

## BEYOND BOOKS OF WONDER: THE HOPE WITHOUT PROMISE NARRATIVE OF 9/11

MICHAEL J. MARTIN

For Andrew Bacevich, it is time that Henry Luce's 'American Century' came to an end. While much of the last seventy years can easily be read as a fulfillment of Luce's desire that the United States accept 'our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and...to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence' (Luce 20), Bacevich contends that this duty has led to the creation of a national narrative that 'ignores and trivializes matters at odds with the triumphal storyline' (Bacevich). As opposed to deriding national pride and mythos, Bacevich reasons that it is time to broaden our narrative to include discussions of national mistakes and catastrophes in an effort to lay claim to an alternative national identity that will help define this new century. In essence, it is time to move towards a realm of American thought where we assess how gaining an understanding of past actions and national catastrophes will help us to make sense of that America which is emerging in a post-twentieth, post-American century.

While the debate between the triumphant Luceian narrative and Bacevich's alternative has easily found a home in the political punditry so dominant in American media, it has also emerged, while less overtly, in discussions of the relationship between American literature and culture. In Melvin Jules Bukiet's 'Wonder Bread' (2007), he critiques the end result of a popular genre of fiction that has captivated the twenty-first-century American; a genre he titles BBoWs (Brooklyn Books of Wonder). BBoWs include Alice Sebold's *Lovely Bones*, Sue Monk Kidd's *Secret Life of Bees*, and Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision*, among others; these are novels that begin with the most dreadful aspects of American life and then, overwhelmingly, end with characters and readers realizing that '[h]istory and tragedy foster personal growth' (25). This outcome, for Bukiet, is no more than an affront to social understanding because 'trauma's never overcome. That's what defines it.... What is, is. The real is true and anything that suggests otherwise, no matter how artfully constructed, is a violation of human experience' (35). Without question, the thrust of the argument is a broad critique against texts that focus on tragedy and yet 'insist on finding a therapeutic lesson in their dark material' (24), but within his discussion it is obvious that Bukiet recognizes a greater and more specific tragedy,

one tied to this new century, that has been impacted by the BBoW syndrome.

His recognition is that the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> remain *the* traumatic event of this century. And, while this trauma has been narratively translated into stories of hope and redemption, the tragedy of such novels becomes that in one's rush to find redemption, no greater national discussion of how trauma might change national or cultural ideology is discovered. There is no question that amidst the loss encountered on September 11<sup>th</sup> that American identity and understanding in all forms (social, cultural, political, literary, etc.) was also on the brink of collapse. Americans felt the crumbling of the national meta-narrative that had, for much of the twentieth century, been tied to Luceian ideas of power, safety, and understanding. In an attempt to deal with the confusion that came with this trauma, we turned to our government for answers and were told that while homeland protection was our first priority, retaliation was guaranteed; that while we were given days to mourn, it was time to return to work; that what we could do for the nation and ourselves was love our children, pray, support the fight for our American values, and spend money.<sup>1</sup>

During times of trauma, one might expect and even desire such a socially stabilizing and redemptive narrative from government, yet the quick encouragement to return to 'normal' life suggests that tragedy and trauma have no place in our national narrative and that the 'normal' has not changed. However, such an end desire for stability and the redemptive narrative only bring about what Bukiet argues against, the overly problematic and incorrect suggestion that from trauma must automatically come growth and understanding. Placing the word trauma 'in its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature', Cathy Caruth recognizes that trauma is 'a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind' and that this wound is not 'a simple and healable event', but is instead an event 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor' (3-4). As such, in translating this act of repetition from the direct survivor to the author responding to the traumatic event (in many cases a 'survivor' of sorts him/herself), the event comes to a collective consciousness through repeated attempts to narrativize the whole. However, it is important to recognize that though the event will 'impose itself again, repeatedly' either through the minds or narratives of the survivor, an understanding of or growth from said event is scarcely a guarantee.

Kristian Versluys, in his introduction to *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, provides readers with a clear and heavily researched discussion of how trauma is translated into narrative. As he quickly notes, September 11 'is ultimately a semiotic event, involving the total breakdown of all meaning-making systems' and that this semiotic breakdown suggests that while 9/11 is 'unpossessable [there] must be added the countering truism that somehow in some way it must be possessed' (2–3). The manner in which such 'possession' takes place is through an effort to cope with said trauma and this, narratively, happens through one's 'choice but to rummage through the symbols that the culture puts at the disposal of the distraught individual' (3). Tracing his understanding of trauma and how and why it is turned to narrative through the work of such trauma scholars as Donna Basin, Dori Laub Jaques Derrida, Sandra Gilbert, and Dominick La Capra, to name only a few, Versluys calls attention to Sandra Gilbert's ultimate conclusion that the trauma narratives of 9/11 are similar to the trauma narratives of other events in that these 'novels affirm and counteract the impact of trauma' (13).

This recognition of trauma, and the impact that such events have on culture and thus narrative, are what Bukiet believes is missing within the American response to 9/11. For Bukiet, the problematic political oratories mentioned earlier not only seeped into the American conscious through our media and politicians, but also, and more dangerously, through our national literature. As such, these positivistic, redemptive, and encapsulating narratives become even more dangerous in that they relay and redefine the past in only a hopeful light. These stories then either forgo or reinterpret the reality of our trauma and, thus, embrace a false reality that is constructed in promise and understanding and naturally finds a home in the BBoW text. That is, the narrative of the BBoW, through an overly simplified nostalgia for a sensible universe and an ultimate belief in redemption, troublingly coalesces with the attempt of our current national ideology to reclaim a narrative of power, strength, and redemption. However, I would argue that in his critique, Bukiet has forgone looking for those narratives within expressive culture that explore the opposite; narratives that explore uncomfortable realities and traumas, and thus do not coalesce with a positivistic national meta-narrative.

While Bukiet believes such narratives cannot be found (or, at the very least, he chooses not to recognize this possibility), such works do exist within postmodern fiction, which has been increasingly dismissed by many twenty-first-century readers and critics. Defining the postmodern author as one who abandons artistry in deference to

‘feckless plot and nonexistent character’, Bukiet has long dismissed the relationship between the postmodern text/writer and American culture, and his rejection of postmodernity’s value has found increased support (‘Crackpot’ 16). Daniel Grassian claims that ‘[t]he main assertion in postmodernism was that literature is its own reality and that fiction need not address any realities other than its own internal consciousness’ (10); Gary Potter and Jose Lopez argue that in this new century ‘postmodernism is inadequate as an intellectual response to the times we live in’ (4); news columnist Edward Rothstein critiques the ‘Western relativism’ of postmodernism and argues that, hopefully, the shock that came from the terrorist attacks would lead our culture to a more ‘intense rejection’ of such an ‘ethically perverse’ academic and philosophic theory. Each of these critiques focuses on the separation of this literary form from the culture to which it responds without recognizing the potential for the postmodern text to continue to speak to or question our contemporary moment. However, while such full-length works as *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* and *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* further this sentiment, Josh Toth and Neil Brooks still contend that even though the postmodern moment is waning (or more appropriately is no longer a dominant philosophical or literary force), ‘*the ghost of postmodernism—has much to teach us (yet)*’ (italics Toth and Brooks 8). What we have yet to be reminded of is that postmodern writing remains directly connected to culture in such a way that it encourages the emergence of Bacevich’s alternative narrative.

Because many define postmodernist fiction as being solely based in meta-fictive technique and linguistic play, we lose sight of its significant interconnection with how one reads and thus interacts with his world.<sup>2</sup> One of the most necessary attributes of postmodern fiction is defined in John Barth’s seminal essay ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ which, while it opens the door for the exploration of the meta-fictional narrative and linguistic play, also insists that such writers must ‘manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions’ (30). In other words, Barth makes clear that the postmodern text, though aesthetically and narratively adventurous, does not lose personal or cultural connection with that world in which the reader exists. Instead, through combining the avant-garde with a narrative that speaks to humanity, the unfamiliar and uncomfortable is provoked in such a manner that readers come to rethink their own world. As the ideological values inherent in the American Century remain, at best, problematic as opposed to guaranteed, the goal then for the postmodern text is to create that narrative which recognizes both the ‘guarantee’ and

the ‘problem’ in an effort not to dismantle national understandings but to provide a reevaluation of the ‘known’.

Postmodern fiction, for theorist Linda Hutcheon, successfully brings about such provocation through the development of a narrative that ‘uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges’ (3). As Hutcheon explains, the purpose of postmodern authors is to ‘problematize narrative representation, even as they invoke it’ (40). These narratives then become didactic in that they highlight the countercurrents to accepted and dominant ideology; they question totalizing systems of understanding without destroying such systems (41). Finally, through this point of installation and subversion, the postmodern novel asks ‘both epistemological and ontological questions. How do we know the past (or the present)? What is the ontological status of the past? Of its documents? Of our narratives?’ (50). Highlighting this central tenet of installation and subversion as a necessary aspect of the postmodern narrative, Hutcheon then places this same idea within the realm of how postmodern literature deals with the issue of history. While Hutcheon recognizes that applying ideas of installation and subversion to novels dealing with historical knowledge/narrative and thus concluding that such historical knowledge is of a ‘provisional, indeterminate nature’ is ‘not a discovery of postmodernism’, the fact that the focus of a text rests on the questioning of the ‘neutrality and objectivity of recounting’ and thus of history is ‘not something we can ignore’ (88). The sense of indeterminate meaning that the forces of installation and subversion place on the historical narrative is ‘not to deny historical knowledge’, but to remind readers ‘that both history and fiction are discourses that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past’ (89). And, when applied to the issue of trauma as it comes from the historical past, narratives of trauma, as delivered by postmodern authors, will then call attention to narrative and historical ‘systems of signification’ in an effort to highlight a culture’s desire to install meaning and historical definition onto such narratives only to, at the same moment, dismantle and make one question the proposed security and meaning offered by such systems.

In working from this definition of postmodernism and thus opening Bukiet’s scope to include postmodern authors who have written narratives in direct response to September 11<sup>th</sup>, readers will then discover that postmodern texts can be a valuable avenue for exploring post-9/11 America; texts that, contrary to the criticism levelled against the postmodern moment, are able to develop a dialectical relationship between hope and trauma, remain connected to culture, and bring about narratives no longer predicated on absolving traumatic events of all the

confusion that accompanies them. The postmodern/post-9/11 texts dealt with in the coming pages, John Barth's *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*, in terms of postmodern practice and sensibility, follow an evolutionary pattern; this pattern will move from the most formally and obviously defined postmodern author (John Barth) to those (Don DeLillo and Jay McInerney) whose works, while they may be less stylistically and/or philosophically tied to the major sensibilities of postmodernism, nevertheless are responding to and have been impacted by the ontological notions of postmodernism. In all, whether cemented in the canon of postmodern authors or recognized as individuals writing within, in response to, and impacted by the postmodern moment, the texts central to this discussion all rely on an installment of the Hutcheonian import of installation and subversion. As they are tied to history and responses to trauma, each text centrally highlights the necessity and reality of entertaining a sense of hope for meaning and regeneration beyond tragedy and lunacy *and yet* still understands that the outcome of tragedy is an awareness of tragedy, that suffering may not teach us anything more than the fact that suffering is possible, and that meaning will not be quickly discovered.

The application and end result of installation and subversion is central to John Barth's *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*. Barth's 2005 text—the most 'traditionally' postmodern text of the three to be discussed here—is comprised of a series of previously published stories that he had planned, prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>, to bring together in a single collection. In an effort to provide order to this indiscriminate group of stories, Barth had the idea to impose, in the tradition of Scheherazade, a frame tale around which these texts would centre. The frame opens with Barth's recognition that '*[t]here was meant to have been a book which... might have opened with a sportive extended invocation to the Storyteller's muse*', but at the time of the work's construction the terrorist attacks on the United States happened and our once playful author now questions his own motives for writing and the design of this frame tale (italics Barth 1). In the opening pages, Barth attempts to maintain that sense of humour and play that was to be found in the original frame tale and he admits to readers his original purpose, '*to put these original, unrelated tales into a narrative frame, connecting their dots to make a whole somewhat larger...than the mere sum of its parts*' and '*to clear the narrative decks so to speak, to recharge and reorient their Original Author's imagination*' (italics Barth 3). However, he also struggles with this literary purpose as his mind is blatantly torn between

his desire to continue the original project and a fear that such a project has no place of value in a post-9/11 world.

Aware that these events have changed our reality and narrative reality, Barth ('capital-A Author') and the individuals he creates in Graybard (that part of Barth that embodies 'Narrative Imagination—the Art-of-Fiction software') and WYSIWYG (an acronym for 'what you see is what you get' and standing in as Graybard's muse) together and separately ask: What role may literary and narrative play have in a world of trauma (4)? And yet, as they entertain this question, they also agree that to forgo play and irrelevance at this moment '*would be in effect to give the mass murderous fanatics what they're after: a world in which what they've done already and might do next dominates our every thought and deed*' (italics Barth 5). Acknowledging both sides to the quandary, Barth/Graybard and WYSIWYG reach the conclusion that 'to tell *irrelevant* stories in grim circumstances is not only permissible, but sometimes therapeutic' (italics Barth 7–8).<sup>3</sup> So, the collection continues.

While the individual stories may seem irrelevant to the post-9/11 American world, the frame tale around which they centre is not. In the frame, two different narratives are told. The first is that of Graybard and WYSIWYG. After each story is 'delivered', the two engage in intellectual and sexual congress. During intellectual congress, they debate the value of each preceding story with WYSIWYG eventually disallowing Graybard from continuing to employ certain narrative strategies or plotlines; as becomes clear, she is allowing Graybard/Barth some final moments with his literary past. Thus, Graybard and WYSIWYG do complete the original dual purpose of the text (to interconnect the stories as a whole and a clearing of the narrative decks). However, this playful and art-centred strand of the narrative frame is told alongside a second narrative, one of destruction.

The second narrative frame centres on the thoughts and actions of Barth and his wife in the eleven days after 9/11. From focusing on his inability to concentrate or write after the attacks, to debating what meaning might be found in national moments of silence, to witnessing the return to normal daily activities, this narrative highlights Barth's fractured natural reality. By interweaving these two narrative strands within the single frame tale, Barth overtly calls attention to the interconnection between discussions of the artistic and human. However, the human (due to 9/11) and the artistic (due to the narrative rules devised by WYSIWYG) are both demolished. As such, Barth is left to wonder: what is the place of the human and the artistic after destruction? The 'answer' can be found in the final story 'Afterwords'.

Here, the collection ends with a last conversation and a new quandary. While Barth/Graybard and WYSIWYG have come to understand that the text has led to a clearing of the narrative decks and thus left them cleansed and ready to return to reality to discover the next step for humanity and narrative (as the two for Barth are intimately connected), the reality into which they emerge is one of threat, loss, and confusion. Because of this new world, they ask ontological questions of their own role in the new American century. The only answer that they arrive at is that a role exists, but this role is unknown and, like reality, is surrounded by true loss.

*‘Oh yes, we’ll laugh again—but we’ll never be young again. Something like that?’*

*Mirabile dictu*, her very words. Nor middle-aged again, for that matter, this time around. Nor innocently secure feeling again, one supposes, to the extent that we—all seem to have been, more or less, till Nine Eleven.

‘So...’

So our question is, Will there be a story henceforward to go on with?

*Some moments’ pause. Then.*

‘A story...’

And presently: ‘We’ll just see, Love. In the dark. Together’.

We’ll see. (Barth 295)

The text ends with everyone—Barth, Graybard, WYSIWYG, and the reader—caught in a nowhere world within trauma. The narrative decks have been cleared, the towers have fallen, and, yet, life continues. Life now, however, is yet to be defined. Instead, we exist as traumatized individuals who are confused and yet maintain hope; the narrative and thus human realization is that trauma is not over, but once it is recognized, accepted and, to a degree, embraced, something new must come. Until that moment, though, we wait in the dark. It is in this dark, then, that Barth throws the narrative gauntlet before his contemporaries and one can see the challenge being accepted by such writers as Don DeLillo and Jay McInerney. In their attempt to bring light to this new landscape, DeLillo and McInerney continue to maintain a hold to the postmodern premise of avoiding complacency and thus develop narratives which highlight the dialectical relationship that can and must exist between understanding and hope, trauma and loss, art and reality.

Don DeLillo knew that the post-9/11 American author would ultimately be trapped between the desire to define and thus know the world and the unknowable. In his essay 'In the Ruins of the Future', DeLillo argues that 'the writer wants to know what this day has done to us' and that because of this desire, s/he will run into the moment of trauma and 'tr[y] to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space' (39). The problem, however, is that this attempt to narrate the moment of 9/11, or the future to come after it, is done 'not in our hopefully normal way, but guided by dread' (39). As the narrative of hope, for DeLillo, is no longer available, the narrative to be constructed must struggle with our desire to find meaning and yet remain haunted by or trapped within that howling space. And, in 2007, DeLillo brought this story to readers in the textually complex and narratively layered *Falling Man*.

While John N. Duvall, in 'Witnessing the Trauma: *Falling Man* and Performance Art', argues that for all of *Falling Man*'s 'postmodern subject matter' it is the author's 'investment in the role of the artist that aligns him finally with the high modernist writers of the first half of the twentieth century' (153) and scholar Paul Maltby, when discussing DeLillo's earlier text *White Noise*, comments that we must 'radically qualify any reading of [DeLillo] as a postmodern writer' (260), to excise DeLillo, and in particular *Falling Man*, from a discussion of postmodern/post-9/11 literatures is a similarly radical gesture. First, while the text may seem to have fully moved beyond the meta-fictional traits of Barth's work, DeLillo's novel remains stylistically postmodern:

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo achieves a secondary set of technical dislocations by employing jump-cut transitions between scenes. Interspersing past and present ones willy-nilly, he generates a kind of achronological collage narrative. He uses deliberately vague pronoun references that compel the reader to search for his or her footing during the first few sentences of each section. Every conversation he constructs is elliptical, its language often arriving in clipped, decontextualized shards. (Olsen)

As Lance Olsen then points out, DeLillo employs such stylistic manoeuvres to announce 'the jittery upendedness of a new dispensation in which everything must be rethought'. Furthermore, in his analysis of *Falling Man*, Kristiaan Versluys calls attention to the fact that the '(post)modern condition evoked in the novel is one of drift' (21). The

point of import in placing these contrasting opinions of DeLillo, in terms of placing him within a distinct theoretical school of fiction, is that he acts as that bridge between postmodernism and culture. Whereas there is no question as to Barth's distinct role within the postmodern canon, DeLillo's role in such a canon may not be as a practitioner of every postmodern sensibility, but as one who chooses to investigate the impact that such sensibilities have on culture at large. In the case of *Falling Man*, the interest here is how such postmodern craft as highlighted by Olsen along with DeLillo's fascination with the reproduced image and its impact on understanding (a fascination also explored in his work *White Noise*) translate and rethink the narrative of survival and trauma as one guided by dread.

In this novel, DeLillo constructs a series of narrative strands where readers encounter individuals who attempt to find meaning in the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. While many of the characters and their narratives are directly tied to the trauma of that day, Lianne experiences these events second (through connections to survivors) or third (through news reports) hand. However, because of this point of separation from the event—or point of narrative disconnect—Lianne struggles with making meaning of everything (her self, her world, her country, her child, her estranged husband, etc). This disconnect traps Lianne in the world of impulsive reaction, and she struggles to find her way out. As she explains to her mother's lover, Martin, she is trapped within feelings of anger and confusion. Martin tells her that to move from impulsive reaction to true understanding she must equate herself to the event: 'There's the event. There's the individual. Measure it. Let it teach you something. See it. Make yourself equal to it' (42). Lianne then studies the post-9/11 world where though 'things were ordinary in all the ways they were always ordinary', she continues to struggle with a belief that still '[e]verything seemed to mean something' (67).

Initially, Lianne measures how others have dealt with this American trauma. Whether working with her Alzheimer patients in their writing group or exploring the mythical narrative of Bill Lawton as devised by her son, she understands that everybody is reacting to this same event with emotions beyond anger. In each of these cases, though, Lianne comes to see that the narratives of those around her cannot lead her to the revelation she so desires and needs. So, she reaches the conclusion that the individual she must study is her own self; she must, as Martin suggested, become equal to the event to gain the epiphany. This is accomplished, or so she believes, through her fateful meeting with *Falling Man*.

David Janiak is a street performer who, embodying the idea of the simulacrum, is seen about New York City recreating that culturally erased image of a body falling from the burning Towers captured by photographer Richard Drew.<sup>4</sup> While Lianne encounters and yet avoids Janiak's performance early in the novel, during her second encounter she realizes that this is as close as she will ever come to the experience of those first-hand victims and survivors, and thus she attempts to embody the entire encounter. As Janiak prepares for his stunt, Lianne forces herself to stay, looks directly into his eyes, sees 'a blankness in his face, but deep, a kind of lost gaze' and comes to understand that 'the bare space he stared into must be his own, not some grim vision of others falling' (167). Lianne believes that Janiak has accomplished what she most desires: the event has become his own, and, as such, must have some meaning for him. Hoping to gain the same through witnessing this event, Lianne looks deep into Janiak and discovers that she sees 'her husband somewhere near. She saw his friend, the one she'd met, or the other maybe, or made him up and saw him, in a high window with smoke flowing out' (167). Lianne has taken her direct step into the event and does not find herself there with Janiak, but instead finds images of her husband or his friends—those who were there at the real event—and thus any great epiphanic moment of redemption and understanding is replaced by more confusion. Frightened by the continued sense of confusion and loss, Lianne rushes from the scene.

With each attempt she makes to become equal to and thus learn from the event, Lianne believes that she has fallen short, and only through the passage of time, a literal distancing from the event, does she finally discover the understanding she has so desired. During the third section of the novel, a section that leaps several years forward in time, Lianne encounters David Janiak's obituary buried in the paper. Suddenly pulled back in time to those days and weeks when she consumed all that dealt with the terrorist attacks, Lianne spends the entire night researching any information she can find on Janiak and, by extension, 9/11. Beyond discovering that Janiak offered no great philosophical reasoning for his actions, Lianne finally learns what she has so desired to know:

The man eluded her. All she knew was what she'd seen and felt that day near the schoolyard, a boy bouncing a basketball and a teacher with a whistle on a string. She could believe she knew these people, and all the others she'd seen and heard that afternoon, but not the man who'd stood above her, detailed and looming.

She went to sleep finally on her husband's side of the bed. (224)

Lianne accepted Martin's postulation that something could be learned from 9/11; that by making herself equal to the event that she might gain an understanding of her world and come to know the purpose of trauma. At this moment, though, she realizes that all trauma leaves one with is a traumatized world. She has, throughout the novel, always been equal to the event, and the confusion and loss of the world that she felt in each experience was the lesson to be learned from 9/11. In rushing to place meaning to the event without accepting that trauma does not breed meaning, Lianne was doomed to fail and thus suffer in her unfulfilled desire for hope. Now, with literal distance, she is finally able to accept a new American landscape that is to be defined by loss (the eventual loss of her husband as he begins to disappear by the end of the novel, the loss of David Janiak, the loss of her dream for meaning, etc.) and she is finally able to sleep.

For Jay McInerney, the hope and destruction of this new American landscape finds textual life in the installation and subversion of the cultural narratives of love and family. While more often labelled a member of the 1980s literary Brat Pack and stylistically considered to be more connected to the neo-Realist writing argued for in Tom Wolfe's 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast', Jay McInerney is, by traditional definition and understanding, the least postmodern author to be discussed in this essay. In fact, Daniel Grassian, author of *Hybrid Fiction: American Literature and Generation X*, argues that McInerney 'mark[s] an important transition from the previous generation of American postmodern writers' and that he displays a 'renewed interest in the modernist search for epistemological certainties' (12). Grassian thus concludes that McInerney is a recognized bridge between the fathers of postmodernism (Barth, Pynchon, Coover, etc.) to the next important generation of American writers (individuals such as Wallace, Powers, Vollman, etc.) (12-18). However, unlike Grassian, I am not so quick to separate McInerney from his postmodern predecessors.

There is no question that the novel under consideration in this discussion, *The Good Life*, is stylistically the most 'un-postmodern' of the three novels. At the same time, however, there also remains little question that McInerney's work is influenced by and responding to the postmodern condition and culture in which McInerney became a writer. Embodying such postmodern characters as Alison Poole in the novel *Story of My Life* and interrogating issues of 'fact' versus 'fiction' through the narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City*, Jay McInerney's

characters and plots confront the question of how one survives, exists or comes to understand self and world within the postmodern condition. This interconnection, in fact, forms one of the foundational issues discussed throughout Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney's *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction*. While throughout the text Young and Caveney are clear to separate these 'blank generation' writers from their postmodern predecessors, they do not ignore how such works can be read as texts influenced by and responding to these same predecessors and the postmodern condition at large. For example, in his chapter on McInerney, Caveney recognizes that '[i]n the fictional world of McInerney, the point at which our personal histories (via the family) interconnect with our public histories (within society) is the very point at [which] this instability is created' (54). It is the point of recognition and acceptance of narrative instability (a point of installation and subversion, using Hutcheon's terms) that highlights McInerney's interconnection to postmodern issues and thus necessitates his inclusion in this discussion. For while *The Good Life* is, in terms of style and narrative, adverse to the traditional postmodern standards explored in the discussions of Barth and, to a degree, DeLillo, the text still avoids any renewed and simplistic interest in epistemological certainties. Through directly interconnecting the breakdown of two different marriages (those of the Calloways and the McGavocks) to the breakdown of American stability (through the aftermath of 9/11), McInerney highlights the necessary instability brought about by forgoing any moment of trauma (familial and national) in hopes of discovering re-birth through tragedy.

*The Good Life* revisits the lives of Corrine and Russell Calloway, the central characters of *Brightness Falls*. Whereas *Brightness Falls* tells the story of a very gritty and horrific time in their marriage, it ends with the suggestion that in having survived a series of life trials, their love for one another may be their salvation. In *The Good Life*, McInerney returns to questions of love and destruction and the narrative pursues the failed epistemological certainty that one might mitigate destruction through reclaiming the vitality of life. In the first section of the novel, readers are introduced to two couples—Russell and Corrine and Luke and Sasha—and shown the breakdown of each relationship. Luke and Sasha are witnessing the collapse of their marriage due to Sasha's infidelity and Luke's decision to leave behind a highly lucrative and yet soul-deadening career which he believes has erased a 'true' self that once existed. Russell and Corrine's marriage remains on the brink because of Corrine's realization that the romance in her life—as well as her youth

and vitality—is dead. As each take steps to understand and try to, possibly, revive their marriage, the events of 9/11 occur.

At the start of the novel's second section, Luke meets Corrine on September 12<sup>th</sup>. Having spent all of the 11<sup>th</sup> at Ground Zero working with rescue crews, Luke, in a state of shock, wanders the city on the 12<sup>th</sup> and encounters Corrine. This moment becomes prophetic when Luke, after robotically sharing all that he saw on the previous day, becomes almost mesmerized by Corrine's image, and suggests that she looks like Katherine Hepburn.<sup>5</sup> During this section of the novel, Luke and Corrine continue to build their connection by working nights at a Ground Zero soup kitchen. Each night that they work, they open themselves up to each other in ways that they do not with their own spouses. During one conversation, Luke and Corrine comment on what they believe should, and yet has not, come from the events of September. Talking about how much of an impact this trauma has had on their respective families, Corrine suggests that the events of this day have driven a wedge between her and Russell. She asks Luke, 'Hasn't this made you closer to your wife? Isn't that the natural impulse—to cling together?' (136). Like Corrine, though, Luke responds in the negative. Here, each realizes the need to hold onto someone or something in a moment of tragedy, and yet each also realizes that this is exactly what they are missing in their independent lives. From this point, they find new hope for themselves and their world not in the family they have, but in one another and the possible creation of a new family.

This hope first exists within the bonds of a friendship, but they soon begin an affair. In one another, they discover who they believe they were in the past and this sense of excitement and security drives their passion. Corrine realizes all that is at stake in this affair when she and Luke escape to Nantucket. After making love, Corrine again opens a discussion of what should be the outcome of 9/11 as opposed to what is. She believes that she should be 'ennobled' by these events, but instead she has begun an affair and is now lying and scheming for her own delight. She is caught between lustful joy and romantic love. However, she is able to see her act as more than lust when Luke, agreeing that he would like to be a step-father to her children, 'nudged the door on her fantasy wide open' (249). During this trip, the two come to *believe* that their love will save them from their crumbling lives.

In the last section of the novel, Corrine and Luke meet in New York City to celebrate Corrine's decision to leave Russell. After a drink, they sneak off to a home Luke has leased for their future life, make love, and then break the single rule they had set for their relationship (to always be brutal, i.e. honest) by lying to each other. While each know that they will

be attending *The Nutcracker* with their respective families that evening, they tell each other that they will be spending the evening at home. In this lie, readers see how the fairy tale that has existed throughout the novel has, like everything else, been changed by reality. Of course, that night at the theatre, the families bump into one another, the couples are all introduced, small talk abounds, and Luke and Corrine realize the fantasy that they have created throughout the last several months will never become real.

While Luke knows that after the holidays he will still leave his wife and try to rediscover what he has lost in life, Corrine realizes that her dream life of ‘after’ began to disappear at that exact moment. In Corrine, Luke ‘saw only sadness and her embarrassed recognition of what just happened—an event that in its outward aspect was as subtle as a shift in the breeze, but which was even now carrying them away from each other’ (362). Luke comes to accept that he will talk to Corrine in the coming days, but the conversations will centre on a future apart. He accepts that he will let her go and that the narrative of love will not conquer the horrors that they have seen (within their own families, selves, and city). However, he does not give up on the idea that such a narrative may again, some day, have a place. As Luke watches *The Nutcracker*, he imagines a future scenario when, in a New York City that is alive again, he would re-encounter Corrine, discover that she was separated, widowed, or divorced, and that they would reunite with all the hope and desire that burns within each.

Within McInerney’s novel, through the installation and subversion of a romantic narrative steeped in failed epistemological certainty, readers are again left in the land of nowhere. There is no question that Luke and Corrine do not end up with their imagined narrative, but as Luke comes to understand, that fantasy is not gone forever. For the moment, though, that hope for a better world cannot be reality. Corrine’s dream, much like the dream of most Americans post 9/11, is an impossible dream. During their last meeting before the theatre, Corrine says to Luke, ‘I wish I could come to you all fresh and dewy. Without all this history. I’m suddenly afraid I don’t have anything new and original to bring to you’ (349). Corrine’s desire is to erase her past and to start anew, but she realizes that this is not possible. Only through wrestling with and accepting her past—by committing herself to this moment in time—can she begin anew; she cannot erase all that led to the potential destruction of her marriage, but must deal with what is at the heart of her loss. Likewise, Americans must understand their history and accept the good and bad of that history. We must understand how our narrative

brought us to trauma, and that the only way to move ahead is to, first, understand and accept our trauma, not simply rewrite hopeful narratives.

McInerney's end idea is quite similar to Andrew Bacevich's response to Luce's ideas of the American Century. Bacevich does not suggest that Americans must turn from the idea that our nation might become, nationally and internationally, a shining light. However, if we are to continue our struggle to become that shining city on a hill, we must not become lost in an identity founded only on ideology and rhetoric, but instead confront our past faults, allow ourselves to learn from such tragedy, and emerge a new America. Like Corrine, we cannot enter this new century fresh and dewy. Instead, we must struggle with our desire for hope within our moment of tragedy; we must recognize our potential while accepting all that we have lost. These confrontations are central to the postmodern text and to those works explored in this essay, and yet the genre of work which encourages such thinking has begun to disappear. Much like the American Century, the postmodern moment is ending and we now attend its wake. However, in death, new lessons can be learned. For, as noted earlier, what we learn at the postmodern wake is that '*the ghost of postmodernism*—has much to teach us (yet)' (italics Toth and Brooks 8). And, what we have to learn is that the postmodern text and author continue to speak to the current American moment. As Stanley Fish, responding to the suggestion that September 11<sup>th</sup> brought an end to postmodernist relativism, reminds all, if relativism is defined as 'the practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some sort of understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them, then relativism will not and should not end, because it is simply another name for serious thought'. The texts discussed throughout this essay do place us in an adversary's shoes, and that adversary is the anti-Luceian, postmodern narrative that offers serious thought and awareness to the trauma of this century and to the possibility of what new America might dawn in the twenty-first-century.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The ideas noted here are clearly seen in the speeches and interviews given by President George W. Bush in the days after September 11th. Of particular interest to this paper is the 'Statement by the President in his Address to the Nation' on the evening of September 11th, remarks made by the President on September 16th, and the 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People' on September 20th.

<sup>2</sup> In the concluding remarks to ‘Post–Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World’, Robert L. McLaughlin rightly reminds readers that ‘postmodernism made the process of representation problematic, it foregrounded literature pointing to itself trying to point to the world, but it did not give up the attempt to point to the world’. Throughout this essay, McLaughlin offers an excellent discussion of the many common misconceptions and simple dismissal levelled against the postmodernist movement and author.

<sup>3</sup> In designing his text, Barth makes it clear that a distinction should be made between himself and Graybard. Barth sees himself as the ‘narrative hardware’ and Graybard as the ‘Art–of–Fiction software’ (4). However, many reviewers conflate Barth/Graybard into one character. While I do recognize such conflation, there are distinct moments when readers must recognize the separation that Barth has devised. As such, when I believe conflation is important, I will refer to the two as one (Barth/Graybard) and when separation is important, I will refer to the software alone (Graybard).

<sup>4</sup> As Tom Junod notes in his *Esquire* article ‘The Falling Man’, Richard Drew’s famed photograph ran only once in most American newspapers. Quickly, most newspapers and television stations grew concerned that in showing this image that they were exploiting the death of this unknown jumper. Therefore, this image has been almost erased from culture, and yet, as Junod’s piece reminds us, it is one of the most widely remembered images of that day and, to a degree, has come to embody the cross feelings of horror, silence, and calm that most attribute to September 11th.

<sup>5</sup> In *Brightness Falls*, when Corrine is feeling unattractive and old, Russell tells her that she looks like the young Katherine Hepburn and she returns to feeling vivacious and lovely. Readers are informed that this statement is a ritual incantation within their marriage. At the start of *The Good Life*, it is obvious that Corrine has been feeling down and unattractive for some time. However, here it is not her husband that saves her through ritual incantation, but Luke who prophetically knows exactly what to say.

## WORKS CITED

- Barth, John. ‘Literature of Exhaustion’. *The Atlantic* Aug. 1967: 29–34.  
 ———. *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*. New York: Houghton, 2004.

- Bacevich, Andrew. 'Farewell to the American Century'. *Salon.com*. 30 April 2009. 20 June 2009. <<http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2009/04/30bacevich>>
- Brooks, Neil, and Josh Toth. 'Introduction: A Wake Renewed?' *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*. Eds. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth. New York: Rodopi, 2007. 1–13.
- Bukiet, Melvin Jules. 'Wonder Bread'. *The American Scholar* 76.4 (2007): 22–35.
- . 'Crackpot Realism: Fiction for the Forthcoming Millennium'. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 16.1 (1996): 13–22.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Duvall, John N. 'Witnessing Trauma: *Falling Man* and Performance Art'. *Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man*. Ed. Stacey Olster. New York: Continuum, 2011. 152–68.
- DeLillo, Don. 'In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on terror and loss in the shadow of September'. *Harpers* Dec. 2001: 33–40.
- . *Falling Man*. New York: Scribner, 2007.
- Fish, Stanley. 'Condemnation Without Absolutes'. *New York Times on the Web* 15 October 2001. 9 July 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/15/opinion/15Fish.html>>
- Grassian, Daniel. *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Junod, Tom. 'The Falling Man'. *Esquire* Sept. 2003. 14 Oct. 2008 <[http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP\\_FALLING MAN?click=main\\_sr](http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLING_MAN?click=main_sr)>.
- López, José and Gary Potter, eds. *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*. New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Luce, Henry R. *The American Century*. New York: Farrar, 1941.
- Matlby, Paul. 'The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo'. *Contemporary Literature* 37.2 (1996): 258–77.
- McInerney, Jay. *Brightness Falls*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- . *The Good Life*. New York: Vintage, 2006.
- McLaughlin, Robert L. 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World'. *Symploke* 12.1–2 (2004): 53–68.
- . 'Postmodernism in the Age of Distracting Discourses'. *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*. Eds. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth. New York: Rodopi, 2007. 53–64.
- Olsen, Lance. Rev. of *Falling Man*, by Don DeLillo. *Quarterly Conversation* 8 (Summer 2007). 20 July 2009

- <<http://www.quarterlyconversation.com/falling-man-by-don-delillo-review>>
- Rothstein, Edward. 'Attacks on U.S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers'. *New York Times on the Web*. 22 Sept. 2001. 9 July 2009<<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/22/arts/22CONN.html>>
- Versluys, Kristian. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Wolfe, Tom. 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast'. *Harpers* Nov. 1989: 45-56.
- Young, Elizabeth, and Graham Caveney. *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction*. 1992. London: Serpent's Tail; New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993.