

# “No return address” – Communicating Trauma in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*

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*In memory of* Alban Denuit, PhD at Bordeaux-Montaigne  
University, killed in Paris on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2015.

## Experiencing

*Missing what cannot be missed*

More than any other works by Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* is, and this almost goes without saying, a novel about a traumatizing event as it attempts to delve into and make sense of 9/11. Before looking into DeLillo’s novel, one must explain what is understood by the phrase “traumatic event,” or what is commonly referred to as trauma. If it remains undisputable that an event occurs or happens, the modality of that occurrence is problematic, to say the least, when one tries to seize it in discourse:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of ‘otherness’, a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery<sup>1</sup>.

One can see that trauma further complexifies a rather intricate reality for it seems both to be part of that reality and to escape

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1. Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening”, in Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 68-69.

its grip. Cathy Caruth, one of the most renowned theoretician of trauma, suggests that trauma blurs conceptual binaries such as presence/absence or knowledge/ignorance:

The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was *not* direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place<sup>2</sup>.

It is the psychical mediation posterior to the event through repetition and memory that illustrates that the event passed through when it happened, without being filtered by symbolic processing. In other words, if the traumatic experience demands to return and to be witnessed, it is because it was not seen when it did happen in the first place: "Trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is *not* directly available to experience."<sup>3</sup> Avoiding or missing an experience and yet being hit by something that no one would deny, this, it would seem, is the very paradoxical manifesting mode of the traumatic event. Bearing this in mind, one understands why Keith Neudecker, as early as page five, cannot but envisage the event only under the guise of an impossible experience, one that cannot to be felt:

Things did not seem charged in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the cast-iron buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. *Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them* (5, my emphasis).

Early in the novel, an image proves that the psyche has gone through an unprecedented violation: "There was a woman behind [a supermarket cart], facing [Keith] with police tape wrapped around her head and face, yellow caution tape that marks the limits of a crime scene" (5). Trauma is a violating shock:

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2. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1998, p. 62.

3. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience, op. cit.*, p. 61.

Trauma is a term that has long been used in medicine and surgery. It comes from the Greek *τραῦμα*, meaning wound, which in turn derives from *tetrainein*, to pierce. It generally means any injury where the skin is broken as a consequence of external violence, and the effects of such an injury upon the organism as a whole; [...]. In adopting the term, psychoanalysis carries the three ideas implicit in it over on to the psychological level: the idea of a violent shock, the idea of a wound and the idea of consequences affecting the whole organization<sup>4</sup>.

While reading the newspaper, Keith's estranged wife Lianne confirms the etymology of the term when she looks at the picture of the performance artist "Falling Man" who reenacts the "primal terror" ("Ruins" 39) embodied by those who fell from the towers. She speaks of "a hole in [her] mind and heart" (222). Although they are enmeshed in the phrase "organic shrapnel," traumatism and trauma are not strictly synonymous terms. Traumatism is usually associated with the body wound whereas trauma refers to its psychic counterpart. The conflated realities of the terms traumatism and trauma are best expressed in a powerful poetic phrase:

In the smoke all I could see was those stripes on the firemen's coats, the bright stripes, and then some people in the rubble, all that steel and glass, just injured people sitting dreaming, they were like *dreamers bleeding* (58, my emphasis).

In *Falling Man*, if the shock endured by Keith can encompass both meanings of the words, it seems that the second definition prevails: "His injury was slight but it wasn't the torn cartilage that was the subject of this effort. It was the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke" (40).

### *Locating trauma*

Two tropes best exemplify the force of the event in its traumatic dimension. The first one is the "organic shrapnel" (16, 66) and

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4. Jean Laplanche, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London, Karnak Books, 2006 [1973], p. 465-466.

the second is the briefcase. One could argue that they are both related to the question of traces. The briefcase is a remnant, the trace of what is left of the event. This comes as no surprise then that it is associated with refuse: "The briefcase sat beside the table like something yanked out of a landfill" (88). The "organic shrapnel" can be read in multiple ways but in the traumatic perspective, what dominates is the issue of otherness, and the latter cannot be reduced to the Oriental other, the terrorist<sup>5</sup>:

"In those places where [suicide bombings] happen, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of better term, and it turned out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who's in striking range [...]. They call this organic shrapnel."

He tweezered another splinter of glass out of Keith's face. "This is something I don't think you have," he said (16).

One cannot help but noticing how the reassuring tone of the doctor's answer is debunked by his awkward syntax. The unconvincing effort to deny the trauma only partakes in reinforcing its indirect presence. The slanted syntax of his response *textually* testifies to the haunting presence of some ungraspable form of otherness. Residues or traces of the event linger in its effects. Otherness transpires in the stigmas composed of glass, steel and flesh, all kinds of foreign bodies that threaten the integrity of the body, altering it, making it, so to speak, unknown not its owner, thus *un-owned*: "traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured, defiled."<sup>6</sup> From the moment Keith is struck by the event, he will never be the same, ever again. As Lianne remarks when

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5. Özden Sözüalan, *The American Nightmare, Don DeLillo's Falling Man and Cormac McCarthy's The Road*, Bloomington, AuthorHouse, 2011, p 24.

6. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, New York, Pandora, 1992, p. 53.

she opens the door to him after the attacks, she faces “a man she’d never known before” (59).

Trauma is not just the skin wound, the scar on the surface that ensures that the wound has healed with time. It is, more decisively perhaps, a foreign element living within, and likely to evolve in the mind of the survivor:

We must presume rather that the psychological trauma – or more precisely the memory of the trauma – acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work<sup>7</sup>.

If it is true that surgical tweezers are sufficient to remove scattered fragments disseminated by the event, there remains an irremovable incursion, unsuspected and located more deeply within and that will demand to be reckoned with. The first instance of the phrase “organic shrapnel” appeared in the hospital where Keith was taken whereas the second one is uttered by Keith himself. This second occurrence tends to confirm that Keith has interiorized the trauma, albeit in an obscure manner:

“He thought of something out of nowhere, a phrase, *organic shrapnel*. Felt familiar but meant nothing to him. Then he saw a car double-parked across the street and thought of something else and then something else again.” (66).

The phrase *organic shrapnel*, this time italicized, gives visibility to the psychic wound in the text. DeLillo’s words are very significant for they indicate the incursion of an entity belonging to a radical exteriority (‘out of nowhere’) which has settled in the psychic dwelling. The text literally depicts the inaccessibility (‘nothing’) of an indisputable presence (‘something’).

The second trope, which appears on the very first page, is the briefcase. It is a crucial element of the novel, a genetic one even, as DeLillo explained:

Later, after I finished *Cosmopolis*, I had been thinking about

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7. Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trad. J. Strachey, New York, Basic Books, 1957 [1895], p. 6.

another novel for some months when I began thinking about what would become *Falling Man*. What made it happen was a visual image: a man in a suit and tie, carrying a briefcase, walking through a storm of smoke and ash. I had nothing beyond that. And then a few days later, it occurred to me that the briefcase was not his. And that seemed to start a chain of thought that led to the actual setting of words on paper<sup>8</sup>.

When he escapes from the tower, Keith carries a briefcase which belongs to Florence Givens, another survivor of the attacks: "He wore a suit and carried a briefcase. There was glass in his hair and face, marbled bolls of blood and light" (3). In other words, the foreign nature of the briefcase that befalls him just as the bits and pieces from the towers suggest that Keith exited the towers with something other in himself, with himself as other, that is to say, forever altered by the event. Thirty pages elapse from the moment Keith receives it and the moment he notices that it does not belong to him:

He'd seen [the briefcase] there before but understood for the first time that it wasn't his. Wasn't his wife's, wasn't his. [...] It wasn't his briefcase but he'd carried it out of the tower and he had it with him when he showed up at the door (35).

It seems that this element partakes in the novel's reflection on trauma for one can perceive a dialectics of appropriation and disappropriation. One could argue that Keith carries the object as much as the object carries him to a certain extent. The imposition of that which does not belong to him betrays the fact that he inherits something despite himself, almost against himself.

As far as trauma is concerned, one can link Florence's briefcase to Keith's words when visiting her for the first time to return the briefcase, he tells her: "*what happened is I didn't know* I had it. It wasn't even a case of forgetting. I don't think I knew" (53, my emphasis). Had it simply been forgotten, memory would have compensated for that loss. The words Keith utters are paramount

8. Mark Binelli, "Intensity of a Plot", *Guernica* (July, 17th 2007), Last accessed on July 16th, 2016, <[http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity\\_of\\_a\\_plot/](http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity_of_a_plot/)>.

as they posit an equivalence between the happening of the event and its concomitant unknowing. It is literally an equation whereby happening equates not knowing, therefore echoing Caruth's own terms on trauma:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on<sup>9</sup>.

In fact, trauma poses the event in a paradoxical way as it suggests that the event is simultaneously lived and missed as if the experience, yet irrefutable, had not registered. When Keith receives the briefcase towards the end of the novel, its reception parallels the mechanisms of trauma: “when the briefcase came to him, he reached his right hand across his body to take it, *blankly*, and then started down the stairs again” (245, my emphasis). Traumatic excess may paradoxically be a missed appointment with what cannot be missed, with the unmissable. This is how Dori Laub puts it: “an event that has not yet come to an existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence.”<sup>10</sup> The briefcase motif encapsulates the crucial interrogation at the heart of trauma, namely its problematic experience and knowability. That is why the novel ends on the briefcase as an element of quest: “I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this. She fell and left it” (244). Although the quest it triggers is primarily the concern of the owner, one must bear in mind that what is at stake is not the fact of owning in itself as much as the necessity to define ownership from an external point of view and this is when the issue of witnessing comes to the fore.

Although the quest it triggers is primarily the concern of the owner, one must bear in mind that what is at stake is not the fact of owning an object in itself as much as the necessity to define ownership from an experiential point of view, and this is when the issue of witnessing comes to the fore.

9. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

10. Dori Laub (MD), “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening”, in Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 57.

## Witnessing

### *The proof of traumatic experience*

The paradoxical experience of the traumatic event raises another question, which is that of witnessing: how can one testify to what happened? Trauma needs to be externalized so that it may be inserted within a narrative that grants it meaning. For when it happens, trauma is that which does not make sense, that which resists coherent narrativization. Moreover, the intensity of trauma does not enable the subject to accommodate inside herself what she is confronted with from outside. It is no surprise then that Keith fails to see himself in what he yet saw with his own eyes: "He could not find himself in the things he saw and heard" (246). Dori Laub explains that a listener is necessary so that trauma may be recognized as such. Listening is a keyword to attest to the authenticity of trauma. Keith listens to Florence's story in utter silence without "interrupt[ing]" her (57). The main focus of Keith and Florence's interviews is to share the fundamental question of the happening of the traumatic event:

the absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story<sup>11</sup>.

In this sense, one can say that the briefcase performs the double witnessing task on the level of experience and narrative. By returning the briefcase to its owner, Keith testifies to the experiential veracity of Florence's trauma, thus enabling her to tell the story of her trauma, a story which up to this point had simply been hushed up:

After what happened, so many gone, friends gone, people I worked with, I was nearly gone, nearly dead, in another way. I couldn't see people, talk to people, go from here to there without forcing myself up off the chair. Then you walked in the door (108).

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11. Dori Laub (MD), "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," *op. cit.*, p. 68



Keith's entry makes way for Florence's possible exit out of herself. By becoming a privileged listener, he paves the way for the externalization of her trauma.

### *The call of trauma*

For Florence Givens, the briefcase symbolizes the possibility to see herself in the event and to stand both out of the event and herself so as to be able to become a witness of the event. Shoshana Felman argues that "one does not have to *possess*, or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker."<sup>12</sup> The briefcase represents the irrefutability of an experience *in want of* or, *awaiting* a narrative. And it is perhaps what some of the items contained in it imply:

He found a set of headphones and a CD player. There was a small bottle of spring water. There was a *cell phone* in the pocket designed for that purpose and half a chocolate bar in a slot for business cards. He noted three pen sleeves, one rollerball pen. There was a pack of Kent cigarettes and a lighter. In one of the saddle pockets he found a sonic toothbrush in a travel case and a digital voice recorder as well, sleeker than his own. [...] There was an imitation leather folio with a *blank* notebook in one of the pockets. He found a *stamped envelope preaddressed to AT&T, no return address*, and a book in the zippered compartment, paperback, a guide to buying used cars. The CD in the player was a compilation of music from Brazil. The wallet with money, credit cards and a driver's license was in the other saddle pocket (36, my emphasis).

The briefcase comprises most and foremost forms of containment. It thus signals a *mise en abyme* of containment itself with the references to myriads of containers of all sorts (pocket, slot, pack,

12. Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching", in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, 13-60, p. 25.

sleeve, envelope, recorder, notebook, case, book, compartment, wallet...). Those stand for the many pouches where the narrative fragments of trauma are lodged, , for some for them, irretrievably so.

The reference to the phone inside the briefcase echoes the several occurrences of this means of communication throughout the novel. Since 9/11, the phone has been emotionally associated with the victims. In fact, many victims trapped in the towers called families and friends to say goodbye. Those conversations, recorded and available online, are now part and parcel of the American collective memory. The cellular phone also appears among the numerous objects associated with the attacks and the personal belongings scattered and lost when they occurred: "The cell-phones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women." ("Ruins" 35). It is even linked to the performance of "Falling Man". When Lianne sees him, she anticipates the horror of the passersby:

They would only see him fall out of sight. Then, she thought, the ones already speaking into phones, the others groping for phones, all would try to describe what they've seen or what others nearby have seen and are now trying to describe to them (165).

It is telling that the briefcase contained Florence's cell phone, that the event separated her from her means of communication with the world outside the tower. When Keith meets her to return her briefcase, Florence unconsciously draws a connection between the attacks and Keith's call to set up a meeting. She fuses the surprising nature of the event with Keith's unexpected telephone call: "The phone call was so out of the blue" (53). Besides, it is worth remembering that Florence was on the telephone with a friend when she heard the plane crash into the tower:

"My phone was ringing. I was at my desk now, I don't know, just to sit, to steady myself, and I pick up the phone. Then we're talking, like hello, it's Donna. It's my friend Donna. I said, Did you hear that? She's calling from home, in Philadelphia, to talk about a visit. I said, Did you hear that?" (54-55).

This episode happens when Florence recalls her trauma by recounting her experience to Keith. In other words, DeLillo deliberately uses the phone to conflate the experience of trauma and its recounting. By sharing her story with Keith and thus verifying the truthfulness of what befell her, the question she is asking Donna becomes a question *indirectly* asked to herself.

### *Communicating trauma*

Towards the end of the novel, the phone is associated with a crucial point that corresponds to the precise moment when Keith suffers the shock of the impact. If Florence was about to pick up the phone at the moment of the impact, Keith was in the midst of a telephone conversation: “He didn’t drop the telephone until he hit the wall” (239). As the phone is still connected, an anonymous listener unwillingly and unknowingly records the event on the other side of the line: “He didn’t know where the phone was but he could hear a voice on the other end, still there, somewhere” (240). In other words, trauma is acknowledged by the truncated presence of an unlocalizable witness, a witness who was both there and not there – everything was heard but nothing was seen. This simultaneity is crucial if one wants to understand the mechanisms of trauma: “Things came back to him in hazy visions, like half an eye staring. These were moments he’d *lost as they were happening* and he had to stop walking in order to stop seeing them” (243, my emphasis).

If one returns to the content of the briefcase, one can see that the phone motif is also hinted at when AT&T is mentioned. Thanks to the reference to the phone company, phone communication is intricately associated to its postal correlative. The movement from voice communication (which ought to include the “digital voice recorder”) to written communication is to be found in the presence of the next two items listed after the digital voice recorder, namely the “notebook” and the “stamped envelope”. Placed in the briefcase, the latter was supposed to be sent to the telephone company. The text does not state whether the envelope is sealed or not. What the text does state implicitly though is that this envelope is *in want*, not of a destination, but of a delivery, or,

to put it differently, in want of communication or transmission. The fact that the address of the sender is missing testifies both to a missing origin and to a destination to come, for in that particular case, the address marks both *archè* and *télos* that is to say, origin and end. Florence is both the sender of the letter – she wrote it – and the recipient of the letter – the letter, retrieved as it were, is sent back to her. By becoming the witness of her own trauma thanks to the briefcase, Florence can begin to make the narrative of her trauma properly hers. That is exactly what she explains to Keith. The latter has the responsibility of delivering the reality of the trauma to its recipient who, had she not received it from an external witness, would never have been able to know that she already had it within her, unwritten or *blank*, so to speak. The empty and unwritten notebook does not so much embody an absence as an implicit presence to come. Florence sums up the function of the briefcase thus:

Then she said, "You saved my life. Don't you know that?"

He sat back, looking at her.

"I saved your briefcase."

And waited for her to laugh.

"I can't explain it but no, you saved my life. [...] 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 this 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 (108-109, my emphasis).

How can one believe in one's own survival after such a shock? How can one still believe to be alive? As early as the beginning of the novel, Keith had somehow pointed out that impossibility: "He tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold" (6). A parallel can be drawn with Caruth's own formulation: "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (Caruth, 1998, 58). And this is perhaps in this sense that a third party must necessarily

be involved to acknowledge that Keith has indeed survived the event. As Keith is going beyond the police checkpoints to reach his apartment, he is confronted with the desolate spectacle of the burning and smoking rubble. Utterly silent, Keith does not know he is not alone:

He realized someone had joined him at the fence, a man in a dust mask who maintained a calculated silence designed to be broken.

“Look at it,” he said finally. “I say to myself *I’m standing here*. It’s hard to believe, being here and seeing it.”

His words were muffled by the mask.

“I walked to Brooklyn when it happened,” he said. “I don’t live there. I live way uptown on the west side but I work down around here and when it happened everybody was walking across the bridge to Brooklyn and I went with them. I walked across the bridge because they were walking across the bridge.” It sounded like a speech defect, the words smothered and blurred. He took out his *cell phone* and entered a number.

“*I’m standing here*,” he said but had to repeat himself because the person he was talking to could not hear him clearly.

“*I’m standing here*,” he said (25, my emphasis).

The anonymous man testifies to the reality of the event and also to the enigma of Keith’s survival. This scene reenacts in a very uncanny way what happened in the tower when Keith was on the phone. That anonymous man feels compelled to speak to someone because sharing his experience is the only way to assert its reality. After that scene, Keith returns to his apartment to collect some belongings and leaves. On the way out, Keith finds himself repeating the very words the anonymous man pronounced as if they were his: “He said ‘*I’m standing here*,’ and then louder, ‘*I’m standing here*’” (27, my emphasis). Though he has managed to escape death, he still has to process and believe the fact that he is alive. That is the reason why DeLillo probably inserted that meeting. Keith will in turn reveal to Florence what the man revealed to him. When he met Florence Givens to return the briefcase, he did not simply give the object back to her, he also gave her back the proof of her existence, the proof that she had

survived. The briefcase is a gift<sup>13</sup>. She is called into being and her life is *given* back to her: “You saved my life” (108).

For Florence, the content of the briefcase is tantamount to her own narrative: “What we carry. This is the story in the end” (91). One must understand her formulation literally. Although she was a direct victim of trauma, she could not make it hers, she could not lay claim to what happened to her, unless the figure of a third person returned it to her, restored it. The same phenomenon applies to Keith, who could not, insofar as he was absorbed by the event, somehow experience it. That is the reason why Keith pays careful attention to Florence’s oral testimony for the latter enables him to extract himself from the event and to see himself (or his self) in it from an external vantage point: “he was ready to listen again. He listened carefully, noting every detail, trying to find himself in the crowd” (58). He patiently waits (54, 55, 57) for the narrative to unfold. And that is precisely why the account of Keith’s trauma appears toward the end. Florence’s narrative allows Keith’s story to become tellable. Thanks to the mediating device the briefcase stands for, Keith, like a spectator, can penetrate in the dark room where the movie of his trauma is being played, a movie that featured him as one of the main characters.

The narrative of *Falling Man*, the book we are reading somehow fills the absence denoted by the blank notebook. Just as Florence’s briefcase – and one would be tempted ultimately to add Keith as a rightful owner of the briefcase – *Falling Man* is, so to speak, handed out to the reader. If Florence manages in the end to tell her story to Keith, the latter does not share his with her. While the briefcase triggers the perlaborative words without which no process of working through can be attained, it is the reader who triggers Keith’s traumatic narrative. Each time, we, as readers, come across the novel, Keith’s story is voiced out and thus made hearable (hence true) to another’s attentive and empathetic ear. We, as readers, perform the ethical task of listening. We, as we read out loud or silently what Keith went through, authenticate the measure of his suffering. Fiction does not simply word out

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13. See the analysis of the naming process in the novel in my book *Don DeLillo. Falling Man*, p. 94.

what cannot be said in common language. It also welcomes the suffering of the other through a reading posture that includes a listening one.

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