"How this took place he couldn't have said exactly": A stylistic analysis of the prose of Don DeLillo

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"HOW THIS TOOK PLACE HE COULDN'T HAVE SAID EXACTLY":
A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE PROSE OF DON DELILLO

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A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

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by
Richard Ronald Sisk
March 1989
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Abstract

Juxtaposing passages of Don DeLillo's prose against like passages from his contemporaries reveals DeLillo's distinct stylistic presence, and an examination of the scarce secondary literature concerning the author's work points to a certain poetic quality in his writing as the basis for this stylistic uniqueness.

This paper will endeavor to pinpoint those rhetorical implements DeLillo employs in rendering his style and will use as its foundation Russian formalist critic Roman Jakobson's theory of the poetic function, the one of six functions of verbal communication identified by Jakobson that accounts for the aesthetic capability in language. From this theory spring discussions of both "poetics" and "style," in order to establish a means of assessing DeLillo's stylistic allure, with Stanley Fish's theory of affective stylistics completing the critical tool.

From three recent DeLillo novels--Players, The Names, and White Noise--this paper will identify the author's "agentification" of milieu and his use of rhythm phrasing as the sources of his stylistic signature. Additionally, to allay concerns about subjective opinion asserted as objective fact, this paper will consider DeLillo's rhetorical techniques not only within the passages quoted, but within the overall context of each novel in which these passages are found.
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CHAPTER I

An Introduction: Why, and How, DeLillo?

All this time they were making love. Marina was spacious, psychologically, an elaborate settling presence. At first, she moved easily, drawing him in, unwinding him, a steadily deepening concentration of resources, gripping him, segments, small parts, bits of him, dashes and tads. She measured his predispositions. She even struggled a little, attaching him to his own body. How this took place he couldn't have said exactly. Marina seemed to know him. Her eyes were instruments of incredibly knowing softness. At her imperceptible urging he felt himself descend, he felt himself occupy his body. It made such sense, every pelvic stress, the slightest readjustment of some fraction of an inch of flesh. He braced himself, listening to the noises, small clicks and strains, the moist slop of their pectorals in contact. When it ended, massively, in a great shoaling transit, a leap of decompressing force, they whispered in each other's ear, wordlessly, breathing odors and raw heat, small gusts of love.

(Players 190)
Why begin a critical study of Don DeLillo with a sex scene?

Why not. It is as good a place to start as any, for the amount of secondary literature about DeLillo's writing is indeed quite small, and no precedent has yet been set as to how critics should approach him, no corpus of opinion established with which commentators might agree or take exception. Yet studies of his work will come, for among the coterie of contemporary American writers of his generation—including the likes of Thomas McGuane, Richard Ford, and Raymond Carver, of John Irving, William Kennedy, and T. C. Boyle, to name a few—DeLillo is singled out by readers and reviewers alike as a "formidable prose stylist" (Yardley 83), and I would estimate that studies, like this one, will begin to sprout up presently, examining DeLillo's work in the hope of describing the means by which he conveys that style.

I stoop, then, to a basic level of titillation in order to appeal to my reader. But the passage above serves other purposes as well. First, it displays many of the qualities this study will consider in an effort to illuminate DeLillo's poetics, aspects of his writing that subsequent chapters will identify and elaborate on. But this passage also offers a point of comparison from which to establish fully the allure of DeLillo's prose and, concomitantly, the need to study it. Consider, for a moment, a related scene from Jim Harrison's 1981 novel, Warlock:
Thus at a convention of surgical nurses at the Renaissance Center she bedded a guest speaker in his suite far above the Motor City, in whose streets dope wars raged that would have appalled Billy the Kidd, Wyatt Earp, Fu Manchu. She pushed this maven from MIT back on his king sized, mirrored vibra bed, solemnly studied his erect penis until he was nervous, let out a fugal laugh which was her habit before sex, and sat on it. By dawn he was ready to give up his wife, children, a full professorship.

(40)

A section from Richard Ford's *The Ultimate Good Luck* from the same year bears resemblances:

She drank some mescal out of a bottle in her bolsa and took a crossroads, then walked him into the bedroom as though the house was hers and turned on the lights and sat on the side of the bed and looked like she wanted to apologize for something. She was a smaller girl with her clothes off, with turned-up breasts and thin legs. Her hair seemed thicker in the light, and when he got in bed with her she climbed on him and fucked him until she worked herself down into her pill and the mescal, down below whatever she'd seen in the boxing ring that was making her want to apologize. (9)

In what ways are these three passages similar, in what
ways different? I would contend that, beyond the sexual content, the similarities are few, while an entire universe of aesthetic calculation is displayed in the differences. To be sure, the subject matter of each passage is essentially the same: one man, one woman, engaged in the act of lovemaking. But at this point the similarities, for the most part, cease, for what each author does with his subject matter—what effect he is able to wrest from the material, what tone he captures in his words—is quite different. Ford and Harrison both employ a more colloquial manner of speech while focusing on the physical appearance of the action. Both authors describe the act of lovemaking in rudimentary fashion, paying attention neither to the act's intricacy nor its essence (Ford: "... she climbed on him and fucked him ... . . . "; Harrison: "She . . . studied his erect penis . . . and sat on it"), so no sense of time is conveyed in the description, no mention of the active process leading to the act's culmination. Ford's and Harrison's sentences are put simply, the bulk of each scene's description rendered through parallel constructions emanating from a single subject, "she." DeLillo, however, writes beyond a physical account of the act, employing an anti-colloquiality together with an increased syntactic range that shows his reader not only what his two characters do, what it looks like when they do it, and what they feel when they do it, but outlining, as well, the source of those feelings along with the greater implications of their actions.
When DeLillo speaks of the "sense" made by "every pelvic stress, the slightest readjustment of some fraction of an inch of flesh," he ventures into a realm of metaphysical analysis that Ford and Harrison only vaguely suggest. DeLillo's picture of lovemaking is drawn more fully, made more complete by adding this dimension to the description. And he accomplishes this not only in addition to, but, perhaps in part, because of the way in which he infuses his sentences with fluidity, grace, and rhythm. He creates a particular ambience for his characters, not only in how he specifies their actions, but by his manipulations of syntactic structures and rhythms as well.

I do not offer these comparisons as a means of ranking authors one against the other. All things are not equal between them; I must assume that intentions differ and are equally unknowable. Such a contest would be arbitrary and counter-productive, an undertaking best left for those occasions when teachers and students might engage in an exercise of this sort over swilled beer, opining less tentatively than in the classroom. Rather, I contrast these three authors' work only for the sake of expressing the differences among their styles. DeLillo's prose is unlike Ford's and Harrison's (and, for that matter, the prose of the other authors mentioned in this study), not better, not more meretricious, not any more meaningful, but simply different. I contend, then, that something is at work in DeLillo's writing not present, or
at least not present in the same quantity (and perhaps quality), in the writing of his contemporaries. From a critical curiosiry, I wish to understand the essence of DeLillo's stylistic uniqueness, in order to establish some critical grounds for appreciating good writing.

Reviewers have labeled DeLillo's style as "unique," "elegant," "intelligent," "graceful," "brilliant," "formidable," "glorious," "fresh," "precise," "eloquent," as possessing an "impressive erudition," "a facility with language," and as amounting to "incantation" (Contemporary Authors 121-22, Contemporary Literary Criticism 76-86)—which, while solidifying the idea of DeLillo's achievement and individuality in my mind, does little to clarify what is unique in his writing. But certain words stick out: Grace, elegance, eloquence, erudition, incantation. And all of these words seem to speak of a quality of language not usually associated with prose. They are, instead, more apropos of poetry.

But while the discovery of his poetry solved my problem of where to begin with DeLillo, it presented other obstacles. How was I to define that poetic quality? Could I define poetry, for that matter? And, in working with only an essence, was it better left alone at just that— an essence—for when I attempted to put it into words would it evade me, merely disappear?

Roman Jakobson, along with other Russian formalist critics, was not intimidated by such questions, and in their work
I found the words and the perspective to begin making sense of my intuitions about DeLillo. The Formalists' description of the poetic function (to which much of the next chapter is devoted) offers a way of understanding what makes poetry poetic—whether it be a sonnet or the most free of verse. Quite simply, they see poetic language as language that calls attention to itself as just that—language—a definition at once both alluring in its simplicity as well as useful for the dialectical doors it could, potentially, open. For, I suspect, what DeLillo's writing does for not only me, but for the reviewers as well is to call attention to itself as language, and, unaware of any critic's postulations, as readers we respond to it with wonder and adulation, as if some ineffable charm were inherent in the words themselves, unaware of any underlying technique by which DeLillo controls and manipulates his readers' responses to what, and how, he says what he does. We have, then, not only a means of discussing DeLillo's style, but some cause to have a certain confidence in crediting fully DeLillo for the creation of his art. This assertion assumes that DeLillo knows fully well the responses his writing evokes. This purposeful manipulation of writing, and hence, the reader, is called "poetics," and its study becomes central to this paper, in order to understand better DeLillo's prose and to delineate also those indistinct notions we have of our own reactions to his writing.

The second chapter of this paper defines several of these
terms—the poetic function, poetics, style—in order to establish some sort of interpretive tool, as well as a rationale for using that tool, which we can apply to DeLillo's prose to begin understanding the effects his fiction has on his readers. I call on such scholars as Roman Jakobson, Jonathan Culler, Richard Ohmann, Sol Saporta, and Christian Mair, as well as a consortium of Belgian rhetoricians and linguists known as Group /7, to provide the building blocks from which I will construct this tool and implement its reasoned use.

Toward the end of the second section I integrate into my discussion Stanley Fish's theory of "affective stylistics"—which shifts the generation of a text's meaning to the reader and away from any fixed and immutable properties of the words themselves—thus taking a critical stance unusual for many stylisticians. Specifically, by dovetailing Fish's theory with poetics, my task becomes one of searching for effect-cause relationships, of moving from response to writing rather than from writing to response, the usual cause-effect formula propounded by so many in the field of stylistics. This stance endorses the acceptability of trying to posit substance to intuition, the underlying basis of this paper.

The third chapter is devoted to analysis, in terms of the interpretive strategy presented in chapter two, of several passages of DeLillo's prose, culled from three recent novels—Players (1977), The Names (1981), and White Noise (1985), since the confines of this paper necessarily limit my scope of
consideration.

My analysis relies on asking two questions of DeLillo's prose: what does the writing do and how does it do it? Fish's theory will guide me through the troubling subjective determinations of the first operation, while Jakobson's model will provide the basis for a largely objective answer to the second. These processes unearth patterns buried in the text in much the same way a metal detector alerts us to things we cannot see, and I propose to identify DeLillo's reliance on and foregrounding of these patterns as the source of his unique style, the font of his appeal.

In my final section, I wish to bring closure to this interaction between DeLillo and his reader, by zooming out from the minutiae of his sentences to a more panoramic view of his work, where I can attempt better to contain and subdue that complex and magical instance of ligature between an author wishing to create a reaction and a reader wishing to experience one. Each writer picks the tool—the rhetorical implement, the elocutionary adz—that allows best for the completion of this task, and DeLillo is no exception. So that I intend not only to identify the tools DeLillo has chosen to use, but also to affirm that, by virtue of the responses he elicits, he has used them evocatively and to great effect.
CHAPTER TWO

The Aesthetic Consciousness:
Poetics, Stylistics, and the Poetic Function

In a 1958 symposium at Indiana University formed to "explore the possibility of finding a common basis for discussing . . . and understanding . . . the characteristics of style in language" (Sebeok 3), Roman Jakobson introduced this model of the factors present in the act of verbal communication:

context(referential)  
message(poetic)      
addresser(emotive)  
addressee(conative)  
contact(phatic)      
code(metalinguinal)  (353)

With this model, Jakobson attempts to delineate the vital aspects in any and all types of verbal (as in that which employs some type of language) communication. Jakobson's model extended a model first proposed by Ogden and Richards in 1923, which presumed only four factors instead of six:

message

sender

contact

sendee

(11)

Jakobson's model, then, includes two vital factors that Ogden and Richards' model does not, "code" and "message," both factors having to do with the particular way in which an act of verbal communication is transacted, a fact that will become
To each factor in his model, Jakobson also attributes a corresponding language function (noted in parentheses), in order to relate a linguistic purpose to each communicative figure. Addresser-based language, then, according to Jakobson, tends to be predominantly emotive, its purpose mainly to convey the speaker's feelings, as is the case with the simple exclamation, "I'm sad." Addressee-based language is highly conative (designed to produce action) and not particularly interested with saying anything about the speaker, intended for the interpretation of the audience. An example of this type of communication is the hypnotist's verbal *modus operandi*, "You are getting sleepy, very sleepy." Contact-based language, on the other hand, is basically phatic, unconcerned with lexical meaning and intended merely to open the channel of communication between parties. We greet someone with the phrase, "How are you?" not because we genuinely want to know the other person's state of well-being, but because we wish to establish contact, verbally to make sure that person is there. And code-based language establishes a metalinguistic link between addressee and addressee. Slang, language reflecting shared experience, most often between persons of similar age or race, is code-based.

The two remaining factors in Jakobson's model are most important in my discussion of DeLillo. Context-based language assumes what Jakobson calls a referential function, aiming to
expand meaning between addressee and addressee. This type of language adds information, clarifies, expresses ideas. According to Linda Waugh, Jakobson's protege, "the referential function is spoken of as 'ordinary language'" ("Poetic" 58). Message-based language, on the other hand, possesses a poetic function and is defined by Jakobson as "the set . . . toward the message as such, [a] focus on the message for its own sake" (356). Waugh clarifies this assertion when she says that the poetic function "comprises the focus within the verbal message on the verbal message itself" ("Poetic" 58). For Jakobson, verse exemplifies that use of language most dominated by the poetic function, since poets presumably pay as much attention to how the message is presented--how it sounds and looks--as they do to the meaning they convey. Language whose main function is poetic, then, places a dominance on how the message is said, while language whose main function is referential places a dominance on what the message says.

Inherent in these definitions is the notion that these six communicative factors, as well as their related functions, are seldom, if ever, present by themselves in any act of communication. For Jakobson, the "verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function" (353). Waugh reiterates his point when she asserts that "Most verbal messages do not fulfill only one function. Rather, they are multifunctional: they usually fulfill a variety of functions, which are integrated one with another in hierarchical fashion.
with one function being predominant" ("Poetic" 58).

Jakobson's and Waugh's observations offer a unique manner of approaching all types of verbal messages, from metered verse to technical writing, journalism to free verse, movies to songs, from a grocery list to a person's face grimacing in pain. In each of these acts of communication, one function of language predominates over one or more of the other functions operating at the same time in the message. This led Jakobson to label prose, in particular, as a "transitional phenomena" (374), which, for Waugh, admitted of,

various gradations on the continuum between 'ordinary' language, with an orientation toward the referential function and the poetic function . . . .

Prose evidences a more complex type, a type in which the poetic and referential modes are intertwined in various ways and to various degrees. 'Literary' prose is, presumably, closer to the poetic end, while 'practical' prose would be closer to the referential end. ("Poetic" 59)

In this respect, we can see that in any prose phrase, passage, or text, both the referential and the poetic functions may be at work simultaneously (as well as any of the other four functions), and, more to the point, one function probably dominates the others. Thus, "such phrases as through thick and thin (or) horrible Harry . . . owe their success as much to their poetic basis (alliteration, paronomasia) as to
their referential basis ("Harry really is horrible")"
("Poetic" 59).

The poetic function's complex nature necessitates its definition, as well as its being placed within parameters, at this point. Jakobson defines tersely the poetic function as "the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (358). But what does this mean exactly? To begin with, Jakobson recognizes two separate axes, two sets of boundaries by which a unit of language is constructed. The first, "selection," refers to the addressee's initial cognitive task in creating a verbal message: to select a word. Thus,

if "child" is the topic of the message, the speaker selects one among the extant, more or less similar nouns like child, kid, youngster, tot, all of them equivalent in a certain respect, and then to comment on this topic, he may select one of the semantically cognate verbs—sleeps, dozes, nods, naps.

(358)

Implied in this assertion is the second cognitive task the speaker faces, combining these two words to create the desired utterance, so that,

both chosen words combine in the speech chain. The selection is produced on the basis of equivalence, on similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and anonymity, while the combination, the buildup of the
sequence, is based on contiguity. (358)

I provide here a chart designed to separate Jakobson's raft of nomenclature into its respective camps, in order to more clearly visualize the poetic function:

| Axis of Selection | main constitutive principle: Equivalence  
|                   | (similarity, dissimilarity synonymity, anonymity) |
|                   | Contiguity |

Thus, by virtue of Jakobson's definition, the poetic function should manifest itself whenever the principle of equivalence is projected, or moves into, the axis of combination. Yet what does this mean? Jakobson describes this manifestation as that instance when "equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence" (358). In other words, the underlying motivation in creating a verbal sequence shifts from choosing the proper words that convey meaning correctly to insuring that the elements of language properly combine to create equivalent formal patterns occurring contiguously throughout the message. Waugh sums this up best, while explaining the reason for the poetic function's name, when she states that, the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.
means quite simply that such sameness is used as (the major) means of constructing the whole sequence. This projection is in fact the defining characteristic of poetry. ("Poetic" 64)

To be sure, Jakobson refers to poetry when he concludes his discussion of the poetic function:

In poetry, one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence; and stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary; no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic pause; no pause equals no pause. (358)

Now, this may all be well and good for poetry, but how can it be applied to prose, that "transitional phenomena" that melds the referential and the poetic functions? The answer to this question calls for an examination of those compositional aspects common to both verse and prose. Northrup Frye identifies one such commonality in his discussion of associational rhythm, "the unit of which is neither the prose sentence nor the metrical line, but a kind of thought-breath or phrase" (886). In outlining this hybrid parameter, Frye alludes to the process necessary for discussing prose in poetic terms: the redefinition of boundaries. Thus, when Ruth Ronen introduces the term "poeticalness," her word for the creative purpose behind the poetic function (66), she shifts slightly the
focus of the poetic function to aid her in her discussion of prose. When the poetic function's subordinate role in prose is decreased—when the addresser chooses purposefully to project the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination at a consciously higher degree than done previously—the prose does not turn into poetry, but rather it attains a quality of "poeticalness." For Ronen, this subtle shift in perspective allows the critic to consider more confidently prose by somewhat the same means used in analyzing poetry, since "Jakobson's discussion of literariness is 'biased toward verse rather than prose,' which makes an extension of his model necessary" (67). Ronen contrasts the poeticalness of poetry, and its "continuous parallelism," with the poeticalness of prose,

where meter and rhyme are absent [and] poetical patterning may be claimed to lose its markedness [or perceptibility] . . . . In texts of narrative prose, equivalent forms in equivalent positions are recognizable either in syntagmatically contiguous text segments or in syntagmatically distant segments.

(68)

Ronen sums up the nature of the poetic function in literary prose when she states, "the case where equivalence patterns connect textually distant expressions is more typical of the way literary prose is organized" (69).

In extending Jakobson's model by minutely stretching its
semantic content, Ronen allows the model to accommodate more fully literary prose, that particular use of language which Waugh recognizes as "more complex" than either true poetry or ordinary language by virtue of its transitional quality ("Poetic" 59). What Ronen advocates is that the poetical nature of prose lies in less obvious, more textually distant loci than does the poetical nature of poetry, her bottom line being that the poetical nature of prose does exist.

What I have presented, then, until now, is a model of the act of verbal communication with one of its elements extensively defined. But how do Jakobson's ideas become a factor in the study of an author's style? And what does a study of the poetic function tell us about our intuitive sense of Don DeLillo's prose style? To answer these questions, I will take another detour in generating a critical tool that will allow for a more thorough understanding of DeLillo. A consideration of the field of stylistics helps bring into focus the place of the poetic function in this discussion of prose and its creation.

In "The Notion of Style," William O. Hendricks asserts, "the major problem with stylistics is the term style itself. No one definition of style enjoys universal acceptance . . . " (35). The obstacle to which Hendricks refers poses a problem, in particular, to the study of DeLillo, for in trying to articulate my sense of DeLillo's literariness, the "poeticalness" of his prose, I need first to remove as much ambiguity as
possible from the very term, style, that I use in pinpointing the source of the author's uniqueness. Thus, Hendricks' disclaimer regarding style serves both to throttle my desire to articulate the seemingly inarticulable and to free me to attempt such a difficult (some might say misguided) task.

Richard Ohmann attempts an encompassing definition of style in 1964 when he proposes a "common sense notion" of the term, stating that, "In general that notion applies to human action that is partly invariant and partly variable. A style is a way of doing it" (426). At first glance, this seems commonsensical enough, and, because of this, his definition is alluring. But this simplified idea of style is problematic, for it can refer to two distinctly different activities. Ohmann presents the example of people playing tennis, wherein participants' styles depend on their use of the options available to them in playing the game, the strokes, shots, and possible placements of the ball. The word play, though, can also be used to mean a musician presenting a piece of music. In this case, play does not connote someone selecting from an array of executory choices, but rather more someone engaged in the act of interpreting. What thwarts Ohmann's attempt at a simple explanation of style is the variable conception of the term "it" (Hendricks 36). Or, put differently, do writers' styles demonstrate their particular pickings from a vast menu of authorial choices (thus rendering an objective sense of style), or do their styles demonstrate their personal ways of
interpreting the manner in which these authorial choices can be used (rendering a more subjective sense of the term that seems to hint at the concept of meaning, which will be treated later in this chapter).

At roughly the same time, Sol Saporta took a different approach to style, concentrating less on what it is and more on what it isn't. For him, style is "the message carried by the frequency distributions and transitional probabilities of its linguistic features, especially as they differ from those same features in the language as a whole" (87). Literary style, in his eyes, can be determined by the degree of deviation from everyday language that authors choose to employ in their writing. The more writers sounded different from everyday language, the more style they were perceived to be using. Saporta's aim, then, was not so much to delineate the traits comprising one or another writer's style, but to call attention to a deviation-norm relationship as a basis for defining the concept.

Though this theory of style remained fashionable for several years, it nonetheless had its detractors. In A General Rhetoric, Group /\ states that this formulation can never be "truly satisfying" (9) because the ticklish point is to determine the norm from which to define this deviation, "which is to be resolved into a norm" (10). For Group /\, the valiant attempt to define a norm always fails. If, they conclude, literary-stylized language is language that employs
figures, then normal language ought to be language that does not employ figures, or at least employs them to a much lesser extent. In shattering this conception, Group 7 falls back on statements by Quintillian and Du Marsais, respectively, who say that if figures are "manner of speaking that are far removed from the ordinary and natural manner," then "during one day at the actual market more figures are used than during several days of academic conferences" (10). Even if Quintillian and Du Marsais are speaking of a time far removed from ours, are they still not correct? Aren't a variety of figures used in such everyday ventures as buying a car, visiting a dentist, creating an advertisement? To look at style, as such, would mean that poetry could never be found, that poetic language could not be evidenced anywhere but in poems. Most critics believe this to be untrue.

I present these flawed definitions of style to help accentuate the concept that "style" is a nebulous, intuition-ridden quality, difficult to pinpoint and extract in pure form. Both Ohmann's and Saporta's definitions have aspects that seem correct, as well as other aspects that appear quite fallible. Certainly Ohmann's attempt to postulate "a way of doing it" caters to the desire to understand the steps authors take when creating their work. And Saporta's idea that style represents a deviation from the norm strikes one as intuitively correct—we do not communicate with our family and friends the same way Faulkner or Hemingway, Donne or Shakespeare communicates with
us—but in trying to define the norm we automatically discount the validity of his explanation, and what would appear to quench a thirst for literary understanding vanishes in illogic. Still, these flawed definitions partly satisfy our curiosities when considering certain authors, and, particularly, for this study, Don DeLillo. He writes in a manner different from his contemporaries, imbuing his work with certain qualities that separate it from "normal" language. Delving into the notion of style helps make this difference understandable, helps to quantify, by some small measure, the way in which he brings this difference to life, helps explain how he "does it."

So, too, do poetics. Jonathan Culler defines poetics as "the structures and conventions of literary discourse which enable [literary works] to have the meanings they do" (8). These would be, in Jakobson's model of verbal communication, the tools by which the addresser communicates the message to the addressee, though specifically in a literary sense. A kind of poetics is used for a particular intent, its effects calculated. Jakobson himself defines a purpose for studying poetics, to determine "what makes a verbal message a work of art" (350). The term "poetics," as used by these two scholars, then, indicates that an array of tools exists from which a writer chooses, in order to create not only meaning, but also meaning that is presented as a work of art, opening doors to many questions. Does a kind of poetics exist in all instances of verbal communication of a literary nature? In such an act
can the addresser convey meaning artlessly? And, conversely, can a writer create an artistic entity free of meaning? These questions have received much attention over the years, and little agreement has been reached. For some, like Waugh, there can be no form without meaning, no meaning without form ("Illuminating" 135). Yet others, like Benjamin Hrushovski, approach poetic language metalinguistically, believing that it aims to call attention to itself as nothing but form devoid of meaning (39-56).

These concerns about poetics serve to substantiate the topic of style. Jakobson states that style is a part, or subset, of poetics (359), one of those "structures and conventions" that Culler mentions, one of those tools an author uses to create both meaning and aesthetic pleasure, satisfying our criteria for the beautiful and artful. When we react to an author's style, then, when we find ourselves charmed by and curious about that "something" in the way that author writes, what we react to is, in fact, a unique set of structures and conventions, and that as structures and conventions, they are self-consciously employed to produce an effect for an audience.

Thus, when Group/7 posits a definition of poetics in A General Rhetoric, they manage to synthesize the definitive elements of both Culler's and Jakobson's formulations, allowing for an explanation of an author's style even when the definition of style in general poses problems. For Group/7, poetics serves,
to explain the effect and value of those modified expressions that [writers] put forth, first of all to determine what proportion of modification [is] compatible not only with the correct functioning of the figure but also with its acceptability by the aesthetic consciousness. (21)

In so defining poetics, they set the stage for discovering the source of the captivating force of DeLillo's prose. First, by virtue of Group/7's definition, to hunt for those elements that give a work its aesthetic appeal is not the frivolous endeavor it might initially seem. DeLillo's work is striking in its "literariness," in its "poeticalness," and we can be assured that a reason for the creative force responsible for this aesthetic quality exists, one possible of being surmised and understood. Additionally, Group/7's definition allows us to assume that DeLillo's use of language is purposeful, that he employs the rhetorical mechanisms he does in order to take advantage of their "correct function[s]," imbuing his novels with a meaning they would not possess if he chose not to use these techniques.

Discerning meaning—such a highly subjective task—poses problems, however, and in seeking to establish DeLillo's meanings, as well as the full thrust of his poetics in creating them, the reader must employ caution. A great deal of negative criticism has been leveled at stylistic studies that not only use linguistics as a basis of critique, as this study
does, but also deign to assign meaning to the linguistic phe-
nomena revealed in the texts. As Christian Mair states:

most authors [of stylistic analyses] freely admit
that their activity is not objective in a scientific
sense but merely a means of checking and possibly
validating their own subjective intuitions, which
are considered to be as indispensable to the stylis-
tician as they are to any other literary scholar.

(121)

Thus, while Mair acknowledges the highly intuitive nature of
literary scholarship, validating, in a sense, the pursuit of
indistinct notions that may lead to nothing more than shrugged
shoulders and upturned palms, he nonetheless hints at the ba-
sic fallibility of stylistic criticism: the desire to turn
subjective intuition into objective fact. Perceptions, thus
rendered, run the risk of being highly arbitrary and lightly
considered, because, in large part, of the attention, or more
properly, lack of attention, afforded context by the stylisti-
cian. As Mair points out, "if prose narrative is dealt with
at all, it is usually very short extracts from modernist
novels whose language is close to that of poetry in many res-
pcts" (120). The problem with this, according to Mair, is
that "a necessary first step in the stylistic analysis of
novels" is for the stylistician to "take . . . choice passages
and analyze . . . them as if they were self-contained" (121).
This practice seems innately dishonest. Mair offers several
reasons to support his claim of misdirected scholarship when he examines a stylistic study run amok from Cummings and Simmons' *The Language of Literature: A Stylistic Introduction to the Study of Literature*:

First, a novel and a sermon belong to entirely different types of text so that even a comparison between the "style" of a 1920's sermon and Hemingway's novel would be unlikely to yield any tangible results. Moreover, the reader is not told how the extremely short passages analyzed function within the longer texts they are taken from and whether they are in any way representative at all. Finally, the three centuries separating Hemingway from Donne are quietly passed over. No account whatsoever is taken of the profound changes in the stylistic norms of written English, the background against which the achievement of each writer has to be seen. (123)

Rhetorical purpose, textual coherence, historical context--the disregard of these factors threatens to undermine, to render useless and ineffective, the work of the stylistic critic trying to assign meaning to an author's use of linguistic structures and conventions employed in creating a style. It is, I think, a point well-taken--this danger in letting increasingly smaller units of text stand for the whole--one that causes me to reconsider the critical parameters outlined so far.

Yet what to do, then? If we accept Mair's assertions,
thus throwing the stylisticians' task into disrepute and labeling it, essentially, a grand waste of time, are we then advising ourselves not to consider or pay attention to those intuitions, those faint murmurings, which hint at the appeal to us of a certain author's prose? This idea seems at once both hypercautious and counter-productive, for if we limit ourselves as critics to only those elements we can objectively ascertain and quantify, then we come to cower at the task of trying to make sense of those effects of the novel most forceful and lasting, those most magical. In this respect, then, Mair's criticism should be used not to advocate the abolition of stylistic analysis, but rather to insure that special care is taken by the stylistician to be less brazen in pronouncing the stylistic concerns of the author as the keys to all that author says and does. The stylistician, thus equipped, is rid of an irritating arrogance.

Stanley Fish has addressed this problem and formulated an interpretive ethic that allows for criticism with a linguistic basis to speak, with sanction, about meaning. Fish makes the same claims regarding the fallibility of stylistic studies as does Mair (indeed, Fish predates Mair on this by ten years). However, unlike Mair, Fish offers a solution to the problem by bringing his theory of the interpretive community to bear on the field of stylistics.

For Fish, the meaning of any text is never inherent in the words themselves but rather is a consequence of the
reader's reaction to those words. Or, put somewhat differently, the vessel that carries meaning is not the text but the reader. As readers respond to a piece of writing, meaning is created within them, and their responsibility becomes not to search for meaning in the text presented, but to discern and fathom their own responses to the text and to extrapolate the text's meaning from these responses. The reader, oriented in this fashion, discards the interpretive question, "What does _____ mean?" and replaces it with the inquiry, "What does that _____ do?" (Fish 66).

Thus, according to Fish, texts do not "possess meaning as a consequence of a built-in relationship between formal features and cognitive capacities," but rather, "they acquire it, and . . . they acquire it by virtue of their position in a structure of experience" (91). Fish espouses this notion both for literary scholars searching to interpret the overall meanings of texts as well as for stylisticians looking to interpret the meanings conveyed in the linguistic patterns they so asiduously hunt. In the application of this theory to stylistics, Fish transcends Mair's restive tone by offering a synthesis of the two practices. Fish states:

In short, I am calling not for the end of stylistics but for a new stylistics, what I have termed elsewhere an "affective" stylistics, in which the focus of attention is shifted from the spatial context of a page and its observable regularities to the
He reiterates his point more specifically, when, in his next paragraph, he says:

Rather than regarding [the information conveyed in the formal characteristics of language] as directly translatable into what a word or pattern means, it will be used more exactly to specify what a reader, as he comes upon that word or pattern, is doing, what assumptions he is making, what conclusions he is reaching, what expectations he is forming, what attitudes he is entertaining, what acts he is being moved to perform. (92)

For rhetoricians interested in style but not willing to place all their eggs in the linguists' basket, Fish's theory provides useful perspective. Affective stylistics allows for--some might say mandates--a more holistic reading of an author's style, a fairer reading, as it were, since in all likelihood, an author does not merely create a style as an end in itself, but instead as a means to an end, as one of many parts--among them such variables as theme, plot, character development, point of view, tone--that combine to form a whole, a certain vision, itself the product of a person who makes assumptions, reaches conclusions, forms expectations, and entertains attitudes.

I consider this the case with Don DeLillo. Though DeLillo is most often lauded for his style, his style is not
his only asset. His prose displays more than a superficial
deftness. The author appears not to write only for the pur-
pose of creating his particular prose style, does not, as Jon
Wallace says of DeLillo's contemporary, Tom McGuane, "talk ... 
[merely] to hear himself talk" (290). Instead, DeLillo's use
of style is but one element among several that serve to make
his writerly vision unique and allow his otherwise disparate
subject matter—he has explored such diverse themes as foot-
ball, pornography, higher-level mathematics, rock and roll,
terrorism, modern marriage, language, the John Kennedy assas-
sination, and the media age—to be elevated to a level of aes-
thetic appeal of which it is not ordinarily capable. Perhaps
this is his intent: to capture his own experience as artfully
as possible, to create literature with a capital "L" out of
the subject matter of post-Vietnam America.

Which returns us to the poetic function, for DeLillo's
manipulation of this element of language, his seemingly con-
scious effort to raise the poetic function of his writing to a
level equal to, if not higher than, the referential function
of his prose, enables his work to transcend the limited appeal
of the bulk of contemporary fiction. Though DeLillo's prose
calls attention to itself as writing--good writing--that is
not its only asset. He exposes successfully the frigid heart
of modern society; he captures its essence in images and ideas.
In fact, he relies on numerous syntactic and rhythmic patterns
throughout his work to create a literary signature that not
only identifies the novels as his, but also keeps them from being only more stories about football, or rock music, or marriage. The number of instances in which he employs these rhetorical patterns suggests he has not accomplished this by chance.
CHAPTER THREE

Sex, Love, Monotony, Contempt:
The Poetic Function at Work

According to my critical postulations, the key to recognizing Don DeLillo's style ought to lie within those patterns of context and structure that appear both within and between texts, patterns whose manifestations, according to my intuitive sense of his writing, ought in some way to call attention to themselves as language. And, in fact, DeLillo's work evidences most strongly a connection between style and content in his conception of contemporary American society. Additionally, DeLillo's prose exhibits a poet's sense of stress and phrasing that reveals a sophisticated rhythmic awareness. Thus, the author roots his stylistic foundations in both form and content. I do not pretend to have exhausted discussion of DeLillo's style; indeed, the study of several other factors, among them diction or his sense of denouement, would not be unfruitful. But I choose to consider his treatment of milieu and rhythm because studying them, in my estimation, reveals the major identifying features of his style, characteristics that come more clearly into focus when eyed through the lens of the poetics established in chapter two.

I begin with those effects DeLillo creates pertaining to his novels' milieus. Essentially, he elevates the context within which he places his characters to the level of charac-
ter itself, making that context as responsible for the outcomes of his novels as any of his characters and their corresponding actions might be. DeLillo does not merely render his settings by detailing places, objects, or times of day, but rather he attributes to them as well an element of personality and purpose, a technique Kenneth Burke labels as as "'agentification' of scene" (Grammar 128). Specifically, DeLillo creates for himself a literary signature by consistently presenting his reader with an utterly current, subtly jaded view of contemporary American society. I use the term "contemporary American society" as opposed to "contemporary America" for two reasons. First, while setting The Names in Greece, all the major characters are Americans dealing and transacting with one another, so the notion of American culture holds. And second, the word society, like the words corporation and multinational (when used as a noun), connotes a sense of incorporeality, hinting not at an entity that is a simple sum of its parts, but something much larger, something with a life of its own, something invisible. This notion of invisibility makes whatever personality DeLillo attributes to American society—characteristics essentially largely negative—all the more frustrating and intimidating. DeLillo's version of contemporary America acting on his characters—on Pammy and Lyle, the married couple in Players who communicate with each other only tangentially; on James and Kathryn Axton, the protagonists of The Names, two people drifting not only apart but into and
out of obsession; and Jack and Babbette Gladney, whose lives are transfixed by the fear of death—is a force that cannot be confronted directly. DeLillo writes in *Players*:

Embodied in objects was a partial sense of sharing. They didn't lift their eyes from their respective [television] sets. But noises bound them, a cyclist kick-starting, the plane that came winding down the five miles from its transatlantic apex, rippling the pictures on their screens. Objects were memory inert. Desk, the bed, et cetera. Objects would survive the one who died first and remind the other of how easily halved a life can become. Death, perhaps, was not the point so much as separation. Chairs, tables, dressers, envelopes. Everything was a common experience, binding them despite their indirections, the slanted apparatus of their agreeing. That they did agree was not in doubt. Faithlessness and desire. It wasn't necessary to tell them apart. His body, hers. Sex, love, monotony, contempt. The spell that had to be entered was out there among the unmemorized faces and uniform cubes of being. This, their secret and mercenary space, was self-enchantment, the near common dream they'd countenanced for years. Only absences were fully shared. (54)

And:

Inside some of the granite cubes, or a chromium
In both passages, DeLillo endeavors to attribute meaning to the physical objects he describes. The "unmemorized faces and uniform cubes of being" in the first excerpt and the "granite cubes" and "chromium towers" of the second set DeLillo's bustling metropolitan stage. Yet these objects, as well as others somewhat more common--"chairs, tables, dressers, envelopes"--serve as little more than symbols of a pervading sense of bleakness and sinister intent intrinsic to them. DeLillo
presents his skyscrapers and crowds against two different backdrops—marriage and money—ultimately distilling these two institutions into strings of abstract concepts: "sex, love, monotonoy, contempt" and "secrecy, possessiveness, cancer-bearing rationality." DeLillo renders these distillations succinctly and forcefully in two sentence fragments pared down to only essential words, attributing to these concepts, and, by virtue of juxtaposition to the objects symbolizing them, an almost brutal efficiency.

Yet how does DeLillo make this work? Two critical notions, one attributable to Kenneth Burke and the other to Stanley Fish, help bring DeLillo's technique into focus. Burke asserts that,

"Identification" at its simplest is also a deliberate device, as when the politician seeks to identify himself with his audience . . . . But identification can also be an end, as when people earnestly yearn to identify themselves with some group or other. Here they are not necessarily being acted upon by a conscious external agent, but may be acting upon themselves to this end. ("New Rhetorics" 204)

In his essay, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," Fish mines a similar yet subtly different critical vein, stating that a reader's response to a piece of writing is shaped by "the projection of syntactical and/or lexical probabilities; their subsequent occurrence or non-occurrence;
attitudes toward persons, or things, or ideas referred to [my italics]; the reversal of questioning those attitudes; and much more" (74). DeLillo, I believe, is well aware of this concept of pre-existing attitudes in his readers. Thus, when he writes of "uniform cubes," "chromium towers," and "unmemorized faces," he presents readily identifiable images of crowd- ed sidewalks and cold, imposing edifices, images his readers not only can identify with, but, if Burke is right, yearn to identify with. Yet DeLillo does not set forth an innocuous image but rather chooses one toward which people likely have an attitude--and a negative attitude, at that--either through direct experience or from absorbing, through various forms of media, the prevailing societal attitudes toward the objects comprising these images. The reader's attitude, however, may not be so finely articulated as DeLillo's; it may consist of nothing more than a vague sense of evil, of a soul-numbing presence embodied in all the granite and mirrored glass. DeLillo has nonetheless set his hook and through a deft exercise in apposition is able to convince his reader of the significance lurking beneath the surfaces of these meanings.

Employing the same technique, DeLillo enlarges upon his view of American society in The Names:

"I think it's only in a crisis that Americans see other people. It has to be an American crisis, of course. If two countries fight that do not supply the Americans with some precious commodity, then the
education of the public does not take place. But when a dictator falls, when oil is threatened, then you turn on the television and they tell you where the country is, what the language is, how to pronounce the names of the leaders, what the religion is all about, and maybe you can cut out recipes in the newspaper of Persian dishes . . . . The whole world takes an interest in this curious way Americans elevate themselves. TV. Look, this is Iran, this is Iraq. Let us pronounce the word correctly. E-ron. E-ronians. This is a Suni, this is a Shi'ite. Very good. Next year we do the Phillipines, okay?" (58)

And:

You can't walk down Bay Street and pick out the Americans from the Canadians. They are alien beings in our midst, waiting for a signal . . . . They're in the schools, teaching our children, subtly and even unintentionally promoting their own values—values they assume we share. The theme of corruption of the innocent. Their crime families have footholds in our cities—drugs, pornography, legitimate businesses—and their pimps from Buffalo and Detroit work both side of the border, keeping the girls in motion. The theme of expansionism, of organized crime infiltration. They own the corporations, the
processing plants, the mineral rights, a huge share of the Canadian earth. The colonialist theme, the theme of exploitation, the greatest possible utilization. They are right next to us, sending their contaminants, their pollutants, their noxious industrial waste into our rivers, lakes and air. The theme of power's ignorance and blindness and contempt. We are in the path of their television programs, their movies and music, the whole enormous rot and glut and blare of their culture. The theme of cancer and its spread. (266)

Iran. Iraq. Detroit. We envision Khomeni, a map of the Persian gulf, an overturned police car set afire. DeLillo has presented places readily identifiable both to and for his readers, places about which they likely share some preconceived attitude. He sets these images against the backdrops of television and several prevailing notions of America's collective egocentricity. By juxtaposing some of these elements, DeLillo not only draws his readers in, but works to establish for them as well his unfavorable view of America, one in which arrogance, selfishness, and a voracious imperialism are the guiding values. Not unlike those passages from Players, these excerpts also make effective use of the sentence fragment. In the first passage above, the author seems to funnel both the meaning and the intensity of the paragraph into one two-letter word, "TV." In setting this word apart as a sentence, DeLillo
is able to create a sense of dread that reverberates back through the paragraph, a fear that television, portrayed as an entity with a life all its own, is not only the manifest symptom of American egocentrism, but perhaps its causative agent as well. In like fashion, DeLillo uses sentence fragments in the second passage—"the theme of expansion, of organized crime infiltration;" "the theme of power's ignorance and blindness and contempt;" "the theme of cancer and its spread"—to heighten impact. These noun phrases stand seemingly independently—as neither agents for nor objects of any particular actions—so that the themes they embody seem to possess an added sense of existing independently themselves, as attitudes and perspectives run amok, as invisible forces at once both loathed yet unavoidable.

Two passages from White Noise further illustrate the author's technique and viewpoint:

In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant
city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed.

A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (46)

And:

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid
transcendence. (155)

These paragraphs resemble, in both structure and content, the passages excerpted from Players and The Names. DeLillo describes generic objects his readers can identify with, readyteller machines and automobiles, set against the backdrops of television, money, and computers. The author employs sentence fragments to great effect, isolating and intensifying certain elements in his contemporary mural. Yet DeLillo does something different here as well. Unlike previous passages, these paragraphs show the main character, Jack Gladney, interacting favorably with these objects, being "blessed" by them, and in so doing DeLillo reveals the invisible, beastly, independent nature of modern society, an aspect of it he had only hinted at before. Indeed, DeLillo writes, "the system was invisible," and that Gladney senses "a meaning, a presence." Yet the interaction between DeLillo's main character and this ethereal being is lopsided; the power flows only one way. The "deranged person . . . escorted from the bank" is evidence of this, someone for whom the numbers do not match. So that when DeLillo's protagonist experiences "gratitude" and pleasure, as well as a "moment of splendid transcendence," he is allowed to feel these emotions only because the system, this once (or twice, actually), has decided to spare him.

And what response is DeLillo continually able to elicit through these passages, through these techniques? He is aiming to produce in his readers feelings of disdain and disquiet
toward modern American society. He presents tangible objects for his readers' consideration, objects they can and want to identify with and about which they already share an uneasiness, so that, in Kenneth Burke's words, DeLillo metonymically reduces a "higher or more complex realm of being to the terms of a lower or less complex realm of being" (Grammar 506). Then, through apposition, DeLillo transforms these objects, rendering an "incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible" (Grammar 506). Through this technique, commonplace objects symbolize the existence of some vague, evil force--cunning, invisible, and indiscriminate--an entity for which people are but victims to satisfy its nasty whims. This, I submit, is DeLillo's bleak view of modern society and the responses he elicits toward it are appropriate and necessary.

Though DeLillo's method of presenting American culture is singular among his contemporaries, his ability to create rhythmically distinctive prose remains the cornerstone of his stylistic uniqueness. One notices the rhythmic quality of his prose immediately, sensing, upon reading further, that DeLillo imbues every line, every sentence, every paragraph with this same poetic character. Yet how can this be explained? Several stylisticians whose primary field of study is rhythm prove helpful in suggesting an awareness of DeLillo's rhythmic patterns. To begin with, a definition of the term would seem necessary in an effort to gain control of the concept, to
understand DeLillo's use of it, but rhythm, like poetry and style, is difficult to define. All too often, especially when studying verse, critics confuse rhythm with meter. This is a fallacious connection, perhaps more so in considering prose, for rhythm, according to Charles Hartman, is free of the "numerical modes" of meter (24). Rather, rhythm transcends the notion of so many iambics and troches arranged symmetrically or in a set pattern throughout a verse or poem. Morris Croll reiterates Hartman's point when he asserts that rhythm does not "depend upon the number of syllables," and that it relates only peripherally to the "old" notions of "rising and falling stress" (429). Yet these assertions concern themselves more with what stress is not than with what it is. Aware of this, Croll ventures a definition of rhythm, one that serves successfully to illuminate the basis of DeLillo's rhythmic expression. Croll claims rhythm represents a "primary, instinctive, physical" desire that "seek[s] release in free and ideal activity," in a "pattern" that tends to "rush to the height of energy and speed" (433). This idea of rhythm befits prose well, eschewing mention of any mathematically or formalistic structuring, concentrating instead on those surgings and pulses, those tensions arising naturally, organically from the text. This frees us, in examining DeLillo, to attend to the rhythmic ebb and flow of his words without requiring us to count anything—not stresses, not syllables, not words.

While this concept of rhythm begins to explain some of
the extra-literal phenomena of DeLillo's writing, it remains, nonetheless, incomplete, presenting a largely linear view of the subject. Rhythm is more than strings of syllables speeding up and slowing down, building energy and releasing it. A certain phrase may be more rich rhythmically than the rest of the sentence it occupies. Some sentences abound with lyricism while others around them fall dead. Particular paragraphs build and sustain a momentum uncharacteristic of the rest of the chapter. In his study, "Rhythm: A Multilevel Analysis," Richard D. Cureton accounts for these varied instances of surging and subsidence, advocating that rhythm, like Jakobson's model of language, is comprised of several aspects all working at once. Cureton states, "all rhythms are based on a periodic return of some unit," and are "inherently hierarchical and interactional: their expressive power derives from the intersecting perceptual forms that they present on many levels of structure within the expressive medium" (243). He outlines five basic rhythmic levels—cadence, word rhythms, rhythm phrases, tone units, and larger phrasing—adding that "the rhythmic gestalt conveyed by a piece of language will be a complex product of the interaction of recurrent groupings on all of these levels of structure" (245).

If we consider Croll's and Cureton's views in tandem, the concept of rhythm acquires a new depth. It becomes more complex, comprised not only of those textual elements possessing and heightening the writing's energy—elements readers cue on
in establishing for themselves the writing's speed, its accelerations and decelerations--but made up as well by the different rhythmic levels working with and against each other in the same instant. Thus, several competing rhythm systems exist in even the simplest utterance. Consider, for example, this passage from *Players*:

So she wasn't unhappy about stepping out onto Eighth Avenue at ten or so in the evening, part of the morbid bazaar that springs up outside the bus terminal every summer night, spreading through the wetness and stench. Restless men sorted among the miscellany. Pigments, styles, dialects, persuasions. Sets of eyes followed her to the corner. Immediately east, west and south were commercial streets, empty and dark now, a ray system of desolation, perhaps a truer necropolis, the outlying zone to which all bleak neon aspires. (204)

Two extended sentences containing multiple clauses, one sentence fragment, and two basically simple sentences. A typical DeLillo mix, almost utilitarian in nature. Yet the passage's rhythmic profile is complex.

To begin with, a subtle cadence can be discerned, a metronomic keep-time that doesn't really engage until mid-way through the first sentence, reaching its strongest point with the central fragment, "Pigments, styles, dialects, persuasions," as if DeLillo were writing in four/four time, this list repre-
senting one measure. The next rhythmic level, word rhythms, reveals an interesting end to the paragraph. In the first sentence, the author establishes the protagonist's mood, that she is "[not] unhappy," a double negative in no way equal in meaning to being happy. Written as such, the phrase evinces an emotional tug and pull in a character whose actual feelings do not match her potential feelings. She should be unhappy, but she is not. The ensuing description enhances this potential unhappiness, as DeLillo details the squalor of this section of the city--bus terminals and sleazy streets, men choosing their vices as if picking through trash. A tension is set up; the place and time of day suggest decay, yet the woman's emotions are brightening. Likewise, four words' individual rhythms run counter to the prevailing word rhythms of the paragraph. "Bazaar," "outside," "perhaps," and "aspires" all place stress on the final syllable, unlike the other polysyllabic words here, and, spaced as they are near the beginning and end of the passage, help maintain the overriding tension. Indeed, DeLillo ends with one of these words, "aspires," the rising rhythm mirroring the the woman's ascendant emotions.

In rhythm phrases, tone units, and larger phrasings, the rhythmic intricacies mount. Cureton defines rhythm phrases as, a minimal matching between syntactic units (usually a word or short phrase) and the occurrence of stress in the flow of the text. Rhythm phrases will usually have one stress per phrase and will have one to
six or seven syllables—but deviations from this norm are possible. Short phrases with strong syntactic cohesion can have more than one stress or no stress at all. (249)

At this level, rhythms begin to differentiate themselves according to how the unstresses of certain syllables group themselves around single instances of stress, thus creating somewhat larger increments of rhythm. The last sentence in the above paragraph might, within these parameters, break down this way:

[ɪm mɛd ɪ æt lɪl] [east, west and south] [wɛrə cɒm mɛr cɪl] [streɪts,] [emp tʃ] [ænd dɑrk nɔw,] [ɑ rɑy sɪs tɛm] [ɒf de sə lə tʃən,] [pɜ hæps] [ɑ tru ɜ] [næ kroʊ pɔ lɪs,] [tʃæt ou tʃɪŋ] [zɔnə] [tə wɪtʃ ɔl] [blɛk] [nɛ oʊ] [ɑs pɪrəs.]

This sentence, envisioned in this manner, now contains seventeen rhythmic units, rather than the fifty units present when examining syllables, and the rhythmic personality of the entire line begins to take shape. As readers, we make choices. The scansion "[emp tʃ] [ænd dɑrk nɔw]" can as easily be broken up to read [emp tʃ ænd] [dɑrk nɔw], each version subtly different from the other by means of moving the juncture, of shifting the pause from between the words "empty" and "and" to between "and" and "dark." Points of acceleration and deceleration begin to unveil themselves, and a sense of the line's overall fluidity is revealed in the number of rhythm phrases.
created; the fewer the rhythm phrases, the fewer the junctural silences between them, and the greater the potential for a flowing line.

Tone units, those groups of syllables "containing more than one stress, but containing only one pitch slide marking a point of emphasis" (Cureton 250), group rhythm phrases into still larger rhythmic increments. The same sentence marked for tone units might break down like this:

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[im mid i ate ly east, west and south] [were com mer
cial streets,] [emp ty and dark now,] [a ray sys tem
of de so la tion,] [per haps a tru er ne cro po lis,
the out ly ing zone] [to which all bleak ne on as
pires.]
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With tone units, we can see that all stresses are not created equal, that only a certain few syllables (marked by double stresses above) assume peak energy. In essence, then, a rhythmic class system has evolved, existing of have-nots, haves, and really-haves. The line builds especially to these spots of extra stress, syllables the reader subconsciously rushes toward and lingers on while there.

Larger units of phrasing exist at and above the level of the sentence. The passage studied here displays this phenomenon. The two longer sentences that begin and end the paragraph glide along, the first few words of each new clause darting forward as the momentum fizzles from the clause before. Yet the fragment placed symmetrically as the fulcrum of the
passage reads slowly, methodically. This short list establishes a point of measured reading and acquires both semantic and rhythmic emphasis. The overall rhythmic pattern of the passage, then, might be represented by the line shape of an overturned bell, as the energy and speed of the opening sentence descend into a rhythmic trough mid-passage before ascending in the last sentence to a rhythmic level equivalent to that of the first sentence.

In examining these last three levels of rhythm, we discern patterns between the three novels. Time and again, DeLillo plays his longer, more complex sentences for speed and fluidity, mixing them with shorter sentences or sentence fragments for a contrapuntal change of pace. His clause-laden sentences embody an array of tone units, so that each sentence possesses several major stress points spaced among several minor ones, giving the sentence a variegated, rather than binary, sense of shape and pacing. Entire passages exhibit rhythmic features, peaks and valleys, as if the paragraphs were breathing, inhaling and exhaling several times between the first sentence and the last. To wit:

Along some northern coast at sundown a beaten gold light is waterborne, sweeping across lakes and tracing zigzag rivers to the sea, and we know we’re in transit again, half-numb to the secluded beauty down there, the slate land we’re leaving behind, the peneplain, to cross these rainbands in deep night. This
is time totally lost to us. We don't remember it. We take no sense impressions with us, no voices, none of the windy blast of aircraft on the tarmac, or the white noise of flight, or the hours waiting. Nothing sticks to us but smoke in our hair and clothes. It is dead time. It never happened until it happens again. Then it never happened.

(The Names 7)

And:

Every semester I arranged for a screening of background footage. This consisted of propaganda films, scenes shot at party congresses, outtakes from mystical epics featuring parades of gymnasts and mountaineers—a collection I'd edited into an impressionistic eighty-minute documentary. Crowd scenes predominated. Close-up jostled shots of thousands of people outside a stadium after a Goebbels speech, people surging, massing, bursting through the traffic. Halls hung with swastika banners, with mortuary wreaths and death's-head insignia. Packs of thousands of flagbearers arranged before columns of frozen light, a hundred and thirty anti-aircraft searchlights aimed straight up—a scene that resembled a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire. There was no narrative voice. Only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers,
accusations, shrieks. (White Noise 26)

Analyzing these excerpts line-by-line would not only require many pages of text, but also would prove no more revealing than my earlier analysis of the paragraph from Players. Rather, I present them as examples that display the same rhythmic complexity as in the passage from Players.

Finally, I am left to assess the meanings DeLillo's stylistic devices assume in the context of the overall novel. What of the use of a four-noun sentence fragment in constructing the murky ambience of Players' tale of terrorism and infidelity? What of DeLillo's use, conscious or not, of Burke's notion of identification in portraying the time-suspended, international setting of The Names? And what of the creation of extended strains of rhythm in presenting the pernicious prevalence of modern media in White Noise? These are difficult questions to answer; to assign a separate purpose to each stylistic device in the context of each separate novel seems, even in regarding the entire novel, exactly the subjective-turned-objective interpretation against which Mair and Fish protest. So, then, I must consider these three novels as a unity, attuning myself to the meanings acquired within this larger category, this broader purview.

DeLillo interweaves his sub-consciously desperate, largely unspectacular characters with various manifestations of modern technological society—terrorism and marriage, obsessions and language, annihilation and television. Players' Pammy and
Lyle stray into terrorism and infidelity in an effort to fill the black hole in their upscale, urban relationship. The Names' James Axton chases a murderous cult in stemming the boredom derived from expatriation and multi-nationalism. Jack Gladney schleps his way through White Noise, driven, as the television blares before him, by an obsession with death. A certain numbness resides in the heart of each of these characters, an ambivalence; these are neither good nor bad people. They are at once both the consumate products, as well as the estranged by-products, of their environments. They exude dependence and independence in the same breath, sanity and madness, resolve and irresolution. Their environments support and encourage them in these dichotomies.

How best to capture the ambience of these bleak considerations, these dismaying conclusions? How to render effectively the allure of the danger we confront every day, as well as the abrupt, time-is-money coldness of it? DeLillo has found a way, and his writing style plays no small part in this. In short, he employs the rhetorical devices discussed in this paper to create a stylistic gestalt—a stylistic "cheese omelette" (7), as Arthur Quinn might say. DeLillo's sentence fragments are the ingredient that best conveys the efficient, unadorned, impersonal characteristic of his modern milieus—fragments used as the semantic bridge between differing concepts that begin to possess some of the ambivalence DeLillo aims to capture. His method of apposition, wherein he
uncovers the truest nature of so many everyday objects, sug-
ests the complexity of his subject matter, revealing a dupli-
city not only in the objects he considers but, as well, in the
tone he uses to write about them. And DeLillo's extended
rhythmic interplays reflect the soporific essence of all these
modern settings—this is style as content—as they mesmerize
and lull us, carry us along, hold us in thrall, even as they
threaten to devour us. DeLillo creates his stylistic vision
through these devices, allowing them, as well, to blossom and
serve, acquiring meanings as one would gifts.
Toward the beginning of *The Names*, the narrator, James Axton, asserts somewhat abruptly, "But I don't want to surrender my text to analysis and reflection" (20). The jarring nature of this utterance arises from the sudden unfamiliarity of the voice. The sentence seems out of place, spoken by someone other than the main character. And perhaps it is. Perhaps this is really DeLillo speaking, exhibiting a bit of literary ventriloquism to express his own selfish, yet not misunderstandable whim.

So be it. But one cannot write well without expecting people to be curious about how one does it, although maybe DeLillo is not keeping the critics at arm's length so much as he is offering his readers a clue to appreciating him. Maybe he is asking them to savor their responses to his writing, to leave those sensations and ideas he elicits in that purest state and not to adulterate and to diminish them with too much fancy thinking.

But the object of his metafictional admonition may not be his reader so much as the writer himself. If the task of writing is to elicit a response in the reader, and if DeLillo seemingly warns against spoiling that response, might he not possibly be warning against spoiling the act of elicitation as well? When we eschew the search for the constituent elements
of a response, opting instead to bask, for the moment, in its mystery and power, we restore a sense of wonder to that instance of connection between author and reader. DeLillo's plaintive, self-conscious statement reflects his own desire to reclaim that sense of awe for himself, to cling to something ineffable in the act of composition rather than to reduce it to a series of seemingly mechanistic actions. Yet what might the source of this desire be? Perhaps DeLillo writes his utterance out of anger and frustration at all the literary scavengers (and I cannot exclude myself) who so arrogantly assert explanations and re-explanations of his work. This is, I think, a common enough experience. Writers snipe at critics continuously (as do critics at writers, writers at writers, etc.) Yet DeLillo may not be frustrated at all. Perhaps he simply knows something the rest of us do not: that those moments when a writer is able to elicit those responses we long for as readers, responses of awe and respect, when we witness a writer striking that perfect balance between truth and art, that those moments cannot be explained. If DeLillo is right, if he has indeed inserted himself into his text with good reason, hoping to forestall and disarm his critics, then the implications for this study, and so many others like it, are undeniably grave. Style, certainly, is one aspect of writing from which our responses as readers spring, and if its existence is inexplicable, then we, as interested critics, waste much time searching for its origin.
DeLillo, however, does not insert himself into the text to tell us his writing cannot be explained. Rather, he wants those of us who would critique him to question our motives for doing so. As I already said, some things are meant to be savored and are ruined by too much inspection. The movie scene that causes you to skip a breath involuntarily. The song that plays on the radio and momentarily gives you back twenty years of your life. The painting you cannot move away from even after an hour because you are not finished looking at it. This may be DeLillo's conception of what art, and writing in particular, should do: to hold us enraptured for a few moments, that and nothing more, and that the reams of pages generated thereafter ultimately signify little.

Some people are satisfied leaving things alone; some are not. DeLillo would no doubt appreciate the former; I am one of the latter. It kills me trying to figure out where the magician keeps the egg before he pulls it out of your ear. So it is with DeLillo. He intrigues me with the responses he elicits in me. He keeps me subjected to his spell. He does something I wish I could do.

So I analyze and I reflect and I discover—correctly or incorrectly, with or without the proper motive—that the responses DeLillo evokes are not rooted in magic, but in real techniques. Raising the poetic function of language to an equal plane with the referential function is one of them. Through this manipulation, he not only constructs his
conception of modern America, but also produces an overriding artistic quality in his writing. His rhetorical tools become the constitutive factors in his prose, occurring contiguously not only within each text, but also from one text to another. We begin to notice. Their recurrence piques our interest. Something special is at work here, we say. I want to know what it is.
Works Cited


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