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DELILLO'S LITERARY LEAPS TO TACKLE 9/11

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Don DeLillo. *Falling Man*.
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Three months after the Twin Towers collapsed, Don DeLillo published in *Harper's* an essay *cum* manifesto entitled "In the Ruins of the Future" that envisioned a world permanently changed and resituated in a narrative composed out of the attackers' fertile imagination. A terrorists' narrative, DeLillo argued, "ends in the rubble, and it is left to us to create the counter narrative." The attack on September 11 was aimed at America and "the high gloss of our modernity…the thrust of our technology…our perceived godlessness…the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life, and mind." In the aftermath, time became scarce, and the speed of life was accelerated. The author's job was to begin in the towers "trying to imagine the moment" of the primal terror as people fell from the "towers hand in hand." A narrative arising out the imagination of destruction is opposed by a writer's narrative, devoid of politics and history, and infused with a language inextricable from the world that engenders it. This counter-narrative is the writer's opposition against their imagination's design on the present-day.

It is easy to be misled by the essay's uncompromising polemical tone and urgent rhetoric, and therefore be tempted to evaluate the piece solely in terms of the acuteness of the political analysis and the accuracy with which DeLillo describes the geopolitical dynamics culminating in the attacks on September 11. The real values of "Ruins" lies not in the accuracy of its perceptions or the validity of its arguments, but rather in its capacity to introduce a world-view contributing to the literary powers of one of America's most distinguished writers. In 2006, Don DeLillo incorporated the rhetoric of his essay to aid in the narrative dramatization of his new novel, *Falling Man*, concerning the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In contrast to the essay's broad analysis, DeLillo narrowed his focus, concentrating his literary efforts on portraying a troubled marriage forced to confront the strange realities of a post-9/11 world.

Falling Man stands apart from much of DeLillo's other work because its ambition is not to intricately construct an inner portrait of an influential and infamous figure, as he did with Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*, or to imagine how a town would face death as a consequence of a mechanical radiation failure in White Noise. When it was released in this spring, *Falling Man* arrived to lofty literary expectations from readers and critics alike anticipating how one of America's most representative writers would recreate the uncanny horror of that solitary September day in 2001. *Falling Man* sees DeLillo's vision of life in the twenty-first century as being irrevocably altered by those who chose to attack the United States. *Falling Man* attempts to track these changes through the social fabric of one couple's life in New York City at that specific point in place and time.

Although the street we're initially placed into within the novel's first pages has been transformed into "a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night," some issues remain persistently important to Keith Neudecker, a survivor of the Twin Towers attacks (29). His marriage is failing, and after a voluntary separation from his wife Lianne, both surround themselves with "certain symmetry" in relation to each other. They remain

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steadfastly committed to an equivalent group to diminish their loneliness and bestow meaning on their lives. Before the towers collapsed, Keith had his poker game and Lianne had "her storyline sessions in East Harlem, also weekly, in the afternoon" with five to seven patients in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease (29). Lianne maintains her meetings, even after the towers fall, interacting through the patients' fading memories and their security from trauma as their memories become less reliable.

After Keith returns home, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, "with glass in his hair and face, marbled bolls of blood and light," the marital tensions ease as the trauma of survival and the disbelief in the aftermath of the attacks is soothed by renewed physical intimacy between them. Resignation to their separation is replaced with a passionate new intimacy to distract them from the world outside:

> "She'd put down a book or magazine and small settled around them. This was sex. They'd walk down a street together and see themselves in a dusty window. A flight of stairs was sex, the way she moved close to the wall with him just behind, to touch or not, brush lightly or press tight, feeling him crowd her from below, his hand moving around her thigh, stopping her, the way he eased and around, the way she gripped his wrist. (7)

Their only child, Justin, lingers in the background, with a pair of binoculars he uses to persistently scan the New York skyline along with his friends, the Siblings, in search of a mysterious man, "Bill Lawton" (Bin Ladin). Despite his parents' attempts to insulate him from the devastation's aftermath, the language of the attacks, with their polysyllabic, foreign sounding names, pervade the social atmosphere and reflect DeLillo's insistence, as he identified it in the *Harpers* article, on "language [being] inseparable from the world that provokes it."

> "DeLillo's job was to begin in the Twin Towers, 'trying to imagine the moment' of the primal terror as people fell from the towers hand in hand."

Pervading Lianne's life and attracting the notice of other New Yorkers is the Falling Man, a performance reenacting the iconic photograph wherein an identified man lunges down to Earth after jumping out from the collapsing towers. The performer selects his stage from New York's numerous locales, carefully contorting himself in front of an expectant audience that knows what to expect but is unable to look away:

> Jumps or falls. He keels forward, body rigid, and falls full-length, headfirst, drawing a rustle of awe from the schoolyard with isolated cries of alarm that only partly smothered by passing roar of the train…But the fall was not the worst of it. The jolting end of the fall left him upside-down, secured to the harness, twenty feet above the pavement…but the worst of it was the stillness itself and her nearness to the man…She could have spoken to him but that was another plane of being, beyond reach. (168)

As the body merges into the iconic image familiar to all New Yorkers, the Falling Man, aka David Janiak, persistently retrieves the past and reenacts on full display, merging entertainment with an image of a pitiless death, as a man falling to his death so that he might not be crushed by the tumbling walls.

Disrupting the continuity of the Keith and Lianne's narrative is the development of Hammad, one of the hijackers behind the plane that would go on to knock down Keith's tower. In contrast to their urbane lives, Hammad's identity is submerged among his fellow Muslims who expressed a "feeling of lost history…too long in isolation…being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies" (80). His self-consciousness and inner identity slowly dissolves into the collective spirit protesting against the intrusion of foreign cultures. Their apartness, as DeLillo describes it in his essay, is "hard and tight…[they] live in a far narrower format" compared to the modern world Lianne

and Keith inhabit, "a wide world, routinely filled with exchange of every sort, an open circuit of work, talk, family and expressible feeling."

Plot, in *Falling Man* and "In the Ruins of the Future," is one of DeLillo's most durable explanations for terrorism because of its ability to construct a feeling of brotherhood among the suicidal terrorists. It was plot that would draw them together and closed the world to the "slenderest line of sight, where everything converges…[to] a claim of fate, that they were born to do this" (174). In a near perfect echo of this passage in *Falling Man*, DeLillo voices the same concern "In the Ruins of the Future":

> This is his edge, his strength. Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference. He lives a certain kind of apartness, hard and tight. This is not the self-watcher, the soft white dangling boy who shoots someone to keep from disappearing into himself. The terrorist shares a secret and a self. At a certain point he and his brothers may begin to feel less motivated by politics and personal hatred than by brotherhood itself.

DeLillo has long maintained that some of his strongest artistic influences emerged from the visual arts and cinema. As a young man, he frequented movies by Goddard, Bergman, Antonioni, all directors who were at work expanding the artistic possibilities of the medium. Critic David Cowart mentions that "more than any other contemporary writer, DeLillo understands the extent to which images from television from film, from magazines, from journalism and photography…determine what passes for reality." *Falling Man* continues in a tradition of DeLillo novels influenced by the visual medium. Various images, from the description of the glass in Keith's hair to the portrait Lianne's mother obtains that contains two shapes resembling the Twin Towers, are essential for the development of the story, but they also must have served as a difficult challenge for DeLillo. To skillfully portray the visual impact of New York City on September 11, 2001, DeLillo had to employ a style capable of replicating the moving images Americans saw on their TV screen while simultaneously being capable of describing something new and unexpected for the reader who feels content with the same images and films repeated repetitiously on the major channels. DeLillo's sentences, parsed with commas and connected with conjunctions, are capable of conveying the images in one stream without breaking them up into short, declarative sentences at the expense of rhythm and sense of motion: "They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars." The epigrammatic rush of this sentence is skillfully chopped up into appositives and sentence fragments, and even complete clauses. The artistic effect is not unlike watching a movie, with quick, jerky cuts to tie visual sense with the scene's meaning.

But DeLillo spent too much time on imagery and not enough on character. And it feels dull and empty when we're left alone with Keith, or Lianne's mother Nina and her husband Martin. Any attempt to bring us closer to these characters is thwarted by DeLillo's refusal to let us inside their heads as much as he's let us inside Lianne's and Hammad's. The third-person doesn't disappear enough for the sake of developing some sort of attachment to Lianne, Keith, and Justin as people rather than two-dimmensional characters created for the expressed intent of serving DeLillo's beliefs. If they were only imbued with more life, the startling images would have been needed; their dynamic with one another would have been far more useful for both the reader seeking for something more than style without the depth these characters depended.

Falling Man is a fine artistic achievement, but its imperfections are reflected in DeLillo's dramatizing his vision of the world within characters capable of supporting more life than he allotted. As art and entertainment merge in this century, *Falling Man* will be useful to help us demonstrate the accuracy of DeLillo's view about the present and the future. ⁂