

THE IVORY ACROBAT

Don DeLillo

Analysis by Carlo Tirinanzi De Medici

Short Story

Don DeLillo's *The Ivory Acrobat* (1988) is a short story set in Athens during a sequence of earthquakes. Through internal focalization on the protagonist Kyle, an American expat, the author explores trauma, identity, and dislocation. The seismic shocks expose contemporary subject fragilities, revealing how catastrophe fractures the self and how resilience arises through the acceptance of difference.

Year of Publication	1988
Publication Place	Unspecified
Editor	Unspecified
Entity	Gulf of Corynth Earthquake (inferred)
Magazine	Granta

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake Gulf of Corynth Earthquake (inferred)

LITERARY EVENT

Time	February/March [1980-1990]
Location	Attica/Central Greece Greece
Coordinates	37.937163, 22.928404
Impacted Areas	Athens and surrounding areas
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	Gulf of Corynth fault system
Magnitude	6.6 Richter (first), 6.6 (third) Richter
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake

Anthropization Level



Ecological Impacts



Social Impacts



INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Kyle
Age	30s
Gender	Female
Nationality	USA
Reactions	Fear Anxiety Apprehension Discomfort Distress Unease Panic Awareness Distrust In Authorities Caution

Name	Edmund
Age	30s
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	British
Reactions	Calm Rationality Trust In Authorities Trust Adaptation

Reactions

Name	Kyle
Age	30s
Gender	Female
Nationality	USA
Reactions	Immobility Paralysis Fear Terror Panic Escape Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Trauma Distress Helplessness Dysphoria

Name	Edmund
Age	30s
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	British
Reactions	Pragmatism Rationality Empathy Trust

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	Escape Disorder Sharing Of Information Fear Panic Curiosity Wonder Alarm

Name	Children
Reactions	Curiosity Euphoria

Name	Elders
Reactions	Passiveness Resignation Fatalism

Group Attitudes

Name	Children
Reactions	Wonder Curiosity Fascination

Name	Elders
Reactions	Calm Awareness Adaptation

Name	The population
Reactions	Unease Fear Fatalism Panic

Earthquake



LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Tremor Aftershock Epicenter Danger Survival Listening Pause Inside/Outside Rumors
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The tremors entered her bloodstream
 She lived inside a pause
 mass-produced magical true self
 The Self is a statuine

Death Ruins Nemesis Thunder Superstition Prophecy
 Civilisation Panicked Mob Cruel Nature

Parataxis, Simple Sentences, High Frequency Connectives, Complex Noun Phrases

Multiple Stops, Ellipsis

Preference For Nouns Adjectives, High frequency of abstracts, neutral, indefinite forms

Relevance of language rhythm

1. Introduction

"The Ivory Acrobat" is a short story by Don DeLillo that originally appeared in a *Granta* thematic issue titled "Murder", edited by British writer Martin Amis in 1988.

The narrator is extra- and heterodiegetic, with fixed internal focalization on the protagonist Kyle, an American expat in Athens. The narrative time covers about ten days during which three strong seismic shocks occur plus other less intense ones not reported in detail: the first two are very close together, the third occurs "eight days and one hour after the first one" (DeLillo 69). Kyle, deeply concerned by the seismic events and living in anticipation of another, even stronger and more destructive shock, talks with Edmund, an English expat with whom she spends the night after the first two shocks. Edmund gives her an ivory figurine (which gives the story its title) to replace a terracotta piece broken during the first earthquake. The story can be divided into seven sequences:

1. The moments after the first shock and up to after the second
2. The first conversation between Edmund and Kyle, after the first two shocks
3. The description of Kyle's emotional state after the first two shocks
4. The moment when Edmund gives Kyle the figurine
5. The third shock
6. The exacerbation of Kyle's emotional condition after this last shock
7. The discovery, some time later, of the ivory figurine, and the apparent beginning of trauma recovery

The internal focalization allows reflection on Kyle's subjective perception and thus focuses on her traumatic experience, but at the same time makes it difficult to identify the objective, phenomenal aspects of the seismic event mentioned in the story.

In all probability, the narrative relates to the 1981 Gulf of Corinth seismic sequence: in that case too, there were three shocks: on February 24 at 20:53:38 UTC, on February 25 at 02:35:53 UTC, and on March 4 at 21:58:05 UTC, thus the third occurred eight days, one hour and ten minutes after the first one. In the narrative the third indeed occurs "eight days and one hour after the first one" (69). Moreover, in the short story the first shock occurs toward evening, as street lighting is already on but shops are still open (55-56), which is compatible with winter sunset in Athens and the timing of the shocks represented in the story. Internal focalization also accounts for factual discrepancies: the actual magnitudes of the three shocks are 6.7, 6.4, and 6.4 on the Richter scale, while the story mentions "6.6" for the first and "6.2" for the second. The earthquake's location ("forty miles west of Athens," 58) is provided by Edmund, which justifies the imprecision. It should also be noted that the biographical note accompanying the story's first edition stated that DeLillo "was living in Greece at the time of the 1981 earthquake" (Begley 92).

The story thus focuses on Kyle and her reaction to the seismic event, seeming to represent a process of progressive traumatic deterioration ending with a possible resolution.

The theme of death is common in DeLillo's novels (from *The Names* to *White Noise* to *Falling Man* and *Zero K*, among others; see Wolf 2022), but in the stories it appears differently, with a quality that has been defined as "epic":

DeLillo [...] favors the fateful mood of the epic fragment in his short stories. Atmospheric subjectivity displaces the impossible objectivity of the novel's panoramic scope; whereas glossolalia and aphasia gesture in the novels toward the confusion of capital and culture, the "trance utterances" that appear in "The Angel Esmeralda" occur as forms of mythic vocalization. (Veggian 116)

2. The Traumatic Experience of the Earthquake

The short story begins in the immediate aftermath of a very strong earthquake shock that, at first, is not even named, creating an atmosphere of high tension ("When it was over she stood in the crowded street and listened to the dense murmur of all those people speaking," 55). Kyle's urgency and uncertainty are thus already evident at the beginning. The effect is to catapult Kyle into a space of waiting for the irreparable, for an event that will reproduce what has already been experienced:

She lived inside a pause. She was always pausing, alone in her flat, to listen. Her hearing developed a cleanliness, a discriminating rigor. She sat at the small table where she ate her meals, listening. The room had a dozen sounds, mainly disturbances of tone, pressures releasing in the walls, and she followed them and waited. There was a second and safer level she reserved for street noises, the elevator rising. All the danger was inside. (60)

The tremors entered her bloodstream. She listened and waited. [...] The tremors lived in her skin and were part of every breath she took. She paused over her food. A rustle. An easing ready tilt. (61-62)

She sat up at night with her book of water-stiffened pages, trying to read, trying to escape the feeling that she was being carried helplessly toward some pitching instant in time. (70-71)

The natural disaster also recalls potential human disasters, such as the total devastation of atomic war. Indeed, Kyle crouches "in the open doorway like an atomic child" (60). The description of the last shock also recalls that of an explosion:

the syntax of the earthquake's description could easily be substituted for a narrative describing a bomb being dropped, with the "power moving on the air" and the moment "bursting" around her. (Westmoreland 120)

Fear and traumatic experience, such as to devour the subject's very identity, are at the center of this story. The main theme is structured around a series of oppositions:

1. **Interior/Exterior.** Here there is a reversal of normal expectations: the house is not a safe place, rather it is the source of fear, a potentially deadly trap, since "All the danger was inside" (60). Open space, instead, is experienced as safe, salvific. Not coincidentally, Kyle struggles to sleep at home and prefers to do so at the school where she works. This opposition is fundamental: lacking a place of belonging (she is an expat and doesn't feel she has a home even in Athens),

Kyle sees her identity waver. The link between enclosed space, like a room or dwelling, and identity is common in DeLillo (Westmoreland 117-118) and particularly recurrent in the short stories of *The Angel Esmeralda*. As observed by Martucci, "Throughout the stories, place is often foregrounded, characters often experience a place-based epiphany that makes them question their perceptions and realities, and the characters' ideas of identity are reliant on the places where they stand" (Martucci 84).

2. **Kyle/Edmund.** While Kyle is frightened and worried, Edmund is calm and rational: he advises Kyle not to think about the earthquake, refuses to talk too long about it, relies on official sources for acquiring information about the seismic event and its consequences.
3. **Subjectivity/Community, or Individuality/Sociality.** For much of the story, Kyle needs to know that what she feels is also common to others, and this awareness reassures her: during their first conversation, she asks Edmund how he felt. When he responds "I thought my heart was going to jump right through my chest," she replies "Good. Me too," (58). Moreover, shortly after, when they realize they both have "experienced similar things," she comments: "Good. I'm glad" (59).
4. **Bust of Hermes/Minoan Figurine.** The first is a tourist souvenir ("I mean it's everywhere, isn't it?" says Edmund, 62), mass-produced; the second is ancient (dating to 1600 BC); the first broke during the first shock and was thrown away; the second broke during an earthquake in 1926 and was repaired, thus the first can be replaced without problems, the second is instead a symbol of resilience. The industrial object is opposed to the artisanal one; the first represents seriality, the second individual uniqueness. Here also resides another opposition, that between rigidity and flexibility flexibility, which emerges in the juxtaposition of Kyle's way of moving (as well as, implicitly, er emotional behavior) and the athletic gesture of the figurine.

3. Trauma and Identity

The earthquake is for Kyle a traumatic event that ends up taking away her very identity. "I used to have a personality. What am I now? [...] I'm down to pure dumb canine instinct" (62), we read at the beginning. And after the third shock the situation worsens: "She was deprived of sentiments, pretensions, expectations, textures" (69); "She was deprived of presumptions, persuasions, complications, lies, every braided arrangement that made it possible to live" (70); "She was deprived of the city itself. We could be anywhere, any lost corner of Ohio" (70).

For Kyle "There's only one subject" (62). Time stops, and Kyle "lived inside a pause" (60), with "the feeling that she was being carried helplessly toward some pitching instant in time" (71) which is that of the shock, already experienced and continually lurking. Kyle realizes this, and "She wanted her life to be episodic again, unpremeditated" (61).

Compared to the inhabitants of Athens, and to Edmund, Kyle seems to feel much worse in this situation: after the second shock no one goes down to the street, while Kyle continues to wander "The streets remained nearly empty and she guessed people didn't want to bother doing it again" (57).

Kyle seems to feel a compulsion to repeat: as Freud observes,

The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it [...] He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past (Freud 18).

The same estrangement from oneself, the same suspended temporality belongs to the protagonist of *Falling Man*, Keith, also traumatized by the attack on the Twin Towers and trapped in "the timeless drift of the long spiral down" (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 137).

At first, the community seems to act like Kyle: surprise, repetition, the same voices repeating identically in everyone's mouth:

People studied each other to match reactions. She watched them search the street for faces, signs that so-and-so was safe. She realized the streetlights were on and tried to recall how long her flat had been dark. Everyone was talking. She heard the same phrases repeated [...] The horns grew louder in a kind of cry, an animal awe. The panic god is Greek after all" (55).

Moreover, as we read shortly after, "It was the same for everyone. They said the same things and searched for faces" (56), and the situation, for Kyle, seems nightmarish:

Traffic lights were dark in certain areas. The long lines of cars, knotted and bent, made scant gains forward. Paralysis. She thought the scene resembled some landscape in the dreaming part of us, what the city teaches us to fear. They were pressing on the horns. The noise spread along the streets and reached a final mass denial, a desolation. It subsided after a time, then began to build again. (56)

But the city resumes living normally, with small adjustments: the cardplayers playing with their coats on, ready to flee. Kyle instead remains trapped in that sense of uncertainty: perhaps because she's an expat, therefore already uprooted, or perhaps because she's American (one cannot help but think of the passage in *White Noise* where protagonist Jack Gladney emphasizes having learned from television that tragedies always happen to others, always to the poor, not to WASPs) and thus lacks, unlike the Greeks, a true collective historical memory. As if the identity of modern man were more fragile, precisely because it lacks solid bonds, as is particularly evident in the case of an expat like Kyle. It should also be noted that in the aftershock Kyle crouches in the "doorway," further indicating her liminal position.

4. Community and Rumors

Besides being able to objectify and share her own trauma, Kyle feels the need to be part of a community, to know that others share her sensations and emotions:

She was afraid everything would appear to be normal. She hated to think that people might easily resume the knockabout routine of frazzled Athens. She didn't want to be alone in her perception that something had basically changed (57).

From this point of view, it's important to emphasize that during all three shocks Kyle is alone: the traumatic experience is private.

To confirm Kyle's tendency to want to be part of a larger set of individuals, she tends to believe all the rumors circulating, even the least probable:

Is it true that before a major quake the dogs and cats run away? She thought she'd read somewhere that people in California habitually check the personal columns in newspapers to see if the number of lost dogs has increased noticeably. Or are we dealing with a myth here? [...] There were rumors that

these were not aftershocks at all but warnings of some deep disquiet in the continental trench, the massing of a force that would roll across the marble-hearted city and bring it to dust. (60-61)

As the narrator tells us, "There was some comfort in believing the worst as long as it was the reigning persuasion. But she didn't want to submit completely" (64). This passage introduces a theme typical in DeLillo's works: paranoia. Indeed Kyle reports that according to some "government is concealing the seismic data" (64) and later wonders "why did they keep occurring at night?" (69). While secrets, conspiracies and rumors are common throughout DeLillo's production (Naas 23-43), some rumors are false or fanciful, others are correct or approximately correct, for example: "Sulfur fell from the factory skies, staining the pavement, and a teacher at the school said it was sand blown north from Libya on one of those lovely desert winds" (67). And it's the rumors themselves that contest fake news: "The last one was not the biggest on the Richter. It was only six point two. And she found out it hadn't lasted longer than the others. This was a mass illusion, according to the word at school" (69). Here, the society at large and the widespread beliefs are not only those linked to conspiracies. In this story, they represent instead a sort of shared knowledge, which is what interests Kyle, who attempts to compensate for her own lack of identity. Even the bust of Hermes seems to respond to this logic: when Edmund points out that it can be easily repurchased ("it's everywhere"), she responds "That's what I liked about it" (62).

5. The Identity Metaphor of the Figurine and Identity Reconstruction After Disaster

The earthquake destroys not only physical space but also identity.

Edmund gives Kyle the figurine emphasizing its metaphorical function, since for him it represents Kyle herself: "'It's definitely you,' he said. 'It must be you. Do we agree on this? Just look and feel. It's your magical true self, mass-produced,'" 66-67). It is depicted at the critical moment, that of passage, which is fixed once and for all, as if eternal: the figurine "was alone in space, with no supports, no fixed position" (71), so that it cannot even be used as an ornament, frozen in a movement that "could be vaudeville or sacred terror" (71-72). However, it promises overcoming disaster: "She has lived. She is living. That's why I got this for you really. I want her to remind you of your hidden liteness" (66). The "hidden liteness" is the ability to leap over danger, like the woman in the figurine.

The story ends when Kyle recognizes that the statue is her opposite: "It was a thing in opposition, defining what she was not, marking the limits of the self" (72). It is through the radical difference of the figurine that Kyle can begin to define herself again:

She remembered the old earthen Hermes, flower-crowned, looking out at her from a knowable past, some shared theater of being. The Minoans were outside all this. Narrow-waisted, graceful, other-minded—lost across vales of language and magic, across dream cosmologies. This was the piece's little mystery. (72)

In Lacanian terms, the *Je* is formed in relation to the Other, that is, to the Symbolic: Kyle moves from an attempt at subjective affirmation based on the identity of the Imaginary (recognizing oneself in the Other) to one based on difference (recognizing the alterity of the Other). Even though Westmoreland (123) believes that the story's solution passes through a "merging of character and figurine, mind and body," Kyle puts the figurine in her pocket and from that moment, as we read in the last line, "took it everywhere". It seems evident from this passage that such a gesture does not imply a fusion but rather the acknowledgement of the closeness, but also of the separation, between character and figurine.

Representation (here, the figurine) is thus a way "to perform [...] the fragility of our own enmeshment in the embodied protocols of shared space and shared time" (Boxall 528); the fusion of representation

and Self would put Kyle in another cul-de-sac.

The overcoming of the traumatic event, that Kyle relives through a compulsion to repeat, begins to be possible when she finds the limit of radical difference: in the Other, Kyle finds the boundaries to her own Self, and she can perhaps move forward recognizing herself in such difference. The dialectic Self/Other, and that of rigidity/flexibility (the rigidity of Kyle's movements, to which she herself refers, opposed to the smoothness of the acrobat, but also the mental rigidity of the traumatized opposed to cognitive flexibility), is essential.

The geological event thus allows revealing the fragilities of the contemporary subject; the earthquake becomes a metaphor for identity crisis and the subject's need to define itself in relation to self and others, and highlights the link between space and identity: by making the place inhospitable, it forces Kyle to establish her subjectivity not in relation to a space identified as homogeneous to the Self, but rather in difference.

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