

9/11 and the Psychic Trauma Novel:
Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Although Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) has been one of the most influential 9/11 novels written to this day, it did not meet the expectations of reviewers when it was published. It is necessary to bear in mind that 9/11 can be understood both as a psychic/personal trauma and a cultural/collective one since it was a wound not only in the mind of those directly affected by the tragedy but also in the nation's sense of identity. Despite DeLillo's previous interest in cultural issues, he chose to write a 9/11 psychic —rather than cultural— trauma novel. This paper analyses the literary techniques and means of representation used in the novel to reflect the effects of traumatic memory and ponders the advantages and shortcomings of psychic trauma novels in the representation of traumas that affect society at large.

Keywords: trauma studies; *Falling Man*; Don DeLillo; trauma fiction; 9/11 fiction; contemporary American literature

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El 11 de septiembre y la novela de trauma
psicológico: *Falling Man*, de Don DeLillo

A pesar de que la novela de Don DeLillo *Falling Man* (2007) ha sido una de las novelas del 11-S más influyentes hasta la actualidad, no estuvo a la altura de las expectativas de los críticos cuando se publicó. Hay que tener en cuenta que el 11-S se puede entender tanto como un trauma psicológico/personal como un trauma cultural/colectivo, puesto que fue una herida no sólo en la mente de los afectados directamente por la tragedia, sino también en el sentido de identidad de la nación. A pesar del interés previo de DeLillo por los temas culturales, el autor eligió escribir una novela de trauma psicológico y no de trauma cultural. Este artículo analiza las técnicas literarias y los modos de representación utilizados en la novela para reflejar los efectos de la memoria traumática y considera las ventajas y desventajas de las novelas de trauma psicológico en la representación de traumas que afectan a la sociedad en general.

Palabras clave: estudios de trauma; *Falling Man*; Don DeLillo; ficción de trauma; ficción del 11 de septiembre; literatura norteamericana contemporánea

1. INTRODUCTION

Out of the growing list of fictional works dealing directly or indirectly with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) has emerged as one of the most well-known and most anticipated trauma novels written in the last ten years.¹ Since DeLillo had previously written about global capitalism, terrorism, conspiracies, death and the media, some readers and critics expected him to write an epic, panoramic, political novel that would illuminate the cultural zeitgeist following 9/11. However, *Falling Man* deals with the domestic and intimate rather than the panoramic and public. It is not the cultural trauma novel that some critics expected. In this sense, Richard Gray's position is representative since he believes that *Falling Man* "adds next to nothing to our understanding of the trauma at the heart of the action. In fact, it evades that trauma, it suppresses its urgency and disguises its difference by inserting it in a series of familiar tropes" (2011: 28). Much of the disappointment expressed by critics like Gray stems from a misconception about the concept of trauma and about the basic differences between psychic trauma novels that capture the effect of suffering on the mind of the individual and cultural trauma novels that focus on the social and cultural consequences of the events.

To understand the difference between these two types of trauma novels we need to take into account that the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States can be considered both a cultural trauma that shattered the nation's sense of identity and a psychic trauma that specifically affected many individual people and their sense of being. Cultural trauma occurs when members of a community feel they have been subjected to a dreadful event that affects their group consciousness to the extent that it marks their memories and changes their future identity in fundamental ways (Alexander 2004: 1). Cultural trauma is socially mediated and power structures and social agents play a very important role in the process of its construction: there is a painful injury to the collectivity, victims are established and responsibility is attributed (22). As a result of this type of trauma the community's sense of identity may either solidify or be disrupted. However, 9/11 was not just a symbolic cultural trauma for the nation; it was also a psychic trauma for many people in New York City. According to Cathy Caruth, psychic trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim's experience of time, self and the world and that causes great emotional anguish in the individual (1996: 3-4). In the case of 9/11 the degree of traumatic psychic response was different for those that watched it on TV, those that witnessed it live outside the towers and those who were inside the towers. It is important to bear in mind that personal/psychic trauma and collective/cultural trauma work in different ways and have different effects. Whereas psychic trauma is a wound on the mind, cultural trauma is a wound on group consciousness as a whole.

The distinction between cultural and psychic trauma is important because the response to them also differs. Survivors of personal traumatic experiences may suffer

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from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is a delayed response that takes the form of repeated hallucinations, nightmares, flashbacks, somatic reactions, behaviours stemming from the event and general numbing (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 173). By contrast, the repression of cultural trauma is more complex, mainly due to its public nature, although mass denial may take place at some stage. As Neil J. Smelser has claimed, the temporal amnesia and the belated return of the trauma experience through hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks which the victims of personal, psychic trauma experience in their minds can be compared to the way different groups in the public arena may defend mass forgetting, or may want to keep the event in the public consciousness for ideological reasons (2004: 53). The same event can be experienced in a direct and personal way as an individual trauma and also as a collective trauma when the victim's sense of collective identity is affected. Many people experienced 9/11 as both individual and cultural trauma and, in the aftermath, the difference between these two types of trauma was blurred. Marc Redfield has also introduced a third term, 'virtual trauma', to refer to the September 11 attacks as mediated events. Unlike other culturally traumatic occasions, 9/11 was a singular event of miniscule material damage on a national scale but, nevertheless, it entered representation "as reproducible, fungible, displaced, split off from itself" (2009: 4). As a mediated event it was traumatic in a symbolic way, not so much for the actual damage it caused but for what it represented.

Don DeLillo has dealt with all these types of trauma during his career. For example, in *Underworld* (1997) we see the combination of Nick Shay's psychic trauma caused by his accidental killing of one of his friends and the cultural trauma of the Cold War in the United States. In the case of 9/11 DeLillo has also dealt with both types of trauma but has used different genres to express the cultural and the psychic consequences of the events. In his essay 'In the Ruins of the Future', written just three months after 9/11, he focuses on the cultural consequences of the event on the nation, whereas in his novel *Falling Man* he deals instead with the psychological consequences and traumatic effects of the attacks on a few individuals. The aim of this essay is to explore DeLillo's choice of a psychic trauma novel rather than the ambitious great American novel everybody expected him to write after the publication of his essay and in the face of his previous novels. I will also discuss the literary techniques and means of representation that allow the author to offer a perspective that only a trauma novel of this type can provide.

2. NON-FICTION AND THE SHORTCOMINGS OF PSYCHIC TRAUMA FICTION

When writers first tried to represent 9/11 in literature they focused mainly on psychic trauma and the domestic, disregarding the political and cultural consequences of the tragedy. This is the case of novels like Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2004), Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the Wall* (2004), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Reynolds Price's *The Good Priest's Son* (2005), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), Julia Glass's *The Whole World*

Over (2006), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), and Helen Schulman's *A Day on the Beach* (2007), among others. However, cultural critics and newspaper reviewers expected to see in this fiction the consequences of the cultural and collective trauma of 9/11. The failure to distinguish between psychic and cultural trauma led to the impossibility of meeting the critics' expectations. Psychic trauma is anti-narrative since victims cannot put into words what happened to them. Thus, some writers sought ways to represent the experience of 9/11 through experimental literary techniques and the introduction of images to capture the horror of the traumatic experience without simplifying it. On the other hand, cultural critics expected political or historical novels that would contain/address the trauma experience of the nation as a whole. Even Don DeLillo in his essay 'In the Ruins of the Future' suggested that literature had the power to create a collective narrative of 9/11, a counternarrative capable of opposing the official narrative and those that simplify the events (2001).² This had already been demanded from the 9/11 Commission Report that, according to Craig A. Warren, illustrated "the public's hunger for literature as a means of shaping national identity" (2007: 534). However, this thirst for a great 9/11 American novel that shows the implications of and the social changes following from the events does not as yet seem to have been quenched by literature. This is a failure that various voices have denounced profusely in recent years (Rothberg 2009; Randall 2011; Gray 2009, 2011).

DeLillo's choice of psychic, personal trauma has to do with a more general question about the role of literature and what it can offer in terms of understanding and relating to the enormity of the events. As Paula Martín Salván argues, through his books DeLillo has defended the independence of literature from history and the power literature has to follow different rules and to even be a consolation or an alternative to history (2009: 208). Lianne, one of the characters in *Falling Man*, claims in the aftermath of the attacks: "People read poems. People I know, they read poetry to ease the shock and pain, give them a kind of space, something beautiful in language," she said, 'to bring comfort or composure. I don't read poems. I read newspapers. I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy'" (2007: 42). Lianne chooses non-fiction (newspapers) over art (poems). However, the choice is not as easy as it seems since on several occasions Lianne is drawn towards two paintings her mother owns, two of Giorgio Morandi's still lives, in which she sees the towers in the long bottle and dark objects in the composition. Unlike newspapers, art may not provide answers but Lianne still needs art to come to terms with the images that haunt her mind and that are freed through Morandi's paintings. In the same way, she tries to interpret the meaning behind the performance of an artist that re-enacts the falling of people from the Twin Towers on 9/11. As Ann Kaplan has pointed out, trauma can be 'translated' and understood via art in order to work through the pain it causes while the wound is still open in society (2005: 19). In spite of her preference for newspapers, Lianne uses the painting and the performance as mediators of her own pain.

² For a thorough analysis of DeLillo's essay see Kauffman (2008: 353).

Lianne's ambiguous attitude towards art parallels the choice that many writers had to make between political novels and novels of psychic trauma when representing 9/11. This division seems to have also marked the way literary critics have reviewed 9/11 fiction. For example, Richard Gray divides this fiction into two types of novels: those that have failed to come up with an adequate answer to the event and those that "get it right" (2011: 17).³ The former represent a retreat into domesticity and family and "dissolve public crisis in the comforts of the personal" (17), whereas the latter resist silence and have a transnational context that overcomes opposition. It is always difficult to decide when a novel 'gets it right'. In fact to talk in such terms is already suspicious, even though both types of novels exist and offer different things to readers. We cannot forget that, unlike journalism, the value of the novel does not just lie in its power to provide context, immediacy and information.

The initial reception of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* is especially interesting because the author's previous fiction indicated that he seemed destined to write about 9/11 as a cultural and political event of social consequences, that he would 'get it right', in Gray's words. Some reviewers of *Falling Man* analysed the subject of DeLillo's previous books in connection with 9/11 and found, for example, terrorism at the heart of *Player* (1977), *The Names* (1982), *Mao II* (1991); communal dread in *White Noise*; dying in full public view and conspiracy in *Libra* (Begley 2007; Birkerts 2007; Kakutani 2007). Prescient enough, the original cover of *Underworld* (1997) was a photograph of the World Trade Centre surrounded by clouds. There was even a looming bird which resembled a plane in the distance. In the original cover of *Falling Man* the towers seem to have disappeared since we see the view above the clouds.⁴ All these connections led reviewers to hyperbolic claims. According to Jonathan Yardley in *The Washington Post*: "Nobody bothered to think about it at the time, but from the moment the first airplane hit the World Trade Center in September 2001, one thing was inevitable: Don DeLillo would write a novel about it" (2007). Andrew O'Hagan stated in *The New York Review of Books* that "[i]f the twin towers could be said to have stood in wait for the Mohamed Attas of the world, then the Mohamed Attas of the world were standing in wait for DeLillo" (2007).

The fact that DeLillo seemed the right author to write the ultimate 9/11 great American novel and the fact that 9/11 became a media event, led many reviewers to

³ Richard Gray includes in the first category novels that he believes domesticate the crisis into the realm of the familiar such as Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2004), Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). Within the second group that 'gets it right' Gray deals mainly with Deborah Eisenberg's *Twilight of the Superheroes* (2007), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) and Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of the Last Days* (2008). John N. Duvall and Robert P. Marzec reject Gray's extreme classification in their introduction to the special issue on 9/11 of *Modern Fiction Studies*, and underline Gray's failure to include in his list other more nuanced, political novels like Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006) and Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) (2011: 385-93).

⁴ The cover to the first edition of *Underworld* can be accessed online at <<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/6a/Underworld.jpeg>> (Accessed 26 April, 2012). The cover to the first edition of *Falling Man* can also be accessed online at <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fallingman.jpg>> (Accessed 26 April, 2012).

expect from the novel what they would expect from a piece of journalism. Fiction was judged by the standard of non-fiction and, as a result, *Falling Man* did not meet some reviewers' expectations. For example, Jeff O'Keefe (2007) complained that the novel offered no new information and Andrew O'Hagan claimed that next to *Falling Man* "the 9/11 Commission Report reads serenely and beautifully. Open that report at any page and you will find a breathtaking second-by-second account of that morning, and of the hijackers' backgrounds, that will make DeLillo's novel seem merely incapacitated" (2007). Obviously, a novel cannot compete with the information an official report may provide, but should not have to. Moreover, a 9/11 novel does not have to represent the enormity of the events or provide answers or help us understand. Michiko Kakutani complained in the *New York Times* that the novel felt small, unsatisfying and inadequate. She seemed angry at DeLillo's choice of Keith, the main character, "a pathetic, adolescent-minded creature . . . [who] decided to spend his foreseeable future playing stupid card games in the Nevada desert" (2007), rather than other more deserving people. She also disliked the fact that the novel did not illuminate "the zeitgeist in which 9/11 occurred or the shell-shocked world it left in its wake" (2007).⁵ In this sense, Sven Cveck has more recently analysed *Falling Man* as "a representation of a specific social process that we could call depoliticization through traumatization" (2011: 197), in which the terrorist's actions are explained through private pathologies rather than strategic global socio-economic issues, and which leads to the substitution of the political by the psychological and individual.

There is certainly a danger that focusing on individual/psychological perspectives may blur the historical and social context. In psychic trauma novels facts are often separated from their causes, which constitutes a problem since, as Judith Butler has claimed: "Isolating the individuals involved absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events" (2004: 5). Taking these initial reviews into account one wonders if *Falling Man* is really a failed novel: a novel that cannot articulate the effects of 9/11 on the country and that cannot provide information that may soothe the pain of those who experienced the event. Of course, to push the debate in this direction is to assume that this is what all novels should offer; that all novels should be political and that characters should stand for whole communities; that novels should help us understand the historical/cultural significance of events. One may wonder whether non-fiction, journalism and the media are more appropriate for such an aim, and what fiction can offer instead.

3. THE REPRESENTATION OF PSYCHIC TRAUMA

What DeLillo does is offer something journalism and the media cannot provide, it re-enacts the traumatic effects of the events in the mind of the survivors and the traumatic

⁵ Kakutani was envisioning a type of 9/11 novel that would take longer to be published. More in the line of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) and Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011).

consequences of the attack in its aftermath. For survivors to overcome their individual trauma they need to assimilate traumatic memories in their existing mental schemes and turn them into narrative memory, they need to be able to put into words what happened to them. In *Falling Man* we find several traumatised characters who try to turn their traumatic memory into narrative memory as they struggle between their urge to know and their need to deny. Moreover, the whole book becomes a representation of how characters have to struggle with the memory of what happened inside the towers since the unassimilated event is beyond the bounds of language and haunts not just the characters but the narrative itself.

Therefore, DeLillo does not present trauma as cultural subject matter or as an issue to ponder and reflect upon. Instead, he re-enacts the workings of traumatic memory in the victims' mind through different stylistic choices and through the trauma novel genre. This genre emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s; according to Roger Luckhurst, it opened with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and includes some of the novels of well-known authors like Margaret Atwood, Pat Barker, Anne Michaels, Benjamin Wilkomirski and W. G. Sebald, among others (2008: 87). There are earlier texts that can be considered trauma novels but it was the clinical elaboration of PTSD in the 1980s that fostered public interest in trauma, the development of trauma studies and its reflection in the literary field.⁶ There is a particular trauma aesthetic and formal radicalism shared by these novels which is based on the paradox or contradiction that traumatic experiences resist language or representation. As Anne Whitehead explains in her seminal book *Trauma Fiction*, this contradiction causes the rejection of the linear representation of traumatic events in trauma fiction and the use of unsettling temporal structures and different modes of referentiality, figuration and indirection. Obviously, none of these aesthetic techniques are new since "trauma fiction arises out of and is inextricable from three interrelated backgrounds or contexts: postmodernism, postcolonialism and a postwar legacy or consciousness" (2004: 81).⁷ The literary techniques that tend to recur in trauma narratives mirror, at a formal level, the effects of trauma and include intertextuality, repetition and fragmentation. According to Laurie Vickroy, who has also studied trauma fiction in depth, these narratives present trauma by internalising "the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures" (2002: 4). The chaotic aspects of trauma are underlined through shifts in time and memory, a variety of voices and subject positioning, visual images, textual gaps, repetitions and shifting

⁶ It is important to acknowledge that there were novels dealing with trauma through formal radicalism and aesthetic experimentation before *Beloved*. See Collado-Rodríguez (2011) for an analysis of the use of experimental strategies to reproduce the effects of trauma in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

⁷ This aesthetic experimentation has also been associated with Modernist literature, and more specifically with the traumatic effects of the First World War, which, according to Tim Armstrong, marks the introduction of trauma into western consciousness as temporal dislocation and anamnesis: "What is produced in the post-war world is, then, a disrupted temporality in which the dynamic relation between past, present and future which we saw as intrinsic to modernity is forced to co-exist with elements of 'frozen' time: a lost past; a traumatic present; a blighted future" (2005: 19).

viewpoints. In this way, readers are able to feel the disorienting positions of characters going through traumatic experiences.

Falling Man is narrated in the third person and the point of view shifts mostly between Keith and Lianne, but also includes Hammad —one of the terrorists— and Florence, another survivor. There are three main parts, each named after a character in the story: Bill Lawton, Ernst Hechinger and David Janiak.⁸ In each of these parts there is a cross-cutting of the perspectives, actions and thoughts of the main characters in the days, months and years after the attacks. These fragmented vignettes produce constant chronological disruptions, especially in the Hammad sections that take place before 9/11 and that close each of the three parts. The narrative is almost circular: it starts with a dazed Keith Neudecker walking away from the towers just after the collapse of the first tower and ends at the moment just before the opening scene when Keith comes out onto the street in his escape from the burning tower. These narrative disruptions become the equivalent of Keith's state of mind, which is described in the novel in these terms: "He used to want to fly out of self-awareness, day and night, a body in raw motion. Now he finds himself drifting into spells of reflection, thinking not in clear units, hard and linked, but only absorbing what comes, drawing things out of time and memory and into some dim space that bears his collected experience" (66). The traumatised minds of the main characters shape the fragmented narrative and its pace.

DeLillo rejects a more traditional mode of representation which seems inadequate when trying to show what psychic trauma feels like. In fact, *Falling Man* is a novel of 'acting out' rather than 'working through'. Historian Dominick LaCapra has taken these two concepts from Freud and psychoanalysis and developed them in the context of trauma and historical studies. *Acting out* is the tendency to relive the past through flashbacks, nightmares, compulsively repeated words and images. It is a compulsive repetition or re-enactment of trauma. *Working through* is the process by which the person tries to gain critical distance from the trauma, becomes able to distinguish between past, present and future and assume responsibility (LaCapra 2001: 141-53). This is what Keith seems unable to do.

Time and space seem to have collapsed in the opening pages where we see how Keith, a lawyer who has worked in the north tower for a decade, has just escaped and is running through the smoke and debris. The opening sentence expresses this temporal collapse: "It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (3). All temporal references in the novel are connected with that day: life unfolds six, ten, fifteen, thirty-six days, three years after the planes hit the towers (34, 44, 69, 170, 229). As the narrator states: "These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after" (138). Lianne is Keith's ex-wife and lives with their son Justin, who is also traumatised by

⁸ The choice of these names has been studied in detail by Joseph M. Conte who claims that they share the attribute of metonymy since each name has been altered to fit some purpose (2011: 569). Bill Lawton is an anglicised name for Osama bin Laden; Ernst Hechinger is the real name of Martin Ridnour, a former German radical activist member of Kommune 1; and David Janiak is the real name of a performance artist known as Falling Man. In the world of *Falling Man* identity becomes fluid as solid beliefs tend to disappear in the aftermath of the tragedy.

the events. She feels that her perception of time has been deeply altered by the terrorist attacks: "Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next. Eight years ago, they planted a bomb in one of the towers. Nobody said what's next. This was next. The time to be afraid is when there's no reason to be afraid. Too late now" (10). As a result, Keith and Lianne act out their trauma, unable to distinguish between past, present and future, and the narrative criss-crossing of their stories contributes to the readers' feeling of their trauma.

As Vickroy highlights, re-enactment, repetition, symbolization and suffering bodies may replace memory in trauma fiction (2002: 30-33). Repetitions are very important in the novel, especially for Keith and Lianne. For example, Keith has to follow a program of exercises for his postsurgical wrist. He raises his hand without lifting his forearm four times a day, ten times on each occasion, for five seconds each time. It is restorative for him and helps him control the unconnected images that come to his mind like "the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke" (40). He still repeats the exercises once his wrist is fine, two or three times a day as it becomes a form of therapy for him: "He would need an offsetting discipline, a form of controlled behavior, voluntary, that kept him from shambling into the house hating everybody" (143). Three years after the attacks, in Las Vegas, he still does the old exercises, the rehabilitation program and the wrist extension twice a day, counting the number of times each day, the repetitions and the five seconds, as he also counts the days after the collapse of the Twin Towers. Lianne has memory lapses and fears she might develop Alzheimer's like her father, but her brain is normal for her age. In hospital the doctor asks her to count down from one hundred by sevens and since the repetitions bring her comfort she keeps counting at home: "It made her feel good, the counting down, and she did it sometimes in the day's familiar drift, walking down a street, riding in a taxi. It was her form of lyric verse, subjective and unrhymed, a little songlike but with a rigor, a tradition of fixed order, only backwards, to test the presence of another kind of reversal, which a doctor nicely named retrogenesis" (188). These repetitions provide Keith and Lianne with some structure in their chaotic thoughts.

4. IMAGES AND TRAUMA

Images play an important role in the trauma process and in its representation in trauma novels. Luckhurst even claims that it is probably in the image that "the psychic registration of trauma truly resides" (2008: 147). Traumatized people see intrusive images and have recurrent dreams and nightmares, which replace narrative memory in a traumatized mind. Some 9/11 novels, like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, have images literally inserted in their pages. After seeing so many photographs and videos of 9/11, *Falling Man* opens with well-known images of the event:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to

their faces or jackets over their heads. They had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths. They had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him. They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars. (3)

There is smoke and ash, office paper flashing past, shoes discarded in the street, paper cups..., the focus is on visual images, rather than narrative, which is the way traumatic memory works since traumatised individuals are possessed by images. One such image is that of a shirt that comes down out of the smoke. It is first mentioned on page four but it keeps returning (88, 246) as a substitute for what Keith really saw but could not integrate in his mind: a falling person.

Keith's own description seems taken from a well-known photograph of a man covered in ash who is described in the novel in these terms:⁹ "He wore a suit and carried a briefcase. There was glass in his hair and face, marbled bolls of blood and light" (3). The truck driver who picks him up sees "a man scaled in ash, in pulverized matter" (6). Lianne describes Keith the first time she sees him: "Like gray soot head to toe, I don't know, like smoke, standing there, with blood on his face and clothes" (8). Those reviewers that claimed that DeLillo had nothing to offer that we had not already seen in the media were right; however, it is the incorporation of the visual images we recognize that makes the narration especially powerful.

Jonathan Yardley complained in *The Washington Post* that the only emotions in the novel came from pictures on television (2007). However, it could also be said that the fact that they come to life in the novel renders them more powerful. At the beginning they are only loose images that return and haunt Keith, only at the end are they integrated into the narrative of the events. Adam Begley in *The New York Observer* captures the effect perfectly: "Reading the virtuoso first pages of his novel, we see the catastrophe anew — smell it, taste it, hear it, feel it— as if that September morning had dawned again, fresh and bright" (2007). DeLillo returns on different occasions to those images that are in everybody's minds when recalling 9/11. Even Hammad, one of the terrorists, watches TV in a bar near the flight school that he attends and likes to imagine himself "appearing on the screen, a videotaped figure walking through the gatelike detector on his way to the plane" (173). Obviously, this is a reference to the famous series of photographs taken from a security camera at Portland Airport in Maine on September 11, 2001 in which we can see Mohamed Atta and Abdul Aziz Al-Omari passing through security.¹⁰

The main recurring image in the novel is of course that of the falling man. It makes reference to the photograph known as 'The Falling Man,' taken by Richard Drew and

⁹ The original Associated Press photograph of a man covered in ash appeared on the cover of *Fortune*, on October 1, 2001 to illustrate the consequences of 9/11 for Wall Street. The image can be accessed online: <http://foliolit.com/wp3/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Fortune_OCT8_01.jpg>.

¹⁰ The image can be accessed online: <<http://www.britannica.com/bps/media-view/159422/1/0/0>>.

published on page seven of *The New York Times* on September 12, 2001. The photograph was further reproduced in hundreds of newspapers all over the world in the wake of 9/11. It shows one of the many people that jumped from the World Trade Center; upside-down, one knee bent. Its publication caused a powerful controversy in the United States since it was considered exploitative and voyeuristic. These responses, together with the fear of being disrespectful to the dead, led to its disappearance from the US media.¹¹ The power of this image is that it symbolises what trauma really means. The fact that the man is frozen in free fall is like a traumatic memory frozen in the brain which cannot be integrated into memory: it lacks a frame of reference or narrative. DeLillo uses the reference to the image in a similar way. Since the novel re-enacts the workings of a traumatised mind, that image cannot be processed and cannot be integrated with other experiences. Thus, the falling man in the novel refers to the safer substitute image of a performance artist who, with the help of a safety harness, suspends himself upside down.

Like the man in the famous photograph, the performance artist in *Falling Man* “keels forward, body rigid, and falls full-length, headfirst . . . The jolting end of the fall left him upside-down, secured to the harness, twenty feet above the pavement . . . There was something awful about the stylized pose, body and limbs, his signature stroke. But the worst of it was the stillness itself and her nearness to the man, her position here, with no one closer to him than she was” (168). Lianne is especially haunted by this image as she comes across the artist on several occasions. In the same way as Tom Junod tried to find out the real identity of the falling man in the Richard Drew photograph, Lianne also ends up finding out who the performance artist is. She finds an obituary and learns that his name was David Janiak and that he suffered from a heart ailment and high blood pressure. His jumps with a safety harness but without pulleys, cables or wires had been very painful and worsened his condition. She still cannot understand the reasons behind his acts but she at least finds a framing narrative for his performances.

This performance artist especially affects Lianne because she is traumatised by her father's suicide and the idea of people jumping from the towers brings forth the image of her father shooting himself. In fact, both the performance artist and the sentence “Died by his own hand” return to her mind on repeated occasions in the way that experiences that resist assimilation may also return belatedly. Curiously, since the 9/11 attacks there have been various artists that have performed similar jumps and re-enacted similar iconic photographs. For example, Brooklyn photographer Kerry Skarbakka,¹² who staged a number of jumps from the roof of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art on June 14,

¹¹ The image did reappear in the US media two years later in an attempt to explain the efforts to find who the man in the photo was and, thus, find the framing narrative it lacked. See Tom Junod ‘The Falling Man’, in *Esquire*, September 2003, 177-81, 198-99 and the 2006 documentary film 9/11: *The Falling Man*, by American filmmaker Henry Singer and filmed by Richard Numeroff. The image can be accessed online: <http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN>.

¹² His series of photographs ‘The Struggle to Right Oneself’ in which the artist stages himself in scenes of falling can be viewed online: <<http://www.skarbakka.com/portfolios/struggle.htm>>. The images taken at the Chicago

2005, or the series of photographs called 'La Chute', made by French artist Denis Darzacq and inspired by the French riots of 2005.¹³

Falling is a key image in the novel: falling through space, time and memory. The initial image of falling ash gives way to Keith's own disintegration as a person. He cannot voice his feelings as he turns in on himself, and when Lianne tells him that they need to talk and that she needs to know if he is going to stay, Keith's answer is: "We're ready to sink into our little lives" (75). In fact, Keith's life enters a downward spiral in the last part of the novel when he decides to spend most of his time in Las Vegas, playing in poker tournaments and losing track of time. Although he likes the anonymity that Las Vegas provides and the way the game helps him forget what has happened to him, images of the tragedy still return in flashes: "These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness" (230). According to Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, traumatic memory is not fixed on a linguistic level but on a somatosensory, iconic level. It becomes non-verbal, context-free, non-narrative memory (1995: 160-63). This is the type of memory that trauma novels try to reflect through images and fragmented episodes. In the novel, Keith seems unable to turn his traumatic memory into coherent narrative memory as flashes of unrelated images cross his mind. The traumatic event cannot be assimilated into a coherently organised narrative of the past.

5. TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND NARRATIVE MEMORY

Lianne tries to escape her trauma by leading a writing group for early-stage Alzheimer's patients in East Harlem. They write about a variety of subjects as they struggle to find their narratives in an attempt to keep their life memories. Curiously, working through trauma involves trying to recover memories that cannot be integrated into narrative language. Lianne's patients undergo the reverse process: they lose the memories which have made up their lives and have given them a sense of identity. What they do is similar to scriptotherapy when patients write about traumas they have endured in order to heal and soften the symptoms. Alzheimer's patients write to keep their memories, trauma patients to recover them, all of them looking for a narrative to provide structure to their lives. Lianne is especially obsessed with a woman called Rosellen who is becoming "less combative over time, less clearly defined, speech beginning to drag" (125). The result is

Museum of Contemporary Art are part of his photo series 'Life Goes On' and can also be viewed online on the website of the artist at <http://www.skarbakka.com/portfolios/lifegoeson.htm>.

¹³ The photographs are available on the webpage of the artist: <<http://www.denis-darzacq.com/chute-vignettes.htm>>. The image of falling people in photographs, sculptures, cut-outs or performances has met with discomfort from some audiences, who have interpreted these artistic representations as a useless reminder of the tragedy. For a thorough analysis of the ways different artists have incorporated the idea of falling in art and literature after 9/11, see Laura Frost (2007).

her loss of memory, personality and identity which might also be seen as a description of Keith's erratic behaviour after failing to retrieve his memories of the attacks.

Florence is the only character in the novel who seems to find the narrative they all seek. When Keith returns to Lianne's apartment he realises he is holding a briefcase that does not belong to him. He returns it to its owner, a light-skinned black woman named Florence Givens, another survivor who also escaped from the North tower in time, who he begins a short-lived affair with and who tells him her story of escape whilst he listens. As professor of psychiatry Dori Laub claims, victims need to tell their stories in order to survive: "The testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness or a listener inside himself . . . repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation" (1995: 70). Florence tells Keith her story, remembering it as she speaks and seeing it all again. Keith's role is to bear witness: "She was going through it again and he was ready to listen again. He listened carefully, noting every detail, trying to find himself in the crowd" (59) but he is unable to tell his story in return.

Both Lianne and Keith are looking for structure, for a plot to shape their lives. Keith only finds it in poker, which has "structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic" (211-12). Lianne goes to church two or three times a week where she finds other regular congregants: "They'd established a pattern, these three, or nearly so, and then others entered and the mass began" (234). Strangely, the only life that seems to have a purpose and a clear structure is that of Hammad, one of the terrorists that hijacked the plane that crashed into Keith's tower. He has a *jihad* narrative to follow: "there were rules now and he was determined to follow them. His life had structure. Things were clearly defined" (83). In a way, Hammad's *jihad* narrative is placed on the same level as Keith's obsession with poker and Lianne's regular mass attendance. Hammad, Keith and Lianne share their need for patterns, rules and structures.

Lianne's need to establish clear niches and escape blurred boundaries is also seen in her attack on Elena, her Greek neighbour. Elena is listening to music that Lianne cannot locate but that she defines as Islamic: "But the music wasn't Greek. She was hearing another set of traditions, Middle Eastern, North African, Bedouin songs perhaps or Sufi dances, music located in Islamic tradition" (67). Unable to place the music, Lianne later calls it "noise" (68). Her choice of the adjective "Islamic" also brings negative associations to her mind but sets the music in a frame of reference where she feels entitled to reject it. Lianne's son and his two best friends also need to incorporate what has happened into their understanding of life. For the children, Osama bin Laden becomes Bill Lawton, a name they can pronounce and that they use in their conversations. They even establish a list of characteristics that define Bill Lawton, shaping the unknown and the unfamiliar into familiar structures.

Maybe because boundaries are so clearly established, albeit through the different narrative voices, it is especially shocking when in the final pages of *Falling Man* the lives of Hammad and Keith cross on 9/11. Starting from Hammad's point of view, the third

person narrator tells us about the situation inside the hijacked plane in the seconds before the actual crash. DeLillo offers here a masterful sentence that links Hammad and Keith in the same second in a single narrative structure:

A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he [Hammad] watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. (239)

This is the final moment in the working through process. The narrative voice leaves Hammad and returns to Keith as the main focalizer. The opening pages in the novel show the moments after Keith leaves the towers; the final pages are the moments just before: we finally bear witness to all those traumatic memories that Keith has been unable to retrieve. We learn that Keith's best friend, Rumsey, died in his arms while he saw someone fall: "He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it" (242). The blood that Lianne noticed on Keith's clothes was actually Rumsey's. We also learn how he ended up taking a briefcase that belonged to Florence, an action he will not remember later. Apparently, Keith saw several people fall but the final image that remains with him is that of an empty shirt coming down out of the sky: "He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life" (246), the same shirt that he sees at the beginning of the novel and that keeps retuning to his mind. We learn that the shirt has been a safe substitute in a mind that could not incorporate the image of falling men in its normal narrative processes, an image that has caused Keith's cognitive and emotional paralysis throughout the novel.

6. CONCLUSION

DeLillo's *Falling Man* is a psychic trauma novel that reproduces fragmented traumatic memory and that follows many of the conventions of the genre. For Kristiaan Versluys the endless reenactment of the trauma in the novel prevents accommodation or resolution (2009: 20). In this same vein, Martin Randall has also mentioned the overwhelming mood of melancholia in the novel (2011: 121), and Richard Gray has complained that the novel is "immured in the melancholic state, offering a verbal equivalent of immobility, that it is symptoms rather than diagnosis" (2011: 28). In a more ambiguous interpretation, Conte sees the Falling Man image not as a figure of death but as "The Hanged Man", the twelfth Major Arcana card in traditional Tarot decks, which is Lianne's own interpretation, and which is regarded "as a figure of suspension, not termination. It signifies time of trial or mediation and evokes selflessness and sacrifice" (2011: 580). This is a vulnerable figure of contemplation and reflection on what has happened. The ending of *Falling Man* reflects these ambiguities and shows an atmosphere of suspension rather than termination. We

have to distinguish between Keith's undeniable state of melancholia and lack of narrative memory of 9/11 and the ending of *Falling Man*, where there is working through and a chronological narrative retelling of the events. In fact, Keith's immobility seems at odds with the final pages of the novel, whose effect cannot be ignored.

It is unclear if these final pages are Keith's incorporation and acceptance of his traumatic memories to his present (his working-through process) or, more likely, a narrative strategy to make readers witness and understand his trauma (our own working-through process). As readers we finally have access to narrative memory, since, for the first time and in a chronological way, we learn of the events that took place inside the towers. It is a return to what happened before the opening of the book when we first meet Keith outside the towers, walking in the dust. However, this narrative memory does not come from Keith himself but from a third-person narrator that focalises on Keith. Keith does not seem to transform his traumatic memory of the event into narrative memory; he never assimilates his trauma into a coherently organised narrative of the past. However, it is undeniable that the novel closes with this figurative assimilation and reconstruction of events that Keith lacks and which seeks to engage readers in the whole process.

In the same way as *Falling Man* comes full circle, I also want to finish this paper by returning to the beginning. When facing a mediated and extremely well documented cultural trauma like 9/11, what can fiction offer? *Falling Man* does not focus on the cultural trauma and its transnational consequences but on the victims and their psychic trauma. Although the novel cannot offer answers, it does provide a first view into the aftermath, when the event still needs to be assimilated or understood. While *Falling Man* does show us the effects of the cultural trauma on the minds of its victims, it does not deal with the cultural trauma itself. Traumatic memory is full of gaps, unconnected images, repetitions and breaks in linear time, which themselves become literary techniques in DeLillo's narrative. He gives voice to the unspeakable, acts out trauma in order to help readers work through it by turning them into witnesses of the full process.

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