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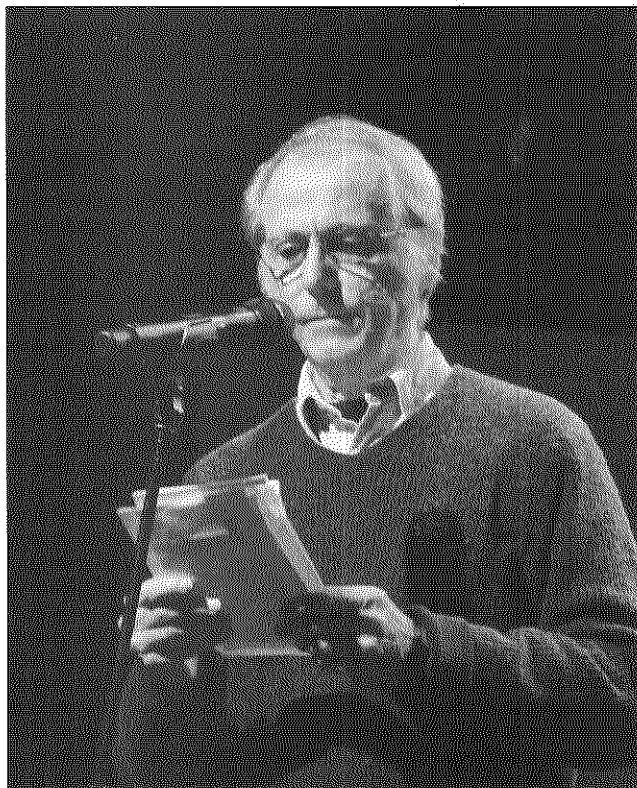
*hinc lucem et pocula sacra*

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Tunnelling Back to Dead Lands

A review of *Zero K* by Don DeLillo  
(Pan Macmillan, 2016)

Don DeLillo in New York City, 2011 (Photograph: Thousandrobots)



Human beings are so 'fallen' that they must start with the simplest linguistic act: the naming of things.

'The Aesthetics of Silence'  
Susan Sontag

i. the doors of cryo-cleansing, or, DeLillo via Donald Duck

I used to watch a film you may have seen. *Donald Duck in Mathmagic Land* (1959) played repeatedly through parts of my childhood, interrupted only by the winding of tape. The plot is almost hallucinogenic. A sailor-capped duck travels back to ancient Greece in search of geometric origins. He encounters a group of pre-Socratic philosophers who teach him the diatonic scale. Clad in *kotinos* and Tyrian purple, Donald congas an amphora beside Pythagoras, who walks the bass. It's a lesson in the mathematical harmony of acoustic intervals: the distance between notes becomes the space between lines, as the jam session dissolves into a montage of golden spirals, rectangles. Unlikely affiliates find structural symmetry. We watch as the Parthenon, star jasmine, Notre Dame, snowflakes, and Mona Lisa's face overlap across the screen. The film ends with an indelible image: a corridor extending into infinity. The duck waddles towards the hallway's vanishing point, opening doors along the way. Eventually, the knobs cease turning. 'The boundless treasures of science are locked behind those doors,' explains an unseen narrator. 'In time they will be opened by the curious and inquiring minds of future generations.'

Set amongst these future generations, Don DeLillo's latest novel opens onto a similar corridor.

I walked the halls. The doors here were painted in gradations of muted blue and I tried to name the shades. Sea, sky, butterfly, indigo. All these were wrong and I began to feel more foolish with every step I took and every door I scrutinized. I wanted to see a door open and a person emerge. I wanted to know where I was and what was happening around me. A woman came striding by, briskly, and I resisted an impulse to name her like a color, or examine her for signs of something, clues to something.

Jeffrey Lockhart is in *The Convergence*, a subterranean cryonics facility founded by his father. Behind one of these doors, his stepmother Artis prepares to enter the icy purgatory. Located at the geographical convergence of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, *The Convergence* collates the various fantasies associated with technological singularity. The centre seems to contain as many paths to immortality as there are seekers. In one explanation, a corpse is immersed into cryonic suspension: 'preservation of the body until the year, the decade, the day when it might safely be permitted to reawaken'. Later in the narrative, this process abruptly morphs into a distinct vision of cyborgification, where only the head needs freezing—to be grafted onto 'a healthy nobody' in some promised future. Behind a different door, researchers are hard at work on a universal language. This reconstruction of Babel, which allows speakers to 'approximate the logic and beauty of pure mathematics in everyday speech', becomes a singularity grounded in linguistics; like Adam in his paradise, we'll at last call the animals by their true names. Glance behind one final door and discover a proper English garden (albeit underground, and in Central Asia). On a bench sits Ben-Ezra, another cryo-candidate, who adds new meaning to the Browning poem with which he shares his name. 'Maker, remake, complete, —I trust what Thou shalt do!' As *Zero K* reveals, some things are not finished until the second time around: until they are remade, complete.

ii. 'We reverse the text here, we read the news backwards.'

If a secretive, massively-funded, subterranean research-institute sounds familiar, it's because the setting is indebted to DeLillo's earlier experiments in *Ratner's Star* (1976). Indeed, the door-lined hallway could be taken as a metonym for the intertextual references of *Zero K*; to a greater extent than any previous work, DeLillo's latest vision is, in fact, a revision. The doors of *The Convergence* are fragrant portals to places we've already known and loved. Jeffrey's father, Ross, involved in 'private wealth management, dynasty trusts, emerging markets', reads as an older and wiser Eric Packer from *Cosmopolis* (2003)—still wearing sunglasses at night. Artis' archaeological interest in burial mounds recalls Kathryn and Owen from *The Names* (1982), seeking ancient inscriptions on the fictional Cycladic island of Kouros. DeLillo's language,

too, often feels extracted from a portfolio of his own greatest hits. After Jeffrey learns that his father's real name is Nicholas Satterswaite, he's thrown into onomastic crisis. He counts the letters, looking for answers like Nick Shay in *Underworld* (1997), who becomes fixated on the presence of names that contain thirteen characters. In *Falling Man* (2007), meanwhile, a stranger tells Rumsey that his life would have been different if he'd been called Ramsey instead; *Zero K*'s Jeffrey has a similar thought, speculating that he would have been able to 'stop mumbling, gain weight, add muscle, eat raw clams and get girls', if only he were a Satterswaite instead of a Lockhart.

Inside *The Convergence*, screens constantly play footage of natural disasters and warfare, contemporary and historic. These, too, are like transmissions from DeLillo's other worlds. We see endless clips of burning monks, recalling an imitation spectacle in *Cosmopolis*, as well as Levi's interest in the Buddhist art of dying in *Running Dog* (1978), and the spiritual immolation of Lyle at the end of *Players* (1997). One of the most prominent feeds is 'the traffic channel', which, as Jeffrey watches, abstracts into a mathematical pattern that 'exceeds its shallow reality'. Our protagonist would get along with Lauren Hartke from *The Body Artist* (2001), who, in one of DeLillo's more cryptic sequences, grieves for her deceased partner by watching a highway webcam in Kotka, Finland. Eventually Lauren discovers that 'dead times' are best, when the roadway is bare and quiet. All these uninterrupted moments of nothing, between the present and the future, constitute the gravitational force behind DeLillo's latest work.

*Zero K* also shows him rubbing shoulders with some of his favourite literary and filmic precursors, touchstones that have largely remained the same over the years. In his first novel, *Americana* (1971), a text brimming with allusions to Irish modernism, David Bell has a dream that 'James Joyce and Antonioni and Samuel Beckett' are sitting in his living room. This trinity is still alive in 2016, as *Zero K*'s *Convergence* feels like something Jack Nicholson might stumble across in the deserts of Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975), or a structure hidden behind a dune from *Zabriskie Point* (1970). Jeffrey himself reads like a tranquilised Stephen Dedalus. While Joyce's young Stephen is fascinated with the phonetic qualities of words like 'suck', Jeffrey is drawn to another set of signifiers: 'Certain words seem to be located in the air ahead of me, within arm's reach. *Bessarabian, penetralia, pellucid, falafel.*' In *The Names*, Owen and James reflect upon *metempsychosis* (the transmigration of souls), a concept that structures Stephen's and Leopold's intersecting quests in *Ulysses*. DeLillo's latest work takes up the idea once again, invoking the term in a discussion of cryonic reincarnation. 'Will my soul have left my body and migrated to another body somewhere? What's the word I'm looking for?' The novel's end resembles the conclusion of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as both works draw to a close with a series of disjointed journal entries. Fittingly, Jeffrey's father, who chose to 'abandon his generational history', becomes like Bloom's father, Rudolf Virág, who changes his name by deed-poll to linguistically assimilate a Hungarian-Jewish past.

But it's Samuel Beckett who steals the show. *How It Is*, Beckett's haunting vision of mud and mire, grows out of German biologist Ernst Haeckel's notion of '*Urschleim*', or primeval sludge. In this (now unfashionable) theory, all of biological life arose from unicellular creatures that composed a primordial, muck-like substance at the bottom of the sea. *Zero K* offsets its dreams of immortality with a kind of mineral death-drive—described earlier, in *Point Omega* (2010), as the desire to become inorganic matter. DeLillo meets Beckett at the source, encoding a discussion of *Urschleim* into the opening pages of his novel: 'Ooze is mud or slime, it's primitive life at the ocean bottom and it's made chiefly of microscopic sea creatures.' The debt, however, is less thematic, more stylistic. Beckett—'the last writer to shape the way we think and see', according to a character in *Mao II* (1991)—haunts the prose of *Zero K*. Take, for example, the opening of Chapter Nine, which could have been lifted straight from the procedural sequences of *Watt*. While Beckett's Mr. Knott permutes the possible routes between his bed, window, and fireplace, DeLillo's Jeffrey has a thing for doors:

I knocked on a door and waited. I went to the next door and knocked and waited. Then I went down the hall knocking on doors and not waiting. It occurred to me that I'd done this two or three days earlier, or maybe it was two or three years. I walked and knocked and

looked back eventually to see if any doors had opened. I imagined a telephone ringing on a desk behind one of the doors, ringer on Lo. I knocked on the door and reached for the doorknob, realizing there was no doorknob. I looked for a fixture on the door that might accommodate the disk on my wristband. I went down the hall and turned the corner and checked every door, knocking first and then searching for a magnetic component. The doors were painted in various pastels. I stood back against the opposite wall, where there were no doors, and scanned the doors that faced me, ten or eleven doors, and saw that none exactly matched another. This was art that belongs to the afterlife.

Not only is there plenty of Beckettian humour, as when Jeffrey muses on whether the men in the cryo-pods ever get hard-ons, but there are whole sections of the novel that feel like discarded drafts from Beckett's Trilogy. I am not the first reviewer to read the 'Artis Martineau' chapter as a resurrection of *The Unnamable*. After Artis is frozen, we get a first-person transmission from her liminal consciousness. It's a series of tautological sentences, spoken in the disembodied first-person singular. Like Mr. Tuttle in *The Body Artist*, the speaker can't locate herself in time or space. Whereas Beckett offsets these manoeuvres through comedy and irony, DeLillo's pastiche catches the reader off-guard with its earnestness. Some of *Zero K*'s sentences read like transcriptions from the smoking section of a London nightclub, once the ketamine has started to course. 'Where is my body?' 'Am I just the words?' DeLillo updates Beckett's Dantean purgatory: disassociation replaces suffering in the future, as language becomes the detrital remains of a personhood in limbo. 'She is all words,' our narrator explains, 'but she doesn't know how to get out of words into being someone.'

iii. 'Die a while, then live forever.'

So what's new? *Zero K* is brimming with classic DeLillo: the dialogue is machete-sharp, there are long discussions about the mystical aspects of financial markets, terrorism, and fiction exist in a kind of cosmic balance. And yet, for the first time, he develops what was once, for him, only a minor theme. As all the quotations above suggest, *Zero K* is obsessed with the generative power of appellation, engrossed in a topic that existed as a fleeting obsession in previous novels. Take *The Names*, where James Axton reflects on how place-names can create a personal sense of place, how the 'Persia' of his childhood conjured a vast 'carpet of sand, a thousand turquoise mosques'. Here, DeLillo's reading of Proust seeps through. Reflecting upon the sonorous quality of the name 'Balbec', Proust's narrator conjures an image of stormy shores and Persian architecture. Both authors are allies against the arbitrary sign, devotees of what could be called 'magical nominalism', in which a name is imagined to represent its object through phonetic, iconic, or morphemic mimesis. The foregrounding of *sense* over *reference* (in Frege's distinction) has always remained a side-project for DeLillo. In *Zero K*, however, he takes the generative potential of language to extreme and erotic ends:

I stood at the map and began to recite place-names aloud. I didn't know why I was doing this. Arkhangelsk and Semipalatinsk and Sverdlovsk. Was this poetry or history or a childlike ramble across an unknown surface? I imagined Emma joining me in this recitation, stressing every syllable, both of us, her body pressed to mine, Kirensk and Svobodny, and then I imagined us in her bedroom, where we took off our shoes and lay on the bed, reciting face to face, cities, rivers, republics, each of us removing an item of clothing for each place named, my jacket for Gorki, her jeans for Kamchatka, moving slowly onward to Kharkov, Saratov, Omsk, Tomsk, and I started feeling stupid at this point but went on for a moment longer, reciting inwardly in streams of nonsense, names in the form of moans, the vast landmass shaping a mystery in which to shroud our loving night.

These are the reflections of a man who has spent a lifetime looking at words, arranging them precisely upon the page. That names could exceed their signifying function, interjecting a body of text between two entwined human forms, reflects the author's personal beliefs in the power of appellation. Since *The Names*, DeLillo has maintained a practice of writing one paragraph per page, giving the words space to breathe. During an interview with Jonathan Bing, he defended his typewriting habits as a meditation on the word made flesh:

[...] there's a sculptural quality, to me, of letter-by-letter, word-by-word, linear progress across a piece of paper as I type and as the hammers hit the page. It's more immediate. It's more physical. It's actually sensuous.

Words, in his hands, become something approaching sculptures; his sentences are a kind of statuary. After fifty years of performing these repetitions of the finite mind, it's not surprising that his latest work is looking towards eternity. In *End Zone* (1972), Gary Harkness is tasked with memorising Rilke's 'Ninth Elegy':

Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window – at most: column, tower... But to *say* them, you must understand, oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves ever dreamed of existing.

If to 'say the names' is to speak the world into existence, then the author is tasked with a moral imperative to write the right world – whatever that may be. DeLillo has never shied away from thematising the contemporary geo-political stage; here in *Zero K*, the young boy Stak will eventually be a victim of the conflict in Ukraine. And yet, to a greater extent than in any previous work, DeLillo's latest novel looks back upon the words its author has written, towards their enduring legacy. As if sailing to Byzantium, it dreams of eternal artifice; not in gold enamelling, but cryogenic preservation pods, enfolded within reams of books.