# Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope:

# Reflections, Applications, Perspectives

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Kristoffel Demoen, Koen De Temmerman & Bart Keunen (eds.)

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# Heterochronic Representations of the Fall: Bakhtin, Milton, DeLillo

## Rachel Falconer

The chronotope of a text changes every time it is read, and this is no less true of the time in which we read Bakhtin's own texts. In the first decade of the new millennium, in the context of a series of terrorist attacks, as well as other global crises, Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" strikes me as ever more pertinent and timely. In FTC, Bakhtin demonstrates how two concepts, freedom and responsibility, underpin his entire approach to language, literature, politics and spiritual life (FTC: 84-258; Morson and Emerson 1990: 369; Morson 1994). In re-reading Bakhtin, post-9/11, I find new points of connection between my academic life and the democratic society which makes this relatively free existence a possibility.

In FTC, Bakhtin sets out to demonstrate how images of the human subject in literature gradually acquire a sense of historicity, of being embedded in specific times and places. In the ancient history of the novel, Bakhtin traces not only how this human subject comes to be represented through time as a free agent, oriented to the openness of the near future, with the capacity to exercise choice. In its most fully developed form (which for Bakhtin is nineteenth century realism), the novel would come to represent the human subject at its most densely and complexly chronotopic: fully addressed in, and answerable to, a particular historical moment, and yet within those parameters, radically free to act.

A peculiar feature of FTC, however, is that it never directly analyses the chronotope of nineteenth century realism, even though this is the genre that clearly represents time, space and the human subject, in ways that Bakhtin values most highly. Although he does discuss the realist chronotope elsewhere, especially in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* it seems odd that he would expend so much time analyzing the chronotopes of romance and adventure time in ancient Greek and medieval literature, at the expense of the nineteenth century novel, which more fully embodies those concepts of freedom and responsibility that the essay celebrates (Bakhtin 1984).

One possible explanation for Bakhtin's focus on earlier literature is that the chronotope is best understood as a theory of becoming and not of being. If the nineteenth century novel presents us with the richest and most completely historical chronotope, then, Bakhtin suggests, we may have more to learn by studying the drama of its emergence than by studying the chronotope in its most perfect and finalized form.

In other words, Bakhtin deliberately stages a *quest* for historicity; and it is this sense of a quest for historical addressivity which is particularly significant at the start of the twenty-first century. In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor argued that to be modern is to find oneself on a quest for self (Taylor 1989: 17; see MacIntyre 1985). But very often that search involves discovering the ground (both spatial and temporal) for fashioning identity. In this sense, chronotopicity is not a given feature of existence in modern times, but something we have actively to create.

Bakhtin argues that each literary genre codifies a particular world-view which is defined, in part, by its chronotope (FTC: 85). That is, the spatial and temporal configurations of each genre determine in large part the kinds of action a fictional character may undertake in that given world (without being iconoclastic, a realist hero cannot slay mythical beasts, and a questing knight cannot philosophize over drinks in a café). Recent extensions of Bakhtin's theory have sought to define the chronotopes of new and emergent genres such as the road movie, the graphic novel, and hypertext fiction. Others have challenged Bakhtin's characterization of certain chronotopes, such as those of epic and lyric poetry, arguing that these genres (and their chronotopes) are far more dynamic and dialogic than Bakhtin's analysis seems at first glance to allow (e.g. Falconer 1997: 254-72).

Rather than taking issue with Bakhtin's characterization of particular genres here, however, I wish to argue that we should pay closer attention to the heterochrony, or interplay of different chronotopes, in individual texts and their genres. As Bakhtin's own essay demonstrates, what makes any literary chronotope dynamic is its conflict and interplay with alternative chronotopes and world-views. Heterochrony (*raznovremennost*) is the spatiotemporal equivalent of linguistic heteroglossia, and if we examine any of Bakhtin's readings of particular chronotopes closely enough, we will find evidence of heterochronic conflict. This clash of spatiotemporal configurations within a text, or family of texts, provides the ground for the dialogic inter-illumination of opposing world-views.

One example of this inter-illumination may be found in Bakhtin's analysis of the visionary chronotope in Dante's *Commedia,* which turns out to contain two conflicting world-views, the historical and the extra-temporal (Dante 1989; FTC: 156-7). If the extra-temporal wins out in the end, it is actually the presence of the historical impulse that animates the work, at least in Bakhtin's account. According to his reading (and, one might add, Erich Auerbach's), the damned souls in Dante's poem are fully historicized images, and strain to break free of the constraints imposed on them by the visionary chronotope (see Auerbach 1957: 151-76). Bakhtin writes:

> To 'synchronize diachrony', to replace all temporal and historical divisions and linkages with purely interpretative, extratemporal and hierarchized ones – such was Dante's form-generating impulse, which is defined by an image of the world structured according to a pure verticality. (FTC: 157)

At the end of his analysis, Bakhtin discovers an unlooked-for bridge linking the visionary chronotope of Dante's *Commedia* and the realist chronotope governing Dostoevksy's minimalist plots (ibid.: 156). This is just one example of how a study of chronotopic conflict within individual texts might yield more nuanced and productive readings than analyses which aim to identify a single, dominant, genre-defining chronotope in a given text.

Bakhtin's essay "Epic and Novel" provides an important example of such dynamic heterochrony played out on the macro-scale, because while it is clear that Bakhtin considers the novelistic chronotope to be in every way superior to epic, it is also clear that the novel could not have emerged into its present form without epic as its explicit adversary (EN: 3-40). It is the negative example of epic which animates Bakhtin's characterization of the novel. There is not a single quality of novelistic discourse which does not exist in vitalizing opposition to epic discourse. If the epic hero is elevated above the plane of the reader, the novelistic hero exists on the same plane; if epic is oriented to the distant past, the novel is oriented to the near future; if there are no beginnings and no strong closures in the everlasting cycle of epic time, the novel turns out to be obsessively concerned with beginnings and ends; if epic concerns itself with glorious deeds and heroic destiny, the novel concerns itself with the prosaic detail of the everyday. In the dramatic conflict of genres that Bakhtin stages in this essay, it is the presence of epic that galvanizes the novel into becoming more, and more insistently, itself.

Some critics have objected to Bakhtin's negative portrayal of epic in his essay EN, while others have tried to use parts of his comparative analysis while setting aside the obvious bias in favor of the novel. To read selectively in this way, though, is to risk reducing Bakhtin's polemical revaluation of the then literary *status quo* to an inertly formalistic description, which can be silently corrected and reapplied. In my view, it is not necessary to agree with Bakhtin's conclusions, but it *is* necessary to engage in the process of evaluation. Reading Bakhtin without forming any *judgment* would be like touring Hell without thinking about justice. Bakhtin's dramatic portrayal of the relationship between epic and novel demonstrates that fundamental values are at stake in the conflict of genres, and the way we account for their differences should reveal the values we hold most dear.

Once again, I would argue that EN has acquired a new significance and topicality in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is not only literary texts which have chronotopes, but also private and public opinion, government rhetoric, media representation and military campaigns that retrospectively shape historical events into narrative with distinctive chronotopic characteristics. In the aftermath to 9/11, the Bush administration chose to recast a day of horror and bloodshed into the opening scene of an epic war on terror. At least on the political level, the possibility for a novelistic understanding of this event was foreclosed as soon as military retaliation "Operation Infinite Justice", got underway. (On 19 September 2001, more than a hundred US combat and support aircraft, and a naval taskforce, were dispatched to

the Middle East and Indian Ocean. This military operation was given the codename, "Operation Infinite Justice" recalling the famous inscription over Dante's gates of Hell: "JUSTICE MOVED MY HIGH MAKER", *Inferno* 3:4). But if the Dantean title of this military campaign seemed grotesque to many (and the embarrassed emendation to "Operation Enduring Freedom" was not much of an improvement), the shift from novelistic to epic perspective may also be traced in many, less jingoistic responses. We are living in a decade in which epic and novelistic world-views are once again coming into conflict, and how we draw upon these narrative frameworks to interpret recent events could help to shape our future. The texts which intelligently and persuasively think through the conflict between these opposing chronotopic perspectives are more significant than ever in our crisis-ridden times.

Bakhtin's two key concepts, responsibility and freedom, may be associated respectively with two major genres: epic and the novel. No one could doubt that for Bakhtin, the novel was the most appropriate vehicle to convey the sense of the freedom of the human subject. As Bracht Branham argues (2002), the novelist's central task is to restore a sense of openness and futurity to events that have already happened. If, as Gary Saul Morson argues in the present volume, to be human means to live in a world where time is open, then novels are just about as indispensable to our minds as oxygen is to our lungs. A vital function of the novelistic chronotope is to create a sense of open futurity, and along with this, to convey the up-closeness of experience, of time and space in their ordinary dailiness.

The reverse is also true, however. To be human is to live in a world where time is closed. And it is often a sense of finitude that drives us to achieve certain goals, or (impossibly, from a Beckettian perspective) to "live in the moment". Arguably, if the novel's strength is to convey a sense of open futurity, then that of epic is to bear the sense of time as finite. Given (as Bakhtin argues) its sense of time as cyclical, mythic, ritualized and distanced from the world of the narrator or reader, the epic does not shy away from representing human life as already scripted. Unhesitatingly, it imposes a finalizing frame, and discovers a formal symmetry to the lives of individuals and generations. While responsibility is a concept developed in both genres, the epic hero's sense of answerability to a particular task emerges from a consciousness of temporal finitude, which is more pronounced than in the novel. We cannot live without a sense of time as open, and we cannot escape a sense of time as finite. Texts which juxtapose epic and novelistic chronotopes wrestle with just this paradox.

One immediate result of juxtaposing these two chronotopes is to reveal the constructedness of both these senses of time. The conditions of ordinary, daily time may feel natural, but they are constructions, no less than are the great, epic symmetries that seem to bind us to one fatal trajectory or another (revenge, infinite justice, etc.). One result of a clash between epic and novelistic chronotopes, then, is a sense of being unmoored from temporal certainties, whether the larger, epic certainties of faith, history, technology, or the more daily certainty of expecting to walk peacefully and safely across a park. Open or closed, ordinary or sublime, the human sense of

time is revealed to be a construction, a fiction, and therefore, the result of a choice. The unmoored reader of a heterochronic epic-novel hybrid not only has to choose between conflicting constructions of time; they also have to weigh up and integrate (or try to reintegrate) the competing demands of freedom and responsibility.

One finds this conflict of chronotopes in contemporary, especially post 9/11, fiction, but also in earlier narratives treating of major historical events and crises. In order to achieve some so-to-speak epic perspective on the present situation, I would like to compare two texts which dynamically juxtapose epic and novelistic chronotopes. In each case, the text is responding to a historical disaster of such magnitude that a nation seems to have been derailed from its former path of development, and its people thrown into an extreme crisis of identity. The first text is Milton's *Paradise Lost,* which was written – by a Republican poet – during the period in which the English Republic failed. It was published in 1667, the seventh year of a monarchy whose restoration Milton never ceased to regard as a national and spiritual disaster. The second text is Don DeLillo's *Falling Man: A Novel* (2007)*,* which is one of a number of contemporary novels representing the events of September 11, 2001.[1]

Two general points might be made, before embarking on a closer reading of the texts. First, both authors wrote under a weight of audience expectation that theirs would be *the* voice to capture the epochal event in literature, and both authors largely disappointed those expectations. Milton's audience expected an epic poem about the political events of the previous decade, or at very least, a poem about British history; the choice of a Biblical narrative was a relief to Milton's enemies, and a disappointment to some of his friends. It was seen by many as a sign of the poet's retirement from his formerly active engagement in national public discourse (Milton had been Latin Secretary to Oliver Cromwell). In his retreat from obviously topical subject matter, Milton might be seen as opting for epic narrative in its most traditional form since, as Bakhtin notes, classical epic typically treats of events from the nation's distant past. But as many scholars have noted, Milton broke entirely new ground by placing marriage, not war, at the centre of his epic conflict. So insistent is his emphasis on domesticity that some scholars have claimed *Paradise Lost* to be the first novel in the English literary tradition (see, e.g. Keeble 2001: 139).

For his part, Don DeLillo had been writing novels about terrorism in America for more than two decades prior to 9/11. In *Players* (1977), he creates a character who works in the north tower of the World Trade Center, for a firm called the Grief Management Council, located there as she says, because "where else would you stack all this grief?" This novel begins with characters in an airplane, watching the film of a terrorist massacre. In *White Noise* (1985), DeLillo imagines an apocalypse following what he obliquely refers to as an "airborne toxic event". And in *Mao II* (1991), he transports his readers from a mass cult wedding in Yankee Stadium, New York, to terrorist atrocities in Beirut. But it is not only DeLillo's choice of subject matter that singled him out as *the* novelist destined to narrate 9/11. In *Libra* (1989) and *Underworld* (1997), he also demonstrated his command of prose epic. In their length,

ambitious scope, extensive cast lists, and above all, in their rhythmic, incantatory style, these novels demonstrate many of the characteristics of classical epic. So if American readers were hoping to find 9/11 re-cast in prose as an epic grand narrative, then DeLillo seemed to be the writer most likely to fulfil the task. But *Falling Man* is emphatically *not* such a work. Indeed, *Falling Man* seems reluctant to represent the event directly at all; the World Trade Center is referred to as "the towers" and 9/11 as "the event(s)". For most of the novel, the protagonist Keith Neudecker fails to remember what happened to him on the day of the attacks, and in the days and years afterwards, he appears to be living his life in a void. As Adam Mars-Jones notes, the characters convey "the feeling of being decentred, peripheral to oneself", while the novel as a whole "gives the […] impression of having no kernel inside its various shells" (2007).

Thus both Milton and DeLillo have been described as masters of epic narrative (though in different senses). Yet *Paradise Lost* and *Falling Man* turn out to be unexpectedly heterochronous; that is, they juxtapose the epic chronotope against the novelistic, or in Milton's case, the proto-novelistic. The reasons for this, in my view, are similar, surprisingly. Both texts represent narrators and characters unmoored from time and space by a cataclysmic event. Adrift from their normal temporal address, they find no point of purchase from which to react to the disaster that has occurred. To regain a sense of agency, they need to combine the temporal perspective of the novel, in which the immediate future appears unscripted and open to intervention, with that of epic, in which their actions bear the full weight of historical meaning and consequence.

Milton and DeLillo happen to have written at points in time roughly equidistant from what Bakhtin identifies as the epicenter of dialogic writing. Dostoevsky's novels were produced between 1840 and 1880, nearly two hundred years after Milton, and 200 years before DeLillo. All three exemplify an engagement with what lies at the heart of all Bakhtin's writing about time and space in literature: how to represent an image of a human being who is at once alive to the forces of history, and capable of reacting to those forces freely, however immense and immutable they appear to be.

The quest for historical chronotopicity is not only an ontological challenge for the character, the writer, and the reader. For the writer, it is also a problem of representation. What narrative form, genre, or chronotope, does one choose to avoid aestheticizing historical disaster, thereby redoubling the character's alienation from reality? This problem of representation becomes part of the conflict of *Paradise Lost* and *Falling Man,* as one chronotope is challenged and dismantled by another. In the following analysis, I would like to focus on two opposing movements in what I am characterizing as a dramatized conflict of opposing chronotopes. In the first movement, the cataclysmic event is represented; the chronotopes of epic and novel, previously blended, break violently apart; the epic world-view predominates, but to the characters' diminishment. In the second movement, which runs concurrently with and against the first, the novelistic world-view reasserts itself, forcefully in *Paradise Lost,*

mutedly and by slow degrees in *Falling Man.* The result is not a synthesis of epic and novelistic world-views, as previously, but rather a bifocal perspective of a novelistic chronotope darkening at its outer edges into an epic sense of irretrievable loss.

Both *Paradise Lost* and *Falling Man* are elegiac works. Both mourn the loss of a fuller state of being, prior to a cataclysmic, historical event. Milton retells the Biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve both as an allegory, and as a theological *explanation* for the failure of the English Commonwealth. Since the Fall, human reason has become clouded and unreliable; only this fact can help to explain why a free people would be, in Milton's words, "chusing them[selves] a captain back for *Egypt*" (1953-, Vol. 7: 463).[2] As Milton elsewhere wrote, "reason is but choosing", and what *Paradise Lost* relates is not so much the loss of innocence, as the loss of mankind's ability to exercise choice (1953-, Vol. 2: 527). Unusually, in Milton's representation, the Garden of Eden is not a state of perfection, although it bears a limited resemblance to Bakhtin's description of Edenic time as "dense and fragrant, like honey, a time of intimate lovers' scenes and lyric outpourings" (FTC: 103). Milton's Eve has nightmares and Adam experiences rejection, and both face a depressing amount of gardening each day. They argue about whose job it is to do what, and neither is sure who should be running the household. Time does not appear to them to be infinite, but it is always reparative. Come morning, their nightmares dissipate and their losses are restored; and this is not because Edenic life is inevitably cyclical, but because Adam and Eve are continually making the right choices.

For DeLillo, New York City was also a paradise in the Miltonic sense that it represented diversity and choice. Thrusting aggressively into the technological future, New York nevertheless had a seemingly infinite capacity to absorb and accommodate difference. In an essay entitled, "In the Ruins of the Future", published in *The Guardian* (first published in *Harper's Magazine*), DeLillo remembers going for an evening walk and seeing:

> crowds of people, the panethnic swarm of shoppers, merchants, residents and passers-by, with a few tourists as well, and the man at the kerbstone doing acupoint massage, and the dreadlocked kid riding his bike on the sidewalk. This was the spirit of Canal Street […] Here were hardware bargains, car stereos, foam rubber and industrial plastics, the tattoo parlour and the pizza parlour. Then I saw the woman on the prayer rug. I'd just turned the corner, heading south to meet some friends, and there she was, young and slender, in a bright silk headscarf. It was time for sunset prayer and she was kneeling, upper body pitched towards the edge of the rug […] Some prayer rugs include a mihrab in their design, an arched element representing the prayer niche in a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca. The only locational guide the young woman needed was the Manhattan grid. I looked at her in prayer and it was clearer to me than ever, the daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York. The city will accommodate every language, ritual, belief and opinion. (DeLillo 2001)

The prelapsarian state, for both Milton and DeLillo harmoniously combines the qualities of both epic and novelistic chronotopes as Bakhtin describes them in "Epic and Novel". For Milton, Edenic time combines epic cycles and a sense of the succession of days (See also Rosenblatt 1972: 31-41). In DeLillo's description of "the daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness" of New York City, there is both novelistic specificity and epic grandeur.

But midway through Milton's epic, this sense of existential fullness and balance gets disrupted. Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and are punished with exile and a death sentence. At the end of Book Ten, they await the delivery of God's judgment in a state of suspenseful apprehension. They know death is coming, but they do not yet understand what that means. In the final two books, Milton depicts a world that has narrowed and hardened around them. It is more distinctly hierarchized: God, who spoke to them in the garden, is now distant and invisible; Adam no longer discourses with sociable angels, but receives lectures from avenging ones; Eve, of course, is excluded from rational discourse altogether.

Adam wants to understand what death is, and how their act of disobedience will affect the future of the race. Michael takes him to a hilltop, and shows him a vision of Biblical history, unfolding in vastly accelerated time and concluding with a vision of the Apocalypse. In the shift to eschatological narrative in the final two books of *Paradise Lost*, what appears to be lost is any room for Adam to exercise his reason or choice. He sees a world of suffering unfolding and he can do nothing to intervene. In Michael's prophetic narrative, few of the characters appear to exercise choice either; most are unnamed, and few are heard to speak. This is the epic chronotope in its most negative aspect; on his mountain top, Adam stands too high above his descendants to engage with them, and we, Milton's readers, stand too far below, and at too great a distance, to enter into their consciousness.

If time appears to have contracted to a downward spiral of "evil days", so too has the rhythm of the poem changed in Books 11 and 12. From the expansive verse paragraphs of the opening three books, we find now that the epic narrator's sentences have shortened, his figurative language has been trimmed, his pentameter lines more frequently end-stopped. If the rolling, enjambed lines of the first book are a sign of Milton reasserting the "ancient liberty" of the heroic poem, then here that liberty has been curtailed. For the last section of *Paradise Lost,* Adam is trapped in limbo – as is Eve, dreaming in her grotto below. They are not living, in the full sense they have experienced before the Fall, but they are not yet dead either.

*Falling Man* begins at precisely this point where the balance between epic and novelistic chronotopes has capsized. The novel begins with the sentence, "It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (DeLillo 2007: 3). This chronotopic shift from "street" to "world" signals a shift away from the novelistic to the epic, specifically the epic chronotope of the infernal afterlife. In this "time and space of falling ash", there is no forward trajectory, either spatially or temporally. The street has become a world in itself, and there seems to be no other

reality beyond it. The description recalls Dante's *Inferno,* where time is arrested, and the only way to travel is down. The scene that DeLillo goes on to describe could well be taking place in the vestibule of Dante's Hell. People are tossed together with debris, and both are whirled downward like bodiless souls: "They ran and fell, some of them confused and ungainly […] Smoke and ash came rolling down […] with office paper flashing past, […] skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall" (ibid.). In DeLillo's reiterated phrase, "this was the world now" (ibid.), one feels, amongst other things, the huge contraction of space and time and world-view, as all that diversity of being and activity is directed into a single movement and purpose: fall or flight from the towers.

In "Ruins", DeLillo argues that the attacks changed New York City from a future-oriented city to one looking backwards to an archaic past: "whatever great skeins of technology lie ahead, ever more complex, connective, precise, micro-fractional, the future has yielded, for now, to medieval expedience, to the old slow furies of cut-throat religion". As a result of the terrorists' martyrdom, New Yorkers "have fallen back in time and space" and the modernist city has contracted into a "heaven and hell". This sense of mythicization of history certainly suggests that, chronotopically speaking, we have shifted away from a novelistic world-view to a more specifically epic one. But as DeLillo's writing previously accommodated a positive sense of epic, I would argue that the shift here is more specifically to the chronotope of *visionary* epic, as Bakhtin defines this in relation to Dante's *Inferno.* In the opening chapter of *Falling Man,* as in *Inferno,* we see historical characters being crushed into an extra-temporal frame of reference (as DeLillo writes, a world of "heaven and hell"). And of course, in *Falling Man,* this is all the more shocking because the visionary epic chronotope is being imposed on *real* people; DeLillo is representing an actual event, not a vision of the afterlife.

But it is also clear from the opening chapter, that *Falling Man* is not just an account of what happened, nor even just an exploration of what its ramifications may be for present reality. The novel is also a polemic (granted, a *quiet* polemic) against the new post-9/11, medieval, backward-looking world order. It is significant, for example, that amidst all the mass of humanity and inhumanity whirling down and away from the towers in Chapter 1, DeLillo represents his protagonist, Keith Neudecker, walking in the opposite direction: *towards* the towers, *back* to the scene of destruction. At the time, Keith is concussed and is unaware that he is heading against the crowds; he does not know that he is holding someone else's briefcase in his hand, and he is certainly not acting heroically in any conscious way. Nevertheless, his action can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the way this novel meditates on the day of the attacks. Beginning in a haze of shock and incomprehension, the novel steadily acquires sharper and narrower focus, finally angling in on a crucial moment of choice, faced by several of the characters during or after the attacks. What might be the point of this narrative technique? In chronotopic terms, one could explain this as an attempt to penetrate to the heart of an epic event, to pinpoint a sense of novelistic

futurity. In Miltonic terms, one could see this as an attempt to rediscover a sense of autonomy and agency in a world that has come to seem fatally predetermined.

The title of DeLillo's novel recalls a photograph taken by Richard Drew of a man falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Centre. The publication of the photograph in several newspapers caused a storm of protest, and it was quickly withdrawn from circulation. The journalist Tom Junod set out to identify the falling man in the photograph, and an ABC documentary was made of his investigation. In DeLillo's novel, however, "Falling Man" refers to a performance artist who in the days following the attacks, staged falls from public buildings around the city. Adopting the same pose as the man in Drew's photograph (wearing suit and tie, falling head downwards, arms at his sides, one leg slightly bent), the artist provokes public outrage in the novel much as the photograph had done in reality. Why turn the sight of a man's death into a public spectacle?

In his review of DeLillo's novel, Tom Junod criticizes DeLillo for obscuring the real falling man's history behind this story of the fictional falling artist, David Janiak (Junod 2007). But DeLillo might equally be praised for handling the historical material with appropriate reticence. Also, as Mars-Jones suggests, the artist Janiak might serve as a negative example of the novelist DeLillo does not want to be, one who creates art by exploiting and effacing real disaster. Mars-Jones writes,

> At first, this seems like a piece of terrorist aesthetics, provocation of a city in mourning, as if the author were offering a model of what he wanted to avoid in terms of appropriating the deaths of strangers […] The man's story, as it finally emerges, is far more interesting, a genuine case of repetition compulsion with a sacrificial aspect. (2007)

In another sense, though, Janiak's method might be understood as a positive reflection of DeLillo's. Certain gestures or phrases are repeated without explanation or analysis, by both; but eventually, these ritualized performances begin to assume patterns which echo and respond to the original moment of loss. This is, perhaps, DeLillo's way of helping us survive with ghosts. For as Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*, "it is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it" (1994: xix), since, if "learning to live – remains to be done, it can only happen between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone" (1994: xviii).

After the searing opening chapter of *Falling Man,* DeLillo follows his characters into a murky limbo of half-memories and partial connections. Despite the novel's title, DeLillo spends a long time *not* discussing the events of 9/11. Keith traces the owner of the briefcase which mysteriously comes into his hands during his descent from the tower. He has an affair with the owner, Florence, but what they are really trying to share is the memory of that day in the tower. Keith's wife Lianne encourages a group of Alzheimer patients to write down and share their memories of the attacks; but all are aware that they are laboring in a process of "diminishing returns". Lianne's mother, Nina, a cultured art historian, argues with her European lover, Martin, over

the meaning of the attacks. But Nina's intelligence seems inadequate to the task of understanding the terrorists' motives, while Martin's seems too compromised by his own possible involvement with terrorist activity in 1960s Germany. Lianne fights off a growing intolerance to things "Middle Eastern", such as the music issuing from her neighbor's flat. And Keith withdraws into a ritualized existence playing poker, not thinking much beyond the game.

DeLillo's characters drift from day to day in a haze of uncertainty and confusion. They all appear to have been washed out by a terrifying experience which they somehow failed to take in at the time, and now fail to remember specifically. The dialogue is fragmentary, and often flat and colorless, so that without speech markers ("he said, she said") one character's voice blurs indistinguishably into another's. It is not so much that the transformed cityscape seems unreal, but rather that they, the people observing it, seem less alive. The narrator relates Keith's reflections thus:

> Things did not seem charged in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the cast-iron buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them. (2007: 5)

To a reader of this drifting reverie, it is not so much "things" that come to seem less certain than before, but the presence of Keith himself. His understanding of language fails ("whatever that means"), and his gaze is like that of a ghost's, someone who looks, without actually being present. To express this in Bakhtinian terms, a novelistic character appears to have become trapped inside a visionary epic chronotope. Time and space have enormous consequence, but not for the individual embedded within them. Dwarfed by the scale and magnitude of events, the character seems incapable of action. His language and consciousness come slightly unstuck, and for him, time ceases to drive forwards.

Although it is not so starkly evident amidst all the verbal thunder of *Paradise Lost,* nevertheless the same sense of suspension pervades Milton's narrative of the Fall. At the end of Book Nine, Adam and Eve wait apprehensively for God's judgment to descend on them, but in a sense, this is the state of mind that both reader and narrator share right from the start of the poem. Like Satan, we engage with the narrative of Genesis from a position of belatedness. For Milton's Republican readers, as for the fallen angel, it is already too late to make the right choice. What we have to face is how to cope with the fact of the Fall. The motivic chronotope of a figure falling from the sky resonates throughout the length and breadth of Milton's epic, no less than in DeLillo's novel. The fall of Satan, itself a precursor to Adam and Eve's fall, is narrated no less than four times in the epic, each time with a different emphasis to the motif. Milton's narrator begins his retelling of Genesis with a description of Satan being cast out of heaven:

> Him the Almighty Power
> Hurld headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Skie
> With hideous ruine and combustion down
> To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
> In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,
> Who durst defie th' Omnipotent to Arms.
> Nine times the Space that measures Day and Night
> To mortal men, he with his horrid crew
> Lay vanquisht, rowling in the fiery Gulfe
> Confounded though immortal. (PL.1.44-53)

Besides providing the primary cause of the epic conflict to follow, Satan's fall is also an example to Adam, Eve and the reader of one possible fate awaiting God's enemies. In this description, the narrator is firmly on God's side, and he positions himself above, looking down on the figure being "hurled headlong" to perdition.

But when we next encounter a falling angel, the sight-line has curiously shifted so that the narrator appears to be looking upwards, as at a comet or plummeting star. Here he is describing Mulciber, the Graeco-Roman god of architecture, but clearly the falling god is Satan's double, being punished (yet again) for over-ambition:

>     from Morn
> To Noon he fell, from Noon to dewy Eve,
> A Summers day; and with the setting Sun
> Dropt from the Zenith like a falling Star,
> On Lemnos th' Ægæan Ile: thus they relate,
> Erring; for he with this rebellious rout
> Fell long before; […] nor did he scape
> By all his Engins, but was headlong sent
> With his industrious crew to build in hell. (PL.1.742-51)

As many critics have discussed, Milton at first aestheticizes the image of the falling god, tracing a slow and beautiful trajectory through the sky, and then, as if to undo this suspension of judgment, he harshly condemns both the god, and his own temporally languid description. Why dwell so insistently on this motif? Stanley Fish argues that this is Milton's method of training the reader in Puritan aesthetics: we are to see how easily one's judgment can be led astray and how frequently it must be corrected (Fish 1967: 88-90). I would put it a little differently: Milton is focusing the reader's attention on the moment of loss of freedom and responsibility, the point after which everything becomes too late to change. This moment is arrested in the line, "from morn to noon, from noon to dewy eve, a summer's day". By elongating the moment, Milton is not so much inviting us to err, as opening up a space for exercising judgment anew. By playing over this scene repeatedly, Milton thus reintroduces, or if you like, creates the illusion of reintroducing, choice. This is crucial for Adam and Eve, and even more crucial for the reader, who is being urged to exercise

choice in a situation where agency and self-determination no longer seem to be possible. One might compare Gary Saul Morson's account of Dostoevsky: "in order to render palpable the act of choosing, Dostoevsky focused everything on the moment in which choice is made" (1994: 105).

From one point of view, the decision to linger over the image constitutes an error of artistic judgment. Indeed for Milton, the error is also theological, because it creates a space in which the poem's readers may decide to sympathize with Satan where theologically, one should not. For DeLillo, the danger is that by reproducing the sense of unreality that many people felt, and still feel, in the aftermath of 9/11, his novel will only magnify the distances that have already opened up, either by failing to connect with his readers (and many have criticized *Falling Man* for its lack of "warmth"), or by captivating them with aesthetic images that are more bearable to look at than the historical traces of the disaster itself. From the opposing point of view (which I share), the freeze-frame is a necessary step in the construction of a novelistic response to epic tragedy. It forces one (character or reader) to set aside the observer or survivor's sense of belatedness, to focus on a particular moment and the temporal edges that touch upon it: the immediate past and future.

Milton labors over descriptions of Satan's fall in part because he wants his readers to stop and think how their futures should differ from his. His final retelling is placed at the epicenter of the poem. Here Raphael describes the event to Adam, and the tone is once again, unflinchingly judgmental:

> The overthrown he rais'd, and […]
> Drove them before him Thunder-struck, pursu'd
> With terrors and with furies to the bounds
> And Chrystal wall of Heav'n, which op'ning wide,
> Rowld inward, and a spacious Gap disclos'd
> Into the wastful Deep; the monstrous sight
> Strook them with horror backward, but far worse
> Urg'd them behind; headlong themselves they threw
> Down from the verge of Heav'n, Eternal wrauth
> Burnt after them to the bottomless pit. (PL.6.856-66)

Literary texts resonate forwards in time as well as backwards, and as I remarked earlier, the chronotope of a text changes every time it is read. After 9/11, for me, these lines have taken on the uncanny resonance of art anticipating history. Unable to face the terror behind them, Satan's followers choose the monstrous leap into open space. The difference between this and earlier accounts in the poem is that here we see Satan's moment of choice. The choice between the fire and the fall may not seem much, but from the perspective of the protagonist situated in that time-space it means everything. This being the first time that Milton represents the consciousness of the angels at the point of falling, Raphael's account here lends Satan's actions a human-like dignity. As Viktor Frankl wrote about choice in the concentration

camps, "the ability to choose one's attitude to a given set of circumstances" is "the last of human freedoms" (1964: 86). Or as Tzvetan Todorov more recently expressed it, "the important thing is to act out of the strength of one's will, to exert through one's initiative some influence, however minimal, on one's surroundings" (1999: 61).

Milton's God is keen to stress that all his creatures, human and angelic, have the freedom to determine their own futures. In Satan's case, he makes this point chiefly to absolve himself from blame for damning a third of his angelic host:

> authors to themselves in all
> Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
> I formed them free, and free they must remain,
> Till they enthrall themselves. (PL.3.122-4)

Once fallen, the angels will continue to choose enslavement over freedom, but Milton's readers need not share the same fate. If even the fallen angels to whom God extends no grace (because they fell "Self-tempted, self-depraved" (PL.3.130) had a choice, then how much more do Adam and Eve have it in their power to reverse or mitigate a disaster that might seem utterly overwhelming? In theological terms, Milton's poem is engaging in the great debate of seventeenth century religions: if God has foreknowledge of everything, does this mean that all our actions are also predestined? Scholars mostly agree that Milton's position on this issue was Armenian, or something similar; that is, he believed that divine foreknowledge does not imply predestination (Keeble 2001: 135; Loewenstein 2001: 361). By thus lingering over and replaying Satan's fall, Milton prepares us for Adam and Eve, who not only choose to fall, but also choose to recover and live on. Thus for Milton's readers, the poem opens up the possibility of revoking choices that have already been made, and that seem to close off the possibility of future change.

According to newspaper reports, about 200 people jumped from the towers on September 11th. None of them are known to have survived. The Chief Medical Examiner's Office of New York City recorded these deaths as "accidental", rather than "suicide", in part to avoid the stigma of the phrase that sticks in Lianne's mind: "died by his own hand" (DeLillo 2007: 169). In *Falling Man,* Lianne happens upon one of David Janiak's performances. As she watches him waiting over a train tunnel, she begins to understand his intentions: "he wasn't here to perform for those at street level or in the high windows. He was situated where he was […] waiting for the train to come, northbound, this is what he wanted, an audience in motion, passing scant yards from his standing figure" (ibid.: 164). Janiak wants to be seen by viewers "in motion" so that his gesture will be mirrored in theirs. For a second, both will seem to be in free fall. As the train approaches, he does not just imitate the threshold crossing into blank space; he re-lives it:

> The train comes slamming through and he turns his head and looks into
> it (into his death by fire) and then brings his head back around and jumps.
>     Jumps or falls. (ibid.: 167-8)

As the day of the attacks recedes into the past, it may take a performance this violent to force an observer to feel some visceral connection with the half-forgotten images of the day. But what seems clear from this description is that the performance is "authentic" in the sense that Janiak is not just imitating the actual falls. He is re-enacting them in an effort to understand what they meant, what the choice and the decision felt like from the inside.

DeLillo also takes his readers into the mind of one of the terrorists, the fictional character Hammad, although I feel that he is less convincingly interiorized than the other characters. To an extent, Hammad occupies a position analogous to Satan in *Paradise Lost* – not in the sense that his portrayal is demonized (it is not), but in the sense that he is the Other against, and by means of, whom Keith becomes a self. Hammad is the character who embraces a narrowed epic world-view; he welcomes the mythicization of history. And he becomes the remote, de-individuated hero that this particularly brittle epic chronotope accommodates:

> he and his brothers […] felt the magnetic effect of plot. Plot drew them
> together more tightly than ever. Plot closed the world to the slenderest line
> of sight, where everything converges to a point. There was the claim of
> fate, that they were born to this. There was the claim of being chosen, out
> there, in the wind and sky of Islam. There was the statement that death
> made, the strongest claim of all, the highest jihad. (ibid.: 174)

Hammad is one version of the person Keith could become, and one glimpses this possible future as Keith plays for revenge against losers at poker, and chooses a life among strangers.

Against Hammad's converging, hard-edged plot, DeLillo counterposes fragments of stories, half-memories and shadowy premonitions, ghostly narratives that lack the terrorist's certainty, but that nevertheless accrue in number and strength throughout the novel. In "Ruins", DeLillo spells out why he sees this as a necessary response:

> it is left to us to create the counternarrative […] There are 100,000 stories
> crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world. Where we were, who
> we know, what we've seen or heard. There are the doctors' appointments
> that saved lives, the cellphones that were used to report the hijackings.
> Stories generating others and people running north out of the rumbling
> smoke and ash […] There are stories that carry around their edges the
> luminous ring of coincidence, fate, or premonition. They take us beyond
> the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated
> being. (DeLillo 2001)

Strikingly, DeLillo is not simply collecting documentary evidence and eye-witness accounts. He is not only interested in the prosaic detail, but also in the epic sense of "fate" and of "elevated being". He is not, then, conceding the right to create epic narrative to the terrorists. He is also looking for "configurations" and "symmetry, bleak and touching" that would convey the weight of a "desolate epic tragedy". *Falling Man* is not such a narrative, but it dramatizes the hard and slow process of becoming it. The novel conveys the effort of accumulating the counter-narrative shrapnel, the "smaller objects and more marginal stories […] to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable", as he puts it in "Ruins".

Towards the end of *Falling Man,* Lianne discovers that the performance artist has died, possibly as a result of his dangerous free-falls which were only arrested by a rope and harness. Reading his obituary, she finds a reporter speculating about Janiak's intentions, and whether the artist meant to remind his audience of the man in Drew's photograph. "Free fall", continues the narrator, possibly echoing some explanation in the obituary, "is the ideal falling motion of a body that is subject only to the earth's gravitational field". After this strangely disconnected allusion to a "free" and "ideal" movement of the body through space, we return to the focalization through Lianne:

> She did not read further but knew at once which photograph the account referred to. It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. The man headlong, the towers behind him. The mass of the towers filled the frame of the picture. The man falling, the towers contiguous, she thought, behind him. The enormous soaring lines, the vertical column stripes. The man with blood on his shirt, she thought, or burn marks, and the effect of the columns behind him, the composition, she thought, darker stripes for the nearer tower, the north, lighter for the other, and the mass, the immensity of it, and the man set almost precisely between the rows of darker and lighter stripes. Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. (2007: 221-2)

Like Milton's description of Mulciber falling the length of a summer's day, the image that Lianne conjures in her mind is undeniably a "composition", a work of art, and not a direct encounter with reality. Lianne recalls him as angelic, beautiful, and perfectly framed by stripes of light and dark. The tiny figure set against "enormous soaring lines" precisely conveys the epic immensity of the tragedy. At this point, however, she is no longer thinking about the artist, but about the photograph, and then, through the photograph, about the picture in her mind which, finally, "burns a hole in her mind and heart". So there is a frame within a frame within a frame, which prevents us from mistaking the image for reality. But the triple frame also leads us inwards, with Lianne, from an epic sense of immensity to a novelistic insistence on the specifics: "blood on his shirt, she thought, or burn marks". Although Janiak is no longer alive, his performance succeeds with Lianne at this point, as her hazy memory is driven into sharp focus for the first time.

Milton's God makes a careful distinction between Satan, whose Fall is deserved and fatal, and Adam and Eve, whose disgrace will be temporary ("man falls deceived […] man therefore shall find grace" (PL.3.131). But in DeLillo's novel, as in many modern texts, Hell is no longer an expression of God's justice. It is rather an expression of humanity's injustice (on this modern view of Hell, see Falconer 2005: 63 and passim). How does one respond to these unwatchable images of innocent people dying? Keith, Lianne and members of the Alzheimer Group all want vengeance, at some obscure level, at different points of the narrative. But their desires do not harden into that singular purpose, in part because the chronotope they inhabit is not just epic; it is also novelistic.

Likewise in *Paradise Lost,* Adam and Eve turn back to their former habits, even before they learn that God does not intend to destroy them (PL.10.1086-105). They resist the easiest response, which would have been to despair, to become satanic. Adam is shown a dark vision of prolonged suffering in ages to come, but the other strand to this vision is the repeated leitmotif of a lone dissenter making a solitary stand, and surviving.[3] Just as the example of Moses cuts a caesura through the downward spiral of human history in Book 12 (211-5), so the example of Noah illuminates the end of Book 11: "So all shall turn degenerate, all depraved,/ Justice and temperance, truth and faith forgot;/ One man except, the only son of light / In a dark age" (PL.11.806-9). Waves of darkness close again over the descendents of both these Biblical figures, as the final victory, of course, belongs to Christ at the end of time. Milton shares with other Puritan thinkers the view that the history of human injustice represents only a transient phase in God's divine plan. But unlike other eschatological thinkers, whom Bakhtin criticizes for emptying human time of meaning, this Puritan framework actually vitalizes Milton's sense of the immediate future. Adam descends from the hilltop, heartened and inspired – not so much by the vision of Paradise restored ('beyond is all abyss,/ Eternity whose end no eye can reach"; PL.12.555-6), as by the thought that the near future is worth fighting for: "with good / Still overcoming evil, and by small / Accomplishing great things". (PL.12.565-6).[4] So the closing prophetic books of *Paradise Lost* perform a double function. On the one hand, the novelistic chronotope, which brought us close to Adam and Eve in their daily, domestic affairs, gives way before an epic chronotope that hurtles us swiftly and at a great distance, through hundreds of years of Biblical history. On the other hand, the rolling cycles of that epic chronotope are continually cut through with singular acts of resistance, and moments of suspended judgment. Through these fissures, the novelistic chronotope floods through the Biblical narrative, resisting foreclosure.

The poem ends on a domestic note. Adam and Eve, who dropped hands to separate before the Fall, leave Eden "hand in hand" (PL.12.648). Casting their eyes back at their home now in flames, they follow the angel reluctantly down the cliff-side. But when they descend into historical time, they find it bears no relation to the doomed world Adam has just foreseen. The immediate future suddenly looks spacious:

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and providence their guide. (PL.12.646-7)

Adam and Eve already know they are *responsible* for the blighted future of the race; but now they also know they are *free.*

In "Ruins" DeLillo echoes this Miltonic image when he alludes to people who joined hands as they jumped from the windows (although I am not sure whether the echo of *Paradise Lost,* which to my ear is unmissable, was intended by DeLillo or not): "People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel" (DeLillo 2001). In *Falling Man,* the Alzheimer group members allude to these scenes, although the novel does not represent them directly. But a metaphorical joining of hands takes place in the final chapter.

Unexpectedly the first conjoining "touch" is between Hammad and Keith. The chapter takes us back in time to the day of the attacks, and focalizes the scene through Hammad as he sits in the hijacked plane, waiting for the collision that will kill him. As the plane makes contact, the focalization jumps from Hammad (presumably now dead) to Keith, sitting on the other side of the wall: "a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall" (2007: 239). Again, it is Hammad's Otherness that "makes" Keith. And in this re-narration of the events of Chapter 1, Hammad's death appears to bring to life a different Keith, one whom we see here for the first time taking responsibility, even acting heroically. He tries to save his dying friend's life (a former poker buddy, which retrospectively explains Keith's obsessive gambling). He helps people down the stairs, and passes objects down; he takes charge of the ownerless briefcase.

Here for the first time, too, we see Keith in sharp focus, moving through the specificity of that particular day, addressing strangers, being spoken to. As he moves downstairs and into the street, it no longer seems like a "world of heaven and hell", so in a sense the chronotope has shifted from epic back to novel. But this "addressive" Keith seems to have sprung into life straight from the deathly touch of Hammad through the tower wall. In *Libra,* DeLillo had written about the Kennedy assassination in similar terms; it was a tragedy that "made" many Americans. Of *Libra,* DeLillo had commented, "fiction rescues history from its confusions" (see Mehren 1988).

In one sense, the final chapter of *Falling Man* releases Keith, and DeLillo's readers, from the oppressive sense of being disconnected and peripheral to the events of September 11th. At last, Keith is actually *there,* and we are there with him, seeing everything in searing detail through his eyes. So one feels that finally time is moving forwards, and having re-lived the past, or perhaps living it here for the first time, Keith will be able to work through it (on "working through" trauma, see Freud 1958: 147-56). In another sense, though, the ending feels cyclical and not sequential. DeLillo returns us to the same scene depicted in Chapter 1. An empty shirt – uncannily rem-

iniscent of a falling body – flaps down from the sky, as it also did in Chapter 1. It seems that the memories will continue to resonate. And perhaps the effect of the novel is not to "work through" these memories. Perhaps rather, its effect is to give them permanence, enclosed in the echo-chambered structure of the novel.

The counter-narrative to 9/11 is heteroglossic; instead of one converging plot, it consists of hundreds and thousands of stories, films, novels, and documentaries. But it is also heterochronic, in the sense that it accommodates both a novelistic, and a newly forged epic chronotope. One hears the epic tone emerging in the last chapter, as Keith listens to people exchanging words on the stairwell above him:

> There were voices up behind him, back on the stairs, one and then another
> in near echo, fugue voices, song voices in the rhythms of natural speech.
> This goes down.
> This goes down.
> Pass it down. (2007: 245)

*Falling Man* reproduces the "rhythms of natural speech" as the basis for a novelistic counter-narrative to 9/11. But those rhythms are also pared down and reshaped so that they echo against each other in the sung voice of epic.


## Endnotes

1.    Other 9/11 narratives include: Martin Amis, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", a fiction essay published in *The Observer* (3 September 2006); Frederic Beigbeder, *Windows on the World* (2003); Paul Greengrass, director of the film, *United 93* (2006); Jay McInerney, *The Good Life* (2006); Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005); and Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). As Mars-Jones notes, DeLillo's title also echoes Saul Bellow's *The Dangling Man* (Mars-Jones 2007).

2.    At the end of *The Readie and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660), Milton writes, "I trust I shall have spoken perswasion to abundance of sensible and ingenuous men: to som perhaps whom God may raise of these stones to become children of reviving libertie; and may reclaim, though they seem now chusing them a captain back for *Egypt,* to bethink themselves a little and consider whether they are rushing" (Milton 1953-, Vol. 7: 463).

3.    For a persuasive discussion of Milton's sympathies with Puritan dissenters, who were persecuted under Charles II, see Keeble (2001: 130). The pre-eminent example in *Paradise Lost* of a dissenter defying the threat of persecution is Abdiel (PL.5.897-903).

4.    Compare Bakhtin: "Eschatology always sees the segment of a future separating the past from the end as lacking value; this separating segment of time loses its significance and interest, it is merely an unnecessary continuation of an indefinitely prolonged present" (FTC: 148).

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