Again on Don DeLillo's *Zero K*: How does a novel turn toward social life?

Eric London
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The WSWS published a review of novelist Don DeLillo's Zero K *earlier this month. The following comment by Eric London offers a different appraisal of the book.*

"Death makes me very angry," said Oracle founder and CEO Larry Ellison to his biographer, Mike Wilson. Ellison has spent over $430 million of his $50 billion to fund programs aimed at putting an end to human aging. While expressing his desire to live forever, Ellison asked, incredulously: "How can a person be there and then just vanish, just not be there?"

Don DeLillo's *Zero K* mocks this conceit of the latter-day aristocracy. The novel features an aging hedge-fund manager and his second wife who join a cult-like group called the Convergence. The purpose of this group is to cryogenically freeze the world's richest people, allowing them to cling to the possibility of eternal life. As one of the Convergence's leading lights tells a group of "money people," including statesmen and leading military-intelligence figures:

"Here you are, collected, convened. Isn't this what you've been waiting for? A way to claim the myth for yourselves. Life everlasting belongs to those of breathtaking wealth." DeLillo's narrator, Jeffrey Lockhart, a thirty-something-year-old, doesn't buy it. He responds, dryly, "Give the futurists their blood money and they will make it possible for you to live forever."

Over the course of the novel, DeLillo expands on this hoped-for utopia of the wealthy. One Convergence spokesperson explains to another assembly of gathered oligarch donors later in the book: "Your situation, those few of you on the verge of the journey toward rebirth. You are completely outside the narrative of what we refer to as history." Soon after, "You are about to become, each of you, a single life in touch only with yourself." The spokesperson continues: "'That world, the one above,' she said, 'is being lost to the systems. To the transparent networks that slowly occlude the flow of all those aspects of nature and character that distinguish humans from elevator buttons and doorbells.'"

To this monologue, DeLillo's narrator responds with a healthy and humorous deadpan: "I thought *what*."

It is to Don DeLillo's credit that he has critically taken up the subject of the world's billionaires and military-intelligence officials trying desperately to escape what they view as the world's biggest problem: "That world, the one above." In a word, society.

DeLillo has written a book which poses an essential artistic question: where is truth to be found—inside oneself, in an escape from history, or in "that world, the one above," in the complex set of social relations that, in their aggregate, make up human society? The breathtaking final pages of the novel indicate that the author is attempting to draw literary life back in the direction of the latter.

That he has posed this question is certainly welcome, even if DeLillo's answers are of highly varied quality, ranging from profound to superficial. Sections of the text, particularly Jeffrey's relationship with his partner and her son, are verbose and boring.

The problem is not DeLillo's skill as a writer, and the book has its better moments. At one point the author describes a love affair taking place roughly in the year 2015: "Know the moment, feel the gliding hand, gather all the forgettable fragments, fresh towels on the racks, nice new bar of soap, clean sheets on the bed, her bed, our blue sheets. This was all I needed to take me day to day and I tried to think of these days and nights as the hushed countermand, ours, to the widespread belief that the future, everybody's, will be worse than the past." The note of escapism aside, the simple rhythm of daily life is well presented here and contrasts simply with the delusions of immortality cited above.

Zero K's handicap is that the author's humanism does

not rise to the level of conveying the complexities of society and of the individuals living in it. DeLillo's detailed portrayal of social anxiety and confusion is the product of not only his attentiveness to prevailing social moods, but also of the fact that he himself is swept up and overwhelmed by them. His characters become empty vessels for nebulous moods, and as a result they are hard to sympathize with. When asked about his characters, DeLillo recently told the *Guardian*: "People always use the word 'identify.' 'Do you identify with these individuals?' And I really don't." This is not a laudable sentiment.

Though the characters appear tired and pessimistic, the reader cannot help but "identify" with the crisis-ridden world they confront. DeLillo portrays this particularly toward the book's conclusion in a series of images with which readers are all too familiar from the nightly news: those of environmental catastrophe, war, and poverty. These scenes are broadcast on television screens which descend in the Convergence's pallid rooms.

DeLillo's is not a world of inward introspection or identity-based self-obsession. His narrator sees homeless people destitute on the street, waiting to die. He realizes to his evident horror that many of the images he is watching are captured by drone. "Another drone image," he says, "ruined town, ghost town, small figures scavenging among the rubble." In viewing this madness, the narrator knows he is not alone: "The halls are jammed with people watching the screens. All of them thinking my thoughts." That the narrator is able to comprehend (and identify with) one of the sources of the delusion of those seeking immortality underground is to his (and the author's) credit.

But DeLillo does not really make sense of this and other contradictions. Incapable of exposing the true essence of the madness and confusion DeLillo sees around him, he creates a flourish of beauty in the last scene, the basic message of which seems to be: "I think humanity will figure this all out."

What is it that the world's oligarchs fear about society, and why are they so desperate to escape "history" by turning toward what they view as the purest form of existence—the individual, separated from all else? What explains the social pathology of the class to which the author refers? Why are "the halls jammed with people" watching in horror and disgust as war and poverty envelop the world, and, importantly, what are they to do about it?

The novel avoids these crucial questions and leans on the tired notion that "death is mysterious" as a crutch. At bottom, DeLillo's weakness is that he portrays social consciousness as a free agent, something connected to reality in an opaque and essentially indecipherable way.

And yet social consciousness can be understood. Ideas—whether in the form of social moods or individual thoughts—are the product of social reality. They are shaped over time by a complex ensemble of social relations. Under capitalism, war is not the product of a "condition" or human malady, but of the contradiction between the international world economy and the capitalist nation-state system. Refugees do not drown at sea because of a general lack of human empathy, but because of decisions made by powerful elites in Washington, Paris, Berlin, and Athens without any input from the vast majority of the population. There is no hint of this vital truth in the novel.

Responding to the Symbolist school of literature, Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov wrote in his essay *Henrik Ibsen* that it is the task of the artist to attempt to both portray social reality and to "advance beyond its bounds."

This "difficult and even insoluble task" is not to be achieved through abstraction, but by "determining the direction of [social reality's] development." Under such circumstances, literature is "capable of uttering magical words that conjure up an image of the future. But," Plekhanov added, "the capacity to utter 'magical words' is a sign of strength, and the incapacity to utter them a sign of weakness."

This inability to comprehend the logic of social development is at the center of the limitations of *Zero K*. Nonetheless, in the novel, DeLillo has raised critical social issues that will undoubtedly receive more substantive treatment under the impact of deepening social and political contradictions and, for this reason, *Zero K* deserves a wide readership.