Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, published in early 2001, perplexed readers expecting another of his sweeping explorations of politics, violence, and the image world. A decidedly quiet, introverted tale of bereavement and spectral visitation, it seemed a radical and rather slight experiment for this acclaimed novelist. In many respects, however, the novel clearly bears DeLillo's stamp: though shorter and more elliptical than his recent work, it revisits two of his most significant themes. The first concerns the range and perils of privacy. In earlier novels, characters such as *Great Jones Street*’s Bucky Wunderlick and *Mao II*’s Bill Gray retreat from public life to seek a space free from invasion, reemerging only to be recaptured by the systems that had threatened them. *The Body Artist* similarly depicts its protagonist—a performance artist named Lauren Hartke—withdrawning in seclusion after her husband's suicide and then reemerging through a work of art that at once announces and shapes a new self. The second and more significant theme concerns the nature of identity, and the permeable membrane between behavior and performance. In *Running Dog*, for example, DeLillo suggests that the ubiquity of cameras has transformed us all into actors under constant observation, even by ourselves; DeLillo's play *The Day Room* offers a dizzying array of masquerades—actors performing in a play-within-a-play that, we eventually learn, constitutes the play we have been watching—designed both to challenge theatrical conventions and to assess the nature of role-playing itself. *The Body Artist* re-examines this theme through Lauren's shifting voices and fluctuating identities. Although a journalist character who reviews Lauren’s piece, *Body Time*, comments that it is “about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are” (110), the novel implies that such a condition may not exist.
But *The Body Artist* is not merely a minor variation on familiar themes. Rather, DeLillo’s masterly manipulation of voices—both narratorial and dramatized—enables him in this novel to raise profound questions about the many possible forms of possession and about the relationship between art and loss. It is also his most nakedly emotional work, limning the arc of grief by portraying Lauren’s encounter with a visitor who may or may not be an incarnate ghost. Perhaps most importantly, this novel marks DeLillo’s most penetrating analysis of the process of artistic generation. As we witness Lauren transmute her grief into a scarifying work of performance art, we come to understand inspiration as a variety of religious experience, a form of ghostly possession. The novel itself embodies the theme of spectral inhabitation by incorporating numerous shades and intertextual echoes: hints of the Gothic (a woman and a mysterious male in a lonely house); allusions to classical Greek myth and drama; nods to the cinema of Ingmar Bergman, with its meticulous examinations of identity (*Persona*), grief (*Cries and Whispers*), and the power of art (*The Magician*); a pinch of *Krapp’s Last Tape* (in both texts a person records and relives moments from the past); and even a dash of Harlequin romance (a woman saved from despair by a male intruder). Yet the novel more than displays these influences; it transforms them through literary ventriloquism. *The Body Artist* haunts and is haunted, ultimately suggesting that to undertake any work of art is to do just that—to perform an undertaking of the dead that must remain incomplete, and hence simultaneously to exorcize spirits and to honor the deceased, not by embalming and forgetting them, but by permitting them to live again as echoes. This undertaking, paradoxically, revives both artist and audience by bringing into existence new selves residing both inside and outside of the work.

The first literary echo is relatively close at hand. The opening chapter, in which Lauren and her husband, film director Rey Robles, prepare and eat breakfast, calls to mind an earlier literary breakfast: the famous repast at 7 Eccles St., Dublin, on June 16, 1904. Our recollection of Leopold Bloom diligently searing a pork kidney for himself and brewing tea for Molly is reinforced by DeLillo’s narrative presence, which dips in and out of Lauren’s consciousness in a pseudo-Joycean (or perhaps Woolfish) manner, though without that “fine tang of faintly scented urine” (Joyce 45). The Bloom breakfast, we recall, soon gives way to an undertaking when Leopold attends the funeral of his unfortunate acquaintance Paddy Dignam. With death on his mind, Bloom attempts to explain to Molly the meaning of the word “metempsychosis,” which he first gets right—“reincarnation. That we all lived before on the earth thousands of years ago” (Joyce 53)—and then confuses with “metamorphosis.” *The Body Artist* also traffics in metempsychosis: both the literary kind, whereby patterns and motifs from previous texts are revived, and the human kind, whereby human beings return to life in altered forms.
Just as the Blooms’ homey chatter conceals serious conflicts, so beneath Lauren and Rey’s domestic bliss a struggle for ownership is taking place: hence, Lauren carefully notes that it is “his coffee and his cup” (8) and “his phone” (12), but “her” newspaper and “her weather” on the radio (8-9). An analogous battle for primacy occurs on the bird feeder outside their window where the sparrows are “fighting for space” (8). Over the course of the novel, Lauren also struggles to maintain control of the novel’s discourse as she confronts several intrusive external voices that threaten to wrest control of her consciousness and her narrative: those of two journalistic reports (an obituary for Rey and a report by Lauren’s friend Mariella Chapman on Lauren’s new art work); the phone voices of Chapman, Rey’s first wife Isabel, and an answering machine; that of the unnamed owner of the house; and most significantly, the echolalic voice of an aphasic man whom Lauren dubs Mr. Tuttle.

This jockeying for control occurs even within Lauren’s own narrative discourse, which frequently slips from an intimate third-person in past tense—itsm sliding in and out of Lauren’s idiom (“sort of jackknife,” “Okay, she put the bowl on the table” [12])—to a second-person voice that registers habitual action. For example, Lauren thinks, “You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day” such as this (7); however, as these narrative slippages imply, her identity is evanescent. Like all pronouns, “you” replaces a noun; but here it also represents a second-level substitution in which it becomes the very pronominal signifier of self-division and permeability. Indeed, Lauren’s frequent use of “you” implies that she habitually performs for herself, her rent consciousness indicating an insecure tenancy in her own head. In short, these instances of what Ian Reid terms “narrative dispossession,” in which a “wrestling or arresting of control over” the narrative voice disrupts the surface of the story (27), point both to a power struggle in the marriage that continues after Rey’s death and to Lauren’s own uncertain grip on herself. By tracing Lauren’s voice as it shuttles through these shifting personae, DeLillo also reminds us of the conventionality of all narrative voices, and through these manipulations the novelist becomes both performer and casting director, determining—or perhaps responding to—the version of Lauren who will dominate the story. Will it be the fumbling, inarticulate homebody? The meticulous artist and pseudo-monastic? The tenant of a strange house? The caretaker and surrogate mother? The bereft widow haunted by her dead husband’s words?

Yet while Lauren clearly demarcates their possessions and habits, the couple also possess and absorb each other, particularly through their voices, as when she realizes that her groan is “echoing Rey, identifyingly, groaning his groan, but in a manner so seamless and deep it was her discomfort too” (9). If intimacy is a kind of ventriloquism or echolalia, then determining the source of any voice is a vexed undertaking. Lauren, for example, always carries a voice in her head that “was hers and it was dialogue or monologue” (16). She makes up stories about people in the newspaper, creates dialogue for them, and becomes
“someone else, one of the people in the story”—a “you,” not an “I”—through reading about them (20). Reading, for her, is also a mode of performance or possession, and one that DeLillo invites his readers to undertake as well, so that our reading animates the characters, possesses them, and allows them to possess us. The intimacy of the narrative technique, that is, brings us close enough to hear the faintest whispers of consciousness, thereby inviting us to eavesdrop on the most delicate patterns of thought and emotion. As selves are gradually laid bare, we cannot help but lend a hand in their exfoliation.

The birds at the feeder provide a striking metaphor for these narrative movements, as well as for the human animals inside the house. For example, crows—carrion eaters and harbingers of death—emit raucous calls just as Rey comments on the “terror of another ordinary day” (15). A few minutes later Lauren spots a blue jay. “It stood large and polished and looked royally remote from the other birds busy feeding and she could nearly believe she’d never seen a jay before” (21). It is easy to read the jay—that “nest thief and skilled mimic” (22)—as an avian alter-ego of Rey, whose name means “king” and who was often cast in his early films as a thief (28). For a jay as for Rey, all places are “landscapes of estrangement” (29). The blue jay also figures Lauren and prefigures Mr. Tuttle, each of whom habitually appropriates others’ words and actions. These bird analogies, indeed, imply that human identities are but flighty masquerades of protective coloration and imitation. To put it another way, the birds represent the human capacity to become “disembodied, turned into something sheer and fleet and scatter-bright” (13); or, to put it yet another way, the birds represent the potential for artistic genius. Mimicking even as he shapes these swift souls, DeLillo’s narrator also hovers and skitters, dipping into and out of narrative time and Lauren’s mind like a bird at a feeder. This is DeLillo or—to borrow the name of one of his earlier acts of gender-bending ventriloquism—Birdwell as a spirit artist, as a master of breath and voice.

Birdwell’s movements through Lauren’s mind recall William James’s famous description of the “wonderful stream of consciousness”:

Like a bird’s life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic. (243)

However, Lauren is much less confident than James in the ready transferability of thought to expression. In her mind words flutter and dart, seldom landing firmly on a precise definition: working the toaster, for example, she can not recall the name for the lever (8), and she vacillates about whether the past tense of “spring” is “sprang or sprung” (10). Savoring the aroma of soya granules,
she describes them aptly as exuding a “faint wheaty stink with feet mixed in” (13; and one notes here how “feet” itself “mixes” the sounds of the words “faint” and “wheaty”). Yet a few minutes later she admits that “[n]othing described” them (16). Shortly thereafter she renders the birds’ flight noises as a “wing-whir that was all b’s and r’s, the letter b followed by a series of vibrator r’s” (17), and then immediately recants her description: “But that wasn’t it at all.” Words too change shape, sometimes merely eluding capture and at other times transmigrating from noun to verb, from blade to body, as when Lauren has to “jackknife” away from the counter when Rey approaches for a butter knife (12). As Philip Nel argues, The Body Artist ponders “the possibilities and paradoxes of poetic diction,” celebrating the sounds of words and yet acknowledging the “impossibility of ever attaining that ideal language which literally embodies the material world” (739). Like identities, language constantly undergoes metamorphosis or metempsychosis, its echoes of earlier words and events usually fleeing down the crevices of time, but sometimes shooting forcefully back into the current of thought.

Lauren and DeLillo do, however, share James’s belief in the elasticity of time, which in this novel stretches, slows, and shuttles backward and forward both intertextually and intratextually. For example, at the end of the first chapter Lauren realizes that she needs to buy some Ajax scouring powder, and later in the novel she recollects the banal conversation (their last one, it turns out) during which Rey promised to go purchase some. The daughter of a retired classical scholar (104), Lauren riffs on the classical allusion in the product’s name: “Ajax, son of Telamon...great brave warrior, and spear thrower of mighty distances, and toilet cleanser too” (86-87). She forgot to add—suicide. In Sophocles’s eponymous tragedy Ajax, disgraced by Athena and beguiled into murdering a flock of sheep instead of his enemies, kills himself out of shame and dishonor, even though the chorus assures him that public opinion, that “gaggle of angry birds,” will disappear at the sight of the falcon, or true hero (16-17). The final portion of Sophocles’s play, like most of DeLillo’s novel, concerns an undertaking, as Ajax’s widow Tecmessa and his brother Teucer contend with Ajax’s enemies over the proper way to dispose of his body. In DeLillo’s restaging, Rey becomes the defeated Ajax while Lauren plays a Tecmessa left weeping, as does Ajax’s mother, like a “poor lorn nightingale” (Sophocles 34).

If this intertext suggests that identity involves the masks typical of Greek drama, the first textual invasion—an obituary for Rey, who, instead of buying Ajax, drove to New York and shot himself in his first wife’s apartment—confirms it. A “poet of lonely places” (27), as the inserted text informs us in DeLillo’s sharp pastiche of journalistic style, Rey was a man of masks who lacked a true home: born in Barcelona, he later lived in the Soviet Union, migrated to Paris, resided in New York, and directed spaghetti Westerns shot in Spain. As Isabel later tells Lauren, he was a man who “hated who he was” (59). He invented
even the name “Rey,” and throughout his earthly existence played a character who made pronouncements such as “The answer to life is the movies” (28). Why? Because his life was a movie. Among his credits was a film called My Life for Yours, which describes the effect he had on Isabel, who tells Lauren, “[w]e were two people with one life and it was his life” (59), but also on Lauren, to whom he trades his life for her art.

This film title introduces the second classical parallel: to Euripides’s Alcestis, a play that also concerns an incomplete undertaking. In this tragicomedy, Admetos, king of Pherai, is informed by Death that he must accompany him to the underworld. Admetos persuades his wife Alcestis to die in his place, but before she dies she compels the king to swear never to bring another woman into his house. When Herakles visits shortly thereafter, Admetos inappropriately (since his wife has just died) extends extravagant hospitality to Herakles and conceals the death from him. After getting comically drunk, Herakles learns of Alcestis’s death and Admetos’s violation of the norms of mourning, and brings a silent, veiled young woman to Admetos, insisting that the king accept her as a gift in exchange for his hospitality. Caught between his vow to Alcestis and the rules of sociability, Admetos agrees to take her in, only to discover that the young woman is Alcestis herself, miraculously brought back to life. She must, however, remain silent for three days until the stain of death has disappeared. DeLillo’s reworking of this play is oblique but illuminating: first, he switches the genders of deceased and survivor, and then reincarnates Herakles as an autistic man. Yet in both cases the dead spouse does return—here, as a voice behind the veil of Mr. Tuttle. I’ll engage with this intertextual echo in more detail later, but for now it is worth noting that both Ajax and Alcestis, like most Greek plays, acknowledge that they are themselves reenacting events that occurred in some legendary past. Even the Greeks knew, in other words, that dramatic art is a chamber of echoes, a gathering of shades.

In any case, it is scarcely surprising that Rey haunts Lauren, because in some sense he was already a ghost when alive. The rest of the novel traces her attempts to come to terms with his death. When she first returns to the house they are renting, everything seems “plunged into metamorphosis” (36), but Lauren seems more pupa than butterfly. Cloaking herself in Rey’s despair, she tries to deal with his absent presence by seeking to “disappear in Rey’s smoke, be dead, be him” (34: she would thereby trade her life for his). She feels him everywhere. Answering the phone, for example, she speaks in a “soft voice... not quite her own” (36); the phone, we recall, was “his” (12). Time seems out of joint, and she tries to straighten or arrest it by watching a live-stream Internet video feed of a nearly empty road in Kotka, Finland, which offers her a “sense of organization, a place contained in an unyielding frame” (38): as if following Rey’s dictum, her answer to death is the movies. However, what strikes her most about the video feed is its juxtaposition of stasis—an apparent timelessness—with the unremitting diachronic linearity conveyed by the digital
time displayed in the corner of the screen (39). This paradox expresses her own sense of dislocation: it is both now and no-time; it is both here and nowhere. Just as Alcestis is described by Herakles as at once alive and dead (Euripides 59), so Lauren lives in limbo. Her emptiness is interrupted by the voice of Mariella, who implores her to leave the house and admonishes her not to “fold up into” herself (39). But this involution is precisely what she needs: to fold up and then spring out like a butterfly bursting from its pod or a bird taking wing.

The trigger for her explosion is the aphasic man she discovers in her house and names Mr. Tuttle, after her high school science teacher. At once ghost, projection of her desire, “heteroclite muse” (Cowart 204), symbol of her inchoate new self, and live tape recorder of her marital conversations, Tuttle is the latest—and one of the most significant—in a long line of childlike figures who populate DeLillo’s novels, starting with the deformed, mute Micklewhite boy in Great Jones Street and culminating in the nine-year-old novelist Tap Axton in The Names and the toddler Wilder in White Noise. These characters engage in what DeLillo has called a “purer... alternate speech” untainted by the distortions and bad faith of institutions (interview with LeClair 24). Like these characters, Tuttle functions as an artistic inseminator, catalyzing Lauren’s new work and encouraging her return to life. His unfinished quality is essential, because it enables him to reiterate Rey and Lauren’s conversations and, in turn, to teach Lauren to stand outside of herself and, eventually, to return to herself through the veil of performance.

Tuttle’s first words, “it is not able” (43), exemplify his linguistic and cognitive disabilities: “I” becomes “it,” the pronoun shift suggesting that he lives at a distance from his own consciousness. Furthermore, many of his speeches display echolalia, such as when Lauren says, “Talk to me,” and he answers “talk to me. I am talking” (46), or when she asks him to “say some words,” and he responds, “Say some words to say some words” (55). Some neurologists and speech pathologists suggest that echolalia, which is characteristic of people with autism and certain post-encephalitic syndromes, is not true speech; according to Oliver Sacks, it “carries no emotion, no intentionality, no ‘tone’ whatever—it is purely automatic” (Anthropologist 233). But in fact echolalia takes myriad forms and serves numerous communicative functions. Some children use echolalia as a bridge between repetition and genuine communication (Schuler & Prizant 175); for example, a person might repeat the final word of a request (“Do you want some bread?” “Bread.”) to assent to it; a child might imitate an adult’s habitual intonation and words when agreeing to do something that the adult wishes. A few people with autism, in fact, develop a sophisticated, collage-like, “delayed echolalia” (Schuler & Prizant 164) in which they piece together utterances from recollected songs, videos or conversations and thereby comment elliptically on what is going on around them (see Rhode 80). Sacks himself cites the case of Stephen Wiltshire,
an autistic artist who can quote and act out entire sections of the film *Rain Man* (which is itself, of course, about an autistic savant) and who has a genius for reproducing musical sounds (*Anthropologist* 234, 237). Wiltshire borrows identities in an attempt to express his own, sometimes seeming "nourished and stimulated" by those second selves but at other times "taken over, possessed and dispossessed" by them (234). In extreme cases echolalia may become a prison: one echolalic patient of Maria Rhode testified to feeling that he resided in a "ghost-house," and Rhode speculates that his echolalia is an "expression of these ghostly echoes" (82). These descriptions fit Tuttle who, having hidden in their house, has memorized countless conversations between Rey and Lauren and repeats them to her during the novel. For people such as Tuttle and Wiltshire, subjectivity is a vast echo chamber in which words float, recede and resonate. But Tuttle is not merely a human parrot. Neither quite performances nor quite original utterances, his echolalic expressions occupy a gray zone between language and mimickry. As we learn from Lauren’s work *Body Time*, an artist must also abide, at least temporarily, in the same zone.

Echolalia signifies an inability to grasp what are called “pragmatics”—the codes and rules that govern conversational interchanges. People with such deficits may, for example, fail to employ contrastive stress, which one would use to say “the father held his son” as opposed to *her* son (Frith 131). Tuttle’s “singsong conjugations” (63) betray this pragmatic deficiency, as Lauren registers in noting that “[t]here’s a code in the simplest conversation that tells the speakers what’s going on outside the bare acoustics. This was missing when they talked....There were no grades of emphasis here and flatness there” (65-66). Lacking a strong grip on pragmatic conventions, Tuttle dwells in language like an unwelcome guest; he uses words, but struggles to apprehend the emotional content of Lauren’s questions and expectations. Thus she calls him a “dummy in a red club chair” (48), but perhaps he is better understood as both dummy and ventriloquist. As such he is an ideal audience: what performer would not want to play to a listener who could imprint and perfectly repeat scripted lines?

Tuttle’s language, Lauren realizes, also ruptures time, his jumbled verb tenses indicating that he somehow lives in more than one moment at once. Thus he observes that “it rained very much” when he means that it is going to rain (44). Lauren corrects him, but later comes to understand that normal language artificially demarcates the pellucid continuum in which Tuttle freely swims. “Maybe this man experiences another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after, and he moves from one to the other shatteringly, in a state of collapse, minus an identity, a language.” “[M]aybe,” she thinks, “he lived in a kind of time that had no narrative quality” (64, 65); she imagines that “[h]is future is unnamed. It is simultaneous, somehow, with the present” (77). Yet her own tense shifts indicate that she is, intentionally or not, advancing under Tuttle’s tutelage. The temporal dislocations he records probably signify
a dysfunction in his brain's executive processes, which refer to the capacity to organize complex actions through sequencing and working memory. Deficiencies in executive functioning manifest themselves in precisely the kind of stereotypic behavior and self-regulation difficulties—the obsessive repetition of the same words, the clumsy gait and fine motor problems—that Tuttle exhibits (Twachtman-Cullen 237; see also Turner). Lacking a sharp sense of sequence, he may perceive the world as a dazzling, disorienting panoply of unconnected events. Sacks speculates that people like Tuttle, though geniuses at "the catching of thisness," live not in a universe but in a "multiverse" of "innumerable, unconnected though intensely vivid particulars," and experience the world as "a collection of moments"—vivid, isolated, with no before and after (Anthropologist 242). Tuttle's mind, that is, operates less like a single bird than like an entire flock, each one of a different color and species, each usurping the other at the window of consciousness.

However crippling his cognitive disorders may be for him, Tuttle's symptoms give Lauren the jolt she needs to transform passive mourning into active art. Thus her first epiphany occurs when she hears from Tuttle's lips "the clipped delivery, the slight buzz deep in the throat, her pitch, her sound" (50). He seems to be "assuming her part in a conversation with someone" else (51), as if he has appropriated Lauren's very spirit. The birds, facing outward, alert for the "jay that mimics a hawk," dramatize the condition of baffled readiness that his echolalia occasions (53). But if her art is inevitably a performance, here Tuttle is not so much impersonating her as channeling voices like a spirit medium. In short, Tuttle represents the muse as intruder, embodying inspiration as a sophisticated brand of echolalia or species of ghostly possession.

But not all of Tuttle's utterances are mere echolalia. As the novel proceeds he sometimes chants an instinctive, almost Heideggerian poetry that demonstrates he is "not closed to inspiration" himself. For example, he sings, "Being here has come to me. I am with the moment, I will leave the moment....Coming and going I am leaving....Leaving has come to me. We all, shall all, will all be left. Because I am here and where. And I will go or not or never....If I am where I will be. Because nothing comes between me" (74). "Nothing comes between me": he wears no veil or mask. Derridean différence be damned: no signifier slices a gap between existence and expression; there is no deferral because all times are one to him. In these zen-like utterances Lauren hears the "stir of true amazement....[T]he wedge into ecstasy, the old deep meaning of the word" (75)—of "ecstasy," that condition of being outside the self. Yet Tuttle's poetry is powerful precisely because he is not outside of himself; rather, like Walt Whitman, he sings himself, sings Being itself by being himself. And sometimes Tuttle's "transparent" language (75) divulges hidden depths, as when he declares, "the word for moonlight is moonlight" (82). Beneath its tautology the phrase initially suggests that words, "like moons in particular phases" (48), can only reflect the light of material reality. Yet, as Tuttle's own
language proves, a word can also impel the tides of meaning and gleam with evanescent lucidity. Tuttle's poetry, that is, represents the purified artistic instinct: having passed through the crucible of meaning. Being may be molded by syllable and cadence. Like one of Hopkins's kingfishers, Tuttle finds tongue "to fling out broad [his] name," to deal out that being indoors where he dwells (Hopkins 51; lines 4-6). Paradoxically, though, he performs this "selving" through a voice that is his own because it perfectly echoes others'.

Inspired by Tuttle, Lauren begins to listen to other voices, such as the stilted one in the electronic message on Mariella's answering machine—"please / leave / a mess / age / af / ter / the / tone" (67)—which she plays over and over, probing the relationship between this automaton and her own identity. Throughout this section DeLillo also embellishes his own ventriloquist performance, drawing words from the air and turning them into a poetry that melds body-sound and rhythm—with spiritual resonance. In interviews DeLillo has declared that he attends as much to sound as to meaning when writing. "There's a rhythm I hear that drives me through a sentence," he admits; "if you concentrate on the sound, if you disassociate the words from the object they denote, and if you say the words over and over, they become a sort of higher Esperanto" ("Art of Fiction" 283, 291). This higher Esperanto is the lingua franca of The Body Artist. For instance, when Lauren recognizes that Tuttle's mind lies "outside the easy sway of either/or" (69), DeLillo renders her realization in a swaying clause of iambic pentameter. Or when Lauren urges Tuttle to "Do Rey. Make me hear him. I am asking you nice. Be my friend," an attentive listener may hear behind her exhortations the syllables of an ascending and descending major scale in solfeggio ("Do, re, mi...": 71). Birdwell lives! Fed by her interaction with Tuttle, Lauren registers the profound shocks of artistic inspiration, echoing his halting poetry and immersing herself in her work, razing calluses, clipping nails, "pruning the body much as a writer prunes sentences" (Nel 749). Indeed, as she "activate[s] the verbs of abridgment and excision[.]...studie[s] her fingers and toes" (76), DeLillo's dactyls activate the original meaning of that word (from the Greek for "finger") on two levels at once. Lauren, Tuttle, DeLillo: all three artists undergo and undertake metamorphoses that mimic the "color-changing birds, the name-saying birds" (71) outside the window.

The true gestation of Lauren's new artwork is heralded when she reads Tuttle a passage about the biology of childbirth (60). As she more fully assumes the role of surrogate mother (feeding and bathing Tuttle), she contributes to her own nourishment, her own re-christening. Reading the book to him, she realizes that Tuttle is speaking to her in Rey's voice, and recalls that Rey once told her that "she was helping him to recover his soul" (61). He said, "I regain possession of myself through you. I think like myself now, not like the man I became. I eat and sleep like myself...when I was myself and not the other man" (62). Tuttle is performing the same operation, enabling her to become somebody else and thereby, paradoxically, to become herself. And he is doing
it not by becoming *himself*, but by becoming both her and Rey. She and Tuttle indeed represent the two forces behind her art: she is the body and he is the inspiration—literally, in that “he knew how to make her husband live in the air that rushed from his lungs” (62). Tuttle models for her a life “lived irreducibly as sheer respiration” (57). Thus she is able to resuscitate Rey by listening “possessively” to his words on Tuttle’s tongue (63), and exorcizes the grief and guilt attached to Rey’s spirit by undertaking—that is, at once raising and burying—both her husband and Tuttle in *Body Time*.

Tuttle’s time-lapsed condition begins to affect Lauren’s state of mind, as well. As if miming his temporal fluidity, she repeatedly practices the act of “eternally checking the time,” emphasizing in order to demolish the linear time that doomed her husband (73). Yet her attitude toward time remains deeply ambivalent. On the one hand she seeks to scour away the past by subjecting her body to monastic exercises that function as an ascetic Ajax powder designed to permit her to “disappear from all her former venues of aspect and bearing and to become a blankness, a body slate erased of every past resemblance” (84). Yet she also desires to recapture the past through Tuttle, to possess him in order to repossess her husband and thereby regain her previous life. Her impulse to revive Rey climaxes when Tuttle rehearses in precise and haunting detail the conversation about Ajax that Lauren and Rey held the day he died. Though she recognizes Rey’s words in Tuttle’s mouth, “she didn’t think the man was remembering. It is happening now...in his fracted time, and he is only reporting, helplessly, what they say.” Through Tuttle’s ventriloquism “Rey is alive” (87), yet “fracted”—at once broken and newly reconstituted. And just as the narrative discourse in these sentences slides back and forth from Lauren’s idiom to the narrator’s past tense, so the shifting verb tenses capture Lauren’s perception of time’s shuttling flight.

Eventually, though, she must accept that all things fade away. Thus, the final chapter before her performance concerns things lost—paper clips, words, sounds, memories, Tuttle himself. First she hears him weeping at night and realizes that his cries bear “a faint echo, a feedback,” as if he is “unable to improvise” himself any longer (90). He begins to reject his food and finally vanishes, leaving “not a single clinging breath of presence” (96). Before he disappears, she is stunned by a temporal dislocation that suggests again how words resist the depredations of time. During one of her earlier pleas to Tuttle to “say some words,” he replied, “Don’t touch it,” in a voice that wasn’t quite his. “I’ll clean it up later” (81). Days later, as Tuttle starts to fall apart, he drops a glass of water, and without thinking Lauren forestalls his clean-up attempts by saying, “Don’t touch it...I’ll clean it up later” (93). After Tuttle’s disappearance, she reflects that “He’d known this was going to happen. These were the words she would say” (98). She reruns the tape she made of his proleptic command, feeling as though her entire life, like that of Beckett’s Krapp, already exists on tape, merely waiting to be discovered and endlessly
replayed. Initially forlorn at his absence, gradually Lauren understands that Tuttle must abscond so that her own voice may emerge; moreover, Tuttle's absence at last lets her truly feel Rey's. Yet "she wanted to take him in, try to know him in the spaces where his chaos lurks, in...the parts of speech where he is meant to locate his existence, and in the material place where Rey lives in him, alive again, word for word, touch for touch" (100). As in Molly Bloom's monologue, present and past mix, and the male figures merge into an undifferentiated "he." Rey gone, she now must possess Tuttle and be possessed by him. But that means she too must disappear. Where to begin? With the organ of language, of course. Thus she scraps her tongue carefully, as if to strip it of the film of selfhood. Answering the phone, she animates Tuttle, speaking with a "dry piping sound, hollow-bodied, like a bird humming" (101). At this moment she begins her reincarnation not only of Tuttle, but also of that veiled spouse brought back to life by Herakles.

The fruits of Lauren's methods are reported in the second inserted text, Mariella's interview and article on Body Time, Lauren's performance piece. The article acts as the counterpart to the first journalistic intrusion, Rey's obituary; indeed, since the interview derives from a luncheon meeting, it dramatizes the etymology of the word "obituary," which comes from the Latin obire, "to go meet." "[R]awboned and slightly bug-eyed," Lauren herself now resembles a cadaver, undernourished newborn, or plucked bird (103). She has become a figure of pure possibility. According to Mariella, in Body Time as in all of her art, Lauren is "always in the process of becoming another or exploring some root identity": like her father, the classicist turned archaeologist, she plunges downward to unearth deep sources (105). This is the backward lurch so familiar to DeLillo's readers, previously seen in Bucky Wunderlick's withdrawal into silence, in the frightening historical regression that climaxes Ratner's Star, in the archaeological and linguistic excavations of The Names, in Underworld's temporal burrowings. But here the description of Lauren's work compels the reader to imitate her, to work backward into the novel to discover how she has incorporated and transmuted experience into art.

For in Body Time she has, like Beckett's Krapp, embarked on nothing so much as a "new retrospect" (Beckett 16). Thus, for example, the audience hears Mariella's answering machine playing relentlessly behind the action (106), and sees again the live-stream video feed from the Finnish highway (107). Lauren revivifies her Asian neighbor (previously mentioned on page 35, and seen again in the final chapter [115]) as an "ancient Japanese woman" (105); she then metamorphoses into a woman in executive attire obsessively checking the time on her watch in excruciating slow motion (106). Her goal, she states, is to "[s]top time, or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that's living, not painted" (107); these are, one realizes, DeLillo's aims as well, for in recycling elements from his own novel and in slowing narrative movement to a crawl, he mirrors Lauren's mechanic muse. At the end of the piece, in another homage
to Krapp, she turns herself into a naked man lip-synching to a voice—possibly Tuttle’s—playing on tape. After an apparent seizure, the “man” seems to fly “out of one reality and into another” (108). Perhaps prompted by Mariella’s tape recorder, to conclude the interview Lauren engineers a final self-reflexive twist and switches again to the naked man’s voice: she echoes Tuttle as he echoed her. As I noted above, Mariella concludes that Body Time is “about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are” (110). If so, Lauren’s appropriation of Tuttle’s voice is not merely a performance, but a blend of being and acting: since his voice, after all, parroted hers, then she is becoming herself using Tuttle as medium. But in another sense, both her work and DeLillo’s imply that there is no “who” who is not also performing, that Lauren’s anti-performance is at the same time a performance (that is, she must perform that appearance of non-performance). We are only “ourselves,” it seems, when we are somebody else, the echo of an echo.

The Body Artist, like Body Time, also reminds us that these echoes extend far into the past. Thus, although Lauren maintains that Body Time is more than just a response to “what happened to Rey” (108), the novel indicates that it is at least partially a means of dramatizing and channeling her grief. She even admits that it stages “the drama of men and women versus death” (109). In this regard it echoes Alcestis, for what King Admetos finally understands at the end of that play is the truth with which Lauren wrestles throughout the novel: that in losing her spouse, she has lost herself (Arrowsmith 18). Lauren’s bereavement, like that of Admetos, leads to her discovery that one must accept one’s mortality in order to be fully human (6). In Alcestis, Admetos’s decision to give his allegiance to the living rather than to his dead wife, paradoxically, allows his wife to live again; in Body Time, Lauren pays homage to Rey, paradoxically, by never mentioning him. Instead, husband and wife come together behind the veil of art, merging in the figure of a naked man lip-synching to a tape recorder.

Both works also ask “what comes after death? Can we be reborn?” Alcestis answers these questions by uncannily inverting the conventions of dramatic identity: first we accept that Alcestis is dead, but then, suddenly, we must accept that she is not. Thus the play reminds us that “Alcestis” is, after all, an actor in a mask playing a character who herself “plays dead” and then pretends to be an unknown woman who is not Alcestis, before becoming “herself” again. The implication is that theater, the very act of masking, bears the seeds of regeneration, not just of a person but of an entire community. Body Time answers those mortal questions by depicting Lauren’s metamorphoses into a series of figures who are not so much characters as full-body masks. Her personae, indeed, imitate what William Arrowsmith describes as the “modal” form of Greek theater, whereby those masked actors are meant to seem generic, universal (4), to comprise “little more than the sum of the possibilities” contained in the masks (8). Similarly, Lauren’s personae—the ancient Japanese
woman gesturing like a Noh actor, the busy executive, the naked man—are simultaneously types and tokens of the self’s infinite possibilities; like those ancient masked thespians, they are at once universal and mysterious.17

Further, if Rey has, in his suicide, reenacted the roles of both Alcestis (the dead spouse) and Admetos (the royal husband), and Tuttle has played Herakles, at once guest and reviver of the dead, so in submitting herself to these transformations, Lauren, like Alcestis (and Admetos as well) undergoes in Body Time a symbolic death, as if to become closer to her husband by experiencing his demise. And she returns veiled—an Alcestis who is both herself and somebody else. In sum, the intertextual specters that haunt both DeLillo’s and Lauren’s works strike mythic reverberations, becoming shards of experience that, torn from their original contexts, glint both forward and backward. Like light passing through a prism, or Greek modes turning up in postmodern music, Ajax, Admetos, Alcestis and Herakles have become human fractals—irregular shapes repeated over the ages in innumerable guises. And just as Lauren is finally transformed by hearing voices from the past, so in reading and hearing the voices in The Body Artist we do not merely intrude upon them, but are possessed by their fracted human shapes, finally, if fleetingly, inhabiting them through DeLillo’s ventriloquism. They are never buried, never undertaken; rather, they overtake us.

After her performance Lauren returns to the house and cleans the bathroom—but not with Ajax. Her self-dispossession should also have been cathartic, but may still be incomplete. She thinks, “I am Lauren. But less and less,” and for most of this chapter she seems suspended between selves, living in many times at once, finding herself “addressing someone who wasn’t quite her” (117). “Being here has come to me” (121), she thinks, echoing Tuttle’s words, which are now also Rey’s words; but who that “me” is remains unclear. To convey Lauren’s suspension, DeLillo’s narrator slips seamlessly from second-person to third, from present to past to future perfect. Thus when Lauren hears a noise she imagines that “Once she steps into the room, she will already have been there” (122). Floating through these “whispers of was and is” (123), Lauren feels Rey (and Tuttle) all around her. Mixing memory and desire, she believes she will surprise him in an upstairs room. But which “him?” Both the pronouns and her inner vision become ambiguous as she conjures an image: “He sits on the bed in his underwear [the state in which she discovered Tuttle], lighting the last cigarette of the day” as Rey would (122).

She even entertains fantasies of forestalling Rey’s suicide: “when she goes out to his car and takes his car keys and hides them, hammers them, beats them, eats them, buries them in the bone soil on a strong bright day in late summer, after a roaring storm” (123). Instead, a buried memory erupts to shed a dazzling light on Lauren’s mourning. She now remembers that “her mother died when she was nine. It wasn’t her fault. It had nothing to do with her.” But of course it had everything to do with her. In dealing with her husband’s death,
she has finally interred and exhumed her lost parent and the little girl who died with her. All her losses merge, and her funerals become a wake: breaking from her haunted reverie, she realizes that the room where she yearned to see Rey is empty. No longer possessed, she throws open the window, feeling the “sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was” (124). Lauren has, at last, undertaken herself.

If she seems to return to her sole self at the novel’s conclusion, *The Body Artist* nonetheless implies that humans do not inhabit an identity but rather, like those kingfishers of Hopkins, selve ourselves by flinging out our names. Yet those names change, because identities are not things but deliberate acts of creation. Moreover, those names do not fade away but resound through our lives and those of the ones who follow us. We are never quite lost. It follows that consciousness is not a narrative, or even a dialogue, but an echo chamber, a room we share with the chorus of all the living and the dead. For DeLillo the highest expression of this music of time is an art that is at once a mode of possession—a sophisticated brand of magic or ventriloquism—and an act of exorcism. Such an art undertakes the world to which it responds, refracts it, and then gives back a newly configured body. Such an art thus manages to be both the most authentic expression of subjectivity and its greatest transformer. Such an art must also, however, restlessly change its form, as *The Body Artist* does, becoming now a poem, now a piece of reportage, now a play. This novel, like its protagonist, constantly molts. It must do so if it is to do justice to Lauren’s—and our own—transitory selves. In that sense, both Lauren’s and DeLillo’s work resembles the kind that DeLillo celebrates in an essay on Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng: “an art outside the strict limits of the written word” (“Artist Naked” 6). The artist can manage these feats, however, only when she or he remains hospitable to the stun of intrusion, the wedge of amazement, those visitations of voice and illumination that transmute suffering into shaped expression. In *The Body Artist*, DeLillo performs such an undertaking, one that is both a recollection and a forgetting.

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NOTES

1 This is not the first time that DeLillo has treated the question of life after death. Near the end of *Underworld*, the figure of a dead girl named Esmeralda seems to appear on a Minute Maid orange juice billboard. More broadly, haunted characters abound in his work, from *Americana*’s Oedipally-fixated David Bell through the middle-aged protagonist of *Underworld*, Nick Shay, still tormented by his father’s abandonment forty years earlier.

2 DeLillo has frequently acknowledged Joyce’s influence, admitting in interviews that the Irish author introduced him to “language that carried a radiance” (“Art of Fiction” 278; see also interview with LeClair 20, 26), and specifically citing Joyce in novels such as *Americana* (145).
have adduced further Joycean debts, particularly in Mao II and Underworld (American Magic 197, 225, 276-77). David Cowart (202) and Philip Nel (738) have remarked on the similarities between The Body Artist and Virginia Woolf’s novels.

3 For a treatment of intertextuality as metempsychosis, see Osteen, Economy 83-84.

4 Thus, for example, as she drives down the highway just after her husband’s death, the second-person narrator expresses her sense of dazed dissociation, which overtakes her until “the noise and rush and blur are back and you slide into your life again, feeling the painful weight in your chest” (31).

5 Such dispossessions constitute a “textual strategy for usurping interest as to whose side of the story will be heard” (27). Reid argues that similar dispossessions also characterize the interchanges between Jack and Babette Gladney in White Noise (59-63).

6 This sentence, with its serial conjunctions, is haunted by Er...
DeLillo's theme of identity as performance. His novels also frequently employ such typologies, most obviously in the first half of his Menippean satire *Ratner's Star*, where the "characters" are little more than cartoon voices exchanging elaborately erudite, arch dialogue.

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