As Glen Thomas observes, Oswald's exile is 'symbolised [...] by his repeated confinement in small rooms'.[52] This

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[48] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein,* p. 2
[49] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 41
[50] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', p. 332
[51] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 48
[52] Thomas, 'History, biography and narrative in Don DeLillo's *Libra*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43, 1997, p. 114

exile, his solitude and sense of isolation, is not merely circumstantial but profoundly existential, even epistemological; he embodies a Cartesian picture of things in which the true self is private and inaccessible – 'there is a veil between him and other people through which they cannot reach him, but he prefers this veil to remain intact' (*L* 12). He has a solipsistic sense of self: he 'feels he is living at the centre of an emptiness'; 'it was all about him. Everything that happened was him' (*L* 357, 385). The solipsist, writes Kerr, has a 'picture of meaning as an occult adventure that goes on in secret behind one's brow'[53] and this picture of meaning is a result of a metaphysically generated doctrine of the self, in which the self is closed-off, private and inaccessible. 'You don't know who I am', thinks Oswald as he clings to the powerful sense of 'his real life, the inward-spinning self' (*L* 37), a life and self he seems incapable of getting a grip of.

Oswald's exile in part derives from and is directly related to his struggle with language, caused by his dyslexia. 'Due to his difficulties with language', writes Thomas, 'Oswald feels that he is somehow exiled from the real world'.[54] Oswald is desperate for meaning precisely because of, in Osteen's words, his 'alienation from the linguistic order', his exclusion from the shared public world, the 'world of social exchange'.[55] Oswald's approach to language, however, can be seen as stemming from his solipsism, for, as Kerr argues, 'perhaps it is only if we are strongly tempted to treat the self as a solitary intellect locked within a space that is inaccessible to anyone else that language looks intuitively like a system of referring to things'.[56]

Oswald's dyslexic struggle with language is the kind of metaphysically generated misconception of language that Wittgenstein aims to bring to light in his later philosophy. Cowart notes that, 'however clinically specific his condition, Oswald becomes at such moments [...] an emblematic figure of all who grapple with the intransigent mechanics of signification'.[57] When Oswald is trying to write his historic diary he is deeply frustrated because 'the nature of things was to be elusive. Things slipped through his perceptions. He could not get a grip on the runaway world' (*L* 211).

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[53] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 76
[54] Thomas, 'History, biography, and narrative', p. 114
[55] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 155
[56] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 57
[57] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, p. 93

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein shows that there is a natural tendency to see the kind of experience Oswald has with language as the general experience of the discrepancy between language and reality. He writes:

> Here it is easy to get into that dead-end in philosophy, where one believes that the difficulty of the task consists in our having to describe phenomena that are hard to get hold of, the present experience that slips quickly by, or something of the kind. (*PI* 436)

Wittgenstein argues, however, that this kind of aberrant experience of language and the world should not be used as a general model of how language functions, since under normal circumstances language functions perfectly well, and it is only romantic yearning or theological prejudice or philosophy that makes it seem otherwise.

Oswald's solipsism and sense of exile can also be seen in the way his life is portrayed as a search for meaning and a clearly defined sense of self. His journey loosely follows the structure of the traditional or mythic quest saga, in which the hero abandons his familiar, safe environment and ventures into the dangerous unknown, where he faces a series of tests and trials, and has to slay a monster for which he is rewarded with a magical prize. According to Joseph Campbell, these narratives symbolise an essentially inward journey from detachment and difficulty to understanding and transformation.[58] There is a clear sense in which Oswald sees his life as a grand quest or struggle and longs for understanding and transformation, as is evident from the way that he identifies with historical revolutionary figures, such as Stalin, Lenin and above all Trotsky, who've made such journeys (*L* 47). However, mostly his life is characterised by repeated losses and recoveries, by a continual sense of starting again. He longs 'to make a move one time that was not disappointed' (*L* 248).

One of the significant differences between Oswald's struggle and a traditional quest saga is that, although Oswald abandons America he never feels particularly safe or at home there. He is, like Wittgenstein's characterisations of a philosopher, both a stranger in his homeland and an exile in 'unknown territories'. His journey is marked by his ceaseless striving to find himself and a community to which he can belong; he

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[58] Cited in Michael Foley, *The Age of Absurdity*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2010, pp. 70-71

desperately tries to 'find a structure that includes him' (*L* 357). He longs to transcend his circumstances and sense of isolated, autonomous selfhood. Indeed, so central is this idea that the epigraph to part one with which DeLillo begins the novel is an excerpt from a letter written by Oswald to his brother, which reads: 'happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is taking part in the struggle where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general' (*L* 1).

Oswald's ideas here are an expression of a basic Marxist conception of things, but in DeLillo's portrayal of Oswald, in the main body of the novel, Oswald's Marxism is characterised by a religious or spiritual yearning. Indeed, Oswald's 'struggle to exist', his lifelong search for meaning and purpose, can be viewed as a longing for transcendence (*L* 86). Oswald, for whom, 'communism is the one true religion' and 'the brig was a kind of religion too [...] a counterforce to politics and lies', is full of a warped kind of religious longing: he 'wanted to carry himself with a clear sense of role' (*L* 100, 248). His political convictions have a deeply religious aspect to them, even his belief that 'religion just holds us back' (*L* 320). His flirtations with Marxism are idealistic fantasies, part of his lifelong yearning to transcend his limiting conditions. His Marxist books 'were private, like something you find and hide, some lucky piece that contains the secret of who you are' (*L* 41). He sees revolution, like his hero Trotsky, as a means of being led 'out of the dark night of the isolated self' (*L* 101).

Oswald longs to escape his solitary cell, to put an 'end to isolation'. He longs to escape the self, 'to climb out of [his] own skin', 'to be swept along', to be 'done with being a pitiful individual' (*L* 101, 322). His vision of how to do this is to merge with history but, as Green notes, Oswald 'imagines history as an impersonal metaphysical force that will at once give him a permanent identity and sweep him out of his isolation'.[59] Oswald believes 'he is a zero in the system' but can only envision hope in terms of entering another system – he can only think in terms of something greater than himself. He longs for salvation of a kind, seeks 'a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs' (*L* 357). In *Mao II*, DeLillo articulates this longing as people's need to 'lose themselves in something larger'[60] and in *Libra* we can see that Oswald desires to enter

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[59] Green, 'Libra', p. 98
[60] DeLillo, *Mao II*, p. 89

another system partly as a way of becoming a different person, of losing, and thus transcending, himself. Alek, the Soviet agent in charge of Oswald, reflects: 'that's what they all want, isn't it, these people who live in corners inside themselves, in blinds and hidey-holes? A second and safer identity. Teach us how to live, they say, as someone else' (*L* 166). At the same time, however, Oswald longs to make himself known, to 'make his existence felt' (*L* 373). He is forever hoping to obtain some form of recognition and acknowledgement for his heroic actions. Thus he is torn between a paradoxical desire to be known and yet remain unknown or hidden, to have a name but to be someone else, to be accepted and yet to escape.

Oswald's dream of merging with history is a variant of what Kerr describes as the metaphysical dream of an 'incorporeal, wordless, unmediated presence of one bare soul to the next', which is the inevitable consequence of the solipsist's view that the metaphysically conceived body is 'what isolates human beings from one another'.[61] Oswald fails to undertake any real or serious political engagement precisely because of his extreme solipsism and the metaphysical way in which he perceives the struggle. Oswald's desire to enter history is actually an attempt to transcend history, for, as Ferrie says to Oswald, 'you wanted to enter history. Wrong approach, Leon. What you want is out. Get out. Jump out. Find your place and name on another level' (*L* 384).

Oswald's yearning for transcendence is, to a certain extent, realised during the assassination, when he experiences a sense of heightened perception that is of such intensity – 'everything was so painfully clear' (*L* 395) – that he has an almost out of body experience. DeLillo writes: 'there was so much clarity Lee could watch himself in the huge room of stacked cartons' (*L* 398). But the experience is short-lived and he soon finds himself back in the same condition that he has known all his life; in a cell, the last of 'the stunted rooms' in which he's 'spent his life' (*L* 100).

There is thus a sense in which Oswald's journey or quest culminates in a return to a kind of home. For though Oswald's life and search ends when he is murdered by Jack Ruby, he does, briefly, seem to have returned to, or rather found something, resembling home, and furthermore this home is transformed: 'he no longer saw confinement as a

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[61] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 93

lifetime curse'. Just prior to being led out of his jail cell for the last time Oswald is struck by an insight and sense of awakening or renewal:

> It was beginning to occur to him that he'd found his life's work. After the crime comes the reconstruction [...]. He will be able to bend the light of that heightened moment, shadows fixed on the lawn, the limousine shimmering and still. Time to grow in self-knowledge, to explore the meaning of what he's done. [...] See his whole life change.
>
> This was the true beginning. (*L* 434)

Unlike James Axton or Lauren Hartke, who also experience a new beginning at the end of *The Names* and *The Body Artist* respectively, Oswald's beginning is curtailed by death. This new beginning is also his end. But though it is an end of his physical self, his death does mark the beginning of the mythical, historical self that he was so eager to become. Furthermore, the arc of Oswald's journey resembles DeLillo's other protagonists who undertake a spiritual quest. This idea of a true beginning, of seeing his life change as he grows in self-knowledge, can be read as both a serious reflection of his metaphysical fantasy life and a deeply ironic comment on the status of his posthumous renown.

V. CONSPIRACY AND CONTINGENCY

Though *Libra* is clearly engaged with the metaphysical there is also a significant engagement with the ordinary. DeLillo contrasts the world of conspiracy and religious longing with a powerful sense of the everyday and contingent, with 'American kitchens' (*L* 16), 'the daily jostle' (*L* 440) and a plethora of seemingly random details. He contrasts the novel's many men in small rooms with grounded, pragmatic women, such as Marina and Marguerite, and, most notably, Everett's wife Mary Frances who, thinks Everett, 'was in the world as he could never be' (*L* 76), and has the capacity to 'bring him back to what was safe and plain' (*L* 16).

The novel, notes Cain, reveals an 'astute, off-beat, defamiliarizing curiosity about everyday life'.[62] This can be seen in the portrayal of Lee and Marguerite Oswald's basement room in the Bronx with their Motorola TV and its tinted filter; in the Everett's middle-class, suburban home with its 'frostless freezer and color-matched appliances, on the quiet street of oak and pecan trees' (*L* 31). It can be seen in the repeated breakfast scenes: Everett buttering his toast; Jack Ruby, who 'liked his juice fresh-squeezed in the morning' (*L* 342), hefting his grapefruits, making scrambled eggs and coffee. And it can be seen in Ruby's reading in the toilet or in his daily run through Dallas with his dog and dirty laundry in the car, going from his clubs to the Sheraton and to the Police and Courts building.

The ordinary moments in the novel are, however, often ironic or ambiguous, they reveal the 'secret symmetries in a non-descript life' and how 'our lives [...] abound with suggestive meaning' (*L* 78). *Libra*, writes Nel, 'explores the extraordinary significance of ordinary lives',[63] and this significance or suggestive meaning results from the way these lives are related to the assassination of JFK. Thus Everett, for example, is described as 'a fellow on a quiet street doing ordinary things' (*L* 51), during the period in which he is thinking obsessively about his assassination plan. On Oswald's last night with Marina, the night before the assassination, he thinks of the time as 'ordinary in every way, simple moments adding up' (*L* 390). And Ruby's apparently casual visit to the Police and Courts building on September 25th is infused with the knowledge of what he will do there two months later.

The novel's engagement with the ordinary is in part due to the use of the Warren Commission report as a source text, described in the novel as the 'Joycean book of America' (*L* 182), and the related emphasis on the random and contingent. The Warren Report, writes Green, provides the novel with a sense of the 'strangeness of contingent things. The testimony and exhibits attached to the report include [...] evidence fraught with potential significance and the most prosaic piece of quotidian reality'.[64] And Knight argues that, for DeLillo, 'the true meaning of the Warren Commission Report

[62] Cain, 'Making Meaningful Words', p. 282
[63] Nel, 'DeLillo and Modernism', *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, p. 14
[64] Green, '*Libra*', p. 99

[…] was the accidental insight it affords into the otherwise invisible interweavings of the vast social – and textual – fabric of America'.[65]

The significance of the ordinary in the novel can most clearly be seen in the way it is used to undermine a coherent conspiracy theory. *Libra* explores both the possibility of a conspiracy theory and moreover, the appeal of conspiracy, or the urge to believe in conspiracy, but does not endorse it. Indeed, according to Willman, DeLillo demolishes the 'ideological fantasy of conspiracy theory'.[66] Willman develops Lentricchia's argument that DeLillo 'presses us to rethink the question of Oswald outside the framework of conspiracy',[67] and this means outside the framework of a reductively logical, causal explanation that betrays a theological need for an unambiguous answer. Both Lentricchia and Willman stress the crucial 'role that contingency plays in derailing the plot leading to Kennedy's death', a role that undermines the sense of an 'engineered history'. Willman notes that DeLillo 'creates a conspiracy held together by the "meaningless" and the contingent',[68] citing the contingent nature of Oswald's inclusion in Everett's conspiracy and the coincidence of Kennedy's motorcade passing in front of the Texas School Book Depository. What DeLillo shows in the novel is that, in the words of Branch: 'the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like' (*L* 441).

Crucially, these contingent, chance elements are what give depth and power to the event and to the novel itself. It is because it can't be fully explained – politically, scientifically, historically, or psychologically – that the assassination has such resonance and imaginative force:

> There is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations. There is no need, [Branch] thinks, to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions. (*L* 58)

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[65] Knight, 'Everything is connected', p. 289
[66] Willman, 'Traversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination', p. 412
[67] Lentricchia, '*Libra* as Postmodern Critique', p. 203
[68] Willman, 'Traversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination', p. 412

Nevertheless, Branch recognises the deep appeal of such a scheme, of certainty and clarity:

> If we are on the outside we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act. (*L* 440)

The desire to believe in a conspiracy is an expression of our need for a definiteness of sense, of the need to believe someone or something is in control. It is a metaphysical yearning for a schematic seamless account, in which everything falls into place with a clear motive, method and execution. In philosophical terms this is parallel to what Kerr describes as the 'powerful inclination to get up or down to something simple and ultimate', either by looking upwards to the celestial realm of eternal forms or inwards at an essential self and mental-individualist knowledge.[69] DeLillo satirizes this attitude in General Walker's paranoid belief in the 'Real Control Apparatus', which is described as

> The mystery we can't get hold of, the plot we can't uncover. This doesn't mean there are no plotters. They are elected officials of our government, Cabinet members, philanthropists, men who know each other by secret signs, who work in the shadows to control our lives. (*L* 283)

Similar paranoid or conspiratorial ideas are expressed by other characters confined to small rooms. Radio disc jockey Weird Beard, for example, opines that 'there are only two things in the world. Things that are true. And things that are truer than true' (*L* 266); and David Ferrie believes 'there's no such thing as coincidence' and that history 'is the sum total of all the things they are not telling us' (*L* 384, 321).

These passages and paranoid statements highlight the metaphysical or transcendent nature of conspiracy theory, how it is based on a platonic conception of meaning, in

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[69] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 62

which the true meaning of things lies hidden, beyond reach, closed off to us. The language used by DeLillo recalls Wittgenstein's ironic description of logic as being of the 'purest crystal', 'as something pure and clear-cut' (*PI* 97, 105). It is precisely because they are 'perfect', ideal, 'everything that ordinary life is not', that both the idea of reducing the world to pure logic and conspiracy theories are so deeply appealing. For we are constantly dissatisfied with ordinary life, full of what Kant describes as 'a longing to pass out beyond our immediate confines and to relate ourselves to other worlds'. A 'malady', writes Kant, which is 'the opposite of the love of home'.[70] The idea that something is hidden – truth, essence, meaning, God – is one which Wittgenstein recognises to have a profound grip on us, but he shows that it stems from a theorizing attitude. The notion of logical purity or a hidden essence is due to the way we seek philosophical solutions. He writes: 'the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement' (*PI* 107). In other words, a metaphysical picture of things leads to the conviction that the essence of things is necessarily hidden and pure. Like logical purity, the unequivocal nature and seamlessness of a conspiracy theory is a requirement, not a result.

Like Wittgenstein, who writes that 'we must stick to the subjects of our every-day thinking and not go astray and imagine that we have to describe extreme subtleties' (*PI* 106), Branch is critical of a theoretical approach and wryly ironic, if not sardonic, about his own role in analysing the 'six point nine seconds of heat and light' of Kennedy's assassination:

> Let's call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment, separating the moments of each crowded second. We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams. Elm street. A woman wonders why she is sitting on the grass, bloodspray all around. Tenth street. A witness leaves her shoes on the hood of a bleeding policeman's car. A strangeness, Branch feels, that is almost holy. There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the heartland of the real. Let's regain our grip on things. (*L* 15)

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[70] Immanuel Kant cited in Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, pp. 37-8

The beginning of this passage has a mocking tone: the repetitive and colloquial use of "let's" sounds derisory, highlighting the absurdity as well as the obsessive nature of Branch's task. The reference to gleaming theories seems to indicate his scepticism and rejection of a theoretical approach, an approach that is implicitly seen as parallel to a theological or metaphysical yearning for authority. Green notes that the language in this passage 'suggests that the theory-building impulse springs from the same source as religious belief and entails the worship of idols constructed by the faithful themselves onto which faith is pinned'.[71] Against this theory-building impulse stands Branch's Wittgensteinian desire to 'regain our grip on things'. The phrase refers to the loss of meaning and inability to make sense of things following Kennedy's assassination, to the sudden disruption to the fabric of ordinary life. As well as to the way in which the unresolved question of how and why he was killed has led to endless speculation and paranoid conspiracy theories. More broadly, however, the phrase can also be seen to refer to the main characters' lack of concrete engagement with reality. How Oswald, Everett and even Branch are isolated, desperate idealists, exiled to the margins, searching for a secure hold on things or place in society. As discussed in the thesis introduction, the statement marks a return or call to return to the physical and ordinary. It indicates the drawing of limits and resonates not only throughout DeLillo's work, but with Wittgenstein's injunction to get 'back to the rough ground' (*PI* 107). Just as Wittgenstein reveals the purity of logic to be a misleading illusion and urges a return to the ordinary, so we can see that in *Libra* DeLillo undermines the underlying metaphysics of conspiracy theory by emphasising the importance of the random and contingent.

The way in which the novel resists a neat historical, political or causal explanation of the assassination can be seen as implicitly critical of a theorizing attitude. The fact that DeLillo emphasises the importance of alternative determining elements does not imply an endorsement of an unequivocal metaphysics. Maltby argues that these non-causal, non-rational elements – 'how patterns emerge outside the bounds of cause and effect'; or the things Branch thinks of as 'holy' (*L* 44, 15) – betray DeLillo's romantic metaphysics, but we can see that, as vital elements in the rejection of conspiracy theory, they are paradoxically part of a more complex picture of things. The metaphysical

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[71] Green, 'Libra', p. 99

quests of both Oswald and the conspirators mirror the quest for certainty and the accompanying belief in a conspiracy that Branch (and, by extension, the novel as a whole) calls into question. It can thus be argued that, although Oswald and the conspirators clearly embody certain metaphysical ideas or a metaphysical conception of things, the figure of Branch and the significant, if not pivotal, role he plays in the novel indicates the extent to which DeLillo's portrayal is fundamentally critical of this metaphysical conception of things.

The novel challenges the idea of unmediated access to historical truth and of a grand narrative that can explain everything clearly and unambiguously. A turn against theory, a turn to the non-rational and non-causal, to elements that are strange and holy, is not necessarily metaphysical. It may suggest the mystery of metaphysics, but does not imply a metaphysical ground or concept of truth. Coincidence and mystery are not signifiers of the transcendent but of the richness and depth of reality, for, as Everett remarks: 'you have to leave them with coincidence, lingering mystery. This is what makes it real' (*L* 147).

Thus we can see how DeLillo's engagement with conspiracy theory can be compared with Wittgenstein's critique of the theorising impulse; a critique that involves an investigation of the appeal of this impulse and metaphysics more generally. Both Wittgenstein and DeLillo explore the seemingly inevitable need that theorisation is a manifestation of, and how it looks to what lies hidden, or beneath or behind things, to explain or provide the meaning of things in a clear-cut, pure and unambiguous mode, and expose the contradictions or dangers that it leads to. Both resist this kind of totalising narrative, and both turn to the ordinary and contingent as a way out from the lure of theory and metaphysics. As has been shown throughout this thesis, this return to the ordinary in Wittgenstein is far from straightforward. It is the site of a continuous struggle, an almost spiritual struggle to return and accept home, to be constantly vigilant, self-questioning and willing to change the fundamental way one sees things. One of the main reasons for this struggle is the constant tension with the impulse to transcendence. Wittgenstein does not advocate the replacement of the necessary with the contingent, he does not reject theory for practice, rather he provides a picture of a tension between conflicting drives.

Likewise, in *Libra* DeLillo's emphasis on contingent elements has to be seen in relation to the appeal of conspiracy theory. The novel obtains its force from suggesting the importance of the tension between metaphysics and the ordinary. The novel accepts neither the lone gunman theory nor the water-tight conspiracy theory, but produces a complex picture of the controlled and the random, the individual and the collective, and the religious and the political. Though ultimately critical of the kind of metaphysical longing underlying both religious yearning and conspiracy theory, it nevertheless reveals the importance of understanding its significant role in individual and social behaviour.

In the final chapter of this thesis we turn to *The Names*, in which the impulse to transcendence is manifested in a dramatic manner. The kind of transformation Oswald sought is achieved in this novel through a return from metaphysical exile to home and the ordinary. We will continue to explore the ways in which DeLillo and Wittgenstein engage with, and ultimately challenge, the powerful appeal of the theorizing impulse and examine the social and political significance of returning to the ordinary. We will show that, like *Libra*, *The Names* reveals the dangers and temptations of both solipsism and the theory-building impulse, and ultimately points towards the importance of community and the kind of 'safe and plain' values embodied in Everett's wife, Mary Frances, who places her trust in the 'ordinary mysteries' (*L* 76).

CHAPTER 5

The Dangerous Sublimity of Logic and the 'Correctness of Detail'[1] in *The Names*

> To be at home in a language is to be at home in the world.
>
> *Stephen Mulhall*[2]

In an introduction to the work of Stanley Cavell, Richard Eldridge summarises the sense in which, for Cavell, philosophy inevitably involves a 'spiritual struggle'. He writes:

> One will find oneself at times pursuing a thought, vision, course of action that is not generally shared, hence seeking abandonment of or departure from the common. But then one will also find oneself, at times, recoiling from the solipsistic madness of apocalyptic vision and returning to the common, accepting it as a cure.[3]

This chapter will argue that DeLillo's novel *The Names* displays these two movements: both the departure from the common – in the striving to find metaphysical meaning – as well as the return to it. In the process, the chapter explores solipsistic madness and the possibility of community and the ordinary as providing a cure. I will argue that the tension between yearning for the transcendent and acceptance of the ordinary, between solipsism and belonging to a community, is central to the novel's philosophical concerns. The philosophical features of both the main characters' spiritual quests and the object of these quests – the language cult – will be examined in detail. I will show the way in which, like all of the DeLillo protagonists examined in this thesis, they are lost and in exile with a solipsistic, idealistic outlook that leads them to seek transcendent meaning. Again, this quest ultimately results in a return to the ordinary.

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[1] Don DeLillo, *The Names*, p. 26
[2] *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 179
[3] Eldridge, 'Introduction: Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance', *Stanley Cavell*, Richard Eldridge, (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 2

The Names is, among other things, a novel about a spiritual quest, or more accurately a series of spiritual quests that, at the same time, as Mark Osteen notes, 'investigates the need for quests'.[4] The quest undertaken by the novel's protagonist and narrator, James Axton, is superficially quite practical – to find and learn about a mysterious group of nomads who are obsessed with language and carry out a number of ritualised murders. But, as is so often the case with quest narratives in DeLillo's novels, this practical aspect is the vehicle for a form of spiritual quest, albeit one that is far from unambiguous or straightforward. *The Names* subtly subverts traditional conceptions of the quest, as can be seen most explicitly in its structural loop and inconclusive ending.

The action of the novel mostly takes place in Greece. Axton is an American risk analyst based in Athens. His estranged wife, Kathryn, and their son, Tap, live in a small island named Kouros, where she is working on an archaeological dig under the direction of an eccentric epigrapher, Owen Brademas. The plot is loosely centred around Owen and Axton's quest to find and find out about the 'language cult'. The quest is also undertaken by Axton's old friend, filmmaker Frank Volterra. Though there is a certain amount of cooperation their quests are to a large extent individual and carried out in isolation, and all of them end in some kind of failure; a failure however, that paradoxically is also something of a success. Their quests result not in transcendent vision or privileged insight, but in a return to the ordinary, with a renewed understanding and sense of acceptance; they succeed to the extent that they provide the characters – Frank and Axton at least – with a sense of the importance of ordinary language and community.

The novel is made up of two narrative strands. Of equal importance to the novel's structure and fabric is Axton's everyday life as an ex-patriot, the events and non-events of his social milieu, and the broader political and economic events taking place in all the countries in which he and his acquaintances carry out their business activities. This second narrative strand acts as a kind of counterpoint to the quest narrative and further emphasises the tension between the transcendent and the ordinary that is so central to the novel.

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[4] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread,* p. 119

The main narrative of the novel ends with a symbolic return to its beginning with Axton reflecting, as he does in the novel's opening pages, on the significance of the Acropolis. (The novel's actual ending is a short story by Tap). The novel is thus framed by two different readings of the Acropolis. The second reading is a correction or reassessment by Axton of his earlier views, which is the result not only of a change of opinion, but a radical awakening. This awakening comes at the end of a metaphysical journey Axton undertakes in which he seeks to find hidden patterns, uncover secrets and explain mysterious actions, but which results in a transformative return to the everyday, ordinary life of community and conversation. Thus we can view his awakening as signifying his return from a form of exile to the world of ordinary things.

This idea of exile and return, and this return marking some kind of transformation, is a recurring theme in DeLillo's work, and has been repeatedly addressed in the thesis. In particular, it was a central feature of *The Body Artist* chapter, in which I argued that Tuttle serves as a kind of facilitator, leading Lauren astray into believing in the possibility of language 'outside language-games'[5] but also enabling her to return to ordinary language and the wonder of ordinary things. As with *The Body Artist*, in *The Names* both the exile and return are a result of, and take place in, language.

In *The Names* this possibility of language 'outside language-games' and the desire to transcend human finitude can be seen both in the language cult, and in the quest to find and learn about them. In *The Body Artist* the movement between exile and return, between the solipsistic temptations of metaphysics and the reassurance of the ordinary, takes place in a narrative characterised by the intensity and focus of its narrow range of concerns. The novel considers the grieving process of a person who is almost completely isolated from the outside world, and so from any social, political or even worldly interests. Though both novels, like the philosophy of early and late Wittgenstein, explore the 'limits of the human' and the apparent human need to exceed these limits, in *The Names* these philosophical features are connected to a broader set of concerns and issues. That is to say, the tension at work in the novel between metaphysics and the ordinary, between the striving after an ideal and the acceptance of the everyday, is embedded in an explicit and detailed geo-political context that

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[5] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 195

necessarily raises a series of questions about the relation between metaphysics and social and political realities. In *The Body Artist* Lauren's return to the ordinary is marked by her having overcome the temptation to transcend human finitude and her renewed sense of the wonder of everyday experience and things. In the final section of *The Names* we can see a similar kind of return, but significantly, this return is characterised by a strong sense of community, family and shared language.

I will thus argue that although the novel reveals, and is engaged with, the kind of tension between metaphysics and the ordinary that we have examined in previous chapters, it does so in a way that enables us to think about the social and political consequences of both DeLillo's and Wittgenstein's work. In the novel the tension at work between the transcendent and the ordinary is perhaps most evident in the contrast DeLillo draws between two different models or pictures of language – an ideal language of logical purity and the ordinary language of conversation and social exchange. In order to explore the philosophical aspects of these different pictures of language I will trace the shift and examine the contrast in Wittgenstein's thinking from the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*. The shift in Wittgenstein's work will be compared with the shift that occurs in Axton's approach to language, as he overcomes his attraction to the logical sublime, the dangers of idealism and a 'theoretical attitude', and returns to the ordinary and an acceptance of community. This return will be illuminated by an account of Cavell's exploration of the social and political significance of the Wittgensteinian ideas of acknowledgement, acceptance and community. This will show how Wittgenstein's later work can help us think about the ways in which the underlying philosophical questions raised by *The Names* relate to broader social and political concerns.

I. CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE NOVEL

The recovery of the ordinary requires an act of self-transformation.[6]

In this section I will examine a number of critical responses to *The Names* and their significant points of contact with a Wittgensteinian orientation. I will then show that the

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[6] Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 12

two dominant critical approaches to the novel are reflected by the two pictures of language displayed in the novel itself, and that these two approaches and pictures of language can be illustrated by the shift in Wittgenstein's account of language from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*.

Several of the critical readings that explore the idea that Axton experiences some kind of awakening as a result of his spiritual journey share a distinctly Wittgensteinian thrust. Jacqueline Zubeck, for example, argues that Axton, Owen and Frank, undertake 'journeys from postmodern abstraction to prosaic actuality' leading to a 'self-awareness which provides the basis for their social and moral regeneration'.[7] Though Zubeck's overall argument is mostly concerned with the ethical consequences of dismissing 'actual practice in the interest of disembodied theory'[8] the way she reads the text in terms of an opposition between theory and practice and her emphasis on the return to the ordinary, to the 'surge and pelt of daily life' (*N* 269), has significant points of contact with a Wittgensteinian perspective. As we have seen in previous chapters the raising of self-awareness as a platform for change, and the movement from abstraction to actuality, is crucial to the project of Wittgenstein's later work, which aims to 'bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (*PI* 116). Though he rarely touches on social or moral concerns they nevertheless remain implicit in and profoundly important to his work,[9] and part of the inestimable value of Cavell's work is the way he teases these elements out of Wittgenstein's writing.

Zubeck's sense that the novel traces a movement away from abstraction towards the ordinary, resulting in a kind of regeneration, is shared by both Osteen and Paula Bryant, but their emphasis is more strongly weighted in terms of the importance of language in this journey. According to Osteen,

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[7] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 356
[8] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 355
[9] James Conant writes that, 'even though Wittgenstein, in one sense "has no ethics", [...] in another sense, his thinking and writing – on every page of his work – takes place under the pressure of an ethical demand. Wittgenstein thought that what (and more importantly *how*) we think is revelatory of who we are (and how we live), and that learning to think better (and above all, to change the ways in which one thinks) is an important means to becoming a better - i.e. to becoming (what Wittgenstein calls) a real – human being.' "On Going the Bloody Hard Way in Philosophy", *The Possibilities of Sense*, John Whittaker (ed.), Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003, p. 90

Axton undergoes a series of life-altering experiences that move him toward commitment and community. His passive character is destroyed and then restored by a newly liberating comprehension of language as the necessary ligature of filial and communal bonds.[10]

While Bryant claims that Axton goes from viewing 'language as timeless, pure, abstract, and thus limited and limiting, to seeing its potential as a dynamic medium, irrational, immediate, expressive, although impure'.[11] Both readings can be viewed in Wittgensteinian terms: Osteen's emphasis on language and the way it relates to commitment and community, as we will see in due course, points to significant aspects of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's work; and Bryant's distinction mirrors the different approaches to language in early and late Wittgenstein, between language as slippery ice and language as rough ground (*PI* 107).

The novel's contrast between two conceptions of and approaches to language, and two different modes of understanding, can also be seen in critical approaches to the novel, between readings which, according to Matthew J. Morris, emphasise 'the linguistic structures [...] at the expense of their political implications',[12] and those which consider the broader context, whether social, political or historical. Taking the latter approach, Anne Longmuir, in her illuminating essay on *The Names*, argues against the general tendency of critics to view the novel as a 'metaphysical meditation on language'. She claims that 'existing academic criticism reduces *The Names* to an abstract analysis of language'.[13] Longmuir acknowledges that 'language and the broader set of related epistemological questions that it raises' are central to the novel's concerns, but she points out that these questions are not asked in isolation. On the contrary, the novel's meditations on language take place 'within a very specific location and period'. The central point of Longmuir's essay is that the novel needs to be subjected to an intertextual reading, and that 'its most important intertext is historical: its references to the Iranian revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis'. She concludes her essay with

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[10] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 118

[11] Bryant, 'Discussing the Untellable': Don DeLillo's *The Names*', *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, p. 169

[12] Matthew J. Morris, Murdering Words: Language in Action in Don DeLillo's *The Names*', *Contemporary Literature* 30, 1989, p. 113

[13] Longmuir, 'The Language of History', pp. 105, 106

a claim which is, perhaps paradoxically, significant for a Wittgensteinian reading of the novel's philosophical aspects:

> Employing the Iranian hostage crisis as an intertext in our reading of the *The Names* forces us to recognise that DeLillo does not explore language in isolation, because he does not believe language exists in isolation but exists within the social text.[14]

This suggestion may seem paradoxical given that a Wittgensteinian reading will necessarily be more closely focused on issues of language at the expense of historical or political implications. However, such an approach, by showing that language does not exist in isolation, supports the kind of reading that examines the social, historical and political context and consequences; it challenges certain theoretical preconceptions that underlie the kind of abstract, analytical readings that Longmuir criticises, and clears the ground and provides the philosophical justification for alternative modes of reading. Furthermore, a Wittgensteinian reading does have significant social and political implications, which are implicit in the philosophical issues under scrutiny in this chapter. These issues broadly reveal that just as language should not be examined in isolation from the broader social and political context, so social and political questions should not be examined in isolation from a consideration of linguistic practices and structures. It is precisely the link between language and the broader context, and the way linguistic issues are related to, and impact upon, the social and political, that will be examined below.

Longmuir's argument that 'DeLillo does not explore language in isolation' is an important one, and yet it doesn't seem to go far enough, for, crucially, DeLillo also highlights the *dangers* of exploring language in isolation. The novel reveals the dangers of exploring language in isolation not only in the obsessive behaviour of Axton, Owen and Frank but above all in the depiction of the language cult – in the extremity of both its theories and its actions. For my purposes, neither the validity of Longmuir's choice of intertext nor the need for an intertextual reading is in question, what is of interest is that the contrast she makes between two critical approaches to the novel – between a metaphysical, abstract analytical approach and a context-based approach focused on

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[14] Longmuir, 'The Language of History', p. 120

specificity – is in fact played out *in* the novel, and what's more, this contrast mirrors and can be illuminated by the contrast between early and late Wittgenstein.

One of the radical shifts in Wittgenstein's thinking, from early to late, is precisely the change from viewing language in isolation to showing how it exists within the social text. Wittgenstein's later work is in part a reflection on his earlier work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and the dangers of an abstract, analytical approach to language; of examining language in isolation. The *Tractatus* is characterised by its abstract analysis of the logic of language – language divorced from any context. The *Philosophical Investigations*, on the other hand, is a critique of this approach to language that, at the same time, demonstrates the importance of context, details and the everyday use of language. It is, writes McGinn, an 'attempt to get us to look at language when it is functioning within the everyday, practical lives of speakers.'[15]

The kind of approach to the novel that Longmuir criticises – an abstract analysis of language – is mirrored in the novel by the theorising, idealist attitudes of Axton, Owen and Frank, especially in their approach to the language cult, (and, as we will explore below, in the language cult itself). For Zubeck, the three characters, who all share an obsession with the language cult, 'privilege theory and negate prosaic particularity'. They are, she argues, 'representatives of the academy' – as writer, epigrapher and filmmaker respectively – and 'are fascinated by the abstract pattern of the murders and ignore the actual practice which brings this pattern into being'.[16] In other words, they embody the kind of 'theoretical attitude' that Wittgenstein shows leads to dissatisfaction with language, philosophical confusion and a yearning to transcend human finitude.

II. AXTON, OWEN, FRANK AND THE LOGICAL SUBLIME

> A main cause of philosophical disease – a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of thinking. (*PI* 593)

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[15] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 37
[16] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 354

This section examines the significant similarities between the three main characters and the reasons for their interest in, and pursuit of, the language cult. It shows how Axton, Owen and Frank are all solipsistic idealists in search of some form of transcendent meaning, and illustrates the way the cult's actions can be seen to embody an idea of the logical sublime.

Axton's initial conception and understanding of language is symbolised or embodied in his initial conception and understanding of the Acropolis. In Axton's first reading of the Acropolis, which opens the novel, there is a strong emphasis on the transcendent nature of the monument, as he attempts to explain his resistance to visiting it. He begins by drawing a contrast with the 'imperfect, blaring' modern city surrounding it, as if they are separate and distinct things. He notes its ethereal qualities, its luminosity and immateriality, calling it a 'white fire' and a 'star lamp' (*N* 4). He also emphasises the form, the 'beauty, dignity, order, proportion' of the 'worked stones', suggesting that he sees the Acropolis as the embodiment of an ideal (*N* 3); an ideal that reminds him of our 'inadequacy', and small human failings.

The reading is a prime example of what Morris calls Axton's 'tendency to overestimate the power of pure form'.[17] This tendency is shared by Owen and Frank, with whom Axton also shares an obsessive interest in finding the language cult. Owen is an intellectual, an idealist and a wanderer, who plays the role of 'elderly sage'.[18] His approach to his subjects of study is far from orthodox, and has more in common with a religious fanatic. He wants to devote the rest of his life to reading inscriptions, 'all I want to do', he says, 'is read the stones' (*N* 23). His idealism and otherworldliness are plain to see, 'Owen's in another world', says Kathryn (*N* 73), and Axton notes how for Owen 'even random things take ideal shapes' (*N* 19). His idealism is most apparent, however, in his approach to reading. He is no longer interested in what the stones he reads say, but only in the shapes of the letters and the materials used, he 'sees a mysterious importance in the letters as such, the blocks of characters' (*N* 35). This experience of the 'shapes' is, for Owen, 'strange and reawakening' and 'goes deeper than conversations' (*N* 36). According to Zubeck, Owen's 'allegiance to a nether world of intellectual paradigms has robbed him of attention to quotidian concerns'; he is

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[17] Morris, 'Murdering Words', p. 122
[18] Born, 'Sacred Noise', p. 215

isolated from 'untidy quotidian complexity'. [19] And for Morris, it is 'Owen's misreading' that 'points him toward extremism and isolation'. [20]

Though equally elusive, Frank is a wilder, less measured and predictable character than Owen. He is a filmmaker, 'a ragged self-regarding artist', and his attitude to film resembles Owen's attitude to stones (*N* 125). He is obsessive about film, governed by a powerful drive to make films, and interested in film itself (*N* 109). The film he proposes to make about the cult would be 'an essay on film, on what film is, on what it means' (*N* 199). He is also, like Owen and Axton, deeply solipsistic. 'I can't surrender myself to places' he says, admitting, 'I'm the place. [...] I'm the only place I need' (*N* 143). Of the three, Frank is perhaps the most explicitly drawn by the possibility of transcendence, he is 'hungry for the limit of things' (*N* 218).

Axton lacks the manic, extreme drive of Owen and Frank, he is disengaged, ironic and complacent – a 'perennial tourist', who lacks commitment in all areas of his life (*N* 43). This is made clear when he explains his resistance to visiting the Acropolis by acknowledging that there are 'obligations attached to such a visit' (*N* 3). His avoidance of the Acropolis is indicative of a more general attitude of avoidance and his reluctance to accept or honour obligations. He is, like Oswald, Nick Shay and Keith Neudecker, 'a man living apart' (*N* 44), and according to Zubeck, 'utterly removed from social responsibility'. [21] His job as a risk analyst involves a moral and emotional detachment from the prosaic reality of the data he collects and interprets. (The contrast between Axton and Kathryn is telling here. Kathryn, an archaeologist, is literally and symbolically grounded by her work). These aspects of Axton's personality are most clearly emphasised in 'the 27 Depravities', a mental list Axton compiles that he believes accurately reflects Kathryn's grievances against him, and which reveals his ironic stance towards his failings. He describes himself as 'self-satisfied', 'uncommitted', 'willing to settle', and 'politically neuter' (*N* 16-17).

Axton's detachment is also evident in the nature of his social existence among the ex-pat community in Athens, which enables him to persist in his disengaged state, his

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[19] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 361
[20] Morris, 'Murdering Words' p. 118
[21] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 357

'artificial life' (*N* 130). The ex-pat world is unreal, a 'pretend world of exotic landscapes and foreign people'; [22] it requires no investment, commitment or responsibility. It is alienating – 'there was around us almost nothing we knew as familiar and safe', thinks Axton, lamenting that, 'we'd lost our capacity to select, to ferret out particularity' (*N* 94). And this alienation is strongly related to Axton's theorising attitude, his generalising impulse, his 'tendency to sublime' the way he see things.

This inability to select, to see the particular, is indicative of his social and political disengagement – he is incapable of recognizing and accepting the broader consequences of his own and his community's behaviour. Axton fears politics, a fear hinted at throughout the novel, such as when he lies about visiting Turkey to his concierge because the concierge 'looks political' (*N* 103). This fear of politics, and his avoidance of social responsibility and commitment, can be seen as related to his refusal to acknowledge or accept what being American might mean; his refusal to acknowledge his real community.

Axton acknowledges the political and historical events taking place in the Middle East, but only as an observer, not a participant, in spite of the fact that he admits his job is concerned with 'money and politics' (*N* 97). He refuses to acknowledge the role that he is playing in these events (and his unawareness of the fact that he works for the C.I.A exemplifies rather than justifies his lack of engagement and sense of responsibility). Furthermore, he sees these events in abstract, transcendent terms: 'in some of these places', he tells Charles Maitland, referring to various Middle Eastern cities, 'things have enormous power. They have impact, they're mysterious. Events have weight [...]. It's a heightening' (*N* 98).

His reading of America is equally vague and abstract. He argues that 'America is the world's living myth' (*N* 114) and thus refuses to acknowledge or take responsibility for the actualities of American political intervention. He seems unwilling or possibly incapable of looking at the wider context or considering the specific details. This attitude is revealed most forcefully in his dinner discussion with Greek nationalist

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[22] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 358

Andreas Eliades, during which Andreas tries to persuade Axton to think about America's imperialistic role in foreign affairs. Axton says that he doesn't want to 'hear the history of foreign interference' (*N* 237) and denies responsibility for American actions and policy, saying decisions taken were 'not by me' (*N* 236), thus failing to understand, at least according to a Cavellian account, what belonging to a democratic state involves, the responsibility that accompanies membership in a polis.

For Cavell membership in a political community is based on consent, an idea that has several significant consequences. By consenting, he writes, 'I recognise the society and its government, so constituted, as *mine*; which means that I am answerable not merely to it, but for it'.[23] Tanesini elaborates this point by highlighting that 'to consent is to undertake a commitment. It is a matter of accepting one's responsibility for one's community'.[24] Axton's refusal to say "we" not only emphasises his political blindness but also his desire for autonomy and longing to transcend the ordinary.

Such attitudes of denial are shared by Frank and Owen, and are partly explained by the fact that all three men are exiles, they're 'a long way from home' (*N* 50). Owen, who hasn't 'been home in thirty-five years', refers to himself as a 'lost traveller' (*N* 77), Frank has been exiled from the film community and lives more or less underground, and Axton laments that there is 'no place in particular' to which he belongs (*N* 49). All three are solipsistic idealists in search of the possibility of transcendence – they are 'looking for something that lies outside the range of expectations' (*N* 140) – and this helps explain their shared attraction to the cult.

Axton learns about the language cult from Owen on one of his trips to visit Kathryn and Tap. Owen tells him about meeting a group of strange people who live in a cave. The cave-dwellers, like Owen, are interested in language, but whereas Owen is interested in inscriptions, the cult are interested in the 'alphabet itself [...] in letters, written symbols, fixed in sequence' (*N* 30). They are 'zealots of the alphabet' (*N* 75). A murder takes place on the island and both Owen and Axton suspect that the group was responsible. They slowly learn more about the group: that they may belong to a bigger organisation; that they have carried out other murders; and, most significantly, that there is 'some

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[23] Cavell, cited in Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 132
[24] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 131

alphabetic link between the victim's name and the place where he or she was killed' (*N* 171). As they learn more about the group, and its extreme behaviour, they become increasingly obsessed with it.

Their interest in the group is driven by the mystery, by the desire to solve a puzzle, but mostly by the logical sublimity of the cult's actions, the way their actions seem to embody some logical ideal, which serves as a 'vault into eternity' (*N* 203). The ideas and language used by Owen the first time he speculates about the group's motives reveals the appeal of the logical sublime. He thinks that maybe the man found murdered on the island 'was a victim of some ordering instinct. They may have felt they were moving toward a static perfection of some kind. [...] To be part of some unified vision. [...] Safe from chaos and life' (*N* 115-6).

Osteen argues that 'a religious longing underpins the obsession with the cult',[25] and though it clear that there is a strong element of spiritual yearning and desire for transcendence in the obsession, this longing manifests itself in an impulse to theorise and an attraction to an abstract ideal, rather than in a longing for communal rapture or release. 'There is a different signature here, a deeper and austere calculation', reflects Owen, 'the murders are so striking in design that we tend to overlook the physical act itself' (*N* 171). It is this design that they find so compelling, the logic of an action with 'no sense, no content, no historic bond' (*N* 216). They are drawn to the transcendent possibilities of pure form, and to the very inhumanity of the logical sublime, and thus they 'barely consider the victims except as elements in the pattern' (*N* 171).

For both Wittgenstein and Cavell an attraction to the inhuman, or desire to transcend the human, is an essential part of being human. In his reading of Wittgenstein, Mulhall claims:

> Nothing is more human than the desire to deny the human, to interpret limits as
> limitations, and to repudiate the human condition of conditionedness (finitude) in
> the name of the unconditioned, the transcendent, the superhuman – the inhuman.[26]

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[25] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 126
[26] Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 94

Crucially, this drive to the inhuman manifests itself in an attraction to the sublime. According to Mulhall, 'it as if the very inhumanity of the sublime seduces us, as if transcending the human condition amounted to an infinitely desirable purification and refinement of ourselves'.[27]

This idea of the sublime is central to Wittgenstein's diagnosis of certain philosophical assumptions about language, and has important parallels with DeLillo's depiction of the language cult. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein diagnoses our 'tendency to sublime the logic of our language' (*PI* 38), and the ways in which logic is considered to transcend the empirical or ordinary, as well as the dangerous consequences of this idea. In his detailed analysis of the *Investigations*, Mulhall shows how Wittgenstein's metaphors in this section, 'interlinked chains of figuration that attempt to capture our sense of the peculiar character, the queerness of logic,' emphasise different but equally significant aspects of the sublime.[28] Firstly, the sublime is figured in terms of depth, as that which lies below the threshold of ordinary awareness. Secondly, in terms of sublimation or refinement, and lastly, the sublime also embodies a notion of sublimity – a sense of exaltation, of being elevated to or beyond a certain threshold.

All three of these senses – depth, purification, exaltation – are manifest in the 'obsessive logocentrism' of the language cult and their 'working towards a purer vision' (*N* 149). They can be seen, for example, in the way cult work at a 'preverbal level' (*N* 208), in Emmerich's claim to Owen that 'only a death can complete the program', insisting, 'it goes deep, this recognition, beyond words' (*N* 293); in Bern's starving herself to death (*N* 292); and in Andahl's account of the 'frenzy of knowing' during the experience of killing, that was 'beyond any horror' (*N* 211). These senses of the sublime are equally manifest in the obsessive pursuit of the cult by Axton, Frank and Owen.

III. WITTGENSTEIN AND THE LANGUAGE CULT

What is the relation between name and thing named? – Well, what *is* it? (*PI* 37)

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[27] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 89
[28] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 88

The cult members see and discuss their actions in formal, or more precisely, logical terms, describing murder as carrying 'out the pattern' (*N* 210). They speak about their 'program' as if the logic itself is self-justifying: 'it's true to the premise [...] it follows logically upon the premise', they say, and emphasise the 'rightness of it'; how it is 'correct', 'valid' (*N* 209, 302). Before concluding, 'it's a blunt recital of the facts', a phrase with faint echoes of the idiosyncratic language of the *Tractatus* and its emphasis on facts: 'the world is the totality of facts, not of things'; 'we picture facts to ourselves' (*TLP* 1.1, 2.1). It is clear, therefore, that the language cult is not merely a reflection on language, but perhaps more significantly on logic – or on a certain picture of language that leads to a logical conception of things.

This emphasis on logic, the way, as Osteen notes, 'their ritual is all structure',[29] and the obvious incongruity between such use of logical language and the act of murder suggests the possibility of reading the language cult as a satirical illustration of a 'theoretical attitude' or an abstract approach to language. Born, for example, suggests the cult can be viewed as an 'hilariously literalistic, expression of Derrida's concept of logocentricity',[30] while Zubeck claims that the cult 'seems to exemplify some of the tenets of postmodernism'. She writes, 'DeLillo seems to incorporate and satirize various strands of postmodern theory [...] by taking it literally. [...] The language cult [...] manifests what might be its logical implications'. The problem with postmodern theory, she continues, is that 'language becomes the disembodied expression of an amorphous discourse' that 'refers only to its own construction'.[31] Her argument, however, is less with postmodernist theory itself, which she admits to 'oversimplifying'[32], than with the dangers of a blind adherence to theory or a theoretical perspective in general, and thus can be compared with later Wittgenstein's critique of the theoretical impulse.

Rather than attempt to pinpoint the precise object of DeLillo's critique I will suggest that the cult embodies and satirizes a general picture of language rather than a theory. By viewing the cult in this way we can illustrate not only the parallels between the cult's vision of language and elements of the *Tractatus*, but also the significance of later Wittgenstein's critique of the metaphysical impulse for our understanding of Axton's

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[29] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 130
[30] Born, 'Sacred Noise', p. 215
[31] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', pp. 353-4
[32] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 354

eventual return. For Wittgenstein does not challenge particular theories of language, rather he diagnoses how a certain picture of language leads to a theorising attitude. Crucially, in order to overcome a picture of language it is necessary to change the way we see things.

The idea of viewing the language cult as a kind of satirical illustration is suggested in the novel itself, though not unambiguously, when Owen comments to Axton that 'these killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls' (*N* 308). The need Owen refers to here can be seen as a manifestation of the 'craving for the metaphysical',[33] or what Wittgenstein would identify as 'an urge to understand the basis, or essence, of everything empirical', a need to secure ourselves to solid foundations (*PI* 89). Wittgenstein recognises and deeply respects this need, but thinks it can be satisfied in other ways than building systems. And though he doesn't mock this need, he does mock a great deal of the misguided, theory-based attempts to satisfy it – including his own earlier effort in the *Tractatus*.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein attempts to satisfy metaphysical problems by producing a logical analysis of how language represents reality and by showing that, in David G. Stern's words, 'all language shares an underlying formal structure'.[34] In this attempt to 'construct a theory of what language's ability to represent the world consists in'[35] he takes the analogy between language and a precise calculus as an elucidation of the essence of language. In this theory, notes McGinn, 'the basic signifying unit of language is the name'.[36]

The cult's actions, as well as the language they use, can thus be seen to represent precisely the kind of search for logical purity characteristic of Wittgenstein's early work, an argument made by Bryant, who claims that the language cult's program 'is a perverse version of Wittgenstein's logical positivist search for one ideal language that will redeem confusion by establishing an inexorable equivalence between word and world'.[37] The parallels between the language cult's 'program' and the *Tractatus*, which,

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[33] Cavell, 'The Wittgensteinian Event', p. 195
[34] Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 7
[35] McGinn, *Wittgenstein,* p. 33
[36] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 34
[37] Bryant, 'Discussing the Untellable', p.160

notes Stern, sets out a 'program of logical analysis',[38] are not only evident in the preoccupation with logic, but also in the primary importance they give to names. Although the language cult never explicitly articulate what could be considered a coherent theory of language, their obsession with names, their focus on one narrow aspect of language and the way in which they employ the technical language of logic highlight the theorising and Tractarian nature of their program.

Perhaps the most significant parallel between the *Tractatus* and the language cult is the way early Wittgenstein's conception of naming is echoed in the language cult's approach to names. The language cult, argues Maltby, 'seek to recover [a] utopian condition of language, [...] the language of name, the kind of pure nomenclature implied in genesis where words stand in a necessary rather than arbitrary, relationship to their referents'.[39] Such a conception of naming can be seen in the outline Mulhall draws of a certain approach to language that Wittgenstein diagnoses in the *Investigations*, an approach which is found in both the *Tractatus* and St Augustine:

> the philosopher has extracted naming from its contexts in our everyday life with words, and hence arrived at the idea that naming is a single, unique, and superlatively definite kind of relation between word and thing – a hidden connection of crystalline purity.[40]

The *Investigations* begins with an extended consideration of this conception of naming and the representational view of language accompanying it, which results from an approach to language exemplifying the 'theoretical attitude' Wittgenstein's later work is directed against. But rather than directly address the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein opens the *Investigations* with a citation from St Augustine, which, argues McGinn, brings out the 'universality of the temptations he is concerned with'.[41] Augustine's account of learning language, claims Wittgenstein, gives us a 'particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects' (*PI* 1). In other

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[38] Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, p. 9
[39] Matby, 'Romantic Metaphysics', p. 262
[40] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 94
[41] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 37

words, Augustine takes one sort of word – the name – as a model and 'derives his general picture of how language functions from this one sort of case'.[42]

According to McGinn, for Wittgenstein, this tendency to derive a general model from a central case is an 'important element in the theoretical attitude', and thus is not unique to St Augustine, but is a seemingly natural impulse. McGinn's summary of this 'first, primitive impulse to theorize about language' has evident parallels with the language cult, who call themselves 'beginners':

> Our general sense of a need 'to penetrate phenomena' predisposes us to neglect the wide horizon of human linguistic activity, and to focus on particular linguistic elements in isolation from both the field of language and the actual employment of this language by speakers. Our attitude towards these particular examples is one of studying them closely in order to discern their essence (e.g. the essence of naming). The tendency to take a narrow or over-simplified view of the phenomenon of language is thereby combined with a tendency to idealize or mythologize it.[43]

These tendencies are equally evident in the behaviour and ideas of Axton, Frank and Owen, as they pursue and idealize the cult, whose secret 'they are intent on unlocking'.[44] One of the problems with this approach to language, according to later Wittgenstein, is that it leads to a 'conception of naming as, so to speak, an occult process' (*PI* 38). In this conception, continues Wittgenstein,

> Naming appears as a *queer* connection of a word with an object. And you really get such a queer connection when the philosopher is trying to bring out the relation between name and thing by staring at an object in from of him and repeating a name or even the word "this" innumerable times. (*PI* 38)

The picture that Wittgenstein paints here of a philosopher's slightly manic or absurd behaviour is analogous to the obsessive behaviour of the language cult who attempt to bring out the relation between name and thing by inflicting repeated blows on their victims 'innumerable times'. It is clear that the cult perceives naming as an occult

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[42] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, p. 39
[43] McGinn, *Wittgenstein*, pp. 39, 37, 39
[44] Born, 'Sacred Noise', p. 213

process and insists on idealizing and mythologizing the process – Andhal speaks of the 'secret power of name forms' (*N* 210). Thus their behaviour – described by Owen as 'ritualizing a denial of our elemental nature' (*N* 175) – can be seen as a satirical embodiment of a metaphysician who is 'under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential' in a philosophical investigation, 'resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language' (*PI* 97).

This idea that the cult are a satirical embodiment of the logical implications of a metaphysical picture of things makes Wittgenstein's critique of his earlier positivist thinking particularly relevant, especially since it too is not without its satirical edge, and since its aim is in part to return us to 'our elemental nature' – to the rough ground of ordinary language and everyday life. One of the ways in which Wittgenstein tries to achieve this return is to highlight or reveal the absurdities of a narrow, logical approach to language, to reveal what he describes as the 'bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language' (*PI* 119), and he does this through innovative formal means. Wittgenstein's purpose, argues Mulhall, is 'diagnostic rather than critical' and thus 'the peculiarities of tone and style in Wittgenstein's writing reflect [...] the particular work they are intended to perform on his readers'.[45] One of these characteristic peculiarities is his use of humour. To carry out the work of changing the way his readers see, Wittgenstein not infrequently uses comical methods to bring into question certain philosophical assumptions and their logical consequences. This comic mode ranges from sarcasm – 'How strange that we should be able to do anything with the [language] we have!' (*PI* 120) – to borderline slapstick – 'Imagine someone saying: "But I know how tall I am!" and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it' (*PI* 279).

These comic tropes, combined with Wittgenstein's striking use of metaphor and imagery convey the manic and absurd state, the head bumping, that a certain philosophical attitude can induce or lead to. A state Wittgenstein encapsulates in an aphorism that, despite its economy, perfectly illustrates not only his ideas, but also his deft use of the comical, metaphorical image: 'What is your aim in philosophy?' he asks himself, answering: 'to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' (*PI* 309).

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[45] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 35

Perhaps the most characteristic way in which Wittgenstein works on his readers, however, is through the relentless posing of questions. These questions take place within the dense, complex dialogues of unspecified interlocutors, but they often read as if they are directed at the reader, and serve to bring the reader into the dialogue, as we can see in the following example, in which the questioning increases in intensity:

> When someone says the word "cube" to me, for example, I know what it means. But can the whole use of the word come before my mind, when I *understand* it in this way?
> Well, but on the other hand isn't the meaning of the word also determined by this use? And can these ways of determining meaning conflict? Can what we grasp *in a flash* accord with a use, fit or fail to fit it? And how can what is present to us in an instant, what comes before our mind in an instant, fit a *use*?
> What really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word? – Isn't it something like a picture? Can't it *be* a picture? (*PI* 139)

Here and elsewhere Wittgenstein challenges the preconceptions and prejudices of his readers, teasing out the logical implications of certain deeply held beliefs. The dialogic element of his writing is essential to the way he tries to change the way we see things, not by correcting particular mistakes or theories, but by showing us how we got into the fly bottle in the first place; showing us the paths we may have taken or be tempted to take, and we why we took or are tempted to take them. One of the most significant temptations, and one that we can see echoed in *The Names*, is the desire to 'penetrate phenomena', to uncover the essence of things (*PI* 90). This desire in part stems from the belief that 'the proposition and the word that logic deals with are supposed to be something pure and clear-cut. And we rack our brains over the nature of the *real* sign' (*PI* 105). Thus we are led to 'imagine that we have to describe extreme subtleties. [...] We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers' (*PI* 106). This image powerfully conveys the mania that can result from a certain conception of language. And forms part of the general picture of how philosophical questions can lead to the obsessive, quest-like pursuit of the hidden essence of things, of logical purity, and the apparent need to transcend human finitude; how, according to Cavell, we feel

'compelled to search for an order or system or a language that would secure human settlement with the world that goes beyond human sense and certainty'.[46]

Wittgenstein reveals, however, that such philosophical searching, which sends 'us in pursuit of chimeras' (*PI* 94), leads to frustration or dissatisfaction, even, argues Cavell, 'touches of madness'.[47] Wittgenstein writes, 'when we believe that we must find that order, must find the ideal, in our actual language, we become dissatisfied with what are ordinarily called "propositions", "words", "signs"' (*PI* 105). Such a desire to find an order or ideal, 'a static perfection of some kind' (*N* 116), and sense of dissatisfaction with ordinary language, is clearly evident in both the language cult and in Axton, Owen and Frank's quests to find the cult. According to Wittgenstein, this dissatisfaction leads us to 'try to purify, to sublime, the signs themselves' (*PI* 94). For Wittgenstein, this longing for logical purity, this deep desire to sublime the logic of our language, inevitably leads to the idea that language or logic is somehow limiting, and thus to a desire to transcend this limit. It is a desire, however, that his work is intended to help us overcome, in part, writes Mulhall, by seeking 'to establish an orientation in which problem-solving and theory-building no longer appear to attract or satisfy us'. Furthermore, argues Mulhall, 'if we can overcome our sense of the sublimity of logic then we might cease to picture logic as liminal, and so as demarcating that which is within from that which is beyond human experience'.[48] Thus, if Axton and the others can overcome this sense of the sublimity of logic and the tendency to sublime the logic of language then they can, in Bryant's words, move from 'despising language as timeless, pure, abstract, and thus limited and limiting, to seeing its potential as a dynamic medium, irrational, immediate, expressive, although impure'.[49]

As we have seen, Axton, Frank and Owen are attracted by the sublime elements of the language cult's program, and the 'problem-solving and theory-building' that this leads to. But it is precisely because these elements fail to satisfy that they are able to return to the ordinary; it is the failure of the sublime, the bumps caused by attempting to transcend the limits of language that enables Axton, at least, to overcome his sense of the sublimity of logic and so renew his approach to language. As discussed in relation to

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[46] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 4
[47] Cavell, 'Declining Decline', pp. 325-326
[48] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, pp. 42, 90
[49] Bryant, 'Discussing the Untellable', p. 169

The Body Artist, according to Noggle, our fascination with an ideal of language leads to philosophical confusion and to 'linguistic alienation'. However, by clearly seeing this fascination for what it is we can be led back to the ordinary, with a new or fresh insight into things. Noggle writes that 'linguistic alienation's value lies in its capacity to purge us of itself, to bring us back to the language game in which we live and breathe'.[50] Axton, Frank and Owen are all in some way purged of their alienating fascination with the language cult, and by extension, with an abstract, idealist conception of language, an ideal language of logical purity and rigour. A language that, like the pure maths Charles Maitland's son studies, 'means nothing, says nothing, refers to nothing, is in fact absolutely useless [...]. It doesn't bear on human experience, human progress, ordinary human language' (*N* 164).

Owen tells Axton that he believed 'India would cure [him] of the fascination' with the cult (*N* 290), thereby acknowledging the extent to which such a fascination is like a disease, similar to Lauren's bewitchment by Mr. Tuttle, and the kind of philosophical disease Wittgenstein thinks needs therapy – 'the philosopher's treatment of a question', he remarks, 'is like the treatment of an illness' (*PI* 255). By recognizing the nonsense or meaninglessness of the language cult's logic – 'they intended nothing, they meant nothing' (*N* 308) – as well as the dangers of an attraction to logical ideals in general, Owen, Frank and Axton are cured of their fascination with the cult. The extent to which Owen is cured of 'the impulse to transcendence',[51] however, is left open, for though they all recoil 'from the solipsistic madness of apocalyptic vision' only Frank and James are seen to return 'to the common, accepting it as a cure'.[52] Frank, argues Zubeck, is rescued from his 'dangerous solipsism' through his return to his lover Del Nearing and 'human intimacy'.[53] We will examine Axton's return in the next section.

Owen has no sense of what an ordinary form of community might be; he is only able to consider two social possibilities: solitude or the 'nightmarish force of people in groups, the power of religion' (*N* 276). Morris argues that Owen lost his 'sense of community'[54] as a result of his childhood trauma of being unable to partake in the experience of

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[50] Noggle, 'The Wittgensteinian Sublime', p. 614
[51] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 71
[52] Eldridge, 'Introduction', *Stanley Cavell*, p. 2
[53] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 355
[54] Morris, 'Murdering Words' p. 117

speaking in tongues. Though Owen fears crowds he harbours a fantasy of the 'fearsome driving rapture' of a collective religious experience, of somehow redeeming this early trauma. But he is drawn to this fantasy – this longing 'to burn away one's self in the sandstone hills. To become part of the wave of chanting men' (*N* 296) – because of the possibilities of a loss of self and not because he is ready to acknowledge or accept others.

Unlike Owen, Axton already has a sense of what community could be, as we can see from his relationship with Kathyrn and Tap, and his friends in Athens. In the first part of the novel he describes a conversation with Kathryn about 'family matters, commonplaces'. He says, 'the subject of family makes conversation almost tactile [...]. There's a close-up contact warmth in the names and images. Everydayness' (*N* 31). He recognises that the 'ordinary and familiar' talk they were having about 'familiar things [...] seemed to yield up the mystery that is part of such things, the nameless way in which we sometimes feel our connections to the physical world' (*N* 32). Though he seems to value ordinary language to a certain extent, at this point in the novel he has a tendency to view even everyday conversation in formalist terms. When reflecting on the conversations he hears on the streets of Athens he thinks, 'this is a way of speaking that takes such pure joy in its own openness and ardour that we begin to feel these people are discussing language itself. [...] It is talk as a definition of itself' (*N* 52). Axton is clearly not immune to the appeals of ordinary language and familial, shared experience, though he has tendency to mystify them, and furthermore, for most of the novel he remains resistant to them.

IV. AXTON'S RETURN

Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement (*OC* p. 49e)

Mulhall argues that to 'overcome our sense of logic as sublime' requires attending 'to the logic of language as [it] is manifest in the empirical context within which our life with words is lived'.[55] At the end of the novel Axton can be seen to return to and engage with the lived, empirical context in which words have meaning. His return to the

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[55] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 92

common, to the familiar and ordinary, can be seen in what Zubeck describes as his 'emerging respect for prosaic detail and regard for the actual embodied particularity of human existence'.[56] This is immediately evident when Axton returns from seeing Owen in India and realises that he needs to know about Kathryn and Tap's 'daily routine' now that they have moved back to Canada. Because they have 'removed themselves from [his] experience of real places' he has no usable details, he is unable to place them in an 'empirical context'. He thus wants to know how they spend their days – 'what I needed was a sense of the present, their living days, the things around them' (*N* 312). Axton longs for what Zubeck calls 'the luminescence of the quotidian, the "details" which "help" one to "see"'.[57] In order to see someone as real, thinks Axton, you need whatever you can collect of 'particular things', asserting aphoristically: 'the only safety is in details' (*N* 311), echoing Wittgenstein's claim that, 'in order to see more clearly we must focus on the details of what goes on' (*PI* 51).

Axton's return to 'human experience' and 'ordinary human language' emerges not only from his failed encounter with the language cult, but through the reading of his son's manuscript (*N* 164). Although Tap's manuscript forms the final section of the novel, acting as a kind of coda to the main action, Axton discusses the profound impact the reading of the manuscript had on him in the final chapter of the main narrative. Tap's story is a retelling of Owen's childhood experience of attending a Pentecostal church in which the congregation spoke in tongues. What Axton finds most significant about the story, however, are Tap's 'spirited misspellings', which he says, made the words 'new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were' (*N* 313). These misspellings are significant, in part, because they debunk the idea of some logically pure idea of language. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasises the importance of how words work, and how this in itself can enable us to see language anew; it is part of what Mulhall calls Wittgenstein's 'anti-subliming strategy'.[58]

This strategy, argues Mulhall, is most evident in 'Wittgenstein's counter-concepts of family resemblance and grammatical investigation'. These counter-concepts are significant in relation to *The Names* because they eschew the idea of a 'state of

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[56] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 355
[57] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 367
[58] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 95

complete exactness' and subvert 'the idea of rigour that is embodied in our sense of the crystalline purity of logic'.[59] In other words, they reveal a way out of the fly-bottle, they prevent the understanding from bumping up against the limits of language, and thus help overcome a desire for transcendence. They also provide an alternative way of thinking about the conception of naming that prevents the kind of fanaticism found in both the language cult and in certain philosophical obsessions. The concept of family resemblance, writes Mulhall, shows that 'the concept of a name is held together by a number of overlapping resemblances, not by a single pure essence that must be hidden behind this multiplicity and dug out from it'.[60]

These counter concepts can thus be compared to, and illuminate, the significance of Tap's prose, which, argues Osteen, 'is a counter language that stands against the obsessive logocentrism of the cult',[61] while Bryant notes that it 'celebrates rather than denies, its own ambiguity'.[62] Tap's language exemplifies and exaggerates the way in which ordinary language in general stands against the dangerous temptations of a theorising attitude. Cavell argues that, 'maybe the very ambiguity of ordinary language [...] is just what gives it the power, of illumination, of enriching perception',[63] and it is precisely the ambiguity of Tap's writing that Axton finds so illuminating and enriching. The ambiguity of Tap's misspellings, argues Zubeck, demonstrates the 'lexical fullness' and 'prosaic richness' of language.[64] Tap's writing enables Axton to, in Wittgenstein's words, '*experience* the meaning of a word' (*PI* p. 214d). In experiences of meaning, explains Mulhall, 'words can seem to be a *manifestation* of their meaning, a living embodiment of the sentiment they express'.[65] Axton refers to the 'spoken poetry' of Tap's words, 'the rough form lost through usage'; insisting that the misrenderings 'seemed to contain curious perceptions about the words themselves' (*N* 313).

Axton's reading of Tap's manuscript, writes Bryant, 'transform(s) his approach to language'[66] and this new approach can be seen when at last he visits the Acropolis. Although not explicitly stated, it is evident and significant that both his decision to visit

[59] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, pp. 93, 90
[60] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 95
[61] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 138
[62] Bryant, 'Discussing the Untellable', p. 164
[63] Cavell, 'Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language', *The New Wittgenstein*, p. 30
[64] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 370
[65] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 164
[66] Bryant, 'Discussing the Untellable', p. 168

the monument and his reassessment of it is in part determined by his experience with the language cult and the fact that he has been cured of his fascination with it. The failure of his quest to discover the secret of a transcendent, logical ideal, and the accompanying revelation of the all-too-human aspects involved in ritualised murder, has resulted in a different or new way of seeing things.

Following his failed quest Axton develops a 'new conception of the Acropolis',[67] a correction of his earlier, metaphysical view. His reading of the monument changes precisely because his approach to language changes. He ceases to be attracted to language as an ideal, and recognises the wonder of everyday language. 'It is the voice,' argues Bryant, 'transpiring language in individual utterance, which matters now to Jim [Axton], rather than the monumental abstractions that language, unshaken by feeling, can construct'.[68] Mulhall writes that 'the conversion Wittgenstein seeks is a turning away from the impulse to theorise about meaning as well as from certain families of theory about meaning.'[69] Such a turning away can be seen in Axton's new reading, in which he acknowledges that he had previously misconceived the Parthenon, 'I'd thought it was a separate thing, the sacred height, intact in its Doric order'. He now realises, however, that it 'was not a thing to study but to feel. It wasn't aloof, rational, timeless, pure. […] But was part of the living city below it'. It is 'scarred, broken, rough'. Totally 'different from the spotlighted bijou' he'd theorised about at the beginning of the novel (*N* 330). A description that echoes Wittgenstein's contrast between the 'slippery ice' of 'the crystalline purity of logic' where 'conditions are ideal', and the 'rough ground' of ordinary language and experience (*PI* 107).

There is a clear parallel here between Axton's two ways of understanding the Parthenon and the two models of language at work in the novel. His earlier conception of the monument – rational, timeless, pure and a separate thing – matches the conception of language embodied in the language cult. His new conception, on the other hand, with the emphasis on its human aspect, its voice, and being part of and not separate from the city, exemplifies ordinary language, language as a tool for exchange, a part of the human experience.

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[67] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 137
[68] Bryant, 'Discussing the Untellable', p. 169
[69] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 42

Axton's new attitude to language and the Acropolis has important social and political consequences. It is significant that his new, radically altered reading of the monument is based on the experience of actually seeing it close-up and amongst a throng of visitors. The other tourists are, he realises, an integral part of the experience, it 'is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk' (*N* 331). This experience is part of his dawning realisation of the importance of community and ordinary language, of 'small talk and family chat' (*N* 312). 'No one seems to be alone', he observes, 'everyone is talking' (*N* 331). Axton's experience and attitude here marks a stark contrast with the isolation and solipsism of Owen's adventures described in the previous section, as well as with Owen's attitude to crowds.

Axton encounters the crowd as a community, a community of voices or speakers. Far from undergoing a loss of self, as Owen fears will happen in a crowd, Axton learns that what is significant about a community is precisely the way in which it enables him to overcome his disengagement and solipsism, and affirm his sense of self. His visit ends with a sudden and significant shift in the narrative voice from first to third person:

> I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language. (*N* 331)

For Osteen this shift 'signals Axton's new appreciation of the communal'; he now 'perceives language as a mode of communion' and recognises language 'as a sign of community'.[70] This understanding of language as what Bryant calls a medium 'of direct interchange between self and other',[71] brings with it certain responsibilities, for, as Hammer notes, 'to say something is to take up a particular position vis-a-vis others, one that encompasses obligations'.[72] This sense of the obligations and responsibilities that come with the social engagement involved in language use, with what possessing or inheriting language actually entails, returns us to the issue of consent. Zubeck writes that Axton's 'awakening [...] brings him back to a sense of answerability for his own

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[70] Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, p. 136
[71] Bryant, 'Discussing the Untellable', p. 169
[72] Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 8

irreplaceable place in the world'.[73] This answerability is not only for himself, but for his community. According to Tanesini:

> For Cavell, to consent is to undertake a commitment. It is a matter of accepting one's responsibility for one's community. This acceptance is realized by acknowledging claims that others make upon us. Acts of saying 'we' sometimes function as an expression of these acknowledgements'.[74]

Crucially, this act of saying "we", this answerability and sense of community, provides a stronger sense of self than the dangerous illusion of solipsism.

This chapter began with a citation from Richard Eldridge concerning Cavell's sense of the 'opposed drives' of acceptance and overcoming inhabiting our relation to the ordinary. These drives lead to our life being shaped and unbalanced by the basic conflicting tendencies orienting it. He writes:

> These tendencies include [...] the pursuit of independent selfhood and the pursuit of communion, community, love, and the common. Seeking both, one is left between avoidance (of others, of the common, of what is common with others in oneself […]) and acknowledgement (of others, of the common, of what is common with others in oneself, as what alone enables thought, recovery, conversation, and restoration).[75]

This chapter has shown that these two tendencies are highly evident in Axton's attitude and behaviour, and how the novel traces the tension between these two tendencies as well as an overall shift from one to the other. For the majority of the novel Axton chooses the path of avoidance, and the pursuit of independent selfhood, but by the end he acknowledges what it means to belong to, and accept, one's community. His transformation mirrors the shift that occurs from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*, and so reveals the kind of change of vision that Wittgenstein attempts to bring about in his later work. Axton's visit to the Acropolis can thus be seen as a sign that he has accepted

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[73] Zubeck, 'Surge and Pelt', p. 355
[74] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein* , p. 131
[75] Eldridge, 'Introduction', *Stanley Cavell*, p. 4

the 'obligations attached to such a visit' (*N* 3) and is ready to pursue 'communion, community, love and the common.'

CONCLUSION

'Let's regain our grip on things': to a certain extent this thesis has been an extended meditation on the force and meaning of this phrase. It has explored its rich resonance by reading it in relation to Wittgenstein and investigating the way it can illuminate DeLillo's writing. Its richness, significance and resonance derive in part from its simplicity and familiarity, its ordinariness and its colloquial tone. But, equally, from its depth of suggestiveness: the way it intimates movement, the importance of returning and the need for change. It can be read as self-commentary – it refers to the narrative itself – but also as a proposal to the reader. The implication is that we have lost our grip: we are lost, disconnected from things, unmoored. Like Wittgenstein, with whose 'back to the rough ground!' the phrase so profoundly echoes, DeLillo is diagnosing a more general condition, but also indicating a cure.

Throughout this thesis we have shown the various ways in which DeLillo's protagonists are disconnected from things: lost, exiled, disengaged and disembodied. All the main protagonists we have looked at experience some form of either figurative or literal exile: Keith and Lianne in *Falling Man* are 'falling out of the world', 'self-sequestered' (*FM* 232, 212); Lauren in *The Body Artist* is alone and isolated, cut off from the outside world, losing her grip on reality; *Underworld's* Nick Shay is disconnected from the earth, pretending to be who he is, trapped in his '*lontananza*'; Oswald, Everett and Branch in *Libra* are 'men in small rooms', exiled to the fringes of society, desperate to break out; and *The Names'* Axton, Owen and Frank are exiles from America and from everyday life and responsibilities.

The thesis examined the philosophical consequences of these different forms of exile by comparing them with Wittgenstein's sense of philosophical exile, arguing that this exile in DeLillo can be read in Wittgensteinian terms: how it determined the characters' perception of things and transformed their attitudes to language, other human beings and to the ordinary. It showed that as exiles they are disengaged from the ordinary, unable to see it clearly or recognise its value. They long to escape it and think meaning

or significance lies hidden within it, or below or outside it. They attempt to overcome 'things' entirely by embarking on a quest: they are led to the temptations of scepticism, the lure of paranoia and conspiracy, to building systems, theorizing, and to the desire for metaphysical meaning and to transcend human finitude.

But these quests inevitably fail to provide the hoped for results; transcendence was only an intimated possibility, a bewitching fascination. However, it is precisely the failure of these quests that enable them to return home, to the ordinary world of things. And furthermore on this return they are transformed. They return with a renewed sense of self and way of seeing things. Suddenly everything looks different. They can see things clearly, appreciate the importance and value of things; grip them. They realise how an engagement with things can provide them with a firm sense of who they are.

And yet not only can this moment not be sustained, but these things turn out not to provide a secure grip after all. Look too closely at things and this looking will create the very isolation and estrangement that led them to need to regain a grip on things in the first place. For, when seen from a certain perspective, on return from exile, these things can seem metaphysical; that is to say, they can seem enchanted or reveal a kind of wonder.

Thus, in the way in which it encapsulates the significance and importance of the ordinary, the sense of metaphysical loss and exile, of a need to return and the ambiguity of this return, as well as the depth, reach and beauty of ordinary language the phrase 'let's regain our grip on things' brilliantly conveys the tension between metaphysics and the ordinary that has been the central focus of this thesis.

The thesis has illustrated and explored significant aesthetic and philosophical features of DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics and the ordinary through an extended comparison with the philosophy of Wittgenstein. It has used Wittgenstein's philosophy to 'throw light' on particular aspects of DeLillo's novels, by drawing comparisons, developing analogies and teasing out various significant or revealing points of contact between their work, which have in turn illuminated significant aspects of Wittgenstein's thought.

The thesis has examined the way in which DeLillo's novels engage philosophically with questions of language, perception and meaning – especially spiritual or ethical meaning. It has traced a series of thematic, conceptual and aesthetic connections between different novels covering a broad span of his career in order to demonstrate DeLillo's primary philosophical concerns. It has investigated significant metaphysical features of DeLillo's novels by examining the way they depict spiritual quests and religious ways of seeing; by looking at the recurring themes of exile, loss, and yearning for transcendence; and the solipsistic nature and outlook of many of the characters. It has demonstrated the significance of DeLillo's engagement with the ordinary by examining the recurring emphasis on looking at and seeing physical objects and things, on the importance of the body, of touch, grip and gesture, ordinary language, the everyday, the familiar and clarity of vision.

The thesis has investigated the relation between metaphysics and the ordinary in DeLillo's novels, and the various ways in which this relation is ambiguous: how the metaphysical elements are tied to or lead to the ordinary and how the ordinary can appear metaphysical or lead to the metaphysical. It has examined this tension aesthetically, in terms of DeLillo's use of imagery and language, thematically, in the way in which his novels are structured as spiritual quests, and philosophically, in terms of the questions raised concerning meaning and perception. Using Wittgenstein's philosophy and developing a Wittgensteinian approach, it has examined the philosophical aspects and themes of DeLillo's novels in relation to similar aspects and themes in Wittgenstein's work. It has done so by focusing on overlapping and crisscrossing similarities, by illustrating patterns and resemblances. The thesis has highlighted resemblances, not only between different novels, but between the novels and Wittgenstein's writing, which involved exploring the 'rich resonance'[1] between key images and phrases in Wittgenstein and DeLillo's work. The thesis paid particular attention to the ways in which both explore and emphasise the sense of movement or tension between metaphysics and the ordinary: the movement from Wittgenstein's images of ice and the dazzling ideal to the rough ground of ordinary language, from DeLillo's 'numinous glow' to the 'thick lived tenor of things'.

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[1] Boxall, *The Possibility of Fiction*, p. 15

The main aim of this thesis has been to demonstrate a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of DeLillo's engagement with metaphysics and the ordinary, alongside an illustration of the literary value of Wittgenstein's later thought – to show how and why Wittgenstein's work can and should be used in literary textual practice.

By approaching DeLillo in relation to Wittgenstein and by examining the significance of his engagement with metaphysics and the ordinary, I have sought to shed light on important and largely overlooked aspects of his work, as well as provide an alternative mode of reading it. This alternative approach is a means of overcoming the dominance of postmodern readings of his work as well as the typical approaches used to argue against these readings. It is a challenge to the idea that his novels should be viewed as either unequivocally metaphysical or as postmodernist.

The thesis has shown that DeLillo's novels invite and reward a philosophical reading. By illuminating the recurring themes and concerns of his writings in relation to Wittgenstein's thought we have shown the depth and subtlety of DeLillo's philosophical thinking. The novels show a consistent concern with metaphysical themes and ideas but that they are related in a variety of significant ways with the ordinary. DeLillo's narratives frequently display, and are structured around, a movement from metaphysics to the ordinary; from striving after an ideal and returning back to the rough ground. I have shown that DeLillo's main characters tend to be idealistic solipsists who, due to an experience of loss and sense of exile, strive to find metaphysical meaning of some kind. Such striving leads to a journey or quest that has a significant spiritual or transcendent element, and initially features a rejection or avoidance of, or inability to experience and see, the ordinary. A journey, however, that ultimately leads to a renewed appreciation, acceptance and vision of the ordinary. Viewing his novels in this way enables us to show how DeLillo recognises both the value and danger of metaphysical impulses. I have attempted to demonstrate the considerable element of irony and critique in DeLillo's treatment of metaphysical themes and ideas and thus have argued that it is misleading to claim that DeLillo's novels endorse a metaphysical conception of things or suggest the existence of a transcendental realm.

The thesis has examined various ways in which DeLillo's characters experience a radical change in the way they see things. In drawing an extended comparison with

Wittgenstein I have attempted to provide a sense of what this change might signify in DeLillo's work. In the chapters on *Falling Man*, *The Body Artist* and *Underworld* I suggested the change in the way the characters see things could be read in aesthetic terms – how they learn to see things anew, to look at, engage with and notice ordinary, everyday things. But I also suggested that this way of seeing might be the result of some kind of spiritual journey that mirrors a similar journey represented in Wittgenstein's philosophy. I showed that the characters obtain a new understanding and way of seeing things more generally, and that there is a significant ethical and spiritual sense to this clarity of vision.

One of the things this thesis has recognised is the inconclusiveness of both Wittgenstein and DeLillo's work: the way in which they repeatedly return to the same set of concerns and their work is characterised by a series of tensions or conflicts. Wittgenstein's work is necessarily resistant to summary or a final resting point; it does not lead to conclusions. Rather, what Wittgenstein provides are the tools and starting points for an open-ended, unceasing process of trying to change the way we see. Similarly, DeLillo's novels rarely feature an unambiguous, conclusive ending. Indeed, they frequently loop back to their beginning: *Falling Man*, *The Body Artist* and *The Names* all end by directly referring back to their opening pages. *Underworld* ends with a curious and unexplained turn to 'things in the room' and on the ambiguous single word paragraph: 'peace'. *Libra*, although it follows the trajectory of the historical record, refuses to provide a conclusive account of the responsibility of the Kennedy assassination. This refusal to provide narrative closure is indicative of the ambiguous nature of DeLillo's novels more generally. Viewing this ambiguity in relation to Wittgenstein's later thought has shown that it has significant philosophical consequences. Like Wittgenstein, DeLillo's novels illustrate that, as Eagleton observes, 'roughness and ambiguity and indeterminancy aren't imperfections – they're what make things work'.[2]

The final chapter of the thesis concluded with the suggestion that Axton accepts and acknowledges the importance of community, of being with others. Given that DeLillo's characters are largely cut off from social, communal or political concerns, such a conclusion may seem paradoxical. But it is only paradoxical if we assume that by

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[2] Eagleton, cited in Scheman, 'Forms of Life', p. 383

portraying solipsistic characters and metaphysical ideas DeLillo is somehow endorsing and outlining a philosophical position, if we assume that DeLillo's characters and the way they see the world directly represent the way he sees the world. But this would entail overlooking DeLillo's evident ironic and critical treatment of his characters, who he portrays as lost, exiled and desperate. Again and again he demonstrates the lure and the dangers of a solipsistic metaphysical outlook, the way in which it leads to scepticism, isolation, loneliness, disembodiment, and a lack of friction and grip.

Similarly, the thesis has shown that Wittgenstein's critical philosophy consists not of what he considered the state of things to be, but in 'assembling reminders' (*PI* 127), reminders of ways of resisting the temptations and traps of a metaphysical outlook, which is both 'commonly held' and 'very hard to shake, because it is rooted deeply within us'.[3] I have demonstrated that, like Wittgenstein, DeLillo repeatedly explores solipsism, scepticism and metaphysical possibility not because he endorses a solipsistic, sceptical or metaphysical account of things, but because he recognises their deep and lasting appeal. In short, I have argued that in his novels DeLillo depicts extreme examples of what Wittgenstein, in particular as read by Cavell, thinks are our basic tendencies: to seek to transcend human finitude, to find transcendental meaning, and to strive after ideals; how in Mulhall's words:

> Nothing is more human than the desire to deny the human, to interpret limits as
> limitations, and to repudiate the human condition of conditionedness (finitude) in
> the name of the unconditioned, the transcendent, the superhuman – the inhuman.[4]

The thesis has shown the way in which DeLillo repeatedly interrogates the appeal of metaphysical notions of the self, language and meaning, but also the dangers and dead ends that they lead to; how his characters' metaphysical quests never end in the achievement of transcendence or in the realisation of the metaphysical hopes. Rather, they result in some form of return, a return to home or the ordinary, in which this home is transformed. More specifically, it is the mode in which the ordinary is perceived that has been transformed; transformed by the realisation that a sense of self and meaning is based on the existence and nature of ordinary things and other people. Thus DeLillo's

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[3] Tanesini, *Wittgenstein*, p. 89
[4] Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, p. 94

novels also illustrate the Cavellian idea that 'humans are able to transcend their own isolation and overcome privacy [through] acceptance and acknowledgement – ways of responding that, though epistemically unassured, secure our habitation with things and others.'[5] Though DeLillo's emphasis is more strongly weighted in terms of our habitation with things rather than others, nevertheless in their depiction of the harmful consequences of isolation and privacy they ultimately point to the importance of community and shared values.

By reading DeLillo with Wittgenstein we have been able to think about the philosophical and aesthetic features of DeLillo's work without recourse to jargon or a distorting theoretical framework and without trying to shoehorn his work into a preconceived theoretical or philosophical position. At the same time, by viewing particular features of Wittgenstein's thought in relation to literary narratives I have highlighted the significant literary elements of his writing. As well as presenting ways of understanding DeLillo and Wittgenstein's work differently, the thesis offers a model of how to read literature and philosophy together.

I have shown that the tension between metaphysics and the ordinary is a vital part of DeLillo's aesthetics: it is what gives his work its depth, reach and power, as well as its subtlety and humanity. For, in their repeated engagement with metaphysical concerns, DeLillo's novels intimate profound mystery and wonder, but the way in which such moments are subverted provides humour, ambiguity and thus prevents his writing from slipping into portentous or reactionary mystification.

There are several significant areas in which the concerns examined in this thesis could be explored further. To begin with, a more in-depth reading, informed by a Wittgensteinian focus on how words work, of DeLillo's poetics may help develop our appreciation of his engagement with metaphysics and the ordinary at a sentence level; may help illustrate how his writing itself embodies or displays the tension between metaphysics and the ordinary. He writes sublime sentences that at times intimate transcendent meaning, but they also emphasise the materiality of words; his writing delights in the sight and sound of words, in their pure form as words, but it also subverts

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[5] Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, p. xii

such formalism in the frequent use of colloquial and ordinary speech. Such a reading of DeLillo's work would be of value not only because DeLillo's style is such a vital part of his aesthetics and writing in general, but also because the kind of Wittgensteinian approach to literature developed in this thesis ultimately points towards a concrete engagement with the materiality of texts.

On the opposite spectrum from such a formal approach, it would be illuminating to examine the ethical and political consequences of the pairing of DeLillo and Wittgenstein. Both are difficult to place politically, indeed both have received conflicting political readings of their work. Wittgenstein is read as being either a conservative reactionary or a proto-deconstructionist radical with profound affinities with Marxist and Feminist thought. Likewise, DeLillo has been read as a reactionary romantic concerned with bourgeois or Catholic ideals of the unique (mostly male) self or as a radical postmodern critic of the incorporated, commodified contemporary experience, of voracious capitalism and the nefarious ways it invades consciousness and human exchange. However, there has been little work in either DeLillo or Wittgenstein studies on their respective politics and more nuanced, considered enquiry is surely called for.

Another possible area of further research would be to explore the significant parallels between Wittgenstein and Heidegger in relation to DeLillo's work. Cowart and especially Bonca have illustrated important ways in which Heidegger's thought can help us read DeLillo, and Wittgenstein's work shares a great deal in common with that of Heidegger. Mulhall argues that Wittgenstein's vision seems 'intimately, even if obscurely, aligned,' with the central themes of Heidegger's work – 'in their mutual emphasis upon the centrality of practical activity to human existence and the treacherous transparencies of ordinary language and life, and in the atmosphere of spiritual fervour which pervades their philosophizing.'[6] It would be illuminating to consider the ways in which this intimate alignment between Wittgenstein and Heidegger could further our understanding of DeLillo's novels.

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[6] Mulhall, 'Wittgenstein and Heidegger: Orientations to the Ordinary', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2, 1994, p. 143

Literary criticism and critical theory seem to be at a strange turning point. Critics have been ringing the death knoll of postmodernism and discussing the end of theory for some time now. Wittgenstein's philosophy offers a way out from some of the intractable problems associated with postmodern theory. In the current climate of a turn against theory and a return to the real Wittgenstein's profound investigation into the ordinary can surely provide valuable insight into contemporary concerns. The significant way in which writers as diverse and notable as David Foster Wallace, Thomas Bernhard, J.M. Coetzee and W.G. Sebald have engaged with his work surely indicates strong possibilities for further readings of Wittgenstein and contemporary literature. Furthermore, as writers continue to be engaged with his work, and critics increasingly consider the value of his writing for reading literature we can perhaps begin to recognise the need for the development of a more fully realised Wittgensteinian approach to literature.

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