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Author(s): James Berger

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# Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, and Turns against Language

JAMES BERGER

**M**OST COMMENTARIES ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TOWER of Babel regard it as a second Fall, a fragmentation of the perfect language of naming that Adam conceived and so the beginning of the split between word and thing that brought into the world lying, ambiguity, irony, negation, artifice, the unconscious, ideology, the subject, the other, and all the various woes and pleasures we now associate with language. In the Zohar, we read that the biblical phrase “the whole earth was of one language” indicates that “the world was still a unity with one single faith in the Holy One” (253) and, a bit further, that when this language was lost to the majority of humankind, their prayers became fruitless because angels only understood the holy tongue (256).<sup>1</sup> A commentary in the Midrash Rabbah, however, regards the pre-Babel unity of language in a less favorable light. “All the earth was of one language of sharp words,” it remarks, and the people were “united in idol worship” (306). This gloss, I think, can be read in two ways. First, we can take it to mean that what appeared to be a unified language was, in fact, already divided. It was a language of disagreement and strife (which we would not expect of the Adamic language of perfect correspondence); and, moreover, the worship of idols suggests a multiplicity of deities and not a unity at all. In this view, the Adamic language was not so perfect after all, was perhaps already partly fallen—a perspective Walter Benjamin suggested in his essay on the distinction between human language and what he called “language as such.” But, second, we might also take this midrashic disparagement of language before Babel as an implicit critique of unity, transparency of meaning, and all other purported virtues of the primal, perfect language. If the singleness of Adamic language is a unity in idolatry,

JAMES BERGER, associate professor of English at Hofstra University, is author of *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (U of Minnesota P, 1999) and editor of Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life: The Restored Edition* (Random, 2003). He is writing a book on portrayals of linguistic and cognitive impairments in modern literature and popular culture.

then the tower itself, as an affront to the single God of justice, is also a monument to the Adamic singleness of meaning. And if this is so, then God's entrusting Adam with the creation of a world language was an enormous mistake. All Adam's undivided significations must, of necessity, have piled together into a single huge signifier whose single aspiration and referent could only be God. And God, then, in a surprising act of good sense and modesty, smashed this natural signifier, this excrescence of Adamic meaning, and henceforth authorized only multiple and divided significations. The broken tower was a sign of liberation, and God was the first polytheist.

This essay explores some of the consequences of damage to a linguistic-social order, for which the destruction of Babel serves as prototype. First, a society may regard its world as fallen and look back nostalgically to the world before the Fall. In this view, the catastrophe is an event of prehistory that has no active consequences, since the world has been as it is through all historical memory. In this case, catastrophe does not entail trauma. Conversely, people who feel the damage to the symbolic order more acutely and traumatically may try to restore the previous order exactly as it was—to rebuild the tower, to reestablish what is imagined to be a perfect language without ambiguity, the language of Adam. This approach, with its rigidity and its determination to rediscover and impose a set of single, absolute signifiers, I associate with a logic of terror and terrorism. Third, in the wake of perceived damage to the symbolic order, people may try to imagine modes of human life removed from symbolic-linguistic behavior altogether: in other words, modes of transcendence. What is at stake in this discussion is the status of language and representation in relation to social trauma. I will argue that over the past century, portrayals of cognitively and linguistically impaired people have played crucial roles in helping European and American cultures to come to

terms with social traumas that are perceived to have damaged not just persons and institutions but also ways of thinking, feeling, and living in a world constructed and mediated by symbols, especially language. Indeed, the trajectory of such portrayals of cognitive and linguistic impairment, from, for example, *Billy Budd* through *Forrest Gump*, forms a history of self-scrutiny for European and American cultures. This essay will examine, in particular, portrayals of neurologically impaired people in the case studies of the neurologist Oliver Sacks and in the novels of Don DeLillo. The cognitively and linguistically impaired figures in these narratives—whom I call “postmodern wild children”—illustrate contemporary tendencies toward desires for terror and transcendence in response to traumatic damage to the symbolic order.

The end of the cold war helped make audible a number of discourses that had largely been drowned out in the militarism and vigorous denials of history of the Reaganist 1980s: the possibilities of genuine peacetime economies, disarmament, serious approaches to world poverty, a proliferation of political visions released by the end of the political need for an anticommunist hegemony. There was also, of course, a renewed and newly triumphal discourse of unchecked global capitalism that looked to the former Soviet bloc and the developing world as places where goods could be produced more cheaply for the American and European markets. This discourse of “free trade” served as a euphemism for the search for cheap labor and the absence of environmental standards. But by the mid-1990s significant social movements were organizing industrial and agricultural workers, students, and environmentalists to protect political freedoms, national sovereignty, and labor and environmental regulations and to oppose the efforts of corporations and their allies in government to impose on the entire world a new gilded age of outlaw capitalism.

The destruction of the World Trade Center stifled much of this multiplicity of voices, as the Bush administration and the corporate powers it represents used this traumatic event to help establish in the world “a unity with one single faith,” which would be articulated in a single language of “homeland security.”<sup>2</sup> These powers are engaged, I would argue, in rolling back the dividedness, multiplicity, and ambiguity that, according to my midrash, God authorized when the Tower of Babel fell. Undivided absolutes of Good and Evil, which were exposed as politically untenable, if not ridiculous, as the cold war ended, were welcomed back by the Bush administration with relief and delight. Every sign sought out its proper referent and clung to it the way that Charlton Heston threatened to hold on to his gun—never to be removed except from his cold, dead hand. This is the characteristic post-apocalyptic symptomatic response: the world of semantic and moral ambiguity has fallen and been swept away; the world of simplicity and clarity has taken its place. Hallelujah! It may be that the split in the signifier is all that holds the world together.<sup>3</sup>

A tower falls, and in the rubble numerous postcatastrophic revelations take shape. One can embrace the fall or deny it, memorialize it or force it into oblivion, or try to restore the tower just as it was. But, in any case, we encounter a condition of trauma, of living in the wake of a previously unimaginable and still unassimilable disaster that in conscious and unconscious ways fills our psychic and social spaces. For al-Qaeda, the tower was the golden age of Islam, despoiled by Western colonialism and the loss of pure faith. For the Bush administration, the twin towers became, in retrospect, embodiments of America’s physical invulnerability, which was adjunct to its moral invulnerability, its absolute innocence. The logic and desire both of terrorism and of antiterrorism are to restore the imagined former state: of social harmony and perfect correspondence between word

and thing—to rebuild its tower, in no matter how grotesque a form. Every historical catastrophe replays the destruction of Babel, for not only are buildings and lives lost but ways of thinking and speaking are transformed.

But in the post-Babel moment, there may also arise a logic and desire of something else, which I think would have to be called transcendence. The transcendent, in this context, would be whatever surpasses, or passes below, all conceptual categories and symbolic forms. The divine, the sublime, the abject, the real, as well as the term *transcendent* itself, serve as catachreses for all that is beyond conceptualization but not necessarily beyond experience. The urges both toward terrorism and toward transcendence are post-apocalyptic responses to a catastrophe that is experienced as a disaster of language. Terrorism holds that the original, primal, pre-Babel language must be restored and that the restoration can only be achieved through violence. The move toward transcendence finds revealed in the catastrophe the idea that language in any form is inadequate. In Plato’s *Cratylus*, the desire for transcendence challenges Cratylus’s position that language can, or should, perfectly correspond to the world; on the other hand, it is not satisfied with Hermogenes’s conventionalist argument, whose implication, if we follow it through Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Althusser, and the whole twentieth-century linguistic turn, is that we are creatures of language, socialized into language, and that language goes, as they say, all the way down. In the linguistic turn’s most dramatic and exuberant form, poststructuralism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, there is a reveling, at times an ecstatic immersion, in the post-Babel, Saussurean condition, which is understood as an epistemological, psychological, and political liberation from the totalizing (yet naive) monologic of some imagined language of correspondence. Yet, in breaking the tyrannical link between signifier and referent, we then are left with only the signifier, whose

subsequent determining functions may be no less tyrannical, merely more arbitrary.<sup>4</sup>

In a broad sense, for the variants of the linguistic turn, there is nothing other than language. Meaning, following Saussure, is construed out of differences, which is to say, out of minor or local alterities—alterities within the language system—but there is nothing (or, at any rate, nothing intelligible) other than language. Even apparently nonlinguistic entities—the unconscious, the body, nature, sexuality—attain all that they can attain of identity and ontological and social standing insofar as they are signifiers. The linguistic turn in all its forms conceives of itself as demystifying and secular. It is iconoclastic in that it sets out to destroy or discredit any forms of representation that claim to be mimetic. At the same time, it is deeply iconophilic in that, however critically, its focus remains always on the representation. The sign is both nothing and everything.

Variations on the linguistic turn have provided the theoretical bases for the humanities and some of the social sciences for much of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Concurrently, however, and with increasing influence over the past fifteen or twenty years, we can see in the academic humanities, in some literary fiction, and in areas of popular culture varieties of what we might call a counter-linguistic turn. In its academic forms, the counter-linguistic turn is not a direct repudiation of the linguistic turn; in particular, it draws much of its impetus from poststructuralism's concern with questions of difference and alterity. But the forms of thinking I'm calling counter-linguistic do not focus only on the local alterities that create meaning in Saussurean terms. Rather, their central claim is that there *is* an other of language, whether or not this other can be conceptualized, and that language does not go "all the way down."<sup>6</sup>

Here are a few examples: (1) Early in the twentieth century, the mystical tendency in

one of the foundational texts of the linguistic turn, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—its suggestion that ultimately what cannot be said is of more value than what can be said; a bit later, Georges Bataille's discussions of heterogeneity and waste as the true bases of culture; and, in the 1950s, Emmanuel Levinas's thinking on the other that cannot be thematized. (2) The "ethical turn" in poststructuralism (e.g., in Lyotard and Derrida), whose focus largely is on social relations and historical and social knowledges that are not commensurable with existing (linguistic) conceptualizations. Related to this ethical turn is a renewed interest in religion among poststructuralist and psychoanalytic thinkers (e.g., Derrida, Slavoj Žižek [*On Belief*], Eric Santner).<sup>7</sup> (3) The shift in Lacanian theory from a focus on the symbolic and on subjectivity as interpellation to a focus on the real—that is, on the unsymbolizable gaps in the symbolic (the shift from Althusser to Žižek).<sup>8</sup> (4) An interest among literary scholars in developments in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology and linguistics, which suggest forms of consciousness and thought not based in language. (5) The growing importance of the concept of trauma in literary studies, where trauma is understood not just as a grievous injury and its symptomatic aftermaths but as a fundamental shock to, and even negation of, the whole process of conceptualization and representation. (6) Studies across several fields that stress materiality or physicality. This work often focuses on the body, which serves as a crucial and contested boundary marker for the limits of language. Debates surrounding the discursive status of the body illustrate the ongoing tensions and interrelations between linguistic and counter-linguistic tendencies in contemporary theory. Judith Butler, for instance, has made compelling arguments that the body is itself a discursive, performative formation. "The matter of bodies," she writes, "will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those mate-



rial effects” (2), and what one may refer to as “extra-discursive” is “formed by the very discourse from which it seeks to free itself” (11). Butler disclaims a naive constructivism in which “the materiality of bodies is simply and only a linguistic effect” (30), but clearly she hedges her bets on the side of the linguistic, which she regards as “the very condition under which matter may be said to appear” (31). In contrast, Elisabeth Bronfen, while describing the relations between the body and language in terms similar to those used by Butler, argues a more counter-linguistic position that emphasizes the persistent presence and effect of what language cannot encompass:

This primacy of the body as object of negotiation and representation . . . also readily calls forth the question whether there is a body outside language or whether our knowledge of the body depends on the highly diverse and differentiated images of it that come to be constructed in accordance with particular social contexts and questions of normalcy relevant at specific historical moments. Is the body always already cultured or does the body pose as the measure and demarcation point of culture, as the site of truth, authenticity and inevitability? Is the body perhaps such a privileged object of our cultural image repertoire as well as such a pressing category in cultural criticism precisely because it quite literally embodies the fact that the incommensurability between the real and its representations can never fully be resolved? (112–13)

(7) Most prominent, and perhaps encompassing these other tendencies: the pervasive concern across a number of disciplines with alterity and the “other” as categories that by definition escape whatever concepts we might apply to them.

It is important to state again that these forms of the counter-linguistic turn tend to be not so much repudiations of the linguistic turn as developments of its terms and assumptions. Theorizations of alterity, for example, can be seen as elaborations of Saussurean descriptions of differentiation. Rather

than show how meaning is created through distinctions between signs in a semiotic system, theories of alterity try to explain how the system itself acquires meaning through its relation with what is posited as outside it. Categories elaborated in poststructuralism are especially important in this regard, since often the secondary term of a binary structure returns as a supplement that simultaneously reveals and heals the lack in a symbolic network. Thus, the “queer” and the “crip” (in queer and disability studies, respectively) re-emerge as banished others that both destabilize and enable norms of gender and physical ability. As has often been pointed out, much of the formative work of the new historicism criticized what it took to be the ahistorical, apolitical, nonmaterialist approaches of poststructuralism while using poststructuralist techniques of textual analysis. More broadly, Levinas’s transcendent, unthematizable other makes possible an ethics; Gayatri Spivak’s silent subaltern demands a politics. In Žižek, the traumatic real is the “rock on which every formalization stumbles” (*Sublime Object* 172), the fissure or wound or threatening alterity in every symbolic order, and simultaneously it is that which generates further symbolization in the effort to cover over or deny the fissure.

The two recurring and often intertwined motifs of the counter-linguistic turn are trauma and transcendence. Language is not enough; language is broken. And something has broken it. The damage to the symbolic order is not just structural, as it sometimes appears in Žižek, but is historical. Events have happened that have had lasting and symptomatic effects on modes of representation and communication.<sup>9</sup> Trauma theory as it has developed in literary studies consistently returns to the Holocaust as the singular obliterating event that shows how historical trauma works: how a morally and conceptually unassimilable crime both generates and stymies efforts to understand and represent it, and how societies can compulsively, symptomatically

repeat it. At the same time as it provides a paradigm for trauma, however, the Holocaust has become venerated as a sacred object. Its presumed status outside language allows it to be both at once—for the traumatic and the sacred are equally unrepresentable, and so the same inadequate terms may be used indistinguishably for both. The witness and survivor take on a sacred status as having returned from beyond the boundary of all previous moral imaginings, and their language can be seen as an awful, almost nonlinguistic mix of metaphor, literal repetition, and indexical pointing that in some sense conveys the traumatic event without being able to represent it. The survivor is Daniel, is Jonah—but a Daniel whose language has been devoured, a Jonah whose language has been drowned.<sup>10</sup>

All these forms of the counter-linguistic turn begin from some version of a post-Babel condition. Language is broken—has been traumatically broken—yet remains nevertheless ideologically imprisoning. There is some other of language (whether divine, traumatic, or neurological), but we have only our existing broken language with which to summon and encounter it. Thus, the transcendent can only be expressed or addressed in terms of the traumatic. What is whole can only be represented in terms of what is broken. At the same time, what is broken also can only be represented by what is broken. The relation of this paradox and this tautology is a persistent, irreducible fact and motive in modern representation. The most bereft and abject circumstance finds available to it only these same tropes that are available to ideas of the divine or transcendent. In the post-Babel condition that has been so widely depicted in Europe and America at least since the First World War, the abject, the traumatic, and the transcendent have been linguistically indistinguishable.

In this context of a modern tension between language and its traumatic-transcendent other, the older, Enlightenment figure of the

“wild child” has returned in new forms. The wild child was seen as occupying a boundary between nature and culture, a biologically human being who had not been socialized and did not possess language. As such, the real or purported feral children who became well known in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries fascinated Enlightenment thinkers, who used them as occasions for contemplating what human qualities, especially moral or spiritual qualities, were innate or natural and what were products of society and language. The wild child provided an apparent test of human nature, though with ambiguous results. The affectionate and generous Kaspar Hauser seemed to confirm a Rousseauesque view of natural goodness—one witness described him as “a living refutation of the doctrine of original sin” (Masson 44)—while Victor of Aveyron inspired an observer to remark that “nature . . . is a state of nullity and barbarism” and that the “moral superiority said to be *natural* to man is only the result of civilization” (Lane 129). The Enlightenment wild child functioned as a thought experiment that permitted the social-linguistic person to be separated from some more primal existence—as noble or ignoble savage, animal or divinity. The wild child was the case in point that would illustrate, if not determine, the most important and troubling questions about human subjectivity, language, moral development, and social organization. If only they could be taught to speak, wild children would tell for the first time of human existence outside language; they would give testimony of Eden, just before Adam named the world and before he learned transgression.

But the experiment was not a success. Many of the documented wild children in retrospect appear to have been mentally retarded or autistic. And, as Jeffrey Masson points out, these wild children, of such interest to eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century thinkers, should be regarded more as testimonies to terrible abuse and neglect than as tests of nature or culture.

What I am calling in this essay the postmodern wild child differs in significant ways from its Enlightenment predecessors. The myth that a child isolated from society and language might unveil essential human truths has fortunately lost its efficacy.<sup>11</sup> The postmodern wild children of Sacks and DeLillo are seen as estranged from language not because of physical removal from human society and language but through neurological damage. Contemporary portrayals of such individuals focus less on innate ideas and moral qualities and more on the nature of consciousness as a physical or spiritual condition and on the nature of the boundary between a nonlinguistic alterity and the social-symbolic order. Thus, these figures of neurological or linguistic impairment are of enormous value in understanding contemporary thought and culture, and an interest in linguistically, cognitively, or neurologically impaired versions of wild children extends through recent fiction, popular films, and popularizations of science and medicine. Not in all cases, but in general, linguistic impairment in these works is a figure for an impairment of language, and the linguistically impaired person is a site both of social-linguistic trauma and of some kind of redemption of that trauma that reaches beyond language.<sup>12</sup>

Like the Enlightenment wild child, the postmodern, neurological wild child, standing just outside the social-symbolic order, tests the capacities of that order. He or she is also, however, an index or symptom pointing to the damage that language has suffered. Enlightenment wild children stood as a potential answer to important philosophical questions; they pointed toward origins. Postmodern wild children play, if anything, a weightier imaginative role, for they point toward ends, toward redemption. Cut off from language through neurological impairment, the contemporary wild child, as presented in the texts I will examine, embodies the full

traumatic-transcendent possibilities of human existence outside language. This is an enormous burden for any representation to bear—even more so since contemporary wild children are encountered in ostensibly secular aesthetic and clinical contexts. The question that is at stake here is how these linguistically damaged figures are responses to modern social trauma in which language—the chief vehicle and transmitter of the social—is itself seen as damaged. In what follows, I will discuss two disparate examples—selected case studies of Oliver Sacks's, and two novels by Don DeLillo—that use neurological impairment as a means to address the predicaments of language in the wake of catastrophe.<sup>13</sup>

Oliver Sacks is a clinical neurologist, but in his popular case studies he has become, in effect, a theologian for a class of secular, educated readers—the house theologian for the *New York Review of Books*, we might say.<sup>14</sup> Sacks introduces his readers to neurologically impaired “others,” whom he describes as outside language and culture in a not especially clearly defined sense. The alterity of these subjects, which Sacks describes at least partly in religious terms, is eventually revealed to be what is for all of us most familiar, but often most neglected: the feeling of being at home in our own bodies, a kinesthetic rather than a linguistic sense of being human. Normative professional neurology, for Sacks, does not recognize this sense, and so it neglects what is most deeply human, which in turn corresponds (again, for Sacks) to whatever can be known about the sacred.

In a brief discussion, a good place to start is with Sacks's narrative of his own injury (in *A Leg to Stand On*), which did not involve language directly but which set the terms for his subsequent case studies. Sacks seriously injured his leg climbing a mountain alone in a remote area of Norway, and he was lucky to be found and brought to safety before he froze to death. He immediately returned to England and had an operation to repair



the extensive damage to his ligaments and knee. The operation was apparently successful, but then his real problems began, for he found that he had no feeling and no power of movement in the injured leg. He had suffered some undiagnosed neurological damage, and, to make matters worse, none of his doctors would acknowledge that anything was wrong. From their perspective, the operation had been successful, and he should proceed with rehabilitation and not bother them further.

Sacks describes his experience of his nonworking leg as more than disturbing and frightening. It is uncanny, a source of absolute horror, and it triggers a crisis that is more spiritual than medical. The leg becomes to him “alien and incomprehensible,” “absolutely not-me,” a “foreign inconceivable *thing*” (70, 72, 74). There was, Sacks writes, “a gap—an absolute gap—between then and now; and in that gap, into that void . . . the reality and possibilities of the leg had passed” (86). Sacks invokes the medical term *scotoma*, which usually refers to a gap in the visual field often brought on by migraines, to help him conceptualize what had happened to his leg, but giving his condition a name—a “scotoma of the leg”—is small relief to him. His doctors ignore his diagnosis, and he realizes that “all the cognitive and intellectual and imaginative powers” he had previously used were “wholly useless.” He “had fallen off the map, the world, of the knowable” (110). Sacks even has a dream that can only be called apocalyptic, in which an enemy has developed a “Derealization Bomb” with the power to “blow a hole in reality.” This bomb did not destroy physical objects, but, rather, it “destroyed thought and thought-space itself” (96).

For Sacks to regain physical and symbolic wholeness, to mend the hole in reality, he must make contact with some part of reality that is deeper than language. He reaches this deeper level through music and physical movement. Listening to a tape of a Mendelssohn violin concerto, Sacks feels that his leg, and the world,

is beginning to be reintegrated, and this sense of reintegration is part of a greater revelation that “life itself was music, or consubstantial with music; that our living moving flesh itself was ‘solid’ music” (118). Later, during his physical therapy, the music again comes into his mind, and suddenly, miraculously, what he calls his “kinetic melody” reconnects his mind and his body (144), and his leg returns to him. He can walk almost normally, and, as he writes, “all of me, body and soul, became music in that moment” (148). There are further setbacks, but his true recovery has begun. Sacks now knows what it is to be balanced, to be at home in his body. He uses the term “grace,” in both its physical and its religious senses, to describe his new condition.

And this is, Sacks makes clear, a *new* condition, not merely a recovery of what he had lost. Before his injury and impairment, Sacks could not be whole or grace-ful, for he regarded his body according to a mechanical, medical terminology. The traumatic impairment forced him to understand the body in a new way, as a kinetic, musical, spiritual entity; further, it impelled him to rethink his relation to his profession and begin to imagine what he calls a “neurology of the soul” that would discover and evoke “a living personal center, an ‘I,’ amid the debris of neurological devastation” (219).

These discoveries that Sacks made through his own experience he subsequently rediscovers and refines in his work with people with severe amnesia, autism, mental retardation, Tourette’s syndrome, and other ailments. In each case, Sacks describes his contact with a person in some degree outside language or the normal use of symbols; and in each case, Sacks finds a moment when this person achieves a form of wholeness, grace, or at-homeness that is beyond or deeper than language. In the patient’s apparent alterity, Sacks identifies a deeper humanity. To be “at home” in this sense is, for Sacks, the most profoundly human state, and each of Sacks’s case studies is, in effect, a test case of the human.

Each patient is a kind of clinical wild child, an other encountered outside the symbolic, who reveals how much of what we think is essential can be stripped away before a core of humanity, which is not linguistic, becomes visible. The patients' separation from language and from the personal, social, and historical coherence that language makes possible is in every case debilitating and most often terribly sad. But only through this traumatic lack or loss of language can the kinesthetic, emotional, and spiritual foundation of the human shine forth unimpeded. The strangeness, the alterity, of the other ultimately in Sacks's accounts is not other at all; it is what is most human, possessed by everyone but not recognized.

Through the study of neurological damage, Sacks encounters both alterity and shared humanity. But these moments of encounter when nonlinguistic, human transcendence is revealed often occur with his patients, as happened with him, during aesthetic, usually musical, experiences. The "uncouth movements" of retarded people, he writes, "may disappear in a moment with music and dancing," for music has the power to hold together a coherent self "when abstract or schematic forms of organization fail" (*Man* 185–86). Sacks notes also of an autistic person that when making music, "his entire autistic persona . . . had totally vanished, replaced by movements that were free, graceful, with emotional appropriateness and range" (*Anthropologist* 239). A drummer with Tourette's syndrome finds he must stop taking medication to drum most inventively; without his tics, he lost also his "wild and creative urges" (*Man* 100–01). An amnesiac, who for twenty years had been able to retain no memory for longer than five minutes, seemed transformed when Sacks took him to a Grateful Dead concert. Sacks writes of his "rare and wonderful continuity of attention, everything orienting him, holding him together. . . . I could see no trace of his amnesia, his frontal lobe syndrome—he seemed at this moment completely normal, as if the mu-

sic was infusing him with its own strength, its coherence, its spirit" (*Anthropologist* 75).

Sacks's accounts of neurological impairment and of the nonlinguistic selfhood that can be discovered by means of, but deeper than, the impairment are paradoxical. His impaired subjects are presented as versions of wild children: outside the symbolic loop, products of nature, not of culture. This obviously cannot be true in any strict sense, since the people he writes about were not raised in isolation but grew up in families, had contact with institutions, and in varying degrees could use language. But, as Sacks writes of the mentally retarded, they "have never known, been seduced by the abstract, but have always experienced reality direct and unmediated, with an elemental and at times overwhelming intensity" (*Man* 175). Similarly, for Sacks, autism reveals an intelligence "scarcely touched by tradition and culture—unconventional, unorthodox, strangely 'pure' and original, akin to the intelligence of true creativity" (*Anthropologist* 253). Sacks intends that these neurological wild children, by showing us what we socialized, symbol-using beings are not, show us more deeply what we are.

But, even more paradoxical, this alterity outside culture is manifested most strongly during experiences of highly structured, sophisticated, in every sense *acculturated* aesthetic events. The immediacy that characterizes the nonlinguistic human core emerges through immersion in the most highly mediated cultural products. Most often, the music is classical—Bach, Mendelssohn, Schumann. Even poetry can reveal the nonlinguistic, as Sacks tells how a mentally retarded woman was "at home with poetic language," a kind of "primitive, natural poet" who could "follow the metaphors and symbols of even quite deep poems, in striking contrast to her incapacity with simple propositions and instructions" (*Man* 179). Sacks's sense of alterity, the nonlinguistic, and transcendence seems to rely on an implicit theory of art, which is something like the following.

The deepest experience of living as a human animal, the most basic form of consciousness, is not symbolic or linguistic. It is bodily, a sense of at-homeness in the body, or what Sacks calls “proprioception,” the sense of one’s body as one’s own.<sup>15</sup> Forms of art are conduits to the nonlinguistic insofar as they are experienced through the body. The organized, felt rhythms of art, most vividly of music, as Sacks presents it, correspond to the deepest sensations of embodied life. With this view of art, Sacks can posit a kind of selfhood that is not a product of language and culture and at the same time provide a cultural means through which we can approach and retrieve it. Art then, for Sacks, is essentially kinesthetic. No matter how sophisticated or esoteric, it remains an elaboration of the body: a form, or expression, or experience that is both symbolic and physical. Thus, on one hand, we fortuitously possess forms of selfhood that are not determined by our social-symbolic orders, that transcend the symbolic, that are, in some way of speaking, sacred; yet, on the other hand, we possess particular cultural media—the products and processes of artistic creation—that appear as direct, though stylized, kinesthetic outcroppings of the transcendent. In its art, culture contains the path to its own alterity; but the alterity is in everyone, seen most clearly in the neurologically impaired, particularly in their moments of immersion in art. We are not, then, alienated from our culture, but we are connected to it through our bodies, not our language, and through the kinesthetic qualities of art, not the conceptual.

Sacks’s seemingly uncritical faith in the redemptive powers of the impaired wild child puts him in company with popular culture products like the films *Nell*, *Rain Man*, *Shine*, and *Awakenings*, an adaptation of his book. There is something too easy, too comforting, in these portrayals of the other on the borders of language. How especially reassuring it might be for some to learn that the classi-

cal canon is a direct emanation of our deepest neural-spiritual being. Sacks’s relation with the other requires none of the iconoclastic, ethical rigor prescribed by Levinas or Jacques Lacan. It hops over the dilemma of the Derridean “double gesture,” the problem of representing the other in terms of the same; the other, in Sacks’s writing, ultimately confirms the terms and norms of the same by extending them to further forms of consciousness.

Yet while there is something too easy about Sacks’s encounters with the other, there is also, I think, a danger in dismissing him too easily. He is uncritical about his biases toward high, classical art, but if we broaden the aesthetic boundaries, we arrive at positions resembling those of Julia Kristeva and Paul Ricoeur, in which a nonlinguistic alterity is structured into aesthetic, even narrative, products.<sup>16</sup> These theoretical stances parallel recent work in evolutionary neurology and linguistics carried out by Terrence Deacon, Gerald Edelman, Antonio Damasio, Steven Pinker, and others, who theorize how symbol use and brain physiology coevolved, advances in one provoking advances in the other while a core nonsymbolic emotional and kinesthetic layer of consciousness remained intact. The problem with Sacks’s writing is not necessarily that he is wrong about human consciousness or about art but that the empathetic pleasures of his narratives seem evidence of a complacency and critical obliviousness. In particular, Sacks never questions either his evident *desire* to see his neurological wild children redeem human consciousness and culture or the general traumatic condition that would call for this redemption.

What would it mean then to employ the neurological wild child to consider more thoroughly the contemporary desire for transcendence in the wake of trauma and to consider also the possibility of terror as another symptomatic response to the “fall” of language? Don DeLillo has spent much of his career writing as a kind of refuge from Babel, investigating

ways that ruined, traumatized language can be reassembled. His novels of the 1980s focus on wild child characters, neurological impairments, and especially the desire to imagine wild children with the power to redeem us and pull us with them outside the symbolic order. In addition, DeLillo places this ineffable, wild, or innocent uttering or muttering of transcendence in relation to the logic of terror. In *White Noise* (1985), both the transcendent wild child, Wilder, and the terroristic reunion of word and thing made possible by the drug dylar are made objects of desire and parody. Escape from the symbolic is impossible, yet the desire for and imagining of escape are continual. In the preceding novel, *The Names* (1982), both transcendence and terror seem more attainable. A terrorist cult seems to mirror the symbolic manipulations of the CIA. And, somewhat as in Sacks, aesthetic production—a chapter from the novel written by Tap, the quasi-wild child character—appears to point toward or echo the transcendent. But, unlike Sacks, DeLillo commits himself to portraying the traumatic burden of a damaged symbolic order and the desperate desire to escape from it—which can take political, artistic, sexual, and simply violent forms.<sup>17</sup>

“I don’t want him to talk,” Wilder’s mother says of her son, whose vocabulary is “stalled at about twenty-five words” (35). “The less he talks, the better. . . . Talk is radio” (264). Wilder represents to the other characters a transcendent place outside symbols and mediation. He is the personified desire for that place. Wilder resembles one of his impaired wild child precursors, William Faulkner’s Benjy, but with two crucial differences. First, Faulkner portrays Benjy’s non-temporal, nonlinguistic consciousness—in exquisite language—and reveals it as a site of continual, unforgotten trauma. Benjy lives forever at the precise moment of greatest loss, while Wilder is regarded as the redemption of all loss. Second, Wilder is explicitly an object of desire while Benjy lives in a state of perpet-

ual desire. Indeed, Benjy’s longing for his lost sister can be seen as the energy that motivates the entire novel. It is important to Faulkner’s novel that the reader understand the source of Benjy’s lamentation and that his consciousness though difficult to approach and though depicted as damaged, nevertheless be accessible. It is equally important to DeLillo’s novel that its damaged child not be accessible, that he be fully other with regard to language. Benjy’s prose consciousness provides a set of interpretive puzzles and, ultimately, a set of understandings of damage and loss that have individual and social resonances. Our lack of linguistic access to Wilder’s consciousness, his status as nearly wholly other, encourages his fellow characters and, perhaps, also readers to grasp at interpretations that partake more of transcendence.

A moment late in *The Sound and the Fury*, when we see Benjy for the first time from an external perspective, affords particular insight into DeLillo’s depiction of Wilder. No longer inside Benjy’s consciousness, we see his incomprehensible moaning described as “hopeless and prolonged. It was nothing. Just sound. It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant . . .” (288). Experienced now externally, as producer of “[j]ust sound,” an other of language, Benjy is immediately open to theological or transcendent interpretations that would have been more tenuous (though not impossible) when his consciousness was rendered in language. In relation to the rest of the novel, the absence of a personal narrative perspective in this final section is uncanny. Whose desire is portrayed at this point? For someone, evidently, wishes to see Benjy’s nonlinguistic sorrow figured now in cosmic terms that had not previously been introduced. And at this moment Benjy most resembles Wilder. Wilder’s similar moment, what we might call his “Benjy moment,” comes when he cries for seven hours straight. Echoing Faulkner, the text describes this crying as an existential and spiritual event. This



description comes, however, not from an external narrator as in Faulkner but from Jack Gladney, Wilder's stepfather, the character most invested in Wilder's transcendent, redemptive position. Jack regards Wilder "as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place" (79), uttering "a sound so large and pure . . . saying nameless things . . . an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony" (78). This may or may not be true; all we know is that it is Jack's wish.

For Jack and his wife, Wilder lives in an extended and unmediated present moment, without knowledge of time or death. Wilder's transcendent obliviousness to death becomes clearest in a parodically triumphal moment near the end of the novel when Wilder resolutely and inexplicably rides his tricycle across a six-lane highway. His pedaling, reports Jack, is "mystically charged" (322) and is incomprehensible to the drivers who swerve to avoid him. But, miraculously, he reaches the other side, "a cloud of unknowing, an omnipotent little person" (289), as someone described him earlier.<sup>18</sup> Why did the wild child cross the highway? To show his imperviousness to every medium of symbolic exchange. He emerges unharmed, triumphant, transcendent; and yet, of course, the scene is ludicrous. It does not so much support Jack's evaluations as expose their hopelessness. Indeed, at the end of his ride, safely across the highway, Wilder falls into a ditch and again begins crying.<sup>19</sup>

Wilder is one possible, though insufficient, way out of the symbolic and its accompanying knowledge of death.<sup>20</sup> The other is the drug dylar, a sophisticated neural inhibitor. But dylar's chief side effect is to cure language of its ambiguities. Under the influence of dylar, a person cannot distinguish between word and thing, and so language is imagined to return to its pre-Babel, Adamic or Cratyllic condition. When Jack Gladney confronts Willie Mink, the inventor, and an addictive user, of dylar, he need only say "hail of bullets," and

Mink falls to the floor trying to avoid them. Every sign becomes latched to its proper referent in an unveiling of true significance. As Jack says, "I knew who I was in the network of meanings. . . . I saw things new." And a moment later, as he fires the actual gun, "I saw beyond words. I knew what red was, saw it in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity" (312). This Adamic restoration of language to perfect correspondence also aims at transcendence, but its method is one of terror. The problem of death and the problem of symbolization are united, and murder seems to solve them both. But again, like Wilder's triumphal tricycle ride, this dylar scene is silly. As usual, Jack's inflated language denies it credibility beyond the ratio of his desire. He *wants* his impaired son to be transcendent; he *wants* this drug to unite word and thing and eliminate the fear of death.<sup>21</sup>

Terror is the primary response to the problem of sliding signification in DeLillo's previous novel, *The Names*. A cult, called "The Names," operating in Greece and the Middle East, has as its central practice a ritual murder based on the alphabet. When a person enters a village whose name has the same initials as the person's name (e.g., when Michaelis Kalliambetsos enters Mikro Kamini), the cult kills the person. The alphabetic link between the names, and between the names and the act of murder, is random and without meaning. The cult members, rebelling against the arbitrariness of linguistic signification, impose an ultimate meaning on linguistic randomness. Through their act, the name one has *will* mean something; no further sliding of signification will be possible.

The cult's rebellion against the shifting Saussurean system of language takes place in the context of shifting and ambiguous economic, political, and military power relations. The novel's protagonist, James Axton, works in Athens for a company that does "risk assessment" to determine insurance rates for companies doing business in the Middle



East. Only near the end of the novel does he discover that his company is a front for the CIA, and Axton realizes that his efforts to determine an economic order in the region's social chaos serve also to impose a new political order. What was ambiguous, shifting, uncontrollable will now be constructed and manipulated with certainty. Axton's and the CIA's creation of empire seems to be corollary to the cult's violent conquest of the alphabet. And Axton, in his sexual life, shows a corresponding wish that signs never depart from their referents. He partly seduces, partly rapes an American amateur belly dancer in Athens because her dancing is for her just a set of gestures she has learned and is practicing; it is a system of signs without fixed meanings. She tells him, "[T]he dancing isn't sexy to me," and he replies that this is "the reason I want you so badly" (227). "Your voice," he continues, is "outside your body. . . . There's a lack of connection between your words and the physical action they describe, the parts of the body they describe. That's what draws me to you so intensely. I want to put your voice back inside your body, where it belongs" (228).

Terror means the forcing of signification into a singleness of meaning, and its semantic territory can be sexual, political, and economic. Once signification has been forced into obedience, material conditions and relations will follow.<sup>22</sup>

But the other response to the sliding signifier—the desire to transcend language and the figure of the wild child—is present also in *The Names*. James Axton's ten-year-old son is called Tap, which is an acronym of his initials and thus an arbitrary name (unlike Wilder, whose name signifies what he is). But Tap too is a kind of wild child on the borders of language who, in fact, taps the roots of signification and who, in his writing, is a tap from which flows a spontaneous, almost primal pouring of words. As with the alphabet terrorist cult, the arbitrariness of signification, pushed to its limit, creates significance.

What we see of Tap's novel focuses on a scene in a midwestern Pentecostal church in which a young boy, based on an archaeologist friend of the Axtons (who becomes fascinated with the alphabet cult), tries to speak in tongues but cannot. Through glossolalia, one presumably hopes to transcend the semantic and mediating aspects of language and apprehend the divine in a relation of immediacy, "face to face." Tap's scene depicts a failure of glossolalia, a failure to escape from language, but in doing so it translates glossolalia into aesthetic form, which resembles a kind of Joycean or Kristevan modernist wordplay. His mother says that his writing "absolutely collides with the language" (32). His father finds the "mangled words exhilarating. He'd made them new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were. They were ancient things, secret, reshapable," and his misspellings "seemed to contain curious perceptions about the words themselves, second and deeper meanings, original meanings" (313).<sup>23</sup>

The chapter from Tap's novel ends the book:

Why couldn't he understand and speak?  
There was no answer that the living could give.  
Tongue tied! His fait was signed. He ran into the rainy distance, smaller and smaller.  
This was worse than a retched nightmare. It was the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world. (339)

Genuine immediacy, genuine face-to-face contact with alterity, which here is the real and the traumatic, DeLillo takes to be impossible; but as a substitute he presents the art of the quasi-wild child as conduit to the traumatic-real-transcendent-other. The way out of language, glossolalia, becomes, in its failure and impossibility, the means for a renovation of language. The trauma of failed escape, the fact, the "fait," of life in a world of signs and "fallen wonder," generates new signs, new wonders. Trauma functions here, as I believe it does in the literary versions of

trauma theory, as the origin of a poetics: an obliterating moment in which new possibilities of language are revealed. Trauma theory explains how novelty is possible and, even more basically, how the nonlinguistic, “the nightmare of real things,” can take linguistic form and how a mediation can bear the imprint of lost immediacy.<sup>24</sup>

In this essay, I have described a set of conditions that apply after the fall of a mythical tower and that, I have argued, seem to have been in effect since the origins of narrative, since Gilgamesh’s companion Enkidu learned language and then could no longer run with the animals. At present, we live with traumatic televised images of the fall of the World Trade Center towers burned into our minds, and we live under the rule of a linguistically impaired president who is immersed in a logic of terror that seeks to impose absolute, reductive, and imprisoning meanings on our most important words. This Cratyllic, Adamic impulse to restore language from a fallen, ambiguous condition to one of certainty has always been a traumatized, or opportunistic, attempt to destroy language as an instrument of thought. On the other hand, the various counter-linguistic turns toward forms of unrepresentable alterity have a great appeal. The concept of the inconceivable, of the other that is wholly other—whether in Levinas or as the “event” in Badiou or as the Lacanian real—can have genuine social and political value, for it urges us never to be satisfied with the prevailing codifications of justice and ethics. As Derrida insists, most pointedly in “Force of Law,” there is always an incommensurability between justice or ethics and established law. Justice and its utopian impulse begin with negation.<sup>25</sup>

But negation, and the notions of alterity that it makes possible, is the quintessential product of language, is impossible without language. Without language, we have a world in which what is, is. This is the world of animals, angels, mystics, and wild children: the

world that Oliver Sacks and Don DeLillo tried to imagine. But with language we live in a world in which what is *not* also is. The other, justice, the possibilities of yet-unformed aesthetic forms are not so inaccessible. “It is not in heaven,” as a famous Talmudic commentary proclaims.<sup>26</sup> That is, our relation with alterity comes not by means of supernatural revelation but through human dialogue. And yet all our dialogues will also be symptomatic of histories of damage and crime, including the dialogues and narratives we create in trying to address our traumatic histories. The most intractable political problems—in the Middle East, for example—generally involve the intersection and concussion of different traumatic histories. Perhaps Freud’s speculative anthropologies in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* are not so far off the mark after all. Each historical trauma is the latest in an interlocking series that may be infinite. Though there was no fall of any historical Babel nor any primal father to be murdered, such a sequence of trauma is the ongoing post-Babel condition. (And this is my best gloss of Cathy Caruth’s evocative and elusive comment that “history, like trauma, is never one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” [24].)

In this context, the distinctions between the tendencies of the linguistic and counter-linguistic turns, which were always tentative, appear even less distinct. Taking trauma and its linguistic ur-site, Babel, as principal terms, language stands between two permeable boundaries. It emerges out of, or together with, material sources: the development of human physiology and neurology; the concomitant development of social relations, economies, and institutions; the almost unbearable emotional pressures that creatures with such complex nervous systems experience simply by living. And language then gestures back toward the nonlinguistic, rendering the material world symbolic, and regarding the symbolic as insufficient. Especially in the wake of trauma, part of whose power is

to overwhelm symbolic capacities, language is a middle realm, never fully itself, always in creative and agonized relation with what it is not.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The original language, in this account, was Hebrew, the only language that could “fully express the purpose of the heart” (256). Umberto Eco glosses this commentary as meaning that language before the fall of the tower was what we might call an effective language, for it “not only ‘said’ but ‘did’” and could activate supernatural forces (123).

<sup>2</sup> A 1994 issue of *Daedalus* entitled *After Communism: What?* presents responses from political scientists to the uncertainties of the post-cold war era. The editor refers to the “genuine bewilderment” regarding the state of eastern Europe and to “the decay of any number of comfortable myths created only yesterday, intended to last for millennia” (Graubard xii–xiii). For a variety of scholarly responses to the September 11 attacks, particularly with regard to theories of trauma, see Greenberg.

<sup>3</sup> See my *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* for analyses of a post-apocalyptic sensibility and of post-apocalyptic responses to historical catastrophes.

<sup>4</sup> In *Cratylus*, Socrates speaks of Cratylus’s position on a language of perfect correspondence as “a kind of hunger” (100). Hermogenes’s analysis of language as we use it, Socrates implies, is probably right; but there nevertheless remains an appetite, a desire that language be and do more. This Cratyllic hunger continues to this day. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, wrote, “We all secretly venerate the ideal of a language which in the last analysis would deliver us from language by delivering us to things” (4). See Steiner; Eco; Genette; and Ree for histories of, as Eco titled his book, “the search for a perfect language.” There is also, however, an opposing Hermogenic (or Saussurean) hunger that desires and delights in the abolishing of linguistic correspondence and mimesis. Roland Barthes’s exuberant political-linguistic critiques of the late 1960s seem to me the best examples of this Hermogenic hunger. “Writing constantly posits meaning,” Barthes wrote in “The Death of the Author” (1968), “but always in order to evaporate it . . .” and so writing, “by

refusing to assign to the text (and to the world-as-text) a ‘secret,’ i.e. an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity we may call countertheological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to halt meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, and the law” (54).

<sup>5</sup> See Fredric Jameson’s *The Prison-House of Language* (1972) and Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s *Language Alone* (2002) for thorough accounts of the linguistic turn in relation to literary theory. Jameson and Harpham are critical of the philosophical and political consequences of the widespread and often uncritical adoption of Saussurean linguistics in literary theory. For Jameson, abandoning the signified and referent in favor of the signifier implies a withdrawal from political thinking, and he concludes that the notion that “everything is language is as indefensible as it is unanswerable” (185). Harpham regards this emphasis on language as “the critical fetish of modernity” (57), and he argues that since language can only be described by means of language, descriptions of it must use metaphors that exclude or repress essential elements and that the exclusions and repressions are especially damaging when a linguistic model is applied to social phenomena. The Saussurean model of language as a self-contained system of signs, writes Harpham, is “necessarily and extravagantly haunted by what it excludes” (34), particularly, for Harpham, notions of human nature and agency. Jameson’s and Harpham’s partly overlapping conceptions of the Saussurean-inspired linguistic turns as totalizing and confining are compelling, but both writers neglect what I am calling the counter-linguistic turn—the important concurrent theoretical moves toward articulating an other of language, or a genuine alterity within language, that might provide an alternative to the prison and the fetish. For accounts of the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy (where the term originated), see Richard Rorty’s introduction to *The Linguistic Turn* (“Metaphysical Difficulties”) and his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. This intellectual trajectory is unrelated to Saussurean linguistics, but there are parallels between the two approaches. Consider, for instance, W. V. Quine’s remark that “no particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the [language] field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole” (205), or Donald Davidson’s view that meaning is determined “by assigning the sentence a semantic location in the pattern of sentences that comprise the language” and that there is “no way to tell what the singular terms of a language refer to” (225, 228).

<sup>6</sup> The first academic responses I have seen to what I am calling a counter-linguistic turn are a 1995 symposium in the journal *Common Knowledge* (vol. 4) entitled “A Turn Away from ‘Language?’” in which Manfred Frank, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and others debated the possibility of a nonlinguistic foundation of subjectivity, and a special issue of *Substance* that featured evolutionary and neurological perspectives on the origins of narrative (Abbott).

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, who in “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas” (1964) had critiqued Levinas’s thinking on alterity as an attempt that must ultimately think the other in terms of the same, moved in more recent work closer to Levinas’s position of positing an other that is “*tout autre*,” wholly other (Derrida, *Gift*). The work of Alain Badiou is another instance of an ethics based on a relation to alterity outside language. Badiou’s ethics centers on the notion of the “event,” an apocalyptic-traumatic occurrence that shatters existing symbolic frames and forces a radical reevaluation of ethics and history. Ethics consists of embracing an attitude of fidelity toward the truth that emerges from the event. This truth is discursive, but the event is not. For these thinkers, then, ethics is a response to an irruption of otherness rather than to a general ethical principle or to a pragmatic evaluation of a particular circumstance.

<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva began her work on “semiotic,” or pre-symbolic, modes of subjectivity well before this broader shift in emphasis, showing again that the movement from linguistic to counter-linguistic is an ongoing tension in modern thinking rather than a single linear progression.

<sup>9</sup> In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra points to a frequent confusion in literary and psychoanalytic theory between absence and loss—the first of which is structural, the second historical. To posit as an absence what is, in fact, a loss is to deny a historical event and may also preclude taking steps toward healing the wounds produced by the loss. Identifying trauma only as an inevitable gap in the symbolic order rather than as the result of a terrible and destabilizing event seems to suggest that paralyzed irony is the most reasonable political stance.

<sup>10</sup> For work on trauma theory, the Holocaust, and issues of witnessing, see Felman and Laub; Caruth; LaCapra; Berger, *After the End*; Hirsch; Rothberg; Langer; Young; and Hartman. For trauma theory as it relates to more contemporary political issues, see Greenberg; Berger, “War”; and Farrell.

<sup>11</sup> There are exceptions to this general recent tendency. The tragic reality of “Genie,” the Los Angeles girl confined by her father for her first thirteen years alone in a room and never spoken to, is an awful, sadistic reminder of the Enlightenment fantasy of isolation. This case elicited widespread interest among psychologists and linguists who hoped to learn from the young woman more about the mechanisms of language acquisition. In fiction, Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* and the film *Nell* invoke the Enlightenment wild child narrative in very different ways. Nell’s isolation renders her pure and redemptive. Auster’s Peter Stillman is damaged, babbling, weirdly inspired in his defective language use, paranoid, possibly psychotic.

<sup>12</sup> See Lane; Masson; Shattuck; and Rymer for accounts of the varied philosophical discourses surrounding wild children. Instances of contemporary neurological

wild children include, in addition to the works under discussion, the novels *Being There*, by Jerzy Kosinski, *Motherless Brooklyn*, by Jonathan Lethem, and *Life and Times of Michael K*, by J. M. Coetzee; the films *Rain Man*, *Shine*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Sling Blade*; and memoirs by the autistic writers Temple Grandin and Donna Williams.

<sup>13</sup> The use of impaired or disabled characters to carry such symbolic weight has been explored and critiqued by scholars associated with disability studies, such as Lenard Davis, David Mitchell, and Sharon Snyder. Mitchell and Snyder argue that the disabled have consistently served as a supplement, or cultural prosthesis, in the dominant narratives of Western culture. What is unspeakable or unresolvable in normative discourse is reimaged in the form of the disabled body. Such appropriation of disability as a “material metaphor” they see as ethically problematic (ch. 2), particularly insofar as disabled characters in fiction are linked by their bodies to their fates, but Mitchell and Snyder advocate new, historicized understandings of representations of disability accounting for the actual lives of disabled people rather than simply heap opprobrium on what they consider exploitative representations. Mitchell and Snyder’s work is of great value in showing the pervasiveness of disability in our most important cultural narratives and “the integral nature of disability as a category of human difference that cannot be absorbed into a homogenizing scheme of a people’s shared attributes” (44). I would criticize their approach, however, and the attitude of many writers in disability studies, for neglecting the role of trauma and especially the effects of trauma on the various discourses emerging in relation to disability. See my “Trauma without Disability, Disability without Trauma: A Disciplinary Divide.”

<sup>14</sup> Popular and nonacademic responses to Sacks’s writing are almost invariably enthusiastic. Walter Clemens in *Newsweek*, for instance, wrote that Sacks’s “humane essays . . . are deeply stirring because each of them touches on our own fragile ‘normal’ identities and taken for granted abilities,” and Brina Caplan in the *Nation* praised Sacks for “a romantic spirit worthy of William Blake or D. H. Lawrence” (212). Criticisms of Sacks come mainly from two sources: scientists and medical professionals who take him to task for his lack of rigor (e.g., Daniel X. Freedman, Jerome Bruner) and writers from the field of disability studies who consider Sacks’s approach a condescending appropriation of his subjects’ lives (e.g., Tom Couser, whose treatment of Sacks is the most thorough and judicious to date, and, more polemically, Tom Shakespeare, who wrote that Sacks “mistook his patients for a literary career” [137]). For an account of Sacks that considers him as a religious writer, see Mark A. Schneider, whose perspective is different from but somewhat parallel to mine. Schneider, a sociologist who takes as his point of departure Max Weber’s theory of modernity as disenchantment, views Sacks as part of a contemporary or postmodern reenchantment of the



world. Schneider argues that, contra Weber, the bureaucratic and technical procedures of modernity have not banished enchantment, that enchantment is “part of our normal condition” and simply takes new forms just beyond the prevailing rational paradigms (x).

<sup>15</sup> *Man* 43. Evolutionary-neurological accounts of consciousness prior to language appear in Damasio and in Edelman.

<sup>16</sup> For Kristeva, the “semiotic” is a mode of expression rooted in biological and psychic drives. Separate from and opposed to symbolic and linguistic expressions, it can be seen in “the child’s echolalia before the appearance of language, but also the play of colors in an abstract painting or a piece of music that lacks signification but has a meaning” (*Interviews* 21; see also *Revolution*). Ricoeur and other theorists such as David Carr and Andrew Norman argue that narrative is not an arbitrary structure imposed on an intrinsically formless reality (as it is in, e.g., Hayden White’s view) but is rather a fundamental human mode of apprehending and organizing the world.

<sup>17</sup> Language is a central concern in all DeLillo’s work, and he has on several occasions used impaired characters to explore the relations between language and some other of language. By ingesting a drug that disables the brain’s language centers, the protagonist of *Great Jones Street* (1973), Bucky Wunderlick, becomes a double of the novel’s mentally retarded character who is said to represent “the beauty and horror of wordless things” (52). When his language abilities return, Bucky is nostalgic for that unmediated experience in which “nothing erodes in the mad weather of language” (265). In *The Body Artist* (2001), we encounter a mysterious figure, possibly autistic, or retarded, or a kind of idiot savant—or perhaps a projection of the protagonist’s imagination—who seems to exist outside any normal chronological sequence and who, perhaps for that reason, cannot properly use language. The protagonist, traumatized by the sudden death of her husband, seeks finally to emulate this condition outside time and language. It is possible even to identify the character of Lee Oswald in *Libra* (1988) as a linguistically impaired quasi-wild child whose dyslexia becomes a figure both for the general senselessness of cold war America and for the difficulties of historical representation. David Cowart’s *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* is the most thorough and consistently perceptive treatment of DeLillo’s attitudes toward language. Noting astutely that DeLillo likes to “tease the reader with what one might call intimations of essentiality” (180), Cowart nevertheless loses sight at times of the extent to which this is a tease, the portrayal primarily of a desire and not a truth. Cowart’s DeLillo resembles at times my reading of Oliver Sacks.

<sup>18</sup> “The Cloud of Unknowing” is the title of an anonymously composed fourteenth-century English text of mystical negative theology. The text describes an ecstatic relation to God that surpasses all attempts to understand or articulate him in language.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Dewey, Arnold Weinstein, and Paul Maltby in various ways regard Wilder as genuinely salvific, arguing that through Wilder, as Weinstein writes, DeLillo “reverses that ultimately opaque language that is prior to all codes and grammars” (306) or that, in Maltby’s words, Wilder illustrates DeLillo’s romantic belief in “some primal, pre-abstract level of language which is naturally endowed with greater insight, a primitive order of meaning that enables unmediated understanding, community, and spiritual communion with the world” (264). David Cowart is skeptical of such assertions, though he then argues persuasively that Wilder as “cloud of unknowing” functions as antidote to the toxic cloud of the novel’s second section and to the “nebulous mass” that forms in Jack’s body (280).

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Burke was right to call the invention of the negative one of the defining features of human language use (9–13), and one can only conceive of death in terms of negation—or the elaboration of negation by means of tropes of the sublime and varieties of catachresis. So elimination of the concept of death—the goal of the drug dylar—brings with it, as its necessary side effect, the elimination of signification, since there is no signified to correspond to the signifier “my own death.” Death, an essential piece of a Saussurean language of systemic relations and sliding signifiers, cannot be part of a language of perfect correspondence. For another perspective on death and language, we can look to evolutionary linguistics. The development of the brain that made possible the use of symbols occurred together with the development of long-term memory, and any reasonably sophisticated symbol use is impossible without an extended memory. Thus, language evolved together with the awareness of time and, concurrently, we must assume, with the knowledge of death. See Damasio; Deacon; and Edelman for discussions on the relations between language and memory.

<sup>21</sup> The critical reception of *White Noise* (the novel of DeLillo’s that has received the most critical attention) recapitulates the theoretical trajectory this essay has described, moving from perspectives oriented by a linguistic turn to readings that suggest turns against language. For Cornel Bonca, *White Noise* was celebrated initially “because it seems to illuminate the [then] reigning theories of cultural post-modernism, as if it were written as an example of what Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, or Jean Baudrillard [had] been saying about our socio-cultural condition” (25). Earlier interpretations, such as those by Leonard Wilcox, John Frow, and Frank Lentricchia (“*Libra*”), often focused on the “most photographed barn in America” as an instance of Baudrillardian simulation, the autonomy of symbols, and the loss of the referent. Later interpretations (e.g., Weinstein; Maltby; Cowart; and Osteen) have tended to focus more on Wilder and on levels of existence or consciousness that transcend or negate symbolization.

<sup>22</sup> Paula Bryant notes that the cult seeks “the binding of symbol and object into one-to-one correspondence



through a terminal act of connection" (18), and David Cowart describes the murders as "expression of a desire . . . to arrest the lexical fullness that gives rise to ambiguity" (167) and to institute "a violent return to the Adamic state of language" (171). Neither, however, recognizes sufficiently the broader political implications the novel draws from these acts of terror. Dennis Foster is explicit on this point, seeing in the cult murders "a demystifying parody of civilized systems," which are likewise, according to Foster, designed to produce "terror, ecstasy, and death" (106). Foster has written a brilliant and provocative analysis of *The Names*, in which he interprets the novel's various anti-Saussurean moves in terms of a Kristevan prelinguistic level of consciousness that motivates all cultural production. This prelinguistic "language" (Kristeva's *chora*) is, for Foster, the origin of what Foster calls a "perversity" that is a universal and implacable feature in human nature. Foster's perversity resembles Kristeva's notion of abjection, Lacan's of the real, and Bataille's of the heterogeneous. This prelinguistic perversity, which we see in the cult's alphabetic murders and Tap's glossolalic novel, is nonrational, nonproductive (in economic terms), equally creative and destructive, and is the force that inevitably derails all social efforts toward rational or progressive goals. Thus, for Foster, all efforts subjects may pursue in order to understand or, in psychoanalytic terms, work through their perverse impulses will fail; for the perverse thoroughly inhabits rationality and language, and therapy is merely another form of perverse enjoyment. Foster's readings, although brilliant, are, I think, marred by the tendentiousness with which he maintains his thesis. All literature, it would seem, indeed all culture, all human thought, is for Foster *nothing but* the enactment of perversity—an "institutional complicity with some more primal need" (96). He begins with this premise, and every example simply proves it further. One is tempted to ask how Foster *knows* these things and to wonder whether his views on human nature and culture, however interesting, are, finally, more matters of personal temperament than of evidence, interpretation, or argument.

<sup>23</sup> The practice of speaking in tongues derives from the following passage in Acts: "Now as the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place; and suddenly there came from the sky a noise like the blowing of a great wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And they saw what was like separate tongues of fire, and one settled on each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in different languages according as the Spirit gave each one the gift of speaking them" (*Acts*, 2.1–4). DeLillo has commented that glossolalia "could be viewed as a higher form of infantine babbling" and that "we feel, perhaps superstitiously, that children have a direct route to, have direct contact to the kind of natural truth that eludes us as adults" ("Outsider" 64). Thus, David Cowart may be correct to say that DeLillo "leaves open the possibility

that a relation persists between the linguistic and the divine" (174). I would emphasize, however, the hypothetical quality of DeLillo's remarks and observe again that what we see in *The Names* is an instance of failed glossolalia reworked into a doubled form of literary art: that is, an extremely sophisticated production of a naive text. And yet I too, like Cowart and like those involved in the various theoretical turns toward physicality, trauma, and alterity under discussion in this essay, want to "leave open the possibility" that something beyond language is being tapped by a successful literary artist.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Osteen offers a compelling reading of the failed glossolalia as an invitation, indeed an obligation, to dialogue. "By immersing readers in heteroglossia, Tap's tale throws off the objections and obstructions to dialogic interplay," and in that way, "though we cannot return to Adamic speech, we may take comfort in the proliferating richness of human talk" (140, 136). Osteen's extended reflection on and analysis of the prefix "ob" (and Tap's secret "ob" language) is a marvelously playful and brilliant contribution to understanding the role of language in this novel.

<sup>25</sup> In addition to the earlier reference to Kenneth Burke's more general comments on the negative in language, I mean "negation" in roughly the senses proposed by thinkers of the Frankfurt school, as a fundamental rejection of prevailing modes of thought, a quasi-apocalyptic mental clearing away of the ideological terrain so as to make room for genuine freedom, whose precise forms cannot yet be known. Herbert Marcuse, for instance, called for "interpretation of that-which-is in terms of that-which-is-not, confrontation of the given facts with that which they exclude" (447), and he placed negation in the context of a damaged world as "the effort to contradict a reality in which all logic and all speech are false to the extent that they are part of a mutilated whole" (449). Utopia is negation's unarticulatable motivating force, whether expressed in philosophy or art. "Utopia remains the negation of what exists," wrote Theodor Adorno, and yet "art is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively. A cryptogram of the new is the image of its collapse; only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia" (*Aesthetic Theory* 32). Or, expressing this incommensurability in other terms, "what differs from the existent will strike the existent as witchcraft" (*Negative Dialectics* 33).

<sup>26</sup> A group of rabbis are arguing about a passage of Torah:

Again Rabbi Eliazer said to them: "If the *halachah* [Jewish law] agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out, "Why do ye dispute with R. Eliazer, seeing that in all matters the *halachah* agrees with him!" But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed, "It is not in heaven."

What did the Holy One do in that hour? He laughed with joy, saying, "My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me."

(*Babylonian Talmud* 353 [BT BM 59b])

Rabbi Joshua refers to the following biblical passage: "Surely, this instruction which I enjoy upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us . . . ?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us . . . ?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart" (Deut. 30.11–14 [Tanakh]).

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