

ANALYSIS

De LILLO AND RELIGIOUS FAITH

Don DeLillo

(1936-)

“There is a sense of last things in my work that probably comes from a Catholic childhood. For a Catholic, nothing is too important to discuss or think about, because he’s raised with the idea that he will die any minute now and that if he doesn’t live his life in a certain way this death is simply an introduction to an eternity of pain. This removes a hesitation that a writer might otherwise feel when he’s approaching important subjects, eternal subjects.”

Don DeLillo

“Although vague about the extent to which he is lapsed, he makes clear that he was raised a very Catholic Italian American, who, like the Irish Catholic Joyce, took his religion seriously for many years. His continued sense of himself as a Catholic manifests itself in a variety of ways. He acknowledges a number of Catholic influences, including Joyce and O’Connor, and his work invites comparison with theirs. He regularly signs his name to group letters in the *New York Times* relating to contemporary Catholic issues, he weaves Catholic themes through many of his novels, and he routinely speaks of the ineffability of human life and of the way that a sort of spiritualized art alone seems able to speak this enigma....

It’s unnecessary to invoke DeLillo’s Catholicism, at the very least cultural, in order to understand and appreciate his artistic achievement, but his insistent return (most dramatically in *Underworld*) to matters of the spirit does suggest that for him a grounding in reality is not enough: loyalty to reality involves a seriousness about transcendence as well.”

Margaret Soltan

“Loyalty to Reality: *White Noise*, *Great Jones Street*, and *The Names*”
Approaches to Teaching DeLillo’s White Noise
Tim Engles and John N. Duvall, eds.
(Modern Language Association 2006) 167-68

“DeLillo’s novels grapple with big questions like the existence of God, the meaning of life, what happens after death, and so on. His interest in such questions, one suspects, has more than a little to do with his Catholic upbringing. With its heavy emphasis on eschatology, Catholicism is an obvious subtext to Jack Gladney’s obsession with death and the afterlife. ‘I think there is a sense of last things in my work that probably comes from a Catholic childhood,’ DeLillo admits....DeLillo’s characters tend to struggle on their own with such questions...they seem entirely cut off from any religious traditions, yet they still want to believe that there is more to life than waiting around for death....

The question of what has happened to faith since the proverbial death of God is a pivotal one in DeLillo’s novels, especially in *White Noise* and *Mao II*, which are both preoccupied with, among other things, the question of belief. And ‘the question of belief’ is just the right phrase, too, for belief in DeLillo’s fiction is always attenuated by doubt in a kind of cognitive dialectic...Belief in anything seems precarious at best, provisional or untenable at worst. Although DeLillo arguably underestimates the persistence of belief in the Old God, his novels accurately enumerate the various dispensations that actually proliferated rather than disappeared in the late twentieth century. What happened to some of the unexpended faith, in other words, is that it got redirected into new forms of religiosity or else displaced, as it were, onto otherwise secular apprehensions of reality....

DeLillo’s fine-tuned fictional worlds often disclose a ‘sense of transcendence that lies just beyond’ the most mundane aspects of everyday life, what the author himself once called ‘a kind of radiance in dailiness.’ ‘Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening,’ he remarks. ‘Other times it can be almost holy or sacred.’ By describing the many permutations of unexpended faith in his novels, the author takes an inventory of the current religious scene. By infusing his fictional worlds with radiance and intimations of

transcendence, he reveals the interpenetration of the sacred and the profane in contemporary culture. Above all, DeLillo captures something essential yet paradoxical about belief: where there is belief, there is likely to be some measure, however small, of doubt....

In the modern context, agnosticism became a viable if not the dominant intellectual position, and the notion of transcendence in turn lost credibility....On the contrary, faith remains absolutely central to many people's lives and is clearly on the rise throughout much of the world. There is no question that the so-called secularization thesis—the view that Enlightenment rationalism would ultimately supersede religion altogether—has been decisively challenged by historians of religion, who point especially to the spread of evangelical Christianity as evidence for the resilience and vitality of belief despite the challenges of modernity....In the world today the dialectic between belief and unbelief has, if anything, intensified. The last fifty years have seen a profound reshaping of religion, although not a weakening or turning away from belief, as many secular liberals assumed....

As doubt and skepticism have become much less stigmatized, and even as outright atheism has become something of a default position among intellectuals and the unchurched in America, so too has belief itself been altered—shaded, we might say—by the dominant ideology of pluralism.... Wholly secular approaches to DeLillo's novels tend to miss his point about the diffusion of unexpended faith into all sorts of religious and metaphysical systems. His novels provide a kind of case study in how religious belief not only persists but indeed has expanded in our supposedly secular postmodern era....

DeLillo's religious eclecticism, the anything-goes ethos of his novels rings true to the experiences of Christian students who may feel marginalized or silenced even though they espouse what is, after all, the nation's majority faith....With his finger on the spiritual pulse of contemporary American culture, DeLillo brilliantly delineates 'the increasingly complex hybridity of religious forms.' Much of the two or more weeks that I spend on DeLillo is devoted to unpacking the religious images and themes in *White Noise*, his most extensive treatment of the question of belief. The amazing diversity of beliefs in *White Noise* is worth noting at the outset, since it illustrates the sheer range of options available in the current religious climate. DeLillo typically indulges in hyperbole to make his point, but the varieties of religious experience are everywhere evident in the novel. The waxing and waning of traditional, mainline denominations; the proliferation of New Age spiritualities;...apocalyptic environmentalism;...religious fundamentalisms; the popularization of quasi-religious practices like yoga; even the more insidious and sometimes deadly practices of cults—all these phenomena and more fall under DeLillo's purview...The first important lesson to draw from *White Noise* is that there are seemingly as many beliefs as there are believers, and that consumerism, if not a religion in itself, infects virtually all religions....

Not one to practice what he preaches, the closest Murray himself comes to a religious experience is at a tourist site known as the Most Photographed Barn in America: 'Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender,' he tells Jack. 'A religious experience in a way, like all tourism.' Murray clearly stands in for the professoriat as a whole in DeLillo's satire of academic life, and at the time *White Noise* was published, Murray's dilettantism could easily have been used to advantage by neoconservatives in the culture wars. DeLillo's portrait of petty academics is amusingly accurate...The whole cast of ridiculous college professors is important mainly for what it reveals about belief in the academy....

Most characters in *White Noise* are almost comically innocuous in their beliefs. They are primarily seekers, exemplifying a new paradigm of finding religious experiences not in traditional churches but in various world religions or even in quasi religions....Following Murray's advice to sample the world's religions and 'pick one you like,' many characters in *White Noise* are engaged in a freewheeling quest for spiritual guidance....A similar lack of skepticism is seen in Babette's unquestioning acceptance of tabloids, and it is worth exploring DeLillo's critique of tabloid journalism in some detail for the ways in which an age-old belief in paranormal phenomena has been displaced into the realm of kitsch....The effects of consumerism on religion are pronounced in *White Noise*, and students need to be jarred out of their complacency and comfort zones to appreciate fully the author's critique....The trick is to get them to empathize with the deep spiritual hunger that DeLillo's characters feel, a hunger that cannot be fed simply by acquiring more things.

Jack emerges as a spiritual seeker who finds moments of transcendence not in traditional religion but in shopping...With no connection whatever to a viable tradition or a community of faith, Jack latches on to whatever shards of spiritual significance he can find, whether in quotidian consumer goods or man-made disasters....Given the post-Enlightenment disenchantment of the world, we might say that Jack's world is re-enchanted, such that a bag of groceries offers a sense of well-being; a family dinner gives off 'extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being,' his daughter's 'ecstatic chant' of a car name, Toyota Celica, strikes him 'with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence'; and finally, simply watching his children sleep makes him feel 'selfless and spiritually large.'

DeLillo clearly engages in what McClure calls 'a post-secular project of resacrilization,' but the author's take on the transcendent is by no means unambiguous. In a bizarre scene near the end of *White Noise*, for instance, the youngest child, Wilder, performs what amounts to a miracle by riding his tricycle across an expressway in rush-hour traffic and emerging unscathed at the other end. It's not at all clear what to make of this miracle; indeed, DeLillo goes out of his way to emphasize its utter incomprehensibility....The bystanders who watch Wilder set out across the freeway can only hope 'for the scene in reverse, the boy to pedal backwards...like a cartoon figure on morning TV.' On the other hand, DeLillo's language lightly applies a religious frame of reference for Wilder's wild ride—he is 'mystically charged,' as if guardian angels are escorting him to safety. The suburban landscape is paradoxically both secularized and imbued with spiritual significance, the transcendent, a sense of the miraculous....

The author picks up and develops this important insight about the persistence of belief in *Mao II* (1991), a political thriller that opens at a large gathering of Moonies in a football stadium. *Mao II* is a wonderful novel to pair with *White Noise*, because it elaborates on the earlier book's analysis of belief and deepens its treatment of cults and other mass religious movements, thus touching on the contentious politics of belief: the damage belief sometimes causes in people's lives, as well as the violence it often engenders in many parts of the world....Cults are on the periphery of *White Noise*, but in *Mao II* they take center state, and DeLillo shows us why crowd psychology plays such a crucial role in them and that belief can still be virulent in our otherwise cynical, noncommittal age....There are certain passages in *Mao II* that seem astonishingly prescient in the wake of September 11, 2001. The novel contains, for instance, a running debate about the architecturally iconic World Trade Center towers....*Mao II* imagines a bleak future in which people either live outside history...or make up history as they go along....These are the extremes, perhaps, of what happens when belief is perverted to serve corrupt ends."

Mark A. Eaton

"Inventing Hope: The Question of Belief in *White Noise* and *Mao II*"
Approaches, 144-53, 156

Michael Hollister (2015)