RSAJournal 32/2021

Daniela Daniele

"*In a Tumbling Void*": DeLillo's Late Lyrical Prose

The Silence (2020) is the last novella in a series of six written by Don DeLillo for the new millennium: an era of trauma verging on the point of "Entropy" announced by Thomas Pynchon in his eponymous story (1960) based on the notion of depleted energy that both writers figuratively locate at the core of all obscure machinations. A few months before the paralyzing attacks of September 11, DeLillo inaugurated a new lyrical, laconic style also adopted in *The Silence*, the story of a total blackout that puts an end to all digital trafficking, bringing the city of New York to a standstill eerily prophetic of COVID-19. The lockdowns announced only one month after the publication of the book provoked a comparable arrest in time, making this fiction turn inward, as if to disclose "[t]he physics of time. Absolute time. Time's arrow. Time and space" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 105).

The abrupt syncope which turns all screens, TV sets, cell phones and computers blank spoils the reunion of five friends gathered in Midtown Manhattan to watch the football final. And since the Super Bowl cannot be broadcast, their conversations get instantly cleared of all the signals flowing from digital devices. As the apartment gets chilly for want of energy, a broken meditation on finitude and survival gets started, in a *mise-en-abyme* of the six novellas composed by the author in the current state of emergency. Their titles are dysphoric omens of the condition of trauma here discussed: *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), *Point Omega* (2009), *Zero K* (2016), *The Silence* (2020). These short, allusive narratives constitute a step away from the sustained satire of the American technoculture provided by the author since *White Noise* (1985).

The spectacular attack on the Twin Towers determined an unprecedented paralysis of the public sphere that intensified the dematerialization of the social scene cohesively depicted in the jazzy New York of *Underworld* (1997). In its place, *Cosmopolis* follows the aimless speed of an abstract, white limousine in Manhattan mimicking the dislocating force of financial

capitalism responsible for the dispersal of the city crowds celebrated in *Underworld* (see Piccinato). As the urban community gets digitally removed from the stadium of the national scene, dissent is reduced to a "form of street theater" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 88), to an ephemeral, arty "protest against the future. They want to hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present" (90-91).

Such a post-traumatic dispersal of the broader social scene urged the writer to seek a more intimate, subatomic access to "the deep mind of the culture (DeLillo, "The Power of History" 62), posing issues of memory, authenticity and sustainability raised by the postmodern flow of disposable voices announced by the humanism of Joseph McElroy's brain in orbit (*Plus* 1976) and in the very title of his own short story "Human Moments in World War III" (1983). The actual breakthrough detectable in DeLillo's late representations of contemporary America is therefore both aesthetic and epistemic, and demands the emergence of a prose poetic form better equipped to shape the residual "human" voices able to disentangle the electronic webs which precariously hold together disembodied strangers online. Quite significantly, in *The Silence*, the conversation of a group of friends gathered in a Manhattan apartment occurs in a social void, turning a convivial occasion into a catatonic account of the old bonds and domestic feelings that survive when the drone of mass communication comes to a stop.

The apocalyptic power failure which prevents them from watching the show makes the tentative, broken language of the quotidian prevail on the social project of configuring a broader political unconscious (see Jameson), currently reduced to a cybernetic scenario whose entropic core is a domestic isolation intermittently broken by "noises floating in the air, the language of World War III" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 83). As all screens instantly go on the fritz, the two couples and the young man roughly sketched by the writer keep staring at a blank TV screen, giving vent to all sorts of paranoid conjectures, like the "dangling" soldier about to be recruited in Saul Bellow's 1944 novel. Their disjointed voices compose the luminous texture of a narrative suspended between poetry and drama: Diane envisions invisible wars fought with bacteriological agents by "[c]ertain countries. Once rabid proponents of nuclear arms, now speaking the language of living weaponry. Germs, genes,

spores, powders" (81). Their volatile counterforces are "hidden networks" operating in a "Deep Space," located "in some transrational warp" (28, 48) and "abandoned by science, technology, common sense" (29). And since in the darkness of the Deep Web "others can hear your thoughts" (3), the motif of the total blackout revives, as it occurs in John Carpenter's movie *Escape from L.A.* (1996), where a neo-primitivist, rebellious underground is ready to neutralize all the electronic devices on the planet. The young Martin Dekker invokes an "Internet arms race" (85) producing "[d]ata breaches," "cryptocurrencies" (85) against the "extraterrestrial" (27), "algorithmic governance" (26) of digital surveillance. These coded instructions, he claims, pulsate for a few seconds before all screens go blank, as spasms of a "language known only to drones" (93): the transnational Esperanto of software developers across the planet (25).

The main source of terror in DeLillo's dystopian apologue on power failure is, therefore, the diffused dread of silence (82) that paralyzes the panic-stricken audience suddenly deprived of its small, daily portion of infotainment. Martin identifies in that unprecedented arrest in time the premonition of his own "expiration date", and starts "thinking aloud, drawing inward" (84), in the attempt to move past that void in communication. His paranoid digressions break down into Beckettian stutters, and into a "babbling" (82) irresolution well illustrated by Albert Einstein's post-apocalyptic epigram: "I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones" (qtd. in *The Silence,* ix). As all digital flesh instantly vanishes in the material obscurity of the blackout, this counterpointed narrative shifts, like Thomas Pynchon's, from paranoia to silence, from the hothouse of speculations to the urban desert of a big city emptied out by the blackout. In this apocalyptic unrest, Diane's and her student's wordy logorrhea is balanced by the profound skepticism of the second couple in the story who envisions in their friends' place a space where they can simply "crash" after the crash landing they have miraculously survived.

Once confronted with the "theorem of the inertia of energy" (31) associated by her friends with the "fall of world civilization" (35), in her immediate, human concerns, poet Tessa Berens perceives their conjectures

as "a function of some automated process" (7), pragmatically turning to her body of poetry which resists abstractions:

> "[…] Is our normal experience simply being stilled? Are we witnessing a deviation in nature itself? A kind of virtual reality? [...]
>
> Is it natural at a time like this to be thinking and talking in philosophical terms as some of us have been doing? Or should we be practical? Food, shelter, friends, flush the toilet if we can? Tend to the simplest physical things. Touch, feel, bite, chew. The body has a mind of its own."
>
> (113)

Tessa is only the last one of the intradiegetic writers introduced by DeLillo in his fiction since *Mao II* (1991). Like the Italian American author, she is not WASP and speaks "a kind of splintered Haitian Creole" (112) elaborated in the "obscure, intimate, impressive" poetic lines jotted down in her inseparable notebook. They are built, like Grace Paley's (Daniele, "I Cannot Keep", 155-65), upon overheard phrases, in a spoken texture that perfectly encounters DeLillo's own literary variations on the American slang.

The sense of intimacy and frugality recovered by the author in the current age of trauma might be attributed to the new structure of feeling grown from the critique of the "mediatised consumer bubble" advocated by the "metamodernist" paradigm (Gibbons 83). But Tessa's convinced humanism reflects an anthropocene attitude that the Postmodern American writer has been coherently pursuing since the late 1950s. The author did not wait for the traumatic arrest in time brought about by the new millennium to claim a more affective, sensuous grip on an "artificial intelligence" which, as Tessa states, may eventually betray "who we are and how we live and think" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 68). DeLillo's parched, lo-fi meditation on mortality urges us to put aside any positivist notion of historical progress to access, instead, a more "permanent" sense of time (Daniele, "La storia in moviola" 122) through the enthralling, domestic sequences that currently shape his rhetoric of silence. In order to contrast the desultory pace of the shock economy and its recurrent manufactured traumas, DeLillo selects a number of unsettling, private moments in a dramatized, amphibious form of prose poetry which, since the mid-nineteenth century, has provided the

most suitable intergeneric model to capture the instabilities of modern times.[1]

In his well-known prescience, the catastrophe of September 11 found a compelling premonition in *White Noise*: the story of a middle-class couple oppressed by a toxic cloud of infidelity and pollution. This novel of adultery framed in an impending environmental disaster which requires periodical emergency protection drills satirically reframed the marital malaise which haunts John Irving's interiors of suburban discontent, and the moribund marriage lyricized by James Salter in the slow, magnetic cadences of *Light Years* (1975). This latter work, in particular, resonates in the volatile narrative fragments which compose *The Silence*, whose fractured, imagistic design equally relies upon a sequence of estranged snapshots, producing the alliterative, fluctuating pattern of interlocked, hallucinated scenes which recalls the luminous stylization of Salter's domesticity, transfixed in the routine of inexplicably enduring relations.

The mute conjugal dissatisfaction, the invisible cracks which suddenly break the hypnotic rituals of love and friendship return in the emotional intricacy of *The Silence*, achieving the chiseled, lyrical distillation that DeLillo has been mastering since the mourning meditations of *The Body Artist* and of *Falling Man*. Respectively based on a private loss and on the historical trauma of September 11, these suspended novellas provide a mesmeric assemblage of emergency states of mind, sketching out the uncharted path of a community transfixed by unuttered afflictions and mysterious conflicts. The crisp, imagistic fragments which compose this desultory prose reflect a collective apprehension and a post-traumatic proclivity for the understatement. The mute oppression of Salter's affluent homes and their impending break-ups reappear in the wry, domestic stillness of *The Silence*, visually inspired by the milky opalescence of Giorgio Morandi's artwork and by the slow pace of Michelangelo Antonioni's movies.

In a public talk given at the Roman Auditorium on October 22, 2016 and two years later at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, DeLillo identified in the toxic fluorescence of the North-Italian town depicted in *Deserto rosso* (1964) the main source of *White Noise*. Still, Antonioni's drama of conjugal distress and the slow, somber cadences of his mannered conversations prove even more effectively reproduced in

The Silence, as an off-screen chronicle of private exhaustion still haunted by the "white noise" of TV commercials and manufactured dreams. DeLillo's hybrid, media-conscious style hardly claims the return to a new "authenticity" in the new millennium since the catatonia adumbrated in his recent novellas is no other than the ultimate, entropic allegorization of the information overflow envisioned by Pynchon. Quite significantly, DeLillo's late lyrical prose illuminates private settings of post-traumatic confinement independent from any automatism dictated by the machine, in the recovery of a disconnected, Avant-garde style responding to the massive, cybernetic growth that as early as 1967 demanded a saturated, meandering postmodern form aptly named by John Barth "The Literature of Exhaustion."

The decline of civilization exorcised by the neo-capitalist notion of an uninterrupted economic growth has been the concern of postwar fiction writers who are currently detecting a diffused sentiment of mortality in the age of trauma.[2] This sense of finitude presides, in *The Silence*, the rituals of love and friendship mechanically reenacted in an America impaired by private and public dysfunctions and rendered by DeLillo in a clipped, absurdist style which constitutes a step away from the encompassing historical novels that have made of him the John Dos Passos of postmodern fiction. The ritualized failed encounter of the five friends vainly gathered for the Super Bowl offers, in *The Silence*, a compelling study of post-traumatic aphasia conveyed in a loose, desultory poetic prose that recalls the rhythmical variations on gossip and small talk experimented, between wars, by Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett. The rhythmical variations of their modernist lyrical plays return in the domestic fragments of *The Silence*, highlighting the involuntary lyricism of small talk in a conflation of Socratic dialogues, cathodic memories and digital communication.

The fractured, laconic speech of the five friends in a Manhattan apartment also continues in the present time the lyrical study of perception started by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, under the disruptive pressure of the World Wars. *The Silence* pays an explicit homage to the vocabulary of rupture of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), reproducing the vernacular phrase "Ere the sockson locked at the dure" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 105), which refers to taverns closed by servants holding a key "secure in the

proper mind slot, the word *preserve*" (105). DeLillo's late prose transfixed by post-traumatic stupor looks back to the exploration of the mind refined by modernist fiction writers, reactualizing the ghostly stillness of homes once animated by human speech and violently muted by death in wartime, as featured in the second part of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The random, hushed dialogues in *The Silence* capture a similar social void as all electronic devices become unserviceable and invisible conflicts seem to demand the absurdist aphasia of Beckett's drama.

The twenty-four disjointed scenes that compose DeLillo's last novella respond to the vast phenomenology of disaster of the new millennium by advocating a critical negotiation with technology freed of the manipulations, interferences and, more recently, of the interfacial processes of social engineering rendered by the author in the ranting, absurdist style of his televisionary plays *The Day Room* (1986) and *Valparaiso* (1999). In the farcical reality shows enacted in *Valparaiso*, the TV viewer on stage attempts a cheap escape from his unhappy marriage through a cathodic alter ego very close to the "optically formed duplicate" that, in *The Silence*, Martin discovers in his mirrored face which, as he says, "doesn't seem to be mine" (51-52, 50). The dreadful porosity of the electronic media also generates Tessa's suspicion that even the blackout could be no other than a computer-designed strategy to get people "digitally remastered" (88). The ability of manufactured realities to trigger human reactions even when all devices are out of service locates DeLillo's narrative focus beyond the self, into "[t]he artificial future. The neural interface" (68) whose grammar is still unfamiliar to the many.

Parataxis and sparse lyrical devices turn the accounted moment of social isolation and immobility into a domestic stillness representative of the social impoverishment of language and thought sternly dramatized by Beckett and Ionesco. The modern legacy of their dried-out absurdism is also detectable in DeLillo's little known one-minute play *The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed Into Heaven* (1990) which stigmatizes, in Beckett's succinct style, the exhausted communication which lies at the core of the voracious demand of digital and cathodic entertainment. As early as 1986, DeLillo's first televisionary play, *The Day Room*, inaugurated his staged satire of the society of the spectacle by featuring TV screens permanently

on and eventually replaced by a delirious actor ranting center stage in a straitjacket. Like that absurdist character, in *The Silence*, Diane's husband, Max Stinner, once deprived of the "infinite jest" of the Super Sunday,[3] keeps staring into a blank monitor as if still "consumed" by it, until he improvises a chronicle of the match, inclusive "of football dialect and commercial jargon" (99, 47).

In this verbal vacuum aggravated by the sudden blackout of electronic devices, both hosts and guests appear as inarticulate in their thoughts and speech as Beckett's alienated personae. Once unmonitored by remote controls, the most familiar gestures result into a series of disjointed actions: Diane watches her shoes find their way out independently from her feet ("They walked off without me"; 101), and Max forgets his daughters' names, holding his chair to make sure he is sitting (102). "It's us, barely" (70), is the alarmed comment of Tessa's husband, Jim Kripps, whose last name is emblematic of his funky terror. However, compared to the nonsense of DeLillo's televisionary plays (Daniele, "The Achromatic Room"), *The Silence* dramatizes an aphasia that strangely enough serves to recompose a distressed quotidian, illuminating the unexplored but still vital "mysteries at the middle of ordinary life" announced in another short play equally based on a sparse, domestic discourse. In this respect, the accounted situation of emergency and loss becomes a reservoir of unengineered, "human moments." Jim, who always reads the screen instructions though overwhelmed by fatigue ("He wanted to sleep but kept on looking"; DeLillo, *The Silence* 3) is finally induced by the blackout to look away and meet the eyes of his wife, who replies with a typical Woolfian staccato effect: "Are we afraid?" (17). Their private talk made up of "[h]alf sentences, bare words, repetitions [...] a kind of plainsong, monophonic, ritualistic," elliptically resurfaces "deep from his throat, the voice of the crowd [...] emerging from a broadcast level deep in his unconscious mind" (46).

DeLillo's post-traumatic recovery of private jargons and long-term relations also originates from his short theater productions. More specifically, the dazzling one-act play *The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life* (2000) is a close study of domestic lingos developed in home retreats which the writer identifies with the basic condition for writing. This

ground-breaking, instant play aptly defined by Frank Lentricchia a "poignant allegory of the quotidian" ("Aristotle and /or DeLillo" 607), records the verbal exchange of a quintessential old couple caught in their daily ritual of passing pills and salad to each other. Their secluded intimacy assumes further meaning in the current COVID-19 crisis, and can be read as a renewed manifestation of the human ability to communicate in the most restrictive confinement.

To delve deeper into the author's lyrical rendition of trauma and silence, it can be argued that his first novella for the millennium, *The Body Artist*, offered the first inner chronicle of a severe arrest in time. Lauren's private mourning, conceived after the death of DeLillo's father, redirected his narrative focus from the vastly shattered, social scene to the spectral interiors filled, like the body artist's empty home, with the digital recordings of her lost partner, which permanently enters her creative interplay with electronic props like the answering machine that reproduces his voice. That ghostly, vocal persistence transfixes the desolation of Lauren's space, in an affective, humanized version of technoculture caught in the grip of new losses and anxieties. That first, estranged novella of domestic confinement was eerily published only six months before September 11 and inspired DeLillo's close study of a quotidian that inaugurated the introverted turn of his rhetoric of silence, shifting from the sensorial panopticon of information epitomized in *White Noise* to a spatialization of inner time already at play in Lauren's *Kammerspiel* and the concurrent electronic dispersal of the social body. As a result, her electronic set designs a space haunted by familiar voices dislocated "[s]omewhere within all those syllables, something secret, covert, intimate" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 86).

By tracking the entropic silence at the core of homely interiors saturated with statics and "white noise," after the completion of *Underworld*, DeLillo redirected his literary focus from the wide national scene of his historical novels to a subatomic perusal of domestic micro-events miraculously resurfaced in the impending historical trauma. This private idiom, cleared of all the metafictional intricacies mechanically associated with the postmodern novel, headed him toward a terser, essential discourse of silence which does not correspond to an absence of sounds but records the intimate and subterranean manifestations of "pure language" (51). The affective utterances

of this recovered "condition of silence" are made up of the predictable speech-acts and domestic formulas that define the soundscape of daily life. In its intermittency, this domestic idiom finds the trochaic rhythm of a heartbeat – "We talk, we listen, we eat, we drink, we watch" (22) – as if to show that, in the general impasse of the public stage, the core of existence relies on a bodily rhythm of survival and on its repetition of the few, frugal words that gradually serve to reanimate the scene of disaster.

The same tentative, vocal gestures broke the spell of the public stage in the beautiful entr'acte composed by Virginia Woolf in wartime, *Between the Acts* (1941), in her impassible record of a pageant intermission and of its slow recovery of a rigorously off-stage routine. In this interval the body reclaims its priorities, making all the spectators, as occurs in *The Silence*, resume their private tones hushed during the public spectacle. Their words float independent from the governance of syntax and grammar, according to a natural, undisciplined family lexicon made of predictable imperatives and homely feelings. In *The Silence*, the minimalism of these spontaneous utterances survive the challenge of the total blackout, sustained by an affective proximity that reveals unnoticed physical oddities and relational discontinuities. In this informal dialectic which finds no media coverage, Diane and Martin perceive the ineffable asymmetries between intellect and touch, being bound together by the eroticism of Diane's erudition, that her pragmatic husband is curiously impermeable to. All these peculiar and unsuspected human flaws starkly illuminate the abeyance of domestic space in which plot and action have no role.

Likewise, in the arrested mobility of a city where subways and elevators do not run, a heightened sense of physicality leads the way, making Martin distinctively perceive his cautious steps through the pitch darkness of Central Park. After their emergency landing caused by the power failure, even Tessa and Jim prepare to rely upon their feet to climb the eight floors to their friends' apartment. The rhythmical pace of their panting breath – "step by step, flight by flight" (110) – resonates in their minds, additionally invigorated by the athletic vitality of a woman jogger who "just kept running, looking straight ahead" (40). In this estranged meditation on the residual human resources left over in times of entropy, Tessa lyrically

envisions a new prospect of "home" in an intimate space which makes words hardly necessary, "being home, the place, finally, where they don't see each other, walk past each other, say *what* when the other speaks, aware only of a familiar shape asking noise somewhere nearby" (96). In these sheltered interiors finally cleared of statics and white noise, her new poem opens with the line "*In a tumbling void*" (96; emphasis in the original), pointing to the oxymoronic combination of stillness and turbulence which perfectly conveys the mixture of suspension and unrest of DeLillo's post-traumatic style, finally hinting at a viable notion of domesticity able to bypass human inadequacies and technical failures.

Unlike the "digital addicts" whom they married, creative minds like Tessa in *The Silence* and Lauren in *The Body Artist* do not "live inside their phones" and are never "mesmerized, consumed by the device" (99, 52). Like the author himself, Tessa cherishes the obsolete but enduring technology of her pen and notebook impermeable to the endless emendations of word processors. She shares DeLillo's cult for the original layouts which safely sit at the Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin next to the papers of Joyce and Beckett, revealing all possible variants: "I need to see it in my handwriting, perhaps twenty years from now, if I'm still alive, and find some missing element, something I don't see right now"; "It's a question of looking at the notes years from now and seeing the precision, the detail" (9, 13).

The British edition of *The Silence* mimics the typewritten format of the author's manuscript, inclusive of the unjustified margins, as if to reproduce the final draft submitted to his editor. This typewritten layout holds a special value for a writer who perceives himself as a humanist in a post-human world, ill-adjusted to the manipulative nature of mass communication and to the violation of privacy inaugurated by the military use of radars as flight control systems.

DeLillo did not wait for the millennium to claim a new humanism for our digital times, remaining firmly anchored to the formalist, lo-fi poetics which sustains his modernist vision of postmodern America.[4] In his critical response to the algorithmic proliferation of electronic codes, he cherishes the naked power of words, deliberately composed on a typewriter which needs no electric power and whose use is only challenged by the

short supply of ribbons which are currently becoming rare collectibles. Compared to the "single, sustained overtone" (14) of word processors, the writer's obstinate tapping on a sturdy Olympia makes the material sound of each letter distinctively audible as it finds its place on the page. *The Silence* partakes of the author's critique of technocracy by disclosing, in the time lapse provided by the blackout, the private lingos that countered the spectacular terrors of the public stage. Tessa's poetry equally relies on that private and casual lexicon of intimacy and friendship, divested of clichés and manufactured formulas: "Tessa begins to separate herself. [...] She thinks into herself. She sees herself. She is different from these people. She imagines taking off her clothes, nonerotically, to show them who she is" (91). Martin also gets to the naked core of his material self by learning, in the cybernetic void, the secret grammar of passions, in moments of self-recognition that offer the reader a survival kit in the current emergency and in those still to come.

In alternative to the deictic imperatives of the innumerable digital alerts, domestic imperatives – "'Look,' he said" (3) – vocally break the spell of trauma, in the form of quotidian speech-acts, whose function is phatic, that is, essentially aimed to keep a line of communication open. The ineffable exchange between the body artist and Mr. Tuttle is made of cryptic signals like Septimus Smith's preverbal slur in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), both being as unintelligible to intruders as intimate talk. Likewise, the chatter of the five friends babbling in front of a blank screen makes of *The Silence* a disorderly, convivial suite orchestrated to reveal the enduring, affective nature of familiar voices and authentic needs, which sound reassuring in their nonsense. The loose trajectory of DeLillo's lyrical narrative subtly explores the apparent inconsistency of the private lingos that, in moments of alarm, renew and ritualize invisible bonds and the enduring mystery of mutual recognition. What strikes us in the erratic, lyrical incantation of these late compositions is their ability to find a private strategy to capture the mind of a traumatized America which slowly reacts to a spectacular paralysis.

The domestic dialogues recorded in *The Silence* amplify the complicity of long-term relations resistant to contingency, as beautifully rendered by T. S. Eliot in "A Dedication to My Wife" (1955): "Of lovers whose bodies

smell of each other Who think the same thoughts without need of speech And babble the same speech without need of meaning" (216). A deep admirer of T.S. Eliot, DeLillo redesigns the hushed language of privacy as a human counterpoint to the computer-generated "[w]ords, sentences, numbers, distance to destination" (*The Silence* 3) that, in *Cosmopolis*, grimly correspond to the scrolling of stocks and shares of financial capitalism that so many lives depend upon. In *The Silence*, the idiom of mutual care counters that mechanical rhythm, as clarified in a rare intervention by the omniscient narrator: "And isn't it strange that certain individuals have seemed to accept the shutdown, the burnout? Is this something that they've always longed for, subliminally, subatomically?" (78).

Similar volatile interrogations intensify the paratactic, imagistic structure of this novella which, in times of technical dysfunction, recites the scant, enchanted syllables of an intimate lexicon. The ability of small talk to dispel plots and conspiracies makes of DeLillo's disjointed prose a language of silence which stars in medias res and proceeds with no story line, in a spatial reconfiguration of personal histories not meant to progress, but deeply absorbed in an affective communication which, in the perfect stillness of the blackout, serves to exorcise the algorithmic curvatures of profit and surveillance.

The unplugged reunion of the five friends represents a human pause from the digital trafficking of displacement and removal which makes Tessa urge her husband: "Close your eyes!" (11). Bewilderment, catharsis, sloth, homophonic variations on plane and computer crashes are the lyrical elements of this apologue on a friends' reunion hard to accomplish in times of trauma and terror. Its sparse intonations of intimate trust disperse the electric impulses and digital spurts that stir our digital activity in a myriad nervous, "bird-brained" vibes (84). The epigraphs in italics which open most sections in *The Silence* fracture the diegetic line into an archipelago of vocal clusters aimed to preserve friendly tones and confidential locutions from the impersonal tedium of pre-recorded messages. This volatile style, so close to the one adopted by Virginia Woolf in her posthumous *Between the Acts*, pushes the literary investigation of the modern mind into the unexplored layers of consciousness stirred in decades of post-human, digital consumption.

As his most recent fiction smoothly merges with lyrical drama, DeLillo tests the ability of the homo digitalis to cope with a bodily silence, in his blind obedience to the electronic urgency to "[f]ind a movie. Watch a movie" (8) that prompts him into impulsive action ("*This was the gambler's creed, his formal statement of belief*" 19; emphasis in the original). By contrast, the peculiar inflections of home-made idiolects like the children's glossolalia in *White Noise* and their playful distortions of TV messages are signs of human resistance to the machine, and elevate small and intimate talk to a literary status. Their involuntary, private versification finds a topographic hub at the Gotham poetry bookstore in Midtown Manhattan, where the literary tastes of the elegant Elise Schifrin in *Cosmopolis* and those of the Latina Tessa Berens in *The Silence* find a meeting ground. As aware as Tessa that "[w]hatever is out there, we are still people, the human slivers of a civilization" (90), DeLillo identifies in this late, imagistic texture a lyrical site where subjects and objects conflate in the Woolfian "luminous halo [...] surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 150). These discursive epiphanies probe unviolated corners of human understanding, preserving the few words of care and wisdom which seem to matter: "The radiant name"; "The luminous figure. The Nazarene. Einstein" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 42, 53).

In this search for authentic moments of human interaction, DeLillo's prose poetry dwells in the gap between the body and the machine, indulging in the literary limbo epitomized by the flying couple on a plane which opens *The Silence* and resonates throughout the author's macrotext in a private allegorization of uncertainty and abeyance which, as early as in 1977, kept another Dantesque couple physically and emotionally suspended above ground in the opening scene of *Players* (1977). And since their absorbed, sacred silence was the concern of another traumatized poet, living in an era also shattered by bankruptcy and epidemics, I would here close my reflection on DeLillo's lyrical prose by evoking Edgar Allan Poe's own parable on "Silence," written in 1838. The title of its first edition is "Siope," achrostically pointing, like an embedded signature, to the encoded name of the poet himself (= "Is Poe"). And its subtitle – "A Fable. In the Manner of Psychological Autobiographists" – is even more intriguing in alluding to a modern fiction ready to delve into the individual psyche that

Stein, Woolf, Joyce, Beckett and, more recently, Frank O'Hara and Lyn Hejinian would further explore. In Poe's pioneering prose poem the locus of human conscience is the rock where the poet/thinker sits in pensive isolation, constantly teased by the devil who inflicts that condition of solitude upon him. In that musing pose (later cast in bronze by August Rodin in 1880), the poet endures all sorts of beastly noises and natural disasters, but when surrounded by total silence, he flees in despair. As Poe chooses the social network of the tribe, DeLillo skillfully builds upon chunks of free indirect speech and of domestic talk his own apologue on silence, unexpectedly finding in that state of radical disconnection new words for "home."

Notes

[1] I here refer to the modernist legacy of prose poetry defined by Mary Ann Caws and Michel Delville as a hybrid genre that unsettles the novelistic conventions and the reader's relation to urban life. The provisional quality of this emotionally charged, sketchy form adumbrates DeLillo's volatile domestic vignettes also led by "word, phrase and thought, rather than by story or representation" (5).

[2] In Jonathan Lethem's *The Arrest* all technology also grinds to a halt, demonstrating, in his immediate reply to *The Silence*, that the critical work of postmodern American fiction has always been, and still is, a joint venture.

[3] My clear allusion to David Foster Wallace's eponymous contemporary classic is not a casual one, since it is deeply indebted to *White Noise*, as duly acknowledged in a 1997 letter written to DeLillo, and currently part of his private correspondence at the Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin.

[4] Frank Lentricchia acutely defines his gifted friend the "last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation" (*Introducing Don DeLillo* 14).

Works Cited

Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." *The Atlantic* 220 (1967): 29-36.

Caws, Mary Ann, and Michel Delville, eds. *The Edinburgh Companion to the Prose Poem*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2021.

Daniele, Daniela. "'I Cannot Keep my Mind on Jerusalem': Grace Paley's Poetics of Hearing." *Intertextual Identity: Reflections on Jewish-American Artists*. Eds. Franco La Polla e Gabriella Morisco. Bologna: Pàtron, 1997. 155-65.

—. "La storia in moviola: Intervista a Don DeLillo." *Scrittori e finzioni d'America*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000. 103-22.

—. "The Achromatic Room: DeLillo's Plays On and Off Camera." *Italian Americana* 29 (2011): 166-80.

DeLillo, Don. "Human Moments in World War III." *Esquire.* July 1983: 118-26.

—. *Players*. 1977. New York: Knopf, 1984.

—. *The Day Room: A Play.* 1986. New York: Knopf, 1988.

—. "The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed into Heaven." *The Quarterly* 15 (1990): 6-7.

—. *White Noise.* 1985. New York: Viking, 1996.

—. *Mao II*. New York: Vintage, 1991.

—. "The Power of History."*New York Times Magazine.* 7 Sept. 1997: 60-63.

—. *Underworld.* 1997. New York: Scribner, 1998.

—. *Valparaiso. A Play in two Acts*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

—. "The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life." *Zoetrope: All Story.* Ed. Francis Ford Coppola. 4 (2000): 75-76.

—. *The Body Artist*. New York: Scribner, 2001.

—. *Cosmopolis*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003.

—. *Falling Man*. New York: Scribner, 2007.

—. *Point Omega*. New York: Scribner, 2010.

—. *Zero K*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

—. *The Silence*. London: Picador, 2020.

Eliot, T. S. "A Dedication to My Wife." *Complete Poems. 1909-1962*. London: Faber & Faber, 2002. 216.

Gibbons, Alison. "Metamodern Affect." *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism.* Eds. Robin Van den Akken, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen. London-New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017. 83-86.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Social Symbolic Act*. London: Methuen, 1981.

Lentricchia, Frank. *Introducing Don DeLillo.* 1991. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.

—. "Aristotle and/or DeLillo". *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* 99 (2000): 605-07.

Lethem, Jonathan. *The Arrest*. New York: Ecco, 2020.

McElroy, Joseph. *Plus*. New York: Knopf, 1976.

Piccinato, Stefania. "Lo sguardo sulla folla: Henry James e Don DeLillo." *La città multietnica nella seconda metà del Novecento*. Ed. Clara Bartocci. Perugia: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2004. 231-46.

Pynchon, Thomas. "Entropy." *The Kenyon Review* 22 (1960): 277-93.

—. "A Journey into the Mind of Watts." *The New York Times Magazine.* 12 June 1966. 34-35, 78, 80-82, 84.

Salter, James. *Light Years*. 1975. London and New York: Penguin, 2007.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Little, Brown, 1996.

Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction". *The Common Reader. First Series*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925. 146-54.

—. *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Hogarth, 1925.

—. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Hogarth, 1927.

—. *Between the Acts*. New York-London: Harcourt, Brace, 1941.