

The Loss of Language, The Language of Loss: Thinking With DeLillo On Terror and Mourning

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This essay is a philosophical reading of Don DeLillo's novel, The Body Artist, and his essay, "In the Ruins of the Future." Focusing on the issues of loss, mourning, and terror after the attacks of September the 11th, I argue that DeLillo gives a picture of mourning as something that occurs through a loss of language. This loss does not end language; instead, it occurs through language.

Silence may only be the tying of the tongue, not the relinquishing of words, but gagging on them. True silence is the untying of the tongue, letting its words go.

—Stanley Cavell (44)

I.

What more is there to say? Is there anything left that is unsaid? Time has passed now, almost two years as of this writing. Have we not said all there is to say about the events that have come to be known simply as "September the 11th"? The most obvious (and perhaps the most responsible) answer is: Of course not. A tragedy of this magnitude is inexhaustible in our minds. It constantly produces thought, emotion, and concern. How could we not continue talking about September the 11th? Could we allow ourselves to stop thinking about it? Is there not some obligation to pursue insight if not understanding in the face of horror?

Yes, but . . . there is the lingering suspicion, the disturbing thought, that maybe we have said it all, or at the very least, that we are repeating ourselves. All the stories, the condolences, the expressions of shock, anger, and sadness—each individually important—are bleeding together into an undifferentiated sentiment that is unbearably light. Such a situation is not exactly a moral failure—the inability to speak properly about a tragedy. It is due, in part, to the mediated culture that we (those who find ourselves in America) live. Through the "endless nightmare feedback loop of jumbo jet, fire bomb, and towers falling down" (Leonard), the patriotic propaganda

put forth by our leaders (not to mention the unjustified conflict in Iraq), and the kitschy, cultural products displayed to convince us that we really are a united nation under the watchful eye of a benevolent god, we have assimilated into ordinariness an event that should be inassimilable. From Joan Didion:

As if overnight, the irreconcilable event had been made manageable, reduced to the sentimental, to protective talismans, totems, garlands or garlic, repeated pieties that would come to seem in some ways as destructive as the event itself. (54)

Thomas de Zengotita expresses similar thoughts:

How often did you hear, how often did you say, “Since the events of 9/11”? A new idiom had been deposited in the language, approaching the same plane of habituality as “by the way” or “on the other hand.” And in the process we got past it after all. Six months or so was all it took. The holidays came and went, and—if you were not personally stricken by the terror of September—chances are you got over it. You moved on. (33)

I do not intend to demean those who have not moved on, those who lost loved ones in the World Trade Center or the Pentagon, those who on that terrible Tuesday found themselves covered in ash. On the contrary, I wish to respectfully emulate those people who just can't get over it.

Which brings me to the question: What is it that rest of us have been mourning through the re-run simulacra of tragedy? Certainly the strangers who died. No one should make light of the straightforward and unequivocal loss of so many lives. I would like to make the awkward suggestion, however, that we also mourn the event itself. The event has been absorbed into its own representations. Its impact has been muted into a news item so familiar it seems familial. Our ability to suffer the event has been lost. In other words, we mourn for not mourning. This inability to mourn, it seems to me, stems from the language we so frequently use to talk about September the 11th. For one of the things that seems to characterize such language is its thin excess. We cannot stop talking about this tragedy, but what we say is so often banal. There seems to me no genuine loss of language (even when a news anchor claims to be at a loss for words). Without a loss of

language, I would think, there is no mourning. What I mean by this is that for our mourning to reach a level of intensity and value that goes beyond the merely reactionary, our words should be as broken as we are, instead of being things that distance us from our brokenness.

II.

It is in difficult situations, of course, that we often turn to others for words. Martin Amis has observed how since September the 11th many novelists have publicly written about the events:

An unusual number of novelists chose to write some journalism about September 11—as many journalists more or less tolerantly noted When the novelists went into newsprint . . . , there was a murmur to the effect that they were now being obliged to snap out of their solipsistic daydreams: to attend, as best they could, to the facts of life. For politics—once defined as “what’s going on”—suddenly filled the sky. True, novelists don’t normally write about what’s going on; they write about what’s not going on. (15-16)

In the vacuum of reason created by terror, one of the “comforting” voices to emerge is that of the novelist (who, of course, competes with all other speechmakers eager to publicly understand the terrorist strikes). Wrenched out of their solipsism, as Amis suggests, like deep sea divers abruptly jerked from the water, storymakers have entered the game of commentary and condolence. This says more, I think, about us readers than novelists. It bespeaks of the need for words in the face of horror.

Don DeLillo is one of the prescient voices for which we, readers, have longed. His literary vision has for some time been aware of the braiding of consumer capitalism and terror. Jeffrey MacIntyre writes: “[DeLillo has] worried about a world in which spectacle and terror would achieve totemic significance in the everyday lives of Americans In light of the events of Sept. 11, Don DeLillo’s America may assist many readers in making sense of a newly uncertain world.” A writer who flirts with anonymity, like his contemporary Thomas Pynchon and one of his own characters Bill Gray, DeLillo as thinker (which is what he insists a writer is) has become uncannily pertinent “since the events of September the 11th.”

For one thing, he has fictionalized about terror long before it domi-

nated the headlines and the bottom portion of the CNN screen. In his novel *Players* (1977), it is a group trying to blow up the New York Stock Exchange; in *The Names* (1982) it is an alphabet-obsessed cult in the Mediterranean who murder people according to the patterns formed by the letters of their names; in *Mao II* (1991) it is Lebanese Marxists who demonstrate their existence to the world by kidnapping and torturing writers. Terror, however, is not simply an object DeLillo contemplates or a spicy element he adds to his plots. He seems to have an eerie sympathy with terror. Not that he condones it, but he seems to think *with* it. He voluntarily follows the flow of terroristic thought and feels comfortable with that territory (while protesting the actions it inspires). If we are to believe his characters, DeLillo seems ever so slightly envious of terror. Bill Gray, the reclusive writer in *Mao II* who appears to be a cross between Pynchon, J.D. Salinger, and DeLillo himself, gives this speech:

For some time now I've had the feeling that novelists and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed. The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated Only the terrorist stands outside. The culture hasn't figured out how to assimilate him. (156-7)

These lines have the feeling of a rant, and one can only speculate that DeLillo shares their sentiment. Furthermore, they seem to romanticize, not only terrorists, but *especially* novelists. Have novelists ever really exerted a noticeable influence on mass culture? The problem they diagnose is “culture as anesthetic”—how the signs, voices, and images that permeate American culture produce a drowsy comfort (Zengotita). According to Bill Gray, terror is the surest remedy for this condition. Just before one is likely to think that Gray (or DeLillo) has reached a point of amorality, however, he draws a sharp line between the artist and terrorist:

It's pure myth, the terrorist as solitary outlaw. These groups are backed by repressive governments. They're perfect little totalitarian states.

They carry the old wild-eyed vision, total destruction and total order Even if I could see the need for absolute authority, my work would draw me away. The experience of my own consciousness tells me how total control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny my efforts to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self-argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think its mine Do you know why I believe in the novel? It's a democratic shout. (159)

It is as if in DeLillo's vision novelists and terrorists play the same game, but writers know that the game, like all games, is a sublimation of violence: no one must die to fulfill a novel. And if a novel is a "democratic shout," with its characters eluding the control of their creator, what would it mean for it to be fulfilled? In other words, where is the program for the social change (or disruption) it would provoke? This passage implies that whatever political effects narrative literature might have, they cannot be calculated.

In addition to terrorism itself, there is also the World Trade Center: DeLillo has spent some time pondering it. In *Players*, Pammy Wynant works for the Grief Management Council whose offices are in the south tower of the Trade Center: "It was her original view that the World Trade Center was an unlikely headquarters for an outfit such as this. But she changed her mind as time passed. Where else would you stack all this grief?" (18). The suggestion is that, not only is the World Trade Center a modern architectural marvel, but it is also an ironic repository (or a sign) for what we mourn. Additionally, in DeLillo's imagination the towers possess none of the permanence to which they aspired prior to their destruction: "To Pammy the towers didn't seem permanent. They remained concepts, no less transient for all their bulk than some routine distortion of light" (19).

Beyond these minor reflections, however, is the cover art to DeLillo's *magnum opus*, *Underworld* (1997). The front cover has a dim black-and-white representation of the World Trade towers covered at the top by a cloudy mist. Below this is an almost all-black outline of a church spire with a cross on top. This religious symbol seems to be pressing into the towers from below. Above it and beside the towers is the outline of a bird. Perhaps it is inappropriate to think of DeLillo as the "author"¹ of this image; nevertheless, it is suggestive. The Twin Towers dominate the picture just as they once dominated the Manhattan skyline. Yet, the cloudy mist at the top of the picture renders that dominance ambivalent. Additionally, the shadowy steeple lies at the bottom of the cover, but it appears to be projecting into the towers,

as if they were trying to press the steeple into the ground but cannot. The implications of this image could be manifold. Is religion the ever-present force that lies beneath the gloss of modernity? Is there an “underworld” that modernity must beat down? Is such an underworld dark only by virtue of its exclusion from consciousness?

III.

It is ironic that DeLillo’s most recent novel at the time of the WTC and Pentagon attacks is his most lyrical; that when real life starts more and more to resemble some of the elements of his fiction, he goes personal and writes a work dealing with emotions and loss. *The Body Artist* (2001) tells the story of how Lauren Hartke, a performance artist, copes with the grief caused by the suicide of her husband, Rey Robles. A short piece of only 124 pages, the book mentions virtually no global or political conditions; everything in it revolves around Lauren and her grief. Why this turn toward the inward and personal in DeLillo’s oeuvre?

What may seem like an evasion or exhaustion on DeLillo’s part—an attempt to write something utterly new—seems to me strangely right. This rightness has little to do with the evolution of a writer’s technique or interests, things that scholars often track. With this work, DeLillo brings forth a compelling and novel portrait of mourning at precisely the time when we are mourning so badly. This terse, little book implies that mourning requires a loss of language.

A loss of language is not merely a loss of words. It is not silence. Silence would be unbearable. Furthermore, a novel, no matter how terse, is a collection of words. DeLillo does not advocate silence in the face of tragedy. *The Body Artist* presents a loss of language through language. This loss is first manifest in the speech of an autistic vagrant.

Lauren and Rey, newlyweds but not young, rent a musty summer house somewhere on the New England coastline. One morning after breakfast Rey drives to New York City and kills himself with a handgun in the apartment of his most recent ex-wife. Of course, Lauren is traumatized. This is the reader’s assumption. She must be traumatized, but she does not show it. No wailing, weeping, anger, or depression. We read Rey’s obituary, but we see no funeral. Lauren just returns to the rental, a house that possesses only four month’s-worth of memories. She makes schedules, cleans surfaces, and becomes addicted to watching a webcam of a highway near Kotka,

Finland. She likes it best when the road is empty. She disregards friends who counsel her that returning to the house alone is unhealthy, offering no reason behind what seems to be her emotional masochism. It's as though she has nowhere else to be.

It turns out, however, that she is not alone. By tracking bumps and creaking noises, she discovers in an abandoned third floor bedroom a near-featureless old man wearing only his underwear. Confirming the enigmatic signs she had noticed in the previous weeks—an unrecognizable hair in the food, noises in the walls—the stranger poses no threat. He hardly notices his discovery, and Lauren shows no fright or even surprise. She cannot figure out how this visitor got into the house and how long he has been there. What is even more remarkable about him, however, is what he says.

The stranger speaks in clear, articulated English, but his sentences are gibberish: “It is not able (43) The trees are some of them (44) Talk to me. I am talking (46).” His speech lacks context, and he barely seems conscious of Lauren’s presence. Since he cannot respond directly to her questions, she names him Mr. Tuttle, after a biology teacher she had in high school. Lauren soon realizes that there is something incredible about Mr. Tuttle’s talk. His speech is not simply nonsense. Instead, it seems to be the symptom of a consciousness completely stuck in the present. Mr. Tuttle shows no awareness of a past or future. He is completely present. He lacks the grammatical structures that produce an identity:

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, a way to enjoy the savor of the honey-coated toast she watches him eat.

She thought maybe he lived in a kind of time that had no narrative quality His future is unnamed. It is simultaneous somehow with the present This is a man who remembers the future. (64-5, 77, 100)

Later, Lauren expands her thoughts on Mr. Tuttle’s consciousness by meditating on the word *continuum*:

Nice word. What does it mean?

She thought it meant a continuous thing, a continuous whole, and the only way to distinguish one part from another, this from that,

now from then, is by making arbitrary divisions.

This is exactly what [Mr. Tuttle] doesn't know how to do

But it can't be true that he drifts from one reality to another, independent of the logic of time. This is not possible. You are made out of time. This is the force who tells you who you are. Close your eyes and feel it. It is time that defines your existence. (91-92)

Mr. Tuttle—who we are told has a “foundling quality” (43), seems to have come from cyberspace (45) and looks as if at any moment he might levitate (45)—does not appear to be human.

In addition to being metaphysically peculiar, Mr. Tuttle's speech has a much deeper meaning for Lauren: her dead husband, Rey, is somehow present in this stranger's talk. Mr. Tuttle says things that Rey had said to Lauren, and when he repeats Rey's speech he does so in Rey's very own voice, as if he were a tape recorder who had followed Rey around, or even a medium in contact, not with the dead, but with the living past:

[I]t was Rey's voice she was hearing. The representation was close, the accent and dragged vowels, the intimate differences, the articulations produced in one vocal apparatus and not another, things she'd known in Rey's voice, and only Rey's She followed what he said, word for word, but had to search for the context. The speech rambled and spun. He was talking about cigarette brands, Players and Gitanes, I'd walk a mile for a Camel, and then she heard Rey's, the bell-clap report of Rey's laughter, clear and spaced, and this did not come from a tape recorder This was not some communication with the dead. It was Rey alive in the course of a talk he'd had with her, in this room, not long after they'd come here. She was sure of this Rey is alive now in this man's mind, in his mouth and body (61, 87)

Lauren's mourning takes the form of language, an attachment to Mr. Tuttle's language, which is itself virtually detached from any context. It is as if she mourns in spite of herself, stumbling upon a vagrant from another world who speaks in a tongue that knows no tense but brings to presence her dead husband. Lauren has tape recorder sessions with Mr. Tuttle where she tries to get him to “Do Rey,” as if she were making a breathing memento.

Lauren has to discover her mourning. Like Mr. Tuttle, it has a foundling quality. Indeed, it is this stranger's speech that allows for her grieving:

“[S]he could not miss Rey, could not consider his absence, the loss of Rey, without thinking along the margins of Mr. Tuttle.” (82) But his language is not that of memory and commemoration. His talk is a nonsense that flows by coincidence into Lauren’s pain.

Mr. Tuttle’s speech initiates a recognition of loss for Lauren, but also is itself a loss:

I am doing. This yes that. Say some words (62)
 Talk to me. I am talking (46)
 I know him where he was (62)
 Somehow. What is somehow (63)
 It is not able (65)
 But you know. I am living (69)
 Leaving has come to me (74)
 Leave into leaving (81)
 In when it comes (81)
 Then when it comes to me (80)
 I will leave the moment from the moment (74)
 The word for moonlight is moonlight (82)

Like a language poem that refuses to stop, the stranger’s sayings lack meaning, that thing lurking beyond words that we desperately seek to justify them. Drifting between tenses and realities, his words are anchored by no context or intentionality. His speech is empty, yet it resonates with a loss that by herself Lauren cannot feel. Somehow (“Somehow. What is somehow?”-56), Mr. Tuttle’s talk is a loss of language that occurs within language. His words lack that which we frequently take to be essential: communicative meaning. But that does not matter for Lauren.

Gilles Deleuze describes such a loss within language as stuttering. According to him, a writer is a “*stutterer in language*.”:

He makes the language as such stutter: an affective and intensive language, and no longer the affectation of one who speaks. (107)

For Deleuze, stuttering or stammering is a way of describing the “poetic comprehension of language” (109), a way of seeing language as more than a means for a speaker (self) to deliver a message. When language begins to stutter, when it “trembles from head to toe” (109), it becomes material,

quasi-physical, and thereby approaches within itself its own negation. In other words, a stuttering language paradoxically creates silence. Silence may be the other of language, but it is not the opposite of language. Language and silence co-implicate each other, but in a language that plods through its own stammerings and vibrations, the close relationship between the two is made clear. In other words, silence is not necessarily the absence of words. Silence “appears” when words refuse to be the messenger boys for consciousness. In the philosopher’s own words:

When a language is so strained that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer . . . then language in its entirety reaches the limit that marks its outside and makes it confront silence. When language is strained in this way, language in its entirety is submitted to a pressure that makes it fall silent. (113)

It is helpful here to picture the image within Deleuze’s thought. When one stutters or stammers one cannot deliberately direct one’s speech. The sounds from one’s mouth do not fully obey the will. To murmur is to utter something that can be heard but not comprehended. It is sound as presence instead of message. In all of these cases language occurs, but it is not a language that satisfies consciousness. Furthermore, it is a language that approaches its own limits, its own outside; it is a language that creates silence.

Mr. Tuttle’s speech is a stammering silence that allows Lauren to mourn. It is a loss of language that is also the language of loss, but the vagrant’s peculiar way of speaking is not the only form of stuttering in DeLillo’s novel. For Deleuze, stuttering is not only an occurrence within writing, it is also a kind of writing. Therefore, it is interesting that DeLillo’s narrative itself seems to literally stutter. That is to say, on occasions the words in *The Body Artist* ponder themselves; the novel’s narrative flow becomes interrupted by the brief self-reflection of the language. Words are forgotten, then remembered; meditated on and examined. Single words stimulate moods or even realizations. Here are a few examples:

“I want to say something, but what.” (8)

What’s it called, the lever. She’d pressed down the lever to get his bread to go brown. (9)

She said, "What?" Meaning what did you say, not what did you want to tell me. (9)

The lever sprang or sprung, and he got up and took his toast back to the table (10)

She sat there and finished her tea and thought of what she thought of (24)

Everything is slow and hazy and drained and it all happens around the word *seem*. (31)

"But are you lonely?"

"There ought to be another word for it. Everyone's lonely. This is something else." (39)

Somehow. What is somehow? (63)

His hands were barely out of the water, the sliver of soap, the washcloth bunched. Soap is called a sliver in this figuration. (67-8)

"The word for moonlight is moonlight." (82)

The best things in the house were the plank floor in the kitchen and the oak balustrade on the staircase. Just saying the words. Thinking the words. (93)

This is not what he was supposed to say. (119)

His time was here, his measure or dimension or whatever labored phrase you thought to call it. (121)

There were five birds on the feeder and they all faced outward, away from the food and identically still. She watched them. They weren't looking or listening so much as feeling something, intent and sensing.

All these words are wrong, she thought. (53)

All these words are wrong, if we believe the above text. Which is to say that they are not right. What would it mean for these words (or any words) to be right? Perhaps correctness is not the issue. After all, when we search for the right word, we probably seek an appropriate term, not necessarily an accurate one. But right words are apparently what novelists-turned-commentators have supplied in the wake of September the 11th. DeLillo is, of course, part of this tendency, though he admits his words are wrong. I take the words' wrongness to be fundamental to their condition *as* words. All poets are liars, according to Nietzsche. All language is poetic, according to Emerson and Heidegger. That is to say, words can and do come from anywhere, not simply from a privileged departure spot bound for credible knowledge. I call this anywhere an emptiness, because it seems fertile, or generative, like a fallow field. The stuttering within the above lines brings this emptiness into greater light, exposes it. This exposure, however, does not have the feel of a revelation, especially one given by a deity or a demiurgic author. Instead, it is more like a minor tremor of self-consciousness, akin to the way a loved-one surprises you with an piercing observation about yourself. The words seem to know themselves as words, know the emptiness from which they come, through their stammering and stumbling. We, readers, are privy to this knowledge, and it matters because we are, after all, speakers of words (or, if you follow the Heideggerian line, words speak us). This suggests that we, readers and speakers, are empty, that is to say, generative.

The novel gives a picture of this emptiness. With Mr. Tuttle gone, Lauren approaches the third-floor bedroom where he was first discovered. As she walks toward the room she longs to be in his presence again, but then this desire intermingles with a desire to be again in Rey's presence until the two desires themselves become indistinguishable. The power of this two-fold longing creates the seemingly-legitimate possibility, and even the expectation, that Rey will, in fact, be in that bedroom:

Are you unable to imagine such a thing even when you see it?

Is the thing that's happening so far outside experience that you're forced to make excuses for it, or give it the petty credentials of some misperception?

Is reality too powerful for you?

Take the risk. Believe what you see and hear. It's the pulse of every secret intimation you've ever felt around the edges of your life.

There are two real bodies in a room. (122)

The novel here seems to address Lauren directly, speaking only secondarily to the reader who might be worried that the book is about to cross the line into fantasy or mythology. But neither Rey nor Mr. Tuttle are in the room. The room is empty:

The room was empty when she looked. No one was there. The light was so vibrant she could see the true colors of the walls and floor. She's never seen the walls before. The bed was empty. She'd known it empty all along but was only catching up. (124)

The revelation of the empty room makes the earlier question, "Is reality too powerful for you?" more complex. The question first appears to refer to the possibility that Lauren's lost companions are present in the room. This possibility, if it were to become a reality, would be unexpected and extraordinary. Indeed in the case of Rey, it would amount to a resurrection. But would such a reality be overpowering, as the question implies? Perhaps for the reader. Lauren, however, wants the two men to be in the room. She might not expect it, but she does desire it. Which raises the question to me: Would a reality that conforms to one's desires be all that overwhelming?

The reality that seems all too powerful is the one that is revealed—the empty bedroom. This is expected and ordinary. The dead do not rise again, and the vagrant will not likely find his way back to the house. Such a reality could be overpowering precisely because it is not desired. Somehow a fantastical glimmer of hope emerges and then disappears. Can you stand it, the text seems to ask both Lauren and the reader. To my reading, this is not a simple scene of magical hope followed by disappointment. A powerful, perhaps overpowering, reality is revealed (or observed): Not the resurrected Rey and the prodigal Mr. Tuttle, but the empty room. The room's emptiness allows Lauren to see the walls for the first time as if this perception or the walls themselves are produced (or enhanced) by the emptiness. Perhaps this is the powerful reality to which the text's question refers. Not simply the reality of disappointment, but the reality of the empty room and its floors, walls, and the light falling upon them, all seen as if for the first time. This scene does not strike me as tragic. It might seem like a bad deal, seeing the resonating empty room instead of Rey and Mr. Tuttle. But is there not something given here? Doesn't the room's emptiness have a thickness to it, a presence? Does it not convey an inarticulate sense of value?

Furthermore, the empty room also seems to have some kind of genera-

tive effect on Lauren's own identity:

She walked into the room and went to the window. She opened it. She threw the window open. She didn't know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was. (124)

Two philosophical thoughts seem pertinent here. The first is Heidegger's use of a jug to illustrate his understanding of how emptiness gives rise to a reality. In his essay, "The Thing," Heidegger pursues the question, "What is a thing?" by examining the "thingliness" of a jug. He observes that the jug is what it is, not by virtue of its form, but because of the emptiness it embodies. Were it not for this void that the jug itself creates, the jug would be of no use. Its reality would not be that of a jug:

When we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug. The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material in which it consists, but in the void that holds. (169)

But right after placing such an emphasis on emptiness, Heidegger questions it. He asks if the jug is really empty, and his answer is no. The jug is never *really* empty, not just because it is always at least filled with air (the scientific answer), but more importantly because its emptiness is conjoined with its outpouring. The jug is what it is because it gives, it pours out, and this is possible due to its emptiness. There are echoes of Kant here. The jug's void appears to be the transcendental condition, the condition for the possibility, for its outpouring. And it is its ability to pour, to give, that makes the jug what it is, its thingliness. Hence, by paying attention to this transcendental condition, one can discover the Kantian *Ding an sich* (which Kant says is impossible).

What interests me here is not Heidegger's troubling addiction to ontology (which I take as a pursuit for a truth beyond truths, despite his attention to things), but the braiding of emptiness and fullness. Again, within a Kantian framework, Heidegger's emptiness is a *condition* for fullness, which implies that emptiness is something to be passed through, transcended, in order to get to fullness. This transcendence is contrary to Heidegger's

desire to pay attention to the jug as a thing (it also does not fit well with DeLillo's empty bedroom scene). Exiting from the Kantian vocabulary (and Heidegger's own ontological tendencies), I would describe the jug's emptiness as *generating* its fullness. Emptiness not as an unchanging state, but something like an action or process. If we take this view, the distinction between emptiness and fullness is not completely clear because fullness could not be utterly separate from the action that creates it. If emptiness is a process that gives rise to fullness, where does one begin and the other end? This question suggests the paradox that emptiness is itself a fullness, or in my preferred idiom, a presence. DeLillo's text better illustrates this point. It is through the emptiness of the bedroom that Lauren sees the light, walls, and floor with a new resonance. But in addition to seeing these things, she must also see the emptiness of the room. If Rey and Mr. Tuttle were in the bedroom, you can bet that she would not see the light, walls, and floor. The resonance of these things are not separate from the bedroom's emptiness.

As I have already said, Heidegger directs his meditations on emptiness toward the issue of ontology, the thingliness of a thing, in this case, a jug. DeLillo's scene, as I read it, avoids this issue (or does not acknowledge it as an issue). It does, however, approach Heidegger's ontological concern with Lauren's action after discovering the empty bedroom. She walks in, opens a window, feels the sea on her face, feels time flowing through her body, and hence, experiences (in some sort of enhanced way) her identity. Here this scene gives rise to its second pertinent philosophical thought: time. The bedroom's generative emptiness appears to have something to do with the flow of time. Together, they allow Lauren to know who she is. But this identity produced by time is not a simple sense of self: "I am Lauren. But less and less" (117). To get a sense of how this works, it is necessary to look at another way that Lauren mourns.

Mr. Tuttle's stuttering speech is not the only vehicle for Lauren's mourning. In addition to her interactions with the vagrant, she also prepares and produces a piece of performance art called *Body Time*. In it are several bodies: an elderly Japanese woman gesturing as if in a Noh drama; a naked man desperately trying to speak but unable; a woman in a business suit attempting to hail a cab and constantly checking her watch; Lauren—hair chopped short, skin colorless—performing an intense series of contortions and acrobatics. Projected on a screen behind the performers is an image of an empty highway. Accompanying the piece is the robotic voice of an answering machine announcement. Clearly all of these elements have been part of Lauren's life

since Rey's death, but she insists that the piece is about time:

Maybe the idea is to think time differently Stop time, or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that's living, not painted. When time stops, so do we. We don't stop, we become stripped down, less self-assured. I don't know. In dreams or high fevers or doped up or depressed. Doesn't time seem to slow down or seem to stop? (107)

This passage makes it hard not to think of Henri Bergson's notion of duration. For him, what we typically call time is really the measurement of consciousness, not the experience of consciousness as a continual flow of becoming. Human intellect segments this flow into measurable quantities so as to facilitate deliberate action on one's environment. What we typically miss, according to Bergson, in our unexamined experience is precisely this continual flow, the awareness of which he calls duration:

[U]sually when we speak of time, we think of the measurement of duration, and not of duration itself. But this duration which science eliminates, which is so difficult to conceive and express, is what one feels and lives. Suppose we try to find out what it is?—How would it appear to a consciousness which desired only to see it without measuring it, which would then grasp it without stopping it . . . ? (113)

Bergson's question here is: How do we envision, make a picture of, duration? Lauren's *Body Time*, it seems to me, is one way to create such an image. But why does this matter to her? Why does she take up this project in the midst of her mourning? Why is it necessary to her mourning?

Perhaps it has something to do with identity. In the empty bedroom scene Lauren wants to feel the flow of time through her body in order to know who she is. Why she would doubt or be unable to feel her identity is not clear to me, unless it has something to do with the losses of Rey and Mr. Tuttle (perhaps they are the missing anchors for her sense of self). Nevertheless, it is the *flow* of time, what Bergson would call duration, that tells Lauren who she is. What she feels in the empty bedroom she cultivates in *Body Time*.

I hesitate to describe, however, Lauren's experience in the bedroom and her efforts in the performance as a searching for and discovery of self. After all there is her statement: "I am Lauren. But less and less" (117). The

less and less suggests that Lauren has not attained some kind of unchanging identity; neither has she gained a self-knowledge that makes things all right. Instead, who she is is less and less Lauren; in other words there is more to what we might call her self than Lauren.

What does this have to do with the flow of time? From Bergson's perspective, the perception of time as measurable increments is part of the general tendency of the intellect to extract immobile pieces from the becoming of duration so as to engage in deliberate action aimed at self-preservation. In other words, our thinking seeks to secure our senses of self. To experience duration itself requires an effort of intuition, which is the violent reversal of the ordinary habits of mind (*Body Time* can be seen as such an effort). This reversal could be characterized as an opening or relaxation of consciousness. Duration is not only something observed, it is part of ourselves. More than just time slowed down, it is experience minus its own feverish attempts to measure and order itself. Hence the awareness of duration constitutes a shift in one's perspective on self. The self enters into the flow of becoming instead of staking its identity on resisting that flow. Lauren's performance piece attempts to stimulate its viewers to experience time as something that constitutes a different kind of identity: time as part of the self, rather than time imposed upon the self.

I feel, however, that I have not fully answered (or even addressed) the question of why Lauren mourns in this way. The question now strikes me as not relevant. Perhaps it is more important merely to note that the production of *Body Time* is part of Lauren's mourning process. We could even think of it as a kind of language, one that responds to loss with another kind of loss, with emptiness and becoming.

IV.

DeLillo has given a response to September the 11th more direct and more expected than *The Body Artist*: his essay, "In the Ruins of the Future." In this piece, he traces a conflict between two types of narratives: a world narrative of consciousness and the various plots of terror. Information technologies, multinational corporations, and capital markets—"the high gloss of our modernity" (33)—form the first narrative. Its cyber-utopianism beckons us to live permanently in the future where there is no memory and market potential is limitless. But alongside this narrative stands the response of terror, the response that resists cyber-utopianism's tendency to dominate

the globe. That narrative of violent resistance has now taken over: “It is *our* lives and minds that are occupied now” (33). The world narrative is based on the excess of infinite exchange; ideas, goods, services substituting for one another at high speed. The terrorist narrative is a plotting that reduces, holds at bay, this excess:

The terrorist, planted in a Florida town, pushing his supermarket cart, nodding to his neighbor, lives in a far narrower format. This is his edge, his strength. Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference. He lives a certain kind of apartness, hard and tight. (34)

These two narratives are, of course, something like mirror images of each other, maybe even dialectical opposites, which is to say, not opposites at all (I like to think of these two perspectives as twins. One good, the other evil. Which is which?).

It is for this reason, I think, that DeLillo brings attention to and calls for the creation of counter-narratives. Amidst the agon between the terrorist plot and the narrative of world consciousness lies another possibility for language and life: the counter-narrative. Counter-narratives are the stories and discourses that lack the domination of elevation and the intensity of focus. As the world narrative stands on a self-constructed peak, a kind of Babel Tower, in order to view and stimulate the mad rush to the future and the terrorist plot burrows into society’s skin with the single goal of destruction, counter-narratives emerge, float around aimlessly, and show none of the control and discipline of the other two types of story:

There are a hundred thousand stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world. Where we were, whom we know, what we’ve seen or heard. There are the doctors’ appointments that saved lives, the cell phones that were used to report the hijackings. Stories generating others and people running north out of the rumbling smoke and ash. Men running in suits and ties, women who’d lost their shoes, cops running from the skydive of all that towering steel. (34)

In a way, what DeLillo calls counter-narratives are the stories told spontaneously and unself-consciously by those who do not matter, who are not aware that they matter, who do not construct their importance out of words that

hope to encompass the earth. The minor stories are for mattering, which is to say, they coalesce value out of awe without creating a narrative that masters or ontologizes that awe. Where we were at the time of the attacks. Who we knew who are now dead. Tales of lives being saved by coincidences. Cell phone communications that provided comfort and sometimes even rescue. Exaggerations and falsehoods about our connection and proximity to the disaster. The gossip and fantasy spawned by the internet. Spontaneous memorials across the city. All of these things, according to DeLillo, are counter-narratives. Were it not such a banal vocabulary, I would be tempted to call counter-narratives *human* stories (And, of course, the world narrative and terrorist plot could be called *all-too-human*).

DeLillo's essay is itself a counter-narrative, a fragmented set of reflections, observations and stories that do not total anything. Despite its self-consciously minor status, the essay is in part a speculation on god and language. DeLillo wants to know if the god of terrorism is a product of economics, a creation of need and envy:

If others in less scientifically advanced cultures were able to share, wanted to share, some of the blessings of our technology, without a threat to their faith or traditions, would they need to rely on a God in whose name they kill the innocent? Would they need to invent a God who rewards violence against the innocent with a promise of "infinite paradise," in the words of a handwritten letter found in the luggage of one of the hijackers? (38)

Here the novelist sounds like Freud, speculating on what our images and formulations of the sacred do for us.² God as a way to feel better. On the other side, god gives way to technology and our sense of self-astonishment:

We don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce (37)

To a believer, such thoughts would surely sound like the cool analysis of unbelief.

About language, DeLillo says it trembles in the face of the tragic event. But it is not diminished or erased. The towers falling down sound exactly as they are. The horror is what it is. Metaphor and analogy seem useless. Yet,

language continues. It never really stops because it is inseparable from the world that gives rise to it. The writer, DeLillo implies, directs the wound created by the event to the stream of words. The writer's words do not represent what happened. They grow out of what happened, carrying with them the emptiness of the event: "The writer tries to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space" (39). This is to suggest that language is inadequate and inevitable. Inadequate in the desire we have for it to control, as in the world narrative and the terrorist plot. Inevitable in that there are always counter-narratives spinning out of control because language does not approach awe but grows out of it.

Which brings me to how the essay ends. God returns to DeLillo's thoughts here. He describes a young Muslim woman praying a month earlier on a New York sidewalk, her prayer rug crowded against a storefront, her prostrated face inches away from its wall. The lesson he takes from this encounter is that New York City will accommodate nearly anything and anyone. This is the strength of the city—a kind of urban piety common after 9/11. But DeLillo thinks the "vital differences" (40) that the city tolerates and cultivates were wiped away in the destruction of the WTC towers. The implication, as I take it, is that the men behind this action were after some kind of purity in contrast to the extreme variety, texture, and chaos New York houses. Then DeLillo ends the essay in a curious way: "*Allahu akbar*. God is great" (40). Coming from this novelist, such a line might be ironic, mocking and critical. It could suggest a connection between god and the purity terrorists seem to desire. Is god that purity on a metaphysical scale? Are god and death close cousins? Is such a view of god not common to most religious believers, not just terrorists? There is nothing in DeLillo's thoughts to prevent one from answering yes to these questions. But this enigmatic last line does beckon for another look.

Perhaps DeLillo is, after all, being sincere. The image of the praying woman has a serenity that is not present in the rest of the essay, and DeLillo describes her in great detail (in three full paragraphs), suggesting a kind of sympathy or comradeship with her. It is as if this image gives birth to the expression of piety that finishes the essay. Which is to suggest that the essay itself is a kind of expression of piety. It is also a counter-narrative. Hence, DeLillo's piety is wrapped into a certain approach to language, one that calls for (and recognizes) the creation of counter-narratives in response to the familial battle between the world narrative and the terrorist plot. God, if that is what we want to call it, lies in language that seeps out of the clutches

of these two rivals.

From *The Names*: “It is religion that carries a language. The river of language is God” (152). DeLillo’s thought here strikes me as no simple apotheosis of all words (God as Word to God as words). He has laid too much importance on the counter-narrative. This is the language that he favors, the language he speaks when he writes *Allahu akbar*. It is language that displays no need to exert control. The world narrative seeks to control the present by turning it into the desired future. The terrorist plot does the same by using the past. Both require tight control of their own stories, the language their desires produce. Counter-narratives, on the other hand, happen. They appear to have no goal, no straightforward vision. This causes me to think of Heidegger’s notion of *Gelassenheit*. But where for him *Gelassenheit* is a releasement toward things, attention to counter-narratives seems to be a releasement toward words (I realize this distinction might appear tenuous)—words achieving a capacity for value in a vacuum of power.

V.

My contention throughout this essay has been that the words through which we mourn are most valuable when, in addition to us, they too suffer loss. For this to happen, we must allow the loss to occur, rather than demand our language protect us (Is not cliché the ultimate in protective language?). Words that disavow protection would, according to my reading of DeLillo, stammer through their resistance to control. I hesitate to turn this argument into a prescription. What are we to do in the aftermath of September the 11th and in the prospect of a war on terror that could be endless? My only guess is that in our various stages of sadness, rage, and fear we allow ourselves to be affected with the silence of an unknown glossolalia.

Notes

¹ The jacket of the hardcover edition of *Underworld* is designed by Carol Carson.

² Cf. Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.

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