

Feb 5, 1997

Dear David

Many thanks for your letter. It's a strong and clear statement and I don't imagine I'll get many responses so deep-reaching and so well-tuned to the tics and tremors of the book.

You mentioned the Eisenstein film. I had many arguments with myself about that episode and wondered if the book might be better off without it. And your sense of color fading to b&w -- I did want color to drain from the book, as in an old film ~~xxx~~ or an old memory perhaps. An idea that first occurred to me at the end of Part 1. Also, your remark about Nick's sense of his mother's death -- a paragraph I feel a particular connection to and one of the very few things one writes that seem to have a marble surface, hard, polished and unalterable.

Your paragraph about assonance prompted me, I guess for the first time, to think about whatever it is I'm doing here.

All I can say is that it happens more or less automatically and involves not only alliteration but reverse alliteration (words that end with the same letter or the same sound quality); rhyming or near-rhyming syllables; and (among other things) a sensitivity to the actual appearance of words on a page, to letter-shapes and letter-combinations. In a line you quote -- snow that was drilled and gilded with dog piss -- there is the assonance of "drilled" and "gilded" but also the particular shaping nature of the letters "i" and "l" and "d" in "drilled and gilded" and the sort of visual echo of the "i" in "piss" at the end of the line. And the "o" sound of "dog" and "snow" tend to mate these words (in my eyes and mind). These are round words, as it were, and the others are slim or i-beamed or tall or whatever.

These relationships, or whatever they are, either happen or they don't. I'm sure I paused before I came up with "gilded" but I doubt that I was looking for a particular

sound or shape, at least not consciously. (Maybe there's a kind of rapid computer-sorting one does at the edge of normal awareness.) And I think the key to all this is precision. If the language is precise, the sentence will not (in theory) seem self-conscious or overworked. At some point (in my writing life) I realized that precision can be a kind of poetry, and the more precise you try to be, or I try to be, the more simply and correctly responsive to what the world looks like -- then the better my chances of creating ~~and~~ a deeper and more beautiful language.

Once, probably, I used to think that vagueness was a loftier kind of poetry, truer to the depths of consciousness, and maybe when I started to read mathematics and science back in the mid-70s I found an unexpected lyricism in the necessarily precise language that scientists tend to use. My instinct, my superstition is that the closer I see a thing and the more accurately I describe it, the better my chances of arriving at a certain sensuality of expression. The beauty a character may find in a piece of weathered brick has its corresponding depth of language, and the writer finds the language precisely where the character finds the visual delight -- in the brick itself.

I'm not sure this is clear (speaking of precision). Wittgenstein could say it better, briefer and more stabbingly, and Eisenstein could show it better, bigger and more starkly. But the reason I use a manual typewriter concerns the sculptural quality I find in words on paper, the architecture of the letters individually and in combination, a sensation advanced (for me) by the mechanical nature of the process -- finger striking key, hammer striking page. Electronic intervention would dull the sensuous gratification I get from this process -- a gratification I try to soak my prose in. I do hear a kind of music when I write but I also see words across a sentence sort of matching up and mating.

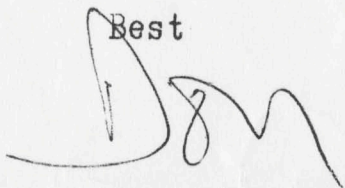
I know there's more to it. I used the word "superstition" a couple of paragraphs back. I could just as easily say faith. A faith that there is in fact an answer to whatever problem I might be having with a phrase or a sentence -- one answer, the right answer (but do I really believe that?) -- and that if I explore the word or words in question, their meanings, their shadings, their origins, the echoes they emit, I'll find what I'm looking for.

I'm glad you mentioned your dad's memory of the Bobby Thomson homer. I was at the dentist (Dr Fish) and the radio was on in the waiting room and as a Yankee fan I was slightly aloof but did share the moment with a very happy dentist and a couple of his assistants.

The Gaddis book you're doing is an interesting mix of high-modernist density and light cinema of the 30s and 40s, with Wm Powell and Myrna Loy.

When a writer I admire responds to something I've written as deeply as you have, it's a great satisfaction. Thank

Best

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be "Don", written in a cursive, flowing style.The letters "HRC" in a white, serif font, centered within a gray rectangular box with a thin white border.

252 Miles Ave./2
Syracuse 13210 NY
11 June 1992

Mr. Don DeLillo
57 Rossmore Ave.
Bronxville 10708 NY

Dear Mr. DeLillo:

After I discovered an autographed copy of Libra under a discreet spotlight at his home and just about fell over sideways, Jon Franzen told me he'd had the hubris not only to write you but to send you an unsolicited copy of one of his books, and that your response had been gracious. He (claimed he) didn't have your address and had reached you through an intermediary. If you value your privacy as much as I'd assume you do, you'll be gratified to learn that I had to go to pretty grotesque lengths to get hold of 57 Rossmore Ave., and was asked not to give it to anyone else, and will honor that request.

I have no wish to violate your privacy. I wanted only to tell you that your work is very important to me, both as a reader and as a writer. Though I guess we know a couple people in common -- Gerry Howard, and this very chatty compadre of Tom LeClair named Larry McCaffrey -- I really have no other justification for writing you than to communicate this: your books, along with a couple novels by Manuel Puig and certain narrative poems, inform my heart and my work, inspire me in the very best sense of "inspire." I was first directed to The Names in the early 1980s by a professor I trusted to guide my extracurricular reading; since then I've acquired and reread the entire DeLillo corpus, even a certain anomalous thing by a Ms. Birdwell, which Gerry took great grim delight (after I'd told him there was no way you hadn't written this thing) in telling me had sold more copies for you than anything until White Noise.

My best friend believes WN and Running Dog are your best things. My favorites are Americana and Great Jones Street and The Names, though I'm also very attached (often literally) to End Zone and parts of Ratner's Star. I have little doubt that your best and most comprehensive novel is Libra, but I read it in galleys when I was trying to do some fiction-work of my own in the transfiguration of real U.S. fact and myth, and jealousy kept me from being able to love Libra, and I've been afraid to reread it. I do think you ought to sue the slats off Oliver Stone, who seemed not only to have ripped you off in several important respects but to have done so ~~for really~~ insipid ends.

In a way, I sympathize with him: I, too, sometimes go back and look at lines and rhythms I've done and get a creepy feeling and hunt around and find that they're derivative of scattered little details in your books. I never know what to do about this: it's not like I ever go back and find things and rip them off -- I'm too timid and too arrogant for that -- it seems rather that a lot of your voices and constructions, as with Puig's and Paz's, hang around in

my head and get mixed up with other experiences and ideas and voices, etc. Sometimes I cut the stuff, sometimes not. When not, I guess I rationalize it as some sort of oblique allusion, or as the sincerist form of compliment I'm capable of.

E.g., part of a long thing I'm in the middle of has a section that I've gone back and seen owes a rather uncomfortable debt to certain exchanges between Gary Harkness and Major Staley in End Zone. I may well, before the project goes to press -- unless you indicate you'd rather I didn't -- send you this section to see whether it's OK with you. This wouldn't be for legal reasons; the debt isn't that extensive. I think it would be more out of respect.

Anyway, I am happy that your work has in recent years started to get the extra-mural admiration it deserves, and I wish you all available joy and success in future endeavors.

Warmest Regards,



David Foster Wallace

