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Myself”: A Comparative Analysis of
Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* and
Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis***

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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At one point in *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo's character Benno Levin quotes Saint Augustine of Hippo: "[I] have become an enigma to myself" (189). However, the similarities between the two narratives go beyond a simple reference. Although centuries apart and operating within different temporal and philosophical frameworks, both are examples of confessional prose, an inherently introspective genre which offers insight into the narrator's emotional development. The works at hand explore concepts key to the human condition, such as time and temporality, corporeality, and morality. The narrators also seek to define themselves in relation to (or against) a superior, ubiquitous, and almighty Other (Saint Augustine in relation to God, and Benno Levin against Eric Packer, the embodiment of cybercapitalism). Apart from thematic similarities, biographical and structural similarities are also to be observed. Hence, as DeLillo is building on (or rather, subverting) what is considered to be the first piece of confessional prose in the Western tradition, the comparative method can be applied in analysing *Cosmopolis*. Such an approach makes possible the singling out and defining of peculiarities as depicted in the novel, which allows for an (other) analysis of the American here and now.

KEYWORDS

American literature, capitalism, corporeality, temporality, comparative analysis, *Confessions*, *Cosmopolis*

The postmodern world is, in the words of Lyotard, "incredulous towards metanarratives" (xxiv). However, in his quest to transpose onto paper the totality of the present-day United States, Don DeLillo proceeds to unmask the current, allegedly non-existent, American grand narrative: (cyber)capitalism. By contrasting DeLillo's novel with Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, a work blatantly steeped in another, markedly Christian tradition, the patterns which enable one to detect the narrative underlying *Cosmopolis* arise. Hence, in employing the comparative method, this essay will aim to single out and define the peculiarities of DeLillo's novel, allowing for an(other) analysis of the American here and now.

For the comparative method to be sensibly employed, the units of comparison must first be established. Likening the United States of America to the Roman Empire is nothing new¹. However, what is currently of interest are two events which respectively figured highly in the Roman and American collective consciousness – the sack of Rome in 410 and the September 11 attacks. The respective perpetrators of these attacks, the Germanic tribe of the Visigoths and Islamic fundamentalists, can be said to have been constructed as "the Other" on charges as enumerated by David Simpson. The attacks might have been "the result of jealousy, of 'them' wanting what we have and destroying it because they cannot have it . . . or from 'them' being too technologically undeveloped and/or cowardly to face their enemy in open combat. *They* are secretive, cowardly, primitive, inflexible . . ." (6–7, emphasis in the original). In short, the events of both 410 and 2001 marked forceful incursions of what the Romans and the Americans each perceived as an essentially "backward" and foreign "Other" into the heart of a global power. *Heart* is an apt designation, as both targets were chosen for their symbolic, rather than strategic, importance – each of these acts was an end in itself, a demonstration of power (Grgas 64, Wickham 23). Although the attacks hardly affected the economies of the two Empires, they unquestionably dealt a great blow to the Roman and American self-confidence. Each reverberated throughout the known world, signalling the global importance of an essentially local event, and gave rise to new narratives (Grgas 63–69). The works of Augustine and DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* can be said to have prefigured such (literary) developments, bestowing upon their authors an aura of propheticism (Mauro 69), as they were written some years prior to these respective apocalyptic events.² In the wake of such momentous developments, the characters central to the works at hand are forced to (re)negotiate their position in this adversity-ridden world, to define how they relate to time and space.

Little wonder, then, that DeLillo chose to give Benno Levin a voice in the form of a confession, a tradition established in the Western canon by none other than Augustine. What sets confessions apart from

testimonies is the fact that in them it is the self, and not an external event or another person, that is being scrutinised and laid bare. This is done to achieve self-transformation (Radstone 169, 175). Hence, Augustine and Levin do not directly analyse the world they inhabit. Rather, it transpires as an outside impetus which prompts their actions and affects their thinking, allowing us to see how the individual self is formulated and shaped by external forces at a given point in time. Of course, a piece of confessional prose written in AD 400 differs vastly from one written at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, it is precisely these (dis)similarities that allow us to diagnose what is peculiar to the experience of the American here and now. First and foremost, Augustine's writings presuppose God as the addressee – as numerous occurrences of formulations such as "I declare and confess this to you, my God" (*Confessions* i.xix) attest. Thus, in Augustine's writing self-transformation is synonymous to absolution and salvation as bestowed on mortals by a divine, external force (i.e. God). On the other hand, Levin's targeted audience is, seemingly, the whole world: "I am planning to make a public act of my life through these pages I will write" (*Cosmopolis* 149). This would fit nicely into the turn that first made its appearance in Dostoevsky's writing, the inward turn that signifies a search for the redemptive, inner truth of *the self*, independent of God, the "projection of an inner life before the world" (Radstone 171). However, this model does not fully accommodate Levin's case. In his own words, "I make mind speeches all the time. So do you, only not always. I do it all the time, long speeches to someone I can never identify. But I'm beginning to think it's him" (*Cosmopolis* 57). It can therefore be stated that Levin also addresses, if not God himself, then his prophet. And this prophet is Eric Packer, the novel's protagonist, who figures as the champion of the new world-religion – cybercapital (Conte 185, 187).

At one point in the novel, Vija Kinski, Packer's "chief of theory," states that people "don't exist outside the market" (*Cosmopolis* 90). Hence, the market can be characterised as ubiquitous and pervasive, all-enveloping, not unlike God as conceived of in Abrahamic religions, whom it supplanted in the twenty-first century. In the same way that the great monotheistic religions have rites by means of which they approach God, Packer achieves union with his God through technology, which "helps us make our fate. We don't need God or miracles" (95). In the words of Joseph M. Conte, "as the Abrahamic faiths promise the afterlife of the soul, so the technological sublime holds forth the transcendence of the disembodied mind" (186). Hence, it is Eric's aim to attain this transcendence, to become "pure information" (*Cosmopolis* 204), as can be observed in Packer's disdain for his own body, which he thinks of as his "meat space" (64). Even Vija Kinski, his collocutor on the questions of cybercapitalist dogma, is described as "a voice with a body as afterthought" (105). Eric navigates external space unseen, in his armoured, cork-lined limousine, abstracting himself even

more from the physical world of yesterday as represented by places such as the diamond district. The choice of the terms "space" and "place" in the previous sentence is not coincidental: "places" are in fact "spaces" marked and shaped by *manmade* intervention, whereas "space" is depersonalised and divorced from "place," characterised by skyscrapers and banks. The space of Packer's New York is an "internal, thought-operated world" (Valentino 146). And it is precisely this rift between body and soul that for Augustine represented the source of real "evil" (Hunter 359). In Augustine's philosophy, it is in the very nature of the soul to wish for embodiment, as "a disembodied human soul is incapable of enjoying the vision of God" (Hunter 356). Corporeality is also one of the features that distinguishes humans from God, for only God is truly immutable and eternal, and hence incorporeal (Griffin and Paulsen 106). Expanding on God's eternalness, the following paragraph will address a category inextricably linked to that of corporeality and space – namely, the category of temporality and time.

Eric's divorce from his body leads to a sort of rupture in the time-space continuum, allowing him to "experience an effect before its cause," i.e. to predict the trends of the stock-market (Conte 186). Observed through the lens of Augustinian philosophy, Eric's "incorporeality" and prophetic abilities would place him on a par with God himself. For Augustine, time presupposes change, and as such, "in its nature time is a dimension of the mind, a psychological condition attaching to being creaturely" (Chadwick 75). In other words, the body ages and eventually dies, with the "human consciousness functioning by anticipating the future, remembering the past, and being aware of the present through perception" (*Confessions* xi.ix, Knuuttila 112), while for God, who is unchanging and eternal, these categories exist simultaneously (Chadwick 76). The closing lines of the novel imply such divine simultaneity, with Eric "dead inside the crystal of his watch, but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound" (*Cosmopolis* 289). Being exempt from experiencing events in their linear succession, Eric can, in a way, be likened to God. However, his god is a god of the future. What transpires in the quote is the focus of cybercapital on what is to come. In the same fashion in which God, in Augustine's philosophy, created time in its entirety, "cybercapital creates the future" (79). This future is what DeLillo famously dubbed as "the utopian glow of cybercapital" ("In the Ruins of the Future"). Its utopian potential lies in the power of technology to eliminate doubt, which obstructs the investment potential and controls the market. However, what is at stake is not only the future, but also the past. In eliminating doubt, cybercapital is eliminating the past as well. As Vija Kinski put it, "All doubt arises from past experience. But the past is disappearing. We used to know the past, but not the future. This is changing. We need a new theory of time" (*Cosmopolis* 86). Such a narrative is in stark opposition to Messianic time as experienced by Augustine. His was a time inextricably linked to and conscious of the past,

the time of the First Coming, as well as oriented towards the future, awaiting its fulfilment in the Second Coming. In short, it had a grand narrative which gave people a sense of purpose (Anderson 24). Time in the twenty-first century, not unlike money, has "lost its narrative quality [It] is talking to itself" (*Cosmopolis* 77). In the words of Peter Boxall, "the landmarks and time marks . . . have lost their organizing power, abandoning the narrative to a kind of directionlessness" (693). In short, in erasing memory, cybercapital presupposes the erasure of existing identity.

However, apart from producing individuals such as Packer who successfully transition into this impersonal identity, the market, which, not unlike God in the Augustinian tradition, is total, also "breeds men and women [who] are necessary to the system they despise" (*Cosmopolis* 90). Every grand narrative (for global capitalism is undoubtedly America's current narrative) engages, although perhaps unwittingly, in the production of its counternarrative, and it is precisely the Islamic fundamentalist past which surfaces as the single greatest opposition to American self-confidence (Conte 184). In the words of DeLillo himself, "it was the power of American culture [steeped in capitalism and its tenets] to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind . . . which drew [the terrorists'] fury" ("In the Ruins of the Future"). Reverting to the beginning of the essay, one can establish that it was actually America that first forayed into foreign territory, whether by means of military intervention or on a symbolic level. And it is precisely on this symbolic level that, owing to the disparity in power and force, terrorists opt to deal a blow (Conte 189). However, fixating on and locating the external enemy often proves to be easier than identifying the internal one. When speaking of the religion of cybercapital, it is not only its ostensible *Other*, Islam, that we have to consider, but also its apostates, the "credible threats" who are treated as such by virtue of their one-time aspiration to enter the ranks of cybercapital. Here one might draw a comparison in the conversions of Saint Augustine and Richard Sheers, who goes by the alias of "Benno Levin," to their respective religions. Although their lives preceding conversion show a certain degree of similarity (a career in academia and families to provide for), the transformative moments in their lives led to radically different outcomes. Whereas Augustine's conversion to Catholicism and appointment as the bishop of Hippo further anchored his life, Sheets's leaving behind his old life to make his millions resulted in bankruptcy and mental instability. Such developments transpire clearly in their writings. Whilst Augustine's is orderly, with an endpoint, i.e. God, in view, Levin's is scattered, repetitive, and fixated on a single idea – bringing down the prophet of the religion that failed him. In short, it is indicative of the fragmentation of the self peculiar to postmodernism, the rejection of cybercapital (Grgas 66, Conte 187). Finally, Levin reappears as a harbinger of the past, or, put differently, he comes back as the figure who lectures Packer on asymmetry and doubt. Eric's quest for symmetry proves to be

an overefficiency, a trigger for self-destruction, resulting from a conscious dismissal of the past. The system, as encapsulated by the character of Eric Packer, crumbles in on itself rather than admitting miscalculation. It is for this reason that Packer himself seeks out his assassin, heading down memory lane as he nears his end (Conte 190).

After what has been said, the comparative diagnosis may be summed up as follows: figuratively speaking, the category of a supreme force remains as present today as it was in AD 400. What has changed is that God has vacated the slot and cybercapital has taken up his place. Whereas early Christian thought stressed the importance of the body-soul harmony and defined the progression of time in linear terms, in eradicating "places" in favour of "spaces" and the past in favour of the future, cybercapital is transforming people's identities. However, the capitalist grand narrative finds (and creates) its counternarrative not only in terrorism, which is rooted in the (fundamentalist) past, but also in those it has failed. Although the disparity in power remains too great for the counternarrative to prevail, the novel, in pointing to the existence of alternative narratives, acknowledges the complexity of the twenty-first century, even if it does not offer a chance of redemption.

END NOTES

- 1 Recent studies on America as Empire include, among others, Ferguson (2004) and Maier (2006).
- 2 Although Cosmopolis was first published in 2003, DeLillo had completed the novel around the time of the September 11 attacks (Mauro 69)

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