LIFE ON THE WIRE: POST-9/11 MOURNING AND THE FIGURE OF THE TIGHTROPE WALKER

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Upon embarking on the journey that has culminated in my master's thesis, my advisor told me that “All ideas are born prematurely.” The “end result” that will subsequently be preserved in the University of Florida’s library system is no exception. It is, indeed, premature. Despite this, the ideas presented here have developed far beyond my expectations. I owe the development of these ideas to several people.

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On August 7, 1974, a tightrope walker named Philippe Petit walked between the buildings of the World Trade Center. His act was immediately given world-wide praise, turning Petit into a local celebrity. As the years passed, however, the memory of Petit’s extraordinary feat began to fade. Not until the tragic event of 9/11 did the memory of Petit’s walk between the Twin Towers regain popular attention.

Beginning in 2001, the story of this amazing feat has been incorporated into a number of post-9/11 texts. Most notably are the following: Philippe Petit’s *To Reach the Clouds*, Mordicai Gerstein’s *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, James Marsh’s *Man on Wire*, and Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*. The continued use of the story of the “man who walked between the towers” raises questions about the role of the figure of the tightrope walker in post-9/11 mourning.

My thesis is that this story has captured the attention of the American public for more deep-seated reasons than the mere fact that it involves the Twin Towers before their destruction. To that end, I conduct a close analysis of the representation of Petit’s ’74 Twin Tower walk in each of the four previously mentioned texts. Based on these analyses, I explore the use and incorporation of historical and traditional literary
representations of the tightrope walker and the role of these elements in the mourning process. More specifically, I focus on the connections of the tightrope walker to the sublime, *fin de siècle*, utopia, and the Romantic child, locating these as possible resistances to the mourning process and signs of nostalgia for a pre-9/11 symbolic order. My conclusion is that, despite these resistances, the use of the tightrope walker in post-9/11 literature opens up space for a productive working through of the trauma of 9/11.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

When most people remember the Twin Towers it is in relation to the infamous day when they fell on September 11, 2001. Yet more than 30 years earlier the towers received extensive coverage for a far different reason: a tightrope walker named Philippe Petit walked between them. Early on a Wednesday morning New Yorkers were amazed to look up and find a man suspended high up in the sky. For nearly 45 minutes Petit dazzled the small crowd that gathered below by performing stunts such as the wirewalker’s knee salute. When he got off his wire he was quickly arrested. The performance was, after all, illegal, since it involved Petit breaking into a business facility after hours. However, this only seemed to increase public interest in Petit’s walk, and he quickly became a local celebrity. While it seemed as if Petit’s walk was destined to become a story shared only by the few who witnessed it in 1974, the tragedy of 9/11 re-ignited public fascination with this extraordinary tale. The connection between these two events was made by Petit himself, who was working on his memoir To Reach the Clouds (2002) at the time of the terrorist attacks. He quickly finished the book in time for the one year anniversary of 9/11 and dedicated it “to the victims [of 9/11] and to their families” (237).

Since the publication of Petit’s memoir, this story has been retold by several authors who wanted to memorialize the towers without re-invoking the image of them falling, an image that the media played ad nauseam in the days after 9/11. The attraction to the story lies in what James Marsh, director of the documentary film Man on Wire (2008), describes as the “antidote quality” of the story, which he claims provides “a unique opportunity to inhabit the Towers again and in a sense rebuild them”
Marsh’s viewpoint also reflects the reason behind the rising public interest in this story. While Americans still recognize that it is necessary to remember 9/11, many are tired, even afraid, of encountering texts that force them to relive this tragic event. One viewer of the documentary film, for instance, praised the film’s ability to give them “another memory” of the towers that was not attached to 9/11 (qtd. in Abele). Others admitted that they were afraid to watch the film because they “had it in their head that it was filled with death”; but seeing that the film is “about joy…they are at peace” (qtd. in Stein).

What is evident from these responses is that Petit’s story is quickly becoming one of the popular ways to remember 9/11. As such, it is important to consider what exactly makes these texts ideal for post-9/11 mourning. While part of the success of these post-9/11 texts is attributed to the fact that they avoid any direct mention of 9/11 but still allows readers/viewers to remember and mourn this tragic event, it seems as if the image of Petit walking between the towers is the real strength behind these stories. In fact, the figure of the tightrope walker—a figure to which Petit’s image is undeniably connected—has a long history in literature and culture, and incorporates elements of the sublime, fin de siècle, and utopia.

The most recent literary usage of the figure of the tightrope walker in texts that pre-date 9/11 is in children’s literature. Children’s picture books reveal a connection between the figure of the tightrope walker and Romantic notions of childhood, and suggest that Petit’s story might be attractive because it re-appropriates the image of the vulnerable and innocent child. Many Americans felt like the vulnerable and innocent child in the aftermath of 9/11; but rather than dealing with these emotions resorted to
“paranoiac acting out” (Welcome to the Desert 49). Besides the obvious fear of another attack, I argue that this vulnerability resulted from a shift in the American symbolic order, and that the figure of the tightrope walker serves as a means of addressing the anxiety caused by this subjective split. Post-9/11 texts that incorporate the story of Philippe Petit’s 1974 walk are rife with resistances to the effects of 9/11; but they also open up spaces for productive mourning. Viewed separately, these texts appear to fail in their efforts to mourn 9/11; but seen as a larger collective project to mourn, they begin to function as a productive working through of this loss.²
The major texts that are a part of this collective effort are Philippe Petit's memoir To Reach the Clouds (2001), Mordicai Gerstein’s picture book The Man Who Walked Between the Towers (2003), James Marsh’s documentary film Man on Wire (2008), and Colum McCann’s novel Let the Great World Spin (2009). These texts can be viewed as a “series,” since each one draws on the other as a way of continuing the mourning process. Beyond the shared storyline, images and even lines of text from Petit’s To Reach the Clouds are repeated in the later texts. For instance, Mordicai Gerstein received an advanced copy of To Reach the Clouds while working on his own book. Gerstein has noted the usefulness of the text in his own work, whose images he claims “were invaluable for making my pictures” (“Caldecott Award Speech”). A close comparison of Gerstein’s water-color rendition of Petit’s walk does, indeed, reveal the closeness of certain images to the original text, such as one where Petit lies down on his back while on the high-wire. Similarly, James Marsh’s documentary film uses images taken directly from Petit’s text; and Colum McCann has taken small facts from the original text as a starting point for some of his fictional stories.

This “return to the original,” however, is not the only thing that binds these very different texts together. Each text is marked by a very personal response to the trauma of 9/11. For instance, Petit, who was working on the manuscript of To Reach the Clouds before 9/11, reveals the way that the event shaped the writing of his text. Petit describes his reaction to 9/11 as follows: “Suddenly, I stopped writing. My towers were under attack, then destroyed, taking an immense number of lives down with them. Then my cathedral was on fire. Doom. Tempest. Chaos. Reflection. After a while, with rebellion in
my blood, I wrote, ‘As an artist, my mission is to create,’ and went back to writing” (234). Here, Petit recognizes the tragedies that punctuated the writing of his text: 9/11 and the partial destruction of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where Petit is an artist-in-residence. He continues to describe the loss of his daughter, Gypsy, who died at the age of 9 from a brain injury. Petit’s text does not escape the markings of these three traumas, and it is clear throughout the text that he is striving to work through these traumatic moments from his life.

While each of these traumas serves as important influences in To Reach the Clouds, I will focus specifically on the trauma of 9/11, since this is what binds these different texts together. What is important to keep in mind, however, is the way that the personal trauma of these writers is intertwined with the collective trauma of 9/11. For instance, Gerstein has claimed that this book served as his own personal response to 9/11. Gerstein has noted that he is a former NYC resident, and that he experienced the shock of 9/11 in a way similar to any other New York resident. Marsh makes similar claims in a Los Angeles Times article, exclaiming, “I know the power of the subtext of the film. I experienced it myself. I live in New York and witnessed the destruction with my own eyes.” (qtd. in Abele). Finally, McCann attributes the formation of his idea for Let the Great World Spin to his father-in-law, who returned ash-ridden to McCann’s home after barely escaping from the 59th floor of the World Trade Center. McCann further explains the reaction of his daughter, who at first cries that her grandfather is “burning,” and when McCann tries to console her clarifies “No, no, he’s burning from the inside out” (“Let the Great World Spin Q & A”). McCann explains that this incident was a
pivotal moment for him, and he used this experience as a starting point for considering the way that different people of the city might have experienced the tragedy of 9/11.

While each author’s text was shaped by their own personal reaction to 9/11, their texts have come to serve as important components in a collective effort to mourn 9/11. As Sigmund Freud noted in “Mourning and Melancholia,” time is the essential component of mourning; only with time can the subject succeed in “freeing its libido from the lost object” (589). The story of Petit’s walk between the towers has become one of the ways of working towards this ultimate goal: Each of these post-9/11 texts shows a deep effort to work through the trauma caused by 9/11. As can be expected, the texts with a later publication date contain a more thoughtful response to 9/11, since their authors have had time to move beyond the immediate shock of the event. This is most evident in the different narrative techniques incorporated in each text, specifically in the way the narrative focuses on Petit.

In To Reach the Clouds, the presence of Petit is excessive; his control of the story and its meaning, his constant presence, is almost suffocating. In Gerstein’s picture book on the other hand, while Petit remains the central figure of the story, the narrator provides some distance from this excessive, eccentric figure. We begin to see the story from different perspectives (above and below) rather than simply from a single, narrow vision. Marsh expands these views in his documentary film. The film, with clever uses of montage, divides the narrative text into several pieces, placing multiple perspectives (both verbal and visual) in the film. The text begins to present new understandings of historical trauma as a collective process by allowing previously silenced voices to speak. Each person, as with the characters in 9/11 novels such as Jonathan Safran
Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and Don DeLillo’s Falling Man must locate themselves in the other’s narrative, thus creating a more complete picture of the event (recall, for example, Keith’s intimate relationship with Florence in Falling Man, where they must continually locate each other in their stories of exiting the World Trade Center after the building was hit). Finally, the tightrope walker becomes almost completely removed in Let the Great World Spin, and only functions as a thread pulling together six otherwise disparate stories. Each time the tightrope walker is mentioned (who remains unnamed for most of the story), the characters are brought closer together. The focus shifts completely from above to below, and the tightrope walker drifts entirely into a figural function. By taking a closer look at the walk scene in each text, which serves as a sort of climax in them, it is easy to see the way in which each text struggles to work through the trauma of 9/11.
CHAPTER 3
ANALYSIS OF THE “WALK SCENE”

These representations of Petit’s walk can be broken up into two critical moments: the first step and the actual walk itself. The first step, where Petit must make his decision to walk onto the wire, is one of the tensest moments in all of these texts, whereas the walk scene serves as a moment of release for all of these tensions. The description of the first step on the wire is the pivotal moment where the void is approached. In these post-9/11 texts, this void becomes the terrifying Real, symbolizing both the loss of the towers and the many deaths that occurred on 9/11. Staging an approach to this void thus repeats traumatic aspects of 9/11, allowing readers to continue working through these moments. Changes in the description of the first step show a steady approach to the void, and reflect the time for the understanding crucial to the mourning process.

In To Reach the Clouds the moments preceding the first step are intensified by highlighting the dangers to which Petit submits himself, as well as focusing on Petit to the extent that literally nothing else seems to exist. This focusing technique is used at the beginning of the passage, where Petit writes:

All of a sudden, the density of the air is no longer the same. Jean-François ceases to exist. The facing tower is empty. The wheel of the elevator no longer turns. The horizon is suspended from east to west. New York no longer spreads its infinity. The murmur of the city dissolves into a squall whose chill and power I no longer feel. (178)

Like a close-up shot in a film, Petit’s narrative blocks out any other information from the scene. Readers are only capable of relating to Petit and his experience of the walk. The effect is titillating, as it pulls the reader into the experience of the first step, intensifying the tension that is built before the moment of the walk itself.
Petit continues by describing in extreme detail the moments before his walk. The wire, for instance, is “Ready to explode. To dissolve” (179), while the towers are “tens of thousands, of tons of concrete, glass, steel, and threat. A gaping mouth 110 stories deep, more than 435 yards tall” (179). Death, which always seems close for Petit, is made even more present through these descriptions. Petit makes it clear that he risks his life by crossing his wire; and in this way he overcomes the fear of death. He writes: “I still belong to the material world” (178). In this line, Petit makes it clear that in walking the wire he not only overcomes the fear of death, but that he will be fundamentally changed. Petit’s prose creates a layering effect, where symbolic meaning is imbued in every sentence, each reflecting on the tragedy of 9/11. His focus on his potential death, the wire that is ready to explode, the “threat” of the void that waits to swallow him—each of these serve as reminders of traumatic aspects of 9/11. The strong emphasis on death in this scene seems to be an effort to work through the complex emotions attached to Petit’s traumatic experience of 9/11. In crossing the void, Petit must literally face death; but the crossing also becomes symbolic of a confrontation with traumatic moments from 9/11, as is indicated from Petit’s description of his approach to the void.

While Petit emphasizes the peril that he willingly undergoes, later texts dare to approach the void in an even more intimate way. In The Man Who Walked Between the Towers, for instance, there are two illustrations depicting this moment. In the first, Petit is shown standing with his legs spread apart, yet firmly planted on the edge of the building. The point of view is from behind, so that readers see the image from the same perspective as the wirewalker; but the view is also, importantly, placed slightly above Petit. In doing this, Gerstein gives readers a point of view that allows them to both look
across to the other tower and to see down. The crossing of these two different perspectives creates the “vertigo” effects that have been identified in his text by scholars (Connolly), and that Gerstein has claimed were intentional (Mehegan). The second image is a close-up of Petit’s foot on the wire (the “first step”), and this time the point of view is from above, so that readers are forced to look all the way down to the city below. The illustration is small in comparison to the previous image, a mere 6" by 4.5" versus the earlier 8" by 6". The size of the image draws attention to the white space that surrounds the illustration, and can be viewed as yet another encounter with the void.7

Later efforts to recreate the walk scene become even more dramatic. In Marsh’s documentary there is a similar emphasis, as in the original, of the possibility that Petit might fall and die. However, the difference is that here concerns are expressed by Petit’s friends. The critical moment in this scene is again where the void is confronted. In a shot similar to Gerstein’s illustration of the city below, Marsh intensifies the feeling of vertigo that is so present in Gerstein’s text. The shot is a black and white image of the city below, which is clearly intended to be the perspective of Petit. We can tell this because this time, unlike in Gerstein’s illustrations, the viewer sees only the wire and a steel beam from the edge of the tower. This shot is meant to recreate what Petit might have seen when he looked down from the edge of the building before taking his first step. If this were not enough, the camera rocks back and forth and then immediately cuts to Petit who says, “This is probably…I don’t know…probably the end of my life.” This cut creates an interesting effect because while we know that Petit did not die, the emphasis on death remains prevalent. Moreover, the shot allows viewers to experience
this fear firsthand through the images, although this experience is still somewhat mediated by the screen.

The representation of the void, while differing slightly in each of these first three texts—we can almost view them as a sequence of shots, each drawing us closer to the void between the towers—are all images viewed from above. Not a single one of these texts attempts to depict the walk from any other perspective than Petit’s in their descriptions of Petit’s first steps onto the wire. While there are interesting takes on the “First step” scene—Man on Wire is a case in point—there is never a moment where the first step is being shown that incorporates a viewpoint from someone else. Even Marsh, who includes friends who helped Petit plan and rig the wire between the towers, only edits in interviews with these people, which offers different emotional perspectives on the walk, but not any other visual perspectives. While the progression in the description of this moment indicates that distance from the event has, indeed, brought about increased understanding, even if this only means that it is finally possible to examine more closely what occurred on 9/11, there is still a strict focus on the tightrope walker in these texts. Certainly this is, in part, due to the fact that Petit remains the central figure of the story.

A look at the opening passage of Let the Great World Spin provides some insight into other ways of imagining this moment in Petit’s story, including the value of such reinterpretations for mourning. Unlike the other texts that re-tell Petit’s story, Let the Great World Spin does not tell the story of the Twin Tower walk from Petit’s perspective. In the opening scene readers are again confronted with Petit’s notorious first steps on the wire. The difference is that the scene is narrated from below, amongst the group of
New Yorkers who watched Petit from the street. The book works to capture the feelings of these previously unnamed participants in this historical event. The shift in perspective is striking. The experience of the people who crowded around the Twin Towers to watch Petit uncannily repeats several emotions that one might imagine New Yorkers felt on 9/11. McCann carefully chooses his words to strengthen the resonances of this past historical moment with 9/11, as in the following passage: “But the longer they [the crowd] watched, the surer they were. He stood at the very edge of the building, shaped dark against the gray of the morning. A window washer maybe. Or a construction worker. Or a jumper” (3; my emphasis). Even in these first few lines, McCann reminds readers of the many people who lost their lives jumping from World Trade Center buildings; he even uses the language of journalists who would later name these people “jumpers.”

McCann emphasizes the uncertainty of those watching below. The crowd looks up at Petit, unsure of who he is or what he is doing. On an otherwise normal day, they wait. The narrator of the scene describes the crowds dilemma in the following way: “They didn’t want to wait around for nothing at all, some idiot standing on the precipice of the towers, but they didn’t want to miss the moment either, if he slipped, or got arrested, or dove, arms stretched” (3). The tension in the scene crescendoes—not from a near fall or any other type of anticipated action—but from the everyday details of the city streets. The passage is filled with lists of details of sights and sounds that surround the watchers: “Car horns. Garbage trucks. Ferry whistles. The thrum of the subway. The M22 bus pulled in against the sidewalk…” (4) Lists like these go on for several pages creating impatience in the reader that is similar to that of the crowd. By focusing on
details other than Petit, who has not been named at this point, the reader is left even more curious about who he is and what is happening. With the arrival of the police, the narrator returns to the watchers, who are now determining what it is exactly that they are observing. One man cries, “Do it, asshole!” While another shouts, “Don’t do it” (7). McCann highlights the indecision on the part of crowd caused by their anxiety and their desire to understand what is happening. Finally, in the last lines of the passage, the watchers come to understand: the man above them is a tightrope walker. Through the carefully laid out details in this scene, McCann captures the emotions of the watchers before they can register what it is that is occurring high above them. The scene seems aimed at recreating the tension and anxiety that those who watched the Twin Towers on 9/11 may have similarly felt.

While the progression in understanding in these texts is evident, it is worth investigating further the purpose behind the repetition of Petit’s story. I have already pointed out that each author’s text derived from their personal experience of 9/11, and in this sense are an effort to mourn both the material loss of the Twin Towers and those who died in them. But is this the only loss that these texts deal with? I suggest that this loss runs deeper, and is a reaction to trauma’s tendency to “produce new subjects” (Kaplan 1). This is an important point in order to understand the significance of the popular response to Petit’s story, in particular, why the tightrope walker has become a crucial figure for mourning 9/11. The purpose of the repetition in these texts is similar to the fort-da game of Little Hans as this incident in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is interpreted by Jacques Lacan. Lacan describes the function of the repetition automatism as a way of dealing with a split that occurs in the subject following a
traumatic incident. He explains that the child does not toss the spool back and forth simply as a way of coming to terms with the absence of his mother, as Freud initially argued. Instead, the spool represents a little piece of the child, or, as Lacan puts it, “a small part of the subject” (62). The boy’s actions are a way for him to account for the subjective splitting that occurs in him as a result of the mother’s departure. This Spaltung is “overcome by the alternating game fort-da [...]. It is aimed at what, essentially, is not there, qua represented—for it is the game itself which is the Repräsentanz of the Vorstellung” (63). In a similar way, 9/11 texts that focus on Petit’s walk use the figure of the tightrope walker as a way of working through the subjective split that occurs as a result of 9/11.

Several signs in these texts indicate this inner change. In To Reach the Clouds, Petit describes how walking on the wire means stepping away from a life he knows (178). In the documentary film adaptation Man on Wire, Petit’s friends describe how “something changed” on the day of the walk. This “something” is precisely what these texts are attempting to confront, and which goes beyond the loss of the Twin Towers. Equally, that “something” is what many tried to verbalize when claiming that “Americans had lost their innocence.” In each of these texts, Petit becomes the means for examining the effects of trauma on the inner self. His confrontation with the void is a way of approaching the traumatic Real of 9/11, while his precarious position on the wire represents the vulnerability of Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. The wire literally represents the inner space between one symbolic order and another. In this way, the repetition of Petit’s walk works to represent a successful (and safe) transition from one symbolic order to another.
The importance of this successful, albeit staged, symbolic crossing is that it addresses the fear inherent in a shift in subjectivity. Judith Butler ascribes this fear to the subject’s “passionate attachment to subjectivity.” This need to attach (or re-attach) is what Butler calls “stubborn attachment.” The stubborn attachment is rooted in the subject’s own “passionate attachment to subjection” (*Psychic Life* 67), so that in order to continue this subjection the subject discovers “modes of stubbornness” by forming sites for maintaining this attachment:

> If wretchedness, agony, and pain are sites or modes of stubbornness, ways of attaching to oneself, negatively articulated modes of reflexivity, then that is because they are given by regulatory regimes as the sites available for attachment, and a subject will attach to pain rather than not attach at all. (*Psychic Life* 61)

The subject’s fear of symbolic death is the source of this need to re-attach to the lost order.

Even though narration of Petit’s story has progressed, reflecting an increased understanding of the trauma of 9/11, there is still nostalgia inherent in each of these texts, a desire to return to a time when the Twin Towers still stood, something Petit’s story temporarily grants. This nostalgia for the lost object (the Twin Towers) works to counteract the productive work of mourning in the first part of the walk scene (the first step), where the traumatic void is encountered. Viewed in tandem with Butler’s notion of stubborn attachments, we can interpret Petit’s walk as representative of a desire to return, to “re-attach” to a lost symbolic order. The fact that Petit crosses safely over the void, and that he is able to walk back and forth between the towers (or symbolic orders), is indicative of this. A return to the scenes in each text where Petit actually completes his crossing makes this more apparent.
As Petit crosses his wire in *To Reach the Clouds* he cries out “You are life, my life. Say I, 'Carry it! Carry my life across’” (184). He refers to the large balancing pole he carries in his arms, which he calls an “extension” of his own body (184). On the first crossing, Petit dwells on his own fragility and the dangers he faces: heavy winds, vibrations in the wire, etc. By his second crossing he triumphantly announces: “My destiny no longer has me conquering the highest towers in the world, but rather the void they protect” (193). As Petit continues to cross back and forth he proclaims: “I’m absolutely no longer afraid of the wire, it is getting shorter as I stroll back and forth” (203). After making several more crossings back and forth across the wire, Petit achieves something else: he is no longer afraid of the void below him (194). The void, which threatens to swallow him should he fall, can be viewed as the opening up of the terrifying Real that accompanies a shift in a symbolic order. Consider, for a moment, the example provided by Slavoj Žižek, where a man and a woman are riding in a car. They are told not to unroll the window of the car no matter what they see, but do so anyway when their car appears to hit a child. When they open the window they are surprised to see only a thick, white pulsating mist. When they raise the window again, the same scene returns. They again open the window and find the terrifying mist. The mist, as Žižek interprets it, is the Lacanian real (*Looking Awry* 14). Like the couple in Žižek’s example, Petit confronts the empty space of the Real (the void); by making his first step onto the wire, he crosses the barrier between the “material world” (178) and the space that constitutes as the Real. His continued crossing back and forth between this threshold—similar to the *fort-da* game Little Hans plays with the wooden spool—reduces the terrifying element of the Real. While it would be impossible to directly
confront the Real in this way, this staged encounter still repeats important traumatic elements (death, loss of the towers, etc.) that assist in the process of mourning. Gerstein’s *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* incorporates a similar description of Petit’s crossing. While readers consider the possibilities of Petit falling, the narrator assuages these fears by declaring: “He [Petit] was not afraid. He was alone and happy and free.” The wire, in this case, represents a space of freedom, a “happy utopia.” The accompanying image is a large pull-out page that increases the feeling of the distance between the two towers. The perspective is from above, so that readers look down on Petit. The angle of the perspective is set so that readers not only see the city below Petit’s feet, but also the wide expanse of the city that stretches across from him. The image captures the sublime aspect of the tightrope walker’s act, making Petit look small, albeit stable and confident, in relation to the world that stretches below and beyond. The lines of the text emphasize Petit’s “oneness” with nature as he walks back and forth along the tightrope. When police come and demand that he stop his performance, Petit simply “walks the other way” and reflects “Who would come and get him?” Only when Petit is “completely satisfied” does he walk off the wire and allow the police to take him into custody. The text, whose visual images continue to create the vertigo effect that has been noted by scholars (Connolly), shifts its focus during the walk scene to increase the readers’ feeling that Petit is safe, so that they may enjoy the act. Images shift to long frames that are cropped so close that they remove views of the surrounding city. In one full double-page image that does include another view of the city below, Petit is painted with a smile on his face. A large bird is placed as the focus of the image and draws attention away from the void below Petit. On the other side of the
image, police are piled at the edge of the World Trade Center, flapping their arms and yelling out to Petit, who calmly takes in the beauty of passing birds. One officer has dropped his hat and is reaching out to catch it. In comparison to the clumsy, wild throng of police, Petit seems even more serene and in control of his body on the wire. All of these small details work to create feelings of the sublime and to characterize the wire as a utopian space of freedom and happiness.

Marsh’s *Man on Wire* gives yet another evocation of the emotional bliss of crossing the wire; but this state is also able to be enjoyed by those watching. The crossing, which is accompanied by the musical composition “Gymnopedie No. 1” by Erik Satie and performed by Pascal Rogé, creates a tranquil feeling after Petit’s tense first steps onto the wire. “Gymnopedie No. 1,” significant for its designation as “furniture music” or ambient music, has been described as:

> lonesome and singularly expressive melodies [that] circle like falling autumn leaves; a monotonous, low bass line accompaniment, and against it softly dissonant chords in the middle register, constantly repeating the same iambic rhythm-pattern. Together this creates an atmosphere of vague melancholy, of mysticism and exoticism. Perhaps there is also a fin-de-siècle feeling, even some salon nostalgia. (Höjer)

Mysticism, exoticism, and *fin de siècle*: these are just some of the different characteristics that have been attributed to the tightrope walker, which allows the music to heighten emotions during the walk scene. Since the walk is comprised solely of photographs taken at the time of Petit’s walk, director James Marsh must rely on both sounds and editing techniques in order to capture the emotion evoked by the images. In addition to the musical selection, Marsh uses different camera techniques, such as pans and zooms in order to create a sense of depth and movement in the still images. He then edits in interviews with Petit and his friends, who recount their emotions at the time.
of the walk. These reflections further capture the magnitude of the event. As Petit’s friend, Jim, describes the moment, “Beyond anything you could ever imagine. It was just mind boggling. The awe of the event and the overwhelming largeness of the scale of the situation. Took my mind into a place where I really wasn’t that concerned about him. It was just magical. It was just profound.” While Petit has criticized Marsh for turning the focus of the story onto the different emotions of his friends, Marsh seems only to contribute to the sense of awe that surrounds Petit’s walk (Williams).

McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* removes itself from its usual perspective and narrates the actual walk (this is different from the first steps that are narrated from the crowds perspective) from Petit’s perspective:

> It was so much like having sex with the wind. It complicated things and blew away and softly separated and slid back around him. *The wire was about pain too*: it would always be there, jutting into his feet, the weight of the bar, the dryness at his throat, the throb of his arms, but the joy was losing the pain so that it no longer mattered. So too with his breathing. He wanted his breath to enter the wire so that he was nothing. This sense of losing himself. Every nerve. Every cuticle. He hit it on the towers. The logic became unfixed. It was the point where there was no time. The wind was blowing and his body could have experienced it years in advance. (241; my emphasis)

One major difference in McCann’s description of Petit’s walk lies in the focus on the pain that accompanies the joy of the walk. If we continue to view the walk as an encounter with the Real, then we might view this as acknowledgement of the pain involved in the process of working through a trauma. McCann does not idealize the walk to the point of losing sight of this pain. In doing so, McCann pushes his narrative as a means for working through, and surpasses the other texts that appear to contrast the tense first step with the joyous act of the walk.
There are a few ways to interpret these moments of emotional bliss on the wire. The first is to consider the sublime aspect of the walk. Philip Shaw has described the sublime as that which “marks the limits and reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits” (2). The sublime has often been thought in connection to nature: a powerful storm or the wide expanse of the ocean; it is the overwhelming feeling of smallness in relation to a powerful (natural) force. But nature is not the only place where the sublime can be encountered. Shaw recognizes the numerous applications of the sublime, noting that: “A building or a mountain may be sublime, as may a thought, a heroic deed, or a mode of expression” (1). Shaw has even made connections to 9/11 and the sublime claiming that 9/11 constitutes as a moment of the sublime because those who witnessed the destruction of the Twin Towers “experienced something of this power [the sublime] to astonish” (2). The sublime aspects of Petit’s walk, as I have already intimated, are drawn out through descriptions of the enormity of the event, such as Petit’s “oneness” with nature and the way he “conquers the towers” (Petit 193).

The tightrope walker has also been connected to the fin de siècle. Tightrope walkers have historically performed as a way of marking the importance of an event. Madame Saqui, a famous French funambulist of the 19th century, is said to have walked between the towers of Notre Dame as a way of celebrating the birth of Napoleon’s son (Demoriane 14). Her walks would mark other momentous occasions, such as successful campaigns of the Emperor. The practice of having a tightrope walker mark occasions such as these dates back several centuries and is said to have been a result of the tightrope walker’s ability to “endow an event with the necessary cosmic
implications. For he is the destiny incarnate of those he honours” (qtd. in Demoriane 80). Perhaps it is because the tightrope walker represents the watcher’s destiny that they have become perfect figures of the *fin de siècle*.

The *fin de siècle* in France was primarily viewed as a time of decay, where morals where thrown to the wind, and “there were no more beliefs” (Weber 10). Despite its original positive connotations, *fin de siècle* quickly came to signify the decreasing standards in morals, daily practices, and the arts (Weber 9). But the use of the term *fin de siècle*, especially when describing the mood of a society, differs dramatically depending on the time and “geographical location” (Laqueur 5). According to Walter Laqueur, “In France it signified to be fashionable, modern, up-to-date” (5). At other times it signified “symbolism, aestheticism, *le art pour le art*”; and yet other meanings incorporated its more negative connotations of frivolity and dejection, “but not of total despair” (5). While some have defined the *fin de siècle* as the despair caused by changes in society, including those caused by technological advances, Laqueur has argued that the focus on despair has been over-emphasized (23). While despair is certainly one aspect of *fin de siècle*, there were equally feelings of hope in a new age that combat negative feelings of “loneliness and insecurity” and “nostalgia for the past” (23). Petit occupies the impossible concept of return to an age that has ended—the *fin de siècle* “nostalgia for the past” (Laqueur 23)—through his apparent innocence and constant belief that he can achieve his “impossible” dream and is reminiscent of classic American values.

Finally, if we return to the language used to describe Petit’s walk we can see that each text constructs the space between the wire as a type of utopia. Petit, when on the
wire, is described as both “happy” and “free.” But this freedom is contingent upon his remaining on the wire. The wide empty space of the wire, as McCann describes it in *Let the Great World Spin*, is a place where the wirewalker can “lose himself completely” a space of “silence” (240-241). When Petit is forced to leave his wire in McCann’s fictional account he thinks “he wanted to remain: he might never walker like this again” (241; my emphasis). McCann’s description repeats some of the sublime aspects of the tightrope walker’s act (i.e., the fact that the wirewalker can “lose himself completely”), but the moment where Petit must leave the wire suggests the utopian aspect of this space.

Utopia, while described as an ideal society, is recognized as an impossible fantasy. Derived from the Greek term *ou-topos*, utopia literally means “no place.” As Susan McManus has noted, the purpose of utopian fictions is to gain a knowledge that “seeks to open spaces of alterity and critique; its alterity seeks to *alter*, to intervene within the configuration of the present by revealing new and different possibilities, not to legitimate the world as it is already given, already known, already ordered” (para. 3). Seen in this way, utopian fiction is a way of positively intervening in history; these fictions imagine an ideal future—not because such an ideal is expected to be achieved—but because it casts doubt on the flaws inherent in society and encourages positive changes. The utopia portrayed in Petit’s walk defies this aspect of utopian narratives because it calls for a return to a prior “happy” moment of history, rather than envisioning a new future.

Petit’s walk was the marker of a momentous historical occasion in and of itself: it occurred the day that President Nixon resigned. Newspapers that covered the event did not fail to make these connections. Hermine Demoriane, a friend of Petit’s and fellow
wirewalker, writes in her diary: “Philippe’s feat was beyond categorization: it was News. She [Demoriane’s mother] pointed out that it happened to be the day Nixon resigned after Watergate. With Philippe’s taste for symbols, this wasn’t mere coincidence” (141). Performing in this transitional moment of history, Petit captures the *fin de siècle* attitude (the “end” of the Nixon era), but his performance also signifies a hopeful new beginning.

While such a theme could be productive in the post-9/11 mourning process, the use of the walk scene seems to perpetuate an unhealthy, melancholic attachment to the Twin Towers in certain cases due to nostalgia for a pre-9/11 symbolic order (i.e., the time before America’s “loss of innocence”). The most obvious of these instances is the end of Petit’s *To Reach the Clouds*, where Petit writes:

> Let us rebuild the twin towers [...]. When the towers again twin-tickle the clouds, I offer to walk again, to be the expression of the builders’ collective voice. Together, we will rejoice in an aerial song of victory. I will carry my life across the wire, as your life, as all our lives, past, present, and future—the lives lost, the lives welcomed since. We can overcome. (239)

Petit’s call to rebuild the towers perpetuates an unhealthy attachment to the Twin Towers that have come to signify all that was lost (e.g., innocence) after 9/11. It does not call to alter history, to “intervene within the configuration of the present by revealing new and different possibilities,” as McManus argues a utopian narrative should; instead, Petit asks his readers to “join hands” and work to rebuild the towers “*com’eron,* *dov’eron,*” or “as they were and where they were” (239).

This message of return was not received with the same enthusiasm in which it was given; both Gerstein and Marsh felt that the towers should simply be commemorated through memory, and their post-9/11 works reflect this feeling. But despite this difference of opinion, there are still elements of nostalgia in their works too. Gerstein’s *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, for instance, has been criticized for its
ending, which reads: “But in memory, as if imprinted on the sky, the towers are still there. And part of that memory is the joyful morning, August 7, 1974, when Philippe Petit walked between them in the air.” According to children’s literature scholar Paula Connolly, the ending of Gerstein’s book is “like the restoration of an idyll to recast a troublesome present” (292), and “attempts to resolve” the loss of 9/11 through the “creative act of one man” (293). The failure of the book lies in its lack of “contextualization” of 9/11: the story only tells readers that the towers are gone, but not why or how it happened (300). Moreover, Connolly argues that Gerstein’s narrative “implicitly replaces” the memory of 9/11 with that of Petit’s act, even though she does note that his story might also been seen as “adding to” the memory of the Twin Towers rather than directly replacing this memory (293). The elements of the sublime, fin de siècle, and utopia all work together in the walk scene in these texts to produce a complex set of emotions that sometimes appear to aid in the mourning process, but, more often than not, represent a nostalgic attitude, a desire to return to a pre-9/11 symbolic order.
CHAPTER 4
THE CHILD AND THE FIGURE OF THE TIGHTROPE WALKER

So what does the child have to do with this? Carolyn Steedman, whose work on the child-figure Mignon explores the ideas invested in this strange, deformed child acrobat from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, discusses the many ideas imbued in the figure of the child acrobat. The child, as Steedman has argued, came to represent human interiority during the mid- to late-Victorian era. According to Steedman, this period saw a rise in questions about the nature of existence. This was, in part, due to the early development of cellular theory. The discovery of the cell raised several questions about the nature of growth and its relation to life and death. For instance, scientists, such as W.B. Carpenter asked the question: “Why did organic function continue, once a body or body part had attained the limits of its development?” (64). However, the turn inside was not simply a physiological one. The development and expansion of psychoanalysis also directed attention to human interiority. With the sharp rise in questions about human interiority it seemed only natural for the Victorians to turn to the child for further investigation into the concept of growth. Indeed, as Steedman notes, “Two important new markets for physiological information were parents of the middle and upper classes, and medical students and practitioners. In popular child-care manuals, and in doctors’ guides, childhood was added to the list of associated terms: growth and death” (63). Interest in the child under these terms built a cult of “child-watching” in a variety of locations, such as the theatre and the street.

Most importantly for the figure of the tightrope walker was the attention given to child acrobats of the Victorian era. These children were watched with both a sense of pleasure and horror. The contorting of the body surpassed what seemed natural for the
human body—and, indeed, it did. British investigators discovered that parents would force their children to perform painful exercises in order to make their bodies more supple (101-102). “The child acrobat thus raised questions about the nature of child development and of childhood itself; it was those questions that provoked the thrill of horror in the audience for ‘Master and Man’. As an aesthetic it was disconnected from the fin-de-siecle appreciation of the adult funambule” (Steedman 110). Steedman claims that child acrobats differ from the tightrope walker because of the horror of the painful training exercises children had to go through in order to carry out their amazing performances, but a close inspection of the earlier Caldecott award-winning picture book Mirette on the High Wire (1992) suggests that both the child and the adult funambulist have interesting connections that are of significance to post-9/11 texts that use Petit’s story as a way of working through the trauma of 9/11.

Mirette on the High Wire is about a tightrope walker named Bellini and a child, Mirette, who becomes his protégé. The book’s premise is that both the tightrope walker and the child do something to save one another: Bellini, the tightrope walker, saves Mirette from a life of dull domestic duties, while Mirette saves Bellini by helping him conquer the fear he has developed of walking on the tightrope. In one of the most striking illustrations in the book, Mirette walks onto the tightrope with her arms outstretched towards Bellini, while Bellini faces the girl while doing a knee salute. It seems as if the man is bowing down to the child, praising her for the gift of confidence with which she provides him. This illustration plays out the dependency that both characters have on each other, but places the child in a decidedly higher position than the tightrope walker. This privileging draws attention to the redemptive nature of the
child in the book, and seems to be most obviously connected to Romantic notions of the child. As Jacqueline Rose discusses in her canonical text *The Case of Peter Pan* (1984), the child, as envisioned by Alan Garner and Jean Jacques Rousseau, had “the responsibility of saving humankind from the degeneracy of modern society” and was “set up as the site of a lost truth and/or moment in history, which it can therefore be used to retrieve” (43). In the case of *Mirette on the High Wire*, Mirette is the Romantic child, who is able to save Bellini from the fear he has developed by reminding him of the joy he gets from walking on the wire. When an exasperated Bellini tells Mirette that he can no longer walk the wire because he is afraid, Mirette replies, “But you must make it [your fear] leave!” Only when Mirette meets Bellini on the wire in the middle of his performance does he completely lose his fear. Mirette thus serves as the means of return (to his former, fearless self) for Bellini.

Children’s picture books like *Mirette on the High Wire* suggest that the figure of the tightrope walker is actually deeply related to that of the child. While the tightrope walker in post-9/11 texts is not actually a child, he carries the symbolic weight traditionally given to children in literature, i.e., as a redemptive figure. The Romantic child, more specifically, functions as the *tabula rasa*, and provides the opportunity to return to an earlier, purer state of humanity. It is the concept of return that makes the connection to the Child so significant for the figure of the tightrope walker in a post-9/11 context. Readers of post-9/11 texts, such as *Man on Wire* and *Let the Great World Spin*, have reacted to these texts in a way that suggests that, rather than provide a means for moving forward (i.e., for working through their loss), they attempt to return their consumer to a previous state, albeit in memory only.
Petit’s sheer determination to achieve his dream to walk between the Twin Towers recalls for his readers classic American values. One of the most memorable lines from both *To Reach the Clouds* and *Man on Wire* occurs when Petit looks out from the top of the Twin Towers for the first time on a scouting trip and says, “I know it’s impossible. But I know I’ll do it” (17). Petit’s upbeat attitude and unwillingness to give up on his dream remains a constant point of focus in each text, overshadowing the moments in the story that resonate with 9/11. It seems to aim at proving that America still is great. After all, Petit came to America as a poor Frenchman and accomplished one of the greatest feats the world has ever known. This “back to [the] basics” move has been criticized by Žižek, who describes this move as a “missed opportunity” (*Welcome to the Desert* 47) —what might be seen as a “failure to understand.”

While each post-9/11 text that has used Petit’s story has shown a progression in the understanding of the event, the fact remains that elements of nostalgia remain tied to the image of Petit’s walk between the towers, and this is the most likely reason it has captured the American imagination. Those who have used his story recognize the fact that it is a way of “bringing the towers back to life” (Marsh), and public response supports this attitude, as I have already demonstrated. There is no denying that Petit’s story is a powerful one, which has the ability to create unique opportunities to confront and explore the lingering emotions stirred up by 9/11. But this work is not over. The continued progression in the post-9/11 texts, such as their more open and healthy approaches (e.g, multiple perspectives) to trauma, reveals the potential in Petit’s story as a way of working through the trauma of 9/11. McCann’s novel *Let the Great World
Spin is a major leap forward in this respect. I have attempted to expose both the positive and negative attributes of the figure of the tightrope walker as a means of working through trauma. The use of this figure reveals both the troubling emotions leftover from 9/11 that still need attending and a continued resistance to this type of healthy working through. But it also shows great potential. While Philippe Petit’s role in the mourning process may still remain troubled and complex, it also has the ability to open up spaces and confront fears and emotions that might not be otherwise. So long as this is the case, I believe that the tightrope walker will continue to remain a prominent figure in post-9/11 texts.
NOTES

1. Slavoj Žižek has pointed out that this “innocence” is an “American ideological category.” According to Žižek, this ideological category causes us to “encounter the limits of moral reasoning: from the moral standpoint, the victims were innocent, the act was an abominable crime, this very innocence, however, is not innocent” (Welcome to the Desert 50).

2. Dominick LaCapra argues that it is important not to conflate absence with loss. According to LaCapra, loss is “specific and involve[s] particular events” (49); and confusing loss for absence creates “endless melancholia, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted” (46).

3. The warm reception of these texts are evident in the awards they have received: Gerstein’s The Man Who Walked Between the Towers won the 2004 Caldecott award, Marsh’s Man on Wire won the 2008 Oscar for “Best Documentary,” and, most recently, McCann’s novel won the 2009 National Book Award for fiction.

4. The most important use of images in this work is the famous “walk scene,” which is comprised completely of photos from the original text—this is due to the fact that no film footage of Petit’s walk was taken.

5. The most noteworthy is the story about the prostitutes Jazzlyn and Tillie. In Let the Great World Spin Petit is in the courtroom when these two characters are being tried for prostitution. In his own work, Petit does describe coming into the courtroom while a couple of prostitutes are still be judged.

6. In every text except for McCann’s the walk scene actually is the climax of the story. McCann’s displacement of this scene is crucial to his own project to explore the emotions of the unheard voices of 9/11.

7. Don Ault has argued in “Imagetextuality: ‘Cutting Up’ Again, pt. III” that the gutter in comics can be viewed as the Lacanian Real (para. 3).

8. The tightrope walkers performance has historically been used to mark the importance of a special occasion, adding the proper air of mysticism to an event (Demoriane 80). Moreover, tightrope walkers would often dress as foreigners and change their names in order to attract larger audiences.

9. In his book Imaginary Communities, Phillip Wegner maps the antinomy happiness/freedom on the Greimiasian rectangle. According to Wegner, the upper position of this rectangle is “that of the complex resolution, the negation of the negation, or the ‘impossible’ synthesis of the positive opposition of happiness and freedom” (167). The representation of Petit on the wire seeks to achieve this “complex resolution” that Wegner describes. Petit therefore occupies the “impossible” top position in the Greimiasian rectangle.
10. In *Man on Wire* the opening scene shows Petit’s crew in readying themselves while the television in the house shows Nixon giving his resignation speech.
WORKS CITED


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Emily A. Murphy was born in Gainesville, Florida but spent most of her life in Orlando, Florida. She returned to Gainesville in 2005 to begin her undergraduate studies, and received a Bachelor of Arts in English in 2008. She chose to continue her studies at the University of Florida in order to pursue a Master of Arts in English. Upon completion of her master’s degree, Emily will continue her studies at the doctoral level. She hopes to continue to find ways to combine her interests in subjectivity, trauma, and children’s literature in her future work.