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Don DeLillo and the Ghost of Language

Abstract. It is difficult to provide an insightful overview of Don DeLillo's fiction without commenting upon the significance that language plays in his novels—not as a craft, but as an object of an in-depth, ongoing study. To DeLillo, language seems to inhabit a paradoxical, liminal space between material existence and inexistence. On the one hand, the author is famous for his masterful control over his words, on the other, he recognizes a mysterious force with which the words affect literature independently of its creator in a possession-like manner. In my article, I discuss DeLillo's reflections on language by analyzing *The Body Artist*, his shortest and arguably most unusual novel, on the surface a strange kind of a ghost story, but beyond that, a profound reflection on language, trauma and contemporary art. I focus on the novel's semi-aphasic character, Mr. Tuttle, to explore the spectral quality in DeLillo's language, connecting it to Jacques Derrida's influential theoretical reflection on the matter.

Keywords: Don DeLillo; language; ghost, haunting; contemporary art; trauma; Jacques Derrida.

The ghost is a fascinating creature that inhabits a liminal space between tangible presence and inexistence. With its ambiguous ontological status, the spectre has obtained a significant allegorical potential in a time of feverish attempts of explaining absolutely everything. The ghost exposes the futility of the task and the naivety of its assumptions. I would like to argue that the figure of the ghost is instrumental in exposing a shift in Don DeLillo's

approach to the problem of language that occurred between his early and his mature fiction. DeLillo's much acknowledged debt to Samuel Beckett is limited in relation to language, as I will attempt to show, to his earlier fiction and is most exposed in such works as *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972), *Ratner's Star* (1976), and it peaks in *The Names* (1982), a novel most acutely focused on language prior to *The Body Artist* (2001). The precise moment in which the shift in DeLillo's thinking about language occurs is difficult to pinpoint, because the successive novels, *White Noise* (1985), *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991) and *Underworld* (1997) devote considerably little attention to the problem of language as separate from other issues such as media, politics, art and religion. In *The Names* the rudimentary plotline seems to be an excuse for an examination of language itself. With the stone as the central symbol in the novel, DeLillo calls on Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) as he sets his action at a typically postmodern intersection of arbitrariness and death. In *The Body Artist* the stone is replaced with the ghost, a blatantly intangible symbol with a distant ring of transcendence, a ray of hope in a novel on trauma triggered by death.

The Body Artist is an unlikely ghost story from one of the figureheads of American postmodernism. DeLillo's position on the literary stage was established during the aforementioned transitory period marked by the publications of *White Noise*, *Libra* and *Mao II* between 1985 and 1991, after which he dedicated the better part of the 1990s to his monumental *Underworld* (1997), by many considered to be his *opus magnum*. The contrast between *Underworld* and *The Body Artist* is unprecedented within DeLillo's *oeuvre*¹. While the former is epic in scale, as it sets dozens of significant characters against numerous cityscapes and landscapes, the latter is intimate, set in an old secluded house inhabited by just three, one of whom dies at the beginning, and another might not even be real. *Underworld* with its collage of people and places attempts to collect, distill and analyze the experience of the American society in the second half of the 20th century. *The Body Artist* tells the story of grave personal loss transformed into a work of art by the eponymous Lauren Hartke.

Although indeed the short novel's focus seems to rest on trauma and the cathartic power of art, it can be noted that *The Body Artist* is also a profound reflection on language². And while, as John N. Duvall notices, "[c]hallenged

¹ Possibly with the exception of *Amazons*, published in 1980 under the pen name Cleo Birdwell.

² A more linguistic study of DeLillo's language in *The Body Artist* has been conducted by Cleopatra Kontoulis and Eliza Kitis in their article "Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*: Time,

on two fronts, DeLillo, like the best postmodern novelists, creates virtuoso performances that affirm the value of language as a medium” (2008: 8), I would argue that DeLillo does question language’s capacity to depict human experience, simultaneously reinforcing its position not as a mediating tool, but rather as a shaping factor. In other words, to DeLillo language not so much represents an external reality as it simultaneously creates an internal one, and challenges the distinction between the two. This conviction reveals his debt to Samuel Beckett as discussed not only by Peter Boxall, the author of *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (2009), but also Mark Osteen, Christian Moraru, Tony Tanner and others. It is a debt that DeLillo himself acknowledges and speaks openly about in an act of literary ventriloquism in *Mao II*: “Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings” (1992: 157). I would like to argue that this influence is particularly important to DeLillo’s early fiction, a fiction dominated by formal problems, amongst which language enjoys a particular sense of importance. DeLillo’s early view on language can be illustrated well with the following famous passage taken from *Molloy*:

They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yes, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally between my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn about. This raised a problem which I first solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones. And when the desire to suck took hold of me again, I drew again on the right pocket of my greatcoat, certain of not taking the same stone as the last time. And while I sucked

Language and Grief,” which I will briefly mention in the concluding part of my argument. The most influential study of language in DeLillo’s *oeuvre* was published by David Cowart, *Don DeLillo and the Physics of Language* in 2002. In Part III “The Word Beyond Speech” Cowart examines the language in *Underworld* and *The Body Artist* under the coined term DeLillolalia, a word which hints at transcendence as it makes a clear reference to glossolalia, which I discuss in the concluding passages of this article.

it I rearranged the other stones in the way I have just described. And so on. (Beckett 2009: 69)

In the fragment above we can see both the futility of the act of sucking stones and its compulsiveness. I have decided to quote the passage in full because it aptly illustrates the way Beckett uses language, a way that brings together lack of purpose with obsession. The stones, themselves imprecisely named, have no nutritional value, but they can be arranged in sequences and systems. Thus they become both conspicuously material and abstract. Placed in Molloy's mouth they call on both: food and words. As I will argue, DeLillo's words, in his earlier fiction, are like Beckett's stones, in the way they form arbitrary systems that carry no substance, but still are obsessively perpetuated. His more mature fiction will abandon the stone as a symbol of language for a more elaborate one, as I will attempt to show, that of a ghost.

Before setting off to write *The Body Artist*, DeLillo explored the paradoxical quality of language in his 1982 novel *The Names*, which tells the story of a mysterious murdering cult in Greece. As the plot unveils, we learn the rule that governs the choice of seemingly random victims: they die when they enter a town whose name corresponds with their initials. The book explores the perversity of the relationship between the arbitrariness of language and the reality of death. The architectural dig that brings together the novel's characters also binds abstract words with tangible stones in the ancient form of engravings:

The tablet at Ras Shamrah said nothing. It was inscribed with the alphabet itself. I find this is all I want to know about the people who lived there. The shapes of their letters and the material they used. Fire-hardened clay, dense black basalt, marble with a ferrous content. These things I lay my hands against, feel where the words have been cut. And the eye takes in those beautiful shapes. So strange and reawakening. It goes deeper than conversations, riddles. (DeLillo 1983: 35–36)

In *The Names* DeLillo still finds the stone a valid symbol, which nearly twenty years later will no longer be the case. The compulsive use of language together with a structural arbitrariness, clearly influenced by the thought of Ferdinand de Saussure and his followers, will be replaced with a more ephemeral sense of transcendence embodied by the ghost. Beckett's grim futility of communication will give way to a more hopeful, spiritual

symbol that is born out of a rather humble acceptance of our limitations in understanding the ways in which we speak to each other.

The ghost, with its inherent ontological doubt in the face of the “certain” world, allows DeLillo to take his considerations further than the blatantly material stone does. The plot of *The Body Artist* is divided into three parts: in the first one we witness a regular, painfully mundane morning in the life of Lauren Hartke and her filmmaker husband Rey Robles, a morning preceding his suicide:

He sat with the newspaper, stirring his coffee. It was his coffee and his cup. They shared the newspaper but it was actually, unspokenly, hers.

“I want to say something but what.”

She ran water from the tap and seemed to notice. It was the first time she’d ever noticed this.

“About the house. This is what it is,” he said. “Something I meant to tell you.”

She noticed how water from the tap turned opaque in seconds. It ran silvery and clear and then in seconds turned opaque and how curious it seemed that in all these months and all these times in which she’d run water from the kitchen tap she’d never noticed how the water ran clear at first and then went not murky exactly but opaque, or maybe it hadn’t happened before, or she’d noticed and forgotten. (DeLillo: 2001: loc. 13–19)

Although the two speak to each other in a way that would seemingly point to the inefficacy of communication, they do communicate, as if in spite of the words uttered. A futility, similar to Beckett’s, is counterbalanced by an understanding that seems extratextual.

The middle section of the novel discusses the protagonist’s relationship with the mysterious house guest. As this part will form the basis of the argument, I will explore it in more detail separately.

The concluding pages of *The Body Artist* are an account of the performance piece that Hartke creates as a result of her husband’s death, and her subsequent contacts with Mr. Tuttle. Narrated in the form of a journalistic report, the passage devoted to Hartke’s performance depicts the transformation that the body artist subjects herself to. After we have learned of the painful stages of preparation which include sanding and bleaching her body (DeLillo 2001: loc. 714–17, 801–5), DeLillo makes his artist revisit the most controversial pillars of the history of conceptual art:

There is the man who stands in an art gallery while a colleague fires bullets into his arm. This is art. There is the lavishly tattooed man who has himself fitted with a crown of thorns. This is art. Hartke's work is not self-strutting or self-lacerating. She is acting, always in the process of becoming another or exploring some root identity. There is the woman who makes paintings with her vagina. This is art. There are the naked man and woman who charge into each other repeatedly at increasing speeds. This is art, sex and aggression. There is the man in women's bloody underwear who humps a mountain of hamburger meat. This is art, sex, aggression, cultural criticism and truth. There is the man who drives nails into his penis. This is just truth. (DeLillo 2001: loc. 1010–16)

This continues until, finally, Hartke's transformation transgresses the boundaries of art while she delivers her body as an offering to a ghost-like possession:

Hartke's piece begins with an ancient Japanese woman on a bare stage, gesturing in the stylized manner of Noh drama, and it ends seventy-five minutes later with a naked man, emaciated and aphasic, trying desperately to tell us something. I saw two of the three performances and I have no idea how Hartke alters her body and voice. She will speak on the subject only in general terms. (DeLillo 2001: loc. 1016–19)

This transcendence brings closure to the trauma caused by her husband's passing. To the present article, however, it is the novel's middle section that is of most importance, as it focuses acutely on the ghostly qualities of language.

Although references to "a presence" in the house are made even before Rey's suicide, Mr. Tuttle makes himself apparent to Lauren only after her husband dies. The visitor is characterized by ambiguity; even the name that we call him is not a name he uses himself—he is called Mr. Tuttle by Lauren because of his physical resemblance to her former teacher. The name is thus vague even beyond the inherent arbitrariness of names that we are accustomed to. It can be further argued that on the intertextual level, it refers to Captain Tuttle, a non-existent soldier in the Korean War invented by none other than Captain Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce, the protagonist prankster from the famous American sitcom *M*A*S*H*³. In the show the

³ This remark was made by Mark Tardi during a conference discussion in Białystok on September 8th 2012.

identity of Captain Tuttle is used by the protagonist to fuel a complex scheme consisting in giving away military supplies to charity. If we chose to include this intertextual joke into our interpretation of the novel, it would only reinforce the feeling of vagueness surrounding Mr. Tuttle, and it would do so in a twofold way: due to the humor and the intertextuality.

In DeLillo's novel, Tuttle's physical appearance itself is paradoxical in nature: on the one hand, it is rather concrete: "[h]e was smallish and fine-bodied and at first she thought he was a kid, sandy-haired and roused from deep sleep, or medicated maybe" (DeLillo 2001: loc. 361:362); on the other, his looks are characterized by a distinct vagueness: "[h]is chin was sunken back, severely receded, giving his face an unfinished look, and his hair was wiry and snagged, with jutting clumps. She had to concentrate to note these features. She looked at him and had to look again. There was something elusive in his aspect, moment to moment, a thinness of physical address" (DeLillo 2001: loc. 395–397). Throughout the story, we never discover whether Mr. Tuttle is a real person, a mental asylum escapee, a figment of Hartke's traumatized mind, or indeed, a spectre. The choice between these three versions prefigures the interpretation of the novel. If we settle on the first option, our reading of *The Body Artist* will be a neo-realistic one; if we choose the second, trauma theory should guarantee a fertile interpretation; whereas if we decide to treat Tuttle as a ghost and place him in the context of, for instance, American gothic, we will be wide of the mark. I have initially chosen this path and quickly realized that the story by all accounts should be scary, and yet it is not; it does feature a woman alone in a secluded house shortly after her husband's suicide and, moreover, when Tuttle speaks, his words echo the words of her dead husband. Nevertheless, the generic framework that DeLillo establishes on the level of the plot is immediately broken on the level of language. *The Body Artist* is written in such a way that it creates the impression of being persistently not scary. In a sense, therefore, the novel itself, much like its character, Tuttle, inhabits a liminal space. This realization propels me towards a metafictional and metalinguistic interpretation.

Mr. Tuttle's most unusual quality is not his looks, nor is it his ability to appear and disappear as he wishes, but rather it is the way he speaks. His utterances can be classified in two groups; either they are echoes of the conversations that he had overheard, and these retain the tones and mannerisms of the original speakers, or they are short, almost nonsensical expressions that seem to escape the readers, but at the same time are vaguely understandable. The first category brings to mind Molloy sucking on stones; speech as such offers nothing, it is a mere compulsive repetition of set phrases.

It also echoes much of our everyday communication, small talk, repeating semantically empty phrases, puns and platitudes.⁴ In this way, DeLillo does not entirely shed Beckett's influence on his understanding of language. The second category seems like a set of extreme examples of Jacques Derrida's *différance*, which add nuance to his former convictions. Let us consider the following: "I know how much this house. Alone by the sea" (DeLillo 2001: loc. 423); or:

"What do you see?" she said, gesturing toward the boat and the advancing cloudline. "The trees are some of them," he said. "Bending. Swaying in the wind. Those are birches. The white ones. Those are called paper birches." "The white ones." "The white ones. But beyond the trees." "Beyond the trees." "Out there," she said. He looked a while. "It rained very much." "It will rain. It is going to rain," she said. (DeLillo 2001: loc. 377–383)

Meaning in these passages, although vague and distant, is not altogether absent, for it does not depart without leaving traces.

In Derrida's view, communication is always partial, but not so much because language is an inadequate representation of the external world, but rather because we understand each other due to the differences between the words we employ as we speak or write (Stocker 2006: 29–30). The incompleteness is crucial to the spectral quality of language, and in the novel, as I have argued earlier, it is one of Tuttle's defining qualities. In *The Body Artist* a significant part of our ability to grasp Tuttle's words comes from the fact that the word "I" differs from "know," etc., but also from the fact that each word is different from each other word as they fulfill the particular functions within the sentences. This conviction echoes Saussure's theory of the sign, but only to an extent, as in Derrida's view, difference is inseparable from the notion of meaning's indispensable deferral, an unattainable quality in the ideal, which becomes the guarantee of language's infinite potential (Sonderregger 1997: 195) and its inherent deficiency. Whilst discussing Saussure in his *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida also helps to account for the inevitable emergence of *traces* implied in the notion of *différance*:

[The] impossibility of reanimating absolutely the manifest evidence of an originary presence refers us therefore to an absolute past. That is what authorised us to call *trace* that which does not

⁴ In DeLillo's debut, *Americana*, the corporate catch phrase "I've been hearing good things about you" is an excellent example of such communication.

let itself be summed up in the simplicity of a present. It could in fact have been objected that, in the indecomposable synthesis of temporalisation, protection is as indispensable as retention. And their two dimensions are not added up but the one implies the other in a strange fashion. To be sure, what is anticipated in protection does not sever the present any less from its self-identity than does that which is retained in the trace. But if anticipation were privileged, the irreducibility of the always-already-there and the fundamental passivity that is called time would risk effacement. On the other hand, if the trace refers to an absolute past, it is because it obliges us to think a past that can no longer be understood in the form of a modified presence, as a present-past. Since past has always signified present-past, the absolute past that is retained in the trace no longer rigorously merits the name "past." Another name to erase, especially since the strange movement of the trace proclaims as much as it recalls: difference defers-differs [differs]. (Derrida 1997: 67)

The formulations used by Tuttle, such as "I know how much this house" quoted above, not only illustrate, but also embody Derrida's point. With their incompleteness, DeLillo asserts the ultimate elusiveness of the ideal, as observed by Sonderegger.

I would like to conclude by noticing that, elusive as it may be, DeLillo's language in *The Body Artist* communicates, as opposed to the language in *The Names*: "the language of *The Body Artist* is a language that connects rather than separates, as it reflects possibilities in the broader, universal discourse in which humans partake in some form or other" (Kontoulis and Kitis 2011: 226). In this way, the characters, if only partially, are able to transcend their solipsistic worlds. The stone, ultimately dead, excludes any possibility of such transcendence, the ghost, dead only in part, suggests at least a hope of a limited connection.

Tuttle's speech, strange as it may seem, presents merely language in its extremity, a distilled version of language, the *spirit* of language. This irresistible pun, despite its seemingly unacademic character, is an apt reflection of DeLillo's mature view on language and the shaping quality it has on the way we think about the world around us.

The Names highlights language's agency in reference to human life, and indeed death, with the linguistic murder cult providing the driving force of its plot. In other words, *The Names* presents language as a tangible presence with a disturbing power over its users, a presence that to a large extent can be deemed as arbitrary. In less extreme cases, this power manifests itself

in the way words can communicate irrespectively of the speaker. DeLillo acknowledged the paradoxical quality of language as both the means and the agent of communication in an interview for the *Paris Review*: “You want to exercise your will, bend the language your way, bend the world your way. You want to control the flow of impulses, images, words, faces, ideas. But there’s a higher place, a secret aspiration. You want to let go. You want to lose yourself in language, become a carrier or messenger” (Begley 1993). *The Names* provides an excellent example of this duality.

The Body Artist not only reaffirms, but also reinforces and expands DeLillo’s early observation of the creating and creative capacity of language. Here, the power of language is as tangible as it was in the case of *The Names*, but in addition, it is also frustratingly elusive. It bears resemblance to glossolalia, which DeLillo discussed with Thomas LeClaire⁵. To him, the phenomenon is “interesting, because it suggests there’s another way to speak, there’s a very different language lurking somewhere in the brain” (LeClaire 1982: 25). Speaking in tongues unambiguously connotes a spectral presence permeating and taking possession of a body. Incidentally, the act of transformation that concludes Lauren Hartke’s performance bears an uncanny resemblance to a ghostly possession, where the boundary between the internal and the external is no longer valid. The act of transformation becomes an act of transcendence, largely unaccounted for in DeLillo’s earlier prose. Although, for obvious reasons, DeLillo’s plots are encrusted with extreme examples of the ghostly qualities of language, it is clear that these properties are equally legitimate in our daily communication, for, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, we must conclude that none of us can effectively use speech of our own devising (1986: 88–89), and hence we are possessed by the words we utter.

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⁵ Interestingly enough the interview took place in 1979 in Greece, where DeLillo was gathering material for *The Names*.

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