

Falling Man

Juan David Gómez*

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For over thirty years Don DeLillo has been one of a select group of American novelists that have assumed the task of examining America's relationship with itself and with the world at large. He has received the National Book Award and the PEN Faulkner award among many others. In this his fourteenth novel, he writes about the events of September 11, 2001 and its effects on half a dozen New Yorkers. The novel *Falling Man* was published six years after the attacks and joins at least ten others that have come to create the 9/11 subgenre of fiction.

The ability to endow a local and complex event with meaning that transcends its time and establishes its relationship to other historical events, is one of the things that historical fiction should do. *Falling Man* has many impressive and entertaining accomplishments, as most of DeLillo's novels do, but fails to transcend the events of that day. The second paragraph of the novel reads: "The roar was still in the air, the breaking rumble of the fall. This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners [...]" (p. 3). For the next two hundred and forty five pages we cannot hear for the roar and are unable to see beyond the smoke and

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ash. We expect *Falling Man* to depart from the attacks on The World Trade Center and to establish a semantic structure that orbits that day and expands outward. The novel does not depart. It roots itself in that place and as a consequence, one cannot provide an account of its plot; plot being understood as action: rising, climax, and falling. What some reviews have done in lieu of this is to present the elements of the story in reorganized fashion.

DeLillo presents his novel in a manner that resembles the trajectory of shrapnel. Organic shrapnel, the pieces of flesh and bone that become projectiles in an explosion, is described in the second fragment of Chapter Three, Section One - the novel consists of three sections, fourteen chapters and as many as twelve subsections per chapter or as few as one, depending on the chapter. The characters in *Falling Man* are also a kind of organic shrapnel because though they have survived physically intact, they have been emotionally and psychologically rent by the explosions.

There are older characters like Nina Bartos, a retired professor, and her German boyfriend. There are middle age characters like Nina's daughter Lianne, a freelance editor, her estranged husband Keith, and Florence Givens with whom Keith has a brief affair. There are Keith's co workers, some who died in the attacks, some who didn't. And some of the characters are children, like Justin, Lianne and Keith's adolescent son, and his friends Katie and Robert.

It is this group of characters that bears the responsibility of driving the novel forward, and although they seem earnest in their willingness to do so, their sincerity does not support or create movement. Inertia comes early. The novel opens with the possibility of reconciliation between Lianne and Keith which doesn't materialize. We are then introduced to Nina and her boyfriend. She is an intelligent and strong willed academic who has, through scholarship and travel, become an expert in the cultures of Western Europe. He is a wealthy international art dealer with a disarming lack of irony and a mysterious past as a member of a terrorist cell in Germany. This pairing is exciting, promising, and fertile. We ask ourselves, how will the author use their perspectives to challenge, enrich, or refashion our own understanding

of 9/11? What we come learn from them, disappointingly, is summarized in this paragraph.

And so it goes with the secondary and tertiary characters who fail to connect with one another, with themselves, and with the reader. Justin's response to the attacks is to speak in monosyllables and then not at all confounding and frustrating his parents. Why monosyllables? One could guess that, like most of what children do, it is mimicry. Here is an example of a conversation between Lianne and Keith, something that they do less and less of as the novel progresses. Lianne is trying to coax him to spend less time on the road and more time at home by arguing that family is important because it helps us to cope with loss, with "things that scare us half to death".

"All right" [he said]

"We need each other. Just people sharing the air, that's all"

"All right" he said.

"But I know what's happening. You're going to drift away. I'm prepared for that. You'll stay away longer, drift off somewhere. I know what you want. It's not exactly a wish to disappear. It's the thing that leads to that. Disappearing is the consequence. Or maybe it's the punishment."

"You know what I want. I don't know. You know" (p. 214).

In this excerpt, Lianne is enigmatic and Keith laconic but these roles are sometimes inverted or shared. The sharp, dry, ironic language that appears here is the language of the novel and the language that DeLillo has perfected throughout his career. Here it works to frustrate our attempt to understand and interact with them. The roles shifting, now they are Justin and we are them. What has caused these people to (mis) communicate like this? Was it 9/11? Where they like this before that date? Is it because they are American? (Lianne thinks so when in a crowded marketplace in Egypt she feels her identity, who she is, "privileged, detached, self involved, white." —p. 214—) Is it because they are upper class manhattanites? These are all reasonable explanations to the question that all readers have a right to ask of the author; why are your characters so?

One reviewer explains the novel's failure to develop its characters by suggesting that DeLillo's efforts are allusive of Lyotard's post modern sublime

so that the art in *Falling Man* is one of perpetual negation that critiques representation so as to preserve heterogeneity. And this may very well be except that when a novel fails to represent anything by alluding to many things it severs its link to what is understood to be a novel.

Falling Man is art conscious. It incorporates paintings, performances, and the visual arts into its plot. It is fitting then to use one of its artistic metaphors to describe the function of characterization and plot in the novel. Nina owns a still life by Giorgio Morandi that plays a central role in the novel. Lianne inherits the painting and comes to accept it as personally meaningful. The mosaic that comes to light once we've come to know the characters is a kind of *Natura Morta*. The characters are assembled like tessera to create a still life that expands to incorporate themes, images, and metaphors. And whereas individual characters fail to convey sense to us these assemblages elicit frustration, confusion and resentment from the reader, all of which are exacerbated by the mist of ennui that permeates the novel. There is nothing wrong with having us feel this way if these feelings come to bear on the historical event at the center of the story. Upon finishing the novel one can say that they could, but not that they do.

The embodiment of someone who produces feelings without purpose is the eponymous 'falling man' of the novel, David Janiak. Janiak is a performance artist who, after the attacks, appears in public to recreate the image of those in the towers who jumped or fell to their deaths. Janiak chooses public places, wears a homemade harness, dons a suit, and does not comment on, or interpret his performances. The public are fascinated and appalled by his stunts, not knowing whether he is a "heartless exhibitionist or a brave new chronicler of the age of terror" (p. 220). It turns out that he is neither, he does what he does in the hope that it will affect those who see it, the kind of effect is secondary to his purpose.

DeLillo pulls off his stunt, through the use of three formal mechanisms: first, by setting the novel in Manhattan, second, by overlapping Janiak's performances with quotidian episodes in the lives of the main characters and lastly, by juxtaposing subsections about Hammad, one of the terrorists

that helped to fly a plane into the South Tower with other sections of the novel. Together, the background of 9/11, the foreground of enervated and disoriented characters, and the story of one of the terrorists is supposed to coalesce and comment on the larger impact of the attacks. They do not: the close up of individual lives does not illuminate the historical scene of which they are a part.

An illustration of why this fails can be seen in the parallel that is drawn between Keith and Hammad. The juxtaposition develops consistently and comes to a point at the end of the novel when Hammad's plane slams into Keith's building. The impact ejects Keith from his chair and into a wall. At this point the lives of the two men, we are to infer, become one. We have followed both through different but related processes of renunciation: Hammad's is religious and then fanatical. Keith's begins during evening poker where the players impose rules on themselves, and ends when he abandons his family, profession, and city to become an asocial and itinerant poker player.

The problem with this pairing is that it fails to enlighten us. It does not give us a clearer view into the mind of terrorist, or that of a religious fanatic, or the ways in which someone can become either of these things, which is, in large part what a 9/11 novel might do. It does not also leave us with a better understanding of what the attacks meant to those who were there and by extension what role they will come to have in the history of the United States.

Shortly after the attacks Keith experiences a general defamiliarization with his environment. The sense of alienation begins when he misunderstands his own thoughts and feelings and radiates out into the public space around him. He sees a woman on horseback headed toward the bridle paths in Central Park and is taken aback. It is something that belongs to another place, something that he cannot name or understand. His social center, his job, friends, and lifestyle have been jarred from their moorings as a result of the September 11, attacks, and he is adrift. This is the sensation that DeLillo's novel evokes and mimes, both in plot and in form and this is where it hits the mark. After reading thirty or more pages of de contextualized, free-indirect style

of prose that strives to create a symbolic and static environment, the world beyond the pages comes to take on, however subtly, strange and unfamiliar edges. The mailbox and the hydrant, the laurel and the doorbell, all appear a little more themselves, more present in their mass and purpose. One stops to examine them because they are worthy of attention, because they have acquired something new. This makes for a circuitous and prolonged walk home and to a refreshing and grateful feeling. One feels gratitude toward that experience with art that has altered, however briefly, one's own reality and relationship with it. One feels Keith, minus the grief and pain. The world is not his horror but our own house of horror where being stunned is precisely what we came in for.

Falling Man succeeds where many novels fail. It affects the reader by helping him to see what he can no longer see and walks past every day. What it fails to do is what it, or we, expect it to. Unpredictability may be an asset for novels in general, but those that anchor themselves in the islands of historical events should at least see that project through.

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