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Shallow Look at the Mind of an Assassin

For 9/22/88

DALLAS—Don DeLillo's ninth novel, "Libra," asserts that what happened here in Dealey Plaza a quarter of a century ago became "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century." If this hyperventilating book were merely what that sentence is—overwrought and unhistorical—it would not matter that "Libra" is a best seller. But the book, one of about 20 pouring forth on the Kennedy assassination, is an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship.

DeLillo's attempt to "follow the bullets' trajectories" back into the minds of Lee Harvey Oswald and others becomes yet another exercise in blaming America for Oswald's act of derangement. It is valuable only as a reminder of the toll that ideological virulence takes on literary talent.

The story is that a cadre of CIA operatives, furious about the halfheartedness of the Bay of Pigs invasion, plan an "electrifying event" to galvanize the country against Fidel Castro. They decide on a "surgical miss" of President Kennedy by a gunman who would leave a paper trail to Cuba. But one thing leads to another, and to the man in the sixth-floor window of the Texas Book Depository.

DeLillo says he is just filling in "some of the blank spaces in the known record." But there

is no blank space large enough to accommodate, and not a particle of evidence for, DeLillo's lunatic conspiracy theory. In the book's weaselly afterword, he says he has made "no attempt to furnish factual answers." But in a New York Times interview he says, "I possibly chose the most obvious theory because I wanted to do justice to historical likelihood."

DeLillo traduces an ethic of literature. Novelists using the raw material of history—real people, important events—should be constrained by concern for truthfulness, by respect for the record and a judicious weighing of probabilities.

History, says a DeLillo character, is "the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us." Of course, "They." That antecedentless pronoun haunts the fevered imaginations of paranoid. For conspiracy addicts like DeLillo, the utter absence of evidence, after 25 years of searching, proves not that there was no conspiracy but that the conspiracy was diabolically clever.

He says that because of the seven seconds in Dallas, "we have been educated in skepticism." Skepticism? DeLillo is a study in credibility regarding the crudities of the American left. He says the assassination was "the turning point in consciousness" for Americans,

that "we have been suspicious ever since" concerning "the secret manipulation of history." In Dallas we entered "the world of randomness," reminded by Oswald that "nothing is assured."

Spare us such sandbox existentialism. DeLillo rejects randomness. His intimation is that America is a sick society that breeds extremism and conspiracies and that Oswald was a national type, a product of the culture. From the unremarkable fact that recent assassins or would-be assassins (Sirhan, Ray, Bremer, Hinckley) have been marginal men, not social successes, ideologists of the left weave indictments of America.

DeLillo's indictment is interestingly uninteresting. It is the familiar, banal thought that Oswald was a lonely neurotic who tried to shed ordinariness by lunging into the theater of the Kennedys. And guess what? DeLillo has said: "Consumerism is a form of mass anesthesia. . . . It makes people lonely."

DeLillo's lurid imaginings will soothe immature people who want to believe that behind large events there must be large ideas or impersonal forces or conspiracies. It takes a steady adult nerve to stare unblinkingly at the fact that history can be jarred sideways by an

act that signifies nothing but an added individual's inner turmoil.

The mind of an assassin can be a deep and demanding subject. But the more DeLillo explains his work, the shallower it and he seem. In a burst of sophomoric self-dramatization, he says: "The writer is the person who stands outside society, independent of affiliations."

The writer is the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government." Automatically as in unthinkingly. DeLillo's celebration of the writer as unaffiliated, "outsider" is hackneyed and unhistorical (Henry James, Jane Austen, George Eliot and others were hardly outsiders.) DeLillo's celebration stops just a short step from declaring the writer as kin to Oswald, who, as a defector, was the ultimate outsider.

It is well to be reminded by books like this of the virulence of the loathing some intellectuals feel for American society, and of the frivolous thinking that fuels it. DeLillo is a talented writer whose talent is subordinated to, and obviated by, puerile political stances. What was unfairly said of a far greater writer (T. S. Eliot, born in St. Louis 100 years ago) this Monday) must be said of DeLillo: he is a good writer and a bad influence.