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"This Was the World Now": Don DeLillo's Falling Man as the Literary Memorial to the 9/11 Tragedy

"There are the days after. Everything now is measured by after"

--- Don DeLillo, Falling Man, 2007, p. 138.

1. Introduction

When the news broke out that the military successfully neutralized the most wanted terrorists since the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, there was a wave of excitement, thrill, tears and patriotic riots in front of the White House. The Washington Post reports several thousands of young Americans rushing to the fence of the White House, in a spontaneous display of jubilation, dancing and cheering 'USA![1] . Not long passed before there were T-Shirts celebrating Bin Laden's death being sold. President Obama addressed the nation, claiming that justice has been served. Relief flooded through the American world, even in the euphoric moment, as if they have been searching for some crumb of comfort, or partial closure ever since that awful morning of 9/11. The emotional and psychological wounds of the 9/11 tragedy become thus more evident, from ten years ago, when the image of the great world in its image crushed so profoundly that it become something new, an unknown and fearful of the so-called post-9/11, or – the world of after.

The literary representations quickly ensued, as there have been more than thirty novels dealing in their own way with the aftermath the tragedy, exploring emotional, social, religious aspects, by authors such as Nicholas Safran Foer, John Updike, Moshin Hamid, Jay Mcinerney, and Don DeLillo. Although the latter, a satirical portrayer of the contemporary American society, published Falling Man six years after the attacks, its opening lines take us right back to the scene we

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remember so vividly as if it was yesterday: “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night” (DeLillo 2007, 3). However intimate an account, wrapped in a complex, detached postmodernistic narration, DeLillo’s view of the post-9/11 tremendously encompasses emotional, social and political ideas that arguably constitute a new era, in literary and worldly sense. In this essay, I argue that of all the fictional accounts of September 11, DeLillo’s Falling Man with its structure, perspective, encompassing the attacker and the attacked, stands out as a turning point in signaling the “world of after”, coming as close as it can to becoming a literary memorial of that tragic day. Further yet, serving as a hymn to the tragedy, the novel comes closest to defining the world of “falling ash and near night” we refer to only as post-9/11.

2. Street, Ashes, and the Post 9/11 World

There are several crucial aspects in which this novel creates a significant literary momentum, in trying to explain the post-9/11 question: What is the world now? Its title begins to open the door to the answers we are supposed to find. The image that the title evokes is the banned photograph of a man free falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center, a horror captured in time. There are different falls that structurally and emotionally support the novel, as the discussion will show. DeLillo’s rhetoric, “This was the world now,” opens a new world to be explored and enables DeLillo to recreate the repressed world in his traditional detached style.

What isolates DeLillo from his fellow contemporaries fictionalizing the same topic is his interest in the attacker, namely, the aspect of terrorism. The perspective, that in this novel has a name, acts as a catalyst, a horrific tool used to construct a border between the old and the new. DeLillo encompasses this terrorist momentum by speaking from a perspective of the terrorist himself. A daring move in which he takes on the challenge to observe the opposite sides, conflicting them to portray the world we live in today. Furthermore, the attack on the World Trade Center marks the great age of terrorism, its peak. In all its horror, the terror becomes one of the rare graspable things in the novel, and its role gains weight and importance in the world that ensues.

Finally, it is essential to consider the novel’s specific structure and symbolism that builds around it. The postmodern disconnectedness of thoughts, fragmented narrations and the tone that echoes throughout the novel reflect the imminent world of after, the post 9-11, most realistically. DeLillo

unites the world with the tragedy, as well as its characters, offering us a unique perspective of the tragedy, inviting us to try and infer what kind of a world this is, with the help of the visualization and imagery – the only effective communication in the novel. By uniting those aspects, Falling Man becomes a symbol of a specific time, a turning point in history.

2.1. Isolation, Detachment – Defining the Structure of the World of After

What seems to be an theoretic prequel to the novel, Don DeLillo's essay "In the Ruins of the Future", proves that nothing can really be definitively said about 9/11, rather that it "instead focuses on the affective quality of the event's singularity and on how language can stylistically image and, in the process, recon?gure what it means for contemporary thought to respond ethically to whatever the event's content might be" (Abel 2). This might sum up DeLillo's strategy in Falling Man. Although it lacks traditional storytelling, DeLillo's introduction chapter does not lack momentum, on the contrary. The arguable detachment and emptiness in narration seem illogical, in those chapters where we are transported back into that beginning of a certain end, as we again become dreaded witnesses to destruction of power: "Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall" (DeLillo 2007, 3), yet as the aftermath to the event, as the story progresses and the world proves to be crumbled, so does the narration. David Wyatt claims, "However incredibly close its characters come to 'the roar' and 'the buckling', the narration holds it at a considerable distance" (156). Although it is not only the opening chapter that describes a start of the new world, and as the novel's structure may suggest, it never lets us really leave. The novel, rather its main part (wrapped between the first and final chapter), consists of fragmented perspectives of the survivors, Keith, Lianne, Justin, Florence, and the opposite, terrorist perspective, contrasting the victimized to the victims. The narrative structure only confirms Wyatt's thesis, but also causes a detachment of characters' emotion, and place in the world, their (un)belonging. This is extracted from all the characters, in the world they now face.

The protagonist, Keith Neudecker, is a measure, an instrument that testifies to the tragedy's immensity, the one most affected by it. Keith becomes a register for the world in its making, and still bluntly unaware of it, with just a hint of a symbol yet to be defined: "There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. (…) A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river" (ibid. 4). The account of something gentle falling, its tragic beauty, in that scant light holds our thoughts in the symbolic to the title. The empty shirt, as the structure proves, floats "aloft", from this world into the next.

If this is the world now, then it seems every notion of what was normal, sensible, American, had vanished. The characters are stuck in, and DeLillo lets them exist only in terms of the tragedy, however intimate the account of the mother Lianne, father Keith and son Justin may be. In this new world, as we begin to define it, they function only in response to the tragedy, just as we respond to the overall work.[2] Dealing with indescribable loss, the characters never really evolve, progress, nor tend to go outside the frames of the tragedy. Lianne probably sums it best right at the beginning: "Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next" (DeLillo 2007, 10). There is a point where progress stops and returns to ground zero.

Lianne tries to cope with the tragedy getting through to Keith. When he leaves the ruins to go back to Lianne, we might assume he seeks that progress now, in the family comfort. Yet this is a reflex, a natural wish of belonging, to some world at least, that brings him back home, whatever home is. He is a walking image, seen through Lianne's eyes, "standing numbly in the flow, a dim figure far away inside plexiglass" (ibid. 40). However, neither of them progresses. Keith's poker plays and Lianne's Alzheimer's group are means of escapism, even before they grasp what they are escaping from. Their son Justin, on the other hand, represents the child's perspective of coping with the world of the adult, trying to find sense in something not even adults can wholly comprehend, as he searches the skies with binoculars for Bin Laden, or as he incorrectly, understands hears, Bill Lawton. The American protagonists are lost and unaware of the world they have yet to get to know, and without a proper honest communication, they will never succeed in it, and find some sense and closure.

To portray to which extent that has gone is quite evident in Chapter 5, when Lianne, observing Keith playing catch with his son, says he "was a hovering presence now. (…) He was not quite returned to his body yet" (ibid. 59). Something is missing from Keith and the world. "There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means (…). Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them" (ibid. 60). In narrative and worldly emptiness, DeLillo portrays the post 9/11 era. Lianne "saw a man she'd never known before" (ibid.). But is Lianne the person she knows, the person she was before? This is the area of the unknown, into which DeLillo throws his protagonists. You can only exist in a world you are able to understand, explain or define. But this is DeLillo's main agenda, proving there is no way of achieving that, finding a way out of the rubble following the morning of 9/11.

2.2 Past vs. Present: The Age of Terror

It is the main antagonistic idea – the threat of terror the novel introduces – that is the means used to construct a new world. It marks the age of terror, one of the greatest issues in the post 9/11 world. When the hijacked planes soared into the two towers, terrorism became the most powerful force, gaining momentum, strength when it conflicted with the present American way. Unlike a natural catastrophe or an isolated criminal act, the world of terror becomes a graspable idea in the DeLillo's tragedy. Unlike Foer or McIrney, DeLillo is interested in both the victimizer and the victim, and their respective worlds, insofar that he dares to conflict them, with terrible consequences. He is not only paying tribute to the victims of that fateful day, but tries to explore the fundamental goals of the attacker, with an aim of providing us with reasons how the new world came to be. In his essay "In the Ruins of the Future" he claims, "Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists. (…) The terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past" (DeLillo 2001, 33-4), and that bringing back the past into the present leads to indefinable, unspeakable consequences in Falling Man.

When the two opposite ideologies, beliefs and worlds collide, tragedy ensues, or as Linda S. Kauffman puts it, "Capitalism and terrorism: two forces on a collision course, both out of control" (357). In her comparative essay on the terror in Falling Man, she rightfully claims that "In both the

essay and Falling Man, DeLillo contrasts Al Qaeda with America; medieval vengeance with advanced technology; a brotherhood of martyrs with global markets" (356). DeLillo's brave tackling of the attacker's perspective makes his account that much more relevant to our understanding of the tragedy. The embodiment of that terrorist perspective, the character of Hammad is even having doubts about jihad, "But does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find the way?" (175). However, he resists the urges for the purpose of the act of terrorism: "The world changes first in the mind of the man who wants to change it" (ibid.), as DeLillo seems to suggest the power of the past, the notion of the strong minds is what will bring change to the world, what marks the end of one world in its latter horror. DeLillo does suggest the strength of terror rising;[3] and it is through Hammad, through mental strength, that this perspective and strength comes forth. It is precisely this strength of the mind what marks the beginning of the age of terror. The hijacking of the planes, with Hammad in one of them, signifies the beginning of that change that first occurred in the minds of the Islamists, as terror becomes the only thing that is positively graspable, horrifying as it is, and in the novel and in the post-9/11 world. Without dwelling too deeply on the political ideas and connotations of the terrorist perspective in the novel, it is simply necessary to acknowledge its role in the author's attempt to portray the worlds, the attacker as well as the attacked. It is the symbol of fall of the free world, in every sense, what represents the stature of terror in its highest form; its success brings out the tragedy. In its peak, the age of terrorism divides the before and after, the pre-9/11 and post-9/11 world, as the narration struggles with what is left in those ruins.

It never comes more close and obvious as in the final chapter, when DeLillo conflicts capitalism and terrorism, the present and the past, which can only lead to destructible consequences, "He [Hammad] fastened his seatbelt. […] A blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall" (DeLillo 2007, 239). Within the same sentence, Hamad's perspective switches to Keith's, the two worlds, ideas and meanings collide, cementing an image of downfall, destruction in our minds, the image so profoundly significant that changed the course of history.

Discussing perspectives of the 9/11 representations, in "September 11 and Postmodern Memory" David Wyatt claims that this switching of perspective provides a "sense that they are not as far

apart as they might seem, […] a moment having less to do with the history of empathy than the laws of physics" (157), yet I am inclined to find the "blast wave" and the fall indeed the ideological clash of the two forces. I believe this is DeLillo's point exactly, that the clash between the terrorism and consumerism, past and present is the overall cause of the fall of world, or rather, man. Moreover, a terrible crash explosion, carved in the minds of 9/11 witnesses, blasts as the views of the terrorist, the past, clash with the views of the modern, American. The two therefore, cannot coexist, as DeLillo politically seems to allude, as disastrous consequences spread rapidly, affecting the world at large.

Kauffman sums it up concisely, "Falling Man portrays the contradictions between present and past; life and death; time and eternity. It records, moreover, the precise moment when these contradictions collide with deadly impact" (56). The novel is then, not only a mark of a great change and a hymn to the tragic day, but also a warning and a literary memorial to the rise of terrorism as a great threat to the present, and future, whatever the world may be.

2.3 The Imagery of the Tragedy

What is undoubtedly apparent throughout the novel is its perspective switching structure and detailed emptiness in communication. There seem to be spaces, voids left between the sentences or rather "stunned numbness [that] depends upon highly procedure-driven sentences: 'He wore' – 'He kept' – 'He saw' – 'He started'" (Wyatt 156). The novel lacks communication in its traditional sense, something DeLillo's narrative seems to suggest evolves out of the post-9/11 world, the world of after. Where Keith does not even attempt to communicate, on his way to a mental recovery, Lianne desperately searches for something meaningful, something that would speak to her: "Everything seemed to mean something. Their lives were in transition and she looked for signs" (DeLillo 2007, 67). She searches the newspapers "until she had to force herself to stop" (ibid .), yet the meaning is distant, unavailable. This is DeLillo's point in the complete structure – meaning cannot be found and communication restored, as the effects of the tragedy outgrow it: "We have our own ruins. But I don't think I want to see them" (ibid. 116). Keith and Lianne find themselves in a labyrinth they must crawl out of, unaware of what awaits them in the end: "In Falling Man after the terrorist attacks, life takes on a dimension of unreality – disoriented in time

and space. The characters feel puny, insignificant" (Kauffman 371). However, there is no escaping this labyrinth at all, and by concluding the novel with the same scenes he has started with, DeLillo makes sure we understand this.

If there is no communication, what does the story tell us? Keith and Lianne do not find any sort of resolution, as they seem to have nothing left to say. "'The every-word, every-breath schedule we were on before we split. Is it possible this is over? We don't need this anymore. We can live without it. Am I right?' 'We're ready to sink into our little lives,' he said" (DeLillo 2007, 76). Nevertheless, there exists a certain telling, or rather showing, and it is profoundly horrifying, that it replaces any other form. It is not a conversation that ever took place between the main characters but it functions in the same way the tragedy functions – through image and visualization, the fundamental of the event of 9/11. This is where the novel acquires it communicative strength, and defining symbolism – the Falling Man.

Lianne plays a central addressee of a disturbing theatrical performance: "He brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump" (ibid. 33). It begins and ends there, in the spot where the performance artist, David Janiak, hangs suspended on a harness wires, upside down:

> *Traffic was barely moving now. There were people shouting up at him, outraged at the spectacle, the puppetry of human desperation, a body's last fleet breath and what it held. It held the gaze of the world, she thought. There was the awful openness of it, something we'd not seen, the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all. And now, she thought, this little theater piece, disturbing enough to stop traffic and send her back into the terminal.*
>
> *(DeLillo 2007, 33, my emphasis)*

The upsetting theatrical, visual performance holds the gaze of the entire nation, as the actual September 11 attacks did. New York becomes a stage where time has stopped. This confirms the thesis that, although nothing definite can be said about the tragedy, it emphasizes the need to show it, the imagistic form that can fill that gap. The artist does not jump, and his performance does not have an exposition or a resolution. Nonetheless, suspended in time, space, fueling anger

of the audience, that terrible frozen spectacle perceivers cannot look away from, visualizes the unspeakable in the post-9/11 world.

“The performance pieces were not designed to be recorded by a photographer” (ibid. 220), they were unannounced, and unexpected. There is probably only one motive the Falling Man evokes – the tragic loss of that day. Hanging suspended, rather than jumping, Janiak holds the “grasp of the world” much longer than the people jumping in free fall, durably, almost endlessly. There is no second act, an intermission, a next show, or the realization that the show is over and now it is time to get back to the real world. The show is the world now, frightening, desperate and upsetting. Just like the title of the novel, the visualized communication “speaks” loudly.

All this leads us towards finding some symbolic and explanation of something so upsetting and widespread it is difficult to comprehend – the fall. There are several falls in the story, yet bound together. The fall of the Towers, the artist’s performance of the fall, and most significantly, the empty shirt falling down from the sky in the novel’s introduction. The artist’s fall’s stunning imagery reaches out to all the recipients and finds its meaning in their minds. Lianne’s perspective expands to our own, as she dwells on it: “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” (DeLillo 222, my emphasis). If there was anything communicating through to her, it was that man. “Then, she thought, the ones already speaking into phones… all would try to describe what they’ve seen or what others nearby have seen and are now trying to describe to them. There was one thing for them to say, essentially. Someone falling. Falling man” (ibid. 165). In her essay on the visual art in Falling Man, Silvia Schultermandl claims “DeLillo raises issues about the symbolic staging of not only the artist’s performance, but of the meaning of 9/11 at large” (51). If the terror of that day, or the whole world itself could have a memorial, a stone statue, it would be Falling Man, his horrific significance, locked in space and time of grief and shock.

Furthermore, DeLillo wraps the story within the fall, starting off and concluding the novel with the scenes of planes hitting the towers. What has happened in between those two posts is the story that lacks closure and meaning, but not the important message. It shows the world that ensued following the attack, yet does not provide an explanation for it, or the characters’ position in it. By wrapping the intimate stories of Keith and Lianne with the monumental tragedy, finishing the novel

with the same scenes of the attack, DeLillo proves there really is yet no understanding of the world, what came to be of it after the fall. There is no escape, closure or comfort, even years after. The world is yet to be defined. Even if the artist dies, the theatrical performance lives on.

Drawing a parallel to Lianne's experiences in the performance reminds us of Keith's, as he is the one closest to the tragedy. Keith "walked from it and into it at the same time […] That's where everything was, all around him, falling away, street signs, people, things he could not name" (DeLillo 2007, 4-246). But then he sees something that echoes in a performance of his own: "There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river" (ibid. 4). The hook that DeLillo started the novel with, somewhat alluded in its title, comes forth again in the final scene: "Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in his life" (ibid. 246, my emphasis). If the Falling Man is a statue of the tragedy that struck New York, then the falling empty shirt relates to an even a larger audience. The whole world watches, "haunted by the images they witnessed, and this hauntedness is indicative of their participation in the perpetuation of 9/11 as a symbolic event" (Schultermandl 52). Struggling, waving arms like nothing in this world, the shirt becomes a symbol of the world that came to be.

3. Conclusion

The first and the final scene in DeLillo's novel evoke those images of Hollywood disaster movies that came true. Concluding the novel with the same scenes it started with, the author suggests that there is no way out of that world, no resolution that helps the affected move on, no end credits, if you will. The post-9/11, a stage of tragedy observed by millions, is the world of rubble that is left after the fall, the smoke and ash in the streets of Manhattan and the crushed mental strength of its people. From this vast scenery, DeLillo brings us down to the detailed, intimate level of characters to show the far reaching effects of the tragedy, and here the authentic perspective ensues. In all of its detachment and ghostlike representation of characters lies the profoundest essence of the world of after. DeLillo furthermore includes, moreover, personifies, crawls under the skin of terror, the attacker, explaining not only what the world of after looks and feels like, but why the age of

terror had made it the way it did. It is a careful and brave step in which DeLillo encompasses one world, and draws boundaries between ideologies, only to crush them with immense force, the force that is one of the rare graspable ideas that stays on in the word after 9/11.

The Falling Man and the falling shirt, the novel's deep communication and relatedness to the greater audience mark a certain time, a turning point of an era. We begin to understand the tears and jubilant joy in Washington over Bin Laden's death. This might actually be a signal of a certain way out of DeLillo's world of smoke and ash, into a world of closure, meaning, resolution – something that, according to DeLillo, we are yet to find.

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[1] “At White House and Pentagon, emotions run high“ 15 June 2011

[2] The novel gains significance in the reader response theory – we as readers become active participants in contructing meaning to the fragmented narration of the novel, as we ourselves are witnesses to the tragedy.Cf. Iser, Wolfgang. The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response. Baltimore: John Hopinks Univeristy Press, 1978. ix-xii.

[3] Several critics have suggested that DeLillo had been writing a 9/11 novel in his previous novels. He has been concerned with the idea of terrorism, e.g. in Mao II, but the importance of the ideology he embodies in Falling Man.

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