The Code of Chaos - Wilderness, Language and the Circularity of Escape in Don DeLillo's *The Names*

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Citation: João Paulo Guimarães. "The Code of Chaos - Wilderness, Language and the Circularity of Escape in Don DeLillo's *The Names*" *Via Panoramica: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, série 3, vol. 7, nº 2, 2018, pp. 52-69. ISSN: 1646-4728. Web: http://ler.letras.up.pt/.

As Leslie Fiedler tells us in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, the most significant works of fiction about the New World reject linear temporality. They are exceptional because they pivot around a voyage towards the remote region of innocence – a plane yet unsoiled by history. Fiedler says that these American texts are "nonrealistic, even anti-realistic" (28) because they are animated by a "flight from the physical data of the actual world" (29). The latter is instead tamed into a "system of signs to be deciphered" (29), in hope that they will unlock the "Ideal" (29) that explains the ultimate truth underlying the plane of ephemeral facts.

In short, regardless of when they were written, "American" texts, as defined by Fiedler, partake of their nation's quest for a vantage point from which the world can be seen in its true aspect. That is what explains the American fascination with wilderness, which, in *Uncommon Ground*, William Cronon describes as follows:

> Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape

> of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are. (80)

Wilderness was what Americans had found when they first arrived in the New World. Because they already saw themselves as denizens of an original unpolluted paradise, the description of their new abode as a wild space was, however, in many ways self-fulfilling. As Donald Pease points out in *The New American Exceptionalisms*, the first settlers had brought wilderness with them in the form of the collective fantasy of the Virgin Land, which, after having been established, allowed them to repress their responsibility for historical events like the removal of the Indians:

> At its core, the metaphor of the Virgin Land was designed to fulfill Europe's wish to start life afresh by relinquishing history on behalf of the secular dream of the construction of a new Eden. The metaphor gratified European emigrants' need to believe that America was an unpopulated space. The belief that the new world was discovered and settled by the Europeans who emigrated there resulted from the coupling of a shared fantasy with historical amnesia. (159-60)

However, physical nature itself also had a part to play in this fantasy. While, according to the national fantasy, Americans were always already guileless creatures that stood apart from the sensible world of history, paradoxically, they still had to expose themselves to the natural world and to tame the latter in order to become pure. Therefore, as civilization made its progress in the direction of the western part of the continent and concurrently destroyed the wild landscapes that acted as an alibi for the nation's self-portrait, the very same people that were deploying modernity into the remotest regions of the country started to be assailed by a feeling of nostalgia for the unexplored frontier. According to Cronon, several ways to circumvent this spiritual lack were soon brought forth:

> If the frontier was passing, then men who had the means to do so should preserve for themselves some remnant of its wild landscape so that they might enjoy the regeneration and renewal that came from sleeping under the stars, participating in blood sports, and living off the land. The frontier might be gone, but the frontier experience could still be had if only the wilderness was preserved. . . . The elite

> passion for wild land took many forms: enormous estates in the Adirondacks and elsewhere . . . cattle ranches for the would-be riders of the Great Plains, guided big-game hunting trips in the Rockies, and luxurious resort hotels whenever railroads pushed their way into sublime landscapes. Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they traveled. (80)

Don Delillo's *The Names* is a story about a group of well-to-do Americans who have discovered a new way to simulate the experience of the frontier: they immerse themselves in the wild life of unstable countries:

> In the end this is what brought them out. It wasn't the local hepatitis, the cholera to the north, even the steady gunfire. It was the arbitrary nature of things. Moods and whims. Nothing the same two days running. Stray events. Life shaped by men who had the wanton force of some sudden turn in nature. (100)

James Axton, the book's narrator and protagonist, is one of these explorers. He is a risk-analyst for a multinational company that insures big corporations against several hazards correlated to the political, social and economic instability of the countries they do business with. By Fiedler's standards, Axton is a model American hero – he is not able to devote himself entirely to his marriage. After he has a one-night affair with one of her friends, his wife decides to leave him. She tells him that it wasn't so much the adulterous act itself that made her furious but the indifference with which he went about it. Axton is then, the prototype of the man on the run from the grip of responsibility who doesn't know who he is or what he wants. He therefore also fits in with those who, according to D. H. Lawrence, set off to America with no ultimate purpose in mind other than to get away:

> They came largely to get *away* – that most simple of motives. To get away. Away from what? In the long run, away from themselves.Away from everything. That's why most people have come to America, and still do come. To get away from everything they are and have been. (9)

Like most of his fellow expatriates, Axton travels towards the wildness of the frontier which, by then, had to be sought in less traditional places. "I was still waiting to be

surprised by life" (102), he tells us. His intention was to open himself to the true meanings that, in the past, one would have found in the natural world. As we have seen, however, in *The Names*, the stand-in for wilderness as the touchstone of truth is the utter chaos of "complex systems" with "endless connections" (303) that, according to these characters, one could find in developing countries. The entangled branches these new pioneers had to grapple with were, in a nutshell, those of history. Axton tells us that it is in these places that one can feel the world as it really is:

> This is where I want to be. History. It's in the air. Events are linking all of these countries. What do we talk about over dinner, all of us? Politics basically. That's what it comes down to. Money and politics. . . . All of us. We're important suddenly. Isn't it something you feel? We're right in the middle. . . . The world is here. Don't you feel that? In some of these places things have enormous power. . . . Everything here is serious. And we're in the middle (97-98).

Like the American explorers described by Fiedler, however, these capitalist crusaders "flee from the sensual data of the actual world" (29). If everything in these places was serious, they certainly didn't see them as such. They do not care about history's branches at all: the fruits are all that matters, the truths that can be percolated from chaos. Their embracement of chaos is anything but selfless: they do it so that they can squeeze patterns and ideal shapes out of it. Axton tells us that, Owen Brademas, an archeologist friend of his, "used to say that even random things take ideal shapes and come to us in painterly forms. It's a matter of seeing what is there. He saw patterns there, moments in the flow" (20).

The irony is, then, that although these characters claim to be driven by a desire for complexity and immersion in the world, they always maintain a distance from their threatening surroundings. David Keller's wife, Lindsay, admits that she and her husband, a banker, stay in a region only "until [she] begins to feel [she] knows it. Until [she] begin[s] to feel responsible" (130). As Douglas Keesey points out, in "They Make the System Equal to Terror", "The American and other international jet-setters

might as well have remained in the air for all the connection they make with the natives on the ground" (121). Keesey throws this idea on the table as a response to Axon's own self-conscious remarks about his and his friends' air travels: "Air travel . . . removes us from the world and sets us apart from each other. . . . We were a subculture, business people in transit, . . . half numb to the secluded beauty down there, the slate land we're leaving behind" (254). Axton also slips in another confession with similar implications: even when he is travelling on the ground, he moves "between places, never in them" (143).

That is why he sees himself as a perennial tourist. Like the American elites previously described by Cronon, he employs the places he travels through merely as a background to his quest for meaning – they are like pockets of preserved wilderness – and never actually engages with the ubiquitous complexity he constantly extols:

> I began to think of myself as a perennial tourist. There was something agreeable about this. To be a tourist is to escape accountability. Errors and failings don't cling to you the way they do back home. . . . Together with thousands, you are granted immunities and broad freedoms. You are an army of fools, wearing bright polyesters, riding camels, taking pictures of each other, haggard, dysenteric, thirsty. There is nothing to think about but the next shapeless event. . . . One day I went out to find the streets full of children wearing costumes. . . . I didn't ask what it meant. I was happy not knowing. I wanted to preserve the surprise in an opaque medium (43-44).

Axton's lack of curiosity and deliberate detachment from what happens around him is, of course, teeming with political overtones. Like we have seen, wilderness, in the American mind, is encrusted with two paradoxical layers of significance – it is, at once, a symbol for the American conquest of complexity and a stand-in for the disavowal of the latter meaning. As Donald Pease bluntly puts it, Americans did not identify with an image of themselves as ravagers of nature and murderers of Indians because nature had, from the outset, chosen them as its true inhabitants:

> Virgin Land narratives placed the movement of the national people across the continent in opposition to the savagery attributed to the wilderness as well as to the native peoples who figured indistinguishable from the wilderness, and, later, it fostered an

> understanding of the campaign of Indian removal as nature's beneficent choice of the Anglo-American settlers over the native inhabitants for its cultivation. (160)

Throughout the novel, Andreas Eliades, a Greek businessman who later turns out to be a secret agent, becomes the mouthpiece for this incongruence at the pith of the Virgin Land myth. He invites Axton to have dinner with him in order to make the latter understand the seriousness of the issues he is enmeshed in: "Andreas took me to a tavern in a half-finished street in a remote district. The place specialized in hearts, brains, kidneys and intestines. I decided this choice of eating place had not been made casually. The evening was to be a lesson in seriousness, in authentic things" (234). While they are having dinner, Eliades predictably summons before Axton's very eyes an image of the chasm between American innocence and American imperialism:

> American strategy. This is interesting, how Americans choose strategy over principle every time and yet keep believing in their own innocence. Strategy in Cyprus, strategy in matters of the dictatorship. The Americans learned to live with the colonels very well. Investments flourished under the dictatorship. (236)

Also quite predictably, his remarks fall on dead ears. Axton simply cannot yoke together the two conflicting images projected by his presence in foreign countries. Like his fellow expatriates, he will go on seeing himself as a noble explorer: "Rather than see themselves the powerful exploiting the weak, these men imagine they are intrepid explorers on a grand adventure" (Keesey 118).

Throughout the book, the protagonist incessantly disavows his connection to the exploitative apparatus of global capitalism. In order to bypass a latent political argument, every time his hotel's concierge asks him where he is off to, he tells him a lie:

> In time, I began to lie. I would tell him I was going to a place that had a name I could easily pronounce. . . . I felt childish, of course. This was part of his power over me. But the lies began to worry me after a while in a way that had nothing to do with childishness. . . . The lie was deeper in Greek than it would have been in English. I knew this without knowing why. . . . The smoky crowded places where we did business

> were not always as different to us as the names assigned to them. We needed the names to tell them apart. . . . I might have been wishing an air crash on myself or an earthquake on an innocent city, the city whose name I had uttered. . . . I also lied when I went to Turkey. I could handle the word for Turkey, it was one of my better words, but I didn't want Niko to know I went there. He looked political. (103)

This scene shows us that Axton is perfectly aware that the names Americans use to pin down the complexities of a place are charged with political implications. There is, at the same time, something about them that is linked to childhood and, therefore, to the innocence that walks in tandem with the American quest for meaning on foreign lands. Childhood, in *The Names*, is linked to the American desire to elicit an order from the world. For instance, when Axton is organizing the information he collected about the problematic countries he travelled through, he feels the childlike pleasure of things falling into place:

> I worked until ten that night, enjoying it, finding a deep and steady pleasure in the paperwork, the details, the close to childlike play of the telex, of tapping out messages. Even putting my desk in order was a satisfaction and odd comfort. Neat stacks, for a change. Labeled folders. . . . It was the setting of limits I thought I needed. A firmness and clarity, a sense that I could define the shape of things. (192)

Although they are disavowed, this childlike act of labeling things has deep political implications. In the extract that follows, Charles Maitland, a diplomat, makes blatant the way supposed primordial names are correlated to western domination. He tells Axton that he took the replacement of "Persia" for "Iran" (after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which ousted a pro-capitalism government) and of "Rhodesia" for "Zimbabwe" as serious blow to the way he recollected his childhood:

> They keep changing the names. . . . The names we grew up with. The countries, the images. Persia, for one. We grew up with Persia. What a vast picture that name evoked. A vast carpet of sand, a thousand turquoise mosques. All the names. A dozen or more and now Rhodesia of course. Rhodesia said something. What do they offer in its place? Linguistic arrogance. . . . There's something to it, you know. This sweeping arrogance. Overthrow, re-speak. What do they leave us with? Ethnic designations. Sets of initials. . . . Every time another people's republic emerges from the dust, I have a feeling someone has tampered with my childhood. (240)

Ironically, though, "overthrowing" and "re-speaking" are the very elements that propel the novel forward – the obsession with finding the original meaning of the world by, paradoxically, subduing the extant meanings, or, as Fiedler would put it, turning the latter into "a system of signs to be deciphered" (29). Owen Brademas tells Axton a story that perfectly illustrates the degree of violence that this quest entails:

> Lately I've been thinking of Rawlingson, the Englishman who wanted to copy the inscriptions on the Behistun rock. The languages were Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian. Maneuvering on the ladders from the first group to the second, he nearly fell to his death. This inspired him to use a Kurdish boy to copy the Babylonian set, which was the least accessible. The boy inched across a rock mass that had only the faintest indentations he might use for finger-grips. . . . This is how he proceeded, clinging from rock to rock. . . . But he made it, miraculously. . . . What kind of story is this and why have I been thinking about it lately? . . . Is that what it is [a political allegory]? I think it's a story about how far men will go to satisfy a pattern, or find a pattern, or fit together the elements of a pattern. . . . Rawlingson wanted to decipher cuneiform writing. He needed these three examples of it. . . . All the noise, babble and spit of three spoken languages had been subdued and codified, broken down to these wedge-shaped marks. With his grids and lists the decipherer searches out relationships, parallel structures. . . . After Rawlingson came Norris. It's interesting . . . that both of these men were at one time employed by the East India Company. . . . Is this the scientific face of imperialism? The human face? (80)

Owen employs this "political allegory", which shows that explorers will not shy away from sacrificing other human lives symbolically and literally to obtain a totality of meaning, as an extreme case that could be used to understand the project being carried out by a group of murderers called "The Names". They represent the epitome of the "overthrow and re-speak" procedure, since they actually kill other human beings in order to unveil the latter's original meanings. They find someone with the same set of initials as the name of the place he/she inhabits and then kill that same person with a weapon that "inscribes" these initials on their bodies. They tell Owen that what they do is "not history. It is precisely the opposite of history" (291), meaning they are interested in attaining a "Platonic orgasm" (216) that grants them access to original forms. That is why they bring their victims' names down to their basic units – the letters of the alphabet: "Each sound has one sign only. This is the genius of the alphabet. Simple, inevitable" (295).

According to Tom LeClair, their written murders are anathema to history, but also to reality, these two terms being virtually interchangeable throughout *The Names*. From this it follows that, when they make a killing, the cult members deracinate their victim from the flow of events:

> Using the implements of early writers – sharp blades and hammers – the cult members inflict themselves on other humans, pursuing the mad absolutism of literacy's "subdue and codify". The cult's "text" – their murdered victim – is isolated, detached, absolutely controlled and wholly original. Such qualities are impossible in oral exchange. (192)

In Delillo's book, orality is a synonym for the complex entanglements that the capitalist explorers find in southern Europe and in Asia. It goes without saying, then, that the term and the regions it evokes have to be understood as foils to America. That is precisely what Axton tells us during one of his visits to his wife, Kathryn, who, after they separated, went to live with their son, Tap, to Kouros, one of Greece's islands: "Why is it we talk so much here? I do the same in Athens. Inconceivable, all of this conversation, in North America. Talking, listening to others talk. . . . Something in the air. . . . The air is filled with words" (79).

The correlation between America, silence and the cult's monomaniacal desire for meaning is, therefore, what animates Frank Volterra's obsession to direct an existential western based on the The Names' atrocities. Although he says that his film will have voices, they will be "*filmed* voices" (199), the camera being, in other words, a mechanical equivalent of the instruments employed by the cult members to inscribe their victims' names. A particular part of his description of the project shall be useful for our purposes:

> The desert fits the screen. It is the screen . . . People talk about classic westerns. The classic has always been the space, the emptiness. The lines are drawn for us. All we have to do is insert the figures, men in dusty boots, certain faces. Figures in open space have always been what film is about. American film. This is the situation. People in a wilderness, a wild and barren space. The space is the desert, the movie screen, the strip of film, however you see it. What are the people doing here. This is their existence. They are here to work out their existence. This space, this emptiness is what

> they have to confront. I've always loved American spaces. People at the end of a long lens. Swimming in space. (198)

Although we had never left the wilderness as a symbolic space, Volterra brings it back to the foreground. That is what, in the end, unites the capitalist expatriates with Owen and the cult – all of them go to the wilderness to confront the emptiness of their existence; all of them break free from responsibility and set out in search for the one truth that will make their life meaningful.

But, in a sense, we already knew this. The way I see it, the remarks that Volterra adds to his conspicuous emphasis on the Americanness of this particular symbolic space are what we ought to be interested in. He says: "But this situation isn't American. There's something traditional and closed in. The secret goes back. I believe it goes back" (198). Moreover, we have to take into account that the heroes in his picture are not generic Americans; they are generic humans: "figures, men in dusty boots, certain faces" (198). When, at the coda of the book, Owen is describing to Axton his last meeting with The Names, he paints a similar picture: "It was interesting how he'd chosen to finish", the narrator tells us, "impersonally, gazing as if from a distance on these unknowable people, these figures we distinguish by their clothing" (309).

These ideas allow us to shed some light on something that Owen and Axton had said some moments earlier. Emerich, one of the cultists, had rhetorically asked Owen: "What is the function of a murderer? Is he the person you go to in order to confess?" (293). That thought triggers the following dialogue:

> 'He was wrong', I said, surprised at my own abruptness. 'You weren't there to confess anything.'
>
> 'Unless it was to acknowledge my likeness to them.'
>
> 'Everybody is like everybody else.'

'You can't mean that.'

'Not exactly. Not stated exactly so.'

'We overlap. Is that what you mean?'

'I'm not sure what I mean.' (293)

Is Delillo, then, implying that the myth of the frontier is not the exclusive property of Americans? We will have to look elsewhere in order to corroborate or discard this idea.

Like Lawrence told us, what motivates people to set off towards the "new world" is, among other things, a desire to run away from themselves. That is why they become innocent by fiat. As Donald Pease explains, however, innocence cannot subsist on its own without a scapegoat onto which to pass one's guilt. Charles Maitland's son says so himself when he accuses his father of blaming others to preserve his flimsy innocence: "The whole point is to pretend not to know. As some people protect their inexperience and fear, this man protects his knowledge of the true situation. It's a way of spreading guilt. His innocence, other people's guilt" (165).

This is exactly what people in the Middle East appear to be doing, from Axton's perspective – they blame Americans for everything that goes wrong with their countries:

> America is the world's living myth. There's no sense of wrong when you kill an American or blame America for some local disaster. This is our function, to be character types, to embody recurring themes that people can use to comfort themselves, justify themselves and so on. We're here to accommodate. Whatever people need, we provide. (114).

Axton also adds that "Everyone is here, of course, not just Americans. They're all here. But they lack a certain mythical quality that terrorists find attractive" (114). This explains why Maitland, a British diplomat, can put the blame on America and proudly display his detachment from the west's imperialism: "During the worst of the

anti-American demonstrations he'd put on his Union Jack lapel badge and go walking right into it" (244).

Americans have, of course, their own scapegoats. When Axton learns that Rowser, his boss, had been sharing information on the Middle East with the CIA, his first reaction is to admit that "Those who engaged knowingly were less guilty than the people who carried out their designs" (317). However, he immediately sneaks in a remark whose purpose is to partially disentangle him from the whole affair:

> If America is the world's living myth, then the CIA is America's myth. All the themes are there, in tiers of silence, whole bureaucracies of silence, in conspiracies and doublings and brilliant betrayals. The agency takes on shapes and appearances, embodying whatever we need at a given time to know ourselves or unburden ourselves. Drinking tea, spinning in the quiet room. It gives a classical tone to our commonly felt emotions. I felt a dim ache, a pain that seemed to carry towards the past, disturbing a number of surfaces along the way. (317)

It is this classical tone, this "pain that seemed to carry towards the past", that vindicates a universal dilation of the frontier myth. When confronted with their own vulnerability, human beings in general tend to run away and look for a better life. I do not subscribe to readings like the one suggested by Keesey, who advocates that the novel ends on a positive note and opens a pathway for Axton's moral regeneration. The critic points out that:

> James decides to stop writing reports for the insurance company and the CIA, to end his infatuation with the cult's deadly silence, and to begin making his own small contribution toward a common understanding. Stating his plans in words whose ordinary nature should not make us overlook the extraordinary change in his character, James says that his goal now is 'some kind of higher typing, a return to freelance life'. Perhaps he will call his book *The Names*. (132)

Axton does say that. But he also says many more things that clash with the idea that his character has undergone a tremendous transformation. For instance, although he lets us know that he may go see his family, he still has not decided to stay put and dedicate himself fully to it. Notice how immediately after he says that his new goal

will be “some kind of higher typing” (the part that Keesey emphasizes), the idea of escape again makes its way into his speech:

> There I would glimpse my wife, spend more time with Tap, decide what to do next. Some higher kind of typing, a return to the freelance life. But where would I live? What place? When the telex began to make its noise, I left the office and went walking in the National Gardens among the plantain lilies and perfect palms (318).

In other words, he goes back to nature – he resumes his quest for meaning and for “perfect palms”. If there is something that his obsession with the cult’s project has taught him, it is that humanity’s struggle to find an order in the face of emptiness and death is tragically circular. This is Owen’s key insight about The Names. Their initial goal had been to subdue the physical world to the mind. Because they feared death, they would try to control the latter by causing it themselves:

> They are engaged in painstaking denial. We can see them as people intente on ritualizing a denial of our elemental nature. To eat, to expel waste, to sense things, to survive. To do what is necessary, to satisfy what is animal in us, to be organic, meat-eating, all blood-sense and digestion. . . . We know we will die. This is our saving grace in a sense. No animal knows this but us. . . . The final denial of our base reality, in this schematic, is to produce a death. Here is the stark drama of our separateness. A needless death. A death by system, by machine-intellect. (175)

They are, nevertheless, defeated by the redundancy of the whole scheme. As Owen tells us: “These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death” (308). This is probably the most important thought the book has to offer. Delillo’s novel seems to be aware of the circularity that Leslie Fiedler had descried on the structure of American escape from death and responsibility – what we escape from always ends up coming back with a vengeance.

If Americans (and other westerners) went to problematic countries to embrace the natives and immerse themselves in a wilderness of truths, they eventually pay the

price for doing so. The "wild people" they welcome into their lives (and who they exploit) end up turning against them. But in a sense, Axton tells us, Americans knew they deserved it:

> They'd seemed, the troops, to have a deep need to pull things out of the walls, whatever was jutting – pipes, taps, valves, switches. The walls themselves they'd smeared with shit . . . . I thought I detected in people who had lost property or fled, most frequently in Americans, some mild surprise that it hadn't happened sooner. . . . Wasn't there a sense, we Americans felt, in which we had it coming? (41)

These "savages" smear their walls with walls with shit in order to emphasize the simple fact that one simply cannot transcend the physicality of death. The novel also seems to be saying, however, that those who are afraid to die cannot avoid trying to get away from this inevitability. Consider, for instance, Axton's reaction, at the end of the book, when he is suddenly confronted with the prospect of his death at the hands of a group of terrorists who reportedly wanted to kill his friend David Keller:

> When the gunman turned my way, I was not only the intended victim but had clearly done something (I tried to remember what) to merit his special attention. But he didn't aim and fire. This is the point. It turned out he didn't know who I was. . . . I waited for the second self to emerge, the cunning unlearned self, the animal we keep in reserve for such occasions. It would impel me to move in this or that direction, strategically, flooding my body with adrenalin. But there was only this heavy pause. I was fixed on the spot. . . . This was the only thing to penetrate that blank moment – an awareness I could not connect to things. The words would come later. The single word, the final item on the list. *American*.

Faced with his imminent death, there is only one thing that James can think of – the final item at the end of a list of his defects that he himself had composed in order to pre-empt his wife's accusations. Therefore, it is his wife (and his refusal to dedicate his life to her) who comes back to haunt him on that very moment. But the novel does not seem to be criticizing Axton – it rather appears to be asking the reader to empathize with the protagonist. Delillo's book does not posit a facile alternative to these characters' inability to commit themselves to the lives they live. When confronted with his involvement in political intrigues and murder plots, Axton does not

magically convert himself into a serious and politically engaged man like Andreas Eliades. Like many of the other characters, he is fated to be a man on the run.

We know that Owen, at least, is condemned to a perpetual escape from seriousness. After having narrated his adventures with the cult to Axton, the archeologist asks the protagonist:

> 'Are you a serious man?'
>
> The question stopped me cold. I told him I didn't understand what he meant.
>
> 'I'm not a serious man,' he said. 'If you wanted to compose a mighty Homeric text on my life and fortunes, I might suggest a suitable first line. 'This is the story of a man who was not serious.'
>
> 'You're the most serious man I know.'
>
> He laughed at me and made a gesture of dismissal. (300)

Although he has spent his life studying ancient cultures and obscure languages, Owen is aware that he only did so to evade the unbearable fact of death. He tells us that he, from a very early age, had been dogged by the image of his mother and father speaking in tongues along with the rest of the people from their Pentecostal congregation. They had attained, in his opinion, a true innocence – a prelapsarian language that unlocked for them the original meanings of the world. Owen, however, never could join them in their celebration of god's marvels because he is afraid to let go – he is afraid to die. The novel comes to a halt with an image of Owen perpetually on the run from "the nightmare of real things": "He ran into the distance, smaller and smaller. This was worse than a retched nightmare. It was the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world" (339). Unlike his parents, he cannot immerse himself in the flow of life because he simply cannot avoid being afraid: "these thoughts of pity toward things that are less powerful than ourselves would not overpower the shadowy remembrance of terror" (338). In the end, he is not a serious man because he is very much like David Keller, who, after having survived the terrorists' attempt to take his

life, goes back to the old self-conscious refusal to acknowledge his own mortality: "David would recover without complications, cracking jokes in the mandatory American manner, the cherished manner of a people self-conscious about death" (329).

Owen's momentous insight is, then, that these jokes that one cracks are themselves cracked at the core: death always manages to reappear from the crevices. That is why one has to keep coming up with new jokes that give meaning to one's life. When Owen attains this epiphany, James tells us that "There was a strange radiance in his face . . . the full acceptance, the crushing belief that nothing can be done" (308). Nevertheless, the archeologist takes this as an ultimate defeat – his life has become an endless contradiction. The novel hints that he will eventually die in that room in Lahore in which he tells Axton his tale. The protagonist, however, has gained something from Owen's stories: "I came away from the old city feeling I'd been engaged in a contest of some singular and gratifying kind. Whatever he'd lost in life-strength, this is what I'd won" (309).

The ultimate difference between Owen and James is, then, that while the former refuses to face the circularity implied by the escape towards the wilderness, the latter goes on to celebrate life in its utter imperfection. At the outset of the novel, the narrator had told us that he didn't want to visit the Parthenon because there was something absolute and final about it: "It's what we've rescued from madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion." (3). He adds that "It looms. It's so powerfully there. It almost forces us to ignore it. Or at least resist it. We have our self-importance." (5). In the home stretch of the book, however, the narrator is finally able to visit the monument. This is the real change in his character – he has realized that beauty and order are beyond humanity's reach although humans are doomed to keep looking for them. As David Cowart contends:

> The monuments of the Acropolis, looming above the aimless, inconsequential lives of the characters from the very beginning, are recognized only at the end as not that which we have rescued from chaos, not as fragments of some richer and better and more coherent order of the past – but as an embodiment of humanity's grief at imperfection and mortality. (179)

In the Parthenon we then find an equivalent of Volterra's camera, the instrument we use to frame the brittle orders that we impose on the world. And, once again, the figures that the camera implies are not described as generic Americans on the run, but as generic humans – anyone could be behind this metaphysical camera:

> The old box camera remains untended on its tripod, the black hood lifted in the breeze. Whereis the photographer, the old man in the battered gray jacket with sagging pockets, the man with the sunken face, dirt in his fingernails? I feel I know him or can invent him. It isn't necessary for him to appear, eating pistachio nuts out of a white bag. The camera is enough. (331)

In the end, if what James finds in the Parthenon is "a cry for pity" (330), then what the novel has to offer is precisely a modicum of wholehearted compassion for those who set out in pursuit of a New World.

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