Conclusion: DeLillo's Cosmopolis and the End of an Idiom

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The triumph of symbolic value, with its attendant liquidity of character, and the implications these hold for the move from virtue to virtuality, are especially promising in American space. These infuse the author’s sense of place, his sense of home, such that he finds the prosaic, secular world of Nabokov’s *Lolita* more familiar, more comfortable even, than the world of Pasternak’s *Zhivago*, with its marvels and magic. It saddens me to assert this, probably because Yury’s inner life appears to extend an attractive hopefulness of depth and meaning. Nor do I think it is merely the realia of daily existence or landscape that makes me feel more at home in a place where surface matters so much. The triumph of the public persona, the confident presentation of self at ease in motherless space, hovering atop the surface of the land, is a remarkable achievement of American culture and a powerful harnessing of consensual fantasy’s liberating potential. This is the progressive statement, the leap to embrace the ether I noted in my introduction. It should not be surprising that an old-world aristocrat like Nabokov might side with the burrowing response: Humbert’s corrosive character is aptly situated in the midst of a landscape without Mother.

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**DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* and the End of an Idiom**

Led by dear charity, hired by sweet hope, fond fancy essays this feat; but in vain; mere dreams and ideals, they explode in your hand, leaving nothing but a burn behind.

—Hermann Melville, *The Confidence-Man*

He lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour... His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy, and bliss, and freedom.

—Plato, *Republic*
One finds a sense of floating above in Russian culture, too. It is perhaps its dominant nineteenth-century mode, inaugurated most powerfully in Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman*, where the steed is Russia rushing forward but also fixed in time and space, a monument to a man and a country that, like Sobakevich’s girth, may have little or nothing behind it. Perhaps inflated claims, with feet planted clearly too far apart to stand that way for long, might serve to compensate for what Andrei Sinyavsky has characterized as the general formlessness of the Russian national character, which hovers in cultural space, amoeba-like, without a moral framework such that, depending on the circumstances and specifics of influence, it may become different things according to “who treats the wood.”

It is significant that Sinyavsky feels the need to note in the same passage that he does not see this state of affairs as “necessarily bad.” Why would he, writing in 1988, see such openness of character—or, as Sherry Turkle has expressed it, such fluidity, emergence, multiplicity, and flexibility—as bad, necessarily or not? Both Sinyavsky’s and Turkle’s claims, it should go without saying, sit squarely upon traditions of thinking about character. And while in the Russian context, it is hard to find the positive figures associated with consensual fantasy, the American equivalents offer greater variety.

Russian floaters and their accompanying exclamatory marks are easy to spot, flitting across the literary landscape, from Gogol’s Chichikov and Khlestakov to Turgenev’s Rudin and Bazarov, Cernyhevsky’s Rakhmetov, and a Dostoevskian panoply. And in the twentieth century, Andrei Bely once more picks up the flying yet constant beast and fixes it with new urgency:

> Russia, you are like a steed! Your two front hooves have leaped far off into the darkness, into the void, while your two rear hooves are firmly implanted in the granite soil.

> Do you too want to separate yourself from the rock that holds you, as some of your mad sons have separated themselves from the soil?

This is not just about Peter driving a wedge between the intelligentsia and the people, leading an upper layer of European-educated Russians away from their native traditions, their “soil” (*pochva*). It also points to the harnessing of consensual fantasy associated with those very Western cultural practices and modes of social life embraced and promoted by Peter—modern finance and government, self-interest, and the partializing, salaried bureaucratic dependency associated with the dominance of a commercial culture, a commercial ethic. Or rather, more often in the Russian context, not the harnessing but the unleashing, with attendant fundamental questions about what terrible
things might be perpetrated by those “mad sons” who, like the hooves of the
great steed, have thrust themselves into the symbolic realm, rising above the
earth, leaving it behind. Humbert and Raskolnikov, Chichikov, Golyadkin,
Hermann, and the horseman’s Yevgeny are thus variations on the theme of
inspired instrumentalization, the confusion of what is “good” with what is
“good for,” once the earth’s surface begins to recede below.

And yet these are all sick male characters, suffering and split by their
entrance into the world of consensual fantasy. Their remedies, by contrast,
have a kind of whole certainty that is earthly and rooted to the same degree
that the former float: the eighteenth-century landed “virtuous man” for Chi-
chikov, for instance; the man of singular, direct “strength of character” for
Golyadkin Senior; Sonya Marmeladov’s ideal man of the soil, who kisses
the earth out of gratitude and shared human suffering; Konstantin Levin’s
peasant; Yury Zhivago’s living, folk-inflected poet-creator. Masculine char-
acter suffers at the hands of consensual fantasy in this genealogy, with nary a
positive figure to be found exploiting and prospering in the ethereal heights,
even ambiguously, and the only healthy counterweights with their feet firmly
planted.

In American depictions, by contrast, ambiguous prospering within the
consensually fantastical dimension has a much richer history. It begins in
the nineteenth century and carries through to present popular imaginings, to
the extent that Americans even today are often seen as imbued with a kind
of confidence that appears to depend on itself alone. As an Italian acquai-
nance once put it in an imperfect yet profound English expression, Ameri-
cans have “a big hope.” This trait of boundless confidence in confidence finds
something of a manifesto—if a manifesto can be ambiguous—in Hermann
Melville’s The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, an equivalent of sorts to
Dostoevsky’s infatuations with consensual fantasy of the 1840s to the 1860s.
Melville’s 1857 book, however, is not a negative portrayal of such phenomena,
as Dostoevsky’s clearly are; it comes closer, rather, to the dubious successes of
Chichikov in part 1 of Dead Souls.

Indeed, the similarities between these two writers, and even more, these
two works, are remarkable. I will not detail the plot of The Confidence-Man
here for those who have not read the book because, in truth, there isn’t much
of one. Men and women, but mostly men, get on and off a boat headed down
the Mississippi, talking with each other, mostly about business, American
business, which means mostly about confidence: the lack of it, the need for it,
the results of having it or not. The book begins with a beggar setting up his
sign on deck and ends with an elderly man trying to authenticate a coin. The
climax, if there is one, occurs in a conversation between a man with confi-
dence and a man without it. It is a strange and rich book, perhaps a novel only in the sense in which Bakhtin treats Dostoevsky’s novels, that is, as a development of Menippean satire.  

Melville shares with Gogol a similarly baroque prose, replete with digressions of a lyrical sort. And in much the same manner that Gogol’s Chichikov flits across the landscape, Melville’s heroes of *The Confidence-Man* engage one another on a steamer, floating down the Mississippi, thereby pointing to the notion of earthly value, that is, the value of the earth somewhere under one’s feet, the uncertain, “unlocatable (or floating) standard” noted by Goux in regard to modern systems of symbolic value. The play with identity that is central to Chichikov’s character and the impossibility of self-authentication in Melville’s book are thus removed from the land per se in the latter. The conditions of mutual recognition, especially those based upon property, become ever more indeterminate, as socially constructed identity floats down-current into the liquidity of character with which we are all intimately familiar, the aqueous foundations of the modern social agent. Under modern conditions, how do you know, how does one ever know, with whom one is dealing? That man you’re talking to who seems so affable, he could be Napoleon in disguise.  

Melville’s book suggests, on one level, that we must have trust, confidence in the words of our interlocutors; we must “credit” them with value, truth in short, by believing them and believing in what they say, in the same way that we trust, have faith, that government bonds or money have value, or will have value when we redeem their promise at some future time. The boat on which they (we) are all traveling is thus aptly named *Fidèle* (faithful), and the characters never rise above the level of self-presenting surfaces, coin faces, whose value they themselves constantly wonder about, like the authenticator at the end of the book.  

On another level, however, *The Confidence-Man* draws into question such faith as naïve and perhaps immoral. We may all just be stupid for taking “at face value” the coin peddled to us by strangers. There may be nothing—or worse, nothing good—behind these facades, masks, personae, suits, roles, or whatever you might call them, as long as it’s not real round people with living souls because they are not that. And, more broadly, perhaps this system of spreading around wealth by means of speculative self-interest and promises to pay in some unspecified future time is not the best way of caring for people, especially those who do not have the means or the minds to enter the realm of consensual fantasy with us, at least not on the same terms. The juxtaposition of charity and commerce that Melville creates—from the beggar at the start to the coin authenticator at the end—is thus an expression of conflict between two visions of social welfare. It is equivalent to Dostoevsky’s...
placement of self-interested rational egoist reasoning in the mouth of Luzhin in *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoevsky implicitly ridicules the self-interest notion by making Luzhin’s underhanded, supercilious, and ultimately selfish motives apparent, even as he allows the character to more or less correctly present the self-interest argument in the form of a brief discourse on the virtue of whole coats. Melville’s treatment suggests the tension between, on one hand, the perhaps morally compromising practice of the confidence man, who is also the expression of the wealth-generating consensual fantasies of modernity, and, on the other, the righteous distribution of wealth through charity, which saves individuals yet impoverishes society.

And just as Gogol’s ringing expulsion of the virtuous man from *Dead Souls* motivates an entire series of responses, so Melville’s implicit questioning of the relationship of confidence to conning inaugurates a rich line of explorations of the modern notion of consensual fantasy and the presentation of self, long before Erving Goffman’s calling it such. Not knowing who to trust, and anxious about being the mark in someone else’s scheme for making a killing—these are symptoms of a perennial American condition, and part of its rich tradition of confidence tales, in which not only are such heroes not darkly sick or split by the conditions of modernity, they are downright infectious in their enthusiasm for such conditions, inviting the rest of us in with a wink and a nudge. For these are the conditions of the con themselves, just as they are the conditions of confidence and the real wealth and sometime well-being generated by it.

There is a kind of marvelous headiness in all this. Let us all assume together that what we’re pretending is real might in fact one day be real, and, in the meantime, on that basis, let us build! A Doges’ palace! Skyscrapers! A Palace of the Soviets! Well, some dreams can be realized, it seems; others not so much. I don’t want to be misunderstood here: the heady flight of the con and the heady flights of confidence, the wealth that can be generated by each, as long as all the players agree—perhaps with a wink and a nudge, perhaps with the faith of true believers—these are real things, a real foundation on which to build. Those who might suggest that they are “nothing but” fantasy, idea, and so on misconstrue their absent corporeality for an absence of effect—a very old blind-spot that still prevents many from seeing tall buildings looming just over there. These promises are made good on through the accomplishments of modern societies, even small ones, like Japan or Singapore, with few natural resources of their own but grand pools of national confidence, national trust, “fictional richesses,” as Montesquieu called them, on which to draw. Only where he saw the principal virtue of such *richesses de fiction* as a strictly national phenomenon, one government borrowing from its
own citizens, the world of the past two hundred years has increasingly been interlaced from country to country, continent to continent, with such promises, creating a vast squishy network of IOUs for us to stand upon, though with varying degrees of stability.

**World City**

And a city is something bigger than an individual?

—Plato, *Republic*

My use of Don DeLillo’s 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* as a kind of coda to this book may disappoint some of his fans. The approach is instrumental in a manner that may also appear contradictory in light of my previous comments. But given the fact that reviewers did not think the book a success, the analysis I offer, in addition to circling back to the beginnings of this book, may also, I hope, prove an example of scholarly consideration over critical short-sightedness. Others may wonder at the inclusion of DeLillo’s book at all in the sequence that begins with Chichikov’s and Golyadkin’s passionate embrace of symbolic value and the questioning of masculine character that they mark. I promise to return to this discussion in due course.

*Cosmopolis*, I shall argue, presents a critique of the world of cybercapital that invokes, and is indeed framed by, the long-standing Atlantic republican contrast of virtue and corruption. By extension, it both gestures toward the global edifice of contemporary commercial culture and pokes at its precarious foundation. In part DeLillo manages this by means of a network of allusive associations of his hero and his book with previous works engaged in querying the same or similar issues—psychological integrity, social justice, trust and trickery, confidence and doubt. Like generic allusions, these hints place DeLillo’s work within a context of like-minded depictions without prescribing a specific set of features by which it must be evaluated. But *Cosmopolis*’s most intriguing innovation occurs at the confluence of virtue and corruption themselves, categories that the book ends up drawing into question, as the physical, bodily foundations of one are ultimately subsumed by the solipsism of the other. This is partly a reformulation of familiar DeLillo themes—the “deathward logic” of plot (as in *Libra*), anxiety over the relations of bodies and signs in postmodernity (as in *Mao II*), and the resulting inward movement into a mediated mental state tenuously connected to the real (as in *White Noise*). In offering up all these themes once again and all together, *Cosmopolis* may at first appear as a kind of DeLillo smorgasbord, but this view overlooks the
Virtue-corruption frame, which transforms the familiar material into something new. As always, corruption endangers the republic. But in the increasingly mediated and distanced reality of the contemporary kosmou polites, or “world citizen,” the traditional weights of virtue dissolve, leaving him who might have attached himself to them without the body to do so. The woman in the window, who might have offered him a raft in some past historical moment, is now empty, not to mention broke.

The conceptual frame for this discussion has been prepared previously. It traces the vagaries of virtue from its origins in functional purity (the excellence of a table, etc.) through Greek-inspired notions of masterly corporeality—as in Machiavelli’s distinctive usage of the Italian virtuoso primarily in the sense of effective, able, and with a masculine tinge—through its subsequent linkage to land, the body politic, and the tradition of republican thought. This is the tradition of thought whose foundations began to dissolve with the increasing spread of commercially inflected consensual fantasy. It is within this context that Cosmopolis finds its greatest resonance, raising it from the topical concerns of early twenty-first-century popular culture in a manner that links it to other lasting ruminations on the meaning of modernity.

Body, Mind, Body

There’s nothing like a raging crap, she thought, to make mind and body one.

—Don DeLillo, The Body Artist

Even for the most progressive minded, the veneer of solidity atop the network of late modern symbolic value, so DeLillo’s depiction would imply, begins to peel away in the realm of cybercapital, where present consensual fantasies concerning things without material foundation become the basis for future consensual fantasies concerning things without material foundation. In focusing our attention on this concrete fact of modernity, DeLillo’s account draws into question contemporary assumptions not only about the reality of a technologically mediated commercial life but also about the implications of modern decorporealization for psychological, social, and political health.

Eric Packer, DeLillo’s cybercapitalist hero, does not need to confront such issues of our time directly, for he is a man ahead of our time. He is ahead of time in general, discerning a world that does not yet exist. This talent has made his fortune, put him at the head of the world’s currency trading industry, but it has also called into question his position in time and space. This is
a major theme of the work, signaled by his remedy for the insomnia that, as announced in the book’s first lines, now afflicts him four or five times weekly:

What did he do? ... He was reading the Special Theory tonight, in English and German, but put the book aside, finally, and lay completely still, trying to summon the will to speak the single word that would turn off the lights. Nothing existed around him. There was only the noise in his head, the mind in time.

When he died he would not end. The world would end. (6)

The divorce from body, the uprooting of thought and its solipsistic repercussions suggested here, is maintained and intensified as the book proceeds, the plot devolving as Packer’s limo makes its way across Manhattan, until he ends up in an abandoned high-rise where a mysterious double murders him, or is about to. The rupture of sorts in the time-space dimension, as perceived by Packer, is evident in the work’s closing lines: “He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound” (209).

Packer’s visionary perception of his future non-self is technologically mediated, but the technology he employs for this is dubious. The crystal of his “watch” is also a screen. He has used it in the past to “hack into corporate systems, testing their security for a fee” (123). In the course of the novel he hacks into his wife’s bank accounts, impersonating her “algorithmically” and transferring her millions into his company, “where he open[s] a new account for her more or less instantaneously, by thumbnailing some numbers on the tiny keypad that was set around the bezel of the watch” (123). Any assumptions one might have retained to this point about the work’s neo-realist foundations begin to give way before a variety of possible symbolic interpretations. And indeed, in the work’s final pages the device turns out to be still more versatile and powerful: it is also an “electron camera . . . a device so microscopically refined it was almost pure information. It was almost metaphysics” (204). And through this almost metaphysical device he glimpses “a body . . . facedown on the floor” and wonders, “Whose body and when?” (205). Thus the nominal timepiece bridges Packer from himself now, “in original space” (209), to himself in an apparently inevitable future moment, while the split between technologically mediated mind and the physical grounding of body must be seen as fundamental to Packer’s, and the book’s, exploration of meaning and mortality, a recurrent theme in DeLillo’s oeuvre.14

To state this differently, Packer lives a life of thought divorced from body. He recognizes himself in his body but sees it as a “structure . . . to dismiss
in theory . . . redundant and transferable . . . convertible to wave arrays of information, the thing he [watches] on the oval screen” of his security system (48). By contrast, when he observes the rise and fall of currencies on the touchless screens in the back of his limo, the data is not a reduction of “unruly human energies” to him, not a “cold compression of . . . every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units” (24). It is life itself, “realized in electronic form,” the “heave of the biosphere.” Packer believes he can discern the life of the planet through these “streams of numbers running in opposite directions,” “the figural diagrams that [bring] organic patterns into play” (24). This is presumably the same visionary power that enables him to see bank towers looming “just beyond the avenue . . . covert structures for all their size . . . tall, sheer, abstract, with standard setbacks, and block-long, and interchangeable” (36). He likes the “empty look” of such structures “from here.” Their emptiness corresponds to the emptiness of the diagrams he sees on screen, for of course, in “original space” they really are empty, of the physical at least. But their future reality exists through the hopes and fears of people, through “every sort of yearning and midnight sweat”: They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren’t here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it. (36)

Such structures are the end of the outside world because they are part of an internal, thought-generated world. And what makes these realized fantasies possible is not, in Marx’s phrase, the “universal equivalent” of money, not at least in its touchable form. For this is as much of an anachronism to Packer as are the words “cash register” (71), or “phone” (88), or the “arms and legs” of a chair (164). No, they are made real by what Vija Kinski, Packer’s “chief of theory” calls the “glow of cyber-capital,” money “without narrative quality,” property without weight or shape, all “living in the future” (78–79). They live in the future because, like all consensual fantasies, they rely on promises for their realization.

Eventually, however, people must do something with their bodies in order for these promises to be kept, and this is the source of Packer’s uncertainty. He sees the future realizations of promises made today, but the corporeal is shadowy and strangely immaterial to him. He tests his body’s reality throughout the work, as if in compensation somehow for a tendency to find life outside it. “There were days when he wanted to eat all the time, talk to people’s faces, live in meat space,” so—the conjunction is implied—“he stopped look-
ing at computer screens and turned to the street” (64). He recognizes that the street is “an offense to the truth of the future,” presumably because the future is composed of mortgaged time, but responds to its palpable throb and rhythm nonetheless. At twenty-eight, he has a medical examination every day, wherever he happens to be (44). Perhaps this enables him to abandon himself to his appetites for food and, especially, sex—physical with Didi Fancher, his art dealer (25–32); verbal with Jane Melman, his chief of finance (50–52), the latter during the discomfort of a rectal examination, apparently a daily occurrence; again physical with Kendra Hays, one of his bodyguards (111); and finally physical once more with his rather abstract wife, Elise Shifrin (177), in the boarded-off section of a city sidewalk. These all appear as rather casual encounters, like almost everything that happens in the book. The plot, too, appears rather casual—a cross-town jaunt for a haircut, during which things happen, on the street, in the limo, in Packer’s head perhaps.

But what is merely probative in part 1 of the book becomes self-destructive in part 2, as he inflicts ever greater pain on himself, pain acting as an unambiguous counterweight to thought: “He sat head down, out of ideas, and felt the pain” (197). The spiral inward begins just after the sex with Kendra Hays, who appropriately dons her “ZyloFlex” body armor during their encounter. Shoveling peanuts into his mouth by the fistful as he watches her dress, Packer suddenly asks to be stunned:

I mean it. Draw the gun and shoot. I want you to do it, Kendra. Show me what it feels like. . . . Stun me to my DNA. Come on, do it. Click the switch. Aim and fire. I want all the volts the weapon holds. Do it. Shoot it. Now. (114–15)

As instances of discomfort multiply amid the increasing violence of the work’s final fifty pages, Packer feels a renewal of physical strength, which feeds on itself, necessitating, according to its own implacable logic, the elimination of all impediments to his own corporeal end. In the process, he first assaults “the pastry assassin” André Petrescu, along with the photographers who have filmed Packer being “glopped” (with a pie); then murders his staunchest bodyguard, Torval; then lies naked in the street with three hundred others (apparently being filmed) in the desire to be undifferentiated “among them, all-body, the tattooed, the hairy-assed, those who stank” (176); and then, on a sudden guilt-inspired whim, shoots himself through the hand (197). In all this he appears to be merely satisfying momentary desires, or better, impulses. He thinks of something and then does it. There are no moral or ethical impediments, only physical ones, and those are treated rather as invitations, infantile
dares to be acted upon. The realization of each thought is treated as a natural extension of his mind's activity. Indeed, we might call him a postmodern Krell, destroyed by his own subconscious, were it not for the apparent underlying deliberation with which the sequence of his actions unfolds and the threat of death that draws him on. Instead, he seems more like a child, or perhaps a teenager who has played a video game for so long that he's begun to see its options and aims as he drives his car or walks down the sidewalk, with snipers or ninjas behind every bush.

**Property, the Road, and the Confidence Man**

There’s something secret and guilty about investing. It’s the wrong use of the future.

—Don DeLillo, *The Names*

As noted earlier in this study, the manner of thinking about the republic as fortified by a body of virtuous property owners has tempted Americans since well before their independence. Two countertraditions, each resting on its own moral and political assumptions, have come to exist alongside it. The first, embraced by the framers of the American Constitution, aims at political stability and freedom by ensuring that no selfish group can secure absolute power for itself, the assumption being that no one group is more virtuous than any other, and none may strive toward virtue at all. The other, which is more to my point here, suggests that property owners, rather than being made substantial by their possessions, are encumbered and deformed by them, and true freedom may be found only in liberation from real estate and, more broadly, from material property in general. This second strain in American thought is akin to, and ultimately derives from, ancient Stoic injunctions against dependence upon “externals,” those aspects of life that lie outside one’s control, up to and including one’s own bodily state. This line of thinking conditions the apotheosis of the rootless wanderer, the frontier hero in certain of its incarnations, the drifter, especially the virtuous kind. Such a liberatory image intersects with the American road narrative, providing counterexamples to the corrupt, morally compromised “townspeople” who may want to do good but are too complicit in the system to manage it. This image is fundamental in DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* as well, though in an unexpected and original manner.

DeLillo’s is a road novel that never leaves the city of Manhattan, that is, a road novel in effect, a virtual road novel. Eric Packer sets out across town
for a haircut, shedding possessions as he goes, and comes gradually closer to himself in the process. Only once he has been stripped down to his essentials—except for the fantastical time piece, of course—is he able to engage in the crucial climactic encounter with his supposed former employee, Richard Sheets, aka Benno Levin, the man who has issued the “credible threat” on Packer’s life, which invigorates the latter’s existence from the final lines of part 1 to the end of the work:

The credible threat was the thing that moved and quickened him. The rain on his face was good and the sour reek was fine and right, the fug of urine maturing on the body of his car, and there was trembling pleasure to be found, and joy at all misfortune, in the swift pitch of markets down. But it was the threat of death at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he’d always known would come clear in time.

Now he could begin the business of living. (107)

The first order of this “business” appears to be the deliberate destruction of his company. Where before he was confident that the Japanese yen could go no higher and he would recoup his losses in a market swing, now

the yen spree was releasing [him] from the influence of his neocortex. He felt even freer than usual, attuned to the registers of his lower brain and gaining distance from the need to take inspired action. . . . There were currencies tumbling everywhere. Bank failures were spreading. He found the humidor and lit a cigar. (115)

Part of this is merely a figurative flexing of muscle. Packer enjoys the fact that he can destroy everything, an echo of the unattributed paraphrase of Bakunin he offers to Vija Kinski: “‘The urge to destroy is a creative urge’” (92). But more fundamentally, the “quickening” of Packer’s existence is directly associated with his losses, the business of living with the business of business destruction, and by extension, the destruction of himself, especially his public self.

Considering the prominence of the novel’s commercial theme, what most prevents it from becoming merely an anticapitalist pamphlet with a plot is the organic connection between Packer’s destruction of self and the kind of business that has made him who he is. Packer trades in electronic currencies, predicting their rise and fall. As the book opens he is expecting the rise of the dollar against the yen. These float against one another, in relative market freedom, depending for their value on people’s hopes and fears, on people’s
verbal communications, and, in the end, on the spaces between them. As Jane Melman explains,

There’s a rumor it seems involving the [Japanese] finance minister. He’s supposed to resign any time now. . . . Some kind of scandal about a misconstrued comment. He made a comment about the economy that may have been misconstrued. The whole country is analyzing the grammar and syntax of this comment. Or it wasn’t even what he said. It was when he paused. They are trying to construe the meaning of the pause. It could be deeper, even, than grammar. It could be breathing. (48)

DeLillo’s dark humor conveys the modern anxiety over the floating standard of contemporary symbolic value noted above. It also helps to flesh out Packer’s otherwise rather skeletal character. The value of his wares is nothing without people’s hopes about the future. He thus trades in trust, faith, and other “fictional riches.” In this, he extends the tradition of the confidence man, as a relative of Gogol’s Chichikov, the enigmatic exemplars of Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*, Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, Fowles’s *Magus*, and a host of others.¹⁹

Packer’s business is not technically illegal, of course, which would, on first consideration, seem to exclude him from the con-man panoply. As John Blair has argued, “An ordinary swindler falsifies legitimate money-making schemes. . . . A con man, on the other hand, offers his victim partnership in an illegal scheme.”²⁰ I think this distinction unduly excludes from consideration the anxiety-laden schemes of the market, where one can “make a killing” with legal impunity. Even were we to remove from consideration the explicit Marxian world the novel invokes—through the rioters’ adapted quotation from the *Communist Manifesto* (“a specter is haunting the world”)²¹—we could still point to the long-standing associations of psychological anxiety, along with moral and social corruption, that have accompanied the spread and amplification of commercial life, particularly in its credit and cybercredit stages.²² In this sense, what Blair calls the “compounded” guilt of the con man may lie elsewhere than in questions of law per se; it may lie in questions of justice. Here again, DeLillo’s book demonstrates its aspirations to what Bakhtin has called “great time,” justice being one of the fundamental themes of Western literary expression.²³

Confidence, in any case, encompasses far more than just the con. Packer’s customers believe they are in on the game, privy to secret information. They hope to acquire vast sums (without necessarily working for them) in the magical turn of market forces. When these “sums” appear on Packer’s screens as abstractions to which he gives life, pieces he moves around and manipulates
for gain, they seem to be part of a scheme, a con or something very close to it. When we understand them as representing and resulting from a social rapport between living, thinking subjects, then they are based upon the purest form of trust in people’s interactions, their promises to make good in the future. In the first case they are tokens, in the second icons.

To the rioters who surround Packer’s limo, his success depends upon a basic instrumentalization of human beings (probably the reason he has such difficulty “seeing” people throughout the book), on the objectification of their lives through labor. The rioters’ exploitation of the rat—by flashing a line from the poet Zbigniew Herbert, “A rat became the unit of currency,” on a giant electronic display—is an attempt to vitalize, grotesquely, Packer’s commodities. The fact that the line is also the novel’s sole epigraph suggests that this is the work’s central intended contrast, namely, between electronic market information on the one hand, “the hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news” (80), and rats on the other, the unsavory, corporeal beings that have long accompanied human progress, particularly in its urban environment, particularly in New York City, where, so the anecdote goes, there is one for every human inhabitant. The shift of perspective that sees one measure of human activity (Melman’s “it could be breathing,” Packer’s “heave of the biosphere”) replaced by the other (the earthly, fleshy, smelly, dirty rat) illustrates DeLillo’s contrastive technique in this work. It also makes apparent the suggestion of an underlying organic filth to Packer’s business existence, both to the person he is and to the nominally abstract things he manipulates. Claims about the unsavory nature of trade have a long pedigree. Apparently, the fact that Eric Packer never touches a penny taints him no less.

Doubt, the Double, and the Sick Cosmopolitan

A cosmology against the void.

—Don DeLillo, White Noise

There is one crucial trait that the contemporary confidence man Eric Packer appears to have lost. Didi Fancher notes it when she comments on the “element of doubt” that has entered his life: “You’re beginning to think,” she whispers, “that it’s more interesting to doubt than to act. It takes more courage to doubt” (31–32). He must not have doubted earlier in his life, as Vija Kinski corroborates: “Doubt. What is doubt? You don’t believe in doubt. You’ve told
me this” (86). But the apparent entrance of doubt into Packer’s thought at this point has created a paradox—a confidence man without confidence—and this has the power to bring down the system he represents from the inside. When combined with the unruffled exterior confidence of the confidence man, doubt makes another kind of hero possible, and this is where DeLillo takes his greatest creative risk: by invoking the well-worn theme of the double and weaving it into the fabric of his novel. False Seeming has entered the city, the world city, the cosmos.

Cosmopolis is rather schematically structured in two parts, with two chapters in each part, and two brief interludes—“The Confessions of Benno Levin”—between chapters 1 and 2 and chapters 3 and 4. The first confession is subtitled “night,” the second, “morning,” and they appear to be temporally reversed, with the second relating things that happen earlier and the first describing a moment after the end of the final chapter, thereby confirming that the body Eric Packer sees in the final lines is his own. The mirrorlike organization, which seems to circle in on itself, is only one of many indicators that, despite its bodily paraphernalia, what we are reading is a kind of psychomachia, or “battle for the mind.” The twin roots of DeLillo’s title suggest, moreover, a Greek conceptual origin to the work that is reinforced by Vija Kinski’s sudden invocation of classical thought amid the riot raging outside Packer’s limo (77).

With this second, internal plain in mind, we may return to the suggestion of justice, rather than legality, at the heart of Packer’s culpability. The polis, the second of the Greek roots that make up the novel’s title—the other being kosmos, or “world”—suggests on one level New York, the “world city,” the capital of global finance, Packer’s business domain. But this superficial reading ignores the significance of the Greek coinage, which ultimately invokes the Stoic notion of the kosmou polites, or “world citizen,” and its long line of Utopian descendants in the Western tradition, from Augustine to Kant and Marx. By understanding his place within the metaphorical “world city,” the “world citizen” is supposed to come to see others as intrinsically valuable ends. He is supposed to respect the dignity of all no matter what the accidents of their birth. He is supposed to learn to be guided primarily by considerations of justice and human well-being. DeLillo’s account creates more than merely an ironic juxtaposition when it places this “world” within Eric Packer’s mind at the book’s beginning (6), based on the kinds of consensual fantasies that undergird the modern world, and which are by their very nature public, not private. Such a world is quintessentially prey, in Pocock’s formulation, to postcivic acquisitive humanity’s fantasies, passions, and appetites, forces “known to feed on themselves and to be without moral limit.”
Two paths of corruption follow from this, one for the polity, the other for the person.

The first is indicated in Packer’s refusal to recognize anything but a personal impediment in the president’s visit to New York City. Packer hates him because he is the president and more powerful, at least politically, than he is: Packer finds it unacceptable that he was once forced to wait in the president’s outer office before a visit (76). Even more telling is Packer’s obvious annoyance at the fact that his cross-town jaunt will be slowed by the diversion of traffic necessitated by the president’s visit. He questions Torval, “Just so I know. Which president are we talking about?” (11). In much the same way, Packer does not acknowledge the legitimacy of any nonpurchasable public goods, goods that might belong to all people. He thus echoes the peasant Mikolka’s words in *Crime and Punishment*, “It’s my goods, I can do what I want,” by insisting to Didi Fancher that if he buys the Rothko Chapel, it will be his to do with as he pleases. In short, this *kosmou polite* recognizes neither the representative nor the fact of the *res publica*.

The person’s corruption, which cannot ultimately be separated from the public’s in this account, is framed by Packer’s encounter with Levin/Sheets, which, as previously noted, comes by the end to look all but internal. Packer appears to be gradually clearing the way for this clash with himself by removing subsequent layers of his persona, his propertied character—his money, his clothing, his wife’s money, his company, his limousine. He sheds two of his bodyguards—one goes home, the other falls behind without comment—and murders the third, Torval, who has stuck doggedly by him, and whose passing, we are told, “cleared the night for deeper confrontation” (148). Packer’s journey across Manhattan has fused, it would appear, with a journey into his own psyche, or perhaps his own future psyche, as the play with time merges with his growing psychic split. The guards who had protected his public self, the people who had reflected him back to himself, the possessions that had filled out his public persona—all these fall away as his limo departs, and he is left on the street, wondering, “Where was the life he’d always led?” (186). But the indecision is momentary. After the second gunshot rings out, he hears his full name on the wind and reflects, “So it was personal then” (187). Deeply personal, it would seem, the more so considering Levin/Sheets’s repeated designation as “the subject” (see, for example, 186, 187, 196).

The referent, moreover, is at times ambiguous, making it unclear which is original, or at least unclear enough to require specification: “The man fired a shot into the ceiling. It startled him. Not Eric; the other, the subject.” The two figures battle as we roll over ourselves in this old narrative ploy, a favorite of Nabokov, and his teacher Dostoevsky, and his teacher Gogol before that,
which invites us to attempt to see through the filter of the narrative to what lies beyond and ask, “What’s really happening here?” Who is the subject? Where is the masculine character? Perhaps we’ve been wrong all along; perhaps Eric is really the “subject’s” fantasy. Could all this be merely an extended dream? We recall the book’s opening in sleeplessness. Could such a character as Eric Packer really exist after all, someone with an electron watch and an elevator that plays only Satie, and who has sex four times in the course of a cross-town drive, once with a doctor’s finger up his butt? When Packer responds to Benno Levin’s name by saying, “That’s a phony name,” why shouldn’t we be tempted to say the same about his?

In a narrative where the smoke is well directed amid the mirrors, there can be no definitive answers to such questions: the text and the filter are one and the same. In other words, if DeLillo is worth his stuff as a writer, he has provided conflicting evidence, hints at more than one reality or at dream and reality simultaneously. He appears to have done just that. Levin/Sheets has no way of knowing Packer will ride his limo to the point he does or be left standing on the street where he is, where he can be shot at or called out to. He hasn’t been following Packer: he has no car. Indeed, Packer appears to have been dropped right in front of the building where Levin/Sheets is squatting. All this suggests the involution of dream. On the other hand, there remain enough naturalistic details sprinkled through the end text—the passage of a bike messenger on the street, for instance, or the presence of a dead or sleeping man in the vestibule of the building where Packer and Levin/Sheets come together—to suggest a difference between the filter and the reality on the other side, inviting us to peer through. Peering leads to frustration and an interpretive impasse. More than that, the attempt to locate the boundary between truth and fantasy in such a narrative points to what Slavoj Žižek has called the fantasy of “ontological consistency,” the pervasive truth of fantasy in the modern world, or, in another formulation, the “positive structuring of social reality by shared fantasy.” This thought leads us back once more to the notion of consensual fantasy that lies at the heart of Packer’s business life and to the construction of a public persona that has provided the value base, the “standard,” for the objects of his trade.

Here the theme of the double as developed by Dostoevsky in his eponymous novel provides an essential interpretive step. That work, which also begins with a conspicuous curtailment of sleep and engages questions of monetary and social worth, similarly skirts the boundary between madness and sanity, pitting an unleashed public persona against its doubtful counterpart and suggesting less a clinical exploration of growing madness than a symbolic battle for the mind of the modern everyman. Dostoevsky’s Golyadkin...
DeLillo’s Cosmopolis and the End of an Idiom

is vanquished by his public persona, who relegates the retiring, conscience-ridden “hero” to the asylum. DeLillo, by contrast, appears to have reversed the pattern. The year-2003 everyman equivalent is not the highly successful Eric Packer, but the shadowy, introspective, doubt-ridden Levin/Sheets. It is the homeless and elder Levin/Sheets—he who, in a scene that recalls the opening pages of Dostoevsky’s novel, confesses to going “from branch to branch well into the night, moving money between accounts or just checking [his] balances” (149)—who does away with his “successful” junior twin.53

Dostoevsky’s retiring hero is obsessed by the masks of modern society and insists that he is his own person, that he “goes his own way.”34 But in the end the public self that he has unleashed into the world takes complete control. His public face becomes his face. And this is how we find Packer, whose image, we are told, “used to be accessible nearly all the time, video-streamed worldwide from the car, the plane, the office and selected sites in his apartment” (15). The public self is here the mask that supports the entire fantasy framework of worth that surrounds Packer and his enterprise. The two-dimensionality of this image of worth, like a face on a coin, suggests an absence of depth to the character, the skeletal quality noted above, an effect maintained consistently. Packer is an impulsive bastard, simple-minded, vindictive, but also completely self-absorbed, a trait highlighted by the fact that while the cameras used to show other people his face as a way of maintaining the value of his business, “because there were security issues to address . . . now the camera operated on a closed circuit” (15). Packer looks at his own mask, everywhere he goes, every hour of the day.

As suggested in chapter 1, Dostoevsky’s book was not primarily about individual sanity, but about the health of the social—rather than the individual—body. By directing our attention inward, to modernity’s fantastical foundations, to the fashioning of public personae, the wearing of masks, the acquisition of status, and the effects of such “progress” on the inner life of one “not handsome, but also not bad looking, neither too fat nor too thin” individual, Dostoevsky’s Double questioned the moral health of a society, that of the rapidly modernizing Russia of the mid-1840s. Cosmopolis, by association, reprises this “Romantic critique of the bourgeois order,” which, from Fourier and Marx to Freud and Weber, portrayed the triumph of the ideology of self-interest as an impoverishment of the “full human personality.”35 But by reversing its ultimate emphasis, focusing not on the mind of the defeated elder but on that of the supposedly successful junior partner, DeLillo manages to draw into question the most cherished ideals of the “junior partner” in European social debate, of specifically American progress—its faith in the future, its confidence in the power of ideas and in the salutary effects of mar-
ket-based innovation. Just as Dostoevsky’s doubtful hero ensures his own destruction by unleashing a public persona who is adept at manipulating the valuable units of modern consensual fantasy—government documents, money, people, his own public self, what have you—so DeLillo implicates the contemporary world in the foundation not only of today’s society but of whatever future life it is already complicit in one day bringing into being, through its hopes and fears, its “hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols,” its “streaming release of words,” the “heave” of an ever more exosomatic “biosphere” (24).

In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo resurrects the double’s retiring alter ego from Dostoevsky’s 1846 book in order to murder the successful public persona to which his own ambition gave birth a century and a half earlier, thereby ending the double’s power on earth and bringing the consensually fantastical world of finance capital to its knees. In a telling scene, Eric Packer catches sight of his trophy wife through the window of her car but does not recognize her. She is framed like many inspirational exemplars of the past; their “carriages” come together and are unable to move temporarily, much as Gogol’s Chichikov was thrust up to the window of the governor’s daughter. What does masculine character do in the face of a potentially life-changing “vision”? Reevaluate where he has been and where he might be going? Examine his life choices? Write a divine comedy? Chichikov was not that kind of man. Nor is Eric Packer. Indeed, the age of the multiplicitous, commercial persona has little place for the necessarily unitary masculine character of the heroic past, the person who would find himself centered, inspired, and made meaningful by the framed face of the beloved. He may not even remember who she is.

**Behind the Kitchen Door**

A friend and good reader has asked, So what, then, must we do? The sense of loss in reading these works this way is indeed palpable. I could, in answer, recite a litany of ills associated with the “old” virtue ethic whose loss is not such a bad thing, from the stiff-lipped brutality of officers in World War I, or other wars besides, to the cowboy ethos of American foreign policy, and the often misplaced confrontationalism that such images seem to encourage some to adopt, even today. Not to mention the accompanying misogyny and homophobia. Moreover, when applied to national groupings, an ideal of steadfast purpose also historically went hand in glove with the extermination of minority cultures: one virtuous people was rather more square-jawed Ancient Greek or Roman than, let’s say, Persian, with all its monstrous variety.
and color. The kind of crossing that is characteristic of us late moderns was poorly if at all envisioned by many a virtue-minded predecessor, for whom a culturally, ethnically, religiously, racially crossed person could never be anything but a bastard. This is a subject for another book, no doubt.

Here let me note simply that I do not see why the ethical goal of trying to be one person should preclude recognizing, validating, even celebrating ethnic, racial, and cultural multiplicity. The one is about persons, the other about peoples, and the desire to have all thought converge in a single point does both a disservice. In at least one case examined above, that of the character Yury Zhivago, I hope to have shown a way in which the heroic virtue ethos might be transformed rather than discarded, retaining some of its motivational force and much of its beauty in the process. Yury sees with his mind’s eye the living connections between corporeal realities, celebrates them, sings their intrinsic worth, recreating them in fact through one and the same grateful, poetic breath.

Having written these words, I must step back, embodied as I am, in this here and now, not in some magical realm of my own inspiration. The confidence index is up today, or maybe it is down. Consensual fantasy follows its course with all its floating standards in tow, powerful and inscrutable. My conceit is not nine months old anymore, waving his little hand on the other side of the glass. He has accumulated years with this book, he and his little brother. Their choices may or may not be described in these pages. I rather hope that they are not. Maybe what I’ve written here will help them in some small way, if not in making sense of their life—these are just some thoughts about stories, after all—then at least by suggesting a way of reading (you like to read, thank goodness) and thinking about these stories that have helped me in making sense of mine.