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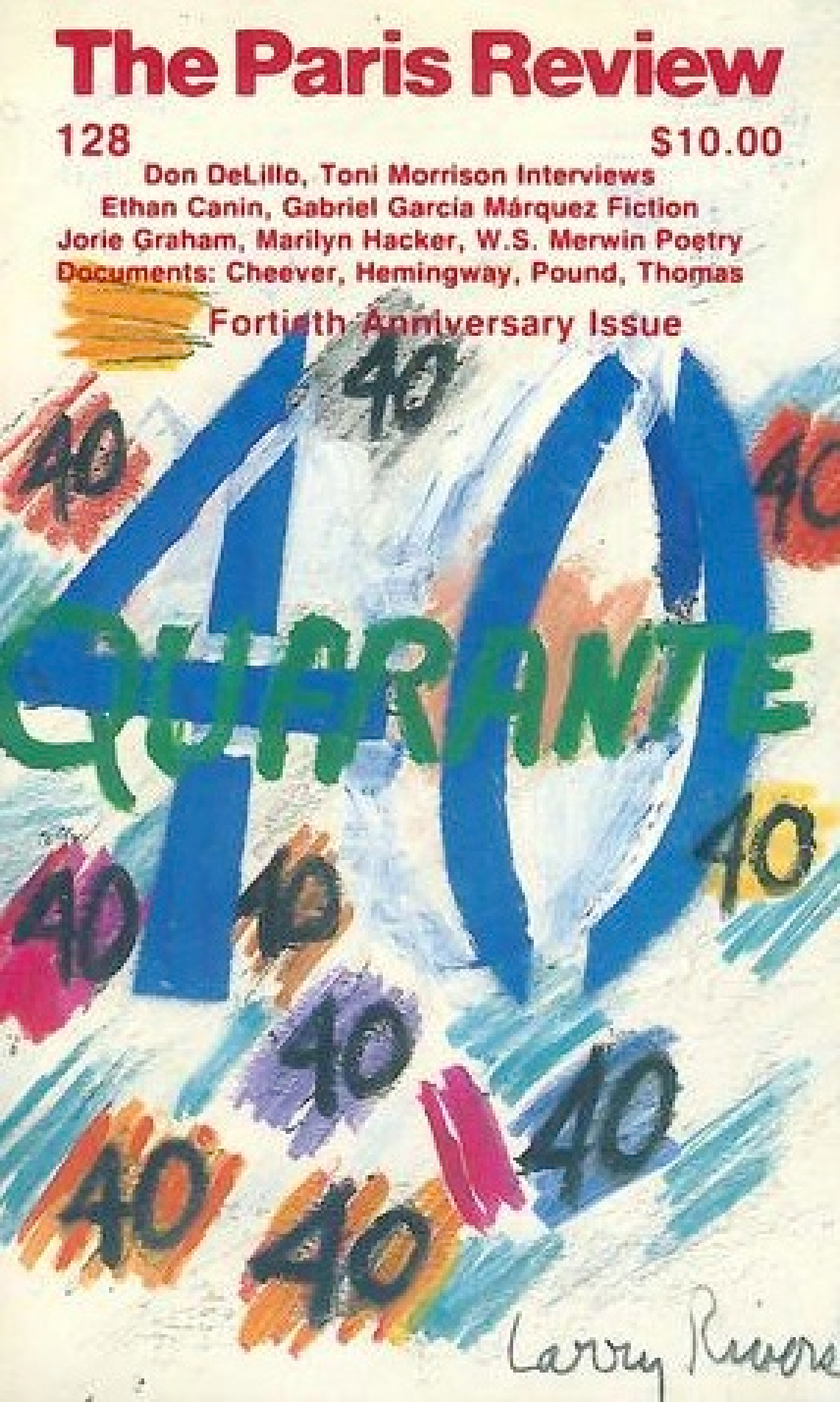

Don DeLillo: The Art of Fiction, No. 135

Interviewed by Adam Begley

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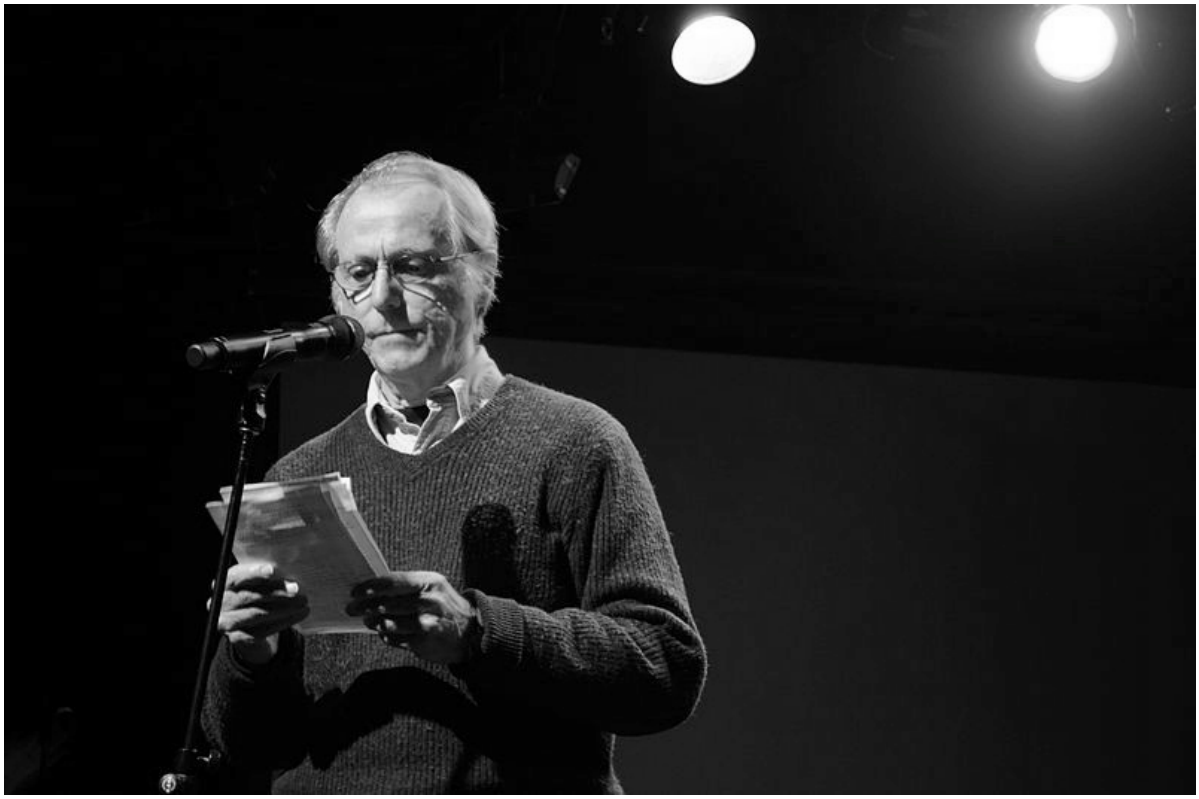

Don DeLillo, ca. 2011. Photograph by Thousandrobots

A man who's been called "the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction" can be expected to act a little nervous.

I met Don DeLillo for the first time in an Irish restaurant in Manhattan, for a conversation he said would be "deeply preliminary." He is a slender man, gray haired, with boxy brown glasses. His eyes, magnified by thick lenses, are restless without being shifty. He looks to the right, to the left; he turns his head to see what's behind him.

But his edgy manner has nothing to do with anxiety. He's a disciplined observer searching for details. I also discovered after many hours of inter-

viewing spread out over several days—a quick lunch, a visit some months later to a midtown gallery to see an Anselm Kiefer installation, followed by a drink at a comically posh bar—that DeLillo is a kind man, generous and thoughtful, qualities incompatible with the reflexive wariness of the paranoid. He is not scared; he is attentive. His smile is shy, his laugh sudden.

Don DeLillo's parents came to America from Italy. He was born in the Bronx in 1936 and grew up there, in an Italian-American neighborhood. He attended Cardinal Hayes High School and Fordham University, where he majored in "communication arts," and worked for a time as a copywriter at Ogilvy & Mather, an advertising agency. He now lives just outside New York City with his wife.

Americana, his first novel, was published in 1971. It took him about four years to write. At the time he was living in a small studio apartment in Manhattan. After *Americana* the novels poured out in a rush: five more in the next seven years. *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Players* (1977), and *Running Dog* (1978) all received enthusiastic reviews. They did not sell well. The books were known to a small but loyal following.

Things changed in the eighties. *The Names* (1982) was more prominently reviewed than any previous DeLillo novel. *White Noise* (1985) won the National Book Award. *Libra* (1988) was a bestseller. *Mao II*, his latest, won the 1992 PEN/Faulkner Award. He is currently at work on a novel, a portion of which appeared in *Harper's* under the title "Pafko at the Wall." He has written two plays, *The Engineer of Moonlight* (1979) and *The Day Room* (1986).

This interview began in the fall of 1992 as a series of tape-recorded conversations. Transcripts were made from eight hours of taped material. DeLillo returned the final, edited manuscript with a note that begins, "This is not only the meat but the potatoes."

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any idea what made you a writer?

DON DeLILLO

I have an idea but I'm not sure I believe it. Maybe I wanted to learn how to think. Writing is a concentrated form of thinking. I don't know what I think

about certain subjects, even today, until I sit down and try to write about them. Maybe I wanted to find more rigorous ways of thinking. We're talking now about the earliest writing I did and about the power of language to counteract the wallow of late adolescence, to define things, define muddled experience in economical ways. Let's not forget that writing is convenient. It requires the simplest tools. A young writer sees that with words and sentences on a piece of paper that costs less than a penny he can place himself more clearly in the world. Words on a page, that's all it takes to help him separate himself from the forces around him, streets and people and pressures and feelings. He learns to think about these things, to ride his own sentences into new perceptions. How much of this did I feel at the time? Maybe just an inkling, an instinct. Writing was mainly an unnameable urge, an urge partly propelled by the writers I was reading at the time.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read as a child?

DeLILLO

No, not at all. Comic books. This is probably why I don't have a storytelling drive, a drive to follow a certain kind of narrative rhythm.

INTERVIEWER

As a teenager?

DeLILLO

Not much at first. *Dracula* when I was fourteen. A spider eats a fly, and a rat eats the spider, and a cat eats the rat, and a dog eats the cat, and maybe somebody eats the dog. Did I miss one level of devouring? And yes, the Studs Lonigan trilogy, which showed me that my own life, or something like it, could be the subject of a writer's scrutiny. This was an amazing thing to discover. Then, when I was eighteen, I got a summer job as a playground attendant—a parkie. And I was told to wear a white T-shirt and brown pants and brown shoes and a whistle around my neck—which they provided, the whistle. But I never acquired the rest of the outfit. I wore blue jeans and checkered shirts and kept the whistle in my pocket and just sat on a park bench disguised as an ordinary citizen. And this is where I read Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*. And got paid for it. And then James Joyce, and it was through Joyce that I learned to see something in language that carried a radiance,

something that made me feel the beauty and fervor of words, the sense that a word has a life and a history. And I'd look at a sentence in *Ulysses* or in *Moby-Dick* or in Hemingway—maybe I hadn't gotten to *Ulysses* at that point, it was *Portrait of the Artist*—but certainly Hemingway and the water that was clear and swiftly moving and the way the troops went marching down the road and raised dust that powdered the leaves of the trees. All this in a playground in the Bronx.

INTERVIEWER

Does the fact that you grew up in an Italian-American household translate in some way, does it show up in the novels you've published?

DeLILLO

It showed up in early short stories. I think it translates to the novels only in the sense that it gave me a perspective from which to see the larger environment. It's no accident that my first novel was called *Americana*. This was a private declaration of independence, a statement of my intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture. America was and is the immigrant's dream, and as the son of two immigrants I was attracted by the sense of possibility that had drawn my grandparents and parents. This was a subject that would allow me to develop a range I hadn't shown in those early stories —a range and a freedom. And I was well into my twenties by this point and had long since left the streets where I'd grown up. Not left them forever—I do want to write about those years. It's just a question of finding the right frame.

INTERVIEWER

What got you started on *Americana*?

DeLILLO

I don't always know when or where an idea first hits the nervous system, but I remember *Americana*. I was sailing in Maine with two friends, and we put into a small harbor on Mt. Desert Island. And I was sitting on a railroad tie waiting to take a shower, and I had a glimpse of a street maybe fifty yards away and a sense of beautiful old houses and rows of elms and maples and a stillness and wistfulness—the street seemed to carry its own built-in longing. And I felt something, a pause, something opening up before me. It would be a month or two before I started writing the book and two or three years before I came up with the title *Americana*, but in fact it was all implicit in that

moment—a moment in which nothing happened, nothing ostensibly changed, a moment in which I didn't see anything I hadn't seen before. But there was a pause in time, and I knew I had to write about a man who comes to a street like this or lives on a street like this. And whatever roads the novel eventually followed, I believe I maintained the idea of that quiet street if only as counterpoint, as lost innocence.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it made a difference in your career that you started writing novels late, when you were approaching thirty?

DeLILLO

Well, I wish I had started earlier, but evidently I wasn't ready. First, I lacked ambition. I may have had novels in my head but very little on paper and no personal goals, no burning desire to achieve some end. Second, I didn't have a sense of what it takes to be a serious writer. It took me a long time to develop this. Even when I was well into my first novel I didn't have a system for working, a dependable routine. I worked haphazardly, sometimes late at night, sometimes in the afternoon. I spent too much time doing other things or nothing at all. On humid summer nights I tracked horseflies through the apartment and killed them—not for the meat but because they were driving me crazy with their buzzing. I hadn't developed a sense of the level of dedication that's necessary to do this kind of work.

INTERVIEWER

What are your working habits now?

DeLILLO

I work in the morning at a manual typewriter. I do about four hours and then go running. This helps me shake off one world and enter another. Trees, birds, drizzle—it's a nice kind of interlude. Then I work again, later afternoon, for two or three hours. Back into book time, which is transparent—you don't know it's passing. No snack food or coffee. No cigarettes—I stopped smoking a long time ago. The space is clear, the house is quiet. A writer takes earnest measures to secure his solitude and then finds endless ways to squander it. Looking out the window, reading random entries in the dictionary. To break the spell I look at a photograph of Borges, a great picture sent to me by the Irish writer Colm Tóibín. The face of Borges against a dark background—

Borges fierce, blind, his nostrils gaping, his skin stretched taut, his mouth amazingly vivid; his mouth looks painted; he's like a shaman painted for visions, and the whole face has a kind of steely rapture. I've read Borges of course, although not nearly all of it, and I don't know anything about the way he worked—but the photograph shows us a writer who did not waste time at the window or anywhere else. So I've tried to make him my guide out of lethargy and drift, into the otherworld of magic, art, and divination.

INTERVIEWER

Do your typed drafts just pile up and sit around?

DeLILLO

That's right. I want those pages nearby because there's always a chance I'll have to refer to something that's scrawled at the bottom of a sheet of paper somewhere. Discarded pages mark the physical dimensions of a writer's labor —you know, how many shots it took to get a certain paragraph right. Or the awesome accumulation, the gross tonnage, of first draft pages. The first draft of *Libra* sits in ten manuscript boxes. I like knowing it's in the house. I feel connected to it. It's the complete book, the full experience containable on paper. I find I'm more ready to discard pages than I used to be. I used to look for things to keep. I used to find ways to save a paragraph or a sentence, maybe by relocating it. Now I look for ways to discard things. If I discard a sentence I like, it's almost as satisfying as keeping a sentence I like. I don't think I've become ruthless or perverse—just a bit more willing to believe that nature will restore itself. The instinct to discard is finally a kind of faith. It tells me there's a better way to do this page even though the evidence is not accessible at the present time.

INTERVIEWER

Athletes—basketball players, football players—talk about "getting into the zone." Is there a writer's zone you get into?

DeLILLO

There's a zone I aspire to. Finding it is another question. It's a state of automatic writing, and it represents the paradox that's at the center of a writer's consciousness—this writer's anyway. First you look for discipline and control. You want to exercise your will, bend the language your way, bend the world your way. You want to control the flow of impulses, images, words,

faces, ideas. But there's a higher place, a secret aspiration. You want to let go. You want to lose yourself in language, become a carrier or messenger. The best moments involve a loss of control. It's a kind of rapture, and it can happen with words and phrases fairly often—completely surprising combinations that make a higher kind of sense, that come to you out of nowhere. But rarely for extended periods, for paragraphs and pages—I think poets must have more access to this state than novelists do. In *End Zone*, a number of characters play a game of touch football in a snowstorm. There's nothing rapturous or magical about the writing. The writing is simple. But I wrote the passage, maybe five or six pages, in a state of pure momentum, without the slightest pause or deliberation.

INTERVIEWER

How do you imagine your audience?

DeLILLO

When my head is in the typewriter the last thing on my mind is some imaginary reader. I don't have an audience; I have a set of standards. But when I think of my work out in the world, written and published, I like to imagine it's being read by some stranger somewhere who doesn't have anyone around him to talk to about books and writing—maybe a would-be writer, maybe a little lonely, who depends on a certain kind of writing to make him feel more comfortable in the world.

INTERVIEWER

I've read critics who say that your books are bound to make people feel uncomfortable.

DeLILLO

Well, that's good to know. But this reader we're talking about—he already feels uncomfortable. He's very uncomfortable. And maybe what he needs is a book that will help him realize he's not alone.

INTERVIEWER

How do you begin? What are the raw materials of a story?

DeLILLO

I think the scene comes first, an idea of a character in a place. It's visual, it's Technicolor—something I see in a vague way. Then sentence by sentence into

the breach. No outlines— maybe a short list of items, chronological, that may represent the next twenty pages. But the basic work is built around the sentence. This is what I mean when I call myself a writer. I construct sentences. There's a rhythm I hear that drives me through a sentence. And the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. They form odd correspondences. They match up not just through meaning but through sound and look. The rhythm of a sentence will accommodate a certain number of syllables. One syllable too many, I look for another word. There's always another word that means nearly the same thing, and if it doesn't then I'll consider altering the meaning of a sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat. I'm completely willing to let language press meaning upon me. Watching the way in which words match up, keeping the balance in a sentence—these are sensuous pleasures. I might want *very* and *only* in the same sentence, spaced a particular way, exactly so far apart. I might want *rapture* matched with *danger*—I like to match word endings. I type rather than write longhand because I like the way the words and letters look when they come off the hammers onto the page—finished, printed, beautifully formed.

INTERVIEWER

Do you care about paragraphs?

DeLILLO

When I was working on *The Names* I devised a new method—new to me, anyway. When I finished a paragraph, even a three-line paragraph, I automatically went to a fresh page to start the new paragraph. No crowded pages. This enabled me to see a given set of sentences more clearly. It made rewriting easier and more effective. The white space on the page helped me concentrate more deeply on what I'd written. And with this book I tried to find a deeper level of seriousness as well. *The Names* is the book that marks the beginning of a new dedication. I needed the invigoration of unfamiliar languages and new landscapes, and I worked to find a clarity of prose that might serve as an equivalent to the clear light of those Aegean islands. The Greeks made an art of the alphabet, a visual art, and I studied the shapes of letters carved on stones all over Athens. This gave me fresh energy and forced me to think more deeply about what I was putting on the page. Some of the work I did in the 1970s was off-the-cuff, not powerfully motivated. I think I forced my way into a couple of books that weren't begging to be written, or

maybe I was writing too fast. Since then I've tried to be patient, to wait for a subject to take me over, become part of my life beyond the desk and typewriter. *Libra* was a great experience that continues to resonate in my mind because of the fascinating and tragic lives that were part of the story. And *The Names* keeps resonating because of the languages I heard and read and touched and tried to speak and spoke a little and because of the sunlight and the elemental landscapes that I tried to blend into the book's sentences and paragraphs.

INTERVIEWER

Your dialogue is different from other people's dialogue.

DeLILLO

Well, there are fifty-two ways to write dialogue that's faithful to the way people speak. And then there are times when you're not trying to be faithful. I've done it different ways myself and I think I concentrated on dialogue most deeply in *Players*. It's hyperrealistic, spoken by urban men and women who live together, who know each other's speech patterns and thought patterns and finish each other's sentences or don't even bother because it isn't necessary. Jumpy, edgy, a bit hostile, dialogue that's almost obsessive about being funny whatever the circumstances. New York voices.

INTERVIEWER

Has the way you handle dialogue evolved?

DeLILLO

It has evolved, but maybe sideways. I don't have a grand, unified theory. I think about dialogue differently from book to book. In *The Names* I raised the level of intelligence and perception. People speak a kind of idealized café dialogue. In *Libra* I flattened things out. The characters are bigger and broader, the dialogue is flatter. There were times with Oswald, with his marine buddies and with his wife and mother, when I used a documentary approach. They speak the flat prose of *The Warren Report*.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned early short stories. Do you ever write stories anymore?

DeLILLO

Fewer all the time.

INTERVIEWER

Could the set piece—I'm thinking of the Unification Church wedding in *Mao II* or the in-flight movie in *Players*—be your alternative to the short story?

INTERVIEWER

I don't think of them that way. What attracts me to this format is its non-short-storyness, the high degree of stylization. In *Players* all the major characters in the novel appear in the prologue—embryonically, not yet named or defined. They're shadowy people watching a movie on an airplane. This piece is the novel in miniature. It lies outside the novel. It's modular—keep it in or take it out. The mass wedding in *Mao II* is more conventional. It introduces a single major character and sets up themes and resonances. The book makes no sense without it.

INTERVIEWER

We talked a little about *Americana*. Tell me about your second novel—what was your idea for the shape of *End Zone*?

DeLILLO

I don't think I had an idea. I had a setting and some characters, and I more or less trailed behind, listening. At some point I realized there had to be a structural core, and I decided to play a football game. This became the centerpiece of the novel. The same thing happens in *White Noise*. There's an aimless shuffle toward a high-intensity event—this time a toxic spill that forces people to evacuate their homes. Then, in each book, there's a kind of decline, a purposeful loss of energy. Otherwise I think the two books are quite different. *End Zone* is about games—war, language, football. In *White Noise* there is less language and more human dread. There's a certain equation at work. As technology advances in complexity and scope, fear becomes more primitive.

INTERVIEWER

Plot, in the shape of shadowy conspiracy, shows up for the first time in your third novel, *Great Jones Street*. What brought you to write about the idea of a mysterious drug possibly tied to government repression?

DeLILLO

It was in the air. It was the way people were thinking. Those were the days

when the enemy was some presence seeping out of the government, and the most paranoid sort of fear was indistinguishable from common sense. I think I tried to get at the slickness connected with the word *paranoia*. It was becoming a kind of commodity. It used to mean one thing and after a while it began to mean everything. It became something you bought into, like Club Med.

INTERVIEWER

Were you looking for a plot?

DeLILLO

I think the plot found me. In a book about fear and paranoia, a plot was bound to assert itself. It's not the tightest sort of plotting—more like drug fantasies, seeing dead relatives come out of the walls. What we finally have is a man in a small room, a man who has shut himself away, and this is something that happens in my work—the man hiding from acts of violence or planning acts of violence, or the individual reduced to silence by the forces around him.

INTERVIEWER

The most lyrical language in *Great Jones Street* is reserved for the last chapter. Bucky Wunderlick, deprived of the faculty of speech, is wandering the streets of lower Manhattan. Why did you apply such poetic beauty to these scenes of dereliction?

DeLILLO

I think this is how urban people react to the deteriorating situation around them—I think we need to invent beauty, search out some restoring force. A writer may describe the ugliness and pain in graphic terms but he can also try to find a dignity and significance in ruined parts of the city, and the people he sees there. Ugly and beautiful—this is part of the tension of *Great Jones Street*. When I was working on the book there were beggars and derelicts in parts of the city they'd never entered before. A sense of failed souls and forgotten lives on a new scale. And the place began to feel a little like a community in the Middle Ages. Disease on the streets, insane people talking to themselves, the drug culture spreading among the young. We're talking about the very early 1970s, and I remember thinking of New York as a European city in the fourteenth century. Maybe this is why I was looking for a ruined sort of grandeur in the language at the end of the book.

INTERVIEWER

There's three-year period between *Great Jones Street* and your next book, *Ratner's Star*. Did it take you all that time to write it?

DeLILLO

It took a little over two years of extremely concentrated work. I'm amazed now that I was able to do the book in that period of time. I was drawn to the beauty of scientific language, the mystery of numbers, the idea of pure mathematics as a secret history and secret language—and to the notion of a fourteen-year-old mathematical genius at the center of all this. I guess it's also a book of games, mathematics being chief among them. It's a book in which structure predominates. The walls, the armature, the foundation—I wandered inside this thing I was building and sometimes felt taken over by it, not so much lost inside it as helpless to prevent the thing from building new connections, new underground links.

INTERVIEWER

What got you so interested in mathematics?

DeLILLO

Mathematics is underground knowledge. Only the actual practitioners know the terms and references. And I was drawn to the idea of a novel about an enormously important field of human thought that remains largely unknown. But I had to enter as a novice, a jokesmith, with a certain sly deference. I had to sneak up on my subject. No other book I've done was at the same time such fun and such labor. And all the time I was writing the book I was writing a shadow book in another part of my mind—same story, same main character but a small book, a book the size of a children's book, maybe it *was* a children's book, less structure, less weight—four characters instead of eighty-four or a hundred and four.

INTERVIEWER

What you actually wrote is very different from your first three books.

DeLILLO

Somebody said that *Ratner's Star* is the monster at the center of my work. But maybe it's in orbit around the other books. I think the other books constitute a single compact unit and that *Ratner's Star* swings in orbit around this unit at

a very great distance.

INTERVIEWER

Your next book was *Players*.

DeLILLO

Structure again but in a completely different way. Structure as something people need in their lives. It's about double lives. The second life is not only the secret life. It's the more structured life. People need rules and boundaries, and if society doesn't provide them in sufficient measure, the estranged individual may drift into something deeper and more dangerous. Terrorism is built on structure. A terrorist act is a structured narrative played out over days or weeks or even years if there are hostages involved. What we call the shadow life of terrorists or gun runners or double agents is in fact the place where a certain clarity takes effect, where definitions matter, and both sides tend to follow the same set of rules.

INTERVIEWER

Owen Brademas, a character in *The Names*, makes some interesting remarks about the novel. At one point he says, "If I were a writer, how would I enjoy being told the novel is dead. How liberating to work in the margins outside the central perception. You are the ghoul of literature."

DeLILLO

The novel's not dead, it's not even seriously injured, but I do think we're working in the margins, working in the shadows of the novel's greatness and influence. There's plenty of impressive talent around, and there's strong evidence that younger writers are moving into history, finding broader themes. But when we talk about the novel we have to consider the culture in which it operates. Everything in the culture argues against the novel, particularly the novel that tries to be equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture. This is why books such as *JR* and *Harlot's Ghost* and *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Public Burning* are important—to name just four. They offer many pleasures without making concessions to the middle-range reader, and they absorb and incorporate the culture instead of catering to it. And there's the work of Robert Stone and Joan Didion, who are both writers of conscience and painstaking workers of the sentence and paragraph. I don't want to list names because lists are a form of cultural hysteria, but I have to mention

Blood Meridian for its beauty and its honor. These books and writers show us that the novel is still spacious enough and brave enough to encompass enormous areas of experience. We have a rich literature. But sometimes it's a literature too ready to be neutralized, to be incorporated into the ambient noise. This is why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation. We're all one beat away from becoming elevator music.

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell me about the passage in *White Noise* in which Jack listens to his daughter Steffie talking in her sleep, and she is repeating the words *Toyota Celica*?

DeLILLO

There's something nearly mystical about certain words and phrases that float through our lives. It's computer mysticism. Words that are computer generated to be used on products that might be sold anywhere from Japan to Denmark—words devised to be pronounceable in a hundred languages. And when you detach one of these words from the product it was designed to serve, the word acquires a chantlike quality. Years ago somebody decided—I don't know how this conclusion was reached—that the most beautiful phrase in the English language was *cellar door*. If you concentrate on the sound, if you disassociate the words from the object they denote, and if you say the words over and over, they become a sort of higher Esperanto. This is how *Toyota Celica* began its life. It was pure chant at the beginning. Then they had to find an object to accommodate the words.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me about the research you did for *Libra*.

DeLILLO

There were several levels of research—fiction writer's research. I was looking for ghosts, not living people. I went to New Orleans, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Miami and looked at houses and streets and hospitals, schools and libraries—this is mainly Oswald I'm tracking but others as well—and after a while the characters in my mind and in my notebooks came out into the world.

Then there were books, old magazines, old photographs, scientific reports,

material printed by obscure presses, material my wife turned up from relatives in Texas. And a guy in Canada with a garage full of amazing stuff—audiotapes of Oswald talking on a radio program, audiotapes of his mother reading from his letters. And I looked at film consisting of amateur footage shot in Dallas on the day of the assassination, crude powerful footage that included the Zapruder film. And there were times when I felt an eerie excitement, coming across an item that seemed to bear out my own theories. Anyone who enters this maze knows you have to become part scientist, novelist, biographer, historian and existential detective. The landscape was crawling with secrets, and this novel-in-progress was my own precious secret —I told very few people what I was doing.

Then there was *The Warren Report*, which is the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the assassination and also the Joycean novel. This is the one document that captures the full richness and madness and meaning of the event, despite the fact that it omits about a ton and a half of material. I'm not an obsessive researcher, and I think I read maybe half of *The Warren Report*, which totals twenty-six volumes. There are acres of FBI reports I barely touched. But for me the boring and meaningless stretches are part of the experience. This is what a life resembles in its starkest form—school records, lists of possessions, photographs of knotted string found in a kitchen drawer. It took seven seconds to kill the president, and we're still collecting evidence and sifting documents and finding people to talk to and working through the trivia. The trivia is exceptional. When I came across the dental records of Jack Ruby's mother I felt a surge of admiration. Did they really put this in? The testimony of witnesses was a great resource— period language, regional slang, the twisted syntax of Marguerite Oswald and others as a kind of improvised genius and the lives of trainmen and stripteasers and telephone clerks. I had to be practical about this, and so I resisted the urge to read everything.

INTERVIEWER

When *Libra* came out, I had the feeling that this was a magnum opus, a life accomplishment. Did you know what you would do next?

DeLILLO

I thought I would be haunted by this story and these characters for some time to come, and that turned out to be true. But it didn't affect the search for new material, the sense that it was time to start thinking about a new book. *Libra*

will have a lingering effect on me partly because I became so deeply involved in the story and partly because the story doesn't have an end out here in the world beyond the book—new theories, new suspects and new documents keep turning up. It will never end. And there's no reason it should end. At the time of the twenty-fifth anniversary one newspaper titled its story about the assassination "The Day America Went Crazy." About the same time I became aware of three rock groups—or maybe two rock groups and a folk group—touring at the same time: the Oswalds, the Jack Rubies, and the Dead Kennedys.

INTERVIEWER

How do you normally feel at the end of writing a novel? Are you disgusted with what you've done? Pleased?

DeLILLO

I'm usually happy to finish and uncertain about what I've done. This is where you have to depend on other people, editors, friends, other readers. But the strangest thing that happened to me at the end of a book concerns *Libra*. I had a photograph of Oswald propped on a makeshift bookshelf on my desk, the photo in which he holds a rifle and some left-wing journals. It was there for nearly the entire time I was working on the book, about three years and three months. When I reached the last sentence—a sentence whose precise wording I knew long before I reached the final page, a sentence I'd been eager to get to and that, when I finally got to it, I probably typed at a faster than usual rate, feeling the deepest sort of relief and satisfaction—the picture started sliding off the shelf, and I had to pause to catch it.

INTERVIEWER

There was a passage in a critical work about you that disturbed me a bit—I don't know if it came from an interview you gave or just a supposition on the writer's part—in which it was claimed that you don't particularly care about your characters.

DeLILLO

A character is part of the pleasure a writer wants to give his readers. A character who lives, who says interesting things. I want to give pleasure through language, through the architecture of a book or a sentence and through characters who may be funny, nasty, violent, or all of these. But I'm

not the kind of writer who dotes on certain characters and wants readers to do the same. The fact is every writer likes his characters to the degree that he's able to work out their existence. You invent a character who pushes his mother down a flight of stairs, say. She's an old lady in a wheelchair and your character comes home drunk and pushes her down a long flight of stairs. Do you automatically dislike this man? He's done an awful thing. But I don't believe it's that simple. Your feelings toward this character depend on whether or not you've realized him fully, whether you understand him. It's not a simple question of like or dislike. And you don't necessarily show your feelings toward a character in the same way you show feelings to real people. In *Mao II* I felt enormous sympathy toward Karen Janney, sympathy, understanding, kinship. I was able to enter her consciousness quickly and easily. And I tried to show this sympathy and kinship through the language I used when writing from her viewpoint—a free-flowing, non-sequitur ramble that's completely different from the other characters' viewpoints. Karen is not especially likable. But once I'd given her a life independent of my own will, I had no choice but to like her—although it's simplistic to put it that way—and it shows in the sentences I wrote, which are free of the usual constraints that bind words to a sentence in a certain way.

INTERVIEWER

Did you try with *Libra* for a larger audience than the one that you had achieved at the time of *The Names*?

DeLILLO

I wouldn't know how to do that. My mind works one way, toward making a simple moment complex, and this is not the way to gain a larger audience. I think I have the audience my work ought to have. It's not easy work. And you have to understand that I started writing novels fairly late and with low expectations. I didn't even think of myself as a writer until I was two years into my first novel. When I was struggling with that book I felt unlucky, unblessed by the fates and by the future, and almost everything that has happened since then has proved me wrong. So some of my natural edginess and pessimism has been tempered by acceptance. This hasn't softened the tone of my work—it has simply made me realize I've had a lucky life as a writer.

INTERVIEWER

I can see how *Mao II* would come naturally out of *Libra* from a thematic point of view—the terrorist and the man in the small room. But I'm curious as to why, after *Libra*, you went back to the shape and feel of your previous novels. There's something about the wandering in *Mao II* that goes back to *Players* or *Running Dog*.

DeLILLO

The bare structure of *Mao II* is similar to the way *Players* is set up, including a prologue and an epilogue. But *Mao II* is a sort of rest-and-motion book, to invent a category. The first half of the book could have been called "The Book." Bill Gray talking about his book, piling up manuscript pages, living in a house that operates as a kind of filing cabinet for his work and all the other work it engenders. And the second half of the book could have been called "The World." Here, Bill escapes his book and enters the world. It turns out to be the world of political violence. I was nearly finished with the first half of the book before I realized how the second half ought to be shaped. I was writing blind. It was a struggle up to that point, but once I understood that Bill had to escape his handlers—the most obvious things tend to take the form of startling revelations—I felt a surge of excitement because the book had finally revealed itself to me.

INTERVIEWER

We talked briefly about men in small rooms. Bill Gray the writer. Lee Oswald the plotter. Owen Brademas in the old city of Lahore. Bucky Wunderlick blown off the concert stage and hiding out. But what about the crowd? "The future belongs to crowds," you wrote in *Mao II*. The sentence gets quoted a lot.

DeLILLO

In *Mao II* I thought about the secluded writer, the arch individualist, living outside the glut of the image world. And then the crowd, many kinds of crowds, people in soccer stadiums, people gathered around enormous photographs of holy men or heads of state. This book is an argument about the future. Who wins the struggle for the imagination of the world? There was a time when the inner world of the novelist—Kafka's private vision and maybe Beckett's—eventually folded into the three-dimensional world we were all living in. These men wrote a kind of world narrative. And so did Joyce in another sense. Joyce turned the book into a world with *Ulysses* and

Finnegans Wake. Today, the world has become a book—more precisely a news story or television show or piece of film footage. And the world narrative is being written by men who orchestrate disastrous events, by military leaders, totalitarian leaders, terrorists, men dazed by power. World news is the novel people want to read. It carries the tragic narrative that used to belong to the novel. The crowds in *Mao II*, except for the mass wedding, are TV crowds, masses of people we see in news coverage of terrible events. The news has been full of crowds, and the TV audience represents another kind of crowd. The crowd broken down into millions of small rooms.

INTERVIEWER

One of the funnier moments in *Mao II*—it's a typically grim funny moment—is when Bill Gray has been run over by a car, and he approaches a group of veterinarians to try to determine the extent of his damage. Where did that come from?

DeLILLO

I said something earlier about going from simple to complex moments. This is one of those instances. I wanted to reveal the seriousness of Bill Gray's physical condition, but it seemed ridiculously simple to have him walk into a doctor's office. Partly because he didn't want to see a doctor—he feared the blunt truth—but mainly because I wanted to do something more interesting. So I took an indirect route and hoped for certain riches along the way. I wanted to make basic medical information an occasion for comic dialogue and for an interesting play of levels. What I mean is that Bill pretends to be a writer—of course, he *is* a writer—doing research on a medical matter he wants to put into his book. This happens to be exactly what I did before writing the passage. I talked to a doctor about the kind of injury Bill suffered when the car hit him and what the consequences might be and how the effects of the injury might manifest themselves. And I played his answers back through the medium of three tipsy British veterinarians trying to oblige a stranger who may actually be gravely ill and isn't sure how he feels about it. Bill the writer becomes his own character. He tries to shade the information, soften it a bit, by establishing a kind of fiction. He needs this for a book, he tells them, but it turned out to be my book, not his.

INTERVIEWER

There are a number of characters in your work who discover that they are

going to die sooner than they thought, though they don't know exactly when. Bucky Wunderlick isn't going to die, but he's been given something awful, and for all he knows the side effects are deadly; Jack Gladney, poisoned by the toxic spill, is another obvious example; and then we come to Bill Gray with his automobile accident. What does this accelerated but vague mortality mean?

DeLILLO

Who knows? If writing is a concentrated form of thinking, then the most concentrated writing probably ends in some kind of reflection on dying. This is what we eventually confront if we think long enough and hard enough.

INTERVIEWER

Could it be related to the idea in *Libra* that—

DeLILLO

—all plots lead toward death? I guess that's possible. It happens in *Libra*, and it happens in *White Noise*, which doesn't necessarily mean that these are highly plotted novels. *Libra* has many digressions and meditations, and Oswald's life just meanders along for much of the book. It's the original plotter, Win Everett, who wonders if his conspiracy might grow tentacles that will turn an assassination *scare* into an actual murder, and of course this is what happens. The plot extends its own logic to the ultimate point. And *White Noise* develops a trite adultery plot that enmeshes the hero, justifying his fears about the death energies contained in plots. When I think of highly plotted novels I think of detective fiction or mystery fiction, the kind of work that always produces a few dead bodies. But these bodies are basically plot points, not worked-out characters. The book's plot either moves inexorably toward a dead body or flows directly from it, and the more artificial the situation the better. Readers can play off their fears by encountering the death experience in a superficial way. A mystery novel localizes the awesome force of the real death outside the book, winds it tightly in a plot, makes it less fearful by containing it in a kind of game format.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you didn't think your books could be written in the world that existed before the Kennedy assassination.

DeLILLO

Our culture changed in important ways. And these changes are among the

things that go into my work. There's the shattering randomness of the event, the missing motive, the violence that people not only commit but seem to watch simultaneously from a disinterested distance. Then the uncertainty we feel about the basic facts that surround the case—number of gunmen, number of shots, and so on. Our grip on reality has felt a little threatened. Every revelation about the event seems to produce new levels of secrecy, unexpected links, and I guess this has been part of my work, the clandestine mentality—how ordinary people spy on themselves, how the power centers operate and manipulate. Our postwar history has seen tanks in the streets and occasional massive force. But mainly we have the individual in the small room, the nobody who walks out of the shadows and changes everything. That week in Maine, that street I saw that made me think I had to write a novel—well, I bought a newspaper the same day or maybe later in the week, and there was a story about Charles Whitman, the young man who went to the top of a tower in Austin, Texas and shot and killed over a dozen people and wounded about thirty more. Took a number of guns up there with him. Took supplies with him, ready for a long siege, including underarm deodorant. And I remember thinking, Texas again. And also, underarm deodorant. That was my week in Maine.

INTERVIEWER

One of the other things that's very important in *Libra* is the existence of a filmed version of the assassination. One of the points you make is that television didn't really come into its own until it filmed Oswald's murder. Is it possible that one of the things that marks you as a writer is that you're a post-television writer?

DeLILLO

Kennedy was shot on film, Oswald was shot on TV. Does this mean anything? Maybe only that Oswald's death became instantly repeatable. It belonged to everyone. The Zapruder film, the film of Kennedy's death, was sold and hoarded and doled out very selectively. It was exclusive footage. So that the social differences continued to pertain, the hierarchy held fast—you could watch Oswald die while you ate a TV dinner, and he was still dying by the time you went to bed, but if you wanted to see the Zapruder film you had to be very important or you had to wait until the 1970s when I believe it was shown once on television, or you had to pay somebody thirty thousand dollars to look at it—I think that's the going rate.

The Zapruder film is a home movie that runs about eighteen seconds and could probably fuel college courses in a dozen subjects from history to physics. And every new generation of technical experts gets to take a crack at the Zapruder film. The film represents all the hopefulness we invest in technology. A new enhancement technique or a new computer analysis—not only of Zapruder but of other key footage and still photographs—will finally tell us precisely what happened.

INTERVIEWER

I read it exactly the opposite way, which may be also what you're getting around to. It's one of the great ironies that, despite the existence of the film, we don't know what happened.

DeLILLO

We're still in the dark. What we finally have are patches and shadows. It's still a mystery. There's still an element of dream-terror. And one of the terrible dreams is that our most photogenic president is murdered on film. But there's something inevitable about the Zapruder film. It had to happen this way. The moment belongs to the twentieth century, which means it had to be captured on film.

INTERVIEWER

Can we even go further and say that part of the confusion is created by the film? After all, if the film didn't exist it would be much harder to posit a conspiracy theory.

DeLILLO

I think every emotion we felt is part of that film, and certainly confusion is one of the larger ones, yes. Confusion and horror. The head shot is like some awful, pornographic moment that happens without warning in our living rooms— some truth about the world, some unspeakable activity people engage in that we don't want to know about. And after the confusion about when Kennedy is first hit, and when Connally is hit, and why the president's wife is scrambling over the seat, and simultaneous with the horror of the head shot, part of the horror, perhaps—there's a bolt of revelation. Because the head shot is the most direct kind of statement that the lethal bullet was fired from the front. Whatever the physical possibilities concerning impact and reflex, you look at this thing and wonder what's going on. Are you seeing

some distortion inherent in the film medium or in your own perception of things? Are you the willing victim of some enormous lie of the state—a lie, a wish, a dream? Or, did the shot simply come from the front, as every cell in your body tells you it did?

INTERVIEWER

From David Bell making a film about himself in *Americana* to the Führer-bunker porno film in *Running Dog*, to the filmmaker Volterra's minilecture in *The Names*, you return incessantly to the subject of movies. "The twentieth century is on film," you wrote in *The Names*, it's "the filmed century."

DeLILLO

Film allows us to examine ourselves in ways earlier societies could not—examine ourselves, imitate ourselves, extend ourselves, reshape our reality. It permeates our lives, this double vision, and also detaches us, turns some of us into actors doing walk-throughs. In my work, film and television are often linked with disaster. Because this is one of the energies that charges the culture. TV has a sort of panting lust for bad news and calamity as long as it is visual. We've reached the point where things exist so they can be filmed and played and replayed. Some people may have had the impression that the Gulf War was made for television. And when the Pentagon censored close coverage, people became depressed. All that euphoria drifting through the country suddenly collapsed—not because we weren't winning but because they'd taken away our combat footage. Think about the images most often repeated. The Rodney King videotape or the Challenger disaster or Ruby shooting Oswald. These are the images that connect us the way Betty Grable used to connect us in her white swimsuit, looking back at us over her shoulder in the famous pinup. And they play the tape again and again and again and again. This is the world narrative, so they play it until everyone in the world has seen it.

INTERVIEWER

Frank Lentricchia refers to you as the type of writer who believes that the shape and fate of the culture dictates the shape and fate of the self.

DeLILLO

Yes, and maybe we can think about *Running Dog* in this respect. This book is not exactly about obsession—it's about the marketing of obsession.

Obsession as a product that you offer to the highest bidder or the most enterprising and reckless fool, which is sort of the same thing in this particular book. Maybe this novel is a response to the war in Vietnam—this is what I'm getting at—and how the war affected the way people worked out their own strategies, how individuals conducted their own lives. There's a rampant need among the characters, a driving urge that certain characters feel to acquire the book's sacred object, a home movie made in Hitler's bunker. All the paranoia, manipulation, violence, all the sleazy desires are a form of fallout from the Vietnam experience. And in *Libra*, of course—here we have Oswald watching TV, Oswald working the bolt of his rifle, Oswald imagining that he and the president are quite similar in many ways. I see Oswald, back from Russia, as a man surrounded by promises of fulfillment—consumer fulfillment, personal fulfillment. But he's poor, unstable, cruel to his wife, barely employable—a man who has to enter his own Hollywood movie to see who he is and how he must direct his fate. This is the force of the culture and the power of the image. And this is also a story we've seen updated through the years. It's the story of the disaffected young man who suspects there are sacred emanations flowing from the media heavens and who feels the only way to enter this holy vortex is through some act of violent theater. I think Oswald was a person who lost his faith—his faith in politics and in the possibility of change—and who entered the last months of his life not very different from the media-poisoned boys who would follow.

INTERVIEWER

In *The New York Review of Books* you were dubbed "the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction." What does this title mean to you, if anything?

DeLILLO

I realize this is a title one might wear honorably. But I'm not sure I've earned it. Certainly there's an element of paranoia in my work—*Libra*, yes, although not nearly so much as some people think. In this book the element of chance and coincidence may be as strong as the sense of an engineered history. History is engineered after the assassination, not before. *Running Dog* and *Great Jones Street* may also have a paranoid sheen. But I'm not particularly paranoid myself. I've drawn this element out of the air around me, and it was a stronger force in the sixties and seventies than it is now. The important thing about the paranoia in my characters is that it operates as a form of

religious awe. It's something old, a leftover from some forgotten part of the soul. And the intelligence agencies that create and service this paranoia are not interesting to me as spy handlers or masters of espionage. They represent old mysteries and fascinations, ineffable things. Central intelligence. They're like churches that hold the final secrets.

INTERVIEWER

It's been said that you have an "ostentatiously gloomy view of American society."

DeLILLO

I don't agree, but I can understand how a certain kind of reader would see the gloomy side of things. My work doesn't offer the comforts of other kinds of fiction, work that suggests that our lives and our problems and our perceptions are no different today than they were fifty or sixty years ago. I don't offer comforts except those that lurk in comedy and in structure and in language, and the comedy is probably not all that soothing. But before everything, there's language. Before history and politics, there's language. And it's language, the sheer pleasure of making it and bending it and seeing it form on the page and hearing it whistle in my head—this is the thing that makes my work go. And art can be exhilarating despite the darkness—and there's certainly much darker material than mine—if the reader is sensitive to the music. What I try to do is create complex human beings, ordinary-extraordinary men and women who live in the particular skin of the late twentieth century. I try to record what I see and hear and sense around me—what I feel in the currents, the electric stuff of the culture. I think these are American forces and energies. And they belong to our time.

INTERVIEWER

What have you been working on recently?

DeLILLO

Sometime in late 1991 I started writing something new and didn't know what it would be—a novel, a short story, a long story. It was simply a piece of writing, and it gave me more pleasure than any other writing I've done. It turned into a novella, "Pafko at the Wall," and it appeared in *Harper's* about a year after I started it. At some point I decided I wasn't finished with the piece. I was sending signals into space and getting echoes back, like a dolphin or a

bat. So the piece, slightly altered, is now the prologue, to a novel-in-progress, which will have a different title. And the pleasure has long since faded into the slogging reality of the no-man's-land of the long novel. But I'm still hearing the echoes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any plans for after the novel-in-progress?

DeLILLO

Not any specific plans. But I'm aware of the fact that time is limited. Every new novel stretches the term of the contract—let me live long enough to do one more book. How many books do we get? How much good work? The actuaries of the novel say twenty years of our best work, and after that we're beachcombing for shiny stones. I don't necessarily agree, but I'm aware of fleeting time.

INTERVIEWER

Does that make you nervous?

DeLILLO

No, it doesn't make me nervous, it just makes me want to write a little faster.

INTERVIEWER

But you'll keep on writing?

DeLILLO

I'll keep writing something, certainly.

INTERVIEWER

I mean, you couldn't take up gardening?

DeLILLO

No, no, no, no, no.

INTERVIEWER

Handball?

DeLILLO

Do you know what a Chinese killer is? It's a handball term—when you hit the ball right at the seam of the wall and the ground, and the shot is unreturnable.

This used to be called a Chinese killer.

Author photograph by Nancy Crampton.