

ASHES TO ASHES: TRAUMA, HISTORY, AND THE ETHICS OF ALLEGORICAL
MEMORY IN POST 9/11 LITERATURE

By

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To my Grandfather—H.L. Robinson; your memory is a source of constant inspiration.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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The post 9/11 era, considered in its development, reveals at least two contradictory political narratives originating from the Bush administration and mass media—each having attempted to situate the sociopolitical magnitude of the event into a coherent framework of signification. While the first strategy has promoted the suggestion of a repetition of history insofar as it associates the event of September 11th with the nationalist rhetoric of World War II, the second strategy has dislocated the event from any historical continuity, claiming that the event, far from having any historical precedent, irreparably alters the present historical situation (“Nothing will ever be the same”).

This project argues that while these political narratives have adopted a historical model which situates 9/11's evental site into a framework of “homogenous” and “empty time,” recent contemporary novels fictionalizing the historical and political consequences of 9/11 have promoted alternative narratives of historical memory challenging the ethico-political efficacy of this historical framework. In particular, Katherine Weber's *Triangle* (2006) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2007) have allegorized the traumatic upheaval of 9/11 in conjunction

with disparate historical traumatic contexts: the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively.

These particular allegorical representation, then, promote a different modality of history, in which the present is conceived as an uncanny site of uneven temporalities. That is to say, both novels use the allegorical trope of ash and burning as the means by which to represent this collusion of historical temporalities; thus the traumatic rupture of September 11th allows history to be read in new, provocatively unfamiliar ways. I will therefore show how this recent proliferation of allegorical representation also produces a specific ethico-political relation to these different historical traumatic contexts. This particular ethical dimension is, in turn, constructed through the way in which the allegorical trope's formal structure, as an instance of the imaginary register, fails to enact a closure of signification, simultaneously maintaining two disparate historical memories without a final movement of resolution. To the extent that these allegorical narratives highlight rather than occlude the Real of September 11th, these narratives remain ethically sutured to the "ruins of history," destabilizing the dominant symbolic narratives by which the Bush administration and mass media have attempted to domesticate this trauma.

CHAPTER 1 PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES

The post 9/11 era, considered in its development, reveals at least two conflicting political narratives that have originated from the Bush administration and mass media. Though each narrative has been underscored by a similar political agenda, and while both narratives have attempted to stabilize the sociopolitical ramifications of the event into a coherent context of signification, their contradictory content has largely been a result of each narrative's specific politicization of the present. The first of these strategies has been principally historical in content: this strategy has attempted to draw a distinct correlation between September 11th and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, while the subsequent 'war on terror' also has been associated with the United States' involvement in World War II. This mapping of historical equivalences not only immediately codified September 11th as a precipitant act of war—even when the identity of a culprit against which a response was to be made was not immediately at hand—but it also inevitably consigned this response to one belonging primarily to a global military operation. Consequently, when the identification of a culprit solidified into the distinct yet still vague designation of Al Qaeda, the fundamental link between the ideologies of fascism and Islamic extremism was immediately established.

Thus only three months after 9/11 the specificity of these historical actualities was erased in order to promote the suggestion of an unequivocal return to, and repetition of, the historico-political situation of World War II. During his media address on Pearl Harbor Day in 2001, President Bush explicitly linked the contemporary threat of modern terrorism with fascism, stating that American had "seen this [threat] before:" "the terrorists are the heirs to fascism ... Like all fascists, the terrorists cannot be appeased: they must be defeated. This struggle will not

end in a truce or treaty. It will end in victory for the United States, our friends and the cause of freedom.” Here a nationalist commemoration of Pearl Harbor is appropriated in order to construct a tripartite schema consisting of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the terrorist attack of September 11th, and the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany—radically distorting the complexity of the historico-political contexts that constitute each of these events. Indeed, this conflation of modern terrorism with National Socialism not only deploys a dubious analogy; as Maja Zehfuss argues, it also further reinforces the notion that the United States’ involvement in the Second World War can be exclusively defined as a “Good War,” a “heroic fight for freedom” against the “absolute evil” of its adversaries—effectively obscuring the US’s own destructive action in World War II (Zehfuss 101).

Likewise, while imagery of Iwo Jima has been incessantly evoked since September 11th—in which the deliberate visual association of firefighters hoisting the American flag at Ground Zero directly alludes to the iconic images of the battle of Iwo Jima—the historical memory of both Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima has coalesced into a historical matrix that effaces the very “final solution” of this conflict. Adam Lowenstein argues that, since September 11th, this juxtaposition of historical phenomena has rewritten the United States’ role in the Pacific during World War II, once again, into a narrative of military heroism. If, according to Lowenstein, this juxtaposition inevitably codifies “Hiroshima as a ‘justified solution’ to Pearl Harbor,” this analogy also “effectively occludes Hiroshima’s own Ground Zero” in the process (Lowenstein 181). Thus despite the lack of salient similarities between September 11th and these disparate historical events, this return and recourse to nationalist memory has been promoted, according to Zehfuss, precisely “because it is not certain that the ‘war on terror’ is a glorious fight for freedom” (Zehfuss 102). The political significance of the Bush administration’s “invocations of

memory,” then, proposes that “the present is like the past and that therefore doing what was right then will also be right now” (Zehfuss 102). This rhetorical appeal to the historical memory of World War II also infamously laid the groundwork for the eventual war against Iraq, when President Bush referred to the “rogue” nations of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the “Axis of Evil.”

The second dominant narrative, however, completely refuses the suggestion of any historical equivalence in relation to the event and the ensuing ‘war on terror.’ This secondary strategy attests to the absolute singularity of the event, maintaining that the event of September 11th represents a total break with the past. The particular rhetoric of this strategy proposes that “everything has changed since 9/11,” or that America, nay the world, will no longer be the same. The ahistorical content of this strategy, in which any relation with a historical framework is discarded, implies that the US was irreparably altered from the event and that, moreover, the specific formal aspect of the attack has justified the drastic modification of the United States’ domestic and foreign policies. To the extent that this narrative strategy discards any and all historical contextualization, it similarly blurs the specificity of September 11th by isolating the event from any historical continuity. As Rex Butler and Scott Stephens contends, the ahistorical nature of this strategy, far from contending with the sociopolitical magnitude of the event, “merely reproduces ideological co-ordinates,” for it “is only the hollow attempt to say something deep without knowing what to say” (Butler and Stephens 2). Analogously, Jacques Derrida, in his interviews with Jürgen Habermas, stressed the necessity of reflecting on the “ideological co-ordinates” which designate 9/11 as an unprecedented event, since this injunction advocating the categorical, ahistorical nature of the event is “less spontaneous than it actually appears” (Derrida 86). Rather this response, according to Derrida, has “to a large extent [been] conditioned,

constituted, if not actually constructed...by means of a prodigious techno-social-political machine” (Derrida 86).

The political undertones of each strategy, then, displaces the specificity of September 11th into a politics of memory that blurs the distinct perimeters of the event’s situated-ness in a precise moment of history, as well as the particular sociopolitical forces that contributed to the event. Furthermore, the disparate content of these strategies—which declares that September 11th has historical analogues, while simultaneously denying the event historical precedence—functions not only to legitimize the current administration’s political agendas. It also radically diminishes both the viability and legibility of alternative narratives of memory and history, through the way in which the dominance of these strategies has limited the discursive possibilities of contextualization. That is to say, since these rhetorical interpretive strategies both occupy and polarize the event, not only politicizing the memory of September 11th but also, in the process, other significant moments of US history, competing narratives of historical memory become marginalized or suppressed. The rapidity with which these strategies were assimilated into popular discourse attests to this radical reduction of alternative narratives. Narratives which promoted the necessity of reflecting on the present situation before hurried military retaliation, interrogated the historical events directly implicating the contemporary, and focused collective mourning on lives lost rather than on tendentious political agendas—all of these were relegated outside the prevailing political conversation.

The past few years, however, have witnessed a marked increase in a growing body of fictional work that has engaged the cultural and political ramifications of September 11th. Though this increase is not altogether surprising given the considerable geopolitical magnitude of the event, it is significant that each of these novels has attempted to historicize and politicize

the memory of September 11th against these dominant strategies and have, conversely, offered alternative narratives of historical memory. Indeed, Jonathan S. Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), Don Delillo's *The Falling Man* (2007), and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) have all, to some extent, ventured to locate the cultural and historical specificity of September 11th in diverse and politically challenging frameworks of contextualization. Each of these narratives promotes a model of historical engagement that undermines the political mystifications of the Bush administration.

In particular, Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* works to situate September 11th alongside the traumatic historical lineage of the bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden: his confrontation with the underbelly of the United States' military history seems to suggest that the complexity of September 11th can be significantly confronted only after a direct engagement with, and a return to, America's own violent past. Foer's focus, then, on how collective traumas of the past implicate the present acknowledges that the present itself is modified as a result of the re-politicization of history that has taken place since September 11th. Conversely, Don Delillo's 9/11 novel, *The Falling Man*, has been one of the few narratives to resist historical contextualization. This resistance, however, is itself deeply political gesture, I would argue, since Delillo's project appears to be an attempt to return to the trauma of September 11th without the political rhetoric that has accompanied the event. In fact, *The Falling Man* seems to indicate that we are still too close to the event to assess its larger sociopolitical significance, to place it into a definitive context of historical meaning. For Delillo, it is the traumatic image of the Falling Man who, forever suspended in horrifying abeyance, works to disrupt the closure of September 11th, reinforcing the historical immediacy of the event. Counteracting narratives that have attempted

to domesticate the event through politically dubious strategies, *The Falling Man* suggests that the present is still too tenuous and over-determined to consign the trauma of 9/11 to a historical closure.

But whereas these novels have directly dealt with the repercussions of the aftermath of 9/11, along with the event's broader context in history, other contemporary novels have taken up these issues in more oblique, allegorical representations. Novels such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Katherine Weber's *The Triangle*, in particular, have allegorized the events of September 11th together with past collective traumas of the twentieth century. Whereas *The Road* conflates images of Hiroshima and September 11th in the form of an ashen post-apocalyptic America, *Triangle* draws a distinct relation between the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911 and September 11th through allegorical descriptions of falling, burning bodies. Though each novel differs significantly in both stylistic and thematic approaches, it is this collusion of historical temporality through reoccurring allegorical tropes of ash and burning that place 9/11 along side historically and politically dissimilar contexts of memory. Rather than upholding conventional politics of memory, the use of historical allegory in these novels not only counteracts the proliferation of repeated images that followed the event but its unfamiliar context of memory undermines the nationalistic rhetoric that has permeated political discourse since September 11th.

What specifically sets these two allegorical novels from those just discussed is how the immediate historical situation is represented as the eruptive return of past historical traumas into the present. Additionally, these novels suggest a more intimate relation to history than perhaps those formally discussed: that is, the allegorical tropes of ash and burning structure a specific ethical dimension through the very textual performance of their allegorical representation. The pervasive use of ash and fire in these novels is allegorical insofar as they both signify and

coordinate a distinct dialectical relation between September 11th and another traumatic historical context: Hiroshima in *The Road*, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in *Triangle*. While fire and burning serve as the tropes of the Real through which both historical traumas are constituted, ash becomes the constituent allegorical image of the remainder of this Real as traumatic encounter, reconfiguring the memory of each historical trauma in relation to a broader historical context. Thus, the allegorical relationship maintained in these narratives implies that the present is determined and constituted by a process akin to the “returned of the repressed,” but only insofar as this symbolic return presents new configurations of history. Particularly, both *Triangle* and *The Road* promote a modality of history in which the present, blasted open by the traumatic rupture of September 11th, reorients our relationship to the past in provocatively new, and ultimately more politically ethical, configurations. Finally, these allegorical narratives suggest that, through the very intimate correspondences between historical traumatic events, an ethico-political alternative to current political discourse is sheltered.

My objective here, then, is twofold: the first part of this thesis will lay down the theoretical dimensions of this emergent allegorical tendency, while the second part will demonstrate the various ethico-political implications of this allegorical dimension through a detailed discussion of Katherine Weber’s *Triangle* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Relying heavily upon Walter Benjamin’s theories of allegory, I will contend that this recent allegorical impulse is not only a result of a counter-narrative of political memory that opens up a broader consideration toward past collective trauma, but that it is also coextensive with a concomitant crisis of representation engendered by the collective trauma of September 11th. My argument will attempt to synthesize the historical dimension of allegory via Benjamin with the referential problems of traumatic experience. Insofar as Benjamin’s notions of allegory are principally

historical in character, thereby acknowledging the “ruins” or the Real of history, this thesis will argue that the allegorical treatment of history in these novels corresponds to the belated, discontinuous temporality of traumatic experience. This synthesis will show the recent proliferation of allegorical representation opens up different configurations of history—each producing a specific ethico-political relation to these histories. This particular ethical dimension is, in turn, constructed through the way in which the allegorical trope’s formal structure, as an instance of the imaginary register, fails to enact a closure of signification, simultaneously maintaining two disparate historical memories without a final movement of resolution. To the extent that these allegorical narratives highlight rather than occlude the Real of September 11th, these narratives remain ethically sutured to the impasse of this Real, destabilizing the dominant symbolic narratives by which the Bush administration and mass media have attempted to domesticate this trauma.

In his *Shocking Representations*, Adam Lowenstein claims that “the allegorical encounter with historical trauma entails an opening out to complex and often contradictory representations, where unexpected recombinations and disfigurements of history can occur” (Lowenstein 50). It is, then, this collision *between* temporalities, *between* history and fiction, which produces the allegorical moment of defamiliarization—or, as Lowenstein calls it, working off Benjamin’s theory of allegory, moments of representative “shock.” This “shock” of representation, produced by the uncanny nature of the narrative’s symbolic repetition—along with the eruption of the past into present—reinscribes the significance of previous traumas into the contemporary, serving as an ethical expansion to, rather than a domestication of, the memories of these collective traumas.

CHAPTER 2 ALLEGORIES OF HISTORY OR, “BLASTING OPEN THE CONTINUUM OF HISTORY”

What these particular descriptions make manifest is that September 11th signals both the break from the decade following the Cold War—which solidified the United States as the uncontested proponent of a global neo-liberal agenda—and the emergence of and entry into a new historical situation¹. Needless to say, while the period of the Cold War provided the United States prevailing political narratives with which to forward and legitimize its assorted political programs (despite intermittent historical situations such as the Vietnam War which temporarily disturbed their coherence), the decade of the 90’s similarly marshaled political narratives suggesting the “end of history”. This political narrative, articulated most concisely in Francis Fukuyama’s neo-Hegelian study, *The End of History and the Last Man*, contended that the end of the global communist project, *i.e.* the fall of the Berlin Wall, fully sanctions and validates the neo-liberal agenda as the end goal of history. Furthermore, this new project, defined by the diffusion of democratization and capitalization to the rest of the underdeveloped world, also fully exposed and legitimized capitalism’s ultimate dream: the desire to unleash the absolute, uncontested deterritorialized flows of capital throughout the entire world. Though this period announced the installation of a new historical situation, where the horizon or objective towards an objective future was perhaps more ambiguous than during the years of the Cold War, September 11th inaugurated a break with both of these political narratives and objectives.

Political historian Harry Harootunian, however, provides a different interpretation of the political narratives of the 1990’s, especially as it relates to September 11th. While Harootunian concedes that “since 9/11 there has been a swelling chorus of opinion aimed at demonstrating

¹ This point is highly indebted to Phillip Wegner’s forthcoming book project, *Life Between Two Deaths: US Culture, 1989-2001*, forthcoming from Duke University Press 2008.

how the destruction of the World Trade towers has constituted an event of world historical magnitude announcing the installation of a new time marked by a boundless present,” he argues that the historical and temporal upheavals of September 11th were nevertheless already present during the 90’s following the fall of the communist project (Harootunian 471). Far from affecting the temporal order and “upsetting the relationship between history and the tripartite division of past, present, and future,” the events of September 11th, then, simply exposed further the asymmetry of the temporal order on a larger global scale² (Harootunian 471). In fact, Harootunian suggests that the narrative pronouncing the “end of history” was really only but the “exhausted echo of this historical displacement, disclosing a narrative that has played out its productivity and whose worn and frayed image finds itself reflected in an attempt to position the temporality of the present as endless duration now that it no longer needs to rely on its relationship to a past and future” (Harootunian 474). If the “end of history” narrative was only but a “worn and frayed” image, September 11th nevertheless allowed the US to once again displace and distort the geopolitical upheaval produced by the fall of communism onto a broader political project connected to the expansion of democratization—‘the war on terror.’

Thus, although Harootunian challenges the opinion that September 11th constituted an “event of world historical magnitude,” I would argue that it was indeed September 11th, conceptualized now as a repetition of the Real produced by the fall of the Berlin Wall³, which not only fully exposed the historical unevenness of the geopolitical and economic order—most explicitly the prevalence of radical fundamentalisms—but also compounded the problem insofar

² One could argue, however, that Harootunian sees Hurricane Katrina, rather than September 11th, as the event which exposed most fully the problems with the current temporal order, since, according to Harootunian, it was Hurricane Katrina that was “able to easily rip off the veneer of the present to reveal an enduring and deep-seated historical unevenness” (Harootunian 475).

³ Again, I must give full credit to Phil Wegner on this point, as his article “Periodizing the Cold War in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*” makes clear the political and historical stakes of Žižek’s formulation of symbolic repetition.

as it allowed the US to fully embrace this narrative and legitimize its political agendas after September 11th. Indeed, Žižek has provided the theoretical perspective by which to conceptualize the actualization of this retroactive accumulation of symbolic meaning. As Žižek argues, “the symbolic status of an event” changes retroactively with its symbolic repetition: whereas the first eruption is “experienced as a contingent trauma,” it is through its subsequent repetition that the event is “recognized in its symbolic necessity”—it finds its place in the symbolic network” (Žižek 61). In short, I am arguing that if the fall of the Berlin Wall, as the first eruption of the Real, constituted the initial destabilization of political narratives describing the historical present and future, it was the repetition of this event—September 11th—that most fully revealed the destabilization and unevenness of this historico-political order.

This discussion, then, allows for a different reading of the narrative threads that I have been delineating. What we have seen since 9/11, both in political discourse and from cultural production, is a hyperactive production of interpretive practice beset with contextual strategies attempting to politicize and historicize the present, or what Harootunian calls “the boundless present.” Both of these representational practices—political discourse and literary production—re-politicized history in an attempt to describe and contextualize the lack of substantive symbolic strategies available to coordinate the effect of September 11th on the present and future. Indeed, from both sides of the political spectrum, the desire to integrate and foreclose September 11th into a stable historical context has been one of the primary political agendas having emerged since the aftermath of the event. Thus, the trajectory that I’ve been trying to trace suggests a trenchant polarization of history. On the one hand, the Bush Administration’s politicization of September 11th as a return to the political and military struggles of World War II—which ultimately and simultaneously negates final historical analysis—suggests a modality of history

that is strictly homogenous and linear. Far from a return to history, the Bush administration's appeal to the national rhetoric of military victories is only but the desperate attempt to advocate the political and military models that lead to the economic reconstructions after World War II. In effect, this modality views history as a progressive series of obstacles, a linear movement of perpetual overcoming; its backward glance toward history suggests that the political strategies that worked then can still be applied to the current historical situation. The Bush administration's recourse to history is really nothing other than the denial of history, insofar as the 90's and September 11th are still consigned to a period of history which spans and includes the second World War and its aftermath. The problem of modern terrorism and the 'war on terror' is thus modeled off the successful democratization of Japan, as well as the reformation of Europe after World War II. Indeed, one could argue that it is this notion of a "boundless present" of homogenous time has solidified into the new political narrative of the Bush Administration, with its endless 'war on terror' and its call for perpetual vigilance in the face of modern terrorism without providing an alternative narrative toward a future objective.

What is more, the political narratives which have dislocated September 11th from any historical continuity allow the Bush administration to obscure the more deep-seated problems that emerged during 1990's. It furthermore allows the plurality of these political issues, spanning from the entry into the 1990's to the aftermath of September 11th, to be consolidated into simplified political narrative focusing all of its emphasis on the problem of modern terrorism—one which now supplements a global military dimension to the economic component that was always already inscribed in the "end of history" narrative. Consequently, this highlights the fact that, far from treating September 11th as an absolute rupture inaugurating a new historical situation, the present is regarded as merely another obstacle toward expanding western

notions of democracy to political and economic spheres which are not only deemed potentially volatile but also archaic compared to the models of modernization valorized by the US and the rest of the Western world.

These allegorical narratives, however, appear to politicize the return to history in a completely different fashion. The use of allegory in these novels politicizes history not only to reclaim the past and the present from political appropriation. Indeed, the performative nature of these allegorical representations also offers a completely different model of history, one which utilizes belated, discontinuous models of temporality that destabilize and expose the political narratives championing homogenous modalities of history. Whereas the Bush administration has effaced the specificity of historical traumatic events through its politicization, these narratives attempt to maintain specificity through the way in which the allegorical mode works to form a certain identity in difference, bringing into view a broader framework of historical memory through the dialectical mode of its signification. These allegorical narratives represent September 11th as a rupture of the Real that makes the symbolic texture of history readable in new ways. Though they still posit September 11th as an absolute rupture—as an historical rupture that must be politically and ethically re-conceptualized—its reengagement with history nevertheless serves as a political project that not only reconfigures the political dimension of US imperialist history. It also paves the way for an alternative politics of memory acknowledging the imperative need for a more ethically positioned political objective, one which is dedicated to the constitution of a new future horizon. Both of these narrative strategies, however far they diverge, indicate that a reengagement with history is not only imperative, but that it is tantamount to a “re-orientation” of the present, insofar as the present, marked as a over-determined and volatile phenomenon, upsets the stability of viably familiar narrative modes. In short, if these allegorical narratives

highlight and advocate an ethical fidelity to something like a “return of the repressed” of the real of history, the Bush administration denies and suppresses this repressed history through its adoption of a homogenous, continuous historical time.

It is important to stress, then, the particular theoretical model with which to conceptualize these renewed historicizations opened up by September 11th. To return to the course of Harootunian’s examination, his description of the temporal unevenness of the historical present is markedly reminiscent of Freud’s notion of the “return of the repressed,” calling this destabilization of homogenous time as the “specter...that has come back to haunt the present in the form of explosive fundamentalism fusing the archaic and the modern” (Harootunian 475). For Harootunian, nation-states and communities that experience the upheaval caused by massive conflict or collective trauma inevitably “define the present by historicizing and temporalizing the asymmetrical interplay of the past and current situation,” which suggests that “history is not only the locus of uneven rhythms, the collusion of coexisting temporalities”—“it is also the scene where the ghosts of the past comingle [sic] with the living...in the habitus of a haunted house” (Harootunian 478).

Later, Harootunian describes the divide between the phenomena of history and memory as an “uncanny domain,” which is ineluctably crystallized through the transformation and codification of historiography into “historical memory” (Harootunian 478). This modification of Freudian concepts into a historical dimension not only approaches the specific description of allegory that will need to be further discussed later. It also helps to show how the historical present can itself be conceived as *Unheimlich*, which indicates that this proliferation of historicizations having occurred after September 11th reveals the installation of a historical situation fully effected by the unevenness of temporal orders. Consequently, this formulation of

the present as *Unheimlich* makes manifest the totality of the political stakes of the present, insofar as this return to history itself can be defined, *a priori*, as a struggle to contextualize the present in relation to the September 11th. As Saul Newman convincingly argues, Freud's "return of the repressed," as the repetition through which the effect of the uncanny is produced, can also be translated into a historical process that harbors a specific political dimension. For Newman, political action takes shape—albeit either radical or conservative—precisely through “the uncanny as a ‘return of the repressed’,” especially when politics “is understood as the attempt to construct something new, coupled with something old” (Newman 117). Thus the contestation of this “unfamiliar” or uncanny historical present plays itself out as a struggle over both a politics of memory and a politics of history; to the extent that this struggle is played out through the symbolic modes of discourse, the *unheimlich* becomes the very site of a crisis of representation.

Yet the concepts of the uncanny and “the return of the repressed” are also theoretically and thematically related to the repetition compulsion endemic to traumatic experience as described by psychoanalytic discourse. Thus, perhaps, the key component linking the phenomena of “the return of the repressed,” the *Unheimlich*, and traumatic repetition is the Freudian notion of *Nachtraglichkeit*: the discontinuous temporality of traumatic experience, or the belated repetition compulsion that follows the aftermath of a traumatic encounter. History theorized in terms of *Nachtraglichkeit* would necessarily be one defined by belated rupture and repetition, but it also, according to Michael Rothberg, would be constitutive of the very “reordering of the past” (Rothberg 24). The concept of trauma as a psychical phenomenon has, of course, largely been investigated in the context of its effect on the individual. To suggest, however, that the traumatic event of September 11th has initiated an emergent collective practices and production is to project a commonly designated subjective category onto a larger social framework. Thus, the

term “historical trauma” designates and substitutes the psychical effects of traumatic effects onto the imaginary and symbolic frameworks of a collective social body⁴. Therefore, I am not interested in discussing the individual, subjective components of traumatic experienced, but rather displacing the referential problems opened up by traumatic experience onto the symbolic category of historical production. Indeed my theoretical framework will use the structural components of traumatic experience as a conceptual model that helps to elucidate the process whereby historical trauma produces many of the effects related to the “return of the repressed” on the social field, through the Lacanian registers of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary.

This particular schema of trauma would thus necessitate a construction of history as an ongoing signifying process, while the collective trauma, here September 11th, would be designated as an eruption of the Real, which would disrupt the stability of the symbolic and imaginary orders sustaining the social field. Slavoj Žižek has shown how history as a signifying process is in no way fixed into a stable framework of signification, but rather contends that “every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in a new way” (Žižek 56). Under this formulation, September 11th, posited as a “new master signifier” into the signifying chain of history, would modify the meaning of associated historical eventualities, since, according to Žižek, “the past exists as it is included, as it enters (into) the synchronous net

⁴ My concept of collective trauma is largely lifted from Kaja Silverman’s definition of “historical trauma,” which she delimits in her *Male Subjectivity at the Margin*. Tracing the modifications to dominant representations of masculinity in Hollywood films that immediately followed the end of World War II, Silverman defines the categorical specifications of historical trauma, here World War II, “as a historically precipitated but psychoanalytically specific disruption, with ramifications extending far beyond the individual psyche” (Silverman 55). Though Silverman’s use of the concept is specifically situated in terms of collective trauma’s effect on categories of gender and sexuality—particularly the function of masculinity as constitutive of dominant notions of ideology and social formations—the essential theoretical implications Silverman delineates in her essay are also pertinent to this project: the capacity certain traumatic events have in disrupting the normative function of social practice; the distanciation from the “imaginary relation” upheld by the social; and the fact that collective traumatic events not only have the potential to radically alter facets of subjectivity but also cultural praxis.

of the signifier,” “retroactively giving the elements [of the historical past] their symbolic weight by including them in new textures—it is this elaboration which decides retroactively what ‘they [historical events] will have been’” (Žižek56). Žižek’s theory of historical processes, borrowed from Lacan’s emphasis on the signifier’s performative function in psychical phenomena, provides an effective means by which to explain how the recent proliferation of historicizations is not merely defined by September 11th’s topical similarities to traumatic historical contexts. Žižek’s statements also highlight how September 11th, as a historical rupture, enacts the hyperactive explosion of historicization as an attempt to integrate and neutralize this very rupture, altering retroactively the symbolic contextual field of other historical events. Thus, Žižek’s description of history ultimately mirrors the psychical aspect of traumatic experience through the belated return of symbolic meaning, pointing to the way in which the past and present collide in uncanny and dissimilar ways. For if the rupture of September 11th initiates something like a reordering of history, this reorientation, I argue, reinscribes the memory of past collective traumas in to the contemporary present.

It is precisely, here, where Walter Benjamin’s theories of allegory and history can be made useful in terms of both the model of the “return of the repressed” as well as this mode of temporal unevenness defining the present. In his *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin suggests that allegorical practice is essentially historical in character. The historical specificity of the allegorical mode is in stark contrast to the signifying modality of the symbol, which was valorized by the Romantics for its transcendent, ahistorical aspect. Indeed, it is significant to stress that the crux of Benjamin investigation on the baroque *Trauerspiel*’s allegorical mode hinges around the historical dimension of signifying practice: for the allegorical tendency arises, according to Benjamin, through a certain relation and attitude toward history. As Jim Hansen

argues, Benjamin's "emphasis on symbolism and, subsequently, the teleological unity of form and content erases the distinction between the transcendental and the material, appearance and essence, subject and object" (Hansen 670). For Benjamin, the essentially undialectical interpretation of the symbol by the Romantics conceals the socio-historical contexts by pointing toward moments of transcendence, in which both idea and material referent are recovered: thus, for the Romantics, the sign always precedes history. Allegory, on the other hand, which was "regularly dismissed by romantic critics as fragmentary, anachronistic, and unpoetic," is reclaimed from the Romantics and exonerated by Benjamin for the way in which allegory mourns the failure of history, with its essentially ruinous aspect (Hansen 670). Therefore, one of Benjamin's primary concerns is showing how the Baroque *Trauerspiel* implies a radically different view of history and subjectivity than the redemptive aesthetic components of tragic forms. While the symbol routinely inhabited tragedy as an expression of affirmation, where "destruction is idealized" and nature is "fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption," in the allegorical moments of the Baroque *trauerspiel* the "observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified, primordial landscape" (Benjamin 166). The allegorical image, unlike the tragic which emphasizes beauty, is a "fragment or ruin;" as Benjamin contends, "allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty...allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (Benjamin 178). If, for example, aesthetic and historical production for Freud is always the expression of a sublimated working-through of traumatic experience, for Benjamin this production is one defined by melancholia, a "return of the repressed" of history into the present.

As an expression of "history's ruin," then, Benjamin suggests that if "allegories become dated," it is "because it is part of their nature to *shock* [*italics mine*]." In order to "shock,"

however, the allegorical representation must always be situated in a historically specific dimension; and what “shocks” is the way in which the allegory’s indirect representation signifies an engagement with a historically uneven temporal order. Specifically, it is under the historical “gaze of melancholy,” Benjamin suggests, that the allegorical object highlights and emerges in social contexts of transition and transformation (Benjamin 183). As Matthew Wilkins convincingly argues, the allegorical tendency of the *Trauerspiel* results from the diminutive authority of the religious and sacred representation during the Baroque period, in which the antagonism between secular, “profane” institutions and the “decay of an existing sacred order” begins to take shape (Wilkins 290). According to Wilkins, then, the “alternations” in representational practice during the baroque period “are...shocking in the way they defamiliarize objects even as those remain recognizable as the understructure of what they were” (Wilkins 290). The shocking aspect of the allegorical representation is engendered through the way in which, during the baroque era, “its authors attempted to map out a new relationship between the sacred and the profane” (Wilkins 290). This highlights the fact that, for Benjamin, the allegorical mode takes place during times of representation crises or social transformation: liminal historical periods in which the symbolic framework used to give cultural and political significance to this transformation is disrupted.

Could we not suggest, then, that the allegorical tendency that has emerged is a result of an imperative to map out September 11th’s impact on history, its relationship between past, present, and future? I would suggest that, if these particular fictional narratives maintain a similar relation to history as to that which Benjamin designates as allegorical, the dimension of history of these conservative political narratives is essentially tragic: it is tragic to the extent that these narratives utilize September 11th as a tragic fall that shelters the nostalgic opportunity of a

return to a time of patriotic affirmation and nationalistic unification. While both narratives modes look back to history for politically redemptive means, these allegorical representations' conflation of historical traumatic contexts harbors a more politically radical gesture. Both *Triangle* and *The Road* work to disrupt both the monopolization of historical memory and the unification of heroic nationalist sentiment inaugurated by September 11th.

If Benjamin's notion of history is not tragic but allegorical, then I would suggest that, much like Zizek's formulation of history, it is also one defined by the psychical model of traumatic experience. As Hansen contends, the "allegorical form itself...is produced by certain kinds of historical crises" (Hansen 672). In his influential "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin posits a conception of history that refutes the reified notion of history as continuous, progressive, or as one of "homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin 261) Rather, history, for Benjamin, conforms closely to the psychoanalytic model of traumatic experience, in which the past "blasts open the continuum of history," a collusion of temporality, of the past and present, in the allegorical moment he calls, "*jeitzzeit*" (261). Likewise, in *The Origins of the German Tragedy*, this language describing historical phenomena is foreshadowed in a passage which deals with the transition from the symbolic to the allegorical sensibility, as it supersedes the mystical, religious paradigm of representation practice: "The mystical instant [*Nu*] becomes the 'now' [*Jetzt*] of contemporary actuality; the symbol becomes distorted into the allegorical" (183). The allegorical moment, much like Benjamin's notion of history, engenders moments of uncanny reconfigurations, in which the past and present gain retroactive significance as they relate to one another. Moreover, as Zizek contends, Benjamin is the only Marxist thinker ever to locate the traumatic kernel around which the very opening up historical signification is located. It is this very formal structure of Benjamin notion of history that, for Zizek, analogizes the

Lacanian notion of “the return of the repressed” while reconceptualizing Marxist theories of historical materialism as a revolutionary phenomenon: “Benjamin...conceived history as a text, as [a] series of events which ‘will have been’—their meaning, their historical dimension, is decided afterward, through their inscription in the symbolic order” (Zizek 136).

The important point to underline from this discussion of Benjamin’s notion of allegory and history is how the use of allegorical representation in these novels mirrors this modality of historical temporality. The images of burning and ash in these novels function as the allegorical figures by which the “past blasts open the continuum of history,” distorting the narratives of history forwarded in these popular political discourses. In other words, as allegorical images committed to the ‘ruins’ of history, the rhetoricity of ash and burning promotes a modality of history in contradistinction to the homogenous “empty” of the Bush administration’s political narratives. Consequently, the conflation of Benjamin’s notion of history and psychoanalytic models of trauma that I have been delineating helps to show how the allegorical images are held in a suspended dialectic of disparate temporalities, and, at the same time, it reveals how this re-emergent allegorical tendency, based on the symbolic repetition, thus gives new symbolic meaning to both traumatic events. The readings that I will forward will attempt to show how the modality of history represented in these novels, coordinated through the textual performance of these allegorical tropes, harbors an additional ethical component—one which ultimately advocates the fidelity to the “ruins” of history.

CHAPTER 3 FROM THE ASCH BUILDING TO THE ASHES OF GROUND ZERO

Before the attacks on September 11th, the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911 held the notorious distinction of being the worst disaster in New York City history. Trapped on the 9th floor of the burning Asch building, one hundred and forty-two workers died attempting to escape from their workspaces, which had quickly become an inferno. Many of the workers, forced to leap from the windows, plummeted to their death to evade the intense heat and suffocating smoke, while others were either burned alive or trampled to death trying to escape through the one unlocked exit. Considering that the modern cityscapes of large metropolitan areas had begun to proliferate all over the US, the specific horror engendered by the descriptions and first-hand accounts of the burning, falling bodies of these workers surely must have severely haunted the collective imaginary of both New York City and the nation at large. At the time, however, the event became a major catalyst for much needed reform to labor legislation, as the event was largely the result of poor work conditions, lack of proper fire codes, and considerable negligence on the part of the business owners and managers. So while the event had significant impact on legislation and reform nation wide, its larger national importance has largely been forgotten; rather it has been relegated to the collective memory of New York City history. With the appalling conditions of the work place as well as the inhumane mistreatment of workers (many of whom having been newly settled immigrants), the event demonstrates yet another kind of political violence endemic to the 20th-century: the violence caused by the expansion of industrial labor. Both September 11th and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, I would argue, were underscored and produced by a particular relation to the circulation of American capital; both events, having occurred in the business district of New York, serve as traumatic bookends of the twentieth-

century, each illustrating differently the impact of the United States' hegemonic influence over socio-economic relations.

Of the various contemporary novels that have dealt with September 11th, several have made use of the memory of the Triangle fire as a way to come to terms with this more recent trauma. In particular, Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005) alludes to the Shirtwaist fire without referring to it directly by name. Cunningham nevertheless shows how the traumatic memory of the Shirtwaist Fire haunts the contemporary present of the post 9/11 milieu with its explicit images of falling bodies leaping from a turn-of-the-century burning building. In much the same manner as the narrative conventions used in the critically acclaimed novel *The Hours*, *Specimen Days* uses the history of the Shirtwaist fire as a trace of traumatic memory that transcends the temporality of its particular historical situation, erupting and returning to the later thematic elements of the novel.

But whereas Cunningham uses the Shirtwaist fire as an important trope, Katherine Weber's *Triangle* (2005) places the event in the forefront of her narrative, which allegorizes its significance in relation to September 11th in productively unfamiliar ways. The novel, which details the traumatic experience of the last living survivor of the fire, Esther Gottlieb, not only traces the contradictions implicit between the processes of memory and the construction of history; it also demands a radically different understanding of the interrelationship between past and present. As Cathy Caruth argues, "the linking of traumas, or the possibility of communication or encounter through them, demands a different model or a different way of thinking that may not guarantee communication...but may also allow for an encounter that retains, or does not fully erase, difference" (Caruth 124). I would suggest that Weber's conflation of the Shirtwaist fire and September 11th, which is constructed through the horrifying

descriptions of burning, falling bodies into an allegorical mode of representation, approaches upon Caruth's ethical consideration. This ethical consideration, however, also harbors a specific political dimension insofar as Weber's decision to evoke the seemingly forgotten memory of the Shirtwaist fire traverses more popular historical contextualizations beset with militaristic connotations. Indeed, it would appear that Shirtwaist fire's memory not only disrupts and defamiliarizes these historical configurations: it also underscores the politically violent aspect of industrial capitalism, while making a trenchant critique of reified constructions of history⁵.

To return to theoretical issues discussed above, the eruption of the traumatic historical context of Triangle Shirtwaist fire into the present highlights the ways in which the allegorical mode of Weber's novel signals the uncanny return of the past. Like the thematic dimensions of the "return of the repressed," *Triangle's* narrative strategies give significant valence to the notion of history as a signifying construction. Simultaneously able to refer to both the falling, burning bodies of both September 11th and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, the allegorical representation in *Triangle* achieves an ethical relation perhaps beyond the political context of memory the novel directly engages. To the extent that the signifying process of the allegorical moment never closes into a framework of totalized meaning, the allegorical representation in *Triangle* remains ethically situated toward the impasse of the Real. Because while the Bush Administration's politics of memory have reinforced a trenchant polarization of September 11^{th's} historicity,

⁵ Incidentally, Cunningham's *Specimen Days* also seems to suggest this critique insofar as the chapter containing the allusion to the Shirtwaist fire focuses on the horror and trauma of industrialized labor. The story, which conforms to the generic conventions of the gothic ghost story, utilizes the machine as a seemingly malevolent entity, which haunts the young protagonist, Lucas, after the death of his older brother, who dies in the opening of the narrative in a factory accident. If the memory of Shirtwaist fire bears a trace of memory onto the larger development of the narrative, it is, much like Weber's, through the description of the disintegrated, ashen dead: "The dead had entered the atmosphere...With every breath Lucas took the dead inside him. This was their bitter taste; this was how they lay—ashen and hot—on the tongue" (Cunningham 99). This description, I would argue, is also strikingly evocative of the days after September 11th, thus tying together the two events through the trope of ash but also the trauma related to capitalist expansion.

Weber's narrative upsets this formulation through the triangulation of historical phenomena. In effect, through the collusion of these historical traumatic contexts, a new transformative configuration is developed.

This collusion of historical traumas is further reinforced through the dyadic aspect of the narrative's construction, both thematically and formally. While *Triangle* concentrates on the historical events surrounding the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, the trajectory of the narrative is divided into multiple switch-points, as each chapter vacillates between disparate character perspectives and narrative times. As the narrative opens with the supposed documented account of Esther Gottlieb's testimony recounting her experience of the fire from 1962, the novel's temporal location rapidly shifts forward to the weeks immediately following September 11th. Punctuated intermittently by the formal accounts and interviews of Esther's traumatic experience over a period of decades, the narrative's primary focus is on Esther's granddaughter, Rebecca, and her life long partner, George Botkin, an eccentrically famous composer of avant-garde classical music. The narrative utilizes these two characters to reveal the ramifications of Esther's secrets regarding the fire, ones which drastically disrupt the very historical closure of the Shirtwaist Fire. Thematically, therefore, the narrative is also divided: on the one hand, the novel is suggestive of the mystery genre, as the narrative slowly chronicles Rebecca's and George's discovery of Esther's memories surrounding the shirtwaist fire. On the other hand, this initial reading breaks down and runs parallel to a secondary thematic strand which is indicative of the historical novel, as it documents the conflicting first-hand accounts of Esther's traumatic experience. As the narrative progresses, the final historical closure of the fire is continually deferred, since Esther's personal memory of the event implicates not only the history of the 142 victims who died, but it also effects and destabilizes the very construction of history itself. By

continually escaping the omnipresent inscription of historiographer Ruth Zion, the clandestine nature of Esther's memory eludes the crystallizing capture of objective history, thus leaving the event open for further translation. These ruptures and destabilizations, caused by Esther's emerging memories, highlight the way in which traces of the past's return to haunt the present, subtly altering it in the process.

Before moving on to a more detailed account of these allegorical moments, it is important to stress the thematic significance of this dyadic formal structure. As the text reiterates Esther's narrative at three different points of the novel—which references the thematic focus on the figure of the triangle—each of the accounts offers a new, conflicting piece of Esther's traumatic experience. Alternating between past and present, the novel's fragmented structure mirrors the way the novel makes use of the Shirtwaist fire as an allegorical figure of September 11th, that is, as a moment of the “past which blasts open the continuum of history” (Benjamin 261). The reiteration of Esther's memory, then, along with the eruption of the past into the narrative space of the novel, is analogous to the psychoanalytic notion of belatedness, or the repetition compulsion that results in the aftermath of traumatic experience. In effect, the temporal fragmentation of the novel postpones and defers the final narrative closure of meaning; but it also stresses the essentially recursive nature of historical construction, such that the repetition of Esther's various accounts, over several decades, continually circles around the limit of what resists historical foreclosure. As Lacan shows, in his reformulation of Freud's essay “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” the distinction between *Wiederholen* (repeating) and *Erinnerung* (remembering) is structured by a certain relation to a limit: “the subject in himself, the recalling of his biography, all this goes only to a certain limit, which is known as the real” (Lacan 49). The Real as a “missed encounter” is, then, that which “always

comes back to the same place” (Lacan 49). The limit Esther keeps returning to, and thus repeats, is found in the reoccurring phrase which begins the novel: “This is what happened” (Weber 1).

As the novel opens with this incipient phrase, Esther’s account introduces a more quotidian description of early 20th-century factory labor, in which she recounts the threading process by which she and her sister manufacture the shirtwaists:

I was working at my machine, with only a few minutes left before the end of the day, I remember so clearly I can still see it, that I had only two right sleeves remaining in my pile—my sister, Pauline, she did the left sleeves and I did the right sleeves and between us we could finish sometimes as many as twenty-four shirtwaists in an hour, three hundred shirtwaists on a good day, if the machines did not break too often, and if nobody put a needle through her finger, which happened all the time (Weber 1).

This passage, with its colloquial element emphasized through the run-on sentence structure, alludes to two important thematic elements. On the one hand, the verbosity of Esther’s accounts, which are always transcribed as a series of free-flowing, run-on sentences, points toward a fact that will be illuminated gradually throughout the novel but is only fully revealed in the novel’s conclusion: the fact that Esther is really her sister, Pauline, since Esther has appropriated her dead sister’s identity to hide the fact of having been raped and impregnated by her boss, Mr. Jacobs. Esther’s account of this threading process, which invariably shifts from the right sleeve or left sleeve depending on the specific account, attests not only to the precarious complications of her memory. This slippage of memory also indicates how Esther herself has taken on a kind of allegorical identity, as she incorporates the memory of both herself and her sister. Thus, the run-on sentence structure performatively conflates the memory of both individuals insofar as Esther’s first-hand accounts also inscribe the testimonial memory of Pauline, who eventually merges and is subsumed under the designation of one identity. Again, while this dyadic structure forecasts the later allegorical relationship achieved through the descriptions of the burning,

falling bodies, it also reinforces the larger motif endemic to the novel, which is the accordant interplay structured by combinations of disparate phenomena.

Secondly, this opening account of the seemingly banal facts which detail the two sisters' threading process modify and become distorted throughout the narrative, attesting to how this slight mnemonic distortion is connected to the very impossibility of ever saying exactly "what happened." Or, to put it other way, it reveals "a certain impossible possibility of saying the event." In his published lecture that goes by the same name, Jacques Derrida expounds upon the paradoxical element of alterity or secrecy which ineluctably occludes the epistemological and ontological constitution of eventuality. For Derrida, the event—as that which "comes," or as that "which comes to happen"—always conceals an element of impossible singularity that ultimately resists capture, a singularity not appropriated by the movement from the event's occurrence to its index, or through the "saying of the event" (Derrida 443). While Derrida maintains that, to a degree, one produces the event through the very processes of mediation that register a "happening" or event, he insists that, in fact, "the saying of the event or the saying of knowledge regarding the event lacks, in a certain manner *a priori*, the event's singularity simply because it comes after and it loses the singularity in generality" (Derrida 443).

Derrida's concept of the event helps to bring the repetitive, elusive nature of Esther's experience of the fire come into view. Esther's inability to qualify her experience not only necessitates the repetition of a narration, which is always structured through the phrase "this is what happened," but each telling also coordinates the emergence of a new formation of the event, either by losing or gaining specifics pertaining to it. This singularity of the event, or the limit to which experience can not penetrate, approaches upon the ethical dimension that the allegorical mode harbors As Derrida argues, "there is iterability and return in absolute

uniqueness and utter singularity,” so that the arrival of the event is always a “coming back,” “a spectral *revenance*” (Derrida 452). Although the reiteration of the past, through the allegorical mode structures a non-totalized element which resists a “complete saying of the event,” it nevertheless produces new combinations and configurations that recall this spectral return. This spectral *revenance* not only describes the haunting of Esther memory that repeats itself throughout the narrative, but it also points to the uncanny spectral relation that is maintained in and through the allegorical moments of the novel.

And it is at this point that the allegorical moments of the novel need to be discussed in order to illuminate the ethico-political dimensions alluded earlier. The opening chapter of the novel moves from Esther’s description of her arduous workday to her account of the fire, an account which slowly begins to culminate in uncanny allegorical moments recalling the falling bodies of September 11th. As Esther recalls the “very awful smell of burning hair” and flesh, along with the horrific sounds of women burning alive, the testimony shifts to a concentrated focus on the traumatic experience of witnessing the women jump from the 9th floor of the building to their deaths (Weber 7). The images of the chaos inside the burning building, where all the women were “pushing at once” so that “girls in front maybe even got squeezed to death,” are eerily evocative of the mayhem told by survivors of 9/11. Yet it is precisely Esther’s extended descriptions of the falling bodies that offer the greatest allegorical impact:

There were girls with their hair on fire and their dresses on fire—screaming, screaming like you can’t image, like animals, not like people anymore—any they were standing in the windows screaming and then they were jumping and the girls watched the ones who jumped, and then they were in the window after them, and they jumped, in rows, it was like they waited their turns, it was just so terrible (Weber 8).

Above and beyond the uncanniness of this account, it is also significant to highlight the particular verb tense of this description: it changes from past tense to an emphasis on the repetition of “screaming” and “jumping” in the present perfect, and then back to the past tense, for the verbs “screamed” and “jumped.” The shifting of tense not only indexes the immediacy of Esther’s memory of the event; it also gestures toward a synchronic register of the event—one which is, for the reader, all too familiar to the present. Later in the description, the perspective of the falling bodies changes to Esther’s viewpoint from the ground, who has inexplicably escaped from the rooftop. This perspective from the ground receives the most detailed elaboration, wherein the description of the bodies hitting the pavement is described by Esther as an inassimilable experience:

So I crossed the street, and there were all these people looking up and so I looked up, and what I saw was so terrible, the girls jumping, jumping, jumping up from so high up, they weren’t like people any longer, it was like watching insects or animals...Some people on the street, they said afterwards, thought they were throwing out the goods to save them, in bundles, when they saw the falling girls, but it wasn’t bundles of goods falling and making that terrible sound...some of the girls I knew only a few days but others I knew for a while and it was such a big shock, one would be burned black like a cinder but I would know the boots or dress, and then another would be perfect and still beautiful expect dead from the fall (Weber 10-11).

Not only does the thrice repeated word “jumping” correspond to the thematic of the triangle, but it also functions as the repetition which is inscribed into her very language. Again, the traumatic experience is displaced from that of a seeing to a hearing, creating a gap in experience as a result of a “shock” that can not be integrated into her symbolic framework. Furthermore, notice how the metaphorical connection to the bag of wet laundry has shifted from her description to that of others. To fully understand how this description also functions as an allegorical moment signaling the imaginary of September 11th, consider a fictional account of September 11th falling bodies. In Don DeLillo *Falling Man*, DeLillo offers a similar description of the main character’s

experience of watching the falling bodies plummet from the Twin Towers—similarly the trauma of 9/11 is also registered in the very failure to integrate the experience into a symbolic framework. Incidentally, it is the description's focus on the shirt, not the body, which provides another uncanny correlation to the Shirtwaist Fire: "then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving *like nothing in this life* [italics mine]" (Delillo 246). As this stands as the last line of Delillo's novel, it is important to stress how the narrative leaves the reader with a moment of the Real, attesting to, in much the same way as Weber's description, the inassimilable experience of the watching the falling, burning bodies plummet from the sky.

Able to simultaneously maintain disparate significations under the proximity of a single trope, the allegorical moments here remain "faithful [to] history in the very indirectness of this telling" (Caruth 27). It is here between the rhetoricity of the burning bodies and its correlation to historical traumatic contexts that the ethical dimension is coordinated, a particular ethical domain structured through its relation to the impasse of the Real. My interpretation of Lacan's Real, though still understood as that which resists symbolization, nonetheless will locate its theoretical impact by shifting its implication from an ontological and epistemological domain to that which Lacan situates in the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* in terms of an ethical relation.

As Cathy Caruth shows, Lacan's reformulation of Freud's interpretation of the famous dream of the burning child resituates the effect of trauma experience in terms of its ethical relation to memory: "Lacan's reading shows us...that the shock of traumatic sight reveals at the heart of human subjectivity not so much an epistemological, but rather what can be defined as an *ethical* relation to the real" (Caruth 92). The dream in question involves one that Freud discusses in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, in which a mourning father who, having just fallen a sleep while

keeping vigil over his dead son's body, dreams that his recently deceased son attempts to wake the man from his dream by asking the chilling question, "father, don't you see that I am burning?". The uncanny nature of this dream is compounded by the fact that, just before falling asleep, the father leaves a family friend in charge to watch over the child's body. After the family friend falls asleep along with the father, a nearby candle accidentally falls onto the corpse of the child just as the child in the dream reproaches the Father. It is here that dream and reality coincide.

Lacan, however, reversing the logic of Freud's analysis, asks a more radical question: "is there not more reality in this message [the child's chilling address] than in the noise which the father also identifies the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door? Is not the missed reality that caused the death of the child expressed in these words?" (Lacan 58). Reading the dream as an "act of homage to the missed reality," Lacan argues that the "Real" traumatic kernel of this dream exists precisely *between* reality and fiction, *between* the address and the response, at the suspended moment between the dream and awaking (Lacan 58). The ethical relation to this "missed encounter with the real" is opened up by this very gap, this non-place of relation, to that which cannot be symbolized or addressed.

While, obviously, this "rhetoricity of burning" provides a precise figural analogue to the allegorical moments in *Triangle*, it is moreover important to emphasize how the structural impasse of this inaccessible gap in Lacan's reading of the dream transforms the epistemological and ontological problems of this circumstance to an ethical relation implicating the gap in experience. For it is precisely this fidelity to the impossibility of response, to an missed encounter which nevertheless structures a telling that is "no longer simply his [the father] own, but tells, as a mode of response, the story of the dead child," that approaches upon the topology of allegory—

not only from an ethical memory which “speaks the other” of another trauma through the non-totalizable sign, but also from the suspended dialectic of the allegorical construction. The allegorical construction, whose etymological roots literally denote “a saying of the other,” is an act of referentiality which modifies and transforms its meaning through the very act of its signification. It is precisely the undecidability of its signification that structures “the allegorical way of seeing” (Lowenstein 13). Just as it is the very structural impossibility of the gap *between* waking and dreaming which forecloses and modifies the father’s relation to the child as an ethical relation to memory, so too, as Lowenstein argues, does Benjamin’s “allegorical way of seeing” transform the object’s meaning through the way in which “meaning” is not presented “as a fixed quantity” (Lowenstein 13). Rather, the object’s meaning “exist[s] in the allegorical moment *between* being and appearance, *between* subject and object, *between* life and death” (Lowenstein 13). It is through the very suspension of signification that the dialectical relation of the allegorical moment is achieved—or, as I would argue, through the very impasse of the Real. For if the allegorical moments in *Triangle* achieve an ethical relation to history, then it is through this very structural gap that does not foreclose the history of either traumatic context. Rather it intensifies the historical specificity of each historical context through their relation. To put it differently, *Triangle* allegorical representation is ethical to the extent that, through the very failure of allegory’s referentiality, the undecidability of the allegorical moment nevertheless structures a new way of seeing the past and the present. Ultimately it provides the foundation for a transformative politics of history and the future.

This process of historical transformation is further envisioned in Weber’s project through the efficacious quality of music, one which corresponds to this “allegorical way of seeing.” To the extent that the allegorical figures of ash and burning coordinate the conflation of disparate

historical contexts, in *Triangle* it is the ability of music to forgo its dependence on the symbolic order towards an unrepresentable Real that fully reveals Weber's project of translating historical memory. For it is precisely music's ability to combine singular tonal qualities into new combinations of chords and harmonies that mirrors the allegorical performance located in the text. So although Weber's project in the *Triangle* appears to be an attempt to resurrect the memory of the Shirtwaist fire while simultaneously allegorizing its relation to September 11th, the novel does so through a very specific function of representation: mimesis. In effect, the novel's focus on the mimetic quality of music suggests that the dynamic affectation of mimesis more effectively translates the rupture of trauma than accounts of objective history. While *Triangle* appears to use the concept of mimesis as a signifying operation through which the past and the present become interrelated, it nevertheless does so, not by conceiving of mimesis as the reproduction of the same, but by emphasizing the relational interplay between the past and present. Mimesis, in Weber's novel, achieves its efficacy through the very synchronicity of disparate phenomena, a synchronicity that recalls the interrelationships maintained in musical tonalities.

It is thus the character of George Botkin and his eccentric use of music that best demonstrates the implications of Weber's specific notions of mimesis, one which, I would argue, corresponds to the "allegorical way of seeing." Botkin, who we are told was a dual chemistry and music major in college, utilizes the ingenuity of his musical sensibilities to map strands of human DNA into award-winning symphonies. These symphonies, built off the combinations and structures of genetic materials, produce a visceral response in his listeners, even conjuring the scent and presence of the dead with the sound of music. While the fantastic element of this plot point perhaps diminishes the verisimilitude of the narrative's content, it does nevertheless

coincide with the continued thematic of mimesis that resonances throughout the novel. Much like the aspect of the Real which defines the Shirtwaist trauma, Botkins extraordinary music talent and compositions are characterized as something beyond language:

Genius flowed from George Botkin, or rather, everything in the world somehow flowed *through* him and came out transmuted into sounds that were unlike any music, unlike anything anyone had heard before. If what Flaubert said is true—that ‘language is like a cracked kettle on which we hammer crude rhythms to make bears dance, while we long with our music to move the stars’—then George Botkin’s music was what all of humankind longed for with every spoken word (Weber 17).

Moreover, Botkin’s musical genius is further described as having the “uncanny ability to see connections and anticipate consequences that eluded” others; that he is able “to see and hear patterns, to perceive sameness and the differences that other people didn’t notice,” and “to transpose those patterns and contrasts into musical forms” (Weber 19). Nevertheless, it is this telling quote by Botkin that most evocatively describes the way in which mimesis differs from the allegorical function, one which is situated toward difference and alterity rather than sameness: “it’s not just two pure pitches, but the relationship between them that gives it musical meaning. The leap is where we feel the significance” (Weber 216). Now while this passage provides an effective description of the allegorical tendency found in *Triangle*, this quote also, through the way in which it plays off the word “leap”—which is, of course, thematically located all throughout the novel—attests to the fact that it is through the figure of falling bodies that most precisely registers the impasse of the Real. In *Triangle*, the dynamic affect of musicality transcends the realm of the symbolic and draws closer to the register of the Real. Moreover, it is through this very dimension of musicality that Weber transcends the temporal and traumatic distances between September 11th and the Triangle Shirtwaist fire.

This element of musicality is then trenchantly contrasted to the discursive operation of historiography. For it becomes apparent through Weber's tendentious representation of the historian Ruth Zion that Weber privileges the emotive affect of art—and, above all, music—as the mode of representation that more effectively communicates the trauma of history. As the character Ruth Zion persists in excavating the “truth” from Esther's memory, the historiographic operation is represented in the novel as diametrically opposed to the function of art, both ethically and pragmatically. While this ideologically loaded binary reveals a salient limitation in Weber's vision, it nevertheless points to the main object of Weber's project. For just as the novel depicts George's translation of the traumas of September 11th and the Shirtwaist fire into music as both an ethical and effective operation, so too does it become apparent that Weber's goal is to achieve a process of translation by bringing these two historical events into a correspondence. As Botkin suggests in a fictional magazine interview later in the novel, “ultimately music plays with the connection between tension and release can render a very specific appealing pattern...and I think that's what we remember best—our emotional reaction to the interplay” (Weber 221). But while this quote registers the overall project of Weber's novel, I would also argue that it also highlights the way in which the allegorical interplay between the two traumas are joined. It is this emphasis on musicality as a moment of the Real which structures a response to historical trauma that reveals the very efficacy of *Triangle's* configuration of historical temporalities. This thematic motif of musicality in *Triangle* thus serves to reinforce the thematic of allegorical relationship between the two traumas, such that something like a “harmony of traumatic experience” is proposed. The trope of musicality shows the way in which two disparate traumas are able to simultaneously “speak,” without eliding the specificity of each event

actuality. Rather, it is precisely the very interrelation of the two memories which inaugurates and registers the transformative aspect of its textual performance.

Perhaps the most significant section of the novel is located in its conclusion, where Botkin's latest symphony is dedicated to the memory of the Shirtwaist fire and September 11th. Here Weber attempts to transcribe the formal elements of musicality into the materiality of the text, to go beyond language in order to utilize it as a tool emphasizing the rhythms and movements of the symphonic orchestra. To do so, Weber's use of rhythmic language becomes coextensive with the repetition compulsion, thus giving the last allegorical moments with September 11th:

At once the chorus of 146 voices rages and begs and pleads and rages again, and the glorious, terrible, destroying music soars around them and lifts them up, and the chorus pulls the music down, and down, and down, and the timpani and the untuned bass drums crash together with a *boom, boom, boom*, for each body as it falls, and the bodies fall, down and down and down, and the despairing music darkens the Stern Auditorium (Weber 229).

Through this description, one can see Weber attempting to push representation to its very limit, not only because of how the quality of the prose mimic the rhythmic nature of music, but also because it attempts to find a limit language that adapts to the excess that is the limit of the Real. Simultaneously commemorating the memory of the Shirtwaist fire and September 11th—both inside the narrative through Botkin's dedication, and outside the narrative since it continues the allegorical project—the final, most devastating, passage conflates the two horrifying images of the trauma with the musicality of Weber's prose, while also referring back to the opening phrase of the narrative:

Underneath the noise of it all is the relentless *boom, boom, boom*, of the bodies hitting the pavement one by one, the terrible stopping short of life is there in the dull weight of each impact [of the timpani drums], it repeats and repeats, the swoop of the falling bodies and then the finality of that resonant impact, the

terrible stillness that ends each fall, again, and again, and yet again, the crashing bodies hit the ground, the overload fire escapes...the fire burns in diminishing ripples now, with nothing left to consume, no more lives to be lost, Asch Building to ashes, dust to dust, there is nothing now but the looking back and the remembering, the sifting of ashes that will continue for decades, *this is what happened, this is what happened, this is what happened, this is what happened* (Weber 230).

Here, ash serves as the penultimate allegorical image of the novel, recalling both historical traumas while attesting to the remainder of the Real that will continue to “burn” through the symbolic texture of history. It is here that Weber’s project can be seen as an attempt to correspond to Botkin’s: both work to bear witness to a notion of posterity that embraces the singularity of each historical trauma, and both works ultimately find allegorical resonance in the accordant interplay between the two traumas. But the figure of ash, as that which endures and retains the memory of September 11th, also bears witness to the impossibility of closure—“the sifting of ash that will continue for decades.” Ash is used, here, as an allegorical sign which bears on the ethical relation of the Real, a relation that, although structuring the very impossibility of a totalized closure, nevertheless constitutes the imperative to engender a continued call to historical memory.

With the final repetitive flourish of the phrase “this is what happened,” the narrative shifts once more from the symphonic performance to a first person narrative of Esther’s experience. This time, however, the full story of Esther’s memory of the fire is told, while Esther, revealing her secret relation to Pauline, becomes unequivocally her self. This overturning, which is punctuated in the narrative through the musical term “*da capo*,” ends the repetition, pointing to a possible working through of the trauma. Instead of watching her fiancé Sam and Pauline jump from the burning building, Esther takes her place alongside them and

imagines a new history: “we are together, I am not alone, they are with me, we will always be together, and then we jump” (Weber 242).

Indeed, while the novel appears to close in a simplistic and redemptive fashion, I would suggest that, if read closely, it actually forwards a series of unanswered questions rather than definitive answers. Each of these alternatives avoids the capture of a historical closure, gesturing toward an opening of history rather than a closure. Insofar as the novel signals the return and the assumption of Esther’s original identity through a final, comprehensive recollection of the event, this realization culminates in another, more fundamental repetition: not simply the repetition of a suicidal tendency recalling the opening of the novel, but also, and more broadly, the closing sequence returns to the scene of history, as it were, in that the novel’s ending suggests a cyclic series rather than a definitive closure. More radically, however, Esther’s final recollection also points to the emergence and possibility of a new history—one that is not a simple working-through of the repetition compulsion of a traumatic history, but rather one which gestures toward the opening of an alternative history through the very trauma of a fall. As this alternative history is constituted through the bifurcation of Esther’s identity, which ultimately brings into view the specificity of both Pauline and Esther’s memory, it provides a way to read the larger implications of Weber’s project. This alternative history, then, should not be thought of as a dislocation or absolute beginning, from the prospect of a working through. Rather, structured through the very impact of a fall, it demonstrates that it is precisely the figure of the falling body by which the histories of September 11th and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire collide. It is precisely between these two historical traumatic contexts that an alternative history can be constructed. In other words, the falling bodies of September 11th bring near the specificity of the falling bodies of the Triangle Shirt waist fire, and vice versa, through the way in which this allegorical figure draws

closer to the zone of proximity that exists between the two histories. Remember, as George Botkin suggests, that “the leap is where we feel the significance” (Weber 216). Finally, these historical traumatic contexts map out a different relation to history: one which remains ethically situated toward the Real history, and from which ultimately a transformative response can begin.

CHAPTER 4 ASHES OF AMERICAN FLAGS

It is significant to note that Cormac McCarthy's fiction has intently focused on the long history of American violence. Since the beginning of his literary career, and most notably with his critically acclaimed *Blood Meridian* (1984), McCarthy's fiction has dramatized the bloody advance of American imperialist expansion. In particular, *Blood Meridian*, which fictionalizes the violent conquest of North American frontier along the tenuously drawn Mexican border during the post-Civil War era, most effectively demystifies the ideology of Manifest Destiny and the heroic ideal of the West. Much like the 9/11 novels that have offered incisive criticisms engaging the Bush administration's idealization of World War II, McCarthy's fictional concentration on the American west has similarly attacked the mythic conceptions of westward expansion.

Remarkably, the historically specific aspect of McCarthy's novels have too often been neglected by McCarthy's critics, replaced instead by a more ahistorical approach that collapses McCarthy's emphasis on violence into a homogenously framed focus on represented violence. While the ubiquity of violence is most definitely a central aspect of McCarthy's vision, ignoring the ways in which the depiction and intensity of this violence changes with each historical context—along the various narrative modes that represent this violence—obfuscates the particular political dimensions that underwrite this emphasis on violence. Instead of reading McCarthy's use of historical violence as a critique of contemporary political brutality, this thematic is usually ignored for a more existential interpretation, which views McCarthy's violence as a transhistorical phenomenon that runs throughout the trajectory of his canon. Critic Vince Brewton, however, persuasively argues that McCarthy's emphasis on violence is not only historically contingent but also politically focused on the historical present. Furthermore,

Brewton maintains that McCarthy's early novels—*Children of God*, *Suttree*, and *Blood Meridian*—all concurrently critique the imperialist violence of 19th Century American while also creating a “clear and discernable correlation” to the “era of American history defined by the military involvement in Vietnam” (Brewton 121). Likewise, by focusing on the modification to aesthetic violence in McCarthy's fiction beginning in the heralded *Border Trilogy*, Brewton further contends that this shift can be seen as an allegorical engagement with the United States' role in the Gulf War (Brewton 129). So, according to Brewton, while the nature of violence in *Blood Meridian* allegorizes “the heart of darkness that was the American experience in Vietnam,” its transformation in the 90's continues this politically charged gesture by mapping the continuation of this violence into another historical horizon (Brewton 121). What Brewton makes clear is that McCarthy's fiction has used history in much the same way as several of the 9/11 focused fiction: that is, McCarthy's fiction similarly suggests that only with an engagement with the violence of America past can one significantly confront or understand the present historical situation.

But while Brewton focuses on the changes in McCarthy's representations of violence, it is also significant that McCarthy's stylistic approach modifies with each different change to aesthetic violence. Indeed, McCarthy's two post-9/11 novels—*No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*—are, in many ways, drastic stylistic departures from his earlier work. Whereas his prior work was historically located in the distant past, with an often prolix style reminiscent of Faulkner's florid prose, his recent novels have been set in the present (*No Country for Old Men*) and the near future (*The Road*). Similarly, McCarthy's prose has become increasingly privative and sparse. *The Road's* narrative structure, in particular, is broken into distinct diminutive fragments, each chronicling a specific moment of narrative time, with little to no dialogue

between its characters. Contrary to his effulgent style in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's prose, no longer redolent with ornate descriptions of the virginal American west, transforms the American landscape into one of ruin and decay, drawing a discernable correlation to Benjamin's critical focus on the moribund aspect that defined the German *Trauerspiel*. That McCarthy's fiction has taken another drastic stylistic turn with the inauguration of another military, political conflict seems to suggest that this departure responds, in various ways, to the historical context defined by September 11th.

In *The Road* the expanse of American west has give way to the ashen landscapes of America's destruction. Rather than a style reminiscent of Faulkner, *The Road's* minimalist style has become strikingly similar to the sparse style of Samuel Beckett. Indeed, if Beckett's oeuvre can be read as the desperate attempt to respond to the historical demands of World War II and the Holocaust through an engagement with the representational limits of language, it would appear that McCarthy's post-apocalyptic vision of America, which is described in a broken, exhaustive rhetoric, is the vision of another radical break in history—September 11th. For both authors, it would appear that it is precisely through the very breakdown of language that disaster is written. As Blanchot hauntingly maintains, the disaster "is what escapes the very possibly of experience:" "the disaster de-scribes," for it is precisely "beyond the pale of writing" (Blanchot). Through a literary language that omits more than it inscribes, *The Road* narrates the collapse of the American project. Withdrawing his language toward literary silence, McCarthy imagines the impact of September 11th as the culmination and result of its violent past.

Insofar as *The Road* engages the sociopolitical ramifications of the post-9/11 milieu, it is precisely the narrative's uncanny allusions to traumatic moments of 20th century history that most effectively signal this confrontation with the present. While the violent depravity of *No*

Country for Old Men tackles the seemingly hopelessness of the present, the ashen landscape of the *Road*, which simultaneously recalls the ashen aftermath of 9/11 and Hiroshima, squarely positions itself as the result and continuation of *No Country's* ambiguously scripted denouement. In effect, *No Country for Old Men's* irrational trajectory of interpersonal violence functions as the necessary prologue to the impoverished, inhumane dimension of the blood cults and cannibalism that inhabits *The Road*. The ethereal, ahistorical setting of *The Road's* narrative—which, incidentally, is the only work of McCarthy's to depict a fictional world outside of history—is engendered through the a represented pastiche of historical traumatic contexts. Though the novel makes no explicit reference to either September 11th or Hiroshima, the abundance of imaginary that corresponds to the aftermath of both these historical events is too prominent to ignore. In effect, in *The Road* the whole of the American landscape has become a veritable “Ground Zero.”

Therefore, the political and ethical dimensions of McCarthy's narrative are maintained through these allegorical recollections of both September 11th and Hiroshima. Much like in Weber's *Triangle*, it is the collusion of history through the allegorical tropes of ash and burning that coordinate the uncanny eruption of the past. This “return of the repressed” of history is analogously directed toward the real of history, as it situates the present as a tenuous site that must negotiate the traumas of two distinct historical moments. It is, however, this very collusion of temporality that modifies the present's relations to the past while, at the same time, maintaining the specificity of each historical phenomenon. Ethically situated toward the Real of history, the figure of ash makes manifest, rather than occludes, America's own violent past. Instead of valorizing the heroic memory of World War II, *The Road* upsets the viability of this political narrative by imagining Hiroshima as the “real” Ground Zero of American history,

reinscribing the memory of this atrocity back into the national imaginary. Signaling both Hiroshima and September 11th, ash becomes the only thing that holds sway in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world, "where all was burnt to ash" (McCarthy 15). Thus I will attempt to circumscribe this ethical dimension of historical memory through the allegorical figure of ash, which draws analogous figurative features to Benjamin's notion of the ruin.

The Road follows the travails of an anonymous Man and Child, rummaging alone in the blacken landscape of post-apocalyptic America. Remaining nameless while "shuffling through the ash," with "each the other's world entire," the two characters wander desperately, often without provisions, across the only thing that still endures—the interstate and country roads of scorched America (McCarthy 6). Equally nameless is the event that caused this massive devastation: while the narrative gives "flashes" of indication that perhaps the disaster was a result of global nuclear war, much like Beckett's derelict imagined worlds in *Waiting for Godot* and *End Game*, the narrative never reveals the explicit causal factor which lead to the destructive event. And it is precisely this omission which strengthens the allegorical aspects of the narrative, insofar as this omission reinforces the ahistorical nature of the post-apocalyptic: the flashes of memory the man experiences throughout the narrative highlight the dilemma of a "boundless present" which is nevertheless haunted by the ghosts of the past. The efficacy of this connection between Beckett and McCarthy is stressed here, again, because, beyond the nameless act of destruction, both authors confront the very limits of historical experience, limits enacted from the results of historical trauma. McCarthy's dystopic world, much like Beckett's, is "barren, silent, godless," without hope for a future (McCarthy 2). Each author deals with the dilemma of how, in a world severed absolutely from history, to maintain a fidelity to the past and future: both authors' work struggles interminably with the question of how to confront a limit that imposes an

obstacle to future horizons. Indeed, just as Beckett emphasizes the atemporal modality of apocalypse, dramatizing the contradictions and limitations of modernity, so too does *The Road's* narrative discard a coherent trajectory: each of the narrative's segments "flashes" and "cuts" at random, disorienting the reader's awareness of time or place. For at the end of the world, time is of no concern: "he thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar in years. They were moving south. There'd be no surviving winter here" (McCarthy 2). Though McCarthy's earlier novels followed the impending destruction of the indigenous cultures and lands of the west, here, the devastation has already occurred; and the Man's and Child's course south metaphorically suggests a descent into the bowels of hell. Whereas, in Beckett's work, the recursive meaningless of existence is forever deferred, in *The Road* meaning fully arrives at its destination through the very collapse of all meaning: "he walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless of the interstate earth" (McCarthy 130)

In McCarthy's post-apocalyptic America, where time and history no longer exist, "there is no later:" "this is later...all things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain...their birth in grief and ashes" (McCarthy 56). Here, a salient connection is made to the notion of the present as boundless, over-determined by the very lack of a future horizon, which was ruptured by a collective traumatic event. It is interesting to note, however, that a very similar sentiment is held by a character from Delillo's *Falling Man*, using almost the same rhetoric to describe the sense of time and movement of history following the attacks of 9/11: "nothing is next. There is no next. This was next. Eight years ago they [terrorists] they planted a bomb in one of the towers. Nobody said what's next. This was next. The time to be afraid is where there's no reason to be afraid. Too late now" (Delillo 10). The

connection here is a significant one. While the figurative use of ash has been a prominent trope in these post-9/11 novels, another popular narrative strategy has been to highlight the change in temporality opened up by the event: either narratives defined by a uncertainty of the future, or narratives, such as the Delillo's quote, that suggest a perpetual deferral of meaning, where the impact of the aftermath is suspended indefinitely. Likewise, McCarthy's dystopic world is defined by hopelessness for the future, from an event that not only liquidates all meaning but also emphasizes the limitations of continuing on into the future. Nevertheless, the two characters endure—attempting to struggle toward the Gulf of Mexico in the hopes of reaching drier, warmer land, which is again suggestive of Beckett's *Unnameable's* closing line: "I can't go on, I'll go on" (Beckett 414). Although this shared narrative thread attesting to the uncertainty of the future could be seen as validation of the rhetorical position that "everything has changed," I would argue that these narratives fully indicate the dangers of adopting this rhetorical position. In terms of McCarthy's narrative, this narrative trend allegorizes the way in which the contemporary present is, simultaneously, over-determined with historical significance while remaining unable to situate the event of September 11th into a coherent context of meaning.

Strikingly reminiscent of Lacan's reading of the "dream of the burning child," *The Road* thus begins with an awakening that initiates the reader into its post-apocalyptic world, one which omits an encounter with this very disaster. This awakening, then, opens *The Road* and similarly depicts a Man having awakened into a traumatic reality—the trauma of the world's collapse. Much like the narrative of Freud's dream, the Man's awakening corresponds to the impossibility of responding to a child: "when he woke in the woods in dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside" (McCarthy 1). For this impossibility of a response to the child is related to the Man's own missed encounter, to the trauma of his loss which can no

longer be communicated by a direct telling: “he could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss well...that he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was in ashes in his own” (McCarthy 154). While the Man must let go of the loss of his prior history and memory, he remains unconditionally motivated to protect the Child, an individual who completely “missed” the apocalyptic event before his birth. It is as though McCarthy’s decision to begin his narrative after the fact of the event is a metaphorical signal pointing to the aftermath of American’s own disaster on September 11th. The catastrophe, left unnamed and unrepresented in the narrative, remains a moment of the Real; as Blanchot argues, one cannot encounter or experience the disaster, but is “that which is most separate,” for “it is...always already past” (Blanchot 1).

Awakening from a dream where “he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand,” the Man’s dream corresponds to an apocalyptic reality, which is described by the narrator as one where the Man and the Child are “pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of a granitic beast” (McCarthy 1). Thus both dream and reality become reminiscent of a nightmare, in which the gap that structures their differentiation constitutes the trauma of an impossibility to respond to either demand. It is this very inability to escape the Real of history and the nightmares of the imaginary realm that inaugurates the limit experience that the Man continually experiences throughout the novel. Beginning from this moment of awakening, then, is the continued problem of an ethical relation to the past, a past that no longer exists, to one that is now rendered insignificant but nevertheless endures in the memory of the Man without a possibility of communication: “he thought that if he lived long enough the world at last would be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory” (McCarthy 18). Because whereas the Man keeps tight to his memories, with an

impossible ethical demand to somehow not betray a memory of the pre-apocalyptic, of memories which no longer bear any practical significance, the Boy is completely separate from this prior world, a “civilized” world he has never known: “he [the Man] thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins...what you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not” (McCarthy 131).

Much like the ethical relation to historical memory Cathy Caruth treats in her reading of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*—a similar narrative which concentrates on two traumatized individuals who inhabit an apocalyptic city—the Man in *The Road* ultimately faces a “deeply ethical dilemma: “the unremitting problem of *how not to betray the past*,” especially when the past has no possibility of shaping the future (Caruth 27). For as the narrative suggests, the past and the future are irreparably lost, especially their imaginative meaning in dreams: “what he could bear in the waking world he could not by night and he saw awake for fear that the dream would return” (McCarthy 130). A similar problem occurs in *The Road*, wherein the fidelity to a past that no longer exists highlights a paradoxical structure of historical memory. Passing through a burned, abandoned city allegorically reminiscent of New York after 9/11, where “cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust,” the Man, attempting to protect his child from the overwhelming horror of “a corpse in a doorway dried to leather”—an image which suddenly switches to the depraved bodies of Hiroshima —offers the Child a warning, stating that “the things you put into your head are there forever” (McCarthy 12). To which the Child replies: “you forget some things, don’t you” (McCarthy 12). The Father, immediately responding with this chilling paradox of memory, responds thus: “yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget” (McCarthy 12). Elucidating the paradoxical slippage between memory and forgetting, the Father’s reply attests to the “burning”

necessity of remembering all that which is “ruinous” and “petrified” by historical eventuality, whereby a fidelity to the past is located within the very interstices of this gap—not only to the tenuous gap between memory and forgetting, but also to the gap of the “missed encounter” with the Real of their trauma.

As the narrative progresses and the struggles against memory and forgetting become more precarious for the Man, the last refuge of memory becomes allegorical connected to the fragile quality of ash, while the ethical relation to the past brings memory closer to the Real:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referent and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying preserve heat. In time to wink out forever (McCarthy 88-89).

It precisely this imperative to keep the memory of history “burning” alive as well as the notion of the future emblemized in the figures of the child and ash that emphasize the political stakes of McCarthy’s critique. Not nearly as pedantic as the tired old idiom, “he that forgets history is doomed to repeat it,” this injunction to memory and history in *The Road* seems to suggest that only with an adamant dedication to and remembrance of the failures of history, to the memory of its ruin, will any type of redemptive historical moment occur. Just as the ruin for Benjamin remains the transformative, allegorical figure of history, so too, for McCarthy, does the reminder of ash become the remnant of the Real of history. In short, the figure of ash, as that which remains of the memory of history, serves as the reminder that the future demands a necessary obligation to the memory of a traumatic past. It is precisely this figure of ash which “blasts opened the continuum of history,” shocking the historical present with an allegorical image linking Hiroshima and September 11th. By placing disparate historical traumatic contexts into a

backdrop of American apocalypse, *The Road* acknowledges the dangers of too quickly domesticating the trauma of 9/11 into a historical closure. Indeed, *The Road* asks a more pressing question as well, one which is allegorized again through this intersection between historical memory and the dystopic world of the novel: “what do the dying bodies of the past...have to do with living bodies of the present” (Caruth 26)? Only through a confrontation between the violence of America’s past and the present will any type of politically responsible future begin. The imperative of this question is precisely registered by the impossibility of a direct response, but it nevertheless demands a fidelity to a historical memory which can not be fully comprehended—an ethical memory to the Real of history.

In returning to the opening sequence of *The Road*, one also finds a significant relation to this moment of awakening and the etymological roots of apocalypse, a relationship which informs an important thematic strand of the novel. In his book *American Apocalypses*, Douglas Robinson shows how American apocalyptic narratives “present an ongoing challenge to dominant American ideologies and to our contemporary ways of thinking” (Robinson xii). It is, however, through the philological investigation of the word, apocalypse, that fully highlights this thematic strand in McCarthy’s novel:

The meaning of the *eschaton*, however, is not in fact the last things but the ‘furthest’ boundary,” the ‘ultimate edge’ in time or space...If the apocalypse is an unveiling (*apo* [from or away], *kalupsis* [covering] from *kalupto* [to cover], and *kalumma* [veil]), then clearly the veil is the *eschaton*, that which stands between the familiar and whatever lies beyond. In this sense the apocalypse becomes largely a matter of *seeing*; and what one sees by imagining an apocalypse depends chiefly upon how one conceives the veil. (Robinson xiii).

Directly following the Man’s awakening, which opens with the touch from one generation onto another, the novel’s next sentence concerns itself with the limits of sight, with a mode of seeing that gradually fades away into the complete darkness of the *eschaton*: “nights dark beyond

darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (McCarthy 1). The tripartite arrangement of sight, limit, and burning follow the chaotic trajectory of each characters journey to the material end of the world and, ultimately, to the absolute end of existence: the father’s inevitable death. The unveiling of the apocalypse has stripped away every limit and boundary which, embodied in the trope of the “ashes of the late world, carrie[s] the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void,” where everything is “uncoupled from its shoring...unsupported in the ashen air” (McCarthy 11). And, even though the “blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable,” (McCarthy 15) where “waking in the cold dawn it [dreams] all turned to ash instantly,” (McCarthy 21) the burning of memory remains: “A forest fire was making its way along the tinderbox ridges above them, flaring and shimmering against the overcast like the northern lights....the color moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember.” (McCarthy 31). It is here that the tripartite rhetoricity of sight, boundary, and burning coalesces into the allegorical image of ash: ash as the trope which alludes to the remains of memory; as that which clouds the field of vision; as that which has no formal structure but skatters with the vagaries of the wind. If the novel’s only characters, the Man and the Boy, intrepidly travel down the limitless boundary of the road, it is the additional figure of ash that functions almost as an additional character in the novel, continually following the misfortunate pair. Moreover, it is the figure of ash that, on the level of the narrative, functions as the metaphorical remnant of memory—as that which continues to burn in memory; as that which points to the allegorical moments of the novel where historical memory and fictional space collide. If the apocalypse concerns a certain limit of experience, this limit is precisely situated in

the figure of ash which, located *between* the two historical traumas, allegorically points to the very limits of experience and comprehension.

Of the numerous descriptions which recall these two events, one of the most salient allegorical moments is the evocative description of the “grainy air,” whose ashen quality becomes so inescapable and pervasive that the man and the child are forced to wear protective masks. Moreover, the narrative tells us, “the taste of it never left your mouth.” This allegorical moment recalls the enumerable references to ominous fog of ashen air that enveloped the city of New York after 9/11, along with terrible notion that this air actually contained the remains of the dead. As was seen in an earlier quote from Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* that I quoted earlier, this focus on the sensual sensation of the ash has been an effective trope of post 9/11 fiction. Consider Jonathon S. Foer’s use in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, in which a young child, Oskar Snell, struggles to cope with the realization that his father, whose body was never found, is part of this ashen air. Oskar’s difficult process of mourning is compounded by the very act of breathing: “he [his father] had cells, and now they’re on the rooftops, and in the river, and in the lungs of millions of people around New York” (Foer 169). Whereas the trope of ash is utilized in Foer’s novel as a problem connected with the missing body, in *The Road* the figure of ash becomes another character: ash, much like Benjamin’s ruin, becomes the figure which is suggestive of all that is mournful about history. One could make the argument that, if for Benjamin the ruin and the death’s head are the allegorical objects *par excellence* for the Baroque period, then the 20th century’s equivalent may well be that of ash, which not only recalls Hiroshima and September 11th but also, and perhaps most saliently, the Holocaust.⁶ As a

⁶ Indeed, While Derrida does not theorize the figure of ash in terms of allegory, his emphasis on ash, or the cinder, has been a significant point of reference to the trauma of the 20th century, which is seen most prominently in *Cinders* but also referenced in *The Post Card* and *Dissemination*. For Derrida, the cinder, as the ineffable remainder of

mournful trope of history, then, the figure of ash also points to the ashen “ground zero” of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Immediately following the passage describing the “grainy air,” the descriptive focus shifts to the landscape, one which, I would argue, recalls the devastation of nuclear holocaust: on the hillsides old crops dead and flattened. The barren ridgeline tress raw and black in the rain” (McCarthy 20). Too numerous to quote, *The Road’s* descriptions of the derelict landscape, rather than a focus on dialogue, overwhelms the narrative space of the novel. In effect, the novel’s emphasis on the lugubrious landscape, which at times seems to conform to the generic conventions of the travel narrative, reinforces the historical references to the collective trauma of Hiroshima. Though never revealed, the aftermath of the apocalyptic event becomes so reminiscent of nuclear devastation that one is tempted to privilege this interpretation, regardless of other scenes which subtly imply an act of a malevolent divinity.

Perhaps the most apparent allegorical moment referring to 9/11 occurs during one of the man’s many flashbacks. These flashbacks recall the Man’s memories which immediately follow the aftermath of the apocalyptic event; more importantly, however, these flashbacks allegorically recall images of September 11th, when escaping survivors fled the burning Twin Towers:

People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done? He thought that in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime but he took small comfort from it (McCarthy 32-33).

What is particularly interesting about this extended quote is that, if read allegorically, the trajectory of the passage chronologically summarizes the aftermath of September 11th: the sectarian violence caused by the ‘war on terror,’ while the “screams of the murdered” who are

signification, becomes another figure among others in a long chain of privileged signifiers that point to the theorization of *difference* and the trace.

impaled on stakes could metonymically refer to the massive violence inaugurated by the event. The final line, however, could be read, much like the rest of the novel, as an elegy for the unquantifiable violence of the twentieth century.

As the Man and Child stagger through the ruins cities and towns of America, the images the novel depicts similarly find allegorical moments signaling the aftermath of both 9/11 and Hiroshima. When the two make it further south out of the mountains, the Man sees something he had not “seen in some while, common the north, leading out of the looted and exhausted cities, hopeless messages to loved ones lost and dead” (McCarthy 181). Immediately following this passage alluding to the innumerable messages left on the streets of NYC after 9/11, we get a image of the city which, I would argue, recalls both, through the salient figure of ash: “the soft black talc blew through the streets like squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor and the cold crept down and the dark came early...with their torches trod silky holes in the drifted ash that closed behind them silently as eyes” (McCarthy 181). In one of the more brutal moments of the novel, the aftermath of Hiroshima can no longer be ignored, as the description remarkably collapses historical trauma and represented image into a devastating allegorical moment:

In two days time they came upon a country where firestorms had passed leaving mile on mile of burn. A cake of in the roadway inches deep and hard going...A mile on and they began to come upon the dead. Figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling...the black skin stretched upon the bones and their faces split and shrunken on their skulls. Like victims of some ghastly envacuuming. Passing them in silence down that silent corridor through the drifting ash where they struggled forever in the road does cold coagulate (McCarthy 190-191).

Consider the imagery of this description with one of the more vividly horrifying sections of John Hershey’s journalistic *tour de force*, *Hiroshima*, which provides Japanese eyewitness reports of the aftermath: “from a busy city of two hundred and forty-five thousand to a mere pattern of

residue in the afternoon. The asphalt of the streets was still too soft and hot from the fires that walking was uncomfortable. They encountered only one person, a woman, who said to them as they passed, ‘My husband is in those ashes’” (Hersey 40). Referring back to the Father’s admonition signaling the paradoxical nature of memory earlier, the Child, upon seeing the gruesome scene, forwards a question directed to the imperative of memory: “What you put in your head is there forever?” (McCarthy 191). Replying in the affirmative to the Child’s question, the Man demands that the Child not look at the charred corpses, to which the Child replies: it’s okay Papa...They’re already here” (McCarthy 191). The invocation of memory here, which immediately follows the most allegorical images of Hiroshima, points to the fact that, while the urge to forget the atrocities of history is in one sense necessary to any continuance, to remember that “they already there” (history’s ruin) is to insist on the fact that “they’ll still be there” (the trace of history) to affect the course of history, regardless of our decision of sight and understanding. It is significant that McCarthy places all three rhetorical coordinates of the novel—ash, sight, and the limit of the road—as it insists on the point that the negotiation of traumatic memory demands a seeing (an understanding) that must necessarily fall short—an ethics to the Real, or an ethics to that which surpasses knowledge.

While ultimately it is the figure of ash that brings together the dialectical moments of history, it is its intimate connection to “the road” that effectively politicizes the memory of September 11th. Because insofar as “everything” else “pal[es] away into the murk,” where “soft ash blow[s] in loose swirls over the blacktop,” the figure of the road, as an allegorical figure of America’s open frontier, harkens back to McCarthy’s earlier fiction dealing with the violence of America’s western expansion. Bringing together images of Hiroshima in the context of America while also using common tropes of September 11th, *The Road* works to place each

historical trauma into an unfamiliar context. Much like the trope of ash as figure of residue or remainder, the road in the novel becomes metonymically suggestive of the same quality—it is that which endures beyond the destruction of America as an event or ideology. When the child questions his Father about the significance and origin behind the “state roads,” then asks him how the destruction of the states came about,” the father is unable to give a definitive answer: “I don’t know exactly. That’s a good question.” (McCarthy 43).

As Benjamin suggests, “the allegorical...is at home in the fall” (Benjamin 234). Similarly, here, in *The Road*, McCarthy allegorizes the eventuality of a fall—the fall of America itself—suggesting the way in which the dying bodies of the past directly implicate the dying bodies of the present. Awakening once again one morning to an ashen American, the Man’s relation to the apocalypse finally begins to become his own unveiling unto knowledge: “he’d come to see a message in each such late history, a message and a warning, and so this tableau of the slain and the devoured did prove to be” (McCarthy 91). Ultimately, it is this dedication to “the tableau of the slain and devoured” of history that works to upset both the heroic idealization of World War II as well as its politicized connection to September 11th. For it is precisely this dedication to an ethics of a traumatic history that harbors the promise of a foundation developed from an ethically sutured political stance: one deeply concerned with the failures of history, rather than the barbarity of the victor’s history, as the necessary condition for its redemptive articulation in a future horizon.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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