

# Mediation Through the Dead

in *White Noise* and the Poetry of Robert Lowell

SAM KRUEGER

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"All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots," muses Jack Gladney rather mysteriously at one point in *White Noise*. In his inspired and original essay, Sam Krueger takes Jack at his word, invoking the motif of death to argue convincingly that there are significant parallels between Don DeLillo's novel and Robert Lowell's 1964 volume, *For the Union Dead*. A late modernist confessional poet like Lowell and postmodern comic satirist like DeLillo might seem to make unlikely gravemates, but Krueger discovers some surprising affinities. Both Jack and Lowell are struggling with "the burden of their consciousness," he argues, and for both, death plays an important role in that struggle. Throughout the novel, Jack is striving to find ways to overcome his fear of death; Lowell, more complexly, turns to a "union with dead writers [which] has the effect of sustaining life." The paradoxical conclusion that both seem finally to come to is that, as Krueger nicely puts it, "a meaningful life means a meaningful death; the two are inextricably linked."

—Dr. David H. Evans

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In Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, the protagonist Jack Gladney draws on the past in an effort to mediate his fear of death, much like Robert Lowell does through his historical poetry in the 1964 collection *For the Union Dead*. Both the character, Jack Gladney, and the poet, Robert Lowell, seek to alleviate the burden of their consciousness through a mediation of their own experiences. For Gladney, his fear of death makes living unbearable, and for Lowell, his aim as a confessional poet is to convey the turmoil he

experiences in its most relatable mode. Lowell and Gladney, a poet and a protagonist, must be discussed in the context of their respective literary environments. In examining Lowell through the confessional poetry that he writes, the reader is able to glean glimpses of his life and struggles. His work *For the Union Dead* contains an overall theme of death and dying relationships, with a number of poems drawing on past literary and military figures through which Lowell explores his contemporary world and inner turmoil. Jack Gladney, however, is a fictional character, and as such he can only be discussed through the medium in which he exists: the novel. He, too, mediates his experience through the past, using the legacy of Adolf Hitler and the German language as his aegis against death.

It is this author's opinion that one cannot acknowledge literary America (and especially New England, where both Lowell is from and DeLillo's story is set) without mention of the Puritans. This particular sect was the first in America to legislate mandatory literacy for children and founded many schools in New England, including the institution that became Harvard College, where Lowell was a student for a time and would later teach at (Fein, *Robert Lowell*, 15). DeLillo's character Gladney teaches at a fictional New England university. Both DeLillo and Lowell reference the Puritans, and in fact the Puritan connection is the first point of intertextuality to be found between their works, and thus, between Lowell and Gladney. Laura Barrett's article "How the Dead Speak to the Living" draws attention to the intertextual nature of DeLillo's novel, and while she was the

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first to draw my attention to the reference to Puritanism in *White Noise*, it was my own discovery of a parallel between the novel and Lowell's titular poem "For the Union Dead" that links these two texts from their respective onsets. *White Noise* begins with families arriving at the university Jack works at: "The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved toward the dormitories" (DeLillo, *White Noise*, 3). The line of vehicles and the orange I-beams immediately drew my attention to the lines in Lowell's poem: "A girde of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders / braces the tingling Statehouse [...] Everywhere / giant finned cars nose forward like fish" (*For the Union Dead*, 70-2). While the lines in Lowell's text come from different places in his poem, the imagery all comes from a subject perceiving his environment from a single static position, and thus the action is happening all at once around him, as it does with DeLillo's narrator, Gladney. Because Lowell describes the orange girders as being "*Puritan-pumpkin orange*," (emphasis added) I have reason to believe that DeLillo chose to colour his I-beam sculpture orange as a nod to Lowell, whose poetry makes sometimes-blatant mention of, and evokes, Puritan idealism. In this way, DeLillo acknowledges the Puritan beginnings of higher learning in America—which is appropriate, seeing as he is setting the scene at the university where Gladney teaches. DeLillo's allusion to Lowell is in keeping with Barrett's argument, which states that *White Noise* is a work of intertextuality:

that which recognizes “our indebtedness to previous representations and [thus is] a metaphor for the novel’s thematic concern with origin and end” (“Intertextuality,” 99). Robert Lowell was fascinated with his personal history, coming from a prominent Boston family with historical ties to the founding of the United States and the Puritans (Fein, 28). Gladney works as a professor and “chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the ‘College-on-the-Hill’” (DeLillo, 4). The name of the college harkens back to Puritan preacher John Winthrop’s famous 1630 sermon, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” where he entreats the New England colonists to “consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon us” (Winthrop, 47). Indeed the fictional College-on-the-Hill is the undisputed center for Hitler studies in America, and, we are told, has become internationally known as a result.

DeLillo’s choice to place Hitler at the center of Jack’s work is not coincidental. Jack seeks, through connecting himself to such an immortal figure, the solace of something not just larger than himself, but so large as to be incomprehensible; though the Holocaust is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, it is implied by the inclusion of the man who caused it. In this way, it is through the past that Jack chooses to mediate his experience of life, for he cannot face up to the overwhelming and inevitable fate of death. As Barrett puts it:

The characters are homesick, nostalgic for a past in which the ego seemed less fragile and arbitrary and language bore some relationship to objective

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reality. Jack especially turns to the past in the hope of finding a beginning, but, as the intertexts confirm, humans have never had access to the prototype; our lives are mediated. The only virgin land is death, and so the characters shuttle between simulations, afraid to face that which has not been mediated. ("Intertextuality," 98)

The past is comforting, because it, more than anything else, can be mediated time and again through the process of serial representation. As Barrett points out, language, similarly, is ineluctably representational in nature, so there can never have been a point in human history when it bore more of a relationship to objective reality. However, there is a solace to be found in the past, precisely because it is comfortably *in the past*. It can be taken up myriad times as the medium through which to interpret and mediate the present and the future, and thus, it is a valuable buffer against one's consciousness. Gladney regards language in the same way, especially the German language, which he embarrassingly does not know, despite his position. He tells us, "I'd made several attempts to learn German, serious probes into origins, structures, roots. I sensed the deathly power of the language. I wanted to speak it well, use it as a charm, a protective device" (DeLillo, 31). His attempts, nonetheless, were hugely unsuccessful, which I interpret as DeLillo maintaining that the seeking of "otherness" to lighten the weight of one's own consciousness is a futile gesture. Jack's attempt at German is just another part of his failing to face his own nature, and therefore failing to face

up to the fact of his life and its necessary involvement with death. The act of facing up to oneself and facing up to death may then be understood as one and the same—and the reluctance, the inability to do so, characterizes the reader's perception of Gladney's experience. With him serving as a miniature facsimile of postmodern America, then by extension, the whole of the country suffers from this reluctance.

Robert Lowell, too, turns to the past to mediate his experiences, and draws from historical figures directly connected to his family's past. *For the Union Dead's* poems allude to a few literary, civic or military figures of the nineteenth century (or earlier, in the case of his ancestor Jonathan Edwards), most notably, Robert Gould Shaw, a Colonel of the Union Army during the American Civil War. Shaw was not an ancestor of Lowell's, but, interestingly, a Charles Russell Lowell, who also fought and died in the Civil War, married Shaw's sister (Fein, 130–1). Lowell's own preoccupation with endings and death, though not as straightforward as Gladney's, still leaks out in the almost-exclusively confessional poetry of *For the Union Dead*. In "Fall 1961," Lowell writes of the common fear of nuclear war.

Our end drifts nearer,  
the moon lifts,  
radiant with terror.  
The state  
is a diver under a glass bell.

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A father's no shield  
for his child. (Lowell, 11)

The threat of nuclear destruction is an entirely twentieth-century phenomenon, and Lowell remarks on the utter futility of a parent's attempt at protection for his child. Perhaps Lowell's longing for the past comes from a nostalgia of his own, for a time before the atom bomb and the experience of absolute fear in the face of certain death. In an age when death on a massive scale can arrive practically unannounced, Lowell turns to the past for a source of strength and self-preservation.

In "Hawthorne," Lowell presents the 19<sup>th</sup>-century writer Nathaniel Hawthorne as a dissatisfied artist. As Richard J. Fein puts it in his book *Robert Lowell*:

Ultimately, Lowell presents a picture of a man who must live with his seething and dissatisfied consciousness, something that troubles Lowell throughout the book; but this poem succeeds in a way most of the others do not because it is more than a work of moiling introspection. Through Hawthorne, Lowell is able to project and dramatize his own situation; through Hawthorne, Lowell can bear his consciousness. As in [his other collections] *Life Studies* and in *Imitations*, the *union with dead* writers has the effect of sustaining life. (Fein, 118-9, emphasis added)

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Fein's very intentional diction of "union with dead" gives the title of Lowell's book added lexical meaning. Lowell looks back, and writes through the experiences of another, because he cannot bear the weight of his consciousness alone; he needs this union with long-dead writers. Though I have chosen to focus exclusively on Lowell's book *For the Union Dead*, Fein's reference to previous works makes clear that this kind of mediation, for Lowell, is a preoccupation. The past serves as a palette for the medium of serial representation, with dead writers reincarnated for the explicit personal expression of the living. Through this emulative creative process, the erasure of any clear origin or end (if these ever existed in the first place) leads to a seeming immortality of self, a comfort in the face of the final frontier; that which defies simulation: death.

The greatest poem in Lowell's *For the Union Dead* is the titular one, which also closes the collection. For Lowell, and by extension, for the reader, it is the figure within the poem who contributes to its greatness. In "Colonel Robert Gould Shaw," Lowell sees a man who embodies the ideals that he himself wishes he could possess. He stands in the face of death and, by doing so, paradoxically chooses life:

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's  
lovely,  
peculiar power to choose life and die—  
when he leads his black soldiers to death,  
he cannot bend his back. (Lowell, 71)

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Lowell is envious of Shaw because of his ability to make this choice, but also because he has already made it. "He is out of bounds now" refers to the fact that Shaw has died, and is beyond the weight of himself and the burden of death—leaving him no pains, no tasks. Lowell tasks him, then, with bearing another's consciousness, the poet's own, and through him mediates his Hawthornian dissatisfaction. The Colonel, young, driven, back unbending even in the face of death and "lean / as a compass needle," leads his 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry on in the right direction (Lowell, 71). To choose life and die seems a contradiction, but given the inevitable nature of death, it would seem less appropriate to choose death and live. Fein comments:

This mind's final honor and heroism is its ability to imagine its inevitable helplessness, and in that helplessness lies a secret exertion of consciousness. The subject of the book's final poem, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, shows that there lies in a public hero the power to know life and thus to choose a meaningful death. (Fein, 118)

In other words, a meaningful life *means* a meaningful death; the two are inextricably linked. DeLillo's Jack Gladney lives in perpetual agitation and fear of death because he cannot reconcile life with its counterpart. He wishes to live a meaningful life in the face of a death that he cannot comprehend, and thus chooses not to accept.

Ironically, it is a brush with what Jack fears most – death – that brings him to a calmer state of understanding. In the penultimate chapter of *White Noise*, he confronts his wife’s ex-lover, Willie Mink, the supplier of the fear-of-death suppressing drug, Dylar. Barrett reminds us that this is another intertext, a nod to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, where Humbert confronts and shoots Clare Quilty, also in the penultimate chapter of that novel (“Intertextuality,” 107). After shooting Mink, and then being shot himself, Gladney narrates, “With the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy [...] [m]y humanity soared” (DeLillo, 315). For the first time in the novel, it seems, Gladney is experiencing things simply from his own subjective perspective, with no mediation. In accepting his humanity, he seems to accept the dread of death that accompanies being alive. As Barrett poignantly puts it, “Jack has passed from blind faith [...] to an acceptance of mystery” (109). Jack himself had given a premonition to this kind of epiphany earlier on in the book after visiting a graveyard: “[m]ay the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan” –and now takes his own advice (DeLillo, 98). It is easy to see this as a fitting conclusion to the work, yet it remains unsatisfying. An acceptance of mystery entails a lack of any true ending, of any kind of satisfying finish, and thus of any kind of new beginning. What becomes clear is that *White*

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*Noise*, at its end, is yet another in a series of serial representations.

The poem "For the Union Dead" concludes Lowell's collection in a similar manner. Richard Fein comments:

"One reason the final poem, 'For the Union Dead,' is the book's most appealing one is that it succeeds in elucidating and dramatizing a public situation by way of the poet's inner turmoil. Mere confessional turmoil in a poem does not necessarily lead to such success." (Fein, 122-3)

Here Fein implies that to achieve a greater confessional success, the poet is *obligated* to mediate personal experience through a public situation. This is to say that to present one's own experience *as itself* is not an authentic enough presentation to be appreciated *for* itself. Mediation is the necessary format for perception. So, Lowell's success as a poet, Fein implies, is predicated on his method of mediation through past figures. It is not enough to know Lowell; we must know Lowell through someone else. In light of this process, we see that Lowell himself is slated to become the medium through which some other artist will present their experience. There is no end to the communication with and through the past, and indeed, "in *For the Union Dead* Lowell carries on some of his liveliest conversations with the dead" (Fein, 119). *White Noise* is similarly concerned with communication with the dead. In jovial interlocutor Murray Siskind's musings on the supermarket being a place of spiritual renewal—much like the Tibetan transitional state,

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he adds—he draws the comparison that the language of the dead is that of “waves and radiation” (DeLillo, 38). We do indeed visit the supermarket periodically through the novel, perhaps becoming reinvigorated each time. DeLillo surely agrees with Siskind as to the significance of the supermarket, for he finishes the novel there, mediating the dead through the technology of “holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living” (DeLillo, 326). In *White Noise*, then, the dead speak to the living. In Lowell’s poetry, the living speak through the dead. The mediation of human experience is inescapable, but my attempt here has been to recognize the medium.

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