



**'SO WHAT IS LEFT THAT'S WORTH THE TELLING?'**  
**CODING REPETITION AND ASYMMETRY**  
**IN COSMOPOLIS BY DON DELILLO**

**Régine CAMPS-ROBERTSON**  
*Sorbonne Nouvelle, PRISMES*

Numbers are a recurrent theme in the work of Don DeLillo. In his 2003 novel, *Cosmopolis*, their relevance reaches still further as they become an organic part of fiction, imparting to the tale as much as to the telling a particular quality that has to do with rhythm, speed and fluidity. The title seems to offer to explore the mutual bond between the city, New York City, and the world, as if a window was about to open on an encompassing view of contemporary life. From the outset, the epigraph, taken from Zbigniew Herbert's poem entitled 'Report from a Besieged City' [HERBERT : 416] announces that a bleak mood has settled on this view of the world. The story is situated in the year 2000, which appeared to be poised on the cusp of a new beginning but is now recorded in American history as a time of crisis linked to the crash of the internet bubble. The main character, Eric Packer, is a child of the digital world, a prodigy at calculating rates and prices, and the harbinger of a new age in which human beings, freed from their bodily constraints, become immortal in the form of digital dust or on a disk. Ensnared in the luxurious microcosm of his limousine, he is determined to head for his childhood neighbourhood for a haircut, regardless of the traffic jams caused by the visit of the president. He drives through New York, one day in April (his last), while defying the rise of the yen until he loses his fortune. After his bodyguards warn him that a man has been threatening his security, he is drawn into directly confronting this man, Benno Levin *a.k.a* Richard Sheets, a down-and-out former employee of his who accuses him of unfair dismissal, and is out to revenge and kill him and then write ten thousand pages of confessions afterwards.

Numbers are woven into the fabric of the novel under varied forms, both in the narrative and in story-telling. The novel pulsates along with the ticker on one of the skyscrapers in the financial district, displaying the fast-changing rates of currencies, prices and market trends, as Packer keeps track of them on screen. In his secluded custom-made vehicle, he is visited by a series of advisers. He regularly satisfies his sexual appetite while plotting his strategy to keep an edge on theory, finance and news, absorbing data at record speed. The flow of information relies on translating all human transaction into a basic zero-one code.

In the narration of this long day, numbers seem to have a story to tell of their own. They encode knowledge in regular patterns and striking correspondences which challenge our reading. Voices multiply within the prism of two distinct but nevertheless intertwined strands in the process of telling the story - a third-person narrative, adopting the point of view of the main character, while

maintaining an ironic distance, and a first-person confession made by the murderer. Seen from the shock-proof windows of the stretch limousine, or from its built-in screens, the teeming crowds of New Yorkers merely pass by one another in a frenzied rush. Events as well as bodies are replicated by their own images, making it impossible to reach their original occurrence or presence.

In such bewildering environment, 'what is left that's worth the telling?' [*Cosmopolis* : 61] This reflexive pause raises a caveat and Don DeLillo has chosen the very man who has no stake in the frantic city life, Richard Sheets, to articulate it. In New York, amid the rampant proliferation of figures and data, there remains some unique form of resistance to the controlling power of a few wealthy and informed masters. Misleadingly, (given the graphic rendering of a street uprising in Wall Street), resistance does not involve demonstrating or rioting. It lies in the force mustered when one individual confronts another. It reveals itself as a most intimate form of disclosure, when an outcast expresses a tragic longing to communicate on an equal footing with another man. Eric Packer's slow progress through the city leads him to be gradually dispossessed, until he lets this underground force of resistance touch him to the quick.

I will first examine how a coherent numerical pattern appears to be offering a code of interpretation which blends with language through repetitions. The coding process is to be understood both as a system of encoding data in computing science and a set of signs and symbols in its hermeneutic dimension. Secondly, I will try to trace the narrative voice within the dynamics of the moment when it properly emerges as such, by identifying the distinctive effect of asymmetry. Finally, I will address the significance, for the novelist, of maintaining a tension, which translates into various degrees of distance, between one and zero, between symmetrical and asymmetrical pairs, and more broadly, between the narrative and some elements of poetry.

### *Encoding experience through and beyond numbers*

The life and death of twenty-eight-year old Eric Packer hinge on his capacity to harness the power of numbers. A billionaire, married to another billionaire, he has become a prominent figure in Wall Street thanks to his gift in mathematics, enabling him to speculate on vast sums. The pace of his exceptionally quick grasp of figures keeps abreast with 'the hellbent spring of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news' [80]. He can accurately predict the curve of currencies and share prices, visionary-like. That is, until the day in April, in the year 2000, when he is driven to his downfall.

From the beginning of the novel, a set of signs points to the intrinsic links between numbers and the protagonist's identity. In the opening sentence of the novel, Packer is counting the number of sleepless nights which ultimately undermine the stability of his self, divided into 'restless identities' [6]. Insomnia steals into his brain, suggesting the presence of a sort of double, as 'every act he performed was self-haunted,' and 'the palest thought carried an anxious shadow' [6]. In this fitful state, as day dawns, he is unable to focus on a course of action. His hesitation is registered through the repetition and incremental expansion of one sentence, 'he didn't know what he wanted' [6], 'he didn't know what he wanted. Then he knew. He wanted a haircut' [7]. 'He knew what he wanted, a haircut, but stood a while longer in the soaring noise of the street and studied the mass and scale of the tower' [9]. This pause, as the character gazes up to the building where he lives, combines precise numerical details with sensory perceptions. He appraises the tower's impressive proportions, at 'nine hundred feet high, the tallest residential tower in the world' [8], and he remarks on its mathematical property, with its 'eighty-nine stories, a prime number' [8]. The visual impact of the building's geometrical structure, 'the mass and scale of the tower' [9], evince a strong emotional response, as he dwells on the

'virtue of its surface' surrounding it with 'an aura of texture and reflection' [9]. Not only does the gleaming surface of the tower mirror and animate the sky and river light around, but it also provides a clue to Packer's sense of being insubstantial. This is confirmed by the negative turn of the ensuing general definition, in which a mathematical property can also be read as a hermeneutic interpretation: 'a surface separates inside from out and belongs no less to one than the other' [9]. After sight, another sense is appealed to – hearing.

In a self-reflexive mood, Packer comments on some words that enter his mind, such as 'skyscraper' and 'hand organizer' [9]. He rejects them as anachronistic, referring to 'the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born' [9]. This echoes a previous opposition between old and new that he had associated with the abstract geometric paintings he owns: 'the work was all the more dangerous for not being new. There's no more danger in the new' [8]. Although the nature of the danger remains obscure, through synesthetic perceptions, numerical details and a time contrast, the opening of the novel delineates the contours of a space beyond the limits of a safe experience and of a safe interpretation too.

The recurrent process of multiplying, doubling up, repeating, reflecting, correcting, adumbrates the existence of a wider code to be deciphered, if we are to come close to solving the enigma that the character appears to be, including to himself. 'I have become an enigma to myself' [189]. These words are not pronounced by Packer. They are attributed to him by his killer, at the end of the novel. Benno goes on to add that, for his part, he feels helpless in the system that other people seem to live by. Rather than the accumulation of precise numbers, the constant play on them at the beginning of *Cosmopolis* seems to point to a reading code to be discovered in meaningful arithmetical and geometrical correspondences.

The act and the notion of counting are recurrent in the novel, either literally or in a figurative sense. Packer rejects the idea of counting as outdated, contrary to his vision of 'a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it' [36]. As Packer's financial assets dwindle, it becomes obvious that the notion of counting plays an ambivalent role. His exceptional talent for speculating is thwarted by the unpredictable rise in the yen. This flaw, in his otherwise unrivalled astute perception of financial market trends, precipitates the loss of his fortune and of his wife's. It irresistibly draws him towards the man regarded as a threat to his life. However, as he loses money, he becomes elated at the prospect of this downward spiral. 'Eric's delight in going broke seemed blessed and authenticated here. He'd been emptied of everything but a surpassing stillness, a fatedness that felt disinterested and free' [136]. This evolution equates counting with a count-down as the paradigm of money, which had dominated his life so far, gives way to that of time. He finally refuses to count how many bullets he has left in his gun, in a count-down to his death.

Conversely, it is vital for Benno Levin to be counting. This man had left teaching to 'do [his] million', by joining Packer's company, and he dropped out of society after being 'demoted to lesser currencies' in his job [153]. The first glimpse Eric catches of him is when he is standing in front of a cash machine [53]. Benno has run out of money, and his only purpose left in life is to secure a place, as the murderer of the man he holds responsible for his plight: 'I want to kill you in order to count for something in my own life' [187]. He eventually comes to be entirely defined by his unfulfilled desire to move from an invisible, meaningless life to one that is totally contained in the act of killing, as well as in the act of writing about his crime:

I thought I would spend whatever number of years it takes to write ten thousand pages and then you would have the record, the literature of a life awake and asleep, because dreams too, and little

stabs of memory, and all the pitiful habits and concealments, and all the things around me would be included, noises in the street, but I understand for the first time, now, this minute, that all the thinking and writing in the world will not describe what I felt in the awful moment when I fired the gun and saw him fall. So what is left that's worth the telling? [61]

The double meaning of 'telling', as writing about his act or counting, is relevant here. Contrary to Packer, he does not count time, and he is not sure of his real age. The two characters seem to evolve along a symmetrical opposition when it comes to money and time.

Some specific figures are highlighted, like markers along the course of the reading. Prime numbers are commented upon. Benno Levin owns 'an Mk. 23 military pistol' [186] and he is forty-one, a prime number, as Eric remarks, to which Benno replies, 'but not an interesting one' [189]. One of the most frequently recurrent numbers is 2. Eric's marriage brought two fortunes together, and he has been married to Elise Shifrin, a poet, for twenty-two days, a redundant, symmetrical looking multiple of 2. 2 is the multiplier in the number of limousines, five being parked along the curb of two streets. Packer used to be blessed with a god-like power to 'tout a technology stock or bless an entire sector and automatically cause doublings in share price' [75]. Two can make up a pair sometimes, offering the reassuring presence of a symmetrical balance (a pair of bodyguards flanks either side of the limousine; Eric's sneeze is automatically followed by a second one). As Eric has his hair cut, he sits between the barber and his driver, who both used to be cabdrivers; they start reminiscing fondly about their love for their cabs until their voices blend into one, lulling Eric to doze off. Two men burst into the restaurant where Eric is having lunch with Elise, flinging two live rats across the premises. 2 can also be the divider of 1, resulting in two halves. Eric explains how he lost his money: 'the yen eluded me. This had never happened. I became half-hearted,' to which Benno replies, 'this is because you have half a heart' [190]. A stretch limousine is built by sawing the base unit into two halves and lengthening the chassis by up to twenty-two feet [70].

Number 2 even more frequently occurs in the form of a reproduction. When Eric undergoes his daily medical check-up, the image of his body is projected onto one of the screens in his limousine, and he notes, 'how dwarfed he felt by his own heart. There it was and it awed him, to see his life beneath his breastbone in image-forming units, hammering on outside him' [44]. Images take on a life of their own, going as far as preceding the event in several instances. In one of them, Eric sees himself recoiling in shock on screen before an explosion has actually happened [22]. Reality becomes a mere echo, a shadow, a belated actualization of the digital version of his body. Eric Packer, who wishes to hasten into the future, who wants to judge his body 'redundant and transferrable' [22], is sometimes caught at his own game, when the digital copy of his body makes him redundant. Here, the balance and symmetry introduced by the effect of a reproduction is broken by the time warp, the disjunction of the expected transfer between the same and the other, 'his body catching up to the independent image' [52], or 'an image that seemed to exist at some drifting distance from the moment' [90].

Several other figures occur within the framework of a regular proportion, either as a multiple of another or as part of a regular series. Eric's father used to frequently tell the barber that in his family, eight people lived in four rooms with two windows and one toilet. This series is multiplied well beyond Eric's father's time, as the barber keeps telling it over and over. Incidentally, this series of figures retrospectively refers to the number of rooms in Eric's flat [48], (which is twelve times the number of rooms in his father's family home), a nod to the American dream realized to arithmetic precision. As Eric Packer drives through Manhattan, he comes across the funeral procession in honour of the sufi rap singer, Brutha Fez, whom Eric knew and loved. The ritualized arrangement and movement of vehicles and people is described through a combination of numbers: 1 squad of police

motorcycles, 2 private security vans, 10 flower cars, 4 bodyguards, 36 breakdancers divided into 6 lanes, 36 limousines running 3 abreast, 4 choppers, 20 dervishes. All the numbers revolving around the dead singer happen to be even numbers. Is this a sign of perfect equilibrium, a visual expression of the dead man in repose, all 'restless identities' forever left behind?

DeLillo juxtaposes the two meanings of the word 'figure' (either a number or the shape of a person seen from a distance or not clearly) when rioters invade the tall tower that displays currencies. Eric watches what is going on outside his limousine on his on-board screens: 'On one of the screens he saw figures descending a vertical surface. It took him a moment to understand that they were rappelling down the façade of the building just ahead, where the markets tickers were located' [92]. Later on, the ticker displays the dramatic fall of price figures as the value of the yen rises, against expectations.

The frequent correlation of numbers may raise the question of the power of language to represent the full texture and depth of experience. However, DeLillo multiplies the references to figures the better to confirm the power of language to accommodate the full energy unleashed by these figures. On hearing, on television, that a former friend of his, Nikolai, has just died, Eric feels cheerful. In this passage, two numbers are salient (1, represented by the tiger and 2 separate people who then make a pair):

Eric and Nikolai had tracked wild boar in Siberia. He told Kinski about this. They'd seen a tiger in the distance, a glimpse, a sting of pure transcendence, outside all previous experience. He described the moment to her, the precious sense of last life, a species in peril, and the vastness of the silence around them. They remained motionless, the two men, long after the animal had vanished. The sight of the tiger aflame in snow made them feel bound to an unspoken code, a brotherhood of beauty and loss. [81]

The reader is alert to the potential of these figures to signify, according to 'an unspoken code'. This code ensures a moment of communication, even of communion around fleetingly sharing a secret and an almost sacred sight. Here the full effect of encoding experience numerically, through salient numbers, is perceived through the intimate association of linguistic properties (the oxymoron in 'aflame in snow', the alliterations and rhythm in 'a brotherhood of beauty and loss') with the numbers chosen. Only then, can the passage take on the quality of an epiphany, which keeps echoing with a nostalgic, mysterious appeal through Eric's sarcastic reaction to the man's death. His chief of theory, Kinski, interprets his reaction as the result of two egos vying with each other for power, 'he died so you can live' [82]. She brushes aside with a scornful laugh the existence of any real order in free societies. Eric does not agree with her and he tries to assert that 'there's an order at some deep level,' 'a pattern that wants to be seen' [86]. At this point, protagonist and reader seem to meet, since for the reader, the pervading inclusion of numbers has been setting 'a pattern that wants to be seen.' Yet, the ambiguity of the code is inherent in the choice of words to express it. The passive voice and the verb 'want' remove any subject who might be able to see the pattern. The verb is ambivalent, indicating both desire and potential failure to see. This verbal disjunction opens a crack in the possibility to represent 'an order at some deep level.' Nevertheless, the blank is both exposed and filled with the ringing echo of the word 'want.'

I will now focus on one passage describing the riot in the streets of Manhattan, where doubles seem to become self-generating.

First, Eric gets out of the car to show his chief of theory the flow of data that keeps streaming along three tiers up above them on a tower. He comments, 'we are not witnessing the flow of information so

much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable' [80]. The oxymoronic juxtaposition of 'pure spectacle' and 'sacred', denies any transcendence to this sacredness. In the next sentence the word 'idolatry' gives away the nature of this new cult, turning the tower into a sort of totem. As any form of transcendence is ruled out, what is left is the unique display of a palpable future as 'the urgent and endless replenishment' [80]. Through the metaphor of the spectacle, 'a form of street theater' [88], representation is equated with repetition, reproduction. Eric is a spectator of the scene of chaos unraveling outside, first physically, by stepping out of the limousine, then virtually on his screens. He thinks that 'it made more sense on TV'. The digital copy becomes more telling than the original action.

The rioters carry a twenty-foot tall Styrofoam rat, dodging taxis in the street. The reproduction in the diegesis, of a real rodent, refers, in the process of the narration, to the scene taking place earlier at the restaurant, where two men hurled two rats across the room. The new addition in the rodent count adds a carnival-like tone to the crowd of protesters and policemen wearing masks.

Finally, the chanting of the crowd offers an instance of vocal reproduction, in the form of a variation on Marx and Engels' writing in *The Communist Manifesto*: 'a specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism', which becomes, 'a specter is haunting the world, they cried' [89]. Later, the variation is repeated visually as it is continuously projected on the third gigantic screen on the tower, replacing the display of figures, a digital-age specter of capitalism. Another quotation is displayed: 'A rat became the unit of currency' [96]. Eric is pleased to recognize the half line from the poem by Zbigniew Herbert that he has recently been reading. Repetition through quotation becomes a structural principle. The line first appears as the epigraph to the novel. Then it is discussed in a dialogue between Eric and Michael Chin, his chief of finance, in which they playfully imagine what Wall Street would be like if such a currency as 'the rat' did exist. Finally, it is repeated again and again in the digital display. Iteration and variation give a paradigmatic quality to the words as well as the image projected, as if language parodied the cyclic patterns of boom and bust associated with capitalism.

The image of Eric's body inside the car takes the notion of copy a degree further, by animating the perception of a double. Packer first catches an image of himself recoiling in shock at an explosion which has not taken place yet. Secondly he does recoil at the blast. Thirdly, the action of recoiling in shock is repeated verbally as Eric and Kinski cannot get over the mysterious inversion between the image and its source in real life.

Finally, the spectacle of a man who has set himself on fire comes into view for Eric as he looks again through the car rooftop. He watches on and tries to call to his imagination a picture of the man preparing himself to take this extreme action. He then climbs back down into the car and looks at the picture of the man on screen. This time the cameramen have zeroed-in on the burning man. Eric ponders on the difference between the acts of the rioters and the act of the burning man. He agrees with his chief of theory's view that the protest is 'a market fantasy': 'There was a shadow of transaction between the demonstrators and the state. The protest was a form of systemic hygiene, purging and lubricating. It attested again, for the ten thousandth time, to the market culture's innovative brilliance, its ability to shape itself to its own flexible ends, absorbing everything around it' [99]. But according to him, the man's act escapes from the reach of the market. Kinsky denies this by turning the singular act into a collective one, referring to all the Vietnamese monks, 'immolating themselves endlessly' [100]. Here, in shifting from one to many, she asserts control over disorder by denying the discrete, singular choice of the individual to take his own life in protest. As a believer in 'the market culture's innovative brilliance,' she can easily fit the existence of the burning man into her mental scheme.

In this central part of the novel the complex structure of interwoven forms of repetitions (physical, mental, verbal, visual, in the diegesis as well as in narration) results in creating a warped, 'unreliable, delusional' [97] perspective, like the picture Eric grasps of the burning man through the flames. The text itself generates several layers of iterative fragments as if seen through as many fumes that obscure as well as reveal the nature of the event described. The pattern that number 2 reveals, through repetitions, leads after all to a dead end.

### *From asymmetry to the emergence of a voice*

The relationship between the protagonist and his murderer is markedly asymmetrical. One is a multimillionaire while the other has no money. 'You have everything to live and die for. I have nothing and neither' [194]. This stark social imbalance bears witness to Don DeLillo's engagement in *Cosmopolis*, with America's failure to deliver on its promise of unalienable rights to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' for each individual. Yet, in their asymmetrical fortunes, the two men do share some symmetry, ironically, in their anatomy - both have an asymmetrical prostate gland. This shared physical oddity brings them closer at the very moment when they are facing each other with a gun in hand. Instead of a duel, they enter into a mutual confession about their respective physical quirk; eventually the murderer is able to reassure his future victim that there is absolutely nothing wrong with an asymmetrical prostate, relieving Eric of the terror that he has been living under since the doctor diagnosed it:

He liked to track answers to hard questions. This was his method, to attain mastery over ideas and people. But there was something about the idea of asymmetry. It was intriguing in the world outside the body, a counterforce to balance and calm, the riddling little twist, subatomic, that made creation happen. But when he removed the word from its cosmological register and applied it to the body of a male mammal, his body, he began to feel pale and spooked. He felt a certain perverse reverence toward the word. A fear of, a distance from. When he heard the word spoken in the context of urine and semen and when he thought of the word in the shadow of pissed pants, one, and limp dick desolation, two, he was haunted to the point of superstitious silence. [52]

Numbers and chaotic grammatical forms express and compound the haunting fear that the body arouses, debunking the illusion of 'mastery over ideas and people', plainly giving in to a mock-heroic tone. Yet, the comic effect subsides in the final dialogue between murderer and victim. DeLillo puts in the mouth of the killer the suggestion that Packer should have heeded the lesson to be learnt from his asymmetrical prostate: 'the importance of the lopsided, the thing that's skewed a little. You were looking for balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides. I know this. I know you. But you should have been tracking the yen in its tics and quirks. The little quirk. The misshape... That's where the answer was, in your body, in your prostate' [200]. Reflecting on these words, Eric almost chides himself in bitter irony, 'maybe he [Benno] was turning out to be a worthy assassin after all' [200]. Eric's detached tone in his humorous remark does not invalidate the relevance of the assassin's view, which is expressed in another of DeLillo's novels: 'however, there's always the view that an ultimate symmetry is to be avoided rather than sought, the reason being that this structural balance represents not victory over chaos and death but death itself or what follows upon death' [*Ratner's Star* : 50]. So although Richard Sheets initially presented himself as a disturbed man, his judgment is to be trusted. He helps Packer better understand himself. In a subtle way, the author shows that the man who counts as zero is crucial to the man who ranks as number one. The novel explores their mutual

dependence, by raising a question, which is close to Thomas Docherty's, 'how might we be sensitive to the fact of the zero within the one even when it remains inarticulated, when it remains silent, when it has a zero-degree of existence?' [DOCHERTY : 129].

The attempt at ordering the shapeless mass of data and experience through balance, precision, repetitive patterns, has led Eric to self-destruction and death. This idea gradually gains resonance as Sheets articulates what has so far been intimated in the course of the narrative: one slight modulation in a repetitive pattern can change the whole nature of its interpretation. From a predictable harmonious form, relying on equal parts, the repeated pattern becomes slightly different, just as one single letter 'a', added to 'symmetry' throws the balance askew. This linguistic twist coincides with an arresting moment in the character's experience. A similar tweaking of a repetitive pattern occurs the second time Eric tries to imagine the burning man in his preparation to immolate himself. Whereas the first time, 'Eric wanted to imagine the man's pain, his choice, the abysmal will he'd had to summon' [*Cosmopolis* : 98], the second time, while Eric is facing the imminence of his own death, 'he thought of the burning man and imagined himself back at the scene, in Times Square, watching the body on fire, or in the body, was the body, looking out through gas and flame' [195]. The mere addition of a preposition, 'in the body,' or the change of verb, 'was the body,' helps to trace the evolution of the protagonist towards a real sense of compassion. Similarly, a recurrent phrase, 'let it express itself', related to different contexts, punctuates the story, occurring four times. First its meaning refers to the physical sense of the verb (Eric notices some spot on his body and the doctor advises him twice to leave it alone) [45]. Then the phrase appears in the flow of words addressed by Eric to Jane Melmann, provoking a contactless shared orgasm [51]. The third occurrence is when the two men in the restaurant whirl the live rats around [74]. Finally it is mentioned one last time, when Eric bursts into the flat where his murderer lives, and presses the trigger of his gun at random [186]. However, before this last repetition, an echo of the phrase appears, at a critical moment in the story, just after Packer has killed his chief of security, Torval. Packer justifies his indifference to the man's death by thinking, 'when you pay a man to keep you alive, he gains a psychic edge. It was a function of the credible threat and the loss of his company and personal fortune that Eric could express himself this way. Torval's passing cleared the night for deeper confrontation' [147]. Again, the enigmatically repeated impersonal sentence seems to be adopted by the protagonist as he rephrases it, replacing the enigmatic 'it' with his own name. The effect creates an illusion of suddenly hearing the character's proper voice for the first time. This becomes possible precisely when the path is cleared for Eric to confront the looming death threat that had been subtly intensifying through the day.

In the previous two examples, a repeated phrase is modulated to echo another, each time in a moment when the character is confronted with the perspective of his death. Asymmetry is ascribed a new symbolic role, beyond the symbolic reference to the obtrusive presence of the body. Asymmetry is related to the broader notion of oneness, in *Cosmopolis*, both as a theme and a mode of investigation. In creating the character of Eric Packer, Don DeLillo questions what it means to be fully realized as one discrete entity, as one being, one consciousness. Being one (even before considering being number one in society) is the numeric expression of the state of a man who feels at one with himself. However, the novel makes it clear that this is never a given.

As an American writer, Don DeLillo creates a character caught in the midst of situations that lead him to gauge the depth, strength and meaning of his relation to the crowd of people around him. The motto 'E Pluribus Unum' (out of many, one) is relevant to the protagonist's sense of identity. He recognizes himself as one of America's business elite, with a driver waiting for him in the morning, just as is the case 'for the investment banker, the land developer, the venture capitalist, for the software entrepreneur, the global overlord of satellite and cable, the discount broker, the beaked

media chief, for the exiled head of state of some smashed landscape of famine and war' [10]. After describing the busy street where Americans jostle past one another, he reflects: 'these were scenes that normally roused him, the great rapacious flow, where the physical will of the city, the ego fevers, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment' [41]. Eric feels he is one of this feverish crowd, and he feels buoyed along, secure in the knowledge that each moment of his life has a discrete shape and vibrancy. Yet, more often than not, this momentum is only an illusion of oneness, even a theatrical staging of oneself as part of a larger crowd. At the end of his long day, Packer stumbles onto a naked crowd lying on the street, taking part in the shooting of a film, while technicians weave around the bodies, reciting numbers and finally shouting 'cut'. Without hesitating, Packer undresses and joins them. 'The experience was a strong one, so total and open he could barely think outside it' [175]. Yet, as he lies in silence, pretending to be dead, like all the other extras, he cannot refrain from thinking of them as the future images they would be on screen, while regretting that his thoughts isolate him from the actual people around him. Like a litany, he keeps asserting his wish to be one of them:

It tore his mind apart, trying to see them here and real, independent of the image on a screen in Oslo or Caracas. Or were those places indistinguishable from this one? But why ask these questions? Why see these things? They isolated him. They set him apart and this is not what he wanted. He wanted to be here among them, the all-bodied, the tattooed, the hairy-assed, those who stank. He wanted to set himself in the middle of the intersection, among the old with their raised veins and body blotches and next to the dwarf with a bump on his head... He was one of them ... He was one [176].

Interestingly, one of these repetitions is shortened to 'he was one'. Rather than a newly discovered harmony with his fellow American citizens, in a Whitman-like assertion of his bond with others, the long monologue exudes his longing to be whole and feel a connection with others. However, solitude remains when the film shooting stops. A brief moment of harmony with his wife follows since they find themselves lying next to each other in the crowd of extras. They are flittingly united in passionate love-making for the first time before she disappears into the night, 'the lone stroke of motion' [178], in the deserted area where the actors perform.

Packer seems to be torn between two conflicting desires. He craves for union, as a way to feel that he belongs to the crowd. Nevertheless, he wishes to go beyond the limits of the self, in a romantic transgression of human oneness, to reach a form of cosmic oneness. As he is dying, he recalls, 'he'd always wanted to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void' [206]. Here the character realizes that he has lived under the delusion that it was possible to break out of the self and become a particle in a broader transcendent universe. Just as in the opening pages of the novel, when Eric felt contiguous with the building he lived in, he appears as a surface, which 'separates inside from out and belongs no less to one than the other' [9], albeit a reflecting surface.

The story of Eric Packer's progress finally traces his awakening to a sense that oneness, wholeness, is not achieved through blending with crowds. Nor is it fulfilled by constantly craving for a sum of valuable assets, whether they be money – 'he borrowed yen in dumbfounding amounts. He wanted all the yen there was' [97] – or acquiring the Rothko chapel, 'walls and all' [30]. Oneness involves becoming acquainted with, and fully aware of, what it means to live a life as one of the uncounted, the unnumbered, dispossessed of belongings, suspended from belonging, being – a nothingness numerically equated with zero.

*Cosmopolis* offers an insight into the devastating effects of modern capitalism. It denounces a society where grabbing all the riches leads to dangerously closing in on oneself; where the on-going transformation of data into a precious commodity creates a merciless race that leaves people behind; where the constant duplication of experience through the media undermines knowledge and perception. The novel tightly weaves these themes on to its canvas. The questioning of power in the social sphere finds a narrative equivalent. At the core of this investigation is the status of the narrator. How many voices are recognized as reliable and entrusted with the telling?

### *Asymmetry and the ethical value of zero in the economy of the novel*

The novel combines two narratives of unequal weight. The place that Benno Levin's confessions occupy in the narrative is limited (13 pages) compared to the story of Eric Packer (166 pages). Besides, the confessions of the murderer do not fit into the time scheme. Whereas the story is announced, before part I opens, as happening on 'a Day in April', at the end of the first part 'The Confessions of Benno Levin' appear, visually detached from the rest in italics. They are at odds with the narrative time span, since the moment of writing announced in block letters is 'NIGHT'. This breach in the flux of the narrative reverses the order of events as a man's death is announced. Some hints are provided - half a haircut, a former employee of the firm - which may point to Levin as the murderer of Packer. But so far, the narrative has only presented Packer in his daytime journey through the city and his death has just been alluded to in one of Packer's reflections: 'when he died he would not end. The world would end' [6]. So the confessions take on a different status from the rest of the narrative. They appear to have been inserted between the pages relating the events that happen on this day in April.

Yet the second section in the confessions announces, through the block-letter heading, 'MORNING', and the story returns to the start of Eric Packer's day. The flashback may be a hint to a change in the dimension of Benno Levin's confessions here. They are now being incorporated into the space of the whole narrative. The writing of the confessions fits into the story of the main character, implying that the murderer is being granted some degree of authorship. Besides, Benno Levin is the one who names the protagonist by his full name for the first time for the reader, 'howling his name in a series of trochaic beats and at a cracked pitch that was more chilling than gunfire' [181]. The three names mimetically stand out from the rest of the text in separate block letters: ERIC MICHAEL PACKER. As if Benno was a writer, his shout has a performative value, creating the name as he utters it. At this stage, the deranged man's question, 'so what is left that's worth the telling?' [61] rings with a deeper meaning, as an aporia that only a reliable character could articulate. Here, the voice of the nervously racked man bursts with raw accents, as it questions both the limits of the act of writing and the legitimacy of story-telling. The verb 'telling' cannot but evoke numbers as well as story-telling. Eric Packer knew beforehand that 'he would not be counting rounds' [181], even though he only had five rounds left as he prepared to fight with his opponent. Now likewise, his opponent will stop telling his story, no longer counting his written pages. Ironically named, Richard Sheets will never gather ten thousand sheets with his writing. Yet the few pages he does write find their place within the time span of this day in April, as if the madman, the dispossessed, was brought into the fold of those whose voices count. The evolution of the character of the outcast in *Cosmopolis* is part and parcel of the time frame chosen by Don DeLillo to present the man's confessions. It also informs the voice to be heard in them. Interestingly, in the first set of confessions, the character sounds articulate. Even if he almost stutters in the first sentence, he sounds confident by the end of his first confession, and even eloquent.

By contrast, in the second set of confessions, his discourse is rambling, frantic, disconnected, jumping from an existential feeling of being lost ('I feel this immensity in my soul every second of my life') to a detailed explanation about his desk ('I have my iron desk that I hauled up three flights of

stairs, with ropes and wedges') [155]. The act of killing Packer seems to account for the difference in his speech. His articulate delivery 'while a man lies dead ten feet away' [60], seems to indicate that closeness to death lends a voice to the speaker, to the writer. This time, Eric Packer lies low, waiting to be taken to the morgue if the vision he has of himself, through the digital crystal of his watch, turns out to be true: 'he knew that Male Z was the designation for the bodies of unidentified men in hospital morgues' [206]. The letter Z points to a zero sum at the end of the glamorous life of the former millionaire. This confirms another character's belief that 'the power of numbers is never more evident than when we use them to speculate on the time of our dying' [*White Noise* : 117].

By interweaving the two layers of story-telling – Eric Packer's story and the confessions of his killer – DeLillo gives prominence to the adjustment of the distance between reader and narrators. Since the killer is endowed with a voice of his own, the reader is also made to experience a gradual sense of empathy for this solitary figure. The major part of the novel is told through the point of view of the protagonist, an indirect autodiegetic narrator since Eric Packer is designated by the third person. The distance maintained between the reader and Packer's consciousness is created obliquely. In the narrative, 'he' could often be replaced by 'I'. The unobtrusive shifts between the protagonist's ongoing reflection on his experience and the narrator's description of the events in the protagonist's life produce the effect of hearing the protagonist's voice throughout. The narrator's presence is to be felt as an ironic slant, constructed and not given. The initial situation involves three instances in the act of story-telling. Within this pattern, the roles can sometimes be inverted. Eric often seems to be the reader of his own experience, turning the reader into his double. For instance, when Eric considers the possibility that there might be nobody out there waiting to kill him, he notes, 'The only thing left was the haircut' [*Cosmopolis* : 98]. This aside blends the character's thought with a conclusion the reader might reach at this stage, recalling the progress made by the protagonist since the beginning of the day.

The confessions of Benno Levin depart from the reading contract established in the beginning, introducing a fourth instance involved in the narration, as Benno writes in the first person and directly addresses his potential reader. Elsewhere, the narrative alternates between associating three instances (character, narrator, reader) and two (character, reader). This pattern lends a rhythm to the narration, which marks the emergence of a voice. Besides, within this predominant regular pattern, dialogues generate minor patterns in the relationship between teller and listener. For instance, when Packer launches into a verbal sexual play with his chief of finance, Jane Melman, he alternately takes on the voice of each of them in an imaginary soliloquy. In this moment, 'he' and 'she' share in turns an 'I' that observes the other. The relationships multiply, since rather than adding two new instances to the narrative situation each time, it juxtaposes them, increasing the pace of the narration, as if the text imitated the two characters' aroused breathlessness. When Packer has finally reached the purpose of his drive through the city, and starts having his hair cut by his long-time family friend, the conversation he has with him intertwines several dialogues. The friend recalls dialogues he had with Eric's father, while simultaneously engaging in a conversation with Eric's driver. Here again, two instances generate other juxtaposed narrative voices, but this time with the opposite effect, since the pace of narration slows down towards a short spell of complete silence as Packer is lulled into sleep. On the contrary, as Packer prepares to burst into the room where his enemy is, he turns to his gun and addresses it as if it was a person, in a one-way conversation. He reflectively notes, 'I know I'm talking to a gun that can't respond' [185]. Dialogue turns to a soliloquy, two instances being reduced to just one. This may foreshadow the imminent moment of confrontation between the two men, who end up living through a moment of intimacy, even if this does not lead to a real exchange. The dialogue lays bare Eric Packer's failure, but Benno Levin is able to communicate fully with him, creating 'a nearness of feeling and experience that Eric could not reciprocate' [204]. Indirectly, Benno Levin's role may

evoke the author's role in creating the illusion of a presence, 'a nearness of feeling' that we, as readers, cannot reciprocate.

In the midst of an apparently regular pattern of discourse, alternating between two and three narrative instances, there seeps in the intimation of a one-way, self-contained contraction that resists the flow of a symmetrical exchange. Throughout the protracted confrontation between Sheets and Packer, the narration around the exchanged words only presents Packer's point of view, while Sheets is referred to as 'the subject'. This ambiguous term reduces Sheets to an anonymous person, as the unknown man who threatens Packer. Yet, at the same time it lends him at least a linguistic form of autonomy, through the implication that he is capable of deciding and taking action. Finally, a sense of empathy arises for killer and victim, who both seem to be in thrall to a predetermined course of action that involves intense suffering and loss. Whereas the narration redeemed the voice of the killer while the protagonist, conversely, was reduced 'in size, person and value' [198] to a near zero sum or Z identity, dialogues seem to have an ambivalent effect on the reader's distance from the characters. Caught within a complex web of exchanges or false exchanges, the interplay of voices in dialogues, and especially in the final one, may hold the reader's sympathy in suspense rather than fully engage it. The shifting degree of this distance mirrors a shifting tension between counting- not counting, between being counted as one and being counted as zero. In Don DeLillo's novel, this is another way of interpreting the constant friction between these two digits. 'The zero-oneness of the world' refers to the domination of digital information over our contemporary experience, but it goes beyond mimetically registering this domination. 'True or false. Yes or no. Zero or one. Data is processed in,' as a scientist puts it in *Ratner's Star* [*Ratner's Star* : 89]. On another level, the tension at play between zero and one points to the looming threat of losing value. Ultimately, 'the zero-oneness of the world' evokes the recognition that our experience is one of duality that boils down to a stark contrast between the living, one, and the dead, zero.

The form of the novel in *Cosmopolis* turns this paradigmatic tension into a dynamic interplay of voices which calls on the reader's response by introducing different degrees of distance into the narration. The novel also resorts to a metaphoric value conveyed by the presence and combination of numbers. Notably, metaphors of death underpin the structure of *Cosmopolis*. Zero appears in that respect as a metaphor for the void. Eric Packer may be a flawed character whose hubris is a wish to control the present in order to anticipate the advent of an all-encompassing future. Yet, the urgency of his yearning is not consumed with his final downfall. It points to an intense desire which his life, however wasted to the world, manages to partly reveal, with the same ambivalence as 'a pattern that wants to be seen' [*Cosmopolis* : 86]. Precisely in the moment when Eric Packer knows that a zero sum looms as the impending dissolution of his identity into an unidentified Z tag, he is all at once recognized fully as a subject, as a wholeness, as one human being. He, who wanted to be 'a consciousness saved from void' [206], feels drawn to the place where the terrifying threat of the void will materialize. Literally, Richard Sheets announces that after killing him he will throw him down a hole. Besides, Eric shoots a hole into his own hand. The hyphenated coexistence of void and wholeness, asserted, in the compact abstract form of its numerical expression, through the coining of the term 'zero-oneness' appears as an 'objective correlative' in the novel, one that forcefully intimates man's terror of the void and the necessary confrontation with it, if he is to be himself, to *be* at all.

Another form of metaphor of duality permeates the story through the archetypal pair of the dead and the living. At the sufi rap artist's funeral, the presence of the dead man's body among the living mourners brings this meaningful pair to a climactic degree, reaching 'a joy of intoxicating wholeness, he and they, the dead and provisionally living' [135]. This joy and sorrow marks a watershed point in the narrative, as Packer weeps and beats his chest in mourning. Yet, at this stage,

he still has a long way to go on his journey before he can make sense of the coming together of the living and the dead. He remains on this side of the divide, the side of yearning, desire, and expectation.

There was one thing more he wanted from this funeral. He wanted to see the hearse pass by again, the body tilted for viewing, a digital corpse, a loop, a replication. It did not seem right that the hearse had come and gone. He wanted it to reappear at intervals, proud body open to the night, to replenish the sorrow and wonder of the crowd. [139]

The body of the dead man does not come back again, yet another form of disruption in the balance established by the circular pattern. This is a wake-up call for Eric. The gap opened between expectation and reality demands a leap into the unknown for the character. Only when Eric becomes one of the provisionally living – as he waits, at the mercy of his murderer, for the shot to sound – can he fully sense his responsibility, leading to compassion. However, he is also already one of the dead, as his watch shows pictures of himself after his death and at the morgue. An element of science-fiction emerges in anticipating the picture of Packer dying.

At this point, the text highlights the novel's attempt to represent a state that transcends the essential components of fiction, time and space. Eric wonders at these pictures beyond the grave: 'have all the worlds conflated, all possible states become present at once?' [205]. The narrative enacts the disappearance of its own tenets. In trying to represent this presence, fiction verges on to the poetic. Through a dense combination of rhythm, sound patterns, images and visual impact, poetry conjures up a presence. Don DeLillo said, in an interview, 'working at sentences and rhythms is probably the most satisfying thing I do as a writer' [LECLAIR : 26]. Some memorable sentences in *Cosmopolis* indeed also bring a most satisfying pleasure to the reader. In them, syllables, vowels, consonants, and the measured beats of a specific rhythm stand out from the flow of the discourse, calling on the reader to enjoy the vocal quality of his silent reading. A few examples can be quoted: 'a brotherhood of beauty and loss' [*Cosmopolis* : 138], 'the sheer and reeling need to be' [165], 'a surpassing stillness, a fatedness that felt disinterested and free' [136]. In these instances, numbers and words combine to produce a specific meter; here, a binary rhythm invites the reader to slow down and dwell on the resonance of the words, as well as their shape, as DeLillo explains: 'when I work I have a sculptor's sense of the shape of the words I'm making' [NADOTTI : 12]. Whether in poetry or in sculpture, space becomes a crucial element to guide esthetic choice, but in fiction, a balance has to be struck by intimately blending time and space. In *Cosmopolis*, the river acts as the seat of this subtle balance; the protagonist is seen near the river at the beginning of the novel and at the end, when he reaches the derelict block of flats where Benno Levin lives. Likewise, the enclosed space of Eric's limousine is the source of his slow pace across Manhattan. The discrepancy between his halted progress and his growing urgency to reach his ultimate goal – facing his death threat – works as a balanced counterpoint. By contrast, the scene in which Packer is able to view himself after death questions the final choice Don DeLillo made, breaching as it does the pattern of meaningful balance observed so far. By adopting yet another form of asymmetry, the author adds a mysterious last twist to the constant and necessary friction at the core of the narrative, between the living and the dead.

Don DeLillo highlights a *poiésis* at the heart of our contemporary experience. It appears to be necessary to accommodate the painful inclusion of asymmetry, if we are to resist the terror experienced by the self, forever facing the void and threatening to closing in on forms of reproduction. The novel reveals the error of 'speculating into the void' [*Cosmopolis* : 21]. In doing this, we are trespassing on our limitations at our own peril. In Don DeLillo's post-9/11 novel, *Falling Man*, the performance of the man reproducing a falling figure from one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade

Center associates, in the position of his body, asymmetry with terror: 'he loomed over the sidewalk, legs spread slightly, arms out from his body and bent at the elbows, asymmetrically, man in fear, looking out of some deep pool of concentration into lost space, dead space' [*Falling Man* : 164].

Oneness is arrived at by circumventing the pitfalls on this arduous journey. Packer is tempted into asserting that he belongs to the motley crowd of fellow Americans. But whether he is a spectator witnessing the funeral of a popular sufi-rap singer, or an extra faking death among a naked crowd in a movie, being at one with the crowd turns out to be a carefully choreographed delusion. A total cannot be reached. It just doesn't add up. Eric Michael Packer is felt to be present by the reader when he eventually acknowledges that he is not able to make another man feel that he counts for him [*Cosmopolis* : 204]. The pain he inflicts to himself, by shooting his own hand, draws on this existential pool of suffering that he is particularly equipped to tap into at will.

He has to come to terms with the tension at play in the irreducible gap between counting as one and not counting. He has become attuned with the 'zero-oneness of the world', no longer reduced to a basic code for the digital transformation of our world but felt in his own flesh. This is a moment when his voice takes on real depth, his character is fully-fledged, and fully-fleshed, like a grown-up Pinocchio shedding his former wooden self and stepping into his vulnerable albeit reliable being. This coincides with his newly-found need to listen to the other, 'to hear anything the man might say, the whole shapeless narrative of his unraveling' [203]. Then asymmetry can be recognized as 'the riddling little twist, subatomic, that made creation happen' [52]. Story-telling empowers us to become subjects, even if the complex dynamics of reproduction and representation ensures that voice and listener are maintained at a distance. The hyphen between zero and one may be seen as a graphic inscription of the notion of 'in-between' that Paul Ricœur coins, « C'est dans le 'entre' de l'expression 'entre protagonistes de l'échange' que se concentre la dialectique de la dissymétrie entre moi et autrui et la mutualité de leurs rapports » [RICŒUR : 400].

RAT is the anagram of ART. Is art endowed with the power to revert the loss of value implied by the epigraph, 'A rat became the unit of currency'? The answer hinges on the presence of one single little word, 'a', as a sign of resistance to converting RAT into ART. As if 'a rat' was a prime number (there is something left if you try to break it down into other numbers).

The only valid currency in *Cosmopolis* seems to be suffering. The protagonist is bent on a self-destructing course, becoming a Z, a man engulfed in the gaping hole of his own identity. He comes to terms with his yearning to keep the screaming void within him at bay. In Don DeLillo's 1991 novel, *Mao II*, the novelist Bill Gray explains, 'do you know why I believe in the novel? It's a democratic shout' [*Mao II* : 159]. Despite their asymmetrical social status, Packer – a posthumous silent sound in his throat – and Levin – howling Packer's name in a cracked pitch – seem to finally return to the community of this cosmopolis. Even if the narrative regularly points to its need for poetry to validate the numerous repetitions and balanced rhythms, the initial question can finally be answered. The telling itself creates the conditions for the subject to come into his own, contrary to the numeric and digital codes, since all the numbers at play in *Cosmopolis* will not yield the experience of 'the indecipherability of a thing seen new'.

### *Works cited*

*Works by Don DeLillo*

*Ratner's Star* (1976). New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989.

*White Noise* (1984). London: Picador, 1985.

*Mao II* (1991). London, Picador, 2016.

*Cosmopolis*. London: Picador, 2003.

*Falling Man*. London: Picador, 2007.

#### *Other*

DOCHERTY, Thomas. *Confessions: The Philosophy of Transparency*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.

HERBERT, Zbigniew. 'Report from a Besieged City'. *The Collected Poems: 1956-1998*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007 : 416-418.

LECLAIR, Thomas. 'An Interview with Don DeLillo'. *Contemporary Literature* [23/1](#) (Winter 1982) : 19-31.

NADOTTI, Maria. 'An Interview with Don DeLillo' *Salmagundi* [100](#) (Fall 1993) : 86-97.

RICCEUR, Paul. *Parcours de la reconnaissance: Trois études*. Paris : Stock, 2004.