TERTIUM DATUR: MAKING CONTACT IN DELILLO’S RATNER’S STAR

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*Tertium Datur: Making Contact in DeLillo’s Ratner’s Star*

submitted by Michael Streit in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

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ABSTRACT

*Ratner’s Star* is considered one of Don DeLillo’s more inaccessible texts, and with good reason: taking the history of mathematical progress as its major temporal arc, *Ratner’s Star* eschews many conventions of fiction in order to create a unique system that operates—as many critics have noted—on a complex interplay of opposites.

Fewer critics, however, have noted the importance of genre to this text. Going beyond the customary nod to Menippean satire, critics David Cowart, John Johnston and Mark Osteen, in particular, investigate the history of this genre to pose texts such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Alice in Wonderland* as important models for *Ratner’s Star*. Extending existent scholarship, this present study roots DeLillo’s text firmly within the tradition of Menippean satire as defined by M. M. Bakhtin, not only to situate DeLillo’s concerns within the context of satire (this has already been accomplished) but also to activate a full-scale analysis of *Ratner’s Star* in Bakhtinian terminology.

With Raphael’s *School of Athens* as a visual touchstone, this study investigates how DeLillo frames and re-frames the tension between the mathematically abstract and the materially tangible by employing Bakhtin’s definitions of the grotesque and heteroglossia. As a strongly grotesque character, Robert Hopper Softly and the “antrum” of his creation encapsulate such interplay of the abstract and the tangible while leaving this tension ambivalent and unresolved. The “New York episodes,” brief flashbacks where DeLillo grounds his protagonist in prosaic life, present a world according to the Menippean style of carnivalesque “slum naturalism,”
wherein languages live and are lived in, rooted to their surroundings. On the other hand, Logicon, an artificial “universal” language, opposes the lived experience and heteroglossia of these New York episodes. In order to demonstrate DeLillo's suspicion of the destructive capability of such a universal language, this study concludes by defining Logicon as the primary antagonist of the novel, a tyrannical and abstracting force that threatens heteroglossic language and the plural realities it represents, Menippean satire as a genre embracing relativity, and most crucially, the artistic discourse of the novel itself.
LAY SUMMARY

In *Ratner’s Star*, Don DeLillo imagines an underground project attempting to invent a universal language designed for extraterrestrial communication. What at first seems to be a hare-brained (yet comical) scheme soon acquires more sinister connotations: rather than communicating with extraterrestrial life, the Logicon project takes on a life of its own as its creators invest it with the aim of revolutionizing all science and language. As a novelist and, moreover, a keen conduit of many dialects and inflections of human language, DeLillo takes the side of the terrestrial rather than the extraterrestrial, surrounding the folly of the Logicon project with a hilarious swirl of languages and curses, places and bodies, sex and excrement, all of which oppose the abstract universalism of Logicon. *Ratner’s Star* makes the convincing case that, while humanity can not help imagining who or what lives in the stars, earth has enough aliens as it is.
PREFACE

Building upon DeLillo criticism and employing the methodology of M. M. Bakhtin to analyze Don DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star*, this thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Michael Streit.
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the novel appears to be a creature from an alien species.

—M.M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” (4)
GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATED WORKS

M. M. Bakhtin:

DiN, “Discourse in the Novel”

FTCN, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel”

N70-1, “From Notes Made in 1970-1”

PDP, Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics

RAHW, Rabelais and His World

Don DeLillo:

EZ, End Zone

RS, Ratner’s Star

WN, White Noise
La Scuola di Atene, a fresco by Raphael, presents the complex process of knowledge in action. Of the few figures in the painting not actually engaged in philosophical debate, a messenger on the extreme left—what Giorgio Spadaro calls the “Apollonian side” of the painting—“rushes in carrying a scroll (antiquity) and a book (modernity)” (55). This “messenger delivers knowledge to the individuals painted on the time line,” said time line being the major x-axis of the Cartesian grid that Spadaro traces in his analysis of the fresco’s compositional geometry, and quite remarkably the “delivered knowledge” held by the figure on the left “is carried into the future by the exiting figure on the right.” Two painted figures, therefore, represent two “abscissae” or ordinates on the same chronological axis, and through the progression from the left of the painting to the right this messenger (and more importantly, his message) passes through schools and sub-schools of knowledge in production.

Framed in the middle of this chronological axis is a pair of figures whose presence Raphael accentuates in as many ways as possible, be it the contrast in colour provided by the sparsely-clouded blue of the sky behind these figures or the crowd fanning outwards in front of the two, the bodies of the multitude displaying postures of attention and contemplation but also acting as compositional markers. Though the gestures of these figures have created endless speculation, the gestures themselves are clear: “Aristotle is looking at Plato,” Spadaro writes, “his right hand motioning out toward the school and parallel to the ground. This horizontal gesture is in direct counterpoint to Plato’s vertical gesture” (53). Purposefully overdetermined
and suggestive, this gestural language combines to make another grid, the $y$-axis of Plato’s “upward gesture of the spiritual world” meeting Aristotle’s “outward gesture of the physical” which betokens the $x$-axis. Plato points to the ideal world of the Forms, an essential nowhere, as Aristotle, his palm downward, ushers an awareness of the now and the here. While the ambivalency of these gestures has spurred numerous interpretations, Glen Most notes that “many viewers have thought that Raphael grants Plato a subtle hint of superiority over Aristotle,” leaving “Aristotle . . . confined to the given world surrounding him” (165).

This confinement, however, is suggested by the perspective of the painting itself, especially compared to the theological La Disputa, housed in the same room as La Scuola di Atene. Spadoro argues that “the slightly downward perspective indicates that the process of thinking is housed in the brain and the brain is within the skull . . . . In the School of Athens the lines in the foreground create a downward movement to the human realm rather than leading to the spiritual world as in the Disputa” (65). This downward perspective, emphasized by Aristotle’s gesture, stresses the very action within the painting itself, the event-ness of it—the production of knowledge. Marcia Hall adds that Raphael’s situation of his theme in a “particular place” rather than “some celestial zone outside of time” is prime among the painter’s innovations (13). Rather than displaying the tradition of the Uomini Famosi (Famous Men) as “lost in meditation and oblivious of one another,” as his predecessors did, Raphael paints his Uomini Famosi “in lively discourse,” having the added effect of portraying discourse “that is also intended to engage the reader”: “Raphael has left an opening for viewers to enter with their imagination, identify some of the figures for themselves, and take part in the dialogue” (11).

In M. M. Bakhtin’s terminology, by emphasizing the chronological transmission of
messages, stressing the “downward perspective” of his subject to include the plural socio-material contexts of speech, and presenting the debate of his figures in media res, Raphael dialogizes painting. Seen from this vantage point, Raphael’s fresco is the type to the antitype of Don DeLillo’s fourth novel, Ratner’s Star. Re-staging the paradox of one messenger appearing twice within a single static image, the distance separating these messengers not so much space but time, Ratner’s Star stages the realization that an extraterrestrial message is merely a terrestrial one in order to conduct a literary tour among the Uomini Famosi of scientific, astrological, and mathematical history—many of whom, Pythagoras and Euclid included, appear in Raphael’s School of Athens and now reappear in another think-tank, Field Experiment No. 1 (FE#1). This tour, though (and through) presenting the monological—as indeed Raphael does in painting the solitary Diogenes and Heraclitus—prizes the dialogical, for the dialogical dramatizes the primary play of opposites within DeLillo’s novel: the solitary finger of Plato, pointing up, and the broad palm of Aristotle, gesturing down. “Experience and pure thought. The mind and the world. External reality and independent abstract deduction” says Walter X. Mainwaring late in the novel, cataloguing the binary logic upon which Ratner’s Star teeters (418). Mainwaring offers no resolution of this binary opposition, but in Ratner’s Star, DeLillo does: the human, “confined to the given world surrounding him,” treads “the contact line of nature and mathematical thought . . . where things make sense, things accede to our view of them, things return to us a propagating wave of reason” (RS 431). Riding the line between binaries, the human, both a and non-a, is the excluded middle which the logic-driven innovations of science expel in order to function—thus leaving humanity alien to itself.
II. Menippean Satire

Shortly after publication of Ratner’s Star, George Stade wrote in the The New York Times that DeLillo’s book “is the something else his [three] others were straining to become”: a “Menippean satire,” which Stade, detailing a genealogy of the genre as well as other contemporary examples, claims to be “the exemplary form of the moment” in 1976. John Johnston agrees with Stade’s diagnosis, writing that “DeLillo works with words, images, and representations as his primary material—not with people and their individual dramas” (274), an approach that permits the author to satirize society-shaping influences. Without mentioning the genre as such, David Cowart traces important connections between Ratner’s Star and its predecessors, particularly Gulliver’s Travels, while Mark Osteen goes the furthest in mapping Ratner’s Star on to the work of Lewis Carroll. Critically, Osteen also mentions that “Ratner’s Star possesses all fourteen features of classical Menippean satire,” according to Bakhtin, before proceeding in an endnote to list some of the more salient (63).

To complement and extend existing scholarship, this present study commits to explicating Ratner’s Star as Menippean satire as much as DeLillo’s novel shows its own commitment to that genre. For Bakhtin, Menippean satire is a genre conceived in antiquity but finding its paragon in the Renaissance (the age of Raphael), most notably in the work of Rabelais, continuing in time to find masterful expression in Dostoevsky. (John Johnston and Osteen are right to connect Ratner’s Star with the fourteen characteristics of Menippean satire, and while this study is guided by these characteristics, only the most important will be detailed
with relation to the novel.) Critical to Bakhtin’s understanding of the development of
Menippean satire is its growth alongside carnival which thus leads to the genre’s
“carnivalization.” As Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson write, carnival for Bakhtin is “not so
much a set of views as a ground for vision” (460): the “carnivalistic categories,” Bakhtin writes,
such as “equality and freedom” of interpersonal contact, “the interrelatedness of all things or the
unity of opposites” are “not abstract thoughts . . . No, these are concretely sensuous ritual
pageant ‘thoughts’ experienced and played out in the form of life itself” (PDP 123). This
practice of carnival formed “an immense, formal, genre-shaping influence on literature” (PDP
123), of Menippean satire in particular; the “atmosphere of joyful relativity characteristic of a
carnival sense of the world” finds its way into literature, where it creates “a weakening of its
one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism” (PDP 107).
III. The Carnival-Grotesque

The carnivalesque becomes synonymous with the grotesque in Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, so much so that Bakhtin hyphenates the two as “carnival-grotesque” (*RAHW* 34). Of the immense variety of carnival-grotesque images, scenes, and characters in *Ratner’s Star*, Robert Hopper Softly, whom DeLillo calls “a sort of white rabbit figure” (LeClair “Interview” 12), is privileged as the grotesque *par excellence* in this novel. Though not exclusively, Softly’s character also conforms with Bakhtin’s eighth characteristic of Menippean satire—“moral psychological experimentation: a representation of the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man” such as “insanity of all sorts (the theme of the maniac), split personality, unrestrained daydreaming, unusual dreams, passions bordering on madness, suicides, and so forth” (*PDP* 116)—and furnishes occasion for characteristic nine, the high frequency of “scandal scenes, eccentric behaviour, inappropriate speeches and performances, that is, all sorts of violations of the generally accepted and customary course of events and the established norms of behavior and etiquette, including manners of speech” (*PDP* 117).

The first mention of Robert Hopper Softly is that he is “a child-sized man with glaringly fair skin and a gift for leading people into situations they would never have entered on their own” (261). Immediately, Softly unites opposites, the child and the man. For Bakhtin, the unification of opposites is a hallmark of how the grotesque image “reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming . . . in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying
and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (RAHW 24). Most importantly, this unification leads to an extreme ambivalency, a double-handedness of the excluded middle. The prime ambivalency of Softly is in relation to time. Neither child nor man and yet simultaneously both, Softly encapsulates Wordsworth’s famous paradox. The erasure of binary borderlines—a distinctive feature of the grotesque—occurs within the chronology of Softly’s body, a thing that is constantly in flux, displaying “the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleted character of being” (RAHW 32). Consequently, Softly mirrors his prodigy (and prematurely born) Billy in this respect: a female character describes the “haunted” fourteen-year old as “too old to be cute. Too young to be sexy” (115).

Given that Softly’s body, “pathologically stunted as it was, possessed to full extent misfortune’s power to reproach not only nature but symmetry itself” (261), he is presented from the outset as a grotesque character, an affront to classical standards of design and beauty. A short blazon of his qualities follows: “Head was disproportionately large, heavy brows shading his gray eyes” along with “a shallow jaw and exceedingly wide mouth, a thumb-sucking machine, aggressively sensual, too much palpitating lip” (262). “The most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth,” Bakhtin notes: “It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss” (RAHW 317). Exaggerated and emphasized, the “convexities and orifices” of the grotesque signify that the body is forever in transit with the world in an “act of becoming,” “never finished, never completed” but “continually built, created”; the grotesque body “builds and creates another body” (317). As a scientist, Softly dreams along the pure Platonic y-axis to conceive Logicon, but as a sensual, lascivious grotesque
he rolls along the terrestrial x-axis, connecting and connected to bodies in the world.

The grotesque mouth teaches how “the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (RAHW 317). In Softly’s case, the mouth carries sexual valency, too. With utter nonchalance he tells Jean Sweet Venable how, with his “gross and pettish mouth,” he “kiss[es] my own thumb every day on waking” (312), thereby uniting infantile with adult sexuality. “The wholly promotional idea that sex is not what you do but what you are” is a maxim from Softly’s mouth, and “the fact that she [Venable] was having nearly continuous sex with a child-sized man” proves that Softly practices what he preaches (367). This view of Softly emphasizes the centrality of sex to his grotesque character:

Softly seminude resembled a Roman sculptor’s serious jest. He appeared ludicrous only to the extent that parts of his body were still bound in cloth . . . naked he was even more imposing than when fully dressed . . . his head [was] more closely related in size to the rest of his appendages, an illusion fostered by the balancing factor of his sex organ, a piece of equipment that seemed to hold him together, structural bond and esthetic connective. (288)

Softly, a paradoxical “serious jest” (α and non-α), is figured here as a collection of “parts,” bound by nothing but his sex organ, “a piece of equipment.” The “bowels and the phallus” are “two areas [that] play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary” (RAHW 317).

As a sexually grotesque logician, therefore, Softly rides the “contact line of nature and
mathematical thought” to comic extremes. This is one aim of the grotesque, to “degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh” through laughter (RAHW 20, emphasis added). Laughter itself “degrades and materializes.” One way to provoke this laughter is through the ambivalency of verbal praise and abuse, called “language of the marketplace” by Bakhtin and defined as an appendage of the grotesque: “abusive words, especially indecent ones, are used in the affectionate and complimentary sense” (RAHW 165). Thus complementing the ambivalency of the grotesque, these terms of abuse also gesture “down, inside out, vice versa, upside down, such is the direction of all these movements . . . debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum” (RAHW 370). Bakhtin links the ambivalency of the grotesque and the verbal curse to the ambivalency of the material bodily stratum (genitals/bowels), writing that “to degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving” (RAHW 21).

To Softly, Venable is not much more than a body. After dressing he thinks of her “aswarm in bedsheets hundreds of feet straight up” (304). This phrase, “feet straight up,” signifying both the measurement and the position, comes to Softly as he contemplates her previous work, deeming her publication “The Gobbledygook Cook Book . . . serviceably useless; a good example, in other words, of what he expected (and would demand if need be) of her current assignment” (304). In relation to Softly’s requirement of her to be utterly nonproductive, therefore, Venable’s transition from journalist to novelist who merely numbers blank
sheets of paper is more than convenient. Her actual productivity completely ceases, opening the possibility of “nearly continuous sex.” The frequency of this sex, in turn, degrades the human subjects involved to a base physicality.

The first and most evident way toward that degradation is verbal abuse. Replying to Softly’s brusque yet typical “Let’s go,” Venable replies, “Rob, I’m kind of busy,” to which Softly concludes: “You don’t have to undress completely. Just give me something to aim at. A suitable accommodation” (288). This is “unfunny” to Venable, and understandably so; to Softly, she is not much more than an assemblage of detachable parts. Yet this is funny, for Softly is parodying himself, as well as the male sexual drive to which he submits without any protest or chivalric constraint. All he needs is a hole.

Later, Softly does submit to a parodic type of chivalry, detailing a blazon of Venable:

“Evil pelvis . . . . Unscrupulously seductive mouth. Belly a bowl of fruit. Labyrinthine navel. Resilient milky thighs. Cute pudendum, hee hee. Lickable armpits. Predatory eyes. Surging breasts. Hair rare. Smile terribly foudroyant. Backside a-tinkle” (312). Despite the apparent praise of this blazon, Venable answers, “Unfunny, ass, and totally inaccurate needless to say.” True enough, the praise of this catalogue is ambivalent, yet Venable veers toward the negative, debasing interpretation. Softly asks her to “call me names and see how far you get” (312), thereby inviting her to take part in this grotesque sex-banter, but she declines, forcing Softly to debase himself in similar terms.

Venable recognizes yet finds herself seduced by the grotesque. She “hate[s] to see all that face-making and bizarre dimpling” during sex, so “darker the better with him” (372). “Funny how she and Rob avoided every preliminary gesture, even a hint of a kiss or
nonfunctional caress,” she thinks (331), “funny” here countering her other two remarks of “unfunny” while also highlighting the ambivalency of her sexual relation with Rob. In the same instant, she entertains the reactions of “touching me just his touch I think insane” (371) and “kissing him would have disgusted her” (331) with the more fundamental assertion that “it was his organ of copulation her body craved, the Latinate folds between her legs that stirred him to ithyphallic meter. Funny all right” (331). Note the play on measurement (“ithyphallic meter”) and sexuality, echoing the earlier “hundreds of feet straight up.” (Both are images of sexually gargantuan proportion, further underscoring Softly’s grotesquely ambivalent size.)

What is the result of this grotesque degradation? Nothing less than a positive reconception of the body as such, parts and pieces perceived as they are, as if for the first time: a radical re-evaluation. “From her reaction to the bluntness of Rob’s marred body, his special unalterability, the abrupt initiatives of his sexual nature, she readily inferred that fantasy, her own, had reached its vanishing point, an event that returned sex to those locations she felt it had long abandoned, between the actual legs, in and around the actual mouth, on the breasts and under the testicles and in the hands, on the tongue, in the actual hole. Together they filled a natural space” (331, emphasis added). Here, Venable’s “funny” can also point to laughter at “having nearly continuous sex with a child-sized man”: laughter at the grotesque degrades and materializes, bringing the body back to itself. Venable has been “degraded” to the material bodily lower stratum in a way that rejuvenates and reintegrates lost parts.

Comparing this outcome with Bakhtin’s analysis of a famous episode in Rabelais sharpens the significance of this “downward movement” of the grotesque. Caught short, the infant Gargantua tests a long list of objects and materials—some inanimate, others animate—for
their suitability in wiping his ass. Bakhtin hails this unabashed episode as “dispel[ling] the atmosphere of gloomy and false seriousness enwrapping the world and all its phenomena, to lend it a different look, to render it more material, closer to man and his body, more understandable, and lighter in the bodily sense” (380). Rather than distancing one from the object of laughter (for that is what seriousness does from above), Rabelais brings one down to the level of the shit and the muck and, through laughter, creates mirth and pleasure. Essentially carnivalesque, this type of downward movement liberates as an experience reversing the charge of that which is condemned by “the seriousness of petty human preoccupations,” “the didactic gloom of moralists and bigots” and “that great seriousness of fear” to become a positive and regenerative element. Bakhtin goes so far to write that this “swab episode” “prepared a new, scientific knowledge of this world, which was not susceptible of free, experimental, and materialistic knowledge as long as it was alienated from man by fear and piousness” (RAHW 380-1, emphasis added). The legacy of this knowledge is that “it drew the world closer to man, to his body, permitted him to touch and test every object, examine it from all sides, enter into it, turn it inside out, compare it to every phenomenon, however exalted and holy, analyze, weigh, measure, try it on. And all this could be done on the one plane of material sensual experience” (RAHW 381). Liberation and immanence are inextricably united. For Bakhtin they are one and the same, abscissae on the x-axis of material embodiment.

Though she is used by Softly, Venable benefits from her physical encounters with the grotesque on this x-axis. Much of the writing from her perspective is cyclical, and two sentences, almost identical in construction and content, rise in her mind: “It [sex with Softly] made her laugh at past loves, at the banality of the past itself” (331), “I laugh at past loves, at the
dreary predictability of the past itself, which may or may not make sense” (372). Her laugh is like the “laughter [that] liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power” (RAHW 94, emphasis added). This is not to say Venable’s problems are solved. A writer burdened with an impossible project, marooned within the grotesquely ambivalent hole that is the antrum, Venable suffers from “fear itself fear itself fear itself” as she grapples with mapping a fiction that gravitates toward the vertical axis (362).
IV. Hole Theory

Ever helpful in *Ratner's Star*, Mainwaring expounds what he calls “hole theory,” saying that “hole theory involves ‘pair creation,’ which is the simultaneous creation of a particle-antiparticle pair” (418). As the grotesque involves the unification and absorption of opposing pairs, a type of “particle-antiparticle pair” relationship, so hole theory connects Softly to the antrum, the primary hole in the novel. The cycloid, “that elegant curve traced by a fixed point on the circumference of a circle rolling along a straight line, the line in this case being the land itself” (15), is the engine that drives this connection. The quote above is Billy’s in admiration of FE#1, but the following comparison is Venable’s: “Here we are now,” she muses in post-coital revery, “set inside ourselves, let him have his say or nay, rutlish tyrant, cycloid, stunted pasha whirling in his silk pillows” (372).

With multiple valencies in the novel, therefore, the cycloid becomes a key overdetermined image. The formation of a cycloid itself relies, as Billy describes it, on “rolling” a circle upon a plane in order to inscribe the shape—technically a trochoid—resultant from one point on the circle. “Trochoid” comes from the Greek τροχός, “trochos,” meaning wheel, which provides a useful way to picture this form (OED). The necessity of the flat plane for the circle (or wheel) to roll upon suggests that the cycloid is *half* its full form; that is, that the other half is *below* the plane rather than above it. Of course, the cycloid is technically complete on one side of the plane, yet it gestures towards bilateral symmetry—that, divided in the middle by a plane, each half would be symmetrical. This usage of “cycloid” mirrors the novel’s bilaterally
symmetrical form, for the plane upon which the cycloid is traced implies a mirrored cycloid beneath it, a “particle-antiparticle pair” relationship.

In the section titled “Bilateral Symmetry,” Softly suffers from post-coital depression. Sucking his thumb in bed, he defines bilateral symmetry—“Exact correspondence of form and constituent arrangement on opposite sides of a dividing line or plane” (300)—in order to “[reject] the idea, never proposed, that there might be someone or something on the other side of an imaginary median line to match his parts and their relationships and into which he might theoretically flow.” His “thumb-sucking,” “mak[ing] a series of tiny plectral sounds, as though pinching an inflated balloon,” emphasizes Softly’s grotesque nature and thereby invalidates what is, evidently, a fantasy of perfect correspondence, his other half. An affront to “symmetry itself” (261), the misshapen Softly does not have an exact mirror image as he would wish, and although he rejects the idea that is “never proposed,” he nonetheless entertains the notion, even if only for rejection’s sake.

Despite his conclusion that, lacking his mirrored half, he is not bilaterally symmetrical, Softly “console[s] himself” by thinking that his depression is temporary, for he recalls “the clinical knowledge that a person afflicted with cyclothemia, the technical name for this condition, was known, of all things, as a cycloid” (300-1). Not severe enough to be considered bipolar, cyclothemia is a similar mood disorder, as its very name suggests (κῶκλος or “kyklos” meaning “circular,” θυμός or “thymos” meaning “mind, temper”) (OED). Mood disorders, in fact, chart well on Cartesian grids: with the positive \( y \)-axis defined as manic severity and the negative \( y \)-axis as depressive severity, cyclothemia shows shallower rises and dives along the \( x \)-axis of time compared to the more violent forms of bipolar disorder. Of course, these charts
merely approximate the degree of manic or depressive episodes for the means of comparing
different disorders, but it is worth noting that the extremes of cyclothemia, its hypomanic highs
and depressive lows, appear bilaterally symmetrical, especially compared to bipolar disorder.
Softly proceeds to mock this definition of himself as cycloid, ironically conflating the definition
of mental illness with geometrical form: “How utterly lovely. What depths of stability and
equivalence. What splendid Einheit or unity” (301). This “splendid Einheit” contains mania and
depression, particle and antiparticle, $x$ and $y$, $a$ and non-$a$.

Softly’s cyclomania explains many aspects of his character, from the inhalant abuse
during his depressive episodes to the satyriasis of his manic bouts. (The term “satyriasis,”
though out of current usage, uses the mythical grotesque to define hypersexuality.) Further,
though, he also relates to the geometrical form. As the prime carnival-grotesque, Softly
transitions the novel’s scene from the above-ground cycloid FE#1 to its mirrored subterranean
“antiparticle,” the antrum. The carnivalesque for Bakhtin “free[s] human consciousness,
thought, and imagination for new potentialities. For this reason great changes, even in the field
of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way”
(RAHW 49, emphasis added). Softly supplies this precedent, paving the way for focus on
Logicon. Remarkably, Softly himself appears conscious of his pivotal role, theorizing on the
cycloid that he himself represents, deepening its function:

What I find most satisfying about this structure is the fact that it comes in more than one
part. The first, naturally, is the cycloid. The second is the first in reverse, completely
below ground level. Same shape upside down. Same distance down as up. Nothing
goes on down there in the sense of official goings-on. It’s nothing more than an
This explanation precedes Softly’s definition of the antrum, his unique (and grotesque) formulation that thematizes the proceedings of the novel’s second part. Softly notes the subversive “antiparticle” aspect of what “goes on down there”—nothing “in the sense of official goings-on”—in addition to creating a type of cosmological scheme along a traced $\gamma$-axis: “Same distance down as up.” Emphasizing this distance recalls the “pathos of shifts and changes” of carnival, when the high are debased and the low become king for a day, thus exposing the arbitrary nature of hierarchies (PDP 124).

Softly’s mirroring of the cycloid is further nuanced by Soma Tobias, famed “woman architect” of FE#1 (78). When Billy realizes who she is, she freely admits that she “abandoned [her]self to the rhythms of the cycloid. Most gorgeous curve in nature. A figure of magical properties.” She then speaks of how “she resolved to apply that shape to a building, a city, a giant tombstone if need be,” the last item in that list catching Billy’s attention. From there, Tobias turns to the Jesuits who “oppose the cycloid form” because they “oppose anything that can be turned upside down and still give pleasure” (79). According to Tobias, the Jesuits are fundamentally wrong because “the cycloid is geometry,” which does not explain “why they have to get sex mixed up in it.”

Against Jesuit doctrine, Bakhtin stresses that “turning upside down” is what carnival does best: comically, it flips values on their head in order to combat the rigid seriousness of institutional life, be it ecclesiastical, economical, or governmental. Bakhtin claims that “representation of the nether world often applied the carnivalistic logic of ‘a world upside down’: an emperor in the nether world becomes a slave, a slave an emperor, and so forth. The
carnivalized nether world of the menippea determined the medieval tradition of representations of joyful hell, a tradition which found its culmination in Rabelais” (PDP 133). Part II of the novel, “Reflections,” inverts “Adventures” in more ways than one, indeed dethroning Billy as the vehicle upon which the narrative progresses; most ironic, however, is how for Billy the “antrum” inverts the levity, or as Bakhtin calls it, the “joyful relativity” (PDP 125), of the first above-ground part. If it could be said that Billy had “fun” before Softly’s arrival, Softly informs him that “the goddam fun is over” (275) upon descent into the antrum because, in Billy’s words, there is “no way how . . . to avoid them in this setup,” “them” being “Serious people . . . . Serious very serious” (291).

To cheer Billy up, who is suffering from “the dread . . . in being logical” (358), Softly inverts seriousness by inverting himself, embodying the name given to him and the psychological disorder with which he is afflicted. The handstand, essentially elevating the lower and lowering the high, is “very characteristic for carnival thinking”: “paired images, chosen for their contrast (high/low, fat/thin, etc.) or for their similarity (doubles/twins),” showcase a “special instance of the carnival category of eccentricity, the violation of the usual and the generally accepted, life drawn out of its usual rut” (PDP 126). Within the netherworld of the cycloid, Softly, cycloid himself, turns himself upside down to give pleasure—just as woman architect Soma Tobias says is a “magical property” of the geometrical form. As a whole, then, the cycloid demonstrates the major critical tension of the novel, combining the upward gesture of abstraction—purely geometric Platonic idealism—with the downward gesture of incarnation, the physically impure grotesque. The cycloid is both a and non-a in the same sense that Billy’s zorg, conceived in the realm of pure mathematics, is eventually applied by Mainwaring to
discover that Earth is in a mohole.

 Appropriately, therefore, the grotesque Softly presents himself as designer and superintendent of the lower half of the cycloid. “I call it the antrum,” he says. “Just a fancy way of saying hole in the ground” (282). Sly modesty!—the Greek ἄντρον “antron,” from which “antrum” derives, does signify “cave,” but the term is more commonly used in anatomy to designate “a natural chamber or cavity in a bone or other anatomical structure” or, more significantly, “the part of the stomach just inside the pylorus” (OED). The pylorus connects the stomach to the duodenum or lower intestine. Softly’s word choice is extremely suggestive, therefore, in the light of this study. Discussing the scene of Pantagruel’s birth, Bakhtin “point[s] out that the images of the ‘well,’ the ‘cow’s belly,’ and the ‘cellar’ are equivalent to the ‘gaping mouth.’ The latter corresponds to the belly and to the uterus. Thus, side by side with the erotic image of the trou (the ‘hole’) the entrance to the underworld is represented: the gaping mouth of Satan, the ‘jaws of hell’” (RAHW 329). The perfect lower half of the cycloid warps to resemble the grotesque hole, the “material lower bodily stratum” that the carnivalesque moves down toward in order to revel in the ambivalency of destruction and regeneration. Indeed, figuring the antrum as a type of hell conforms with Bakhtin’s sixth characteristic of Menippean satire, which details the “three-planed construction” of setting: “action and dialogic syncretis are transferred from earth to Olympus and to the nether world” (PDP 116). This three-planed construction permits the hero to travel from world to world, creating an Einsteinian relativity that, N. Katherine Hayles writes, “implies that we cannot observe the universe from an Olympian perspective” (qtd. in Keesey 78). Within this relativity, conventions (especially of earth and Olympus) are dethroned as arbitrary because travel between worlds, according to Menippean
satire characteristic three, creates “extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a truth” (PDP 114). Bakhtin maintains that “the menippea accorded great importance to the nether world” in particular.

In this context, the cycloid as “giant tombstone” acquires meaning. The above-ground cycloid is a tombstone for the hole beneath it. Much of the second part of the novel is dedicated to Maurice Wu’s cave-spelunking, during which he discovers massive amounts of guano in addition to evidence of his “revolutionary thesis”: “Man more advanced the deeper we dig” (321). For Wu, “true wealth and abundance are not on the highest or on the medium level but only in the lower stratum” (RAHW 369) in the “downward movement” which “dig[s] a grave, but . . . a bodily, creative grave” (RAHW 370). The guano present in the antrum—cycloid, bowel, cavern—represents the ambivalency of “the images of feces and urine” and how “they debase, destroy, regenerate and renew simultaneously. They are blessing and humiliating at the same time” (RAHW 151). Understanding this ambivalency, Wu advocates that “we should do everything we can to see [the bats] survive and prosper. This is because their waste material is useful as fertilizer. Maybe you don’t know it but the economies of entire countries are based on the export and domestic use of bird droppings” (326). Less scatologically, Wu’s occupation in “prehistory” involves him digging into strata of death that are paradoxically generative, for Wu’s discovery of “Man more advanced the deeper we dig,” combined with Mainwaring’s assertion that Earth itself is in a mohole, solves the mystery of who sent the code: “We’ve reconstructed the ARS extant and it turns out to be us” (405). Like the messenger in La Scuola di Atene appearing twice in one image, the ARS extant (ARSE) and the workers on Logicon are the same figure separated merely by time; in the bowels of the antrum, the ARSE are queerly brought back
from the dead, and the transmission of the message from past to present catastrophically reveals the extent to which the “present” ARSE have been talking out of their ass.

“Little Billy Twillig” is aged fourteen because this places him in the full flush of puberty, a temporal zone pitting him between purely abstract mathematics and the raw needs of his growing body. The ambivalent figuration of the antrum as tomb/womb and bowels/genitals concludes Billy’s own “adventures” in investigating the ambivalence of his “dangle”—an organ of generation and of excretion—and the holes that receive it and its issues, be they receptacles of waste or areas where there’s “female hair down there” (314). Billy first encounters his fear of “old people’s shitpiss” in the airplane toilet where he suspects “an elderly woman with a plum-colored growth behind her left ear” “had left behind some unnamable horror, the result of a runaway gland . . . . Diseased in this case. Discolored beyond recognition. Possibly unflushed” (7). Significantly, this “old person” is female, a detail that sharpens the sexual aspect of this ambivalence. Billy then dwells on the word “cunctation,” autologically enacting the definition of that word as he does so; he delays the purpose of his visiting the toilet by recalling Eberhard Fearing’s utterance a moment ago. Fearing’s word frightens him, as it “implied a threat” that has nothing less than death as its end. Like Jeff Lockhart of Zero K, Billy’s attention turns to trigonometry for comfort, abstracting him from the physical as he “undid his zipper, bent his knees . . . and then slipped his dangle (as he’d been taught to call it) out of his pants” (7). The narrative voice, representing Billy’s attention, fluctuates in classic Rabelaisian style from abstract musings on ancient number systems to the task literally in hand, “tapp[ing] the underside of his dangle in an effort to influence whatever membranous sac was storing his urine” (7-8).

The toilet itself “appeared to be a bottomless cistern,” a hole so deep that Billy imagines
the bandage he flushes “floating to the surface of the water that filled a stainless-steel wash basin in a toilet on an airliner above an antipodal point” (8). The “stereotyped Oriental smile” that Billy assumes afterward, in light of the hole-digging, spelunking Wu—a Chinese man “engaged in a lifelong effort to become Chinese” (392)—renovates the figure of “digging to China” as more of a flushing to China. More importantly, though, Billy figures the hole of the toilet as actually two holes, or one space with two entrances. Not only does this image parody Lewis Carroll’s rabbit hole, it mirrors the mirroring of the antrum’s antipodal point, FE#1. Additionally, this image shades into the thematic of Wu: digging so far he emerges “practically out the other end” (324). In Wu’s case, archeological excavation leads backwards through the relics of time until, reaching the antipodal point, these relics point to the future of an advanced civilization superior to the present.

The other dangle in the novel belongs to Endor, and this dangle appears inside a hole. First, this hole is equated with failure. As Endor admits, “when I failed to interpret the message, there was no recourse but the hole” (85). The irony of an astronomer who condemns himself to a hole is not lost on Endor, for he seems not only conscious but oddly proud of his downward movement, criticizing the fact that “science requires us to deny the evidence of the senses” so that “we see the sun moving across the sky and we say no, no, no, the sun is not moving, it’s we who move, we move, we” (87). Endor tunnels downward and reaches his antipodal point, becoming a type of madman Newton who eschews calculation of the gravity of planets but rather “feel[s] it in the bottom of my feet. There is want at the center of the earth. Never mind impressed force and inverse proportion. There is sheer wanting to contend with” (87). Literally, Endor digs himself deeper into his own failure, coming out of the other side. The antipodal point
of the scientist is the mystic, and Endor, talking of “want,” that “universal suck and gulp” (88), assumes the role of paternalistic guide and guiding light for Billy—especially the pubescent Billy. Desire and its dangers form the backbone of Endor’s intermittent dialogue.

Though not as much as the second hole, the “hole’s hole,” the “first” hole in which Endor stands is a source of fear for Billy. At first, Billy is “reluctant to sit at the edge of the hole (with legs dangling in suitably youthful fashion) for reasons he did not care to articulate to himself” (84), though articulate he soon does. In the context of Endor’s exposition on desire, Billy’s learned habit of referring to the penis as a “dangle,” and the ambivalency of holes in general within the text, the resultant image of legs dangling in a hole (though as yet unarticulated by Billy) evokes the image of sex. The sexual quality of this hole gains credence from earlier in the novel, when Billy “tried to imagine the birth of Cyril’s wife’s baby”: “It would happen in grim lights violently. A dripping thing trying to clutch to its hole. Dredged up and beaten. Blood and drool and womb mud. How cute, this neon shrieker made to plunge upward . . . . Cling, suck and cry” (36). Here, the womb is figured as a hole in the ground, and the amount of pain and violence accompanying this passage intensifies the ambivalence of the womb as tomb and the baby being exhumed rather than born. Diction of life and birth mixes with the death Billy imagines brooding in his own body, which he typifies as terrestrial “mulch, glunk, wort and urg” (291). “Cling, suck and cry” also evokes Endor’s hole-derived maxim that “suck and gulp are the activating principles behind the abstract idea of want” (90).

Aside from this association left unarticulated by Billy, he does catalogue three fears, and all of them involve the recursiveness of holes. Fear number one is that Endor will pull Billy in and eat him. Billy devises a “logical trap”—a syllogism—that he distinguishes from the purity
of numbers, criticizing how “words cannot be separated from their use” (86). Of logical traps, he
deems they are “easy to get into and hard to get out of”—much like a hole. The second fear
involves Endor forcing Billy to eat insect larvae, if not for nourishment then as an “invigorating
pastime.” Billy envisions another “language trap,” here, afraid of Endor’s “knowledge of large
words and the spaces between such words”—spaces that, like a hole, one could fall into. Billy’s
third fear is of the second hole, the hole’s hole, “a truer than usual pit” that terrifies because it
functions as a semantic black hole. Self-referential yet signifying nothing, this hole is
monoglossic in the Bakhtinian sense, its meaning refusing to refract into other contexts or reflect
other languages. The hole’s hole is a hole as such: “It evoked only: second hole. Untraveled
territory. Nothing to picture. No noise to imagine in anticipation of the real thing” (86). A hole
within a hole, it gestures toward an infinite descent without the promise of antipodal emergence
as in the airplane’s “bottomless cistern” toilet.

Billy finds himself fearing the hole’s hole as well as what Endor might do to his physical
person, but underlying all three scenarios is Billy’s fear of semantic language. Be it the
dialogical value of words to index or indicate, “scientific persuasiveness” and the rhetorical
power to persuade, or (ironically) the failure of language to specify anything beyond itself
(“Nothing to picture. No noise to imagine”), its inability to represent the world, Billy becomes
lost in “propositional dream-shock” (87), terrified of the implications between language and the
world that surrounds him—a direct contrast to the abstract purity of numbers. Endor jests that, in
“digging and clawing,” he is fulfilling “man’s need for metaphysical burrows that lead absolutely
nowhere” (90), referencing Kafka’s story. Absolutely not the case for Endor, this reference
nonetheless defines the fear Billy experiences, that referential language tunnels only to itself,
paradoxically leading nowhere by looping to infinity.

Following this fear is one of many comedic moments of the novel. Endor, “the great man,” “respected throughout the world” (86), “began to urinate into the second hole, adjusting his stance so that the long feeble arc terminated at the point where the second hole commenced. Although he redeposited his scaly old dangle, he didn’t bother fastening his pants and so the zipper just sagged there, fatigued and silver in the sun” (87). The surprise of this action, unexpected and crude, accounts for much of the humour, especially contrasted to Billy’s earlier fears. Endor assumes the character of holy fool, a mystic too far enveloped in his idiosyncrasies to consider “normal” conventions. Leaving the Olympian stratum of FE#1, Endor takes to the nether regions and naturally acts in this “earthy” way. Thus Endor’s true situation comes to clearer focus as Billy realizes this isn’t the first time Endor has urinated in the hole’s hole and that he will soon crawl into the hole’s hole again (which he does). Endor’s sudden urination is bathetic in a non-parodic sense. Rather than the “depth” (βάθος) that bathos denotes implying a satirical exaggeration of pathos to produce a mawkish or cloying effect, here Endor undercuts his global prestige by suddenly urinating into the “depths” of his own creation (OED).

As Endor returns to the hole’s hole, Billy “trie[s] to ignore the fact that the elderly scientist had quite recently urinated into that very area” (88) because, just as in the airplane toilet episode, “excrement worried him a bit. Shitpiss” (37). Endor turns his hole’s hole into a toilet, a “bottomless cistern” in which to put his “old people’s shitpiss.” As this scene is viewed from Billy’s perspective, Endor’s “male member” (374) appearing as a “scaly old dangle” humorously repurposes a euphemistic term “as [Billy had] been taught to call it,” mirroring the previous bathroom scene as well (7). This is a bottomless cistern, though, that Endor crawls into,
recalling Slothrop’s Roseland Ballroom adventure into the toilet to find his lost harmonica. Neither Billy nor Endor finds his sudden urination into the hole’s hole explicitly funny, per se, but the language used to describe the act, in addition to the reasons stated above, creates the effect also produced by the scatological: laughter.

For Bakhtin, this is a critical function of the material bodily lower stratum, and for Billy the fear he feels when faced by excrement is ironically dispersed by the same. To say that “excrement worried him a bit” ironically understates Billy’s condition; the horror of the “something about waste material that defied systematic naming” recalls Gary’s desert-venture in *End Zone* as well as, critically, the hole’s hole itself and the cosmic terror it invokes. To prepare his discussion of the triumph that laughter brings, Bakhtin describes “cosmic terror” in terms that evoke Billy’s fear of excrement and of the toilet-like hole’s hole. Cosmic terror is “fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful” such as “the starry sky, the gigantic material masses of the mountains, the sea.” (Gary’s encounter with “simple shit,” “nullity in the very word,” begins with an identical catalogue of “The sun. The desert. The sky. The silence,” etc. [EZ 87-8].) In one sense, Bakhtin thus gestures towards the sublime. Bakhtin goes a step further, however, writing that this “cosmic terror” may be “used by all religious systems to oppress man and his consciousness” (*RAHW* 335). Before urinating in the hole’s hole, Endor embarks on themes of cosmic terror, saying “too many stars. Too much force and counterforce . . . . It’s just too much, too big” (84-5). This sense of cosmic terror combines with the immeasurability and recursive infinity of the hole’s hole. The hole’s hole is hole to the power of hole. Hole squared.

How does one combat this cosmic terror? First, through the “material principle in man himself” (*RAHW* 335). Greater attention to the body, Bakhtin argues, ushered in the Renaissance
realization that “man assimilated the cosmic elements: earth, water, fire and air.” From this comes the connection between the cosmic and the bodily mundane, the impersonal and the personal: it is in the “material acts and eliminations of the body—eating, drinking, defecation, sexual life—that man found and retraced within himself the earth, sea, air, fire, and all the cosmic matter and its manifestations, and was thus able to assimilate them” (RAHW 335-6).

Mathematician and astrophysicist, Endor’s work above-ground was well suited to connecting the cosmic to the material element of humanity. So, grotesquely, is his present state. “Insect larvae. That’s what I eat,” he says; “Tell them when you get back. Endor eats insect larvae . . . . Furry little items from the earth” (85). Again and again, Endor emphasizes the source of his food, even inviting Billy to “watch him eat some more larvae” (91), and this tendency is never far from his character, indeed seems to define his character. Before Endor confirms what Billy suspects as his diet, Billy sees “several small crawling things mov[ing] about in his white beard,” a detail that again connects Endor as a character with the consumption of food (84). The novel’s first mention of Endor, however, also includes a humorously bathetic transition from the cosmically high to the materially low. On first meeting Billy, Endor describes himself as “the wizened child of Thales and Heraclitus” (22). Billy remembers that “his breath had smelled of peanuts.” Even then, Endor has an air of the “material acts and eliminations of the body” about him. His wearing a “star pentagram on a chain around his neck” (21), a symbol that signifies diverse concepts but pertinently represents the four elements plus ether, is a small but important detail that rounds this portrait of him.

“In the sphere of imagery,” Bakhtin writes, “cosmic fear (as any other fear) is defeated by laughter” (RAHW 335). This line of thinking extends the logic of Bakhtin’s assertion that the
body is a bridge to the cosmic. “Dung and urine,” too, “as comic matter that can be interpreted bodily, play an important part in these images. They appear in hyperbolic quantities and cosmic dimensions. Cosmic catastrophe represented in the material bodily lower stratum is degraded, humanized, and transformed into grotesque monsters. Terror is conquered by laughter” (335). Endor’s “long feeble arc,” to be sure, is not a Gargantuan “hyperbolic quantity.” All the same, his urine functions as comic matter that dispels cosmic fear as much as it generates cosmic fear. Curiously, this action serves to humanize the otherwise grotesque (yet paternal) Endor, creator of and guardian against what scares Billy most.
Indeed, Tom LeClair emphasizes the primary role of fear in Ratner’s Star, arguing that the novel “reveals . . . an important and distinguishing determinant of DeLillo’s sensibility—fear—that was largely hidden or only obliquely expressed in his first three books” (Loop 113). Drawing metaphors from developmental biology, LeClair asserts that “the correspondences between Billy’s life and mathematical history suggest” that “the phylogeny of fear recapitulates ontogeny,” thus reversing the now-outdated “recapitulation theory” of Ernst Haeckel (137). For LeClair, “DeLillo’s flashbacks to Billy’s boyhood in the Bronx create this ontogeny” of fear, meaning that Billy’s individual experience of fear patterns the exposition of fear experienced by other characters in the novel, particularly in the second part.

While LeClair presents a strong case, tracing an important theme in DeLillo that many critics after In The Loop have also worked to continue, his argument forces him to neglect the containment of the flashback episodes within the larger and significantly comic form of Menippean satire. Distinguishing the New York episodes from the rest of the novel, LeClair does note that the flashbacks use “the most private materials of DeLillo’s own background, his boyhood in the Bronx” (Loop 110) but necessarily downplays the generic import of these episodes, how (as Johnston correctly asserts) “the only truly novelistic sections—flashbacks to Billy Twillig’s family life—seem like vestigial remnants of a superannuated form” (Johnston 267). In fact, the tone and pace of these flashbacks differ from the rest of the novel because they conform to characteristic twelve of Menippean satire—“a wide use of inserted genres”—and
consequently thirteen as well, “the presence of inserted genres reinforces the multi-styled and multi-toned nature of the menippea” (*PDP* 118). Granted, DeLillo explores his native Bronx and the fear it generates, but he carnivalizes this locale and contains its fear in ways that his later novels, say *Underworld* or *Falling Man*, clearly do not. Instead, DeLillo uses the inserted genre of the flashback to show stages of Billy’s *Bildung* wherein the hero, treading the same line between impure nature and pure mathematical thought, is surrounded by blooming, buzzing heteroglossia that stand opposed to the crisis of thought and language represented by Logicon.

The rationale for including these flashbacks within the larger narrative mirrors the MacGuffin of the book as a whole, that of deciphering the code from Ratner’s Star. As it turns out, the code is not only *not* from outer space but from a Golden Age civilization that (strangely) predates human history. The code is a message from the past, one that boomerangs back to the earth’s present. All messages are necessarily messages from the past, and so the narrator eases into the first brief flashback with a self-consciously parenthetical statement, a marker to show awareness and perhaps even ask permission: “His father (to backtrack briefly) was a third-rail inspector . . .” (4). From there, subsequent flashbacks appear in direct contrast to the present action of the novel. Boomeranging back into the text, the episodes follow their own coded method of entry.

These flashbacks oppose real and embodied experience, what Bakhtin would call “messy” life, with Billy’s budding powers of abstraction. Mirroring this oppositional content, the *formal* organization of this content operates with identical logic, staging the presentation of Billy’s infant life along the lines of a mathematical sequence. This process is the coded method of entry. “Within the series one, two, four, seven, eleven, he was quick to discover the buried
series one, two, three, four” is the first sentence of the third flashback, placed in a chapter called “Expansion” (69). There are five flashbacks in “Adventures,” one of each occurring in chapter one, two, four, seven and eleven. The equation that generates this sequence is \( n(n+1)/2 + 1 \), and in the context of the flashbacks this equation is autological: prefacing the third flashback of the fourth chapter, it describes both itself and the larger structural sequence of which it is a nested part. The circularity of this sequence’s application—that the formula of this sequence is itself part of the larger demonstration of it in the flashbacks—is intentional, and not only because DeLillo set for himself the goal of making a novel that was “naked structure” (LeClair “Interview” 11). Billy’s early life, its “expansion,” both can and cannot be encapsulated by \( n(n+1)/2 + 1 \). This oscillation between the mathematically abstract and the tangentially and prosaically real is what makes Billy tick as a character in the world of *Ratner’s Star*. The abstract and the real constantly dovetail into each other, informing and conforming with the other.

According to Bakhtin’s third characteristic of Menippean satire, “the content of the menippea is the adventures of an idea or a truth in the world: either on earth, in the nether regions, or on Olympus” (*PDP* 115). The New York flashback episodes—all occurring in Part I, “Adventures”—detail “the adventure of the idea on earth,” where the “idea” of abstracting mathematical thought trudges through the petri dish of New York—a famously polylingual and heteroglossic locale—among a cast of those whom Bakhtin hails as the champions of the novel, the “prosaic.” The New York of these episodes is constructed from what DeLillo himself refers to as “a kind of radiance in dailiness” (DeCurtis 63) and what *White Noise*’s Alphonse Stompanato, a “New York emigre,” calls the “real power [that] is wielded every day, in these
little challenges and intimidations, by people just like us” (217). In sum, these episodes show it is not despite but because of Billy’s poor surroundings that he becomes the child genius he is, for Billy’s power of abstraction is his first line of defence. As Murray Jay Siskind replies to Babette Gladney in White Noise, who asks him how he knows so much: “I’m from New York” (51).

The text does not hesitate to introduce this idea, doing so on the second page in the briefest flashback of the novel. In a scene that eerily prefigures the young Lee Harvey Oswald’s “year he rode the subway” (Oswald, too, liked to “stand at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass” [Libra 3]), Billy, “standing at the very front of the first car,” thinks he sees a rat, a small detail that foreshadows Billy’s meeting Ratner in the Great Hole later in life (4-5). Babe Terwilliger, the workingman clown of these New York scenes, introduces “the idea that existence tends to be nourished from below, from the fear level, the plane of obsession, the starkest tract of awareness” (4). In the subway system—one variation of the hole—Babe clowns around, “mak[ing] a series of crazy people’s faces” in a grotesque manner, before the train crashes, its raw physicality and heft apparent: “stunned metal, a buckled frame for bodies intersecting in thick smoke” (5). The “superlunar calm” that Billy experiences in shock, leading to his realization that “there is at least one prime between a given number and its double,” coincides with the celestial, the astronomical, and therefore opposes the materiality of this scene. Yet, for all that, the physicality and force of the crash creates the “superlunar calm” that is also the “interval” in which Billy comes to his abstract mathematical realization. Billy’s understanding of the intervalllic nature of prime numbers hatches within his stunned, bodily interval. This scene in the subway shows how Billy abstracts insight from the world. From his carnivalized surroundings he shaves away time and space to arrive at a distilled, ideal conception
of reality.

Contrasting FE#1, a place where “one thing doesn’t lead to another the way it should” and which has “such separate parts” (232), the times and spaces of New York are essentially tied to the wide spectrum of individual types of utterances as well as the individuals whom they pass to and through, themselves. Moreover, these individuals are portrayed in the organic context where they create and interact with this language. In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin uses examples of “Aristotelian poetics . . . the poetics of the medieval church, of ‘the one language of truth,’ the Cartesian poetics of neoclassicism, the abstract grammatical universalism of Leibniz (the idea of a ‘universal grammar’)” to define how “centripetal forces in sociolinguistic and ideological life” coalesce in the attempt to create a “unitary language,” a language “directed away from language plurality” (DiN 271). By definition, this unitary language homogenizes any utterer (if it requires an utterer); it ignores individuality and all varieties of contextual circumstance surrounding the individual and/or the speech act itself. Opposed to this unitary language is “dialogized heteroglossia,” defined as coming to being through “the authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape”; this utterance is “anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance.” Heteroglossia is “centrifugal,” operating on the periphery of the centripetal unitary language and resisting its gravitational pull.

No utterance is purely centrifugal or purely centripetal. “Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces),” Bakhtin is careful to note (DiN 272). Focusing on the development of genre throughout history, however, Bakhtin places
the centripetal tendencies of poetry on one side and, on the other, “the literature of the fabliaux and Schwänke of street songs, folksayings, anecdotes, where there was no language-center at all . . . where all ‘languages’ were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face” (DiN 273). The result is that although utterances are contestable zones where the centripetal struggles with the centrifugal, and vice versa, novelistic genre itself is the literary zone best suited to display this struggle and to favour the heteroglossic.

For Ratner’s Star, the development of Logicon in Part II—a “universal logical language” (285) that “is not designed to be spoken” (289)—is an attempt to create a unitary language, purely centripetal in its nature, stripped of all existential and socio-material context. The goal is to create a profoundly monologizing system. The reason for this is the assumption that such a language would be most probably recognizable by the ARS extants. Edna Bolin remarks that “the artificial radio source extants would probably have less trouble understanding a message from Earth than we ourselves experience every time we try to decipher fragments of an ancient language found buried somewhere on our own planet. This seeming irony . . . merely emphasizes the absence of logic in our spoken languages” (289). The real irony, of which Bolin can not yet be aware, is that there is no “outside,” the ARS extants are “ourselves,” and that rather than a radio signal from space Billy is in fact deciphering a message from an ancient people. The irony that she does acknowledge, however, underscores exactly what Logicon is designed to overcome: a lack of logicality in human semantic speech that creates difference.

This lack of logicality is precisely what permits language to flourish, chaotic, unstructured, inventive, and improvisational. Like DeLillo’s respect for the “radiance in dailiness,” Bakhtin champions the prosaic and the everyday, the commoner and the crowd, and it
is in this sense that in the New York flashbacks, away from the specialized jargon of FE#1 and the displaced, convoluted reasonings of the antrum, DeLillo showcases the messy chaos of the Bronx and how its inhabitants, inextricably tied to their physical surroundings, shape their environment into creative and individualized language. Where Logicon approaches language through a series of formal rules, suggested by Supreme Abstract Commander Chester Greylag Dent (the title is informative)—“Have you drained the system of meaning?” “Have you established a strict set of rules?” “Have you taken measures to safeguard your system of notation from vagueness and self-contradiction?” (347)—the New York episodes, in particular, attempt nothing of the kind, preferring to exult in a language that “lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it,” where “dialogic interaction” is meant to indicate “the authentic sphere where language lives” (PDP 183).

Consider Faye and her relationship with Billy. Given to monologues, implied by the fact that the text usually inserts her mini-speeches without direct thematic reference to the matter following and preceding, Faye’s relationship with Billy develops a language that completely depends on context and, for it to have any meaning, remains tied to its “extralinguistic” content (PDP 183). Faye tells Babe “K.b.i.s.f.b”—a textbook Rabelaisian debasement that throws the high low—revealing that she learned it from “the kid [who] brought it back from Connecticut” (27). In time the novel reveals this as a favourite saying of Billy’s, and here Faye shows how she has taken this childish curse and redirected it towards her husband, connecting the playground with marriage. Confessedly raised on movies and popular culture, Faye often dips into this pool of reference in her dialogue: she asks Billy “Is you is or is you ain’t my baby?”, referencing the Louis Jordan song, to which Billy replies “Drop dead” (74-5). This reference recontextualizes
“baby” from a term of romantic to maternal endearment. Billy’s reply is understandable, given this fact, for he understands this shift in context. As Bakhtin would say, Billy can see the “quotation marks” placed around “baby.” Perhaps the greatest example of Faye and Billy’s shared language—other than the “double-imitation” nickname “mommy”—is the vegetoid, “an extended fantasy, a joke arising from the fact that the material remains of roughly twenty meals were packed into the sink” (131). This material assumes a life of its own because Faye knows the genre conventions of the blob horror flick: “People in such situations were always powerless to move. This became Faye’s theme” (132). In an added layer of recontextualization, DeLillo, too, appropriates the giant adenoid of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Along with Billy, Faye creates a discourse around this vegetoid that infiltrates—or “seeps through”—the objectivity of the narrative voice. Faye’s parody of this horror genre is another example of her pop culture fluency and how she repurposes this fluency to shape her surroundings, allowing her to “read” the world around her. Indeed, the fact that Billy seems impacted, if not frightened, by this vegetoid episode derives from the very conventions that Faye parodies: a normal kitchen on a normal day is exactly when a vegetoid would strike.

Faye’s remarks, including the great “Nertz to you, bozo” in response to Babe’s demand for the television set (251), are nearly nonsensical without the specific context that surrounds them at the time of her utterance and a history of how and from where she derives her material. For instance, the thematically complicated act of her calling her son “mommy” imitates Billy’s imitation of her own voice, defying logic and semantic content but also challenging her own self definition. In the context of the relationship she creates a “loophole,” defined by Bakhtin as a “special type of fictive ultimate word about oneself with an unclosed tone to it, obtrusively
peering into the other’s eyes and demanding from the other a sincere refutation” (PDP 234). She effectively places quotations not only around the word “mommy” but around the act of Billy’s imitation. Taking “an endearment beyond the southernmost border of messy affection” (25), she mirrors this term back to her son until it becomes both meaningless and meaningful in a most paradoxical way.

With Faye in mind, the New York episodes fulfill an important characteristic of Menippean satire, number five: “Crude slum naturalism” is the technique that shows how “the adventures of truth on earth” can “take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth” (PDP 115). This “slum naturalism” is not portrayed as separate or distinct from “the adventures of truth” but exists in an “organic combination of philosophical dialogue, lofty symbol-systems,” and “the adventure-fantastic.” Such a description of this style perfectly encapsulates the larger thematic that sets Billy as both a product of his heteroglossic, polylingual upbringing in New York and a prodigy whose powers of abstraction literally and physically abstract him from such an environment. Elements of slum naturalism are found in Faye’s vegetoid episode, Babe’s immediately opening a can of Champale when he returns from work and his ownership of a “sawed off poolstick (for nonsporting purposes) and a large black attack dog (26) as well as an “officially defunct Ford model called the Urban Eco-Pak” (70)—not to mention his streetside brawl with a “very, very old and almost surely Chinese” man (255). They are found in the episode of “estranged common-law husband” who follows Rosicrucia Sandoval, “Sixto Ortiz by name,” “his right hand inside his jacket, a theatrical mannerism meant to signify the presence of a weapon”; Babe’s folk-wisdom that “Hispanics only shoot from cars” comes from the movies
that exploit this same slum naturalism (248). The shooting of Alphonso Rackley, complete with the aftermath of police outlining the body in chalk while “little kids slid out from the massed adults and played in the halls, running up and down the stairs in their underwear” as a “transistor radio played Latin soul” (137), moves along the same stylistic lines. The hagiographic legend of Raymond (Nose Cone) Odle, affectionately known as “little-big” and “No’Co pivotman” (135), prematurely fizzles out, while meanwhile, back in the Bronx, “the games grew edgy. No one seemed to care about the score. The players wore combat boots and gave each other immoderate chops to the neck in lieu of strategic fouls” (139).

The world presented in the New York flashbacks is messy, chaotic, poor, and full of suffering. But it is real and realized, non-abstracted, resistant to the type of data-extraction that the character Kyzyl describes in FE#1, of “tagging indigents for further study” (189). Languages from different ethnicities, professions, and pastimes swirl and collide in these sections, finding new contexts but not relinquishing the socio-ideological origins from which they derive. Perhaps the greatest example of a trope in slum naturalism and of the overall heteroglossic tenor of the New York episodes in general is the “scream lady.” The scream lady presents Billy with his first two codes, preparing him for his task of deciphering the message from the ARS extants later on in his life. The relation between these two sets of codes (from the scream lady and from the ARSE) ends there, however, because the codes of the scream lady are internally dialogized to great extents, semantically rich and ambiguous, and assembled from a wide variety of sources and contexts (including mathematical symbols)—all of which criteria the ARSE code does not meet in the slightest.

“Dialogic relationships can permeate inside the utterance,” Bakhtin writes, “even inside
the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically” (PDP 184). He refers to these collisions as “microdialogues.” The scream lady’s notes are in fact a series of microdialogues that show “a twofold direction,” “directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (PDP 185). This double-voicedness of speech emerges through the scream lady’s paronomastic mania: malapropisms, homonyms, and bad puns are the linguistic devices with which she speaks to the world. In the first note-code, the palindromic “grim pill of pilgrim welfare” exploits the aural similarities of the two syllables to criticize a drugged and placated populace; the “king” of the U.S. is compared to “S/hit/ler,” playing on the morphological similarity of the Fuhrer’s name with excrement while similarly tying this play on words to “syph/ill/U.S.”, a double pun. The commercial mecca Rockefeller Center becomes “Rock/fooler Center” (73). The same techniques continue when Billy enters the scream lady’s apartment to see the writing on the wall: Mark of the Gospels becomes “St. Marx,” complete with chapter and verse; Hallelujah becomes “Hellelujah”; Mao Tse-Tung, “Meow Tse-Tung,” and “Confucius = Confuse/U.S.” (250). There are more examples, but that should do. Utilizing the ambiguity built into a language that operates as a system of differences, the scream lady plays with similarities of linguistic sound and sight in a way that brings two radically different discourses into active contact. Bakhtin’s definition of parody involves “Discourse becom[ing] an arena of battle between two voices” (PDP 193), and the scream lady does this brilliantly: she “speaks in someone else’s discourse, but in contrast to stylization parody introduces into that discourse a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, once having made its home in the other’s discourse, clashes hostiley with its primordial host and forces him to serve directly opposing
Bakhtin uses the figure of a parasite to illustrate his understanding of parody and its dialogical process, what he calls the “passive varidirectional double-voiced word.” It is an appropriate figure for the scream lady’s codes. They are perfect examples of how utterances participate both in centripetal and centrifugal forces; indeed, to formulate what are essentially conspiracy theories about the American government, she employs monologizing terms of socio-economic power and renders them dialogical; she hollows them out from within and employs their power for her personal ends, inflecting them with heteroglossic (not to mention scatological) contexts and connotations. In sum, she outpowers the dominant “unitary language” of American power by surrounding it with competing discourses. Combined with the description of her character in the style of slum naturalism, the scream lady emerges as a marginal but importantly recurring figure who is Bakhtinian through and through. To a sociologist like Kyzyl, the scream lady is easy to tag, finalize, or monologize, yet Billy is the one whom she gives her teeth-marked note to, Billy whom she allows into her apartment so that he can see her walls. Rosicrucia Sandoval is content—and stupid—to say that the scream lady got an “ectomy,” because that’s what you do to “hysterical organs” (248). Only Billy stands before her scream and then says “Put it in words” (249). Billy engages her in dialogue, and consequently he de-monologizes her: he sees into her complicated, messy life, a life that can not be reduced to any “unitary language.” He also sees how life can abstract itself into code.

Another important recurring character to consider in the New York episodes is Ralphie Buber, “Crabman.” Like the scream lady, Ralphie’s manipulation of language emphasizes the centrifugal and the heteroglossic; his character adds, in contrast to the scream lady, a dimension
of the gargantuan and the grotesque that lends itself easily to his true role, that of the fool. Ralphie, “local oaf” (253), one who “spent his nights and days on the verge of a lunatic drool” and whose “basic nature seemed best defined by drivel and slime” (252), is clearly a foil to the genius Billy, and yet Ralphie is something of a counterpart, a partner of the slight-of-body prodigy. Ralphie’s “attitude of corpulence offended” in reaction to being “punched by little fists” is a Gargantuan attitude, a bearing in the world that is physical, “oversized and extremely flabby,” to the point of being able to ignore “informal mauling[s]” (253). Ralphie and Billy’s game of spitting on each other in the kitchen (probably initiated by Ralphie) provokes Babe to rightfully say “That’s about the dumb-assest thing I’ve ever seen” (70), but this game evokes another of Billy’s abstractions from the world: the sound that the spitting makes is rendered by the text as “two two two two” (70). The number is made onomatopoeic and rendered four times: two squared, two times two. Each spit (“two”) entails another (“too”). The dumb-assedness of this scene is another instance where Billy sees the world as a departure point to enter pure mathematical speculation; critically, though, the scene emphasizes the gross materiality of this departure.

Buber’s first comment in the book is his firm statement that “Girls have three armpits. The extra one is between their legs” (72). Patently untrue, Buber’s statement nevertheless reveals a world of pre-pubescent male speculation, a zone of lore and gossip that runs counter to the “official” account. The fool for Bakhtin is one who has the “right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single of the existing categories that make life available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and falseness of every situation” (FTCN 160). Ralphie pushes his function of the fool further when he masquerades as
the grotesque “Crabman” to bait Consagra, who, himself an ethnic “other,” plays along in a
carnivalesque ritual of oaths and debasing. Crabman is a grotesque combination of crab and man
that doubles as an officer of the “crab patrol,” calling on radio to “sound the crab alarm” that he’s
spotted “an imported human in the area,” “a man here that’s acting like he’s white, male, human”
and apparently good to eat, “free food on the stoop” (253). Consagra is indeed “said to be an
illegal alien” (251), well known to Ralphie as he imagines the scenario of “Crabman versus the
guinea wop” (252). Ralphie enacts this “versus” by becoming other himself, the Crabman, in
order to extend the “alien” status of Consagra from American citizenship to the human species.
Fools “exploit any position as they choose, but only as a mask,” Bakhtin writes, “their entire
function consists in externalizing things” (*FTCN* 160); “talking into the crab’s abdomen,”
Ralphie “us[es] the creature as a microphone as well as alternate persona” (254), even talking in
“crab” (“throttled aquatic sounds”), to externalize in the most dumb-assest way (sic) the “alien-
ness” of humanity itself.

The concept of the “alien” (and how the “alien” can and must be human) runs throughout
*Ratner’s Star*. Indeed, Crabman (“I’ll bite off your ass”) confronting Consagra (“Shut up you
face”) parodies the Logicon venture of inventing a universal language to respond to the ARS
extants. The two interactions—one in New York, the other across time—share a similar
situation at heart, and yet the methodology at work in these encounters could not be more
different. There is an enormous gap between Consagra’s world and Crabman’s, evident from
Consagra’s limited Italian-English dialect and his stolid form that roots him in the lower classes
of society, “the hooded scorn a laborer has” (253), whereas Crabman is an alien in more than one
sense of the word, playing a joke which (perhaps) only he can truly understand. Heteronomous,
centrifugal language meets in the centre of this confrontation, all the same, drawing upon cultures and places that find form within each respective speaker’s discourse. Though there is a centre of this confrontation, there is no linguistic centre, and that is the value this scene presents: Bakhtin’s “Galilean linguistic consciousness.” Without a linguistic “centre,” there appears a massive shift in perspective, one of relativity in which “oppositions between individuals are only surface upheavals of the untamed elements in social heteroglossia, surface manifestations of those elements that play on such individual oppositions, make them contradictory, saturate their consciousness and discourses with a more fundamental speech diversity” (DiN 325). Compared to this situation, the Logicon project’s attempt to centralize language by eliminating all embodied context (heteroglossia) appears all the more sinister.

This comparison is the use and ultimate value of the fool, Bakhtin claims. The fool “grant[s] the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not ‘to be oneself’ . . . the right to rage at others with a primal (almost cultic) rage” (FTCN 163). Inability to communicate is what the fool does best, and through this inability the fool defrocks the authority of “unitary language.” “Stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always polemical,” Bakhtin continues (DiN 403). “It interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away.” The “lofty pseudo intelligence” that Ratner’s Star poses in dialogue with the Crabman scene is the Logicon project. Bakhtin goes further, though. He extends the importance of the fool from specific scenes to the novel at large, writing that “the author needs the fool: by his very uncomprehending presence he makes strange the world of social conventionality. By representing stupidity, the novel teaches prose intelligence, prose
“Prose wisdom” is everywhere in the New York episodes, and this is their main contribution and function in relation to the major plot that envelops them. The experience they represent—and the literary art that forms this representation—is irreducible to mathematics or to any other system of abstraction. The reality of these episodes is raw, crude, dumb-assed, and stupid, and this is the point: the sustained irony of Billy’s development, that a child-genius could comically emerge from such conditions, never finds resolution, nor does it need to. Compared to the scientific jargon of FE#1, Billy brings his own assemblage of jargon (“H’o” [6], “People from the Bronx don’t have heroes” [247]), dialogically rooted in real space and actual time. Scarier than scientific jargon, though, is the anti-jargon of Logicon, and Billy’s resistance to it (and to logicality itself) is better understood in the context of his upbringing.

Time, naturally, separates the flashbacks from the novel’s present action. Within that passage of time Billy experiences the onset of puberty—a crisis that colours the pre-pubescent New York days as innocent and carefree, a state Billy longs to return to. The Billy in New York is “completely in accord with the notion of forever being this thing called ‘small boy’,” a boy “unthreatened by a sense of his own capacity for change” (75). At fourteen, this capacity for change foregrounds the contact line Billy experiences between the needs of his physical body (“nature”) and the contemplation of abstract figures (“mathematical thought”) and, indeed, whether the two are at all capable of co-existing within the same being. Billy in the flashbacks is not yet the Billy daydreaming of “enormous breasts bazooms boobs titties” (336), the Billy who, rather than “completely in accord” with the limiting definition of his self, claims in a cryptic (and Artis-of-Zero K-like) section, “I Am Not Just This” (370). Puberty, that generator of the dynamo
of the material bodily lower stratum, de-finalizes Billy’s contained self, opening him up to speculate that—in a way similar to his realization of primes between numeric intervals—“There is a life inside this life. A filling of gaps. There is something between the spaces. I am different from this.” He dreams himself backward through time to a uterine, idealized and abstracted state of being: “If only I could remember what the light was like in that space before I was dripping tissue. There is something in the space between what I know and what I am and what fills this space is what I know there are no words for” (370).

“Dripping tissue” echoes the “dripping thing” that Billy imagines coming out of Myriad Kyriakos’s womb, and this connection clarifies both Billy’s imagined scene of Myriad giving birth as well as his own imagined return to the womb. In terms of the novel’s structure, the scene with the imagined Myriad in labour occurs near the beginning of the first part, while Billy’s interior monologue in “I Am Not Just This” occurs near the end of the second. As LeClair writes, DeLillo “rewinds the pattern” in the second part of his novel, “looping backward through the mathematicians’ names and ideas” in order to create a mirror image of the first part (or to simulate the return of a boomerang) (Loop 131). With the novel divided in two, therefore, these scenes match in their palindromically temporal position. With Billy’s later interior monologue in mind, his imagining of Myriad’s baby becomes evidence of his own wishes, a type of defensive projection. The “dripping thing trying to clutch to its hole” does not want to be born. In a shocking transition, Billy actually assumes the perspective of the baby, asking “Had there been a light in her belly, dim briny light in that pillowing womb, dusk enough to light a page, bacterial smear of light, an amniotic gleam that I could taste, old, deep, wet and warm?” (36). This is the same uterine light that Billy alludes to when he is inside the antrum, itself a type
of womb. Light, curiously ambivalent, invisibly abstract and yet essential for the apprehension of bodies and physical forms. Billy imagines: “Follow with the eye” (36).

The light thus figured within the womb is good for one specific reason: “to light a page.” In the antrum, Billy constructs a small tent within his cubicle because it’s “calm” and “easy to concentrate” inside it (368); earlier, he mentions to Venable during an interview that he writes in the dark “using big letters” (297-8). Against the changes of his own nature, Billy reconstructs a womb within which he can find that amniotic gleam. Significantly, Softly refers to an “interval” when he addresses Billy inside of his womb-tent: “Chooses to listen to his circulating blood as it bears tender nutrients through his body? Decides he needs an interval of quiet breathing, right? Intends to invent the nonce word that renders death irrelevant” (369). Now, the interval relates to Billy’s present quest to crack the code (which turns out to be a statement of time, a measure of intervals). It also carries the spatial sense of “in between,” the liminal state of the womb to which Billy wants to return. “Return, return to negative unity” is how Billy concludes his fantasy of Myriad’s baby crawling back inside the womb; he wishes to do so himself, thinking that “There is something in the space between what I know and what I am and what fills this space is what I know there are no words for” (370). Here, the “what” that Billy cannot define is the “nonce word that renders death irrelevant”; it is the negative unity, the ideal and abstract space of being that will never die because it is never born, sought by Billy. Maurice Wu’s earlier statement, therefore, that “the birth of a baby equals the death of a fetus” (356), suggests an order of operations that Billy’s mathematical mind sees as a potentially reversible process. Mathematical abstraction is a defence against death.

LeClair correctly asserts that “with these flashbacks DeLillo both establishes the motives
for human abstraction from circumstance and foreshadows its extreme effects in ‘Reflections,’
where Billy and the other characters respond to fear with childish regression” (126), and indeed,
the second flashback of the story starts with the sentences “His mother often called him mommy.
It was a case of double imitation” (24). This regressive “double imitation,” mother and child
calling each other by the same name, is a type of negative unity, an imitation that reduces
difference in favour of absolute identity, an equation of $1 + 1 = 1$. The last page of the book
shows Billy, anonymized as merely “another figure” pedalling on a tricycle found in Endor’s
room, passing between a “measured length of darkness” and a “white area between the shadow
bands that precede total solar eclipse” (438). This area is described as an “interval of whiteness,
suggestive of the space between perfectly ruled lines”: an abstractly perfect yet spatio-temporal
interval in which Billy “emit[s] . . . this series of involuntary shrieks.” Myriad’s baby, once
again, that “odd-headed blob, this marginal electric glow-thing,” “this neon shrieker,” parallels
Billy pedalling back in time toward the “reproductive dust of existence” (437).
VI. On Logic, Logicon

Across DeLillo’s work is a fascination with names, how (as Venable ponders) they are “the animal badges we wear, given not only for practical necessity but to serve as a subscript to the inner person, a primitive index of the soul” (396). Not just a few of his novels, however, feature an antagonist whose very role, countering the fleshly humanity Venable imagines, is encapsulated in the name DeLillo gives it. An element of inhuman futurity, of cold and chemical sentience, invests these names with the dread present in the sounds and syllables themselves. 

_End Zone_ features Gary Harkness’s football team pitted against West Centrex Biotechnical, a game ending in catastrophe. Glen Selvy in _Running Dog_ works as a double agent for a company that eventually sends ex-ARVN rangers to “adjust” him. The company is called Radial Matrix. 

_White Noise_ presents Jack Gladney’s family utopia spiralling down a black hole of madness and death, and at the centre is a drug named Dylar.

Situated within this array, the slick futurity of the neologism “Logicon” does not seem out of place. While positioning Robert Hopper Softly as the novel’s major antagonist is difficult and perhaps unnecessary, his mention of “his naive delight on establishing a relationship between his name—the letters of the first, middle and last able to be correlated one-to-one-to-one—and the cardinal number six” (261) is enough to raise an eyebrow, especially considering that seven pages prior, during the final New York flashback episode, a message resembling a sign or an announcement appears out of context: “LET HIM WITH UNDERSTANDING RECKON THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST FOR IT IS A HUMAN NUMBER 666” (254). With the
denotational significance of Satan as “adversary,” Softly emerges in his nether-world antrum as a grotesque antagonist whose role is as ambivalent as the rest of his character. It is Softly, however, who not only spearheads the Logicon project as its main theoretician but who also steers the very purpose of Logicon from replying to the ARS extants to a more “pure” enterprise. Once Billy announces that he has deciphered the code, Softly informs him that “there is no code worth breaking” because “the only value the signals have is that they got us going on the Logicon project” (416). From Softly’s point of view, the code is merely one “part”: “that part was a preparation for this part. You needed the background, the activity, the other side of the problem” (416). Both for the received message and for the intended reply, Softly’s opinion, remarkably, is that “content is not the issue” (416). All that is necessary for him to know is that there is a message from “‘millions’ and ‘millions’ and ‘millions’ of years ago”; the bare form of this message is enough to warrant “a reply in a universal cosmic language,” although, like the received message, “it doesn’t matter what the reply is” (416).

The implications of Softly’s hijacking of the Logicon project as an end unto itself rather than a meaningful reply are wide-ranging and severe, worrying the fragile border between the plural languages of embodied humanity and the abstract monolith of logical universalism. Before that, though, exploring what Logicon actually is, as well as its originally intended use, will help clarify its role as antagonist in the novel and its role as antagonist of the novel, too—novelistic discourse, as such.

Near the end of the novel’s first part, Softly introduces Logicon to Billy as a necessary system with which to engage in extraterrestrial communication. At the outset, this necessity is linked with purity, a type of unstained perfection achieved through absolute dedication and
sacrifice. Because “we’re dealing with beings of extraordinary capacity,” nothing less than a “ruthlessly precise system of symbolic notation” is appropriate for communication (272). Logic is the key to achieving this precision; it is “the scrub brush the mathematician uses to keep his work free of impurity,” the tool to “eliminate contradiction and go beyond all those lax attitudes that make true scientists want to crumple up whimpering” (272-3). For Billy, this means that his “brilliant instinctive skimming,” or what Edna Lown describes as his “computation strain” with “not much sense of discrimination. Not much use for logic” (285) will get a “no” in response from Softly’s “Logik,” which “says yes or no to the forms constructed through intuition” (272).

As the New York episodes show, Billy’s style of intuitional thinking is intimately tied to the world. His method of abstracting “pure” mathematics from an impure world relies on the jolt, the stimulus, of this world and the way its events interact with him as a body and as a person. This is largely why “the goddam fun is over” for Billy when he descends into the antrum. The Logicon project requires life and all of its accidents to be stripped away in order to proceed. “The pain, the dread, the risk involved in being logical” is this process of stripping away, exactly what Softly believes “the boy had to overcome” (358). Logicon and the “Logik” that structures it operates through the binary of “yes or no,” “a or non-a” that Softly makes quite clear does not “permit” a knowledge of history, despite the fact that “History is full of interesting things” (287). The isolated echo-chamber of the antrum permits the team to “forget about history” in order to work (287). Billy asks twice if “the outside world know[s] about any of this?” (305), and Softly answers in the negative. The “outside world” is necessary neither before nor after the fact of Logicon’s creation, for in reasoning terms this outside world symbolizes an a posteriori rationale that Logicon disregards in favour of a pure a priori.
Tied to the concept of an *a priori* purity, therefore, is an ironic sense of *universality*. Because Logicon seeks to follow the “*a or non-*a” of rational logic, *because* it does not rely on terrestrial context or *a posteriori* meaning or reference, it is appropriate for extraterrestrial communication. Logicon is a “transgalactic language,” a “pure and perfect mathematical logic” which provides “a means of speaking to the universe” beyond the human sphere (274): a “universal logical language” (285). The irony of this universality is that, in “drain[ing] the system of meaning” (347) as Supreme Abstract Commander Chester Greylag Dent suggests, Logicon appears as a *nonsensical* language in its human context. Humans are left out of this universal loop. Two actual extracts of Logicon are presented (359, 378), and their apparent complexity belies the fact that they are literally (and by design) meaningless. They appear as codes far more difficult in design than the original code from the ARS extants and yet, apparently, these extracts are steps on the way to create a means for communication.

“Draining the system of meaning” is critical for Logicon to function, as Dent suggests and Edna Lown realizes. Soon after her character is introduced, she notes that “logic precedes mathematics. And since the fundamental elements of logic have no content, mathematics has no content. Form, it’s nothing but form. It stands on thin air. The symbols we use are everything” (285). “Content,” in Lown’s formulation here, is “impure” in the same sense as intuition, according to Softly. Content and the context that it entails—indeed, “con” as a prefix itself, “with-ness” or “together-ness”—must be eliminated. Logicon, having no content, is not a container for meaning: nothing but form entails that “the focus of our thought . . . is the notation itself” (285), a curious type of superficiality. Billy actually sees this superficiality as beautiful: the “nearly surreal cleanness of its ideology” shows “nothing unnecessary, nothing concealed” so
that “the mechanical drawing . . . is the machine” (359). In other words, there is no semantic context to the Logicon excerpt Billy analyzes. It points to nothing “outside,” refers to nothing but itself. No hermeneutics necessary, no interpretation, no ambiguity or multivalency. Like the monotheistic deity of the Old Testament, אֲדֹנָי אֲרֶץ אֶרֶץ אֲדֹנָי, it is what it is.

This self-referentiality of Logicon describes Lown, too, as she imagines, ouroboros-like, “entering herself just as surely as if she’d been able to bend her arms into her mouth and swallow them to the shoulders; arms, legs, torso” (329). Combined with purity of logic, purity of universality, and purity of form is an emerging “self-purity,” or purity of purpose. Apparently disregarding the project’s initial purpose, Lown “view[s] the Logicon project as an intellectual challenge and nothing more. An advance in the art of mathematical logic. A breakthrough in economy and rigor . . . She had no strong conviction that Logicon was essential to celestial communication” (318). This view is mirrored by Softly, for whom “the very uselessness of Logicon . . . is what makes the project a pure act of the intellect and therefore supremely enriching” (409). Softly explicitly states that the previous purpose of communication is to “miss the point” of the project: “To transmit an actual reply to the message senders would be to miss the point of the whole thing.” This statement marks yet another separation: address. Logicon is not designed to address anyone or anything; it is a pure enterprise, and any application of it is a mistake. (This progression of Logicon from application to purity ironically inverts Billy’s own research. The zorg, which pure mathematician Billy remarks is “useless” [417], is nevertheless used by Mainwaring to identify that Earth is located inside a mohole.) If the team truly wanted to communicate with space, using a rudimentary system of radio waves—like the message sent by the ARSE—would be more successful. Mathematician Hans A.
Freudenthal was thinking along these lines. In 1960 he published *Lincos: Design of a Language for Cosmic Intercourse*, in which he outlines a progressively complex language system that begins with “regular sequences of pulses” (Eco 308).

This purity of enterprise has a universalizing implication of its own. Not only is Logicon a “pure act of the intellect”; it is also meant as a revolutionary force to become the foundational groundwork for human knowledge. Softly says to Lown that the project is “a revolution in the making. All science, all language wait to be transformed by what we’re doing here” (284). Lown echoes this sentiment later, reflecting on “the transformation, in Softly’s phrase, of all science, all logic” (318). In their seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno assert that “on the road to modern science, men renounce any claim to meaning,” “substitut[ing] formula for concept, rule and probability for cause and motive” (5). The action of “draining the system of meaning” creates the intellectual attitude “for the Enlightenment” that makes “whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility . . . suspect” (6). But most important, in referencing “Leibniz’s *mathesis universalis*” and “Bacon’s postulate of *una scientia universalis*,” Horkheimer and Adorno trace the universalizing tendency of “formal logic”: “Formal logic was the major school of unified science. It provided the Enlightenment thinkers with the schema of the calculability of the world. The mythologizing of Ideas with numbers in Plato’s last writings expresses the longing of all demythologization: number became the canon of the Enlightenment” (7). With universality comes unification, and, as Horkheimer and Adorno mention, what does not “conform” to the imposed rules becomes suspect—and potentially nullified. The Logicon project presents itself as “neo-logistic,” carrying forward the legacy of the Enlightenment and its schematic for opposing logic to intuition, form to content,
purity to impurity.

Horkheimer and Adorno make no attempt to cushion the severity of their tone as they assert that “Enlightenment is totalitarian” (5)—totalitarian in its austerity and self-presentation, totalitarian in its commitment to the absolute without exception, and totalitarian in its fascination with control. Softly’s statements that “logic is the scrub brush the mathematician uses to keep his work free of impurity,” that Logicon demands a “ruthlessly precise system of symbolic notation,” quite readily pick up totalitarian overtones within this ideological context. Lester “Lester-pet” Bolin, called a “joker” by Lown (289), is the last important technician working on the Logicon project who has not yet been discussed. One of the quirkier characters within the antrum—in a meta-reference to *End Zone*, he suggests the team should wear Logicon jerseys (300)—Bolin and his innovations on the project are critical to a sharper understanding of what Logicon truly is, how its totalitarianism actually functions. First to be considered is Bolin’s desire to type Logicon on a portable Royal typewriter (314). Immediately, this contrasts the Logicon project with writing of a more conventional sort—a novel, perhaps. Logicon does, in fact, oppose both Venable’s journalistic project as well as her novel about Logicon. This opposition will be addressed later. For now, this is Bolin’s take on appropriate fonts for the project: “Bolin thought it might be interesting to match the logical symbolism of the characters on his typewriter with a highly distinctive metalogical notation—a sort of Nazi typeface (super-Hollywood-gothic) with broad counters and thick slurping serifs. It would set off a strict contrast, command attention, forcefully highlight the existence of logical rigor” (400).

Bolin reveals his genius with this joke (if that is what this is). The “strict contrast” he imagines is between the “broad counters and thick slurping serifs,” the bold and lush materiality
of such an extravagant typeface, and the abstract severity of “logical rigor.” Bolin is sharply aware of the oppositions that Logicon poses, and this is not the only instance of him emphasizing or parodying this very opposition. Aside from the contrast of materially-rich typeface and “logical rigor,” however, the “Nazi typeface” supports the totalitarian project of Logicon, preoccupied with its ruthless quest of perfection and purity. Complementing the totalitarian nature of Logicon is critic Douglas Keesey’s keen emphasis on the “business takeover” of FE#1 by Elux Troxl’s conglomerate ACRONYM, which he characterizes as “a barely disguised Nazi organization” that plans to use the intellectuals of the think-tank “as Hitler used Germany’s scientists during World War II” (79).

With this all-consuming quest in mind, Logicon appears in a clearer light, stripped of its innocence: it is nothing less than an inverted tower of Babel, digging down into the earth of the antrum rather than rearing itself into the sky (see Cowart 147). Baudrillard reads the Old Testament legend of the Bible in his characteristically trenchant way, linking the myth to the contemporary crisis of the “perfect crime,” defined by Baudrillard as the “murder of reality.” For Baudrillard, “we came very close to the perfect crime with the Tower of Babel” (90). Continuing his strong reading against the grain, he sees God’s intervention as fortunate, for even though “God stepped in to scatter the languages of the world and sow confusion among men,” “from the point of view of language itself, the richness and uniqueness of language, it is a blessing from heaven.” The beauty that Baudrillard sees in language comes from the basic fact that languages “are incomparable, irreducible one to another. It is by this distinctness that they exert their particular seductions, by this otherness that they are profoundly complicit.” Baudrillard sees the very project of a “reconciliation” of language absurd, writing that “they
could be [reconciled] if they were—merely—different. But languages are not different, they are other.” If this reconciliation were to happen, if it were forced into being by stamping out the inherent alterity of human languages, what would result is “the true curse”: “when we are condemned to the universal programming of language.” Throughout his essay on “The Babel Syndrome,” Baudrillard continues to employ metaphors from the emerging digital world (“virus,” for example), and this is no accident. This borrowing from digital computing points forward to the increasing reliance on technology and the potential hazards of that reliance and hearkens back to the dreams of such computational power.

Leibniz was such a dreamer. The history of Leibniz’s *characteristica universalis*, from the derivations of “primitive thoughts” to a “cogitatio caeca,” or “blind thought” of combinatorial calculus, is complex, but one brief example from Umberto Eco’s research demonstrates both the lineage that Logicon continues and what the Bakhtinians so vehemently resisted (279). In 1703, receiving a description of the *I Ching* and its 64 hexagrams in correspondence from a missionary to China, Leibniz “void[ed] the Chinese symbols of whatever meaning was assigned to them by previous interpretations, in order to consider their form and their combinational possibilities” (286). These symbols were opportunities for Leibniz to exercise his binary calculus; for him, “syntax . . . was more important than semantics” (284) because “blind thought manipulates signs without being obliged to recognize the corresponding ideas” (281). Rather humorously, such an approach to the hexagrams is the only way not to interpret their overdetermined, polysemous forms. Nevertheless, Leibniz’s draining this system of meaning “anticipate[d] by a century and a half Boole’s mathematical logic”: a critical step in creating “the true and native tongue spoken by a computer” (286).
“Bakhtin imagined himself as offering an alternative to the view that knowledge in the humanities must be modeled on the hard sciences and that culture, language, and the mind could ultimately be described as systems,” Morson and Emerson write in their study on Bakhtin (101). Indeed, Bakhtin actively resisted systems and systemizing thought throughout his long career. Morson and Emerson acknowledge this as a fundamental concern of Bakhtin, noting that he “used a variety of terms for the mistaken attachment to systems. His earliest term for this error was *theoretism*; later, he tended to call it *monologism*” (28). Morson and Emerson add their own “covering term” for this mistake: “*semiotic totalitarianism*, the assumption that everything has a meaning relating to the seamless whole, a meaning one could discover if one only had the code.” Logicon is the system to end all systems, an end zone of meaning, a point-omega of abstraction from the human plane, and as such it represents the many sites of combat in which Bakhtin struggled to preserve a sense of human creativity and freedom. These sites are just as present in *Ratner’s Star*, and the very existence of the oncoming Logicon project threatens to nullify their presentation as such in the narrative they occupy—in addition to the possibility of their representation in the form of novelistic discourse.

Early in his career Bakhtin wrote against the rise and subsequent prevalence of Saussurean linguistics. For Bakhtin, semiotics is always found wanting because it separates—one might say “purifies”—*langue* from *parole*, prioritizing *langue* by claiming that utterances of *parole* are mere instantiations of a system. Bakhtin contends with this model, distinguishing semiotics from “live speech”: where “Semiotics deals primarily with the transmission of ready-made communication using a ready-made code,” “live speech,” surrounded by the multiple contexts of its utterance, “is first created in the process of transmission, and there is, in essence,
no code” (N70-71 147). It is this “process of transmission” where there is no code that Bakhtin focuses on throughout his career and what he contends linguistics leaves out. Because linguistics as a discipline is “something arrived at through a completely legitimate and necessary abstraction from various aspects of the concrete life of the word” (PDP 182), Bakhtin acknowledges this abstraction but returns to dwell within the “concrete life of the word,” the contexts, usages, shapings and re-shapings of the utterance. “Metalinguistics” is the name of this return to the material-context “life of the word”; it is the study of the word “not yet shaped into separate and specific disciplines, that exceed—and completely legitimately—the boundaries of linguistics.” What linguistics abstracts from “live speech” are “dialogic relationships (including the dialogic relationships of a speaker to his own discourse)” (PDP 183), and it is this aspect that Bakhtin dedicates himself to exploring.

Valentin Voloshinov, an esteemed member of Bakhtin’s circle, sharpens the critique against linguistics in his work Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. Voloshinov agrees that linguistics abstracts langue from parole to prioritize langue, but he emphasizes that linguists enforce a further isolation of self-referentiality. “What interests the mathematically minded rationalists,” Voloshinov writes, “is not the relationship of the sign to the actual reality it reflects nor to the individual who is its originator, but the relationship of sign to sign within a closed system already accepted and authorized” (29). This closed system facilitates an understanding of “the inner logic of the system of signs itself, taken, as in algebra, completely independently of the ideological meanings that give the signs their content.” Language thus assumes “conventionality,” “arbitrariness,” a type of variability that makes a comparison to algebra legitimate. Staying true to Bakhtin, Voloshinov proclaims that this equivalency of language and
mathematics is a mistake: “the fact is that the mathematical sign is least amenable to interpretation as an expression of the individual psyche—and it is the mathematical sign, after all, that the rationalists hold to be the ideal of any sign, including the verbal sign.” Voloshinov holds up Leibniz’s “idea of universal grammar” as the exemplar of this mistaken process.

Like Bakhtin, Voloshinov stresses that the very system of linguistics cancels the creativity inherent in every utterance, no matter how banal. “What is important for the speaker about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal”—i.e., that parole finds a mirror in langue—“but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign” (33). In order to find “the starting point of linguistic thought,” linguistics must essentially close an ongoing dialogism, forcing an utterance to resemble an “isolated, finished, monologic utterance, divorced from its verbal and actual context and standing open not to any possible sort of active response but to passive understanding on the part of a philologist” (35). The philologist (or linguist) must, in sum, murder to dissect; if the word is alive, it will squirm on the operating table; if it is material, it will offer too much resistance to the fine tools of the abstract. Either way, linguistics aims at direct equivalency, a mathematical precision.

Through this Bakhtinian lens, an earlier scene in part one of Ratner’s Star presents a situation directly opposed to Logicon’s extreme reductionist abstraction. Billy meets the one and only Cheops Feeley—he of the Cheops Feeley medal—and has the rare chance to get a Leduc electrode planted underneath his scalp. Feeley explains that this implant “will result in an overpowering sense of sequence. You’ll be aware of the arrangement of things. The order of succession of events. The way one thing leads to another” (244). Feeley proceeds to give an example to illustrate his point:
Eating a sandwich will no longer be the smooth operation you’ve always known it to be. You’ll experience, should you agree to host the electrode, a strong awareness of your hands, your mouth, your throat, your stomach, whatever’s between the slices of bread, the bread itself. You might even find yourself in retrograde orbit, so to speak. Bread, bakery truck, bakery, flour, wheat and so on. There is so much involved. Our lives are so dense. The baker’s hands, the farmer, his barn, the paint job, the latex, the trees . . . You’ll be involved in a very detailed treatment of reality . . . You’ll be establishing fresh paths of awareness. Taking nothing for granted. Dealing with unlimited data. Every breath you take will be subjected to a thorough sequential analysis. Heart, lungs, nostrils, oxygen, carbon dioxide and so forth. There is so much involved and it’s all right there for the asking. (245)

Feeley offers this electrode specifically to Billy—“you with your enormous powers of abstraction” (244). The electrode stimulates appreciation of the world’s material composition, and indeed, to an extreme degree. One point of the electrode is that although it stimulates this appreciation of the world’s “density,” that density is always already there; there is always “so much involved,” but humans continually take this for granted—a habit the electrode aims to rectify. There is always “unlimited data,” but the human being, trying to live an unburdened life, abstracts consciousness from this material array and therefore neglects the “sequence of things.” Critically for Feeley (note the pun on a material nature, a “touchy-feely-ness”), the sequence of things involves the merging of various contexts. “Eating a sandwich” involves the digestive system—itself an assemblage of internal organs—in addition to the hands conveying food to the mouth, that entry point of swallowing the world. The sandwich itself is a heterogeneous
assemblage composed of various parts. Feeley focuses on the bread, breaking down its composition to the point of reaching “retrograde orbit” whereupon the “baker’s hands” come into play, creating a parallel between the hands holding the sandwich. The contexts of the delivery truck, the bakery, and the farm surround the item of sliced bread and are never not present in the material item itself. Most importantly, Feeley maintains the material/physical aspect of these contexts but presents them through the viewpoints of others: the hands that bake the bread are “the baker’s hands,” belonging to someone; the barn belonging to the farmer is “his barn,” and the paint job, the latex, and the trees are all part of the context as the farmer himself would see it. His contexts are embodied viewpoints.

Implanting this electrode is tantamount to viewing the world a la Bakhtin, albeit to an absurdly parodistic degree. All the same, this scene yields a metacritical reading of the critic’s role in following the “life of the word.” The utterance to Bakhtin is a sandwich, composed of familiar parts like bread and vegetables. Never must the critic assume that each sandwich is exactly the same as the one following or preceding it. Each sandwich, while perhaps similar in form and structure, is by necessity a new iteration on the sandwich and irreducible to mere “sandwichness.” Likewise, the critic must follow the ingredients from their past sources of production as well as, like Feeley describes, follow these foodstuffs to their future destination—the digestive system (i.e., the recipient). The word has a “life” because it is formulated, sent, and received by living people—rather like a sandwich, whose ingredients were once alive (to varying degrees) and whose nutrition serves to further life. For Bakhtin, “actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems: within these various systems
(identical in the abstract) are elements of language filled with various semantic and axiological content and each with its own different sound” (*DiN* 288). Among these irreducible multitudes, “there may be, between ‘languages,’ highly specific dialogue relations; no matter how these languages are conceived, they may all be taken as particular points of view on the world” (*DiN* 293). Following on this point that languages are particular points of view on the world, Bakhtin introduces alterity, as Baudrillard also does. “As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing,” Bakhtin writes, “language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (*DiN* 293).

This heterogeneity, this alterity, is cancelled by Logicon. As Osteen briefly suggests (84), Logicon denies Bakhtin’s assertion that “as a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in language”—stratification meaning the process of running language along lines of various professions, genres, tendencies, etc.—“there are no ‘neutral’ words and forms—words and forms that can belong to ‘no one’; language has been shot through with intentions and accents.” By its very attempt to act as *the* one, Logicon *is* this “no one.” If “language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions,” if “it is populated—over populated—with the intentions of others” (*DiN* 294), Logicon seeks to completely neutralize the process of language, removing the interplay of the intentions of others with the speaker’s intentions, for after all, Logicon *has* no intentions and is *not* a speaker. As discussed above, the Logicon project quickly subverts its primary purpose of communication to become a self-enclosed and pure enterprise, a revolutionary model that, by
being the one, addresses no (other) one.

Lester Bolin, that jokester, highlights this aspect of Logicon by paroding it. A latter-day Frankenstein, “Lester’s been working on an experimental thing. He believes he can get it to speak Logicon” (289). Described by Lester himself as a “thing” (374), he adds to the frame housing the physical “computer-driven control system,” as “a sort of joke,” a “box-shaped ‘head’ and cylindrical ‘torso’” (340). Later in the novel the details are revealed that “he’d long considered the possibility of using lipstick or paint or crayon to make formal markings on the ‘head’ and ‘torso.’ Abstract ritualistic figures. Proto-geometry of some kind” (400). This is the “old-fashioned ingenuity” that Bolin admires most in his own work (374, 400): giving the non-human Logicon a human form sharpens the emphasis that Logicon’s language is not only nonhuman but anti-human. The “primitive android” of/for Logicon that Bolin creates masquerades as a human who, like any other language-manipulating being, is capable of receiving, interpreting, and sending information in dialogue with other speaking beings (426). This anthropomorphized shell mocks Bakhtin’s assertion that “prior to this moment of appropriation,” i.e. making language “one’s own” through intention, “the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own” (DiN 294). Logicon appropriates this appropriation. In its own painted-on mouth lies the single most severe of “neutral and impersonal” languages that, ahistorical, anti-contextual and non-perspectival, threatens in its revolutionary capacity to take the language out of other people’s mouths, neutralizing it and making it “one’s own.” The ultimate centripetal force, Logicon as a
system undercuts (and is therefore scarier than) a dictionary because its existence is at odds with heteroglossic reality. Its systemizing prioritization of logic, universal in scope, aims to flatten all context to a flat and monological plane. Like Dylar, Logicon is “technology with a human face” (WN 211), an invention that transcends humanity by destroying it.

Extending the joke further, Bolin envisions Logicon “in such a way that it would operate only upon insertion of a coin” (340). This parodies the severity and seriousness of Logicon, its grave import, turning the device into a carnival amusement; Bolin’s asking to see Venable’s “fuzzy-wuzzy,” however, coupled with his action of “revealing his genitals” to her as “a form of dreamy speech” (400), adds connotations of prostitution to the coin-slot. In “The Babel Syndrome,” Baudrillard connects “the universal language” with “the true Babylon, where all languages are confounded and prostituted one to another,” causing “a veritable pimping on the part of communication which is the opposite of the magic illusion of otherness” (90-1). The seduction and interplay of languages in the plural is reduced to pay-on-demand functionality, a mathematical equivalency that Voloshoniv decries. The monetization of language is the prostitution of language. What’s more, the place where the coin is “inserted” is “Logicon’s ‘navel’” (426). Bolin’s choice of this area for the coin-slot parodies even further the mock-humanity of Logicon, drawing attention to but emphasizing the lack of an umbilical cord. In addition, this location of the coin-slot symbolizes omphaloskepsis, navel-gazing, the self-referential absorption that forms the core of Logicon’s modus operandi. That the “primitive android” of Logicon has a navel is further evidence of its centripetal and centralizing influence.

Finally, Bolin also aims to get Logicon to speak even though Lown “says it’s inherently unspeakable” (374). First to note is that the “computer-driven control system,” that is, the
physical machinery of Logicon, is “known, like the language itself, as Logicon” (340). This means that for Logicon to speak, it must speak itself: the hardware is self-identical with the language, creating the tightest and most complete of referential loops. Though hard to say exactly what the benefit of getting Logicon to speak is, apparently Bolin does succeed. The text provides one example of the process of moving from “an array of symbols” to “the meaning . . . of each array” and finally to “the corresponding phonetic speech units (Logicon) that the squat object would emit”: “/ : nK” corresponded to the statement “the function letter f contains n number of f-less transforms’ and both of these corresponded to the sound ‘fu ling ho’” (426). “Fu ling ho,” as humorous as it sounds in the context of its utterance, resembles Chinese and recalls Billy’s reaction to written Logicon giving him “a sense of what he instinctively regarded as ‘extreme Chinese formalism’” (359). Chinese has been a universal language in East Asia for centuries, used as a common tongue (especially for scholarship) throughout disparate countries. Also, as Eco notes, Leibniz had “a continuing interest in the language and culture of China” (284), and the fixation that Ratner’s Star has on all things Chinese reflects this interest.

The fundamental irony, therefore, of a universal language is that the process of universalization leaves no one with whom communication is possible. The universalization necessary for the creation of a universal language eliminates difference. Morson and Emerson emphasize that Bakhtin’s contention with systems and systems-thinking is precisely this point: “the problem with systems, Bakhtin implies, is not only their inaccuracy, artificiality, and predictability (nonsystem can exhibit those traits too); the problem with system is that it does not necessarily contain any human beings. Without concrete individual instances there is no obligation, because only the particular can obligate us” (70). The difference entailed within and
between individual human beings, each “concrete individual instance” which is irreducible to any other, disappears when faced with a system that promises universal communication. In this sense (and couched within another layer of irony), Logicon is a utopian project, promising a renaissance of unified exchange among humans as well as other forms of life; the only caveat is this utopia occurs nowhere, an ou (not) topos (place), factoring out time and space. In contrast, “novels are radically anti-utopian,” Morson and Emerson explain, “because they presuppose the impossibility of a single language of truth and imagine social discourse as an unfinalizable discovery of new and unforeseeable truths” (323). The novel is the champion of Bakhtin’s dedication toward unceasing interaction between grounded and material viewpoints. Realized dialogically, the novel also presents dialogical interaction and encounters, and indeed, this is what the novel does best. Using a term that has particular relevance to Ratner’s Star, Bakhtin theorizes that “the writer of prose . . . often measures his own world by alien linguistic standards” (DiN 287); this measuring is consequent to “a deeply involved participation in alien cultures and languages (one is impossible without the other) [which] leads to an awareness of the disassociation between language and intentions, language and thought, language and expressions” (DiN 369). Without the encounter with the alien, abstaining from alien linguistic standards, language is centralized in a “naive absence of conflict” (DiN 368), absolutely bonded (“associated”) with ultimate and monologizing ideology.

Accordingly, Logicon threatens the very genre of Ratner’s Star and the novel as such. If one target of this novel’s satire is the hubris of a runaway scientific methodology, this same methodology internally threatens the genre and artistic medium that house it. After Ratner’s Star, DeLillo extends this compositional technique in Players but most explicitly—and to
greatest effect—in *Mao II*. *Players* introduces terrorism as a major concern in DeLillo’s work but *Mao II* pits terrorism as a competitive force threatening to displace the role and mission of the novelist. The genius of *Mao II* is that it does not so much comment upon but rather presents this competitive struggle *as such* within the threatened artistic medium at DeLillo’s disposal. As an inverse example to illustrate this point: imagine a violent terrorist who, displaced by the rise and importance of literary art (!), decides the pen is mightier than the sword and that his aims would be better achieved by writing a novel.

Not merely monological but *monologizing*, *Logicon* actively works against many of the characteristics of Menippean satire outlined by Bakhtin, in addition to the genre’s reliance on and absorption of the carnivalesque. “In the monologic world,” Bakhtin writes, “*tertium non datur*: a thought is either affirmed or repudiated; otherwise it simply ceases to be a fully valid thought” (*PDP* 80). Yes or no, *a* or *non-a*. Of all the character’s in *Ratner’s Star*, it is Jean Sweet Venable who most fully realizes that “In an environment of philosophical monologism the genuine interaction of consciousnesses is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well” (*PDP* 81); her character is a stand-in for DeLillo himself, the novelist at the cross-roads between the continuation and extermination of his art. Beyond merely Menippean satire, *Logicon* forces the novel itself on the chopping-block, and Venable is DeLillo’s satirical meta-exploration of this conflict.

Venable’s presentation in *Ratner’s Star* begins with her as a journalist and, more interestingly, as a reader. Convinced that “once she’d been a character in a novel” despite “such essential differences” between herself and this character (310), Venable muses on the “kingship of printed fiction,” “its arbitrary power” (311). The knowledge of the author, that “son of a
“bitch,” is seen by Venable as a means of control and of finalization of her character. What Venable’s seemingly vain quest emphasizes, though, in this second part surtitled “Reflections,” is that “printed fiction” is a reflective surface. Even though there is little convincing evidence that she has been a character in a novel, fiction nonetheless allows her to see herself. It is no coincidence that “the first word she’d ever spoken . . . was pupilla, which has the roundabout charm of meaning ‘little orphan girl’ while it refers to the pupil of the eye, a connection based on the fact that when a child looks at her own miniature reflection in another person’s eye, she sees a female figure locked inside concentric rings” (398): Venable asks herself “What do I expect to find mingled with my own reflection in the center of that frigid iris?” and as a reader of the novel, she sees herself in the center of the author’s eye.

Of course, the Venable who sees herself as a character in a novel is a character in DeLillo’s novel. DeLillo exploits the “arbitrary power” of printed fiction when he connects the reflection Venable sees in the novel she reads with another reflection of Venable in Ratner’s Star: “The only thing, superficial or otherwise, [the author had] used as perceived” is Venable’s “emblematic birthmark on the buttock”—“This and her inclination to predict” (310). Skia Mantikos, whose name, “the shadow prophet,” indicates predictive power (423), has “birthmarked on her right buttock . . . a star-shaped geometric figure” (428). Even more so, Venable as a girl is “a thing that whirls” (398), which is what Mantikos does. Is the novel that Venable reads the novel including Skia Mantikos? Is the reflective doubling—the shadowing—the eclipsing—of Venable a coincidence, or evidence of deeper design? Because the act of reflection occurs within the one level of narrative—Venable reading herself into a novel—and the other—Mantikos reflecting Venable in Ratner’s Star—these two levels of narrative reflect
themselves, making what Douglas R. Hofstadter calls a “strange loop” and therefore making it impossible to cleanly distinguish the two. This bizarre moment of doubling reinforces the kingship of fiction being arbitrary. Fiction does, as Venable says, have a “capacity to gain possession of a person or thing by ineradicable prior right” (311), but that possession comes through the “distressingly strange” (310), “painfully strange” process of “searching the pages for signs of . . . persona” (311). Fiction reflects but imperfectly so. Fiction is the excluded middle, neither a nor non-a. Because Venable writes herself in as a reader, the “surfaces, guise and conscious intentions” she sees in the novel are at least partially her own, and her conception of being entrapped by the novel is a result of her own dialogical interaction with a text that apparently has little if anything to do with her (311).

But Venable’s role as a vehicle for meta-commentary does not end there. In fact, *Libra* reprises Venable’s position as a writer caught between fact and fiction in the character of CIA historian Nicholas Branch, a character who in DeLillo’s words “feels overwhelmed by the massive data he has to deal with” and thus “feels the path is changing as he writes” (DeCurtis 56). As Branch stands in for novelist DeLillo in *Libra*, so Venable is his proxy in *Ratner’s Star*; DeLillo admits as much, saying that “*Libra* is, in a curious way, related to *Ratner’s Star*, because it attempts to provide a hint of order in the midst of all the randomness” (DeCurtis 56). Her decision to write fiction about the Logicon project follows her “plan to make strict rules . . . . Reading my book will be a game with specific rules that have to be learned . . . . Just like mathematics, excuse the comparison” (352). This plan mirrors DeLillo’s comment made in an interview with LeClair: “I was trying to produce a book that would be naked structure. The structure would be the book and vice versa . . . . Abstract structures and connective patterns. A
piece of mathematics, in short” (11). In this interview DeLillo recognizes the “risk” of a “book that is really all outline,” a book that “reduce[s] the importance of people” to a “role subservient to pattern, form, and so on,” and this risk seems both transferred to Venable’s project on the Logicon project and transformed into the fear she associates with it.

For, invariably, Venable has the tougher job ahead of her. Her novel becomes “complete when the pages were complete, hundreds of them, blank nearly every one, easy to imagine with certain kinds of words on them”; the pages are merely numbered in sequence, no other writing on them, because “it was not necessary to think of these words and set them down on these pages” (398). “She knew what they would look like with words on them.” Part of this preposterous situation derives from Venable’s character. She is a “pretender” in the Bakhtinian sense, the type of people “living, in effect, as if they were characters in a novel” instead of taking responsibility for the minutiae of one’s daily actions (Morson 181). While writing “Eminent Stammerers,” Venable imagines herself as a Modern Library Giant (397). Pretender or not, however, Venable is ironically successful, for in writing a completely blank novel for which “setting down words” is not necessary, she accurately reflects the anti-content, anti-contextual, monologizing Logicon. This type of restrictive bondage experienced by a writer tasked with tackling Logicon is literalized by Skia Mantikos, Venable’s shadow-double. Her lips are sewn shut.

As a crowning touch, DeLillo borrows from the ending of Voltaire’s “philosophical story” Micromégas in this scene of Venable’s bizarrely ambivalent literary triumph. Micromégas is an exemplar of Menippean satire and one of the first identifiable science-fiction stories in existence. The degree to which DeLillo plunders this story merits a fuller examination
of its links with Ratner’s Star than is possible here. The story ends with Micromegas, a giant from Sirius, making a promise to the Earthlings with whom he makes contact:

He promised to prepare a fine book of philosophy for them, written very small so that they could read it; and that in this book they would see the explanation of everything. To be sure, he did give them this volume before his departure. They took it to Paris, to the Academy of Sciences. But when the secretary opened it, he saw only a book with blank pages. “Ah!” he said, “I thought as much.” (43)

Similarly with Venable’s novel about Logicon, Micromegas’s “fine book” intends a universal scope, “the explanation of everything.” Yet this universal scope is an impossible subject for a book to contain. Ironically, a blank book, like an empty glass, is a vessel with the potential to be filled with “everything.” This potential, this “knowing what the words would look like on the page,” is not quite the same thing as having words on the page, although, parallel to Venable’s blank book, the “explanation of everything” is a topic writable by no one, belonging to no one and situated nowhere. Indeed, the story Micromégas, told from the point of view of the Sirian, makes human civilization strange and other (humans are “animalcules” to the giant) and stresses the perspectival relativity of knowledge itself—a “Galilean consciousness”—making an “explanation of everything” impossible yet no less desirable. The paradox is that an explanation of everything requires a universal language, but this universal language eclipses individual perspectives refracting through the plurality of languages.
VII. Howls of Awe, Cries of Wonder

The “system interbreak” of the novel, crucially timed in synchronization with the eclipse, is a remarkably lyrical meditation on the relationship between perspective and knowledge, the “explanation of everything.” Esoteric in tone, mystical in intent, and checking off characteristic seven of Bakhtin’s *menippea*, “observation from some unusual point of view, from on high, for example” (*PDP* 116), this passage shockingly posits a “hypothetical ARS extant” as “you,” one who has “the benefit of an omnidirectional viewpoint and are able to observe” the immense panoramic activity (building upon the grit of the New York episodes) of the eclipse moving across the Indian subcontinent (430). This viewpoint, able to “perceive completely” (431), resembles a reincarnation, a return back to the intelligible realm “from the Outside . . . [which] is the equivalent of entering once more your outgrown frame of logic and language.” Although this ARS extant has “solve[d] reality,” perceiving it “now as a micron flash of light-scattering matter in a structure otherwise composed of purely mathematical coordinates,” the second-person “you” lights upon the most minute of “real world” events and details of lives during the suspended reality of an eclipse. If “mathematics is what the world is when we subtract our own perceptions,” this world is achieved through an ascetic transcendence of “the will to live” to ultimately find that mathematics “contain[s] a painless ‘nonexistence,’ the theoretical ideal of *n*-space” (432).

In this passage, mathematical science and transcendental mysticism unequivocally unite. One being who falls within the ARS extant’s gaze is a “bony old man . . . in his scrambled
loincloth,” his “mud body oblivious to the vast ashen inevitability of all things that pertain to his particular snag of earth” (433). This man chants “sannyasa . . . sannyasa,” renunciation, which is the fourth and final ashrama (stage) of Hinduism (OED). The passage carefully emphasizes the particular snag of terrestrial earth to stress the man’s renunciation of it, his method of egress from the particular itself. Both mathematics and spiritual asceticism are methodologies to bypass the shifting illusoriness of maya, the perceptual world, and the eternal cycle of birth and death, samsara. In the realm of the pure, “to be Outside”—the unnamed narrator of the “system interbreak” continues—“is to know an environment infinitely less complex than the one you left [the material world]” (432). There is no perspective in this “Outside” because the individual as such has been shed, leaving a simpler mode of being compared to the material messiness, the untold accidents, of the physical world.

The unnamed narrator, posed in the first-person plural, ends the “system interbreak” with a creed-like tone, even bordering on that of a manifesto. “You see our rapt entanglement in all around us,” the narrator says, addressing the ARS extant, “the press to measure and delve” (maya derives from the Sanskrit mā, meaning “to measure”):

There, see, in annotated ivory tools, lengths of notched wood, in the wave-guide manipulation of light and our nosings into the choreography of protons, we implicate ourselves in endless uncertainty. This is the ethic you’ve rejected. Inside our desolation, however, you come upon the reinforcing grid of works and minds that extend themselves against whatever lonely spaces account for our hollow moods, the woe incoming. Why are you here? To unsnarl us from our delimiting senses? To offer protective cladding against our cruelty and fear? The pain, the life-cry speak our most
candid wonders. To outpremise these, by whatever tektite whirl you’ve mastered, would be to make us hypothetical, a creature of our own pretending, as are you. (433)

Destruction, disintegration, and death rush to the foreground during this brief “system interbreak” interlude. Interrogating this ARS extant, engaging it in dialogue, this unnamed “we” narrator denies that the ARS extant’s rejection of the world places it in the role of saviour, one who can “unsnarl,” “offer protective cladding.” Even among the “trophy bones of epic death” and rampant disease (433), immersed in the swirl of intense perception and experience, rapt in the dance of life and its ultimate end, the unnamed “we” makes a point of preferring the “richness of inborn limits” that material existence entails (432). The Second Coming boomerang-arc of the ARSE is refused. Palm down, the real overcomes the ideal.

And, faced by the reality of the oncoming eclipse, the Logicon project crumbles. Bolin asks “Is science dead?” (421), and for Softly the answer is yes. Failing to convince himself that “an unforeseen eclipse is no more startling, logically, than an eclipse predicted decades or centuries earlier” (435), Softly experiences “a deeper than logical fear that drove him into flight”: “Fear (perhaps) of eclipse per se.” The eclipse eclipses his Babel aspirations, and his “deeper than logical fear” sends him to the depths of Endor’s hole’s hole where he encounters a “large and slyly constructed object”—the body of Endor himself, whom the narrative dehumanizes and anonymizes to an extent that DeLillo will replicate in his disposal of Bill Gray in Mao II. The “human object” (438) is “covered . . . by whole cities of vermiculate life” (437). In true grotesque fashion, the end of Endor regenerates into new beginnings. The body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world. Once preying on “furry little items fresh from the earth” (85), Endor becomes food for the life of the earth, completing the cycle and inverting
the hierarchy of eater and eaten. Death is birth as birth is death (recalling Billy’s visions of childbirth). This ambivalency runs deeply in the image of Endor. Neither Softly nor the narrative voice lingers on a mournful tone because Endor’s body fits into the comic reversal that concludes the novel.

Narrative focus leaves Softly as he “crawled, knowing, he scratched at dirt, he clawed the hard earth, everywhere, feeling it, a sense of interlocking opposites, the paradox, the comedy, the fool’s total radiance” (438). The eclipse obscures the sun but (paradoxically, comically) illuminates Softly’s status as the prime fool of the novel, above Buber, Endor, and all the others. In *White Noise*, Sister Hermann Marie tells Jack Gladney that “there is no truth without fools” (319), and the supreme foolishness of Softly and his Logicon project works to set the truth of *Ratner’s Star* in starker relief: the zorgasm. The “sense of interlocking opposites, the paradox, the comedy” that Softly (and Billy) feels is the zorgasm, another neologism coined by DeLillo. Critic Joseph Dewey rightly identifies the word as “entwining mind and body, the abstract mathematical symbol (the zorg) with the rinsing (and sweetly terrifying) vulnerability of the orgasm” (48), but the term also denotes the beautiful purity of the zorg combining with the applicational design of the orgasm as intended for procreation. A zorgasm encapsulates what DeLillo says of the structure of his book, that “there’s a strong demarcation between the parts. They are opposites. Positive, negative. Discrete, continuous. Day, night . . . . But they also link together” (LeClair “Interview” 12). The zorgasm is the alien becoming the self and the self becoming alien, that “we’ve reconstructed the ARS extant and it turns out to be us” (405). It is the meeting point between the *y*-axis of Plato’s abstract Forms and the material bound to the *x*-axis of Aristotle.
Looking at Bolin’s feet, Edna Lown remarks that “Lester’s shoes were scuffed and battered and she could see them pressing into the earth, which was his way of thinking and working, a concentration downward” (318). Bolin’s process of abstraction relies on the material substratum from which to leap upward. Learning that the ARS extants are terrestrial, Lown, “looking [down] into the dirt between her feet,” thinks “Everything . . . . Everything is here” (405). For the narrative “we” of the “system interbreak,” and for Lown, too, earth is enough. The invention of the extraterrestrial merely disguises the immense plurality of the alien, in all sense of that word, on and within terra firma. Faced with the death of science, their abstracting hubris humbled, the characters of Ratner’s Star are brought to their knees, significantly re-grounded, in their realizations of the carnivalesque nature of the human universe. Softly’s sounds made while digging, the ones that “became by degrees more rudimentary and crude,” as well as Billy’s “noise resembling laughter,” his “expressing vocally what appeared to be a compelling emotion,” are both signs of devolution, of absolute carnivalesque debasing, but they are also instances of the “life-cry” that the narrative “we” says “speak our most candid wonders.” They are commitments to the earth and to the death that makes that earth terrifying and rejuvenative.

DeLillo ends his latest novel, Zero K, with another life-cry from a small boy. The boy’s “urgent cries were suited to the occasion” (273-4); they were “unceasing and also exhilarating, they were prelinguistic grunts,” “howls of awe . . . far more suitable than words” and “cries of wonder” (274)—rudimentary and crude, like Softly and Billy’s noises. Though not in reaction to a “noncognate celestial event,” this boy is moved by a celestial “event” whose name the narrator, Jeff Lockhart, can not remember but describes in language soaked with death: “the day’s dying
light” (273) comes from a “full solar disk, bleeding into the streets” of Manhattan (274). (Where else?) In Zero K, too, the sun occasions an apocalyptic revery as Lockhart imagines this is the way of the boy “own[ing] the end of the world”—referring to the first sentence of the novel to create a narrative loop, thereby mirroring the palindromic structure of Ratner’s Star—but Jeff comes to a better conclusion. The boy “was not seeing the sky collapse upon us but was finding the purest astonishment in the intimate touch of earth and sun,” in all the contact this intimacy entails. Zorgasm. Faced with a choice of conceiving death as absolute terminus, on one hand, and technology’s abstracting and organ-harvesting promise of immortality on the other, Jeff chooses neither, neither $a$ nor non-$a$. He chooses life.
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