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A Critical Study of the Theme of Death in Don Delillo's *White Noise* from an Intertextual Perspective

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> The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.
>
> Ernest Becker

Becker's views on death are fully realized in Delillo's novel *White Noise*. The fear of death figures as the mainspring of activity in the lives of Gladney and his wife Babette activity inspired by their noticeable attempts to deny or avoid or defeat death. Gladney's and Babette's peculiar preoccupation with death is foregrounded in the first pages of the novel. Watching the wagons of the parents of college students who are returning to college after summer vacation, Babette says: "I have trouble imagining death at that income level". In response to this Gladney says: "Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands"(5). This short exchange sets the tone for the whole piece in which Gladney and Babette engage in deploying a series of strategies to avoid or deny, or defeat death.

According to James B. McCarthy one of the common devices of the denial of death is the manic defense in which the individual enthusiastically pursues a form of activity designed to ward off the fear of death:

> Perhaps the most widely used security operation that holds the fear of death at bay is the "manic defense,"…. Manic activity, constant involvement in physical activity, or even fantasy can mark an attempt to deny inner reality and depression … When pursued to an extreme, the most ordinary healthy, positive daily activities and interests can involve a manic defense against depression and concerns about death.. The need to be constantly occupied, the inability to tolerate aloneness with oneself, the rush to fill leisure time with social life, or some activity at the expense of any opportunity for introspection and illustrative of the manic defense against depression and fear of death (McCarthy 11-12).

Babette's enthusiasm for reading to the blind is a pure example of manic defense against the fear of death. So much is implied by Babette's pursuit of her

undertaking to an extreme throughout the whole novel. Babette and Gladney, however, seem to be aware of the importance of the pursuit of an activity as a means of alleviating fear of death. This comes out in an exchange between them in which they admit that they find it difficult to cope with the fear of death:

> "I depend on you to be healthy outgoing former Babette. I need this as badly as you do, if not more."
> "What is need? We all need. Where is the uniqueness in this?"
> "Are you feeling basically the same?"
> "You mean am I sick into death? The fear hasn't gone, Jack."
> "We have to stay active."
> "Active helps but Wilder helps more." (Delillo 263)

Gladney's remarkable preoccupation with the establishment of Hitler Studies is another character style of manic defense against death. Gladney's attraction to Hitler can also be interpreted in terms of the dynamics of the cult – another device, as James B. McCarthy also observes, for coping with the fear of death.

> In contemporary American society, the equation of lack of purpose with a poorly established sense of identity emerges clearly in the cult popularity of youth movements …. Total identification with a group, adoption of its philosophy, and worship like devotion to its leader all give the individual member a false sense of self through a shared identity. Death anxiety and purposelessness vanish as the self is surrendered to the cult ….The grandiosity of the cult leader reduces feelings of inadequacy in the follower. The illusion of fusion and shared identity temporarily rescues the worshipper from the pain of purposelessness and death anxiety (McCarthy 147).

In *White Noise* Hitler is presented as someone who is not only bigger than life, as we may say of many famous figures, but bigger than death since he has caused the death of millions of people. This, as it were, adds to his grandiosity as an effective cult leader who would provide Gladney with enormous sense of security in the face of death as he struggles to cope with his death anxiety.

Gladney's self-styled attempt at evading death through his involvement in establishing Hitler Studies does not pass unnoticed by his friend Murray Siskund when he commends Gladney's ingenious hitting on the idea of establishing such studies as a kind of "preemptive" measure:

> The college is internationally known as a result of Hitler Studies. It has an identity, a sense of achievement. You've evolved an entire system around this figure, a structure with countless substructures and interrelated fields of study, a history within history. I marvel at the effort. It was masterful, shrewd and stunningly preemptive (Delillo 11-12).

A classical example of the avoidance of death through manic defense can be found in Tolstoy's short novel *Ivan Ilych* in which Ivan Ilych tries to cope with his death anxiety by burying himself in work and wholeheartedly embracing the ceremony of his office and position. This had enabled him to avoid thoughts about death until

cancer stripped away his defensive use of denial and avoidance. Don Delillo's intertextual use of Tolstoy's short novel in *White Noise* seems to indicate his tendency to give his novel a meaning within the framework of human perpetual endeavor to solve the problem of facing death. In his comments on the use of intertextuality in literature Jonathan Culler argues: "[intertextuality] calls our attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that the autonomy of prior texts is a misleading notion and that a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written" (Culler 60).

Similar views are held by Brenda K. Marshall:

> Intertextuality is precisely a momentary compendium of everything that has come before and is now. Intertextuality calls attention to prior texts in the sense that it acknowledges that no text can have meaning without those prior texts, it is a space where 'meanings' intersect. There is no such creature as the autonomous text or work (Marshall 128).

Delillo's keenness to establish thematic or even generic links between his novel and other works dealing with the theme of death is reflected, as the ensuing discussion will reveal, in the rich intertextuality which characterize the texture of *White Noise* as a postmodern novel.

The postmodern impulse in *White Noise* emerges in Delillo's conspicuous presentation of the theme of death in association with television, an important cultural medium in the postmodern era. Delillo's use of televised death as an illusory means of denying or avoiding death, I would argue, is a postmodern version of Tolstoy's use of illusion as a tool to avoid death in *Ivan Ilych*. In his desperate attempt to avoid death Ivan Ilych cherishes an illusion based on false syllogism:

> 'Caius is a man, men are mortal therefore Caius is mortal', had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius man in the abstract – was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not abstract man, but a creature quite quite separate from all others (Tolstoy 259).

Resorting to illusion as a means of avoiding death in *Ivan Ilych* is not confined to the central character. Peter Ivanovich, Ivan Ilych's close friend, in his turn, tries to build an illusory barrier between himself and death by convincing himself that all was true of Ivan (after his death) is obviously not applicable to him. These examples of illusory denial of death (in which him not me dynamics is at work) in Tolostoy's novel seems to anticipate Delillo's employment of televised death as an illusory evasive device through which the viewer is convinced that death can happen only to the others. Irving Howe quotes a young German author who maintains that in the postmodern period: " people no longer have any opinions; they have refrigerators. Instead of illusions we have televisions" (26). Brenda K. Marshall tells us: "Intertextuality is not simply a reference to earlier texts, but is a manipulation of those texts as well" (130).

Here is how Gladney describes fascination by T.V. disasters in *White Noise*:

> That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese.
> There were floods, earthquakes, mudslides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death … Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping (Delillo 64).

Kavanaugh's remarks on the psychological satisfaction that the individual may derive from watching death on television may explain this peculiar fascination by death in *White Noise*: "Television feeds our fantasy of forever being a spectator. Even a bloody nose or a fainting spell by a fellow viewer would have aroused more emotion in me than a hundred deaths on the tube." (13)

Steven Connor's more subtle views on the psychological function of watching T.V. may shed more light on the remarkable fascination by T.V. disasters in *White Noise*:

> A T.V. screen or computer monitor cannot be thought of simply as an object to be looked at, with all the old forms of psychic, projection and investment; instead the screen intersects responsively with our desires and representations, and becomes the embodied form of our psychic worlds (Connor 192).

But as Ziauddin Sardar and Merry Wyn Davies observe televised death and disaster failed to function as a tool of lessening the horrifying effect of the catastrophe of 9/11. Sardar's and Wyn's views in this respect are worth quoting in toti:

> The picture of a plane swooping through a clear blue sky, tilting as it makes its approach to the elegant symmetry of a glass tower and then exploding in vibrant flame, has become a defining image of the 21st century. We witnessed that moment, and all the devastation that followed, live on television. The whole world experienced the catastrotrophe of 9-11 through the power and global reach of TV. Today, what we know of the world around us is mediated by television – now the first port of call for news, information and entertainment everywhere. We live in a world of images, packaged visual stories that come to us, and at us, wherever we turn – on billboards, in newspapers and magazines, on television, in the cinema – and we read into the images more than pictures tell. This one defining image is horrific and real. It is not lessened just because it is effortlessly associated in our visual memory with the many unreal, fictional images of disaster that we have seen in films and on television. The important question is how much our response to the image of reality – our efforts to come to terms with the meaning of a real event – is shaped and structured by those associations. What are the links between the real and unreal images that shape our relations with the world in which we live? (Sardar 15).

In the light of these thoughtful observations, it is, I believe, legitimate to ask whether "televised disaster", at least in America, would remain as effective device to cope with "real" disaster, that is in post-9/11 reality. The answer to this question lies beyond the prime concern of this paper. Our more immediate task is to continue our investigation into Delillo's characteristic use of intertextuality as a means of presenting a profound study of the theme of death in contemporary American society which is made more obvious in his frequent references to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. According to commentators, the working title of Delillo's novel was *The American Book of the Dead*. In his definition of one of the main functions of intertextuality, David Lodge argues that novelists have always tended to "freely recycle old myths and earlier works of literature to shape or add resonance to their presentation of contemporary life"(99). It is in these terms that we should interpret the intertextual use of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, that is as a means of defining contemporary American concept of death. To make further comments on this point more intelligible I would briefly examine the nature of the fact of death as it is presented in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

In The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* death is presented as a decided fact of life which one should be constantly prepared to face at any time. The significance of the awareness of death in the Tibetan tradition is encaptured in the teachings of one of the prominent Buddhists when he says: "If on waking up in the morning one does not meditate on death, the entire morning will be wasted. If we don't meditate at noon, the afternoon will be wasted. Similarly, if we don't meditate on death in the evening, the night will be lost to meaningless pursuits (Mullin 226).

The main message of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is to teach people the art of dying by practicing innumerable spiritual rituals, the ultimate goal of which is to help the practitioner to accept death as the complement and summation of life on this earth. Death for Tibetans can be even experienced ecstatically provided human beings have grown spiritually by right practicing of the Art of Dying. Then, and it is only then that death will indeed have lost its sting.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead (which is also referred to in *White Noise*), in its turn, presents death as the natural phenomenon around which the Egyptians have woven their most elaborate web of ritual. For the Egyptian, as for the Tibetans, death is conceived as a stage in the life course. In other words both of the two civilizations adopt a death accepting attitude towards death. The death accepting attitude towards death in old Egyptian civilization is well established as one critic suggests in their devotion of their main sciences to dealing with death: "chemistry concerns itself with mummification, medicine is devoted to curing illness, engineering is concerned with constructing temples and tombs for the pharaohs, and astronomy is dedicated to deifying light the opposite of darkness which controls the kingdom of death" (Al-Yusuf 34).

Against this background, let us now consider how death is perceived and cast in socio-cultural context in contemporary American culture. In their book *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement* Michael R. Leming and George E. Dickinson write:

> Americans have developed a paradoxical relationship with death – we know more about the causes and conditions surrounding death, but we have not equipped ourselves emotionally to cope with dying and death. The American way of dying is such that avoiding direct confrontation with dying and death is a real possibility for many persons (20).

In the same context, Charles A. Corr observes:

> Death has become less natural and familiar to us and thus increasingly appears to be less appropriate as a part of a person's lot in this life. Here we find the real import of what it is to be a "death-free generation." Direct contact with natural human death is a more and more unusual event in our experience, and we seem to have arranged our lives, intentionally or unintentionally in ways that tend to decrease further the opportunities for us to confront the realities of life (17).

In his book, *The Experience of Dying*, E. Mansell Pattison argues that there are four main distinct attitudes towards death: death denying, death defying, death desiring, and death accepting (303-309). In both of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and *The Tibetan Book if the Dead*, as it has been already pointed out, death accepting is presented as a distinct cultural phenomenon.

In contrast, the American culture, as the last two quotations point out, adopts a death-denying attitude towards death. Just as the writings of Charles A. Corr, Michael R. Leming and George E. Dickinson furnish an intellectual context for the death denying attitude embedded in American culture, so *White Noise* provides a fictional context for dramatizing the concept of the denial of death in postmodern American culture. It might be argued that Delillo's novel sets out to examine the possibility of acquiring the art of the denial of death by practicing evasionary measures and a number of strategies. That is contrary to the main message of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Small wonder then that, in his article on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* entitled "Psychological Commentary", C.G. Jung argues "Generally speaking, we have nothing in the west that is in any way comparable to the Bardo Thodol [The Tibetan Book of the Dead], except for certain secret writings which are inaccessible to the wider public and to the ordinary scientist" (xlix).

According to the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, an essential requirement for learning the Art of Dying is the willingness on the part of the individual to detach himself from the world's utilitarian and physical interests. One of the fundamental rituals in the *Book of the Dead* reads: "O nobly – born, that which is called death that now come. Thou art departing from the world, but thou art not the only one, [death] cometh to all. Do not cling, in fondness and weakness to this life" (103).

Nothing seems to be more alien to the turn of thought of Babette and Gladney than detachment from the materialism of contemporary American life. Pointing out Babette's passionate lust for life, Gladney observes: "The point is that Babette, whatever she is doing makes me feel sweetly rewarded, bound up with full soul woman, a lover of daylight and dense life" (Delillos 5). In his comments on the satisfaction they derive from shopping, Gladney also remarks:

> "It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number the familiar package designs and vivid lettering the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, is the sense of replenishment we felt the sense of well being the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less expect less" (20).

It is in proportion to their powerful lust for life and well-being that Gladney and Babette experience intense death anxiety. Thus Delillo's dramatization of the theme of death reflects the overall picture of contemporary American frame of mind in postmodernity.

Charles A. Corr's remarks on death may illustrate the point I am trying to make: "One important factor significant in defining who we are at any given time in history and in any particular social and cultural context is the nature of our experience with death" (14).

In light of the numerous discrepancies between the presentation of the theme of death in *White Noise* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, one would suggest that Delillo's novel has been conceived as a kind of parody of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Ronald Barthes conceives of parody as one of the main functions of intertextuality: "Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, and contestation" (231) Jonathan Culler as well points out that intertextuality may acquire parodistic dimension. Culler describes literary works as intertextual constructs whose meanings are established in relation to other texts which they "take up, cite, parody refute or generally transform" (70).

Culler's contention that intertextuality may involve "transformation" of a pretext is applicable to Delillo's use of Plato's *Phaedo* as part of his novel's intertextual space. This occurs in chapter (38) of *White Noise* in which Delillo refers to the long discussion of the fact of death by Murray and Gladney as a "Socratic walk":

> The long walk started at noon, I didn't know it would turn into a long walk I thought it would be a miscellaneous meditation, Murray and Jack, half an hour's campus meander.
> But it became a major afternoon, a serious looping Socratic walk with practical consequences (282).

The phrase Socratic walk evokes Plato's *Phaedo* in which Socrates and his interlocutors Simmias and Cebes engage in a lengthy discussion of death. In Phaedo Plato makes Socrates argue that death is a kind of gift or blessing that should be jubilantly received provided that the individual practises for death and thus he becomes fully prepared for death when it comes. According to Jacques Derrida in *Phaedo* Plato underlines the significance of man's constant awareness of death and his contemplation of the best way to receive death.

> The Phaedo explicitly names philosophy: it is attentive anticipation of death, the care brought to bear upon dying, the meditation on the best way to receive, give, or give oneself death, the experience of a vigil over the possibility of death (12).

Derrida adds that in *Phaedo* death is presented as an "art" which can be learnt. Indeed, in the course of his meditation on death, Socrates prescribes practising for death as the best means to come to grips with the fear of death:

> Well then, as I said at the beginning, if a man has trained himself throughout his life to live in a state as close as possible to death, would it not be ridiculous for him to be distressed when death comes to him? (Plato 50).

While the discussion of the fact of death in *Phaedo* concludes with finding a solution to the problem of death, not only as a decided fact of life, but also as an event which can be happily anticipated, the Socratic walk in *White Noise* fails to appease Gladney's fear of death, let alone putting an end to his constant search for new means of denying or mastering death. Motivated by his sincere desire to help Gladney, Murray suggests that he may come to grips with his fear of death by believing in an afterlife: "Seriously, you can find a great deal of long-range solace in the idea of an afterlife" (286). But for Gladney belief in a second life is only a "convenient fantasy". Murray goes so far as to suggest that Gladney may conquer death by killing the others. But none of these options will work for Gladney.

Insofar as Phaedo presents a solution to the problem of death in ancient Greek civilization in contrast with the failure of the Socratic walk in *White Noise* to achieve a positive attitude towards death in the postmodern era, one is tempted to suggest that the intertextual use of Phaedo in *White Noise* can be considered as pastiche. My argument is based on the assumption that intertextuality may take the form of pastiche as soon as it involves recalling less problematic past times by way of commenting on the complexity of life in the postmodern era. Here is how Madan Sarup defines the function of the use of pastiche in postmodern art and literature.

> The disappearance of the individual subject and the unavailability of unique and personal style has brought about a new practice: pastiche. To recapitulate, pastiche has become a ubiquitous mode which suggests that we wish to be recalled to times less problematic than our own (181).

Intertextuality in connection with the theme of death is used to introduce another postmodern feature in *White Noise*, namely the opposition to grand narratives, especially Freudianism. During the Socratic walk, Gladney, taking issue with Murray, refers to Freud's well known contention that repression of the fear of death is the best means towards coming to terms with death as being outdated. According to Julia Kristeva: "a text works by absorbing and destroying at the same time the other texts of the intertextual space"(Marshall 130).

The reference to Freud in *White Noise* expands the novel's intertextual space to accommodate a new voice in connection with the theme of death. This multiplicity

of voices and pretexts within a single text presented in *White Noise* suggests Delillo's use of intertextuality in relation to death in conformity to another postmodern feature, that is the relativity of truth.

Just as Delillo challenges Freud's views on death, so he, as Tom Leclai observes, rejects Ernest Becker's notion that repression of death is essential for human beings to lead a normal life. In his book *The Denial of Death*, Becker cites with approval G. Zilboorg's views on the necessity of repressing the fear of death:

> If this fear were as constantly conscious, we should be unable to function normally. It must be properly repressed to keep us living with any modicum of comfort. We know very well that to repress means more than to put away and to forget that which was put away and the place where we put it. It means also to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness (17).

Inspired by such views Becker maintains: "repression takes care of the complex symbol of death for most people"(20). This is hardly applicable to Gladney or Babette.

Gladney seizes every opportunity to express his death anxiety in the hope of finding a way to cope with it. On one occasion he even lays bare his fear of death to Winne Richards, a young research nectrochemist who tries to help Gladney to accept death as an act which gives meaning to life:

> "I don't know what your personal involvement is with this substance (Dylar)," she said, "but I think it's a mistake to lose one's sense of death, even one's fear of death. Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition. You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a find line, a border or limit"(Delillo 228-229).

Similar views are held by Murray when he tells Gladney that death is a final stage of life which makes it complete: "Excellent Jack. Do you believe life without death is somehow? Incomplete? How could it be incomplete? Death is what makes it incomplete"(284). Neither Winne nor Murray succeeds in making Gladney adopt a positive attitude towards death.

The view put forward by Winne and Murray recall a passage in D. H. Lawrence's novel *Women in Love* which is rightly described by Alan W. Friedman as Lawrence's "Book of the Dead" (Friedman 208):

> She sat crushed and obliterated in a darkness that was the border of death. She realized how all her life she had been drawing nearer and nearer to this brink, where there was no beyond, from which one had to leap like Sappho into the unknown. The knowledge of the imminence of death was like a drug. Darkly, without thinking at all, she knew that she was near to death. She had travelled all her life along the line of fulfilment, and it was nearly concluded. She knew all she had to know, she had experienced all she had to

> experience, she was fulfilled in a kind of bitter ripeness, there remainedonly to fall from the tree into death. And one must fulfil one's development to the end, must carry the adventure to its conclusion. And the next step was over the border into death. So it was then! There was a certain peace in the knowledge.
>
> After all, when one was fulfilled, one was happiest in falling into death, as a bitter fruit plunges in its ripeness downwards. Death is a great consummation, a consummating experience. It is a development from life. That we know, while we are yet living. What then need we think for further? One can never see beyond the consummation. It is enough that death is a great and conclusive experience (Lawrence 185).

The discrepancy between Ursula's firm belief that death is a great consummation of life and Gladney's failure to accept such a conviction can be ascribed to the basic difference between the true state of sensibility and real structure of feeling in both the early modern and postmodern periods, that is insofar as the former emphasizes determinacy, foundationalism, and belief in universals; whereas the latter is marked by emphasizing indeterminacy, anti-foundationalism, and the questioning of any belief system that claims universality or transcendence. These features of postmodernism play a vital role in the course of Gladney's search to find a solution to the problem of death, to establish a kind of a system in terms of which death becomes less strange and understandable. The following exchange between Murray and Gladney during the Socratic walk provides a textual evidence in support of this line of interpretation:

> "In that case you can always get around death by concentrating on the life beyond." How do I do that?" It's obvious. Read up on reincarnation, transmigration, hyperspace, the resurrection of the dead and so on. Some gorgeous systems have evolved from these beliefs. Study them. "Do you believe in any of these things?" Millions of people have believed for thousands of years. Throw in with them, belief in a second birth, a second life, is practically universal. This must be something. "But these systems are all so different" (Delillo 285-286).

Delillo's views presented in a fictional context correspond to what A. Corr had to say about death in contemporary American society in a socio-historical context:

> Another factor that contributes to making death a more difficult experience is the dominant scienticism and agnosticism of our times …. We have overestimated our claim to the future and our power to control it. Consequently, we feel betrayed by death and subjected in some nameless fashion. It is not enough to throw over the philosophies and religions of the past and to become a secular society, without creating new systems of meaning or adapting traditional ones to the new situation. Humans cannot function effectively without some frame work in which to make sense of the events of life and the power of death (Corr 40).

Instead of establishing a framework in which a sense of the power of death could be made, *White Noise* sets out to present a postmodern treatment of the theme of death based on irony, parody and playfulness. Tony Walter's general remarks on the treatment of death in the postmodern world are peculiarly applicable to the temper of *White Noise* whose major concern is the exploration of postmodern culture.

> Bauman (1992a, 1992b) has focused even more sharply on how society handles death, suggesting a shift from modernity to postmodernity. Postmoderns, he suggests, are like nomads looking at most for the next camp and more aware of where they are and where they have been than of where they might be going – somewhat different from the modern pilgrim who is 'going somewhere'. For the postmodern person, 'nothing seems to be immortal any more. But nothing seems mortal either' (Bauman, 1992a: 170). In some circles, both traditional and modern ideas of 'the good death' are becoming fragmented, with each dying person encouraged to find their own spiritual and/or psychological path (Walter, 1993). But if postmodernity transforms the way we approach death, one might also ask whether death challenges postmodernity? Can there really be a postmodern death, characterised by the irony, paradox and playfulness of postmodern life, or does death reveal a more serious need for meaning that undermines postmodernity? This should surely be an important question for theorists of postmodernity, as well as for those concerned to understand the social construction of death and dying (Walter 266-267).

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