

COSMOPOLIS

Don DeLillo

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In *Cosmopolis*, Don DeLillo gives us one day in the life of 28-year-old Eric Michael Packer, a currency trader and financial assets manager with a “personal fortune in the tens of billions.” The reader accompanies Packer during the hours spent traveling across Manhattan by limousine—a journey interrupted and prolonged by a couple of meals, the occasional amorous encounter, a presidential motorcade, an enormous demonstration against globalism, and the funeral of a rap star. A late-capitalist Faust, Packer has “made and lost sums that could colonize a planet,” but he has finally overreached (or overleveraged) himself against a currency (the yen) that refuses to respond to his manipulation. Towards the end of his westward odyssey (and well before he meets a murderous former employee, his double and the final reification of his self-destructiveness), he realizes that his day is passing in more senses than one. Given the story’s temporal frame, Packer’s fate has a certain Miltonic resonance: he falls from morn to noon, from noon to starry eve. Like some figure of ancient Sardanapalian refusal to let the rest of the world survive his own end, Packer starts taking down those around him as well—his wife, his vizier-like chief of security—and even thinks of burning his stretch limousine, the modern tycoon’s Viking longboat.

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In the course of this single day, Packer’s empire collapses like... certain great towers in New York, the “world city” of DeLillo’s title. In his first novel since the events of September 11, DeLillo develops suggestions, first made in a December 2001 *Harper’s* essay, that the towers and what they stand for are brought down less by ideological conflict than by a deadly combination of overreaching and simple Spenglerian entropy: great civilizations eventually overextend themselves and perish. A metaphor for contemporary American appetite and its consequences, Packer moves mythically westward as his manic borrowing of yen brings him closer to ruin—his own and that of the world made in his image. Like that other Ulysses-for-a-day, Leopold Bloom, Packer also functions as recording instrument for the civilization that, as he makes his progress through the city, passes before him in review. DeLillo hints at some tectonic shift in the zeitgeist, but he leaves pictures of any new, displacing dispensation to the worried surmise of readers. Will the future belong to crowds, as he declares in *Mao II* (1991)? Will proliferating information clog the arteries of understanding, as in *Libra* (1988)? Will our civilization be choked by the rubbish it generates, as he intimates in *Underworld* (1997)?

Though *Cosmopolis* accommodates all of these destinies, a particular manifestation of waste seems most to exercise DeLillo here. Less egregious than the contents of the trash compactor in *White Noise* (1985) or the garbage scows and dumps and hazmat of *Underworld*, waste in *Cosmopolis* figures in frequent references to obsolescence—not only in cul-

tures but in institutions, in language, and especially in technology. Quick to recoil at the worm of obsolescence in this or that technological apple, Eric Packer has begun to worry about the most marvelous operating system of all: his own body. Now fantasizing survival as pure data, now imagining one of his subordinates bathing his viscera in palm wine and natron, he contemplates corporeal destiny and half-seriously speculates about prospects for some personal exemption from the fate of all the gadgets he buys, uses, and discards.

One might expect that anything or anyone opposing such a figure of nihilistic rapacity would enjoy the author’s approbation, and certainly many readers will assume that DeLillo means to endorse the cause of the demonstrators who break in waves against Packer’s creeping limousine. Indeed, so deadpan and detached is this author that he is forever being hijacked by critics who forget that, as Sir Philip Sidney famously observes, the poet nothing affirmeth. To some degree, every novel becomes a Rorschach for readers, but the especially *scriptible* fictions of DeLillo seduce critics into dubious acts of projection, the constructing of meanings they want to find. Like a theme doll or action figure (Western Barbie! Disco Barbie!), the author is dressed up in outfits congenial to variously tendentious politics. Thus we get Marxist DeLillo, Sporting DeLillo, Conspiracy Theory DeLillo, Theistic DeLillo, Neoromantic DeLillo, and so on. Not that critics must always reenact the parable of the blind men and the elephant: from LeClair’s Systems-Theory DeLillo to Osteen’s Subversive Ventriloquist DeLillo, the best criticism discerns principles of coherence in the DeLillo oeuvre, a postmodern approximation of Faulknerian vision and breadth.

To subject DeLillo to narrow-gauge political readings is seriously to misread one of our most subtle artists. Before considering how this novel’s depiction of antiglobalist passion should be construed, one might pause over the funeral of Brutha Fez, a “Sufi rap star” admired for his adaptation of ancient *qawwali* lyrics. The author’s tone in characterizing Fez’s obsequies is a masterpiece of ironic control. DeLillo sets a kind of trap for readers prepared to think of someone like Brutha Fez as legitimate culture hero. Only the wry observation that he has departed from precedent by dying of natural causes (rappers are normally homicide victims) signals just how his memory will figure here. The funeral—beside which the Moonie wedding that begins *Mao II* appears downright intimate—gradually makes clear just how skewed our cultural priorities can be. This funeral is so over the top, so endless, on such a grand scale that at last one begins to laugh. But behind our laughter is the recognition that we have seen extravagant spectacles like this before, and they “celebrate” only a nation’s addiction to sensation and the artistic pretense of hustlers who endlessly traduce the multicultural vision. Perhaps most disturbing is that DeLillo’s set piece, as we know from daily journalism, involves little if any actual exaggeration.

By the same token, the picture of antiglobalism in this novel should not be understood as authorial side-taking. Along with anyone who watches the nightly news during meetings of powerful industrial nations’ secretaries or ministers of the economy, DeLillo has observed the fury of those who object to globalism and its domination by American capital. In this novel, however, the antiglobalist demonstrators remain nameless and almost entirely faceless (though not dickless—one parachutes naked into the melee, daubed all over in anarchist red and black). When one demonstrator burns himself to death, the characters think, predictably, of the passionate conviction that Vietnamese monks once brought to their

protests. But this self-immolation (as dubious in its moral grounding as the same act carried out by Jack Laws in *Players* [1984]) merely calls into question the demonstrators’ judgment and sense of proportion. Though noisy and disruptive, the antiglobalist demonstrators lack stature. In their red and black they parade before Packer as before his spiritual ancestor, Hawthorne’s Major Molineux.

In *Cosmopolis*, then, DeLillo undertakes an objective meditation on the inevitable fate of powerful men (seldom women) and the powerful civilizations they co-opt. The occasional reference to ancient Egypt hints at the decline—now gradual, now precipitous—of those states and individuals that seem most secure in their power. Less interested in polemics than in disinterested observation, DeLillo at once anatomizes our nation’s appetite for sheer spectacle and satirizes the lemminglike surrender to the tide of money and power and celebrity that scours the American social shingle.