ANALYSIS

The Names (1982)

Don DeLillo

(1936-)

"Don DeLillo's first novel was called *Americana*. *The Names*, his seventh, is a dense, brilliant, ultimately rather elusive meditation on the relation of this half-mythological America to the historical world. A series of discreet markers gives us the time: 'This summer…was the period after the Shah left Iran, before the hostages were taken.' The principal settings of *The Names* are Greece and India, but the Americans in this novel mainly live in their own time and place, a sealed compartment, a subculture. They are executives of banks and insurance companies; they live in Athens, have lived in Teheran, Beirut, Cairo, Cyprus. They travel constantly to Turkey, Kuwait, Pakistan, Jordan, Zaire. 'It is like the Empire,' one of them says. 'Opportunity, adventure, sunsets, dusty death.' It is like tourism, another says: 'Errors and failings don't cling to you the way they do back home.' Later we read: 'Americans used to come to places like this to write and paint and study, to find deeper textures. Now we do business.'

They do business, but they look for textures too, and no one more so than Mr. DeLillo's narrator, James Axton. Axton is a risk analyst for a company that insures multinational companies against the hazards of political upheaval and also (as it turns out) an unwitting agent for the C.I.A. He refers to his story as a 'text,' sees himself as sorting experience, trying to know people twice, 'the second time in memory and language,' which gives an interesting edge to a wisecrack he makes: 'I go everywhere twice. Once to get the wrong impression, once to strengthen it.' He worries about filling his tale up with 'analysis and reflection,' and thinks of an Oriental storyteller rattling through a narrative for a rapt and ragged mob squatting in the dust. Whenever the storyteller pauses to consider things, 'to weigh events and characters,' his hearers get angry and shout, 'Show us their faces, tell us what they said.'

We to want to shout this at Mr. DeLillo at times, and he knows we do. Axton shows us faces and speech—dazzling, almost Jamesian speech—but the story keeps fading, not into analysis and reflection but into other stories, accounts of parallel, perhaps connected events. David Keller, a burly banker who gets happily drunk and swims fully clothed in the sea, later is shot at while jogging. Ann Maitland, a veteran among the traveling wives, cheats on her husband with a voluble, passionate Greek who is some sort of spy. Axton, separated from a wife he still visits, is trying to think through the marriage he can't let go. His son, aged 9, is writing a novel. Americans: 'Eerie people,' as Keller says. 'Genetically engineered to play squash and work weekends.' And they are lonely, and excited, convinced that 'the world is here,' in places like Athens, where money and power flow through all the circuits. 'Action, risk,' Axton says. 'It's not a loan to some developer in Arizona. Everything here is different, foreign: 'We could only register the edges of some elaborate secret.'

'My life is going by and I can't get a grip on it,' Axton says. 'It eludes me, it defeats me… Nothing adds up.' He wants to find a passion that is not an insanity. And yet an insanity is what he pursues. Or rather, he pursues its pursuit by two other men, an archeologist and a moviemaker; Axton conceals himself, as he says, in their obsession. The two have come across a haggard sect that shifts nomadically about the Middle East and India like an eerie, tattered mirror image of the multinational executives. The sect is composed of what the archeologist calls 'zealots of the alphabet,' adepts who have consecrated themselves to the magical life of letters, symbols, script, names. They are grim lovers of writing who kill people, sporadically and seemingly at random, choosing as victims the infirm or the mentally defective. Their victims always have the same initials as the name of the place in which they are killed.

Axton and his friends have to insist, as much for themselves as for us, on everything the sect is not. They are not kin to the killers we know, or think we know, 'the stocking stranger, the gunman with sleepy eyes, the killer of women, the killer of vagrant old men, the killer of blacks, the sniper, the slasher in tight leather, the rooftop sodomist who hurls children into the marrow alley below…. There is a different

signature here, a deeper and austere calculation.' But there is not the sickly Manson madness either, and the sect is not religious in any familiar way. Its members are not sacrificing themselves to their God, or gods, or investing life with arcane ceremony. They have no motivation, no attitudes or needs. 'No sense, no content, no historic bond, no ritual significance.'

The sect acquires a human face only when one of its members deserts—he deserts toward humanity. The sect represents the arbitrary, the meaningless not as chaos and confusion but as heartless, pointless pattern, rather like the shapes of destiny in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* or the hidden countries and conspiracies in Thomas Pynchon's *V*. 'Madness has a structure,' the deserter says. 'We might say madness is all structure.' But this is too rational an explanation, and the man can only talk this way because he is deserting. As the archeologist realizes: 'They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror to our souls. They make the system equal to the terror.' Axton asks, 'Is this what the cult intended all the time, this mockery?' The archeologist answers, 'Of course not. They intended nothing, they meant nothing. They only matched the letters.'

The Names is a powerful, haunting book, formidably intelligent and agile. 'Conversation is life,' Axton says, 'language is the deepest being…. Every conversation is a shared narrative.' Mr. DeLillo sees the narrative even when it's hiding, as when he has Axton perceive that Ann Maitland, overbright with tension and fatigue, is using 'pitch as an element of meaning. What she said was beside the point. It was the cadences that mattered, the rise and fall of the ironic voice'; or when Axton understands that even the pettiness of his quarrels with his wife alludes to their 'desperate love': 'It was part of the argument. It was the argument.'

The Names often feels like major work but it also feels a little blurred, its insights scattered rather than collected. 'If you think the name of the weapon is beautiful, are you implicated in the crime?' Well, are you? And is this such as sharp question as it seems? On the other hand, the murderous sect may be too schematic a proposition, too pure a picture of the system gone wild—the C.I.A. converted into a structuralists' coven. It is true that American fiction is full of people stranded between plotlessness and paranoia, between making no sense of their lives and making too much, and it would be a good defense of Mr. DeLillo to say that he has dramatized this dilemma strongly. But it would only be a defense and *The Names* is still a hard book to hold in the mind. I would rather concentrate on Don DeLillo's extraordinary verve and wit and the particular riches—Axton, the Americans abroad, the always looming politics of the late century—to be found between the tidy scheme and the easygoing diffusion of *The Names.*"

Michael Wood
The New York Times Book Review (1982)

"*The Names*, the novel about American expatriates that immediately precedes *White Noise*, explicitly investigated for the first time what had always been DeLillo's implicit subject: the nature and value of language itself. Although the plot outline resembles those of DeLillo's earlier novels, *The Names* leaves us with DeLillo's first hopeful denouement, as narrator James Axton recognizes in his son's exhilaratingly mangled prose a source of redemption that prefigures Jack Gladney's discovery of 'splendid transcendence' in the utterances of his children."

Mark Osteen, ed.
White Noise: Text and Criticism
(Viking Penguin/Critical Library 1998) xi

"*The Names*, with its wide range and subtlety, is the summation of DeLillo's first seven novels because it unites many of his essential themes and corresponds formally to the multiple collaborative systems we live among. *White Noise*, with its compression and ironic explicitness, is the ghostly double, the photographic negative, of *The Names*…. The title of *White Noise* appears, quite appropriately, in *The Names*. The passage describes air travel, one of that novel's symbols of American-made alienation: 'We take no sense impressions with us, no voices, none of the windy blast of aircraft on the tarmac, or the white noise of flight, or the hours waiting…. The fear of death, which infects Owen Brademas and the cult in *The Names*, moves to the center of *White Noise*, driving its narrator/protagonist, a composite of Brademas's anxieties and the cult's responses, into the double binds DeLillo knotted in *The Names*."

Tom LeClair
"Closing the Loop: *White Noise*"
In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel
(U Illinois 1987)

"Again, after three books in three years (*Ratner's Star* a while in the making), there is—given his work habits—a considerable gap, this one of four years, a period during which DeLillo lived in Greece and wrote his politically most ambitious novel, *The Names* (1982), a book set in Greece and various Middle East locales. *The Names* is shaped by a form virtually invented and perfected by Henry James—the international novel—and tried occasionally and bravely by American writers since (Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald in *Tender Is the Night*). Almost never achieved in the form is the textural richness that marks James's major books, in which the American innocent is set down in the alien context of Europe. James Axton, first-person narrator of *The Names*, undergoes what Henry James's American innocent cannot avoid: a tragic education beginning with the knowledge of his alien contest and ending with knowledge of self, his own complicity, learning that what he thought and desired to be the horror of Old World otherness is more than matched by horrors belonging to American selfhood.

For sheer tonal thickness and range, DeLillo has not written before or since anything quite like *The Names*. Axton's narration is propelled as if by a voice of multiple personality: When in conversation with other Americans like himself, in the employ of the multinationals, he is all wit and sophistication; with his estranged wife, all irony and intimacy intertwined; with himself in meditation on landscape, the play of natural light, Athens, airports, Greek architecture, the hold places of Islam, the sights and especially the sounds of the Middle East—the sounds of the Arabic tongue—he gives us long and frequent stretches of prose poetry, a lyrical language so evocative that it overcomes the headlong push of narrative time with sensuous, ecstatic, plot-stopping reverie.

Literally plot-stopping: displacing story, as if Axton needed to repress the plot that will eventually catch him up in his search for the meaning and the perpetrators of a series of cult murders. Axton's lyric poetry is an effort to escape from what fascinates as it closes in on him: a desire for the innocence that neither his work nor his culture will permit him—lyricism as a literate, connoisseur's form of catatonia—and his final understanding of the murderers is of a madness driven by similar lyric need: to stop history, to get out of a world made dense, diverse, and too present by polyglot pressures and modern technology…to become rooted again in order to live as close to our centers as possible."

Frank Lentrichia, ed.
New Essays on White Noise
(Cambridge U 1991) 10-11

"*The Names*…is a breakthrough book insofar as it articulates for the first time a virtually religious sense of awe before the very fact that language exists, as if DeLillo had discovered an extraordinary mystery in the utterly familiar act of human utterance. DeLillo has both James Axton and Owen Brademas learn to attend to language not as attempts to communicate specific meanings but as aural or palpably physical phenomena, whose meanings are less important than the 'swarming life' or 'being' that seems to emanate from them. A fine example of this occurs early in the novel when James, in a typically uncontextualized eruption of wonder, listens to a crowd of Athenians 'absorbed in conversation.' It occurs to him that 'Conversation is life, language is the deepest being'…. Here James lets language evade the responsibilities of content until it becomes something else—a broad signifier of something behind or immanent in all denotation ('over it all, or under it all' is another way to put it). In this case, language becomes that which 'bridges the lonely distances' between people, that which literally consoles them in their mortal states.

This particular view of what language 'really means,' the message hidden though immanent in its very *sound*, becomes clearer as the novel proceeds. During their exhausting (and beautifully rendered) marital quarrel, James realizes that amidst the pettiness of their accusations, 'the pain of separation, the fore-memory of death' hovers over and under their talk (*The Names* 123). 'Kathryn dead, odd meditations, pity the sad survivor,' James thinks. "Everything we said denied this. We were intent on being petty. But it was there, a desperate love, the conscious hovering sum of things. It was part of the argument. It was the argument.' Immanent in their language is the apprehension of death….

Later, Owen and James (after his separation from Kathryn) become fascinated by the names cult, a terrorist group which randomly matches them, and then ritualistically murders the people because of the coincidence. The group is playing a nihilist end-game with the idea that language is arbitrary, that signifiers lack any essential connection. Owen is at first transfixed with the cult's ideas, sensing a kinship between their mocking but inexorable terror-logic and his own haunting despair brought on by his sense that he himself can never link signifier to Signified, word to Word, as his tongue-speaking Pentecostal forebears were apparently able to do when he was a boy.

He follows the cult to India, and in a capitulation to his own nihilism, does nothing while the cult murders one more victim. The game, he then realizes (too late), is up. He can no longer bear what the cult stands for, and makes his own stand against them. He tells James: '[The cult's] killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death' (*The Names* 308). This speech, one of the high moments in DeLillo's work, tells us that language, whatever it specifically denotes, and however it may be used to 'subdue and codify' human beings, remains in the broadest sense a manifestation of 'our need to build a system against the terror in our souls.' Language is 'our means to contend with death,' and therefore the only responsible use of it comes from understanding that this terror dwells in all human utterance. Any other use mocks language. In the simplest terms, then, we need language because it bridges the lonely distances created by the fact that we are all going to die.

Owen's speech revivifies James Axton: 'I came away from the old city feeling I'd been engaged in a contest of some singular and gratifying kind. Whatever [Own had] lost in life-strength, this is what I'd won' (*The Names* 309). Upon his return to Greece, he is finally able to confront the Parthenon (as well as many other things), a monument he's avoided the entire novel because it has always felt to him too 'exalted': 'It is what we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion' (*The Names* 3). Yet this time, with the help of Owen's affirmation of what language's immanent message is, he can face it. The Parthenon no longer seems to him monumental, 'rescued' from history and placed at an imposing remove from human discourse. Now he sees it as *part* of the human crowd that surrounds it, as part of the babbling white noise of human beings who congregate around beauty, dignity, order, and proportion as a way of handling their own death fears. The result? 'I hadn't expected a human feeling to emerge from the stones but this is what I found, deeper than the art and mathematics embedded in the structure, the optical exactitudes. I found a cry for pity. This is what remains to the mauled stones in their blue surround, this open cry, this voice which is our own' (*The Names* 330).

It is a lovely passage, stripped clean of the studied neutrality or corrosive cynicism that has characterized the bulk of DeLillo's fiction till now. James is able to overcome the monument's authoritative aura, and to sense in the Parthenon a merely human cry for pity, a testament to our common mortal terror and longing. And he's able to do this not despite but because of the tourists who talk and snap pictures along the upright fragments of the ruin: 'This is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk. Everyone is talking. I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is indeed what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant, or slaughtered ram. Our offering is language' (*The Names* 331). This passage, which ends the novel proper (and precedes the excerpt from Tap's novel) is the culmination of the novel's exploration of what DeLillo feels lies immanent in language.

Language is the organized utterance of mortals connecting themselves to other mortals. However humans may use language to exploit each other, it is also what binds them in life against the terror of death, and in that respect, it is 'the deepest being.' What is so powerful is DeLillo's serene sense of celebration. Nowhere in DeLillo's work have his narratives moved to such a sense of climax and epiphany. *The Names* is itself a kind of annunciation, a novel which takes delight in its self-conscious effort to *share* the cry of pity which is language, to speak language's death-echoes while announcing that to speak them is precisely to live most boldly.

The novel's coda, called 'The Prairie' and written by James's son Tap, is a pure and generous 'offering,' a nine-year-old's effort to tell Owen Brademas's story of how as a boy he was unable to speak in tongues at his Pentecostal church meetings. The text, replete with misspellings, reveals not just language's slippery

multiplicities (as a Joycean text does) but Tap's *own* cry for pity. Tap's own aliveness—his attempt to bridge the lonely distances—keeps poking through the curtains of standard English. Earlier, James says that he finds the 'mangled words' of Tap's novel 'exhilarating.' 'He's made them new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were. They were ancient things, secret, reshapable' (*The Names* 313). 'The Prairie' is about falling from grace, of course, about a boy's recognition that he's filled not with the Word, but simply words. While 'worse than a retched nightmare,' this very recognition brings him into the 'fallen *wonder* of the world' (my italics)—which is finally the world of *The Names* itself, where language, fallen indeed, remains a matter of wonder because, with every utterance, it speaks the mystery of human beings grappling with time and nothingness. And with such a recognition can come the awareness that the human scene is everywhere and always a matter of pity and awe."

Cornel Bonca
"Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species"
College Literature 23.2 (June 1996)

"*The Names* addresses the question of the mystical power of names: secret names, place names, divine names. For DeLillo wants to remind us that names are often invested with a significance that exceeds their immediate, practical function. Names are enchanted, they enable insight and revelation. As one character explains: 'We approach name forms warily. Such secret power. When the name is itself secret, the power and influence are magnified. A secret name is a way of escaping the world. It is an opening into the self'… Consider the remarkable ending of *The Names*—an extract from the manuscript of a novel by Tap, the narrator's (James Axton's) nine-year-old-son, replete with misspellings. In Tap's novel, a boy, unable to participate in the speaking in tongues at a Pentecostal service, panics and flees the church: 'Tongue tied!…' These lines conclude both Tap's novel and *The Names* itself.

'The *fallen* wonder of the world' connotes the failure of language, in its (assumed) postlapsarian state, to invest the world with some order of deep and abiding meaning, to *illuminate* existence. More specifically, the language that has 'fallen' is the language of name, the kind of pure nomenclature implied in Genesis… The novel follows the lives of characters who seek to recover this utopian condition of language. For example, people calling themselves 'abecedarians' form a murder cult whose strategy is to match the initials of their victims' names to those of the place names where the murders occur—all in a (misguided) effort to restore a sense of the intrinsic or self-revealing significance of names….

The novel suggests that the visionary power of language will only be restored when we 'tap' into its primal or pristine forms, the forms that can regenerate perception, that can *reveal* human existence in significant ways. Hence the novel's inquiry into 'original meanings,' the concern with remembering 'the prototype'… The 'gift of tongues' is also understood as a primal, and hence visionary, language—'talk as from the womb, as from the sweet soul before birth,' the language by which '[n]ormal understanding is surpassed.' (And far from DeLillo keeping an ironic distance from such mystical views of glossolalia, he has endorsed them in interviews.) Moreover, one can hardly miss the novel's overall insistence on the spoken word—especially on talk at the familiar, everyday, pre-abstract level of communication—as the purest expression of primal, visionary language…. Such meanings are assumed to exist (as in some transcendent realm) outside the space of intertextuality."

Paul Maltby
"The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo"
Contemporary Literature 37.2 (Summer 1996) 258-77

"DeLillo's metaphysics emerges most strikingly in *The Names*, a novel full of sounds as well as places to which most Americans cannot, or will not, respond. In part because the focus of this novel is so intensely on American bad faith, it is an excellent one with which to conclude classroom discussion of DeLillo's ideas. The book is divided into chapters that name places—'The Island,' 'The Mountain,' 'The Desert,' 'The Prairie'—and these arid locations act as symbolic backdrops for the story: the effort of one American to overcome his evasion of the tragic reality of human life. James Axton's very name suggests the exertion required to break out of the self-referring world. As in his other novels, DeLillo here essentially narrates a set of ascending steps toward transcendent knowledge. He can be thought of as a more generous, less sardonic Flannery O'Connor…

It is to Axton, the main character and narrator of *The Names*, that DeLillo gives the most inflected, self-conscious moral knowledge. An expatriate American living in Greece, Axton begins the novel in a condition of willed ignorance (he doesn't know, or doesn't want to know, that he works for the CIA) and of active evasion—evasion of his personal history as well as of the Acropolis and all it stands for. He makes a sharp initial distinction between his preferred modern Athens, 'imperfect, blaring' (noise again), and the daunting 'beauty, dignity, order, proportion' of 'that somber rock,' where 'so much converges.'

By the end of the novel, though, he is climbing the hill to the Parthenon and realizing that 'it was not a thing to study but to feel. It wasn't aloof, rational, timeless, pure…. It wasn't a relic species of dead Greece, but part of the living city below it.' The noise of the Parthenon is the exhilarating and deeply reassuring sound of human conversation among the many foreign tourists at the site. It is also, even more important, a noise from the past: Axton hears a 'human feeling' in the stones themselves: 'I found a cry for pity…[an] open cry, this voice we know as our own'….

Most of the characters in *The Names* inhabit the abstract, evasive realms of the air or underground. If they are businesspeople, they fly about doing their obscure multinational business; it they are archaeologists, they sit in the dirt performing a kind of fanatic epigraphy. It is the triumph of Axton that he finds a way to 'have a grounding in the real world'—to exist in the modern-ancient city, receptive to the perennial human cry in it…. 'Hell is the place we don't know we're in,' says a character in *The Names*. "Is hell a lack of awareness?'… The virtuous rhetoric of DeLillo is a wholly humanized Blakean soundscape in which, as he writes in *The Names*, 'language is the deepest being' and conversation the privileged social mode, since it is in conversation that this dynamic of exchange takes place for the sake of the liberation of the syntax of pathos."

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.
(MLA 2006) 163-65, 167

Michael Hollister (2015)