

## "A LANGUAGE NOT QUITE OF THIS WORLD": TRANSCENDENCE AND COUNTER-LINGUISTIC TURNS IN DON DELILLO'S FICTION\*

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The aim of this article is to examine Don DeLillo's "visionary concern with language" (Weinstein 1993: 289). I will focus on conceptions about language specifically related to ideas of transcendence, epiphany and purity in DeLillo's novels, and I will analyze the rhetorical patterns in which those conceptions are usually articulated. I will search for recurrent motifs that contribute to a discursive and rhetorical model for the analysis of DeLillo's work and I will try to offer an interpretative frame that may throw some light on the literary and cultural ascendancy of DeLillo's ideas about language, tentatively proposing that the rhetorical matrix from which he draws many of his articulations on language may be located in literary models from medieval mysticism, romanticism and modernism.

**Keywords:** *language, Romanticism, Mysticism, ineffability, revelation.*

Este artículo propone examinar lo que Arnold Weinstein ha denominado "Visionary concern with language" (1993: 289) en la narrativa de Don DeLillo. Mi intención es centrarme en concepciones acerca del lenguaje específicamente relacionadas con ideas de trascendencia, epifanía y pureza en las novelas de DeLillo, y analizar los patrones retóricos en los que tales concepciones suelen articularse. Buscaré motivos recurrentes que contribuyan a un modelo discursivo y retórico de análisis de la obra de DeLillo, e intentaré ofrecer un marco interpretativo que pueda arrojar luz sobre la ascendencia literaria y cultural de sus ideas sobre

el lenguaje, proponiendo a modo de hipótesis que la matriz retórica de la que toma muchas de sus articulaciones acerca del lenguaje podría localizarse en modelos literarios provenientes del misticismo medieval, romanticismo y modernismo.

**Palabras Clave:** *lenguaje, romanticismo, misticismo, infabilidad, revelación.*

In this article, I would like to examine what Arnold Weinstein called Don DeLillo's "visionary concern with language" (Weinstein 1993: 289). In a 1983 interview with Tom LeClair, Don DeLillo acknowledged that "language was a subject as well as an instrument in my work" (LeClair, 1983: 81). As scholars such as Arnold Weinstein (1993) or David Cowart (2002) have noted, language is "the cornerstone of DeLillo's work" (Weinstein 1993: 289). Uses of language in his work include explicit theorizations on linguistic issues in a poststructuralist key, postmodern metaliterary games or parodies of vernacular conversation, professional jargons and specialized discourses (Cowart 2002: 2).

DeLillo's ideas about language, nevertheless, tend to be formulated in similar terms in many of his novels, suggesting recurrent rhetorical patterns and particular views on linguistic issues that point toward the "visionary". DeLillo, in Cowart's words, "does not defer to the poststructuralist view of language [...] Fully aware that language is maddeningly circular, maddeningly subversive of its own supposed referentiality, the author nonetheless affirms something numinous in its mysterious properties" (2002: 5).

I would like to examine the recurrence of specific conceptions about language related to ideas of transcendence, epiphany and purity in DeLillo's work, and to analyze the rhetorical patterns in which those conceptions are articulated. Although it would not be accurate to talk about a consistent "theory of language" in DeLillo (Bonca 1996: 25), I contend that the pattern I will focus on has remained quite regular for most of his career. For this reason, I will read from the different novels in search of common motifs that contribute to a consistent

discursive and rhetorical model, often juxtaposing their formulations in order to illustrate the recurrence of this pattern. I will try to offer an interpretative frame that may throw some light on the literary and cultural ascendancy of DeLillo's ideas about language, tentatively proposing that the rhetorical matrix from which he draws many of his articulations on language may be located in literary models from medieval mysticism, romanticism and modernism.

In my reading, I will draw on previous academic work on this topic, particularly on those analyses that have highlighted the "visionary" overtones in DeLillo's treatment of linguistic issues. Although many critics have dealt tangentially with this aspect of his work, only a few of them have analyzed in depth the recurrence of rhetorical and narrative patterns associated to its explicit thematic representation. David Cowart's *The Physics of Language* (2002) is the only book-length study on language in DeLillo's fiction, but authors such as James Berger (2005), Cornel Bonca (1996), Arthur M. Saltzman (1994) or the already mentioned Arnold Weinstein (1993) have produced illuminating examinations of some of DeLillo's novels. It is necessary to mention that, although most of them have focused on the separate analysis of individual novels, many of their insights may have further application to DeLillo's work in general, as I will try to illustrate.

DeLillo tends to emphasize those aspects of human language—and those behaviors regarding language—that can be said to be abnormal in one way or another, "anti-languages" to some extent. Weinstein's remarkable analysis of thematic uses of language in DeLillo's fiction begins with the notion that "DeLillo is out to guide his readers into verbal precincts they have never entered before" (Weinstein 1993: 289). He points to the recurrence of abnormal linguistic behaviors, pathological or not, in DeLillo's novels, which is particularly remarkable. As Cornel Bonca has noted, "from the beginning DeLillo has been fascinated by the kinds of language that elude systems, classification, or semiotic analysis" (1996: 25): In *Ratner's Star* (1976), a character known as "the scream lady" suffers attacks of what appears to be a combination of logorrhea, coprolalia and verbigeration (DeLillo 1976: 249). In *The Body Artist* (2001) a stranger with his linguistic skills severely damaged appears at the

protagonist's door. DeLillo's portrayal of Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* (1988) emphasizes the character's dyslexia or "word-blindness" (DeLillo 1988: 166), which is diagnosed by KGB recruitment agents when he passes the tests in order to become a spy for the Soviet Union. In *White Noise* (1985), Wilder, the youngest child of the Gladney family, suffers from either autism or selective mutism.

Other cases, not necessarily pathological, may be mentioned as well: the episode of glossolalia or "speaking in tongues" narrated at the end of *The Names* (1982), the fascination with infant babbling in *White Noise* or the different attempts on the part of several characters in *End Zone* (1972) or *Underworld* (1997) to attain states of quasi-mystical speechlessness. An extreme version of the same tendency would be the plain and direct rejection of language, that is to say, the quest for silence undertaken by several characters as part of a general "pattern of withdrawal" (Osteen 2000: 450) that includes other anti-social behaviors such as extreme isolation or the recurrence to violence against any aspect of the character's "old life". The best example of this tendency would be Bucky Wunderlick, protagonist of *Great Jones Street* (1973).

The final aim for the characters following this pattern in DeLillo's fiction seems to be the attainment of what Arnold Weinstein has called "epiphanic, almost nuclear clarity" (1993: 296). All the linguistic phenomena aforementioned imply a manipulation of the common uses of language, a challenge to normal communicative skills or even the utter obliteration of any form of language at all. They are usually presented in DeLillo's novels as the mechanisms through which revelation can be achieved. In what follows, I will try to illustrate this narrative pattern through the analysis of several passages from DeLillo's novels in which the topic of language has an explicit thematic representation.

James Berger describes linguistic behaviors in DeLillo's fiction as "turns against language" (2005: 341) and he talks about a general "counter-linguistic turn" in the humanities that would account for the idea, often expressed in novels such as *White Noise* (1985) or *The Names* (1982), that "there *is* an other of language, whether or not this other can be conceptualized" (2005: 344). I share Berger's assumption that

DeLillo's reflections on language tend to be codified in terms of the desire to escape from the symbolic-linguistic order in search of some form of transcendence. In order to illustrate this idea, and as the departing point for a preliminary schematization of the pattern I will be analyzing, I would like to quote one of DeLillo's most celebrated passages. In what has come to be known as the "Toyota Celica episode" in *White Noise*, DeLillo gives expression to the "counter-linguistic turn" in Jack Gladney's quasi-mystical experience:

She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

*Toyota Celica.*

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder [...] Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (DeLillo 1985: 155)

This fragment can be used as corollary of the narrative and rhetorical pattern I will try to synthesize in this article. The scene takes place when the Gladney family has been evacuated from their home after a toxic spillage in their town, Blacksmith, and taken to some public facility to spend the night. While everyone else sleeps, Jack Gladney wanders among the cots and sleeping bags in search of existential comfort, watching his children sleep and wondering: "There must be something, somewhere, large and grand and redoubtable enough to justify this shining reliance and implicit belief" (DeLillo 1985: 154).

Jack incarnates here the recurrent quest for transcendence undertaken by characters in most of DeLillo's novels, a quest permeated by romantic imagery: from the wandering hero in search of a meaning to his life to the wise child knowing secrets inaccessible to adults. Jack searches for clues to guide him towards a transcendental revelation, expressed in terms that echo William Wordsworth's in "Intimations of Immortality": "I was ready to search anywhere for signs and hints, *intimations of odd comfort*" (154; emphasis added). As critics

have repeatedly pointed out, Jack's existential crisis is inevitably related to the obsessive thought about his own mortality. It is in this context when Steffie, one of his daughters, starts speaking in dreams. The growing intensity of the language used in this fragment leads to a moment of revelation, described as a truth previously known but forgotten, "familiar and elusive at the same time" (155). The description of Steffie's utterance is full of religious and magical overtones, as illustrated by expressions such as "ritual meaning", "verbal spell" or "ecstatic chant", and the utterance itself is delayed, increasing the narrative tension and producing the delay of the moment of revelation itself. Revelation, moreover, will be possible only after Steffie's utterance is stripped of its referential meaning, that is, only after Jack overcomes the idea that "Toyota Celica" is just the name of a car. That is when the "moment of splendid transcendence" takes place.

From this brief analysis the basic features of a recurrent pattern in DeLillo's fiction may be sketched, built around a character in search of some form of transcendence: 1) The recognition of a kind of transcendental truth or meaning of indeterminate nature that is not accessible through common language, that is, the experience of the ineffable; 2) The need to challenge the limits of common language in order to access revelation of that truth; 3) The emphasis on the magical, ritualized, even pathological elements of language, transcending its basic communicative, referential functions; 4) Revelation is achieved when language has been completely stripped of its usual referential bondage or literally obliterated.

Through this mechanism, DeLillo's novels open a view into a non-referential verbal space comparatively described as original, profound and pure, often using a romantic and modernist rhetoric of mystic ascendancy in which the veil of language is torn to allow for epiphany. The nature of the epiphany itself remains, in most cases, undisclosed. In the above quoted passage, readers are never assured whether Jack's "moment of splendid transcendence" has to do with his fear of death or his sense of purpose in life. This recurrent imprecision as to the kind of revelation achieved by DeLillo's characters has led critics such as Pifer or Osteen to an ironic reading of passages such as the "Toyota Celica" episode. According to them, DeLillo would be

ironically appropriating a transcendental discourse devoid of its object, thus underlining the constructiveness of this kind of rhetoric.

The way of transcendental revelation encompasses several stages in DeLillo's fiction. The first of these steps would be the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of common language to express transcendental experience. As David Cowart has noted, “the author shows particular sensitivity to whatever resists naming or goes unnamed” (2002: 182). In the Western tradition, the ascendancy of this rhetoric of the ineffable can be said to span from medieval mysticism to modernism. Saint John of the Cross, T.S. Eliot or William Faulkner could be mentioned as significant referents for DeLillo's fiction in this sense (Cowart 2002: 185-186; Berger 2005: 351). In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney undergoes serious expressive difficulties when trying to narrate his nearly mystical experiences: “The spirit of these warm evenings is hard to describe” (DeLillo 1985: 324). The contradiction between wanting to tell and being unable to do it is underlined by some of these characters' statements: “People come and don't know what to say or think, where to look or what to believe” (DeLillo 1997: 824). The moment when a character feels for the first time the intuition that there is some truth or meaning hidden inside or beneath the surface of common experience is referred to in *Ratner's Star* as “the screech and claw of the inexpressible” (DeLillo 1976: 22). In *End Zone*, Gary Harkness faces this experience of the ineffable in the desert, trying to access a mental state beyond consciousness:

But in some form of void, freed from consciousness, the mind remakes itself. What we must know must be learned from blanked-out pages. To begin to reword the overflowing world. To subtract and disjoin. To re-recite the alphabet. To make elemental lists. (DeLillo 1972: 89)

If common language is not the appropriate vehicle to access transcendence, this language needs to be stripped off its mundane qualities; it has to be reshaped in order to accommodate new mental states. All the terms used in this passage point to a two-step process. First, language has to be unmade—negative prefixes such as “sub-” and “dis-” indicate this—and then remade—“remakes”, “reword”, “re-

recite”—in a new form. The mental state from which new knowledge is to be achieved is associated to the act of cleaning the slate of language, so to say: “it must be learned from blanked-out pages”. The conventional act of naming the world, which has become excessive (“overflowing”), has to stop and restart: “reword the overflowing world”. Gary Harkness expresses in this passage a recurrent obsession for many of DeLillo’s characters, that of stripping language of all its referential meanings. In *White Noise*, J. Murray Siskind uses similar imagery when he talks about the need to perceive reality beyond “veils of mystery and layers of cultural material” (DeLillo 1985: 37): “It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability” (1985: 38). As in the aforementioned passage, the use of prefixes in this fragment (*de*-ciphering, *re*-arranging, *un*-speakability) contribute to a reactive or negative rhetoric, implying a reaction or counter-movement against a previous situation. A dialectic relationship is implied in this rhetorical *via negativa*, which may be tentatively conceptualized in James Berger’s terms, as a tension between language and “the other of language” (Berger 2005: 344).

The same contrast between a view of consciousness being determined by language and the possibility of a mental state external to it is established in *The Body Artist*, one of DeLillo’s most recent novels and, according to some, his most openly modernist text to date (Nel 2002: 736, Bonca 2002: 62). In this novel we read the following statement about one of the characters, Mr. Tuttle: “He hasn’t learned the language. There has to be an imaginary point, a nonplace where language intersects with our perceptions of time and space, and he is a stranger at this crossing, without words or bearings” (DeLillo 2001: 99). Living without language makes Mr. Tuttle a stranger in the world, without means to interact with it. In this passage, the linguistic order is metaphorically described as a grid—suggested by terms as “imaginary point,” “intersect,” “crossing”—intended to contain reality.

DeLillo’s narrator in *The Body Artist* hints at the possibility of reaching this pre-verbal space occupied by *aphasic* characters such as Mr. Tuttle. As Arnold Weinstein has pointed out, “DeLillo reveres that ultimate opaque language that is prior to all codes and grammars” (1993: 306). Most of DeLillo’s characters, somehow trapped in that intersection of language in the epistemological ordering of reality, long

to reach that space. In the above quoted passage from *The Body Artist*, Mr. Tuttle is said to inhabit a place whose coordinates are external or previous to the linguistic and temporal ordering of reality. According to Lauren Hartke, the character from whose perspective we learn about Mr. Tuttle, this is precisely what grants him access to a level of understanding she can only hint at. In the rest of DeLillo's fiction the same logic is repeatedly articulated: transcendence, meaningfulness or simply truth lie hidden in common language. Characters will look for it either spatially, underneath the surface of common words, or temporally, at some point in the past.

In order to understand this articulation, the rhetorical mechanisms on which it is founded should be examined. The first of these mechanisms is based upon the opposition between surface and depth, truth lying always underneath visible, external reality. This could be considered a mechanism of excavation, for it helps to codify metaphorically an underground truth that needs to be dug up. This idea is constant in DeLillo's work, in which the frequent topic of conspiracy is usually expressed in terms of a subterranean truth hiding beneath the surface of things: "The true underground is where power flows. That's the best secret of our time..." (DeLillo 1973: 231); "the pulse of history is always underground" (DeLillo 1977: 89); "the well-springs [...] deeper and less detectable" (DeLillo 1997: 319).<sup>1</sup>

The second mechanism is related to a temporal sequence according to which truth has been lost in time and needs to be recuperated. It could be considered a mechanism of regression, best exemplified in the movement towards *infancy*—meaning "speechlessness" etymologically—as the original point from which truth emerges. In Arnold Weinstein's words: "To see like a child again is to see dimensions, to perceive auras, to grasp the connectedness of what is discrete, the particulars of what seems joined, the odd magic of the material world we have made (1993: 299). This rhetoric connects with romantic and transcendentalist conceptions of childhood as a prelapsarian stage during which human beings have access to a kind of knowledge that adults are doomed to forget."<sup>2</sup>

In both mechanisms, access to truth has been lost and needs to be recuperated. A sequential pattern is established, then, triggered by

the wish to return to that prelapsarian state in which some form of language could actually be the means toward truth and not an obstacle to it. In *The Names*, the narrator describes common language as “the fallen wonder of the world” (DeLillo 1982: 339), illustrating the sequential pattern I have just sketched. This novel deals explicitly with the issue of referential meaning, turning it into the triggering element of the plot: “The search for ancient inscriptions reveals itself to be a quest for ordinary language, language that is immediate and immanent” (Weinstein 1993: 293). In the novel, thematic concerns about language are illustrated by the activities and theories of a secret cult denominated “the Names” or “the Abecedarians” (DeLillo 1982: 210). Their name, meaning “learners of the alphabet. Beginners” (1982: 210), points to a movement of return towards linguistic origins. According to the members of this sect, the relationship between an object and its name should tend towards the elimination of the limit that marks the conventional relationship between signified and signifier. The Abecedarians’ aim can be described as the search for a purely iconic language in which the word *is* the thing represented.

They assume the existence of a natural relationship between signifier and signified, preexisting the conventional relationship, the imposition of which implies a fall regarding this previous, purer language in which meaning is not “added” to the word, but it is created in it as “pure presence”. As Arnold Weinstein has noted (1993: 293), the novel echoes the logocentric workings exposed by Jacques Derrida in *De la grammatologie* (1967), according to which writing is chiefly perceived in Western thought as derived from spoken language, as a byproduct of this, as part of an epistemological chain in which truth is identified with the spoken word understood as “presence”: “All the metaphysical determinations of truth [...] are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos, or of a reason thought within the lineage of logos, in whatever sense it is understood [...] Within this logos, the original and essential link to the *phonè* has never been broken” (Derrida 1976: 10-11).

These characters’ intention is to fully obliterate the gap or *differance* between signifier and signified. In order to fulfill their aim, the Abecedarians will use a sharp object to stab people whose initials coincide with those of the place where they are assassinated.<sup>3</sup> Derrida’s

notion of the "violence of the letter" is to be understood literally in this novel, for the etymological meaning of "writing" as "engraving" is here enacted in the sharp objects used by the assassins but also in their method, which includes engraving their victims' initials in stones to be left near the dead bodies.

The method is described by one of its members in terms of the feeling of *agnitio* or recognition provoked by their crimes:

Something in our method finds a home in your unconscious mind. A recognition. This curious recognition is not subject to a conscious scrutiny. Our program evokes something that you seem to understand and find familiar, something you cannot analyze. We are working at a preverbal level, although we use words, of course, we use them all the time. This is a mystery. (DeLillo 1982: 208)

The ritual involved in the assassinations is described as an attempt to reach a pre-referential level—"we are working at a preverbal level"—in which the distance between signifier and signified is dissolved. The notions of regression and excavation are repeatedly used in the novel to express the way back to "natural language", indicated in the terms "home" and "familiar". On the one hand, the notion of "recognition" (etymologically, "to know again") implies the recovery of something known but forgotten, a movement back to some place of origin. On the other hand, the mention of the unconscious opens the way for a recurrent rhetoric in the field of psychoanalysis, according to which the unconscious lies at the deepest bottom of the mind. Notions of depth abound in this passage—"I cannot describe how fully and *deeply* it reached me" (1982: 209), "how *deep* we are in" (1982: 210)—and the conversation itself takes place inside a cave, thus reinforcing the idea of hidden knowledge.

The same movement towards interiority and regression to a speechless state will articulate the narrative development of *Great Jones Street*. In this novel, Bucky Wunderlick, a rock star, abandons his group in the middle of a national tour and retreats to a decrepit apartment in an obscure New York City suburb. Bucky is exemplary of the

recurrent “pattern of withdrawal” in DeLillo’s fiction of the 70s (Dewey 2006: 41; Osteen 2000: 450), and akin to the already mentioned Gary Harkness from *End Zone*. In reference to the latter, though it could be equally applied to the former, David Cowart recalls Wittgenstein’s affirmation “Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent” (qtd. in Cowart 2002: 27). Wunderlick’s personal crisis will end in physical reclusion, associated in the novel to his will to abandon articulated language: “The room’s tensions were suitable to few enterprises besides my own, that of testing the depths of silence. Or one’s willingness to be silent. Or one’s fear of this willingness” (DeLillo 1973: 25). Absence of language is associated to depth—“the depths of silence”—and to the regression to a pre-referential verbal state. Long before taking the drug that will temporarily deprive him of the capacity to speak, Bucky explores through his lyrics the idea of babbling: “I was born with all the languages in my mouth [...] Baby god” (1973: 205-206). His last edited record, entitled “Pee Pee Maw Maw”, represents the wish to return to infant language that culminates in his last, unreleased recording, “Baba Baba Baba” (204-205). Wunderlick refers to these recordings as “the mountain tapes” and describes them as “genuinely infantile” (148). Retrospectively, he perceives the songs as announcements of his future muteness: “I had no idea whether this was good or bad. I didn’t know whether the songs were supposed to be redemptive, sardonic or something completely different. Tributes to my own mute following” (148).

Wunderlick’s speechlessness will take place after the intake of an experimental drug that will provoke a brief episode of aphasia. His disorder is explained by another character in the following terms: “You’ll be perfectly healthy. You won’t be able to make words, that’s all. They just won’t come into your mind the way they normally do and the way we all take for granted they will. Sounds yes. Sounds galore. But no words” (DeLillo 1973: 255). While he is completely unable to produce any words, he is still able to emit inarticulate sounds: “I made interesting and original sounds. I looked out of the window and moaned (quietly) at the lumbering trucks...” (1973: 264). Through aphasia, Bucky attains “permanent withdrawal to that unimprinted level where all sound is silken and nothing erodes in the mad weather of language” (1973: 265). Afterwards, Bucky will remember his aphasic period as one of absolute happiness: “I was unreasonably happy,

subsisting in blessed circumstance, thinking of myself as a kind of living chant" (264).

This "living chant", that is, the prelapsarian—"unimprinted"—verbal state made of inarticulate sounds, brings Wunderlick the kind of transcendental experience many of DeLillo's characters are looking for. It should be noted that this kind of language, in DeLillo's fiction, tends to be described as sound devoid of any referential connection. It seems as if, in order to grant access to meaningful knowledge, language should first have to refer back to its own materiality, denying its primary referential function. However, as Arthur M. Saltzman has noted, the paradoxical turn of this mechanism of access to transcendence makes the epiphany inevitably dependent on language itself. Revelation can come only through language; it can never strip itself completely of it: "Whatever transcendence he pretends to is derivative, obligated to the medium whose undertow he means to supervene" (Saltzman 1994: 808).

In connection to this, I would like to go back for a moment to the "Toyota Celica" episode quoted at the beginning, in order to point to one word which is repeated three times in the passage: "Utterance". The "moment of splendid transcendence" experienced by Jack Gladney in this passage is explicitly associated to Steffie's utterance, to the oral quality of her words, and not to the referential meaning of those words.<sup>4</sup> While the utterance itself is described in positive terms evoking transcendence—"beautiful", "mysterious", "wonder", "amazed"—the realization of its referential bondage is rejected as "simple", "ordinary", "near-nonsense", "brain noise". It is the material aspect of the utterance and not its referent what provokes revelation in this passage: The sonic quality of the words "Toyota Celica" provoke Jack Gladney's awe, and not the car referred to by that name. As Cornel Bonca indicates, the passage points to the paradoxical notion that a transcendental non-linguistic knowledge is "hidden though immanent in its very sound" (1996: 27).

In DeLillo's fiction, characters devise different techniques in order to denude utterance from its referential meaning, in order to reach "what language 'really means'" (Bonca 1996: 27). The two most recurrent mechanisms are these: First, the repetition of a word or

phrase until its conventional meaning recedes. Second, the constant wailing or crying, or listening to it as a means to enter an abstract level of utterance. It should be noted that both are common practices in different forms of religious mysticism (in Sufism, Buddhism or Christian medieval mysticism, for instance). Explicit examples of the first are found in *End Zone* and *Underworld*, and instance of the second kind are present in *White Noise* or *Great Jones Street*.

In *End Zone*, Gary Harkness locks himself in his room and stares at a poster on the wall for hours, until words start to lose their meaning:

I looked at this sign for three years (roughly from ages fourteen to seventeen) before I began to perceive a certain beauty in it. The sentiment of course had small appeal but it seemed that beauty flew from the words themselves, the letters, consonants swallowing vowels, aggression and tenderness, a semi-self-re-creation from line to line, word to word, letter to letter. All meaning faded. The words became pictures. It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age that words can escape their meanings. A strange beauty that sign began to express. (DeLillo 1972: 17).

Similarly, in *Underworld*, the protagonist-narrator Nick Shay explicitly links this conception of a reference-free language to mysticism: “I need to change languages, find a word that is pure word, without a lifetime of connotation and shading” (DeLillo 1997: 296). Shay develops his mystical theory of language around this idea: “We try to develop a naked intent that fixes us to the idea of God. *The Cloud* recommends that we develop this intent around a single word. Even better, a single word or a single syllable” (1997: 295). The character describes his search for that word or syllable in terms of romanticism—“It was romantic. The mystery of God was romantic” (1997: 296)—but he is actually echoing the purifying and cleansing rhetoric of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a medieval text that he had mentioned previously in the passage.<sup>5</sup> References to nakedness and purity abound in the passage: “With this word I would eliminate distraction and edge closer to God’s unknowable self” (1997: 296); “and finally I came upon a phrase that seemed alive with naked intent” (292). Nick Shay will call the result

of this process "a word that is pure chant" (292), a phrase DeLillo would recycle for *The Body Artist* to describe how Lauren sees Mr. Tuttle's speech: "It was pure chant, transparent, or was he saying something to her?" (2001: 75).<sup>6</sup>

The search for the mystical word in this passage is articulated, again, in terms of depth, as the advance towards hidden, profound God/truth: "A word to penetrate the darkness" (DeLillo 1997: 296); "a great and profound word" (1997: 296). Nick Shay will finally find inspiration in one of the Christian medieval mystics, Saint John of the Cross: "Three words and five syllables but I knew I'd found the phrase. It came from another mystic, a Spaniard, John of the Cross, and for that one winter this phrase was my naked edge, my edging into darkness, into the secret of God. And I repeated it, repeated it, repeated it. *Todo y nada*" (297). The phrase "todo y nada"—"everything and nothing"—is taken from chapter thirteen of *Noche oscura del alma* (San Juan 1999: 162). By endlessly repeating it, Nick reaches the transcendental state he is looking for.

In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney reaches a similar state in quite a different way. As in the "Toyota Celica" episode, the possibility of revelation is related here as well to proximity to children. In one of the first chapters of the novel, Jack is depicted holding his disconsolate two year old child, Wilder, trying to make him stop crying:

The huge lament continued, wave on wave. It was a sound so large and pure I could almost listen to it, try consciously to apprehend it, as one sets up a mental register in a concert hall or theater. He was not sniveling or blubbering. He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. (DeLillo 1985: 78).

As in previously analyzed passages, both the purity of Wilder's cry as well as the deep levels of understanding it is able to provoke are highlighted. Wilder's name recalls the primitive dimension of DeLillo's concern with language (Saltzman 1994: 809), which is confirmed in the text by the description of his cry as "an ancient dirge" (DeLillo 1985: 78). Wilder, who can be considered the incarnation of

the romantic wise child in DeLillo's fiction, is here attributed "a complex intelligence" (1985: 78), responsible for Jack's entrance into the counter-linguistic realm. The kind of communication established between Jack and Wilder in the passage, moreover, is said to take place beyond or below the level of reference: Wilder is communicating, he is "saying things", but those things are "nameless", they belong to the realm of the ineffable, what cannot be said through common language.

Through his contact with Wilder, Jack Gladney is one of the few characters in DeLillo's fiction that actually fulfills the process I have tried to outline. The narrative voice describes his experience as "some reckless wonder of intelligibility" (DeLillo 1985: 78), and it is articulated in rhetorical terms as the act of entering a space dominated by the material quality of language, pure sound: "I entered it, in a sense. I let it fall and tumble across my face and chest. I began to think if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility [...] I entered it, fell into it, letting it enfold and cover me" (1985: 78).

The "suspended place" mentioned by Jack Gladney can be said to match the realm of Mr. Tuttle's experience of reality in *The Body Artist*. In this novel, Lauren Hartke will experience the same kind of transcendental revelation by sharing Mr. Tuttle's chant:

She didn't know what to call this. She called it singing. He kept it going a while, ongoing, oncoming, and it was a song, it was chant. She leaned into him. This was a level that demonstrated he was not closed to inspiration [...] She wanted to chant with him, to fall in and out of time, or words, or things, whatever he was doing. (DeLillo 2001: 74)

Lauren Hartke identifies Mr. Tuttle's unintelligible utterances as songs, echoing another Romantic *topos*: the idea of *Ursprache* or pure, poetic original language present in the works of Fichte, Novalis or Schlegel. When she joins Mr. Tuttle in his chant, Lauren will experience transcendence as quasi-mystical ecstasy: "This is the point, yes, this is the stir of the amazement. And some terror at the edge, or fear of believing, some displacement of self, but this is the point, this

is the wedge into ecstasy, the old deep meaning of the word, your eyes rolling upward in your skull" (DeLillo 2001: 75).

Like many of the characters in DeLillo's early novels, Lauren Hartke and Jack Gladney perceive "the beauty and horror of wordless things" (DeLillo 1973: 52). The kind of experience undergone by both characters is described in terms of the Romantic sublime as defined by Edmund Burke. The utterance triggering this kind of experience is described as having some formal beauty, but it is mainly associated to concepts such as "inspiration" and "amazement". It is also pervaded by fear, "some terror at the edge". This combination of feelings, according to Burke, distinguishes the beautiful from the sublime: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other" (Burke 1937: 49). Lauren's experience seems to fit perfectly well into Burke's description of the sublime, implying the falling out of the conventional parameters of time and language, and the "displacement of the self" in favor of the transcendental thought that overwhelms the subject.

As a conclusion, I would like to return to James Berger's idea that the thematic expression of linguistic concerns in DeLillo's novels may be considered "as the origin of a poetics" (2005: 354), suggesting that the frequent explicit reflections on language that can be found in his work might be used as a sort of theoretical framework for the analysis of aspects such as narrative structure or style. This notion may lead to two separate lines of analysis, which I would like to propose for further examination in the future.

On the one hand, the rhetoric of revelation that permeates ideas about language in DeLillo's fiction may be said to have a correspondence in the narrative structure of many of his novels. As Arthur Saltzman has mentioned in connection to *White Noise*: "the novel is filled with disappointed verges—DeLillo builds to the point of revelation, only to resubmerge into the usual blather" (1994: 811). Saltzman's observation can be equally applied to other novels by DeLillo, in which the nature of the truth or secret meaning characters

look for tends to remain concealed from the reader. It may be claimed that, as long as this transcendental truth belongs to the realm of the inexpressible, it cannot be narrated, it cannot enter the shape of common language and therefore, it cannot be communicated to the reader. Its alterity, in DeLillo's novels, remains intact and inassimilable till the end. By engaging in this rhetoric of transcendental revelation and its ineffable character, DeLillo partakes of a literary milieu that brings together many authors who have turned revelation into a narrative device.<sup>7</sup> Texts such as *The Body Artist*, *The Names* or *Ratner's Star* may be said to share a narrative structure that could be called "apocalyptic", built around the imminent revelation of a final truth that is endlessly deferred, displaced beyond the scope of the books themselves, as it cannot be expressed through human language.

On the other hand, Berger's statement may be interpreted as an invitation to consider that DeLillo's own writing tends, at some moments, to embody the kind of linguistic ideal he describes in his novels. In this sense, it may be claimed that DeLillo's fiction follows what he declared to be his intention regarding *Ratner's Star*: "I wanted the book to become what it was about" (LeClair, 1983: 86). In *End Zone*, Gary's attempt at obliterating language is followed by the growing "nakedness" of his narration: "The sun. The desert. The sky. The silence. The flat stones. The insects. The wind and the clouds. The moon. The stars. The west and east. The song, the color, the smell of the earth." (DeLillo 1972: 89-90). The novel is thus reduced to the sort of "elemental list" mentioned by Gary in the aforementioned passage, bringing it close to the mental state he described as outside the discursive ordering of consciousness.

This tendency may be identified in specific passages of novels such as *Players* or *Underworld*, but *The Body Artist* is undoubtedly the novel in which DeLillo has devoted all his effort to the creation of a narrative that follows, in the language that constitutes the text, "the concept of a primal or original language so directly connected to things that it remains unintelligible to any but the speaker" (Nel 2002: 739). As Philip Nel has noted, DeLillo reverts to modernism, creating a novel that "holds out the possibility of pure speech and then withdraws again" (746).

*The Body Artist*, DeLillo's homage to imagistic poetry (Nel 2002: 738) may be seen as the author's most explicit attempt to date to practice the counter-linguistic turn he has repeatedly thematized in his novels. DeLillo's writing seems in those "moments of clarity" (Nel 2002: 742) to assume his characters' quest for transcendence, echoing their concerns in his own statements about the creative process. This poetics of transcendental revelation may become the leading impulse for his writing, commented on by the author himself:

There's a zone I aspire to. Finding it is another question. It's a state of automatic writing, and it represents the paradox that's at the center of a writer's consciousness—this writer's anyway. First you look for discipline and control. You want to exercise your will, bend the language your way. You want to control the flow of impulses, images, words, faces, ideas. But there's a higher place, a secret aspiration. You want to let go. You want to lose yourself in language, become a carrier or messenger. The best moments involve a loss of control. It's a kind of rapture, and it can happen with words and phrases fairly often—completely surprising combinations that make a higher kind of sense, that come to you out of nowhere. (Begley 1993: 282)

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> As Cornel Bonca has noted, this articulation of "unconcealment" as excavation can be related to the one formulated in the writings of Martin Heidegger (1996: 40; 2002: 60).
- <sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of the romantic resonance of this motif in DeLillo's fiction, see Pifer 2000. James Berger reformulates the idea in his conception of the "postmodern wild child" (2005: 347), while Weinstein's seems to spring from an Emersonian notion of childhood as it is expressed, for instance, in "Nature" (1836).
- <sup>3</sup> The motif echoes Jorge Luis Borges' celebrated story "The Garden of Forking Paths": "Mi problema era indicar la ciudad que se llama Albert y no hallé otro medio que matar a una persona de ese nombre" (Borges 1997: 118).
- <sup>4</sup> One of the aspects on which critical debate has focused when analyzing this passage is the issue of whether Jack's revelation

should be read ironically, that is, whether readers should consider his experience as real transcendence or as a parody of it. Cowart gives a brief summary of critical positions around this issue (2002: 73). I would like to state, however, that I agree with Arnold Weinstein (1993: 306) and Cornel Bonca (1996: 30) rather than with Cowart in this matter. In my opinion, the rhetorical articulation in the passage links it to a literary tradition of (mystic, romantic, modernist) epiphanic transcendentalism independently of whether it is read ironically or not.

- <sup>5</sup> The character's reflection on *The Cloud of Unknowing* connects this passage with a similar one from *White Noise* where the same mystical text is mentioned (DeLillo 1985: 280). It may also recall another passage from J. D. Salinger's *Franny & Zooey*, with which it shares its mystical concerns: "If you keep saying that prayer over and over again—you only have to just do it with your lips at first—the eventually what happens, the prayer becomes self-active. Something *happens* after a while [...] The same thing happens in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, too. Just with the word 'God'. I mean you just keep saying the word 'God'" (Salinger 1964: 37-38).
- <sup>6</sup> It should be noted that DeLillo had already used the same phrase in an interview, commenting on the "Toyota Celica" passage in *White Noise*: "When you detach one of these words from the product it was designed to serve, the word acquires a chantlike quality [...] If you concentrate on the sound, if you disassociate the words from the object they denote, and if you say the words over and over, they become a sort of higher Esperanto. This is how *Toyota Celica* began its life. It was *pure chant* at the beginning. Then they had to find an object to accommodate the words" (Begley 1993: 291; emphasis added).
- <sup>7</sup> With no pretensions to offering a comprehensive list at all, the names of Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*), Edgar Allan Poe (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*), James Joyce (*The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) or Samuel Beckett (*Worstward Ho*) may be mentioned as practitioners of this kind of rhetorical construction also found in DeLillo's fiction. St. John of the Cross may be called forth as well: The sudden ending of *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is justified in terms of the ineffable nature of

the direct experience of the divine. Assuming this rhetoric of ineffability, the author creates a structural pattern in which the writing itself suffers the consequences of trying to narrate an experience outside the symbolic-linguistic realm. In this case, as in most of the above-mentioned works, the experience of ineffable revelation is conveyed through narrative mechanisms.

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