Michael LeMahieu

fictions of fact and value

The Erasure of Logical Positivism in American Literature, 1945–1975

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Positivist philosophers and postwar writers, as I discuss in the pages that follow, struggled with the apparent nonsense of emotive terms such as "love." Every morning my children, Alice and Theo, further augment a love that eludes expression. To attempt to say how much they mean to me would be, to steal a phrase from Wittgenstein, perfectly, absolutely hopeless. I'll always try to show it. Much more than my writing depends on the kindness, inspiration, and reassurance I receive daily from Elizabeth Rivlin, with whom it all makes sense.

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Introduction

Postwar Fiction, the Fact/Value Problem, and the Literary Response to Logical Positivism

[T]he imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed.

—WALLACE STEVENS, *"IMAGINATION AS VALUE" (1948)*

Metaphysics disappears, logical positivism arises.

—NORMAN MAILER, *THE PRESIDENTIAL PAPERS (1963)*

In the fifteen years between Wallace Stevens's assurance that the imagination as metaphysics would survive logical positivism unscathed and Norman Mailer's lament that it had not, writers in post-World War II America were consistently preoccupied with a philosophy that originated in post-World War I Vienna.[1] Mary McCarthy dreamed about it, and Neal Cassady rapped about it.[2] Ayn Rand, adversary of the New Left, blamed it for reason's obliteration; Ursula Le Guin, champion of the New Left, blamed it for reason's sanctification.[3] T. S. Eliot considered it devoid of imagination, "a method of philosophizing without insight and wisdom"; Thomas Pynchon considered it a source of inspiration, listing among the phases of his intellectual development a period "of atheism/logical positivism that led to a rash of science fictions."[4]

Read collectively, postwar writers' allusions to, engagements with, and representations of logical positivism amount to a constitutive encounter between literature and philosophy at mid-century: after the end of modernism, as it was traditionally conceived, but prior to the rise of postmodernism, as it came to be known. Postwar writers could not look away from logical positivism: "in the longer view," Eliot prognosticated, "logical positivism will have proved of service by explorations of thought which we shall, in future, be unable to ignore."[5] Literary scholars, however, even those with philosophical leanings, have consistently overlooked it.[6] Despite an article in their journal lauding logical positivism as a "revolutionary" philosophy, the *Partisan Review* crowd never did fête Rudolf Carnap, the preeminent figure of the Vienna Circle

of logical positivists, or A. J. Ayer, whose 1936 *Language, Truth, and Logic* "acquired almost the status of a philosophical Bible," the way they did Camus, de Beauvoir, and Sartre in the late 1940s.[7] Nor did literary critics in subsequent years develop readings of postwar texts inspired by Wittgenstein with anything approaching the frequency or energy of those inspired by Derrida. And yet although postwar writers routinely, though tendentiously, identified Wittgenstein as a logical positivist, his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) prefigures their own aesthetic critique of logical positivism, as I argue in chapter 1.[8] More than either existentialism or deconstruction, logical positivism defined the philosophical problem field out of which "postmodern" fiction emerged.

Unlike existentialism, a contemporary and in many ways complementary philosophical development, logical positivism never spawned a cultural style; to the contrary, it seemed to lack all style: square to existentialism's hip, the pocket protector to the black turtleneck, the academic to the *engagé*.[9] It did, however, infiltrate the cultural imaginary and influence postwar intellectual life in the arts as well as the sciences.[10] The prewar displacement of logical positivism led to its postwar predominance: the emigration of philosophers and mathematicians from the Vienna Circle and the allied Berlin Circle to American universities in the decade following 1933 laid the groundwork for positivism to reach its apex in the two decades after 1945.[11] Contemporary American novelists, many of whom were working at universities, registered this impressive influx of talent. In his short story "Zetland: By a Character Witness," for example, Saul Bellow refers to Carnap, who in 1936 accepted an appointment at the University of Chicago, where he taught Bellow's friend Isaac Rosenfeld, on whose life the character of Zetland is based. In 1952, Bellow began a year in residence at Princeton just as Carnap was beginning the first of two at the Institute for Advanced Study. In Pynchon's first novel *V.*, he repeatedly refers to logical positivist doctrines and to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. In the 1950s, during his period of "atheism/logical positivism," Pynchon was an undergraduate at Cornell, where he matriculated with an engineering physics scholarship in 1954 and, after serving two years in the Navy, took a liberal arts degree in 1959. During the time he was there, Cornell's faculty included preeminent philosophers such as Max Black, translator of Carnap and Gottlob Frege and author of the influential *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (1964), as well as Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein's student at Cambridge and his host at Cornell during the summer and fall of 1949, a visit witnessed by a young William Gass, who at that time was studying philosophy under Black.[12] The cross-currents of postwar fiction and positivist philosophy run deep.

It was thus through established institutional affiliations that logical positivism exerted its persistent, though often unnoticed, influence on postwar American literature. Mark McGurl has demonstrated the signal importance of academic institutions in shaping the development of post-1945 American

fiction, particularly the rise of the creative writing program.[13] In her 1961 essay "Characters in Fiction," Mary McCarthy suggests that the logical positivist appears alongside the creative writer in the cast of characters produced by postwar American universities. She wryly imagines the daughter of a reformed gangster going off to college and marrying "a poet-in-residence or a professor of modern linguistic philosophy."[14] They would have been rivals in more than one sense.

When novelists responded to logical positivism, they were not trespassing on foreign territory but defending their own, for what the positivists defined as philosophical problems writers received as aesthetic concerns. The literary response to logical positivism continues a series of historical oppositions between enlightened scholars and dogmatic priests, bohemian poets and petit bourgeoisie, literary outlaws and organization men. While literary anxieties about the emergence of a scientific, technocratic culture long predate the twentieth century, logical positivism cut close to home by basing its scientific aspirations on a linguistic philosophy.[15] The logical positivists modeled philosophy on the physical sciences by employing logical methods to analyze empirical evidence, thus progressing beyond what they considered the dead ends of traditional metaphysics. Sometimes referred to as "logical empiricism" or "neo-positivism," their philosophy combines elements of the empiricism of Locke and Hume, the positivism of Comte and Mach, and the logic of Frege and Russell. It thus intertwines and intensifies the philosophical strands that make up "the Enlightenment project."

Two postwar literary preoccupations in particular derive from logical positivism: the relationship between facts and values and the correlative distinction between sense and nonsense. What J. L. Austin referred to in the twentieth century as the "value/fact fetish" takes its modern form in the eighteenth with David Hume's claim that one cannot derive "ought" from "is."[16] The logical positivists extended this line of reasoning, becoming "the most influential marketers of the fact/value dichotomy."[17] A linchpin of mid-century moral and linguistic philosophy, the fact/value problem also figures prominently in postwar fiction. A character in John Barth's *The End of the Road* rejects "the fallacy that because a value isn't intrinsic, objective, absolute, it somehow isn't *real*."[18] The eponymous hero of Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* protests that everything "depends on the values—the values. And where's reality? I ask you, where is it?"[19] Writing in 1980, the philosopher Abraham Edel reflected on the pervasiveness of the fact/value problem: "If a questionnaire had been circulated in 1960 to determine the central philosophical problem of moral theory during the greater part of the twentieth century, the likely winner would have been the fact-value problem. It might have won out also as the central philosophical issue in the social sciences."[20] As indicated by the publication dates of the works that are the main focus of this study—Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" (1955), Barth's

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The End of the Road (1958), Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), and Pynchon's *V.* (1963)—it was also a central aesthetic concern. The fact/value problem pervades post-1945 American fiction.

Poets, playwrights, and novelists received the fact/value problem as three complementary doctrines: the verificationist criterion of meaning, the emotivist theory of ethics, and the elimination of metaphysics. According to the first, the meaning of a sentence resides in the method of its verification. With the exception of definitional truths ("All unmarried men are bachelors") and logical necessities ("It is either raining or not raining"), sentences gain their sense by virtue of their reference to empirical facts ("Socrates was a bachelor"; "It is raining"); if a sentence fails to advance a proposition that could be verified (or, after Karl Popper, falsified) by empirical evidence, then the sentence lacks sense: neither true nor false, but meaningless or, as the early Wittgenstein put it, "simply nonsense." Le Guin responds directly to this doctrine when she complains that "our philosophers, some of them, would have us agree that a word (sentence, statement) has value only in so far as it has one single meaning, points to one fact which is comprehensible to the rational intellect, logically sound, and—ideally—quantifiable."[21] According to the second doctrine, which is an application of the first, all ethical propositions are fundamentally nonsensical, given that they use terms that have no external referent. "Good," "right," and "just" index not objective properties but subjective feelings: "[I]n every case in which one would commonly be said to be making an ethical judgement," Ayer writes, "the function of the relevant ethical word is purely 'emotive.' It is used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them."[22] Rand explicitly blames this doctrine for what she regarded as the New Left's narcissism: "Hasn't Logical Positivism taught them that ethical propositions have no cognitive meaning and are merely a report on one's feelings or the equivalent of emotional ejaculations?"[23] The third doctrine, which would provoke Mailer's despair, finds its truth and method encapsulated in the title of Carnap's essay "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language."[24] The positivists maintained that ethical inquiry, religious meditation, and aesthetic contemplation were all forms of metaphysical speculation that did not constitute meaningful discourse, as Carnap explains in another essay: "All statements belonging to Metaphysics, regulative Ethics, and (metaphysical) Epistemology have this defect, are in fact unverifiable and, therefore, unscientific. In the Viennese Circle, we are accustomed to describe such statements as nonsense (after *Wittgenstein*)."[25] In his 1928 *The Logical Structure of the World,* one of the most influential works of logical positivist philosophy, Carnap states that "scientific strictness" will "eliminate all speculative and poetic work from philosophy."[26] Thus would philosophy switch allegiances in the battle of what Carnap's contemporary C. P. Snow first referred to in 1956 as "the two cultures."[27] Philosophers assert, the logical positivists maintained, while poets express.

The poets took notice. Yet even as postwar writers responded to logical positivism as a threat to aesthetic representation, their works often manifest its influence, particularly concerning "emotive" or "meaningless" terms. Consider "love." When in "Good Country People" Manley Pointer insists that philosophy Ph.D. Hulga Hopewell profess her love for him, Hulga responds: "In a sense... if you use the word loosely, you might say that. But it's not a word I use. I don't have illusions."[28] After confessing his love for his friend's wife Rennie in *The End of the Road,* Jacob Horner immediately remarks, "This, I fear, was not true, at least in the sense that any meaningless proposition is not true, if not false either."[29] In *V.,* the narrator describes the young Schoenmaker's affection for and subsequent grief over the deaths of the World War I pilots with whom he serves: "But in each case, loss was as unspecified as the proposition 'love dies'" (100). Barth's and Pynchon's use of the term "proposition," and their examples of "meaningless" and "unspecified" propositions, explicitly allude to logical positivism's analytical methods and eliminative conclusions. Illusory, meaningless, unspecified: when speaking about love, characters in postwar fiction sound like so many logical positivists.

Fictional characters are not necessarily mouthpieces for authors, however, and writers do not traffic in atomistic propositions, nor novels seek confirmation in empirical evidence; rather, positivist philosophy appears tactically in postwar literature in order to advance authors' aesthetic strategies, which are often latent, implicit, or ironic. These strategies therefore demand a more complex accounting than a simple story of the influence of ideas. In the works of Barth, Bellow, O'Connor, and Pynchon, logical positivism is woven in the fabric and hidden in plain sight. In some instances, a text's protagonist is a logical positivist, as with the title character in Bellow's story "Zetland." In others, logical positivism appears contextually—as when O'Connor writes to a friend that the "negative appearance" of her work results from her efforts to avoid becoming "the stinkingest logical positivist you ever saw"[30]—only to reappear textually at one or two levels of remove, as chapter 2 argues it does in "Good Country People." In *The End of the Road,* the focus of chapter 3, logical positivism appears both metonymically, in Barth's allusions to Wittgenstein, and thematically, in his treatment of the logical positivists' separation of facts from values, which is also, chapter 4 suggests, the central analytical problem of Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King.* At times, logical positivism is an insurmountable obstacle: the multiple drafts of a novel from which Bellow excerpted "Zetland" remain unfinished. At others, it is an obstacle overcome: chapter 5 demonstrates that Pynchon's rewriting of a central episode in *V.* largely erases logical positivism in order to realize its aesthetic vision; yet, perhaps more than any other work of postwar American fiction, *V.* encodes the very positivism that it erases. In their attempts to overcome logical positivism, or to come to terms with it, the works of postwar writers time and again testified to its influence, even when the result is, as O'Connor puts it, "negative."

In tracing the influence of logical positivism in postwar literature, *Fictions of Fact and Value* charts a genealogy that is often erased in the very texts where it registers and disowned by the very authors that it includes. The encounter between postwar fiction and positivist philosophy was less frequently a direct confrontation—though at times it was precisely that—than a series of tactical displacements, refractions, and even evasions. These aesthetic tactics only heighten the encounter's critical interest, even as they partially explain its critical neglect. As a result, this study, unlike many philosophical approaches to literature, combines theoretical and archival methods: joining close reading and philosophical analysis with biographical information and archival research. A familiarity with the period's philosophical problems is necessary to understanding literary interventions in those problems; but because those interventions often suppress the philosophy that provokes them, the archive provides an indispensable repository of etiological or genealogical evidence. At times these various approaches combine to form a literary historical method that might be described as "positivist," empirically observing the manifest ways that postwar fictions register the influence of logical positivism; at other times that method might be described as "negative," closely reading key passages that demonstrate how texts take shape from factors that remain absent, latent, or suppressed. This hybrid approach responds to the peculiar combination of logical positivism's influence and erasure in postwar literature, and it unsettles in turn an implicit analogy in literary studies—premised perhaps unwittingly on positivist assumptions—whereby archive is to theory as fact is to value. This book thus stakes its claim between literary history and history of ideas, and between literary criticism and critical theory, on ground perhaps best described as "literature of ideas."

Don DeLillo's second novel, *End Zone* (1972), exemplifies the aesthetic tactics that simultaneously evince and elide postwar literature's preoccupation with logical positivism. In the novel's concluding pages, the narrator Gary Harkness finds himself in the dorm room of his football teammate Taft Robinson, the first African-American student to enroll at Logos College in West Texas. Gary has learned that Taft is quitting the team:

> I took a moment to scan the walls for tape-remnants. Poster of Wittgenstein, I thought. Maybe that's what he'd had up there, or almost had. Dollar ninety-eight poster of philosopher surrounded by Vienna Circle. Two parts to that man's work. What is written. What is not written. The man himself seemed to favor second part. Perhaps Taft was a student of that part.[31]

Of all the possible posters for Gary to imagine in Taft's room, one of Wittgenstein surrounded by the Vienna Circle seems less than intuitive. The interests of DeLillo's novel are college football and nuclear war; these were not Wittgenstein's. Yet the imagined poster conforms to a larger pattern in DeLillo's work and in postwar literary history, where logical positivism appears as a spectral presence, as in this passage, where its traces remain visible, and

legible, as "remnants." The poster is multiply negated: merely imagined in the first place, it is imagined as "almost" having been there, which it currently is not, marked now only by traces of what was once perhaps its presence.

An analogous dialectic of absence and presence attends DeLillo's reference to the "two parts" of the *Tractatus,* a text that combines logical analyses of what can be said with mystical reflections on what cannot. Wittgenstein describes the two parts of his work in a 1919 letter to a prospective publisher:

> I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can ONLY be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* [*schwefeln*] today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent [*schweige*] about it.[32]

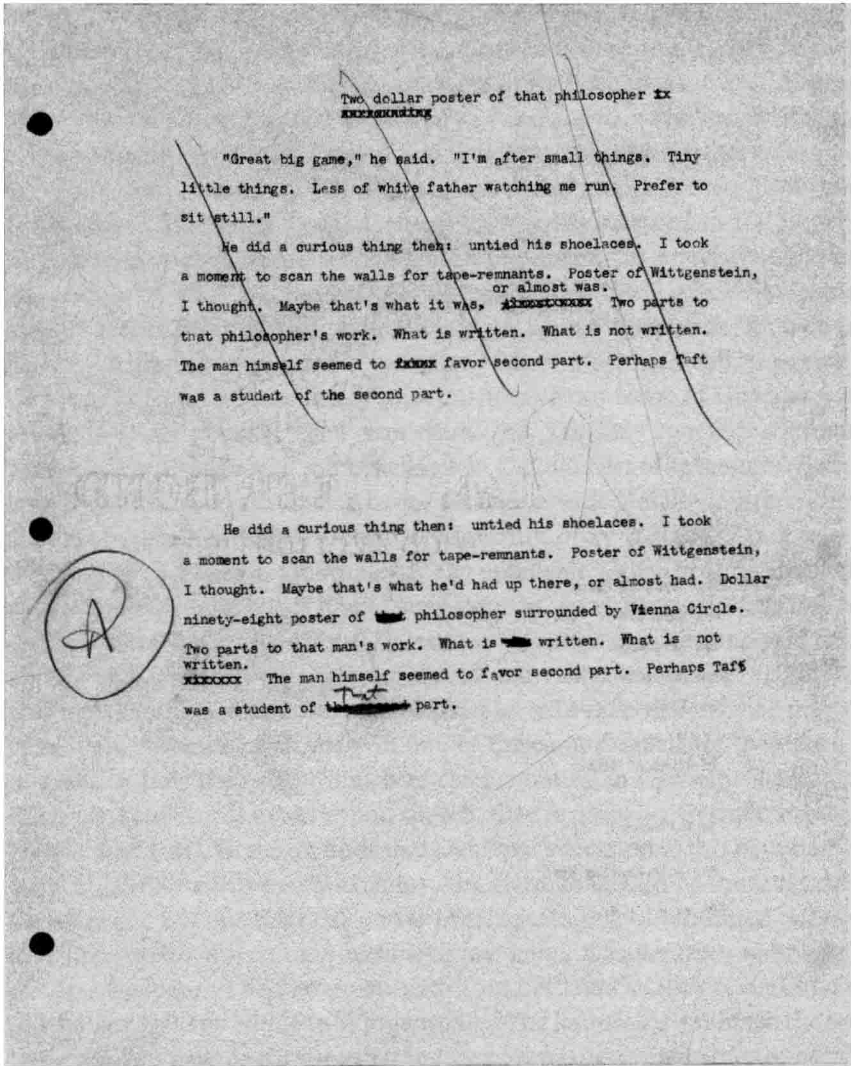
Just as DeLillo imagines a poster that may once have been present but now is absent, Wittgenstein describes the important part of his book as present despite remaining unwritten.[33] Where others babble, he remains silent.[34] As I discuss in chapter 1, the Vienna Circle philosophers focused entirely on Wittgenstein's logic, politely ignoring his treatment of the mystical and the ethical. DeLillo's description of the "philosopher surrounded by Vienna Circle" thus captures both the logical positivists' support for and circumscription of Wittgenstein's philosophy. For postwar writers such as DeLillo, as opposed to positivist philosophers such as Carnap, the *Tractatus* epitomized both the philosophy of logical positivism and its aesthetic critique. The text's denotative function of delimiting the logic of language is undone by its performative function of deconstructing that logic. DeLillo, like many of his contemporaries, was drawn less to the "technical" aspects of the book than to the "evocative" qualities of its language: "I've read parts of the *Tractatus,* but I have no formal training in mathematical logic and I couldn't say a thing about the technical aspects of the book. I like the way he uses the language. Even in translation, it's very evocative."[35] Inasmuch as both of their works join logic and mysticism, facts and values, Wittgenstein's interests are also DeLillo's.[36]

In Wittgenstein's terms, DeLillo's novels mediate what can be said and meditate on what must be passed over in silence: the characters in *End Zone* oscillate between various forms of jargon and what Gary calls "varieties of silence" (191). As one reviewer insightfully noted, "each of the characters speaks a jargon that mocks its origins, a reduction to the absurd of what once passed for thought."[37] Gary attempts to strip away the layers of jargon in order to remake the world: "To begin to reword the overflowing world" (89). The end zone of Gary's deconstructive logic is pure silence, though he fears it is an impossible ideal: "Perhaps there is no silence. Or maybe it's just that time is too compact to allow for silence to be felt" (89). Silence is a leitmotif in *End Zone*: it blankets

the West Texas geography, raising the specter of a post-apocalyptic world; it is described as "metallic" (3), "difficult" (31), "menacing" (31), "enveloping" (33), and "long" (34). At the center of the novel is the inscrutable, silent figure of Taft, who comes closest to embodying Gary's ideal. For Taft, silence is a form of withdrawing from the world that is the case and of indexing that which jargon excludes. "I'm not very talkative, Gary," Taft tells his backfield mate, "I go whole days without saying a word" (232). Taft embodies a reclusive, ascetic ideal characteristic of DeLillo's works and also of Wittgenstein, both the man and his work.[38] "I try to create degrees of silence," Taft tells Gary, going on to explain: "The kind of silence that follows the playing of a radio is never the same as the silence that precedes it. I use the radio in different ways. It becomes almost a spiritual exercise. Silence, words, silence, silence, silence" (239–240). In a novel that criticizes and satirizes various language games—mass media, game theory, and organized sports—Taft's silence functions as an unspoken testament to what eludes a positivist desire for the facts; he favors, like DeLillo and Wittgenstein himself, the second part of Wittgenstein's work.

DeLillo inscribes Taft's absent poster of Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle into *End Zone* as one of a series of "spectators," a variable figure in the novel that functions as silent witness to what DeLillo describes as "some larger mystery. I don't know what to call it. Maybe Hermann Broch would call it 'the world beyond speech.'"[39] The archive provides a key to understanding the figure of the spectator in the novel. While the image at the conclusion of *End Zone* represents a poster that may once have been present but now is absent, the genetic history of the novel tells a story of an image coming into being. DeLillo did not include the description of the imagined poster in any of the three typescript drafts of the novel housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC) at the University of Texas at Austin.[40] There is, however, one prior trace of its origins before it appears in the galleys: the final typescript before the galleys is bound with over 150 pages of notes and revisions, including rewritings of lines or phrases, alternate versions of particular paragraphs, and passages to be deleted, moved, or inserted. These pages include a first draft version of the imagined poster of Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle (see fig. I.1). In addition, the second page of these notes contains two columns, one typed in the lower left of the page, the other handwritten in the upper- and middle-right of the page (see fig. I.2).

The typed column shows DeLillo trying out various titles for the novel, which even at this point remained unsettled: the first typescript draft is titled "Modes of Disaster Technology," the second typescript draft "The Self-Erasing Word." The handwritten column falls under the heading "The Spectator" and then lists eight candidates for the role: "1) Reader; 2) Rilke; 3) Wittgenstein; 4) Tudev Nemsky; 5) Man with flesh growing over mouth; 6) Professor of Untellable; 7) Tom Wade; 8) Double-D." This list illuminates DeLillo's conception of the novel at a late stage in its development. At the beginning of the list



Two dollar poster of that philosopher

"Great big game," he said. "I'm after small things. Tiny little things. Less of white father watching me run. Prefer to sit still."

He did a curious thing then: untied his shoelaces. I took a moment to scan the walls for tape-remnants. Poster of Wittgenstein, I thought. Maybe that's what it was, or almost was. Two parts to that philosopher's work. What is written. What is not written. The man himself seemed to favor second part. Perhaps Taft was a student of the second part.

He did a curious thing then: untied his shoelaces. I took a moment to scan the walls for tape-remnants. Poster of Wittgenstein, I thought. Maybe that's what he'd had up there, or almost had. Dollar ninety-eight poster of philosopher surrounded by Vienna Circle. Two parts to that man's work. What is written. What is not written. The man himself seemed to favor second part. Perhaps Taft was a student of that part.

FIGURE I.1 *Wittgenstein surrounded by Vienna Circle*

Source: Don DeLillo Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

is the Reader and at the end is "Double-D," DeLillo's self-reference. The figures that show up between reader and author all appear in the novel, although, like Wittgenstein, all were late additions.

Like the poster that once hung—or almost did—in Taft's room, and like the important part of Wittgenstein's work that remains unwritten, this manuscript list provides a key to understanding DeLillo's novel. The cumulative effect of these "spectator" figures in *End Zone* is to transform the novel's theme of silence

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