
Joseph Dewey. *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo*.
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Don DeLillo has been relatively quiet in the last ten years. Since the publication of the celebrated tome *Underworld* in 1997, his output has included two uncharacteristically diminutive novels and two rarely discussed (although very excellent) plays. When God withdraws, the priests come out, and so since the turn of the millennium, the number of full-length studies devoted to DeLillo has swelled from two to seven, with 2006 being the first year to see two such publications. The general trend in 21st-century DeLillo criticism has been to try to rescue DeLillo from the postmodern theorists who busily laid claim to him in hundreds of scholarly journal articles from the 1980s and 1990s. Recent books by Cowart (2003) and Kavadlo (2004) have aspired to return DeLillo to the people by emphasizing his underlying humanism, his predilection for mysticism, and his rich delight in the communal satisfactions of language and narrative. Dewey's *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo* continues this push by articulating the thesis that DeLillo's career represents a development through cynicism and postmodern quietism toward a spiritual vision of the resurrection and reclamation of "the human soul itself" (148).

The very idea of a meta-narrative adumbrating DeLillo's evolution is unique to Dewey's book. Other DeLillo studies tend to take as their starting point DeLillo's stylistic consistency over his 35-year career, or to attribute any development in his outlook to historical shifts in the social climate of the America he has been writing in and about. The notion that DeLillo might be developing as a thinker and a writer in response to what he has written has escaped other critics who have indulged the temptation to view DeLillo's novels synoptically. Cowart's study even dispenses with authorial chronology altogether, organizing his discussion of DeLillo's 13 novels thematically. Dewey's stratagem of considering DeLillo as a thinking person in time rather than as a scroll of disembodied words effectively evokes the consistency of DeLillo's early quasi-nihilism and, most impressively, identifies DeLillo's pseudonymously published novel *Amazons* (1980) as a crucial turning point in the author's career. One of the strongest contributions of Dewey's book to the critical discussion is in fact his incorporation of DeLillo's "paratexts," including his essays, short stories, and plays, into the texture of DeLillo's novelistic canon. That said, the evolutionary thesis becomes problematic when Dewey's analysis of the texts needs to bend and strain to make DeLillo develop in the direction that Dewey wants him to. Dewey's discussion of DeLillo's first novel, *Americana* (1971) is hobbled by Dewey's

unwillingness to take its protagonist's spiritual inclinations seriously. According to Dewey's argument, if it is DeLillo's first novel, it must also be the most nihilistic one. Correspondingly, Dewey's treatment of *Cosmopolis* (2003) unconvincingly alchemizes the grim technofetishism and apocalypticism of DeLillo's most recent novel into DeLillo's crowning statement of humanistic affirmation.

In its resistance to theoretical gobbledygook and its elucidation of DeLillo's understatedly labyrinthine plot structures, Dewey's book is ideal for readers trying to orient themselves in Don DeLillo's strange and often frightening world. Dewey's analysis is most satisfying when it takes the broad view, as in its explication of the suicidal claustrophobia of *Running Dog* (1978), the obsessive atmosphere of *Mao II* (1991), or the mutually ironizing polarity in the structure of *Underworld*. But when you write about 14 books and three plays in the space of 150 pages, the details are bound to suffer. Despite (or, conceivably, because of) what is universally recognized as the intricate density of DeLillo's sentences and images, close readings are rare, especially in the more recent, anti-theoretical works. Dewey's prose is characterized by a manic hastiness to get through the plot of each of the texts he discusses, resulting in sprawling catalogues of plot details, abandoned parenthetical asides, and suggestiveness substituting for clarification. One sometimes gets the impression that Dewey is settling for the very clichés which DeLillo is patently attempting to provoke his readers into transcending. Representatively, the tired saw that television "deadens" our response to the world is inadequate to the complex meanings DeLillo finds in mass-media. Likewise, an overly moralistic ideal of "authenticity" creeps into Dewey's readings of *Great Jones Street* (1973) and *The Body Artist* (2001) in a way that diminishes the ambivalence with which these works treat conventional assumptions about subjectivity and agency.

DeLillo enjoys the strange position of being simultaneously among our most admired of contemporary authors and our least read. Any critical text that can do the work of making DeLillo more approachable to the mass audience that aspires to admire him is valuable and important. *Beyond Grief and Nothing* is exemplary in this respect; reverent without being mystifying, jargon-free without being facile, comprehensive but without any claims to totalization. If it is a little weak on the nuances, Dewey's summary of DeLillo's career to date provides an enlightening contribution to our fledgling understanding of this monumental and elusive author. ✱