

The return of the waste: Author as recycler in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

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Abstract

Zygmunt Bauman uses 'waste' as a metaphor to speak of those human beings considered as redundant, dysfunctional and unnecessary in the 'liquid' modern world. This notion could also be traced in the works of contemporary writers of fiction. A case in point is *Cosmopolis* (2003) by Don DeLillo. This essay is an attempt to discuss the novel in terms of the 'liquid' modern notion of waste and the fear / threat of turning into it. The protagonist of DeLillo's novel, Eric Packer, is thus considered as an agent of capitalism whose novelistic encounters could be examined as projecting the ruinous consequences of his self-centeredness and indulgence. It is the nemesis of his wasteful life that meets this man of capital in the end and finally speaks back in dialogue to him. The voices of the wasteful and the wasted resound through the pages of DeLillo's fiction. It is due to this quality that we may call DeLillo a *recycler* of what has been marginalized, jettisoned and left unnoticed in the contemporary 'liquid' times.

Keyword: Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, liquid modernity, waste, recycling, consumerism

Introduction

A work of literature might be a reflection of its author's mind, yet it directly or indirectly represents the external world and the times of that author. As Ashcroft and Ahluwalia explain in reference to Edward Said's concept of worldliness of literature, "texts have ways of existing which even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society: in short, they are in the world, and hence 'worldly'" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001: 22). Novels offer a unique 'embodiment' of the world. Terry Eagleton in *The English Novel* states that this literary form is of and about "modern civilization" and its mutable values. Unlike romance, its predecessor, novel is no more concerned with the "Nature or the supernatural" but rather "portrays a secular, empirical world [...] and believes in what it can touch, taste and handle" (Eagleton 2005: 3). He maintains that the novel has gone through many changes in its struggle to capture the world that comes into being: "As reality grows more complex and fragmented, the means of representing it become more problematic as well; and this forces language and narrative into a more

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elaborate self-consciousness" (ibid. 21). Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, as we will try to show in the following pages, well exemplifies this.

Don DeLillo as an important contemporary writer focuses on representing the late 20th and early 21st century America. His works are widely recognized as postmodern, even though he rather believes himself to be a modernist and "correspondingly critical in [his] relationship to the social context in which and about which" he writes (Moreland 1995: 18). Nevertheless, DeLillo is commonly seen as representing the turn to postmodernism in American literature. Whether it is his close attention to life in contemporary America, or his employment of a set of literary techniques such as irony, parody, metafiction, and the presence of open-ended randomness in his narrative system that has won him this title, DeLillo for one thing is sure to make his reader ponder over the reality around him. His language has the same linguistic innovativeness that Fredric Jameson praises in E. L. Doctorow and associates with "Freud's 'return of the repressed'" in being historically engaging (Jameson 1991:24). It is because in an age in which advertising images speak louder than words DeLillo has found his way through the assemblage of these marginalized words to historicize America's present, that is his prose engages his readers with a sense of history. John N. Duvall in his short discussion of the importance of Don DeLillo's works explains: "DeLillo explores the ways in which contemporary American personal identity (as fragmented as it may be) is related to larger social and cultural forces forged over time. Fully aware that the twentieth century is the first to have been thoroughly documented on film, DeLillo shows us nothing less than how America became postmodern" (Duvall 2008: 2).

Zygmunt Bauman uses the term 'liquid' modernity to describe our time. He finds the term suiting the fluidity of life as lived today. The name suggests an extension, a continuation, and of course the liquefaction of the era we call modernity with its system of rationality, certainties and legislative laws. According to Bauman, in this era we are moving away from these codes of modernity, to find new ways of living. Correspondingly, one is constantly in a state of becoming, never resting and filling what one has emptied, never clinging to anything, always mobile and changing. This Bauman calls, intriguingly, "the continuation of disembedding coupled with dis-continuation of re-embedding" (Quoted in Blackshaw 2005: 48). In this outlook life is increasingly being experienced not as the loss or destruction of rationality but rather a

reconstruction, a movement from modernist ‘solid’ values to shape a ‘liquid’ world, with mobility as the index of its time. “Forms, whether already present or only adumbrated, are unlikely to be given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies because of their short life expectation” (Bauman 2007: 1). This has both welcome and unwelcome implications. On the one hand, it opens new possibilities over what was once considered to be absolute truth. On the other hand, it puts the whole weight of life on the individual’s shoulders. As Ulrich Beck famously puts it, in these times of change and ambivalence, people are increasingly forced “*to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions*” (Beck and Beck-Gernshein 2002: xxii). The individuals of liquid modernity are to deal with global problems, the problems caused by global capitalism, the so-called invisible forces of ‘negative globalization,’ on their own.

In such times of uncertainty and distress, a fake consolation is offered by the market in the shape of commodities. Consumption appears to be the medicine to relieve the pain of living in the unrelenting flow of life. The idea of ‘choice,’ the ability to ‘choose’ among the commodities, gives a sense of freedom, a promise of life. Consumerism is presented as the ultimate happiness and ‘choice’ has grown to be the “meta-value” of the consumer society toward which all social struggles are focused (Bauman 2005: 58). Bauman thus elaborates:

Bit by bit, problem by problem, the consumer attitude refers the whole of life to the market; it orients every desire and each effort in the search for a tool or an expertise one can buy. It dissolves the problem of control over the wider setting of life (something most people will never achieve) in the multitude of small shopping acts that are – at least in principle – within your reach. It privatizes, so to speak, issues so that they are not perceived as public; it individualizes tasks so that they are not seen as social. It now becomes my duty [...] to improve myself and my life. (Bauman 1990: 204)

Within the confines of consumerist societies, however, there occurs every day the disposal of the left-outs and rejects. *Waste* is an unavoidable element of liquid modernity in its all-encompassing wasteful consumption. It should be noted that in Bauman’s terminology *waste* does not just signify the material reject, or the byproducts of ‘industrial process,’ but, more importantly, wasted humans, those labeled as redundant, dysfunctional and unnecessary. In *Wasted Lives* Bauman speaks with concern about the ‘vagabonds’ of the globalized world:

refugees, asylum-seekers and ghetto-dwellers, those who are considered as superfluous and unwanted. The story of the redundant humans already within the boundaries of a society is of another kind, yet closely related to that of refugees. The local wasted humans of liquid modernity, their maladies, as experienced in developed countries, are of a new kind. The afflictions that people experience, even if not given a new name, bear a new significance. 'Unemployment,' as an example, bears different significations for the 'liquid modern' citizens than it did for their previous generations. In fact unemployment is no more of 'unemployment' – "a manifestly temporary and *abnormal* condition and so [...] transient and curable" (Bauman 2004: 10). Unemployment as such is of a quality linked to the first stage of modernity, the era where men and women, more than anything, were recognized as 'producers.' In that context, being *unemployed*, as the prefix 'un' shows, was synonymous with a deviation from the norm. In liquid modernity, however, where one is recognized by the kind of 'consumer' one is, unemployment is marked as the immanent quality of 'redundancy' (ibid. 11); "In a society of consumers they are the 'flawed consumers' – people lacking the money that would allow them to stretch the capacity of a consumer market" (ibid. 39). To be labeled flawed and redundant is to be marked as permanently disqualified and stripped of one's relevance, "to have been disposed of *because of being disposable* – just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe" (ibid. 12).

The present article is an attempt to understand the perspective that DeLillo's novel offers on both consumerism and the production of waste. Eric Packer and Benno Levin will be discussed as personifications of each aspect respectively. They will be dealt with one at a time but will meet under the third heading, 'The Return of the Waste,' where the fates of the two are linked together.

Consumerism

If vagabonds are the outsiders of a 'liquid' modern society, the avid consumers are its most welcomed citizens. Consumerism is well exemplified in the life of the central character of *Cosmopolis*. Eric Packer is a young 'self-made' billionaire who in a course of a single day loses a large portion of his capital in his betting against the yen. From the very first page of the novel, in Eric's lonely walk in his penthouse, we read the

patterns of a consumeristic mind. Feeling the shadows of doubt in his life that night, his mind roams from space to space as he walks from room to room inspecting his properties. He wanders around looking at his achievements, seeking what he has bought and taken under his roof, to overcome this uncalled-for discomfort. After all, as Bauman points out, accumulating marketed goods, which Eric has loads of, is believed to be the ultimate happiness in liquid modernity. Eric's constant referring to his properties throughout the novel highlights the same point. However, he is not host to much happiness as he is to fear. As Bauman understands, the greatest of liquid modern fears lies in "insecurity of the present and uncertainty about the future" (Bauman 2006: 128). These two unbearable demons of liquid life are born of the helplessness that one feels in a lack of control over the precipitative tides of change in this era. And uncertainty and insecurity pervade Eric's mind. Even though he always has his poker face on and speaks with an expression of control and authority, his fear cannot be concealed. This is how Shiner, his chief of technology, speaks of the same insecurity he feels in the face of the harrowing randomness of times: "Things happen like bang. This and that simultaneously [...] I love information. This is our sweetness and light. It's a fuckall wonder. And we have meaning in the world. People eat and sleep in the shadow of what we do. But at the same time, what?" (DeLillo 2003: 14). He speaks these words all of a sudden while answering Eric about the security of his systems. His report on the safety of the system and sites ironically turns into a confession of his being apprehensive about his own life. Shiner's scattered and fragmented self-expression speaks for itself: it tells the reader of the unbalanced world of the individual which spins around him and spins him around. This is how the ambivalence and inconsecutiveness of events threaten even those global elites who seem to be running the world.

Such a fear has become a component of life for liquid modern men and women. Bauman maintains that in contrast to the objective evidence, "it is the people who live in the greatest comfort on record [...] who feel more threatened, insecure and frightened [...] and more passionate about everything related to security and safety" (Bauman 2006: 130). Ironically, it is this 'security obsession' that has become the most prolific source of anxieties and fears. That is when consumerism introduces itself as the way out. One of the ways to fight the risks that menace one's sense of well-being is to indulge in excess. In other words, it is not so much about

reflecting on one's condition to root out and resolve the distressful adversities than it is about buying one's way to amnesia in the heap of what could be purchased or acquired. People seek salvation in excessive buying, in having things, even having access to information as made easy by the internet is one form of such self-indulgence.

Information is one of Eric's obsessions too as projected on all his flashing screens filled with numbers and data. Eric's repetitive noting of the movement of data on the screens communicates the same consumerist sense of self-evasion through diving into the pile of one's 'havings.' It is also reflected in his owning numerous counsellors, chiefs and advisors in different fields. These people are not so much people to him as they are a reflection of his might and glamour. Recognizing himself as the proprietor of all these is a defense mechanism that allows Eric to feel safe in the shadow of the security they claim to offer, and where he takes refuge from the global earthquakes that shake him up. In the beginning of the novel, we follow Eric through one of his troubled strolls: "He walked through the apartment, forty-eight rooms. He did this when he felt hesitant and depressed, striding past the lap pool, the card parlor, the gymnasium, past the shark tank and screening room" (DeLillo 2003: 7). Passing through his rooms and their facilities, Eric, the ultimate consumer, is in fact seeking the confirmation of the codes and principles based on which he has made his choices.¹ We read these lines along with a piece of news he has received: "The Yen rose overnight against expectations" (DeLillo 2003: 8). Overcoming his feelings of loss, wearisomeness, insubstantiality and hesitance in life by surveying his material achievements, he is trying to soothe himself. This gives him the sense of reassurance that he has done alright. Although he is among the global elites with enough resources to avoid the insecurities of liquid life – such as losing a job – still he experiences the same contingencies, aimlessness and under-determinations as others. The same expression of taking shelter in his 'havings' is frequently manifested in the novel. Standing in front of his tall building in admiration, he thinks that he likes looking at it whenever he feels "wary, drowsy and insubstantial" (ibid. 9). When asked if the cork lining of his limousine is ok, his answer is negative. However, he says that

¹ To repeat again, for Bauman, choice – the capacity of choosing, not necessarily the object of choice – is the determining factor of one's social status. Choosing is a value in itself and the more possibilities one has for action as such, the more distinguished one is recognized to be (Bauman 2000: 87).

the “important thing is that it’s there” (ibid. 71). The luxurious details used in the car and his customized equipment, such as the cork lining, are employed by Eric only as a “gesture”: an expression of his self-worth, a token of his identity. The limousine does not even act as a vehicle for traveling in the novel. It is hardly ridden as a car in that sense, because for half the time it is stuck in traffic. Just like the old military Soviet airplane that used to carry “nuclear bombs and cruise missiles” (ibid. 103) and is now owned by Eric, a parked emblem that could not possibly be used, it is another instance of Eric’s self-pronouncement: a gesture of wealth, power and authority. Eric’s attempt to overcome these feelings of doubt and fear by reviewing his assets is, then, indicative of the fact that he, like everyone else, has fully integrated a consumerist mindset. As Bauman puts it, “following the principle of the consumer society, it induces individuals to view the arousal of desires clamouring to be satisfied as the guiding rule of the chooser’s life and a criterion of a worthy and successful life” (Quoted in Poder 2008: 103). In this way, consumerism does not entail autonomy, but rather it imposes heteronomy on liquid modern men and women, forcing them to live in preplanned ways. Clearly, if they fail to follow these criteria and agendas, they will be in danger of becoming outsiders.

This consumerism shapes the individual’s life in more profound ways too. As an example, when Chin – Eric’s currency analyst who is also younger than him – asks him how old he is, Eric distracts himself by looking at the screens in his car that are showing the “roll and flip of data” (DeLillo 2003: 24). He feels disparaged in the single notion of growing old and withdraws to the secure empire he has built himself: “the zeroneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet’s living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole” (ibid. 24). This is how he directs his attention to the temporal liquid life. Liquid men should always be on the go and in the know, or else they are out at a moment’s notice. To be advanced in years here implies insufficiency for the pace of the system and this Eric cannot stand. Later on Didi Fancher, the forty-seven year old art dealer, asks Eric the same question. He willfully replies “twenty-eight,” for she asks his age to compare it to the “hundreds of millions” he is betting against yen (ibid. 29). In this instance, his early success in business is to be applauded and he will not miss the chance. Aging implies ‘waste.’

Consumerism, in sum, has developed a syndrome of extreme self-indulgence – as Danette's 2015 TV commercial keeps repeating 'It's ok to indulge everyday' – that leads to indifference toward the consequences of one's actions. Individuals are so involved in wrapping and unwrapping social and cultural fashions around themselves that they almost forget about what remains of this constant metamorphosis. The marketed identities in liquid modernity are to be constantly 'constructed' over time to fit in, but such construction is impossible without demolition. After all, being a good consumer is not determined much by what you buy than by the constancy in the act of buying. To be 'up-to-date' is to customarily renew and reform yourself in the shape of what the market is offering at the time: to deconstruct and reconstruct yourself in its image. In Bauman's words, "self-constitution entails disassembling alongside the assembling, adoption of new elements as much as shedding of others, learning together with forgetting" (*Intimations of Postmodernity* 194). Once recognized as old, slow or not cool, the rusts of waste start to cover the subject to be forgotten. And among the things to be forgotten, when out of efficient or fashionable use, are humans. So once you become unrelated to the program of 'development,' you are destined to be categorized otherwise, and no one is exempt. People are living in an era of constant movement, running against a backdrop of upheaval and change. They are forced to be individuals and biographical solution seekers, because they cannot rely on anything whatsoever – not their relationships, neither their jobs, nor the ground on which they stand. At the end of the day, everyone is a potential waste. Consequently, people become obsessed with themselves and their own well-being, hardly caring for the others. Bauman holds that "the modern variety of insecurity is marked by the fear mostly of *human* maleficence and of *human* malefactors," which leads to "a refusal to trust the constancy, dedication and reliability of human companions" (Bauman 2006: 131,132). Refusing to form firm bonds with the other members of the society paves the way for one's own unexpected exemption. This, inevitably, leads to feeling more insecurity. Ironically, 'indulgence in excess,' which offered itself as the escapist move away from all the fears of becoming unwanted, has turned out to be a source of waste production, requiring greater garbage disposal sites. As Bauman states, "in our present-day strategy of fighting risks with the weapon of excess, waste is preprogrammed" (Bauman 2004: 25).

Waste

Wastefulness is the corollary of extravagance. When the main determiner of one's identity is the extent of one's ability to 'choose,' and choosiness becomes the pivot of self-definition, then why stop? After sexually consuming his female bodyguard, Eric asks her to shoot him with her stun gun; why not? There it is, a new experience and his 'will' that chooses it. The masochistic pleasure that he seeks is what drives him in his business too: pushing the limits of sanity toward new experience by 'choice.' It is an expression of the power to be extravagant, an act which is defined in itself that will yield nothing. It exists as a mere expression like his buying insanely expensive stuff of no use, a wasting of money and his life away. Reading Eric as the personification of capitalism, with his choices and the actions based on those choices, one sees a null and 'wasteful' trajectory, a breeding of a trashed future. Notably, proceeding on his self-destructive path, after being stunned, Eric returns to his car and borrows more yen and watches "his fund's numbers sink into the mist on several screens" (DeLillo 2003: 115). Even though his path of making constant choices leads to horrendous consequences, Eric, this man of capital, does not stop repeating the same mistake over and over again. He, absurdly, carries on making the same move as if there is no other alternative. His life and his choices are confined by the limits of consumption: a repetitious cycle of use and abuse with depreciative consequences. Finally, he ends up in an abandoned building and dies in the dump. He dies by the bullet shot by one of his own 'wastes.'

The plot of *Cosmopolis* reminds us of Jack Gladney's words in *White Noise*: "All plots tend to move deathward [...] It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot" (DeLillo 1998: 26). The novel has not a tightly woven plot, but rather some fragment-like chapters sewn together. All the short chapters describing Eric's interactions – each shifting from one to the next and coming to an abrupt end – manifest what we may call the metaphorical death-fullness of the plot of *Cosmopolis*. This notion is present in Eric's wasting of his entire asset on a losing bet for sheer self-validation. In the beginning of the novel, we find Eric Packer, the young mogul, sleepless and lost in his spacious apartment; upon leaving there, he moves toward his death. The senseless way he wastes his money and his life during a single day might seem to contradict the fact that he is a greedy capitalist. Yet, his way of piling up wealth matches the way he wastes it. The loss of his capital, in

fact, coincides with acquiring it; he is on top of it all, yet what he has achieved is not enough for him. He still wants more: to flow further, to do what is left undone. After all, it is the 'movement,' the sheer 'fluidity' in the riverbed of liquid modernity which counts. He has owned the American Dream, financially and physically, but has he done everything to its most extreme ends? Are there any stones left unturned? That is when destruction comes into play in his mind, like the crude satisfaction of consumption. "He didn't know what he wanted. Then he knew. He wanted to get a haircut" (*Cosmopolis* 7). In finance, to get a 'haircut' is a metaphor for conveying a financial loss. As William Safire writes in *The New York Times*, it is "probably based on the weakening effect of the biblical Delilah's shearing of Samson's invigorating mane," and is commonly adopted to mean "a sudden loss of equity or drop in income" (Safire 2009: N.p.).

We have made mention of the wasteful behavior of Eric, the liquid modern antihero, and also how indirectly the idea of waste threatens his own security. Yet the presence of waste becomes more evident as the pages turn and the world of the novel unveils what often goes unseen in everyday life. It could be said that DeLillo makes a parade of capitalism's weapon backfiring in indignation in *Cosmopolis*. On his way, Eric faces a group of protestors making a commotion in the street who shake his car. These people, running into Broadway, are protesting against "THE SPECTER OF CAPITALISM" for its "HAUNTING THE WORLD" ever-increasingly (DeLillo 2003: 96). In the commotion of the scene, we read a state of turbulence, associable with *waste*. Watching people throwing cans, breaking and burning and police firing gas, Eric pokes his head out of the sunroof into "the smoke and gas, with burning rubber thick in the air," and he feels like an astronaut who has come upon "a planet of pure flatus" (ibid.). Eric's strong imagery is awkwardly juxtaposed with his feeling toward the whole scene: "It was bracing" (ibid.). The satirical description of Eric's thoughts and feelings responds to Kinski's idea, that what capitalism shares with anarchism is the belief that the "urge to destroy is a creative urge" (ibid. 92). Thus, this is what capitalism has produced and brought upon itself. This is the unintended, the 'collateral,' production which was taken by the trucks to the disposal sites, but here DeLillo has noted the return of this waste in a postmodernist gesture. The protestors' carrying a Styrofoam rat, kids jumping over cars with skateboards, people chanting and spray-painting have a sense of theatricality for Eric, and for

the reader who finds the protest taking place in ‘Broadway.’ Yet the parade – this theatre of ruin as directed by DeLillo – is contiguous with a reality. In the backdrop we find New York City, the hallmark of capitalist flourishing, as a sewage with “A RAT” as its unit of currency (DeLillo 2003: 96). The protest decries this putridity by replacing the stock ticker, shown on big electronic displays, by a line from Zbigniew Herbert’s poem (“A RAT BECAME THE UNIT OF CURRENCY” (ibid.)). The novel also begins with the same epigraph by Herbert, which Paul Giaimo reads as DeLillo’s implying “that New York City is under the siege of the Wall Street wildcat deregulated capitalism of the late 1990s and early 21st century” (Giaimo 2011: 109). Thus the hidden truth of this side of liquid modernity is made discernible to the untrained eye of the reader. From this view, what the novel does is ‘conveying’ the social, cultural and economic trash, with an insistent language, from the margins of the reader’s recognition to its center – an act of mental ‘recycling.’ As we will explain in the following section DeLillo in short seems to offer a socially-recycling narrative.

The Return of the Waste

The first of the two chapters in the midst of the main storyline of *Cosmopolis*, entitled “The Confessions of Benno Levin,” is an instance of what we read as the return of the waste in DeLillo’s work (DeLillo 2003). The chapter captures the thoughts of Benno Levin – a man about whom we know nothing up to this point – on the night of murdering his rich boss. The incorporation of this short chapter into the middle of the story accords with the confusion and the deadly threat which is sensed to lie beneath the comfortable life of Eric. We know nothing of Benno’s identity and also that of the man he has murdered. Anonymous and faceless, he writes about the man he used to work for, who now lays dead in front of him, almost nameless. The dead man could be identified as Eric only by way of associations. And the chapter foreshadows the outcome of Eric’s over-indulgent life, for as we read we increasingly understand that Benno is a human waste disposed of by capitalism. But here lies the capitalist himself, now symbolically in the same room as Benno, wasted, and taken out by his own waste. The words of the wasted man rise out of the pages of the novel as something uncalled for, but ironically predictable. Here, the

outcast, who was supposed to be removed from view has returned, brought back by the author.

Moreover, the intrusive appearance of Benno's chapters on the path of Eric's narrative resembles the sights of the poor and vagabonds about his car on his way to have a haircut, from the sight of drivers who stand talking "in accented voices" near limousines, waiting for "the investment banker, the land developer, the venture capitalist" (DeLillo 2003: 10), to a derelict "dressed in bubble wrap" who tries to get on a tour bus (ibid. 36), or a woman with her baby begging on the sidewalk of the 'diamond district' who seemed "rooted in the plot of the concrete" (ibid. 65). These Others of the man of capital appear in different parts of the novel and are observed detachedly and nonchalantly by Eric. They are mentioned briefly in only one or two sentences for they signify not more than a sight, or eyesore, for him. They cause no pangs of conscience, no sense of moral responsibility in Eric. The absence of such human feelings toward his kind does not make Eric an eccentric evil man; it only locates him as a man of his time. Through the liquidity of times, morality has also given itself to transition and metamorphoses. Giving the example of Eichmann's defense in his Jerusalem's trial, Bauman explains that in modernity your act is not conceived immoral unless you have evil 'intentions.' Thus Eichmann's lawyers tried to defend him by telling the court that the death of six million people was not out of hatred or ill intention of their client, but his mere loyalty – called 'workmanship instinct' by Bauman – toward his superior's order. Therefore, in the modernized logic, "if some people suffer as a result of some other people's fulfillment of their duties, a charge of *immorality* [...] does not apply" (Bauman 2006: 61). As in the case of Eichmann, the faces of these derelicts of American society cause no pain nor arouse sympathy in the main character. Irresponsibility toward the causalities of his action is a mark of Eric's character. But since we are dealing with how the wasted are portrayed and treated in the novel, we shift our focus to Benno, the man who will actually kill Eric.

In the "Confessions of Benno Levin," we get to know the man through his own words. He used to be an assistant professor of computer application, but leaves his job to make his millions. Then working for some time for Eric, he finds himself left-out due to the pace of the system. He loses everything and breaks down. As Danièle Linhart notes, "these men and women not only lose their jobs, their orientation points, the confidence of being in control of their lives; they also find themselves

stripped of their dignity [...], of the feeling of being useful and having a social place of their own” (Quoted in Bauman 2004: 13). Now Benno is living in “a derelict tenement” with “windows boarded,” and “a padlocked iron door where the entrance used to be” (DeLillo 2003: 179). He owns a “stationery bike with a missing pedal that someone left on the street one night” (ibid. 61), of which he constantly speaks. It is because he identifies himself with the bike in being defined as stationary, disposable and unusable. Once one is recognized as inadequate, one is left feeling excised and thrown away. What is left is confusion and fear: “I have severe anxieties that my sex organ is receding into my body,” says Benno (ibid. 192). He feels emasculated, worthless and forgettable. He is brought down to this level by the totality which is the specter of liquid modern capitalism. ‘Benno Levin’ is a name that he has ‘chosen’ for himself to replace his real but ‘refused’ identity. When confessing his real name to Eric, he feels an “essential defeat,” (ibid. 192). He insists on being called Benno Levin, because Richard Sheets, as he used to be called, proved inefficient for the mighty pace of liquid modernity. Refused and static, he breathes in knowing that he has become redundant:

They said I had problems of normalcy and they demoted me to lesser currencies. I became a minor technical element in the firm, a technical fact. I was generic labor to them. And I accepted this. Then they let me go without notice or severance package. And I accepted this. (ibid. 60)

The excluded, the ‘surplus population,’ is considered as ‘technical element,’ a “sideline of economic progress,” or, in Post-Iraq-invasion terminology, the residuals of the “collateral damage” of the progressive system (Bauman 2004: 40). The players of this game might even consider the word ‘damage’ as too severe and want to replace the phrase to ‘collateral causality.’ But assuming the wasted ones as technical faults removes them from moral considerations. It could be said that capitalism reapplies the Holocaust to those of its members who do not lubricate its turning wheels by objectifying and ultimately terminating them: “Modern genocide, like modern culture in general, is a gardener’s job [...] If garden design defines its weeds, there are weeds wherever there is a garden. And weeds are to be exterminated” (Bauman 1989: 92).

Being laid off the system does not mean that the rejected individual mentally steps out of it too. An important factor that Bauman points out is that the wasted still want to be part of the liquid modern life with all its

appurtenances. In fact, this is the only way of life that they know. "Ask the vagabonds," says Bauman, "what sort of life they would wish to have, given the chance of free choice – and you will get a pretty accurate description of the tourist's bliss 'as seen on TV'" (Quoted in Davis 2008: 144). For vagabonds "have no other images of the good life – no alternative utopia, no political agenda of their own" (ibid.). Yet the problem with a life spent on consumption is simply that it is incomplete. It fails to recognize other possibilities and this leads to its extreme insufficiency. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the case of Benno. He is stripped of his job and, accordingly, of his social stance; he has become trashed and lost. But he still carries the mentality of consumerism with him. He finds his self-worth in money, which may explain his going mad after termination from the system. His dependency on the liquid modern lifestyle has left him in a state of vacuity now that he is a reject. And what he does to reconfirm himself is ironically to find reaffirmation of his legitimacy in the same system: "I still have my bank that I visit systematically to look at the last literal dollars remaining in my account. I do this for the ongoing psychology of it, to know I have money in an institution. And because cash machines have a charisma that still speaks to me" (DeLillo 2003: 60). The only difference made in Benno is that his feeling of insecurity has caused him not to trust the system wholly, so he comically goes to ATMs to take cash in hand. In other words, he still defines himself in relation to money. His desire for money, power, status and fame are all evinced through his obsession with Eric, for he constantly compares and narrates himself in relation to him: "I wanted to pinpoint him in my mind. It was important to know where he was, even for a moment. It put my world in order" (ibid. 151). Eric is the American Dream come true, the idol toward whom everything runs and out of whom everything flows. Benno even inadvertently uses his words in his writings (ibid. 55). His obsession with the powerful image of the man makes him unconsciously mouth what he would have said. Because, to repeat, once labeled as superfluous and deemed as unwanted the wasted man loses his self-esteem and confidence in keeping up with the society. This is evident here in Benno's wandering words in a struggle to express himself. And it is in expressing himself that Eric's image appears as a pillar to prop against. His intent to kill Eric brings to mind that of Oswald in killing Kennedy in *Libra*, for the act of murder is a form of self-reaffirmation for

both desperate men: “I want to kill you in order to count for something in my own life” (DeLillo 2003: 187).

In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo notes the violence in contemporary life as a recurring motif in his works. His explication of this motif is illuminating:

I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America. Again we come back to these men in small rooms who can't get out and who have to organize their desperation and their loneliness, who have to give it a destiny and who often end up doing this through violent means. I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go. (DeLillo 1998: 329)

Killing Eric is thus a vengeful statement – a striking back at the system that bleeds these people in its desire to have more, achieve more, concur and produce more. When Eric mocks Benno and calls his intention to murder him a cheap imitation that has no history, Benno replies: “The whole thing is history. You are foully and berserkly rich” (DeLillo 2003: 193). Later on, he explains that

the crime is real because you're a figure whose thoughts and acts affect everybody, people, everywhere. I have history, as you call it, on my side. You have to die for how you think and act. For your apartment and what you paid for it. For your daily medical checkups [...] For the limousine that displaces the air that people need to breathe in Bangladesh. This alone. (DeLillo 2003: 202)

Richard Sheets / Benno Levine wants to avenge his transformation into a wastrel, to avenge the feeling of being worthless. What he wants is a voice, to speak out to the public and make his presence known. In line with killing Eric, Benno writes his so called “spiritual autobiography” from the margins where he dwells. He writes from the capitalist and industrial site of waste, at his discarded desk which he has found on the sidewalk (DeLillo 2003: 149). He is stripped of his identity and impaired, down to almost nothingness, but he wants to speak back: “I want to write ten thousand pages” (ibid. 57); “There are great themes running through my mind. The themes of loneliness and human discard” (ibid. 58). But as he confesses, “already I see I'm repeating myself” (ibid. 57). He is the reject of the globalized world who wants to tell his own story but fails in expression. He cannot keep his words focused; his writing is filled with

anxiety, ambivalence and a helpless rage. His stream of thoughts wavers between the two ends of the liquid modern world: the high top and the low down, Eric and himself, the definer and the defined. But he even feels that now nothing can define him. The metaphor he uses in his morning Confessions about himself shows a man reduced to a quantum of nothingness: "There are dead stars that still shine because their light is trapped in time. Where do I stand in this light, which does not strictly exist?" (ibid. 155). He fails to rise and rehabilitate himself. His failure in writing is reflected in his cigarettes: "I also have my cigarettes close at hand. I want to feel like a writer and his cigarette. Except I'm out, they're gone" (ibid. 61). As Zygmunt Bauman notes, the wasted "may well be excused for feeling rejected, being incensed and indignant, breathing vengeance and harboring revenge – though having learned the futility of resistance [...] they could hardly find a way to recast all such sentiments into effective action" (Bauman 2004: 40).

Conclusion

However unsuccessful Benno's writing and his murdering of Eric are – his gesture of killing the prosperous capitalist fails for he kills a man degraded to his own level – DeLillo's novel succeeds in amplifying this confused noise. The wasted voice of the wasted man, the voice of the 'collaterally' damaged, resounds within the pages. One might disagree with this claim and contend that for an instance Benno is not portrayed as a rebel with a well thought-out cause, but is rather a desperately disoriented man who has partially lost his sanity for being terminated by the system. Such a reading would make DeLillo's text unsympathetic toward the wasted character in portraying him as a desultory assassin. But examining the novel in its affective resonance, we see that almost all characters are typically disoriented in their own way, that Benno only appears as disconcerted as everyone else. Benno is as extravagant in his intentions as his prosperous counterpart, Eric. After all, as Bauman points out, the wastrels of liquid modernity are "collective replicas (an alter ego? Fellow travellers? Mirror-images? Caricatures?) of the new power elite of the globalized world [...] Like that elite, they are untied to any place, shifty, unpredictable" (Bauman 2003: 66). DeLillo has then satirized the liquid modernity in its totality, grinning while pointing the path to where the limousine of capitalism heads: toward waste and inanity. At the end of the

story, Eric has a vision and sees himself dead with an identification tag that says “Male Z” which designates “the bodies of unidentified men in hospital morgues” (DeLillo 2003: 206). He ends in total vacuity; he dies unknown and unidentified. Benno compares him to “Icarus falling” and notes how unlike what he thought, his fall is self-inflicted and unheroic. Paul Giaimo also compares Eric to Narcissus in seeing his own reflection in his watch before he dies. Like Narcissus, he tries to take possession of his self – which is ironically the only thing that he actually fails to own. Yet Narcissus is transformed into another entity, a flower, and is made eternal, while Eric dies in total anonymity. Giaimo concludes that: “This failure in *Cosmopolis* of Packer to enact either the Icarus or Narcissus myths represents the failure of capitalism to mythologize itself, to be enough to serve as a vehicle (like the limo) for complete artistic, individual self-transcendence” (Giaimo 2011: 113). We can also read this as liquid modern man’s failure in pronouncing himself as anything significant through consumption; an insignificant death after an extreme life of self-indulgence that carries nothing: a total waste.

Zygmunt Bauman holds that people are now so occupied in their ‘dailyness’ and the fear of the specter of exclusion – called *metaphorical death* by Bauman – that they are forced to believe that they should live with the ad hoc standards of liquid modern life (Bauman 2006: 47). The burden of living ‘efficiently’ is too heavy a task to carry. Life has grown too engaging to leave space for the idea of death in its context, but that does not mean that it is absent. As Kinski describes it to Eric, this is a life where people have “stopped thinking about eternity. They began to concentrate on hours, measurable hours, man-hours, using labour more efficiently” (DeLillo 2003: 79). Ironically, the story abounds in indications of death and its imminence: the news of rich and famous people dead, a credible threat as constantly reported to Eric, or relations starting and dying into each other. Yet the limousine rides on through New York, insensible toward death, contained in the compact life. The deaths are mere news; they have no significance. It belongs to the present and the past. But in the liquid times, as Kinski maintains in the novel, even the present is “sucked out of world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets [...] This is why something will happen soon, maybe today” (ibid. 79). People now are all about ‘becoming.’ Man is always in the making. But again the story abounds in memories and remembrances. This paradox as made between the transgressing characters’ attitude toward life and the

construction of their surrounding in its containing 'fear,' 'past,' and 'wastefulness' is what could be read as 'returning the waste.' As Bauman uses the word, 'waste' is not just the material surplus, but the unwanted, the superfluous, the rejected in any system of which human societies are an example. Every society gives birth to its own human wastes and tries to dispose of them. This puts a lot of pressure on men and women in order to fit in and keep up with the system. In the same manner, nearly all the characters in *Cosmopolis* share the anxiety of turning into social wastrels and being marginalized, a fear that is manifest in all their psychological mindscapes. The voice of the 'collaterally' damaged and the wasted reverberates in DeLillo's fiction. It is due to this quality that we may call DeLillo a *recycler*, one who brings the refused from the margins of recognition to the center of the reader's attention. He recycles for the individualized individuals for whom nothing outside the confines of their egos is worth paying attention to. These are the liquid modern men and women who are so busy living the rat race out of the fear of becoming redundant and irrelevant to the game that they have somehow forgotten the game itself. DeLillo shows them what they escape from, the waste, the image they find as repulsive but also inescapable. From the mere descriptions of the sites of industrial and social waste – as part of the natural city sight – to the depiction of the wasteful consequences of consumerism on the life of man as an individual and part of society, DeLillo's writings could be read as bringing back what has been erased from the sights of common liquid modern men and women through the circulation of various manifestations of waste in the story. Waste, then, turns against its own discursive meaning (that is meaninglessness) and becomes productive of something new. It gains stature and a signification, suggesting new insights toward the system from which it was discarded. It is a rejected messenger, now speaking back with its recycled tongue, opening the reader's eyes toward the decay of its creator.

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