

Against the End: Asceticism and Apocalypse in Don DeLillo's *End Zone*

MARK OSTEEN

In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche writes that the ascetic “treats life as a maze in which we must retrace our steps to the point at which we entered or as an error which only a resolute act can correct, and he further *insists* that we conduct our lives conformably to his ideal.”¹ Many of Don DeLillo’s novels portray such characters who attempt to rediscover primal simplicity through strategies of ascetic self-denial. Bucky Wunderlick, narrator and protagonist of DeLillo’s 1973 novel *Great Jones Street*, withdraws from the fame and noise of rock-n-roll stardom to a small, silent room in New York City’s urban desert; undercover soldier Glen Selvy, in *Running Dog* (1978), seeks simplification and purity in a mechanizing routine that returns him to his training ground and finally compels him to commit ritual suicide. But *White Noise* (1985) demonstrates that ascetics are driven by their principles of attenuation towards an obsession with ends as well as origins. Jack Gladney, narrator of *White Noise*, desires to re-authorize himself, to regain control over his fear of death and annihilation by mastering discourses of authority and replotting his life. His exposure to a toxic cloud that represents his own nebulous dread leads him to invent a melodramatic tale in which he figures as both author and hero. In their quest for simplicity, then, DeLillo’s obsessives ultimately seek terminality: both their own deaths and narrative closure as a terminal point of their life-tales. These characters thus seek an origin that is also an end: each narrows himself to discover either a life gov-

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956) 25; emphasis his.

earned by rules that obviate the necessity for thought—an end to complexities of meaning and morality—or an end to life itself. All of them verge on suicide or murder. In these first person novels each protagonist attempts to place himself within a framework that simplifies competing impulses and discourses into a single-line narrative that moves inexorably toward perfect and violent closure. While DeLillo's obsession with these ascetics implies sympathy for their quests, the novels instead offer indeterminate conclusions in which no character discovers the final solution to his malaise nor the source of the maze. Indeed, these novels finally constitute a thoroughgoing critique of the American ascetic ideal as a solution to technological anxiety. Rather than helping them cope with their fears, DeLillo demonstrates that asceticism deflects their life-preserving impulses into a pursuit of apocalypse.²

DeLillo has stated that obsession is useful to writers because it involves "centering and narrowing down, an intense convergence. An obsessed person is an automatic piece of fiction. He has a purity of movement, an integrity. . . . Obsession as a state seems . . . close to the natural condition of a novelist at work on a book."³ Like authors, DeLillo's ascetics are obsessives who contrive plots, and plots seem inevitably to proceed toward terminal places, toward end zones. As Gladney states in *White Noise*, "all plots tend to move deathward."⁴ Obsession focuses consciousness upon a single goal, and an obsessive, like a novelist at work, travels in a straight line towards closure. Thus these novels explore the nature of terminality. But DeLillo's novels repudiate closure; they invariably end by not ending, sometimes circling back to their beginnings, sometimes offering ambiguous epilogues that cast doubt on their apocalyptic denouements, and sometimes simply trailing off indeterminately.⁵ Thus, DeLillo's novels not only comment upon American asceticism and the related attrac-

² Michael Oriard has pointed out the ascetic tendency in DeLillo's novels in his article "Don DeLillo's Search for Walden Pond," *Critique* 20 (1978): 524. But Oriard argues (I think, mistakenly) that DeLillo embraces this simplifying impulse as a solution to his characters' problems.

³ Tom LeClair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," *Contemporary Literature* 2 (1982): 29.

⁴ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985) 26; subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Tom LeClair has observed this tendency of DeLillo's novels to return to their beginnings in his *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987).

tion for apocalyptic endings, but also interrogate the value of closure as the terminal point of fictions. An obsessive who portrays the limitations of obsession and the delusions of asceticism, DeLillo critiques linear plot by offering unresolved, static, or self-undermining narratives. DeLillo's plots, especially their ends, deconstruct the impulse towards apocalyptic closure as a tendency in human consciousness and as features of the narratives through which we order experience.

In *End Zone* the narrator, college football player Gary Harkness, retreats in confusion to a tiny college on the Texas desert, obeys the authoritative urgings of his ascetic coach, and flirts with self-annihilation through an obsession with nuclear holocaust. Gary desires an "end zone" of purity in which all complexities of meaning and choice are voided, a simplification of landscape and language to the ultimate purity of nothingness. In this text DeLillo traces the source of our cultural fascination with nuclear apocalypse to the ascetic and religious desire for violent cleansing, for a purification through which we conquer the dread of death, paradoxically, by bringing it about. *End Zone* charts ways that we turn nuclear apocalypse into a mythic fiction that satisfies our powerful attraction for terminality. The novel implicitly connects our attraction for nuclear holocaust to the related desire for fictional closure. However, *End Zone*, I will argue, is finally against the end. By revealing the religious and linguistic mutations that underlie the lure of apocalypse, the novel criticizes both the ideology of atomic weapons and the conventional fiction that exploits it. Moreover, by frustrating his readers' desire for novelistic closure DeLillo uses his own fiction as an antidote for that apocalyptic disease.

Americana, DeLillo's first novel and the one that immediately precedes *End Zone*, introduces the relationship between asceticism and apocalypse in the remarks of a secondary character. In this novel, narrator/protagonist David Bell deserts his job at a television network for a geographical and spiritual journey to the source of his desperation. He is accompanied by three other spiritual voyagers seeking either a purified life or, better, the "purest of deaths."⁶ One of them reports the words of a Sioux

⁶ Don DeLillo, *Americana* (1971; New York: Penguin, 1989) 50; subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text. (This reprint edition follows the pagination of the original edition.)

medicine man named Black Knife. America is, he says,

a nation of ascetics. . . . We have been redesigning our landscape all these years to cut out unneeded objects such as trees, mountains and all those buildings which do not make practical use of every inch of space. The ascetic hates waste. We plan the destruction of everything which does not serve the cause of efficiency. . . . What we really want to do . . . is to destroy the forests, white saltbox houses . . . antebellum mansions. It's what we are. Straight lines and right angles. We feel a private thrill, admit it, at the sight of beauty in flames. We wish to blast all the fine old things to oblivion and replace them with tasteless identical structures. Boxes of cancer cells. Neat gray chambers for meditation and the reading of advertisements. Imagine the fantastic prairie motels we could build if we would give in completely to the demons of our true nature. [*Am* 126]

We want to simplify the landscape—and our experience—by building perfect structures—both architectural and mental ones—in which we all become indistinguishable from one another. This is the ascetic dream: to destroy everything and start over, but now to make everyone perfect, that is, identical. We want to replace the forest with a desert. And the new image of our “ascetic scheme,” according to Bell, is “the low motel, neat and clean at ground zero” (*Am* 220).

Deserts and motels: one prefigures the landscape after a nuclear holocaust, and the other reflects the terminal condition of the American ascetic spirit. Again and again DeLillo's ascetics end their tales in one or both of these terminal sites. The desert is harsh, unforgiving—and clean. As a character in DeLillo's novel *The Names* expresses it, “the desert is a solution. Simple, inevitable. It's like a mathematical solution applied to the affairs of the planet.”⁷ Motels represent in DeLillo's novels an almost irresistible urge to create sterile spaces, to destroy history by demolishing its architectural symbols. Often DeLillo's motels are found in the desert, and thus they do not interrupt its sterility so much as internalize that terminal geography. The blandness of motel rooms betrays the spiritlessness at the heart of this ascetic ideal: first we want to create deserts, and then fill them with rooms that reflect an even graver emptiness. A motel room is an indoor desert; it is another locus of terminality. For DeLillo deserts and motels are fictional end zones, places where plots

⁷ Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Knopf, 1982) 294.

end.⁸ Not surprisingly, then, when Gary Harkness contemplates nuclear war, he does so during long walks into the desert. When he finally plays his nuclear war game, it is in a motel room at the edge of that desert. In Black Knife's statement, DeLillo shows that the urge to destroy so as to achieve individuality and solitude actually annihilates both. The quest for purity is merely part of a consumer fantasy of indistinguishability; instead of individuality, we become identical commodities—motel rooms. Rather than filling our lives, these terminal delusions diminish them.

Like *Americana*, *End Zone* concerns "the nature of diminishing existence" (Am 288): how the ascetic ideal is already appropriated by consumerism, how ascetic obsessions frustrate the search for individuality, and how the desert is always filled with motels of the mind. In *End Zone* DeLillo shows that these tendencies also underlie our cultural fascination with nuclear annihilation.⁹ As its title suggests, *End Zone* is about "extreme places and extreme states of mind."¹⁰ The extreme place is again the southwestern Texas desert, the location of Logos College, where Gary Harkness has withdrawn after several failures to play football. An empty landscape is made to be filled, and the characters in this novel fill it with games of all kinds, the most obvious, of course, being football. The Logos coach, Emmett Creed, demands that his players lead "a simple life," and provides a comforting routine which "creates order out of chaos."¹¹ Gary, who came to Logos because he "wanted to disappear," responds to these exhortations of self-discipline because they resonate with his desire for self-annihilation, and because they remind him of

⁸ DeLillo's novels almost always end in either deserts or motels. For example, Bell, in *Americana*, ends his quest for origins in a circular race track in the Texas desert; Selvy, in *Running Dog*, returns to the Texas desert and there sacrifices himself. Lyle Wynant, one of the protagonists of *Players* (New York: Knopf, 1977), is suspended at the end of that novel in a motel room, where he contemplates motels as a place "to be afraid on a regular basis" (209–10). Jack Gladney consummates his quest to kill death in a motel room at the end of *White Noise*. Gary Harkness's end zone—a desert motel—further confirms the identification of these geographical and architectural terminal sites.

⁹ For a discussion of the theological foundations of the apocalyptic mentality in American fiction, see Douglas Robinson, *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985).

¹⁰ Anthony DeCurtis, "Matters of Fact and Fiction," [interview with DeLillo], *Rolling Stone* 17 Nov. 1988: 117.

¹¹ Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (1972; New York: Penguin, 1986) 5, 10; subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.

his own father, who lives according to such hearty directives as "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Gary embraces "simplicity, repetition, solitude, starkness, discipline upon discipline"; "the small fanatical monk who clung to my liver would thrive on such ascetic scraps" (EZ 26, 30). Coach Creed, master plotter, is another obsessive ascetic, a "landlocked Ahab . . . who was unfolding his life toward a single moment," and who narrows experience into a linear narrative with the goal line at the end (EZ 54). Like DeLillo's other protagonists, Gary seeks an origin that is also an "end zone" where language is simplified, choice is reduced, and one's life is narrowed into "the straightest of lines . . . uncomplicated by history, enigma, holocaust, or dream" (EZ 4).

The words of both Creed and Gary's father "hark back," as another character puts it, to ancient ways; they represent those primal origins to which the ascetic wishes to return. Their discourse is authoritative, in Bakhtin's sense, because it is felt to be "located in a distanced zone," presenting itself as the "word of the fathers." Such authoritative discourse "permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions" and demands "unconditional allegiance." It is fused with authority, so that "when coach says we hit, we hit" (EZ 35).¹² This discourse defeats dialogue; it is a monologue—univocal, direct: it is the Logos, the Word of God. No player is allowed to stand out or make decisions for himself. The football team thus operates according to the principle of indistinguishability that governs motel construction and the mass production of commodities, and the Coach's goal is to turn the team into goal-bound ascetics like himself. Late in the novel, after the season has ended with a loss and team solidarity has begun to evaporate, Creed calls Gary into his office and, mixing punishment and honor, makes him co-captain. He tells him that football is an "interlocking of a number of systems" in which the individual is a small element in a large machine; when the systems interlock, "there's a satisfaction to the game that can't be duplicated. There's a harmony." Sacrificing oneself for the team is a mode of asceticism that paradoxically enables self-knowledge through self-annihilation: "We need more self-sacrifice, more discipline.

¹² M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 342–43.

Our inner life is crumbling. We need to renounce everything that turns us from the knowledge of ourselves. . . . Loneliness is strength. . . . [Nothing] makes more sense than self-denial. It's the only way to attain moral perfection. . . . Purify the will. Learn humility. Restrict the sense life" (EZ 199–201). Creed has also won over Taft Robinson, the black running back introduced on the first page of the novel, with these advertisements on "self-denial, on being alone, on geography," the ascetic's terminal geography of interior and exterior deserts (EZ 237).

Creed's aim, one that Gary alternately embraces and repudiates, is to produce a life in which the self is overwhelmed by routine. DeLillo's later story, "Human Moments in World War III," portrays two soldiers in space who exist according to a similar creed: in technological purification they find a life "in which every breath is governed by specific rules, by patterns, codes, controls."¹³ Creed creates what Robert Jay Lifton might call a "totalistic environment": one that proceeds on the assumption that it "contains the key to absolute virtue," and which "mobilizes the vast human potential for guilt and shame in its imperative of eliminating all 'taints' and 'poisons' in a demand for purity." It also loads language in ways that "eliminate ambiguity about even the most complex human problems and reduces them to definitive-sounding, thought-terminating images."¹⁴ Obviously such asceticism is only a step away from fascism, from "final solutions" that resolve problems through mass atrocity. Thus Creed's prize ascetic, Taft Robinson, gains a mixture of pleasure and horror in reading about "the ovens, the showers, the experiments, the teeth, the lampshades, the soap" (EZ 240). Likewise, Gary becomes obsessed with that other final solution: nuclear war.

In this regard, Nietzsche points out that the prevalence of the ascetic ideal testifies at once to modern man's desperate attempts to affirm life, and to his "persistent morbidity . . . his *tædium vitae*, exhaustion, the longing for 'the end.'"¹⁵ Similarly, in *End Zone* the authorities' asceticism fuses the survival instinct with the impulse towards "the end" by prompting players to in-

¹³ Don DeLillo, "Human Moments in World War III," *Great Esquire Fiction: The Finest Stories from the First Fifty Years*, ed., intro. L. Rust Hills (New York: Penguin, 1983) 581.

¹⁴ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Basic, 1983) 298.

¹⁵ Nietzsche 256.

vent obsessive games that create apparently perfect structures—ones that impel them towards end zones. One of these is “Bang, You’re Dead,” which the football players play in the dormitory. The rules are simple: you follow the order to die. Here words function as weapons; language is simplified into imperatives and human existence narrowed into a brief plot in which one lives, is shot, and dies beautifully. Another such structure is the simplified football game near the end of the novel that the team plays in a snowstorm, hoping to recapture the unity lost after the season has ended. Slowly eliminating rules and play possibilities (no passing, no deception), the players reduce the game to the plodding of identical white players towards the goal line. The players find comfort in the purity of bodily contact and the warmth generated by violence. The bitter cold is both mortifying and satisfying in this winter desert. Both of these games simplify even Creed’s asceticism, and combine deathward motion with a yearning for the primitive.

But Gary’s terminal desires are manifested more directly in his fixation with nuclear holocaust. He reads a book on nuclear war and, half-ashamed, finds that he likes it: “I liked dwelling on the destruction of great cities. . . . Pleasure in the contemplation of millions dying and dead. I became fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability . . . stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, spasm war. Pleasure in these words” (*EZ* 20–21). He begins to take circular walks into the desert and back while contemplating nuclear destruction, trying to punish himself until he ceases enjoying it. But this tactic fails; instead, “Pleasure nourished itself on the black bones of revulsion and dread” (*EZ* 43). In chapter 16 he discusses this morbid fascination with an Army officer, Major Staley, in a desert motel “barely distinguishable from the land around it.” Staley explains that “there’s a kind of theology at work here. The bombs are a kind of god. . . . We begin to capitulate to the overwhelming presence. It’s so powerful. . . . [we say] Let it happen, whatever he ordains” (*EZ* 79–80). It is clear that Creed is imbued with godlike authority, but the idea of The Bomb as God may at first seem less plausible. And yet *End Zone* demonstrates through Gary’s obsessions that our society’s ambivalent mixture of attraction for nuclear weapons and/or dread of them resembles religious feeling. Ira Chernus

has recently analyzed this nuclear theology, making a convincing case that our cultural fascination with nuclear weapons derives from a distortion of religious impulses. Nuclear weapons, he argues, inspire both awe and dread, and remain mysteriously fascinating both because of their complex technology and because of their seemingly limitless power. The numinousness of nuclear weapons—their mystery and power—induces us to identify with their destructive force, and indeed finally to try to merge with their power by letting them rain down.¹⁶ Tom LeClair has paired the theology of The Bomb with Creed's discourse, viewing them as similar versions of logocentrism, a re-inscription of theological values based upon what Derrida calls a "metaphysics of presence," which claims to supply final meanings and answers and bring an end to play.¹⁷ But this discourse is not based merely upon a theology or metaphysics of presence, because one paradoxical element in the attraction for nuclear weapons is their power for total destruction. They are "present" in our minds only when not used—when absent physically—and when truly "present"—that is, when used—they will bring about an ultimate absence, the end of civilization and perhaps even the extinction of humanity. The Bomb eludes the metaphysics of presence because it generates logical contradictions: it is the one weapon whose value depends upon its never being used. That nuclear war will extinguish mankind is perhaps arguable, but the symbolic force of these weapons is unmistakable: they represent an ultimate simplicity, indeed, a void, for which we often yearn.

In *The Fate of the Earth* Jonathan Schell shows convincingly that nuclear war would result in a "gross simplification of the landscape" into a "republic of insects and grass."¹⁸ Gary's obsession with nuclear holocaust reflects the ascetic urge to bring about this simplification. As *Americana* demonstrates, the ascetic views holocaust as a path to purification that leads to regeneration. In its ultimate expression, asceticism longs for an apocalypse that will annihilate the human species in an attempt to cleanse it of evil and complexities of choice; it hopes to purify

¹⁶ Ira Chernus, *Dr. Strangelove: On the Symbolic Meaning of Nuclear Weapons* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1986) 12–19.

¹⁷ LeClair, *In the Loop* 65.

¹⁸ Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Avon, 1982) 65.

the world by destroying it. Gary sees in the stark desert landscape a reflection of his own fascination with the results of nuclear war—this is his end zone. A nuclear war would satisfy the ascetic's unbearable desire for violent termination, providing the human narrative with a closure as complete as it is possible to conceive: the simplification of nothingness. Late in the novel, Gary's roommate, Anatole Bloomberg, concludes similarly that "an individual's capacity for violence is closely linked with his ascetic tendencies." He goes on to assert mockingly that in "our silence and our terror we may steer our technology towards the metaphysical, toward the creation of some unimaginable weapon able to pierce spiritual barriers, to maim or kill whatever dark presence envelopes the world" (EZ 215). Lifton has associated such views with what he calls "nuclearism"—the religion of nuclear weapons. This creed views them as "a solution to death anxiety and a way of restoring the lost sense of immortality," and generates an ideology in which "'grace' and even 'salvation'—the mastery of death and evil—are achieved through the power of a new technological deity." At the heart of nuclearism is the ascetic ideal of the Bomb's "purifying function."¹⁹ Here, then, lies another paradox in our theological relationship with The Bomb: because of the logic of deterrence, in which having nuclear weapons prevents others from using them on us, they become the means of our deliverance from their own "dark presence." The Bomb thus seems to save us from Itself. Moreover, as Anatole suggests, if we use nuclear weapons, we will never have to fear them again; nuclear apocalypse will paradoxically rid us of the constant dread that haunts us.

DeLillo's later novel, *White Noise*, returns to these themes, suggesting that the obsession with nuclear disaster is simply the furthest expression of a progressive delight in contemplating atrocity. The family of narrator Jack Gladney is fascinated with catastrophes of all kinds: "every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping." (Gladney himself exemplifies this by turning his fear of personal death into a professional study of Adolf Hitler.) One of Gladney's colleagues tells him that "we need an occasional catastrophe to break up

¹⁹ Lifton 69, 79.

the incessant bombardment of information. . . . We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else" so that we can watch them on television (WN 64, 66). If apocalypse is a game in *End Zone*, in *White Noise* it is a television show. Television frames and distances the chaos inherent in disasters and thereby gives them an illusion of orderliness. They satisfy our need for violence, seeming simultaneously super real and unreal. *White Noise* also suggests that we secretly crave them because they produce a simplified life in which the only problem worth considering is how to survive. But when the Gladneys are confronted with a real disaster—a mini-holocaust embodied in a toxic cloud—they betray the same mixture of fear and fascination that Gary Harkness shows. The cloud is "a terrible thing to see," but it is also "spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event." Their fear is "accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is . . . a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful" (WN 127). These words echo the responses of people who have actually witnessed an atomic explosion, a response compounded of admiration for its beauty and awe of its power—a sense of numinous mystery identifiable as religious. Like Gary, the Gladneys want both to flee from mass death and to embrace it.

Gladney later begins to worry about this attraction to apocalypse. He wonders if this is the "point of Armageddon": "no ambiguity, no more doubt," and fears that "if enough people want it to happen," it will happen (WN 137). Gladney's colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, exploits and deflects this fascination by showing his students film footage of car crashes. He tells them that "it's not decay they are seeing but innocence. The movie breaks away from complicated human passions to show us something elemental, something fiery and loud and head-on. It's a conservative wish-fulfillment, a yearning for naivete. . . . We want to reverse the flow of experience, of worldliness and its possibilities." This is not violence, he claims, but "celebration": through it we may "improve, prosper, perfect ourselves" (WN 218). Once again violence promises purification. Such holocausts combine the desire to return to origins with the yearning to create and reside in end zones. This same desire, DeLillo implies in both novels, also underlies our need for fictional closure. We crave a cataclysmic end that ties up all complications into a

package, allows us vicariously to indulge our love of apocalypses, and permits us to fantasize about starting over again.

These views of nuclear apocalypses and weapons present them as symbols, as a "Big Bang" recapitulating the primal explosion of the Creation, as a magical device that solves all problems at once by blowing them to oblivion. This mythic response ignores the realities of the effects of nuclear weapons, which of course would be much closer to chaos than to order. After the awe-inspiring blast and heat would come the horrors of radiation sickness, epidemic, and famine. But for those actually sending the missiles, a nuclear war might very well seem clean because they would also be those most shielded from its horrible effects.²⁰ Similarly, for some nuclear strategists, fighting a nuclear war seems to resemble a game because they are walled off from its realities. The jargon from which Gary Harkness gains so much guilty pleasure exemplifies this irony. He complains to Major Staley that "there's no way to express thirty million dead. No words. So certain men are recruited to reinvent the language. [The words] don't explain, they don't clarify, they don't express. They're painkillers. Everything becomes abstract" (EZ 85). Gary argues that the jargon of nuclear strategists protects them—and, they hope, us—from recognizing the enormity of what their words represent. Like nuclear strategy itself, its language is founded upon paradox: the words are designed not to signify but to deny signification, to shield their users from responsibility for planning and carrying out mass destruction. Just as the weapons themselves would produce a radical simplification of geography, so the jargon itself reduces and simplifies language: it empties itself of referentiality, proceeding towards the ultimate simplicity of meaninglessness. The result is a kind of linguistic end zone, a verbal ground zero. Once again nuclear holocaust engenders a metaphysics not of presence, but of absence.

²⁰ Indeed, although the conflict in "Human Moments in World War III" is specifically non-nuclear, the distancing effect of technology on those fighting the war can be applied to nuclear wars. In both cases, the complex technologies create a shield for the warriors, and apparently reveal to them the "hidden simplicity of some powerful mathematical truth" (574). Two nuclear holocaust novels that treat this phenomenon are Alfred Coppel's *Dark December* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1960), and Mordecai Roshwald's *Level 7* (New York: Signet, 1959).

In his discussion of *End Zone* Tom LeClair argues that "the new danger of nuclear war is its turning the whole world into a closed system."²¹ But this misses the point. The global ecology after a nuclear war would be no more "closed" than before, only drastically reduced. More importantly, nuclear war could very possibly result in the extinction of the human race. Schell implies that such a result, which paradoxically kills death itself because no more people would die, would therefore cause the death of meaning itself: since no more human beings would be left to ascribe significance to experience, meaning would be annihilated along with the people who produce it.²² In this sense, the jargon of nuclear war does accurately signify the results of using nuclear weapons: just as the jargon kills meaning, so do the weapons; the voiding of complexity and meaning produced by nuclear holocausts is paradoxically represented by the sterility of the game-language of strategy. One of Gary's teammates is taking a course on "the untellable"; nuclear war is often referred to as "the unthinkable." *End Zone* implies a relationship between the two, in both the linguistic and theological senses. To grasp the "unthinkable," nuclear strategists invent words and phrases that have significance only within the parameters of their game theories. The jargon attains the status of a secret language, acquiring a cult-like authority perfectly appropriate for a religious ritual. Like Creed's commands, the jargon of nuclear war presents itself as authoritative discourse, sharply demarcated from the real horrors it tries not to specify, and thus betrays the same desire to simplify as Creed's directives. Like Creed's discourse, it generates a totalistic environment, annihilating complexity and operating within an illusionary framework of absolute morality—us against them. Thus Gary attempts to master nuclear holocaust by mastering the discourse of its priesthood. Strategic jargon tries to make nuclear war "untellable" by detaching words from real-world contexts, becoming a secret language impenetrable to any but the elect. Through such linguistic placebos, we are prevented from confronting the horrors of nuclear war, and from doing anything to prevent it. But ultimately nuclear holocaust is "untellable" not only because such vast destruction boggles the mind, and not only because we

²¹ LeClair, *In the Loop* 79.

²² Schell 128–29.

create psychic and linguistic defenses to avoid thinking about it, but because we must translate it into language that is always insufficient to represent a condition in which meaning is necessarily absent because all users of language are dead. In this sense, by killing meaning, nuclear holocaust casts its shadow over language itself.

In part 2 of *End Zone* DeLillo provides a terse but involving description of the big football game between Logos and its arch rival Centrex (theology vs. technology). Since we are not players, the play signals become an impenetrable language comparable to the jargon of nuclear strategy. In giving his play-by-play account, the narrator vows to "unbox the lexicon" of football for all eyes to see, and thus disclose "a cryptic ticking mechanism in search of a revolution" (113). This implies that, as in "Bang, You're Dead," words themselves are the primary weapons in both nuclear strategy and football; football jargon, like that of nuclear strategy, is a destructive implement that "cleanses" the landscape of complexity and choice. Likewise, DeLillo has said that the characters in *End Zone* are "pieces of jargon. They engage in wars of jargon with each other."²³ In the penultimate chapter of the novel, Gary and Staley play a nuclear war game using this jargon in Staley's desert motel room—the novel's end zone. Most of the terms and even the crisis scenario which initiates the game come directly from Herman Kahn's *On Escalation*, which uses an "escalation ladder" to predict and analyze how a crisis might move up the rungs into nuclear war.²⁴ Kahn is one of those men recruited to reinvent the language, having defined many of those words which please Gary (for example, "stark deterrence" and "super-ready status"). Moreover, the game itself adheres quite closely to Kahn's escalation ladder, moving inexorably from "ostensible crisis" to "spasm response" (EZ 221–25).²⁵ Like Kahn, Staley denies that nuclear war will necessarily be all out or "insensate." He tells Gary that future wars will be so "humane" that we will "practically have a referee and a timekeeper," as in a football game (EZ 82). But clearly, those who think in terms of "scenarios" already see nuclear war

²³ LeClair, "Interview" 21.

²⁴ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965) 37–50.

²⁵ See Kahn 42–50.

as a game. Under the pretext of "thinking about the unthinkable" (the title of one of Kahn's earlier books), strategists such as Kahn and Staley actually prevent our confronting the realities of nuclear holocaust by camouflaging it with pseudo-objective terminology. The habit of thinking in jargon that shields them from the realities of destruction encourages them to conceive of war as a perfect structure, as rule-bound and safe, as occurring within white lines that demarcate the thinkable from the unthinkable. This, then, is how jargon itself is a weapon: the violence it does to meaning, and the simplifications it effects on morality and responsibility help to harden the mind so that it accepts, indeed, even welcomes, nuclear apocalypse.

In this way the ascetic desire for purity mushrooms into a form of fascism that permits atrocity. Turning nuclear holocaust into a game makes it more likely to occur; once framed, it seems more manageable, and apocalyptic closure seems desirable. Nuclear war becomes merely another scenario, a fiction with a pre-conceived end. Indeed, Kahn's book is a kind of prolegomena to any future nuclear war fiction, a sketch of an ideal novel that ends in a satisfying spasm of violence. Like Kahn's scenarios, Gary's and Staley's war game begins with Gary overwhelmed by his many options; as it proceeds, however, the choices become increasingly limited as the war follows its inexorable logic of closure, and it ends, like Kahn's scenario, with all-out insensate war. Of course nuclear war is not a game; unlike a game, a real nuclear war could have no winner, because it would destroy the means by which such things could be decided. In the novel, the end of the game is punctuated by a phone ringing and startling Staley, a symbol of the real world intruding upon the insular world of the game. But real nuclear war ultimately eludes any framework we can give it, whether linguistic or ludic. Its meaning is truly the voiding of meaning: an ultimate simplicity. *End Zone* shows how the conventional strategic mentality prepares us for its coming by fostering the notion that nuclear holocaust is a game, a fictional plot with a satisfyingly apocalyptic conclusion.

Gary seems to understand that the jargon itself is somehow to blame, because earlier in his desert walk he thinks that by contemplating the destruction of humankind one will eventually be forced to "reinvent the language" constructively. "In some form

of void, freed from consciousness, the mind remakes itself. What we must know must be learned from blanked-out pages. To begin to reword the overflowing world. To subtract and disjoin. To re-recite the alphabet" (EZ 89). Perhaps by remaking language and restoring its lost simplicity, one can avoid the dangerous abstractions of nuclear theorists. But the rest of the novel makes it clear that this is merely another of Gary's ascetic simplifications: the desire to blank out and then rewrite those empty pages is another expression of that eschatological impulse that makes nuclear holocaust attractive. Gary hungers for closure that will lead to renewal. His desire for regenerative destruction may be further implied when, at the end of the novel, he begins to fast and finally has to be fed through tubes. But the meaning of his fast remains ambiguous. Earlier Creed showed him a painting of St. Teresa of Avila, and reminded him that she ate food out of a human skull (EZ 202). Creed urges Gary to purify himself similarly, to emulate a Sioux warrior through devotions like fasting and solitude (EZ 200). It is not certain whether Gary's final fast demonstrates his intention to follow Creed's advice, or whether it represents a repudiation of his unity with the team, and hence a rejection of his responsibilities as captain and therefore of Creed's asceticism. To make sense of this conclusion we must first locate the context of the novel's recurrent motif of consuming.

Gary's roommate, Anatole, a three-hundred pound lineman, also practices modes of self-discipline. At first Gary "reveres" Anatole's weight. To weigh three hundred pounds seems to him "a worthwhile goal for prospective saints and flagellants. The new asceticism. All the visionary possibilities of the fast . . . to expand and wallow Somehow it was the opposite of death" (EZ 49). Here Anatole's comic asceticism seems life-affirming. Then he goes on a diet, but soon gives it up because he feels himself losing his identity and decides that "What I had considered self-control was really self-indulgence. To make me pretty" (EZ 76). His words complicate the significance of Gary's final fast: is his fast self-indulgence or self-mortification? Or are they the same? The connection between nuclear weapons and the theme of consumption may at first seem distant, but DeLillo implies a fundamental relationship between them through the

symbolic weight of another character, Gary's girlfriend Myna Corbett. She too is obese, and although she has a pretty face, she rejects the "responsibilities of beauty" (EZ 66). Nevertheless Myna spends a great deal of time arranging striking combinations of clothing to wear. Gary likes her because she seems unthreatening, but he is first attracted to her when he sees her wearing an orange dress appliqued with a picture of a mushroom cloud, and later tells her that she resembles "an explosion over the desert" (EZ 41, 68). His attraction to Myna is thus coupled with his fascination with nuclear holocaust. At one point she and Gary make love in the library, and Myna now appears to him as the "the knowable word, the fleshmade sigh and syllable"; she seems "cloud-bosomed, ultimate" (EZ 218). In the person of Myna, Gary not only loves the bomb; he wants to have sex with it. He finds in her an antidote to the jargon of his mentors and relief from rituals of attenuation. But she further complicates the relationship between self-mortification and self-indulgence when she returns from vacation many pounds lighter. Although she had seemed to be a nonconformist, she claims that she had been "satisfied just consuming everything that came along." Her clothes fetish "took me further away from myself and made my life a whole big thing of consumption, consuming, consume" (EZ 227-28). Now, she claims, she can discover who she really is underneath the fat. She claims that her obesity represented consumerism, but by losing weight and accepting the responsibilities of beauty, she may be placing herself even deeper into the consumer fantasy of female beauty as thinness. Even self-discipline, in other words, may be self-indulgence, or simply an element of the American consumer mythology of self-improvement. She claims that she is now facing the responsibilities of beauty, but the reader is prompted to ask whose beauty it is.

The relationship between consumption and nuclear weapons can now be clarified. One writer has argued that the nuclear arms race is a form of potlatch, a ceremony in some pretechnological societies in which prestige is established by extravagant gift-giving. According to this argument, the arms race represents "a cycle of prodigality-challenge in which each of the adversaries, by wasting an enormous amount of wealth on arma-

ments, hopes to intimidate the other and prove his own superiority."²⁶ But many, perhaps most, people in the United States do not see expenditures on nuclear arms as waste, but as necessary to deter nuclear attack. We thus establish prestige through threat, not through prodigality itself. In fact Myna's conversion from rituals of consumption to rituals of attenuation implies a more plausible interpretation of the relationship between nuclear weapons and consumer economics. *End Zone* suggests, through the complex relationship among eating, asceticism and apocalypse, that The Bomb has been incorporated into the consumer mythology: it is the ultimate consumer item. We spend huge sums on nuclear weapons, not to use them, but merely to *possess* them as symbols of power and wealth. Nuclear weapons offer themselves as the answer to our sense of dissatisfaction, bringing fulfillment with a Big Bang. But we cannot consume them; they are commodities utterly without use value, because to use them is to annihilate them and also the global economy in which they have exchange value. Like *Americana*, then, *End Zone* reveals how the ascetic impulse and its accompanying hunger for apocalyptic endings emerge from the promptings of consumer culture. In this sense, if we could use nuclear weapons, they might solve all of our problems, bringing magical relief like that promised in advertisements for headache remedies. Thus it is appropriate that the words used in *White Noise* to describe the toxic cloud (which here stands in for the mushroom cloud), echo the language of television advertising. The cloud resembles a television commercial for a detergent or drug "packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols," a "national promotion for death . . . backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation" (WN 127, 158).²⁷ Myna, first a consumer and then dieter, and Gary, an ascetic and finally a faster, thus represent the two strains of our relationship with nuclear weapons: on the one hand we want to consume them and have them consume us, and on the other hand we see them as a means of purification and salvation, as the implement of our ultimate self-cleansing.

²⁶ Franco Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis of Death*, trans. Alenka Pfeifer (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1975) 19. Cited in Chernus 112.

²⁷ This resemblance to ads has been pointed out by LeClair (219).

Gary's final hunger strike may now be seen as his response to Myna's new self, but it still remains indeterminate. He may be trying to pare himself down further, to face his responsibilities, or his fast may be his final act of desperation, the last step towards suicide as closure, the end zone for his internal scrimmage. Indeed, the novel's inconclusive conclusion conforms perfectly to the unmistakable sense of anticlimax produced in its final section. One reason for this impression is that DeLillo places that staple of sports fiction, the Big Game, not at the end of the novel but in the middle, and then follows the team's disintegration and Gary's further explorations in part 3. (In this regard, it resembles a nuclear disaster novel: part 1 builds to a confrontation, the middle section details the "war," and part 3 describes the aftermath.) An even more radical departure is that the Logos team loses the game, although one could argue that losing is perfectly in keeping with Creed's creed of self-mortification: what better method of self-discipline could be imagined than losing the Big Game? But what is significant is that DeLillo refuses to succumb to his characters' desire for linearity and violent closure, and denies it to us, as well. *End Zone* deconstructs conventional plot structure. In an aside at the beginning of the description of the game, DeLillo's narrator addresses the exemplary spectator, listing what readers look for in sports fiction and what spectators want in football games. Football is not war, he says, and the exemplary spectator understands that "sport is an illusion, the illusion that order is possible." Both reader and spectator need "details" of "statistics, patterns, mysteries, numbers, idioms, symbols"; both spectators and readers want the saving illusion of a perfect structure that eliminates the complexity of real life for the simplicity of goal-driven behavior. Both want a fictional world "rat-free and without harm to the unborn," unlike the real world would be after a nuclear war (*EZ* 111–13). In short, as DeLillo has stated elsewhere, *End Zone* presents the idea that "fiction itself is a sort of game."²⁸ But DeLillo changes the rules. In conventional or genre fiction, which *End Zone* pretends at first to be, we are impelled by the Author, the master-plotter and God of the

²⁸ LeClair, "Interview" 21.

text, towards closure. He eliminates, like Creed, unnecessary details, giving us all we need to know. Appropriately, given the novel's food motif, the narrator describes his play-by-play narration as "a form of sustenance" (EZ 112). And yet the author denies us the most satisfying "sustenance" of a closed conclusion that ties up the text into a neat, consumable package. Just as Gary fasts at the end, so does the reader seeking the easy consumption promised by conventional fiction. Instead, the reader is forced to nourish himself, like Gary, "on the black bones of revulsion and dread," and on a plot that resists climax, closure, and even character development. Here the novel involves itself in paradox: while sustaining a critique of asceticism, it simultaneously forces an asceticism of reading upon its audience. In this regard, despite its wit and humor, a picture of the reader of *End Zone* would resemble St. Teresa, taking morbid nourishment by eating out of a human skull.

According to the categories defined by Marianna Torgovnick, *End Zone* offers a "confrontational" conclusion that flouts generic conventions and forces readers to question their own expectations about closure.²⁹ *End Zone's* end is genuinely strange, even in this age of open endings. Inconclusive and anticlimactic, the novel seems simply to trickle off; the reader finds himself looking for the missing pages. It does not play the game of conventional fiction. In *White Noise* Gladney asserts that "all plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. . . . We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that we must sign" (WN 26). But DeLillo breaks that contract, at the same time demonstrating that this desire to move deathward is behind the desire to read, invent, or inhabit apocalyptic fictions.³⁰ *End Zone* implicitly critiques fictions that pander to our apocalyptic yearnings by promulgating the myth of a world that can be remade from the ashes, and which offer nuclear war as an antidote to the tedium of everyday life. *End Zone* does not end in apocalypse, but instead shows the intimate connection be-

²⁹ Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 18.

³⁰ The most influential discussion of the relationship between fictional endings and apocalyptic fiction is, of course, Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966). For an illuminating examination of experimental techniques in several novels that are more explicitly about nuclear holocaust, see Peter Schwenger, "Writing the Unthinkable," *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1986): 33-48.

tween the need for fictional closure and the desire for the end of the world. The novel concludes—or fails to conclude—on Gary's description of his enigmatic hunger strike: "In the end they had to carry me to the infirmary and feed me through plastic tubes" (EZ 242). Gary may be moving deathward, or he may be defying death by trying to wrest control of his life from Creed's authority. This ending does not simplify, but instead critiques simplifications. We feel somehow cheated: by replacing the asceticism of apocalypse with an asceticism of reading, the novel forces readers to confront their own desire for violent closure. Moreover, the end of *End Zone* is also self-critical, since DeLillo, who has called himself a "failed ascetic," turns his irony upon himself: he too has displayed his fascination with nuclear holocaust by writing novels about it.³¹ The anti-apocalyptic ending of *End Zone* thus simultaneously critiques conventional plot and makes a strong statement against "the end" as presented and consumed in our apocalyptic fictions. DeLillo writes a nuclear novel that is not apocalyptic. Just as it repudiates conventional closure, then, *End Zone* repudiates nuclear apocalypse.

But like nuclear holocaust, *End Zone* finally escapes its ludic frame. In presenting fiction as a kind of endgame, *End Zone* self-consciously illuminates the tendency of fiction to proceed towards end zones, to satisfy the consumer mentality that craves apocalypse as a solution to personal or political dilemmas. We cannot read it as a running back races towards the end zone; instead DeLillo locates us within an indeterminate terminal landscape that frustrates our wishes to make them ultimate end zones. If the jargon of nuclear holocaust is itself a bomb, then fiction that panders to such apocalyptic yearnings is a similarly destructive weapon, yielding to our desire for self-annihilation, our own ascetic and consumerist urges toward the simplification of experience. In its refusal to provide closure, *End Zone* defuses the bomb hidden in most endings, and thus begins the operations necessary to defuse nuclear weapons as well.

³¹ Robert R. Harris, "A Talk With Don DeLillo," *New York Times Book Review* 10 October 1982: 26.

A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the Contemporary Literature Conference in Marietta, GA, April 1989.

Copyright of Papers on Language & Literature is the property of Papers on Language & Literature. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.