

Words, War, and Meditation in Don DeLillo's *End Zone*

Don DeLillo's *End Zone* deserves the reviewers' raves cited on the cover of the paperback edition!—"brilliant," "irresistible," "no mere football novel"—but many new paperback novels seem to receive similarly enthusiastic tributes and they are nevertheless forgotten. How does a good book begin to be taken seriously? How does it begin to engage the attention of responsible critics of contemporary fiction? In this essay I would like to suggest that *End Zone* should receive serious consideration, and that its achievement just might have earned it a place with our enduring literature, with those books that we reread, teach, and think about when we think about other books.

"No mere football novel," no: *End Zone* will disappoint readers who hurry through its pages expecting the razzle dazzle of football games, where men lock horns in war-like combat, scrimmage, pass, charge, and otherwise live up to the expected terms in a sportscaster's vocabulary. A game does occur in the central section of the novel, not from a sportscaster's outside view, but rather from a player's inside view, telegraphed in an inscrutable playing code with action communicated through the speed of short, vigorous, but otherwise incomprehensible sentences. Indeed, the novel is about football only insofar as training for that game is one stage of the way to the evacuation of the world of sense, to a stark, blank state of Zen-like meditation out of which eventually a new language and a new value may rise. Set in the West, it is a book about the decline of language under the bombardment of terms from thermonuclear warfare, and an attempt to revive language through an ascetic disciplined ritual of silence and self-loss through football.

Simplify, simplify. The team members come to the deserts of west Texas to begin their lives again, the WASP Gary Harkness dropping out of success and his father's clichéd memoranda urging upon him the values of enterprise and effort, the Black Taft Robinson spurning Columbia University athleticism (however feeble) and other offers of cash and fame, the Jew Anatole Bloomberg deciding to jettison the burden of history, namely, in his case, his Jewishness. These three come in early August to this *End Zone* of America, to a college which is trying to put its name on the map, under the direction of a new coach, significantly named Creed, who is himself, after an outburst of unprofessional violence, trying to begin again, to save himself, to make a name. These four are abandoning their old selves, trying to become new men, and Creed directs them in the rites of self-loss, preparatory to initiation. "Warlock and avenging patriarch" (p. 4), he isolates them from society like primitive pubescents, forcing them to abjure extraneous frivolities and to concentrate on the football until it becomes in their minds a living thing. "The thing to do is to concentrate on objects" (p. 34). Thus, the pigskin is the living, thinking idol of the tribe; "get down to basics" is the creed; and Creed, seated under a portrait of Saint Theresa, promises no cash, no fame, no attributes, but only work, pain, and suffering, as the Sioux Indians purified themselves through fasting and solitude (p. 164). Of Creed's promises Robinson later remembers: "No time for non-essential things. We would deny ourselves. We would get right down to the bottom of it. We would find out how much we could take. We would learn the secrets" (p. 195).

The college is "Logos College," and its name reminds us that new knowledge comes with new words. But new words do not come until the old ones go through a process of purging, fasting, and paring down. The old words are words of war and words of advertising, vast terms that have long ceased

to connect with the things they signify. An army general, uprooted from any human ties by living in a motel room in the desert and refusing to answer the telephone, spews forth his calculations on thermal warfare with passing mention of "two thousand megs for each side." Gary Harkness finally interrupts him, saying "Major, there's no way to express thirty million dead. No words. So certain men are recruited to reinvent the language" (p. 64). The Major's words are "painkillers"; in the swarm of specialized technological words, "nobody has to feel any guilt" (p. 67). Similarly, in the wake of the team's defeat in the most important game of the season, a publicity agent is hired to contradict the reality. With no interest in the game per se, this master of puff, Wally, unpacks his emptiness with words, to the point where shaking a hand becomes "Handation" and making it big becomes "Bigation." Wally manipulates the players' names so that they make an incantatory rhythm regardless of real actions on the field. He likes "freak appeal . . . any kind of charisma" (p. 145). He tells Gary, "you got to daze people. You got to climb inside their mouth" (p. 145).

The language of war, the language of advertising, and even the empty mouthings of everyday conversation, haunt the book and hypnotize the players. Gary listens to the Major and to Zap, a professor of geopolitics, reel off speculations on mass death, having lost sight of the single dead human body suffocated beneath these abstractions. Gary asks questions trying to get to the bottom of such finality, trying to see and feel how it will be. Unable to reach this single unalterable fact, he repeats the words as if they are magical spells, annihilates his feelings in these sounds: "I became fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability, post-attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, spasm war. Pleasure in these words. They were extremely effective, I thought, whispering shyly of cycles of destruction so great that the language of past world wars became laughable, the wars themselves somewhat naive . . . Had I gone mad?" (p. 17). Just so his salesman father had forgotten his real sorrows in meaningless but cadenced maxims pasted to Gary's door in place of paternal love: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going" (p. 13), and just so Bloomberg is submerged in the accumulated fat of his tradition and in the reversals and indirections of Jewish speech. Words for the unimaginable and untellable still mesmerize at the end of the novel, despite the austerities of initiation: Taft is obsessed by books about the Nazi ovens ("the showers, the experiments, the teeth, the lampshades, the soap," p. 198); Gary is obsessed by books on thermonuclear war ("Horrible diseases, fires raging in the inner cities, crop failures, genetic chaos, temperatures soaring and dropping, panic, looting, suicides, scorched bodies," p. 198). These words are themselves a disease or a bewitchment; they make everyone babble.

In the face of the lack of reference of words to real things and real life, the ascetic, exiled initiates find in the desert a single stone and a pile of excrement. This sudden startling pile of excrement is the occasion for one of the most beautiful meditations in the book, for it focuses Gary Harkness's thoughts about the end zone, which is at once a void and the beginning of a new ball game. History is excrement, the old used up language is excrement, but once it has been evacuated, it nurtures a new life cycle. "Nullity . . . whisper of inexistence . . . rot repeating itself" (p. 70) allow us to start from scratch while paradoxically reminding us that Kilroy was here. "All around me the day was ending" (p. 70), broods Gary, hearing in the distance an army staff vehicle approaching from a desert base. He thinks, "but in some form of void, freed from consciousness, the mind remakes itself. What we must know must be learned from blanked out pages. To begin to reword the overflowing

world. To subtract and disjoin. To re-recite the alphabet. To make elemental lists. To call something by its name and need no other sound" (p. 70). Gary stands in the desert evening near the pile of excrement and the stone painted black by Bloomberg ("metaphorist of the desert") in honor of his mother's death, and begins an elemental list, naming, like Adam, the new things that he sees which are all he feels sure enough to know: "The sun. The desert. The sky. The silence. The flat stones. The insects. The wind and the clouds. The moon. The stars. The west and the east. The song, the color, the smell of the earth. Blast area. Fire area. Body-burn area" (p. 71). The desert is a palimpsest, and so is the evacuated life of Logos College. The similarity of DeLillo's title to Beckett's *Endgame* may thus not be accidental, for the themes of garbage, excrement, minimal survival, recycled conversations, clichés, Chaplinesque gags, and sudden silences are similar. When Clov in *Endgame* quotes Prospero's "Our revels now are ended,"² he could well appear in *End Zone*, pointing to its sense of an ending as renewing apocalypse, and its belief that all activity is invented play. In the face of such emptiness, only discipline and silence may lead us back to the simple correspondence of things with words, away from the cancerous reduplication of shadows; for "a new way of life requires a new language" (p. 193). This is the end zone, and a new game can begin in "spiritual exercise," in "silence, words, silence, silence, silence" (p. 198).

Anya Taylor
The City University of New York

NOTES

¹Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (New York: Pocket Books, 1973).

²Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 56.