

# Trauma, Narrative and Mastery

*Psychoanalytic perspectives on Don DeLillo's  
Falling man*



Ari Sendi

ENG4790 Master's Thesis in English, Secondary Teacher Training

Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages

Thesis Supervisor: Bruce Barnhart

Faculty of Humanities

Fall 2020



# Trauma, Narrative and Mastery

Psychoanalytic perspectives on Don DeLillo's *Falling man*

Ari Sendi

© Ari Sendi

2020

Trauma, Narrative and Mastery

Ari Sendi

<https://www.duo.uio.no>

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet I Oslo



## Abstract.

This thesis offers a reading of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. The goal of this project is to use psychoanalytic theory to study the novel's representation of the relationship between trauma, narrative, repetition and mastery in the context of the 9/11 attacks. The first section of my analysis focuses on psychoanalytic approaches to understanding the relationship between narrative and trauma and discusses these perspectives in light of the novel's protagonist and his affair with a minor character in the text. The second section of my analysis focuses on connecting Freud's articulation of unconscious desires to repeat traumas in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to DeLillo's representation of poker in the novel.



## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Bruce Barnhart for his support, empathy and valuable academic insights during the process of writing this thesis. His interest and passion for the relationship between literature and the world around us has been very inspirational and his classes at the University of Oslo has also meant a lot to me. I would also like to thank M.B. for all the love and support. I am very lucky, and I am very grateful. Thanks.

Ari Sendi, 2020, New York City.





# Table of Contents

<b>1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Theoretical framework .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2.1 Approaching trauma.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2.2 Trauma, Narrative and Literature .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.3 Psychoanalytic concepts.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.4 Limitations .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3 Discussion and analysis.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.1 A glimmer of hope – Narrative building as a lifeline .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.2 Despair – Keith Neudecker’s never-ending fall .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>4 Concluding comments .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>50</b>

# 1 Introduction

It's September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Dressed in a suit, covered in blood and debris, and carrying a suitcase, Keith Neudecker is walking through a storm of ash, chaos, and destruction. He is walking from the financial district on the lower west side of Manhattan, headed north towards Canal Street. Standing amidst the chaos and horror of one of the most destructive acts of violent terrorism in modern history, Keith stops for a moment as he sees a white shirt floating in the sky, falling towards the East River. This scene is our entry-point into *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo's 9/11 novel, which explores the trauma of September 11<sup>th</sup> through an intimate portrait of an upper-class family living in Manhattan. The opening sequence draws us right into the chaos and destruction on the streets of Manhattan in the moments after the first tower was hit, and the remaining pages of the novel present the days and years after the attacks. Here, we observe the different ways in which this traumatic event shapes the lives of the novel's characters and affects the dynamic of their family. DeLillo creates an interesting dynamic with the novel's intimate depiction of domestic family life as the entry-point to exploring the massive global event of 9/11 and its traumatic aftereffects. In the novel, DeLillo introduces us to a small selection of traumatized characters, shaped in different ways by their experience of the day the Twin Towers fell and we watch how they struggle, in different ways, to try to make sense of life after the unthinkable happened.

The terror attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 are among the most course-altering and significant historical events of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the introduction to his 2009 book *First as tragedy, then as farce*, Slavoj Žižek describes the attacks on 9/11 as a sort of pivotal historical moment, a departure from a period of American optimism following the fall of the Eastern Bloc in the late 80s and the era of Bill Clinton, into a period marked by uncertainty, instability, and danger (pp. 1-3)<sup>1</sup>. As Žižek and other critics have observed, the 9/11 terror attacks would indeed mark the beginning of a new decade affected by unpredictability, conflict, and shifting global power dynamics – only twelve years after Francis Fukuyama had declared “the end of history” and by that the global triumph of the western breed of liberal democracy and global capitalism (Fukuyama, 1992). As such, the 9/11 terrorist attacks are considered the first defining historical event of the 2000s, which marked the beginning of the first decade of the new millennium and the start of a new world.

---

<sup>1</sup> A similar analysis is made by Conte, 2011 (pp. 1-2).

In *After the Fall*, Richard Gray also sees the events on 9/11 as a sort of pivotal moment or a point of cultural departure. However, his analysis of the fall of the Twin Towers and the responses to 9/11 further connects the event to a broader analysis of reoccurring patterns in writing and perception of history and cultural identity in the US. “There is a recurrent tendency in American writing, and in the observation of American history, to identify crisis as a descent from innocence to experience: but the crisis changes, the moment of descent has been located at a number of different times in the national narrative, most of them associated with war” (Gray, 2011, p. 2). Gray points to historical events such as the War of Independence, the Civil War, the world wars and the war in Vietnam as examples of this type of fall or crisis. Gray emphasizes the importance of narrative, and the narrative pattern he describes goes like this: Something happens, a crisis, typically violent and traumatic. The crisis is experienced collectively and its impact results in a perceived descent from innocence to experience, disrupting the status quo of American culture. With this experience, the culture changes and American culture prior to the crisis is perhaps viewed with nostalgia as a period marked by innocence and naivete compared to American post-crisis life. This way, the particular crisis or “moment of fall” becomes the defining cultural and historic moment of its time and for the generation of American writers and people responding to it. This American narrative, Gray argues, was re-evoked by the events of 9/11.

While the premise of Gray’s analysis builds on the notion that that the fall of the Twin Towers evoked an old narrative pattern in American culture, Gray observes that the attacks on 9/11 have certain qualities making it distinct from the crises of other generations, other “moments of fall”. One of the elements making the events on 9/11 unique, Gray argues, was “the specific terms in which writers reacted to it” (Gray, 2011, p. 4). In his book, he is particularly interested in how writers of fiction have responded to the attacks – and the relative success and failure of these writers in addressing the attacks in a meaningful way. An event of such enormous impact as the fall of the Twin Towers does invite or demand representation in art and literature, and the 9/11 attacks naturally generated a variety of different literary responses, as well as other forms of artistic expressions.

When writing on the events of 9/11 – the fall of the Twin Towers and the aftermath it caused, Gray states that “These are as much a part of the soil, the deep structure lying beneath and shaping the literature of the American nation, not least because they have reshaped our consciousness; they are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing” (Gray, 2011, p. 24). Given the large scale and impact of the events of the attacks, it is safe to say that the effects of 9/11 on

American writing and culture, in general, was immense. In many ways (at least until we enter the post-COVID world), we are still living in the post-9/11 world, in the days after the towers fell. The full extent of how the terror attacks have shaped American culture and society, and continue to affect how we think and write, is probably still beyond comprehension and will perhaps always remain somewhat unclear.

The difficulty of comprehending an event of such a massive scale as 9/11 and the collective trauma it caused is evident in the early literary responses to the attacks. Like Gray, several critics have commented on how these initial literary responses to the events on 9/11 suggested a collective doubt in the ability of language in making any valuable contributions to understanding or representing the attacks. In the discourse of literary responses to 9/11, statements such as "There are no words", "I have nothing to say," "Language cannot express..." etc. have become almost like a trope in early statements issued in the time after the attacks. However absurd it seemed to respond to such an event of extreme violence and trauma by using language, and despite the difficulty of producing anything other than banalities and platitudes, a number of novels directly or indirectly addressing the events of 9/11 have been published in the 19 years since the attacks.

Along with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safer Foer, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Mohsin Hamid, and *The Zero* (2006) by Jess Walter, DeLillo's 2007 novel is perhaps the most well-known 9/11 novel, commonly regarded as one of the most influential novels representing and discussing the attacks. In the field of literary criticism, *Falling Man* is often mentioned in discussions of post-9/11 literature and literary representations of trauma, and since its release critics have published several articles offering different readings of the novel. As the novel deals so directly with the 9/11 attacks and represents the effects of the attacks on individuals immediately impacted by them, critics generally understand the novel as a mediation on cultural and individual trauma. Several critics, including Charles (2011) and Baelo-Allué (2012) have studied *Falling Man's* representation of psychological trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Other critics' readings of the novel have generated discussions on numerous further issues, including the novel's relationship to post-modernism via post-modern interpretations of the sublime (Anker, 2011); the novel as a counternarrative to the narrative of terrorism (Conte, 2011; Qingji, 2015); gender perspectives and questions of masculinity raised in the novel (Parish, 2012; Bjerre, 2011; Abe, 2011; Marshall, 2013); and how the novel raises problems regarding the limits of representation in literary depictions of trauma (Carroll, 2013). Moreover, some critics have analyzed the novel with a focus on embodiment and

temporality (Harack, 2013; Lack, 2016; Polatinsky & Scherzinger, 2013; Brandt, 2014) and have discussed the novel in terms of the function of fiction as testimony in the wake of traumatic cultural events (Brandt, 2014; Webb, 2011).

*Falling Man* has come under some criticism by scholars who see DeLillo's choice to center the novel around an intimate portrait of a family, focusing on their inter-personal dynamics with relatively little attention paid to outside characters, to be problematic in representing the effects of the 9/11 attacks. The main criticism here, argues that DeLillo's representation of the 9/11 attacks domesticates the attacks and vacillates between "large rhetorical gestures acknowledging trauma and retreat into domestic detail", which in turn "reduces a turning point in national and international history to little more than a stage in a sentimental education" (Gray, 2011, p. 30). Furthermore, the novel has been criticized for its lack of character development, as some critics have argued that DeLillo seems excessively negative in his representation of post-9/11 trauma, depicting it as something that traps the survivors in a permanent mental state which cannot be escaped (Gray, 2011, p. 28).

In this thesis, I will offer psychoanalytic perspectives on the novel. Although several critics have previously provided psychoanalytic readings of *Falling Man*, most of these readings seem to focus, in some form, on Freud's concept of "melancholia" as opposed to "mourning", and to which extent the respective terms correspond to DeLillo's representation of trauma and loss, particularly through the novel's main character, Keith Neudecker (Versluys, 2009; Marshall, 2013; Ally, 2019). Another psychoanalytic reading of the novel, offered by Summer (2014), uses Freud's concept of "the protective shield against stimuli" as articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as an entry point in analyzing DeLillo's representation of trauma, also focusing on the character of Keith. However, research on the novel's representation of trauma through psychoanalytic perspectives with an explicit focus on the intersection between trauma, narrative and mastery, has been very limited. I view the lack of focus on these elements to be an oversight, considering how closely aspects of DeLillo's novel align with psychoanalytic perspectives on mastery and narrative in relation to trauma. This relationship between these elements in the novel is what I will seek to explore through this project.

The central argument I will make, is that the novel's representation of the effect of the 9/11 terror attacks on the characters Keith Neudecker and Florence Givens, directly evokes psychoanalytic understandings of trauma and identity, and generates a textual intersection of narrativized identities, trauma, repetition and mastery. In my analysis, I will demonstrate how DeLillo operates with a psychoanalytic logic in his representation of these characters and I

will argue that the novel engages directly psychoanalytic understandings of the relationship between narrative and identity, with Freud's writing, and the concept of "repetition compulsion" as articulated by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The aim of this project is to contribute to the literary discourse around *Falling Man*, to offer new psychoanalytic perspectives on DeLillo's novel, and to explore the novel's implications on the relationship between trauma, narrative and mastery.

In the first section of the analysis, I will examine how DeLillo explores the relationship between trauma and narrative through the novel's representation of the affair between Keith and Florence. Most of the research published on *Falling Man* has more or less ignored the character of Florence Givens, and in my reading, I will argue that she plays an important part in the novel's understanding of the relationship between trauma and narrative. I will argue that DeLillo operates with a psychoanalytic logic of how we as humans live our mental lives, which becomes evident in the depiction of how these two characters experience trauma, and in their attempts to represent the attacks and relate to each other. Moreover, I will argue that in these scenes, DeLillo represents the construction of narratives as vital in how we process trauma, and that the novel also emphasizes the significance of narratives in general, in how we as humans process reality.

In the second section of the analysis, I will turn to the parts of novel that depict Keith's developing habit of playing semi-professional poker in the time after the attacks. I will connect this aspect of the novel to central ideas in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* regarding the nature of trauma and the concept of repetition compulsion. I will argue for reading Keith's gambling as a form of repetition compulsion related to an unconscious drive to master unprocessed trauma, which is persisting as a narrative gap in Keith's perception of reality. I will argue that in these scenes DeLillo shows us a man consumed by his traumatic past, frozen and unable to move on.

Throughout the analysis, my aim is to show that a psychoanalytic reading of *Falling Man* does more than merely showing us the relevance of psychoanalytic frameworks in understanding both literary texts and contemporary cultural issues and their effects on the individual and collective psyche. More importantly, what we gain from a psychoanalytic reading of the novel is a valuable insight into the drive for mastery and desire for control in the American collective unconscious post 9/11. Furthermore, it provides a productive way of thinking of and understanding contemporary modes of narrativizing personal and cultural traumas as an element of identity formation. Before conducting the analysis, I will provide a brief presentation of central texts that have informed the approach of this thesis.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Approaching trauma

Since the 1990s, literary criticism has seen an increased interest in analyzing literary texts with a focus on trauma. We can find the first articulations of the concept of trauma similar to how we understand it today in the works of Sigmund Freud. In his early texts on psychoanalysis, Freud developed a new understanding of trauma and the effects that experiencing a traumatic event can have on the psyche, which has remained highly influential. Foundational works of literary trauma theory by critics such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman were published in the 1990s, after post-structuralist critics such as Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Roland Barthes had revolutionized literature departments around the world with approaches to analyzing literature that questioned long-held assumptions about the nature of literary texts and how they reference reality. Caruth and Felman's works connected post-structuralist approaches to analyzing literature to earlier psychoanalytic theory which explored the nature of trauma. Through their work, they created a space for critics to use literary texts to think about questions of trauma and the relationship between trauma and literary texts in new ways. In the following, I will provide a brief overview of the developments in the theory of trauma and introduce central ideas within the field of trauma theory which I will draw on in my analysis.

Fundamentally, a trauma constitutes some type of wound. While the word “trauma” can be used to refer to any kind of wounds, like injuries to the body such as broken bones or burnt skin, the term is now most associated with mental or psychological wounds caused by one or several violent or painful events in an individual’s past. The works of Freud offer some of the earliest articulations of the concept of trauma as a psychological phenomenon, and the contribution of Freud in developing the concept of trauma, as it is understood today, has been foundational. In his psychoanalytic practice, Freud encountered patients who suffered from psychological symptoms of past violent events long after the physical wounds had healed. A well-known example of this is his interest in soldiers who experienced reoccurring nightmares evoking scenes from the battlefields long after returning from war. Through his interest in how violent events can cause wounds to the mind, as well as to the body, Freud articulated the concept of trauma as a psychological phenomenon. The most



central aspects of Freud's understanding of trauma are evident in the following quote from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

*"We describe as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism's energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure. At the same time, the pleasure principle is for the moment put out of action. There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem arises instead – the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of"* (Freud, 1920, pp. 172-173).

In Freud's view, at the center of traumatic experiences lies emotionally challenging, violent, frightening or dangerous events that disrupt the subjects' lives long after the events themselves are over. What Freud is describing here is not any enduring physical damage that may continue to affect the lives of subjects in the time after the initial event has passed, but the psychological damage caused by such events. What causes an event to be traumatic, Freud argues, is not only the initial danger and emotional distress, but the overwhelming and unthinkable nature of such an event, which causes an inability for the subject to comprehend and process the event as it occurs. The impact of such an extreme event triggers a form of fight or flight reaction and often causes what he describes as "a disturbance on a large scale".

In the quote above, Freud uses the term "the mind's protective shield". In his view, the full volume of sheer stimuli existing in the world, the totality of all aspects of reality, contains more stimuli than our mental capacity can handle, and processing everything all the time would cause a form of sensory overload. What he describes as the mind's protective shield against stimuli is a vital psychological mechanism that filters all the outside world's stimuli into a sustainable worldview that can be processed. Traumatic events, he argues, cause a breach in this protective shield, overflowing the mind with an amount of stimuli which cannot be processed. Following this breach, a "traumatic neurosis" may occur with subsequent symptoms. In other words, what Freud is describing here is how a traumatic event can shatter a person's worldview. He sees trauma as occurring when a person experiences an

event in an unprepared mental state, something which the individual is not in a position to comprehend or adequately process.

Freud also refers to the problems of "mastering, binding and disposing" of traumatic events. This points to how the impact of trauma shatters representational capacities. Freud understands the psychological impact of traumatic events, the breach in the mind's protective shield, as resulting in an inability to process the reality of the event at the time of its occurrence, as well as an inability to represent and access the event in the time after. The inability to access the event cohesively in the time after, causes a "gap" in the mind, between the reality of the event and the subject's perception of the event. Thus, the subject's understanding of the event, and as a consequence, of reality and itself becomes fragmented, and it struggles to bind the fragmented elements of its experience into a cohesive understanding of the event and themselves. In lack of a cohesive understanding of what happened, the event remains unprocessed, an element of reality that the subject cannot master and cannot dispose of, and thus, it cannot "move on", and the symptoms of the traumatic neurosis persists. Freud believes that the unassimilated nature of traumatic experiences, the inability to master a narrative of what happened, to be the critical factor in causing the severe symptoms in the time after the event, and the apparent inability to move on, heal the mental wounds, and leave the event in the past.

Freud's 1917 seminal essay *Mourning and Melancholia* has also been highly influential in how we understand the nature of trauma. In this essay, Freud attempts to conceptualize a psychoanalytic framework for analyzing the nature of how humans react to loss. He makes a distinction between what he views as two typical reactions to loss – the two similar yet distinctive mental states named in the title of the essay. In the case of mourning, Freud describes great emotional pain and psychological symptoms commonly associated with grief, but emphasizes that in most cases the loss is gradually processed and after time integrated and accepted by the subject as it completes "the work of mourning", which in turn relieves or diminishes the symptoms.

What he describes as melancholia shares the symptoms and severe emotional pain associated with mourning but proves to be more problematic in terms of processing the loss and moving forward. Freud states that in melancholia the self-regard of the subject is severely disturbed, beyond the feelings of guilt and shame that often occur as a part of grieving the death of a loved one. He writes: "The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in

melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud, 1917, p. 246). This severely damaged sense of self is absent in mourning, Freud argues. Moreover, Freud states that a distinctive feature of melancholia is that the loss is in some sense unconscious or unknown, either in the sense that there is no known triggering cause or loss and that the mental state seemingly comes from nowhere or that the full extent of the loss is not recognized by the subject.<sup>2</sup>

Freud argues that the aspects of the loss that remain unconscious are crucial factors of melancholia and prevent the subject from engaging in a productive process of mourning. If we recall for a moment how Freud describes the process of mourning as “work” – and that the emotional pain and inhibiting symptoms which come with mourning usually pass in time as the subject goes through a process of mentally and emotionally dealing with the loss of an object (person or abstraction), we see how this becomes a problem in the case of melancholia. Following this logic, if there is no triggering event or the subject remains unaware of the specific loss at the center of its current mental state, there can be no “work of mourning”. Thus, the subject cannot engage in dealing with the loss/event, which would relieve the symptoms and start to heal the wounded psyche. As a result, the subject may be trapped in a melancholic state, unable to heal the shattered sense of self and relieve its painful symptoms.

There is a clear link between Freud’s writing in *Mourning and Melancholia* and his later articulations of trauma. Like in traumatic experiences, Freud describes how both in mourning and melancholia a loss is experienced in an unprepared mental state, leading to a complicated relationship between reality and the subject’s perception of reality. Furthermore, as the victim is not ready to let go of the lost object (person or abstraction), and in the case of melancholia, the full extent of the loss is on some level itself unconscious, aspects of the loss remain unknown and unprocessed, resulting in negative symptoms. This noticeably resembles the nature of traumatic experiences and the unassimilated nature of trauma. Like in the case of trauma, the loss in question with its unknown and unprocessed aspects disrupts the subject’s sense of self and the world. This disruption in the ability to present the experienced event and, as a consequence, themselves, time and the world cohesively results in a wound in the subject’s psyche, a type of persisting mental gap.

Implicitly, the notion of mastery is also present here. In the case of mourning, the loss is initially something that cannot be mastered as the full reality of the loss is too painful to accept. However, by processing the loss through completing the work of mourning, the subject regains a sense of agency and can gradually master the reality of the loss and in turn

---

<sup>2</sup> See Freud (1917, p. 245) for an in-depth description of the unknown dynamics of loss at play in melancholia.

accept it and dispose of the symptoms. In melancholia, crucial factors of the loss remain unknown and therefore unprocessed. Thus, the loss cannot be processed and the relationship between the event and the subject is passive, a sense of agency is denied, and the loss persists as a part of the subjects lived experience which cannot be mastered, resulting in a continuing melancholic state where the damage to the self-regard cannot be repaired.

In the influential 1996 book *Unclaimed experience – trauma, narrative and history*, Cathy Caruth offers a useful definition of trauma, which resonates with Freud's early intuition of trauma, but is, perhaps, somewhat more precise in its articulation: "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). Both Freud's early articulations of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Caruth's definition are helpful starting-points into discussing the nature of traumatic experiences. There are no apparent contradictions in how Freud and Caruth understand the general nature of traumatic events as experienced directly by individuals. Furthermore, they both leave sufficient space to include all kinds of trauma – at the individual/interpersonal level and larger structures of cultural, historic and intergenerational trauma. Moreover, they both understand traumatic experiences as a temporal relationship between a specific triggering event and the individual's life following and related to the event. In this thesis, I will operate with an understanding of the term "trauma" which resonates with Freud's articulation but corresponds directly to Caruth's (1996) definition.

## **2.2 Trauma, Narrative and Literature**

As Pederson (2019) has pointed out, "The history of the relationship between trauma and narrative is almost as long as the history of trauma itself" (p. 86). The concept of narrative is closely linked to the nature of trauma and plays a vital part in several critics' attempts to conceptualize trauma, from Freud's early articulations to later critics such as Caruth and Felman. The relationship between trauma and narrative will be central for the analysis of this thesis. When conceptualizing narrative in the fourth chapter of *Testimony – Crisis of witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Felman quotes Barbara Herrnstein Smith, defining narrative as "verbal acts consisting of someone telling someone else what happened" (Felman, 1992, p. 93). Felman elaborates on Smith's definition, stating: "That "something happened" in itself is history; that someone telling someone else that something

happened is narrative" (Felman, 1992, p. 93). So, in the most general sense, we can say that narrative is an act of linguistic expression – of someone communicating a connected sequence of events to someone, in this sense my use of the term “narrative” corresponds with Smith’s definition offered by Felman (1992). However, the idea of internal “self-narration” as an aspect of identity formation is also crucial to how I will approach narrative as a concept in this thesis.

*“Narrative is both the representation of external events and the telling of those events. My interest in narrative derives from my belief that we make sense of our life by ordering it and giving it shape. The stories we tell ourselves provide continuity among the concatenation of diverse episodes in our lives, even if our stories inevitably distort and falsify. Each of us is continually writing and re-writing the texts of our lives through our defenses and rationalizations, making adjustments in the way we present ourselves to ourselves and others. To the degree that we are self-conscious, we live in our narratives about our actions, thoughts and feelings” (Schwarz, 1990, p. 1).*

In this sense, my understanding of and use of the term “narrative” in this thesis directly corresponds to Schwarz’s understanding of the term and its relation to how humans interpret reality, as demonstrated in the above-cited passage. The emphasis here, is on how narrative functions in our psychological reality as a way in which we structure the outside world. In other words, how our perception of ourselves and our relationship to the external world often takes form through an ongoing process of internal self-narration. My use of the term “narrative” also includes this aspect, that narrative can be the act of "someone telling themselves that something happened". The relationship between trauma, identity formation, and narrative will be further discussed in-depth by drawing on psychoanalytic theory throughout the analysis and textual discussion of this thesis.

Given the close relationship between trauma and narrative, it may come as no surprise that some critics grew fascinated with reading literary texts in search of exploring the concept of trauma. Following the years of development of literary trauma theory since the 1990s, the approach of reading literary texts with a focus on trauma has been granted a great deal of attention amongst critics and has grown into a substantial area of interest within literary criticism. In the following, I will give a brief account of some of the main interventions in

trauma studies as a field of literary criticism and present some central ideas developed by this school of thought, which have informed the approach of this project.

The relationship between trauma and narrative goes back to the earliest articulations of trauma in Freud's texts published in the first half of the 1900s. However, it was only in the 1990s that critics started paying particular interest in connecting trauma theory and literary criticism. Following the surge in interest in connecting trauma theory to literature, the study of trauma in literary texts was established as a field of literary criticism. A rather general, yet useful articulation of the central approach of literary trauma theory is articulated in the influential essay "On traumatic knowledge and literary studies" by Geoffrey Hartman. In the opening paragraph of the essay, Hartman states that "A theory emerges focusing on the relationship of words and trauma and helping us to "read the wound" with the aid of literature" (Hartman, 1996, p. 537). Put differently, Hartman sees trauma theory as a new approach of literary criticism, aiming to understand the relationship between trauma and literary texts and using literature to gain insight into different types of trauma – an insight which might only be available through reading literary texts.

The 1990s saw several notable works of trauma theory. The books *Testimony – Crisis of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history* (1992) – a joint project by literary critic Soshana Feldman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub, and *Unclaimed experience – Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) by literary critic Cathy Caruth, seem to be regarded as the two most central and influential works in establishing trauma studies as a field of literary criticism, and nearly all published journal articles discussing trauma in the context of literature reference one or both of these books. Following the publication of the abovementioned works, the field of literary criticism saw an increased interest in critics engaging with literary text with an approach to discuss the concept of trauma. The tradition of psychoanalysis and Freud's early articulations of trauma and grief played a vital part in the development of literary trauma theory, and psychoanalytic perspectives also remain highly relevant and influential in discussions of trauma represented in present-day literature. The literary critics associated with establishing literary trauma theory, such as Caruth and Felman, were also influenced by the work of post-structuralist critics and the tradition of deconstruction. Both Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man are associated with "the Yale school of deconstruction", which originated from the Department of Comparative Literature

at Yale University in the 1970s, the same institution where Caruth earned her p.h.d a decade or so later.<sup>3</sup>

For Caruth, particularly the work of Paul de Man was very influential, and a substantial section in *Unclaimed Experience* is devoted to a close reading of de Man's essay "The Resistance to Theory." By combining an interest in the psychoanalytic notions of the fragmented and unassimilated nature of trauma and its belated impact on the survivor's psyche with post-structuralisms new and inventive ways of reading literature and its skepticism towards the ability of linguistic systems to reference reality in an accurate way, the works of literary trauma theory ala Caruth and Felman in many ways changed the ways critics talked about and understood the relationship between trauma and literature. While questions and concerns certainly have been raised by later critics regarding this close relationship between the early forms of contemporary trauma theory and the tradition of deconstruction, the works of Felman and Caruth seem to remain highly influential in the field of literary trauma theory to this day.<sup>4</sup> The growing and substantial body of research on trauma in literary studies demonstrate that critics find the world of literature a highly productive and insightful way of discussing the nature of trauma and issues of the representation trauma in society and culture.

In my discussion and analysis, I will draw on some central ideas from literary trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's foundational 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience - Trauma, Narrative and History*. In the following, I will introduce some concepts from the book, which are especially relevant. Most importantly, the central thesis of literary trauma theory, which is that there is a specific and especially productive connection between the concept of trauma and the language of literature. As mentioned earlier, in *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth combines psychoanalysis and deconstruction to create a theoretical framework for discussing the concept of trauma. Or, more specifically, the relationship between specific features of the nature of trauma and literary language. The main goal of Carruth's book is to explore this relationship.

The book makes a strong case for why the language of literature offers a particular insight into the concept of trauma. Already in the first few pages of the book, Caruth reminds us that Freud himself turns to the world of literature in one of his earliest conceptualizations of trauma and the concept of repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud

---

<sup>3</sup> See Buchanan (2020).

<sup>4</sup> See Toremans (2018, p. 65).

uses a scene from the 15<sup>th</sup> century romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberta* by Torquato Tasso to illustrate the phenomenon of repetition compulsion, how survivors of trauma unwillingly re-experience certain aspects of their past traumatic experiences through un-wanted repetitions and often unconscious acts in the time following the original traumatic event.

In Tasso's story, the character of Tancred unwittingly kills the love of his life, Clorinda, on the battlefield as she is disguised in enemy armor. Following Clorinda's funeral, Tancred, struck with the grief of Clorinda's death, finds himself in the midst of a magic forest. Afraid, he slashes a tree with his sword. To Tancred's surprise, blood pours out of the tree from where the sword struck. Followingly, Clorinda's crying voice emerges from the tree's wound, addressing Tancred and confronting him with the fact that he has wounded her again (Freud, 1920, p. 165). Caruth points out how, initially, rather than instigating a detailed analysis of the relationship between trauma and literature, Freud uses the story to effectively illustrate how past traumas can sometimes shape how humans act and think in the present. In this specific conceptualization of the dynamic between unassimilated elements of trauma and related patterns of behavior and thought in the time following a traumatic event, Freud evokes the language of literature or poetry, a language full of ambiguities.

We have now established that one feature of traumatic events is that they are unassimilated, that they are not fully comprehended and processed at the time of occurrence. As the original traumatic event cannot be mentally comprehended when it first occurs and rejects representation in the time after, aspects of the traumatic experience will be unassimilated and return to haunt the person after the event. This is precisely what happens in Tasso's story. In the accidental killing of someone he loves, Tancred suffers an unexpected experience so dramatic and catastrophic that it is beyond his comprehension when it happens. It cannot be assimilated when it happens but cannot be disposed of or left in the past either, and later returns to shape his life and actions.

Thus, Caruth points out, it seems that at the heart of the concept of trauma, we find a paradoxical relationship between the known and the unknown. When surviving trauma, aspects of the traumatic experience remain unknown to the survivor. Some aspects remain unassimilated, which are the parts of the traumatic experience that create a gap in the survivor's perception of reality. Full knowledge of and comprehension of the traumatic experience remains beyond the reach of the survivor's cognitive ability. However, the traumatic event is not entirely unknown and it remains with the survivor in various ways. A paradox of traumatic experiences is recognizing that one has survived a catastrophic event, yet knowing that the full reality of the experience cannot be comprehended and will perhaps



remain unknown forever, yet continue to shape the survivor's life. It is this weird relationship between the known and the unknown in trauma that Caruth suggests resonates so strongly with literature and literary criticism.

*"It is the moving quality of this story, I would suggest – its striking juxtaposition of the unknowing, injurious repetition and the witness of the crying wound that best represents Freud's intuition of, and his passionate fascination with, traumatic experiences. If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experiences, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of trauma precisely meet"* (Caruth, 1996, p. 3)

In this thesis, I will operate with an understanding of trauma corresponding to Freud and Caruth, as characterized as a phenomenon that is unassimilated, fragmented and beyond full comprehension when it happens. Furthermore, that in its fragmented and unassimilated nature, trauma resists representation. This thesis will also draw on Carruth's understanding of the relationship between trauma and literature; that the unassimilated nature of trauma causes it to resist "straightforward" representation, as well as the idea of both Caruth and Hartman that literary language, but also other forms of artistic expression like films and the visual arts, can represent traumatic experiences more successfully than direct "factual" representation. Like the critics mentioned above, I see the interpretation of literary texts as a particularly productive entry-point into theoretical discussions of the nature of trauma.

### **2.3 Psychoanalytic concepts**

As previously mentioned, the most central concepts and ideas which I will use when presenting my reading of *Falling Man*, draw on psychoanalysis, as I propose that there is a strong connection between psychoanalytic perspectives on trauma and DeLillo's novel. The direct connections I make in the textual discussion and analysis is between aspects of the novel and psychoanalytic understandings of trauma, psychoanalytic approaches to understanding the relationship between trauma and narrative, and Freud's understanding of the concept of repetition compulsion and mastery as articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure*

*Principle.* At this point, I will not be going into detail discussing these concepts, as they will be thoroughly elaborated on as I move into the textual discussion and analysis.

## **2.4 Limitations**

Given the relatively limited scope of this thesis and the specific topics I will address, there are some limitations to my discussion and research. While the influence of the philosophy of deconstruction has been foundational in the development of literary trauma theory, my reading of DeLillo's novel will mainly apply the aspects of trauma theory related to psychoanalysis, and mostly exclude the approach of deconstruction. Thus, elements of the novel and its relationship to trauma, literature and representation which could be analyzed through deconstructive theory, particularly the works of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, will not be discussed. Furthermore, the possible dynamic between Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction and Lacan's notion of the symbolic order will also, for the purpose of this thesis, not be explored.

A selection has also been made with regard to which psychoanalytic texts I will draw on in the analysis. In *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Freud writes on observations of different reactions to loss. This text has been influential in later interpretations of trauma and the different ways in which people process trauma. The exact traits of "mourning" and "melancholia" and the distinction Freud draws between these reactions to loss are articulated clearly in this text, and when applying these terms, I refer to the specific way in which he understands them in the text, not the broader understanding of the term "mourning" as we use it in everyday language. Likewise, when using the term "melancholia" and "melancholy", I also draw directly on Freud's 1917 understanding of the terms as articulated in the text.

Furthermore, regarding psychoanalytic approaches to the relationship between trauma, narrative and mastery, I will also draw on some ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Given the limited scope of this project, I will focus on a few central concepts which I find particularly relevant for the discussion and also draw on the work of later Lacanians like Slavoj Žižek. I would like to emphasize that when discussing Lacan's understanding of the dimensions which constitute human reality, I operate with a tripartite distinction between the imaginary, symbolic and real, like most recent interpreters of Lacan's work, rather than a

binary distinction between the imaginary and real, like in earlier interpretations of Lacan à la Louis Althusser.<sup>5</sup>

The last section of my analysis draws on the concept of “repetition compulsion and mastery”, as articulated by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud first introduced the concept in *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* from 1914 and also writes on the subject in his 1925 work *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. The variations between his approach to the concept in the *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* (1914) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) are minimal, however, it slightly differs in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. Here, I would like to emphasize that his writing in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is what will serve as my basis of understanding repetition compulsion. I will not go into an analysis of how Freud’s approach to this concept developed over time, and simply acknowledge that it did. I chose to connect DeLillo’s novel to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as I found this text to offer the richest entry-point into analyzing the novel’s representation of trauma in terms of repetition and mastery.

### 3 Discussion and analysis

#### 3.1 A glimmer of hope – Narrative building as a lifeline

A few days have passed since the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Keith Neudecker is sitting by his desk in the study, examining the content of a brown briefcase, trying to remember why he was carrying a briefcase that did not belong to him out of the tower on the day of the attacks. The briefcase, we soon learn, belongs to a woman named Florence Givens. Florence worked in an office on the floor below the one occupied by Keith’s company in the World Trade Center. She was also present during the attacks and managed, like Keith, to escape the North Tower in the moments after the plane hit. In the novel’s fifth chapter, the two characters interact for the first time. Keith visits Florence in her apartment on the west side of Manhattan to return the briefcase. The visit extends from a brief exchange of a misplaced object to an extended stay, where Keith and Florence sit and discuss their lives and their experience of the attacks. Despite Keith’s recent reunion with his ex-wife Leanne, his encounter with Florence develops into a physical and emotional affair. While being rather

---

<sup>5</sup> In his influential essay, Louis Althusser operates with a binary distinction between the Lacanian *real* and *imaginary* in his Marxist critique of Ideology in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. See: (Althusser, 1970).

short-lived, the affair and the dynamic between Keith and Florence plays an important part in the novel's representation of trauma.

The novel only includes four scenes where Florence and Keith interact, and their relationship ends relatively early in the plot. Nonetheless, despite being a minor character, Florence's presence in the text is not insignificant and she has an important function in the novel. The introduction of Florence creates a space in the novel where we can observe Keith outside his family and work environment, and the sexual aspect of their relationship gives us some renewed insight into the issues with infidelity which his wife, Lianne alludes to as the main factor in the initial dissolution of their marriage. Even if we avoid a moral judgement of Keith's apparent problems with monogamy, the sexual aspect of his relationship with Florence leaves us questioning his ability or desire to recommit to Lianne and return to a role within the family structure. Here, we see how the introduction of Florence generates a form of character development in Keith, providing us with nuance of his personality and bringing about a sense of ambiguity in his motives and desires.

However, the function of Florence goes beyond simply providing nuance to the novel's protagonist. The scenes that Florence and Keith share are a vital component in the novel's representation of trauma, and more broadly, how the nature of trauma is understood in the novel. Through the portrayal of Keith and Florence's affair, DeLillo reflects on the relationship between trauma and narrative and asks us to think about the significance of the stories human beings tell themselves about themselves and the world. In the development of the affair, we can observe the differences and similarities in their experience of trauma and the ways in which narrative plays an important part in how these characters are able to access, process and confront the memories they have of the attacks.

Throughout the following pages, I will demonstrate how the dynamic between these two characters functions as an intersection of trauma, narrative, and mastery. There are several places in the novel where these three elements interact. In the specific scenes portraying Keith and Florence's affair, I will argue that the elements intersect in DeLillo's representation of the traumatized characters' attempts to process their fragmented memories of the attacks together. This process becomes particularly visible in the dialogue, which in these scenes functions as a tool for narrative reconstruction of unassimilated elements of their trauma. I will connect the repeated acts of narration that we see in these scenes to a drive for mastery in the wake of trauma. Furthermore, I will consider the relationship between Keith and Florence's respective success and failure in performing and mastering a cohesive narrative of their experience in the tower and the characters' further development in the novel

and ask which implications this has for the novel's understanding of the 9/11 attacks and trauma in general.

During their first verbal exchange, Keith tries to explain to Florence why it took some time before he got around to returning her briefcase: "See, what happened is I didn't know I had it. It wasn't even a case of forgetting. I don't think I knew" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 53). With this line, DeLillo effectively reminds us of the unassimilated nature of traumatic experiences – the gaps that the impact of trauma leaves in the survivor's memory of the traumatic event. For Keith, not knowing that he had carried the briefcase out of the tower was not a matter of not remembering, Keith never knew he did, not even as it occurred. This particular element of the day of the attacks, the act of carrying Florence's briefcase and the logic behind the act, is just one of several unassimilated aspects of his experience in the tower.

The briefcase serves as a concrete example of the gaps left in Keith's memory of the event and his narrative of what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Here, it becomes evident how DeLillo evokes one of the central traits of the nature of traumatic experiences in the first line of dialogue shared by Keith and Florence, situating their encounter and their relationship in the context of trauma. When they meet, they are both severely traumatized and struggle to make sense of the attacks and their survival. The briefcase also underscores the sheer absurdity of their encounter: two complete strangers, connected by the most devastating event in recent American history and brought together by something so mundane and arbitrary as a business briefcase, an everyday object lost in the chaos of the attacks.

In addition to the psychological trauma, we also get the impression that they both experience some feelings of isolation. Keith already seems somewhat alienated from Lianne and his son, Justin, and we learn that Florence is a widow and lives alone. Even if this wasn't the case, feelings of isolation seem unavoidable when directly experiencing such severe trauma, as no matter how much others empathize, others cannot possibly understand the experience. In the connection to each other, bound by their shared experience in the tower, they seem to get something they cannot get elsewhere, and we see how they form a strong bond rather quickly. In these scenes, we observe as these two traumatized characters attempt to reconstruct their reality in the wake of an event that shattered all meaning and left blank spaces in their memories and understandings of self and reality. Here, the novel leaves us thinking about the possibility and challenges of moving forward following the most extreme and painful aspects of human experience. I believe these questions necessitate a consideration of psychoanalytic perspectives on the function of memory and narrative in how we experience and understand trauma.

*“While memory is potentially granted an identity building redemptive and therapeutic power, this is denied in trauma whose impact seem to shatter all representational capacities, leaving only a flood of rarefying affect and disrupting an individual’s cohesive sense of self. Trauma, defined as the psychological effects of suffering on an individual or a collective, has been conceptualized in memory studies as a temporary or permanent interruption of the ability to represent the traumatic event or to make meaning of it” (Arnold-de Simine, 2018 p. 141).*

In the above-cited quote from *Trauma and Literature*’s chapter on trauma and memory, Silke Arnold-de Simine writes on the memory gaps left by traumatic experiences. Her understanding of trauma seems to derive more or less directly from psychoanalytic theory, as she emphasizes the damage on the victim’s identity and sense of self in traumatic experiences. Like other important scholars in the field, such as Caruth and Felman, Arnold-de Simine sees the disruption of “representational capacity” (e.g. narrative) as one of the key features associated with trauma. Hunter (2018) suggests a similar understanding between narrative, identity formation and trauma, stating that “It is in the un-narrability of trauma that its impact on the subject lies. An event that cannot be fully known by the subject cannot therefore be narrated. This is why trauma remains permanently present in the mind of the survivor” (p. 69). This perspective in trauma theory builds on a psychoanalytic logic, suggesting that in some sense, an aspect of human consciousness can be understood as occurring through a type of constant process of (conscious or unconscious) internal self-narration. This type of self-narration becomes evident when we think about how we as humans perceive ourselves, as an entity in a temporal relationship with events, other humans and society.

We can understand this type of self-narration as a central aspect of how we as humans construct identity and our sense of self, by internally creating meaning through interpreting the stimuli of the external world and in this process develop a more or less cohesive sense of who we are and how we relate to our environment and time. Put in Lacanian terms; as we grow and inevitably drift from the imaginary to the symbolic order, in some sense, we create a narrative, a story of a “self”. Following this perspective, our representational capacity, for example our ability to narrativize a sense of who we are, becomes crucial to form a cohesive sense of self. In films and tv-shows, when one character meets another character for the first time, they will often say “What’s your story?” instead of “Who are you?”, or “Tell me about

yourself'. While this formulation has become almost a trope in the stylized dialogue found in fiction, I believe that it effectively illustrates this way of thinking of narrative as a central aspect of forming identity and that in some sense, we become the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.

If we now apply this perspective to what we know about the effects of trauma, one of the ways in which traumatic events cause pronounced psychic damage to the subject becomes clear. When a traumatic experience results in the temporary or permanent breakdown in a subject's ability to represent their experience of reality in a cohesive manner, to itself or others, this in turn results in a break in the narrative and the disruption of a subject's cohesive sense of self. Put differently, unassimilated aspects of trauma may cause a form of psychic wound, resulting in gaps in the survivor's personal narrative of him/herself and the world, and thus disrupts the survivor's sense of a unified self and its relationship to time. In its unassimilated nature, marked by gaps, the original traumatic event remains inaccessible and cannot be processed in a productive manner, resulting in persisting psychic wounds and subsequent symptoms.

Perspectives from Jacques Lacan's approach to psychoanalysis are helpful when connecting the psychological damage caused by trauma to the concept of narrative. Lacan is often considered to be the most influential psychoanalyst since Freud. His approach to psychoanalysis, drawing on concepts from structural linguistics such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ferdinand De Saussure in his readings of Freud's work, was considered extremely controversial in its time, but has remained very influential, particularly in literature departments around the world. Lacan's body of work is vast and notoriously complex, so for the purpose of this discussion, my use of and elaboration on Lacan's writing will be limited and I will avoid going into too much detail. Rather, I will focus on some basic concepts, also relying on contemporary interpretations of his work.

The idea that human life is greatly affected by past experiences, which shape our personality in ways we are unconscious of and repress, lies at the center of Freud's thinking. Past events, in our childhood or later, may dramatically alter who we become as persons for reasons which we may remain forever unaware of. One of Freud's most crucial contributions was the development of a theoretical framework to help us understand our unconscious desires and motives that significantly affect the way we think, act and relate to others. For Lacan, the concept of the unconscious was equally important. However, his work offered a new analytic insight, arguing for a different reading of Freud's notion of the unconscious. Famously, Lacan argued that the unconscious is structured like a language. This perspective

does not necessarily need to be considered a departure from Freud. Still, it can be regarded as a development of Freud's notion of the unconscious, or a departure from the ways that Freud's work was read before Lacan.

*“If for a symptom, whether neurotic or not, to be considered to come under psychoanalytic psychopathology, Freud insists on the minimum of overdetermination constituted by a double meaning – symbol of a defunct conflict beyond its function in a no less symbolic present conflict – and if he teaches us to follow the ascending ramification of the symbolic lineage in the text of the patient's free associations, in order to detect the nodal points of its structure at the places where it's verbal forms intersect, then it is already quite clear that symptoms can be entirely resolved in an analysis of language because a symptom is itself structured like a language: a symptom is language from which speech must be delivered” (Lacan, 1953, pp. 222-223.)*

In the quote above, Lacan's view of the unconscious is evident in how he describes symptoms. Here, he seems to understand the forms that symptoms take and the specific mechanisms behind how past trauma affects us in the present as belonging to the unconscious. While less explicit, the applications of the lessons from structural linguistics are also evident here. Suppose we view language, like structural linguists, as constituting, at its most fundamental core, of a system of words (signifiers) referring to objects and phenomena (signified). We can then observe how Lacan applies this perspective to the nature of symptoms and its implications for psychoanalytic practice. He argues that the patient's symptoms, like the patient's language, can be viewed as a text built on the same structure as language and interpreted as such. In other words, the patients' symptoms, their fears, actions and patterns of behavior thoughts, often symbolize something else, in the unconscious. Consequently, one can extract meaning and insight into the unconscious through reading symptoms, and this communication occurs as a structure of signifier → signified. Thus, Lacan argues, the unconscious has its own form of logic and can speak through symptoms.<sup>6</sup>

When writing on how to understand the unconscious in Lacan's work, Slavoj Žižek states that “(...) the unconscious itself obeys its own grammar and logic: the unconscious

---

<sup>6</sup> This perspective can also be seen in light of Caruth's description of “the wound and the voice” in her reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in the introduction of *Unclaimed Experience*, (Caruth, 1996, pp. 3-4).



talks and thinks. The unconscious is not the preserve of wild drives that have to be tamed by the ego, but the site where a traumatic truth speaks out” (Zizek, 2006, p. 3). Here, Zizek not only offers a useful, clear articulation of Lacan’s understanding of the nature of the unconscious, but also explicitly connects it to trauma. The connection to trauma is also visible in an earlier passage in Lacan’s text, where he writes that “The unconscious is a chapter of my story that is marked by a blank or occupied by a lie: it is the censored chapter. But the truth can be refound; most often it has already been written elsewhere” (Lacan, 1953, p. 215). Lacan then states some examples of “elsewhere” of places where a traumatic truth speaking through the unconscious can be found, of ways in which experiences we cannot access, are registered in the unconscious and find ways of addressing us in the present. He writes that the “truth” or this “the censored chapter” can be refound in a subject’s childhood memories, body, style of life and character, speech, traditions, and the ways in which a subject may distort the truth.

This description of the unconscious corresponds to how we understand the nature of traumatic experiences. Traumatic events often remain inaccessible, a part of our story which we cannot integrate and accept. Yet, it can stay with us in other ways, shaping our personalities and the ways we live our lives, in ways that we may remain oblivious to. The connection between trauma and narrative becomes visible in the above-cited passage, where Lacan's use of the words "story," "chapter," and "written" when describing the unconscious may be viewed as merely a fitting metaphor, illustrating how we think and our relationship to the unconscious. I believe it also signals an understanding of some form of self-narration or a "story of self" as a central part of how we understand ourselves as individuals and that it plays a crucial role in our unified sense of self and our idea of an "I". Here too, we can see that the rupture of the narrative in the story of self, caused by trauma, can trigger severe psychic damage. The description of the unconscious as a part of one's story marked by a blank, or occupied by a lie, corresponds with how we understand the narrative gaps left by the impact of trauma that I have discussed in the previous pages. Similar to gaps, we can understand what Lacan describes as "occupied by a lie" as the insertion of a false narrative that may occur as a form of defense mechanism, and which may be evident in cases where the reality of a subject's circumstances is so painful or unthinkable that the integration of the event is impossible.

While Lacan is somewhat ambiguous in this description, we can also link the cited passage to the therapeutic potential of processing trauma through narrative building. The last line of the passage argues that the shattered sense of self can be restored or restructured by

discovering the truth through decoding symptoms and patterns of behavior and thus filling the narrative gaps or disposing of false narratives, healing the sense of self. This view is perhaps more clearly articulated a few lines later in the essay: “The hysterical core of neurosis in which the hysterical symptom manifests the structure of a language, and is deciphered like an inscription, which, once recovered, can be destroyed without serious loss” (Lacan, 1953, p. 215). The idea here seems to be that through decoding the language of the unconscious into a form of speech that we can understand, we may be able to see a truth about our past, which we were unable to recognize earlier, and learn how to live with this truth. After this process, the narrative is cohesive, not marked by gaps and false narratives, and a coherent sense of self can be restored. Consequently, the “core of neurosis” is destroyed, and the subject can move on.

The famous Lacanian triad of “the real”, “the symbolic”, and “the imaginary” is also helpful when considering the connection between the psychic damage caused by trauma and narrative, as discussed above. For Lacan, the intertwined orders of this triad constitute human reality. “The imaginary” is where humans first come to live their psychic lives and is closely related to the formation of the ego or an idea of self, related to what Lacan calls “the mirror stage”, where a child first sees its reflection in a mirror and for the first time recognizes itself as an unified entity separate from the rest of the world, leading to an experience of completeness and unification.<sup>7</sup> Inevitably, the sense of complete identification experienced in “the imaginary” is disturbed by the symbolic order – the realm of language. The three orders, especially “the imaginary” and “the symbolic”, are so closely linked together and dependent on each other that while they have clear distinctions, it is difficult to see them independently. Together, the imaginary and symbolic orders constitute the form that all external acts of human existence take, such as language, relationships, politics, norms of society etc., as well as how we live our mental lives – human consciousness and how we interpret the world around us, our place in it, and how we understand ourselves as humans. For Lacan, these two dimensions together constitute the aspects of reality which humans are able access and identify.<sup>8</sup>

Though the descriptions of “the real” in Lacan's writing are notoriously vague, there seems to be a consensus amongst readers of his work in understanding “the real” as constituting the full extent of the material world, which cannot be perceived beyond “the

---

<sup>7</sup> See “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function” (Lacan, 1949, pp. 75-81).

<sup>8</sup> For further in-depth explanations of “The Lacanian Triad”, see Žižek (2006, pp. 8-9); Žižek (1992, pp. 215-229); Jameson (1977, pp. 349-379), and Dale Parker (2008, pp. 139-40).

imaginary" and "the symbolic." Lacan sees this "full reality" as something that exists beyond the symbolic and imaginary orders and thus cannot be accessed through human perceptions of reality. If we apply the Lacanian triad as a framework to discuss the psychic wounds caused by trauma, it seems to suggest that suffering a traumatic experience can be understood as a brief encounter with "the real" (Pound, 2008, p. 10; Zizek, 2006, pp. 72-75). This encounter results in a persisting wound in the psyche. It is an event that the subject experienced directly, but that resists being processed and integrated through the psychological structures of the imaginary and symbolic orders. Lacan's understanding of the human psyche views human beings as dependent on the structures of the imaginary and symbolic orders to organize raw stimuli and the chaos of the natural world into a cohesive and sustainable view of reality. Consequently, because of human dependency on these structures, "the real" or "pure" reality of the world, undiluted by human structures of meaning, remains a dimension of the world beyond the reach of human perception.

Thus, we see how such an encounter with "the real" becomes problematic. Just like "the real" in the Lacanian triad, trauma, as an encounter with an extreme event, represents a dimension of reality beyond what humans can understand, mentally process, and endure. This means that survivors of trauma, in some fashion, must recognize a triggering event, that something happened. Still, on a certain level, the event remains an aspect of their direct experienced reality, which remains beyond articulation and comprehension, resisting representation, and processing. The comparison between the nature of trauma and the order of "the real" in the Lacanian triad serves as a way of observing how the reality of traumatic events often remains inaccessible for survivors. Experiencing a situation beyond what humans are mentally equipped to endure may lead to an inability to present the event to oneself or others cohesively. Thus, the unprocessed experience remains a blocked chapter in the story of self, a gap in the survivor's narrative of him/herself, and a persisting mental wound.

On the day of the attacks, Keith and Florence experience a direct encounter with their mortality and the terror of extreme violence. The reality of this event and the shock of a sudden direct confrontation with a violent death, should not have been accessible to them in the way that they experienced it. Thus, it could not be fully grasped or processed at the time it occurred, and their tools of comprehension rejected the full reality of the event as they experienced it. The result of this impact, and trauma in general, can be understood as a sort of collapse of imaginary and symbolic structures, where a person is subjected to a reality which cannot be accurately processed, neither represented in language nor imagined in the psyche.

The experience of reality breaks with the systems of signifiers we as humans are dependent on to interpret reality and time. For Keith and Florence, the state of trauma originating from the experience of the attacks can be understood not only as the crisis of the attack itself, but also the mental shock of being subjected to an extreme reality that they were not able to comprehend or mentally defend themselves against.

The resulting mental state, marked by gaps in the memory, left by the impact of trauma, which temporarily or permanently disrupts the subject's ability to access the event and present it cohesively, causes an inability to understand what happened and inhibits thinking of or reacting to the event in a meaningful way. Consequently, the development of a capacity to represent the traumatic event to oneself or others plays a central part in psychoanalytic approaches to conversation therapy aimed at treating trauma and is viewed to have significant potential for recovery.<sup>9</sup> Building a cohesive narrative of the traumatic event, in this case, the horror experienced in the minutes and hours after the planes hit the tower, is understood as a way of gaining a sense of mastery over the event. Mastering the narrative of the traumatic event becomes a way to "claim" the experience. In this process, the subject may integrate it into his/her story of self and the world. Building a cohesive narrative of the attacks becomes a way of freeing oneself from the event and not being subordinated by it. In this sense, to master the narrative of the event becomes to master the event itself, and in turn being able to dispose of the event, leaving it in the past and not letting it determine the present. Thus, a return to the site of trauma, in conversation, can become, if successful, a tool to start healing the psychic wounds and rebuilding the shattered sense of self. The significance of such "narrative building" in processing and attempting to master traumatic experiences becomes evident in the representation of Keith and Florence.

In the novel, DeLillo identifies a U.S. drive for mastery and control post 9/11. However, his relationship to mastery proves to be more of a diagnosis than a critique. In presenting how trauma and mastery intersect, DeLillo abstains from making judgments or a moral evaluation of this psychological mechanism. Instead, he takes the role of an observer. He presents the desire to control, the drive for mastery, almost as a chemical reaction, like a scientist in a laboratory. Like how water will inevitably start to boil when put to a specific temperature, DeLillo presents the drive for mastery following a traumatic event in itself as neither positive nor negative, but simply what happens when a person or collective is put through a severe traumatic experience. In this way, rather than critiquing it or praising it,

---

<sup>9</sup> For more on therapeutic potential of narrativizing a traumatic event, see Pederson (2018, pp. 97-99).

DeLillo observes the complexities of the drive for mastery that occurs following trauma. This analytic and observing quality of DeLillo's prose is evident in how dynamics of trauma, narrative, and mastery are presented in the depictions of Keith's gambling later in the novel and in the relationship between Keith and Florence. The relationship between narrative and mastery becomes particularly evident in how Keith and Florence interact.

With the exception of their last scene together, DeLillo places Keith and Florence in an isolated and intimate setting inside Florence's home, with no one else present. Their first and second meeting mostly consist of Florence attempting to narrativize her memories from the day of the attacks. In these scenes of dialogue, Keith assumes a passive position, mostly listening closely to her recollection of the events. This specific dynamic in the parts of their dialogue directly related to the attacks is very similar to the typical dynamic between the subject and the analyst in psychoanalytic approaches to conversation therapy. In these scenes, Keith and Florence, the survivors of severe trauma, are sitting facing each other, one on either side of a coffee table, as they reflect on the attacks.<sup>10</sup> The dynamic in the conversations, the position in which they are seated, as well as the content and format of the dialogue, gives clear associations to psychoanalytic practice and psychoanalytic perspectives on trauma. Through this representation of Keith and Florence, DeLillo leaves us thinking of the possibility of healing and what it means to lose the "story" of yourself.

*"She talked about the tower, going over it again, claustrophobically, the smoke, the fold of bodies, and he understood that they could talk about these things only with each other, in minute and dullest detail, but it would never be dull or too detailed because it was inside them now and because he needed to hear what he'd lost in the tracings of memories. This was their pitch of delirium, the dazed reality they'd shared in the stairwells, the deep shafts of spiraling men and women"* (DeLillo, 2007, pp. 90-91).

The cited passage serves as a good entry-point to describing the novel's understanding of trauma and the connection that DeLillo makes between trauma and narrative in his representation of Keith and Florence. When they meet, only a short time after the attacks, they are both in a mental state of severe trauma. Here, Keith explicitly calls the fragmented memories of the attacks "their pitch of delirium", signaling a shared terrain of emotional disruption and psychological wounds. At this point, aspects of the day of the attacks remain

---

<sup>10</sup> For an example of the format of Keith and Florence's dialogue, see DeLillo (2007, p. 88).

unknown and unprocessed by Keith and Florence. One can understand the gaps in their memories of the attacks as a vital element of their mental wounds. DeLillo also describes the experience in the tower on the day of the attacks as a “dazed reality”. This phrasing, like Keith and Florence’s relationship in general, alludes to the double bind of traumatic experiences – the imposing, inescapable reality of the traumatic event while the event simultaneously resists comprehension and can remain inaccessible for the survivors. The impact of this “dazed reality” caused severe psychic damage and gaps in Keith and Florence’s memories of the event.

Here, Keith also explicitly depicts how his recollection of the attacks contains gaps, or as he describes it, “lost memories”. Keith himself indicates that in some sense, his memories of the event exist and have been registered somewhere but remain only in a space beyond his reach. We may understand Keith’s lost memories from the day of the attacks, as directly corresponding to Lacan’s perspectives on “blanks” or “a censored chapter”, which I have previously discussed. At this point in the novel, shortly after the attacks, when Keith returns the briefcase, neither him nor Florence have a cohesive account of their experience of the attacks and the full reality of the event cannot be accessed. Their internal narrative of the event is broken, and their memories of the experience are fragmented as is, to some extent, their sense of self. Images of human bodies in free fall reoccur frequently in the book and these images become an effective symbol of Keith and Florence's mental state following the attacks.

There are several examples in the novel where images of human bodies in free fall are evoked. The shirt Keith sees floating in the sky in the novel's opening scene, the numerous scenes describing the public performance art pieces by the character of David Janiak, known as “The Falling Man”, and the man Keith sees falling towards the street on the other side of the window as he makes his way down the tower to safety in the last pages of the novel, are all examples of this. DeLillo also includes a definition of the term in the novel, stating that "free fall" is "the ideal falling motion of a body that is subject only to the earth's gravitational field" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 221). In other words, the experience of free fall is to be subject only to gravity, isolated from everything and effectively being a literal and physical fragment. The absence of structures and experience of not having anything to hold on to, experienced in free fall, can be read as an image of how trauma causes a breakdown in tools of comprehension, of imaginary and symbolic structures of meaning, triggering psychological fragmentation. In this sense, when they first meet, Keith and Florence are in a type of free fall, as the man in the infamous image which the novel's title evokes. One may understand their mental wounds,

the fragmented narratives of the attacks, and the following absence of a cohesive sense of self as a type of mental state which resembles a continuous psychological free fall. The affair which they engage in, especially their conversations, can be understood as an attempt to grasp and process what happened to them, to master the event, and in this sense, to stop falling.

When Florence shares her recollection of the attacks with Keith, her narration takes place in a very detailed manner and chronological order – starting with the plane hitting the tower, followed by the chaotic journey down the stairwells towards safety. In the dialogue, Florence does not only return to the site of trauma by narrating the memories of her experience on the day of the attack. She also repeats the act of narration, narrating the traumatic event several times, going over her memories as she retells her account of the attacks to Keith in an almost ritualistic manner and with a particular focus on small details. What we see in these scenes is how Florence processes the trauma of the attacks through narration. By gaining the ability to present her experience of the attacks as a cohesive narrative to Keith, and thereby, to herself, she redeems a sense of mastery over the event.

While Florence is still clearly affected by the attacks and unable to make sense of the attacks on a large scale – her specific experience of the attacks, the plane hitting the tower, the route of escape, the shattered glass, and moments of panic in the staircases, is mastered and built into a cohesive narrative in her conversations with Keith, as she repeatedly and in great detail narrates her experience of the attacks. By transforming the fragmented memories of the attacks into a cohesive narrative, Florence successfully integrates the event into her narrative of herself and the world and can start healing. She does not only “remember” what happened, but she regains a sense of unified self through filling the narrative gaps left by the terror on the day of the attacks. Paradoxically, this shows how repetition in relation to trauma can occur both as a destructive symptom of the unassimilated aspects of trauma, in the form of repetition compulsion, and as a productive way for victims to take an active part in processing trauma and to begin to heal by mastering the narrative of the traumatic event in their past, or in Freud’s words “doing the work of mourning” (Freud, 1917, p. 245).

*““I can’t explain it but, no, you saved my life. After what happened, so many gone, friends gone, people I work with, I was nearly dead, in another way. I couldn’t see people, talk to people, go from here to there without forcing myself off the chair.” (...)* *“You ask yourself why you took the briefcase out of the building. That’s why. So you could bring it here. So we could get to know each other. That’s why you took it and that’s why you brought it here, to keep me alive.” He didn’t believe it but he*

*believed her. She felt it and meant it. "You ask yourself what the story is that goes with the briefcase. I'm the story," she said.*" (DeLillo, 2007, pp. 108-109.)

In this passage, we see how this very specific type of emotional labor which DeLillo shows us through the character of Florence has helped her heal the psychological wounds from the attacks. The role that narrative plays in her process of working through her trauma is stressed quite literally, as she expresses that her relationship with Keith and their conversations saved her life. This passage is also one of the few places in the novel where Florence directly addresses her mental state in the time between the attacks and the first encounter with Keith. Here, she describes an inability to interact with other people and a form of paralysis in the time after the attacks. She says she was "nearly dead, in another way", signaling that while she obviously wasn't physically dead like several of her coworkers, she experienced some sort of detachment from her life. These subtle lines essentially leave us with an impression of her as being caught in a state of mental trauma and psychological disintegration, dominated by the traumatic event. Now, Florence is no longer dominated by the attack. She has processed her experience in the conversations with Keith, constructed a cohesive narrative of the attack and as such regained a cohesive sense of self, reassembling her ruptured reality. In this sense, she can consider herself "alive" again.

Another important point, which in my opinion speaks for Florence's success in processing her experience of the attacks, is her departure from the plot circa halfway through the novel. The last time she appears in the story is in her apartment, shortly after the scene in which Keith instigates a fistfight in the mattress store while helping her shop for a new mattress. This scene is brief, only consisting of a couple of paragraphs and some lines of dialogue. After having sex, Florence expresses some ambivalence towards the nature of her relationship with Keith, when she is yet again reminded of his unavailability as Keith is getting ready to leave to her flat to go back to Lianne and Justin. Though the last lines of the scene are ambiguous as to who ends the relationship, or if the relationship is explicitly ended at that point, the scene concludes their affair and this is the last time we see Florence and Keith together, and the last time we see Florence at all.

Charles (2011) has argued, like other critics, that the form and structure of *Falling Man* resemble the mental state of trauma, in its use of fragmented scenes and circular structure, which resembles the repetitive nature and lack of development associated with trauma. I would also add that DeLillo's use of third-person narration seems to play into the dissociative state that traumatic experiences can trigger, where people end up feeling like



they observe from afar, something that happened to them directly. Suppose we understand the text itself, its form and structure, as representing the mental state of trauma. In that case, Florence's departure from the story seems to underline her success in processing her experience on the day of the attacks and move on. Here, to "move on" does not mean forgetting the experience in the World Trade Center. Rather, it means integrating it into her narrative of "self" as she reassembles her reality, which was ruptured in the time after the attacks. Her brief encounter with "the real", an abyss outside her reality, is processed and translated into a reality that Florence is able to live with and thus she is able to move on from the crippling mental state of trauma. As Florence exits the story, she stops falling. Keith, however, stays in the novel, in a persisting mental state of paralyzing trauma and with a fragmented sense of self, and as the story goes on, we observe Keith as he continues to fall.

In the final lines of the dialogue in the above-cited passage, we also see how DeLillo places an emphasis on the significance of "story" in Florence. Addressing Keith, the last thing she says is "I'm the story". This simple sentence and the emphasis on "story" does not only point to the relationship between narrative and trauma in the specific dynamic between the two of them, but also underlines the psychoanalytic logic imbedded in DeLillo's novel, which suggests, that on some level, as humans, we are the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. Here, DeLillo mediates on how internal narration provides a sense of self which becomes a story. When trauma disrupts this narrative, we may for some time, lose our sense of who we are.

For Florence, the conversations with Keith become a way for her to take an active part in the process of recovery and regaining a sense of agency lost on the day of the attacks. It becomes a way of mastering the traumatic event. In DeLillo's representation of Florence, we see how this character has a clear active relationship with the event at the center at her trauma as she engages with it through narration. In repeatedly returning to the site of trauma from her own apartment as she sits opposite Keith and presents the event to him in "dullest" detail, she engages in the work of mourning.

While in the novel, Florence represents a success through her engagement with the traumatic event and by processing it in a productive way, Keith embodies the complete opposite. In the scenes where the two interact, it becomes evident that his experience is largely marked by unassimilated aspects. While listening to Florence talking through the attacks, Keith states that he is trying to "spot himself" in Florence's narration: "He listened carefully, noting every detail, trying to find himself in the crowd" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 59). This suggests that to a large extent his experience of the attacks remains fragmented and

unassimilated. Thus, Keith cannot access the event in a similar way and is unable to give a cohesive account of his experience of the day of the attacks to himself or to others. So, it seems that in the absence of his own coherent narrative of the attacks, he tries to find himself in Florence's narration, in an attempt to fill some of the gaps in his own account of the attacks, to re-build his broken narrative, and in that way, mend parts of his shattered sense of self. However, Keith ultimately fails in this attempt and central aspects related to his experience of the attacks remain unknown to him.

In the scenes depicting his affair with Florence, they are both engaged in the relationship and take an active part in the emotional and physical aspects of it. However, as previously mentioned, in the parts of the dialogue where they discuss their specific experience of the attacks and their memories of that day, Keith assumes a passive position, mostly listening as Florence speaks. I have argued that his passiveness alludes to the typical subject/analyst dynamic in psychoanalytic therapy praxis, though it also demonstrates that while he plays a crucial part in Florence's process of working through her trauma during their conversations, he does not seem to be able to access and process his own experience of the event in a similar manner. On the contrary, Keith represents a man utterly consumed by his traumatic past.

In the scene in the mattress store, one of their final encounters, we see Keith instigating a fistfight with two random men inside the store. Keith starts this fight because he believes the men are talking about Florence in a condescending way. Leaving aside a gendered reading of this for now, this act presents us with an irrational out-of-place violent impulse that displays some kind of misplaced anger and desperation. There are several ways in which one could read this violent outburst, but I believe that this scene ultimately signals Keith's failure to process the trauma of his experience of the attacks and his persisting wounded sense of self. Acts of violence are complicated to analyze and I will avoid going into the vast discourse of different symbolic interpretations of violence. Nonetheless, on some level, violent acts are often understood as the result of feelings of powerlessness or a form of impotence.<sup>11</sup> Applying this perspective on violence to the depiction of Keith's experience of trauma, strengthens the impression of Keith as a character who is unable to access and process his experience of the attacks in a meaningful way. Due to his inability to conceive of the traumatic event in a cohesive manner, he is unable to master the event, and thus his damaged sense of self cannot be healed. What we witness in the scene in the mattress store

---

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt communicates this perspective in "Reflections on Violence" (Arendt, 1969, p. 20).

can be understood as an attempt by Keith to regain some sense of lost agency by physically dominating the men he violently lashes out against.

Keith's passiveness, his inability to present his account of the attack in a similar manner to Florence, as well as this violent outburst, forecast the downward spiral we observe in him as the novel progresses. In terms of processing trauma in a healthy way, Keith does not show any improvement as the plot of the novel moves forward. If anything, Keith regresses in the later sections of the novel, becoming more distant and alienated. In Keith, DeLillo displays a character caught in a persisting mental state of trauma and in the further development of the plot much attention is placed on Keith's inability to move on and the various ways in which the attacks continue to dominate his life.

Though Florence Givens' narrative building and processing of her trauma, and her subsequent departure from the novel, DeLillo leaves us with a glimmer of hope. The development that we see Florence go through suggests that even the worst and most shattering traumatic events can be processed and that even severe psychological wounds can be healed. In this character, DeLillo show us the possibility of recovery and emphasizes the foundational part that narrative plays in processing severe trauma. The novel suggests that in order to heal and move on from a traumatic event, a cohesive narrative is needed to reconstruct the self and reality while integrating the traumatic event in the new story of a "post-trauma self". The character of Florence Givens represents the mastery of trauma through narrative construction.

### **3.2 Despair – Keith Neudecker's never-ending fall**

A couple of years have passed since the attacks. Long after his relatively brief affair with Florence, Keith Neudecker has not been able to break out of the mental and emotional state of paralysis the experience in the tower left him in. Keith is sitting inside a casino hotel room, somewhere in Las Vegas, taking a break from gambling for some food and rest. He is growing increasingly distant from his wife and son, and keeps coming back to the poker tables, staying there for extended periods of time. The harmful effect this growing obsession has on his family life becomes clear quite early on, so the question that arise in these parts of the novel is: what keeps Keith coming back? Furthermore, how is this obsession with poker related to Keith's trauma? In this section of the analysis, my focus will be on these questions. I will argue that the best way to understand the relationship between trauma and poker is through the concept of "repetition compulsion".

At the beginning of the novel, Keith and Lianne have been divorced for some time. It quickly becomes apparent that Lianne and Keith's marriage was far from a healthy relationship, and it is suggested that the marriage was marked by conflict, unfaithfulness, and distrust. This becomes evident early on in the novel, even before Keith's affair with Florence, when Lianne describes the years she spent married to Keith as "the eventual extended grimness called their marriage" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 7). However, in the time after September 11<sup>th</sup>, Keith and Lianne decide to try to reunite and live together as a family again. Before that, Keith was living by himself in an apartment in the financial district of lower Manhattan. Prior to the attacks, his life seemed to mostly consist of work and solitary activities such as watching videos and working out. Apart from interactions with his estranged family and colleagues in his firm, we get the impression that he led a somewhat isolated existence.

Nevertheless, before the attacks, Keith did belong to one social circle, a group of six men who regularly arranged poker games. DeLillo leaves us with the impression that, for Keith, the weekly poker game went beyond being just a social gathering and constituted an important part of Keith's identity. "It was the one uncomplicated interval of his week, his month, the poker game – the one anticipation that was not marked by the bloodguilt tracings of severed connection" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 27). These poker games provided Keith with a sense of community and functioned as some sort of safe space for him that he did not seem to get anywhere else. In the sections of the novel describing the time before the attacks, the poker games are the only social interactions we see Keith engage in, except from some contact with his family and the lunch breaks with his friend and colleague Rumsey (also a member of the weekly poker game). It is clear that in this social ritual, Keith finds a sense of unity and a feeling of belonging to a group with a "shared code".

We learn that Keith and another member, Terry Cheng, were the only members of the group not seriously injured or killed in the attacks. It is unclear how many of the group lost their lives and how many were injured. However, we discover that Rumsey, the one member of the group that Keith seems to have had the closest relationship with, did not survive. The specific details of Rumsey's death remain unclear until the very last pages of the novel, when we learn that Keith directly witnessed Rumsey's death in the tower. It also becomes evident that after the attacks, the group's remaining members did not stay in touch with each other. After one of the two phone calls with Terry Cheng following the attacks, Keith reflects on how the group dissolved after the attacks: "There was nothing left, it seemed, to say about the others in the game, lost and injured, and there was no general subject they might comfortably

summon. Poker was the one code they had shared and that was over now" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 129).

In the last section of the novel, three years have passed since that day of the attacks, and Keith has long healed his relatively minor physical injuries. However, it is clear that he still suffers from psychological symptoms of trauma. In this section of the novel, we observe Keith as he starts to attend poker tournaments and play competitive poker in casinos. As organized gambling is illegal in New York, Keith has to travel to destinations such as Atlantic City, Las Vegas, or abroad to European cities to visit casinos and attend various tournaments. The relationship between poker and trauma in DeLillo's portrayal of Keith comes to represent the compulsive behavior that can result from unassimilated trauma. In these scenes, DeLillo explores the unconscious drives in humans to repeat their worst traumas, the phenomenon Freud calls "repetition compulsion".

As I have elaborated on in previous sections of this analysis, repetition is vital to understanding the nature of trauma and the processing of traumatic events. Repetition, which Lacan considered one of the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, will in some form or another always take place in the meeting between the analyst and the patient.<sup>12</sup> Typically, the analyst assumes a rather passive position in the therapy session compared to other forms of conversation therapy, e.g., psycho-dynamic therapy. The patient does most of the talking, repeating through conversations with the analyst past traumas, emotions, relationships, dreams, and conflicts as a form of narrative, which is interpreted by the analyst.

When seeking to treat the symptoms caused by trauma in therapy, a psychoanalytic approach would encourage the patient to return to the site of trauma in conversation with the analyst. The idea here is that the return to the site of trauma in a safer environment, in a prepared state of mind, and with the assistance of an analyst, would help the patient assimilate the unassimilated and relieve symptoms by constructing a cohesive narrative of the traumatic event and the time after, in the therapy sessions. Thus, bridging the gap between perception and reality and healing the damaged sense of self and wounded mind. Here, repetition is a tactic used in therapy to relieve symptoms. However, paradoxically, symptoms can also take form as repetitions.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes on the nature of trauma and the various ways in which survivors come to repeat or revisit painful aspects of their worst traumas in unwanted ways. Freud points to nightmares when describing how such unwanted

---

<sup>12</sup> See: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1973).

repetitions may occur explicitly, like in the case of traumatized soldiers who are haunted in their dreams by memories from the battlefields. Freud argues that the relationship between nightmares and trauma signals some type of fixation in the subject to “the moment to which trauma occurred” i.e., the triggering event.<sup>13</sup>

Freud describes and speculates in-depth about this phenomenon, observing that in the pain and disruption that these repetitions cause, the compulsion to repeat seems to be so powerful that it effectively overrides the pleasure principle<sup>14</sup>. This compulsion to repeat can be understood as situated in the complicated relationship between the unassimilated unknown aspects of the original traumatic event and how it continues to shape subjects' lives in the present, causing an inability to leave behind the traumatic event and dispose of it. In other words, repressed aspects of the original traumatic event force themselves on the survivor in different ways, such as in nightmares and destructive patterns of behavior.

There is a clear paradox at the center of trauma as a concept. On the one hand, traumatic experiences reject representation. These represent the most extreme aspects of human experience; incomprehensible events which cannot be incorporated into a person's narrative of him/herself and the world, and thus the events exist in a place outside our psychological reality, where human structures of meaning collapse. Simultaneously, Freud proposes that the incomprehensibility and unassimilated nature of traumas seems to be precisely what drives our compulsion to repeat them. At first glance, it seems completely counter-intuitive that humans may have some inner drive to repeat elements of our worst experiences, the parts of our lives that were so painful and devastating that they could not even be comprehended as they occurred or articulated in the time after. However, Freud suggests that there is a psychological logic at play in the compulsion to repeat traumas, coming from an urge to master.

Freud believes that unwished-for repetitions are manifestations of our wish to master unassimilated traumas. One example Freud uses to illustrate this phenomenon is an observation he made watching a toddler play by itself. The toddler had made a habit of throwing toys away and finding them again. For example, he used a wooden reel attached to a string to play a game where he tossed the reel over the edge of a cot. As the reel disappeared, he expressed a sound (described by Freud as “oooo”), which Freud and the toddler's parents understood as signaling the German word for “gone”. As the toddler pulled the string and the

---

<sup>13</sup> See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920, pp. 156-157).

<sup>14</sup> “The Pleasure Principle” in psychoanalysis, refers to Freud's idea that humans instinctively seek pleasure and avoids pain. See: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. (Freud, 1920, pp. 1-2)

reel returned, he expressed a joyful sound (described by Freud as “da”). Freud understood this sound as signaling the word “there”. In this simple game of gone/there, where there was undoubtedly more pleasure in the reel returning than when it disappeared, Freud believed he saw the toddler’s recreation of the traumatic moment of his first separation from his mother. Freud speculated that the reconstruction of this experience in a different setting came from a desire to master something which could not be mastered as it initially occurred; that it was an attempt to regain control.

*“On an unprejudiced view one gets an impression that the child repeated his experience as a game from another motive. At the outset he was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part. These efforts might be put down to a drive for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not”* (Freud, 1920, p. 159).

Freud uses this very specific observation to think about a more general tendency in humans to repeat past traumas. Something traumatic happens to us, and later we unconsciously seek out repetitions of this traumatic event in different contexts, attempting to master it. In addition to this observation of the toddler’s game, the act of repeating trauma in therapy, and the case of nightmares, Freud also points out how humans often get caught in cycles, repeating similar destructive relationship patterns over and over e.g., repeatedly choosing partners who are emotionally unavailable, abusive, etc. Freud is more ambiguous here, but he seems to suggest that these repetitions too are the result of a similar drive to master or regain a sense of lost control or agency.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of repetition compulsion serves as a highly productive way of thinking of DeLillo's representation of Keith’s relationship to poker in *Falling Man*. In my opinion, the link between this aspect of the novel and the concept is quite obvious. However, connecting Keith's gambling to the trauma of the attacks and the concept of repetition compulsion firstly relies on the premise that his gambling can be accurately assessed as compulsive. So, in order to analyze the gambling as originating in a traumatic experience, we must first establish whether DeLillo portrays Keith's gambling as a pattern of compulsive behavior, examine the

---

<sup>15</sup> See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920, pp. 164-165).

destructive aspects of the gambling, and then demonstrate direct links between the time Keith spends in casinos and the attacks.

*“In these months of mastering the game he was spending most of his time on the strip now, sitting in leather recliners in the sports-book parlors, hunched under the shade canopies in the poker rooms. He was finally making money, quiet amounts that had begun to show consistency. He was also going home periodically, three or four days, love, sex, fatherhood, home-cooked food, but was lost at times for something to say. There was no language it seemed to tell them how he spent his days and nights. Soon he felt the need to be back there”* (DeLillo, 2007, p. 197).

The quote above describes how Keith spends extended periods of time in casinos and also demonstrates how his mental state is largely affected by trauma. The phrase “lack of language” alludes to the breakdown of representational capacities which an encounter with a traumatic event can cause, and the emphasis on consistency points to breakdown in a cohesive sense of self, the narrative gaps a traumatic experience typically include. As for the family dynamic between Keith, Lianne and Justin, being away for months at a time clearly has negative effects. Despite the fact that they seem to maintain a relationship, we get the sense that the trips to the casino create a distance between them. Furthermore, the above quote states that Keith returns for “some days” of love and fatherhood, which demonstrates his inability to provide love and be a present parent on the days where he is not there, which seems to be most of the time. We are left with the impression of a distant partner and parent, unable to fully participate in the relationships with his family and provide the emotional support needed in a partner and parent. “He missed the kid. Neither liked talking on the phone. How do you talk with a kid on the phone?” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 206). Here, Keith explicitly reflects on the growing distance between himself and Justin and the fact that he misses him. Still, Keith is drawn to the casinos and even after just a few days at home with Lianne and Justin, he feels a need to return to the poker rooms in Las Vegas.

In addition to creating distance in the family relationship, the two last sentences of the above-quoted paragraph also demonstrate Keith’s inability to communicate and share experiences from the casino with his family. One way of reading this, is that Keith does not want his family to know what his days in the casinos look like, because he knows that the hours spent gambling seem unhealthy and display a pattern of depression and destructive behavior. However, one can also read this as signaling that Keith himself does not understand



this compulsion and/or does not have the language to fully articulate his attraction to the poker tables, which keeps him isolated, far away from his home with Lianne and Justin. The urge that Keith feels to return to Las Vegas after a few days in New York, leaves us with the impression that he is not fully present even in the limited time he is spending at home. So, the question still remains; what does Keith get at the poker tables, what need is met in the casinos which draws him back, despite the adverse effects on the relationship with his family?

*“The whole place stank of abandonment. In time Keith got up and walked over to the poker room where he completed his buy in and took his seat, ready for the start of the tournament, so-called. (...) This was never over. That was the point. There was nothing outside the game but faded space”* (DeLillo, 2007, p. 189).

DeLillo portrays the casino environment and the ritual of gambling in a rather bleak and depressing manner. The people in the casino convey a kind of sadness and emptiness as they sit and gamble for hours on hours, leaving the reader with the impression of gambling as a dreary and isolated activity devoid of fun. While the gambling trips obviously provide Keith with something, the act of gambling in itself is never portrayed as a hobby which brings him any traditional form of joy or excitement. In this sense, we can associate it with compulsions. Compulsive acts do not typically generate any new sense of happiness but are only pleasurable in relieving feelings of anxiety that were already there.

Gambling addiction is a well-known phenomenon, and the quote above illustrates gambling's addictive qualities and its similarities to other forms of addictions. For many, at the center of addiction lies something, be it trauma, other mental illness, poverty, or other challenging circumstances, that the addictive substance of choice offers a temporary release from. When describing everything existing outside of the casino as a mere faded space – a big void, and the atmosphere inside the casino as marked by abandonment, of social lives and relationships destroyed, DeLillo effectively portrays the kind of escapism which characterizes so much of addiction and compulsive behavior. The escapism offers a temporal release from painful circumstances, which results in a pattern of destructive behavior that does not offer any solutions or real benefits, only the short-lived relief of pain at a high cost. Through the inevitable dynamic of addiction, the negative consequences are outweighed by the temporary absence of agony, and thereby the person is trapped in a pattern of destructive behavior.

While Keith's trips to the casinos can be read as a form of escapism and a way of coping with the trauma from the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, by shutting out the outside world,

I propose that discussing the force driving this behavior as form of repetition compulsion offers a rich reading. Keith does not fit the bill of a “gambling addict” in the traditional sense – someone unable to stop playing poker despite losing all his money and property, completely losing control to the addiction and to the rush of winning. Still, I believe his gambling should be characterized as a compulsion, as we have seen that he feels a distinct need to gamble despite the obvious negative effects. I would also argue that there seem to be joyless and monotonous traits to the way he gambles. Despite mentioning making quiet, consistent sums of money, Keith also states that the financial gain and risk, the actual money has very little to do with his compulsion to gamble.

Keith and his family are wealthy, and their financial situation gives us the impression that neither a win nor a loss at the level on which he is playing would significantly affect their financial stability. Likewise, we get the impression that the sums won are only required to financially maintain a life without working, where poker is the main activity, rather than to cover any form of urgent financial need. “The money mattered, but not so much. The game mattered, the touch of felt beneath the hands, the way the dealer burnt one card, dealt the next. He wasn’t playing for the money” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 228). So, while there does not seem to be any real financial incentive for his gambling, what seems to matter to Keith is the act of gambling itself – the sensation of being *in* the game and not necessarily the rush of winning the game. Keith’s urge to shut out the world and make it into a void of empty space clearly connects the gambling to his trauma. In understanding his gambling as a form of repetition compulsion, the question that remains is *why* Keith turns to poker, specifically, as a way of shutting out the world. Furthermore, precisely *how* his compulsive gambling relates to the painful and unprocessed memories of his experience on the day the planes hit the World Trade Center, remains unarticulated.

*“He was never more himself than in these rooms, with a dealer crying out a vacancy at table seven. He was looking at pocket tens, waiting for the turn. These were the times when there was nothing outside, no flash of history or memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine of the cards”*  
(DeLillo, 2007, p. 225).

As demonstrated above, the contrast between Keith's weekly poker games in the time before the attacks and his solitary gambling in the Las Vegas casinos in the years after, is striking. The weekly poker games with his friends offered Keith a safe space, providing him

with a sense of community. The casinos mainly seem to give him some relief from the outside world, where he experienced a catastrophe beyond comprehension, but this environment also entails some degree of isolation and alienation. In the weekly poker game, there was community, and in the casinos, there is detachment. While the contrast between the communal experience of the weekly poker game and the casinos' alienating environment is unmistakable, there does seem to be a similarity in Keith's attraction to the two very different poker contexts. In both instances, Keith is seeking something other than the actual winning, which does not seem that important to him; the goal of the game is secondary.

The casino becomes a refuge from a world where signifiers evoking reminders of September 11<sup>th</sup> are everywhere. Nevertheless, in choosing casinos and the world of poker as Keith's attempt to escape his trauma, DeLillo raises a paradox: The arena of Keith's escape, the casinos which he is drawn to, denote clear connotations to the trauma Keith experienced on the day of the attacks. It serves as a reminder of the dissolution of the social group that was clearly very important to Keith, his dead and injured friends from the weekly poker game, and the traumatic moment when Keith witnessed Rumsey's death in the tower. I propose that in this paradox, we can observe how DeLillo explores the concept of repetition compulsion.

On p. 230 in the novel, Keith's nightmares are described, giving us an example of how unprocessed memories of the attacks force themselves on him directly in his sleep. What we see in Keith's developing obsession with poker is also how unassimilated aspects of his experience on the day of the attacks reappear in a delayed manner, though in a more indirect way. At this point, I would like to turn the reader's attention to a line of a paragraph cited earlier in this section: "In these months of mastering the game he was spending most of his time on the strip now" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 197). The phrase "mastering the game" is an interesting choice of words in this context.

One would assume that Keith would be very familiar with the rules of poker through his poker group. Earlier in the novel, we observe the group playing different versions of poker with pedantic attention to minor, specific variations in the rules of the different ways of playing the game. Admittedly, playing poker with friends is very different from playing poker in a casino or a tournament and requires a somewhat different skill set. Nonetheless, the argument I am making here is that what DeLillo shows us in Keith's gambling is him repeating aspects of the catastrophe which he could not fully process as the attacks happened, aspects of the experience that he cannot master. Keith's urge to master these aspects, comes to shape his life in the present, leading to a destructive pattern of behavior.

*“He wasn’t making enough money to justify this life on a practical basis. But there was no such need. There should have been but there wasn’t and what was the point. The point was one of invalidation. Nothing else pertained. Only this had binding force. He folded six more hands, then went all-in. Make them bleed. Make them spill their precious losers’ blood. These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness”*  
(DeLillo, 2007, p. 230)

In the description of poker as the only thing having “binding force”, Keith conveys the persisting psychological damage he suffers, and how his sense of self is still fragmented in the time after the attacks. The relationship between Keith's trauma and his attraction to casinos and the world of poker can be perceived on different levels. Connecting the compulsion to gamble directly to the social ritual of the weekly poker game and, by extension, his dead and injured friends serves as a strong and plausible reading. Here, we can understand the full impact of the attacks, the death and loss that Keith suffered due to the attacks, as something not yet fully processed and comprehended in his psyche. He lost more than friends, acquaintances and a social ritual on the day of the attacks. He lost an essential aspect of his identity. He lost a sense of community and a sense of brotherhood. Keith is unable to fully grasp or articulate the extent of what was lost in the attacks, and its impact on his life and sense of self. This creates a gap in his sense of self, between his perception of what happened and the reality of event. He is unable to comprehend the real circumstances surrounding his life and of "moving forward" in leading a life forever marked by the disaster of extreme violence.

The long periods spent in the casinos can thus be understood as the manifestation of repetition compulsion, drawing Keith to an environment where what was lost that day, the friendships with members of the weekly poker game, and Keith's sense of belonging, becomes particularly visible. Like in the story of Tasso,<sup>16</sup> through a wound that Keith cannot fully understand or identify, speaks a voice that addresses him and demands his attention to witness an extreme truth of what he lost when the towers came down. The poker tables in the casinos highlight aspects of Keith's trauma, which remain unknown and unprocessed,

---

<sup>16</sup> See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920, p. 165) and *Unclaimed Experience* (Caruth, 1996, pp. 1-4).

contributing to his inability to move on and to leave the event in the past. The compulsive gambling he engages in could thus be read as the delayed force of impact of the loss of his friends, an aspect of his trauma that he hasn't fully processed and has not managed to assimilate into his narrativized sense of self. This results in an inability to mourn the loss in a healthy and productive way. Instead, it keeps him frozen, in a state of melancholia, where he repeats this aspect of his trauma in an unproductive manner. Despite his repetition, the loss remains unprocessed and something which Keith is not able to master.

Describing the poker games, Keith states that "Only this had binding force" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 230), alluding to the fragmented sense of self one may experience as a result of trauma. In the representation of Keith, DeLillo leaves us with the impression of a man with a severe psychic wound, on the verge of total psychological disassociation. In the relationship between Keith's trauma and the scenes depicting his compulsive gambling, DeLillo creates a space where we can explore how lives can be dominated by trauma and cause destructive patterns of behavior long after physical injuries have healed. Furthermore, the lost sense of community and the damage caused to Keith's idea of himself in the dissolution of his safe social space echoes the damage that acts of terror can have on society's social fabric and the feelings of alienation which unthinkable acts of violence can induce.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth describes "the enigma/crisis of survival," which can arise after experiencing a close encounter with death. Caruth's understanding of trauma, where she draws on Freud's writing both in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, suggests that what follows in the aftermath of surviving a destructive, violent event – the temporal relationship between the original event itself and the continuous ongoing experience of trauma and survival – is not just an aftereffect of the destruction caused by the impact of trauma, but rather the enigma of surviving such an extreme event: "What Freud encounters in the traumatic neurosis is not the reaction to any horrible event, but, the peculiar and perplexing nature of survival" (Caruth, 1996, p. 60).

Such crises of survival arise when survivors attempt to continue their lives after an inconceivable experience that could not be entirely "known" when it occurred. After a traumatic event, survivors go on with a missed experience, a breach in the mind, and a gap in their narrative of themselves and the world. In Lacanian terms, trauma can represent an encounter with the real, a void beyond the reach of the signifier, which rejects representation and where all structures of meaning rupture. The direct encounter with this void shatters the sense of self and the psychologically sustainable understanding of reality, which has been continuously cultivated from the formation of a person's "I" during the mirror stage, until the

triggering traumatic event first occurred. After the event, the survivor must reconstruct a cohesive sense of self and a sustainable perception of reality. Perplexed by the absurdity of survival and day to day life in the aftermath of a trauma, like a violent confrontation with one's mortality, follows not only a crisis of the initial meeting with death, Caruth argues, but a correlating crisis of life.

Caruth's argument here seems highly applicable to DeLillo's depiction of Keith. At the center of Keith's trauma lies not just the specific day of the attacks, but every single day that follows the attacks – all of which, in a way, constitute days that he survived the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Connecting such a "crisis of survival" to Keith seems particularly plausible due to the sheer absurdity and arbitrariness of his survival, combined with his relatively easy physical recovery. His survival and minor physical wounds contrast the extreme nature of the event he suffered, both the cultural impact of the event and the massive damage it caused in terms of dead and injured. One can imagine the questions that must arise surviving such an event, feelings of guilt and shame, as well as the difficulty in making sense of one's own survival and complete physical recovery in the midst of nearly 3000 dead and over 6000 injured. The notion of "survivor's guilt" becomes particularly relevant when the specifics of Rumsey's death become clear in the last pages of the novel, where we learn that Keith directly witnessed him die before he managed to escape. The difficulty in coming to terms with the unlikeliness of survival, yet knowing that you did indeed survive, may evoke a sense of disassociation when trying to participate in normal day-to-day life – which could lead to compulsive behavior.

In DeLillo's depiction of Keith, there is also another dynamic at play that connects the circumstances of Keith's unlikely survival to the concept of repetition compulsion and the game of poker. The nature of the disaster at the center of Keith's trauma is marked by chaos and his survival by a sense of chance. When the planes hit the towers on September 11<sup>th</sup>, survival was dependent on random factors and luck; who was on sick leave that particular day, who was out to lunch or had an appointment uptown, who had which offices on what floor of the buildings and managed to get out before the collapse etc. Such random factors of chance were of immense importance in determining who lived and who died on that day. For Keith, it is plausible to state that an element of the unassimilated aspects of his encounter with death on the day of the attacks, would be the inability to know and process the full extent of having survived by chance and of knowing that given a slightly different set of circumstances, changing only one minor factor in the equation, Keith could just as easily have died that day. If he was dealt a slightly different hand, if you will, he would have died

that day in the tower. My argument here is that there is a clear connection between this dynamic of Keith's survival and the nature of the game of poker.

Fundamentally, poker is a game of chance, where random factors of luck have decisive effects. You play the cards you are dealt, and the element of chance cannot be avoided. However, the game and tradition of poker include a vast number of strategies to apply when playing the game. At professional levels, the skill of playing poker is determined by the use of such strategies. The ability to read other players' patterns and their facial expressions and other strategies is perceived, in the long run, to be of greater importance than the hand of cards you are dealt in one round. The poker player's skill, their ability to apply such strategies, and read patterns are deemed more important than in other games typically played in casinos, such as roulette, slots, craps, etc. The skill required in mastering the game, that fact that there is something other than blind luck there, is possibly one reason why some regard poker closer to a sport than the other mentioned forms of gambling. Still, the element of chance cannot be disregarded, as when it comes down to it – the cards you are dealt will, for better or worse, more or less determine your chances against your opponents.

*“The cards fell randomly, no assignable cause, but he remained the agent of free choice. Luck, chance, no one knew what these things were. These things were only assumed to effect events. He had memory, judgement, the ability to decide what is true, what is alleged, when to strike, when to fade. He had the measure of calm, of calculated isolation, and there was a certain logic he might draw on” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 211).*

We can understand Keith's direct encounter with his mortality on the day of the attacks and the unlikelihood of his survival as elements at the center of his trauma. Furthermore, particularly in the section of the novel where Keith is playing poker, the complete randomness of death on that day, of life and death being left to the mercy of chance, seems to be another defining component of his trauma. The element of chance, the arbitrariness of his survival, and the role that dumb luck has played in his life highlight the absurdity of his survival and of life after the attacks. In the portrayal of Keith's compulsive gambling, DeLillo shows us that this element of chance and randomness is a dimension of what happened to Keith, which he cannot process or master.

Throughout the time spent in various casinos, this downward spiral towards isolation where Keith is becoming increasingly more emotionally distant and alienated from society,

becomes a manifestation of a compulsion to repeat his trauma, not only by repeating the loss of his social identity and sense of belonging, but also as a compulsion to repeat the element of chance. In the casinos, Keith is acting out a form of repetition compulsion where he is re-experiencing the sensation of luck determining his outcome. However, in mastering the game of poker by learning the various strategies applied in the game to outweigh the element of luck, the casino environment provides a platform where he can feel some sense of control over the random factors. What Keith is seeking here is to regain some agency, which was lost on the day of the attacks, where he was made a victim of random circumstances by forces beyond his control and a survivor by sheer coincidence.

In Keith's compulsive gambling, DeLillo depicts a man's inability, yet ongoing attempt to master the reality of the event at the center of his trauma and survival. In the casinos, Keith re-visits a place where he both re-experiences an aspect of his trauma, an element of his survival which he cannot fully "know" and tries to triumph over this element in a different setting. He is driven by the feeling of unsafety or risk, of not knowing what comes next and of being left to chance – but simultaneously being in a context where this feeling of unsafety and the dependency on luck is situated within a structure which allows him some control over it and the opportunity to repeat it infinitely. For Keith, poker's appeal has nothing to do with money, its appeal is in winning the game by "beating" the random factors, luck and chance, and thereby mastering an unprocessed element of his trauma. However, this pattern of behavior proves ineffective and fails to address his trauma in any useful way. By the end of the novel, what we see in Keith is a man paralyzed by his past, stuck alone, going in circles in a revolving door of his own trauma, unable to access and process this painful truth at the core of his psychic wound.

*“(…) “Thinking about it is one thing. Seeing it would put me in depression. People sitting around a table going shuffle shuffle. Week after week. I mean catching planes to go play cards. I mean aside from the absurdity, the total psychotic folly, isn't there something very sad about this?”*

*“You said it yourself, most lives make no sense.”*

*There was one final thing, too self-evident to need saying. She wanted to be safe in the world and he did not” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 216).*



The above-cited passage is from an exchange of dialogue between Lianne and Keith towards the end of the novel, where they discuss poker. This exchange shows Keith's failure in processing his experience on the day of the attacks and the persistent effects his trauma continues to have on his mental state. Keith has not been able to process the full reality of what happened to him, and he is left without a cohesive sense of himself and the world, a gap in his narrative self. Now, safety is not only an illusion for Keith; it does not exist at all. Life and society do not make sense. Unable to process and integrate his experience, he cannot move beyond his trauma and is effectively consumed by it. He is drawn into a destructive pattern of behavior by the unconscious desire to master existence in a constant state of risk, challenging chance over and over again in the casinos. In this sense, by the end of the novel Keith is left in a never-ending psychological free fall. He is unable to access or address his trauma in any real way and is unable to move on.

The novel suggests that some sense of agency over the triggering event is vital to moving forward from trauma. Such agency can be reached if a subject can construct a cohesive narrative of the traumatic event in its past. In the novel, we see how trauma shifted the whole trajectory of Keith's life. Going back is not an option as his old life does not longer exist. At the same time, he struggles to create something new as he is trapped in a state of permanent melancholia, which keeps him from engaging with his life in a meaningful way in the present. In this sense, Keith is psychologically stuck in a liminal space between his past life and the present, unable to navigate the reality of the post-9/11 world. Keith comes to represent a failure in processing and understanding the 9/11 attacks in a meaningful way. In the absence of a cohesive narrative of the attacks, he cannot understand the attacks, himself, or society in post 9/11 America. Still, through the symptoms of his trauma brought on by the unconscious drive for mastery, we see how the events of 9/11 continue to shape his existence and how he relates to the world around him.

## 4 Concluding comments

This thesis has offered an analysis of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* as an exploration of trauma, narrative and mastery, and the psychoanalytic logic embedded in DeLillo's story of the loss and grief of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Drawing on a framework of psychoanalytic theory, I have employed perspectives from Freud's writing and some Lacanian concepts when studying how the elements of mastery, narrative, and repetition intersect in DeLillo's representation of trauma in post-9/11 America. I have shown that the novel's representation of trauma aligns

closely with psychoanalytic theory and that a psychoanalytic reading of the novel focusing on the mentioned elements raises new perspectives on the text.

The first section of the analysis focuses on the character Keith Neudecker and his affair with Florence Givens. Through their relationship, I demonstrate how DeLillo presents narrative as a vital aspect of identity formation and an important tool for processing traumas. I argue that Florence, through her conversations with Keith, displays how she goes through a productive process of working through her trauma, and that her repeated acts of narration were instrumental in this process. Florence succeeds in processing her trauma from the day of the attacks and can integrate those painful memories in her story of self and gain a sense of mastery over the event, and thus, she can move on. Furthermore, her success in working through her traumatic past and moving on is underlined by her departure from the story. In this sense, Florence becomes a small glimmer of hope in a story of crisis, as she displays that moving on from even the worst traumas is possible, but only if one can take an active part in processing the event, e.g., through narration.

On the contrary, Keith cannot process the fragmented painful memories of his experience in the tower and remains frozen in a traumatic state. Unable to move forward, we observe how Keith remains in a state of persistent melancholia and how symptoms of his traumatic past manifest in his growing compulsion to play poker in casinos. Alienated from society outside the walls of the casinos and growing increasingly distant from his family, we observe Keith in a psychological free fall, trapped between his past and the present. The drive for mastery is still present in Keith, which results in his destructive pattern of behavior where he continues to repeat unassimilated elements of his trauma years after his initial encounter with the crisis.

It is in DeLillo's representation of humans in crisis, of our psychological responses to traumas, where the presence of Freud's ideas is clearly most pronounced. DeLillo's text is deeply informed by Freudian concepts. Critics such as Versluys (2009) have commented on the novel as an articulation of Freud's notion of melancholia. In the analysis, I demonstrate how DeLillo's representation of poker in relation to Keith's trauma aligns with Freud's writing on repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In Keith's character and the representation of poker in the novel's final sections, DeLillo's presentation of the despair of unprocessed traumas is very effective. Moreover, the Freudian ideas which shape DeLillo's story also show the echoes of psychoanalytic theory in the present and demonstrate ways in which similar structures of meaning continue to motivate contemporary culture.

Much like the representation of the persisting state of trauma experienced by the novel's protagonist, certain aspects of the novel itself feels repetitive and unresolved. In this sense, the novel does not satisfy the reader with any conclusive answers to big questions following the 9/11 attacks. DeLillo's reluctance to offer any answers in the novel may indicate the unhealed wounds and ongoing trauma of the 9/11 attacks in the American psyche at the time of the novel's publication. While the novel diagnoses a need for control and mastery and a desire for a cohesive narrative and understanding of the attacks in post 9/11 America, this desire or need is not met in or by the novel.

Rather than seeking to provide conclusive answers, DeLillo asks us to look at the most painful and extreme aspects of the human experience. He invites the reader to observe the vast array of complexities that inhabit the most radical parts of our existence and think about intricate psychological mechanisms that seek to control and master events we cannot understand, such as encounters with catastrophes beyond comprehension. The novel shows us how these psychological mechanisms, with all their ambiguities, may function as a productive tool for processing trauma and allow us to heal mental wounds or drive us to patterns of behavior that become detrimental and destructive. The novel aligns with psychoanalytic perspectives on trauma, which see a strong connection between trauma and narrative. The potential healing benefits of processing traumas through narrative construction becomes evident in the novel, as well as the results of narrative gaps resulting from trauma. Moreover, the novel leaves us with the notion that the stories we tell are a vital part of how we navigate reality, construct our identity, and thus, they shape who we are and are a part of what makes us human.

In the novel, we observe the shattering effects that losing one's story of self can have and the persisting damage it can cause when the ability to construct a cohesive narrative of reality is lost as a result of an encounter with catastrophic change. In many ways, the novel's representation of trauma in post 9/11 America is bleak. However, there is also an implicit implication of empowerment in DeLillo's approach to trauma and its relationship to narrative and mastery. On one level, the novel suggests that even if its protagonist fails, no matter the severity and scale of a catastrophic event, there is always a possibility of moving forward, regaining agency, and building a new story of self. I believe this takeaway is the reason why, despite the novel's very specific subject matter and motive, I find it so resonant today, as we stand in the midst of a new, very different crisis, which nevertheless feels like a similar moment of cultural departure, a new chapter.

## References

- Abe, Noemi (2011). Triangulation and Gender Perspectives in “Falling Man” by Don DeLillo. *Altre Modernità*, No 2 pp. 65-75. DOI: 10.13130/2035-7680/1293
- Anker, Elizabeth S. (2011). Allegories of Falling and the 9/11 Novel. *American Literary History*, Vol 23(3), pp. 463-483. DOI: doi:10.1093/alh/ajr017
- Althusser, Louis. (1970). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation). In, Dale Parker (Ed.), *Critical Theory: A reader for literary and cultural studies* (2012, pp. 449-460). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ally, Hamza Karam. (2019). Mourning in the Age of Terror: Revisiting Don DeLillo’s Elusive 9/11 Novel *Falling Man*. *Canadian Review of American Studies*. Vol 49(3), pp. 349-371. URL: <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/741243>.
- Arendt, Hannah. (1969). Reflections on Violence. In *Journal of International Affairs*. (Vol. 23. No 1, Political Conflict: Perspectives on Revolution, pp. 1-35). URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24356590>
- Baelo-Allué, Sonia. (2012). 9/11 and the Psychic Trauma Novel: Don DeLillo’s “Falling Man”. *Atlantis*. Vol 34(1) pp. 63-79. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43486021>
- Buchanan, Ian. "Yale School of Deconstruction." *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. : Oxford University Press, , 2018. *Oxford Reference*. URL <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.uio.no/view/10.1093/acref/9780198794790.001.0001/acref-9780198794790-e-753>.
- Bjerre, Thomas Æ. (2012). Post-9/11 Literary Masculinities in Kalfus, DeLillo, and Hamid. *Obris Litterarum*, Vol 67(3) pp. 241-266. Doi: 10.1111/j.1600-0730.2012.01051.x
- Carroll, Hamilton. (2013). “Like Nothing in this Life”: September 11 and the Limits of Representation in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*. *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol 40(1) pp. 107-130. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.2013.0005>
- Charles, Marylin. (2011) FALLING MAN: Encounters with Catastrophic Change. *The Psychoanalytic Review*. Vol 98(4) pp. 425-450. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1521/prev.2011.98.4.425>
- Conte, Joseph M. (2011). DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror. *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol 57(3) pp. 557-583. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2011.0059>
- DeLillo, Don. (2007). *Falling Man*. London, United Kingdom: Picador.

Felman, Soshana & Laub, Dori. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York, USA: Routledge, Chapman and Hall Inc.  
Caruth, Cathy. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience – Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore Md: The John Hopkins University Press

Freud, Sigmund. (1914). Remembering, Repeating and Working Through. *The Standard Edition Of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. (Volume 12, pp. 145-157). London, United Kingdom: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis.

Freud, Sigmund. (1936). Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*. (Volume 5, pp. 1-28). DOI: 10.1080/21674086.1936.11925270

Freud, Sigmund. (1917). Mourning and Melancholia. *The Standard Edition Of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. (Volume 14, pp. 243-258). London, United Kingdom: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis. DOI:

Freud, Sigmund. (1920). Beyond the Pleasure Principle. *Psychoanalysis and history*. Volume 17 (issue 2) p.151-204. URL: <https://www-eupublishing-com.ezproxy.uio.no/doi/abs/10.3366/pah.2015.0169>

Fukuyama, Francis. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, U.S: Free Press

Gray, Richard. (2011). *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*. Oxford, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons Publications.

Hartman, Geoffrey, H. (1995). On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies. *New Literary History*, Vol 26(3) pp. 537-563. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057300>

Harack, Katarina. (2013). Embedded and Embodied Memories: Body, Space and Time in Don DeLillo's "White Noise" and "Falling Man". *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp. 303-336. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43297879>

Hunter, Anna. (2018). The Holocaust as the Ultimate Trauma Narrative. In J. Kurtz (Ed.), *Trauma and Literature*. (1<sup>st</sup> edition, pp. 66-82). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press

Jameson, Fredric. (1977). Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism and the Problem of the Subject. *Yale French Studies: Literature and Psychoanalysis* (No. 55/56, (1977), pp. 338-396).

Dale Parker, Robert. (2015). *How to Interpret Literature*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Lacan, Jacques. (1973). The Four Foundational Concepts of Psychoanalysis. In: Sheridan, Alan (trans.), *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book XI* (1981 ed.) New York, USA: W.W Norton Company.

Lacan, Jacques. (1949). The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience. In: Fink, Bruce (trans.), *Écrits* (2006 ed, pp. 75-81). New York, USA: W.W Norton Company.

Lacan, Jacques. (1953). The Function and Field of Speech in Language in Psychoanalysis. In: Fink, Bruce (trans.), *Écrits* (2006 ed, pp. 197-269). New York, USA: W.W Norton Company.

Lack, Anthony. (2016). Shattered: Time, History and Possibility in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. *HyperCultura* Vol 5(2). URL: <https://doaj.org/article/9345ad5074ef4318a255d5fef00b58c2>

Marshall, Alan. (2013). From This Point on It's All about Loss: Attachment to Loss in the Novels of Don DeLillo from "Underworld to Falling Man". *Journal of American Studies*. Vol 47(3) pp. 621-636. URL: [www.jstor.org/stable/24485832](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24485832)

Parish, Mary J. (2012). 9/11 and the Limitations of the Man's Man Construction of Masculinity in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol 53(3) pp.185-200. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111611003717691>

Pederson, Joshua. (2018). Trauma and Narrative. In Kurtz, Roger, J. (Ed.), *Trauma and Literature*. (1<sup>st</sup> edition, pp. 97-110). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press

Polatinsky, S. & Scherzinger, K. (2013). Dying without Death: Temporality, Writing, and Survival in Maurice Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol 54(2) pp. 124-134. DOI: [10.1080/00111619.2010.549857](https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2010.549857)

Pound, Marcus. (2008). *Zizek: A (very) Critical Introduction*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Qingji, He. (2015). Ethics Counter Narrative in DeLillo's *Falling Man*. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. Vol 17(5). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2750>

Schwarz, D. (1990). The Narrative of Paul de Man: Texts, Issues, Significance. *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 20(2), 179-194. Retrieved September 30, 2020, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225954>

Simine, Silke Arnold-de. (2018). Trauma and Memory. In Kurtz, Roger, J. (Ed.), *Trauma and Literature* (1<sup>st</sup> edition, pp. 140-153). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press

Summer, Charles. (2014). Don DeLillo's Falling Man and the Protective Shield Against Stimuli. *American Imago*. Vol 71(1), pp. 1-27. DOI: 10.2307/26305074

Toremans, Tom. (2018). Deconstruction. In J. Kurtz (Ed.), *Trauma and Literature*. (1<sup>st</sup> edition, pp. 51-65). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press

Versluys, K. (2009). American Melancholia: Don DeLillo's Falling Man. In *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (pp. 19-48). New York: Columbia University Press.

Webb, Jen. (2011). Fiction and Testimony in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. *Life Writing*. Vol 8(1) pp. 51-65. DOI: 10.1080/14484528.2011.542638

Zizek, Slavoj. (2006). *How to read Lacan*. London, United Kingdom: Granta Books.

Zizek, Slavoj. (1992). Why Does a Letter Always Arrive at its Destination? Imaginary, Symbolic, Real. In Dale Parker, Robert (ed). *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*. (2012 edition, pp. 215-231). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Zizek, Slavoj. (2009). *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London, United Kingdom: Verso Books.