What a Difference a Day Makes: Forever and Always, the Event Horizon of Eric Packer in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

If Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* were an episode of "The Twilight Zone," Rod Serling's introductory monologue may have gone something like this: "Eric Packer, a successful businessman living in New York City, has an intestinal yearning to 'get back to basics.' He has everything going for him: the perfect career, a young, beautiful wife, the freedom to do anything and go anywhere—the world is at his fingertips. But today Mr. Packer wants a haircut. Not just any haircut… a haircut from the old neighborhood. A place he hasn't been in so long, he's not sure he remembers what it looks like. Little does Mr. Packer know, his journey to the barbershop is about to make an unscheduled detour into…" The "twilight zone" of this occasion is the sense-obliterating hyperreality of Manhattan "IN THE YEAR 2000… A Day in April."[1]

In prime postmodernist fashion, *Cosmopolis* opens a dialogue about our pretensions and conceits, particularly as manifested in a supremely capitalist mode (cum globalization). The suggestion here is that nothing has inherent value. Relationships, property, influence, labor, even *time*—have all been obscured by the ubiquitous shadows and light of representational form, so that value obtains only in derivative articulations. "Meaning" has been reduced to mere gesture, the *insinuation* of meaning, hyperbolic symbols; or, likewise, it has been co-opted by simulacra.

The book itself stands as an object example of its internal argument, its structure a challenge to formal storytelling. The text is a dual narrative, parceled into strands, whose halves stand in counterpoint (spatially, temporally, intellectually, emotionally) to one another. The main body text concerns itself with Eric Packer's odyssey in direct, linear formulation. The second text occurs in supplemental intrusions, entitled in converse sequence, "*The Confessions of Benno Levin*: Night" and "*The Confessions of Benno Levin*: Day," the first of which details the aftermath of the novel; the second, certain events leading up to the climax (and culmination of the two narratives). Thus, we are asked to respond to a story that happens in halves, from disparate points of view, in opposing timelines. The method by which information is conveyed—as opposed to the information itself—takes on its own meaning. The significance is left to our surmising.

Beginning with the essential text: Eric Packer, the protagonist as such, represents the most primal of economic successes; his existence is qualified by extravagant consumption, his wealth unsurpassed by any practical measure. He lives in a forty-eight room triplex in the tallest residential tower in the world. The rooms of his $104 million apartment include a rotating bedroom, lap pool, card parlor, gymnasium, shark tank, screening room, meditation cell, atrium, and borzoi kennel. He's working on getting a zoning variance to install a heliport on the roof, and considering putting a shooting range in the lobby. He owns a bulletproof stretch limousine whose floor is lined with Carrera marble, imported directly from Michelangelo's native quarries, and which has been "prousted"—a process by which the superstructure has been lined with cork in order to silence the city. The limousine is appointed with the most cutting- of cutting-edge technology, including various "spycams" equipped with night vision and dashboard computers that keep tabs on the immediate environment, the city, and the world at large—all transmitted to plasma screens surrounding Packer's private, mobile throne (complete with fold-away toilet). Under his employ is an army of consultants, who visit him in the "jump seat" of his limo at his beck and call. Though he has an office in the city, it's unnecessary, as he can take care of all of his business on the move. He even has a physician on call who pops in to give him physical

[1] As emblazoned on the introductory page

exams— *daily* physicals—complete with prostate palpations (his prostate having the nebulous characteristic of being asymmetrical). His business is a well-oiled machine, and if he were to continue on in his current vein, he likely would never have anything to worry about.

In a way, at the crux of *Cosmopolis* is a fairly simplistic cyberpunked parable: though Eric Packer has unlimited resources and access to the most elite and forward-thinking of lifestyle enhancements/improvements, his "selfness," his "meaning" outside of his function as an economic, systemic influence, is unclear. He has become a kind of wandering haunt, a practical simulacrum in a virtual world of ostensibly-ordered symbols and simulacra gone haywire, in which self-awareness bleeds into information systems while data streams and semiotics otherwise preclude self-awareness in equal measure. Given its urban context, "*Cosmopolis* is one example of a fictional narrative that incorporates the perspective of antiglobalization into a narrative of the impact of technological trajectories on the experience of urban space" (Spencer 226). It would seem that Eric Packer, being at the center of this "impact," has sold his soul at the crossroads—and today, a day in April, 2000, is his shot (albeit impossible) at redemption.

Everything in Eric Packer's life is representational. His is a moment in which the appearance of meaning often has as much or more impact than actual meaning. Packer's fortunes have been made off nothing he himself can claim to have innovated, produced, or manufactured. Rather his wealth represents the transference of massive and various chunks of electronic funds to and from various multi-national accounts, with the fortuitousness of market trends working in his favor. He is essentially a middle-man, an elite "fence" between financial fortresses, gathering wealth by trading up—one of those exalted people who intuits where there's money to be made, while possessing little or no interest in the why or wherefore of it.

Even more to the point, Packer deals directly in currency (as opposed to say, corporate stock, or loan debt)—currency, which of its own properties is essentially useless, whose only value is what the public accords. Indeed, the book opens with the epigraph "a rat became the unit of currency," a line from Polish-born twentieth-century poet, Nbigniewski Herbert's work, "Report From the Besieged City" (a poem which additionally contains the poignant line, "everyone here suffers from a loss of the sense of time"). For, what could be more absurd than a rat becoming the unit of currency? Paper, with numbers, symbols, and portraits printed on it? Streams of digital information passing along wires or through space? On this particular day, Eric Packer is betting that the value of the yen cannot go any higher; he's convinced it has peaked, so he keeps borrowing against it (from his limo), knowing that if it doesn't drop, he's going to lose his entire fortune. Sensorially, he feels no effect of consequence; the possibility of betting everything obtains as an intellectual gesture, remote. The effect is amplified by the fact that he can engage in the borrowing, buying, and selling from any physical space via the metaphysical space of the wireless, mobile internet.

At the day's outset, at least intellectually, Eric Packer retains faith. The grandiose scope of his deluded condition is articulated thusly:

> It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness 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. (24)

Nevertheless, everything is not quite as crisply delineated as he might imagine. Technology, his ostensible ally, fails him relentlessly. For example, his limo, the central specter of his allegiance with hi-tech, is unable to perform its primary function—that of providing mobility. The reason: the most prosaic of all—an ongoing traffic jam. Various events effectively shut down traffic throughout the day: the U.S. President's visit; a water-main break; the funeral procession of an internationally-revered, Sufi rap star; and a protest march turned riot. The extent of the limo's incapacity is illustrated as Packer keeps encountering his wife, who's persistently ahead of him, and who is traveling on foot. The limits of his technology are further illustrated by his inability (as with his staff's) to discern the identity or whereabouts of a nebulous so-called "credible threat" purportedly stalking him. So, while he should be able to travel across town freely—in this case, to get a haircut—and whereas he ought to be the most well-informed person in the city, his devices fail to effectuate the actual qualities they necessarily represent.

Additionally, his life is replete with superficial associations, people representing mere functions of his lifestyle or business, plausibly disposable (as he demonstrates eventually by shooting and killing Torval, his chief of security, with Torval's own voice-activated uber-pistol). The prime example of this superficiality is his marriage. His marriage is a practical motif of his lifestyle rather than a legitimate relationship. His wife, the famously beautiful heiress to a massive fortune, may or may not live with him—her living situation isn't clarified. He runs into her occasionally on the streets of Manhattan as she trucks around looking for entertainment. Their conversations come off like a first date; through bits of earnestly-clever repartee, we learn that they've been married twenty-two days, that she's in her early twenties (we learn later that Eric's twenty-eight), doesn't know his eye color, nor how he makes his money, and that they don't have sex (despite Eric's pushing of the issue on each encounter). Their marriage is characterized as a kind of medieval union of powerful houses. Though Packer is aware that she's an aspiring poet, he doesn't suspect any talent in her, and each time he comes across her throughout the day, which is often, he doesn't initially recognize her.

He has a lover, a "scorched blonde" twenty years his senior, who challenges his persona, accusing him of being "receptive to mysteries,"(an indication of the prior generation's residual humanity?), despite his perpetual emotional disengagement (she reminds him that he's never mentioned his wedding, that she saw it on TV). He later has intercourse with a female member of his security personnel, whom he then commands to tazer him, as well as a meta-sexual episode with one of his advisors wherein talk and ostensible psychic transport precludes the need for physical contact. Beyond that, the people employed to protect and counsel him are ultimately unable to fulfill their duties, though they perform their roles with absolute precision and efficiency. By Walter Kirn's estimation, "Not one of these supporting figures is anything but an agenda with a face, meant to embody some tired thesis about desensitization or compulsion" (Kirn 2).

Despite the assessment of Eric Packer as a "rogue capitalist running amok in the dying days of the stock-market bubble," there is something more implicitly meaningful going on here (Varsava 80). "He's a visionary, a mix of Icarus and Faust…master of an amoral universe…with a casual expertise in ornithology, botany, poetry, astronomy and old English etymology…" (Morrison 26). The opening pages of *Cosmopolis* depict Packer as a man vaguely in trouble; he's

in the midst of a bout of insomnia; sleep fails him four to five times per week. At such moments, he reads science and poetry—the first because he has always been interested in the ways things function, the latter because "Poems made him conscious of his breathing. A poem bared the moment to things he was not normally prepared to notice" (DeLillo 5). (Indeed, as to his ambiguous "humanness," every moment he has pause to think, he drifts into reflections about perception—what is a telephone?, what is a surface?) He is in the strange predicament of trying to be a flesh-and-blood hero in a world of simulacra. In this, he is alone. The other people in his life conform to each his or her pertinent role, flotsam and jetsam on the vast currents of the system construed abstractly by Packer and other sovereign forces like him. He's quit taking the sedatives and hypnotics prescribed to help his insomnia because, while under their influence, "[e]very act he performed was self-haunted and synthetic" (6) and he works out ferociously, to rid himself of "the day's tumults and compulsions" (7). In the opening pre-dawn insomnia, trying to think of something to do to ease his meta-anxiety, he settles on a haircut.

The importance of these opening pages lies in their expression of a paced isolation. There is no significance attached to the decision to get a haircut. It is presented merely as the absence of non-thought, a fissure in the malaise. However, I would argue that it does not constitute the simple rhetorical device that one critic claims, a "touch [that] is supposed to establish [Packer's] eerie poise and impossibly coldblooded self-containment." (Kirn 1) Rather, in counterpoint to the tenor of the novel overall, it seems to be a moment aimed at offering insight into the complexity of postmodern life, a blurring of the territories of soullessness and the sympathetic. What makes it interesting is its distinctive relief from the pointed, aggressive, and startling action of the rest of the book. These pages establish a tone of private melancholy—prior to our being thrust into the frenetic, "hyperbolic deadpan" data-flood of the limousine ride—a hint that, buried somewhere at the cellular level, Packer apprehends his circumstance of being stuck in a non-viable moment, and is actively taking steps to disengage from the trap he's set himself (Kirn 1). This tone is particularly important because it allows us insight into the notion that despite his emotional detachment, he has a highly attuned and observant, philosophical mien. It makes us suspect he might actually find what he's missing. So, while it may be true that the day will see him "run amok" by variations, he will not be so much as a "rogue capitalist," rather as a kind of born-again post-virtualist—that is, someone who is no longer willfully complicit in the preponderance of veneer over natural, elemental mechanisms. Make no mistake, Eric Packer is not a sympathetic character; his ruthlessness shows its ugly head quite vividly. Still, there's something here that's more dynamic than strict sociopathy; something human deep within Packer is refusing to succumb to the presiding automated ethos.

The entirety of the novel takes place in one day, and the essential plot consists of a trek across town to get a haircut. Perhaps the most pertinent question one might ask of such a restrained premise is, what's at stake? In this case, as it turns out, everything. As Packer considers, in a particularly lucid, portentous moment before leaving his apartment in the morning, "Nothing existed around him. There was only the noise in his head. When he died he would not end. The world would end." (DeLillo 6) As we soon discover, what ought to be an easy, fairly quick trip across town becomes a journey mired in the gumbo of the hyperreal. "[T]he slow grind of the city's gears [is pitted] against the abstractions of high finance, the contrast evident in the crawl of urban traffic and the dazzling simultaneity of cyber-capitalism." (Begley 17) It is a journey that includes dramatic elements of an epic tale: power-shifts, sexual diversion, civic upheaval, reversals of fortune, collapse of marriage, celebration, murder, and a

hero's death. It is through this journey that Packer comes face to face with the borderland between the real and the representational. Whether he apprehends the consequences or not, he will come into contact with mortality time and again, including, ultimately, his own. His guiding principle is the allegorical quest: a barbershop trip imbued with nostalgic illusions apropos of spiritual invigoration. What he experiences along the way is a wash of carnivalesque events that disrupt the established commonplace movements of the city.

Assessments of DeLillo's depiction of such seemingly severe or exaggerated circumstances in *Cosmopolis* hasn't been very forgiving. As one reviewer for *The New York Times* complains,

> For going on 50 years now, educated Europeans and Americans have been satirizing unbridled materialism, rampant dehumanization and the like consistently and pretty much en masse (though perhaps not to much effect in the real world). This particular nightmare vision of sleek despair and medium cool existential aimlessness has been smelling stale for quite a while now, as riddled with trite conventions and canned attitudes as late medieval chivalric poetry. (Kirn 1)

What's unfortunate about this observation is its central truth (yet offered parenthetically) about such works' influence: "perhaps not to much effect in the real world." This statement also comes off as a bit disingenuous, considering that Kirn's own writing employs a generous ration of satirical-seeming historiographical metafiction; I prefer Blake Morrison's sentiment:

> …*Cosmopolis*, which has hard things to say about the direction postmodern society is taking, is an awkward, rebarbative book….The heroes of novels don't have to be likeable, and as the epitome of disengagement, cut off from common pursuits and recognisable feelings, Packer isn't someone we're meant to engage with. (26)

Or, as Updike puts it, "DeLillo gives signs of wanting to drop us down into the quotidian mundane, where we can be wounded" (100). It may be true that a lot of writers have taken ironic pokes at the intellectually comatose, resigned masses participating in cultures gone absurd, but DeLillo's unrelenting, harsh light—though it may not be refreshing (or even entertaining per se)—may be more pertinent, in the way a slap to the face awakens the senses. Our globalized culture is daily proving itself to be grossly underattentive and psychically incapacitated; why not speak to it in its own devolved, caricaturized language? As DeLillo says of criticism against *Cosmopolis*, "I think I'm writing in the 21st century and some people are still reading in the 19th…. One of the functions of American culture is to absorb everything and to make it safe for consumerism. And it would be healthy if certain writers, certain film-makers, certain painters refused to accept this absorption, and wrote or painted or made films that argued at some level against it" (Ross 11). There doesn't seem to be much satire here, frankly, at all. Absurdity yes, debasement, profanity—but satire per se depends on one's own reflex to straightforward, incessant irony. By Morrison's estimation, "The heaviness of the message squeezes the life out of this novel." But he also finishes off with, "But we ignore [DeLillo] at our peril" (26).

What seems to be the central issue of the unsympathetic, dissociative nightmare that is the ethos of *Cosmopolis*, is technology. But, though the efficacy of technology is at issue—the absurd limits to which it has pushed our imaginations beyond contextualization—it is simply the most conspicuous motif of the overarching theme: obsolescence. The genuine article, the real McCoy, has not merely become indistinct; it's been outperformed by its simulated counterpart. Time in this case is an inadequate measure of progress, because it's bridled to passé three-dimensional reality. The efficiency with which we have catapulted ourselves ahead of our own perceptual reckoning has undermined the impact of time itself.

Throughout the novel, obsolescence is alluded to again and again. Packer spends his moments of pause ruminating on how inane our language and devices are, simply by virtue of them having specific definition. He regards skyscrapers as anachronistic. ATMs—automated teller machines—he thinks of as "aged and burdened by [their] own historical memory. [The term] worked at cross-purposes, unable to escape the inference of fuddled human personnel and jerky moving parts. The term was part of the process that the device was meant to replace. It was anti-futuristic, so cumbrous and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated" (DeLillo 54). Packer expresses similar ridicule toward airports, walkie-talkies, personal computers, even assassination attempts on presidents. Apparently, by the time an idea has become fully formed, it's already worthless—the succeeding concept already on the verge of becoming. (He scrutinizes his high-tech PDA with casual disdain, remarking that he'll soon have to throw it out for a new one.) Poignantly, we discover during Packer's limo ride that time itself has seemingly become obsolete: watching himself on the limo's internal screens, Packer catches his image reacting to events before he experiences them in reality. "This temporal dislocation recurs, indicating an underlying shift in the past-future paradigm" (Updike 100). Again, in terms of comprehensive metafictional effect, the structure of the novel itself incorporates the suspension of time, with its dual, temporally-counterpoint narrative—at the close of which, Packer actually witnesses his own murder on his high-tech watch's telescreen seconds *before* he's actually executed.

Still, though the book may be a novel of ideas, and criticized as such, there obtains a human impetus. People abound. Thinking of this story as a case in point (as I'm supposing) of an uber-capitalist who's essentially vulnerable and on the lookout for his own humanity, there comes a point during the progression of his journey (as he enters more and more into direct contact with the elements "on the ground" of the city), wherein he begins to register increasingly the idea that being unable to distinguish between the real and the simulated signifies a movement toward chaos. Packer's challenge is to divine this distinction between reality and artifice, a tricky proposition. Even episodes of violence, which at first seem more "real," are overexposed in the blur. The brutal stabbing to death, for instance, of Arthur Rapp, director of the International Monetary Fund, on live television (The Money Channel), has the ironic quality of a moment of intimacy between victim and attacker—Rapp appearing to draw the assailant to him as he's being stabbed in the face and throat. Too, his murder, itself represented in real time via video stream, carries the broader consequence of an attempted rubbing-out of an *idea*—that is, Arthur Rapp himself, as a public figure, *represents* the combined forces behind global capitalism. And later, when Packer witnesses a self-immolation on a nearby sidewalk during an antiglobalization protest in which people dressed in rat suits are throwing bricks and smoke bombs, urinating on and spray-painting his limo, there retains the sensation of illusion—despite the fact of the event occurring right in front of him. The act of a man burning himself obtains the quality of a bit of

theater—surrounded by more theater: "There was something theatrical about the protest, ingratiating even...a shadow of transaction between the demonstrators and the state….It attested again…to the market culture's innovative brilliance, its ability to shape itself to its own flexible ends, absorbing everything around it" (DeLillo 99). People all around watch the man on fire, frozen in shock or wailing, or running past without noticing. Packer watches the entire scene repeated on his video screens immediately after.

Yet, something in Packer is beginning to respond to these visceral intrusions in the façade. The blurring of the real and the representational has reached such a fever pitch, it has awakened him to a level of active participation—in essence a kind of testing of the breakdown of continuity, like pinching oneself in a dream. He gets out of the car:

> He saw a few tourists creep along Broadway under bunched umbrellas to stare at the charred spot on the pavement where an unknown man had set fire to himself. This was grave and haunting. It was right for the moment and the day. But the credible threat was the thing that moved and quickened him. The rain on his face was good and the sour reek was fine and right, the fug of urine maturing on the body of his car, and there was trembling pleasure to be found, and joy at all misfortune, in the swift pitch of markets down. But it was the threat of death at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he'd always known would come clear in time. Now he could begin the business of living. (107)

By the time Packer shoots his own chief of security at the edge of a city basketball court, in which adolescents are shooting hoops, the distinction of reality for him has become unrecognizable to the point of hallucination; the murder is a mere curiosity, part of a larger structure of social attitudes that only obtain meaning in the abstract. Tangible consequence has utterly dissipated. Packer throws the pistol down and observes,

> There were no windows flying open or concerned voices calling. The weapon was not equipped with a sound suppressor but there'd been only one shot and maybe people needed to hear three, four, more to rouse them from sleep or television. This was one of the routine ephemera of the night, no different from cats at sex or a backfiring car. (146-47)

But, despite his apparent difficulty apprehending reality from virtuality, Packer's journey toward mortality is inexorable. He will lose all of his (and other people's) money, continuing to bet against the rising value of the yen, simply because to quit in the midst of such a decision wouldn't be "authentic." Using his watch's wireless interface, he will (digitally) steal and then lose his wife's family fortune. He's running off his rails, and such actions come with a kind of stark emancipation. After losing all of his own money, then his wife's—essentially throwing it away—he commits himself to the ritual of it, reverently: "He was making a gesture of his own, a sign of ironic final binding. Let it all come down. Let them see each other pure and lorn. This was the individual's revenge on the mythical couple….Let them see each other clean, in killing light" (DeLillo 123-4).

When Packer does eventually make it to the barbershop, there is a brief interlude of what might qualify as "human"—if only it panned out. The barbershop is an ancient building with cracked ceiling and paint coming off the walls in the Hell's Kitchen area of Manhattan, a neighborhood of brick tenements with garbage-strewn streets and stray dogs nosing around. This is where Packer spent his childhood. The barber, an elderly colloquial figure who may as well have worked here for centuries, gives Packer an avuncular long-time-no-see welcome, invites him to snack on "the take-out in the fridgerator that I nibble at when I get the urge" (160). This is the kind of familial warmth Packer has been yearning for and comes as a relief from the hyperkinetic, clogged-arterial chaos of Times Square. The barber, one Anthony Adubato, knew his father well; he retells the story of his father's cancer as he's done countless times before, always the same. The minor ritual is a comfort: "This is what [Packer] wanted from Anthony. The same words. The oil company calendar on the wall. The mirror that needed silvering" (161).

For the first time in the novel, Packer shows some generosity; as he and Anthony sit to eat, he asks if he can invite his driver in to share the meal, a request that is granted offhandedly. Through this gesture, Packer sees (literally) his driver for the first time—a tall, thin black man with missing fingers and a devastated eye—and learns his name, Ibrahim. Anthony and Ibrahim swap stories about driving (turns out, Anthony used to be a cabby), and there is the mention of Ibrahim having been "Acting Secretary of External Affairs" in his past life.

This is the moment Packer has supposedly been waiting for, a communion of sorts, between people of the earth, breaking bread together. A genuine human interaction. Yet, as he sits in the barber chair, even he isn't able to abide the downshift in pace to this folksy nonchalance, and he falls asleep. He's been habituated to operate at a different speed; to his mortal frustration, he fails to recapture his "humanness." He awakens to the voices of Ibrahim and Anthony, still engaged in the swapping of tales, seemingly oblivious to his slumber. Anthony sits him down to his haircut, but Packer doesn't have the patience for it. He is only able to sit still long enough for *half* a haircut, before fleeing back into the frenetic nightscape.

Finally, the culminating illustration of the supremacy of artificiality occurs as Packer is being chauffeured back to Eleventh Avenue. A lunch van pulls out in front of the limo, causing some suspicion since it's well past lunchtime (he's still worried about the "credible threat"). "He'd fitted the gun under his belt, uncomfortably. He remembered that he'd slept. He was alert, eager for action, for resolution. *Something had to happen soon, a dispelling of doubt and the emergence of some design,*[2] the subject's plan of action, visible and distinct" (172). Nearby is a trolley with a boom aloft and a camera attached. Packer gets out of the car and scouts a hole in a fence to discover 300 naked people fallen about in the street: men, women, children sprawled in various positions, eyes closed. "Of course there was a context. Someone was making a movie. But this was just a frame of reference. The bodies were blunt facts, naked in the street." (172-3) In response, Packer removes his clothes and joins them, incidentally lying down alongside his wife (whom he naturally doesn't recognize). The scenario is one for which DeLillo may have taken direct inspiration from Baudrillard's observations, "[R]eality itself, the world itself…has already been transformed into an interactive performance," and, "We are no longer alienated and passive spectators but interactive extras." (Baudrillard 2) As Packer lies there, participating silently among the throng of nudity, of real, exposed, human people, he is struck by a sudden, profound reverie, perhaps the best he'll achieve in his hyperreal state:

[2] My emphasis

> It tore his mind apart, trying to see them here and real, independent of the image on a screen in Oslo or Caracas. Or were those places indistinguishable from this one? But why ask these questions? Why see these things? They isolated him. They set him apart and this is not what he wanted. He wanted to be here among them, all-body, the tattooed, the hairy-assed, those who stank. He wanted to set himself in the middle of the intersection, among the old with their raised veins and body blotches and next to the dwarf with a bump on his head. He thought there were probably people here with wasting diseases, a few, undissuadable, skin flaking away. There were the young and strong. He was one of them. He was one of the morbidly obese, the tanned and fit and middle-aged. (176)

This scene constitutes the final stroke of bearable absurdity. It draws us to the extreme outer-reaches of Packer's quest for substance; it's time to die. Upon leaving his driver and the limousine, in what might be construed as a fit of either discovery or insanity to walk the city streets alone at night, Packer—quite coincidentally, so it would seem—meets up with his "credible threat," Benno Levin, at the confluence of the two narratives. There, in resigned, fatalistic repose, Packer faces his representative anti-self and is put out of the world's misery—following a respectable amount of esoteric repartee.

The brief interjections that make up the counter-narrative of *Cosmopolis* obtain the quality of episodic epilogues popping into the primary text. They're concerned with Benno Levin, a man who has lost his home and family and has become a person in the background—living in a condemned building and scavenging scraps of furniture, while he composes his 10,000 word manifesto and cooks up plans to eliminate the person he deems responsible for his situation: Eric Packer. Here again is a circumstance that has been elevated to dizzying heights of supreme contrivance. Benno's actual name is Richard Sheets, an ex-employee of Packer's who was fired for mishandling obscure third-world currencies, despite his having attended the matter with utmost vigilance. In a binary-oriented paradigm, failure to perform dictates its own conclusions; there is no latitude for human peculiarity. Benno understands this, and he also apprehends the theoretical, metaphysical nature of the system—a system driven by social expectations, attitudes, and agreements—and that he is helpless to do anything about it. As he describes his world: "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" (155)? For this, Benno imagines himself as a tragic figure, and he throws himself with full dedication into the role. As he hunkers down to work on his manuscript under the light he steals from a city lamppost, he considers, "My small days spill into light-years. This is why I can only pretend to be someone. And this is why I felt derived at first, working on these pages. I didn't know if it was me that was writing so much as someone I want to sound like." And shortly, "In the world today everything is shared. What kind of misery is it that can't be shared" (60)? When the two finally face off, as Benno holds Packer at gunpoint, Packer offers one final gesture in an attempt to break through the abiding pretense: he confesses to Benno that his prostate is asymmetrical—to which Benno responds, "So is mine." But, alas, there is no comfort in this, no communion. Packer, still searching, asks, "What does it mean?" The answer: "Nothing. It means nothing…. It's harmless. A harmless variation" (199).

As Updike prefers it, Packer's odyssey may ultimately be quotidian, lame, and derivative—in contrast to DeLillo's prior successes in depicting "realism's patient surfaces and

saturation in personally verified detail"—this from DeLillo's "visionary side, fed by the bleak implausibilities of modern technology and tabloidized popular culture…often enough enjoy[ing] a counterweight of domestic emotion and common decency." (101) Or, as Michiko Kakutani ruthlessly claims of DeLillo's desolate figure, "[Packer is] such an extreme and uninteresting exemplar of this anomie that he utterly fails to engage our attention. He's a cartoon nihilist, a comic-strip capitalist pig…" But, why is such a possibility necessarily a bad thing? By all appearances, Packer seems to represent the curiosity: What if there is a deeper human consciousness tugging at even the most cutthroat uber-capitalists? True to his character, Packer acts on what he knows and is able to recognize—the action itself doesn't determine success. In his own way, he cannot right himself—veer suddenly *on* course—because such an action would be a suspension of his innate mode of pretense. Ultimately, DeLillo seems to be saying that if we rely too heavily on symbols to inform our narratives (both personal and public), we run the risk of investing those symbols with inappropriate significance, unbalancing our sense of identity and even reality; Packer is the champion of such an imbalance. DeLillo could have gone the conventional route, made his novel a little more palatable to the critics who demand a kind of sympathetic transformation, but he would have accomplished a contrivance. In this case, Packer may be a madman, but he's true to the end. Once again, I agree with Blake Morrison's assessment: "Packer is less a character than a cypher, a symbol of dystopian triumphalism. If he doesn't seem 'believable' or 'realistic', so be it: the words have no meaning in the world he inhabits. The problem for the reader is deciding what authority to accord his observations: do we care what he thinks, given where he's coming from" (26)? Maybe such nihilism is something the literary and art world is overdue for, something it is going to have to finally face in the 21st century, if only to overcome it.

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