

A DISTURBANCE OF MEMORY: LANGUAGE, TERROR, AND INTIMACY IN DON DELILLO'S *THE NAMES*

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Before her eyes was the violent blue sky—nothing else. For an endless moment she looked into it. Like a great overpowering sound it destroyed everything in her mind, paralyzed her. Someone had once said to her that the sky hides the night behind it, shelters the person beneath from the horror that lies above. Unblinking, she fixed the solid emptiness, and the anguish began to move in her. At any moment, the rip can occur, the edges fly back, and the giant maw will be revealed.

—Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*

No definition of science is complete without a reference to terror.

—Don DeLillo, *Ratner's Star*

In the margin of a copy of Diophantus' *Arithmetica* is scribbled Fermat's last theorem. This bit of marginalia, which asserts that a specific mathematical equation can never really be satisfied, has haunted mathematicians for three centuries. No one has been able to reconstruct Fermat's proof for this assertion; but no one has been able to counter the assertion either.¹ It is a precursor of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Gödel's Theorem formulated even as Newton was theorizing his dynamic theories

1. If $n > 2$, then there is no solution to $x^n + y^n = z^n$. Several mathematicians have claimed to have the proof for Fermat's theorem (including Fermat himself, who claimed to have found the proof, but teasingly remarked that the margin of *Arithmetica* was too small to hold it), most recently Andrew Wiles of Princeton University. Fermat's equation is a single line; Wiles's «proof» is 200 pages long and remains to be verified.

of a clockwork universe; «laws» premised upon the constants of position, velocity and mass and verified through clock-time.

Even systems as logical and constant as mathematics tremble upon the void. For the system of real numbers, the symbols that constitute the language of mathematics, were chosen for their utility and not for their correspondence with reality. Mathematics is pure language, pure pattern, pure abstraction, pure routine—a collection of symbols that refer only to themselves. According to Roger Penrose in *The Emperor's New Mind*, real numbers refer to a *mathematical idealization* rather than to any actual physically objective quantity. The system of real numbers has the property, for example, that between any two of them, no matter how close, there lies a third. It is not at all clear that physical distances or times can realistically be said to have this property. (86)

Don DeLillo, in *Ratner's Star*, defines mathematics as «what the world is when we subtract our own perceptions. . . the press to measure and delve. . . in annotated ivory tools, lengths of notched wood, in the waveguide manipulation of light and our nosings into the choreography of protons» (432). Through mathematics «we implicate ourselves in endless uncertainty» (432). References to mathematics occur in most of DeLillo's novels, but his most cutting criticism of this scientific impulse to codify and control occurs in *Ratner's Star*, a novel whose very structure, as Tom LeClair has shown, is «the history of mathematics. . . moving in its 2,500 years away from its foundations in concrete experience toward increasing abstraction, and then, in the twentieth century, moving backward through its achievements to investigate those foundations»² (116). *Ratner's Star* traces Billy Twillig's (and other) attempts to decode a mysterious message supposedly sent by an intelligent race («Ratnerians») living in the vicinity of Ratner's Star. Billy, who believes that there is nothing scary about mathematics, eventually decodes the message, proving that it originated from Earth rather than Ratner's Star (which turns out to be a black hole—the ultimate nonrepresentable terror of the universe) At the same time, he learns about the true terror at the heart of mathematics, a terror unleashed by mathematicians' attempts to investigate (or deconstruct) the very foundations of mathematics itself. The inhabitants of Field Experiment Number One attempt to create a metamathematics, «Logicon,» which, according to Charles Molesworth, «is needed in order to insure the coherence of the mathematical solutions that will be developed and to control all possible communication with extraterrestrials» (147). Of course, any attempt to create a complete system only proves the incompleteness of any one system (Gödel's Theorem once again), revealing the uncertainty and terror that underlies systematizing attempts to repress and control. Even Billy eventually succumbs to the terror at the heart of mathematical abstraction, following his mentor, Rob Softly, into a (symbolically black) hole at the end of the novel.

2. In an interview with LeClair (one of only two major interviews he's given) DeLillo says of *Ratner's Star*: «I wanted the book to become what it was about. Abstract structures and connective patterns. A piece of mathematics in short» («An Interview With Don DeLillo», *Contemporary Literature* 23 [1982], p. 27).

DeLillo's metaphor for this fundamental uncertainty at the heart of all systems is a mathematical equivalent and fictionalization of the concept of black holes, the «mohole», named after Orang Mohole, one of the eccentric mathematicians in *Ratner's Star*. Mohole has come up with «a unique system of relativity,» at whose core is the «mohole totality» or «value-dark dimension» (80). The essence of Moholean relativity, «that in a mohole the laws of physics vary from one observer to another» (185), is complete uncertainty and, consequently, terror. A mohole is like a mirror that reflects light and sound to other parts of the universe, except that it is not a mirror.³ «It's part of a theoretical dimension lacking spatial extent and devoid of time value. Value-dark in other words» (181). Moholes can't exist in Einstein's space-time continuum: «'wherever there are moholes' implies that a mohole occupies space, which it doesn't. I suppose it could be said that a mohole is space-time raised to a higher electrovalent power, or sylphed» (181). What is certain about moholes is that they reveal «the inadequacies of human language in the face of the mohole phenomenon» (181), the inadequacy of language to adequately represent and define exactly what a mohole is. The mere mention of moholes is enough to unleash fear and terror in Mohole's fellow scientists:

Just mention the value-dark dimension and people go glassy-eyed. All these fears about invisible mass. These morbid parties full of whimpering people. Missing matter is explained by Moholean relativity. The mass holding the galaxies together is trapped in moholes. This is why we can't find it. . . Oddly the people showing the greatest fear are often the same ones who support every step in my formulation, from the big bang to the *n*-bottomed hole. The explanation for the missing mass frightens them more than the fact that so much mass is missing (183).

So does the fact that Earth itself turns out to be in a mohole. As Tom LeClair comments, «the utterly abstract Mohole theory is transformed into a concrete truth that causes an almost religious terror in Billy and the other scientists» (130). Ironically, as the efforts of the scientists and mathematicians in *Ratner's Star* show, it is the very attempt to systematize, to explain, that reveals the fundamental uncertainty and terror of the unknowable and nonsystematizable.

DeLillo's interest in mathematics is directly related to his interest in how «the

3. A mohole, like a black hole, is nonrepresentational. Mohole tells Billy: «Incidentally, its no good trying to visualize a mohole. I've already tried and it can't be done. Nobody knows what it looks like because it doesn't look like anything» (p. 181). Of course, Billy would have no problem visualizing what Mohole looks like—but this confusion of names (and names that represent nonrepresentational concepts) and the objects they signify points to the poststructuralist concept of language as a set of arbitrary signifiers.

inadequacy» of language represses its own incompleteness through the logocentric operation of such constants as transcendental truth—and how this incompleteness is linked to the concept of terror discussed above. Although DeLillo has denied any interest in contemporary language theory,⁴ he is in close agreement with Derrida in his belief that it is language itself that orders reality by creating systems of safety that paradoxically seek to conceal the fact that reality (world) has no real connection with the symbols (word) that represent it. Like many postmodern linguistic philosophers, DeLillo feels we seek to create our sense of unity by locating a point (or constant) from which a routine, or system of safety, can be constructed. Yet, for DeLillo, it is not only the representational failure of mathematics, but of language itself, that is the undoing of all systems based upon centralized, transcendental truths.

It is in *The Names* that DeLillo most directly investigates the need to «subdue and codify» (80), to order the random, chaotic void of the universe into a meaningful pattern of repetition and reinforcement. Here James Axton, an American expatriate risk analyst living in Athens, attempts to find out «how far men will go to satisfy a pattern, or find a pattern, or fit together the elements of a pattern» (80) by himself trying to find meaning in the apparently random murders of a possible terrorist group. Terrorism becomes the hinge that breaks apart the system of safety called «routine» in the novel, revealing the chaos, the disorder, inherent in the system, the element that cannot be signified or codified into order, but only suppressed. This is the «surprise» of routine. As we continue to construct more elaborate systems of mechanized routine in order to subdue and codify the void, to satisfy the pattern, to find a unifying light that is only (in twentieth century terms) a cinematic illusion, we only increase the ability for terror to influence and overwhelm us.

DeLillo's central example of this process is the filmmaker Frank Volterra, who, defeated in his attempt to understand terrorism by trying to film one of the cult's murders (and thus represent terror on film), contemplates the solace offered by the mechanical routine of opening and operating Frank's Same Day Dry Cleaning. Volterra himself has been subdued and codified by his contact with chaos and seeks refuge in the ordinary, the repetitious, the predictable. Plots, whether as simple as Volterra's scheme, or as complex as the marginalized CIA agents' assassination of President Kennedy in *Libra*, are attempts to order or control chaos. For DeLillo it is such attempts at systematization itself that empower terror and death in the first place. In attempting to suppress terror, to master it, DeLillo's characters only succeed in unleashing it and in turn destroying

4. In a recent interview, Anthony DeCurtis asked DeLillo, «In *The Names* and some of your other books, language itself seems to be one of your subjects. That self-referential quality parallels a lot of theoretical work being done in philosophy and literary criticism these days. Do you read much writing of that kind?» DeLillo replied, «No, I don't» (*Introducing Don DeLillo*, p. 61).

their carefully plotted systems of safety. For DeLillo, all plots, whether terrorist plots or fictional plots, end up promoting death.⁵

If DeLillo seems obsessed with the nature of language and its relation to the world, DeLillo's relatively few interpreters are absolutely obsessed with the nature of language in his novels. *The Names*, in which language seems to be the central concern, has elicited particular attention to DeLillo's attitudes and uses of language. For example, Tom LeClair reduces DeLillo's penchant for «composing textual patterns» in *The Names* to «spatial form, a structure of correspondences, multiple subtexts,» and narrative perspectivism» (178). And David Bosworth writes:

The Names is about «naming,» about language, about its irrational, emotive, almost mystical power; about how, beneath the pale skin of their meaning, words link up in a kind of geometric abstract art that soothes our deepest fears and satisfies our most urgent need to rescue order from the chaos of our lives. . . DeLillo impresses on us his view that what matters about language is its «pattern,» its deeper rhythms and syntax, the design behind the signs rather than what they signify. (29-30)

This recalls Deleuze and Guattari's notion in *A Thousand Plateaus* of a sign as referring only to other signs, which add up to a temporary, amorphous continuum, a postsignifying regime of signs, rather than a supposedly stable, «paranoid-interpretive ideal» system of signification. It is the pattern that is important, not what the pattern signifies, since signs refer only to other signs. This revolutionary, countersignifying regime «marks a mobile and plural distribution, which itself determines functions and relations, which arrives at arrangements rather than totals, distributions rather than collections, which operates more by breaks, transitions, migrations, and accumulation than by combining units» (118). An «accurate» interpretation of exactly what a pattern signifies is impossible. Significance is not represented from, but projected upon, the world, which becomes a white wall or blank screen upon which meaning is produced.

Contrary to DeLillo's public statements about a lack of interest in contemporary theory, his ideas on language often mirror those of poststructuralist theorists like Deleuze and Guattari. DeLillo, however, is also a novelist, and most of his critics, in their

5. DeLillo's *Libra* both supports and undercuts the paranoid notion that all plots are seamless structures, logical connections that add up to a central interpretive truth. For DeLillo, the paranoid necessity to plot, to control the diverse multiplicity of the world through a carefully constructed system of safety, is a death-promoting activity. Nicholas Branch, the CIA employee in *Libra* charged with writing an official «history» of the Kennedy assassination, believes «there is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations. There is no need, he thinks, to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions» (*Libra*, p. 58).

enthusiasm for DeLillo's critiques of language, have lost sight of the human element in his novels, most specifically characterization. While his characters are often criticized as being flat, his major achievement in *The Names*, beyond any metafictional musings on the role of language, is an investigation into what it means to be a character, what it means to be human, in a world constructed of poststructuralist language. His theme is *intimacy*: intimacy with place, with people, with the world, with the past, and with language itself, which becomes, not a barrier against, but a means for, the sharing of human experience. What James Axton discovers, as he finally ascends the Acropolis at the end of the novel, is the power of memory (ultimately, a linguistic construct) to redeem the past through the act of narrative.

In *The Names* DeLillo refers to memory as «the faculty of absolution» (304). He is not, however, the first writer specifically to link memory and the Acropolis together; in one of his last writings, «A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis», Freud investigates the nature of «derealization,» a defense mechanism by which we categorize a piece of reality as strange, something we are anxious to keep out of our egos. In this «letter,» Freud relates his incredulity that the Acropolis really exists: «Incredulity of this kind is obviously an attempt to repudiate a piece of reality» (242). He finds that through derealization he is trying to repudiate a reality he knows will bring joy and insight. The Acropolis becomes a metaphor for a displaced past doubt or memory of doubt. Freud's experience on the Acropolis «culminated in a disturbance of memory and a falsification of the past» (246), a derealization, through fear, that protects against, but ultimately prevents, insight. *The Names* opens similarly, with Axton commenting, «For a long time I stayed away from the Acropolis. It daunted me, that somber rock» (3). Whether or not DeLillo was aware of Freud's experience, it helps us to understand why Axton, a man who has been in Athens for over a year, has avoided the Acropolis: «The weight and moment of those worked stones promised to make the business of seeing them a complicated one. So much converges there. It's what we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion. There are obligations attached to such a visit» (3). Axton's derealization and its rescuing of order from madness are keeping him away from intimacy, intimacy with beauty, dignity, order, proportion: in other words, according to DeLillo, what makes us human.

The shattered stones of the Acropolis, as it turns out, contain cultural memory. According to DeLillo in *Mao II*, it is memory as a repository of meaning that terrorism seeks to destroy through its attacks on innocent people:

Maybe that was it. When you inflict punishment on someone who is not guilty, when you fill rooms with innocent victims, you begin to empty the world of meaning and erect a separate mental state, the mind consuming what's outside itself, replacing real things with plots and fictions. One fiction taking the world narrowly into itself, the other fiction pushing out toward the social order, trying to unfold into it. (200)

The cinematic metaphor of projecting meaning out onto the blank screen of the world is once again evident here. And the use of language for creating sheer plots and fictions is the terror of the supposedly nameless cult in *The Names*. They employ names themselves, the repositories of safety, order, and meaning, as the instrument of terror, of death, and of chaos. The fiction, the plot, that they try to push out into the social order is that there is a special meaning in the correspondence of a particular person's initials with the initials of a particular place, enough to make that person qualify as a victim of the cult. A highly arbitrary signifier/signified relationship is presented as the establishment of a reality. This relationship, which equates the need for order with terror itself, contradicts the very notion of a controlling order. As DeLillo's Owen Brademas, an archeologist who specializes in studying the alphabet, remarks to Axton:

These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death. (308)

The making of meaning, the means of putting off or covering up the fundamental terror of the world, becomes, in the hands of the cult, another way of promoting death. Ironically, the cult, through their promotion of terror and death, is seeking a means of intimacy: their desire to kill is the very thing that keeps the individual members of the cult together as a group. They are people who have a common purpose. This is a perversion of the intimacy that Axton himself has been unable to face in his own life and his involvement with the places and people around him.

As a system of stability, as a barrier against having to deal with terror on a personal as well as a political level, Axton clings to the clichéd notion of the American as tourist in a multinational world. «I go everywhere twice. Once to get the wrong impression, once to strengthen it» (255). For knowledge implies intimacy, and once intimacy is achieved, the category of tourist disappears. Axton is well aware of this power of knowledge to bring intimacy:

I began to think of myself as a perennial tourist. There was something agreeable about this. To be a tourist is to escape accountability. You're able to drift across continents and languages, suspending the operation of sound thought. Tourism is the march of stupidity. You're expected to be stupid... being stupid is the pattern, the level and the norm... I was happy not knowing. I wanted to preserve the surprise in an opaque medium. This happened many times in large and small ways. Athens was my legal home but I wasn't ready to give up tourism, even here. (43-44)

Paradoxically, patterns such as «being stupid,» repetitions that contain the illusion of control, also contain what DeLillo calls the «surprise» of routine. For part of being

a tourist, of not knowing a place, is to be continually surprised by it: «My life was full of routine surprises. One day I was watching runners from Marathon dodge taxis near the Athens Hilton, the next I was turning a corner in Istanbul to see a gypsy leading a bear on a leash» (43). Without connection, without intimacy, and caught in a routine that only looks forward to the next surprise that itself violates (then becomes a part of) the routine, Axton's life is the life of the perennial tourist, «with nothing to think about but the next shapeless event» (44).

The real surprise is that, in this disconnected world of pattern and repetition, terror itself has become commonplace: «There had been over five thousand terrorist incidents in the last decade. Kidnappings were routine business. Ransom requests for five million dollars were not unusual. In this decade a quarter of a billion dollars in ransom money had been paid to terrorists» (46). Making his living from this situation, Axton works as a risk analyst; his boss, George Rowser, uses the information Axton gathers through his travels to convince insurance companies to provide ransom insurance for executives who could be targets of kidnappings and extortion attempts. Ironically, having ransom insurance makes an executive an even more likely target for terrorists, since they know the company will pay. For Axton, who has always worked freelance, working for Rowser offers the safety of routine in a way that also seems to «manage» terror: «I'd have a steady job, an office, a secretary, a schedule and clear-cut responsibilities» (49). Terror has become merely another cost to be factored in for Americans doing business overseas and ironically, the shaky foundation for Axton's supposedly stable employment. In the world of international corporations and cartels, terror has been subdued and codified.

Patterns, routines, connections are the grids that human beings impose on chaos to provide the illusion of order and safety. Beneath the pattern, however, is the darkness of a non-codifiable terror. According to Owen Brademas, at night, «the things of the world are no longer discrete. All the day's layers and distinctions fade in the dark. Night is continuous» (81). What violates the authority of pattern is that something always comes along that disrupts the pattern, that is not part of the pattern. No matter how complete a pattern may seem to be, there is always a surprise growing out of the routine system, a violation of routine that points out the incompleteness of the pattern. So a new pattern is constructed that assimilates the surprise into a new routine. But ultimately, only night, terror, chaos are continuous, always there to unravel the carefully constructed structures of daylight and safety.

The cult's «random» killings point to a revelation of the power of chaos and terror in *The Names*, of course, but in Axton's world even terror itself can become routine, codifiable, part of the pattern. It is Owen, the master of languages, who suggests that there is sense, meaning, pattern behind the killings, and Axton, unable or unwilling to become intimate with the places and people in his own life, still is caught in a quest to discover what that meaning is. Somehow, it is intimately connected with the cult's interest in the alphabet.

According to DeLillo, language is the medium we use to make the connections, to construct the patterns that give meaning to our lives. Yet language functions as a thin veneer to cover the fact that «night is continuous.» It even functions as what he metaphorically calls «one-sentence stories»:

All these places were one-sentence stories to us. Someone would turn up, utter a sentence about foot-long lizards in his hotel room in Niamey, and this became the solid matter of the place, the means we used to fix it in our minds. The sentence was effective, overshadowing deeper fears, hesitations, a rife disquiet. (94)

But these one-sentence stories are not representative of the place, nor do they succeed in containing the terror of the unknown. Axton, for example, always lies to his concierge about where he is going:

But the lies began to worry me. . . there was something metaphysically disturbing about them. A grave misplacement. They were not simple but complex. What was I tampering with, the human faith in naming, the lifelong system of images in Niko's brain? I was leaving behind in the person of the concierge an enormous discrepancy between my uttered journey and the actual movements I made in the external world, a four-thousand-mile fiction, a deep lie. (103)

By tampering with «the human faith in naming,» Axton's lies and the cult's murders reveal the arbitrary relationship between the world and the words with which we attempt to represent it. Our patterns, our routines, are incapable of ordering chaos and terror because the very medium they are constructed of is unstable and arbitrary. For DeLillo, language, pattern, routine are, at best, fragmentary and incomplete structures of stability.

But they are also all we have to use in order to construct meaning in our lives. The meaning of the present, according to DeLillo, is built upon how we verbally arrange the fragments of the past. Through pattern, through connection, the past can communicate to the present; only in that sense «one age speaks to another» (80). Interpretation, repetition of meaning, plays a key role in DeLillo's notion of intimacy, intimacy with both the present and the past. Axton comes to believe in the power of memory to connect the past and the present, to give meaning to life. Looking back on what he's been through and the people he's known, he says:

These are among the people I've tried to know twice, the second time in memory and language. Through them, myself. They are what I've become, in ways I don't understand but which I believe will accrue to a rounded truth, a second life for me as well as for them. (329)

This second life, or rounded truth, is the truth of fiction, formed through narrative reworking and connection. The pattern of memory and narrative becomes the truth, no matter what the pattern may signify outside itself. It is the act of fiction that DeLillo most strongly supports here, the narrative of a life reconstructed and reworked through memory and provisional, fictive patterns.

No longer seeking to avoid insight through the process of derealization, Axton finally ascends the Acropolis with a mass of other tourists. It is this connection with the mass of humanity, this intimacy with people and place, that defines what it means to be human:

I walk to the east face of the temple, so much space and openness, lost walls, pediments, roof, a grief for what has escaped containment. And this is what I mainly learned up there, that the Parthenon was not a thing to study but to feel. It wasn't aloof, rational, timeless, pure. I couldn't locate the serenity of the place, the logic and steady sense. It wasn't a relic species of dead Greece but part of the living city below it. This was a surprise. I'd thought it was a separate thing, the sacred height, intact in its Doric order. I hadn't expected a human feeling to emerge from the stones but this is what I found, deeper than the art and mathematics embodied in the structure, the optical exactitudes. I found a cry for pity. This is what remains to the mauled stones in their blue surround, this open cry, this voice we know as our own. (330)

In the routine of being a tourist, Axton now finds a surprise, the connected intimacy of the dead past of the Acropolis with the living present of Athens. The art, the mathematics, the structure itself become meaningless by themselves, but the memory of the past, connected with the present, provides Axton with intimacy, with pity for the rest of his fellow tourists, all seeking to fill the emptiness and fear of the self and the world. On this ancient foundation of Western civilization, Axton finds that he is no longer alone. «This is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk. Everyone is talking. I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is what we bring to the temple, no prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language» (p. 331). It is in this Babel of languages that Axton discovers how we seek to fill the void, through intimacy with language, «the fallen wonder of the world» (339).

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