

Inverse Apocalypse in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Abstract

In this study we argue that Don DeLillo parodies the paradigms of traditional apocalypse narratives in his novel, *Falling Man* (2007). This work illustrates how DeLillo's inversion of these paradigms foregrounds the entrapment of his characters into a mood of speculation about the end of the world. This entrapment into the mood of speculating about the End is closely associated with the mood of Islamophobia that permeates Western mainstream media.

The significance of this study lies in showing that while DeLillo inverts or deconstructs the paradigms of traditional apocalypse in the novel, he constructs, instead, a secular version of apocalypse in order to unmask the threats that lurk beneath the individual as well as communal life. Ultimately, this essay argues that DeLillo's parody of the apocalypse does not provide a promise of redemption but perpetuates the sense of uncertainty about the end of the human world. This is probably why DeLillo assumes a narrative position that combines irony, parody, and, at times, playfulness. The argument utilizes the cultural as well as the textual perspectives that mark *Falling Man* as a counter-terrorist narrative. Unlike traditional apocalypse writers, DeLillo seems to claim that it is not the end of the world but how ordinary people feel about their threatened world that really counts.

Key Words: DeLillo; *Falling Man*; Apocalypse; Islamism; The Novel and Terrorism.

INVERSE APOCALYPSE IN DON DELILLO'S *FALLING MAN*

I

The contemporary American writer, Don DeLillo, is well-known for his keen insights into what he considers the age of terror. With novels focusing on domestic and international terrorism, DeLillo has parodied the theme of an apocalyptic end of the world in intricate plots that reflect America's susceptibility to external as well as internal forces of destruction.¹

One particular novel by DeLillo, *Falling Man* (2007), explores the far-reaching effects of the 9/11 attacks on the American subject who is shaken out of the delusion of the certainty of the future. DeLillo's parody of the *Book of Revelation* as a metanarrative, specifically the theme of apocalypse, leads us to read his novel as a subversive counter-revelation text. While revelation means essentially unveiling some kind of truth or achieving clarity of vision about the world and human existence, the approximation of such moments of revelation in DeLillo's text is constantly thwarted. DeLillo chooses to muffle his narratives in a mood of uncertainty, thus deflating the very essence of revelation and denying any sense of resolution.² In other words, DeLillo's parody of the apocalypse does not provide a promise of redemption but perpetuates the sense of uncertainty about the end of the human world. In "Can the Apocalypse be Post?" Teresa Heffernan observes that, "[f]rom the Last Judgment to the nuclear holocaust, the drama of the end has played itself out; emptied of meaning, the end of the world is now only a spectacle in reruns. In this postapocalyptic period, the real has imploded and the subject has disappeared; history, culture, and truth are absorbed by the simulated image"(171). In such cultural atmosphere, the parody of grand narratives provides a rich ground for the contemporary novel. Mark Osteen describes DeLillo's strategy of using parody of apocalyptic themes as follows, "...by frustrating his readers' desire for novelistic closure, DeLillo uses his own fiction as an antidote for [the] apocalyptic disease" (144-45).

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo departs from his earlier works that focus on the discontents of the postmodern condition. As Christina Cavedon observes, DeLillo "turns away from melancholy postmodern discourses to a rather straight-forward interest in a portrayal of post-9/11 American culture as traumatized" (289). Cavedon considers this departure "surprising" since "DeLillo has been, with the possible exception of his novel, *The Body Artist*, neither interested in trauma as a medico-psychiatric condition... nor in anything closely resembling trauma theory's interest in how collectively shared traumatic incidents continue to haunt a culture" (262). DeLillo, as Cavedon argues, does not seem to subscribe to the mainstream nationalist discourse of patriotism and resilience. However, "by concentrating on American victims as characters he invites a starkly American point of view" (321). As a result, the position which DeLillo adopts in *Falling Man* is unambiguous about the "traumatizing" threat of Islamism. This is reinforced throughout the narrative by references to how this threat is disrupting the

web of American domestic life by its foreign menacing power, thus generating a restless apocalyptic mood.³

Falling Man, in its perpetuation of lack of revelation, functions as a parody of the Biblical Apocalypse. Joseph Dewey traced the presence of an apocalyptic “temper” in American literature more than a decade before 9/11.⁴ As Dewey observes:

The apocalyptic temper is an attempt by a culture that is genuinely puzzled and deeply disturbed to understand itself and its own time. In a culture caught by a crisis [i.e. such as the Islamist threat] that challenges the very undergirdings of its makeup—its people suspended in graceless poses of helplessness, uncertainty, and fear—visionaries puzzle out a way of setting the present crisis within a larger context ... as wide as the cosmos itself, an order that points humanity toward nothing less than the finale of its history. (10)

The description of “people suspended in graceless poses of helplessness, uncertainty, and fear” uncannily foreshadows DeLillo’s “Falling Man,” who appears “suspended” helplessly in an upside-down posture.

DeLillo parodies the paradigms of the end of the world in order that he can comment on the negative implications of contemporary Western culture, such as its obsession with consumerism and susceptibility to simulations and the illusions of media and its hegemonic conflicts with the Other(s).⁵ Describing the importance of simulation as “the post-apocalypse of the postmodern,” James Berger observes:

If post-apocalypse of the *doppelgänger* is characteristic of modernity, the post-apocalypse of the postmodern is Baudrillardian simulation. In Baudrillard, the catastrophe is the end of the whole apocalyptic hermeneutic itself. There can be no unveiling because there is nothing under the surface: there is only surface; the map has replaced the terrain. Commodification is universal, and no longer even under the interpretive control of notions of the ‘fetish’.... Not only ‘God’ but also ‘labor relations’ or ‘material conditions’ would have no revelatory value. (8-9)

DeLillo’s representation of an inverse apocalypse precludes the possibility of revelation as it accentuates a sense of exhaustion, hence implying that the end of the world may have already taken place. The narrative simultaneously speculates about destruction, death, and extinction from an existential vantage point, whereby the act of waiting for an apocalyptic end of the world itself becomes an apocalyptic experience.

The significance of this paper lies in showing that while DeLillo inverts or deconstructs the paradigms of traditional apocalypse in *Falling Man*, he constructs, in the process, a secular version of apocalypse so as to unmask the threats that lurk

beneath the individual as well as communal life. This entrapment into the mood of speculating about the end, as will be argued, is closely associated with the mood of Islamophobia that permeates Western media at the moment.⁶ The fear that the world (basically Euro/American centrism) may come to an end at the hands of irrational and vengeful Jihadists is hard to conceal not only in DeLillo's recent novels but also in the avalanche of novels and films that invoke apocalyptic themes reflecting this fear.⁷

The discussion is concerned with two interrelated contexts that will form the structural as well as the thematic axes of this study. The cultural context considers the points at which the Eastern world-view is propped up against the Western, especially as related to the fear of death. The narrative context focuses on *Falling Man* as a counter-terrorist text that ironically thrives on the theme of terror.

The cultural context confirms the current supremacy of the West and how this has led to the resurgence of the conflict between the antithetical cultural discourses of East vs. West. As Martin Amis puts it in *The Second Plane*, "September 11 was a day of de-Enlightenment.... The conflicts we now face or fear involve opposed geographical arenas... [and] opposed centuries or even millennia. It is a landscape of ferocious anachronism: nuclear Jihad on the Indian subcontinent; the medieval agonism of Islam; the Bronze Age blunderings of the Middle East" (13). Such a conflict is also pointed out by Benjamin Barber in *Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy*, where he observes that Jihad is "a rabid response to colonialism and imperialism and their economic children, capitalism and modernity; it is diversity run amok, multiculturalism turned cancerous...." (11).⁸ In historical terms, such a conflict between the East and the West refers back to the times of the Crusades or even earlier.⁹ Its major grids are the oppositions of self vs. other; good vs. evil; and other binaries that only widen the gulf between the two. As Edward Said has observed in *Culture and Imperialism*, "[t]hroughout the exchanges between European and their 'others' that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them,' each quite settled, clear, and unassailably self-evident" (xxv).

In cultural terms, Western secularism has marginalized religions such as Islam. In *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*, Ian Almond detects the ironic situation of Islam in that it continues to be unrecognized by Western thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard:

[T]he insubstantiality/insignificance of Islam and Arabs conveniently facilitates Baudrillard's own ontology of the hyperreal [T]he peripherality of the Islamic world and Western thought's equally peripheral consideration of it ... has been a standard feature in most Western responses to the East. This brute fact of the West's ontological non-recognition of the Islamic world—together with all the subsequent connotations of Occidental truth/fact/reality versus Oriental dream/fantasy/unreality [mainly characterizes Western discourse]. (165)

Almond further observes that “the resort to Islam and Islamic cultures as a means of obtaining some kind of critical distance from [Western] society” characterizes the critique of modernity in the West. He comments, “More significantly, it is the employment of the Islamic Orient—its motifs and symbols, its alterity and anachronisms, its colour [and] also its threat—[that] sustain[s] an attempted critique and re-location of Western modernity...” (2). It is in such contexts that DeLillo examines American culture in its collision with the rising threat of Islamism. The American worldview is not only pitted against its foreign counterpart, but also subjected to self-critique in an attempt at self-understanding. Almond reminds us that the threat of Islamic extremists is re-inscribed “within a darker, Occidental destiny as a symptom of Western decay” (173).

Jean Baudrillard comments on the imperative of conjuring up some sort of “Other” for the West in his essay “The Spirit of Terrorism.” He observes that with the triumph of global power “a fantastical enemy appeared, diffused over the whole planet, infiltrating everywhere as a virus, surging from every interstice of power; Islam. But Islam is only the moving front of the crystallization of this antagonism” (3). Baudrillard further elaborates on the inevitable confrontation between the West and Islamism:

This antagonism is everywhere and it is in each of us. Thus, terror against terror...But asymmetrical terror...And this asymmetry leaves the global superpower totally disarmed. Fighting itself, it can only founder in its own logic of power relations, without being able to play in the field of symbolic challenge and death, as it has eliminated the latter [death] from its culture. (3)

Highlighting the convergence of the image and the real in the attacks, Baudrillard argues: “And the New York events have radicalized the relation of images to reality... While before we dealt with an unbroken abundance of banal images and an uninterrupted flow of spurious events, the terrorist attack in New York has resurrected both the image and the event” (“The Spirit of Terrorism” 6). Having “eliminated” death from its culture, the West experienced the happy illusion or *simulacrum* of permanence.

In his essay, Baudrillard further outlines the superior posture of Western civilization that leads to its embodiment of the seeds of its own destruction: “The West, in its God-like position...becomes suicidal, and declares war on itself” (1-2). Baudrillard also cites the example of the towers as compelling themselves into suicide out of sheer hubris (1). In *Falling Man*, such sentiments are expressed in a conversation between Nina, Lianne’s mother, and Martin, her lover. As a radical liberal with a suspicious political past, Martin critiques American capitalist hegemony and denounces the provocations of the tall towers. He sarcastically asks Lianne: “But that’s why you built the towers, isn’t it? Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so that you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious” (116). The fantasies of destruction Martin speaks of are also suggestive of a latent desire for self-destruction of DeLillo’s characters. In *Cosmopolis*, for instance, the destructive impulse of the protagonist is clearly couched

in a critique of capitalism as a prologue to Western self-destruction.¹⁰

The obsession with artistic representations of the end of the world, especially in the aftermath of the fall of the towers, may well be interpreted as a symptom of such “fantasies of destruction.” Elizabeth Rosen observes that in contemporary representations of the end, “modern man is far more afraid of apocalypse *not* occurring than occurring” (145). In such productions, the threat of Islamism is conceived in apocalyptic proportions—a fact which often reflects a kind of self-indulgence in the rehearsal of world-end themes. The Biblical *Book of Revelation* with its eschatological motifs is typically a major source of inspiration in such fictional and cinematic representations. As Rosen explains:

Apocalypse is a means by which to understand the world and one's place in it. It is an organizing principle imposed on an overwhelming, seemingly disordered universe. This accounts in part for the continuing fascination with, and attachment to, stories about the End. Anyone who notes the often alarmist delivery of news reports about global warming or conflicts in the Middle East, or goes to the Cineplex to see the latest end-of-the-world scenario avoided (or not), or listens to American presidents speak in terms of evil empires or axes of evil can easily be forgiven for believing we are approaching End-times. (xi)

Rosen points to the fact that DeLillo has always been fascinated with the language and images of the end of the world, but he is more concerned with the human response to apocalyptic fear (145).

When the attacks on the towers actually took place, Islamism came to be regarded as a catalyst of apocalypticism. As DeLillo suggests “In the Ruins of the Future,” published shortly after the attacks, the punishment for the “Hubris” of American capitalism might have been deserved but not to the extent of what happened on 9/11:

We can tell ourselves that whatever we've done to inspire bitterness, distrust, and rancor, it was not so damnable as to bring this day on our heads. But there is no logic in apocalypse. They [Muslim terrorists] have gone beyond the bounds of passionate payback. This is heaven and hell, a sense of armed martyrdom as the surpassing drama of human experience. (34)

DeLillo marks the rising threat of a militant Islamism empowered by its “suicidal” impulse: “But now there is a global theocratic state, unboundaried and floating and so obsolete it must depend on suicidal fervor to gain its aims” (“Ruins” 40). The novel reflects the views expressed by DeLillo in his essay, where he recycles the nationalist discourse in relation to the Other:

We are rich, privileged and strong, but they are willing to die.
This is the edge they have, the fire of aggrieved belief. We live in

a wide world, routinely filled with exchange of every sort....The terrorist planted in a Florida town....lives in a far narrower format. This is his edge, his strength. Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference. ("Ruins" 34)

The fear of the Other is closely identified with the Islamists' courting of death and the rewards of the here-after which stand in stark antagonism to the Western world-view that has immersed itself in the pursuits of the here-and-now.¹¹ In her book, *The Essence of Islamist Extremism: Recognition Through Violence, Freedom Through Death* (2012), Irm Haleem observes that "Radical Islamist rhetoric makes frequent references to violence as 'jihad;' 'jihad' as duty, self-destruction as imperative.... 'loving death' as the description of the self. But while such references are popularly understood as indicative of the distinctly *Islamic* nature of Islamist extremism, ... there is nothing distinctly *Islamic* about Islamist extremism" (1). Instead, "the radical Islamist explanations of self-destruction are ... at once Hegelian (in the dialectical sense relevant to the slave), Gilgameshian (in the sense of what radical Islamist discourse understands about the master), and de-constructive in reason (in the sense of how it defines 'life' and 'death')" (73). She further elaborates, "Self-destruction is ... promoted in radical Islamist discourse as an alternative method to challenging the master's mastery through challenging the master's control over the self..." (8). Halim concludes, "Thus, in contrast to the Gilgameshian master who in death loses his power, the Hegelian slave is empowered through his death" (77).

It is worth noting, at this point, that the critique of American hegemony is not foregrounded in *Falling Man*, as in DeLillo's earlier fiction. This critique is voiced by a secondary character: Martin. One may compare this to Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), where the consequences of "the impulse to empire" are parodied through apocalyptic discourse in the declarations of Major Weissenman:

In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it, kept on. Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis. But now we have only the structure left us, none of the great rainbow plumes, no fittings of gold.... (722)

Another example of the difference between DeLillo and Pynchon is that of dealing with the apocalyptic element. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo polarizes the impulses of life and death as antagonistic forces, while Pynchon, in contrast, keeps them in tandem as equally viable forces in his narrative. As David Robson observes, "*Gravity's*

Rainbow encodes within itself both a thematic and formal awareness of both poles of apocalypse: the creative energies of desire that can transfigure the real (Eros-apocalypse), and the element of death within the play of signification...that potentially can obliterate the real (Thanatos-apocalypse)" (73).

DeLillo's polarization of the impulses of life and death triggers a similar dichotomy between the hyperreal and the real. Cavedon observes that in many of DeLillo's novels, as in *Falling Man*, "reality seems to have been replaced by hyperreality. Understood as a negative phenomenon, hyperreality is tied to the idea that within the American Dream of unlimited progress there is something inherently averse to human needs" (259). She further continues:

Although DeLillo's characters can be understood as suffering from the unstable physicality and corporeality they see to be originating from their hyperreal habitat, they simultaneously treasure this condition. Not least because the world of simulacra offers an escape from physical reality's threat of injury and death via late capitalism's more pleasurable defining features: consumerism and mass mediatization. (259)

This explains the reiteration of the view of the terrorists not only as heralds of death but also as destroyers of the fantasies promulgated by capital and media.

In his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek identifies the threat of Islamism with the function of the "Real" due to "the irrational... agency" of terrorism and the active nihilism of terrorists (33). The Islamist threat, therefore, may be conceived as the wake-up call that has led America into the "desert of the real" away from the secure illusions of what the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, in his book, *Belief* (1999), calls "fabulation." For him, this concept is understood "as the weakening of the principle of reality." It is "the recognition that the world is increasingly identified with a proliferation of *Weltbilder*, of images of the world which give rise to conflict of interpretation" (2). Elsewhere, in his *The Transparent Society*, Vattimo comments on the transformation of the real into the unreal in contemporary Western culture: "...the world of objects measured and manipulated by techno-science (the world of the real, according to metaphysics) has become the world of merchandise and images, the phantasmagoria of the mass media" (8).¹²

It is a truism that the Western media widely promotes the news related to the threat of Islamism. This Orientalist caste still holds a great attraction for the West, and it envelops the fear of Islam with an aura of fascination and sensationalism. As Bobby Sayyid observes: "Ghosts, despite not existing, are terrifying. Muslims also generate such fear ... and, like ghosts, they seem to appear everywhere and anywhere" (2). It is precisely such fear that appears to control the rhythm of American daily life in *Falling Man*. In its rejection of the current world order, Islamist revival is received by

the Western psyche as an experience of the “return of the repressed” (Sayyid 3). This “return” to a primitive fear is irresistible to the modern psyche, and it perpetuates the divide between the East and the West. As Sayyid describes it:

[T]he Islamic revival signals a cultural anxiety in the West. The West sees in Islam the distorted mirror of its own past. It marks the rebirth of the God they had killed so that Man (*sic*) could live. The Islamic resurgence marks the revenge of God; it signals the return of faith, the return of all that puts into question the idea of the progressive liberation of humanity. These ideas trade on the notion that only in the West are humans truly free, truly human. (4)

Though ultimately associated with the fear of the end of the world, the Islamist threat is initially linked to the Western fear of death, which has become a driving cultural force. Such fear is expressed by almost all of DeLillo’s characters who wield different psychological strategies to mask it.

The lack of anchor into reality is emphasized not only in *Falling Man*, but also in earlier novels like *White Noise*.¹³ Cavedon describes the intricate relation between reality, hyperreality, and the fear of death in DeLillo’s fiction as follows:

[DeLillo’s] characters suffer from an immense fear of death they repress with the help of the kind of consumption their lifestyle in a distinctly postmodern setting affords them. At the same time, by consuming catastrophe via the media, they attempt to ward off nefarious effects of exactly those surroundings—all of which are related to the threat of a reality disappearing at the expense of an all-encompassing hyperreality. (338)

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo deliberately destabilizes any possible interpretation or understanding of “the end.” As Teresa Heffernan observes, “Rather than looking to the end to stabilize meaning, to draw division between absence and presence, the real and the simulated, we might look at the end or death as the impossibility of stabilization of either the referent or the sign...” (180). The impact of the attacks as a reminder of reality leads the characters to “seek proof that reality is still in existence. They can be viewed as being fascinated by...what Jacques Lacan calls the *tuché*...[which] refers to a missed encounter with the real” (Cavedon 261). The ensuing recognition of reality, subsequently, unleashes the long-suppressed or forgotten fear of death and a sense of reality that has been deliberately evaded.

The relegation of death to a peripheral site in the Western unconscious and laying claims to the future as a certainty have become marked features of Western world-view. As Charles Corr comments:

Another factor that contributes to making death a more difficult

experience is the dominant scientism and agnosticism of our times ... We have overestimated our claim to the future and our power to control it. Consequently, we feel betrayed by death and subjected in some nameless fashion. It is not enough to throw over the philosophies and religions of the past and to become a secular society, without creating new systems of meaning or adapting traditional ones to the new situation. Humans cannot function effectively without some framework in which to make sense of the events of life and the power of death. (40)

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the threat of Islamism, one may argue, has become such a meaning-giving "framework" that affects Western world-view in a decentered global world. This framework, as will be illustrated, governs the mode of representation in DeLillo's text.

II

The textual perspective allows us to approach *Falling Man* as a counter-narrative to terrorism. As DeLillo puts it, the terrorists' narrative "ends in the rubbles and it is left to us to create a counter-narrative" ("Ruins" 34).¹⁴ Soon after the 9/11 attacks, DeLillo declared, "The world narrative [now] belongs to terrorists" ("Ruins" 33). Curiously enough, both novelists and terrorists are concerned with "plots" that undermine God's "plot" for humanity's salvation at the end of time. As Joseph Conte observes, "DeLillo repeatedly invoked the World Trade Center as representative of the gigantism and hubris of global capitalism, a force that he has stridently resisted from the start of his career in *Americana* ... But in the aftermath of 9/11 the vilification of the towers represents an uncomfortable dramatic irony" (563).¹⁵ This kind of irony is evident in the narrative's inversion of the paradigms of the traditional apocalyptic narratives and the accompanying tone of guilt and self-questioning of the characters. The characters express a keen sense of curiosity to identify and know the enemy with much theorization about the nature of the conflict between the East and the West. Such an approach is further complicated by the fact that DeLillo was, and most likely still is, so critical of the capitalist system to the degree that he has envisioned its demise over and over again.

It is within these diverse contexts that Islamism is simultaneously associated with the fear of death as well as the fear of the end of Western civilization. This type of double-edged fear is the preoccupation of what is called "The New Atheist Novel" that conceives itself as an aesthetic "front" against terrorism. For the New Atheists, "Islam [like all religions] comes to embody the irrationality, immorality and violence of religion in general.... From its apparent embrace of martyrdom as a sacred duty to its alleged desire to punish apostasy with death, the Muslim religion is a monstrous anachronism in the modern age" (Bradley and Tate 5).

As suggested earlier, DeLillo's use of Islamophobia is contextualized in terms

similar to those of some other atheist novelists – Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, and Philip Pullman. Bradley and Tate observe that:

the New Atheist novelists' representation of what they call 'Islam'—and it is revealing that they do speak of such a monolithic entity—is little more than a mosaic of quotations from each other's works, from that of fellow travellers..., and from neo-Orientalists like Bernard Lewis. (30)

In his critique of Islamist fundamentalism, DeLillo considers Islam to be resistant to secularization. He recycles Western views regarding the controversy related to Islam's exceptionalism, particularly in his presentation of the terrorists' narrative.¹⁶ The view that Islam is exceptional raises the problematic issue of subsuming Islam under grand narratives. According to Emad Bazzi:

[Postmodernism] champions the right of systems of faith and non-western views in general to challenge the exclusivist and universalist claims of instrumental reason only to claim in the end that they too are products of particular societies and cultures and are thus just as equally prone to deconstruction. However, with regard to Islam, this applies only to the first condition which is necessary for constituting a metanarrative, that of having a prescription for what should be considered as valid knowledge and proper principles for organizing life. As regards the second and more crucial condition, that of justifying these claims on the basis of universal reason, Islam should not be considered a metanarrative. (68)

For Bazzi, the fact that reason is not absolute or "autonomous" in the Muslim worldview "precludes Islam from being subject to postmodernism's deconstruction of metanarratives. In fact, it precludes Islam from being considered as a metanarrative. But this does not mean that postmodernism can be an ally of Islam either in the epistemological or sociopolitical sphere" (72). As such, DeLillo's predilection for a simplified recycling of clichés and stereotypical pseudo-knowledge about Islam influence his objectivity. He inscribes the strictures of the New Atheist novel in his display of some stances that reveal his intolerance of Islam and his use of certain narrative strategies that show Islam as an alien other.¹⁷

There is no critical consensus regarding DeLillo's political position, especially as regards the Islamist Other, in *Falling Man* as it varies according to individual reader-response impressions. For instance, Marie-Christine Leps observes that DeLillo's characters are caught "within clear antinomies (us and them; before and after; peace and war...), [yet] his novel's reader is reminded of other possibilities, born from reaffirming contradictions, over and over" (202). Approaching the narrative perspective from a different angle, Birgit Däwes suggests that "*Falling Man* favors openness and pluralism over simplifying explanations of difference" (280).¹⁸

Falling Man provides a pulpit where Lianne, a major narrative consciousness, frankly speaks about her fear of Islam in a tone of inescapable anxiety. DeLillo's representation of the Islamist threat is, somehow, diffused by concomitantly suggesting that there are internal threats as well. For example, social and familial disintegration seem to be rupturing the web of daily life in an equally threatening manner. In addition, the distribution of point of view in the narrative allows some arguments against American political hegemony to be voiced by minor characters. Further, the fact that DeLillo raises existential questions places the immediate threat of Islamism within a larger cosmic scale.¹⁹ In other words, the narrative juxtaposes the immediate tangible fear of Islamism with a philosophical mood of existential anxiety that perceives all humanity as being propelled toward an inevitable catastrophe. An instance of this is when Lianne thinks of Kirkegaard's words: "*The Whole of Existence Frightens Me*" (118 italics original). Also, her thoughts on conversion to Catholicism are conditioned by the influence of her readings on Christian Existentialism (see *Falling Man* 236).

Indeed, DeLillo's vision is subversive of the possibility of any resolution. The traditional apocalypticist, as Lois Zamora reminds us, "consoles his readers by letting them see, beyond the landscape of catastrophe..." (15). Inversely, DeLillo's text deliberately blocks any hope of redemption by endlessly repeating images of disasters and foregrounding the lack of insight into the meaning of life. In *Falling Man*, Islamism functions clearly as a force that heralds such disasters. Yet as an instance of counter-revelation, DeLillo's narrative reveals mainly the disturbed workings of his characters' anxious minds in their isolation and fear. Zamora comments on how American writers express "the sense that contemporary culture has reached a crisis point – an end point – when the old forms are no longer sufficient and new forms are struggling to establish themselves" (123). DeLillo elaborates on this theme in *Point Omega* (2010), where the mood of futility and hollowness prevailing in the aftermath of the Iraq war is paralleled by an existential mood, which renders that war even more irrelevant and meaningless.

In a reverse-time pattern, *Falling Man* opens with the immediate scene of the towers' collapse as perceived by Keith, one of the surviving workers at the World Trade Center. Some chapters are related from the viewpoint of one of the planes' hijackers, and the final section depicts the attacks themselves as apocalyptic. Yet, unlike the traditional apocalyptic narratives, DeLillo's narrative begins immediately after the attacks and ends with the attacks themselves. As the narrative unfolds, it resists the temptation of imposing order on chaos, as expected in conventional apocalyptic narratives. Instead, it shows the characters as already living "in the ruins of the future," groping for temporary outlets out of their chaotic lives, yet remaining trapped in their fear of the unknown future. Lianne, for instance, "lived in the spirit of what is ever impending" (212). Although DeLillo does not offer an "explanation" of the world, he allows his characters to voice speculations on how they feel about the world.

The novel commences with snapshots of the day of (9/11) in the first section entitled "Bill Lawton":

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night ... The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down the streets and turning corners...seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall. (3)

The sense of the end is clearly pronounced by Lianne, Keith's estranged wife, who says: "Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next...The time to be afraid is when there's no reason to be afraid. Too late now" (10). DeLillo voices much of the resentment against Islam through Lianne, a book editor, a worried mother, and a humanitarian who works with Alzheimer patients to help them resist the erasure of memory. In this way, she seems to appropriate the role of DeLillo as a novelist whose novel will not only bear witness to the events but also safeguard collective memory of these events.

Instead of foregrounding the phenomenal disasters of traditional apocalypse, DeLillo focuses on human consciousness as it registers the impact of shock and the following attempt to cope with the resulting trauma. For the New York citizens, the sense of leading an ordinary daily life is replaced by the haunting fear of explosions lurking in subways and unattended packages. DeLillo turns an inward look at the impact of the attacks on American daily life that has been infiltrated by terror:

We like to think that America invented the future. We are comfortable in the future, intimate with it. But there are disturbances now, in large and small ways, a chain of reconsiderations. Where we live, how we travel, what we think about when we look at our children. For many people the event has changed the grain of the most routine moment. We may find the ruin of the towers implicit in other things. The new Palm Pilot...the stretch limousine parked outside the hotel, the midtown skyscraper under construction, carrying the name of a major investment bank—all haunted in a way by what has happened, less assured in their authority. ("Ruins" 39)

Here, DeLillo interweaves the pathos of everyday life with the apocalyptic threat of Islamism. Instead of providing a lot of space to the narrative of disaster, he foregrounds marginal objects and links them directly to the impact of terror, "There were shoes discarded in the streets, handbags and laptops, a man seated on the sidewalk coughing up blood. Paper cups went bouncing oddly by" (16). The narrator zooms on "a supermarket cart [that] stood upright and empty" (5), in a direct reference to consumerism, which DeLillo perceives as one of the evils of contemporary American life. The reference to Giorgio Morandi's paintings of still life (*Natura Morta*) is utilized as a recurrent intertext throughout the novel. It signifies the invasion of the domestic by

the terroristic through the association of the tall bottles on the kitchen shelf with the twin towers, as Lianne perceives them in the painting: "These were groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins...but there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name...somewhat ominous" (12).

At such moments, Lianne fears communication with others, since feelings of isolation and terror accompany her daily chores. DeLillo shows us that despite the feelings of solidarity among the people in the immediate days after the attacks, his characters remain locked in their own fears. This is the case of Keith and Lianne, whose attempt at giving their marriage another chance fails. Keith remains addicted to his poker games and Lianne remains trapped in her fear of memory loss, despite medical evidence to the contrary. As Keith puts it, "We're ready to sink [back] into our little lives" (75). As Cavedon observes, DeLillo "portrays the events and their aftermath exclusively in terms of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder" (323). On a few occasions, both Lianne and Keith attempt to escape the traumatic impact of the attacks by briefly recapturing scenes of domestic bliss in the past. However, DeLillo does not allow them to indulge in nostalgia. Unlike Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990), whose ending transcends historical trauma to some promising future with the words "family" and "home," the ending of *Falling Man* fades gradually into dust and smoke. DeLillo's characters remain captives to the chaos of the present and the apprehensions of the future, longing for "the naked statement of belief" (61). At best, Lianne comes to think that "the hovering possible presence of God was the thing that created loneliness and doubt in the soul." Yet, deep in her soul, she thinks that God was "...the entity existing outside space and time that resolved this doubt in the tonal power of a word..." (236).

Lianne is emotionally moved by the repeated media-images of the falling towers. The repetition of the attacks on videotapes and in the press betrays an obsession with terror and how it has infiltrated the people's lives:

Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching. The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting sprint that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, into some other distance, out beyond the towers. (134) ²⁰

As Zamora puts it, repetition is a suggestion of immanence (140). The repetition reminds of the entrapment in cyclical time and of the perpetuation of anxiety about the unknown future, thus debunking any possible revelation. In his parody of the old biblical forefathers who searched the sky for signs from God, DeLillo has Justin and his friends spend much time gazing out the windows searching the skies for the planes. The narrative tactic of introducing innocent young children, who barely know or understand the atrocities of the real situation around them, is significant here. It depicts America caught in a moment of innocence in juxtaposition with the evil of the attackers.

Early in the novel, DeLillo resorts to Orientalist clichés about Islam. Through his reference to Shelley's "The Revolt of Islam," he evokes fear of Islam and draws attention to its threat. The title appears on a postcard sent to Lianne by a friend prior to the attacks but which arrives in time, three days after the attacks. The postcard causes Lianne to experience a confused sense of reality as if the threat of Islam were time-travelling to land in her mail-box or at her doorstep.

The Islamist threat, in itself, is perceived in the novel as a violation of the "sanctity" of the innocence of American civil life. In an interview, DeLillo said that "... for some years now I think the true American religion has been 'the American People.' The term quickly developed an aura of sanctity and inviolability.... All the reverence once invested in the name of God was transferred to an entity safely defined as you and me" (PEN American Center "An Interview with Don DeLillo"). Though DeLillo introduces multiple points of view on the attacks, more space is reserved for the anti-Islamist arguments. For example, while Nina relates the attacks to political and socio-economical Western hegemony, Lianne blames it on cultural backwardness:

It's not the history of Western interference that pulls these societies. It's their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world, of choice, of necessity. They haven't advanced because they haven't wanted to or tried to. (65)

DeLillo speaks of the terrorists collectively and his narrative, ironically, de-animates them. Moreover, like other atheist novelists, he foregrounds the depravity of the sexually repressed terrorists. The narrative traces the transformation of Hammad into a terrorist in Afghanistan, where he learned "that death is stronger than life. This is where the landscape consumed him, waterfalls frozen in space, a sky that never ended.... God's name on every tongue throughout the countryside He wore a bomb vest and knew he was a man now, finally ready to close the distance to God" (172). This open space is contrasted to the small cubicle office in the corner where Keith works "with a limited view of the morning sky" (241).

Ironically, DeLillo portrays Keith as Hammad's American godless double. At several junctures in the narrative, both appear in juxtaposition. The last scene in the novel the "He" referring to Hammad slips quite eerily into the "He" referring to Keith; both attacker and victim. Just as Hammad, Keith develops a strong bond of brotherhood with his mates at poker games, especially in their developing of game rituals and restrictions.

For Keith, the game provides a kind of spiritual pursuit, and its rules offer him a meaningful control over his life. Like Hammad, he also experiences detachment from the mainstream of American daily life. Such an empty life makes Keith "wonder if he was becoming a self-operating mechanism, like a humanoid robot..." (226). As he drives through the desert at night, "It took him a moment to understand what he was looking at, many miles ahead, the city [Las Vegas] floating on the night, a feverish sprawl of light so quick and inexplicable it seemed a kind of delirium" (226). The Las

Vegas scenes function as an indictment of American consumerism and energy waste. In such descriptions, Keith's views of American life as an "illusion" correspond to those of Hammad.

Hammad holds American life in contempt for it being characterized by "illusion," routine, and mechanical repetition:

This entire life, this world of lawns to water and hardware stacked on endless shelves, was total, forever, illusion.... People water lawns and eat fast food ... These jogging in the park, world domination. These old men who sit in beach chairs, veined white bodies and baseball caps, they control our world. He wonders if they see him standing here, clean-shaven, in tennis sneakers. (173)

Hammad's feeling of being invisible to the Whites is dramatically contrasted to their being subjected to his gaze: "The people he looked at, they need to be ashamed of their attachment to life, walking their dogs... These people. What they hold so precious we see as empty space" (177). Above all, Hammad thinks, "We are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength, to love death, to feel the claim of armed martyrdom" (178).

III

Almost three years after the attacks, the Islamist threat is shown to be still lurking in the streets, which are swarming with protestors against the war on Iraq. Lianne describes them as "shit-faced fools to be gathered in this heat and humidity for whatever it was that had brought them here" (182). She sees the word *Islam* on a leaflet that her son had taken from a woman with a black headscarf. To her dismay, her son begins to recite a line of the song in Arabic which makes her uneasy (184). Lianne cannot hide her feeling of white supremacy in facing the crowd, "These were a white person's thoughts, the processing of white panic data. The others did not have these thoughts" (185). The sense of insecurity continues to haunt Lianne on occasions when antagonistic attitudes to America are voiced by the European Martin, Nina's lover. He speaks of America as being unwanted: "We are all beginning to have this thought, of American irrelevance.... Soon the day is coming when nobody has to think about America except for the danger it brings. It is losing the center. It becomes the center of its own shit. This is the only center it occupies" (191). DeLillo casts Martin as a shadowy terrorist who may be associated with some underground movement in Europe. Nonetheless, Lianne "respected his secret, yielded to his mystery.... May be he was a terrorist but he was one of ours, she thought.... which meant godless, Western, white" (194-95).

As Zamora reminds us, "Biblical apocalypse ... embodies two parallel quests, one for an understanding of history, the other for the means to narrate that understanding" (14). DeLillo approximates such "understanding" through foregrounding

the live performance of the Falling Man, whose iconic fall from tall buildings and over bridges and trains graphically documents the tragic fall of some workers to their deaths on the day of the attacks. Lianne describes one striking scene:

The jolting end of the fall left him upside-down, secured to the harness, twenty feet above the pavement. The jolt, the sort of midair impact and bounce, the recoil, and now the stillness, arms at his sides, one leg bent at the knee. There was something awful about the stylized pose, body and limbs, his signature stroke.... He remained motionless, with the train still running in a blur... and the echoing deluge of sound falling about him.... (168)

This is a reference to David Janiak, whose profile and life-risking stunts are googled by Lianne (see *Falling Man* 219). As the media describes him, “Falling Man [is a] Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror” (220). Lianne wonders:

Was this position intended to reflect the body posture of a particular man who was photographed falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center, headfirst, arms at his sides, one leg bent, a man set forever in free fall against the looming background of the column panels in the tower?.... Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. (221-22)

One cannot escape the Biblical connotations of the *Fall*, with man appearing doomed to a perpetual state or condition of “falling.” The notes of pessimism are hard to miss here. However, in existential terms, the performer’s fall may be construed as a “leap of faith,” signifying the possibility that those who once feared death are now being daringly playful with it.

DeLillo ends the narrative with an apocalyptic scene that precludes revelation. The eerie light unveils the trauma of “what comes after” with no sign of Biblical angels “hovering in the air above”:

The windblast sent people to the ground. A thunderhead of smoke and ash came moving toward them. The light drained dead away, bright day gone. They ran and fell and tried to get up.... The only light was vestigial now, the light of what comes after, carried in the residue of smashed matter, in the ash ruins of what was various and human, hovering in the air above. (246)

By inverting the paradigms of apocalypse and relating them to the Islamist threat, DeLillo recycles the fears expressed in his earlier fiction. Obviously, the fear of the atomic bomb during the Cold-War era is now displaced by the fear of Islamism.

As an atheist novelist, he does not envision salvation or redemption nor does he expect God's intervention. He reserves the visionary role for the artist; simulator of the real—the "Falling Man"—who repetitively approximates the horror of those falling for their deaths without grasping the meaning of it all. Like the performance artist who dangerously dangles himself from tall structures in protest, DeLillo suggests that the only feasible means of dealing with this impending danger is through the "stunts" of counter-narratives.

Notes

- (1) Examples of domestic terrorism in DeLillo's fiction abound: the Texas serial killer in *Underworld*; Oswald's role in Kennedy's assassination in *Libra*; hostage taking and bombings in *Mao II*; and seizure of the Nasdaq exchange by anarchists in *Cosmopolis*. Examples of American novels dealing with 9/11 attacks as "external" terrorism include: Jay McInerney, *The Good Life* (2006); Jonathan Franzen; *Freedom* (2010); Jonathan Safran Foer; *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005); Philip Roth, *The Plot against America* (2004); and John Updike, *Terrorist* (2006).
- (2) According to Zamora, the first word in the *Book of Revelation* is closely associated with the concept of revelation. It "originally derives from the Greek word *apokálypsis*, to uncover, disclose....Apocalypse is eschatological in nature...it is concerned with final things, with the end of the present age and with the age to follow... a mode of historical thought and a literary form" (10).
- (3) For a discussion of DeLillo's "Orientalist" perspective, see Houssein Pirnajmuddin and Abbasali Borhan, "'Writing Back' to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*," *The Journal of International Social Research*, vol.4, no.18, Summer 2011, pp. 128.
- (4) For a study of the Western obsession with apocalyptic themes, see Joseph Dewey, *In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue U P, 1990). See also a *Time* article (July 22, 2013) "Out with a Bang" about American movies on the end of the world. It should be noted that Jacques Derrida criticized the prevalence of an apocalyptic tone in Western philosophy in his "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy," *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State U of New York P, 1992). He described this obsession as follows: "The imminence matters no less than the end. The end is near, they say, which does not exclude that it may have already taken place" (31). In his *The Specters of Marx* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), Derrida criticized Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* and the "Messianic eschatologies" that seem to mobilize the world. See the second chapter, pp.61-95.
- (5) The term parody is used here in accordance with Simon Dentith's definition:

- "Parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (9). Mark Osteen describes DeLillo's strategy of using parody of apocalyptic themes, as follows: "...by frustrating his readers' desire for novelistic closure, DeLillo uses his own fiction as an antidote for [the] apocalyptic disease" (144-45).
- (6) See John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin, *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011); and Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), for more on the rising fear of Islam in the West.
 - (7) For more on this, see Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali, "Islamophobic Discourse Masquerading as Art and Literature: Combating Myth through Progressive Education", *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*, edited by John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), where he observes: "... 'The White Man's Burden' continues today in the shape of xenophobic and Islamophobic imagery that inundates the contents and covers of many modern, mass-produced titles of popular fiction. These include thrillers, techno-thrillers, spy fiction..., romances, nuclear...holocaust fiction...children's fiction, and, of course, adult and pornographic fiction" (157).
 - (8) For more on the conflict between Islam and the West, see Anna Hartnell, "Violence and the Faithful in Post-9/11 America: Updike's *Terrorist*, Islam, and the Specter of Exceptionalism." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol.57, no.3, 2011, pp. 477-502, where she comments on the tremendous impact of 9/11 on the complexities of the relations between Islam and America.
 - (9) For an account of the Western "cliché" fear of Islam as "a precursor of the Day of Judgement," see Bradley and Tate, pp. 48-49.
 - (10) In *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer, a god-like cyber capitalist predicts his own death as he feels elated by the power of media and technology. For a discussion of this novel as a critique of capitalism, please see Randy Laist, "The Concept of Disappearance in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*," *Critique*, vol. 51, 2010, pp. 257-275. See also Todd Rohman, "Specters and Props: Protest as Fantasy in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*," *English Studies Forum*, 2011, pp. 1-7.
 - (11) For a discussion of Islamist view of death, see Irm Haleem, *The Essence of Islamist Extremism: Recognition through Violence, Freedom through Death* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), particularly the chapter entitled "Self-transcendent Recognition," pp. 73-95.
 - (12) See Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*. Translated by David Webb (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), specifically the chapter entitled "Ethics of Communication or Ethics of Interpretation?" pp.105-120, for a discussion of the negative role of the media in Western culture.

- (13) In *White Noise*, for instance, Babette falls prey to the lure of the illegal drug, Dylar, which she believes will help her face her fear of death. Also, Jack takes much pleasure in shopping, which apparently masks his fear of death: "It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested ... in the sense of replenishment we felt the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls..." (20). The novel illustrates that the American obsession with consumerism is only a masked desire to fight and defer death. Elsewhere in the novel, DeLillo couches the idea of the anxiety over death in apocalyptic terms. Jack describes the weekly ritual of vicariously watching disasters on television: "...we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes....Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64).
- (14) In *Mao II*, DeLillo observes that the novelist makes "raids on human consciousness" (41), a stance which makes him similar to a terrorist.
- (15) Cavedon comments on how *Falling Man's* "negation of 9/11 as a pre-existing fantasy in DeLillo's earlier work [reflects] the fact that the desired conversion has successfully taken place in the very moment the simultaneously dreaded and desired fantasy became reality" (383).
- (16) See Shadi Hamid's *Islamic Exceptionalism, How the Struggle over Islam is Reshaping the World* (New York, Saint Martin's P, 2016) for a thorough discussion of how Islam's exceptionalism provides a point of reference for Muslim reformers so they can construct ideological discourses resistant to Western hegemony and colonialism.
- (17) For a study of the negative representation of Islam and Muslims in *Falling Man*, please see Eman Aldukhina, "The Representation of Islam and Muslims in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*," *Al-Nasser University Publication*, vol. 1, no. 6, 2015, pp. 1-14.
- (18) See Cavedon for a survey of the critical reception of *Falling Man*, pp. 327-330.
- (19) For more on Existential thought in DeLillo, see John Carlos Rowe, "Global Horizons in *Falling Man*," in Stacey Olster, ed. *Don DeLillo: MaoII, Underworld, Falling Man* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011) pp. 121-34. See particularly his discussion of "the Existential Aura" in DeLillo's fiction. According to him, DeLillo "still believes in the fundamental abyss, the randomness of existence" (129).
- (20) According to Cavedon, "the mass media, especially television, soon started to present 9/11 in a curious doublespeak that simultaneously professed lasting traumatization and resilience..." (10). She further observes "[d]ue to the fact

that the footage of the attacks repeatedly shown on television prompted the widespread exclamation that the events were somehow unreal..., the alleged task of literary fiction writers was to produce realistic texts that could represent the events in a coherent narrative" (158).

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