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Say the Words: Reading for Cohesion in Don DeLillo's Novel

*Point Omega*

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## Say the Words: Reading for Cohesion in Don DeLillo's Novel *Point Omega*

**ABSTRACT:** This essay turns to Don DeLillo's novel *Point Omega* to revisit a blind spot of narrative theory—narrative's relation with lyricality and poeticity. Responding to recent debates on this topic by shifting the emphasis toward modes of reception and readerly engagement, my essay examines how the novel's experimental mix of literary forms changes the game of what narrative commonly does. *Point Omega's* unusual brevity (it is the shortest of DeLillo's recent short novels) and eventlessness (nothing much happens, and much of what happens evades reconstruction) are key to this operation. I argue that the novel endorses lyric and poetic strategies—among them, slowing down the reading process by amplifying the demand for "speakerly appropriation" (Schlaffer), and *spacing* the narrative by exploiting the cinematic frame as the prime compositional measure—with the effect of impairing the temporal reign of emplotment along with the knowledge-generating logic of cause and effect. As a result of downplaying narrative dominance (and frustrating our expectations to find out what has happened), we read for cohesion (a sense of unity) rather than for coherence (a system of rules). I contend that this poetological agenda and the receptive mode that it harbors mark a break with—or plot against—the concern with paranoia that was the staple of DeLillo's earlier, longer, Cold War novels. And I suggest that *Point Omega's* post-paranoid style casts a lyric-poetic instance on the fundamental unknowability of reality against the blazing knowledge regimes of our crisis-ridden age.

**KEYWORDS:** *narrative theory, brevity, lyricality, poeticity, reception aesthetics, post-paranoia*

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*Fundamentally, although imperfectly, often blindly, even going against the grain of grammatical constraints, every brief literary form, by virtue of a powerful urge, inscribed in the being of language itself, in the being-of-language, has a tendency to lean toward what would be the pure present.*

—Paul Zumthor, “Brevity as Form” (76)

Don DeLillo, one of the most artful and seismographic contemporary U.S. novelists who to this day writes on a manual typewriter, sees his profession endangered by the massive influx of new technologies: the resulting acceleration of time and compression of space might reduce the human need for narrative (or at least for narrative as we know it), and the fate of the novel is emblematic of this.

Novels will become user-generated. An individual will not only tap a button that gives him a novel designed to his particular tastes, needs and moods but he will also be able to design his own novel, very possibly with him as a main character. The world is becoming increasingly customized, altered by individual specifications. This shrinking context will necessarily change the language that people speak, write, and read. *Here is a stray question (or a metaphysical leap): will language have the same depth and richness in electronic form than it can reach on the printed page?* Does the beauty and variability of our language depend to an important degree on the medium that carries the words? Does poetry need paper? (“PEN Interview”; emphasis added)

DeLillo’s recent novels rear up against this scenario with a twofold strategy: they are short, and they are strikingly lyrical. *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), *Point Omega* (2010), and *Zero K* (2016) all have fewer than 250 pages with two of them, *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, having less than half of this size and a particularly stylized prose. And even though these novels are also available as e-books, they seem to be written with a conscious investment in paper-based literature, in “the sensual feel of the hammer hitting the page” (DeLillo quoted in Jacob 73). Even the monumental *Underworld* (1997) with its more than 800 pages was written this way.

For a novelist who made a name for himself by writing in epic length, the turn toward brevity is a remarkable shift. It prompted John Banville, in a barbed review, to suggest that “the thick [books] are his novels and the thin ones are his poetry” (40). With only 117 generously set pages, *Point Omega*—the book at the center of this essay—is DeLillo’s thinnest one so far, and its lyricality is indeed striking. Granting that Banville has lyric poetry in mind, he certainly has a point regarding its formal properties, for the lyric does gravitate toward brevity. Paul Zumthor stresses this drift in his lucid reflections on “Brevity as Form,” from which I have taken my epigraph. For him, narrative thrives on “a linear concatenation of interdependent units,” and fostering interdependence implies a certain length (and an affinity to the dramatic); lyric, on the other hand, thrives on “the addition, circular or unordered, of more or less autonomous units,” which explains its affinity with the short form (and the gnomic) (78). Without overworking this useful distinction (Zumthor himself is careful not to),

I bring it to this discussion to suggest that the lyric, due to its intricate ties to the short form (poems, songs, aphorisms), is not seamlessly compatible with the networking productivity of narrative. In fact, rather than narrate it tends to *evoke* in highly ritualized and explicitly performative enunciations (and often in tandem with an elliptic truth). Consequently, then, I want to base the reflections below on an understanding of narrative as a kind of language use in which an act of telling serves the end of interconnecting dispersed elements across space and time with the aim of evoking a sense of *progress* (gaining insight, maturity, solace, a sense of belonging) while moving from beginning to end. And I propose an understanding of lyric as a kind of language use in which an act of enunciation (which may or may not be narrative) serves the end of evoking a feeling, thought, observation, treasured person, or place with the aim of giving a heightened sense of *presence* to what is evoked. Both narrative and lyric are inherently dialogic: like any language use they are directed toward a receiver, aiming to engage her in some kind of communicative exchange. This exchange, I further assume, always and inherently entails a desire for change (in feeling, opinion, outlook, mood) in the receiver, which presupposes a participatory consent on behalf of the receiver (from paying attention to playing along with the potentially intricate demands of a particular mode of exchange), and which is regulated in and through the particular form of a communicative act. Theorists have described this dialogical engagement in terms of contract, transfer, transference, and transaction (Barthes 95–96; Iser 236–48; Fluck 365–84; Brooks 216–37; Schwab 22–48), yet they have rarely given thought to how it is modulated by different literary modes. Drawing on James Phelan’s useful distinction between narrative form as being inclined to cultivating judgment over time and lyric form as being inclined to evoking a non-judgmental, and usually presentist affirmation of what is being communicated (Phelan 22–24), the distinction I want to establish at the outset of this essay is the following: whereas narrative strives for change in its recipients by taking them on a journey (no matter how short) in which a narrator function serves as an internal guide (and thus, as Phelan rightly states, needs to stay at a relative distance), lyric does so by involving us in an extended and intensified state of *now*, in which a speaker (rather than a narrator) function serves as a site of appropriation and embodiment (and distance is bound to collapse).

As we shall see, *Point Omega* is a powerful case in point when it comes to invoking lyrical presence. Even so, there can be no doubt that it *narrates*. It tells us a story about a set of characters that are alienated and oddly detached from each other and from the world, searching for something that might give meaning and moorings to their lives. Yet if this basic make-up makes *Point Omega*’s narrative novelesque, reading it as a *novel* (granted our willingness to endorse this designation, added to the title with a tentative gesture) is vastly affected by the unusually polished lyricality of its prose; by the careful modulation of its language through procedures such as rhythmic patterning by means of syntactic, verbal and tonal repetitions. Exploring this mixing of narrative and lyric, and asking what kind of readerly involvement it affords is part of what I want to accomplish in this essay.

Perhaps more subtle, yet certainly just as formative for the reading experience is yet another feature to be considered here: the fact that narrative flow is notably perforated. The text is *spaced* in ways that verge on the kind of segmentation that Brian

McHale (with Rachel Blau DuPlessis) considers to be the defining feature of poetry. This spacing is a direct result of DeLillo's innovative use of the cinematic frame and techniques of framing; the most striking effect of this procedure is the creation of narrative movement from beginning to end that is simultaneously advanced and obstructed. *Point Omega*'s unusual mix of narrative, lyric, and poetry is grounded in this artful experimentation with the frame. The book hence provides an ideal test case to revisit some of the gasping blind spots of narrative theory, reminding us how boldly we have neglected to grapple with matters of lyricality and "poeticity" (the awry term that McHale mobilizes against the common and mistaken tendency to level the distinction between lyric and poetry and treat lyricality as poetry's dominant aspect) in our theoretical endeavors; asking how we can begin to integrate the latter two modes into our as of yet slanted understanding of what narrative is and how it does what it does. In taking my cue from Phelan that hybrid forms allow writers to "create effects that are not possible by remaining within the boundaries of any one" mode (24), my aim is to trace and explore how *Point Omega*'s hybrid form changes the game of what narrative commonly does, and to consider what this might tell us about telling stories about our uncertain age.

### Brevity and Hybrid Form

One of the most common and potentially useful things that narrative does is to emplot a chain of events in a way that allows us to reconstruct—to find out, to *know*—what has happened (cf. Koschorke). Peter Brooks (with Roland Barthes) has aptly described this inclination of narrative as an "overcoding" of the proairetic code (or code of actions) by the hermeneutic code (or code of enigmas and answers) with the effect of "structuring the discrete elements of the former into larger interpretive wholes, working out their play of meaning and significance" (Brooks 18). Such "overcoding" belongs to the receptive process as much as it belongs to the text (for Brooks, it is indeed an eminent feature of "reading for the plot"). Fiction writers have tampered with this mechanism in manifold ways: by willfully leading their readers astray, by multiplying, interlacing, or abandoning plotlines, by reducing eventfulness, etc. As we are about to see, *Point Omega* is a novel in which nothing much happens. And this implies that knowing is vastly dissociated from narrating here—vastly but not completely.

This reduced eventfulness (about which I will have more to say) is paired with something truly unusual: the one remarkable thing that *does* happen—the disappearance of one of the main characters—evades reconstruction. It can thus rightfully be claimed that narration in *Point Omega* revolves around the kind of "extraordinary event" that is often considered to be the defining property of the novel's small cousin: the novella. *Die unerhörte Begebenheit* (in Goethe's original formulation) finds a natural ally in the short, abbreviated form, for in being both *unheard of* and *literally unheard* such an *event* begs to be made heard and known rather than ventilated in epic length. So yes, *Point Omega* might more aptly be categorized as a novella. But can the *event* around which it revolves be extraordinary—can it even be an event—if we do not know what has happened? Perhaps the "extraordinary event" that is insinuated

here is not so much the disappearance of one of the main characters but the bold disavowal of narrative's propensity to reconstruct what has happened.

In any case, brevity is crucial to *Point Omega*'s peculiar kind of eventfulness. With Zumthor we might say that it is exploited to the end of making the novel *cohesive* (due to its brevity we perceive it as sufficiently unified) without being fully *coherent* (at no point in the process of reading it do "indices . . . become organized in the reader's imagination into an ideal system of combinatory rules, an interpretive hypothesis confirmed or invalidated by what follows") (77). In tampering with coherence, DeLillo endorses a hybrid form that is certainly narrative yet aims for unity first and foremost by invoking a sense of presence (and this harks back to the aforementioned affinity between the short form and the lyric). Pondering over these issues is hardly a retreat into formalism. It is indispensable to understanding brevity's formidable powers, especially the power to regulate and mold the nexus of knowledge and narrative. Short forms, according to Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer, "assert their epistemological and poetological valence in pragmatic relations to longer, larger, and more extended forms," and it is through this relationality that they rectify not only their "modes and signs of compression, poignancy, omission, and abortion" but also—and in *Point Omega* quite succinctly—their "inchoateness and incompleteness" (12, my translation), their being tentative and provisional.

DeLillo's short novels can be placed in at least two such vectors. There is the above-noted pressure on the novel to degenerate into a mere service item, propelled by the digital possibilities of self-publishing that Mark McGurl has lucidly described in a recent essay and that DeLillo seeks to displace with his "leap" into literature's paperless afterlife. And there are DeLillo's longer novels, especially *Underworld*. For many, including myself, *Underworld* marks the end of DeLillo's engagement with Cold War America (cf. Wilcox). His use of the longer form, which finds its epitome in this monumental work, was closely tied to the poetological agenda of making Cold War paranoia tangible by literary means. And if the eerie feeling of an "everything is connected" (*Underworld* 825) that was the underlying theme and motif of these earlier explorations needed the longer form out of the sheer practicality of mapping the maze of endless connectivity, could the mix of narrative and lyric afforded by the brevity of DeLillo's post-*Underworld* novels not be equally emblematic of his explorations of post-Cold War America? Is there, in other words, a receptive thrust at work in the short novels that is geared toward mapping the present, and if yes, how does DeLillo's recent endorsement of brevity and lyricality come to bear on it?

The mix of the two is indeed crucial here. DeLillo's prose has always involved the highly performative, rhythmicized and ritualized kind of speech that is the lyric's defining feature (cf. Culler). DeLillo considers language "a subject as well as an instrument" (DeLillo quoted in LeClair 5) and as such no less than "the final enlightenment and the final revelation" (DeLillo quoted in Chénétier 108). His realistic modulation of language is a consistently lyrical ritual, insinuating a mode of reception that indulges in rhythmic patterning and linguistic artifice, in processing sentences so beautifully composed—"The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever" (*Point Omega* 17)—that they beg to be read aloud. In DeLillo's earlier novels these features play a subordinate role. The "moment of splendid transcendence" ex-

perienced by the protagonist of *White Noise* when overhearing his daughter mumble “Toyota Cecilia” in her sleep (155) is a rare occurrence of the lyric gaining the upper hand. Coming across the passage, one is inclined to pause and repeat the words to oneself, seduced by their soothing rhythm, the melodious modulation of vowels, and the oracular promise of meaning. But moments like these stood out in the earlier novels; they were the exception, slight ruptures in an incessantly plotted and often labyrinthine narrative texture. In the short, post-*Underworld* novels this texture has become porous (segmented, as we shall see, in a narrative-untypical way) and the lyrical ritual has become amplified. In turning to the text that takes this mixing of the lyric and the narrative to an unprecedented extreme, I should note that DeLillo’s latest novel, *Zero K*, while also being short and lyrical, is much more conventional again. It looks like *Point Omega* is the end point of its author’s recent experimentation with mixing literary forms.

### With Glacial Pace and Lyrical Force; or, *Point Omega*’s Hybrid Form

*Point Omega* tells a story about two men: Richard Elster, an aging intellectual with an eloquence so daunting that it last brought him a job as a civilian advisor for the second Iraq War (“I wanted a haiku war . . . a war in three lines” [*Point Omega* 29]); and Jim Finley, an obsessive yet fairly unsuccessful filmmaker in his mid-thirties, who functions as the narrator of the novel’s four main chapters. Finley follows Elster to his remote hideaway in the Californian desert to win him over for a film. The project is reminiscent of McNamara’s “confessions” about the Vietnam War, captured on celluloid in Errol Morris’s *Fog of War*. Finley’s film (and this is another film-historic reference, this time to Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark*) is supposed to consist of a single shot, man against a wall. The man: Elster talking about his time in the Pentagon.

Out there in the desert, “somewhere south of nowhere” (*Point Omega* 20), Finley makes his case for his project. But most of the time the two men sit around, drink, think, and talk—about walls, words, and war, about time and duration, about life, mortality, and death, about perception, telling, and naming, about meaning and unmeaning. All of these are recurring themes in DeLillo’s narrative world. “His are novels of ideas, less narratives than speculations, unsettling and provocative with characters who do not so much talk as think aloud, their conversations polished and accomplished” (Dewey 3). But in *Point Omega*, these conversations are not only polished and accomplished; they are outright artificial. For instance, the following conversation, in which Finley confronts his host with his desire for receiving an answer regarding his project:

“You want to sit here.”

“The house is mine now and it is rotting away but let it. Time slows down when I’m here. Time becomes blind. I feel the landscape more than I see it. I never know what day it is. I never know if a minute has passed or an hour. I don’t get old here.”

“I wish I could say the same.”



“You need an answer. Is that what you’re saying?”  
 “I need an answer.”  
 “You have a life back there.”  
 “A life. That may be too strong a word.” (*Point Omega* 23–24)

Other dialogues (like this one between Finley and Elster’s daughter, Jessie, who joins the two men in the desert half way into the narrative) are even more artificial.

“Heat.”  
 “That’s right,” Jessie said.  
 “Say the word.”  
 “Heat.”  
 “Feel it beating in.”  
 “Heat.” (*Point Omega* 64–65)

Nobody talks (or thinks) like this, and that is precisely the point. The many repetitions (semantic, tonal, and syntactic), the melodious rhythm they create, the juxtaposition of short and long sentences, the scarce use of commas to let the language flow—these are all familiar devices of lyrical composition. One looks in vain for the authentic vernacular that can still be found in the “longer” short novels (*Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man*), for conversations in which characters say things like: “I never thought you’d marry so soon. But what do I know? I have chickpeas mashed up and I have eggplant stuffed with rice and nuts” (*Cosmopolis* 161). *Point Omega* is devoid of such lapses into everyday speech; here (as in *The Body Artist*) the prose is thoroughly and consistently artificial. Some of the especially stylized conversations (like the one about “Heat”) are visual approximations of poetry. In fact, one may think of them as mini-poems inserted into the narrative and gaining a graphic unity through the radically abbreviated, repetitive syntax, in which individual lines are compositional (sound) units as much as, or even more than they are sentences uttered in conversational exchange. Here is another example (of Finley talking to Elster); many more could be found:

“The climate,” I said.  
 “The climate.”  
 “The asteroid,” I said.  
 “The asteroid, the meteorite. What else?”  
 “Famine, worldwide.”  
 “Famine,” he said. “What else?” (*Point Omega* 51)

Critics have complained that this language is bloodless and stifling (Banville, Katukani). What they miss, or at least too readily dismiss, is the poetological task performed by the pronounced artificiality of *Point Omega*’s prose. In terms of reception the first thing to be noted is that this prose slows down the reading process to the speed of reading a lyrical text (how this intersects with the narrative’s assertion of poetry will concern us later). Different from conventional prose, the lyric can barely be read faster than it can be heard. The reason for this is that it demands to be read aloud (or at least with a suppressed voice). Zumthor makes a related point when noting that

brevity does not necessarily translate into a short read, and that some short texts actually take a long time to process. “Real time,” he goes on to argue, “being a lived-in time, necessarily modalizes, in the act of reception, the process of ‘concretizing’ the text in the sense the term is used by the Constance Rezeptionsästhetik school” (Zumthor 77). In an insightful (but unfortunately untranslated) essay, Heinz Schlaffer, a member of the Constance school, touches upon this matter when considering the particular kind of receptive engagement at stake when reading lyric poetry. (Neither Schlaffer nor Zumthor limit their considerations to written forms, but in the light of my interest in *Point Omega*’s text-based lyricality I will stick to the act of reading here.)

In line with the general assumption of reception aesthetics that no literary work is complete without the act of reception, Schlaffer contends that lyric poetry—because it needs to be voiced—asks for a direct and most immediate kind of embodiment. This point is seamlessly compatible with Phelan’s argument that the lyric asks its recipients for a heightened degree of participation, which involves a “fusion” of reader and speaker (22). Even more so than Phelan, Schlaffer insists on the corporeality of this performative act: engaging with lyrical forms demands that we step into and *appropriate* the role of the speaker. (Common assumptions, made even by students of literature who are familiar with the fundamental difference between authors and narrators, that authors speak in and through their poems hark back to this erasure of distance.) For Schlaffer, the speaker (often, but not always a “lyrical I”) is practically a common good. Structurally anonymous, it is appropriated by each and every reader in the act of reading, and this mode of engagement with the text is distinctively lyrical. We do not step into and appropriate the role of a narrator or any of the characters in a narrative in this fashion, no matter how strongly we might feel for, agree with, or even identify with them. Yet when we appropriate the role of the speaker, our act of reading is geared toward *giving presence* to the (words of the) speaker (43–47). For the time that our reading lasts, we *become* the speaker, whether we like it or not. Lyric poetry is entirely committed to the present in this regard: it has not been written to describe an action, and hence it does not wait to be read in order to recapitulate (and thus re-enact) that action. For Schlaffer, a lyric poem *is* an action. The action is not so much geared toward making present a recorded world (this would be the aim of narrative, including epic poetry). Lyric poetry seeks to make present the act of speaking itself—which means that the author must hope for the action engendered by the speaker to bring forth the world of which she speaks (54–57). As a receptive mode the lyric thus prioritizes the affective over the cognitive. We speak and feel and listen before we understand and judge, and (like singing along to the lyrics of a foreign song) we may at times not even be able to understand what is being made present this way, yet still feel moved and asserted by it.

With this in mind, we are now equipped to begin to unravel the interplay of the lyric and the narrative at work in *Point Omega*. In amplifying the lyric, the novel asks its reader to make present its narrative world; not by stepping into the role of DeLillo, Finley, or the anonymous man who serves as the focalizer of prologue and epilogue, but by engaging in an act of reading that thrives on appropriating the words on the page as *spoken*. In doing so, the lyric acts out and translates into narrative form one of the novel’s most pertinent concerns: slowing down time through the power of art

(and, as we shall see, for DeLillo time always moves toward death). The narrative begins programmatically in this regard—in New York’s Museum of Modern Art where a work by video artist Douglas Gordon is being shown, a soundless screening of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, slowed down to the glacial pace of four frames per minute that stretches viewing time to a full twenty-four hours. DeLillo’s encounter with this work was the initial inspiration for this book, and time does something similar when his characters are exposed to the desert. The clock-time of modern life, “nausea of News and Traffic” (*Point Omega* 18), gives way to the deep time of geology, “[t]he time that precedes us and survives us” (44). For us, this basic pattern (or rhythm) is especially interesting because it sheds light on how the lyrical ritual has been altered here. The slow motion effect around which it revolves aims at intensifying the experience of an otherwise hidden reality—in precisely the absence of meaning that becomes tangible in the shift from clock-time to desert-time. A gnomic knowledge of an unknown or even unknowable reality becomes present in the lyric deceleration of time.

The first of the four main chapters not only takes us from the MoMA gallery to the desert; it also takes a leap from thinking about suspending our usual perception of time on the occasion of seeing the Gordon piece to implementing decelerated time as a receptive, speakerly mode. After a diffuse number of days, retrospectively quantified as “somewhere around twenty-two” (*Point Omega* 66), Finley stops counting. Shortly thereafter Elster’s daughter Jessie arrives: an unworldly young woman sent away by her mother out of concern about her burgeoning relation with a strange man whom she has been seeing back home in New York. Her sylphlike presence changes the dynamic between the two men, at times making Finley wonder whether they “were becoming a family” (54), at others fantasize about having sex with her. But since we hardly gain any insights into these characters and their lives, we can only guess why they do what they do and say what they say. Is Elster fascinated with scenarios of extinction and fossilization (the end or “omega point” of human existence about which he loves to speculate) because of what happened behind the closed doors of that war room in the Pentagon? What are the reasons for Jessie’s peculiar lack of connectedness with the world? And Finley? Does he fantasize about her out of boredom, true attraction, or to get back at her father for his reluctance to be in his film?

It is no coincidence that critics who did not like the amplified lyricality of *Point Omega*’s prose also complained about the lack of depth of its characters. Yet their flatness is just as essential to the poetological project of this short novel as its stylized prose. They are, indeed, pure surface, and this holographic quality—holographic like the screen in Gordon’s work—takes us back to the suspension of time: in this case the temporal logic of emplotment. With its denial of depth the narrative breaks with the normative horizon of literary realism, which anchors in plausibility as a narrative correlation of cause and effect and in psychological character development. In conjunction with the extreme, laboratory-like environments in which we encounter these characters (the remote house in the desert, the dark space of the gallery), their lack of development gives them an almost naturalistic air. Yet while naturalistic storytelling holds on to the plot-driving impulses of progression, which it shifts from the lofty domain of the psyche to the material, visceral domain of drives and forces, *Point Omega* pursues a different kind of literary experiment.

## The Frame as Poetic Measure and Narrative Format

True to its receptive agenda of exploiting art to the end of suspending our usual sense of time, *Point Omega* creates a narrative texture that counters the temporal drive of emplotment—the linear, irreversible movement from beginning to end—with a compartmentalization that might best be called *spacing*. Each of the four chapters that make up the main part of the text consists of a series of episodes with a length that varies between a few lines and few pages—short episodes, some of them as short as stanzas. The resulting narrative is visibly disjointed, the illusion of a steady flow willfully disrupted. Blank lines separate individual episodes, and like the gutter in graphic narrative these lines are markers of temporal discontinuity (cf. Horstkotte). They are gaps that the reader needs to fill when moving through the text (cf. Berlatsky)—and as such, they are virtual echo chambers for the lyrical language resonating from the text. In these empty spaces the appropriation of lyrical agency becomes intertwined with the casting of semantic openness. But they are also actual blank spaces on a page or a screen, spaces with a potentially different materiality that affects how language resonates in them. And the generous layout, the fairly large font-size, the visual pattern created by alternating between fuller paragraphs and the abbreviated conversations looking like mini-poems is geared toward the grainy paper surface and the clearly bounded space of the printed page rather than the more amorphous continuity of text on the screen of an e-reader.

We need to step back here for a moment to grasp what is special about this narrative form. McHale (with DePlessis) rightly points out that “gappiness” is intrinsic to narrative. There are gaps between letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc., and engaging with narrative involves a negotiation of these gaps. Yet whereas narrative usually absorbs this process into its flow with the effect of creating a sense of continuity, in poetry the creation of meaningful sequence hinges on making sense of line breaks, stanza breaks, page space, etc. And if this feature leads McHale to contend that “segmentivity, ‘the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments,’ is ‘the underlying characteristic of poetry’” (Du Plessis quoted in McHale 14) the kind of spacing that we find in *Point Omega* approximates this poetic mechanism. Within the individual chapters episodes could be shuffled around without substantial effect on our ability to understand the narrative. Deemphasizing coherence in favor of cohesion is conducive to this modular operation. A rhythmic patterning of segments and gaps, of “bounded units . . . operating in relation to . . . pause or silence” (Du Plessis quoted in McHale 14) creates a formal sense of connectedness where hermeneutic negotiations remain tentative and uncertain. Some consecutive episodes even begin with the exact same words, invoking a feeling of a standstill or simultaneously possible realities. In this kind of narrative meaning is never tied down; it is tried out in poetic gestures.

This also means that narrative does not gain its form from the irreversible consecution of cause and effect. Instead, it is organized in a (at time frustratingly haphazard) structure of episodic clusters, or—in analogy to *24 Hour Psycho*—of disconnected frames. With McHale (and John Shoptaw) we may think of these formal impediments as compositional “measures” against which the narrative brushes in its construction

of meaning, with the effect of invoking an alteration of measure and countermeasure that, for McHale, is the nuclear feature of narrative in poetry (16–17). The visual and rhythmic contrast between longer sentences and fuller paragraphs and the above-mentioned conversational “mini-poems” about feeling and saying “heat” or listing potential catastrophes is a case in point. But the primary tact-giving measure in *Point Omega* is the frame. Narrative segments are framed by empty lines, prologue and epilogue frame the main narrative, the individual chapters can be read (in analogy to the Gordon piece) as a radically decelerated consecution of individual frames. And with the formative role of poetry brought into view, the interplay of poetry, lyric, and narrative orchestrated in this text becomes discernable. Far more than just being intricate, this relation is, indeed, truly interdependent since assertions of dominance of either modality are structurally dispersed. Due to the unusual kind of segmentation, plot or *fabula* is organized just enough for the story or *sujet* to take shape, but too little to narrate without the pronounced lyricality of its prose.

So yes, spacing and intensifying the lyric dimension of the narrative tampers with the temporal reign of emplotment, perforating its logic of cause and effect by slowing down time to the glacial pace of watching—reading—individual *frames*. But the sense that time is progressing (and that we must thus search for causal relations) is not given up. Even in the slowest possible motion narrative is geared toward its end. All the more important becomes the project of suspending time by evoking presence from within the porous narrative structure. “It takes close attention to see what is going on in front of you. It takes work, pious work, to see what you are looking at” (*Point Omega* 13). The liturgical search for patterns of cause and effect gravitates toward those rare moments when something does happen—or rather, *has* happened that evades reconstruction, as in the extraordinary event of Jessie’s disappearance without a motive or trace. The impenetrable mystery that surrounds her absence brutally changes the conversation between the two men. But while their metaphysical speculations instantaneously cease, it takes days before Elster dares to ask what has happened. “Not what I thought or guessed or envisioned. What happened, Jimmy?” (87). In this narrative world, brevity does not lead to a focus on signs of evidence. Rather, what looks like evidence (the knife found by the search squad in the desert) turns out to be mere objects of speculation that take us nowhere with certainty.

As the story winds down, Finley asks a remarkable question about this carefully crafted porousness of meaning and form. “Had she strayed past the edge of conjecture or were we willing to imagine what had happened?” (*Point Omega* 81). Are the two men willing to follow her where she has gone? To imagine the place and the state she is in? But we might just as well ask the reverse: can they help but wonder?

### Post-Paranoia

For us readers, another feature of this porous narrative form is crucial in dealing with these questions. The four chapters of the main part, vaguely set in the late summer/early fall of 2006, are framed by two precisely dated sections. Set on September 3rd and 4th, these sections—I read them as prologue and epilogue—take us to the already

mentioned gallery in New York's Museum of Modern Art where Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* is being shown. Both sections are focalized through an anonymous man "standing against the north wall, barely visible," watching the film and the people as he has done for days now, uncannily enjoying the thought that "Nobody was watching him" (*Point Omega* 3, 8). It is in this gallery, one of the many small rooms that breed trouble in DeLillo's fictional world, that we encounter Elster and Finley for the first time. At least the matching descriptions (their sneakers, the older guy's stick and ponytail) strongly suggest identifying the two men in the desert retrospectively with the two men entering the gallery. At this point they are still nameless individuals, acutely observed by the mysterious man whose habits are obviously strange and possibly on the verge of perversion or psychosis.

Elster tells his daughter about the Gordon piece, and we learn about *her* visit to it in the epilogue. At least we are once again strongly encouraged to identify the young woman in this section as one of the three main characters. But even before we find out about "Jessie's" encounter with the strange man in the gallery, we are asked to make connections between the frame and what is inside: between time slowing down in Gordon's work and time slowing down in DeLillo's desert; between the nameless man in the gallery and Norman Bates, the killer in Hitchcock's film; between Jessie arriving at her father's house and Janet Leigh arriving at Bates Motel; between Finley pulling back the shower curtain when frantically searching for Jessie and *Psycho*'s notorious murder scene; between the spotless knife found by the search squad in the "real" world of the novel and the lethal weapon in the "fictional" world of the film. Yet again, searching for causal relations is frustrating rather than illuminating. And while the epilogue substantiates our worst nightmares about Jessie's whereabouts, it also questions them. Asked by the strange man in the gallery if she can "imagine [herself] living another life," she responds casually: "That's too easy. Ask me something else" (*Point Omega* 111). But if it is so easy for her to imagine herself in another life, could this not mean that she has vanished to do so now?

Slight as it is in light of all the work that has been put into setting our imagination on a different track, there is a chance that our visions of her as the victim of a horrific crime are mere projections. "The point is not the probability of violence," writes Michael Wood in his review of the book, "but the chance of it; it is the chance that we cannot get out of our minds" (5). This is a lucid observation, but I disagree with the conclusion that Wood draws from it. Contrary to him, I think that what is at stake here is *not* a continuation of the concern with paranoia that shaped DeLillo's writing so substantially until (and including) *Underworld*, and which, for Wood, returns as the eerie feeling that the world might be vanishing before our eyes in *Point Omega*. Yet as an engine of knowledge production paranoia is tied to a narcissistic subject position (and psychic as well as narrative disposition) within an order that has become opaque in the maze of possible connections but that is essentially cataclysmic (cf. Keen), and for precisely this reason I see *Point Omega* not as a continuation with paranoia, but as a departure from, if not a scheme—a plot—against it. Rather than presenting sheer endless possibilities of making connections that eventually are all bound up in an irreversible movement toward the end, the options laid out here to mend the brutal gap

that Jessie's disappearance has created are quite overseeable. There is suicide, murder, or slipping into another life, the odds being 2:1 against life for death.

In *Libra*, DeLillo has one of his characters say that all plots move toward death ("the idea of death is woven into the nature of plot. . . . The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death" [221]), and plots are indeed deadly in this novel. *Point Omega*'s title reference also evokes an end point, but one of a different kind. In Teilhard de Chardin's original use of the term, "omega point" can lead to a state of spiritual transcendence in which God's will becomes present. In DeLillo's abysmal toying with it this end point is rather a state of entropic stillness, and hence a lifeless counterpoint to such revelations—the deadly silence of inorganic matter. One thing is certain, however: the plot of this novel does *not* lead to death. It is too porous to do so. Perhaps DeLillo's reversal of the words ("point omega," not "omega point") is a tribute to an end that both relativizes the possibility of death and exhaustedly collapses into the story's beginning. In any case, *Point Omega*'s final section takes us back to the MoMA gallery on the day following the prologue and preceding the main narrative without bringing narrative closure. In fact, it takes us back there in a way that makes us not only revisit but revise the entire story. The novel's temporal structure encourages such plotting experiments. The two consecutive September days enclose the time that follows, and hence the narrative operation performed by the text both repeats and anticipates the choreography of the frame that watching the Gordon piece establishes early on. But it is not until we have reached the end that we realize that we have also read toward closing the frame. And it is by analogy to *24 Hour Psycho* we may ask ourselves if we have been reading not a reconstruction of events but the content of one singular frame, one extended presence.

Even so, it takes a leap of faith to keep Jessie alive. The lyric helps with this leap. It does so by filling the yawning gaps in the narrative—not with images, as the lyric so often does, but with words themselves. "I keep seeing the words," Finley says in a passage that reads like a meta-commentary on the lyrical ritual so artfully employed in this novel. "They've become physical states of mind. I'm not sure what that means. I keep seeing figures in isolation, I see past physical dimension into the feelings that these words engender, feelings that deepen over time" (*Point Omega* 19). What at first comes across as a modernist avowal of the materiality of language is then bestowed with a quasi-religious, transcendental dimension: a redemptive capacity of language that resides in its materiality.<sup>1</sup> From *The Names* to *Libra* on to *Zero K* this is the metaphysical horizon of DeLillo's lyric-poetical ritual. Or perhaps even more fittingly, in the words of earth artist Robert Smithson (and, as it happens, earth art is a frequent point of reference in DeLillo's narrative world): it is an "infraphysical" horizon, located within rather than outside the material world, involving a "transcendental state of matter" (Smithson quoted in Roberts 9). From this material constitution of language—from where it *is* without referencing, and where it sounds more than it means—DeLillo generates a narrative impulse that is crucial for his storytelling. "Watching those letter-shapes form means something," he says (DeLillo quoted in Jacob 73). And if the lyrical ritual that his recent short novels have amplified was once upon a time used to ward off ghosts and talk to the gods, *Point Omega* revives this ar-

chaic function of the lyric by way of reducing (like no other of DeLillo's short novels) narrativity to a bare minimum.

Can we draw any conclusions about the current state of the novel's narrative art from this reading, if not in general than perhaps from the position of a writer overtly concerned about a reduced need for narrative and a diminishing power of poetic language in literature's paperless future (cf. DeLillo, "PEN Interview")? I am inclined to think that DeLillo toys with downplaying narrative dominance to the end of telling stories in and about our crisis-ridden present. Regardless of the spectral existence of his novels on Kindle, this narrative mode—perforce its enhancement through lyric and poetry, both of which are more firmly paper-based than narrative today—insists on the printed book as its preferred carrier medium. That existential matters have gained weight in tandem with DeLillo's recent experiments of reducing narrative form might have to do with his advanced age. But just like his earlier concern with paranoia as the mood of an age this quarrel resonates with larger, collective concerns about life and death—fueled by war, terror, humanitarian catastrophes, and haunted by the fact that it is practically impossible not to know about these things. DeLillo's most recent novel, *Zero K*, vivifies this predicament of our present media age in dwelling on the instant dissemination of catastrophic images, letting them flicker across the broadband screens in the windowless immortality lab in a desert on former Soviet territory. *Point Omega's* countermeasure against this blazing regime of image-based evidence is a lyric-poetic instance on the fundamental unknowability of reality. An affective measure that, in the post-paranoid narrative world of an aging man with seismographic antennas, calls for an act of reading for cohesion rather than coherence. For a sense of unity that is felt rather than thought through, and for the metaphysical leap as participatory mode of reading literature.

### Endnote

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1. Grappling with this dimension of DeLillo's work is a pertinent concern of recent scholarship. For Nel, *The Body Artist* marks a return to modernist concerns with form whereas Bronca reads it (with Heidegger) as an existential search for immanence. Cowart traces DeLillo's fascination with the materiality and opacity of language throughout his career. McClure, Hungerford, and Schneck all stress the mythical, religious dimension and the longing for transcendence that runs through DeLillo's work—and that becomes amplified in the short novels due to their pronounced lyricality.

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