

The Limitations of Representation in September 11th Narratives

by

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Abstract

In an evolving literary dialogue authors, academics and journalists continue to struggle to make sense of the tragedy of September 11, 2001. This paper will examine texts written about 9/11—news stories, personal narratives, scholarly essays, and novels— through the lens of theories of tragedy. From this theoretical perspective it will analyze limitations of expression and representation of 9/11. In the first chapter, the writings of Jacques Lacan and Jean Jacques Rousseau will enter into conversation with contemporary academics Slavoj Zizek and Fredric Jameson. This dialogue will examine ways in which theories of tragedy can be applied to help make sense of 9/11—specifically Lacan's theory of a passive audience and Rousseau's criticism of theater will be given particular attention in framing Jameson and Zizek's contemporary arguments. The second chapter will explore limitations of linguistic expression through the theory of Friedrich Nietzsche and the example of a passage on 9/11 by John Updike. The third chapter will briefly examine the role that social taboos and time sensitivity have played in the limitation of 9/11 narrative. The final chapter will offer close readings of two 9/11 novels, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Saturday*. This chapter will argue that the 9/11 novel is a special genre that transcends more scientific, analytical representational barriers and offers a valuable, unique portrayal of the tragic experience of 9/11.

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Short Titles

LD: Rousseau, Jean Jacques. "Letter to D'Alembert." In *Letter to D'Alembert and Writings for Theater*, edited by Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth, and Christopher Kelly, 237-352. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004.

EP: Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris: Les Editions du Seuil, 1986.

"DD": Jameson, Fredric. "The Dialects of Disaster." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:2 (Spring 2002): 297-304.

BT: Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*. Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited, 1967.

ELIC: Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

S: McEwan, Ian. *Saturday*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005.

Introduction

The Greek playwright Aeschylus created one of the first artistic representations of historical tragedy. His play, *Persians*, remains one that is studied for two reasons: it is the oldest surviving tragedy and, although written by a Greek, it offers the unique historical perspective of the Persian outsider. Unlike most Greek tragedies, *Persians* has a historical basis, the Persian invasion of Greece, and the pivotal battle of Salamis more specifically. Its grand scale and basis in history separate it from other classics like *Antigone* and *Oedipus*. William Arrowsmith claims that there is much to be learned from the “crucial otherness” (Arrowsmith, v) of the play. *Persians* is also unique for another reason: The audience witnesses the victory of the Greeks at the Strait of Salamis from the perspective of “the other”—the Persian regents, Xerxes, and Xerxes’ mother. *Persians* is a relatively short play (1,714 lines) and lacks the character development and complexities of other Greek tragedies. An impersonal, didactic drama, *Persians* warns its audience of the dangers of “hybris”—an “act of insolence or outrageousness” (Herington, 10). According to C. J. Herington the unconventional reality-based play was accepted into the Greek tradition because it was the very “incarnation” of “hybris-ate...on the grandest conceivable scale” (Herington, 10-11). The play marked a watershed moment in Greek theater because it broke the social taboo of limiting performances strictly to the “divine myth and heroic legend” (Herington, 11). Although often labeled a historical tragedy, Aeschylus’ primary purpose was not to document the details of the Persian invasion. This is clear because the play itself offers very few details about the actual invasion or the battle of Salamis. His intent, rather, seems to have been to create a dramatic work of art

that might serve a very basic, instructional function: a warning against the dangers of hubris (Herington, 5).

Since this initial western confluence of history and drama in Greek theater, the mixing of reality and fiction has come to occur on an everyday basis in the modern world. Today, history is interpreted by authors and historians, producers and directors, reporters and scholars and applied to a vast spectrum of generic categories. These modern artists and scholars owe a great deal to the ancient Greeks, whose religious rites, songs, dithyrambs, and tragedies continue to serve as influential moorings for modern writing. There is some element of Greek tragedy that still engages audiences and readers in the present day. Certainly, Greek tragedies are studied for a variety of reasons: their historical significance; their political or religious functions in Greek society; their impact on the literary consciousness later civilizations. In a political science class, Sophocles' Creon is emblematic of the flaws of a totalitarian monarchy; in a psychology class, Oedipus manifests Freud's theory of psycho-sexual development; in a women's studies class Antigone could be the destabilizing, feminist figure who disrupts familial norms¹; in a history class Shakespeare and Sophocles are brought into conversations about postcolonial Africa²; and in English classes tragic theorists from Aristotle to Terry Eagleton³ comprise the readings on the syllabus. What is most remarkable about ancient tragedy is its ability, millennia after its conception, to speak to the human condition, capture the individual's attention, and engage and affect an audience's emotions. This enduring power of Greek tragedy to move the human individual has captivated scholars

1. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

2. Ato Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 56-75.

3. Terry Eagleton. *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

for centuries. Great minds throughout history such as Aristotle, Rousseau, Lacan, and Nietzsche have devoted significant time and attention to Greek tragedy, analyzing its parts, how they function, and what kind of arousing, disturbing, or cathartic effect tragedy might evoke.

Applying the writings of tragic theorists to historical events is not a new idea. Mark Sanders, for example, applies a Hegelian reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* to South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Committee*. Sanders explains how a process of amnesty and forgiveness in South Africa has significant parallels with the idea of customary law that is so present in Sophocles' play. This essay will evaluate September 11th, 2001 through the lens Jacques Lacan, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Friedrich Nietzsche—examining ways in which narrative expression of 9/11 has been limited by linguistic and social conditions.

Chapter 1: Limitations of a Passive Audience

Unlike Plato who worries that theater will lead audiences to dangerous, radical emotions, or Adam Smith who praised theater for its ability to create meaningful social cohesion through shared feelings of empathy⁴, Rousseau believes that audiences are isolated in the theater and fail to feel these intense emotions. In his *Letter to D'Alembert* Jean Jacques Rousseau criticizes theater as a place that isolates its audience: "People think they come together in the theater, and it is there that they are isolated. It is there that they go to forget their friends, neighbors, and relations in order to concern themselves with fables, in order to cry for the misfortunes of the dead, or to laugh at the expense of

4. Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1875).

the living.”⁵ He believes that, unlike real life, theater creates a one-sided relationship between performers and spectators. Because the audience is not required to participate, he argues, any emotion of compassion felt by the audience is merely self-congratulatory. According to Rousseau this vain self-flattery engendered by the theater has a pernicious, effeminizing force:

The Stage is, in general a painting of the human passions, the original of which is in every heart. But if the Painter neglected to flatter these passions, the Spectators would soon be repelled and would not want to see themselves in a light which made them despise themselves. So that, if he gives an odious coloring to some passions, it is only to those that are not general and are naturally hated. Hence the Author, in this respect, only follows public sentiment. (“LD,” 263-264)

Rousseau imagines theater here as a malleable phenomenon completely dependent upon its own audience. For Rousseau drama depends so much on the public’s approval that it cannot challenge public sentiment, make controversial claims, or change moral behavior.

Rousseau is not of the mind that one goes to the theater to relieve stress or to purge troubling emotions by means of some sort of cathartic process that takes place on stage. He sees theater as a mechanism that cannot change sentiments but only reinforce existing feelings. Rousseau sees danger in this intensification of emotions that theater must, therefore, generate. These feelings of intensification are generated by the work of art as a whole, but vary dependent upon assumptions and presentiments individual audiences or audience members bring with them to the playhouse:

5. Jean Jacques Rousseau, “Letter to D’Alembert,” in *The Collected Writing of Rousseau Vol. 10: Letter to D’Alembert and Writings for Theater*, Allan Bloom et al., eds. (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004), 262. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “LD.”

In London, a Drama is interesting when it causes the French to be hated; at Tunis, the noble passion would be piracy; at Messina, a delicious revenge, at Goa, the honor of burning Jews. If an Author shocks these maxims, he will write a very fine play to which no one will go. ("LD," 266)

Although written in 1758, the aesthetic questions of Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert* are relevant to present day debates about the purpose and effect of theater and performance. In fact Rousseau might object more to the modern movie theater-going audiences of today than the eighteenth century theater-going audience of Europe. One could argue that the modern, dark movie theater experience is even more stifling to human interaction than an eighteenth century playhouse. Furthermore, the amount of action-adventure or fantasy-type movies now in theaters would have probably appalled Rousseau, who denounced the diversionary purpose of theater and denounced playwrights for being professional writers instead of leisured intellectuals ("LD," 307)

Adding to his veritable laundry list of objections to the theater in his *Letter to D'Alembert*, Rousseau claims that any pity evoked by theater is "a vain emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion which produced it;" he defames it for its basis in fictional "fables" and potential the potential sympathy it may cause audiences to feel for villains; he says "the continual emotion felt in the theater excites us, enervates us, enfeebles us, and makes us less able to resist our passions" ("LD," 268, 271-272, 293). Passions for Rousseau are dangerous inasmuch as they distract or prevent reason, which he claims is most readily achieved in "tranquil solitude" rather than a crowded theater ("LD," 295). To elucidate his already belaboured tirade against theater Rousseau imagines how a playhouse might change a hypothetical small town. He concludes that it would induce

five distinct “disadvantages:” a slackening of in the work ethic, a subsequent loss of time and money for individuals, a decrease in trade, establishment of new taxes, and an “introduction of luxury” (“LD,” 297). After these points, Rousseau makes a few somewhat unconvincing and dated arguments about a feared dependence on women and the immorality of actors and actresses. Finally, he ends with his vision of the Spartan ideal: a vision of “modest festivals and games without pomp...course feasts and fatiguing exercises” (“LD,” 349). Oddly, Rousseau spends only a brief moment describing this outdoor festival which he offers as an alternative to the denounced ethos of the theater. He makes the paradoxical claim that “in laborious idleness, everything was pleasure and entertainment” (“LD,” 349). While it is difficult to come to firm, specific conclusions about Rousseau’s Spartan utopia, three things are clear: Rousseau valued reason above passion, a steadfast work-ethic above aesthetic diversions, and community based gatherings above isolating entertainments.

After September 11th several scholars published articles about how the American response to 9/11 is influenced by cinema. The remarkably controversial and polemical Marxist Slavoj Zizek argues that Americans were awoken from a cinematic fantasy on 9/11. In his 2002 article “Welcome to the Desert of the Real” he references the American films *The Truman Show*, *Time Out of Joint*, and *The Matrix*, *Independence Day*, *Escape from New York*, and the James Bond film series, claiming that Americans, through these films, have either imagined living in an “irreal,” materialistic world or fantasized about terrifying moments of vulnerability on American soil (Zizek, 385-86). Zizek does not go so far as to explicitly link these films to the cause of what he calls an American “sphere” of isolation from global-political awareness (as Rousseau might have done), but he does

point to them as a marker of the American “holiday from history”—a term he borrows from George Will (Zizek, 388). Zizek actually takes Rousseau’s argument a step further saying,

So it is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality—in the late capitalist consumerist society, “real social life” itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbors behaving in “real” life as stage actors and extras (Zizek, 385-386).

The paranoid American fantasy of Zizek’s essay is one which Rousseau feared might occur in his beloved Geneva; it is an abandonment of Zizek’s “real” (Nietzsche’s Dionysian) and Rousseau’s ideal, rustic Spartan festival; it is transformation of the “real social life” into the imagined world of theater and cinema (Zizek, 386).

Centuries after Rousseau voiced his concerns about theater-going, Jaques Lacan expresses a similar concern for those theater-going audiences that witness tragedy in particular. The ones “who are moved” in Lacan’s understanding of tragedy are not the audience members but the members of the chorus. He elaborates on this passive role of the audience saying,

Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on stage. The Chorus takes charge of them. The emotional commentary is done for you...Therefore, you don’t have to worry if you don’t feel anything, the Chorus will feel in your stead. Why after all can one not imagine that the effect on you may be achieved, at least in small dose of it, even if you don’t tremble that much? To be honest, I’m not sure if the

spectator ever trembles that much. I am, however, sure that he is

fascinated by the image of Antigone.⁶

Rousseau is willing to believe that theater has some power to stir emotion in the audience; it just lacks the ability to motivate the audience to action (it may even encourage inaction—a real fear Rousseau harbors for his hardworking, protestant Geneva). Lacan, on the other hand, worries about whether or not the audience is emotionally moved at all. He argues that the audience, rather than feeling the classic tragic emotions of pity and fear, instead feels only a strange fascination with the tragic heroine, Antigone. The chorus for Lacan acts as a surrogate audience, one that shoulders the emotional weight of the tragic action so that the theater audience need not feel pity or fear.

A second point made by Lacan in the same lecture on Antigone is that “spectacle,” at least as far as tragedy is concerned, is of marginal significance to the purpose of the play (*EP*, 252). It is what is heard, rather than what is seen by the audience of tragedy that is of primary importance for Lacan: “On the level of what occurs in reality, an auditor rather than a spectator is involved” (*EP*, 253) Lacan offers an unforgettable, erotic metaphor to further explain how visual effects (what he calls “mise en scene”) only enhance the theatrical performance: “But we shouldn’t forget that [stagecraft/mise en scene] is only important—and I hope you will forgive the expression—if our third eye doesn’t get a hard on; it is, so to speak, jerked off a little with the mise en scene” (*EP*, 253). Lacan’s spectator, therefore, is almost completely disengaged from participation in the theatrical performance, playing no participatory role.

6. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Paris: Les Editions du Seuil, 1986), 252. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “*EP*.”

These tragic theories of the passivity of the audience are alarming in their assertion that tragic theater fails as a mode of conjuring significant, emotional responses. These theories of a passive theater-going audience unsettle common assumptions about the authenticity of emotional responses to tragic art. It would be even more alarming, however, were Lacan's phenomenon of the chorus to translate to real life tragedies; if somehow real life events were taken charge of by a surrogate audience which would not only direct and order our thoughts and feelings but rob us of the opportunity to feel the most profound human emotions of pity and fear *outside of the theater*. Shockingly enough, some scholars have made this seemingly avant-garde proposition in regards to the public's reaction to the events of September 11, 2001.

In the essay "The Dialects of Disaster," Fredric Jameson constructs an argument from a Marxist dialectical perspective about the nature of the American public's response to 9/11. The arguments he presents in this essay parallel Lacan's theory about Sophocles' *Antigone* in two important ways: 1. He claims the American public's emotional response is limited by the media 2. He argues that the spectacle of the event detracts from a sincere, aesthetic response. This theory has much in common with Lacan's theory about the relationship between chorus and audience if one allows the American public to fulfill the role of the audience and the media the role of the chorus.

Jameson doubts whether or not pity and sympathy are as "innate a feature of the human constitution" as Americans assume they are.⁷ He questions whether it "is natural and self-explanatory for masses of people to be devastated by catastrophe in which they have lost no one they know, in a place with which they have no particular connections"

7. Fredric Jameson, "The Dialects of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Spring 2002): 298. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "DD."

("DD," 298). Similar to Lacan's theory about the passivity of the audience, Jameson's essay articulates that, after 9/11, the public, inundated repetitively with guiding media slogans, is made to feel someone else's emotion. Jameson cites Guy Debord, noting that this notion of collective, passive persuasion is similar to Debord's concept of the "spectacle," a notion that the very nature of capitalist societies alienates and degrades human beings.⁸ The main point of his article, however, strongly parallels Lacan's notion of the surrogate audience:

[W]hat we feel are no longer our own feelings anymore but someone else's, and indeed, if we are to believe the media, everybody else's. This new inauthenticity casts no little doubt on all those theories of mourning and trauma that were recently so influential, and whose slogans one also finds everywhere in the coverage. ("DD," 299)

Jameson questions how genuine emotional responses to 9/11 were given what he calls the "unrealistic visuals of a special effects or computer graphics type" and the confusing "amalgamation of media sentiment and emotion" ("DD," 297). Essentially, Jameson is arguing that there was a two-layered boundary to interpreting or understanding 9/11 on an aesthetic level. Jameson focuses his paper on what he classifies as an obstacle to a universal sincerity of reaction on the part of the American public: "the media hype and the subsequent media patriotism" ("DD," 298). Jameson, citing the classic theory of Aristotle's *Poetics*, admits that the events of 9/11 have the ability to stir powerful, sincere emotions: "fear comes from putting myself in a victim's place, imagining the horror of the fire and the unimaginable height outside the windows; pity then sets in when we remember we are safe ourselves, and think of others who were not" ("DD," 298). His

8. Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle (2 February 2007)," <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/>

controversial claim is that the media “systematically use[s]” this “powerful vehicle for producing emotion” on its audience (“DD,” 299).

Jameson argues that this systematic manipulation of emotions stems from the abuse of the event as a spectacle. This second obstacle to sincere emotional response seems to be the graphic images of the 9/11 attacks played repeatedly on television and internet news channels. He argues that the transition from “real event” to mere “spectacle” occurs gradually over time as the media asserts its influence: “Once a nameless and spontaneous reaction has been named and classified, and named over and over again so insistently by all the actors of the public sphere, backed up by thinly veiled threats and intimidation, the name interposes a stereotype between ourselves and our thoughts and feelings” (“DD,” 299). Here, Jameson argues that a sense of intimidation propagated by popular culture can assume a certain amount of control over a public’s thoughts after a catastrophic event like 9/11.

Not only is the public dissuaded from hearing or reading personal, emotional responses to the tragedy, but is also made to believe that there is one unifying emotional response. Jameson goes on to question the validity of the “alleged universality of this collective feeling” (“DD,” 298). He objects to the hegemonic influence by the mainstream media. He might have preferred a more participatory and diverse forum for analyzing the events of 9/11. Anthological accounts of journalism and personal essays are an alternative source of 9/11 narrative that in many ways counters the idea of one universally patriotic reaction. While not as prolific as recent, bestselling fiction novels that have assumed the task of addressing September 11th, these anthologies bring a unique, multi-authoritative agency to the literary conversation about 9/11.

Several editors of collections of personal or eye-witness accounts of 9/11 speak to the diversity of individual emotional responses to the tragedy and the urgency of understanding the wide range of personal responses. In his introduction to *9/11 8:48am Documenting America's Greatest Tragedy* Ethan Casey has the following to say about the diversity of entries published within:

The book your holding is intended as a record of what a wide range of people in New York and Washington, around the United States, and worldwide saw, felt, believed, and wanted on and soon after September 11, 2001. The very nature of the event and its aftermath calls into question the moral authority of the long-reining punditocracy—the Experts—because we're so obviously all in this together. It's fitting—nay, it's urgently important—that this book has many authors, and that many, perhaps most, of them are claiming no authority but that of unmediated personal experience. (Casey, xi)

Casey's adamant call for a diverse, personal-narrative response to the tragedy and an attentive, critical interpretation of mainstream media is a sentiment shared not only by academics like Jameson but a variety of editors and publishers. Not long after 9/11 a score of anthologies of personal essays were compiled and published: Casey, editor of the electronic journal *Blue Ear*, along with Jay Rosen, chair of the NYU journalism department published *9/11 8:48am Documenting America's Greatest Tragedy* just nineteen days after the tragedy. Similar compilations *At Ground Zero 25 Stories from Young Reporters who were there*, David Talbot's *Afterwards: Stories and Reports from 9/11 and Beyond*, and *September 11th an Oral History* were all published in 2002. The

editors of each anthology each voice brief statements of purpose of varying outspoken intensity in the introductions to the anthologies. The most outspoken voice after Casey is that of the then editor-and-chief of *Salon.com*, David Talbot. Talbot claims that his anthology is a politically balanced and honest compilation of journalism on 9/11 saying, "Salon has always avoided party-line journalism, preferring a mix of voices and opinions to the political monotone of the left or right" (Talbot, x). While some of the essays in the anthology have a definite leftist slant (*Salon.com* staff writer Eric Boehlert writes about the "lynching" of a Florida university professor by a conservative "hysterical media")⁹, Talbot claims that the purpose of the collection is not to examine September 11th in geopolitical terms alone. Instead he claims that his book's value stems from its unconventionality and unauthoritative tone. Talbot and Casey are making a similar paradoxical claim: that the authority of these collections of personal narrative and apolitical journalism comes from the very fact that they are not authoritative.

The authors of the sections of these books are numerous and the topics and themes (although all related to 9/11 in some way) are various. For example, in *September 11th an Oral History*, one sales assistant gives up on her dream of living in New York City and decides, after 9/11, to move back to her hometown in Texas, but another contributor feels a patriotic call to stay in New York despite advice to the contrary (Murphy 133-140, 37-40). There is not an overarching message to these anthologies, only the unifying topic of 9/11. Some contributors are inspired with patriotism and determination, while others are disenchanted or confused. In this way, by letting witnesses of the tragedy speak for themselves, these collective publications address the

9. Eric Boehlert, "The Prime-Time Smearing of Sami Al-Arian," in *Afterwards: Stories and Reports from 9/11 and Beyond*, ed. David Talbot. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002).

problem raised by Rousseau and Žižek, and Lacan and Jameson. Unlike a Rousseauian spectator, the reader of *September 11th: An Oral History* must actively engage the text, reconciling different responses to a tragic event. The intentional incoherence of the anthological 9/11 text also offers a challenging alternative to the traditional, hegemonic messages of mass media that Jameson classifies as intrusive and controlling.

In his introduction to *9/11 8:48am Documenting America's Greatest Tragedy* Jay Rosen explains why he believes it so important to publish a book of collected essays about 9/11. He argues that television “appears to preempt [the] drive to conjure with reality” (Rosen, vii). He ascribes value to accounts written down and collected in a book because he claims “ordinary book-ness” will have an effect that will conjure reflection, rather than the reaction to the spectacle of a television news story. In this way he believes that his collection will provide more of a “human sense” of what happened on 9/11. Rosen and Casey dare readers to imagine the “unimaginable” and “unbelievable” by the simplest method possible: listening to the stories of “ordinary people” who were there. Casey and Rosen’s anthology of personal essays and Talbot’s collection of journalism of freelance writers, authors, professors, and staff writers and editors of *Salon.com* both call into question the narrative structure of the mainstream media. They offer an alternative to what Jameson calls the “media affirmation of collective unanimity of a vast tidal wave of identical reactions” (“DD,” 298). The reactions and conclusions of the readers of these anthologies could be completely different because there is an essential element of freedom and participation on the part of the reader. The reader absorbs a collection of narrations and forms individual conclusions rather than reading a unified, mainstream narration that presents predetermined conclusions for its audience.

One characteristic these anthological accounts share with mainstream media narratives is their availability through the internet. Both Rosen and Talbot mention the important role played by the internet in relation to their publications. Talbot, a visionary “webzine” creator, says that, “The web allows for an immediate, intimate, and reflective type of journalism not easily replicated by other media” (Talbot, x). As a medium for quickly and efficiently consolidating responses from geographically diverse locales the internet played a key role in the formation of Talbot’s book. Rosen too notes that his anthology is a “book of the Internet Age,” and gives thanks to all those who contributed to its formation (Rosen, viii). It seems relevant, then, to put these web-based conglomerations in conversation with the mainstream¹⁰, internet media they defy.

In response to Talbot’s and Casey’s claim that their books present a more diverse perspective than mainstream media, one might counter that mainstream media (for the purposes of this paper, CNN) too has the fathomless fluidity of the internet at its finger tips. How could established news networks fail to take advantage of the limitless possibilities the internet offers for covering an tragedy of such grand scale? According to a collection of essays edited by two criminal justice professors, Steven Chermak and Frankie Y. Bailey, the mainstream media failed to produce balanced reporting after 9/11, instead constructing a narrative of “superficial quality” and “puzzling unanimity” (Chermak, 5). Chermak and Bailey’s publication, *Media Representations of September 11*, claims that the mainstream media irresponsibly help to create and maintain a dominant and narrow national political ideology. One article of this collection of research-based journalism targets internet news specifically arguing that although the

10. For the purposes of this paper the term “mainstream media” refers to popular US news media providers. The most popular internet news source, according to the report *The State of the News Media* by The Project for Excellence in Journalism, is CNN.

internet has the “seductive possibility of a plurality of perspectives,” sites like CNN.com only essentially offer one mainstream perspective.¹¹ The study questions why the internet, a medium designed to take users “beyond narrative,” has been underutilized in this way by “static and circular” mainstream news websites (Brown, 116). One answer seems to be that many of the news stories on CNN’s websites are self-limiting because they are catering to an imagined, uninformed audience.

The greatest difference between CNN’s internet news coverage and the web-based anthological publications is their apparent purpose. CNN organizes its website in a way that seeks to simplify and explain the events of 9/11 while the collections of essays and journalism seek to complicate those events. One of the best examples of CNN’s organizing, explanatory approach to its internet coverage of 9/11 is the outline. The outline article on CNN.com is a brief article broken up under four or more headlines. These headlines are usually: “Summary,” “Update,” “Key Questions,” and “Impact,” but sometimes include headlines like “Who’s Who” and “Victims.” Often the substance under these headlines is so minimal and simplistic that it causes one to wonder what kind of audience is expected to be satisfied by such banality. Is it really worthwhile to point out in the “Who’s Who” section that George W. Bush is the U. S. President or within the “Impact” section that “[t]he events of September 11 exposed the vulnerability of the world’s greatest superpower, presenting the United States with the challenge of recovering emotionally and physically” or within the “Key Questions” section: “What will be the global effect?” These statements appear in a CNN.com article almost a month

11. Michelle Brown, Leia Fuzesi, Kara Kitch, and Crystal Spivey, “Internet News Representations of September 11: Archival Impulse in the Age of Information,” in *Media Representations of September 11*, ed. Steven Chermak, Frankie Y. Bailey, and Michelle Brown (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003).

after the attacks.¹² This article presents itself in an excessively organized and oversimplified format. While this focus on organization might be advantageous for finding the article on an internet search, the lack of content found in this kind of outline leaves the reader unsatisfied.

After the horrific terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, President Bush addressed the nation saying, “These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed. Our country is strong.”¹³ Then Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle had this to say of the attacks:

I think we are forever changed. You can't go to New York and not realize that that will leave an indelible mark not only on the city but on the country. We'll all remember September 11. We'll all remember these days.

And I think as we do, we have to change the way we conduct our lives.¹⁴

There is truth in both of these statements. But there are also limitations to these words. September 11 was a chaotic moment, and, certainly, many were frightened. There is no doubt that the United States is a “strong” country that witnessed incredible acts of heroism by those responding to the attacks at the World Trade, the Pentagon, and in United Flight 93. But Bush’s statement is unsatisfying in some ways. It leaves one wondering: were we really not frightened into chaos or retreat? Is it necessarily a bad thing if we were? In what ways is our

12. “Recovery: Top FAA security chief leaving, (5 October 2001),”
<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/10/05/rec.recovery.facts/index.html>

13. George W. Bush, “Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation (11 September 2001),”
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>

14. Tom Daschle, “Daschle: 'I think we are changed forever' (21 September 2001),”
<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/21/rec.daschle.cnn/index.html>

country strong? Likewise, one wonders about Daschle's words: does his use of the word "have" indicate that we must make a conscious choice to go about our daily lives in a different way, somehow forcing ourselves to remember that things ought to be considered differently in a post-9/11 world or does he mean that we were affected in ways by those traumatic attacks that have already changed us whether we like it or not?

Chapter 2: Limitations of the Words Themselves

As background material for an informed analysis of the ways in which language fails to convey meaning or limits expressive capabilities of individual's who attempt to talk or write about 9/11, one might consider one of the most famous theorists on the subject of language and tragedy, Friedrich Nietzsche. In his first publication, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche introduces a theory of tragedy that involves the interaction between two forces, the Dionysian and the Apollinian. He defines these two forces most succinctly as forms of art: "the Apollinian art of sculpture, and the nonimagistic, Dionysian art of music."¹⁵ He argues that these two opposing forces acting together are the essence of Greek tragedy. Nietzsche describes the Apollinian force as analogous to a dream-state for two reasons: 1. it acts as inspiration for the artist; he must first conceive his art or poetry in his mind in this way and 2. The Apollonian is a reality that even at its most intense moments can be recognized as "mere appearance" (*BT*, 34). To describe his vision of the force that opposes this illusory dream-state Nietzsche uses analogies of intoxication and music, describing what he calls the Dionysian. It would be foolish and misleading to try to ascribe any definition to the Dionysian, because Nietzsche describes

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited, 1967), 34. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "*BT*."

it as an ethereal force that transcends words. Nietzsche says we can steal “a glimpse into the nature of the Dionysian” by imagining the “blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man” at the sight of the collapse of the “principium individuationis” (*BT*, 36).

Nietzsche stresses this point regarding the failure of language to adequately convey the Dionysian. Under the influence of the Dionysian one “has forgotten how to walk and speak” and expresses himself not with words but “supernatural sounds” (*BT*, 37). Nietzsche argues that music is the medium that best conveys the primordial emotions of the Dionysian. And language can only attempt to describe music through “figurative speech,” removing it one more degree from capturing the Dionysian:

Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music,
because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction
and primordial pain in the heart of the primal unity, and therefore
symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena. (*BT*, 55)

If language is this far removed from expressing the Dionysian one wonders why Nietzsche chooses an art form which relies extensively on the use of language, Attic tragedy, as an ideal representation of the Dionysian. The reason is that he values the relationship between the Dionysian and the Apollonian in Greek tragedies. The intense, primal emotions of the Dionysian must be presented through some form of representation (in Nietzsche’s vision of Greek tragedy it is the satyr chorus). In this way the Dionysian will always be elusive because it must be betrayed by the Apollonian through which it is expressed.¹⁶

16. From a conversation with Vivasvan Soni, November, 2006.

Regardless of the difficulty in purely expressing the Dionysian, Nietzsche believed that the Greek tragedies that relied on the interaction between these two artistic energies had a valuable healing power to relieve feelings similar to those Hamlet experiences when faced with horrifying knowledge:

Here, when danger to his will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdities of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity.
(*BT*, 60)

Nietzsche goes on to argue, however, that this healing power of tragedy is lost when one removes the Dionysian energy from a tragedy. He argues this occurs when Euripides, speaking for “a newborn demon called Socrates,” changes tragic art forever by introducing rationality and the pursuit of knowledge as central aspects of his plays (*BT*, 90-91). In one of his most lucid passages in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche expounds on failings of this Socratic weltanschauung which champions “the unshakeable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of correcting it” (*BT*, 95). Nietzsche calls this modern scientific notion an “illusion” that inevitably dead-ends due to its insufficiencies and then turns to art as “protection and remedy” (*BT*, 98). Nietzsche is saying that science and logic fail to make sense of horrific, chaotic, and incomprehensible events. In many ways to many people September 11, 2001 was a horrifying,

chaotic, and incomprehensible day. In some ways political, academic, and scientific analyses of 9/11 fail to soothe the pain, confusion, and turmoil caused on that day.

It is so difficult to talk about September 11 not only because it is a sensitive subject, but because tragedies of such proportion are hard to describe in words. The phrase “words cannot describe” or “loss for words” are understandably used very frequently in response to questions about emotional responses to the 9/11 attacks or the acts of heroism on that day. How does one even refer to September 11, 2001? “The tragic events of 9/11,” “the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon,” “the day of terror,” or simply “9/11”? No single phrase captures the intensity and profundity of the events and emotions of that day. We have come to casually use the shortest possible euphemism “9/11” in daily discourse, perhaps because we do not want to dwell on the dark severity and horror of that day. On November 5, 2001, CNN ran a segment discussing the labeling of September 11. “Although media coverage has been virtually non-stop,” says CNN anchor Paula Zahn in the video, “the events of that day have defied a simple label.” CNN correspondent Jean Moos goes on to say, “It seems the bigger the loss, the more likely we're left at a loss for words. From ‘disaster’ to ‘acts of mass murder,’ even our vocabulary seems ‘jolted by attack.’”¹⁷ And it is not only words that fail to capture September 11, 2001, but any medium. In a CNN segment that aired on August 24, 2002, CNN reporter

17. Paula Zahn and Jean Moos, “Words Fail Us: What to Call America's Most Recent 'Day of Infamy'? (5 November 2001),” <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0111/05/ltm.06.html>

Sanjay Gupta said, “I find myself at a loss for words. I still do, when I think about this. It was too enormous. The pictures didn't do it justice.”¹⁸

Words, pictures, videos, art—no single medium seems capable of conveying such an incredible tragedy. But writers, journalists, correspondents, photographers, New Yorkers, and Americans did try to put 9/11 in words. Take the eloquent, prolific, and acclaimed author John Updike for example. If anyone could describe 9/11, surely he would be the one. And he did in the September 2001 issue of *The New Yorker*. In a brief account of his experience of watching the attacks on the World Trade Center unfold, Updike offers a descriptive, literary slant, saying, for example: “Smoke speckled with bits of paper curled into the cloudless sky, and strange inky rivulets ran down the giant structure’s vertically corrugated surfaces.” Eloquent, to be sure, but how effective or accurate is Updike’s account? Leon Wieseltier attacks what he calls the “limitations of literariness” of these lines arguing that

Such writing defeats its representational purpose, because it steals attention away from reality and toward language. It is provoked by nothing so much as its own delicacy. Its precision is a trick: it appears to bring the reader near, but it keeps the reader far.¹⁹

Wieseltier continues his close reading on Updike’s essay, carefully criticizing Updike’s analogy of an elevator falling for the collapse of the towers and the use of the word “tinkle” as one that acts as a “small salvation from the horror” (Wieseltier, 50). He then questions whether Updike’s description of the “glorious” weather is appropriate when

19. Sanjay Gupta, “CNN Presents: ‘America Remembers, Part II’ (24 August 2002),” <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0208/24/cp.00.html>

¹⁹ Leon Wieseltier, “Clippings,” *Washington Diarist* (8 October 2001): 50

describing the “deathscape” of Manhattan and concludes by catching perhaps another error in Updike’s final lines: “A walk on Mantague Street, Updike recalls, ‘renewed the impression that, for all its failings, this is a country worth fighting for.’ Amen, amen, amen; but a principle is not an impression” (Wieseltier, 50). John Updike’s essay is an example of a sincere and thoughtful attempt to depict the attacks on the World Trade Center, but, at least for Wieseltier, is unsatisfactory and distracting. Wieseltier, like Nietzsche, questions the capacity of words to convey deep impressions of a tragic experience. His insightful, close reading makes one question whether he is being ‘moved’ by the events of 9/11 or by the words describing those events. Updike’s words fail because their literary descriptiveness implies a kind of finality and definiteness—but they certainly do not “capture” the breadth or detail of the tragedy with any sort of irrevocable finality.

Perhaps definiteness is something that simply cannot or should not be sought after in describing the tragic events of September 11, 2001. In his essay “The Novel is Dead, Long Live the Novel,” author Brock Clarke champions this perspective.²⁰ Centering his argument on criticism of Tom Wolfe’s nonfiction texts and Rachel Donadio’s *New York Times Book Review* essay, “Truth is Stronger than Fiction.”²¹ Clarke argues that Donadio’s claim that “no work of fiction has *captured* our historical moment” is misleading because it implies that the purpose of fiction literature is to define or neatly categorize contemporary society. Clarke says this notion “betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of what fiction can do to and with the world, and what the world does

20. Brock Clarke, “The Novel is Dead, Long Live the Novel (13 November 2006),” <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2006/summer/clarke-novel-dead/>

21. Rachel Donadio, “Truth is Stronger than Fiction (7 August 2005),” <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B03E6D8103CF934A3575BC0A9639C8B63>

to it.” Clarke speaks of literature both fiction and nonfiction when he asserts that “In wanting our literature to capture our historical moment, we are asking, basically, for our literature to simplify our historical moment.” Clarke enthusiastically champions fiction literature for the very reason that it is fiction; because it has the power to create “a world which evokes our own world’s confusions and contradictions without attempting to be a replica of our world.” Under this theory, to talk directly of the terrorist attacks of September 11, to attempt to define them, or even describe them in a straightforward way is usually a failure. The exception to this would be describing the events in a multitude of straightforward ways, from the varied perspectives of personal accounts without ascribing authority to any individual opinion. This is the intention of Talbot’s compilation of essays for *Salon.com*. He prefaces the essays by saying, “Here, in these pages, is a scrapbook of living history, eyewitness accounts, and impassioned essays that capture that millennial fever of 9/11 and the days that followed” (Talbot, xi).

* * *

In her essay “Language and Nihilism: Nietzsche’s Critique of Epistemology” Tracy B. Strong offers a detailed analysis of Nietzsche’s theories and work on the subject of language. She opens her essay by saying: “That language both gives us a world and at the same time necessarily poses (usually unrecognized) limits to that world may now be considered a generally recognized principle of linguistics and the philosophy of language” (239). What is interesting to Strong is not simply that language fails as a perfect medium of communication, but how and why language fails or succeeds in different ways. Weiseltier is right to criticize the diction and tone of Updike’s essay. But what Weiseltier’s critique does not offer is an alternative style or example of narrative

form. After reading Weiseltier's critical appraisal, the reader recognizes his contentions as valid, but is left wondering how Updike could have done better. Perhaps it was simply too early, weeks after the tragedy, to publish this sort of essay—one which grapples with the task of putting into words the extreme, sometimes chaotic, emotional reaction to 9/11.

A crucial point of Strong's essay is that whether we like it or not, we are stuck with language and all its limitations: "The choice for Nietzsche is not prison or freedom. But limitation of the chaos or not being" (Strong, 241). According to this logic, we must be bold enough to write and talk about chaotic and traumatic events no matter how delicate, sensitive, and controversial they are. Strong summarizes Nietzsche saying, "The practical disjuncture between words and life is not the result of the simple misuse of words; it is inherent in the natural operation of the language" (Strong, 244). In this vein one might read Updike's text more sympathetically, ascribing the shortcomings of his passage to inherent linguistic limitations rather than creative or artistic failings. His essay should not be seen as dogmatic insight into a kind of universal experience that was September 11, but rather as the first effort or the first step in an evolving organism of narrative that would adapt to social criticism and political atmosphere over time.

Chapter 3. Limitations of Social Taboos

Time certainly has had a major influence on the types of narrative published since September 11, 2001. Immediately after the attacks shocked Americans tuned in to CNN or Fox News for hours, trying to understand what had just taken place. Accounts like Phil

Oye's are representative of this feeling of shock and the almost insatiable desire for news which, in many cases, accompanied it:

I make my way home and once I reach home and sit down and watch 15 hours of CNN. And forget about checking e-mail until 1 am. All in all, an absolutely amazing day. I can't believe how calm I was.²²

But not soon after 9/11 Americans started searching for alternative forms of narrative. It was not that television and internet media failed to cover the tragedy extensively enough, but that Americans sought different narrative forms that might better satisfy a craving for more sophisticated, philosophical, and radical prose or perhaps a different form of media altogether. In a 2002 article published by *MediaCentral* Kenneth Gordon notes that "Ever since the September 11 attacks sent readers looking for more depth and analysis than they were getting on Fox News or CNN, books [sic] from *The New Yorker* to *Mother Jones* have seen gains in newsstand sales, subscriptions, and ad pages."²³

According to the same article, the Atlantic Quarterly saw its "single-copy sales hit a sell-through peak of 52.4 percent and circulation [rise] 5.1 percent" and, in December of 2001 *The New Yorker* produced a profit for the first time in eighteen years (Gordon, 34).

It was not until 2006 that feature films about 9/11 were produced (*United 93* in April and *World Trade Center* in August). Paul Greengrass said that in every interview he had about the film he was asked whether or not it was too soon to bring those events to

22. Phil Oye, "Trade Center Survivor Recounts Harrowing Escape (20 September 2001)," <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/vic.personal.account.cnn/index.html>

23. Kenneth Gordon, "Serious Gains for Serious Mags - America's taste trending toward serious periodicals - Industry Overview (1 September 2003)," http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3065/is_9_32/ai_107024726/pg_2

the screen. He said the idea that it was too soon was “nonsense” and mentioned that the press has been talking about the events since the day they transpired.²⁴ The notion that there is a necessary or proper amount of time needed before a tragedy should be represented as art is not a new idea. One of the first examples of this delicate principle of time-sensitivity is the public reaction to the Greek play “The Capture of Miletus.” Herodotus tells of this play by Phrynichus that depicted the capture of the Greek-friendly city by the powerful, invading Persian empire and the disapproving political action taken in its wake:

The Athenians made clear their deep grief for the taking of Miletus in many ways, but especially in this: when Phrynichus wrote a play entitled The “Capture of Miletus” and produced it, the whole theater fell to weeping; they fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmas for bringing to mind a calamity that affected them so personally, and forbade the performance of that play forever.²⁵

To some people Greengrass is a modern day Phrynichus. While his movie has received criticism and praise, the task of classifying it as either inappropriately premature or tactfully insightful is largely subjective.

There were some who paid dearly for speaking or writing words that were considered too unpatriotic or avant-garde in the days and months after the tragedy. The most well-known examples are the talk show host Bill Maher and the *New York Times* writer Susan Sontag. Maher, on the first broadcast of his late night show *Politically*

24. Lew Irwin, “Studio Briefing (26 May 2006),” <http://imdb.com/news/sb/2006-05-26#film4>

25. Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus* (4 October 2000), <http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.6.vi.html>

Incorrect after September 11th stated that the acts of the terrorists were “not cowardly.”²⁶

In a conversation with conservative author Dinesh D’Souza, Maher said the following after D’Souza said the terrorist attackers were “warriors” and that the American people “shouldn’t blame themselves”:

But also, we should -- we have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly. You're right.²⁷

This comment, broadcast nationally on ABC just six days after the attacks sparked a firestorm of criticism that led to the cancellation of Maher’s show in June of 2002. Maher’s show always lived up to its name by offering provocative and outspoken opinions on political issues. But these comments overshadowed all his other political dissensions specifically because they were given so soon after the tragedy. Looking back at his comments Maher commented on this time-sensitive phenomenon with Larry King soon after his show was cancelled:

I thought it was interesting about two weeks ago, Bush called the terrorists very clever killers. And I thought, boy, the last time I complimented them, I lost a show, which really just shows you how much things have changed

26. Stanley Fish, “Condemnation without Absolutes (15 October 2001),” <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F50617FE385B0C768DDDA90994D9404482>

27. “CNN American Morning with Paula Zahn: Talk with Bill Maher (16 December 2002),” <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0212/16/ltn.15.html>

in the eight months since September 11th. And it really is about timing.

You know, what I said -- if I said it today, no one would even blink.²⁸

Maher here discusses a fascinating linguistic phenomenon: linguistic definitions and connotations are inseparably linked to the time of their delivery. In the immediate days after September 11th, words written and spoken on that theme were scrutinized under a powerful microscope, not just by corporations like ABC, but by the government and the public as well.

In his essay “Politically (In)corrected: Electronic Media Self-Censorship Since the 9/11 Attacks,” Bruce Drushel names three forces of “expression inhibition” since September 11th 2001: “coercive government officials, timorous media organizations, and perceived pressure for conformity from the public at large.”²⁹ Drushel argues that in the atmosphere of crisis that followed 9/11 the government was not the only censor of speech and press. Newspapers like the Oregon’s the *Daily Courier* and the *Texas City Sun* both fired writers who publicly criticized President Bush soon after 9/11 (Drushel, 206).

Rather than blaming newspapers or television networks, Drushel blames a social phenomenon known to communication theorists as the “Spiral of Silence” (Drushel, 208). This theory states that people are acutely aware of perceived social beliefs and greatly fear social ostracism and isolation. This awareness and fear lead to an inhibition of self-expression. Drushel concludes by championing government intervention to insure balanced and free expression in a “free marketplace of ideas” analogous to government intervention that insures a free commercial marketplace (Drushel, 215).

28. CNN Larry King Live, “Interview with Bill Maher (24 May 2002),”
<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/020524/lkl.00.html>

29. Bruce E. Drushel, “Politically (In)corrected: Electronic Media Self-Censorship Since the 9/11 Attacks,” in *Language, Symbols and the Media*, ed. Robert E. Denton Jr. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004).

Chapter 4: The 9/11 Novel: Filling the Void

When novels about September 11th started being published there were outcries from intellectual circles about their inappropriateness. Many seemed to think many years ought to pass before fiction writers would be able to tackle the topic adequately. A 2002 article from the Guardian addresses the immediate shock 9/11 instilled in fiction writers:

After a couple of hours at their desks, on September 12, 2001, all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation. I remember thinking that I was like Josephine, the opera-singing mouse in the Kafka story: Sing? “She can't even squeak.”³⁰

By 2005, novels like Ian McEwen’s *Saturday* and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, had already been published. Freideric Beigbeder’s *Window’s of the World*—one of the most highly criticized novels for its direct engagement with 9/11—was also published in 2005. Jay McInerney’s 9/11 novel *The Good Life* hit bookstores in 2006. Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* is another 9/11 novel, poised to come out in June 2007. According to a 2005 *Hearld Tribune* article “Words like ‘exploitative’ and ‘tasteless’ are launched like righteous missiles” in the direction of fiction authors whose novels center on themes from 9/11 or the tragedy itself.³¹ While there has been debate about the tactfulness of writing fiction about 9/11 in general, the majority of the criticism seems to have fallen on the shoulders of Jonathan Safran Foer, whose second novel was one of the first to deal directly with imagined victims of 9/11.. The salvo of criticism launched in Foer’s direction is, in part, due to the relatively brief time in which it was

30. Martin Amis, “The Voice of the Lonely Crowd (1 June 2002),” <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,725608,00.html>

31. Chris Cleave, “Too Soon to Write the Post-9/11 Novel? (12 September 2005),” <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/09/12/opinion/edcleave.php>

published after September 11th, 2001. Compared to other national and international tragedies, the period of time before the publication of literature has been relatively brief as an Australian newspaper reporter points out,

All Quiet on the Western Front appeared 11 years after the end of World War I for example, while *Catch-22* took 16 years to gestate and capture the absurdities of World War II. One of the seminal novels about Vietnam, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, appeared in 1990, roughly two decades after the events it portrayed.³²

The criticism of Foer's 9/11 novel was not limited to accusations of exploitation or gaucherie, however. Foer also employs a post-modern writing style that has raised objections, most famously for the flip-book of the body "falling up" from the World Trade Center at the end of the novel. It has also been criticized for its narrative style, its precious tone, and its ambivalence. One of the most caustic critiques comes from *New York Times* book reviewer Walter Kirn. In his review Kirn criticizes the novel for at least four reasons.³³ He first accuses *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* of having a cold message, saying the novel takes on a grand subject matter "while showing no passion, giving no offense, adopting no point of view and venturing no sentiment more hazardous than that history is sad and brutal and wouldn't it be nicer if it weren't." After criticizing the novel for this ambivalence, he complains about the narrative style. He finds the child-narration to be verbose and annoying, the kind that would "drive adults to the bar for a stiff drink." Thirdly, Kirn finds it ironic that a novel that purports to be avant-garde

32. Edward Wyatt, "9/11: Fact Meets Fiction (19 March 2005),"

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/Books/911-fact-meets-fiction/2005/03/18/1110913752579.html>

33. Walter Kirn, "Everything is Included (3 April 2005),"

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9407EFDF173FF930A35757C0A9639C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>

delivers, in fact, a clichéd message. He finds fault in what he identifies as a philosophical triteness of one-liners found in the novel claiming that these observations come at the reader like “a rain of truisms, aphorisms, nuggets of wisdom and deep thoughts tossed off by Oskar and the other characters as if they were trying to corner a market in ironic existentialist greeting cards.” Kirn continues to attack the novel for its triteness, arguing that it boils down to the childish notion of imagining that “time could somehow run backward as in a movie and dead people could hop up and not be dead...how incredible that would be. Sept. 11 would never have happened!” Finally, Kirn argues that the consequence of this passionless, trite, annoying novel is that it actually restores established attitudes instead of challenging them or revealing new ones.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is much more than a fable with a moral like an “overstuffed fortune cookie” as Kirn suggests. First, Kirn complains of the annoying tone of the narration of a curious nine-year old child who is constantly asking questions or thinking up bizarre ideas. But he drops his analysis there. He does not consider that Foer might have intended for his young, precocious narrator to be a little irritating. In fact, the decision to narrate the novel from a purely innocent point of view is an ingeniously clever technique. It allows Foer to comment on the extremely sensitive subjects of loss and grief without the screens and limitations of socially accepted norms of behavior. The verbose, probing narration of the nine-year-old Oskar actually enhances the reader’s ability to engage in the content, themes and questions the novel has to offer. Oskar, because of his young age, can challenge the reader’s assumptions of what is appropriate or normal by making seemingly shocking declarations. Oskar does just that in a conversation with his mother:

“Dad had a spirit,” she said, like she was rewinding a bit of our conversation. I told her, “He had cells, and now they’re on the rooftops, and in the river, and in the lungs of millions of people around New York, who breathe him every time they speak!” “You shouldn’t say things like that.” “But it’s the *truth!* Why can’t I say the *truth!*” Your getting out of control.” “Just because Dad died, doesn’t mean you can be illogical, Mom.” Yes, it does.” “No, it doesn’t.”³⁴

Here, Foer draws attention, via the character of Oskar’s mother, to the social forms and affectations that threaten to set limits on Oskar’s response to tragedy. A young, precocious narrator like Oskar can straddle the boundaries of socially accepted behavior. His young age vindicates him, to a certain extent, of his offensive remarks, and, at the same time, his intelligence wins him enough respect to be taken seriously by the reader. Kirn makes the mistake of confusing an annoying narrator with an annoying novel. The novel really would be trite if Oskar did not make contentious statements (e.g. that people breathe his father every day) or develop seemingly ridiculous ideas for inventions (e.g. skyscrapers that are built into the ground).

The most outlandish of Kirn’s claims is that the novel is passionless. Foer specifically composes a protest against such a passionless, analytical, universal understanding of 9/11 at various moments in his novel. One example of Foer’s foray against the passionless and analytical is the section about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Kirn disregards the allusions to Hiroshima and Dresden simply as “very bad explosions” that are “thrown in” by Foer, but, certainly, Foer did not weave these

35. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 169. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “*ELIC*.”

incidents into the novel simply to fill space. The brief section that deals with Hiroshima is an interview between an unnamed interviewer and a witness to the Hiroshima bombing named Tomoyasu. The interviewer begins by asking Tomoyasu if he can describe “the events of that morning” (*ELIC*, 187). He continues to ask Tomoyasu about tangible effects of the bombing that happened on that day. Take, for example the following dialogue:

Interviewer: Did you see the mushroom cloud?

Tomoyasu: No, I didn’t see the cloud.

Interviewer: You didn’t see the mushroom cloud?

Tomoyasu: I didn’t see the mushroom cloud. I was trying to find Masako.

Interviewer: But the cloud spread all over the city?

Tomoyasu: I was trying to find her. They told me I couldn’t go beyond the bridge. I thought she might be back home, so I turned around. I was at the Nikitsu Shrine when the black rain started falling from the sky. I wondered what it was.

Interviewer: Can you describe the black rain?

Tomoyasu: I waited for her in the house. I opened the windows... (*ELIC*, 188)

In this scene the eager interviewer is interested in analyzing the event from a detached, objective perspective. He asks about material and visual aspects of the event that a larger, global audience would be curious about. Tomoyasu, however, is interested in telling *her* intimate story. Her story is that of a personal search for a loved one, and the intense feelings of grief and loss that come after her daughter dies in her arms. After her moving

account, the details about the shape of the mushroom cloud or the color of the rain seem trivial. As the interview progresses Tomayasu does not even seem to hear the questions the interviewer is asking. Her sole focus becomes her story—the search for her child. This passage illustrates the gap between a news-media representation of tragedy and a personal response. Tomayasu naturally tells her story, even when coaxed to recount a more aloof narrative.

Foer comes back to this personal/objective dichotomy in a conversation Oskar has with his mute grandfather who has been absent his entire life. Oskar confides in this strange man (without knowing that he is his grandfather), telling him about his unending search for information about his father who died in the World Trade Center on 9/11. Oskar explains how he has to make “Google” searches in foreign languages to search for images of the attacks because American sites are less graphic. It is possible that Foer intends this passage as a minor jab at US censorship of images like bodies falling from the towers, but more likely the passage’s primary purpose is to contrast Oskar’s personally connected relationship with 9/11 to those of people around the world who are not as directly connected to the tragedy. Oskar says, “It makes me incredibly angry that people all over the world can know things that I can’t, because it happened *here*, and happened to *me*, so shouldn’t it be *mine*” (*ELIC*, 256). In this scene Foer creates a portrait of a young boy who lost his father in 9/11. Here, and throughout the novel, he *shows* the reader—through drawings, photographs, blank pages, and the words themselves—the complex, frustrating feelings of a victim’s family member. As in the Tomayasu passage, in this passage Foer reflects on what it means to make a traumatic experience accessible. The tragic effect in this passage is that Oskar is dispossessed of an intimacy he feels

toward 9/11. The fact that people all over the world can casually learn about and reflect on a tragedy with which he is so personally connected bothers him severely. Oskar sees himself as someone who stands in contrast to those that experience what Jameson would call an aesthetic response of unanimity to a media spectacle. Through the medium of the novel, Foer loosely poses the question Jameson asks specifically in his academic essay: “is [it] natural and self-explanatory for masses of people to be devastated by catastrophe in which they have lost no one they know, in a place with which they have no particular connections” (“DD,” 298).

Michito Kakutani, a *New York Times* writer, criticizes *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* for being “contrived and improvisatory, schematic and haphazard.” He argues that Foer is trying to employ a kind of magical realism similar to that of Gabriel Garcia Márquez. He cites Foer’s use of pictures, blank pages, and the surreal episode of the protagonist’s grandfather becoming mute as evidence of Foer’s foray into a genre which, according to Kakutani, Foer enters clumsily at best:

Clearly Mr. Foer has used these techniques as writers in Latin America and Eastern Europe have used them to try to get traction on horrific events that defy both reason and conventional narrative approaches, but all too often his execution verges on the whimsical rather than the galvanic or persuasive. In fact, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* tends to be at its most powerful when Mr. Foer abandons his willful use of experimental

techniques and simply writes in an earnest, straightforward manner, using his copious gifts of language to limn his characters' state of mind.³⁵

But some of the most straightforward sections of the book are those that use Foer's innovative, imagistic techniques. There is, for example, an emotionally charged letter written by Oskar's mute grandfather to his dead son. Oskar's grandfather hurriedly tries to explain his reunion with his wife and grandson. Unable to speak, he presses numbers on the telephone trying to spell words in a vain attempt reconnect with his estranged wife. Then, in one of the most moving moments of the book, the grandfather begins to run out of space on the page for his writing. The text on the page of his letter (and on the page of Foer's novel) becomes more and more compact until it finally becomes an illegible cluster of overlapping words—which become more compact until the page is almost completely black with ink. Foer could have traditionally expressed the anxious desperation the grandfather feels to reconnect with his family, but the modern, visual effect of the jumbled words on the page is more effective—greatly enhancing the emotional intensity of the passage. For Foer to explain in the traditional, “straightforward” way that the frantic, old man ran out of space while writing his letter would not convey the same concentration of emotion because the reader would remain a passive assessor of the grandfather's plight. In this passage, however, the reader becomes more than just a disengaged evaluator of a text; he becomes a kind of archeologist who witnesses first-hand the precious pieces of epistolary evidence that come together to construct Foer's novel.

35. Michito Kakutani, “A Boy's Epic Quest, Borough by Borough (22 March 2005),” <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/22/books/22kaku.html?ex=1174449600&en=f83e3d4d168c2f62&ei=5070>

A more conservative writer might claim that pictures and textual irregularities don't belong in a novel. Indeed John Updike called for less graphic effects in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* saying, "a little more silence, a few fewer messages, less graphic apparatus might let Foer's excellent empathy, imagination, and good will resonate all the louder." Kukatani and Updike are bothered by the unconventionality and scattered organization of Foer's novel. One should consider, however, that the novel is grappling with the most exceptionally chaotic moment in recent history. It is Foer's intention to communicate that sense of disorganization through a multilayered interweaving of avant-garde techniques and traditional prose. He avoids the traditional, straightforward literariness of Updike's passage that eloquently describes 9/11 in *The New Yorker*. Instead, Foer, in Nietzschean fashion, draws attention to the limitation of the descriptive power of words.

The most direct example of this commentary on linguistic limitation is a passage in which the mute grandfather meets the woman that will become his wife. They sit together at a diner. She is doing all the talking. Finally, he explains by writing in his daybook that he is mute. She cries, then uses the last page of the book to write, "Please marry me" (*ELIC*, 32). Because he is now out of paper the mute can only flip back to what he has previously written in the book. Thinking the command is a joke, he points to a page on which "Ha ha ha!" is written (*ELIC*, 33). The woman continues the conversation by pointing to the same words she has written on the page:

I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got." She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me." I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm not sure but it's late." She flipped forward and pointed at,

“Please marry me,” and this time put her finger on “Please,” as if to hold down the page and end the conversation, or as if she were trying to push through the word and into what she really wanted to say. (*ELIC*, 33)

Because he is out of paper, Oskar’s grandfather can only convey approximations of what he wants to say. One of the fascinating aspects of this passage, though, is how the grandfather’s approximations are essentially equivalent to what his spoken response would likely be. Although his response, “I’m sorry, this is the smallest I’ve got” in a literal sense is unrelated to the woman’s command, it effectively communicates his apologetic hesitancy. Oskar’s grandfather, a sculptor, thinks later in the same passage, “I could have released myself from the marble of myself” (*ELIC*, 33). Through the lens of Nietzschean tragic theory, the grandfather is one who seeks the ecstasy of the Dionysian. He wants to escape the marble of his Apollinian shell. The fact that he has lost the ability to talk is further evidence for the link to Nietzsche’s theory. Nietzsche describes the person who experiences Dionysian ecstasy as one who has “forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing” (*BT*, 37). Foer grants a complicated, cynical angle on this Nietzschean parallel, however, as the grandfather struggles through a broken marriage and grieves for his lost son later in the novel.

The sometimes chaotic, fragmented structure of Foer’s representation of tragedy exposes the limitations of science and logic that Nietzsche writes about. In one section of the novel, Oskar is trying to eavesdrop on a conversation his mother is having with a doctor about Oskar’s grief-stricken condition. Oskar can only catch parts of the conversation. Foer expresses this by scattering the audible words and phrases on the page. A brief sample looks something like this:

What?

what it sounds like.

even a hospital, in the way

we usually think

safe environment

home is a safe environment

Who the hell do you think you are? (ELIC, 206).

The result is an only partially coherent representation of the conversation. The reader, like Oskar, is forced to try to make sense of the evidence presented. In many ways similar to his precocious protagonist, Foer unconventionally tells it like it is, letting the words on the page directly represent the words Oskar overhears. Kakutani would classify this unusual textual representation as one of the novel's less "straightforward" moments. But what could be more straightforward than presenting the exact words that were overheard, without description or judgment—the only possible way would be to replicate their audio quality. The reader again sees the world exactly from Oskar's perspective. Foer's graphic and textual representations show the reader what this perspective is like in ways that words would not be able to describe.

Foer's 9/11 novel might not offer a logical, political analysis of September 11th, but it does not lack a political function. Christian Meier traces the political function of tragic art back to its inception. He writes that tragedy in ancient Greece "served to refresh, regenerate and further develop the ethical basis of politics" (Meier, 43). He further speculates on the possible function of Greek tragedy saying, "[t]ragedy would have prevented the Athenians from exhausting their energies in the political field and from adopting too isolated a view of politics" (43). He bases this historical insight on Jean-Pierre Vernant's theory that "tragedy [does] not reflect reality but rather

problematize[s] it” (Meier, 42). Meier says that the Greeks would view tragedies primarily as citizens. The plays themselves would not necessarily be political in themselves but they would serve the political function of granting the citizen a kind of distance from the everyday. By producing a kind of existential, reflective effect on the viewer, a tragedy would enable citizens to broaden their perspective when considering important political issues.

Ian McEwan’s post-9/11 novel, *Saturday*, is not primarily a political novel, although politics is often at the forefront of the characters’ minds. McEwan, like Foer, uses 9/11 as a backdrop for commentary on the age-old conversation about what it means to represent and experience tragedy and trauma. The novel follows the thoughts and actions of an English neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, on a Saturday shortly before the United States and Great Britain were to send their first troops to Iraq. Henry has “confused and shifting” ideas about the coming invasion of Iraq, but constantly worries about the coming war and has several political conversations with family members.³⁶ One of the pervading themes of the novel is the difficulty in filtering and interpreting politics in a post-9/11 world. At the beginning of the novel Henry witnesses a plane crash from his bedroom window. Immediately, his thoughts are afflicted by the possibility of terrorism:

Henry knows it’s a trick of vision that makes him think he can see an outline now, a deeper black shape against the dark. The howl of the burning engine continues to rise in pitch...That is the other familiar element—the horror of what he can’t see. Catastrophe observed from a

36. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 62. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “S.”

safe distance. Watching death on a large scale but seeing no one die. (*S*, 16)

Henry's imagination runs wild, speculating on possible horrifying scenarios that might be happening inside the plane. He later finds out that the plane was a Russian cargo plane that had a malfunction, and that terrorism had no role in the plane's crash landing. Through this example, McEwan comments on the haunting effects of anxiety terrorism causes. It changes the whole way in which Henry thinks, troubling his thoughts with complicated questions that defy simple answers. Terrorism becomes part of a daily, mental checklist of items Henry considers (*S*, 202). It also spurs what becomes a divisive argument between Henry and his outspoken, liberally-minded daughter (*S*, 191).

As a neurosurgeon Henry is used to being able to understand and control the human mind. Not only is he frustrated by the anxieties of a new world order, but he is also a pragmatist who struggles to understand the literature his artistically talented daughter recommends for his reading. He wonders what practical function could possibly be gleaned from the abstract symbols of fiction: "The times are strange enough. Why make things up?" (*S*, 66). He finds his daughter's opinion that "people can't live without stories, [to be] simply not true. He is living proof" (*S*, 68). At the end of the novel, however, Henry witnesses the enchanting power of poetry.

Baxter, a criminal with a degenerative brain disorder, breaks into Henry's home after being involved in a car accident with Henry earlier in the novel. Using his medical knowledge of the human brain, Henry was able to outwit and escape from Baxter after the car accident, but now finds himself helpless as Baxter, a man with no future, threatens to rape Henry's daughter, Daisy. Just when all seems hopeless for Henry and his family,

his daughter recites from memory a poem that resonates with Baxter. Moved by the poetry, and thinking that the poem had been written by Henry's daughter (it was actually "Dover Beach") Baxter has a change of heart.

The criminal violation of Henry's home can be read as a metaphor for the violation that was experienced after 9/11. Previous to this horrifying invasion of privacy, Henry was of the opinion that only music provided a kind of ecstatic purity that could soothe the minds of those troubled by the increasingly complex and frightening world:

So far, Daisy's reading lists have persuaded him that fiction is too humanly flawed, too sprawling and hit-and-miss to inspire uncomplicated wonder at the magnificence of human ingenuity of the impossible dazzling achieved. Perhaps only music has such purity. (*S*, 68)

Nietzsche says that "language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music" because it can only symbolically represent music, and, therefore, will never be able to "bring the deepest significance" of music to us (*BT*, 55-56). McEwan might argue that even if literature be unable to match the "cosmic symbolism" of music, it still has the ability to sway the human spirit. Henry again contemplates the unique power of music while listening to his son's jazz band:

Out in the real world there exists detailed plans, visionary projects for peaceable realms, all conflicts resolved, happiness for everyone, for ever—mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill. Christ's kingdom on earth, the workers' paradise, the ideal Islamic state. But only in music, and only on rare occasions does the curtain actually lift on this

dream of community, and it's tantalizingly conjured, before fading away
with the last notes. (*S*, 172)

Here McEwan comments on the transporting effect of music—it's ability to summon an ecstatic escape from the practical problems of reality. However, he darkly frames this awesome Dionysian power, pointing out the tragic consequences of the idealism musical vision inspires. Nietzsche, too, recognizes the dangers that exist for one who experiences the terribly depressing return from Dionysian ecstasy to everyday reality (*BT*, 60). Here, according to Nietzsche, is where art enters to transform this nauseating depression into a sublime experience (*BT*, 60).

While the 9/11 novel might on some level act as a retreat from the everyday, granting one a broader perspective on politics—as Meier claims tragedy did for the Greek citizenry—it also might soothe minds troubled by the “nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence” in ways that academic, political and journalistic texts cannot (*BT*, 60). This idea that novels should offer some sort of practical or “useful” narrative was seconded by the Beigbeder, the French author of the 9/11 novel *Windows of the World*. Beigbeder had this to say about the 9/11 attacks:

Many people here said, “It's their turn. They deserve it.” No one deserves something like 9/11. But if a catastrophe happens, we have to make it useful, so that we can try to make it never happen again. We have to understand it, and that is why I wrote this novel.³⁷

The 9/11 novels are not scientific texts. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Saturday* were published after the *9/11 Commission Report* and countless academic and

37. Edward Wyatt, “9/11: Fact Meets Fiction (19 March 2005),”
<http://www.theage.com.au/news/Books/911-fact-meets-fiction/2005/03/18/1110913752579.html>

scientific analyses and speculations about 9/11. In one sense the 9/11 novel serves a purpose that objective, scientific media have never filled. Nietzsche says that thought and science present a “profound illusion” of being able to “penetrate the deepest abysses of being” (*BT*, 95). He explains the limits of science and reason saying, “This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct and leads science again and again to its limits at which it must turn into art—which is really the aim of this mechanism” (*BT*, 96). The 9/11 novel begins to fill a void that news-media like CNN and academic texts like those of Jameson and Žižek have left behind them.

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