CHAPTER 5

MAO II: THE HERO RETURNED

The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extracircumferential phenomena, drawn into the core of the eddy.

Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Keesey, Don DeLillo 178

I want everybody to think alike... Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we’re getting more and more that way.

Andy Warhol, “Warhol in His Own Words” 458

The Novel and its Hero

Given that Mao II considers the loss of power of a writer’s ideas in contemporary American society, the four pages of blurbs that accompany the trade paperback are deeply ironic. The marketing of the novel seems oblivious to the content or ideas contained therein, and, in fact, strengthen DeLillo’s thesis that the author and his creation have lost control and become nothing more than consumable images on an open market.

Indicative of the postromantic world that continues to conflate artists and their creations, the blurbs indifferently refer to both DeLillo and Mao II as having “nerve,” and positive reviews are shrouded in the rather disturbing rhetoric of firearms to prove this point. The San Diego Tribune assures that the “gunfire prose sets you on edge, waiting for the next word-bullet to the brain,” while the Virginian Pilot and Star Ledger will only affirm that the ideas “pack the menacing warning of a cocked trigger.” Vanity Fair reaches new heights of non sequitur in defining DeLillo as the “Lone Ranger” who “fires his perceptions like a beltload of silver bullets.” Other emotive words (“anger,” “nightmare,” “jolts,” “fierce,” “thunderstorm,” and “frighteningly lucid”) spice the bait for the prospective reader.

S. S. Halldorson, The Hero in Contemporary American Fiction
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How is one to approach a novel investigating the uselessness—the undangerousness—of the novelist and his ideas in contemporary society, which is itself marketed as a place of danger, terror, anarchy, and nerve? What is one to make of Vince Passaro’s review article in *The New York Times* entitled “Dangerous Don DeLillo”? Is he mocking the author? Is he mocking the ideas in the novel? Could he be serious? Or is this nothing more than an empty (even cynical) alliteration meant to sell to a Saturday afternoon audience? As Bill Gray implies in *Mao II*, an artist is always navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of creation and promotion, and it is to his or her detriment to either ignore or attempt to reconcile them.

In *White Noise*, Murray Siskind (former sports reporter, now professor of culture studies) understands the Jameson depthlessness that generates such a clash between the created product, the advertised product, and the theorized product. He tells Jack Gladney during a discussion of popular American movies:

> I see these car crashes as part of a long tradition of American optimism. They are positive events, full of the old “can-do” spirit. Each car crash is meant to be better than the last...It’s a conservative wish-fulfillment, a yearning for naivete. We want to be artless again...It’s a celebration. A reaffirmation of traditional values and beliefs...Look past the violence, Jack. There is a wonderful brimming spirit of innocence and fun. (207)

As Murray sees it, the violence is advertising spectacle (all loud noises, twisting bodies, and machines). The “reality” for him is not in what the director created or even the advertised product. For Murray, reality is *his* interpretation, *his* theory, which sees only a reiteration of the “can-do” spirit of American nostalgia when there was always something bigger, better, or brighter to be achieved. Roland Barthes claimed that a critic does not discover the truth about a text but layers an interpretation upon it. I contend that there is a difference between narratives that are layered and those that are refined or cannibalized by various interested parties when desired pieces are removed from the original to become something else in their own right. To bring this back to the theory of the hero, no society has only one hero or one story; there are hundreds even thousands that create and bind selves onto a society. Heroic narratives are meant to be layered one on top of another. Beginning from the first primal narrative of the individual (“I am because I am not *not*”), they form protective circles of belief ranging from foundational narratives of teleological complexity