Understanding Don DeLillo

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A scene from Don DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man* (2007) illustrates a salient narrative feature of the most recent phase of the writer’s career. The scene in question opens the novel’s seventh chapter. In it the character Lianne Glenn looks at a still-life painting hanging on the wall of her mother’s New York City apartment. The painting draws her attention throughout the novel, but it assumes a new significance to Lianne in this scene. The narration, which shifts to Lianne’s point of view, describes how the painting depicts “two dark objects, the white bottle, the huddled objects” (111). Lianne turns from the painting, and as she does so the painting extends out of its frame, into the room occupied by her mother, a retired art historian, and her mother’s lover, an art dealer. Her name is Nina; his name is Martin. She was a professor at one time; prior to working as an art dealer, Martin was possibly involved in a militant left-wing group in his native Germany. The scene is suffused by the quiet tension between the figures in the painting and the figures in the room. Lianne ruminates on that tension and begins to interpret the painting. She describes how the two dark objects, which suggest the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, cannot be allegorized. They cannot even be Nina and Martin. Set in the weeks following 9/11, the novel blurs the line between life and art at times; for example, a performance artist roams the city, re-creating the pose of a man who fell or jumped to his death from one of the burning buildings. Lianne, who refuses to admit any easy relationship between art and life in this moment, has begun to reclaim autonomy and perspective by thinking through the still-life painting, but also without simplifying, reducing, or
dismissing the power of the art in question. Lianne appears to contradict the novelist Bill Gray in DeLillo’s *Mao II* in that she refuses to admit that art can no longer shape the inner life of a culture. Only art, it would seem, has that conflicted privilege. Elaborating her daughter’s discourse on the scene, Nina notes that the relationships in question—between art and history, persons and art, peoples—expose the delicate but persistent truth of what she calls “being human, being mortal” (111). As the scene concludes, the reader is left with the impression that the still life was alive, or coming to life, and that it was Lianne who made it so. Meaningful art does not appear from transcendent ideals; it is a restless point that stands out from a process of dialogue, thought, and deliberation. Lianne begins to process her trauma and gather a new life about her as a human being, citizen, and mother.

Clearly, this is not the fiction of alienation and despair that DeLillo is alleged to have exclusively written during the twentieth century. Sadness and solitude—or what remains of them—offer little defense against the new horror that has befallen Lianne’s city. Only art offers sanctuary; literature speaks as its conscience. Read in light of this scene, the works of this most recent period of DeLillo’s career appear more taciturn and introspective. It would be mistaken, however, to regard these writings as a mere reaction to the 9/11 attack, as DeLillo had written two of the novels in question—*Cosmopolis* and *The Body Artist*—prior to that day. The difference is in how his fiction articulates experiences and moods familiar to readers of his earlier work. Individual characters are not crowded by other figures, as they are in his earlier writings. With the exception of *Falling Man*, which effectively contrasts two protagonists (Lianne and Keith), the novels of this later period—*The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), and *Point Omega* (2010)—dramatize individual lives with renewed attention to the affective intonations of words and characters. (Flashes of it were evident in earlier works, but largely ignored.) In these books the common themes and plot devices for which DeLillo was renowned (catastrophe, paranoia, consumerism) become minor props. The stages are sparse; characters communicate by elemental gestures; and the narration is more terse, syntactical relations more subtle (and also more refined, as we shall see). Lianne’s perception of and response to the still-life painting embodies the point.

Some readers have expressed disappointment with DeLillo’s recent novels. By contrast, I will argue that they rank as his most formally accomplished because in them he developed the narrative experiments of his earlier works in such a way as to amplify the dramatic and latent affective elements of his style. That section of DeLillo’s audience that remains disaffected by these works can be excused for remaining in the fin-de-siècle twilight of novels such
as *Underworld*. To some readers that novel is the high-water mark of DeLillo’s career (as well as a certain phase of American literary fiction). Having composed three of the most celebrated novels of the late Cold War (*White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Mao II*), *Underworld* (1997) was DeLillo’s lone full-scale attempt at writing a historical romance, and one that would take nothing less than the second half of the “American Century” as its subject. Rumored to have triggered a bidding war during which rights to the novel were sold for a six-figure sum (DeLillo denies this rumor, by the way), *Underworld* may be described as the publishing industry’s version of the kind of “media event” that horrifies, stuns, and puzzles many of his fictional characters, regardless of its selling price. If Bill Gray’s statement that novels changed “the inner life of a culture” can be transposed to the publishing event itself and thereby understood as the capital-intensive investment in the production and sale of literary fiction, then Gray was right insofar as the publication of *Underworld* legitimized literary postmodernism in the publishing mainstream on an unprecedented scale. It changed the culture: led by an astounding advertising “blitz” that included full-page ads in major newspapers and magazines, along with posters and displays that were distributed to booksellers, the novel’s prepublication history was itself a media event; at the height of the frenzy, the world’s best readers lined up to pay tribute (Salman Rushdie called it “magnificent”) in glowing critical reviews. The buildup to *Underworld* resembled the chase for “the product” in *Great Jones Street*: it was an event that had escaped from one of DeLillo’s plots.

A backlash of sorts developed against DeLillo, and postmodern literary fiction in general, in the years that followed the publication of *Underworld*. No reader could describe *Underworld* as a failure or as a sellout that compromised DeLillo’s art. Had readers become exhausted by the promotional propaganda and hype that preceded it? Was it untimely insofar as it appeared in that very moment when the Cold War receded into memory and our attention was turned to the first signs of another historical phase, characterized by sectarian conflict, failed states, and the globalized flow of digital capital? Were its readers dulled to its achievement, victims of the repeated criticism that DeLillo’s characters lacked “substance”? DeLillo had never written for critics, after all. Why write for critics, when you can write for crowds? These factors may have explained what happened in some way. Why read a historical novel, after all, after Frances Fukuyama (an intellectual aligned with DeLillo’s more conservative critics) had declared the “end of history?”

Wendy Steiner’s essay “Look Who’s Modern Now” (1999) encapsulates the backlash. In an argument that prefigures the recent critical turn toward lyrical postmodernism and postironic sentimentalism, Steiner’s essay singled
out *Underworld* as the poster child for a literary postmodernism that had run its course. While offering praise for the book’s famous prologue, Steiner explained also that she (and other judges of the National Book Award Committee that year) had decided that DeLillo’s well-written historical novel was nonetheless passé. The judges ruled in favor of another novel representing a “softer modernism,” a work concerned not only with irony and despair but also with poetry and love. DeLillo’s novel, by contrast, represented a male-dominated mode of literary fiction that had lost touch with the culture. A new fiction had taken its place, she argued, a fiction of “nurturing steadfastness” that augurs a return to sincerity.²

One might note a number of flaws in Steiner’s argument. Why, for instance, had she excluded postmodernists such as Joan Didion and Kathy Acker from the accusation of “brittle intellectualism”? Did writers such as Toni Morrison or Louise Erdrich not qualify as “ethnic” or “traditional” or “postmodern” in some way? Steiner had published her essay in order to recant her survey of post–World War II American fiction in volume 7 of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1994). She had devoted the majority of that work to the same school of postwar American fiction to which DeLillo belonged, yet without excoriating it in that volume for its lack of feeling or cultural relevance. Indeed, her short account of DeLillo’s *White Noise* in that volume is an excellent one; she praises it as “an especially apt case of contemporary fiction, in that it merges existentialism, politics and individual assertion” in a manner that joins the “Pynchonesque lion” of narrative technique with the “Rothian lamb” of “humanism.”³ Steiner’s earlier argument had insightfully identified an oft-overlooked strain of affect in DeLillo’s prose writings; her later argument singled out DeLillo and accused him of practice to the contrary. At the end of her polemical renunciation of DeLillo (and of a good deal of her previous work), she cited sales figures to partly justify the change of mind. Like history and the Cold War, literary postmodernism had also run its course, and the marketplace offered proof.

*The Body Artist*

Scribner, the publisher of all of DeLillo’s new books beginning with *Underworld*, released *The Body Artist* in 2001. The original dust jacket of the first edition featured a detail from Michelangelo Caravaggio’s *The Musicians*, but the subsequent paperback edition adopted a nude photographic portrait (cropped to eliminate the model’s exposed breast) for its cover. The photograph was taken by the mid-twentieth-century photographer Bill Brandt. Its selection returned to the design style of the covers for DeLillo’s prior novels. Previously, Viking printed *Mao II* with the eponymous painting by Andy...
Warhol while Scribner had used André Kertész’s 1972 photo of lower Manhattan, with a church steeple in the foreground and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, as the cover design for Underworld. The publisher chose in this case the work of a modern artist whose career was similar to DeLillo’s own. Brandt had started his career in newspaper media and achieved renown with photographs of European cities (and London in particular) before and after World War II. During the 1940s and 1950s, he photographed portraits of modern artists including Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, René Magritte, and Francis Bacon, as well as portraits of writers, among them Iris Murdoch, Dylan Thomas, and Graham Greene. (It should be noted these literary examples suggest an inspiration other than that of Fay Godwin for Brita’s photographs of novelists in Mao II.) Thematically, the choice of Brandt’s photo was perfect. Brandt’s early works depicted a quasi-Victorian modern England, littered with advertisements and consumption, caught between two ages (think of the contrast between small-town America and big-time New York City in DeLillo’s Americana). The quasi-neorealist photographs of landscapes and postwar urban ruins, as well as Brandt’s experimental portraits of artists, suggest the postindustrial world of White Noise. Brandt’s 1961 collection of photographs entitled Perspectives on Nudes, taken over a period of fifteen years, include some of the photographer’s most celebrated images. The ironic portraits and empty landscapes of Brandt’s historicist middle period give way to what Mark Haworth-Booth described as the “colossal scale” of Brandt’s experiments with aesthetics and technique in the nudes of the period from which the cover of DeLillo’s The Body Artist was drawn.4

One cannot help but note the suggestion offered by DeLillo’s publisher: the choice of Brandt’s photo for the first issue of The Body Artist in paper binding implies a similar aesthetic turn in DeLillo’s career. In reproducing the work of a celebrated modern artist (DeLillo’s affinity for modernism is well-known and widely discussed among his critics), the publisher associates DeLillo’s latest work of fiction with Brandt’s portraits. One might understand the cover in these biographical terms at some risk or note that publishers use such designs to invoke certain prestigious associations between their product and the jacket art in question. In a general sense, the covers adopt art as a type of visual shorthand in order to “recycle” the aesthetic modalities of an earlier historical time, thereby confirming a quintessential habit of postmodernism (which DeLillo portrays in a more cautious manner in his fiction). In any case, readers considering the selection of either the detail of Brandt’s photo or that from Caravaggio’s painting—both works of a decidedly more introspective mood—would have been right to expect that The Body Artist was somewhat different from DeLillo’s previous novels.
The Body Artist begins with a short meditation on the passage of time. It is presumably offered in the second person as the pronoun “you” appears to address the reader. It then describes a morning scene. The set design is simple: a kitchen, two persons, and birds that appear outside the window. As the conversation begins, the narration turns from the second person to the third person with a series of personal pronouns in the third person—he, she, they—to establish preliminary dramatic roles. The third person alternates with first-person dialogue. Possessive pronouns—my, your—occasionally underscore tensions between persons and things, and are replaced at other times by articles—particularly “the”—which avoid possessive connotation. Pronouns accumulate a subtle tension as the chapter proceeds, and the tension serves to blur distinctions not only between person and objects but also between characters and readers. For example, when “he” (the reader has perhaps noted “she” calls him by name as “Rey” in a previous line) complains, she replies, “Give us all a break” (17), thereby using the oblique “us” to suggest a plurality. In a similar manner, the nominative “you” appears after he speaks, telling her, “You need the company” (21), but she has tuned him out. When the narration returns (presumably to her reading the paper), it does not adopt the third person but instead absorbs and elaborates his terse, even hostile use of “you.” As in the opening paragraph of the chapter, the narration adopts the second person, using (or reusing) “you” again, but now it is unclear if the “you” refers to the reader or if it is a reflexive “you” by which she addresses herself. In a single sequence, the narration shifts from third-person pronouns describing her reading the paper to third-person narration describing him speaking in the first person, followed by a long paragraph using the oblique “you” to suggest the second person (which may also be her referring to herself), and finally returning to the third person (“she”) to reestablish her point of view (or the reader’s). Not only has the line between character and reader been blurred, but the distinction between the two characters has been destabilized by the shifts between gendered and ungendered pronouns, thereby serving early notice of a critical point in The Body Artist.

Whereas the words are crafted to impart the scrupulous syntactic attentions of poetry, the narrative stages the dialogue at a reflective pace. The mood is not only that of the subject’s inner time, wherein time is not so much marked as interrupted and amplified by words (what Boxall calls “unmeasured time”). The technique resembles that of slow-motion cinematography, and it will appear again in the closing scene of DeLillo’s Cosmopolis (2003), the opening sequence of Falling Man (2007), and as the operating principle of Point Omega (2010). As the narration proceeds, it assumes a modular, “stacked” quality, not unlike a cinematic montage. For example, rather than
describing the birds outside the window in a single paragraph, DeLillo inserts references to them between other sections over the course of the opening chapter. These sequenced moments almost appear interchangeable, as if they could be restacked like dishes, but for the slow procession of inner, syntactical time that holds the dialogue in a tenuous chronological order.

An interchapter follows this first tour de force of literary prose. That chapter takes the form of a published obituary that describes the life and death of one of the two characters the reader had met in the book’s poetic first chapter. The “she” of that chapter called him Rey. The obituary informs the reader that Rey Robles was a renowned director of avant-garde films, that his biography is not entirely clear, and that he has committed suicide. In the final lines we learn that he is survived by his wife—the novel’s protagonist, the unnamed interlocutor who inhabits varied singular and plural pronouns in chapter 1—“Lauren Hartke, the body artist” (29).

Interchapters of this type are a common feature of DeLillo’s novels. One thinks of the faux record-industry press releases he inserted between chapters of Great Jones Street. Yet they are integral rather than interruptive features of the later novels. DeLillo integrates the obituary at the beginning of The Body Artist and a later “published” review of Lauren’s performance into the reflexive narrative structure of the book, blurring in unexpected ways the line between reader, narrator, and character. In the obituary interchapter, for instance, the reader is again returned to Lauren’s point of view as a habitual reader of newspaper print, an implication that carries throughout the novel.

Modern mass media are a prominent feature of The Body Artist. Lauren and Rey share newspapers and listen to radio broadcasts. In DeLillo’s previous novels, media play ambiguous and sinister roles in the lives of characters, but here their presence suggests shared imaginative currents, a communal and intimate media world. Using conjunctions to imply the point, DeLillo writes in the first chapter: “You separate the Sunday sections and there are endless identical lines of print with people living somewhere in the words and the strange contained reality of print seeps through the house and when you look at a page and distinguish one line from another it begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware that you are doing it and then you stop, seeing whatever it is in front of you at the time, like half a glass of juice in your husband’s hand” (19). In a recent study, Tyler Kessel has claimed that such moments confirm the “textualization of Lauren,” but if the reader is willing to accept Kessel’s claim, then it can be extended to a “textualization” of the reader as well.5
Using the smallest parts of speech to great poetic effect and then extending their subtle narration to the implied reader(s) of the first interchapter, the opening pages of *The Body Artist* are unique in DeLillo’s career. One might compare them to the “memorable” opening scenes of so many of his novels. But where those famous scenes experiment with perspective on a macrocosmic scale, *The Body Artist* reverses the scale. Yes, there is a comparable complexity, but *The Body Artist* shifts the burden of that complexity to the smallest units of human communication: words. The difference is that between astrophysics and poetry. It asserts furthermore DeLillo’s devotion to the medium of print. It is as though the narration had suddenly become aware of another layer of texture, a more porous and malleable medium that allows the writer to integrate other media and genres (such as the obituary and performance review) into its substance to more subtle effect. A certain distance will eventually return with the second interchapter—the book is not a painting, this is not a pipe—yet the distance between writer and medium, character and reader, has effectively vanished.

*The Body Artist* also integrates another, more recent medium into this dynamic: the Internet. In her grief after Rey’s suicide, Lauren begins impulsively to watch a live web camera that broadcasts images from a Finnish highway. It replaces her prior relationship to newspapers, yet without the dialogue of community. It breeds solipsism rather than solace. The new medium engrosses her and she recedes into her grief. She begins a regimen of exercises, working almost mechanically, to prepare for a nebulous performance whose form has not yet become clear in her mind. Suspended in this mournful state, Lauren finds “him” in the house.

She eventually gives him a name, “Mr. Tuttle,” and she imagines at one point that he has materialized out of the computer. Lauren resents his presence at first, fearing it because she imagines he may be a homeless man or a patient escaped from a psychiatric hospital. (The latter is eventually implied as a probable explanation.) Mr. Tuttle ultimately poses no physical threat to her. He is childlike, innocent (but not entirely), suggesting a more subtle and articulate version of Mrs. Micklewhite’s wailing son in *Great Jones Street*. Peter Boxall has perceptively noted that the two characters share many common features in that both are “naked, prehistorical” figures. Boxall also notes that Lauren, in preparing her performance, will “enter Mr. Tuttle’s continuum, where past, present, and future are distinctions that have not yet been devised.” The difference between Bucky and Lauren, and *Great Jones Street* and *The Body Artist*, lies in the manner by which Mr. Tuttle is introduced after the breaking down of narrative distinctions and through Lauren’s orientation to the new medium of the Internet (as a medium of introspection rather
than alienation). In *Great Jones Street*, the combined narration and characterization are not afforded a comparably refined attention.

Lauren attributes to Mr. Tuttle the strange noises that she had previously heard in the old coastal New England house. The reader may recall the hair she found in the first chapter, a clue that reinforced our shared point of view with Lauren. She concludes that Mr. Tuttle has been there for some time and that, more important, he has been listening. Like Lauren or the blue jay that is described as a “a skilled mimic” (22) in chapter 1, Mr. Tuttle repeats what he hears. Yet while he has a capacity for mimesis, he does not appear able to coordinate the relationship between the words he imitates with time. Lacking context or a register for the nonverbal cues of communication, he speaks without self-awareness. He completely lacks irony. Lauren soon recognizes that Mr. Tuttle speaks with her late husband’s words and intonations. Mr. Tuttle had listened to recordings of Rey, who had dictated his autobiography into a tape recorder.

In the middle sections of the novel, Lauren begins interviewing Mr. Tuttle and recording his interviews with the same tape recorder Rey had used. She observes his manner and speech, and she begins to imitate him (and, by default, her dead husband). The novel begins to fold back on itself in time. Earlier lines of dialogue assume new significance as language synchronizes in a mimetic loop. The novel has already described what she is doing in an earlier passage that extends the description of reading the newspaper to her final moments with Rey: “You become someone else, doing dialogue of your own devising. You become a man at times, living between the lines, doing another version of the story” (20).

In the fifth chapter of the novel, Lauren realizes that Mr. Tuttle repeats her final conversation with Rey prior to Rey’s suicide. The reader does not know until this point that the last scene of the first chapter is also the last of their marriage: after the morning breakfast, Rey drives to New York City and kills himself. Lauren has been all the while training by stretching muscles, trimming hair, and scouring pores in preparation for a performance. She has found its subject—“you”—in and through Mr. Tuttle. The main section of the novel concludes.

The main section of the book consists of the five chapters in which Lauren discovers, observes, and becomes Mr. Tuttle. These are followed by the second interchapter. It takes the form of an article, part performance review and part interview, written by Lauren’s college roommate, a journalist named Mariella. To this point DeLillo has fused the novel in a sequence of delicate metaphors (Lauren–Rey–Blue Jay–Tuttle–You) and chronological folds. Mariella’s article adds a new texture in that it is the first time in which media introduce a
distancing and objective communication in the novel. Mariella’s summary of Lauren’s performance describes the characters that Lauren mimics in her art. The reader recognizes them from earlier chapters. Lauren sees an “ancient” Japanese woman in town (and sees her again in the final chapter, as Lauren considers revising her work). The live webcam of the highway in Kotka, Finland, plays behind her on the stage. She becomes Mr. Tuttle and also Rey, a physical mimicry of the voices on the tape recorder. Lauren acts only with her body, translating words into gesture and movement (or stillness). Mariella, the journalist, also appears (as a voice recording) in the performance from an earlier scene in which she speaks with Lauren over the telephone. A final question includes a miniature of the entire novel to that point, yet it is part of Mariella’s article rather than the performance: when Mariella asks whether Rey’s suicide inspired Lauren’s performance, Lauren denies any link. And then Lauren begins speaking to Mariella in Mr. Tuttle’s voice (as Rey). The artistic performance, and all of its prior confusions between physical and verbal language, erupt from the article’s condensed recitation of the novel itself. Mariella describes her reaction: “It is about you and me. What begins in solitary otherness becomes familiar and even personal. It is about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are” (109–10). Mariella has effectively been absorbed into the narrative, which is not a novel at this point so much as a physical performance imitated in words (and vice versa). We see the repetition by perceiving Mariella’s distance from what we have read in the previous pages. The distance is not one between reader and text, however, but rather between reader and varied narrative modes (journalism, fiction) that have unique narrative modes and capacities. Even as the reader reviews the novel in light of Mariella’s article, Mariella’s review returns us to the world of print.

Lauren returns instead to the old house after her performance. Mr. Tuttle is gone. The tactile comforts of other routines return to comfort her. One routine does not. Lauren notes, “She hadn’t read a paper in a long time” (115). Suspended in the timeless present of her work, her art, Lauren dissociates from the world. She has visions of Rey, her work, and herself (the reflexive pronoun emerges with emphasis in the book’s final pages). She speaks to herself and to the reader, but not as the reader, as if to say, in the didactic sentiment of the novel’s final lines, that it is print that divides us and art that brings us together. As is often the case in DeLillo’s novels, the conclusion avoids any simple resolution. The verb tenses of the novel’s final lines suggest the complexity of how Lauren desires experience and self-awareness even as she seeks sensations and temporalities that will “tell her who she was.” With elusive pronouns and contrasting verb tenses, DeLillo concludes The Body Artist so as to break the narrative bond that joins the reader to Lauren.
DeLillo’s academic readers have offered a mixed view of *The Body Artist*. In a 2011 study, Paul Giaimo claims that the novel “yields a look at the concept that the artist’s first moral responsibility is to his or her integral self.” Giaimo then describes Lauren’s dead husband, Rey, as an inhibiting and repressive presence that Lauren must shed in order “to live healthfully and successfully as an artist.” Discussion concludes with “moving on to wider spheres, 2007’s *Falling Man,*” suggesting that *The Body Artist* had been in some way a minor and provincial exception to the main body of DeLillo’s works.7

Peter Boxall has taken a more subtle and compelling view of DeLillo’s postmillennial fiction. He devotes the final chapter of his excellent 2006 study *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* to it, describing DeLillo’s characters of the period as inhabiting “unmeasured time.” Boxall discusses both *The Body Artist* and *Cosmopolis* (his book appeared in the year before *Falling Man*) to show how DeLillo’s sense of narrative time (as well as our own) “has escaped from its boundaries, and is no longer measured in decades.” Invoking the “out-of-joint” time of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet,* Boxall describes the postmillennial turn in DeLillo’s writing: “One of the working contradictions of DeLillo’s most recent prose [is] that this evacuation of the moment, this entry into the suspended non-time of post-historical mourning, is also a delivery into the very fibrous material of the moment itself.” Boxall proceeds to draw an insightful comparison between *The Body Artist* and *Americana,* novels that he claims share an ambition to transform how readers experience a novel. According to Boxall, *Americana* was forward-looking, but a novel that looked to the end of a certain way of enumerating historical time in literary-narrative terms; *The Body Artist* is instead a novel that erases the threshold in question and explores alternately the narrative possibilities of that aforementioned “unmeasured time.” The question remains, however, of whether *The Body Artist’s* unmeasured time does not also betray a new historicity; Boxall believes that it does, using the role of the Internet (the novel’s Finnish webcam) to make his point. Boxall’s argument makes a persuasive case for how *The Body Artist* challenges the reader to reconsider not only its writer’s gifts but the role that literary narrative might play in and against our evolving notions of “unmeasured time” and history.8

*Cosmopolis*

Boxall’s description of *The Body Artist* and its successor *Cosmopolis* (2003) as elaborating “unmeasured time” indicates a shift in the historical orientation of DeLillo’s fiction, and the reader should not regard that shift as something amorphous, ahistorical, or abstract. Nor should the two novels in question be regarded as identical. As I sought to illustrate in my summary of *The Body
Understanding Don DeLillo

Artist, DeLillo’s careful attention to the tenses and voicing of words imparted to that work a narrative subtlety unmatched by his previous writings. One might say it even affirms the continuing narrative power of print media into—and against—the Internet Age. Furthermore, the novel’s narrative elements are perfectly interwoven with its dramatic characters and events, so much so that they are inseparable parts of what is arguably his most complete work of literary fiction. The Body Artist uses time and tense to synchronize the relationships that bond the audience, artist, and the work of art. In Cosmopolis the narration instead dramatizes asynchronous temporalities that torment consumers, financiers, and global capital markets.

The narrative principles shared by the two novels are quite simple. The Body Artist used parts of speech such as pronouns and verbs to transfer agency between and among characters and audiences. (DeLillo uses pronouns in that way to a different effect in the closing pages of Cosmopolis.) Placed at strategic intervals in The Body Artist, the protean words slowly create a web of mimetic displacements whose primary movement is cohesive. Time is understood there as a linear sequence of actions and reactions that slow to a dreamlike and ultimately recursive form as gestures imitate words and vice versa. Time is not so much disrupted as it is folded back on itself to expose nonsequential trajectories of memory, language, and gesture. It is “fibrous,” to use Boxall’s term, in that it develops the textured integrity of an aesthetic form that embodies Lauren’s artistic becoming. In this way The Body Artist dramatizes a shared human time in which language attains a malleable and unifying materiality.

Cosmopolis reconfigures the temporal arrangements of The Body Artist. In the latter work pronouns diffused dramatic roles, thereby connecting the audience with Lauren’s tactile sense of time and language. In Cosmopolis, by contrast, DeLillo introduces language that moves at light speed. Transitions are abrupt and every detail and word quickly loses depth; narrative time is asynchronous with respect to human language, sensuality, and perception. Whereas The Body Artist opened the density of narrative time, Cosmopolis dramatizes its electrified disruption.

Yet DeLillo’s execution of a narrative organization in Cosmopolis is as complex and artful as that of The Body Artist. The primary difference is in the dramatic result: whereas the latter novel’s characters cohere in time, the characters of Cosmopolis literally come apart. The novel’s protagonist, Eric Packer, reacts to the video of an explosion before a bomb actually explodes outside his car. In a later scene he sees video of his murdered body being wheeled into a morgue, even though he is still alive. An assassin describes the same death scene from his own point of view, but several chapters before
the murder actually occurs. Eric never truly dies in the novel, although his death is described to the reader by two different characters (one being the presumed deceased). In this way the novel uses anachronism and discontinuity to dramatize the asynchronous time of global capital markets: Eric expires but he does not. Rather, he continues to exist as a numerical quantity on a spreadsheet, in the form of debt, as an image broadcast for media consumption, as a shock wave washing over collapsing global markets, and so on. In the words of Eric’s Chief of Theory, Vija Kinski, Eric inhabits an economy in which “people will not die” (104).

As noted in previous chapters, DeLillo has written often about American business culture. Advertising, publishing, contraband, waste disposal, art, entertainment, and academia count among the economic activities to which he devotes long sections of earlier novels. Signs of these activities can intrude on every second of our lives and even saturate our consciousness (let alone our sleep, as is the case in White Noise). In DeLillo’s America there is a business person for every artist or assassin and a dollar to be made for every second of our attention, divided or otherwise. While DeLillo has often discussed contemporary market capitalism, Cosmopolis is his only novel since Players (1977) devoted almost entirely to the portrayal of American financial markets. John McClure presciently observed in a 1991 essay that for DeLillo, “capitalism has penetrated everywhere, but its globalization has not resulted in global rationalization and Weber’s iron cage.”9 As McClure notes, DeLillo’s early novels looked to spaces at the edges of empires to identify exceptions to globalization. Cosmopolis instead ventures into New York City, the heart of global capital during the final days of the twentieth century.

Specifically, Cosmopolis dramatizes the international currency markets, markets that Eric Packer has manipulated in order to become the most powerful investor on the planet. The world is his office. His office is mobile, unmoored, because the majority of the novel takes place inside or in close proximity to Eric’s limousine. The automobile is a character in its own right. Armor-plated, it is decorated with marble floors and fitted with cameras that provide a 360-degree view from its interior. Where Lauren Hartke exists in an expansive, open-ended time, Eric Packer is contained in the limousine by quantified simulations of time that scroll along the limousine’s computer monitors.

In structure Cosmopolis consists of four chapters and two interchapters. Chapter 1 opens the novel in Eric Packer’s luxury New York triplex, where Eric does not awaken so much as he transitions from insomnia to work. He leaves the building to find his limousine, driver, and security detail waiting for him on the street. A fictional American president named Midwood is visiting
the city on that day, and the midtown traffic patterns have been altered. Eric’s primary goal, while working from his limousine, is to make his way across town to get a haircut. The scenes that follow alternate between planned meetings and fortuitous encounters. The majority involve people who work for Eric, characters who are picked up along the streets. The characters include his director of technology, his chief currency officer, and his finance officer. Eric sometimes leaves them in the car, after which they vanish from the narrative or are suddenly replaced by a new character when Eric returns to the limousine. These characters function as advisors to Eric’s main financial strategy: to “bet” against the devaluation of the Japanese yen and to profit thereby. Eric insists its value will not rise, he ignores his advisors, and the yen increases in value over the course of the single day in which the novel is set.

Unlike the recursive episodes of *The Body Artist*, the scenes in *Cosmopolis* have a cumulative effect. Minor anachronisms gather along the novel’s course and move toward some final event. For instance, Eric meets with his “Chief of Theory,” a company officer named Vija, at midday in Times Square. The limousine, which is again caught in traffic, is surrounded there by a crowd of rioting anarchists protesting the U.S. president’s visit (among other things). Inside the limousine Eric and Vija watch from monitors as the riot unfolds while they discuss the relationship between currency and time. Vija tells Eric, “The present is harder to find. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential. The future becomes insistent” (79). Moments later, Eric recoils before a bomb detonates beside the limousine. In Vija’s world, wherein technology accelerates time, the future is already in the present. In his arrogance Eric does not yet understand that the anachronistic effect may apply to him.

Eric punctuates the ironic anachronisms of the novel’s narration by offering a running commentary on technological obsolescence. Obsolescence is not limited to technology; Eric extends it to human beings as well. He often describes and reflects upon objects, customs, and ideas that he regards as uselessly archaic. Automated teller machines are “so cumbersome and mechanical that even the acronym seemed outdated” (54). He imagines cash registers “confined to display cases in a museum of cash registers in Philadelphia or Zurich” (71). Offices, sleep, telephones, computers, and even ethnicity are all obsolete in his eyes. What Eric does not yet recognize is that he too is becoming a reliquary human form displaced by the very technologies he claims to master. While Eric appears proud and cynical in the novel’s early chapters, his inner life becomes increasingly thoughtful and complicated. He contemplates poetry and admires abstract art (regarding the latter also as an investment). He wants to love his wife, the poet Elise Shifrin, who regards Eric
with suspicion and expresses her reservations to him. They meet at random throughout the novel, and they finally communicate during a final encounter. Even as Eric becomes sympathetic and thoughtful, he remains enthralled by the very same technology that makes him obsolete. After speaking with Elise in a final, poignant scene, Eric punches a few buttons and drags her finances (she is a wealthy heiress) into the whirlpool that pulls him “out of the world,” thereby rendering him the very sort of anachronism—a fallible human being—that he regards with contempt.

*Cosmopolis* appeared at a specific moment in the history of American capital and technology. It is a world of volatile financial transactions quickened by the rapidity of digital communications. Those digital networks of communication resemble those that Bill Gates described in his 1999 book *Business @ the Speed of Thought*. A primer on how to build (or rebuild) industry so as to synchronize it with emergent digital technologies, Gates’s book draws upon the examples of major multinational corporations (Microsoft, Boeing, and others) to illustrate his practical advice. For example, the book’s fifteenth chapter, entitled “Big Wins Require Big Risks,” describes how Boeing, the aerospace company, streamlined a “digital information flow” to facilitate and also accelerate communication between its Japanese and American offices.10 Equipped with a glossary of terms for the digital media ingénue (presumably the “old guard” of executives and managers who resisted the new technologies), Gates’s book is part prophecy, part assembly manual.

The metaphoric subtitle of Gates’s book is *Using a Digital Nervous System*, and Gates uses that cerebral metaphor to illustrate business communications in the new digital economy. According to Gates, institutional hierarchies old and new must learn to exchange information between their respective offices (such as finance, design, manufacture, marketing, and sales). In Gates’s words, a fully integrated corporation becomes like “the human nervous system. The biological nervous system triggers your reflexes so that you can react quickly to danger or need. It gives you the information you need as you ponder issues and make choices. You’re alert to the most important things, and your nervous system blocks out the information that isn’t important to you.”11 The operating assumption of this metaphor is one of unwavering optimism with respect to the vigilant system’s infallible communications.

*Cosmopolis* portrays a world in which the new digital communications systems are more pervasive than they appear to be in Gates’s book (which was published in 1999, one year prior to the one in which *Cosmopolis* is set). Eric’s investment company was nonetheless the prototypical start-up of the new world of 1990s digital finance. The novel informs the reader that his company first took form as a website “forecasting stocks” (75), after which it grew into
Understanding Don Delillo

a global powerhouse. Having established a corporate structure based upon a model of communication similar to that described by Gates (and represented in the novel by the various officers of the company), Eric Packer quickly became the most powerful investor on the planet. He soon found himself mingling with Russian tycoons, I.M.F. officers, and an American president, to mention a few examples of his social circle. (I use the word “social” loosely, as the characters inhabit virtual fortresses and have little social interaction of which to speak beyond the media and work.) As such, from its human networks to its business communications, the world that is contemporary with *Cosmopolis* is that which Gates described, the difference being one of scale; the individual “nervous systems” of Gates’s varied multinational corporations have become a single system: the global capital market.

In the view of Vija Kinski, Eric’s Chief of Theory, that market has attained a universal presence with the capacity to rationalize financiers as well as their rioting opponents. In her view, the market’s growth has inexorable momentum capable of absorbing and commodifying everything, including resistance. Eric, however, senses another possibility within the market’s increasing speed and expanding mass: an exception to the market’s near totality. The exception appears to Eric while he and Vija watch the riot from within the limousine. They watch on the computer monitors as a protestor immolates himself in the square outside: “‘What did this change?’ . . . ‘Everything,’ he thought. Kinski had been wrong. The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act” (99–100). Realizing that the market was fallible, Eric hedges his bets against it, attempting thereby to exploit what he presumes to be the market’s weakness: an exceptional individual. Eric persuades himself that he is the Wall Street analog of the self-immolating man: a nervous system that the market cannot control or direct. Insist as Eric might upon his own counterintuitive pride, the Japanese currency rises in value against his judgments and prognostications.

In the end, Eric Packer would seem the ironic victim of his own disgust for obsolete things. He loses his bet but in actuality he becomes the victim of another outsider: a homeless man. Using the pen name of Benno Levin, the homeless man writes a journal, the chapters of which constitute the interchapters of *Cosmopolis*. Benno Levin, we learn, is a former employee of Eric’s company, and his real name is Richard Sheets. Writing as Benno Levin in two interchapters, Levin/Sheets describes his employment at Eric’s investment firm, his failed marriage, and his current life as an occupant of an abandoned building. Levin/Sheets also makes a brief appearance in an early chapter, when Eric notes a “familiar” man (54) standing near an ATM machine. In the first of the interchapters from the diary recounted by Levin, the reader also sees Eric,
not as a man in a limousine near the ATM, however, but as a corpse on the floor. In this way, the narrative structure of Cosmopolis embeds anachronisms (Eric’s premature reaction to the explosion, Levin’s description of his corpse, and so forth) within its plot.

The novel’s chronological disruptions are largely an effect of the narration’s organization, which is slightly out of sequence. These disruptions are most obvious in the Levin interchapters, although the reader may not realize it while reading them (whereas in The Body Artist the attentive reader becomes aware, rather than forgetful). As in The Body Artist, DeLillo elaborates narrative along a temporal axis, modifying it in different ways to dramatize the novel’s characters and milieu. In the earlier novel, narrative time becomes malleable. It is not so much amorphous as it is pliant. Just as Lauren can make her physical appearance and gestures into those of a man, the attentive reader can learn to inhabit the narrative, only to follow Eric into ruin. Time, in this sense, is a mimetic element that takes a physical form in art, as art that must be attained by a certain imaginative discipline. (DeLillo’s admiration for asceticism takes its most daring aesthetic form in this case.) Cosmopolis also works along a temporal axis, modifying it to dramatize the novel’s characters and milieu. But whereas narrative time becomes malleable in the earlier novel, it hardens into violence—the rigor of Eric’s corpse—in the later book. The time of markets is the time of quantities, of physical presence reduced to an inanimate state. The reader cannot participate, only observe and await the next turn. Time, in this sense, is a mimetic element that is repeatedly invaded and deformed by the false nervous systems of markets and their surrogate machines, against any willful resistance. (DeLillo’s suspicion of global markets takes its most critical form in this case.)

Despite differences that render the two novels distinct, the final chapter of Cosmopolis briefly returns to the semantic ambiguities that worked as the poetic narrative material of The Body Artist. In the final scene Eric accompanies his limousine to its parking lot. A shot rings out from an empty building across the street. Eric enters the empty building and confronts Benno Levin/Richard Sheets. Pronouns blur the line between Benno and Eric, as well as Eric and his own corpse, as he witnesses his own death (187, 197). In The Body Artist, the anachronistic pathos of language includes the willing reader; in Cosmopolis the anachronistic force of language renders the reader powerless to save its victims. In the former, we are both the audience and characters, whereas in the latter we are confused spectators at an execution.

Reviewers and academic critics responded to Cosmopolis in very different ways, so much so that Cosmopolis appears distinct in the history of criticism about DeLillo’s writings. Academics have since championed the novel as one
of DeLillo’s most accomplished books, whereas reviewers initially compared it unfavorably to DeLillo’s earlier writings (and to *Underworld* in particular). But reviewers also judged *Cosmopolis* in relation to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a world historical media event to which they expected the novel to reply in some way. This is because *Cosmopolis* was Don DeLillo’s first novel to be published after the murderous spectacle of September 11, 2001. In the nearly two years that passed between that day and the publication of *Cosmopolis* (and nearly continuously thereafter), reviewers increasingly turned DeLillo into a prophet of sorts, an artist who had since *White Noise* best described how we react to terror, disaster, and genocide. In a sense reviewers and writers painted DeLillo as being possessed by a literary variant of Eric Packer’s ability to witness a fateful event before its occurrence.

Reviewing *Cosmopolis* in the *Guardian*, author Blake Morrison asked: “Is *Cosmopolis* a post–September 11 novel? Yes and no. When the planes hit the twin towers 20 months ago, it looked like something from DeLillo, and having got there before it happened he’s surely right not to revisit the scene. But the omens are present [in *Cosmopolis*].” In a 2005 essay published in the *New York Times Book Review*, Benjamin Kunkel struck the same note when writing about literary depictions of terrorism published during the 1990s: “No one has been more explicit or intelligent about all this [literature that mixes ‘detestation of the terrorist with a distinct if shameful envy’] than Don DeLillo.” In an earlier section of the article, Kunkel reaches back to DeLillo’s 1977 novel *Players* to cite a line from that novel that describes the “transient” properties of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, thereby setting a precedent for DeLillo’s prophetic appearance. The depiction of DeLillo as a postmodern seer continued through Michiko Kakutani’s review of DeLillo’s subsequent novel, which depicted characters in post-9/11 New York City, as the review begins with the statement: “No writer has been as prescient and eerily prophetic about 21st century America as Don DeLillo.” Reviewers extended the prophetic trope in a new direction when director David Cronenberg’s film adaptation of *Cosmopolis* was released in 2012. In this case they regarded DeLillo as a prophet of another event: the 2007 global recession prompted by banks, predatory lenders, and market speculators. Returning to that novel in a film review published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Cornel Bonca wrote: “Re-reading *Cosmopolis* now, . . . given the context of the 2007 global meltdown and the Occupy movement that followed, it appears to me that DeLillo has once again taken on the mantle of the artist-prophet.”

In these reviews and others, to borrow Peter Boxall’s terms, it is as though the “smallest warps and discontinuities” of DeLillo’s recent novels had somehow escaped into the world and visited DeLillo’s reviewers. Again, one
reconsiders Bill Gray’s statement in Mao II in which the character—a novelist—remarks that novelists can no longer shape the “inner life of a culture.” I do not criticize the reviewers’ anachronisms here. One can reasonably admit that DeLillo’s fiction has shaped the way in which we respond to traumatic world-historical violence and disaster. It was also reasonable to expect that DeLillo, who is after all a proud New Yorker, would respond to the savagery committed against his native city in some way. (We will visit his post-9/11 essay, as well as his belated post-9/11 fiction, later in this chapter.) It is confirmation that novels can still shape our sensibility in ways that ask us to feel and think anew. One can obtain perspectives and influences far worse.

If there is a criticism to be made, it is that in shaping the discussion of DeLillo’s more recent fiction in prophetic terms, criticism also limited the ability of reviewers to recognize the sensational narrative achievements of his recent novels. There was little precedent for them to follow, as DeLillo’s enemies had complained about his “flat” characters for decades. The trend continued through his recent works. Denby offered a favorable review of the film. After the reference to Updike’s critique of DeLillo’s novel, Denby defended both the book and its adaptation when he wrote that “when John Updike reviewed the novel [Cosmopolis] in these pages, he asked why we should care about the possible death of this arrogant cipher,” that “arrogant cipher” being Eric Packer, of course.\(^{16}\) The premise of such criticism is that a protagonist must be “sympathetic” and that the story must communicate a moral virtue. In Updike’s view it is possible to praise a novel only if it conforms to a certain set of moral conventions that are embodied in its principal character or characters. Here, too, we find another sort of anachronism, not a prophetic one that imposes contemporary criteria on DeLillo’s past writings but an absolutism of the metaphysical variety.

Cosmopolis was greeted in a much different manner by DeLillo’s academic readers. As noted earlier, Peter Boxall’s 2006 study is exemplary in that it distinguishes DeLillo’s later fiction while not losing sight of its relationship to the earlier writings. By contrast, reviewers such as Kakutani (writing about Falling Man) and Morrison (writing about Cosmopolis) unfavorably compared the respective novels to DeLillo’s Underworld. Their frame of reference was divided between prophecy and the past, allowing little room for any new relation to the present time (or, for that matter, the future).

Boxall, a British intellectual, counts among an influential group of academic critics who have revitalized discussion of DeLillo’s writings of the young millennium. They include both American and British writers. Some are renowned scholars of DeLillo’s work who were part of the first wave of DeLillo’s academic readers during the late 1980s. They include figures such
as John McClure, Mark Osteen, John T. Duvall, David Cowart, and others. In recent years other established literary intellectuals have also turned to DeLillo’s writings. They include Stacey Olster, Joseph Conte, Patrick O’Donnell, and Linda S. Kaufman, the last of whom has published a series of excellent writings on *Falling Man*, as we shall see. Critics of more recent vintage, such as Boxall, Phillip Nel, and Tim Engles, have also published excellent recent criticism on DeLillo’s writings, with increased attention to his recent fiction. While their publications are dispersed in monographs and academic journals, these critics, together with others, have also contributed original essays that appeared in two recent collections devoted to DeLillo’s writings: *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (2008) and *Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man* (2011). The latter volume features only passing references to *Cosmopolis*, while the former volume devotes substantial sections, as well as an entire essay, to that novel.\(^{17}\) The sections include John McClure’s discussion of DeLillo’s sense of mystery in a theological key, dividing attention between his Catholicism and “ecstatic traditions.”\(^{18}\) Ruth Helyer explains instead masculinity, violence, and the media in her discussion of the novel,\(^{19}\) while Peter Knight’s essay explains DeLillo’s novel in the context of Fredric Jameson’s notion of “late capitalism.”\(^{20}\)

Joseph Conte’s fine essay in that volume, which is devoted entirely to *Cosmopolis*, merits discussion for the careful attention that Conte pays to the difficulty of calibrating *Cosmopolis* in relation to the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 (and perhaps by extension, but perhaps with greater relevance, to the economic crisis of 2007). Conte begins by noting that DeLillo had “nearly finished drafting his thirteenth novel, *Cosmopolis* (2003), at the time” and that DeLillo subsequently stepped away from the work after September 11, 2001.\(^{21}\) Reviewing the temptation to regard DeLillo’s prose as prophetic, the essay is careful to note the tendency but does not succumb to it. Conte chooses instead to draw a contrast between the novel and event: “In millennial American culture, the catastrophe of the Towers seizes on consciousness, its terror breaking through the anomie of multinational capitalism and media saturation.”\(^{22}\)

Disruption results in a sudden transformation of historical perspective, a paradigmatic shift in which we regard global capital—a quasi monopoly that replaces the binary conflicts of the Cold War—as having generated a new antagonist (terror) from within its own design. The result, explained in part through the persistence of American Cold War-era intellectuals (the neoconservatives) who framed the “War on Terror” by recycling the familiar rhetoric of the Cold War, transforms what appeared at first as a paradigmatic shift into
a sort of tragic repetition. In Conte’s view it is unfair to regard *Cosmopolis* as a literary reply to 9/11. Rather, he argues that the terror of 9/11 is best understood as a horrifically violent response to the global markets depicted in *Cosmopolis* and in an indirect way also an attack against the secular traditions of individualism, democracy, and literary expression represented by the institution of the modern novel.

One might ask, at such a point, why DeLillo felt compelled eventually to write a novel that would depict in some way the 9/11 attack and its aftermath. After all, if one agreed with reviewers who claimed him a prophet of the event, it would seem that he had already written about 9/11 before the fact (for example, in Brita’s running commentary in *Mao II* regarding the Twin Towers’ proximity to her apartment in lower Manhattan).

Scribner published Don DeLillo’s fourteenth novel, entitled *Falling Man*, in 2007. The novel was received with confusion and dismay. Reviewing it in the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani coupled the book with its predecessor: “Unfortunately, his strangely stilted 2003 novel ‘Cosmopolis’ was a terrible disappointment, and so is his spindly new novel, ‘Falling Man.’” Reviewing *Falling Man* in the *New York Review of Books*, critic Andrew O’Hagan asked, “What becomes of a prophet when his word becomes deed?” O’Hagan proceeds to draw attention to the novel’s sentences, which he believes to be of a lesser quality, describing them as examples of DeLillo’s “inability to conjure his usual exciting prose.” Is it fair to expect a person, who as Conte notes was so affected by the attack that he stopped working, to compose an excited response to such an event? Reviewers expected perhaps a “mega-novel,” along the lines of *Underworld* or *White Noise*, and O’Hagan is correct to note a scene in *Falling Man* that regards the notion of such a book with suspicion and distaste. With *Falling Man*, reviewers implied, Don DeLillo refused to come down the mountain.

When read in light of *The Body Artist* and *Cosmopolis*, however, *Falling Man* would seem consistent with the quiet achievements of DeLillo’s fiction of the young millennium. One might imagine the two previous novels—one about a woman who learns to cope with grief through art, the other about an angry, defeated man—as the outer panels of a polyptych, or multipanel set of paintings. (Peter Boxall briefly entertains a relationship between those two works when he writes that “it may be that *The Body Artist*, in its monkish, rural retreat, makes a strong contrast to *Cosmopolis*, set as the latter is in the buzz of a futuristic city.”) Following this line of thought, the outer panels formed by the two previous novels are hinged together and closed like doors. Opening them reveals the panels of a third, larger painting to the viewer. In
this case we might regard *Falling Man*, in which a woman and man contend with the consequence of the attack, as the center panel of the first decade of DeLillo’s twenty-first-century career.

*Falling Man*

Announcing a novel, whereby the first words precipitate a sort of narrative chain reaction that carries through the work, has long been praised as a trademark of DeLillo’s fiction. His novels begin with sharp, memorable sentences arranged in carefully tailored narrative patterns. In cases such as *Mao II* (1991) and the more recent *Point Omega* (2010), the novels’ first sections are titled so as to distinguish them as distinct parts of the work. (In those two novels, the section titles are “At Yankee Stadium” and “Anonymity,” respectively.) These sections are often isolated for praise, a critical habit that extends also to individual sentences. (One reviewer of *Underworld* began the essay with the memorable line “Don DeLillo is now the best writer of sentences in America.”) As I noted in the previous section, reviewers such as Kakutani, who invokes the “Prologue” to *Underworld* as a standard for evaluation of DeLillo in her review of *Falling Man*, and O’Hara, who judges *Falling Man* by the “magic” of its sentences, are the rule. What is lost in this praise for the celebrated beginnings of DeLillo’s books is how the narration of his novels depends also upon the careful selection and placement of individual words and parts of speech, a matter whose import I hope to have explained with respect to his recent writings. This is not a way of splitting additional hairs; rather, it indicates a relationship between part and whole that DeLillo recalibrates in his late fiction.

How then might we understand these celebrated sections—as distinct sections of a novel or as integral to its entirety? As noted in the previous chapter, DeLillo regards some of them as dispensable (citing the opening of *The Names* as an example). Any answer we offer to the question will find at least one exception in DeLillo’s actual works. I tend to the latter view insofar as the later novels sustain the initial arrangement of words in such a way that they accumulate and acquire density over the novel’s course. In this view, we might usefully divide the narration of DeLillo’s twentieth-century novels into two types. In the first type a narrator speaks in the first person, and a novel begins. David Bell in *Americana* and Jack Gladney in *White Noise* announce the novel, and a narrative catalysis proceeds in the form of a controlled reaction. As *Americana* begins, the reader will notice that the “shot” pans out, and the novel’s narrative scope widens over the course of the story, from the cramped New York apartment, to New England, to the American Midwest, until it finally reaches the open landscapes of the Southwest at its conclusion.
The view is controlled insofar as we see what David wants us to see. First-person narration serves in this way as a framing device. As the scene widens, however, the narrator tends to diminish in stature. The same might be said for Jack Gladney’s bookends to *White Noise*, where he describes the habits of two different yet related American crowds (those being the parents of college students and supermarket consumers). Not every one of DeLillo’s twentieth-century novels diminishes the narrator by this expansive effect; the narrator of *The Names* (1982) begins from a removed position: “For a long time, I stayed away from the Acropolis” (3), only to become embroiled by virtue of increased proximity to the novel’s plot.

In the second type, there is what appears to be third-person narration. At first glance, it appears passive, even aloof, but over the course of the opening pages the narration will often turn to address the reader. *The Body Artist* begins with a formal detachment but exploits the ambiguity of pronouns to draw the reader into the narrative process. Take, for instance, the opening line of *Mao II* (1991): “Here they come, marching into American sunlight.” The reader, confused perhaps by the adjective (what precisely might constitute “American” sunlight?) may not recognize at first how the narration speaks to an implied audience: the crowd in the stands watching another crowd, that of the wedding ritual. The narration describes how Karen Janney’s father, Rodge, experiences the scene (and also later, how Karen sees it), but it is being described to the reader and not directly from the character’s point of view. The narration provides a certain scale that is simultaneously intimate (we are addressed) and expansive (a scene is described).

*Falling Man* would seem to belong to this second type. It does not draw the reader in, as did *The Body Artist*, or offer the asynchronous distance of *Cosmopolis*. *Falling Man*’s narration begins with a combined distance and proximity, and with them the ancillary affective categories of remembrance and shock. This may have also been the goal of the narrative’s design, at least in the opening pages, which again proceeds from DeLillo’s elaboration of pronouns, a common technique of the novelist’s previous works. And yet the opening pages of *Falling Man* suggest both a break and a continuation of his narrative style. I mean it in the sense that the chapter perfectly exemplifies DeLillo’s vaunted “style” but also dulls it, as if to resist the temptation to deliver a “spectacular” opening salvo to an audience that clearly pressed him for one in reviews of his previous novel.

The novel begins: “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night” (3). As was the case in DeLillo’s prior two books, the narrative’s artistic burden is placed on the pronoun—the ambiguity of “it.” To what does “it” refer? The street itself is negated in favor of
Understanding Don deLillo

abstractions: “world,” “time,” “space,” and “near-night.” Rather than focus on one, the narration elaborates the cosmological connotations of the lot over a series of conceits, the most prominent being a geological one that shapes the reader’s perception of “it.” Things are defined in negative terms; they are conjoined, broken apart, and rendered. *Falling Man* begins in this way, with syntactic ruptures, metaphorical dead-ends, and by a sort of shaken narrative accumulation of things, random things, as a novel of consequence. DeLillo has taken the pronominal emphasis of his recent narrative designs and exploded it on the page as if to illustrate “those things are no longer applicable to ‘it.’”

A figure appears from the debris and shock. It is the silhouette of an observer who was previously implied. Now the pronouns assume another function—that of gathering a point of view from the cosmic wreck. We note “he,” “him,” and “his,” the masculine pronouns assuming a tenuous coherence as the scene unfolds. Three quarters of the way through the chapter, the reader finds this passage: “He heard the sound of the second fall, or felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down, a soft awe of voices in the distance. That was him coming down, the north tower” (5). At this point, the reader infers that “he” had previously left a different tower, but the metaphorical conjunction between “him” and “the north tower,” which thereby links a person with an object of incomparable magnitude, comes apart both literally and figuratively at the moment it is suggested. Clearly, *Falling Man* is not a novel without philosophical ambitions, ambitions that are evident in these poetic ruptures between words and the things to which they refer. Readers who clamored for spectacle were sure to be disappointed by the somber, fractured lines of the novel’s first pages. Certainly, one can ignore “it” in the search for other things. For instance, one can judge *Falling Man* for the philosophical or political assumptions of its premise, which posits a “world” in which language, in a state of shock, has temporarily lost its coherence, but one cannot dispute the artful craftsmanship with which DeLillo has designed the narration of the book’s opening chapter, as if to refuse expectation.

Diffidence, one might call it, but it is diffidence with respect to the signature “first lines” of DeLillo’s own career as well as audience expectations. If one looks closely, the components of that heralded style are strategically placed in the ruin of the scene. There is the implied catastrophe, a world historical event aspiring to genocide. There is a character emerging from shock. The prose is ironically terse and observant to detail. Evidence of global capitalism (one might regard it as the destruction of the office files and furniture that attracted David’s attention in the opening chapters of *Americana*) litters the air and ground. The narration notes “the tai chi group from the park nearby” (4), frozen in their stances, a scene reminiscent of a similar moment
in DeLillo’s *Running Dog* (1978) and also a reminder of his interest in Asian religions and particularly variants of Buddhism that stress physical discipline. There is a conceit that connects “him” to the tower, “the world,” and a cosmology, but it is in collapse (as opposed to the pervasive, amorphous figure of “white noise”). “It” is coming done (in slow-motion, of course).

The process will continue over the course of the novel with respect to the figure of the initial observer who emerges from the event (but never quite from his shock). “His” pronouns will slowly assume identity, history, and community, even the specificity of a name (Keith) over the following chapters. But *Falling Man* will also move in the opposite direction, developing a counterpoint to “it,” a pronoun against whose lack of clarity a new protagonist appears in increasingly sharper and antithetical relief: Lianne.

It is useful to regard *Falling Man* as a mirror image of *White Noise* (1985). Like that earlier novel, *Falling Man* is a melodrama about a postnuclear family set in the aftermath of a disaster. In the latter novel’s case, the principal characters are Keith Neudecker and Lianne. (Some commentators refer to Lianne as Lianne Neudecker, but she is never named as such in the novel; Keith and Lianne are legally separated, and Lianne most often identifies with the “Glenn,” her father’s name.) Previously married, Keith and Lianne were legally separated (not divorced) and living apart prior to the period in which the novel is set. They are parents to a son named Justin, who lives with Lianne on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. (Keith lived in an apartment across from the World Trade Center, at the southern end of the island.) Keith is the observer of events in the opening chapter, although he is not named until the novel’s second chapter, as if the shock of survival had estranged him from his own name. Thereafter he inhabits the name with discomfort, only to recede again into anonymity and the amnesiac spaces of the American Southwest.

Lianne offers a far different trajectory. In *White Noise*, for example, the extended families of Jack and Babette had no significant presence of which to speak. (Only Babette’s father briefly appears in the book.) Keith’s family is also largely absent. His father visits from Western Pennsylvania, three years after the novel begins, but never appears in a scene, remaining instead in a nearby room of the apartment. Lianne’s father and mother have a significant presence in the novel. Her mother, Nina, is a retired art historian who lives nearby. Lianne’s father, Jack, committed suicide years before, at the onset of symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. Lianne believes he did so because he wanted to spare her his inability to recognize her. While Jack’s influence is significant in Lianne’s life—she runs a writing workshop for persons with Alzheimer’s disease, for example—Nina has a more powerful presence in the novel. She and her lover, Martin, often host Lianne and Justin. They discuss art, politics,
and history, and their conversations often ruminate on life after “it.” Just as significant is the fact of these conversations. As opposed to the postgenealogical characters of *White Noise*, Lianne’s interactions with her family sustain multigenerational narrative modes for much of the novel. If the disruption of the opening pages is a geological surface movement, then these multigenerational narratives function as a planetary core, exerting a centripetal, stabilizing energy for Lianne.

The plot of the novel may be summarized as follows: Lianne and Keith attempt to reconcile their marriage after “it.” As Linda S. Kaufmann has noted in an excellent review of the novel’s narrative of their broken family, the two characters “resume a semblance of family life, though the conflicts that drove them to part remain unresolved.” In this context Keith, his downtown apartment destroyed, returns to live with Lianne and Justin. Keith’s wrist is injured during his flight, and he must rehabilitate it with a regimen that recurs throughout the novel. Lianne proceeds with her own work as a leader of the writing group and also as a freelance editor. In the weeks that follow the novel’s opening scene, Keith slightly recovers from the initial shock by finding consolation with another survivor of the attack, an African American woman named Florence, and the two commence a brief romantic affair. Both together and as separate individuals, Lianne and Keith contend with an array of reactions and emotions, many of them conflicted, after the attack. Following the reconciliation, Keith begins to drift away from New York City, living between Nevada, where he gambles, and New York City, while increasingly favoring the former place. Lianne remains in New York City with Justin.

Spread over fourteen somber chapters, this family melodrama constitutes *Falling Man*’s primary terrain. Many of DeLillo’s signature narrative techniques appear throughout the novel, but as with the case of the family melodrama, they are often stripped of any comic or absurdist pretense. Take “the crowd,” for instance. In the opening lines of previous novels such as *Mao II* and *Underworld*, for instance, crowds are afforded an extraordinary complexity in a manner that suggests a sentience independent of the individuals who compose them. Those crowds express comedy and terror, become locations of intrigue and surprise, and function as engines of art and history. By contrast, there is a scene in *Falling Man* in which Keith listens to Florence describe the masses of employees escaping the building prior to its collapse. Florence recounts her descent, the same stairwell, and the details of the crowd; Keith recognizes fragments of his own escape in her words. He returns to the memory through her eyes, but try as he might, he cannot see himself among the fleeing workers. Although it would seem to bring them together, the mass experience ultimately divides them. In the end, they are linked only
by Florence’s briefcase, which Keith absentmindedly picked up as he fled and which he has since returned to her. For Keith, crowds have lost their wondrous vitality and their capacity to function as the imaginative witnesses (and substitutes) to historical events. Crowds have fallen silent.

Imagination, memory, and the ability to react with either thought or affect are instead reserved for Lianne, who recovers those abilities after an initial period of shock. In describing a scene from the book at the beginning of this chapter, I noted how Lianne dwells upon a still-life painting, bringing it to life, as it were, through the ensuing conversation between her, Nina, and Martin. In a recent essay, Julia Apitzsch has noted that DeLillo replaced the “media images that constitute our experience of the event” with figural and performance art, the still-life painting of the scene in question representing the former group. Whereas the crowd no longer speaks to Keith, Lianne listens to art. Here is the response and solution—complicated, introspective, and thoughtful—to the horrific shock that opens the novel. Whereas Keith is locked into his subjective view of the event, Lianne escapes that subjectivity by virtue of an exchange. Her relationship to objects is an imaginative and critical one. In the end, as Apitzsch is correct to note, Lianne and her mother, Nina, must return the still-life paintings to Martin because “they now link his shady past to the present terrorist activities in ways that cast a new light on everything.” Nina returns to visit the paintings when they are exhibited in a New York gallery.

The function of art in *Falling Man* is not limited to what Apitzsch describes as Lianne’s “ekphrastic” perspective, which transforms the novel into a still life of sorts. There is a second art form with which to contend in the novel: photography. It is embodied by the infamous and iconic “Falling Man” photograph to which the novel alludes in an extraordinarily difficult manner, not by reproducing it, as it were, but by creating a fictional character who re-creates the photograph as a public performance wherein he suspends himself from buildings. Whereas the still-life painting invites Lianne to pensive reflection, *Falling Man* provokes anger and shock. The two figures mark key points along the broad affective spectrum whereby Lianne responds to and processes the tragic day. DeLillo’s fictional re-creation of the photograph in art may be said to intervene in and complicate a comparable public catharsis that generated controversy and debate around the relationship between art and terror. As John N. Duvall has noted, “Falling Man is a terrorist of perception.” Duvall proceeds to note how “a number of visual artists tried to represent the particular horror evoked by those who jumped from the towers rather than burn to death. The contemporary response to these artistic meditations was quite negative.”
Apitzsch describes the photograph’s function as follows: “The fictitious Falling Man [in DeLillo’s novel] echoes the infamous photograph taken by Richard Drew of one victim jumping out of a tower window. The photo was printed on page 7 of the *New York Times* and reprinted by various other newspapers. It became known under the title ‘Falling Man,’ and it created a scandal among people because of its alleged sensationalist exploitation of terror.”

The photograph itself was taken from the street level in lower Manhattan, and it captures a person descending—it is not clear whether the figure jumped or fell. The photograph was later the subject of a September 2003 article written by Tom Junod for *Esquire* magazine. (A follow-up to the original article was published in that same magazine in 2011.) A documentary film, loosely based upon Junod’s original *Esquire* article, was released in 2006. With respect to the photograph itself, it is difficult to resist a critique of its “iconic” status, and one must acknowledge the widespread dispute that surrounded the photo. Does the photo violate the terrible privacy of a dying man’s desperate choice? Is it exploitation of the event, a fragment of a spectacle published only to sell newspapers and thereby profit from tragedy? Or is the very fact of its publication an assertion of unwavering commitment, on behalf of a free press, to inform the public? Each of these questions assumes a motive of design or an intention prior to the fact of publication.

All of these precedents would seem to guarantee a causal relationship between the image and DeLillo’s novel; yet DeLillo has insisted in interviews that his novel was not “inspired” by the photograph in any way. One cannot assume DeLillo’s ignorance of the matter, given the role of the media in his fiction, his predisposition to newsprint, the resemblance between the photograph and Falling Man’s poses, and so forth. With respect to the novel itself, the questions raised about the photograph’s possible role as source material must shift into a different frame. In the first place, the novel does not reproduce the photograph in any visual form. The novel alludes to Drew’s photograph at several points. At one point in the closing chapter, Keith, the man who “was . . . coming down, the north tower” (5) in the opening pages, may catch a glimpse at the field of his vision of a person falling from one of the tower’s upper floors in the minutes after “it” occurs. In these instances, the premise and moment of Drew’s photograph occupies a rhetorical space at the edge of the novel, a space from which it is never entirely assimilated into the work.

In the second place, the novel portrays instead a man named David Janiak, a parachutist, who calls himself Falling Man and suspends himself from tall structures in New York City. Readers are never privy to objective descriptions of the figure; rather, we only know of David through Lianne’s reactions to
him, either in person or in news reports. Lianne reacts in critical fashion during one of the novel’s more complex scenes. The novel’s ninth chapter shows Lianne walking across Manhattan’s Upper East Side as she seeks a patient who has gone missing from the writing workshop that Lianne conducts every week. She passes housing projects and notices children at play. A hush descends, and concerned faces appear in the windows of the buildings. They are all looking in Lianne’s direction, but not directly at her person. She looks up and sees Falling Man waiting in a position above and to the side of a subway track that emerges from a nearby tunnel. Lianne turns her attention to the spectators, then back to the waiting David Janiak. She realizes the spectacle is not meant for the residents but for the commuters of a train that is speeding through the tunnel. Janiak leaps, and Lianne now watches the shocked commuters who react to his three-dimensional replication of the photograph. The aesthetic action is comparable to when Lianne animates the still life in her mother’s apartment, the difference being that Janiak’s re-creation of the photograph is public, spectacular, and provocative. The complex narration of the scene, in which Lianne observes two sets of observers as well as Janiak (all of whom do not seem to note her presence), is as carefully orchestrated as any narrative sequence in DeLillo’s prose. The effect, however, is again different: Lianne recoils before the scene, which comprises both the spectators and Falling Man (as opposed to Janiak alone). We know that her point of view is unique, but we do not know what shocks her. Is it the physical risk of Janiak’s leap from his perch? The commuters’ faces twisting into frightened expressions? The neighborhood’s apprehensive residents whom Janiak and the commuters, but not Lianne, appear to ignore?

There is also the sudden nature of Falling Man’s performance to consider, the strategy of which is significant in its own right. Linda Kauffmann describes Janiak as an artist who “purposefully avoids the celebrity that most of the culture craves. Each jump is spontaneous, so the media cannot record it. He depends on the element of surprise, and refuses to explain his actions, motives, or intentions.” Kauffmann’s published essays on DeLillo’s *Falling Man* are particularly insightful, and they merit special consideration. In the article just cited, she ultimately argues that both Falling Man (Janiak) and the novel’s use of the genre of the family melodrama resist assimilation: “*Falling Man* defies tidy categorization of every sort, including those related to sexual politics.” Furthermore, as Apitzsch notes, DeLillo insists upon replacing media spectacle with art in the novel. Regarded together, these are the means and the end of *Falling Man*. Art is the means by which Lianne “tries valiantly to work through the trauma [of ‘it’],” as Kauffmann writes in another essay. In this view of DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Lianne attains a status comparable to
that of Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist* or Bill Gray in *Mao II* insofar as each exhibits a fierce and altruistic determination to survive in, through, and by thoughtful and critical response to works of art.

There remains, however, one aspect of DeLillo’s novel that has not been commented on at any length, although certain critics have alluded to it. I have drawn attention to the episodic structure of DeLillo’s novels. That structure includes the extensive use of separately labeled interchapters that interrupt the flow of chapters, or even chapters that function as counter-narratives to the central plot, as was the case in the “diary” chapters of *Cosmopolis*, and also DeLillo’s dust jackets, or photographs reproduced between parts of a novel (as in *Mao II*). *Falling Man* adopts a similar pattern in that its fourteen chapters are divided into three parts, respectively titled “Bill Lawton,” “Ernst Hechinger,” and “David Janiak.” The numbered chapters within each part are devoted to Keith and Lianne, but each of the three parts concludes with a separately titled interchapter. The interchapters are labeled “Marienstrasse,” “In Nokomis,” and “In The Hudson Corridor,” the last of which ends *Falling Man*.

The three interchapters appear to be loosely based upon the account of the terrorist hijackers described by *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004). The protagonist of these interchapters is a fictional character, a young Arab man named Hammad. He is a hijacker trained to subdue passengers while other terrorists take over airplane control systems. Although there was no hijacker by that name on any of the four hijacked planes—Hammad is depicted as being on the plane that strikes the south tower of the World Trade Center, the first of the four planes to crash—his story follows the exact details of that plot. (One of the other terrorists who actually hijacked the planes is named in DeLillo’s novel.) The difference is that DeLillo’s narration strips away the sociopolitical commentary that typifies the official documents, revealing in its place a bare narrative of indoctrination.

Hammad’s story begins in Hamburg, Germany, where he studies engineering and falls in love with a Muslim woman. He lives in a crowded apartment with other members of the cell. It proceeds in the second interchapter to flight training in Florida, where the pilots are separated from the other hijackers, who would murder the crew and contain the passengers during the flight. In the first two interchapters, Hammad is divided between skepticism and loyalty to his peers. The character development is reminiscent of Karen Janney’s in *Mao II*. Skepticism modulates the development of both characters: for Karen it is manifest in the form of family memory; for Hammad it appears in the form of a girlfriend named Leyla. Karen’s doubts eventually lead her away from the cult, however, whereas Hammad’s doubts accede to complete
zealotry. There is a second difference: in *Mao II* the reader is not privy to Karen’s induction into the cult. There is instead the opening scene that describes her near-complete devotion, the flashback (told by Scott) of her incomplete deprogramming and escape, and finally, from Karen’s point of view, her mystical, phantasmagoric vision of New York City. In *Falling Man* the narration surveys the social process of Hammad’s radicalization. The process combines a psychological group dynamic with the presence of a tyrannical figure. In the former case, the group punishes bad Muslims, and Hammad must beat a man; in the latter case, Hammad is shown to wither before the paranoid exhortations of Amir, the cell’s leader. (Amir is part of the full name of one of the actual 9/11 terrorists.) The cell’s dynamic also includes a regimen of physical discipline. In every case—doctrine, exercise, or violence—preparation for the attack involves adherence to routine. The “Marienstrasse” chapter is terse, with sparse sentences that convey an atmosphere of ascetic preparation. In this way DeLillo depicts fanaticism as moving away from self-realization. As opposed to bildungsroman, Hammad’s story describes a “de-selfing”—an erasure of his earthly attachments to things, ambitions, family, loved ones, and friends—to all but his fellow conspirators.

The critical response to Hammad has been complex. In its most heated moments, critics have ventured fierce accusations regarding the limits of DeLillo’s imagination. For instance, Sascha Pöhlmann has argued that *Falling Man* “does not succeed in imagining the terrorist as anything other than an Orientalist construction of an Islamist terrorist.” In one of three essays she has published on *Falling Man*, Linda S. Kauffman has regarded Hammad instead as a “three-dimensional” character whose religious “doubt” makes him “particularly memorable.” While Pöhlmann regards the novel within a broad ideological framework and Kauffman considers it in light of the novelist’s post-9/11 writings, Paula Martín Salván’s has placed Hammad along the ascetic figures that appear throughout DeLillo’s novels, these generally being characters who are “involved in a search for some form of transcendence.” Salván makes a number of insightful arguments in her essay (correctly noting, for example, the qualitative disparity between *Falling Man* and John Updike’s ill-conceived 2006 novel *The Terrorist*). The most relevant to our present discussion of the novel’s episodic structure is her argument regarding the relationship between the brief, epigrammatic prose style and the novel’s other characters, when she writes that “the dissolution of writing itself at the end of an ascetic process is a device DeLillo uses elsewhere in *Falling Man*.” In Salván’s view, the asceticism extends to Keith and later encompasses a more general function of the novel that posits “storytelling as a means to confront terrorism.” This view is a reasonable one, even as
it would seem to confirm Pöhlmann’s accusation regarding the novel’s ideological orientation vis-à-vis the privileged role of art. But Salván’s is also incomplete insofar as it does not contend with the narration of the novel’s final interchapter, “In the Hudson Corridor,” and what that narration implies with respect to the novel’s design.

In the later chapters of Falling Man, Lianne and Keith begin to separate once again. At the same time a mirroring effect embedded in the narration reflects the figural movements of Lianne, Keith, and Hammad. In chapter 14 Keith returns to gambling in Las Vegas. He continues his routines, his wrist-rehabilitation exercises of flexing and stretching (scenes that illustrate Salván’s point regarding asceticism). Lianne turns instead to community, to family, and to the Catholic Mass. Unlike that of the male characters, Lianne’s routine is not self-annihilating, nor is it a prop that merely juxtaposes Keith and Hammad, who are drawing closer even as the novel appears to move away from “it” in time. As noted above, the third and final interchapter, entitled “In The Hudson Corridor,” closes Falling Man. When the hijacked airplane hits the south tower, a sentence that begins with Hammad ends with Keith: “A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, 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” (239).

It is notable that DeLillo does not use pronouns here to confuse the two men (as the reader is confused with Lauren in The Body Artist, for example). Hammad has long since become depersonalized, the pronoun “he” working as a substitute for the proper noun in the final interchapter. Keith is named in the sentence, however, but if the reader recalls Keith was also reduced to a pronoun in the novel’s opening chapter, a shocked nominal status from which he slowly emerges, but never entirely, over the course of the book, his name becomes something arbitrary, even uncomfortable along the way.

Falling Man’s cyclical structure would appear to suggest a condemnation of violent socioreligious conflict, whose modern ethos and causes, it suggests, are embodied in the masculine characters of Hammad, Keith, and Martin. From the opening narration in which Keith materializes only to come apart once again over the novel’s course (only to return to the traumatic moment), it would suggest a bleak view of history to which Lianne is the counterweight. The characters are never idealized or flattened to thin ideas: Hammad doubts his devotion, Keith tries to regain integrity but fails, Lianne’s anger upsets her attempts to comprehend the motives for the attack, and so forth through
Florence and Nina, Martin and Justin. Is it true, given the forms of violence, not all of them physical, that characters commit against one another, that *Falling Man* is designed in some way to heal the “trauma” of the event? Can we return to a prior state, the novel seems to ask, as we continue to behave in this manner? If we raise these questions, we risk reducing the novel to a morality play, a work whose didactic impulse is extracted from the substance of its design. The design itself, from the claustrophobia of its opening pages through the violent momentum of its alternating chapters, interchapters, and parts, suggests a novel that regards its own aesthetic design as necessary and suspicious, as well as intrusive, violent, and conclusive (similar, in this way, to how Lianne regards David Janiak), yet also introspective, critical, and expansive (similar, in this way, to Lianne’s relationship to her mother’s collection of still-life paintings). The pattern is consistent with the narrative experiments of DeLillo’s works of the new century. *The Body Artist* drew the reader into the peculiar linguistic temporalities of its syntax, and *Cosmopolis* proposed that markets effected technological and cognitive ruptures in the narrative perception of time. In *Falling Man* narrative time is instead cyclical, and violently so: characters and readers are placed in a position to simultaneously recoil from historical memory and experience. *Falling Man* does not convey those cycles as a media loop by which the repetition of an image becomes nauseatingly common, nor does it advocate a specific historical model (for example, the cyclical model of history proposed by Giambattista Vico). Unlike its predecessors, *Falling Man* dramatizes time as traveling along individual and communal currents and countercurrents. It does not represent historical time but rather rival and turbulent perceptions of it, those perceptions that the novel correctly claims to belong to the flow of aesthetic experience (as opposed to those of mediated commercial time or that of rationalized, historical time). These are the wells from which spring revolutions of violence as well as virtue.

As noted earlier, the critical reception of *Falling Man* has been mixed. When regarded within that strange “genre” of post-9/11 fiction, it certainly does not resemble the mood or design of other books that are included in the lot, most of which were being written more or less at the same time that DeLillo composed *Falling Man*. Absent are the relativist fantasies of Updike’s *The Terrorist*, a book about a radicalized Arab American teenager whom the novelist admitted to researching while being escorted by car through Paterson, New Jersey (presumably because it was documented that some of the 9/11 hijackers passed through that city’s large Arab American community prior to the attack). If *Falling Man* is to be compared to other treatments of “it,” a pronoun the novel uses to indicate amorphous shock as well as an event that was its cause, it should also be noted that DeLillo does not venture into
the weak comparative historicity of a novel such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), which lightly equates 9/11 to the Allied firebombing of Dresden, Germany, during World War II (the latter having been the occasion for Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*). And with respect to other prior works of American literature, *Falling Man* did not attempt to elaborate any classic figure of American literary rhetoric (as did Joseph O’Neill in returning to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in his 2008 novel *Netherland*). In their essays Pöhlmann and Salván express criticism and articulate reservations about the status of DeLillo’s novel vis-à-vis these other works (they do not mention O’Neill’s novel, however), and other critics have attempted to define the relationship of DeLillo’s novel to the event along other trajectories.39 One could draw any number of comparisons, perhaps at the risk of unfairly implying that the novels in question were written in a vacuum or in some implicit dialogue with one another. Regardless, the novels enter into a context, one that precedes the event in question and continues after the fact; and they enter a market in which readers flocked to bookstores to purchase books that might explain the event either directly (one recalls *The 9/11 Commission Report*, a best-selling government document) or indirectly (sales of spiritual and religious writings likewise increased after the attack). *Falling Man* can fairly be said to avoid comparison to the other novels that were published in the first decade after “it” happened. In doing so, one risks making it exceptional on the one hand, with all the cultural chauvinism that term entails, or appealing ad hominem on the other to DeLillo’s own stated preoccupation that the novel today functions at the edges of culture, its presence diminished by terror and the media.

If a fair comparison can be made, one might note that the novel affirms the latter option in that *Falling Man* is consistent with DeLillo’s refusal to write in such a way that would merely “entertain” a reader. Referring to DeLillo’s post-9/11 essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” Sascha Pöhlmann notes that “while the nation clamored for answers [following 9/11], DeLillo resolved instead to ask more questions.” 40 The essay’s maneuver is typical of the inconclusive manner of his previous novels. As noted earlier, elements of *Falling Man* (Keith’s drifting into the Southwest, for example, or his cinematic alternate take on the scene when he returns to his ruined apartment) follow long-established habits in DeLillo’s fiction (even if their use is subdued). This was perhaps the mistake that many readers and critics made when reviewing the book: they expected it to conform to an earlier pattern by which DeLillo would again summon the spectacular metafictions of his mid-career success and that he would direct that arsenal against the attack so as to expose the media, terrorists, plots, and jargon that largely shaped our response to it.
Critics nearly demanded it: after all, DeLillo was a prophet, and eventually the prophet must speak. And speak he did, as *Falling Man* delivers what appears to be a rebuke to that section of his audience who demanded of the oracle that expectations be met.

*Falling Man* contains a sequence in which Lianne meets with an editor, Carol Shoup. Carol works for a publishing firm that occasionally hires Lianne to edit books as an independent contractor, thereby outsourcing work to her, as it were. Carol offers Lianne to edit the manuscript of a nonfiction book, which is implied to be an academic study that “seems to predict what happened” (138). Returning to the loaded pronoun of the novel’s opening line, DeLillo has Carol further describe a “book that is so enormously immersed, going back on it, leading up to it. And a book that’s so demanding, so incredibly tedious” (138). Lianne responds wryly by repeating Carol’s phrase “seems to predict” in the dialogue they exchange during their meeting. Here is metafiction, but not of the kind that DeLillo’s reviewers requested.

DeLillo may have directed the book offer scene against critics, but he may have also addressed the publishing industry in that moment. It is a recurrent habit: Fenig the genre writer rails against it in *Great Jones Street* (1973), and three separate characters—Bill, Scott, and Charles (an important editor at a major publishing firm) all offer their largely negative views on it in *Mao II*. Lianne provides a curt reply to the industry’s rush to publish books that would not have otherwise been published had the attack not occurred. (As Carol notes in the scene, the manuscript in question circulated among publishers prior to the attack but was rejected at that time.)

Broadening the view of the implied criticism of the industry, one returns to Julia Apitzsch’s argument that *Falling Man* avoids long discursions on the mass media (discussions for which DeLillo had become famous in other novels, such as *White Noise* and *Mao II*). Is it fair to suggest that DeLillo’s novel fulminates in some way against the media and its technicians, the editors, producers, and pundits who, churned by vengeance-minded propaganda, plunged the republic into a new type of bloodlust? Perhaps. *Falling Man* would appear in this view a novel that asserts the institution of literary narrative against “it,” the latter being an expansive and terrible thing that would seem to be slouching towards Bethlehem through the sum of our actions. In that position *Falling Man* does not ask, “How are you complicit?” but rather, “What do I expect from this novel, or any novel or other work of art?” If we seek familiarity and its distracting comforts, delusion is sure to follow. To ask such a question as thousands die, tens of thousands and millions in the years that follow, continuously and without end in sight, while corrupt and cynical bureaucrats and ideological technicians spout clichés even as they transform
war into a more sophisticated form of capitalism or make bedfellows with the very prophets that DeLillo depicts in his fiction (Linda Kauffman has noted the 2004 ceremony in the U.S. Capitol building honoring the Reverend Moon, one of the demagogues portrayed in Mao II), would furthermore seem a matter of minor and privileged concern in light of the blood spilled since a fanatical gang of murderers visited “it” upon New York. “It” is a day, whereby time has become a figure of some intractable space, and a day that does not end in DeLillo’s novel.

The early pages of this book referred to Edward W. Said’s writings on “late style.” Said describes three phases—early, middle, and late—in the history of the modern novel. He assigns them also to the shape of writer’s careers. He notes that in late style a “special maturity” becomes manifest. It can take one of two forms. In the case of the composer Giuseppe Verdi, the late works “exude not so much a spirit of wise resignation as a renewed, almost youthful energy that attests to an apotheosis of artistic creativity and power.” Other artists, such as the novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, exemplify another lateness, one that “involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going against.” I have found it useful to regard DeLillo’s later works in this way, with some distinctions. Falling Man and Point Omega come closest to the mood of Lampedusa wherein older orders persist to complicate the present time. In both cases a quasi-imperial American conservatism provides the example, with Richard Elster, the former Vietnam-era military official of Point Omega, being representative. (Linda Wagner Martin aptly described the latter novel as effectively offering “depletion.”) By contrast, the technical innovations of The Body Artist and Cosmopolis approximate the youthful energies of the late Verdi. What unites them above these distinctions is another impulse, one that might be described as DeLillo’s stubborn refusal to admit the present time as the only available path the future might take. In this turbulent temporal frame, Eric Packer must be a victim of his own disgust for obsolescence because he would otherwise represent the future, Lianne must refuse to accept the terrorist’s terms because she would otherwise abandon what she imagines the future might be, and Lauren must continue refining her performance by working into the future through but also against the drag of memory. The same may be said for the later short stories, even the somewhat lighthearted “Hammer and Sickle,” wherein DeLillo’s prose does not delight in the absurd so much as relinquish it to another generation, to youth, and the protagonist seeks instead a resolve that will allow him to face the future, even if in finding that resolve he must once again break the law.
In the end, *Falling Man* does not portray novelists and terrorists but survivors and suicides. The resulting perspective avoids the psychedelic tumult of Karen Janney’s synesthesia in *Mao II*, replacing it instead with the quiet manner in which Lianne regards a still life. It is not an excited view that suggests youthful provocation or the historical force of a later confidence. As the protagonists of the three novels near or begin middle age, we feel that DeLillo writes to remind us that a novel is not made from the sentiments it provides to its audience but from the vulnerable possibility of sentiments which that audience has not yet recognized.