

SECRET AGENCY: AMERICAN
INDIVIDUALISM IN
OSWALD'S TALE AND *LIBRA*

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IN 1979 *The Executioner's Song* explored the life of a man "who assumes ... the role that history has given him" after he murders two private citizens. In *Oswald's Tale* (1995) and *Libra* (1988), Norman Mailer and Don DeLillo follow the trajectory of a seemingly unremarkable man who claims a role in history by killing the president of the United States. Unlike "empirical" accounts of the assassination (the Warren Commission Report, scholarly histories and newspaper articles) the narratives of Mailer and DeLillo posit for Oswald a culturally significant motive that is at once personal and expressly political: When Lee Harvey Oswald fires on Kennedy he doesn't just end the President's life, he begins his own. In that moment Oswald transforms himself from "a zero in the system" (DeLillo, *Libra* 106) to "a prime mover, a man who made things happen" (Mailer, *Oswald's Tale* 605).

If, as Myra Jehlen comments, "projections of the future generally sum up the past" (49), these narrative projections of the past clearly comment on their present. Although the accounts of DeLillo and Mailer differ stylistically and thematically, both place Oswald's assassination of John F. Kennedy in their respective contemporary context. The journey from "a man" who assumes an *assigned* role in history to "a zero" who changes it points to a profound shift in the perception of individual agency that came to fruition in the 1980s. The nature of the shift is not contained in Oswald's desire to transcend his marginality (which he shares with Gary Gilmore), but his response to it. While the authorial incarnations of Gilmore and Oswald are sometimes accurately compared (Olster; DeCurtis), their cosmologies and senses

of self are in diametric opposition. Mailer's Gilmore is a fatalist. Although he contends mightily with his circumstances, he accepts their strictures as inevitable. The Oswald of Mailer and DeLillo is quite the opposite. Rather than submitting to fate, Oswald casts himself as its agent. By assassinating the President, Oswald quite literally escapes his subjectivity to fate and confirms retrospectively his grandiose sense of himself as an important man.

Accordingly, Oswald's act is not essentially self-destructive. Rather, it is self-constructive in a way Gilmore's crimes were not. As Richard Poirier argues, this act of self-creation, of *individuation*, is not only personal, but innately political: "[A]ny effort to find accommodation for human shapes or sounds is an act that partakes of political meaning" (*Performing* viii). Poirier's notion of the "performing self" as a political self encompasses both authors depiction of Oswald and the specific goals of their authorial projects: "[T]his activity, when it is found in writing, offers a traceable exemplification of possible political and social activities" (viii).

Oswald's Tale and *Libra*, then, are expressly political works. Oswald's bid for selfhood complicates *Executioner's* nuanced critique of individualism in American life. Mailer reads Oswald's crime as an Emersonian act of self-making—both audacious and peculiarly American. For DeLillo, Oswald's act of murder adds an unsettlingly literal dimension to Gilmore's last-ditch negative agency: The predication of Oswald's life on Kennedy's death suggests a kind of zero-sum game in which celebrity status confirms personhood.

As the depictions of Mailer and DeLillo make clear, the existence of such a figure as Oswald, or more accurately, such a peculiarly unmoored Oswald, has broader and more ominous ramifications than Poirier may have supposed. These biographical narratives are unsettling not merely in what they allege about Oswald, but in what Oswald suggests about the nature and formation of American identity. As Marita Sturken points out, "Within the national discourse, the stakes of biography are high; the meaning of certain life stories helps to shape the way the nation and its history are defined" (45). Mailer and DeLillo's Oswald embodies American ideals surrounding individual freedom and personal agency. As a result he is *both* villain and hero, and his life story functions as a kind of case study.

In *Oswald's Tale* and *Libra* the overdetermined faith in the transformative power of individual action suggests not confidence, but a profound anxiety about the possibilities for personal agency. What is important in

understanding the provenance of DeLillo and Mailer's neo-Emersonian Oswald is how this loss of faith paved the way for a return to conservative values in the 1980s.

Libra and *Oswald's Tale* are, of course, not only reflections of the Reagan era; they are also incisive responses to specific events of the period. *Oswald's Tale* is the product of concrete historical forces, as well as more pragmatic goals. *Glasnost* allowed Larry Schiller, and therefore Mailer, the dual rewards of exclusive "scoop" and almost guaranteed profitability. The novel was Mailer's third collaboration with Schiller and Mailer refers quite matter-of-factly to his attraction to the material's novelty. According to him, "One stimulus to the writing of this book was an offer from the Belarus KGB to allow a look into their files on Oswald ... [I]t was ... the equivalent of an Oklahoma land-grab for an author to be able to move into a large and hitherto unrecorded part of Oswald's life" (*Oswald's Tale* 349). But Mailer's comments also suggest a journalistic verve for investigation, and the inborn skepticism that often makes his analyses so trenchant: "Of course, the task in Russia had not been to look for such an answer.... this was not a search for a smoking gun ... it was more one's aim ... to set up a base camp on the slopes of such a mystery" (349). More importantly, Mailer underscores the role the huge political changes of the early 1990s played in gaining access to the information that made *Oswald's Tale* possible: "[T]he end of the Cold War encouraged Russian and Byelorussian acquaintances of Oswald to loosen habits of discretion formed under Stalin and preserved by Brezhnev" (349).

The implicit question posed by both narratives is whether Oswald represents an aberration, or the logical conclusion of the potentially destructive aspects of American individualist values. For Mailer, whose abiding interest in the figure of the Sociopath-as-heroic-individual is central to his work, the ambiguity of the boundary between the two is nothing new.

What is new is the *political* specificity of Mailer's metaphor. In *Executioner*, he compares Gilmore to Houdini, dangling him between Romantic self-sacrifice and Karmic responsibility. In *Oswald's Tale*, Emerson and Hitler represent the twin poles of Oswald's self-perception. As in Gilmore's case, Mailer clearly admires Oswald, but doesn't shrink from revealing the will to power that unites the moral duality he sees in Oswald's character. But Mailer's critique of Oswald is not simply an isolated psychological portrait—it is a social critique. Although he deliberately avoids answering the question of Oswald's "normalcy" or aberrance, his suggestion that the reader consider

Oswald a kind of everyman places the onus for the creation of such a person, on American life. In summing up the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, Mailer suggests that the fundamental desires of a presidential assassin are not so far removed from our own: "Let us, then, say farewell to Lee Harvey Oswald's long and determined dream of political triumph, wifely approbation, and high destiny. Who among us can say that he is in no way related to our own dream?" (*Oswald's Tale* 790–91).

Libra's critique of Oswald is similarly inextricable from its critique of American culture. In referring to Oswald as a cultural "production," Frank Lentricchia also posits him as a metonymic American. But while Mailer brings Oswald to "America" (Oswald is like all of us), DeLillo brings the nation to Oswald (we have become like Oswald). In *Libra* it is not Oswald that is aberrant, but Americans themselves. According to Lentricchia, "DeLillo does not ... imply that all Americans are would-be murderous sociopaths. He has presented a far more unsettling vision of normalcy, of an everyday life so enthralled by the fantasy selves projected in the media ... that it makes little sense to speak of sociopathology or a lone gunman. Oswald is ourselves painted large, in scary tones, but ourselves." ("Don DeLillo" 17–18).

Lentricchia's acute reading of *Libra* reveals the ways in which DeLillo and Mailer's accounts are different. While critics have read both *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* as "postmodern" works, they are more accurately critiques of the political, cultural, and economic changes that comprise the notion of postmodernity. However, the two works locate their critiques of "late capitalism" quite differently. While *Libra* is a critique of a newly minted American self, most understandable in psychoanalytic terms, Mailer's critique centers on the environmental factors (social and political) that made a figure like Oswald necessary. Yet DeLillo's psychological portrait of Oswald differs substantively from Mailer's temporal contextualization of Oswald's ideology. In DeLillo's Oswald Lentricchia sees the birth of the postmodern individual, a media-created American, who truly exists only in the bright lights of the camera.

DeLillo's critique of the postmodern self enacts Lacan's theories of identity formation. Like a child suddenly recognizing himself in the mirror as an entity separate from his mother, Oswald's sight of himself on the television monitor brings provides his first purely objective sense of himself. As he looks into the camera and "could see himself shot ... and watched himself

respond to the augering heat of the bullet,” (*Libra* 439) he finally “feels” himself in the self-other relationship that, according to Lacan, is necessary to define individual identity. Dying, he enters “the white nightmare of noon, high in the sky over Russia” where he finally feels the defining sense of “Me-too and you-too. He is a stranger, in a mask, falling” (440). Lacan describes the mirror stage as “an identification,” and as “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (2). According to Lacan, it is the moment in which “the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it ... its function as the subject” (2). Oswald is conflicted. While he is drawn to assuage his loneliness by subsuming his identity into a larger consciousness (to “merge himself in ... history”) (*Libra* 87), his narcissistic drive to escape the pain of being subjected to history proves stronger. DeLillo underscores Oswald’s self-objectification as Oswald fires his first shot at Kennedy: “There was so much clarity Lee could watch himself in the huge room of stacked cartons ... He fired off a second shot” (398).

While Mailer’s social critique is trenchant, his speculations and attributions of motive to his “real characters” are often less carefully delineated than he claims. Furthermore, the act of “fictionalizing” is not confined to inclusion (“making up dialogue”), but is equally susceptible to exclusion. Ultimately, *Oswald’s Tale* rejects the power of empirical evidence to convey a reliable image of “truth.” Unlike DeLillo, Mailer denies the reader the comfort of narrative closure or the promise of meaning. After following Mailer through almost eight hundred pages of interviews, testimony, and authorial speculation, the reader is confronted by a mischievous hook: “Did Oswald do it?” What follows is not a piece of formerly withheld “evidence” of Oswald’s innocence or guilt, but a disquisition on the ultimately opaque nature of evidence itself:

[O]n one can go, trying to explore into every last reach of possibility, only to encounter a disheartening truth: Evidence, by itself, will never provide the answer to a mystery. For it is in the nature of evidence to produce, sooner or later, a counterinterpretation to itself ... It will be obvious to the reader that one does not (and should not) respect evidence with the religious intensity that others bring to it. (*Oswald’s Tale* 775)

DeLillo's stance is diametrically opposed to Mailer's. In both the DeCurtis interview and the author's note at the end of the novel, DeLillo makes it clear that he views the role of fiction (and authors) as not simply descriptive, but also as redemptive. Not only can fiction "rescue history from its confusions" by "filling in its blank spaces," but "the fiction writer tries to redeem the despair" (DeCurtis 56) that arises from the failure to construct coherent narratives, like his fictional librarian Nicholas Branch.

DeLillo and Mailer present indeterminacy as an escape from opposite problems, but both writers ultimately reinscribe the power of the authorial voice to order an otherwise unmanageable universe. In both novels, the stakes of agency are stratospheric. For DeLillo, indeterminacy is a "refuge" from "being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities" (*Libra* 458) while for Mailer it provides an exit from self-delusion. At its core, *Libra* functions as a gloss on Oswald's famous protest that he was "just a patsy," presenting Oswald as the victim of the Debordean spectacle, falling prey to an illusion of mastery that ultimately robs him of consent. Although Oswald believes that, through Kennedy, he is controlling his fate, his path is preordained in the plotting of *Libra*. Mailer, too, explores the notion of the assassination as a kind of fool's game, but in *Oswald's Tale* the true "patsies" are seekers of the truth, who, to the extent that they seek answers, are metaphors for the reader.

Libra and *Oswald's Tale* cast Oswald retrospectively as curiously postmodern, or in Mailer's case, post-Cold-War individual. This placement is why DeLillo and Mailer's depictions of Oswald have a disorienting "back to the future" quality. In them he appears to be both an avatar of future American selves and an anachronistic "throwback to modernist alienation" (Olster 48). In this way, Oswald both creates and is created by what Thomas Carmichael calls "the first postmodern historical event" (Carmichael 207).

One of the reasons for the temporal disorientation of *Libra* is that the perception of the Kennedy assassination as the primal loss of American innocence is by its very nature a retrospective notion. Although DeLillo sees the Kennedy assassination as the point of origin for Bell's "end of ideology,"¹ it is likely that the opposite is more historically "true," which is to say that DeLillo's perception of Oswald is itself a product of the post-Vietnam period. This is why Carmichael characterizes the assassination as a kind of year zero that alters the future and reframes the past, referring to it as both "the original site of a contemporary nostalgia" and "the moment at which all

that follows in the postmodern period was violently interjected into contemporary experience" (207).

DeLillo and Mailer pinpoint the Kennedy assassination as the origin of a kind of existential crisis for the nation. In the *Rolling Stone* interview, DeLillo claims that the true legacy of the assassination was a loss of meaning: [W]hat has become unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas is not the plot ... but the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared. We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity" ("American" 22). While Mailer may not share DeLillo's "big bang theory" of contemporary consciousness, he does suggest that the enduring attraction to the conspiracy theory of the assassination (and the attendant status such a theory confers upon Oswald), stems from the nation's need to impose meaning on the event. In *Oswald's Tale* he points out that if Oswald was indeed a lone gunman, who is to say, "a petty figure, a lone twisted pathetic killer who happened to be in a position to kill a ... president, then ... [t]here was no logic to the event and no sense of balance in the universe" (606). This sense of "randomness and ambiguity" permeates both *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale*. Its attribution of causality to unpredictable and uncontrollable forces renders political ideology irrelevant and the notion of centralized power an illusion.

Mailer's depiction concerns Oswald's interactions with an increasingly ambiguous power structure. As he makes clear in his interview with Robert Begiebing, Mailer's perception that power is no longer centralized in the traditional political organs began in the 1980s. According to Mailer, "In the sixties I used to see it as the FBI and the CIA being sinister. Now I suppose it has moved over to the idea that such things as television and plastics are getting us much closer to totalitarianism than the FBI or CIA ever would" (qtd. in Begiebing 321). Mailer's indictment of television and "plastics" is not unlike DeLillo's in spirit, but differs in its focus on specific political changes that had become apparent in the 1980s.

DeLillo and Mailer's neo-Emersonian Oswald is a product of the Reagan era. In neither novel is Oswald hostile to Kennedy's politics, or particularly enamored of those of the Soviet Union. Instead, both accounts present Oswald's Marxist ideology as the logical vehicle for both the expression and maintenance of his sense of alienation. That this oppositional status is crucial to his sense of himself is indicated by his rejection of both systems. In the United States Oswald idealizes the social and economic cohesion of the

Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union he yearns for the economic and personal freedoms of the U.S. But in DeLillo and Mailer's critique, Oswald's "disloyalty" is also evidence of the failure of ideology itself. Having been among the very small number of people who had lived under both systems, Oswald had a unique vantage point on what would later become a received sentiment. Among Oswald's papers is a tract containing what might be described as a mission statement. In it he writes, "I have lived under both systems. I have sought the answers, and although it would be very easy to dupe myself into believing one system is better than the other, I know they are not" (*Oswald's Tale* 302).

In an interview in *The Bloomsbury Review*, Mailer characterizes Oswald as a Libertarian (De Pree 3), but the material in *Oswald's Tale* actually presents him as a reactionary. In spite of its (somewhat warranted) respectful treatment of Oswald's political writings, Mailer's account suggests that Oswald's opposition to centralized power is less a bid for negative liberties than a protest against any externally-imposed structure. In the same interview Mailer comments: "[Oswald] didn't believe in the Soviet Union, didn't believe in America, didn't believe in capitalism, didn't believe in government" (3).

By the 1980s, Oswald's political disillusionment looked remarkably contemporary. As Mailer points out, "A lot of his ideas are held by people today" (3). DeLillo and Mailer's novels of the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, are characterized by the emergence into this seemingly post-ideological world. Their accounts of the events surrounding the Kennedy assassination are the logical conclusion of a broad-based move away from a notion of politics as a source of progressive action. *Executioner's* critique of "the system," for example, is essentially Modernist in nature: Unlike its later counterparts, *Executioner* addresses the failure of a specific ideology (in this case the ideals of the American dream); in this sense its vision is specifically progressive, and the disillusionment it expresses is a product of the very lost "coherent reality" to which DeLillo refers. In contrast, while DeLillo and Mailer configure Oswald's ostensibly "political" crime as highly personal, it is only superficially linked to his ideology or the specific circumstances of his life. In this context, Gilmore's crimes of passion are in some ways more rational and more "political" than Oswald's pre-meditated "hit." Despite the media's depiction of Gilmore's shootings as "motiveless," Mailer presents them as a direct response to Gilmore's monstrous sense of thwartedness. By casting the murders as vengeance for the denial of Gilmore's basic rights to life, liberty,

and the pursuit of happiness, Mailer imbues them with a political significance that Oswald's act ironically now seems to lack.

Despite their rather obviously political subject matter, the novels' depiction of their "prime mover" as both apolitical and solipsistic would seem to argue in favor of Irving Howe and Frederick Karl's view of the American political novel as a kind of mythic beast. Between their "postmodern" assertion of the ultimate meaninglessness of both facts and events and the attendant discrediting of internally political content, it would be worthwhile to ask why either *Oswald's Tale* or *Libra* should be construed as political novels at all. This question raises again the vexed issue of whether the political nature of a work lies in its content or its representation of that content. However, to the extent that one of the central preoccupations of postmodern criticism is the relationship between aesthetics and ideology, a distinction must be made not only between the "real" or historical Oswald and the Oswald of DeLillo and Mailer's imagining, but also between Oswald's ideology, and that of his "authors'" representational strategies.² And while the issue of "postmodernity" as it pertains to either representative strategy or temporal positioning is itself "political," the location of its "political" nature is so confounding as to make the argument moot. Is DeLillo's "TV" Oswald, whose protean identity, or "absence of substantial and autonomous selfhood" (*Libra* 447) more "postmodern" than Mailer's master-manipulator? Or, is Mailer's self-conscious metanarration and interrogation of the "characters'" testimony more truly "postmodern" than DeLillo's fictionalized faithfulness to what he felt was the "truth" of the historical record?

The ironic "problem" with attempts to assimilate both notions of the political nature of texts is that while they may not be mutually exclusive in terms of political goal, they are so in terms of political "content." This problem is exemplified by a curious reversal evident in critical discussions of *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale*. While there are dozens, if not hundreds of scholarly articles that address *Libra* as an avatar of some aspect of a new postmodern consciousness (either of literature or of the self), *Oswald's Tale* has been virtually omitted from academic discussion.³ Although Mailer's novel was widely reviewed in the popular and literary press (the *Nation*, the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*), it was barely discussed in peer-reviewed literary journals. The simplest explanation for this omission could be the sheer volume of Kennedy assassination narratives in publication by 1995. The perception of these accounts as a kind of cottage industry had dogged *Libra* seven

years earlier,⁴ and very likely contributed to *Oswald's* dismissal as a species of pop journalism rather than "serious" literature.

More important, and more likely is the perception of *Oswald's Tale* as dated, or at least oddly devoid of critical subject matter. To put it simply, in a universe in which "context is now text" (Jehlen 42), critics found DeLillo's indictment of our subjection to mass media a richer source of cultural critique than Mailer's exhaustive account of the workings of human passions and political institutions. In such a critical climate, Mailer's very rationale for the writing of *Oswald's Tale* excludes it from the category of "political" critique. As a self-described "close reading" of The Warren Commission Report, Mailer's narrative embraces the very critical mode and faith in representation that poststructural literary criticism has rejected as de-politicized:

For two generations of Americans, the Warren Commission's twenty-six volumes ... have become a species of Talmudic text begging for commentary and further elucidation ... [T]he twenty-six volumes will also be a Comstock Lode of novelistic material, not of much use in solving a mystery ... but certainly to be honored for its short stories, historical vignettes, and vast cast of characters...."(*Oswald's Tale* 351)

Mailer's offering of *Oswald's Tale* as straightforward assessment of the political climate of the Cold War was read as similarly outmoded. In his view the political nature of *Oswald's Tale* is more or less transparent:

If we obtain nothing else, we can count on gaining a greater understanding of the dominant state of our political experience in these decades of the Cold War, for Oswald, willy-nilly, became one of the leading actors in this tragicomedy of superpowers who, with limited comprehension, lived in dread of each other. (*Oswald's Tale* 353)

Ironically, however, the very "postmodern critique" that Frank Lentricchia suggested made *Libra* so powerful and so topical in 1988 makes it strangely limited in 2009. *Libra's* occasional one-note quality is neither DeLillo's "fault" nor seemingly his intention, but instead a product of changing social and critical times. It is also a testament to Lentricchia's great influence as a critic.⁵

In any case, *Libra*'s reception as a specifically "postmodern" novel has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring the more concrete elements of its political analysis. Perhaps because DeLillo engages less than Mailer with Oswald's specific ideology, critics have virtually ignored its role in the novel, preferring to focus on its critique of Oswald's susceptibility to the heroic fictions of pop culture. Ironically, in post-structural terms DeLillo's depiction of Oswald's ideology and Jack Ruby's motivations is remarkably apolitical in that, unlike Mailer's, it hews remarkably close to received interpretations of the historical record.

In the case of these two novels, the most useful way to address the relationship of "the postmodern" to "the political" would be to see them as co-existent rather than mutually exclusive. Despite the temptation to oppose "internal" political content (*Executioner's* broad-scale critique of the late 1970s, or that of the proletarian/collective novels of the 1930s) to the "external" or "contextual" political nature of representation itself (present in all texts) it is more accurate to see both ways of reading as serving the same ends. What is more important than the *location* of a political critique is its *function*. In terms of their "postmodern" representational strategies, *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* are both "political" in that their rejection of structure—the reassuring frameworks of ideology, empiricism, and government—challenges official (state) versions of a nationally and culturally constitutive event. Both novels lay claim to extensive empirical evidence (the Warren Report and personal interviews) regarding the Kennedy assassination without reaching any conclusions regarding its "truth" or meaning. This stance questions the reassuring order represented by the testimony of solid citizens and ideologically transparent FBI men, and by implication, the legitimacy of the Warren Commission as representative of the state. This challenge to the status quo is one of the defining characteristics of what John Duvall calls "productive postmodernism,"⁶ but it is also the central assumption of any left-wing political novel.

Thus, in spite of their "postmodern" metacommentaries on Oswald as a cultural signifier, *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* have more in common with the socialist/proletarian novels of the thirties and forties than might be supposed. Mailer and DeLillo's reading of Oswald as both a producer and a product of social forces, rather than simply as "a private individual operating in the 'private sector'" (Lentricchia, "Don DeLillo" 2) forms a clear link to the more "traditionally" political novels of the first half of the twentieth

century. While their narratives propose a more complex vision of individualism (both isolating and liberating) than their precursors, neither Oswald nor the other figures in the novels is ever presented as truly divorced from their social and cultural circumstances. In contrast to the novels of “the new regionalists of and for the Reagan eighties” DeLillo and Mailer “offer us no myth of political virginity preserved, no ‘individuals’ who are not expressions of—and responses to—specific historical processes” (“Don DeLillo” 2). More important than the question of whether Oswald is a “modern” or a “postmodern figure” is the fact that both novels foreground individual agency as a specific response to social and political forces. In both *Libra* and *Oswald’s Tale*, Oswald is driven by the need to negotiate his identity between what the novels argue are mutually exclusive poles of individual and community.

The fact that these works discredit the possibility of a purely empirical account of the assassination suggests that their “meaning” lies not in what they may allege, but rather, in their power to reveal what is at stake for “the way the nation and its history are defined” (Sturken 45). This is why the most obvious divergence between the two narratives is surprisingly easy to overlook: In DeLillo’s version of the assassination, Oswald is not the assassin. Although he hits Kennedy, he does not fire the fatal shot. On the other hand, in *Oswald’s Tale* Mailer avoids explicitly linking Oswald with the definitive bullet (using caveats such as “Innocent or guilty” and “... if one supposes that he did shoot Kennedy”), but systematically shoots down most of the evidence to the contrary. David Courtwright is one of the very few critics to take up what would seem to be an important argument on DeLillo’s part: that Oswald was innocent. In “Why Oswald Missed” Courtwright addresses the very point that the notable absence of other commentary makes clear. In both narratives, the nature of the fatal shot is treated as an incidental rather than central element. Although Glen Thomas lumps *Libra* (and presumably *Oswald’s Tale*) into the hundreds of “reevaluations of the assassination,” (Thomas 107) neither work is “about” Oswald’s guilt or innocence, or even whether he acted alone or as part of a conspiracy.

In interviews, both Mailer and DeLillo have made it clear that their own judgments concerning Oswald’s role in the assassination are not only surprisingly unchallenging to the final conclusion reached by Warren Commission, but immaterial to their novels. DeLillo has reportedly dismissed Oliver Stone’s sensationalizing conspiracy film *JFK* as “Disneyland for paranoids,”

and rejects the plotting of *Libra* as nothing more than a plausible device: “I don’t think there was any orchestrated attempt by established offices in any intelligence agency ... I purposely chose the most obvious possibility—that the assassination was engineered by anti-Castro elements—simply as a way of being faithful to what we know of history” (qtd. in Heron 1). Mailer also leans toward the theory that Oswald acted alone, but interprets the terms “conspiracy” and “secret agent” rather broadly. When asked, by a *Newsweek* journalist for “the bottom line,” Mailer responds, “I think he did it by himself, but I think he was leaned on by the FBI and the CIA, which is why there was that tremendous effort at cover-up. Oswald was a do-it-yourself guy. It’s hard to see him giving his gun to someone else. It would have been like him giving his wife to someone else” (Sawhill 60).

Mailer implies, that for state purposes, empirical evidence was far less important than bringing in the necessary verdict. Although he favors the Lone Assassin theory, Mailer suggests that the evidence alone wouldn’t have been enough to convict Oswald:

In my mind there’s a 75 percent probability that [Oswald]’s the lone assassin, but I don’t consider the case closed. If I had been his lawyer, I could have gotten him off. I’ll bet any decent lawyer could have gotten him off. Unless you had a hanging jury, the jurists would have to have a reasonable doubt. There’s too many loose ends. The biggest loose end would have been the magic bullet. That ... alone is enough to get a guy off! (DePree 3)

The same argument appears in *Oswald’s Tale* in a slightly more pointed form. While Mailer stops short of accusing J. Edgar Hoover of a blatant miscarriage of justice, the implication is clear: “Given Hoover’s conclusion in the first twenty-four hours after JFK’s assassination that Oswald did it all by himself, the word passed down the line quickly: FBI men would prosper best by arriving at pre-ordained results” (*Oswald’s Tale* 612).

A 1977 article in *Foreign Policy* confirms Mailer’s assertion. In the article Donald Schulz asserts that the lone gunman theory was the official position of the State Department almost immediately after Oswald’s death. According to Schulz, “the evidence strongly supports that there was an overwhelming predisposition on the part of the White House, the Justice Department, the FBI, the CIA, and the commission itself to accept Lee Harvey

Oswald as Kennedy's lone killer, without adequately investigating other hypotheses and leads that might have led to different conclusions" (58).

In "*Libra* as Postmodern Critique," Frank Lentricchia argues against the novel's basis in the elements of traditional social critique: "*Libra* is a fiction of social destiny, but one which largely sets aside the usual arguments of determinism based on class, social setting, ethnicity and race" (435). Here Lentricchia dismisses the novel's very real engagement with issues of race and class, claiming that the role that these forces played in naturalist (and presumably socialist) novels is replaced by the more totalized oppression of "the charismatic environment of the image": "DeLillo's American tragedy is classless, not because he refuses to recognize the differences that class can make, but because the object of desire, what is insistently imagined in *Libra* as the conferrer of happiness, is never located in the privileged social space of those Fitzgerald called 'the very rich' ..." (436). In other words, the object of aspiration is no longer material, but rather, to become the object of aspiration itself. Lentricchia's reading is extremely sharp, but it also has the potential to reduce many of the characters in the novel to ethnic stereotypes, and to cast their struggles as a "modernist" anachronism. For example, Lentricchia writes:

In the voice of Jack Ruby, DeLillo appears to have opened an escape hatch back to the earth of the robust ethnic life. The illusion of the essential health and purity of the ethnic voice—its self-possession—is strengthened by DeLillo's narrative strategy in the Ruby sections of the book, his virtual disappearance as a narrator: not into "DeLillo" but into the objective dramatist who writes pure dialogue ... The illusion is of the ethnic voice's accessibility, its sincere public thereness. It feels good to be released through Ruby from 'the world within the world' ... the ethnic familiarity and charm of Ruby's voice is a sort of code that tells us we are at last outside of the subterranean world of power.... ("Don DeLillo" 26)

While the subsuming of racial, ethnic, and regional identities by the media spectacle is clearly DeLillo's point and the source of his critique, Lentricchia doesn't acknowledge the degree to which *Libra* depicts these elements as co-existent rather than mutually exclusive. In fact, it is the

irresolvable tension between these two forms of identification that is reflected in Oswald's schizophrenic ideology. And, as Lentricchia himself points out, it is Oswald's point of view that dominates the novel: "The disturbing strength of *Libra*—and DeLillo gives no quarter on this—is its refusal to offer its readers a comfortable place outside of Oswald" ("Don DeLillo" 17). Thus, the relief the reader feels upon being "released" into Ruby's voice equates Oswald's worldview, and not DeLillo's, with the "subterranean world of power" that makes the novel so claustrophobic.

The most obvious refutation of Lentricchia's assertion is DeLillo's invention of Bobby Dupard, Oswald's African-American cellmate, and confederate in the attempt on the life of General Edwin Walker. While Dupard's lively and often funny commentary could be read as possessing the "ethnic familiarity and charm" and "accessibility" to which Lentricchia refers, its potential as comforting stereotype is belied by its cynical bite. As DeLillo suggests, the brig's shifting power relations defeat any lasting form of solidarity. Such an analysis of power relations has more in common with a traditional left-wing critique than Lentricchia owns. Furthermore, DeLillo credits this analysis to Oswald. As Oswald watches Dupard's beating, he can't help but imagine ways to avoid his own. Nevertheless, he reflects on his own reaction:

[h]e hated the guards, secretly sided with them against some of the prisoners, thought they deserved what they got, the prisoners who were stupid and cruel. He felt his rancor consistently shift, felt secret satisfactions, hated the brig routine, despised the men who could not master it, although he knew it was contrived to defeat them all. (*Libra* 100)

As DeLillo points out, the power structure of the brig is not equally oppressive to all; its cruelest divisions are along the lines of race and masculinity. Dupard is harassed with racist epithets and beaten for no apparent reason, while Oswald's harassment is intended to impugn his masculinity. Although Oswald and Dupard are allied through their shared marginal status and desire to disrupt power relations, their political common cause never breaches the racial divide. Dupard's solidarity with Oswald is real, but uneasy; his conversations with Oswald are marked by a good-natured but satiric wit. Instead of the mentor that Oswald is searching for, the "artful old

con who would advise the younger man ... a grizzled figure with kind and tired eyes," Oswald "wasn't sure what he had here in Bobby R. Dupard" (99). DeLillo underscores the divisiveness of race contained in the two men's differing perceptions of the military. While both men joke about their mothers' misguided faith in the armed services, it appeals to Oswald in ways in cannot to Dupard. Dupard comments: "I definitely get the idea they want to send me home in a box. The first minute I put on the green service coat, I look like I'm dead. It's a coffin suit for a fool. I seen it on the spot." Poor and disenfranchised though he is, Oswald is white. In his army uniform, where Dupard sees a dead man, Oswald sees an idealized self: "I liked the uniform ... It was great how it looked. I was surprised how great I felt ... I looked in the mirror and said it's me" (106).

Similarly, while Oswald emphasizes his and Dupard's oppression by a common and faceless enemy ("it" vs. "we") Dupard underscores the isolating effects of racism ("they" vs. "me"). Oswald tells Dupard, "*it's* the whole huge system; *we're* a zero in the system." Dupard responds, "[*t*]*hey* give *me* their special attention. Better believe" (106, emphasis added). Unbeknownst to Oswald, the two men are also divided in their cosmologies. Dupard's ideology is religious; Oswald's political. In response to Oswald's comment about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a book about "us here and now," Dupard responds, "I used to read the Bible." In turn, Oswald's version of a faith from which he's fallen away is the Marine Corps manual: "... I read the Marine Corps manual ... Then I found out what it's really all about. How to be a tool of the system. It's the perfect capitalist handbook" (106).

Ideology, and later the brig, provide for Oswald the sense of destiny and meaning for which Dupard once turned to the Bible. As DeLillo points out, his atheism is intolerable for mainstream Americans. In the service he had once told Reitmeyer [that] communism was the one true religion:

He'd been speaking seriously but also for effect. He could enrage Reitmeyer by calling himself an atheist. Reitmeyer thought you had to be forty years old before you could claim that distinction. It was a position you had to earn through years of experience ... maybe the brig was a kind of religion too. All prison. Something you carried with you all your life, a counterforce to politics and lies. This went deeper than anything they could tell you from the pulpit. It carried a truth no one could contradict. (100)

Despite Stacey Olster's characterization of DeLillo's Oswald as "almost a *throwback* to modernist alienation" (49), DeLillo reads Oswald's peculiarly cipher-like sense of self as a *precursor* of postmodern consciousness. As Lentricchia himself points out, the other figures in the novel have a concrete quality that Oswald does not. Not coincidentally they also have a connection to specific moments in history that, for better or worse, anchors their frames of reference in time and space. Thus, it is not Oswald, but the other characters in *Libra* who exhibit the modernist alienation of Olster's argument. Unlike Oswald's, the disillusionment of Jack Ruby, David Ferrie, Guy Bannister, Wayne Elko, and the disillusioned revolutionary Raymo stems from the failure of the ideological frameworks upon which they based their lives.

In the experiences of Raymo, a Castro supporter who takes part in the assassination plot, DeLillo underscores the inextricable relationship between religion and ideology.⁷ Raymo is embittered not only by the betrayal of the United States, but by Castro's as well. His memories of the revolution reveal the qualities that made Castro such a powerfully inspiring, and devastating, figure:

He was with Castro in the movement ... Fidel was some kind of magical figure then ... Tall, strong, long-haired ... mixing theory and raw talk ... explaining everything ... He made the revolution something people felt on their bodies. The ideas, the whistling words, they throbbed in all the senses. He was like Jesus in boots, preaching everywhere he went, withholding his identity from the campesinos until the time was dramatically right.... From the first minute, Castro was inventing a convenient history of the revolution to advance his grab for power, to become the Maximum Leader. (*Libra* 184-5)

As a kind of "Jesus in boots" Castro's "mixing theory and raw talk" and "explaining everything" seems to unify the most painful and insoluble dichotomy in human experience. Earthy and pious, simple and intellectual, Castro marries the bodily to the spiritual. His "preaching" of communist ideology explains the origin of people's suffering, and like a religion, brings meaning to their lives. The mixture of "theory" and "raw talk" which translates the revolution into "something people felt on their bodies" makes the

link between the personal and political manifest, and closes the gap between political theory and its practice. Finally, however, even Castro is revealed to have feet of clay. Not only does he rewrite history in order to achieve the power he supposedly eschewed, but his ideals are revealed to be hollow. Later, Raymo explains to Oswald,

I used to believe the great thing of Castro was the time he spent in prison ... I used to say this is the man's honor and strength. He comes out of prison with authority if he is sent there for his beliefs. It is completely different in Castro's own prisons. We came out of La Cabana with anger and disgust. We were the worms of the CIA. (293)

In response to Oswald's proud claim that he was sent to prison in the military "for politics ... Just like Fidel" (293), and that going to prison for one's beliefs is "a necessary stage in the evolution of any movement that cuts against the system ..." (294), Raymo points out the extreme naïveté of Oswald's idealization of Castro and of his faith in revolutionary ideology:

Castro spent fourteen months in an isolation cell. He read Karl Marx. He read Russian. He told us he read twelve hours a day ... Always studying, always analyzing. Years later I saw the executions of men who fought by his side in the mountains ... I thought about it a lot ... and I'll tell you my beliefs. I believed in the United States of America. The country that could do no wrong. With the great U.S. behind us how could we lose? They told us, they told us, they promise ... We have the full backing of the military. We went to the beaches thinking they would support us with air, with Navy ... What happens? We find ourselves in the swamps, lost and hungry, eating tree bark ... They disarmed us and fastened our hands in one big looping chain and put us in troop trucks to go to the nearest militia camp and there's a plane passing right overhead and I call out 'Don't shoot boys, it's one of ours.' (294)

But Oswald is not quick to give up his faith in communism. In the brig he turns to communism to reconfigure his physical constraint as freedom from

the constraints of his ego. There he relinquishes responsibility for his personal destiny. Instead of his own abasement,

[h]e tried to feel history in the cell. This was history out of George Orwell, the territory of no-choice. He could see how he'd been headed here since the day he was born. The brig was invented just for him, It was just another name for the stunted rooms where he'd spent his life ... He'd been headed here from the start. Inevitable ... Maybe what has to happen is that the individual must allow himself to be swept along, must find himself in the stream of no-choice, the single direction. This is what makes things inevitable. You use the penalties and restrictions they invent to make yourself stronger. History means to merge. The purpose of history is to climb out of your own skin. He knew what Trotsky had written, that revolution leads us out of the dark night of the isolated self. We live forever in history, outside ego and id. (100–101)

In *Libra* Oswald is torn between two conflicting frameworks: that of the Marine Corps, which glorifies the individual, and that of Communism, which subsumes it within a larger agenda. While The Marine Corps champions individual agency, his contact with the Party “didn’t see the individual,” and “never talked to Lee in a personal way” (94). However, the Marine Corps also imprisons Oswald, first within its rules, and later, in the brig. As the guard in the brig reminds Oswald, “In this head we know our [Marine Corps] manual word for word ... In the final assault it is the *individual* Marine with his rifle ... who closes with the enemy and destroys him” (103–4, emphasis added).

For Oswald, the traditional “function” of ideology is reversed. Unlike the other characters in the novel, whose ideologies are an expression of their identities, which is to say, the sum total of their nationalities, ethnicities, and value systems, Oswald delimits his identity through the political ideology he adopts. If Oswald’s ideology can be characterized, it is an ideology of opposition. In the United States, where he is poor, he is a Marxist, and fixates on a life in the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, where his salary supplemented and his work light, he feels oppressed by the lack of social freedom and the scarcity of high-quality consumer goods. As both DeLillo and Mailer

point out in different ways, what looks like inconsistency in Oswald's politics is really a misperception of his true motivation. Because the ultimate goal of Oswald's ideology is establishing an identity rather than accomplishing specific political goals (that is, being rather than doing) it lacks content in the traditional, or perhaps "Modernist" sense of the word. It does not, however, lack context. For Oswald, Marxism serves several functions, the least of which are its ideals of collectivity and equality. More importantly, in the 1950s it was an obvious choice for someone looking, as Oswald was, to define himself in opposition to his environment.

In *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale*, Marxist ideology offers Oswald an opportunity to reconfigure his alienation from his peers as a positive choice. Its narrative of economic oppression and the subjugation of the weak by the strong confer meaning on Oswald's marginal status. As a high school student, his discovery of the writings of Marx, Trotsky and Lenin open up a "world within the world" that simultaneously assuages his loneliness and frees him from the insularity of his peers and the stifling domesticity of his mother's tiny apartment.⁸ DeLillo imagines Oswald as a high school student sitting "cross-legged on the floor, scanning titles for hours," in search of

books that *put him at a distance from his classmates*, closed the world around him. They had their civics and home economics. *He wanted subjects and ideas of historical scope*, ideas that touched his life, his true life, the whirl of time around him ... He'd read pamphlets, seen photographs in *Life* ... *People of Russia, the other world.* (33, emphasis added)

The young Oswald identifies with the loneliness of the revolutionaries, and their struggle against a common enemy: "These were men who lived in isolation for long periods, lived close to death through long winters in exile or prison, feeling history in the room, waiting for the moment when it would surge through the walls, taking them with it. History was a force to these men ... they felt it and waited" (34). The narrative of revolution, also makes sense of Oswald's daily life and grants dignity to his marginal social position: "He found enough that he could understand. He could see the capitalists, he could see the masses. They were right here, all around him, every day" (34). Later, when Oswald is stationed in Japan as a Marine, his fascination with communism is strengthened by its potential to confer upon him the

trappings of adulthood. For a nineteen-year-old Private teased for his small stature and high-strung personality, its association with intellectual, social and sexual sophistication is irresistible.

Oswald's discussions with Konno, a mysterious figure he meets in a nightclub while stationed in Japan lessen his sense of isolation, and counter the humiliation of his army experience. Konno, who is suggested to be a Soviet agent, is master of a skillful totalizing rhetoric that assuages Oswald's hunger for meaning by placing his struggles in the context of a common human experience. Soon, Oswald "counted on these discussions with Konno, who was able to argue Lee's own positions from a historic rather than personal viewpoint" (88). Through his association with Konno, Oswald also has his first sexual experience, which underscores his new sense of destiny and belonging. In the woman's room,

[h]e felt different, serious, still. He was part of something streaming through the world ... The moment had been waiting to happen. The room had been here since the day he was born, waiting for him, just like this, to walk through the door. It was just a question of walking in the door, entering the stream of things.
(84)

Although Oswald craves connection, DeLillo and Mailer return repeatedly to his bid for singularity. In different ways, both authors see Oswald's fascination with fame as the result of the nebulous boundaries of his personality, which necessitate defining himself in opposition to his environment. Because of his competing needs to merge and individuate Oswald is most comfortable in anonymity, as an outsider. In Japan, where he is serving in the Air Force, Oswald walks alone, literally losing himself in the "mazes of narrow streets mobbed with shoppers." There, as DeLillo points out, "[h]e was remarkably calm. There was something about being off-base, away from his countrymen, out of America, that took the edge off his wariness eased his rankled skin" (83).

Mailer pinpoints Oswald's sense of himself as an exceptional person as the source of an unbridgeable rift between Oswald's political ideology and his personal goals. Unlike Gilmore, whose fatalism and belief in Karma complicated his individualism, Oswald "always felt that he was extraordinary personally and that he had to do something extraordinary" (DePree 3). In this

way, Gilmore and Oswald's positions are oddly reversed. Despite Gilmore's individualist and determinedly anti-social stance, he was primarily motivated by the desire for *affinity*. As Mailer contends, "Gary wanted freedom and love ... he wanted to be with Nicole" (DePree 10). Oswald's self-perception on the other hand, was more conflicted. His desire to see himself as a Lukacksian Great Man runs contrary to his wish to "lose himself in history ... outside the borders of ego and id" and "to merge his life with the greater tide of history" (DeLillo *Libra* 87). In short, while Oswald claimed to abjure the notion of the individual in favor of community, *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* oppose his desire to merge with history to his solipsistic desire to control it.

Mailer and DeLillo see Oswald's marriage as symbolic of the split between his personal and political lives. In keeping with their dissimilar worldviews, however, the two authors characterize the split differently. In a letter to his brother, quoted in the body of *Oswald's Tale* and on the frontispiece of *Libra*, Oswald claims that for him "happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home ... Happiness is taking part in the struggle where there is no borderline between one's own personal world and the world in general." For DeLillo, Oswald's vacillation between the intimacy of domestic partnership and the broader fellowship of communism is a choice between two mutually exclusive sources of belonging. For him, domestic life inextricably links belonging with consumption:

He got Marina settled in bed, then sat next to her ... he felt the power of her stillness ... and of the child she carried. He would start saving right away for a washing machine and a car. They'd get an apartment ... their own furniture for a change, modern pieces ... these are standard ways to stop being lonely. (*Libra* 371)

But DeLillo also suggests a certain ideological *naïveté* on Oswald's part. Oswald is surprised to find that his Soviet friends place the most value on their private lives:

He talked to his friends about Cuba, surprised to find they weren't passionate about the subject ... Chocolate was expensive. These people had a vicious sweet tooth. Always a crowd at

the local confectionery. Life was small things Chocolate, a record player, a meal at the automat. (199)

Mailer makes the same observation in *Oswald's Tale*. Like the young Soviets in *Libra*, Marina inhabits only the small-scale landscape of her personal experience: "Of course Marina's grandmother used to tell her, 'Politics is poop!' How Russian is such an attitude: My private life is my only wealth! She was in this sense the worst possible wife for Oswald" (*Oswald's Tale* 555). As Mailer's inclusion of Marina's testimony indicates, her derision of Oswald's activities spurred him on in his political pursuits and alienated him from their marriage: "You see, when I would make fun of him, of his activity ... he said that I didn't understand him and here, you see, was proof that someone else did, that there were people who understood his activity" (*Oswald's Tale* 555). As Mailer points out, The Oswalds' opposing orientations to life also creates conflicts in Oswald himself: "We come back to his basic dilemma: To which half of himself will he be faithful—his need for love, or his need for power and fame?" (*Oswald's Tale* 555).

In *Libra*, the fictionalized version of rogue agent David Ferrie is the mouthpiece for DeLillo's shrewd assessment of Oswald's ideology. Ferrie sums up Oswald's attraction to radicalism: "I think you've had it backwards this whole time. You wanted to enter history ... What you really want is out. Get out. Jump out. Find your place and name on another level" (*Libra* 384). Ferrie also tries to convince Oswald that the plan that has been conceived for Oswald to carry out is both Oswald's destiny and his own creation. Pointing out that Kennedy's motorcade will pass the building where Oswald works, Ferrie tells him, "There's no such *thing* as coincidence ... it happens because you make it happen ... You see what this means. How it shows what you've got to do ... There's something else that's generating this event. A pattern outside experience. Something that jerks you out of the spin of history" (384).

While *Libra* presents Oswald's Marxism as a kind of exoskeleton for his amorphous ego, *Oswald's Tale* configures his politics conversely as an expression of that ego's demands. But Mailer's Oswald is also a vehicle for Mailer's own concerns. In this sense *Oswald's Tale* is like a number of Mailer's other works of "entrepreneurial" journalism which, Morris Dickstein notes, must be read through the lens of "old Mailer obsessions, which sometimes obstruc[t] our view of the subject." (*Leopards* 161). These "obsessions," which

also include war, masculinity, and homosexuality, shadow Mailer's otherwise sharp critique of Oswald's radical individualism and his depiction of Jack Ruby's relationship to Jewish and American identity.

In terms of specific ideology, Mailer's Oswald is a far more protean figure than DeLillo's. Unlike DeLillo, Mailer depicts Oswald's political rhetoric as contradictory. Here Mailer is on solid ground, particularly because his assertion is based on historical documents to which DeLillo did not have access. Here Mailer cites KGB transcripts in which Oswald argues with Marina. Now that Oswald wants to return to the U.S. he argues in favor of the very elements of American life he denigrated when he renounced his citizenship. Ironically, he cites the wish for property as his reason for returning to the U.S., and chides Marina for her disinterest in private ownership. In direct opposition to his statements in the letter to his brother, Oswald offers Marina the pleasures of a private life, which he implies will provide her with everything she needs:

LHO: You'll never have anything here, but over there you'll have your husband and everything.

WIFE: ... What will I do there? I'll sit at home the whole time and that's it.

LHO: ... But you're going to live with me there. You'll have everything ... What do you have here? One room ... and even that isn't yours.

WIFE: We live here, it's ours.

LHO: ... I don't sense that it's my own ... I don't get any feeling it's mine... .

WIFE: Idiot, you don't understand anything. (*mimics him*) Property, property.

LHO: You don't understand this concept of property ... I want to live there because the standard of living is high. (Mailer, *Oswald's Tale* 231)

Mailer doesn't attempt to resolve the contradictions inherent in Oswald's ideology. Rather he reads in them retrospectively the potential to commit an act like the one Oswald committed: "[A] man who can have congress with Stalinist and Trotskyite organizations at the same time when they have been implacable enemies for close to three decades, may be ready to deal with any

political contradiction if it will advance his purpose" (515). More importantly, Mailer's comments suggest a certain amount of admiration for Oswald's *realpolitik*. Rather than seeing Oswald's politics as contradictory, he is able to see them in a dialectical relationship, and hence, in constant flux:

I'm a great believer that if you advance an idea as far as you can and it's overtaken by someone who argues the opposite of you, in effect you've improved your enemy's mind. Then someone will come along on your side and convert your enemy's improvement of your idea and convert it back again. I'm nothing if I'm not a believer in *the dialectic* ... The thought of everyone thinking the way I do is as bad as any other form of totalitarianism. (Begiebing 329, emphasis added)

Neither Oswald's politics nor his personality was easily amenable to its environment. To a large extent this was the inevitable effect of his oppositional nature, but this trait itself was at least partially the result of socioeconomic factors. Like Gilmore, Oswald was somewhat of a fish out of water in his own time. Morris Dickstein's depiction of postwar American society as a time of "peace, prosperity and galloping consumerism" (*Leopards* 17), and when the advent of "the new therapeutic culture of psychoanalysis" was "gradually replacing [the] social consciousness" of the Depression (*Leopards* 53) suggests that Oswald's ostensibly left-wing politics were, in the affluent and contented atmosphere of the postwar, a throwback to the oppositional stance of the Old Left progressives of the 1930s. Given Oswald's social and economic marginality, such identification on his part is not surprising. As the son of a single mother who barely earned enough to pay the rent on their series of "small rooms," Oswald hardly felt the benefits of postwar prosperity. The "supermarkets, air-conditioning ... and dishwashers" that could be "taken for granted by middle class Americans by the 1960s ..." (*Leopards* 17) were not part of his experience. Generationally, Oswald should have been a part of the New Left, but his social conservatism and defensive enforcement of gender roles would most likely have alienated him from his peers. Temperamentally, Oswald was suited to neither affiliation, a conflict played out in the "double life" engendered by his simultaneous attraction to "Karl Marx and the U.S. Marine Corps manual" (*Oswald's Tale* 372).

Mailer's personal dialectic creates inconsistencies in his depiction of Oswald, and, at times, papers over a failure to resolve conflicts in his own values. Although Mailer later hews to Oswald's self-identification as a Marxist, Oswald's political manifesto, "The Athenian Credo" eschews both communism and capitalism, and is arguably as right wing as it is left wing. Here Mailer points out, "Oswald, ironically, was a libertarian rather than a leftist by the end.... He was adamantly opposed to government, believing only small collective groups, by agreement, work" (DePree 3). Not only does Mailer later insist on Oswald's *rejection* of collective action, he also ignores the ramifications of his comment that "some ultra-right-wingers do not sound like reactionaries but libertarians; that, on the evidence of the Athenian credo, appealed to Oswald" (*Oswald's Tale* 515).

The credo seems to appeal to Mailer as well, for his assessment of Oswald's politics is most in keeping with his own position as a "left conservative." True to Mailer's own values, Oswald's "Atheian System" creates "a truly democratic system" by assimilating what he felt were the best features of the world's two dominant economic systems and marrying them to American social freedoms. Oswald's utopia abolishes nationalism, a centralized State, and the taxation of individual citizens. It maintains freedom of speech, universal suffrage, and free compulsory education. Interestingly, while both private and collective enterprises are guaranteed, "monopoly practices [will] be considered capitalistic," "[t]hat combining of separate collective or private enterprise into single collective units [will] be considered as communistic" (*Oswald's Tale* 506–07).

Oswald's credo is essentially populist, as Mailer points out. It is attractive to "the mass of Americans" (*Oswald's Tale* 507), which is to say, a wide swath of working-and middle-class people. Like Mailer's own work, the contradictions inherent in Oswald's system are intended to "[mount] a pincers attack on the status quo," but are both in spite of this and because of this, peculiarly American in stance. In rejecting both the "Soviet Communist International Movement" and State intrusion into private life (centralization and taxation) Oswald's politics are almost purely reactionary. No sooner does Oswald characterize his system as "opposed to Communism, Socialism, and capitalism (sic)," he makes it clear that his anticipation of "the final destruction of the capitalist system" makes way for a new and specifically *American* Communist Party. Such a party must declare independence from the "domination and influence" of its Soviet motherland, thereby acting to

“free the radical movement from its inertia” and transcend its current status as a “weakened” and “stale class of fifth columnists of the Russians,” in the service of “[safeguarding] an independent course of action ... an American course” (*Oswald’s Tale* 506–07).

In Oswald Mailer finds the perfect marriage of Emersonian hero and the prototypical autocrat, Adolph Hitler. In summing up Oswald’s manifesto, Mailer cautions the reader against the inevitable outcome of revolutionary thought: “Has there ever been a dictator who did not issue comparable statements in the early years of his revolution?” (*Oswald’s Tale* 508). On the other hand, one of Mailer’s most important authorial “speculations” casts Oswald’s perception of the assassination as an Emersonian act. Extending Priscilla Johnson McMillan’s thesis in her biography, *Marina and Lee*, Mailer claims that Oswald was “presented [with] a new conflict-to be the instrument of history or the leading man” (*Oswald’s Tale* 782). While Mailer admits, “Oswald may never have read Emerson,” he encourages us to read a passage from Emerson’s “Heroism” as a primary source of insight into Oswald’s character. According to Mailer, “[the passage] gives us luminous insight into what had to be Oswald’s opinion of himself as he sat ... waiting for the Kennedy motorcade-he was committing himself to the most heroic deed of which he was capable” (*Oswald’s Tale* 783, emphasis added). Here Mailer appears to depict the assassination attempt as the result of Oswald’s delusions of grandeur. Ventriloquizing Oswald’s belief that “‘It had become his fate to decapitate the American political process’” (*Oswald’s Tale* 782; McMillan 518).⁹ Mailer cites Emerson on the heroism of dissent: “‘[Heroism] works in contradiction to the voice of mankind and in contradiction, for a time, to the voice of the great and good. Heroism is obedience to a secret impulse of an individual’s character’” (*Oswald’s Tale* 783).

Oswald did read *Mein Kampf*, lent to him by Russian émigré and possible CIA agent, George de Mohrenschildt. Although he comes off as more Machiavellian than libertarian, de Mohrenschildt and Oswald occupy a certain common ground:

Possessor of an eclecticism that made him delight in presenting himself as right-wing, left-wing, a moralist, an immoralist, ... de Mohrenschildt could hardly have failed to see that there was a profound divide between Oswald’s ideology and his character: Absolute freedom for all was the core of his political vision, yet

he treated Marina as if he were a Nazi corporal shaping up a recruit. (*Oswald's Tale* 458)

Mailer speculates at length, but somewhat inconclusively, on what de Mohrenschildt's attitude toward Oswald might have been, and on what his intentions might have been in presenting Oswald with Hitler's biography. However, Mailer does quote several passages from *Mein Kampf*, as he does from Emerson, with the understanding that they be read as a parallel to Oswald's thinking:

[O]ne can think of no moment in Oswald's life when he would have been more ready to ... feel some identity with Hitler than in these weeks alone in Dallas working at a low-paying job while feeling within himself every presentiment that he was a man destined for greatness against all odds. So it is worth looking at a few of Hitler's remarks. (*Oswald's Tale* 457)

Mailer chooses well, for the passages he quotes concerning Hitler's early loneliness and poverty and the comforts of reading mirror Oswald's experience exactly. Most importantly, Mailer quotes an italicized passage that was apparently of particular importance to Hitler, and by association, Oswald:

It must never be forgotten that nothing that is really great in this world has ever been achieved by coalitions, but that it has always been the success of a single victor ... Great, truly world-shaking revolutions ... are not even conceivable and realizable except as the titanic struggles of individual formations. (*Oswald's Tale* 457)

Mailer goes on to note "Individual formations' are, of course, to be understood as a synonym for *one man*" (*Oswald's Tale* 457).

Mailer is careful to limit his association of Oswald with Adolph Hitler to what he argues is their shared belief in the individual as historical catalyst. He takes pains to disassociate him from racism or any other forms of extreme nationalism. To that end he reasserts for Oswald the very political positioning he earlier cast into doubt:

Oswald was a Marxist. To relax his grip on Marxism would have been equal to intellectual decomposition for himself. The concept of a fatherland was odious to him; can one conceive of his “feeling inner pride in the privilege” [qtd. in *Mein Kampf*] of being an American? He would hate concepts of race and historically destined folk. (459, emphasis added)

Ultimately, Oswald’s political ideology is moot. The Great Man theory of history that Mailer imputes to Oswald is impossible to assimilate into Oswald’s Marxism without acceding to Mailer’s central argument about him. Instead, the man Mailer claims was a Marxist but “not a leftist,” casts as a libertarian but presents as a reactionary, is first and foremost, an embodiment of his Hipster or Psychopath whose radical individualism Mailer sees as a courageous stand against the conformity that composes “the partially totalitarian society” (“The White Negro” 339) that determines the fate of American lives.

If we take into account Mailer’s division of American society into a dichotomy between the Rebel, a “frontiersman in the Wild West,” and the Conformist, “a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society” (“The White Negro” 339), his comparison of Oswald to Emerson and Hitler is problematic. While such a comparison immediately suggests itself as a trenchant critique of the dark side of American individualism, Mailer makes no attempt to address its ramifications. As a number of critics have pointed out (Menand, McCann, and Patell) Mailer’s agon is with liberalism rather than individualism. But in this case, Mailer’s failure to address the contradictions and, perhaps more importantly, the affinities between Emerson’s Individual and Hitler’s Superman mar an otherwise sharp critique of American values in both the Cold War and the Reagan/Bush era.

Mailer’s personal biases (or perhaps, “obsessions”) also cloud a potentially superb reading of Jack Ruby. While Mailer’s vivid descriptions of Ruby are some of the most compelling in *Oswald’s Tale*, his treatment of Ruby’s testimony and Ruby himself, rather than illuminating the ways that race and class inform political power, reveals the ways in which Mailer’s “fetishization of racial difference” (Dickstein, *Leopards* 35) and preoccupation with tribal identity encourage a reversion to stereotype.

Mailer calls Jack Ruby “a spiritual brother to Oswald” (*Oswald’s Tale* 740), and (like Nicole in *Executioner*) Ruby functions as a kind of secondary

protagonist in the novel. In a section entitled “The Amateur Hit Man,” Mailer describes Ruby as:

A minor thug from the streets of Chicago ... [h]e is of the Mob in the specific values of his code, and yet never a formal member in any way—too wacky, too eager, too obsessed with himself, too Jewish even for the Jewish mob. All the same, he is pure Mafia in one part of his spirit—he wants to be known as a patriot in love with his country and his people. He is loyal. Select him and you will not make a mistake. (*Oswald's Tale* 733)

Like Oswald's attraction to Marxism, Ruby's identification with the Mafia serves specific personal agendas that are at odds both with each other and with the organization itself. If Oswald cannot be loyal to any personal or political connection, Ruby is loyal to too many. As Mailer points out, this intense loyalty makes Ruby both a true member and an eternal outcast from the familial “nostra” of the Mafia. But this is also true of his relationship to American identity. Narcissistic (“obsessed with himself”), unapologetically ethnocentric (“too Jewish even for the Jewish mob”), and self-consciously patriotic (painfully anxious to prove his love for “his country and his people”), Ruby's conflicting loyalties make him vulnerable to exploitation. His liminal position—neither insider nor outsider—makes him equally expendable to the Mafia and the Warren Commission, and therefore, like Oswald, an ideal candidate to carry out the political errands of opposing organizations. Also like Oswald, Ruby sees himself as a patsy, telling Earl Warren “I have been used for a purpose” (*Oswald's Tale* 740; WC 5: 211).

In Mailer's work, the tragedy of Ruby's life is that, unlike Oswald, he *knew* he was “just a patsy” from the beginning, but had no power to prevent it. Mailer's reconstruction of Ruby's testimony before the Commission suggests that Ruby was the sacrificial lamb for a number of political agendas. Not only was he coerced to kill Oswald and accept full responsibility for the act, but the Commission's failure (or refusal) to recognize the danger of his position forced Ruby back to a cover story that served its purposes. During his testimony before the Commission, Ruby petitions Earl Warren in vain for protection, claiming “there will be a certain tragic occurrence happening if you don't take my testimony and somehow vindicate me so *my people* don't

suffer because of what I have done" (*Oswald's Tale* 740; WC 5: 211, emphasis added).

Ruby, in his testimony, refers to either "his people" or "his "family" at least three times. While Ruby seems to use the terms to refer solely to his immediate family, Mailer interprets Ruby's usage of both phrases as a reference to the Jewish people as a whole. This interpretation of Ruby's reference to "my people," while far broader than Ruby seems to have intended, illuminates Mailer's view of Ruby's position in the larger context of American identity. Mailer's depiction of Ruby's Jewish identity as a kind of tribal connection that subsumes American identity seems (like that of Oswald's sexuality) overdetermined. But, as Sean McCann reminds us, Mailer is no liberal. Rather than celebrating a civic identification, Mailer's "fiction and social criticism emphasize the way that, in its celebration of 'deep' and 'familial' kinds of political obligation—of communities unified by 'common history' and bound by moral ties antecedent to choice—the republicanist vision lends itself to a fascination with racial exclusivity" (McCann 298).

A more accurate sense of the nature of Ruby's concerns is indicated by his interchangeable use of the phrases "my people" and "my family." Earlier in his testimony, Ruby has told the commission "my whole *family* is in jeopardy" qualifying this with, "My *sisters*, as to their lives" (*Oswald's Tale* 737, emphasis added). Ruby goes on to list the members of his family by name, including his sisters and his in-laws, claiming again "they are in jeopardy ... just because they are *blood-related to myself*..." (*Oswald's Tale* 738, emphasis added). While the Jews are very arguably Ruby's "people," Mailer's contention that Ruby acted on orders from the Mafia and therefore feared its retaliation for "talking," contradicts, even without Ruby's own references to his sisters, his own reading. While Mailer attempts to impute to Ruby a simplistic "tribal" loyalty "antecedent" to any other, Ruby's actual comments suggest a more basic and politically assimilable loyalty to the members of his immediate family.

Ruby's conflict arose from a far more complex negotiation of competing *loyalties* to various identities than Mailer's limited vision of mutually exclusive loyalty shifting among competing tribes. While Mailer goes out of his way to defend his interpretation of Ruby as obsessed with paranoid fantasies of Jewish persecution, he is uncharacteristically silent regarding evidence that, given the ethnic and racial stratifications of the American South in the early 1960s, Ruby's fear of anti-Semitism was not wholly irrational. Mailer

chooses to focus on Ruby's blood ties to his ethnic identity rather than explore the disturbingly widespread (and documented) influence of pseudo-"nationalist" organizations like the John Birch Society.

The basis for Mailer's assessment that Ruby is "all-but-insane" (*Oswald's Tale* 740), which is to say, paranoid, is most likely an apparent non sequitur in Ruby's testimony before the Commission in which he claims that "[t]he Jewish people are being exterminated at this moment. Consequently, a whole new form of government is going to take over our country, and I won't live to see you another time" (*Oswald's Tale* 740). In order to explain this mysterious comment, Mailer sets it up with a projection of Ruby's thoughts *before* he speaks. This is the second prominent moment of Mailer's authorial "speculation," in an otherwise "faithful" and "accurate" examination of the historical record, and reads like pure authorial invention. Ruminating on Ruby's predicament, Mailer suggests that Ruby associates the Mafia's retaliation against him and his family with the Nazi persecution of the European Jews:

The people outside who will punish him if he rats on them are evil. And evil has no bounds, as Hitler proved. So, if Jack Ruby tries to explain to the Warren Commission that he was only an agent in the death of Oswald, a pawn for the Mafia leaders who passed the order down the line ... then there will be Mafia leaders rabid with rage ... In retaliation, they will yet kill all the Jews. The safety of the Jews always hangs by a hair, anyway. (*Oswald's Tale* 739)

Ruby may not have been in an entirely rational state, but a number of sources, including newspaper articles and the testimony of General Edwin Walker, suggest that his fear of anti-Semitism was not as paranoid as Mailer depicts.¹⁰ It is more likely that Ruby's conflation of the Mafia with the Nazi party, and his references to "a new form of government" taking over is a *conscious* metaphor, which is to say, an oblique reference to something Ruby believes too dangerous to assert directly: that fringe elements (specifically the John Birch Society) were acting on the political fate of the United States—forces that Ruby apparently fears will ultimately hold legitimate government power, as the Nazi party did in Germany. In fact, it seems more likely that the Jews that Ruby speaks of as being persecuted "at this moment" are not

European Jews, but American Jews whom he sees as vulnerable to extreme right-wing organizations such as the John Birch Society and Ku Klux Klan.

Ruby in fact makes an almost explicit reference to his “use” by not only the Mafia, but also (inadvertently) the John Birch Society. In what seems like another *non sequitur*, Ruby abruptly changes the topic, commenting,

[T]here is a John Birch Society ... in activity, and [General] Edwin Walker is one of the top men of this organization—take it for what it is worth, Chief Justice Warren.

Unfortunately for me, for me giving the people the opportunity to get in power, because of the act I committed, has put a lot of people in jeopardy with their lives.

Don’t register with you, does it? (*Oswald’s Tale* 738–9; WC 5: 198)

Ruby goes on, claiming that “If certain people ... want to gain something by propagandizing something to their own use, they will make ways to present certain things [so] that I do look guilty” (WC 5: 209), and that “I am used as a scapegoat and there is no greater weapon you can use to create some falsehood about some of the Jewish faith, especially at [*sic*] the ... heinous crime of ... killing ... President Kennedy” (WC 5: 211).

A number of sources indicate that Ruby’s anxiety about being scapegoated, particularly as a Jew, was well founded, and not to be dismissed as wholly paranoid. In an article on the effects of presidential assassinations, Murray Edelman and Rita James Simon argue that the motives of political actors are frequently discounted in the service of national unity. This may be one reason why the Commission discounted Ruby’s testimony so easily: “[A]fter every assassination there are emphatic high level assurances that the polity is healthy ... and that the assassination was the work of a psychotic or ... whose actions in no way reflect a widespread movement of or extensive discontent” (202). Edelman and Simon also give credence to Ruby’s fears regarding accusations about his involvement in the Kennedy assassination. As they point out, accusations of ideological extremism are politically useful: “Like other efforts to interpret and use the shock of the assassination in order to influence public opinion, it casts the authors’ adversaries in the role of *scapegoat*” [emphasis added]. Furthermore, they argue, “this relationship

between accuser, accused and public opinion was even more apparent when the extremist groups were the accusers" (216).

Edelman and Simon's argument also supports Ruby's conflation of anti-Communism and anti-Semitism into a generalized right-wing agenda. Edelman and Simon claim "the charge that the assassination was a Communist plot came almost entirely from the extreme right wing (216). This charge was apparently the official position of the John Birch society, which maintained that both Kennedy and Oswald's deaths were the result of a Communist conspiracy. According to Edelman and Simon, the John Birch Society approved a "statement by [a] former Congressman ... that Oswald was a Communist and that when a Communist murders he acts under orders" (216). Edelman and Simon also quote a February 1, 1964 *New York Times* article in which Gerald G.K. Smith, whom they characterize as "long active as a right-wing extremist and anti-Semite," directly links Oswald's alleged Soviet loyalty with Jewish sympathy for Ruby. In it Smith claims that Kennedy was himself a Communist and was assassinated by a Communist because Kennedy planned to thwart the Soviet Union and embrace right-wing ideology *and* (using Ruby's more identifiably Jewish given name), that "'a Los Angeles Jew was raising money to free Rubinstein'" (216).

The testimony of General Edwin Walker, the victim of Oswald's first assassination attempt, and a fellow John Birch member, suggests that he shared Smith's view of the assassination as a Communist plot. Furthermore, Walker clearly attempts to link Ruby to a Kennedy assassination plot based on extremely flimsy evidence.¹¹ Committee attorney Wesley Liebler questions him:

Mr. Liebler: Do you know if anyone discussed the assassination with Oswald prior to the time he assassinated the president ... do you have any indication of that?

General Walker: I have no personal knowledge that they did

Mr Liebler: Do you have any indication that they did?

General Walker: I certainly do.... The indications seem to be not only mine ... that Oswald and Rubenstein had some association.

Mr. Liebler: Can you indicate what it was?

General Walker: Well I am wondering about one thing, how Rubenstein can take his car in to be fixed and Oswald can sign the ticket and pick up the car.

Mr. Liebeler: Now can you tell us where and when that happened?

General Walker: I haven't been able to verify that it happened for sure, but I have been told it happened.

Mr. Liebeler: Who told you that?

General Walker: My information came from a repairman, from another fellow to a friend of mine, to me.

Mr. Liebeler: Could you give me the name of that person?

General Walker: I don't think it is necessary. I think you have all the information ... (WC 11: 419–20)

In addition to his obvious wish to cast Ruby as a conspirator, Walker (like Smith) insists on referring to him as Rubenstein, in spite of the fact that the Committee does not do so. Walker's heightened awareness of racial and ethnic difference is further underscored by several other references, including a shooting that he read about in the paper, which included "a Latin type running away" (WC 11: 418).

Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that the tone and content of Walker's testimony before the Commission indicate that, far from being marginalized by his association with an extreme-right-wing political organization, Walker instead seems to expect preferential treatment by the Committee for himself and his colleague, General Clyde J. Watts.¹⁶ In fact, the atmosphere in the room is apparently so congenial (or at least, Walker and Watts are so relaxed), that the presiding attorney for the Commission, Wesley Liebeler is moved to remark, "Since this is almost a friendly, if I may say so, session, I assume that we can take it that the remarks you are making will be under oath, is that correct?" (WC 11: 415). Furthermore, Walker repeatedly takes control of the questioning, often refusing to provide information and instructing the Commission on what kind of information he is willing to give, telling Liebeler, "I would prefer you to question me on which way you want me to discuss this case and I will answer what is necessary" (418), and offering "I will answer that at some later date if you find it necessary, I will reconsider it" (422).

Mailer's uncritical acceptance of Ruby's seemingly bizarre and paranoid statements regarding the fate of the Jews is telling, particularly given his skepticism of Ruby's cover story, not to mention his compelling readings of

Ruby's other comments as veiled attempts to point the Commission in the direction of Mafia involvement:

We all know [Ruby's] famous story or cover story. He was grief-stricken by the death of JFK, so bereaved that he shut down his strip-joints for the weekend, and was so appalled at the possibility that Jacqueline Kennedy might have to come to Dallas to testify in Oswald's trial that he decided to shoot the accused—"the creep," as he would call him. But only at the last moment did he so decide. No premeditation ... Yet never on the face of it has a crime seemed to belong more to the Mafia. (*Oswald's Tale* 733-34)

The credence Mailer gives to the Mafia involvement theory suggests that he is no opponent of the notion of special-interest groups vying for power. Furthermore, Mailer's exhaustive research for his "Talmudic" commentary makes it unlikely that he overlooked the potential validity of Ruby's arguments. However, as McCann points out, Mailer is not particularly interested in depicting or combating the victimization of Jews, the enmities of white nationalist groups, or the hegemonic power of high-ranking white officials. While clearly no fan of Reagan, Hitler, or the John Birch Society, Mailer lacks the quintessentially liberal interest in ameliorating difference and fostering social harmony. On the contrary, it is in these oppositions that his vision of the nation inheres. As Sean McCann points out, "the separatist politics of black nationalism partake for Mailer a higher degree of integrity than integrationism ever did" (325-26); Mailer sees such divisions as a location for the "'explosive individuality'" (325-26) celebrated in all of his novels.

In choosing to champion a heroic "Emersonian" Oswald over the "snarling little wife abuser" (*Oswald's Tale* 607), Mailer celebrates the possibilities of American individualism in something of a critical vacuum. Without an equally acute treatment of the ramifications of his "psychopath," Mailer's argument, while audacious, is somehow incomplete.

Herein lies the difference between DeLillo and Mailer's accounts of the trajectory of Lee Harvey Oswald. Unlike Mailer, DeLillo is a liberal; his depiction of Oswald is a critique of the very psychopathic personality that Mailer celebrates more or less uncritically. Like DeLillo, Mailer suggests that Oswald—as Psychopath—"may indeed be the perverted and dangerous front-runner of a new kind of personality which could become the central

expression of human nature before the twentieth century is over" ("White Negro" 345). However, for Mailer, the primacy of the psychopath has a Darwinist inevitability that he sees as a morally neutral bid for survival within the conditions dealt to us by society: "For the psychopath is better adapted to dominate those mutually contradictory inhibitions upon violence and love which civilization has exacted of us ..." ("White Negro" 345).

While both Mailer and DeLillo disapprove of the tenor of such a civilization (which they seem to agree was both expressed and brought to fruition by Reagan's policies in the 1980s), they do so on different grounds. This is not to say that *Oswald's Tale* is not, like *Libra*, a social critique, but only that its goal is not a progressive bid for social change.

NOTES

1. See Daniel Bell for the original context of the phrase.
2. According to Žižek, "The most elementary definition of ideology is probably the well known phrase from Marx's *Capital*: 'they do not know it, but they are doing it'.... The very concept of ideology implies a kind of basic, constitutive naïveté." See Žižek, *The Subjective Object of Ideology*.
3. A notable exception is Sean McCann's 2000 article "The Imperiled Republic Norman Mailer and the Poetics of Anti-Liberalism," discussed later in this essay.
4. Thomas Carmichael refers to Kennedy assassination narratives as a "continually proliferating chain of texts." See "Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, *The Names*, and *Mao II*."
5. Lentricchia appears to have written one of the first scholarly articles about the novel, setting the tone for those that followed.
6. See Duvall's anthology of the same name.
7. See Whittaker Chambers' notion of communism as "the great alternative faith of mankind" in his memoir, *Witness*.
8. In an ironic moment, Oswald is given a "save the Rosenbergs" leaflet (12).
9. Ruby's somewhat breathless and disjointed style may have been influenced by the habitual use of the amphetamine appetite-suppressant, Preludin, which he refers to in his testimony. While long-term use of amphetamines at high doses is known to induce what psychiatrists call "amphetamine psychosis," Ruby's self-awareness and insight into his state suggest a certain degree of rationality. This is not to argue that Ruby's perceptions were entirely objective, but only that, in the service of establishing Ruby's "tribal" Jewishness, Mailer neglects compelling evidence that Ruby's fears may have had a basis in fact. See Warren Commission, *Hearings Before the President's*

- Commission*. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Publishing Company, 1964 v 5, 196 and 199.
10. A 1961 letter written by Morris Udall attests both to Walker's affiliation with the John Birch society, and to the Society's position that communists were infiltrating the United States government: "[T]he testimony revealed that Gen. Walker is a member of the John Birch Society, an organization whose leader says former President Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles and other high officials of our government have been Communist dupes." See <http://www.library.arizona.edu/>.
 11. It is worth noting that General Watts is at pains to distance himself from Walker, commenting that, "My opinion and General Walker's don't generally jibe" (415).

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