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# Flying Man and Falling Man: Remembering and Forgetting 9/11

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# 9

## Flying Man and Falling Man

### Remembering and Forgetting 9/11

*Graley Herren*

More than a decade after the September 11 attacks, Americans continue struggling to assimilate what happened on that day. This chapter considers how key icons, performances, and spectacles have intersected with narrative reconstructions to mediate collective memories of 9/11, within New York City, throughout the United States, and around the globe. In *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, W. J. T. Mitchell starts from this sound historiographical premise: "Every history is really two histories. There is the history of what actually happened, and there is the history of the perception of what happened. The first kind of history focuses on the facts and figures; the second concentrates on the images and words that define the framework within which those facts and figures make sense" (xi). What follows is an examination of that second kind of history: the perceptual frameworks for making sense of 9/11, frameworks forged by New Yorkers at Ground Zero, Americans removed from the attacks, and cultural creators and commentators from abroad. The chapter juxtaposes two radically different emblematic figures associated with the World Trade Center: "Flying Man" and "Falling Man." "Flying Man" refers to the performance art of Philippe Petit, the French high-wire walker who audaciously strung a wire between the Twin Towers and walked across it several times on August 7, 1974, as well as more recent references to this spectacle like Colum McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009). "Falling Man" refers first to the notorious photograph taken by Richard Drew of a man (most likely Jonathan Eric Briley) who leapt to his death from the burning North Tower on September 11, 2001,<sup>1</sup> and second to New York novelist Don DeLillo's various appropriations of the image in *Falling Man* (2007). As the first "hypercanonical" work of 9/11 fiction (Duvall and Marzec, "Narrating" 394),<sup>2</sup> DeLillo's novel in particular has served to spark debates about literature's capacity for articulating trauma and to test the limits of trauma theory as a framework for processing responses to the attacks.

## Drew's Falling Man

Nearly 3000 people died in the World Trade Center attacks, including many people who chose to jump from the towers rather than face death by fire or asphyxiation between the time when the first plane hit and when the final burning tower collapsed. How many jumped? That depends on whom you ask, and who's doing the asking, and why you want to know. While researching an article about the identity of one particular jumper, investigative journalist Tom Junod of *Esquire* magazine discovered wildly varying estimates. The *New York Times* conservatively estimated that 50 people had jumped to their deaths. *USA Today* used video sources, eyewitness accounts, and forensic evidence to estimate at least 200, with perhaps as many as one out of six deaths from the North Tower – the first hit and the last to collapse – resulting from the death plunge. “And yet,” wrote Junod in 2003, “if one calls the New York Medical Examiner's Office to learn its own estimate of how many people might have jumped, one does not get an answer but an admonition: ‘We don't like to say they jumped. They didn't jump. Nobody jumped. They were forced out, or blown out’ (“The Falling Man”).

The most notorious photograph of someone forced or blown out on that day was taken by Richard Drew, a veteran photojournalist who had also been present in 1968 at the Los Angeles Ambassador Hotel, where he snapped several photos of the just slain Robert F. Kennedy. On September 11, 2001, Drew was near the World Trade Center and shot numerous photos of people jumping, including a shot snapped at 9.41 a.m. that would quickly earn notoriety simply as “Falling Man.” Drew told Junod that, while reviewing his shots from the day, he was instantly grabbed by the iconic image: “You learn in photo editing to look for the frame [...]. You have to recognize it. That picture just jumped off the screen because of its verticality and symmetry. It just had that look” (Figure 9.1).

The image ran in dozens of media stories in the days following 9/11. The American outcry against “Falling Man” was instantaneous, widespread, and vitriolic. News sources across the country pulled the photo and were forced to answer charges that they had sensationalized the tragedy by exploiting a man's death. Junod asserts, “In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo – the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes” (“The Falling Man”). Why was this particular image, or the act it depicted, deemed so unacceptable by the American viewing public that it was forced or blown out of most major media outlets in the wake of 9/11? To begin answering this question, consider the most notable (though not the most beloved) literary work depicting 9/11, DeLillo's *Falling Man*.



Figure 9.1 In this Tuesday, September 11, 2001, file picture, a person falls headfirst from the North Tower of New York's World Trade Center. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

### DeLillo's *Falling Man*

It came as no surprise that quintessential New York novelist Don DeLillo felt compelled to respond in writing to 9/11. Reviewer John Leonard eloquently summarized DeLillo's oeuvre:

It wasn't a question of whether Don DeLillo would write a 9/11 novel, or even when. He has been writing it all along, from *Americana* to *Cosmopolis*, dreaming out loud in signs, ciphers, portents and premonitions. The superstructure and the manifest content may have been about money and media, or baseball and rock and roll, or language and religion, or prophets and pilgrims, or paranoia and pornography, or atomic bombs and dead Kennedys, but some kind of 9/11 was always implicit. (18)

DeLillo provides an early working blueprint for *Falling Man* in an essay he composed for the December 2001 issue of *Harper's* magazine. "In the Ruins of the Future" proclaims the end of one American narrative and initiates a search for its replacement: "The Bush administration was feeling a nostalgia for the cold war. This is over now. Many things are over. The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative" (34). It remains for writers to try and understand what happened, to excavate, reconstruct, and assimilate. With the dust barely settled on Ground Zero, DeLillo already tips his hand about where the heart of his eventual counternarrative will lie: "The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel" (39). At this early stage, DeLillo was apparently inclined to find a redemptive dimension to the tragedy: he emphasizes the primal terror that unfolded in the towers, but also the spiritual solidarity and human beauty scattered amidst the rubble. By the time he published *Falling Man* in 2007, however, the redemptive dimension had been replaced by a starker vision of what transpired in the towers. Kristiaan Versluys goes so far as to claim that "of all the 9/11 narratives, DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* is, without a doubt, the darkest and the starkest. Unlike the *Harper's* essay, it describes a trauma with no exit, a drift toward death with hardly a glimpse of redemption" (20).

The novel focuses primarily on the 9/11 experience of an estranged married couple, Keith and Lianne. Keith Neudecker is a middle-aged lawyer who worked in the North Tower and survived the attacks. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, he temporarily returns to his wife, Lianne Glenn, and their son, Justin. However, he ultimately drifts away from his family, gravitating toward the vapid world of professional poker in Las Vegas. Keith is so hollowed out by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that he has no desire and little capacity for articulating his testimony. Though the novel begins *in medias res* on 9/11, with Keith on the street fleeing the still-standing North Tower, it is not until the novel's closing pages that we finally learn what happened to him before his escape. To put it in terms of trauma studies discourse, Keith's experience is characterized from the start by *belatedness*. Cathy Caruth posits that the event that returns to traumatize the survivor is one that occurs "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness" (*Unclaimed* 4). The trauma is therefore only apprehended belatedly and incompletely, having never been properly experienced in the first place: "[T]rauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4). Therefore, the PTSD sufferer remains incapable of assimilating

the experience, or making sense of it, or doing anything but reliving it in search of what he or she missed the first time through.

From the moment of impact, Keith is profoundly disoriented, always a step behind understanding. As everyone else starts herding toward the exit stairwells, Keith actually moves against the tide – “the guy going the wrong way” (241) – deeper into the building, in search of his friend Rumsey. When Keith discovers him, Rumsey is already severely injured in ways that elude comprehension: “Something came trickling from the corner of Rumsey’s mouth, like bile. What’s bile look like?” (241). Keith tries to move Rumsey toward the exit, but then more debris crashes down from the ceiling and kills his injured friend. Only then, after Keith has witnessed the death that will haunt him relentlessly thereafter, does he *belatedly* reflect, “This is when he wondered what was happening here” (243). In other words, even though Keith is directly involved in the 9/11 attacks, his experience is never direct in the sense of being apprehended in real time. He cannot begin assembling and processing what has occurred until it is too late. Of course, by this point, the experience itself, like his friend, has already expired. Therefore, his “memory” of 9/11 is really a misnomer; he does not remember 9/11 so much as he involuntarily relives it: “These were the days after and now the years, a thousand dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness” (230).

Critical responses to *Falling Man*, and in particular to the portrait of Keith Neudecker as a study in trauma, have been mixed. While DeLillo’s depiction of trauma seems clinically accurate, his alleged obsession with trauma as the exclusive paradigm for comprehending – or failing to comprehend – 9/11 accounts for much of the critical ambivalence toward *Falling Man*. In their introduction to a special *Fiction After 9/11* issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, John Duvall and Robert Marzec capture the growing disaffection with trauma theory as an approach:

One of the things that we hoped to do in this issue was to move the discussion of 9/11 fiction past the dominant theoretical paradigm for understanding it – trauma studies. A problem with so many of the submissions we received was that they seemed primarily to confirm a truism of trauma studies – the notion that trauma is unknowable and that, whatever novel was under consideration, it finally underscored the inability of any narrative to mediate 9/11 in a way that would make it knowable to others. (“Narrating” 395–6)

Duvall and Marzec accurately pinpoint *mediation* as the heart of this epistemological problem: what, if anything, can be known about a traumatic experience, and what, if anything, can be mediated to one who did not physically endure that experience? This issue of mediation is crucial, since

the vast national and global majority impacted by 9/11 experienced those events from a distant remove, from ground other than zero. These experiences can only be understood in refracted forms through various prisms of mediation.

Richard Gray has emerged as one of the most outspoken critics of trauma studies and of literature steeped in the traumatic; he challenges the capacity of such work to meet the needs of mediation. In his manifesto *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), Gray singles out DeLillo's *Falling Man* as representative of this systemic failure: "What we are left with is symptom: in this case, the registering that *something* traumatic – perhaps too dreadful for words, unsusceptible as yet to understanding – has happened" (27). He finds that DeLillo's novel, like Keith himself, remains stuck in the solipsism of trauma: "[T]he novel is immured in the melancholic state, offering a verbal equivalent of immobility, [...] symptom rather than diagnosis" (28). Gray charges that *Falling Man* "adds next to nothing to our understanding of the trauma at the heart of the action. In fact, it evades that trauma, it suppresses its urgency and disguises its difference by inserting it in a series of familiar tropes" (28). What Gray endorses as an alternative to this brand of stasis or reversion to familiar forms is "enactment of difference: not only the capacity to recognize that some kind of alteration of imaginative structures is required to register the contemporary crisis, to offer testimony to the trauma of 9/11 and its consequences, but also the ability and willingness imaginatively to act on that recognition" (29–30). Gray's call for new imaginative structures for registering the crisis of 9/11 is welcome. However, I disagree with his assessment that *Falling Man* entirely fails to address this mandate. In fact, one need look no further than DeLillo's depiction of Lianne for an alternative model that moves beyond the paralysis of traumatic symptoms toward what Laura Tanner has termed "embodied perception" (59).

Tanner analyzes the collapse of phenomenological distinctions – between the real and the virtual, between now and then, between direct, immediate experience and remote, mediated experience – as a sign of a broader contemporary condition, what she calls a "crisis of existential phenomenology" experienced by secondhand spectators as well as survivors (61). Many cultural critics deride external spectators for daring to assert an intimate connection to historical trauma which they did not personally endure, a phenomenon labeled by Dominick LaCapra as "vicarious victimhood" (47) and Marc Redfield as "virtual trauma" (*Rhetoric* 2). Tanner counters that the sophistication of modern technology, and the adeptness with which users fundamentally engage the world through this technology, is changing the nature of material, embodied reality to encompass mediated as well as immediate experience. She argues that the binary ontological distinction between embodied reality and virtual reality no longer strictly pertains: "As technology enables us to inhabit preestablished networks of connection regardless of the physical space our bodies occupy, the grafting of digital

imagery onto sensuous apprehension extends and destabilizes our experience of embodiment" (63). She refers to this new hybrid experience as "embodied perception" (59) or "augmented reality" (62, 63). Tanner makes a valid point that rather than dismissing such experiences as naïve or pernicious, it is more valuable to understand this widespread phenomenon.

This idea of an "embodied perception" precisely characterizes Lianne's connection to 9/11 in *Falling Man*. From the moment Keith arrives on her doorstep, "up from the dead" (8), her life is directly impacted by 9/11, even though all of her engagements are indirect and mediated. She is torn by warring compulsions. On the one hand, she feels morally obligated to confront the deadly attacks; if her husband had to live through them, then the least she can do is watch and try to relate. On the other hand, she instinctively recoils from the devastation and fears that there is something profane and perhaps masochistic about viewing such horror.<sup>3</sup> For instance, she compulsively watches broadcast replays of the planes crashing into the towers:

Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching. The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting sprint that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, everyone's, into some other distance, out beyond the towers. (134)

She experiences the impact of the planes viscerally, as if the planes, or more specifically the images of the planes, are penetrating her body.

The interpenetration of embodied perception works both ways. Sometimes the image feels as if it enters the spectator by force, but other times the spectator initiates the exchange, actively interjecting herself into the image. Referring to spectators' complex and frustrating attempts to assimilate images from 9/11, Tanner observes, "The struggle to absorb the image – to realize it or try to locate ourselves in it – emerged out of the way in which we apprehended those images viscerally even as they failed to register within our body field" (68). One of the animating impulses driving DeLillo's *Falling Man* – and much of his oeuvre, for that matter – is the impulse to locate ourselves in images. Images contain the power to anticipate or even dictate our sense of identity, how we locate ourselves in relation to the world. But we can also appropriate images to serve our needs, turning them into mirrors, projection screens, or containers for our personal preoccupations. In the days after the attacks, everything seemed charged with residual portent and implied commentary upon 9/11. Looking at a Giorgio Morandi painting hanging in her mother Nina's apartment, Nina's lover, Martin, observes, "I keep seeing the towers in this still life" (49). The image simply depicts white milk bottles juxtaposed against obscure darker objects, yet Lianne concedes, "She saw what he saw. She saw the towers" (49). However, in a

later chapter set in 2004, after her mother's death, Lianne attends a Morandi exhibition in Chelsea and sees something very different: "She could not stop looking. There was something hidden in the painting. Nina's living room was there, memory and motion. The objects in the painting faded into the figures behind them, the woman smoking in the chair, the standing man" (210). In the wake of 9/11, Lianne loads the simple image of bottles with the memory of the towers. But in the wake of Nina's death, she reconceives and replenishes the bottles, filling them now with Nina and Martin: "All the paintings and drawings carried the same title, *Natura Morta*. Even this, the term for still life, yielded her mother's last days" (211). Powerful images may exert a force capable of viscerally impacting and seemingly remaking us; but we, too, possess the perceptual capacity to remake what we see by projecting ourselves and our experiences into the image. John Duvall observes that "[t]he prevalence of art, artists, and art critics in the novel at the very least raises a question about what role art might play in addressing the traumatic events of 9/11," and he believes "that in *Falling Man* DeLillo illustrates both the inadequacy and the necessity of artistic mediation and meditation to the task of remembering and memorializing 9/11" ("Witnessing" 153). Duvall is right, and it is precisely this dimension of artistic mediation that Richard Gray overlooks by focusing exclusively on Keith's immediate trauma.

Lianne's engagement over time with 9/11 is intricately bound up with the other key losses in her life: her estrangement from Keith, the death of her mother, and her lingering, unresolved feelings about her father's suicide. When she was 22 years old, Jack Glenn was diagnosed with the early stages of Alzheimer's, and rather than allow himself to slide into advanced memory loss and dementia, he kills himself: "Died by his own hand. For nineteen years, since he fired the shot that killed him, she'd said these words to herself periodically, in memoriam" (218). Lianne is haunted not only by his death, but also by fears that she will inherit his illness. In other words, she has a long and troubled history with issues related to remembering and forgetting. The 9/11 attacks reanimate those latent anxieties, and images from the towers provide screens on which Lianne projects and plays out her deepest fears. Most significantly, she locates her concerns in the figure of the Falling Man.

The novel's title refers not only to Richard Drew's notorious image but also to a renegade performance artist dubbed "Falling Man" (DeLillo's invention, though reminiscent of Philippe Petit), who stages audacious spectacles all over the city. Revealed after his death to be David Janiak, a classically trained artist and a survivor from the World Trade Center, the eponymous Falling Man suspends himself from a harness and reenacts the plunge and pose of the jumper in Drew's photograph.<sup>4</sup> Lianne happens upon Falling Man performances on two separate occasions. As with videos of the attacks, she is horrified but cannot look away. One thing that attracts her attention is a desire to understand Falling Man's motives for reenacting this ghastly image. She studies his face, but he remains a closed book, an inscrutable blank canvas: "There was a blankness in his face, but deep, a kind of lost gaze. Because what was

he doing finally? Because did he finally know? She thought the bare space he stared into must be his own, not some grim vision of others falling" (167). Lianne then redirects her gaze inward, examining her own motives as spectator: "But why was she standing here watching? Because she saw 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. Because she felt compelled, or only helpless" (167). She begins inscribing her own anxieties onto the tabula rasa of Falling Man, turning him into an avatar for Keith. Through a rapid series of perceptual shifts, she goes from looking at Falling Man, to looking at Keith, to looking through Keith's eyes, seeing what she imagines he saw while trapped in the burning towers. Finally, unable to bear this particular embodied perception any longer, she flees. But as she retreats, Lianne has a sudden burst of insight into why this image so haunts her: "She thought, Died by his own hand" (169). DeLillo does not allow Lianne to elaborate any further on this epiphany, but her intimate personal connection is now clear: she intuits an experiential link between the jumpers and her father. Both the jumpers and Jack committed suicide, of a sort. Yet both cases were preceded by an awful calculation and fatal determination that suicide would be preferable to the alternative form of death (burning or asphyxiation for the jumpers, senile dementia for Jack) that otherwise inevitably awaited them. This final link in Lianne's perceptual chain leads her back to an event even more remote in time and place than 9/11. Falling Man ultimately provides Lianne with access, albeit limited, speculative, and triangulated, to an embodied perception of her father's suicide.

### Petit's Flying Man

Through his depiction of Lianne Glenn and Falling Man, DeLillo provides a major perceptual model for mediating and assimilating 9/11. By contrast, a number of cultural creators have turned to the strikingly different imagery of Flying Man, ideally embodied in Philippe Petit. In the autumn of 1974, a 25-year-old French performance artist pulled off a spectacular piece of renegade street theater 110 stories above the streets of lower Manhattan. The massive Twin Towers of the World Trade Center had been open for business less than four years when Petit, with the help of several accomplices, snuck to the top of the structure, secured a wire connecting the rooftops of the North and South Towers, and on Wednesday morning, August 7, 1974, performed his act on the high wire. Over the course of an astounding 45 minutes, Petit crossed between the towers eight times, walking, kneeling, saluting to the spellbound crowd below, and even lying down on the wire, before finally exiting into the awaiting arms of NYPD and Port Authority officers, who immediately arrested him for criminal trespass. Petit wrote a book about the experience in 2002 called *To Reach the Clouds*, and director James Marsh turned it into the exhilarating film *Man on Wire*, which won the 2008 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

One can no longer contemplate the soaring beauty of Petit's performance without simultaneously contemplating the subsequent destruction of the Twin Towers 27 years later. Though the attacks are never directly referenced in *Man on Wire*, the documentary is implicitly saturated with nostalgia and loss and can be rightly regarded as an oblique 9/11 memorial.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the viewer is constantly struck by the uncanny confluences between Petit's elaborate stunt and the destructive acts perpetrated by the 9/11 hijackers. For starters, both audacious plots involve years of intense, covert planning conducted by foreign nationals. Much of the documentary focuses upon the six years of preparation by Petit and his collaborators, beginning before the construction of the World Trade Center had even been completed. As spectacles – granted, of an entirely different order, but spectacles nonetheless – both events also share a number of common elements: authors, performers, behind-the-scene collaborators, grand stages, and captivated audiences. As crimes – though again of an entirely different order – they also share the elements of private conspiracy, public defiance, clandestine operation, and conflict with the authorities rooted partially in cultural biases and misunderstandings. However, Petit's high-wire walk invites comparison not only with the attackers' plot but also with their victims' demise, particularly with the so-called jumpers, those who chose death by falling over death by burning in the towers. A number of images in the documentary emphasize the staggering scale of the towers, designed as they were to provoke a sublime response of admiration, awe, and terror. According to Petit, it takes an excruciating ten seconds to fall 110 stories. Few people have seriously stared down the prospect of a fatal plunge of that magnitude. Those who jumped from the Twin Towers did, involuntarily, and so did the death-defying Flying Man.

The uncanny affinities between August 7, 1974, and September 11, 2001, are best communicated through an eerily prescient image captured during the high-wire walk (Figure 9.2). The photo depicts Petit at his most petite, a tiny figure suspended in the clouds, dwarfed by the giant towers and by the jumbo jet looming in the background. It feels as if a wrinkle in time has transported the first hijacked plane back to 1974. Colum McCann verbally recaptures this fantasy in his novel *Let the Great World Spin*. The novel reproduces the photo and includes this commentary:

A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories. We wait for the explosion but it never occurs. The plane passes, the tightrope walker gets to the end of the wire. Things don't fall apart. (325)

This is the nostalgic prelapsarian fantasy, before the fall, the hope that we can rewind history and rewrite Yeats's prophetic "The Second Coming," where this time things don't fall apart, and the [World Trade] center can hold.<sup>6</sup>

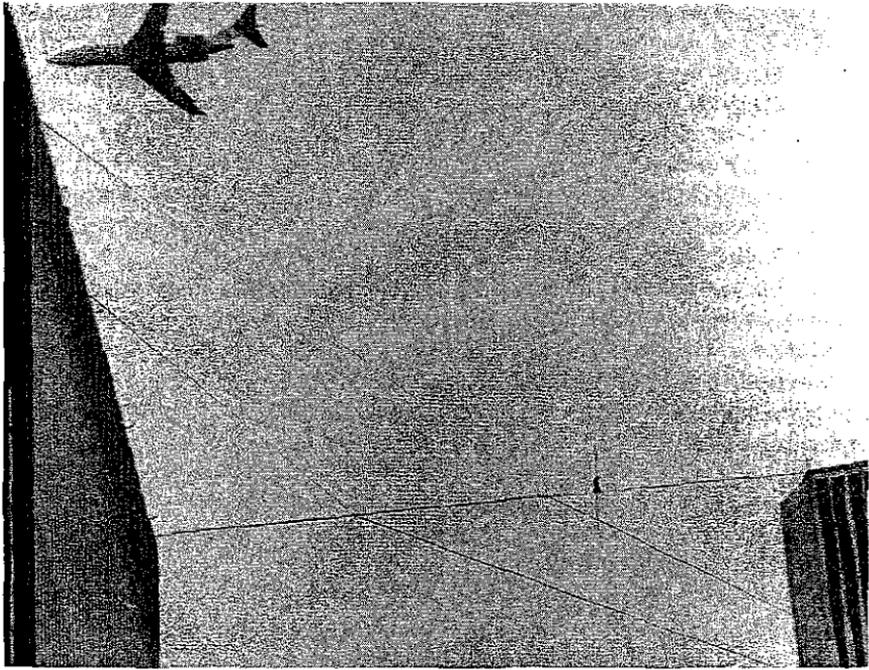


Figure 9.2 Philippe Petit crossing between the Twin Towers, August 7, 1974. © Vic DeLuca. Permission courtesy of Rex USA

There has been a notable resurgence of interest in Philippe Petit's high-wire walk between the Twin Towers in the years since the September 11 attacks. Though many outside the city had never heard of the stunt until recently, native and transplanted New Yorkers have cherished its memory for years. Many of those locals directly affected by the attacks came to regard post-9/11 America – and more specifically post-9/11 New York – as an ideal environment in which to revive Petit's now-hallowed spectacle. For instance, in 2003, long-time New York resident Mordicai Gerstein wrote and illustrated the Caldecott Medal-winning children's book *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*. The *New Yorker* magazine commissioned several artistic renderings of Petit's walk for its fifth anniversary commemorative issue.<sup>7</sup> The various versions, including Owen Smith's cover on September 11, 2006, depict the funambulist walking across the clouds above the city, hovering like a resurrected or unfallen angel above the Ground Zero abyss. Most prominently, McCann's National Book Award-winning *Let the Great World Spin* takes place largely in 1974 New York and features recurring descriptions of the high-wire walk from different perspectives (including that of the fictionalized Petit himself). The walk serves as a common reference point

binding several characters' stories together. McCann explained in an interview, "[W]hen the towers came down in 2001 – the tightrope walk popped out of my memory, one of those eureka moments, and I thought, what a spectacular act of creation, to have a man walking in the sky, as opposed to the act of evil and destruction of the towers disintegrating. I certainly wasn't alone in this. It was almost part of a collective historical memory" (Johnston). How can one account for this particular collective historical memory? What might one glean from these interpenetrating iconic phenomena: the casting out of Falling Man from the American collective memory and the corresponding exaltation of Flying Man as a preferable emblem for 9/11?

One obvious answer, but it is no less true for being obvious, is that most Americans prefer to focus on an uplifting image that makes the spirit soar than on a dispiriting image that all-too-literally brings one down; we choose the phoenix over the ashes from which it rises. That interpretation may be true, but the issue is far more complicated. What is also in contention here, as Karen Engle ably illustrates in *Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the Visual Imagination*, is the socially sanctioned use and misuse of art. Latent in the outrage over the Falling Man photo was the suspicion that it was too perfect, too artistic. In DeLillo's novel, Lianne responds directly to the unnerving aesthetic appeal of the image:

It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. [...] The man with blood on his shirt, she thought, or burn marks, and the effect of the columns behind him, the composition, she thought, darker stripes for the nearer tower, the north, lighter for the other, and the mass, the immensity of it, and the man set almost precisely between the rows of darker and lighter stripes. Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. (221–2)

What makes the image obscene to many is not just that it depicts the agonizing final moments of a person plunging to his death, but that it does so in such an aesthetically pleasing way – not contrived, yet somehow perfectly composed, raising concerns that Drew's real agenda may have been less to bear witness than to win himself a Pulitzer Prize. However, the ethical standards applied here are relative and contingent. By contrast, as Engle observes, there has been no comparable public outcry of conscientious objection when aesthetic forces are marshaled in support of the victims and rescuers. Consider the hagiography of Father Mychal Judge, the Fire Department Chaplain who died tending to victims. The ubiquitous photo of his dead body was apparently immune to charges that it "exploited a man's death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering pornography" (Junod, "The Falling Man"). Why? Presumably because the image in this case bears witness to American heroism and noble sacrifice,

and in doing so, aesthetically evokes Christian iconography of the pietà. In the “war of images” between America and its attackers, it would appear that you’re either with us or against us. Drew’s crime was not so much framing and disseminating the perfect shot as it was aiding and abetting the enemy by allowing his camera to be turned against his own people.

The roots of the problem go even deeper, however. It is considered at best tasteless and at worst blasphemous to say so, but there was surely an aesthetic dimension in the design, implementation, and desired effect of the 9/11 attacks. On September 16, 2001, German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was excoriated for describing the attacks as “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, on the first anniversary of the attacks, conceptual artist Damien Hirst controversially told the *Guardian*, “The thing about 9/11 is that it’s kind of an artwork in its own right. It was wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact. It was devised visually” (Allison).<sup>9</sup> One instinctively recoils at such unfeeling statements; they seem at once a desecration of the 9/11 victims and a perversion of art. Yet multiple commentators have observed how frequently avant-garde artists, from the Dadaists to Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty, have called for spectacles of violence on a mass scale as the necessary corrective for the squalor, apathy, corruption, and spiritual paralysis of dominant bourgeois values.<sup>10</sup> Al-Qaeda’s motives were not artistic per se, but its methods might as well have been, choreographing and staging the attacks as visual spectacles geared toward maximum impact on a global audience. Furthermore, the choice of stages could not have been more emblematic, and the attack on the World Trade Center in particular was deliberately designed to displace an American icon with a jihadist counter-icon. “Theater is always a feature of terror,” asserts Lawrence Wright in *The Looming Tower*, “and these were terrorists whose dramatic ambition was unrivalled” (201). Any attempt to take the full measure of 9/11’s impact must account for the dimensions of iconography, spectacle, and spectatorship.

The iconic message delivered on 9/11 may have been essentially anti-Western, but the medium for communicating it was anything but. Even as it was unfolding, the violent spectacle had an unsettling homegrown familiarity. Al-Qaeda effectively stole a page from America’s own playbook, beating the nation at its own game, plagiarizing a trademarked script. Isn’t there a bright thread linking the audacity required to build the world’s tallest building – and then to build another one right beside it – and the audacity required to string a wire between those towers and perform on it for 45 minutes, and the audacity required to hijack an airliner, convert it into a suicide/homicide missile, and crash it into one of those iconic towers – and then to do it again right beside it? Martin Ridnour (aka Ernst Hechinger), a German radical turned art investor in *Falling Man*, puts it this way:

But that’s why you built the towers, isn’t it? Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of

destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It's a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down. (116)

And they did; they brought it falling down – the buildings, yes, and thousands of people with them, but also what the buildings stood for. In his seminal study *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord asserts, “The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (24). From its inception, the World Trade Center was designed as the Capitol of capital, a self-sanctified beacon of America’s unassailable global commercial dominance – “a self-portrait of power,” as Debord also describes spectacle (19).

The provocation may be obvious, but it is no less true for being obvious. In accepting the dare to topple the United States’ iconic dominance, to out-spectacle the American spectacle with their own “shock and awe,” the jihadists extended a trajectory already set into motion with the construction of the Twin Towers, reciprocating their part in a mutual death-dance, a joint production – a Twin Terror. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this dangerous connection was most notably made by cosmopolitan critics from outside the US, such as Jean Baudrillard, who speaks of “an unpredictable complicity, as though the towers, by collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, had joined in to round off the event” (“The Spirit” 8). Revelations of reciprocity, latent connectedness, methodological affinity, and ideological (even dramaturgical) complicity between America and her avowed enemies are far too disturbing for most Americans to confront directly, let alone to accept. Given the choice, most gladly prefer to look up to the daring spectacle of heroism, beauty, and resolve symbolized in Flying Man than to look down upon the shocking spectacle of Falling Man, a victim forced or blown out of his doomed tower, deposited amid the real and symbolic rubble of the destroyed World Trade Center.

The American preference for the flying over the falling motif is perfectly captured in the naïve fantasy of Oskar Schell, the nine-year-old whose father died in the World Trade Center attacks and who narrates Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). The book famously closes with several successive photos of a World Trade Center jumper, reassembled in reverse order, so as to create a flipbook false impression of the man flying up into the safety of the tower, rather than falling down to his death. The popularity of the novel and its film adaptation attests to the appeal of indulgent fantasies where things either don’t fall apart or, having fallen apart, can be put back together again. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag characterizes the affectation of innocence in response to atrocity as the pose of one who has “not reached moral or psychological adulthood,” adding, “No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia” (114). Amnesia tells half of

the story, what is willfully forgotten or repressed; the other half of the story is what is selectively remembered, resurrected in its place. The reemergence and ubiquitous popularity of the Flying Man trope in its various guises, particularly with each anniversary of the attacks, has been at once a symptom of and a potential antidote for our collective anxiety about how to remember 9/11. If we flip the history book backwards fast enough, we might watch the towers rise and see Flying Man soar again.

But is this approach morally mature enough for an America that cannot afford to pretend innocence of its global role and position in the twenty-first century? While Oskar Schell's flipbook in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* does help to explain the appeal of the Flying Man image, it does not solve the very real problem of how the very real jumpers can or should be remembered, or how "retrospectators" might gain access to that experience in ways that are both authentic and respectful. If airbrushing all those falling men and women out of our collective narrative about 9/11 is unacceptable, what preferable forms might commemoration take? The solution must involve more than simply abandoning fantasies of resurrection and myths of nationalist redemption, and replacing them with a remorseless, unflinching gaze into the abyss. Want to watch the jumpers? You can. It doesn't take long to find innumerable images and unendurable footage on the Internet. Given my topic for this essay, I felt obligated in the name of research to look up some of these websites – but I soon abandoned that plan. The collective, unspoken agreement to suppress photos and videos of jumpers may smack of censorship, sanitization, revisionist history, and paternalistic protection; but take a look at some of those taboo images and you will quickly conclude that the answer is not simply to lift all sanctions and promote general perusal of the forensic evidence. At a gut level, examining image after image of fatal plunges and ghastly impacts feels much more like surfing porn than engaging in solemn commemoration. Referring to the repression of the material bodies of 9/11 victims, David Simpson wisely counsels, "No universal consciousness or sympathy is likely to emerge from that repression, although the lifting of repression is not by any means guaranteed to produce that sympathy" (53). How produce that sympathy then? Can 9/11 be remembered in ways that recover the experiences of victims and survivors honestly without exploitation? Is there a place for the empathic spectator to engage with those experiences without either co-opting 9/11 to serve nationalist agendas or laying false claim to its survivors' trauma?

### Falling Shirt

There are no easy answers to these questions, but one interesting perceptual approach that mediates between the Flying Man and Falling Man iconography is suggested by an intriguing shared image found in both DeLillo's and McCann's fiction: the image of the falling shirt. The one perspective that even

DeLillo respects as taboo is that of the jumpers. The emblem of Falling Man in its various guises presides over the novel, but the individual experiences of the falling men and women are off limits, untold and irrecoverable. In his 2001 *Harper's* essay, DeLillo notes, "There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space" ("In the Ruins" 39). This initial credo charges the writer with filling in the emptiness with a counter-narrative that helps readers to make sense and heal. But by the time he produces *Falling Man* six years later, he clearly feels compelled by other responsibilities to the dead. Rather than imaginatively filling the void left by the jumpers, he leaves the "howling space" of their lacunae more or less intact. In so doing, he confers special status on the jumpers, comparable to the position held by the *Muselmänner* in discourse on Holocaust testimony.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the jumpers left an indelible imprint on survivors and spectators alike, and material traces of their experience survive even in the absence of narrative testimony. Keith caught his first peripheral glance of a falling person while attempting to save Rumsey: "Then something outside, going past the window. Something went past the window, then he saw it. First it went and was gone and then he saw it and had to stand a moment staring out at nothing" (242). Once again, Keith only belatedly comprehends what he has seen: he experiences the fall, the sensory perception of the fall, and finally the cognitive register of what has already passed from view: "He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it" (242). Even before his friend has died, even before the towers have collapsed, Keith has experienced his first bout with traumatic repetition. Tellingly, the catalyst for initiating his new post-traumatic reality is an anonymous figure whose own testimony is erased during the plummet to the ground.

The victim's 9/11 narrative is lost, but a remnant lingers and signifies: an empty shirt. DeLillo's emblem for bracketing the absence and silence of Falling Man is this floating shirt. Keith notices the shirt in the first chapter, just after he emerges from the North Tower: "There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river" (4). This would seem to be just another naturalistic detail drawn from the real detritus of the towers' destruction. Yet the shirt immediately assumes a kind of talismanic significance for Keith far exceeding its modest materiality. He emphasizes its importance when he arrives on Lianne's doorstep from Ground Zero; one of the first things he tells her is that "there was a shirt coming down out of the sky" (88). And DeLillo gives the shirt pride of place as the closing image of the novel: "Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life" (246).

So what is DeLillo doing with this shirt, and why does he return to it at such crucial junctures in *Falling Man*? In the first place, the shirt is a

memento mori, an artifact of someone killed in the attacks. The seemingly innocuous garment belies the horror and grief associated with its missing wearer's death. Unlike the person who once wore it, the lifeless shirt is immune to injury and floats gently, harmlessly to the ground. The shirt constitutes a material presence, but it is simultaneously a placeholder for absence. Keith's own shirt is covered in blood when he arrives at Lianne's apartment, as she recalls: "There was more blood than she'd realized at first and then she began to realize something else, that his cuts and abrasions were not severe enough or numerous enough to account for all this blood. It was not his blood. Most of it came from somebody else" (88). Lianne's "embodied perception" constitutes one subject position vis-à-vis 9/11; Keith's position is more pathological – the perception of bodies, of physical carnage. The floating shirt assumes prominence in his recollection of 9/11 as a protective screen memory, emptied of its original content. It allows him to remember what happened, but to remember it slant: traumatic loss, but someone else's trauma, someone else's shirt.

Colum McCann also incorporates the floating shirt image into his opening chapter of *Let the Great World Spin*. At the beginning of Petit's 1974 high-wire walk, he discards a shirt, and in the process gives his onlookers a brief fright. McCann draws upon this true anecdote but inflects it with post-9/11 resonance. The echo of DeLillo is surely intentional:

And then they saw it. The watchers stood, silent. Even those who had wanted the man to jump felt the air knocked out. They drew back and moaned.

A body was sailing out into the middle of the air.

He was gone. He'd done it. Some blessed themselves. Closed their eyes. Waited for the thump. The body twirled and caught and flipped, thrown around by the wind.

Then a shout sounded across the watchers, a woman's voice: God, oh God, it's a shirt, it's just a shirt.

It was falling, falling, falling, falling, yes, a sweatshirt, fluttering [...]. (7)

For a moment, before Petit soars as Flying Man, the spectators on the ground anticipate the death plunge of Falling Man. McCann's novel tends to avert the reader's gaze upward and backward. But what the passage above illustrates is an object lesson reminiscent of Lianne's reconception of Morandi's milk bottles as the Twin Towers: the post-9/11 world refracts our perceptions of the pre-9/11 world. One can no longer look up at Petit's daring feat or back at 1974 New York without simultaneously recalling how 9/11 later changed both them and us. In a perceptual as well as a physical sense, the pre-9/11 towers no longer exist. "This was the world now," observes Keith on *Falling Man's* opening page – not "This is the world now," or "This was the world then," but a simultaneous intermingling of past and present. Though McCann approaches his subject from above and DeLillo from

below, McCann from before and DeLillo from after, their respective tropes for remembering and forgetting 9/11 ultimately cross trajectories and interpenetrate one another. Beginning on September 11, 2001, and extending both forward and backward in time, no nostalgic vantage point remains for viewing Flying Man without also seeing Falling Man.

## Notes

1. For the most compelling investigation into the identity of the jumper in Drew's photo, see Junod, "The Falling Man"; see also the documentary film based upon Drew's photo and Junod's article, *9/11: The Falling Man*.
2. As the editors of a special *Fiction After 9/11* issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, Duvall and Marzec note that they received 14 submissions on this novel alone, leading them to label it "hypercanonical in the discussion of 9/11" ("Narrating" 394).
3. Martin Harries draws a fascinating analogy between 9/11 spectatorship and the figure of Lot's wife, who was turned to a pillar of salt as punishment for witnessing God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.
4. Other critics have independently made the same connection I have between Philippe Petit and DeLillo's David Janiak; see for instance Rowe (131) and Kauffman ("Bodies" 148). Versluys also suggests real-life falling artist Kerry Skarbakka as a model for Janiak (22), and Duvall elaborates on this idea in "Witnessing Trauma" (159–61).
5. See the chapter on the film in Randall's book *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (88–98).
6. Gray notes the prevalence of falling imagery at crisis points in American history: "There is a recurrent tendency in American writing, and in the observation of American history, to identify crisis as a descent from innocence to experience" (2). He sees this postlapsarian theme as the product of "a powerful vein of nostalgia at work in American thinking" (3).
7. See Mavroudis, who recounts in words and images the evolution of the *New Yorker's* cover for the fifth anniversary of 9/11.
8. See Lentricchia and McAuliffe, *Crimes of Art + Terror*. Stockhausen's full comments were made at a Hamburg conference and can be accessed online in German at *The Stockhausen Foundation*. For an example of the scorn heaped upon Stockhausen for these comments, see Tommasini.
9. Hirst soon issued an apology for his comments; see Scott.
10. For multiple examples, see Schechner (1821). Schechner first drew the connection with Artaud much earlier, when he participated in Román's "A Forum on Theatre and Tragedy in the Wake of September 11, 2001" (131–2). Other participants in the forum, including Una Chaudhuri (97–9) and Marvin Carlson (133–4) independently made the same comparison.
11. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi asserts, "I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. [...] We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims' [*Muselmänner*], the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception" (83–4). Agamben memorably appropriates the figure of the *Muselmann* as emblematic of the lacuna at the heart of all Holocaust testimonies; see *Remnants of Auschwitz* (41–86).