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## “Modern Death” in Don DeLillo: A Parody of Life?

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This essay aims to carve out an uncharted space to critically reflect on death in our times. It problematizes the existentially absurd and paradoxical nature of death by focusing on Kierkegaard's pseudonymous Socratic questioning and the undecided relationship Don DeLillo's characters have with the actuality of their own deaths.

## **“Modern Death” in Don DeLillo: A Parody of Life?**

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BANU HELVACIOGLU

**T**his inquiry is premised on an attenuated distinction between thinking *of* death and thinking *about* death. While I work through the former with reference to select writings by Kierkegaard, for the latter I rely primarily on Freud's reflections on war and death in 1915. On both accounts, the emphasis is on the existential dimension of death as the actual termination of one's life. Even though the characters in Don DeLillo's novels and novellas raise questions about thinking of death and thinking about death, and hence oscillate between different existential dimensions of human mortality, I focus on the paradoxical nature of death at the intersection of uncertainty and humour.

The first question to clarify is: Which terms put forth by a thinker and/or an author does one focus on, and how and why? One of the practical problems, provisionally labeled as “intertextuality” (Hutcheon), or “an age of parody” (Bradbury 46-57; Rose

266-70), is characterized by a constant re-writing of the past, multiple interpretations and innumerable re-contextualization. Linda Hutcheon addresses this problem by conceptualizing parody within the interactive process of reading. From the point of view of the ways we—academics—quote, cite, interpret, and dislocate a text’s intentions from an assumed original, Hutcheon points out that “parody is showing us that there is a need to look again at the interactive powers involved in the production and reception of texts” (86). In examining the intricacies of this interactive process, Hutcheon draws attention to a horizontal relationship between the author and the reader, and a vertical relationship between the text in question in relation to other texts. While the specifics of the interaction between texts may take the reader in a completely different direction than the authors intended, there also arises a rich terrain for analyzing missed allusions (34) and the pragmatic and ideological implications of “authorized transgressions” (101). Pragmatically, to especially emphasize the formal dimensions of satire and irony in parodied texts, Hutcheon relies on the term “ethos” to “mean the ruling intended response achieved by a literary text” (55). The emphasis on the formal dimensions of a literary text, however, does not guarantee immunity from ideologically and politically received meanings, especially of such an intriguing yet vague notion of the immanence of death as it relates to culturally specific realms of providence.

The less-than-clear assumed yearning for immanence in academic reviews of DeLillo’s writing<sup>1</sup> and the equally controversial nature of Kierkegaard’s works in relation to the existential dimension of how one knows death both impel me to begin with exploring the interactive process of reading these authors, whose unique writing styles rely on the formal literary techniques of parody. If, through a brief interactive reading, I were to take note of Heidegger’s passing reference to Kierkegaard in *Being and Time* (494n, 497n), then it would be rather important to distinguish between what Heidegger refers to as “existentiell” and “existential.” According to Heidegger, “In the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard explicitly seized upon the problem of existence as an existentiell problem and thought it through in a penetrating fashion” (494n). Because Heidegger’s critical assessment is directly related to his problematization of phenomenology as the fundamental ontology and the science of Being of entities, it is wise to take note of Charles Guignon’s insightful interpretation of the ontic level, in which Heidegger locates Kierkegaard’s theological inquiry (497n) in *The Concept of Anxiety*.<sup>2</sup> Paraphrasing Heidegger, “the ‘what-is’—entities in the broadest sense of the word—are called ‘ontic,’ where that term refers to the items (in the broadest sense of that word) that are taken as constituting reality (in the broadest sense of the word)” (Heidegger qtd. in Guignon 186). The ontic level, understood as

constituting reality, might include “physical objects, numbers, fictional characters, humans, mystical beings, spirits and even gods” (Guignon 186). In this understanding, all empirical, factual, and culturally specific remarks one makes, such as “DeLillo being raised as a Catholic,” just like Heidegger was (Bonca 60), and all observations, dialogues, thoughts, and feelings transmitted through fictional characters are located in the ontic level and are therefore existentiell matters. Existential, on the other hand, starts with the question of the understanding of being and moves in the direction of Being in the world. In this regard “the roots of the existential analytic [. . .] are ultimately existentiell, that is ontical” (Heidegger qtd. in Guignon 187).

In Heidegger’s passing remark to Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety*, the existentiell dimension concerns both theology and psychology as scientific fields of inquiry belonging to the ontic level. Even though there is still an understandable intellectual interest in Kierkegaard’s works, which directly address the theological underpinnings of anxiety (dread), despair, and death, I focus not on the theological, but on the Socratic and the fictional nature of his writing via pseudonyms that assume the role of authorship.

The author of *The Concept of Anxiety* is Vigilius Haufniensis. In a later work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, by Johannes Climacus, one notes a self-critical reflection of *Anxiety*, as well as of *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>3</sup> According to Climacus, “*The Concept of Anxiety* differs essentially from other pseudonymous works in that its form is direct and even somewhat didactic” (269-70). Climacus also comments on how “Magister Kierkegaard [. . .] has] a carefully shaded touch of the humorous” (270). Climacus, then, moves on to what I consider one of the central nerves of our times, the solemnity of the immanence: “To all appearances humor gives greater significance to what it means to exist than irony does, but nevertheless immanence is *übergreifend* [encroaching], and the more or less is a vanishing quantifying compared with the qualitative decisiveness of the essentially Christian. Therefore, humor becomes the last *terminus a quo* [point from which] in defining Christianity” (272). The point I note in this passage is not only limited to the decisiveness that defines an “essential Christian” but extends to any world view or ideological interpellation such as “Allahu Akbar—God is Great,” which is based on an eternal truth. According to Climacus, “at the point where the decision comes in the moment, and the movement is forward toward the relation to the eternal truth that came into existence in time—at that point humor is not present” (272, *emph. mine*).

My starting point in this inquiry is precisely this assumed abstract point where humour is not present.<sup>4</sup> In translating this abstract point into existential terms pertaining to the subjectivity of this inquiry, two issues are important to take into

account: one's own existential relation to the abstract category of death and the extent to which one can abstract one's thoughts from historically and culturally specific approaches (such as the "theological" in Heidegger's assessment of Kierkegaard's work) and ideologically defined world views about an afterlife.

Throughout this inquiry, as a reminder that all those unuttered moments of taking the last breath, as experienced by humans in their own particularity on this planet Earth, evades my span of attention, I reside in Kierkegaard's unique sense of humour articulated by Climacus: "Lest existence mock me for having become so erudite that I had forgotten to understand what will happen to me and every human being sometime—sometime, but what am I saying!" (166). Paul Muench notes that "throughout his discussion of death, Climacus uses the formulation 'thinking death' or 'thinking the uncertainty of death' as opposed to thinking 'about' either of these. This usage may be one way of trying to mark for his readers a manner of engaging with death that is distinct from how death is typically approached by the absentminded and distracted" (121).<sup>5</sup>

If part of my subjectivity, defined by uncertainty toward both my own and others' deaths, raises the question of death in solemn terms, the second part of my subjectivity, as it pertains to Climacus's abstract point about the absence of humour, takes me to the political and ideological implications of reading fiction. In noting an existential (existentiell in Heidegger's terms) problem of our times, defined by the religiously and politically sanctioned acts of murder, intimidation, and incarceration of authors and artists, I work through the element of humour in both Kierkegaard and DeLillo's writing by focusing on their fictional characters instead of on their works' general themes. For the purpose of this inquiry, I have identified three characters from DeLillo's novels: Murray Jay Siskind in *White Noise*, Bill Gray in *Mao II*, and Lianne in *Falling Man*. Yet, this specific focus alone does not suffice to isolate the general themes in DeLillo's fiction writing in particular.

It is important to note that my intention is not to establish congruence between Kierkegaard's thoughts and DeLillo's writing. In "Don DeLillo: Kierkegaard and the Grave in the Air," Daniel Greenspan shares part of a "personal letter" DeLillo sent in response to Greenspan's inquiry about Kierkegaard making an appearance in *Falling Man*. In DeLillo's words: "I'm not a full-fledged Kierkegaardian. I'm not sure how K. found his way into the novel." When he mentions the fact that he had read some of Kierkegaard's works in the past, DeLillo refers to such thematic titles as "fear, trembling, sickness, [and] death" (qtd. in Greenspan 81). In his analysis, Greenspan offers a "tragic reading" enriched by his previous work,<sup>6</sup> where the interpretive context of *Falling Man* foregrounds "Kierkegaard's fundamental interest in what happens to

people who struggle traumatically with the experience of something at the limits of understanding, who struggle to make it a part of their experience, what they know” (82). It is in this context that Greenspan identifies what I regard as the core chord in both Kierkegaard’s and DeLillo’s authorships: “At issue was not the philosophical or theological *what* of the work so much as the ability to powerfully name a forceful *how* of writing” (81, *emph.* Greenspan’s).

Unlike Greenspan’s emphases on tragedy and the limits of understanding, I take into consideration the interactive role of imagination on the part of the reader in relation to the texts at hand. Whatever similarity I find in Kierkegaard’s and DeLillo’s senses of humour is simply a product of my imagination, permeated with their fictional characters. In building an imaginary passage between the writings of these two authors, my objective is to carve out an uncharted space to reflect on both the paradoxical nature of death and the thought of death in our times. In abstracting the element of humour, the questions that I focus on in both Kierkegaard and DeLillo’s writing are the extent to which one can exist in one’s own death and the extent to which one can actually prepare oneself for one’s own death. Since the latter question verges on the attenuated distinction between thinking of death and thinking about death, I will address it by also taking into consideration Freud’s reflections from the beginning of the twentieth century.

In terms of the particularities of Kierkegaard’s writing style, with the notable exception of his first and late published writings, Kierkegaard used pseudonyms. This particular writing style is often regarded as his trademark not only for the indirect and imaginary construction of his thoughts, but also as a means to engage with his own works in a critical fashion, often in the form of self-mockery. His first work, *The Concept of Irony*, which was his dissertation, and his last articles, ranging from those published in the daily *Fædrelandet* to those he then decided to publish independently in *The Moment*, always had a special place for Socratic questioning.<sup>7</sup> In *The Moment* (1 Sep. 1855) he wrote: “The analogy before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic one, to scrutinize the definition of what it is to be a Christian” (qtd. in Garff 754).

In this context, the main point to take into consideration is what Lore Hühn succinctly states in analyzing Kierkegaard’s relationship with Socrates and Hegel: “The value of questioning is not measured by the answers given, but rather by how they come about, how they prove to be relevant for the questioner and what they bring about.” For the purpose of this inquiry, it suffices to note that “it is in the nature of [the Socratic] form of questioning that the addressee must discover the questionable nature of what he claims to know” (1069). On a similar note, but this time with an emphasis on Kierkegaard’s problematization of subjectivity, David Possen aptly highlights the

notion of “concerned ignorance”: “My concerned ignorance presupposes precisely that I know *enough* about an issue to know that I am ignorant of it, and to become concerned about that fact” (126, *emph.* Possen’s). I focus on two sides of the attitude to the uncertainty of one’s own death: the absurdity of existing in one’s own death and Socratic concerned ignorance. Climacus addresses these two dimensions by suggesting that “subjectivity is actuality” (*Postscript* 343).

In the *Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus professes that in spite of the “extraordinary knowledge or proficiency of knowledge, [he is] by no means able to regard death as something [he has] understood” (166). Later in the text, when discussing ethical subjectivity, he points out that the intellectual rigour in thinking is not an actual action. For Climacus “the actuality is not the external action but an interiority in which the individual annuls possibility and identifies himself with what is thought in order to exist in it. This is action” (339). He concludes the section on actual and ethical subjectivity with the statement that “subjectivity is actuality” (343).

To elaborate on this particular type of subjectivity, it will be useful to denote how my imagination gets in the way of receiving Climacus’s problematization of “actuality” as it pertains to death. I take this notion of actuality to imply that no matter how much I rehearse in thinking about my own mortality, I can only come close to the actuality of my own death if I start existing in my own death. But how can I exist in my own death when I have responsibilities and commitments in my life? Shall I leave a message on my voice mail announcing to the callers that “I cannot come to the phone right now because I am dead”? If I do this, sooner or later one of my colleagues will tell me I am being irresponsible. If I try this Socratic rehearsal with the tax department and say that I cannot pay my taxes because I am no longer a resident of the country in which I live and am instead residing in my own death, I will be penalized for defaulting on my taxes. What about my home life? The temporality of routine conflicts with the temporality of existing in one’s own death. What it means to act upon one’s own death, in this contradictory context of temporalities, has different connotations.

The paradox in the absurdity of living the actuality of one’s death is two-fold. First, if I were to continue existing as an ethical person with responsibilities and commitments to others, I cannot spontaneously live with the actuality of my own death. To put the same paradox in different terms, if I insist on existing in my own death, I will end up lying to myself and to people who love and care about me. Similarly, there is no such thing as cheating death as long as one keeps mythical, mysterious, and religious figures out of the purview of one’s life. In *White Noise*, Murray Jay Siskind articulates this paradox as the “juicy existentialist dilemma”: “You have said good-bye to everyone but yourself. How does a person say good-bye to himself?” (337). He reiterates the

question shortly after: “That’s what it all comes down to in the end [. . .] A person spends his life saying good-bye to other people. How does he say good-bye to himself?” (338). The first time Murray poses the question, my emphasis is on the singular person’s negotiation with the actuality of his/her death; Murray’s second question addresses the paradox at the level of a mortal human being in universal terms.

The second paradox in the actuality of one’s death can be addressed as follows: Suppose I choose to live a reclusive life, somewhat similar to character Bill Gray, the reclusive writer in *Mao II*. Then, in facing the actuality of my own death, there still remains Murray’s juicy existentialist dilemma: How do I end my life? How do I say good-bye to myself? Bill Gray articulates his uncertainty about this question in two ways: “Please Jesus let me work [. . .] Can’t die yet” (54). Shortly after, he changes his mind to “I’m between novels [. . .] so I don’t mind dying” (55). To paraphrase the same uncertainty in order to invite Climacus into this inquiry: If actuality is not the external action but an interiority, then at what point in one’s finite temporality, where exactly, in which specific location, and how does one die? In this context, dying as the actual termination of one’s life is considered an action. The main question in this regard is: Does one actually walk into one’s own death? If so, what are the chances that this would be an accident and not a suicide?

Kierkegaard addressed dying as action on numerous different occasions. I focus on the one where one’s own death is in relation to historically, culturally, and politically specific settings. DeLillo’s works, which emphasize both the human experience and death as a public event, provide different angles to this question.<sup>8</sup> Almost three decades after the publication of *White Noise*, in an interview DeLillo gave on the occasion of receiving the Carl Sandburg Literary Award in October 2012, he said: “My work is influenced by the fact that we’re living in dangerous times. If I could put it in a sentence, in fact, my work is just that: living in dangerous times” (Nance). This gives critics an occasion to interpret his works thematically while evading the question of how the abstract category of death and the action of dying are uniquely carved out.

This inquiry does not address the question of death as a factual public event, in terms of the Kennedy assassination in *Libra*, the spectre of Ayatollah Khomeini’s televised death in *Mao II*, the intricate workings of the historicity of the Cold War in *Underworld*, or of the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001 in *Falling Man*. Yet, insofar as Climacus’s problematization of the actuality of death is concerned, the external, general patterns of thinking about death in a broader context are impossible to ignore. Hence, once again we return to the same intersection of an existentially abstract nature of death and specific world views that define what death is.



In an effort to approximate the Socratic form of questioning to concerned ignorance about the academic misgivings of our times, I take note of David Noon's critical tone regarding the political landscape in DeLillo's writing: "In each of his novels, DeLillo's characters circulate through a political terrain in which critical, civic dialogue is impossible and the traditional institutions of public life—education, for instance or politics—fail to offer constructive possibilities of renewal" (90). This observation, however, assumes the existence of a civic dialogue either in abstract thinking or in fiction writing. In the history of political thought, it is this general assumption about the possibility of civic dialogue that has always precluded the Socratic form of questioning as a solitary retreat into oneself, as if it has nothing to say or do with the general modes of thinking and living.

Kierkegaard's dissertation under his own name, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, took up this challenge in critically examining Hegelian and Christian world views. For the purpose of this inquiry, to address the hypothetical question about the time and place of a political terrain that offers civic dialogue, it is useful to note how Kierkegaard concludes the first part of his dissertation: "This is best seen in [Socrates's] view of death. He is ignorant of what death is and of what there is after death, whether there is anything or nothing at all; consequently he is ignorant" (270). Yet, Kierkegaard is quick to point out that in Socrates's ignorance "the whole substantial life of Greek culture had lost its validity for him, which means that to him the established actuality was unactual, not in this or that particular aspect but in its totality as such" (270-71). Furthermore, "the Greek state could not find [. . .] satisfaction in Socrates' death, since by his ignorance Socrates had frustrated any more meaningful connection with the thought of death." The main thread in this paradox is that because "Socrates knows nothing at all [. . .] it is an irony over the state that it condemns him to death and believes that it has inflicted punishment upon him" (271).

One finds a similar pattern in Climacus's problematization of the importance of thinking death "into every moment of" one's life (*Postscript* 167) at the intersection of the uncertainty one has regarding one's own death and the intelligible forms of understanding offered through the Hegelian concept of "world history" and the prevalent Christian world view on eternity. In *The Concept of Irony*, one finds Socrates at centre stage but, in Climacus's problematization, the focal point is the parodied characterizations of distracted scholars or, in particular, an absentminded person: "The late bookseller Soldin [. . .] when he was going to get up in the morning, he was not aware that he was dead" (167). What is common in both works is to pose the challenge of whether death can be treated as a construct that one can understand and about which one can generalize its broader (political and/or theological) consequences. Kierkegaard

in his critical analysis does not question whether Socrates was real, but instead through the writings of three of his “closest contemporaries [. . .] Xenophon, Plato and Aristophanes” (13) focuses on what his death tells us about the uncertainty of the actuality of death.

When I maintain that there are fictional attributes in Kierkegaard’s writing, by “fictional” I specifically mean any concentrated form of thought as a product of imagination and a creative-critical mental processing of one’s surroundings, which contain elements of reality and factuality. Fiction in this regard comes closer to the paradox of the actuality of death in Climacus’s authorship of the absurdity of an erudite subjectivity articulated in the approaches adopted by the distracted and the absent-minded. As all of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writing in one way or another reminds us, everything about what matters in life (including theology, literature, philosophy, poetry, and, for that matter, love, marriage, and work) can be parodied—except for death, which is conceived at the threshold of uncertainty and concerned ignorance. No one knows what the last breath feels like. With this point in mind, when I turn to DeLillo’s writing, there is no easy way to identify a specific instance in which to isolate the actuality of death.

Murray Jay Siskind, who coins the term “modern death” in *White Noise*, goes to some length to identify death as a knowable entity that is studied objectively, but at the same time he poses the paradox in the abstract category of death as having a life of its own: “‘This is the nature of modern death,’ Murray said. ‘It has a life independent of us.’” Murray puts the paradox of modern death as follows: “The more we learn, the more it grows [. . .] Death adapts, like a viral agent” (175). In *White Noise* Murray is characterized not only as distracted, but possibly irresponsible and amoral as well. The emotionally unattached “ex-sportswriter” turned into an academic specializing in “Elvis studies” bluntly states that he is “happy in a town called Blacksmith [. . .] I’m here to avoid situations” (12). When the computerized system identifies the deadly nature of the “situation” (165), an “airborne toxic event” that forces residents of Blacksmith to evacuate their homes and crowd into the nearest emergency shelters, some seeking comfort in God’s mysterious ways, Murray courts prostitutes near one of the shelters (174-78). Yet this seemingly flimsy character also takes “contemplative” (295-98; 272-73) “Socratic walk[s]” (324-39) with Jack Gladney, the novel’s main character. At the end of one of those walks, after Murray and Jack cover every conceivable theme concerning what matters most in one’s life, Murray iterates the “juicy existentialist dilemma” as it concerns the singularity of Jack’s own mortality and the general viewpoint about the mortality of humankind: at the end of one’s life, how does a person say good-bye to oneself?

Murray's term "modern death" and his contemplative walks with Jack seem like a teasing instance of the Socratic questioning of death. In DeLillo's writing, "a serious looping Socratic walk, with practical consequences" (324) could refer to a pedestrian or a hiking path on a university campus. Without suffocating the author's imagination too much with my critical attention, I single out Murray, with his lackadaisical approach to academia and his native New Yorker's scepticism of the morals of a small town like Blacksmith, to introduce the paradox of death as a juicy existential dilemma. While the entire narrative can be interpreted within one or another culturally enriched theoretical frameworks, Murray's question remains unanswered as long as the reader receives it as a question posed to challenge the extent to which one can think of one's own death within erudite forms of understanding. While one may continuously think about death, preparing for one's own death is an antinomy of action, unless of course one does not expect to be reunited with oneself in the afterlife.

In *White Noise*, Winnie Richards, "a research neurochemist" (211) in her thirties, touches upon another dimension of the existential dilemma: "I think it is a mistake to lose one's sense of death, even one's fear of death. Isn't death the boundary we need?" (262). Since the question concerning the boundary between life and death tends toward general patterns of understanding, instead of going into the details of Hegelian and Christian world views in Kierkegaard's authorship, I rely on Freud's essay "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" in order to identify the general elements of thinking *about* death today in our temporal present. In this regard, Socratic concerned ignorance entails not only what Freud offered at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also the religiously, culturally, and morally enriched world views that one lives with at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Freud's essay leads us into the problem of thinking *about* death in multiple directions. I will mention three dimensions. First, Freud reiterates Kierkegaard's points about the singularity and the uncertainty in relating to one's own death, but he shifts the focus from actuality to an emphasis on death as a spectre: "It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators" (289). Over the course of two World Wars and the tumultuous times of the 1960s, the point that the human mind cannot comprehend, imagine, or directly relate to one's own death is articulated in different analytical frameworks, including a Lacanian reference to the symbolic, denoting the irreconcilable character of the representation of death (Wilcox). Notice the subtle shift that is already in process, from Freud contending that one cannot witness one's own death except as a spectator, to that of the impossibility of representing death in writing (literature, poetry) or visually. Even though Freud was aware of the impossi-

bility of representing death, he considered the ameliorative character of the “world of fiction [. . .] literature and [. . .] theatre” as part of “cultural and conventional attitude[s] toward death” (290-91).

In this context, the second dimension of Freud’s thoughts on war and death is that there is something about death that impoverishes us humans: “This attitude of ours towards death has a powerful effect on our lives. Life is impoverished, it loses in interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked” (290). While Freud elaborated on this thought pattern in his subsequent works on mourning and melancholia, leading us into more nuanced thoughts about death as loss, in the historical courses since World War I, we have once again started parting ways with the actuality of our own death, distracted by the daily televised coverage of wars and “natural disasters.” We have become absent-minded enough to conflate death as a literary and a theoretical theme with the paradoxical nature of death itself.<sup>9</sup>

The third dimension of Freud’s thoughts on war and death takes us to what he refers to as the “susceptibility” to “cultural” and “moral” misgivings. In critically reflecting on the “first and most important prohibition made by the awakening conscience [. . .]: ‘Thou shalt not kill’” (295), Freud has left us with a “civilizational” conundrum. According to Freud’s world view, “the primaeval history of mankind is filled with murder” (292). Even though he defines the attitude of our unconscious toward the problem of death as a question (296), Freud nevertheless returns to this civilizational attribute by claiming that, “if we are to be judged by our unconscious wishful impulses, we ourselves are, like primaeval man, a gang of murderers” (297). No doubt since Freud’s times this so-called primal instinct to kill has gone through different cultural and political façades with gendered implications. The one I find most challenging for our times is the conundrum of what has come to be known as suicide bombing: a willful act of suicide and mass murder in one. Just as I do not know what death is, I do not know whether I could take my own or someone else’s life with a conscious act of murder. This double uncertainty aims to put a critical distance from all religious, moral, and cultural codes concerning an analysis of the terrorists of our times. Yet, I take note of a powerful metaphor in DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, “organic shrapnel” (16, 66), to question what it means to be critically distant from terrorism.

In *Falling Man*, a physician attending Keith’s physical injuries inflicted at his decimated work place in the Twin Towers on September 11 informs Keith that “organic shrapnel” is the residue of “the tiny fragments of the suicide bomber’s body.” When “the bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who’s in striking range.” By definition, perfectly healthy

individuals who survived the attack on the Twin Towers might be diagnosed “months later” as having developed lumps in their body: “these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin” (16).

Within the elusive nature of reading fiction, shortly after Keith’s estranged wife Lianne alludes to the scholars and philosophers she studied in university (65), Keith, in one of his numerous attempts to resume a normal life, “thought of something out of nowhere, a phrase, organic shrapnel. Felt familiar but meant nothing to him” (66). Such is the paradox one finds in DeLillo’s writing, which teasingly juxtaposes what I consider an allusion to Kierkegaard as one of the scholars Lianne studied with a fictional diagnostic that has no resonance in Keith’s memory even though he was subjected to the fictional-actual attack in New York.

I mark this juxtaposition of fictional-actual as an interpretive impasse, an empty space, deliberately defined as an impasse in thought, in order to suggest two things. First, sometimes in one’s life, there is no easy, direct answer to the question of what just now happened. In an attempt to resolve this impasse, the juxtaposition in DeLillo’s writing can be analyzed with reference to Freud’s “uncanny” and/or the Lacanian “real.” Second is the position I take in this inquiry: that there is an irreducible difference between a writer’s imagination and that of a critic’s/reader’s.<sup>10</sup> Leaving an interpretive impasse as an empty space in thought also aims to recall the limitation of thinking *about* death through literary and/or philosophical works.

What remains from Freud’s time in my own temporality, living in the vicinity of multiple wars being waged in Turkey, Ukraine, Syria, and Iraq, is one of the most pressing paradoxes concerning what has become the universal human “attitude toward death.” In wartime “death will no longer be denied” (Freud 291); “if you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death” (300). How does one prepare oneself for death? Can one prepare oneself for death? It is in the specific context of our present susceptibility to the audio-visual simulation of reality that Winnie Richards in *White Noise* appears as someone with “a spacey theory about human fear” (263). Partly inquisitive and partly prone to generalizing, Winnie, on the one hand, enquires about the extent to which human fear through a sense of one’s own death is the force that gives “texture to life” (261). On the other hand, with the help of Jack A.K. Gladney, who, as the extra initials in his name (19) suggest, is always in need of extra credentials in pursuit of academic knowledge, Winnie tends to draw conclusions about death. Jack’s thought, that “fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level,” leads both characters to an inquiry about the possibility of coming to terms with death: “Self, self, self. If death can be seen as less strange and unreferenced, your sense of self in relation to death will diminish, and so will your fear” (263). But for Jack, the Professor of Hitler Studies, death in this

dialogue is not an academic topic. Momentarily he is on the threshold of acknowledging the actuality of his own death, from having been exposed to the deadly toxic spill in his town, and resuming his normal routine life at home and at work. As the narration unfolds, Jack's concern about the consequences of his exposure to the deadly toxic spill is developed in line with his academic, intellectual side in wanting to know if there is anything he can do to prepare himself for death.

Within an interpretive impasse, Jack's indecision can also be considered as an instance of absurdity in Climacus's terms of the paradox between existing in one's life defined by certain responsibilities and commitments and existing in one's own death as in the actual process of dying. In one of those intense moments, Jack asks Winnie: "Am I supposed to go rock climbing on weekends?" But he realizes that just as he has the option of "risking death" in ways like "driving fast around curves" or sitting "in a cage full of African snakes," he may as well "go on with [his] life, raise [his] kids, teach [his] students" (264).

Insofar as Jack's brief indecision denotes the singularity of death, his temporal existence is defined by his work and home life. In the case of Lianne in *Falling Man*, however, in addition to the particularities of her life, defined by such daily chores as picking up her son from school and preparing dinner, as well as by her regular familial, social, and work-related activities, there is also the publicly and historically defined temporality of living in New York in the aftermath of September 11. Unlike in Jack's case, the thought of death for Lianne is something she lives vicariously through other people's experiences, most notably those of her father, who committed suicide instead of living with Alzheimer's, her dying mother, and her estranged husband, Keith, who, in a manner of speaking, "survived" death. In this specific context, Lianne, who first alludes (65) and then refers to her experience of reading Kierkegaard when she was in university (117-18), gives the impression that life, not death, is a parody of the past.<sup>11</sup>

Within an elusive interpretive impasse, Lianne appears to be in the solitary company of her individuated Kierkegaard: "She loved Kierkegaard in his antiqueness [. . .] She read her Kierkegaard with a feverish expectancy [. . .] *The whole of existence frightens me*, he wrote. She saw herself in this sentence." Even though I tend to mark this passage within the interpretive impasse of memory, especially at a time of personal and public trauma (see Greenspan), it is important to note that "the fear of existence" in the brief allusion to *The Sickness Unto Death* (118) must be distinguished from Winnie's reference to the human fear that gives texture to life. Lianne seems to be closer to what Anti-Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *The Sickness Unto Death*, would have described as "the restlessness of spirit" before "the merely human self" and "before

God” (91-111). Winnie, on the other hand, is depicted as an erudite academic who thinks about death while in the existential grip of her painfully shy character (264).

As Anti-Climacus put it in *The Sickness Unto Death*, “In fact, even about the distinction between not being *able* to understand and being *unwilling* to understand, Socrates tells us nothing; while on the other hand, he is the grand master of all ironists on the distinction between understanding and understanding” (127, *emph.* Anti-Climacus’s). The most significant foreground to Socratic uncertainty and concerned ignorance is in how Bill Gray in *Mao II* walks into his own death, if there is such a thing as a path to death. Bill Gray, initially described as a reclusive author who finally decides to publish a book he “has been working on and off for twenty-three years on” (51), is later revealed to likely be a pseudonym for Willard Skansej Jr., born in Des Moines, Iowa (144). As the fictional-actual interpretive impasse unfolds in the novel, Bill Gray at age “sixty-three” (65) lives in the corporeality of his aging body—visceral (124, 135), sexual (54, 84), on medication (122, 184), with a heightened awareness of his mental occupations along with his bodily functions (136) and a “writer’s will to live” (48), “playing the idea of death” (42)—yet when visited by the actuality of his own death, he oscillates between a reluctance to die and a submission to death (54-55). In such indecision toward his own mortality, he is a human being in a male body.

Because the literary dimensions of the parody of an author combined with the background political and cultural climate in the Middle East and the U.S. have been analyzed in detail, my emphasis is on the juxtaposition of an imaginary setting for a hostage’s life and of Bill Gray’s walking into his own death. From the writer’s point of view, what mattered most in the life of Jean-Claude Julien, a Swiss U.N. worker and a poet abducted while doing research on healthcare in the Palestinian camps in Beirut, was the subjectivity of his existence in a vaguely defined war zone: with “no one to remind him who he was” (111), his days unfolding without a “sequence or narrative” (109), “cut off from people whose voices were the ravel of his being” (110). In the brief interval when the hood over his head was removed so he could eat, “he waited for the moment when he could count the launched rockets flashing” (107-08). Yet, as a poet who relates to his surroundings through the sounds of a language, the hostage was planning “to learn Arabic” (108).

Within an interpretive impasse, when Gray was in pain due to an injury inflicted in a seemingly freak accident, “he could not remember why he wanted to write about the hostage [. . .] what was the actual point?” (198). I mark this question as Socratic concerned ignorance. Similar to the ironical uncertainty in Kierkegaard’s depiction of Socrates’s death from the purview of the state’s condemnation, Gray was concerned enough about a hostage’s life to note how hard it is to “adapt to the absence of sense-

making things” (203). Perhaps because of his concern, “he wanted to imagine what it was like to know the extremes of isolation. Solitude by the gun. He read Jean-Claude’s poems many times” (154). Gray acts upon his concern by following two different scripted courses of action. The first (offered by his long-time friend, former editor Charles Everson), to create a media event to draw attention to the hostage’s plight, was sabotaged by a bomb explosion in London. The second (offered by political scientist George Haddad, who had studied in Britain and worked in Athens) was to appeal to the kidnappers. Gray was on his way to actualize this second option when his corpse was found on the ferry upon arrival at Junieh, a taxi ride from Beirut. This is the main twist in the narration, when DeLillo intentionally frustrates the reader’s/critic’s desire to know what happened to Bill Gray. The incomplete nature in the turn of events in DeLillo’s writing denotes Kierkegaard’s paradoxical point about Socrates’s death, which frustrates any meaningful connection to the thought of death. The fictional-actual cause of Gray’s own death remains undecipherable.

Within DeLillo’s elusive writing style, it seems to me that Bill Gray was in Larnaca, Cyprus, waiting for the ferry (195) to be fixed so that he could take it to Junieh. In Larnaca, following the British way, the flow of traffic is the reverse of otherwise international standards. Gray “stepped off the curbstone and took about seven strides” then “one step in reverse” before he was hit by a car (167). Maybe he was in the middle of the road when a car following the routine traffic flow hit him. Once again, without suffocating the author’s imagination, I reserve a space for Bill Gray’s end in the realm of uncertainty. In my own ignorant-erudite state of mind, unable and unwilling to understand how a writer of his calibre would accidentally walk into his own death, I considered the following factors: not only was Bill Gray living in the temporality of changing typewriter ribbons (55), professing to be “sentence maker” and “not a great big visionary” (162), but he is also a product of an astute mind. After completing the novel, DeLillo explained the intentionally comic effect of Bill Gray’s conversation about his injuries with veterinarians instead of physicians (Begley). Bill Gray was neither didactic nor particularly interested in satire. Under these circumstances, his end reminds me of the uncertainty of death from the temporality of the pens of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms. Have times changed so much that we can now comfortably exist in our own death without the slightest apprehension about how we bid farewell to ourselves? DeLillo’s writing poses the challenge to entertain the possibility of the extent to which one can think death independently of everyday routines and present cultural, moral, and political conventions, while the tender humour in his writing, with a bit of help from Climacus and Anti-Climacus, helps us endure life in these war-torn times.



## NOTES

1/ See Cornel Bonca's "Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species" in *College Literature* (23 [1996]: 25-44. Print). For a peculiar conflation of the "Jesuit influence" and Kierkegaard's theology, see Paul Giaimo's *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011. vi, 172-74. Print).

2/ Because of the slight differences in different editions of *Being and Time*, I use Guignon's citations except for *The Concept of Anxiety*, which in Guignon's text is referred to as *The Concept of Dread*. The full title is *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*.

3/ Even though *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric* by Johannes de silentio is also regarded as one of Kierkegaard's theological inquiries, in the background of my inquiry, I am following Lasse Horne Kjaeldgaard's analysis of Kierkegaard's contestation of Aristotelian poetics with "parody rather than argumentation" in this seminal work. See Kjaeldgaard's "'The Peak on Which Abraham Stands': The Pregnant Moment of Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*" in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* (63.2 [2002]: 303-21. Print).

4/ See, for example, DeLillo's essay "The Power of History" on the relationship between history and fiction writing in the *New York Times Magazine* (7 Sep. 1997: n. pag. Web. 14 July 2014) and how he contextualized "Allahu akbar" in "In the Ruins of the Future" (*Harper's Magazine* 303.1819 [2001]: 40. Print).

5/ To support Muench's nuanced reading of Climacus's problematization of death, it is important to note that Kierkegaard also makes a subtle distinction between "thinking about death" and thinking "oneself in death" in "The Decisiveness of Death." See *Thoughts on Crucial Situations in Human Life* (Trans. David F. Swenson. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1941. 78-79. Print).

6/ See also Greenspan's *The Passion of Infinity: Kierkegaard, Aristotle and the Rebirth of Tragedy* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008. Print).

7/ For Kierkegaard's contextualization of *The Concept of Irony* within a categorization of his own authorship, see *The Point of View for my Work as an Author, A Direct Communication, A Report to History* (1848. Trans. Walter Lowrie. London: Oxford UP, 1939. 55, 57, 98-99, 169. Print).

8/ See DeLillo's "In the Ruins of the Future" (33-40) and interviews by Adam Begley and Thomas LeClair ("An Interview with Don DeLillo." *Contemporary Literature* 23.1 [1982]: 19-31. Print).

9/ See Leonard Wilcox's "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative" in *Contemporary Literature* (32.3 [1991]: 346-65. Print) and "Terrorism and Art: Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and Jean Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism*" in *Mosaic* (39.2 [2006]: 89-105. Print). For postmodern conventions, see Laura Barret's "'How the Dead Speak to the Living': Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*" in the *Journal of Modern Literature* (25.2 [2001/2002]: 97-113. Print). On literary conventions and political connotations of an author, see Margaret Scanlon's "Writers among Terrorists: Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and the Rushdie Affair" in *Modern Fiction Studies* (40.2 [1994]: 229-52. Print). For a condensed articulation of intertextuality, "death in sonic terms," and the fear of death, see David Cowart's *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002. 71-90. Print).

10/ For a humorous account of this irreducible difference, see Malcolm Bradbury's *Unsent Letters: Irreverent Notes from a Literary Life* (New York: Penguin, 1995. Print).

11/ Within DeLillo's entire oeuvre, there are at least two comparable instances of a parody of the past as it pertains to a matter of life. One of the most explicit instances is captured in Brugel's detailed painting of the Triumph of Death (1562) in *Underworld* (41-50). In *Cosmopolis* (London: Picador, 2012. Print) the way Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (398 AD) makes an appearance in the financial district of New York at some futuristic point in time is also on par with reference to Kierkegaard in *Falling Man* (189).

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