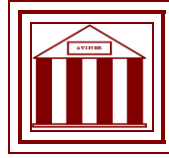


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**Contrasting Communication Styles in
Don DeLillo's *The Names***

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Contrasting Communication Styles in Don DeLillo's *The Names*

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Abstract

In the late 1970s, prominent American novelist Don DeLillo lived and wrote in Greece, giving rise to his seventh novel, *The Names* (1982). This complex work, according to the novelist, marked a new beginning, in part because of the renewed attention to language and modes of communication. *The Names* is an "international novel," following in the tradition of American novelists such as Henry James.

The American narrator, initially an aloof, detached observer, notices the people of Athens as they connect with each other and their environment. Alluding to the foundations of this mode of communication in oral culture, he says, "Conversation is life, language is the deepest being." Late in the novel he finally walks up to the Acropolis, which he had thought of as cold, distant, and mute; now he is surprised to discover that the place is actually integrated into the life of the city itself. He hears the voices of the people around him and realizes they engage in an organic, natural style of communication, one concerned with whatever is necessary to health and well-being.

DeLillo's novel contrasts this organic, living mode of communication, rooted in orality, with the distant, technocratic, literary mode as practiced by various characters, including the mysterious cult that murders individuals based on a purely mechanical matching of initials in place names with the initials of a victim's name. Other characters distance themselves from life through academic study, filming from a helicopter, and so on.

This study examines the ways this novel contrasts these two orientations toward language, bringing to the surface the way DeLillo's work, stemming from the writer's own experiences in Greece, privileges the organic, nourishing mode rooted in orality.

Keywords: Communication, Orality, Literacy, DeLillo.

Don DeLillo, one of the foremost contemporary American novelists, lived and worked in Athens for approximately three years, until sometime early in 1982.¹ With Athens as his base, he traveled elsewhere in Greece, as well as to the Middle East and India. He later said that these experiences reinvigorated his writing: ““What I found ... was that all this traveling taught me how to see and hear all over again.””² From this new awareness emerged *The Names* (1982), his seventh novel. He has said, “And with this book I tried to find a deeper level of seriousness.... *The Names* is the book that marks the beginning of a new dedication.”³ Although not as well known among the reading public as his subsequent novel, *White Noise* (1985), and perhaps surpassed in some minds by a later novel, the massive *Underworld* (1997), at the time several critics recognized *The Names* as the definitive DeLillo work. Tom LeClair, writing in *In the Loop* (1987), his early book-length study of DeLillo’s novels, unequivocally called it the novelist’s “best” and approvingly quoted a reviewer who referred to it in similar terms.⁴ Likewise, David Cowart (2008), even after the publication of *Underworld*, could still refer to *The Names* as the writer’s “definitive work.”⁵

The Names is an “international novel,” following in the tradition of American novelists such as Henry James. As with a Jamesian novel, readers follow Americans and other expatriates as they interact with another culture. DeLillo’s novel is hardly simple, however, as it includes various subtexts and interrelated themes. Besides dramatizing the foreigners’ attitudes toward their host country or countries, *The Names* expands the frame to include the world of political intrigue and upheaval, as it is set during the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. It also describes local customs, contrasts different modes of travel, and touches on the family life of its protagonists. Furthermore, it most mysteriously refers to an elusive murderous cult seemingly called *Ta Onómata*, The Names. The theme that binds these threads concerns language, especially in the novel’s contrast of communication styles arisen from oral culture with those that have evolved from literary culture. We might say that when DeLillo says he learned “how to see and hear,” he is obliquely referring to these two modes. A literary person *sees* language inscribed; an orally inclined person *hears* the words.

The novel’s narrator is the American James Axton, who describes himself as a “risk analyst,” one who reviews the political and economic climate of various countries and writes reports for potential investors, highlighting whatever conditions might endanger the prospects for multinational corporations. Late in the novel he discovers that he has unwittingly been working for a company with ties to the Central Intelligence Agency, and he thereupon resigns. But he is a technocrat; a literate person by profession and upbringing, he compiles lists that he communicates through electronic media.

¹ LeClair, p. 176

² Harris, p. 18

³ Begley, p. 92

⁴ LeClair, pp. 177, 180

⁵ Cowart, p. 152

Demonstrating this kind of detachment, at one point he mentions that he sat in his office “wait[ing] for the telex to address [him].”¹ He deals in synthesis and abstraction. Early in the novel he describes his estranged marriage to Kathryn and says he has compiled a list of the grievances he imagines she has against him, calling them “the 27 Depravities” (16-17). He says of his talks with his wife that they were possible when they dealt with “subjects remote from us” (20).

The word *remote* succinctly describes the purely literate person’s relationship to what Walter Ong, in his *Orality and Literacy* (1982), calls “the human lifeworld.” Literacy entails “elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience.”² Kathryn, for her part, is also a detached observer, but in a way different from Axton. She finds refuge at an archeological site, scraping away at a hole on a remote island, pulling up shards of pottery from Minoan times. As Axton describes her, she is “separate from the things that surround her” (132). Within the dig she has contracted her life: “She rarely looks over the rim. The trench is enough. A five-foot block of time abstracted from the system. Sequence, order, information. All she needs of herself” (133).

The literate expatriates with whom Axton socializes—businessmen, bankers—are likewise detached from their environments. When Axton visits Charles Maitland’s apartment, he notes the way Maitland immediately retreats to the living room after opening the door: “Charles grew impatient with conversation in doorways,” no doubt because it would intersect with the unpredictable life outside. Their conversation on this occasion begins with a mention of the books on shelves, which turn out to be those of Maitland’s wife, Ann, as Axton realizes: ““You’re two distinct people, aren’t you? They’re hers, most of them. You read manuals, specification sheets”” (95). When Axton dismisses Maitland’s inquiry about Axton’s recent trip to Cairo by saying he was there for only a day, Maitland says, ““That’s all it takes. Great cities take a day”” (96). When the Maitlands’ son Peter, a student of mathematics, arrives in Athens, Axton asks about the branch of mathematics the young man is studying, Charles steps in with an explanation: ““He speaks to no one. He says he’s not able to talk about it. There are certain things he can’t discuss with his *professors*. It’s too bloody rarified”” (164).

The people in Axton’s circle travel widely, from capital to capital, compiling their reports, but not connecting with Ong’s “human lifeworld.” They speak of other countries in terms of abstract categories. The banker David Keller, for instance, refers to “his” countries as “either terrorist playpens or they’re viciously anti-American or they’re huge tracts of economic and social wreckage” (232). His comments uncannily resemble those made by then Secretary of State Madeline Albright in a 1998 address to Howard University, when she placed the countries of the world into four categories: advanced industrial states, societies in transition, rogue states, and “basket cases,”

¹ DeLillo, *The Names*, p. 89. Subsequent page numbers of this text appear in parentheses throughout the body of this paper.

² Ong, p. 42

meaning failed states.¹ The emissaries of technologically developed, literate societies in DeLillo's novel create abstract categories, or as Kathryn wryly encapsulates the agenda, "Subdue and codify" (80).

Axton calls himself and his associates "a subculture," connecting to foreign places from the remote vantage point of the airplane: "I flew a lot, of course. We all did. We were ... business people in transit, growing old in planes and airports" (6). Later in the novel he again mentions this means of travel and its way of disengaging the traveler from the environment: "Air travel reminds us who we are. It's the means by which we recognize ourselves as modern. The process removes us from the world and sets us apart from each other. We wander in the ambient noise, checking one more time for the flight coupon, the boarding pass, the visa" (254). Axton says of Greece and other countries he visits, "Americans used to come to places like this to write and paint and study, to find deeper textures. Now we do business" (6), to which today we might now add—and conduct drone strikes. Axton says, "All these places were one-sentence stories to us" (94). It is not surprising, given this detached, mediated interaction with place, that on one more than one occasion in the novel Axton and others find themselves getting lost when riding in cars or walking, less remote means of transport.

The kind of detachment I'm describing manifests itself in a number of examples throughout the novel. David Keller, for instance, on New Year's Day wants to fly to Frankfurt to watch American football games on television (194). His way of interacting with his children from an earlier marriage is to fly to New York, to sit in a hotel with them eating ice cream sundaes, then fly back. When Axton's boss, George Rowser, first appears in the novel, Axton provides him his latest reports concerning Turkey, which he describes as "precise figures for nonperforming loans.... foreign exchange factors, inflation rates, election possibilities, exports and imports" (50). The informal conversation that follows is noticeably clipped and laconic, almost monosyllabic. It ends with Axton's mocking commentary on Rowser: "He went back to his reading.... He had a dozen nervous gestures.... I imagined him stranded in Goose Bay. Big empty remote innocent Labrador.... No politics, no risk... He would die there, gesturing" (51). Later Axton describes Rowser's mind as binary: "'on-off, zero-one'" (97).

Owen Brademas, Kathryn's mentor at the archeological site, emerges as a central character in the novel. He has become an epigraphist, one who studies ancient inscriptions. He admits that the content of the languages he studies mean nothing to him. His interest is purely aesthetic and detached. He says, "'I've begun to see a mysterious importance in the letters as such, the blocks of characters.... I find this is all I want to know about the people who lived there. The shapes of the letters and the materials they used'" (35-36). Owen's use of language becomes increasingly detached from utility and meaning. Kathryn says of him, "'Owen's in another world. He's left this one behind'" (73). His reading of scripts has become a very private obsession. Ong would seem to be

¹ St. John, p. 158

describing him when he writes, “Literates often manifest tendencies (loss of contact with the environment) by psychic withdrawal into a dreamworld of their own” (68).

Ong, writing of how the evolution of print culture has affected consciousness, further explains this removal from human interaction. When words are comprehended solely in terms of visual surface, he says, the mind itself is altered, turned inward: “[P]rint encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as more and more thing-like.... Print encouraged the mind to sense that its possessions were held in some sort of inert mental space.”¹ Fittingly, readers last see Owen when Axton visits him in a small room in Lahore, a room “out of the color and the light.” Owen refers to it as the place he’s been preparing for, containing “the correct number of objects, the correct proportions.” He says, “For sixty years I’ve been approaching this room” (275).

With the possible exception of Axton and his family, *The Names* provides more background information on Owen than on other characters. Readers learn that he was raised in Kansas within a Pentecostal church and has been haunted by his inability, in his youth, to experience glossolalia, speaking in tongues. According to what he was taught, this mysterious language precedes meaning, being something pure and abstract, “as from the sweet soul before birth, before blood and corruption” (306). His youthful failure seems to explain much of his longing in adulthood, and it clarifies his fascination with the murderous cult, whose members choose their victims when the victim’s initials match the name of the place into which he or she has wandered. For example, a feeble-minded man named Michaelis Kalliambetos is murdered when he wanders into a village named Mikro Kamini. The cult has no political agenda, no concrete cause. The killings are mechanical, reminding us of the earlier description of Rowser’s mind as binary, on-off, zero-one. An apostate from the group tells Owen about the cult, and Owen comes to understand that the group is “intent on ritualizing a denial of our elemental nature. To eat, to expel waste, to sense things, to survive. To do what is necessary, to satisfy what is animal in us, to be organic, meat-eating, all blood-sense and digestion.” The ritual involves a “needless death. A death by system, by machine-intellect” (175). But this explanation explains too much, perhaps, as the apostate, Andahl, introduces what Axton’s paraphrase of Owen later calls “an element of motivation, of attitudes and needs.” Owen later realizes that the cult cannot be understood rationally: “No sense, no content, no historic bond, no ritual significance” (216).

The yearning for a language that precedes consciousness; the interest in inscriptions apart from their content or utility; the compiling of statistical reports; the cult’s machine-like murders, which the character Volterra thinks of filming from the remote distance of a helicopter—these activities arise from the desire to avoid risk and ambiguity, the stuff of life. As Owen says in feeling some empathy for the cult, “Numbers behave, words do not” (208). Or as the

¹ Ong, p. 129

critic Cowart puts it, the desire is “to arrest the fluidity in language, the ‘free play’ of signifiers.”¹ But such desire implies something like a death-wish. It is telling that by the novel’s end the abecedarian cult members are dying off or drifting away, and Owen Brademas has been reduced to that cell-like room in Lahore, from which he presumably will not be leaving.

Against what LeClair calls the novel’s “catalogue of alienations,”² *The Names* displays uses of language more closely tied to its oral origins. Often DeLillo’s chapters appear structured to dramatize the contrast. For instance, immediately after Axton records his laconic conversation with boss Rowser, mentioned earlier, he describes the street scene in Athens on a typical summer night. “Summer nights belong to people in the streets,” he remarks (51). He then mentions people amassing on park benches, chairs and tables being set up on sidewalks or alleys or rooftops, the blaring of music. He says, “The cars are out, the motorcycles and scooters and jeeps, and there are arguments, radios playing, the sound of auto horns” (52). Similarly, just after Axton departs from Owen in Pakistan, with “no further commentary and reflection,” he walks into the streets of Lahore, saying, “The alleys were full of people and noise.” He suddenly has entered a realm that intimately engages the senses: “Bare bulbs were arrayed on strings over tiers of nuts and spices. I paused every few feet to see what was here, nutmeg and scarlet mace, burlap bags of coriander seeds and chilies.... I lingered at the trays of dyestuffs and ground spices, heaped in pyramids, colors I’d never seen, brilliances, worlds...” (309).

Even Axton, early in the novel, says that he and his estranged wife could still communicate directly when the subjects remained familiar, concerning family. “The subject of family makes conversation almost tactile,” he says. “I think of hands, food, hoisted children. There’s a close-up contact warmth in the names and images. Everydayness” (31). To call conversation almost tactile is to say it does retain a connection to the human lifeworld. Thus we also see Axton’s acquaintance from India, Anand Dass, and the way his son Rajiv interacts with him. Rajiv seems “always to be dancing around him, asking questions, grabbing hold of the man’s arm, his hand, even the loops in his belt” (85-86).

As LeClair summarizes in his paraphrase of Ong’s work, “In oral cultures, the ideal is harmony.... [T]he oral culture is ... concerned with preserving what is necessary for its health and survival.”³ So even a seller on the street is using language intimately connected to the stuff of life. As the novel says of a peddler of lottery tickets, his repetitive pitch is a “summons to buy, to act, to live” (319). Axton is, as mentioned, a literate thinker and writer, a risk analyst compiling lists and reports divorced from everydayness; but he does attend to the life around him. The vital, open, free and unhindered communication on the streets of Athens does not escape his notice. He says,

¹ Cowart, p. 162

² LeClair, p. 180

³ LeClair, p. 190

Conversation is life, language is the deepest being.... It is the sound and picture of humans communicating. It is talk as a definition of itself. Talk. Voices out of doorways and open windows, voices on the stuccoed-brick balconies, a driver taking both hands off the wheel to gesture as he speaks. Every conversation is a shared narrative, a thing that surges forward, too dense to allow space for the unspoken, the sterile. The talk is unconditional, the participants drawn in completely.

This is a way of speaking that takes such pure joy in its own openness and ardor that we begin to feel these people are discussing language itself. (52)

The novel begins with Axton's mentioning that he long postponed a trek to the Acropolis. He assumed that such a visit would be too weighty, the "somber rock" too daunting, and he speaks of the ancient structure in abstract terms: "Beauty, dignity, order, proportion" (3). However, late in the novel Axton makes the trip and is startled by what he finds:

[T]he Parthenon 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. This was a surprise. I'd thought it was a separate thing, the sacred height, intact in its Doric order. I hadn't expected a human feeling to emerge from the stones but this is what I found, deeper than the art and mathematics embodied in the structure, the optical exactitudes. I found a cry for pity. (330)

In these closing passages of Axton's narrative, *The Names* celebrates something like a Tower of Babel, preferring its multiplicity of voices, its secularity, and ultimately its humanity rather than the pure connection of word to world sought by the cultists or the "invisible spirit's voice" sought by the Pentecostals (337). As Axton further describes the scene on the Acropolis, he says,

No one seems to be alone. 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 what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language. (331)

It appears that DeLillo's novel privileges communication and noise that arises from what Axton calls "the spoken universe" (94), as LeClair argues.¹ As he further notes, Axton changes and becomes more self-aware not through his reading but through his experiences and his listening to others (197). There is an obvious paradox, however: DeLillo himself is a writer, and *The Names* is a printed text, not oral literature. However, *The Names* does not end when

¹ LeClair, p. 189

Axton's narration does, for it contains an epilogue written by Axton's young son, nicknamed Tap. Readers early learn that Tap has been writing a novel, and we also have heard that he is a notoriously bad speller. The final pages of DeLillo's novel give us what is presumably a portion of Tap's narrative, with misspellings that derive from hearing language spoken, not from seeing words written. One of his characters "smelt of spoilt milk"; his main character, a fictionalized Owen Brademas named Orville Benton, is encouraged to "yeeld totally" in order to speak in tongues (335, 336).

In this chapter DeLillo, through Tap, is experimenting with a synthesis between orality and literacy. Axton earlier mentioned Tap's misspellings, calling them "spirited," and he gives the example of Tap's writing "burch cruch" instead of "birch crutch." Axton comments further: "This term had a superseding rightness as it appeared on the page. It found the spoken poetry in those words, the rough form lost through usage. His other misrenderings were wilder, freedom-seeking, and seemed to contain curious perceptions about the words themselves, second and deeper meanings, original meanings" (313).

The novel is not arguing for an impossible return to pure orality, but it recognizes that there is a tradeoff, with gains and losses for humans as they grow in literate sophistication. The novel seeks to find ways of restoring and preserving an intimate connection with the world, its peoples, and ourselves. I recently stumbled upon an anecdote about Samuel Johnson's blind housekeeper, who, in order to determine the level of the tea in a cup would put her finger in it. It's an apt image: some knowledge is best gained through direct, intimate experience. Or, as my wife likes to remind me, when I want to know the weather I should stop staring at the radar images on the computer screen and instead step outside the door.

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