

Casting about for the truth of 9/11: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Falling Man by Don DeLillo, New York: Scribner, 2007, 246 pp.

At the beginning of his most recent novel, *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo describes the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. I heard DeLillo read this passage to a New York City audience last year:

“The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air. The noise lay everywhere they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time.”

After he finished, I realized that some of the listeners were crying, and I turned to a friend who had been jogging near the World Trade Center that sunny morning in Hudson River Park and asked her if DeLillo had captured the time when over 3,000 people died to “a soft awe of voices in the distance.” Without taking her eyes off the author at the podium, she simply nodded.

DeLillo summons up an omnipresent and immediate terror through four senses at once. In a few precise sentences, he offers us something new in material that we have looked at and read about repeatedly. This is one of his strengths as an artist: he was not present at the collapse of the towers, but he catches the moment perfectly and fills it with significance.

DeLillo has fashioned a number of characters who pass through the first days and months after the events of that September: a lawyer named Keith Neudecker; his estranged wife, Lianne Glenn, an editor of textbooks; and their son Justin, among others.

After the collapse of the towers, Keith finds himself, injured, at the door of Lianne's apartment. They begin to make some accounting of their marriage and life in general.

It is impossible, however, to go about daily life in the old way. In the following months, Keith and Lianne try to understand the effect that the attack has had on them and their family. Keith gets involved with another survivor, but there is emotional distance in the intimacy. The novel's plot pivots on the anger and fear stored up in him and the neurotic, but ultimately harmless ways that it displays itself.

Lianne also tries to cope. She, too, is disturbed and frightened. She gets upset at a neighbor who plays Middle Eastern music. She spends her days looking more closely at the books she edits, and facilitating a group of people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Memories return her to her father's violent death.

The couple seeks to understand the fantasies their son has built up around the events. His interpretation of what is going on around him provides the book with a poignant dimension.

After a few years, the lives of these people have been rerouted by the 9/11 events, some of them more than others, though none of the changes are momentous.

In earlier novels, especially *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* (1997), DeLillo was able to bring quite disparate American characters to life, not only as individuals, but also as social types. In *Mao II* (1991), he ranged, less successfully, into the minds of terrorists and their victims.

In these books, one discovers not only precisely described sensations of immediate experience—a terrorist bomb blast in *Mao II* is an unnerving rehearsal for the disaster in *Falling Man*—but also a strong sense of a particular time and place, and the concerns of people living in that period.

While his best novels have a “peculiar atmospheric depth,” as the critic F. R. Leavis said of George Eliot's work, DeLillo's social outlook and artistic approach are not suited, ultimately, to measuring and weighing people's actions in the larger historical sphere.

The essential and the inessential in the historical process itself were given equal weight even in those novels, marring the unity of the works, and giving a generally unsatisfying sense of how people develop as a part of history. In fact, the idea of historical process itself is largely absent from DeLillo's work.

He has suggested that historical truth may be lost in “endless suggestive human involvements” and that the “twentieth century was built largely out of absurd moments and events.” In *Underworld*, for example, he has made too much out of a coincidence—a famous baseball game and the explosion of the first Soviet nuclear weapon occur on the same day. What happens to us (and what we do) is not a part of a law-governed process.

In *Falling Man*, this weakness dominates and we get, overall, a series of disconnected moments, moving and often insightful in themselves, which do not help us much in understanding the greater impact of 9/11 on the American population.

Keith and Lianne belong to Manhattan's upper middle class, and the author draws this social milieu expertly. They are educated liberals who find themselves unexpectedly living in “a place of danger and rage.”

On the surface, Keith and Lianne exhibit a psychological distance from the tragedy. It is impossible not to be affected, though, and they understand that they must come to terms with how they are reacting. So many trivial things in life have been undermined by the disaster, it seems. They even make some tentative attempts to discover why 19 men killed more than 3,000 people and themselves, but in the end, this is not their main concern.

There may be an implied criticism of the lawyer-writer-academic layer of Manhattan, its unpreparedness and its complacency, but this is what DeLillo fails to draw out. Why do these people act as they do? It is not really his concern, either.

What is astonishing about *Falling Man* is the almost complete absence of the government and media response to 9/11, as well as its vast consequences, and the impact of all that on the characters. We are told that Lianne pays close attention to the news, but it hardly shows, and when it does, we learn relatively little of what she thinks, much less how it might change her.

It does not take much effort to recall the barrage of fear-mongering and patriotic hysteria, and subsequent warmongering, from the New York daily newspapers, and from television, radio and web sites. Editorial pages featured scholars and intellectuals who toed the line of the official propaganda, declaring an end to irony and advising us to gird ourselves

for the new, long war on terror. Torture became a popular subject of conversation within certain “liberal” layers. Later, the media sanctioned an official government cover-up of the tragedy.

There were round-ups of thousands of immigrant Muslims, secret detentions and deportations. Within a month, the United States had launched a military assault on impoverished, but strategically located Afghanistan. By the end of October 2001, Congress had enacted the Patriot Act. The build-up to the invasion of Iraq began.

This was the social environment after 9/11. Its significance cannot have eluded an author who examined the Cold War and John F. Kennedy’s assassination, for which he did a good deal of critical research. One is struck in *Falling Man*, for example, by the absence of the element of government conspiracy and hidden corporate-military machinations, which were a focus of *Libra*, for better or worse.

There is another issue, perhaps also related to the problems of *Falling Man*: isn’t there something in the media-government behavior that would cause a visceral reaction in an artist? The way the media-state superstructure treated 9/11 is a ghastly impediment to telling the truth about people and events. This would seem, in fact, to be the major dilemma for a novel about these events and their aftermath: how did Keith and Lianne survive such tragedy under a bombardment of chauvinistic lies and distortions? What sort of effect did this have on Justin? How could anyone think straight?

People in *Falling Man* do think over what happened on September 11. Lianne listens to an argument between her mother Nina, a retired academic, and her boyfriend, Martin, an art dealer who may have been involved with the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group in Germany in the 1970s, about the causes of terrorism.

Nina advances the notion that terror is motivated only by religious fanaticism. It is “the thing that happens among men, the blood that happens when an idea begins to travel, whatever’s behind it, whatever blind force or violent need.” Martin, representing a more sophisticated view, responds: “Don’t you see what you’re denying? You’re denying all human grievance against others, every force of history places people in conflict.” Lianne is “disturbed by the fervor in their voices.”

This scene captures the sense of many arguments in parts of Manhattan at the time. Nevertheless, it is somewhat isolated in the novel. The characters grope for a deeper understanding, but the author does not hold them to it. Characters’ ideas are treated in an offhand way, and the reader does not benefit.

It is not surprising, then, that the rationale for the developments that various characters undergo is somewhat hazy. For example, in the weeks after the attack, Lianne exhibits anti-Muslim bigotry, and yet by 2003, she has joined in the mass protests against the impending invasion of Iraq. As with many people after 2001, the official line of the government and media begins to influence her less.

This is an enormous historical-psychological process. Nina’s outlook cannot explain this any more than it can explain the motivations of the hijackers. Something closer to Martin’s views on history is required. DeLillo, writing with the hindsight several years after 9/11, also seems unable or unwilling to account for why Lianne moves to the left.

DeLillo’s portrayal of Hammad, one of the hijackers of American Airlines Flight 11, more explicitly corresponds to Nina’s view that terrorism is a “virus that reproduces itself outside history.” Hammad has no family and no past. We don’t even know his nationality. In Germany, Florida and then on American Airlines Flight 11, he is torn between the lures of the fleshly world and his commitment to the plot, as DeLillo calls it. Everything remains on the surface.

DeLillo shows that Hammad and his fellow Islamists think they are pure of spirit and excuse the crime they are planning because they think they are superior to this world. “Plots reduce the world,” DeLillo has said. But the real hijackers were products of political and social conditions of the

world, whatever may have been in their heads. If there was ever a time for an author to rise above the consciousness of his characters, this is it.

In the absence of historical resonance, DeLillo’s terrorists are motivated by the appeal of brotherhood set above ideas or beliefs. This particular band of brothers, however, existed for definite social and historical reasons. But for DeLillo, the relationship is an end in itself, or inexplicable. “In apocalypse there is no logic,” he has said. This is simply laziness.

Behind DeLillo’s avoidance of the deeply political and historical nature of the causes and consequences of the September 11 tragedy we sense not a cogent intellectual or aesthetic stance, but an artist’s retreat and confusion. As a result, the novel lacks unity, and *Falling Man* is a pastiche of scenes and narrative directions.

There is another way his tendency to diminish the role of historical process breaks up the unity of the work: he leans too much on the importance of a single, startling image.

Falling Man takes its title from Richard Drew’s well-known photograph of a man falling or jumping from the North Tower. Lianne’s reaction, looking at it, is: “Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart.” This is a powerful reaction, but we never discover just why she has it or exactly what it means.

Is there a symbolic element, as in the biblical Fall of Man, which might indicate that DeLillo has a broader perspective about the 9/11 events, for good or ill? If so, the reference is not worked into the novel anywhere.

The image reappears throughout the novel whenever the performance artist known as Falling Man appears, jumping from high structures and hanging in imitation of the Drew photo. One of the few newspaper headlines that we see asks if we should view the performance artist “as heartless exhibitionist or brave new chronicler of the age of terror.”

The importance of this sort of supposedly history-making image has been a part of DeLillo’s world view. In a long passage in *Mao II*, his protagonist, a writer, and a photographer discuss the autonomy of the image as a feature of contemporary society. He has claimed, fairly, that these opinions, which belong to characters in a novel, should not be attributed to him as the author.

However, the idea comes up repeatedly in the thinking of other characters, and he does apparently have some affinity for it. In a 1997 essay for the *New York Times Book Review* called “The Power of History,” speaking of a murder caught on videotape, he notes that “the image-act of your own witness...tends to transform you” and that “it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside of the tape.” But the world doesn’t diminish, in fact.

The effect here, with the falling man, is to clutter the novel with a symbol that is not clearly symbolic of anything precise or revealing in our world of three dimensions. As an artistic device, it adds to the disconnected and superficial feel of the work as a whole.

Parts of *Falling Man* are moving, and one can learn something about the reactions of a particular social layer in New York at the time. The novel, though, does not succeed as a unified work of art. It falls short of the significance of the events themselves.

DeLillo has said that he did not want to write a political novel about the events of 9/11. Why that is, only he knows. But it is in keeping with the work of many writers today who are seeking to tell the personal side of the political without first telling the political side of people.



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