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Technology and Faith in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Toward the end of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Jack and Murray go for an extended walk during which they discuss strategies for 'getting around death'.¹ Jack, professor of 'Hitler Studies,' is terrified of death; Murray, professor of Popular Culture, speaks confidently about the answers and alternatives to Jack's fear. Murray outlines three mechanisms for coping with the fact of human death: faith in technology, faith in the afterlife, and murder. The first two are evasive, easily conflated, and involve placing the responsibility for death beyond oneself, in something over which one has no control. The third involves taking life and death into one's own hands, undermining both fate and chance through the sheer force of human will. In all three cases, the helplessness of the human when confronted with vulnerability and death is overcome, however artificially. How, then, is the reader to understand the meaning of technology when taken in the context of this conversation about the human relation to death? How does the concept of technology take shape when juxtaposed with religion, on the one hand, and murder on the other, as a mechanism for seizing control over one's relation to death? Murray discusses technology as a potential mechanism for enabling life, for escape from the paralysis that results from recognition of death. Nevertheless, in Jack's experiences throughout the novel, technology continually fails in this function, leaving him feeling alienated from his

¹ See pp. 272-280.

own death as opposed to free of responsibility for it. Jack is unsettled by intimations of a genuine plane of human experience, of an emotional reality that is inadequately covered up and ultimately threatened by the technological world through which he paradoxically seeks escape. He yearns to believe in technology, but cannot help but identify it, on some level, with inauthenticity and false hope, with what he refers to as “the daily seeping falsehearted death.”²

The similarities between religion and modern technology, as mechanisms for ‘getting around death,’ are not difficult to see. We trust experts where we once trusted priests; in the place of God we have expertly-designed machines. In an age where religious belief is decreasingly plausible, where can one turn but to ‘technology,’ to that which is man-made but outside of the individual’s control, for comfort in the face of mortality? As DeLillo’s characters demonstrate, the desire, the need, to believe in the infallibility and completeness of technology can be all consuming. The hope that the miracle drug Dylar – proclaimed by the elusive scientific expert Winne to be “an interesting piece of technology” – will be able to cure ‘fear of death’ is strong enough to drive Babette to sexual submission and Jack to murder. Throughout the novel Jack turns to doctors, experts, elaborate tests and analyses, in order to learn about his death so that he may ignore it. Yet technology, unlike religion, cannot be traced to a transcendent or omniscient power; it is at bottom a human creation. Although Jack desperately wants to believe in technology, in the competency of experts and the limitlessness of expertly generated knowledge, he is ultimately unable to do so. The Dylar doesn’t work, his

² P.22.

medical tests are inconclusive, and the experts, human and fallible, keep changing their minds. Technology fails as a religion because, unlike religion, it is capable of failing *us*. Technology provides us with nothing to believe in outside of ourselves, offers no immutable truth in which we can take comfort. Technology as religion is incomplete. It emerges as something Jack wants to, but cannot, believe in.

To make matters worse, Jack's pursuit of technology, his desire to believe that it can control and appease his fear of death, leaves him uneasy about the resulting detachment from death. He opines: "A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying."³ Technology makes him feel divorced, but not free, from the burden of his own mortality. His life feels out of his control, at the mercy of experts, authorities, and technical apparatuses that he does not understand but to which he has no choice but to submit. Through technology, he can only ever half-escape himself and his death, such a partial escape leaving him feeling disjointed and as frightened as ever. He is left with the occasional raw emotion – fear, lust, love – and the overwhelming feeling that his life has escaped his control. It is only through his attempt at murder in the concluding pages of the novel, and his subsequent attempt to save the life of his victim, that he is able to cease feeling helpless, unsettled, and alienated from his humanity. (At this point, however, the reader becomes unsettled because Jack appears to have lost his mind.) Technology is too human to provide the kind of peace of mind religion can offer; further, it is too external and decentralized to provide any tangible power over life and death.

³ p. 137

Are God and murder the only alternatives to the anxiety Jack feels in the face of death? Can one non-violently encounter one's mortality while maintaining a modicum of peace of mind? Perhaps Murray, through his academic and postmodern detachment from life, provides insight into this possibility. Murray sees the modern world in terms of a real and endlessly fascinating landscape of "codes and messages." He understands human experience in terms of the "psychic data" he finds in supermarkets and on television, a technological matrix of symbols that need not point to anything deeper, but which are meaningful as such. He does not fear death, nor is he plagued by the sense that technology has somehow cheated him out of authentic experience – he is not searching for meaning or authenticity of any particular type. For Murray, technology is neither an escape mechanism nor an inauthentic way of accessing reality; rather, it contributes to the meaning making process that is itself the substance of modern life. From the perspective of academic detachment and fascination with the ways in which *others* make sense of the technological systems in which they move, Murray himself is never forced to directly grapple with the meaning of his own mortality.