Triangulation and Gender Perspectives in 'Falling Man' by Don DeLillo

by Noemi Abe

In the post-9/11 climate, the discussion of many ethical issues, such as family, gender and the (female) body drew to a halt in the face of the strong nationalistic propaganda that tended to censor any views that did not comply with its rhetoric. Lauren Berlant (1997) argued that the collapse of the public sphere into the private one has engendered a society in which the political is hidden within the domestic in such a way that the dynamics of hegemony are no longer apparent. This concealment of the mechanisms of ideology has, she suggests, neutered the critical faculties of the American population, reducing citizens to a condition of infantile credulity, which can be manipulated at will by the increasingly monopolistic mass media system. Berlant's theory of infantile citizenship asserts that this reduction of citizenship is founded upon a political rhetoric structured on sentimentalised feeling: "We might call this anti-political politics 'national sentimentality'" (Berlant 1997:11). In a post 9/11 America, Ann Kaplan points out that there is a thin line between sensationalism and sentimentalism, and it is extremely problematic to disregard all sentimental approaches, since these might bring a beneficial response to trauma,

> much of the writing about 9/11 has focused on individuals and on personal loss —
> a focus that many object to and describe as "sentimental". It would be better to
> leave aside attributions of sentimentality (who is one to say how loss should be
> handled?) and rather address the differing politics surrounding the attacks together
> with the natural defense nations construct against remembering what is
> humiliating (Kaplan 2005:147).

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In Kaplan and Berlant, the term *sentimentality* is shown in its full polyvalence, a term that is often used with divergent purposes in different political contexts, in a derogative or exemplary way. The term *sentimentality* is connected to the definition and use of categories such as emotions and feelings, and a sentimental approach could be still regarded as central in political gender-related discourses. More to the point, the definitions of emotions and feelings themselves need to be constantly re-examined both scientifically and culturally. 9/11 rhetoric not only tended to censor feelings and emotions that were regarded as "feminine" in a revival of a politicization of the private sphere – as Susan Faludi points out that there was a "post-9/11 fixation on male protectors at work and mommies at home" (2007:139) – but also aimed at promoting sentimental heroic male narratives.

The main criticism of 9/11 Novels pointed to an over-personalization of the aftermath of 9/11, and to what was interpreted as a private angle in their narratives, According to a wide range of critics these novels were in need of a contextualised and historicised perspective, an incisive geopolitical outlook in order to provide diverse reflective templates for 9/11. The shift of judgment from *too* domestic, familial, inward-looking to sentimental is immediate, and shows the tendency to classify "all discussion of emotion [as] part of the same negative sentimentality" (Kaplan 2005:22).

I will present a reading of *Falling Man* that primarily considers the affective power of the novel upon the reader, through an investigation of the emotional framework of the narrative. The immediate affect engendered by a first reading of *Falling Man* is a sense of discomfort and entrapment, due to a stylistic approach rendered through an analytical and clinical gaze: a naturalistic dissection of a post-9/11 familial melodrama. However, the "violent affect"[1] of the novel derives not so much from its tragic subject matter, but rather from the temperaments of the family members and their relationships that emerge as a series of alliances and hostilities. The emotional intensity that the narrative evokes is paradoxically rendered through a symptomatic confusion of feelings in the main character, Keith, who almost seems determined to detach himself from any affectionate relationship. *Falling Man* undoubtedly investigates a male reaction to 9/11 and its consequences, and this has often been viewed by literary critics as an inescapable traumatic state of its protagonist, which crystallizes in "pure melancholia" (Versluys 2009:20) or "emotional

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[1] I am quoting Marco Abel's original variation of affective criticism. In his *Violent Affect* (2007), he promotes an innovative approach to the reading of images of violence in literature and film: "the questions we ask of violent images [should not be] what they mean and whether they are justified but *how* they configure our ability to respond to, and do things with, them. The plane of encounter with these images is, in other words, not that of judgment but that of ethics (response-ability). I will call what is ultimately a thoroughly subjunctive encounter with violence 'masocriticism'" (Abel 2007: xiii).

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numbness" (Gray 2008:132), leaving "Keith [to emerge…] as a pathetic, adolescent-minded creature" (Kakutani 2007).

The idea that 9/11 novels had to reflect the so-called primary nature of 9/11 – it being new and unprecedented – in their formal and thematic renderings proved not only to be imprecise but rather quite the opposite: as a matter of fact, those novels that engage in motifs deeply-rooted in the American literary tradition are the same ones that offer greater insight into 9/11 and its repercussions. I would argue that *Falling Man* is indeed one of these novels, and its melancholy tone echoes the prolonged male adolescence of the American hero, which is one of the founding motifs of the literary tradition. Pamela Boker in her *The Grief Taboo in American Literature* (1997) examines those motifs that were mapped out by the influential essays of D. H. Lawrence (1951), R. W. B. Lewis (1955), and Leslie Fiedler (1960). Boker goes as far, however, as seeing these traits as distinguishing not only writers of such a venerable literary tradition, but also US male culture in general:

> As articulations of the prolonged mother-loss and father-hunger inherent in the male adolescent's struggle both to attain and to retreat from masculine maturity – a contest that I believe is left perpetually unresolved in the literature of America – the fiction of Melville, Twain, and Hemingway strikes a deeply meaningful and psychologically powerful chord in a narcissistic and fundamentally adolescent male culture (Boker 1997:5).

Boker's preferential use of object-relations psychoanalysis offers a new dimension to the American myth of the self-determined male hero, the "American Adam" that reveals a legacy of mother-loss and father-hunger, repressed grief and repressed femininity in these three founding figures of American literary history. The psychoanalytical investigation does not only involve the works of these authors but is also used the personal histories of the authors and the connection to the grief and loss present in their works. This is a perilous task because her analysis presumes a direct and linear connection between the writers' personal experiences and their works. Boker acknowledges the perilousness of her approach by saying: "As a methodological premise, I grant the fact that genius can never fully be explained or dissected" (7). The emphasis on genius is inherently connected to what I perceive as lacking in Boker's text. It appears she did not take into consideration the fact that certain motifs have been permeating American literary works for a significant length of time and therefore may not be ascribed so closely to the writers' personal histories. On the contrary, the central position in the literary tradition of certain works by writers such as Melville,

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Twain and Hemingway might have been granted precisely *because of* their extensive use of these motifs.[2]

This brief discussion on Boker's text has served me to suggest that the motifs of unresolved grief and perpetual male adolescence in *Falling Man* are precisely what make DeLillo's novel engaging, and perhaps, one of the main reasons for its being generally greeted by a cold reception.

Keith's reaction to the attacks is related to that end of innocence that the 9/11 attacks have determined in the American psyche. The state of illusory innocence that he had tried to maintain in his lifestyle, distinguished exclusively by male bonding, is dramatically destroyed on 9/11. While he and his wife watch a replay of the attacks on television, he symptomatically and irrevocably acknowledges his entering into adulthood: "'The second plane, by the time the second plane appears,' he said, 'we're all a little older and wiser'" (*Falling Man*, 153).[3] Keith therefore shows a resistance to giving up his (pre-9/11) adolescent attitude in order to adopt a paternal role: "How is it possible that he was about to become someone of clear and distinct definition, husband and father, finally, occupying a room in three dimensions in the manner of his parents?" (*FM*, 157).
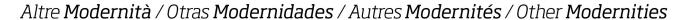
While Keith is physically back with his family, he struggles emotionally to connect with his wife and son. According to Frank Rich, "[w]hether Keith and Lianne will reconstitute their marriage is almost irrelevant to what DeLillo is up to here. In the ruins of 9/11, relationships are a non sequitur. Disconnectedness is the new currency. Language is fragmented. Vision is distorted" (Rich 2007). On the contrary, *Falling Man* shows us the attempt to rebuild relationships that were disrupted before 9/11. Keith is, in fact, portrayed as a man with a violent streak in *pre*-9/11 descriptions,

> He used to come home late, looking shiny and a little crazy. […] She understood by this time that it wasn't the drinking, or not that alone, and probably not some sport with a woman. […] It was who he was, his native face, without the leveling element, the claims of social code. […] He carried that glassy look in his eyes and a moist smile across his mouth, a dare to himself, boyish and horrible. But he did not put into words whatever it was that lay there, something so surely and recklessly cruel that it scared her, spoken or not. The look scared her, the body slant. He walked through the apartment, bent slightly to one side, a twisted guilt in his smile, ready to break up a table and burn it so he could take out his dick and piss on the flames (*FM*, 103-4).

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[2] I am, of course, not suggesting anything new here, but simply am applying Nina Baym's famous critical argument. Cf. Baym 1981, "Theories account for the inclusion and exclusion of texts in anthologies and theories account for the way we read them" (123).

[3] From now on as a bibliograpchic indication I will indicate the title *Falling Man* simply as *FM.*

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After 9/11, Keith's war-like tendencies seem to burst out into the open: "[Lianne] thought he looked like army, like career military […] not in combat but in the pale rigors of this life" (*FM*, 18). Although the above quotations could be seen as partisan given that Lianne is his estranged wife, Keith's characterization as aggressive and violent is actually confirmed by the other members of the family circle. Martin, Lianne's mother's lover, claims to like him, but it is mostly for his not being from Manhattan and thus representing to him "the heartland" of the U.S.. Martin, who is German, brings to the novel an external perspective, a European outlook: "Keith had once owned a pit bull. This, at least, seemed to mean something, a dog that was all skull and jaws, an American breed, developed originally to fight and kill" (*FM*, 44). Lianne's mother, Nina, defines him as a male prototype that women should be aware of,

> Her mother had said it clearly, years earlier. 'There's a certain man, an archetype, he's a model of dependability for his male friends, all the things a friend should be, an ally and confident, lends money, gives advice, loyal and so on, but sheer hell on women. Living breathing hell. The closer a woman gets, the clearer it becomes to him that she is not one of his male friends. And the more awful it becomes for her. This is Keith. This is the man you're going to marry.' (*FM*, 59)

Keith embodies a masculinity that chooses comradeship – "The poker games were at Keith's place […] men rolling their shoulders, hoisting their balls […] testing the forces that govern events" (*FM*, 96); "They used intuition and cold-war risk analysis" (*FM*, 97) –, expansionism – "Keith used to want more of the world than there was time and means to acquire" (*FM*, 128) – and sport. His relationship with women is often conflictual or merely physical, like sport. His instinctual reaction to go back to his estranged wife's apartment immediately after the fall of the towers seems, therefore, his attempt to comply with a vision of men as protectors of the vulnerable side of society, namely women and children (Tickner 2002:337).

Keith happens to begin – all of Keith's actions seem to be lacking intentionality or forethought – an affair with a fellow survivor, Florence. Although he is incapable of emotionally connecting with Florence too, he shows the same – if not stronger – protective attitude: "if anyone said a harsh word to Florence, or raised a hand to Florence, or insulted her in any way, Keith was ready to kill him" (*FM*,). Keith is mired in a modular behaviour that has more to do with gender and models of masculinity than trauma itself: "it is generally harder for men to cross gender lines, than it is for women" (Tickner 2002:343).

Keith's idealistic vision of manhood is split into two modular representations, that of 'the soldier' in charge of the protection of his domestic territory, and that of the 'good father', portrayed in a quiet and even overly-rounded existence: "This was his father seeping through, sitting home in western Pennsylvania, reading the morning paper, taking the walk in the afternoon, a man braided into sweet routine, a widower,

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eating the evening meal, unconfused, alive in his true skin" (*FM*, 128). But, as Margaret Mead observes, in order to embrace maturity, the individual needs to overcome the idealistic perception of one's own parents: "Those who have taught us goodness are found to be, in various degree, neither all good nor all wise. This discovery is essential to maturity. It may be made earlier than puberty, it may be made much later. It may never be made at all, and a man may remain a perpetual boy scout for life" (1965:134).

Nina and Martin have a strong political argument over 9/11, which appears to be an example of a gendered – even stereotypical – reading of political events. Nina's position regarding 9/11 is marked by anger, directed at the terrorists and also at her lover's defense of them. Hers is certainly not a position based on a geopolitical evaluation, but rather stands for an emotional reaction, and it is most revealing precisely for this reason. The preconceived exclusion of women from the "facts of war" turns into the ability to provide an external view of those "acts of men" which otherwise tend to be justified and considered as natural and necessary, by men. Nina affirms: "Yes, there's something else but it's not history or economics. It's what men feel. It's the thing that happens between men" (*FM*, 112). Thus, a perspective centered on feelings and emotions, which is normatively relegated to the domestic, the personal and private spheres – in stark opposition to a rational and factual reading of world affairs – proves to be, according to the narrative's economy, at the base of the novel's analysis of 9/11, and essentially a political matter. In the structure of the novel, Keith's uncertainty toward feelings is counterpointed by the convictions of the terrorists: "They felt things together, he and his brothers. […] They felt the magnetic effect of plot. Plot drew them together more tightly than ever" (*FM*, 174). Besides the indisputable weight of the economical, political and religious features at the heart of the ideology of the terrorists, there also lies a visceral motion banally consisting of "what men feel", a mirroring of Keith's comradeship with his friends before 9/11.

The term 'plot' provides an insightful commentary on the fascination of war actions in the inherited male imagination. To be part of a plot gives them a heroic perception of themselves and a sense of masculine identity that unites them in a tradition connected to a magnificent past: The involvement in a plot has that epic flavour which has for time-immemorial been culturally designated as the ultimate purpose and realization of manhood. Hammad, in order to become a man, felt that "he had to fight against the need to be normal" (*FM*, 83), a normality which is fundamentally perceived as distinguished by romantic love and family.

Keith somehow abides by the same vision of life. To his wife's question, "Is it possible you and I are done with conflict?", he replies ironically "We're ready to sink into our little lives" (*FM*,). The passage from a state of "conflict" to a sinking into "little lives" shows how a normal life, characterized by the absence of conflict, is in Keith's perception precisely a "little" life. Keith and Hammad both share a repulsion for 'normality', perceived as both unheroic and as simply *boring*. They also share a

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common view that it is women who ask them to be normal. And who *is* normal after all? To their minds, a normal life is a woman's life, it means doing ordinary things, such as providing for and minding children, while they feel they should instead be pursuing the 'heroic',

> If war is a phenomenon we associate with men and 'hegemonic' masculinity, peace is a term we stereotypically associate with women and […] devalued feminine characteristics […] As Jean Elshtain (1987:230) has suggested, we are afraid of letting go of war because we fear even more the prospects of a sterile peace. Peace is frequently seen as an ideal, and even uninteresting, state with little chance of success in the 'real' world (Tickner 2002:337).

In her essay "The War of the Fathers: Trauma, Fantasy, and September 11" (2002) Susannah Radstone focuses on the American reaction to the attacks, arguing that the rhetorical response to 9/11 by the Bush Administration is based on the opposition of two father figures: the "chastened" but powerful "good" patriarchal father vs. the "bad" archaic father. She explains: "In this Manichean fantasy can be glimpsed the continuing battle between competing versions of masculinity" (459), reaffirming after September 11 old gender-related fantasies and fears. "What requires further analysis within this scenario is, first, the (hidden) place of women and, second, the complex places of religious and ethnic difference within this 'battle of the fathers'" (459). As I have sought to highlight in what seems to me to be one of the key points in *Falling Man*, rendered through Keith's behaviour, "the notion that after September 11, nothing would ever be the same again needs reevaluating [given that] the reimaginings of gender prompted by September 11 appear anything but new. Fantasies of invulnerability and of a battle between different orders of paternal power appear to leave women on the margins of a 'war' that is at once political, psychic, and cultural" (Radstone 2002:459). The battle of the fathers of Bush's rhetoric is contrasted in *Falling Man* to a battle between two men that stands for unfulfilled fatherhood.

In her comment on Gil Anidjar's *The Jew, the Arab*, Paola Di Cori aptly adds women to the figures of the Jewish and the Arabs as embodiments of 'others' in the formation of a European identity, bringing forth the question of gender in the history of the enemy and shifting from a bilateral clash of opposite male figures to a metaphorical triangulation that extends the concept of identity into a trilateral affair,

> Dagli inizi degli anni Novanta – in particolare dalla guerra del Golfo […] – i tratti caratteristici con cui in Occidente si rappresenta il nemico sono mutati radicalmente. In modo speciale, sono tornate, rivedute e corrette, antiche modalità di costruire un immaginario minaccioso, terrificante, punitivo […] E ancora una volta ebrei e arabi, con le donne ad accompagnarli a distanza più o meno ravvicinata, hanno costituito una specie di triangolazione […] un triangolo isoscele

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con la punta verso in alto; con arabi ed ebrei come lati uguali e le donne alla base. Il triangolo è interamente circondato da uno spazio cristiano, bianco, maschile e maschilizzato (Di Cori 2008:119).

Accordingly, the dualistic vision of war between two male archaic and archetypical father figures engendered by post-9/11 rhetoric should be instead evaluated in its trilateral dimension, given that at its core lies a variation of the Eurocentric triangle described by Di Cori, built upon three representational types: the hero, the white middle-class man; the enemy, the evil Arab (terrorist); and the composite character in the middle, the woman, who shifts from ally, to victim, to a plausible enemy supporter. The feminization of the country had in fact been cited as one of the reasons for America's vulnerability, "women's liberation had 'feminized' our men and, in so doing, left the nation vulnerable to attack" (Faludi 2007:28). Faludi goes on to show how, initially there was a halting if not a reversing of "the Clinton-era policies that had sought to expand women's role in battle zones" (2007:33) and secondly how the attacks against feminists or female public figures –such as the often personal and demeaning attacks against Susan Sontag that Faludi aptly calls "the stoning of Sontag" (2007:35) – were so much stronger than the ones that other male left-leaning intellectuals received. Otherwise, women were generally depicted as 9/11 victims, epitomized by the 9/11 widows (Cf. Faludi 2007:114).

Nina and Lianne's political position in the novel could be considered as *juxtapolitical*, quoting Lauren Berlant's definition of "women's culture", which as a mass-mediated non-dominant community lies "in *proximity* to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough" (Berlant 2008:x). Lianne's stance in the novel, concerning the motives and consequential behaviours of the members of her family, and more in general in her relational and social attitude – in regards to work, the Alzheimer group and the wider collective life of the city – are juxtapolitical. This is in alignment with the primary characteristic of "women's culture", which is conventionality, in a subordinate position to the dominant male culture, for its "flourishing in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds" (Berlant 2008:3). Lianne shows an unconscious inclination to maintain for as long as possible a state of compliance towards those who she considers "her" men: "Maybe [Martin] was a terrorist but he was one of ours, she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her – one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white" (*FM*, 195). In an almost Woolfian reverie, Lianne depicts her relationship with her father through a society *tableau* that captures the social subordinate position that she maintains in regards to the men in her life,

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She was only a girl, always a daughter, and her father was drinking a Tanqueray martini. He'd let her add a twist of lemon, giving her comically detailed instructions. Human existence, that was his subject that evening, on the deck of somebody's beat-up house in Nantucket. Five adults, the girl on the fringes (*FM*, 231).

The spatial position in the scene could be read as a symbolic representation of a more general attitude of her standing apart, a living on the outskirts of life's experience. Lianne has the constant sensation that other people live real lives and not her, which could be ascribed to her perception of herself and her position in the world as "always a daughter".

Lianne's general displacement causes her to wander among the places of memory and of the city of New York, setting in motion a psychological emancipation from the male figures that have strongly marked her existence. Towards the end, she reaches a revelatory moment: "She wanted to disbelieve. She was an infidel in current geopolitical parlance" (*FM*, 232). And yet, Lianne's character abruptly disappears at the end when the narrative reaches its dramatic peak in the recounting of the attacks from within the towers, with its final encounter of the two indisputable protagonists, the two male opposites, Keith and Hammad.

If Versluys (cf. 2009:20) on the one hand, underlines how the melancholic mood of the novel can be ascribed to the effects of a traumatic state that, according to Freudian theories, represents the incapability of overcoming a loss and, therefore, of acting out a natural process of mourning; on the other hand, Cvek interprets the traumatized mood of *Falling Man* as DeLillo's metaphorization of the American political situation, the inability to work through the end of a perception of national innocence: "the novel does not narrate the process of emergence of a reformed subjectivity, but an uneasy national moment in the traumatic process of historical transition and internal transformation" (Cvek 2010:335). The traumatic state of the main characters described in many 9/11 novels – who are characterized by their apathy and inability to act – could be, therefore, read as a metaphor for an adolescent, melancholic and narcissistic state of mind that permeated post-9/11 America.

The question of whether this melancholic state has been the effect of the traumatic event or a consequence of the paternalistic rhetoric of the Bush government, which treated the citizens as apathetic adolescents in regard to social and political issues, is not answered in the 9/11 literary production, however, but is continuously raised as a form of self-criticism and as a starting point in overcoming the time of crisis and terror.

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