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The Writing of Ruins: Beckett, Late Modernism, and the Inhuman in Don DeLillo's Postmillennial Fiction

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This article explores the influence of Samuel Beckett on Don DeLillo's twenty-first century fiction. Although DeLillo often remarks on Beckett's direct influence, the late works – I analyse *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), and the most recent, *The Silence* (2020) – go further than DeLillo's earlier writings in pursuing something approximate to what Beckett terms a 'literature of the unword' (2009c: 515). Much like his predecessor, DeLillo is also a writer caught between modernism and postmodernism (intellectually and stylistically, if not historically). In the prophetic novel *Mao II* (1991), protagonist Bill Gray notes: 'Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings' (2016: 157). This vision of Beckett as an heroic author opposed to the mass mind is displaced in DeLillo's minimalist later writings as they turn away deploying and exploring highly textualised forms of postmodern subjectivity towards an engagement with material and bodily finitude. Drawing on Beckett's *NoHow On* trilogy as a comparative case study, I claim that rethinking Beckett's writing in terms of late modernism helps to explore his ongoing influence on DeLillo and the particular inhuman forms that populate DeLillo's late career depiction of a highly mediatised, globalised and terrorised contemporary. These late works, in their ruined state of literary exhaustion, aim to – following Beckett – allow the 'void [to] protrude like a hernia' (2009c: 521).



Born in 1936, Don DeLillo is one of the oldest contemporary American writers, and his early career (his first novel, *Americana*, was published in 1971) spans alongside Samuel Beckett's own writings, notably the famously sparse later works of the 1970s and 1980s. The influence of the latter writer on the former is undeniable and often acknowledged by DeLillo himself. In a 2004 interview DeLillo effusively comments: 'Beckett is a master of language. He is all language. Out of the words come the people instead of the other way around. He is the last writer whose work extends into the world so that (as with Kafka before him) we can see or hear something and identify it as an expression of Beckett beyond the book or stage' (2004: n.p.). Beckett's singularity is also noted in DeLillo's fictional writing. In the prophetic novel *Mao II* (1991), protagonist (and novelist) Bill Gray notes: 'Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings' (2016: 157). In *Mao II* Beckett is upheld as an heroic figure, a symbol for the very idea of individual expression in a pernicious age of mass thinking and media control. Anticipating the cataclysmic events of 9/11 – events that would haunt and determine much of DeLillo's postmillennial creative output – *Mao II* presents the figure of the terrorist as the new agent of consciousness. Terror is now the tool of culture critique.

But the atavistic impulse of terrorism also poses a relation to time; it is a response to globalisation and the incorporation of the present, a condition DeLillo's conceives, in his 9/11 essay 'In the Ruins of the Future', as 'being forced to live permanently in the future' (2001b: n.p.). So whereas the terrorist seeks reversion and regression, 'to bring back the past' (2001b), the writer is tasked with redeeming the present. Yet how well does Beckett fit this role? Beckett's aesthetic pronouncements throughout his career – often cryptic and paradoxical – suggest an art of failure and impotence, an art built on the disavowal of self-expression and, presumably, the model of heroic or – at the least – individual subjectivity that underpins it. In dialogue with Georges Duthuit he famously concludes: 'there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express [...], no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express' (1984: 139). In 1948 Beckett writes, and partly in response to the ineffable terror and destruction of the Second World War: 'For what remains to be represented if the essence of the object is to elude representation? There remain to be represented the conditions of that elusion' (2011 [1948]: 879).

In this article, I explore Beckett's influence on DeLillo's postmillennial writings, notably those published after the compendious *Underworld* (1997). Peter Boxall contends that 'DeLillo's fiction, his body of novels stretching from *Americana* in 1971 to *Cosmopolis* in 2003, comes into being in the wake of the "last writer" [...]. DeLillo's writings take place, perhaps, in what Beckett's character/narrator Molloy calls his

“ruins” (2006: 4). Although I concur with Boxall that we can read DeLillo’s entire oeuvre as an ‘extended enactment of the exhaustion of possibility in post-war culture’ (4), most critics claim that the postmillennial writings mark a subtle shift. Following another Beckett character, Murphy, who in Beckett’s eponymous first novel retreats from the big world in favour of a little world, DeLillo’s postmillennial works appear to turn away from what Martin Paul Eve describes as the earlier ‘quasi-encyclopedicism’ (2015: 576) of *Underworld*. As Brian Chappell writes: ‘After the monumental artistic and critical success of *Underworld* (1997), DeLillo turned to a lean presentation, tending toward abstraction, evoking a Beckettian modernism bent on silence and failure’ (2016: 3). *The Body Artist*, published in 2001, is concerned with themes of loss, silence and time. Perhaps better described as a novella, the comparable *Point Omega* (2010) – which concerns similar themes and is notably philosophical in tone (despite its grounding in the events of the war on terror in the 2000s) – can be considered a companion piece to the earlier work and, until 2020’s *The Silence*, was the shortest of DeLillo’s published fictions. I explore *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* in the first section below. Both minimalist texts are vexed by the limits of consciousness and of the failure of the human as such, a topic thematised explicitly in reference to the idea of an omega point and taken up again in 2016’s *Zero K*, a science fiction that recounts a battle against mortality through technologies of cryopreservation. DeLillo’s more ‘worldly’ postmillennial fictions, *Cosmopolis* (2003) and the 9/11 novella *Falling Man* (2007), more directly tackle the topic of inhuman terror. I discuss these in the final section of this essay.

In this essay I claim we can better understand and appreciate DeLillo’s writings of the first two decades of the new century through a specific framing of late modernism as both a formal and attitudinal operation that I trace back to Beckett’s 1937 proclamation of a ‘literature of the unword’ (2009c: 515). Rather than merely reflecting highly textualised forms of postmodern subjectivity, DeLillo’s later fictions deploy a minimalist mode that, following Beckett, allows the ‘void [to] protrude like a hernia’ (2009c: 521). DeLillo’s style in many of these late works is variously described as lean or spare; it is a style described by James Baxter as one of ‘stripped exteriors and formal austerity’ (2021: 195), and recalls the much condensed stories that comprise Beckett’s late *NoHow On* trilogy – *Company* (1979), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), *Worstward Ho* (1983) and the related *Stirrings Still* (1989). Both Beckett and DeLillo are commonly seen as writers concerned with profound existential themes. But the late modernism I am deriving from Beckett’s unwording aesthetic is rooted in a conceptualisation of the non-human or, more specifically, what Beckett terms the ‘inhuman’. Echoing his resistance to philosophical interpretation in interviews, Beckett’s *The Unnamable*

discards the existential framework as simply too much ‘balls about being and existing’ (2010a: 63). DeLillo’s postmillennial works are full of balls about being and existing, but like Beckett’s own enterprise, his writings resist systematisation; they provide no programme or model for the human, no understanding of life. In other words, they explicitly resist the task of representation encoded in the Western mimetic tradition. But the abstract and metaphysical concerns of DeLillo’s late works do not constitute an empty formalism or flight from history, accusations often levied at Beckett and more broadly at modernist and postmodernist aesthetics in general. It is *through* this resistance to philosophical systematisation and conceptualisation that DeLillo challenges the eternal present of the neoliberal contemporary. Writing on Beckett, J.M. Coetzee – another contemporary late modernist – argues that: ‘Beckett was an artist possessed by a vision of life without consolation or dignity or promise of grace’ (2008: 169). This vision of life as inconsolable manifests in a late modernist aesthetic that eschews art as a source of redemption. Always with an eye on the present, both the existential here and now as well as the historical contemporary, DeLillo’s late works attempt to represent the conditions through which the present evades representation. Ultimately I claim that, by drawing on Beckett’s legacy of ruined writing, these works constitute a writing of the ruins; a profound engagement with the terror and inhumanity of the contemporary.

Late Modernism in *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist*

Much like his Irish predecessor, DeLillo is a writer caught between modernism and postmodernism. Unlike Beckett, however, we might suggest DeLillo’s occupancy of this liminal state is intellectual and his stylistic in-betweenness is not simply an historical one. Throughout this essay I draw on the concept of late modernism in the same manner that Theodor Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, writes of modernity; that is to say, as ‘a qualitative, not a chronological, category’ (2020: 232).¹ In contrast to a postmodern temporality in which the future is permanently happening or happened, where techno-capitalist speed and consumer society’s relentless production of self-sameness nullify the possibility of real change, DeLillo’s works are inscribed with a temporal structure of lateness that privileges ontological self-division and non-coincidence. As Peter Fifield writes, in contrast to a postmodern aesthetic of play, late modernism marks a ‘falling

¹ In larger theoretical contexts, the term late modernism is notably used by Fredric Jameson and Tyrus Miller (1999). For Jameson, Beckett is an exemplary late modernist figure, he is one of those ‘who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms’ (1991: 305). Other accounts of Beckett in relation to late modernism include: Peter Fifield (2013), Mark Pedretti (2013) and Shane Weller (2015).

away from modernism's systematising, totalising visions into scepticism and decline' (2013: 11). These two features, epistemological scepticism and ontological finitude, mark the qualitative understanding of late modernism propagated in this essay as a framework for reading DeLillo's late work through Beckett's unwording aesthetics.

Yet whereas Beckett's unwording aesthetics derives from the specific cultural context of a transition from English to French – to write in an alien language, *sans style* and therefore without the connotative baggage of the native speaker – DeLillo's late modernism might rather be read in relation to the inner alienation of the language degradation of postmodern American society itself. In other words, whereas Beckett attempts to exhaust the language of the culture, DeLillo finds himself writing from a situation where, as John Duvall writes, 'just about every aspect of modernist aesthetics has been coopted by Madison Avenue to sell all manner of consumer goods' (2008: 5). Accordingly what is at stake in the framework of late modernism when applied to DeLillo is the notion of an aesthetic autonomy at a time when, as Duvall continues, a mid-century privileging of the arbitrariness of the signifier – a foregrounding of language that is anticipated by literary modernism and nowhere more so than in Beckett's work – has increasingly come to track alongside 'media culture's degradation of language' (2008: 8). Insofar as postmodernism has come to denote *both* a primary strand of post war literary aesthetics (notably metafiction) and an oppositional cultural condition of late capitalism, the term late modernism gains further traction as a means to prevent this conflation. As Duvall writes, DeLillo's fiction portrays 'a culture of simulation wherein representations of representations of representations create a regressive maze in which any notion of reality becomes obsolete or meaningless' (2008: 5). But if DeLillo explores a cultural condition in which representation has replaced the real, it does not follow that his own works mirror that condition, a condition thematised variously in the works as the lived experience of a heavily mediated contemporary and its incarnation as the mass mind, as image culture, as financial capitalism, as the globalised city, as a global politics of security and terror. DeLillo, like Beckett, may not be capable of delineating the real to us as such, but its absence is felt keenly across his works.

Although this late modernism might be tracked throughout both writers' careers, especially with regard to their shared epistemological scepticism towards what used to be called grand narratives, the late style of both DeLillo's postmillennial works and Beckett's *NoHow On* trilogy exemplify the ontological implications of late modernism alluded to above. The concept of late style thus helps to further qualify the adjective 'late' in my account of late modernism. For Edward Said, writing on Henrik Ibsen, the author's late style is linked to a will to 'tamper irrevocably with the possibility of closure, and leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled than before' (2007:

4). This characterisation of impossible closure can certainly be traced in Beckett, as for example in the final words of *The Unnamable* (words that have come to serve as a mantra for the wider oeuvre): ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’ (2010a: 134). In contrast to T.S. Eliot’s ambition to ‘purify the dialect of the tribe’ (2002: 205), Beckett’s aesthetic of exhaustion performs a sacrilegious vandalism of modernism’s coveted sense of ‘the new’.² As Boxall writes, Beckett’s writing ‘marks the limit of the literary imagination’ (2009: 303). Importantly, however, this crisis of the imagination manifest in late modernist scepticism is also linked to a crisis of faith in the human as such. As Shane Weller writes: ‘Late modernism is perhaps best understood precisely as such an art of impotence and ignorance, an art that no longer trusts the power of the aesthetic to achieve epiphany’ (2015: 95–96).

In DeLillo’s writing, too, there is a palpable link between a distrust in language to represent truth and a loss of faith in the coherence of the human subject. The opening of the first chapter of *Point Omega* exemplifies the late modernism of the whole novella, including its diminished setting and visceral refusal of both narrative closure and spiritual redemption: ‘the true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever’ (2010: 21). Revolving around the character of Richard Elster, an enigmatic Bush-era Pentagon advisor, the narrative is set in the American desert and described as ‘somewhere south of nowhere’ (25).³ Recalling the wasted landscapes of *Happy Days* and *Endgame*, DeLillo’s draws out the cosmic opacity of the ‘nowhere’ setting to produce a vertiginous layering of character and place. In the first half Elster is presented as a cryptic but nonetheless heavyweight intellectual, a war apologist and theoretician capable of unpacking the multiple meanings of the word ‘rendition’. In the latter half of the book, however, Elster succumbs to a slow mental degradation that results from the sudden disappearance of his daughter Jessie in the desert (she is not found by the end of the story and is suspected to be the victim of a stabbing). Throughout, the desert functions as a backdrop for his transcendental ruminating, a cosmic or existential milieu. And yet the desert also functions as a subtle reference to American cold war nuclear testing and most of all as an oblique metaphor of the Iraq war. As Eve writes, the intra-US setting provides a metaphor of the internal enemy, the other within as the subject of rendition: this is ‘how the invasion of another sovereign power can be justified on the basis of terrorism; agents of terrorism are shown at once

² For Beckett, this sense of linguistic renewal was typified by his own predecessor, James Joyce. In the same letter where he declares his own account of a literature of the unword, Beckett describes Joyce’s *Ulysses* in triumphant terms as an ‘apotheosis of the word’ (2009c: 519).

³ As James Baxter notes: ‘DeLillo’s more recent turn towards minimalist style stages a curious debt to the abstract spatial production synonymous with Beckett’s “nowhere”’ (2021: 195).

as Other (both nationally and culturally) and also as integral to the host' (2015: 588). The estrangement from within constitutes both an element of the novel's immanent critique of the Iraq war but also is key to the novel's broader ontological investment; the privileging of an implacable and inscrutable materiality that cannot be sublimated in terms of a post-geographical or existential vision nor reduced to waypoints on a political-allegorical map.

This foregrounding of a finite materiality, a sheer there-ness that gestures towards an ontological precariousness beyond redemption, is recorded by Jim Finley, a filmmaker who resides with Elster in the hope of making a documentary and who narrates the story:

He spoke in fragments, opening and closing his mind. I could watch him being driven insistently inward. The desert was clairvoyant, this is what he'd always believed, that the landscape unravels and reveals, it knows future as well as past. But now it made him feel enclosed [...], hemmed in, pressed tight. We stood outside and felt the desert bearing in. Sterile thunder seemed to hang over the hills, stormlight washing towards us. A hundred childhoods, he said obscurely. Meaning what, the thunder maybe, a soft evocative rumble sounding down the years (2010: 109).

The strange mix of sterility and childhood, death and birth, recalls Pozzo's famous sense of time in *Waiting for Godot*: 'Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! Its abominable. When! When! [...]. They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more' (Beckett 2006: 83). In a section of epigrammatic dialogue, typical of DeLillo's late works and reminiscent of the stylised dialogue of Beckett's plays, Elster calls this mortal time 'the usual terror' (2010: 56). It is offset with a sense of transcendent time, the 'deep time, epochal time' (2010: 91) of the omega point, but this accommodation with mortality and finitude doesn't last for long.

Like *Godot*, the temporal and the spatial are bound together in *Point Omega*. In Beckett's play the spatial organisation of the stage and the (non)movement of the characters are inseparable from the themes of decay and stasis prompted by the wasted landscape (represented by the Alberto Giacometti inspired tree). DeLillo draws on the inseparability of medium and message by engaging with film, an incredibly important reference across his works. The novella is framed by two scenes that feature an anonymous figure narrating his experience viewing a 24-hour video installation of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* at the New York Museum of Modern Art. Massively dilating the time of the narrative, the installation baffles the tourists and other museum

attendants, including Elster and Finley (we learn later of Finley's early attempt to recruit Elster for his project by courting him at the museum). Our anonymous narrator of these two scenes notes their appearance: 'They walked out. What, bored? They went past the guard and were gone. They had to think in words. This was their problem' (12–13). When the narrative proper begins, in one of his first interviews with Finley, Elster discusses his work for the Pentagon in terms of creating 'new realities overnight' (36). The technique he uses is that of the poetic form of the Haiku: 'Haiku means nothing beyond what it is. [...] It's the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count. I wanted a haiku war' (37). Massively important to the revitalising modernist projects of Eliot and Pound, the haiku form promises the union of sensory and intelligible, a redemption of poetic language in the modern era. Yet the success of this union also foretells a more sinister and sceptical end, for the union of sensible and intelligible is also a collapse of the distinction. The materiality of the signifier replaces the materiality of the world, a world that we can no longer perceive except through its absence. Shortly after learning of the discovery of a knife following Jessie's disappearance, Finley is overwhelmed by what he describes as such an 'enveloping nothing': 'The silence was complete. I'd never felt a stillness such as this, never such enveloping nothing. But such nothing that *was*, that spun around me, or she did, Jessie, warm to the touch' (118). Like his other late work, *Point Omega* is a text permeated with a Beckettian sense of the ineffable; of the irreducibility of world to word. In Beckett's works, this irreducibility is perhaps ideally figured by the tree (which sprouts either four or five leaves between acts) in *Waiting for Godot*. Like the other suggestive motifs that emerge in the play, the tree is both a symbol and it is a failure of symbolisation, or more specifically, it is through this failure that it ultimately stands for – or *symbolises* – the irreducibility of the world to the word. As Beckett notes in a 1948 letter to Duthuit: 'I shall never know clearly enough how far space and time are unutterable, and me caught up somewhere in there' (2011b: 98). Like Beckett, DeLillo's sense of the physical remnant, the material and bodily remainder, is inscribed into the materiality of the text itself. Just as *Godot* highlights its own textuality by comically addressing its own audience, DeLillo's text reflexively interrogates its own place within a prior history of (cross-media) representation, inviting us as an audience to foster a vigilance attuned to more than mere narrative progression.

This vigilance is captured by the two scenes of the video installation that bookend the novella, which suggest a strong late modernist connection between a sense of irreducible materiality and the mediatic status of the art object. It is notable, given the topic of Beckett's influence, the central role of performance art in DeLillo's late works. Examples include the installation in *Point Omega* but also the titular body artist of *The Body Artist*, the falling performance artist in *Falling Man* and the artist-prankster

who interrupts Eric Packer's journey through the city in *Cosmopolis*. Taking a cue from Beckett's innovative dramatic works of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the television play *Quad* (1981), performance and conceptual artists of the late twentieth-century have borrowed greatly from Beckett's *oeuvre*.⁴ Drawing on Beckett's anti-mimetic legacy, conceptual artists imply the experience of time, space and matter without relying on their direct representation in objects. On the one hand, then, *Point Omega* invites a symbolic logic that refracts the shock and awe of the war on terror through the exacerbated, visceral realness of *Psycho*'s slowed down movie reel but, on the other hand, it achieves the same kind of scepticism that marks Beckett's *Watt*, where we read in the appendix: 'no symbols where none intended' (2009b: 223). DeLillo's eloquent dovetailing of the personal and epochal, of late life and late empire, is not interested in leaving us with a representational lesson but rather in confronting us with the very material mystery of 'the strange bright fact that breathes and eats out there, the thing that's not the movies' (2010: 19).

The blurring of historical present and ontological present is reported directly in the narration in *Point Omega*: 'The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters the body. All the man's grand themes funnelled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not' (124). DeLillo's earlier novella, *The Body Artist*, also invites a suggestive reading with regard to Beckett's legacy and draws on a similarly etiolated 'nowhere' setting, more mindscape than landscape. Set largely in an 'old frame house' (2001a: 10) by the coast, the story follows Lauren Hartke as she grapples with the traumatic loss of her husband, Rey Robles, another filmmaker who is described in his obituary as a 'poet of lonely places' (25). Hartke is the titular body artist and the novella, narrated in the third-person but heavily focalised from her perspective, records her fragmented mental state in terms of a peculiar bleeding together of the interior and exterior that appears to situate embodied experience as a kind of ineliminable and unmediated reality, a bulwark against the ravages of traumatised memory. The narration also records her existential disconnection by mirroring the dislocation of linear time that she feels. This is especially associated with Mr. Tuttle, a spectral character who appears after Robles' suicide and who has the uncanny capacity to dissimulate his voice. Reflecting on these bizarre apparitions, the narration records: 'Maybe this man experiences another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after [...]. She thought maybe he lived in a kind of time that had no narrative quality' (68). This other kind of time, one in which – to follow *Malone Dies*, we are 'flayed alive by memory' (2010b: 97) – manifests in his peculiar paratactical speech:

⁴ For an account of this borrowing, see Tubridy (2014).

Coming and going I am leaving. I will go and come. Leaving has come to me. We all, shall all, will be left. Because I am here and where. And I will go or not or never. And I have seen what I will see. If I am where I will be. Because nothing comes between me' (2001a: 78–79).

Tuttle's fragmented logorrhoea echoes the disembodied voices that culminate in Beckett's *The Unnamable*. The mix of mobility and inertia, across spatial and temporal planes, even more resonantly recalls the short prose work *Stirrings Still*, which is itself about the experience of stupefying loss: 'One night as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go. One night or day. For when his own light went out he was not left in the dark' (2009: 107). Beckett's prose, like Tuttle's speech, is both minimalist and dense, rhetorically performing the fatigue of bereavement. For Hartke, ultimately, Tuttle is a figure 'who violates the limits of the human' (2001a: 108).

For Laura Di Prete, *The Body Artist* captures 'voice and body function[ing] synergistically to force trauma into representation, [...] to explore viable forms of working through' (2005: 484). Yet the Beckettian emphasis on a stirring stillness, or a stilled stirring, an ineluctable divisibility at the heart of the self – between past and present, 'here and where' – suggests rather a work that refuses the reduction of trauma to the kind of therapeutic closure afforded by the work of representation. *The Body Artist* attests to the profoundly unrepresentable nature of trauma, the resolution of which, the ideal state of an unmediated existence, if possible is only so in the negative (through a total loss of self). One recurring image in particular emphasises the text's suspicion towards representation. One of the rituals Hartke adopts in the wake of her late husband's death is to regularly view a 24-hour video feed of a road in Kotka, Finland: 'It was best in dead times. It emptied her mind and made her feel the deep silence of other places' (2001a: 38). The Kotka scenes transplant the emptied spaces of Beckett's works into the virtual non-space of the digital live stream, inviting retrospectively a sense of both authors' self-reflexive awareness that no matter how pared back our reality might be there is no escape from mediation. In Hartke's performance piece, which closes the narrative, this site of mediation is the body. Yet in an interview that comprises the penultimate chapter she suggests a proximity with the disembodied and inhuman Tuttle: 'I am Lauren. But less and less' (123). This casts into doubt embodied transformation as a source of redemption, a mastery of internal otherness through external performance rather than compulsive repetition. As Leo Bersani argues: 'Experience may be overwhelming, practically impossible to absorb, but it is assumed – and this is especially true in much encyclopaedic fiction – that the work of art has the authority to master the presumed raw material of experience in a manner that

uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material' (1990: 1). Against this 'culture of redemption' – which perhaps marks some of DeLillo's own earlier writings and their panoramic ambitions, notably *Underworld* –, the late modernism of *The Body Artist* suggests no deep internal subjectivity that is not always already mediated by its outside, by language, time and memory.

Inhumanity in *Falling Man* and *Cosmopolis*

In *Falling Man* and *Cosmopolis* we find a similar juxtaposition, and incongruity, of ontological finitude and historical contemporary, as each of these novels attempts more pointedly to register the trauma of 9/11 and the crisis of American empire in the twenty-first century. In 'In the Ruins of the Future', DeLillo suggests that 9/11 is at least in part a product of an imminent structural shortcoming, a product of the failure of the utopian promise of American-led globalisation. In both works, he draws again on a Beckettian sense of dislocation to explore the worldlessness that is a product of new 'zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every break of the planet's living billions' (2003: 24). And in both fictions the towers themselves represent the spectrality of the neoliberal regime, making present an absence that haunts the city. In *Cosmopolis* Eric Packer claims: 'They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren't here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it' (2003: 36). In *Falling Man* a character suggests: 'You build a thing like that so that you can see it come down' (2007: 116). Much like the 'nowhere' setting of *Point Omega*, DeLillo's depiction of the global city of New York in these two works is both fundamentally dislocated but also specifically American, an estrangement from within that recalls Jean Baudrillard's description of the 'American desert': 'All that is cold and dead in desertification or social enucleation rediscovers its contemplative form here in the heat of the desert. [...] The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form' (1988: 5–6). Simultaneously critical and mesmerised, Baudrillard's vision of American postmodernity reframes the desert not only as an exhaustion of social relations but as an arena for their potential re-inscription. DeLillo's writing in the ruins of the future also suggests a comparable ruin of writing, a harnessing of the desert not as a means to redeem the present but as a space for producing what he terms a 'counternarrative' (2001b: n.p.).⁵

⁵ DeLillo writes: 'There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space' (2001b n.p.).

Falling Man engages this fraught task by refusing the epic scale that might be considered appropriate for an explicitly 9/11 novel. The action focuses on a middle-class family and charts the progress of post-traumatic recovery. The eponymous falling man is a performance artist who re-enacts the event, 'those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump' (2007: 33). Suspending and freezing the ephemeral acts of those who jumped, the falling man replicates the structure of trauma as an irruption of the past into the present. This doubled time, a Beckettian stirring stillness, establishes a dislocation and repetition at the heart of self that is anticipated in the novel's opening scene. Capturing the impressions of Keith Neudecker during the attack, the first chapter opens: 'It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night' (3). In the twilight effect established by the ruins of the towers DeLillo's prose offers a murky vision of a disarticulated world, an absence of partition or border that would distinguish us, separate us, that would make us whole. Abandoned to the world, DeLillo's vision emerges in contradistinction to the sharp binary of 'Us and Them' (2001b: n.p.) that he associates with the civilisational struggle of the terrorists. Much of the novel unfolds in private spaces, rooms of bourgeois apartments and discrete hideouts. As Boxall writes: 'This aesthetic of isolation in the room that runs through DeLillo's work is one of his most visible inheritances from Beckett' (2009: 184). DeLillo's fictionalised terrorist, Hammad, is told that: 'A man can stay forever in a room, doing blueprints, eating and sleeping, even praying, even plotting, but at a certain point he has to get out' (2007: 79). In the dramatic final section, which revisits the scene of the attack, the collision of worlds, of the past represented by the terrorists and the present of the global city, is framed as a collision of perspectives as the narrative focalisation pivots mid-sentence from Hammad to Keith:

A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. He found himself walking in a wall. He didn't drop the telephone until he hit the wall. (239)

In this merging of spatial and temporal, of East and West, past and present, we have, as Boxall argues, 'an extraordinarily intimate and unboundaried coming together of them and us, of self and other' (2009: 186).

This unboundaried aesthetic, however, hinges on a fundamental ambivalence. The space of merging is also the space in which death enters life. The novella's ethical vision

is not thus affirmative but depends on a failure to imagine. This is a negative vision which, like in Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, fundamentally pins the self's (dis)articulation to both onward progress and fundamental loss, a dynamic epitomised by the reversibility of value suggested in the palindrome on/no: 'On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on' (2009: 81). As the text proceeds in this paratactic mode, the aporetic pursuit of failing better becomes intrinsic to the narrative economy; any isolation of 'best' or 'worst' is subjected to a constitutive contingency since every negation, or 'no', constitutes yet a further saying and hence a going 'on'. As the text makes clear: the '[l]east [is] never to be naught' (95). Rather than a cosmopolitan merging of worlds, DeLillo's vision resembles what *Worstward Ho* terms the 'boundless bounded' (83), a paradoxical sense of the present not as a site of consummation following the therapeutic purgation of traumatic memory but as a site of a perpetual stirring in which death and life are inseparable.

DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* similarly juxtaposes a conjoined vision of ontological finitude and global contemporary. DeLillo's first fictional work to appear after the 9/11 attacks, the novel was seen as a failure to address the scale of the events. Set in a single day, and constituting an Odyssey-like journey through the city, *Cosmopolis* nods to modernist predecessors, notably Joyce's *Ulysses*, but also points to their fundamental exhaustion in its own minimalist mode and scope. Tracking the multi-billionaire Eric Packer's journey through Manhattan to get a haircut, the novella's forward momentum is continually interrupted both by a series of security risks (anti-globalist protests are erupting throughout the city) and DeLillo's subordinating of action to stylised dialogue and theoretical rumination. Sustained sections of essayistic narration record the flux-like and discombobulating nature of the postmodern contemporary that recalls the cadence and thematic concerns of his earlier fictions: 'We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become a kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment' (2003: 80). The image of the mass mind rapt and enthralled to mediated information summons similar images of the postmodern sublime across DeLillo's oeuvre. The text also relates the collapse of the boundaries of medium and message to prior modes of representation, notably abstract expressionism. Epitomised by the work of Mark Rothko in *Cosmopolis*, Packer's financial speculation to acquire the Rothko chapel suggests an affinity between modernist autonomy – the severing of art and life, word and world – and a market rationality that is reflected subjectively in the form of Packer's warped time-sense, his sense of living in an eternal present, an 'omnipresent' (77). As the narration ironically records: 'There's no more danger in the new' (8).

Yet if *Cosmopolis* follows DeLillo's career-long effort to document the end of history, it also offers a re-calibration of how to think about and *through* this sense of ending. As Alenka Zupančič writes, Francis Fukuyama's famous account of liberal capitalism as the end of history also marks a Beckettian sense of ceaseless ending: 'What it marks is, quite the contrary, the impossibility to end: namely, the impossibility to end capitalism, or the impossibility for capitalism as we know it to come to an end' (2020: 833). As DeLillo speculates in his 9/11 essay, if the terrorists desire a collapse of the temporal boundaries between past and the present they do so as a response to capitalism's collapsing of the temporal boundaries between future and present. DeLillo thematises this second collapse in terms of security. In this context, Packer's armoured limousine and security personnel symbolise an attempt to master the future: to eliminate any possible threat of danger through anticipatory action. As Johannes Voelz argues, *Cosmopolis* is invested in describing this state of living in the future: 'As life becomes entrenched in the virtuality of the future, the future ironically begins to recover its pre-modern function as sheer fate' (2015: 511). Counter to the parallel theodicies of Islamic fundamentalism and the global market, *Cosmopolis* poses the material finitude of the body. In the final section Packer comes face to face with his principal antagonist, a disgruntled and solipsistic former employee going by the pseudonym Benno Levin. Levin has been issuing death threats throughout the narrative, and is an archetypal Beckettian man in a room. This section marks the apogee of Packer's increasing attention to his own embodiment and of the novel's suggestion of an alternative existential orientation towards the present. In his frustrated confrontation with Levin, Packer – in an apparent attempt to breakthrough to the 'real' – shoots himself in the hand:

The pain was the world. The mind could not find a place outside it. He could hear the pain, staticky, in his hand and wrist. He closed his eyes again, briefly. He could feel himself contained in the dark but also just beyond it, on the lighted outer surface, the other side, belonged to both, feeling both, being himself and seeing himself. (201).

Here the attempt to access the real and escape the virtual appears to backfire; this world of pain is visceral but still fundamentally mediated, a sound rather than a presence. Like Beckett's unnameable narrator in *The Unnamable*, Packer is constituted by an intrusion of the external into the internal. But rather than through the 'words of others' (Beckett 2010a: 25), Packer observes his own death through the mediated image projected on his high-tech watch: 'This is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound' (209).

In this final orientation towards death the novel suggests an alternative to the state of arrested ending that marks the speculative logic of both security and financialisation. Rather than project a future of alternative possibilities, DeLillo underscores the double-bind that marks temporal existence: that threat and desire both hinge on a future that cannot be predicated in advance. Through the dramatisation of traumatised subjectivity and bodily danger, DeLillo highlights how the attempt to foreclose the contingency of the present through global terrorism or financial speculation is actually an attempt to secure an *immediate* present, a present unthreatened by the possibility of loss and death but also – and paradoxically – absent of the very openness through which the possibility of change and life also arises. In other words, to overcome the spectral logic of death that haunts the capitalist marketplace in *Cosmopolis*, and that finds its ideological counterpart in the bid for immortality that the terrorists make in *Falling Man*, death must be incorporated as intrinsic to life. Contrary to the eternal present of postmodernity, and the presence of the eternal made manifest by theocratic fundamentalists, DeLillo's late works follow Beckett in issuing a sense of the present as unredeemable and inconsolable. We might term this a sense of infinite finitude, a perpetual stirring stillness that we find encoded across the *NoHow On* trilogy, as for example in *Company*: 'Might not the voice be improved. Made more companionable. Say changing now for some time past though no tense in the dark in that dim mind. All at once over and in train and to come' (2009a: 21).

Coda

Like DeLillo's other late works explored above, *Cosmopolis* is underwritten with a late modernist sense that the linguistic medium of the literary form itself is insufficient for conveying the chaos of the contemporary. Accordingly, these late works betray their Beckettian inheritance by pinning their success to a necessary failure of direct representation, a failure observed in their own hermeneutic ambiguity and resistance to closure. This failure is premised on a fundamental repudiation of what is mockingly outlined, in *Falling Man*, as the idea of the 'major project': 'timely, newsworthy, even visionary, at least in the publisher's planned catalog copy – a book detailing a series of interlocking global forces that appeared to converge at an explosive point in time and space' (139). It is only through the ruin of this writing that we can muster a suitable means of writing in the ruins. In a letter dating from his tour of Nazi Germany just prior to the catastrophic world-events of the 1940s, Beckett writes:

I am not interested in a "unification" of the historical chaos any more than I am in the "clarification" of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphisation

of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know. Meier says the background is more important than the foreground, the causes than the effects, the causes than their representatives and opponents. I say the background and the causes are an inhuman and incomprehensible machinery and venture to wonder what kind of appetite it is that can be appeased by the modern animism that consists in rationalising them. (quoted in Knowlson 1997: 244)

This attitude finds expression, too, in DeLillo's latest publication, the short work *The Silence*. Written during the covid-19 pandemic, *The Silence* verges on allegory but refuses to rise to the bait. Privileging the flotsam and foreground, the text avoids any direct reference to the pandemic, and DeLillo's pandemic novel – which includes an essay on the author's experiences of the event in New York – suggests that the apocalypse may not come about with a bang but rather with a lingering whimper, a felt silence perceived as the presence of an absence. On the verge of what may be a new World War or the collapse of civilisation, the narrative remains steadfastly indoors and ends with a character staring into the blank screen of a disconnected television. If the short work has a mantra it appears on the penultimate page: 'The world is everything, the individual nothing. Do we all understand that?' (2020: 115). Echoing a lifetime's suspicion of liberal individualism and self-expression that is only exacerbated in these late works, DeLillo's late modernism renders vain our efforts to bridge the individual chaos and the historical chaos. We are condemned to making, as Beckett once wrote, simply yet another stain on silence.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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