

Terror, Aesthetics, and the Humanities in the Public Sphere

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In a 1991 interview for the *New York Times Magazine*, Don DeLillo expressed his views on the place of literature in our times in a statement that he has echoed many times since and developed most fully in his novel *Mao II*:

In a repressive society, a writer can be deeply influential, but in a society that's filled with glut and endless consumption, the act of terror may be the only meaningful act. People who are in power make their arrangements in secret, largely as a way of maintaining and furthering that power. People who are powerless make an open theater of violence. True terror is a language and a vision. There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to.¹

The implications of DeLillo's statement are that we are all engaged in national, international, transnational, and global conflicts in which acts of representation, including those of terrorism and spectacular physical violence as well as those of language, performance, and art compete for the attention of audiences and for influence in the public sphere.

In the early days of the Iraq War, the United States used the power of images, such as those of the "mother of all bombs" and a wide array of weapons, as well as aesthetic techniques to influence and shape the consciousness of millions and to generate strong support for the war. The shock, fear, and nationalism aroused in those days after 9/11 have enabled the Bush adminis-

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tration to pursue a military agenda that it had planned before 9/11. Since then the extraordinary death and destruction, scandals and illegalities, and domestic and international demonstrations and criticisms have been unable to alter the direction of this agenda. Those of us in the humanities who are trained as critical readers of political and social texts, as well as of complex artistically constructed texts, are needed now more urgently than ever to analyze the relationships between political power and the wide range of rhetorical methods being employed by politicians and others to further their destructive effects in the world.

If humanities scholars can create conscious awareness of how such aesthetic devices such as we see in those photos achieve their affective appeal, citizens may begin to understand how they are being manipulated and motivated by emotion rather than by reason and logic. In spite of our ability to expose some of these verbal and visual constructions as devices of propaganda that function to enflame passions and stifle reasonable discussion, we humanities scholars find ourselves marginalized and on the defensive in our institutions of higher learning where our numbers have been diminished and where we are frequently being asked to justify the significance of our research and teaching. While we know the basic truth that the most serious threats to our societies today are more likely to result from cultural differences and failures of communication than from inadequate scientific information or technological inadequacies, we have been given no voice in this debate. With the strong tendency toward polarized thinking and opinion and the evangelical and fundamentalist religious positions in the U.S. today and in other parts of the world, leaders continue to abandon diplomacy and resort to military actions. Most government leaders find the cultural and social explanations of the problems we face to be vague, and they are frustrated by complex human issues. That is not reason enough, however, for us to abandon our efforts to influence and perhaps even alter the current course of events. In spite of the discouragements that we as scholars of the humanities are experiencing in these times, it seems to me that we have no option but to continue to pursue our research and our teaching and hope to influence others to question the meaning and motives of what they see and hear.

In these dark times, I take my inspiration from those writers past and present whose works have served as a counter-force to the misdirection of our politics and foreign policies and who have employed the aesthetic to address the political. In a paper that I delivered in Berlin in April 2004, entitled, "Aesthetics and Politics in the American Novel," I presented an argument regarding several nineteenth-century American writers who employed what I call

an aesthetics of astonishment—the use of language and imagery to jolt readers into recognizing some of the ways that governments use rhetorical strategies to justify decisions to which many citizens are fundamentally opposed.

Using Melville’s “Benito Cereno” and Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* as my main texts, I argued that these texts raise questions about the effectiveness of U.S. leaders in negotiating in other cultures or in understanding people different from themselves. Hank Morgan and Amasa Delano fail in their missions abroad for reasons having to do with pride, arrogance, a sense of racial and cultural superiority, and indifference and blindness toward other cultures and cultural others. As a result, they leave death and devastation in their wakes. Because of the fundamental resistance of American publishers and average readers to accept such criticisms of the United States, however, both writers presented their critiques in coded language and through insinuation. Both works gradually reveal the negative features of their protagonists so subtly that many readers will fail to perceive the racism of Delano and the despotism of Morgan. But as a way of prompting perceptive readers to recognize that more is being suggested than what first meets the eye, both writers also employed an aesthetics of astonishment to startle some readers into questioning their own assumptions. In “Benito Cereno,” it is the shock of awareness that occurs when Delano, and most likely the reader as well, discovers that the San Dominick is under the command of the African, Babo. In *Connecticut Yankee*, it is Hank’s brutal execution of twenty-five thousand knights in a confrontation in which Hank and his small army have no chance of escape, but in which Hank nevertheless chooses to massacre as many as possible anyway in a display of his superior technology.²

I

Today, I want to look at some of the ways that more recent writers of fiction have employed a similar aesthetics of astonishment to prompt readers to examine the realities of their society and the failures of their leaders. Of those contemporary writers who are attempting to engage what many consider to be the most disturbing tendencies in American domestic politics and international policies today, two are Don DeLillo and Philip Roth. With his breakthrough book *White Noise*, DeLillo effectively exposed so many of the aspects of the rhetoric of advertising, bureaucracies, and government with his parodies of formulations such as the “airborne toxic event.” For those who may not know *White Noise* by DeLillo, one of the funniest and most memo-

rable passages of *White Noise* describes what goes on inside a jetliner that falls from thirty-four thousand to twelve thousand feet. Instead of the expected formulaic calming voice of the Captain assuring the passengers that they all will be safe and that the plane will recover, passengers hear from the flight deck: "We're falling out of the sky! We're going down! We're a silver gleaming death machine!" (90). But then, the narrator reports that soon "certain members of the crew had decided to pretend that it was not a crash but a crash landing that was seconds away. After all, the difference between the two is only one word." He goes on: "The basic difference between a crash and a crash landing seemed to be that you could sensibly prepare for a crash landing. . . . The news spread through the plane, the term was repeated in row after row. 'Crash landing, crash landing.' They saw how easy it was, by adding one word, to maintain a grip on the future, to extend it in consciousness if not about actual fact" (91). Throughout this work, DeLillo exposed and critiqued the ways that official rhetoric and manipulations of language can create versions of reality in ways in which people are most often unconscious.

In *Libra*, his novel on the Kennedy assassination that focuses on Lee Harvey Oswald, DeLillo went even further in his effort to enlighten his readers about the function of official accounts of history and his own fictional account. While clearly suggesting in the novel that there are many people in the U.S. and Cuban governments who had wanted to kill the President and that there are good reasons for suspecting a conspiracy was involved, he also self-reflectively raises questions about his own motives and purposes as a writer to write a novel that explores this subject. He integrates literary criticism into the text and repeatedly draws the readers' attention to the conventions of fiction he employs, while he questions the tendency of some readers to believe that a novel about an historical event is more likely to present the truth than official accounts or histories. Thus, the reader of *Libra* is more likely to conclude the work as an even more skeptical reader of all historical and fictional accounts than he or she was at the beginning.

Although his epic on cultural American memory, *Underworld*, appeared in 1997, DeLillo chose for the dust jacket a photo of the World Trade Center buildings as seen through a ghostly haze. The text suggests the ways that grand illusions, manipulations of the truth, and distractions such as sports and popular culture, enable people to endure the waste, violence, aimlessness, and emptiness of contemporary life that lead to misplaced values and tragic failures.³ It is a black comedy in which the Cold War, with its nuclear threat looming over the lives of millions for fifty years, is recounted, and while

there is a sense of anticipation of some tragic event yet to come, there are no clear suggestions about what the source of such a global catastrophe might be.

DeLillo's 2003 *Cosmopolis* is his first novel since 9/11. Highly controversial and severely criticized by some, this work is something of a departure from what readers have come to expect from him. While many reviewers praised the work for its aesthetic qualities such as "the vibrancy of his verbal and scenic imagination" (Wolfe), many found the issues it raises unresolved and the ending inconclusive. As in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the action occurs on a single day in April 2000, just as the stock market is about to collapse. Two other modernist texts are clearly at play in important ways in DeLillo's text—Eliot's *Wasteland* and "Prufrock." *Cosmopolis* forecasts the social and economic plunge that would soon follow the bursting of the dot-com bubble and the consequences of the collapse of Worldcom, Enron, and the World Trade Center.

The protagonist is Eric Packer, a twenty-eight year old billionaire venture capitalist whose deals are of such impact that they have put many companies out of business and caused the loss of millions of jobs; thus, aware that many hate him, he is paranoid and lives in fear for his life. On this particular day, he is gambling everything on the collapse of the Japanese yen which, in spite of all expectations, inexplicably continues to rise. Eric leaves his multimillion dollar apartment on Manhattan's east side and takes his custom-designed thirty-five-foot armored limo across town to get a haircut. But the President of the United States is visiting New York, and with the traffic jams that result, it takes him all day to get across town.

Inside his limo, Eric works in front of several computer screens and TV monitors while surrounded by armed bodyguards. Throughout the day, he has visits from several employees and business associates, some of whom are also his lovers, has a medical exam, and he has three chance encounters with his wealthy socialite wife of three weeks with whom he has not consummated his marriage. During the last meeting, they do so on the street. While Eric's limo crawls across 47th Street on his journey through the 21st century wasteland of New York from the wealthy east side to the poor west side, a series of astonishing, often violent, events occur: a burst water-main floods the theater district with mud and debris; angry, anti-globalization protestors set fire to cars, attack his limo, and wave and carry images of rats to symbolize their disgust for capitalists; a huge, celebrity-packed funeral procession for a young rap star stops traffic; a bomb explodes near an investment bank; a man sets himself on fire; moviemakers film three hundred extras lying na-

ked in a street whom Eric joins on a lark (and where one of his coincidental meetings with his wife takes place); and a serial cream pie assassin who travels the world attacking famous leaders makes Eric his mark.

Meanwhile, on the televisions inside Packer's limo, the director of the International Monetary Fund is shot and killed while appearing live on the Money Channel, and the owner of Russia's largest media corporation dies of gunfire. Eric's chief of security alerts him that there is also a credible threat against his own life. In the midst of all of this chaos, the regular appearances of rats on the streets is a constant reminder of the decay of the natural and social support systems resulting in disease, high unemployment, diminishing medical services, shrinking school budgets, and the dangerously inflated stock market, not to mention a recurring rat metaphor for a tycoon like Eric himself.

Scenes of shocking violence are typical in much of DeLillo's works and usually appear aimed at calling attention to the bizarre chaos of contemporary life where it is difficult to distinguish criminals, insane murderers, and terrorists from leaders who direct state and corporate-generated violence. In *Libra* and *Underworld*, for example, the CIA, FBI, KGB, organized crime, and the White House appear to be in regular dialogue. In *Cosmopolis*, however, the enemy is not so evident, and the direction in which to point the finger of blame for the collapse of the economy is never clearly determined. At first, Eric appears to be the likely villain, but while his life and actions may contribute to the impending disaster, he is just one of many culprits and is himself a victim at several levels, not the least being his financial collapse. Furthermore, DeLillo has given his assassin a chapter early in the novel in which he speaks to Eric's corpse, thus defusing any suspense about Eric's murder and invoking a degree of sympathy for him as well as evoking a desire in the reader to understand Eric's tragedy.

The question then is what is the point of all this shock and awe and what does the novel have to contribute to our perceptions and understanding of American society and the world in which everything since 9/11 (as is commonly repeated) has supposedly changed? Is the text asking the reader to question any prior assumptions or values?

To answer these questions, we must recall that even within all of this gloom, DeLillo remains a very humorous writer whose wit, satire, and dark comedy are keys to the connections between the aesthetic and the political, psychological, and the philosophical spheres of knowing found in his works.

Central to the novel is the collapse of the system, the market, and the soci-

ety, but it is upon the fragmentation and dissolution of Eric's fragile ego that DeLillo focuses the reader's attention because, in spite of the media, the courts, and the corporations that may make it appear that forces and uncontrollable economic shifts are to blame, DeLillo forces the reader to acknowledge that disastrous consequences finally result from the decisions and acts of the individuals who have the power to act. Eric fancies himself a scholar of science, history, and philosophy; he has knowledge of many random facts. But much of his success has hinged upon luck. He has taken chances that wiser investors would not take and has won, until today when his luck is running out. Because of arrogance and self-destructive tendencies, he ignores the advice of his top advisors to stop investing in the fall of the yen. On this day, he is losing his grip and regressing into childhood. His desire to return to the barbershop in his old neighborhood to have his hair cut by the barber who gave him his first cut when he was four reveals a nostalgic yearning to return to the womb and to abandon control—the control that he has carefully cultivated during his rise to power.

It seems that the turn that DeLillo has taken in this work is away from the satiric critic of the culture of glut and waste mindlessly digging its own mass grave and toward the issue of leadership. In *Eric Packer*, DeLillo gives us a contemporary Captain Ahab, Hank Morgan, Tom Sawyer, or Jay Gatsby—a man of aesthetic and sexual appeal who represents the United States on a global stage and who appears to possess confidence and talent, who is charming, and who acts decisively, but who is finally just another Wizard of OZ: a confidence man, a shrunken man hiding behind a computer screen and a grandiose reputation. Eric replies more upon appearances and rote information than upon human qualities traditionally associated with leadership—such as wisdom, maturity, compassion, integrity, and an ability to identify with and understand the nature of other people. His new wife, Elise, is an established poet (whose writing he refers to as “shit”). Elise says to him early in the day: “You know things. I think this is what you do. I think you’re dedicated to knowing. I think you acquire information and turn it into something stupendous and awful. You’re a dangerous person. Do you agree? A visionary” (8). Indeed, an arrogant, egotistical visionary for our times. During the day, she learns that he is having affairs with several other women, three of whom he has had sex with on that day. She tells him that the only way she can remain married to him would be if she were able to be indifferent to his callous disregard of her feelings, which she cannot be: “I think we’re done, aren’t we? You speak of being free. This is your lucky day” (122).

Perhaps, because of his rhetorical force and bravado, commentators have,

in my view, taken Eric far too seriously. Rather than a symbol or stereotype of the worst of cyber age robber barons, Eric is a comic figure, a spoiled bully who is out of control, self-destructive, and is begging to be punished—a child who needs limits. Some critics have scolded DeLillo for the often pompous, pretentious, and sometimes nonsensical pronouncements that Eric makes throughout. But I believe that his hollow expression signals that he is not the brilliant analyst but is more like Prufrock—a lonesome man, pushing beyond all the limits, wandering the city streets, dwelling on the past, and anticipating death. An early alert to readers that there is less to Eric than meets the eye occurs in the second paragraph, where DeLillo has him expound upon how important poetry is to him: “He read science and Poetry. He liked spare poems sited minutely in white space, ranks of alphabetic strokes burnt into paper. Poems make him conscious of his breathing. A poem bared a moment to things he was not normally prepared to notice. This was the nuance of every poem, at least for him, at night, these long weeks, one breath after another in the rotating room at the top of the triplex” (5). The rest of this opening section is packed with such banalities: “Nothing existed around him. There was only the noise in his head, the mind in time. When he died he would not end. The world would end” (6).

Another example of Eric’s vacuous responses to literature occurs when he visits Gotham Book Mart, and the narrator observes: “He browsed lean books always, half a fingerbreadth or less, choosing poems of four, five, or six lines. He scrutinized such poems, thinking into every intimation, and his feelings seemed to float in the white space around the lines. There were marks on the page and there was the page. The white was vital to the sound of the poem” (67). Not knowing how to translate the words of the poems into meaningful ideas, Eric remains fascinated by the blank white spaces that make no demands upon his interpretive abilities. Earlier, he says that he likes all “white paintings because they are unknowable—knife-applied slabs of mucoid color” (8).

The noise in Eric’s head is discordant and incoherent, and he appears to have attention deficit syndrome as his mind leaps from one image and idea to another just as he rushes from one appointment and one lover to the next, never finding satisfaction or rest. In place of reflection, ideas, and conceptualization, he has his delusions of grandeur and desire for the next acquisition; on this day, he will next triumph in the market or die a broken ignominious failure, which he does. Eric’s monomania is like that of Melville’s Ahab and thus raises the question of whether his all white, thirty-five foot limo is really a version of Moby Dick in which Eric is an unwitting victim, already en-

tombled.⁴ As with Ahab, in his failure and death, he is overreaching in the worlds of finance, sex, and human relationships. In his failure and death, he will take his crew and the investments of millions down with him.

During his visit to one of his lovers, Didi Francher, she tells him that once he had “all this talent and drive. Utilized. Consistently put to good use.” “But,” she says, “that’s not true any more. . . . Not since an element of doubt began to enter your life. . . . You’re beginning to think it’s more interesting to doubt than to act” (32). Like Ahab who never doubted that he would kill Moby Dick, Eric has had complete faith in his own calculations. Confident in his security systems, his limo, and his bodyguards, he has thought himself invulnerable, but what he ignores is the complexity and unpredictability of human nature. Throughout the day, he has been fixated on his doctor’s observation that his prostate is asymmetrical, and although he has no idea if that is a health risk, he takes it to be an ominous sign.

When he introduces Benno Levin, DeLillo alludes to the humor of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* when the outcast Benno says that he steals electricity from a lamppost and lives in an abandoned warehouse. In a lengthy dialogue with his assassin, Eric learns that Benno also has an asymmetrical prostate and that it is “a harmless variation” (199; and earlier on page 8, and 54). But Benno, who has studied Eric intensely from his many TV and magazine interviews and the articles about him, tells him that he has failed because he “forgot something along the way. The importance of the lopsided, the thing that’s skewed a little. You were looking for balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides. I know this. I know you. But you should have been tracking the yen in its tics and quirks. The little quirk. The misshape. That’s where the answer was, in your body, in your prostate” (200). This is ironic given his preoccupation with his genitals throughout.

What has led many critics and readers to find this novel disappointing is that it seems to provide no resolution. We may come to recognize Eric to be a shallow, selfish, insensitive egomaniac who is deeply insecure, lonely, homicidal, self-destructive and suicidal, but the death that he appears to welcome at the hands of a disgruntled former employee seems to tell us nothing. However, DeLillo’s references to earlier lonely American searchers like Ahab, the narrator of *Invisible Man*, and Gatsby suggest that Eric is a grotesque 21st century incarnation in a series of failed American visionaries. *Cosmopolis* is a dark comedy that reminds us that all too often the so-called “best and the brightest,” like those who confidently advised escalating the war in Vietnam forty years ago and those who assured Congress that an invasion of Iraq would achieve peace in a matter of months, are most often people

like Eric, amoral egotists who base their advice on their computer models and gross statistics, blithely dismissing cultural complexity and badly misjudging the power of the intelligence and the will of the other and their own limits.

II

“Inflammatory,” “shocking,” “in your face to the max”—these are a few of the phrases used by reviewers to describe Philip Roth’s novel, *The Plot Against America*, published late in 2004. Quite different in style and structure from DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*, Roth’s text employs a first-person linear narrative in the form of social realism to recount historical events that occurred between June, 1940 and October, 1942, when he was between seven and nine years old. The setting is the Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, where he grew up, and the characters include his own family members and many public figures of the time, including Walter Winchell, Fiorello La Guardia, Franklin Roosevelt, Charles Lindbergh, and Henry Ford. Because he wants his readers to understand that most of the events he reports are historically accurate, Roth adds a “Postscript” that contains “A True Chronology of the Major Figures” and other historical documentation. To make the point that history can take very unexpected turns, however, Roth hypothesizes what might have happened had Lindbergh become President in 1940. One of the fascinating things about the book is that Roth shows us how easily it could have happened once you consider the political turmoil of the 1930s, the motives of those who hated Roosevelt and the New Deal, and the magnetic power of Lindbergh’s celebrity. Even reviewers who find some problems with the book admit that “it could happen anywhere, at any time if the right people and circumstances come together” (Ryan).

Roth’s nightmare goes like this: from May, 1927, when he made the first solo transatlantic flight, Lindbergh was a beloved American hero—seen as a brave, modest, handsome patriot. When his young son was kidnapped and murdered in 1932, there was an enormous outpouring of sympathy for him and his wife Anne. While some scholars and journalists who followed Lindbergh’s activities knew him to be an anti-Semitic isolationist, ordinary Americans had little or no knowledge of his politics.

On September 11, 1941, he delivered a speech at a rally of the America First organization that opposed entering the war. Lindbergh said that the United States should not succumb to the will of foreign powers and should pursue “an independent destiny.” He charged that “the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration” were supporting intervention and that “be-

hind these groups [. . .] are a number of capitalists, Anglophiles, and intellectuals who believe that the future of mankind depends upon the domination of the British empire” (15). In Roth’s novel, when the Republican convention becomes deadlocked between the nominations of Dewey and Willkie, those supporting Lindbergh arrange for him to arrive unexpectedly at 3:18. “The lean, tall, handsome hero, a lithe, athletic-looking man not yet forty years old, arrived in his flying attire, having landed his own plane at the Philadelphia airport only minutes earlier, and at the sight of him, a surge of redemptive excitement brought the wilted conventioners up onto their feet to cry “Lindy! Lindy! Lindy! for thirty glorious minutes, and without interruption from the chair” (15).

Imagining Lindbergh as an unconventional campaigner, Roth depicts him as having powerful charismatic appeal: “His [acceptance] speech was unadorned and to the point, delivered in a high-pitched, flat, Midwestern, decidedly un-Rooseveltian American voice. His flight outfit of high boots and jodhpurs and a light-weight jumper worn over a shirt and tie was a replica of the one in which he’d crossed the Atlantic, and he spoke without removing his leather headgear or flight goggles which were pushed up on his forehead” (29–30). Landing his own plane at airports around the country, he would climb out and speak a short and simple message: “My intention in running for the Presidency is to preserve American democracy by preventing America from taking part in another world war. Your choice is simple . . . Lindbergh or war” (30). In contrast to Lindbergh, Roosevelt appears to say too much, to be too complicated, and to sound effete: “It was straight-talking Lindy who never had to look or to sound superior, who simply was superior—fearless Lindy, at once youthful and gravely mature, the rugged individualist, the legendary American man’s man who gets the impossible done by relying solely on himself” (30).

In spite of all that Roosevelt has done for the poor and working people, the power of Lindbergh’s charm and simple message leads to a solid victory. Roth’s attribution of the reasons for Lindbergh’s victory are so typical and familiar that it is hard to believe that they are, in this case, fictional. “The experts concluded that twentieth-century Americans, weary of confronting a new crisis in every decade, were starving for normalcy raised to heroic proportions, a decent man with an honest face and an undistinguished voice who had resoundingly demonstrated to the entire planet the courage to take charge and the fortitude to shape history, and of course, the power to transcend personal tragedy. If Lindbergh promised no war, then there would be no war—for the great majority it was as simple as that” (53).

Those in Jewish communities, like members of the Roth family, are terrified by Lindbergh's openly anti-Semitic statements and by the possible consequences that could result from the rumored connections between Lindbergh and Hitler, and it is hard for them to understand the adulation that the majority of the people feel toward their President. Roth's father, a patriot who strongly believes in the American system, is shocked at the overwhelming support Lindbergh receives and makes a statement that sounds very similar to ones we've heard since the last election: "We knew things were bad but not like this. . . . They live in a dream, and we live in a nightmare" (76).

Within months, the government creates new programs under the Office of American Absorption, the goal of which is to unify the country by making Jews and other members of minority groups part of the mainstream. For teenagers, there is the "Just Folks" project that sends teens from eastern cities to spend the summer on farms in the west (84). Roth's brother goes to Kentucky and returns a strong advocate of the program, thereby dividing the family. Soon, Roth's father's insurance firm notifies Jewish employees that they must accept transfers to branches in other parts of the country if they wish to remain employed. It becomes clear that the government intends to break up Jewish communities and isolate Jewish families in predominantly Christian towns. Roth's father realizes that he had been mistaken not to join others who had already moved to Canada because he believed that no such thing could happen in the United States. Roth says that he "watched my father fall apart. . . crying like a baby and a man being tortured—because he was powerless to stop the unforeseen" (113). It is in this context that Roth presents a powerful statement about the precariousness of the present and the possibility that the future may take a direction that perhaps no one would have predicted: "As Lindbergh's election couldn't have made clearer to me, the unfolding of the unforeseen was everything. Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as "History," harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the pages as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic" (113–4).

Having moved from actual history to fictional history, Roth needs to shift back to the historical record, and he does so by creating a *deus ex machina*. Suddenly, Lindbergh and his plane disappear, never to be seen again. Amid rumors that there is a plot against America, a reactionary Vice President takes over and orders the FBI to take many prominent people into protective custody, including the first lady. Fearing a surprise attack by Canada, they seal the borders. After a week of terror for many, Mrs. Lindbergh manages to get

access to radio and gives a national speech condemning the Vice President and his allies: She says: "I declare that injurious history of usurpation to be ended. Our enemies' plot has failed, liberty and justice are restored" (319). One of the democrats christens her "Our Lady of the White House" and things go back to normal. A new election is called, Roosevelt wins, and the United States enters the war.

I believe that Roth's work succeeds in linking the aesthetic and the political and in affecting the political climate of the country. The many very public, positive reviews of this novel and its status as a best seller have already gone a long way toward getting people to think of the parallels to the current threats upon free speech and democracy. Of course, those who voted for Gore, which was nearly half of those who voted, embrace the book as a *tour de force* that excoriates the current administration. Bush supporters are not reading the book but labeling it as unpatriotic and even treasonous. The "what if" satire enables Roth to connect powerful historical associations to the current techniques of bureaucratic rhetoric and legal maneuvering that unfortunately are thriving in our new political context.

III

Let me now turn to the current plight of the humanities in American education. On my campus I direct a humanities center called The Center for Ideas and Society. The faculty in our College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences consider it crucial to sustaining the intellectual life of the college, supporting faculty and graduate student research, and for articulating to the campus and the community the importance of the humanities to the society at large. We have been quite successful over the last five years in obtaining institutional grants from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, we have international exchange programs with the University of Utrecht and a research group in Paris, and have had twenty-six international scholars in residence since 1995. In 2001, the Center's core budget was severely cut, and for the last four years, the activities of the Center, apart from those funded by outside grants, was drastically reduced. This reduction was not limited to our campus but to research programs in general in the University of California system, but what has been most disturbing is a general attitude among administrators nationwide that the humanities are a luxury that we can no longer afford. We all know for a fact that over the last fifteen years, the number of faculty positions for literature professors has dropped drastically as administrators have chosen to hire part-time lectures and instructors instead of replacing retiring

tenure-track professors. Repeatedly, we are asked to justify the “use-value” of our work and give evidence of our impact on the public at large outside the academy. A recent letter from the Rockefeller Foundation indicated that they are in the process of deciding whether to fund humanities projects at all in the future.

I have read over the last several months, many reports and statements from around the country in which colleagues struggle mightily to make the case for the humanities by pointing to the relationship to new technologies, to the formation of cultural policies, to bringing ethical and moral questions to the work of science, and to making the community, state, and nation more humane places. But when it comes down to questions such as why should institutions and foundations be willing to fund humanities departments to have relatively small classes for majors and graduate students, we find ourselves saying something like “because what we do matters.” We need to find more effective ways to answer these questions, and to do so we need bolder approaches.

I want to close by giving a recent example of the kind of bold approach that we might emulate. On May 15, Mark Danner, a longtime staff writer for *The New Yorker* and Professor of Journalism at Berkeley and Bard College delivered a powerful commencement address to the graduating English majors at Berkeley, the class that began college in the fall of 2001. It will appear in the June 23rd issue of the *New York Review of Books*. He gave his talk the title “What Are you Going to Do with That?”—the question that every English major and graduate student is repeatedly asked by parents, relatives, and friends about why they study literature. As a College Master at Princeton, I often had to debate parents who threatened to stop paying tuition for their children who wanted to switch majors from science to humanities. Danner says that in the United States with “all its vulgar, grotesque power,” it should not be surprising that those who choose to study literature would be scorned because they seek to develop the moral imagination instead of seeking economic self-justification. Such an idea, he says, has never been popular in the U.S. and “became downright suspect after September 11, 2001.” He says that by declaring themselves to be questioners—humanists—they are already outsiders. They have doomed themselves by “learning how to read, learning how to question, learning how to doubt” and thereby being forced to see the “gulf between what you are told about the world” and “what you yourself cannot help but understand about that world.”

When Danner became a journalist, he began to write about wars, massacres, and violence, and he gives several examples of horrors he has covered

in such places as Salvador, Haiti, Bosnia, and Iraq and of the perpetrators of crimes of enormous evil he has interviewed. In a statement that goes very much to the core of DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, Danner explains that these evil doers all believe that what they are doing is right and good. He describes an interview with a Serb leader in Bosnia who had killed sixty-eight people the day before: "I was writing a profile of him and he of course did not want to talk about bodies or death. He preferred to speak of his vision for the nation. For me, the problem in depicting this man was simple: the level of his crimes dwarfed the interest of his character. His motivations were paltry, in no way commensurate with the pain he had caused. It is often a problem with evil and that is why, in my experience, talking with mass murderers is invariably a disappointment. Great acts of evil so rarely call forth powerful character that the relation between the two seems nearly random. Put another way, that relation is not defined by melodrama, as popular fiction would have it. To understand this mass murderer, you need Dostoevsky, or Conrad."

On the current situation in the United States, Danner makes the following observations: Among government officials, he finds "unprecedented frankness in explaining the relation between power and truth." Indeed, our officials believe that power can determine truth. He quotes an unnamed advisor to the President: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality." Danner's recent book is called *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror*.⁵

Danner recounts a press conference of a few weeks ago with Donald Rumsfeld and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace in which a reporter presented a very well-informed statement summarizing several reports stating that the events at Abu Ghraib were systematic and ordered by higher commanders. He mentioned a memo by the commanding general in Iraq that approved twelve interrogation techniques that "far exceed the limits established by the Army's own field manual." He also described a process called "rendition" which authorizes that people who are suspected of having information can be kidnapped off the streets by U.S. intelligence agents and taken to third countries to be tortured, and quotes a military report estimating that 85–90% of those held in Abu Ghraib had no intelligence value.

The reporter asks of Rumsfeld: "I wonder if you would just respond to the suggestion that there is a systematic problem rather than the kind of individual abuses we've heard of before?" Rumsfeld and Pace both respond by saying that there have been many reports on the scandal, but that they cannot think of any that "characterized it [the torture] as systemic or systematic.

When the reporter tried to ask a follow-up question, Rumsfeld ignored him and turned to another questioner as other reporters laughed. Danner quotes from several reports that the reporter might have wanted to mention, which speak of the “systemic,” “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses” and point to the “vast gulf of lies” that can be traced to the Departments of Justice and Defense and to the White House. Danner says: “What is interesting about this fact is that it is not hidden but that it is revealed. We know this—at least those who are willing to read know it. Those who can see the gulf between what officials say and what the facts are. And we, as I have said, are fairly few. . . . In the U.S., there is a divide between those who simply agree to believe and those who are determined to read and think. As English majors, he concludes, “you have taken a step along the road to being Empiricists of the Word.”

It is clear to me that in the years ahead the work of scholars and teachers of languages, linguistics, literature, film, philosophy, history, and religious and culture studies will be more important than ever before in addressing mankind’s most critical problems and guiding students everywhere, and especially in the United States, to respect and, humbly, to try to understand the peoples of every culture.

NOTES

This paper was given at the Annual Meeting of the Japanese Association for American Studies, Rikkyo University, 9 June 2007. Portions of this address were part of a paper presented at a conference in Munich, Germany, 10 June 2005.

¹ See Thomas DePietro’s *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, 84.

² Twain’s visionary satire, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, seems to suggest that the central hubris of U.S. power lies in its terrific ability to achieve maximum damage for the sheer sake of spectacle, even if this means that no certain endgame is possible. Hank’s war-mongering depravity at the siege is no more prescient as an allegory of U.S. imperialism in the 19th century than it is for our own global stance in the 21st century. We need to look no farther back than in the military fireworks during the opening hours of the Iraq war in 2003. As with the first Persian Gulf war, CNN was there to broadcast the artillery light-show, which didn’t disclose the whereabouts of Saddam Hussein or serve any other practical purpose than to offer a sideshow attraction to tax-payers wondering where their military budget goes.

³ Images of the WTC before 9/11 seem all the more foreboding if we look at the cover art of DJ Spooky’s *Riddim Warfare* in ’98 (Atari-like image of buildings in collapse), the cover art of Modest Mouse’s *Lonesome Crowded West* (also of two identical towers in ’97), and the photograph of William Burroughs pointing his shotgun at the Twin Towers back in 1977.

⁴ In Terry Southern’s *Magic Christian*, Guy Grand—a jaded multimillionaire with a fop-pish sense of humor—decides to produce a fleet of fifty-foot luxury sedans as a comic send-up to America’s gross desire for power and consumption. Once bought, many of the sedans create traffic jams due to their inability to make left turns on the streets of New York City. Eric Packer’s car is a Moby Dick spectacle of garish proportions that seems to suggest a continuing

trend in U.S. value systems (i.e. the SUV).

⁵ Mark Danner's UC-Berkeley address, as well as his other writings, can be found at his website: http://www.markdanner.com/nyreview/061004_Torture_Truth.htm.

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