

The Lure of Space

Psychasthenia as Mnemonic Device in

Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days*

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In a puzzling essay written in 1935, French critic Roger Caillois problematizes the notion of mimicry as a solely defensive device in the animal world. He suggests, instead, that mimicry is governed by a “veritable *lure of space*” (99; emphasis in the original), as a result of which particular species morph into their environment regardless of the need to camouflage themselves. Caillois claims that a similar drive to assimilate into one’s spatial surroundings can also be traced in humans. What functions as mimicry in certain animal species he identifies as a “disorder of spatial perception” (99) in humans, which manifests itself as “*depersonalization through assimilation into space*” (100; emphasis in the original). A significant inspiration behind Jacques Lacan’s conceptualization of the mirror stage, Caillois’s essay, written in a Surrealist vein, syncretizes biology and psychology with magic and, similarly to many of the precepts of psychoanalysis, holds little relevance to psychological practice today. Still, his conceptualization of psychasthenia as a disorder fueled by the lure of space, rather than the urge to hide, has granted it a long afterlife in the humanities.

Finding its etymological roots in the Greek *psykhe* (soul or spirit) and *astheneia* (weakness), the term psychasthenia had been introduced to psychological discourse by Pierre Janet’s pioneering and hitherto untranslated works *Lés Obsessions et la Psychasthénie* (1903) and *Les Névroses* (1909), where he describes psychasthenia as a neurotic condition that entails anxiety and obsessional disorders on the one hand, and the subject’s loss of a sense of reality on the other (see Gossop 9). Following Janet, Karl Jaspers describes the psychasthenic syndrome as a “diminution of psychic energy” often connected to “some somatic and physiological weakness though they may also occur without this. [...] The psyche

generally lacks an ability to integrate its life or to work through and manage its various experiences; it fails to build up its personality and make any steady development” (442).

Although the term is no longer used as a diagnostic category in psychological practice, Caillois’s application of psychasthenia in relation to mimicry has unmoored it from the realm of medical discourse and gave it a new life as a cultural trope denoting the desire to become one with the environment. Towards the end of his essay, he refers to Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) as a literary example of psychasthenia. In the novel Saint Anthony “falls prey to the lure of material space: he wants to disperse himself everywhere, to be within everything, ‘to penetrate each atom, to descend into the heart of matter – *to be matter*’” (101; emphasis in the original). In Caillois’s interpretation, Flaubert’s aesthetization of Anthony’s descent into hell “appears as a form of that process whereby *space is generalized* to the detriment of the individual” (102; emphasis in the original).

In Michael Cunningham’s 2005 novel *Specimen Days* a similar “generalization” of space is at work, though here it is Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855) that functions as an intermediary force that instigates a mimetic identification with space. *Specimen Days* is made up of three interlocking stories set in New York and playing out in different time frames. The first one, “In the Machine,” takes place at the end of the nineteenth century, featuring a twelve-year-old boy with a disability, Lucas, as the main character. A son of Irish immigrants living in abject poverty in a Lower Manhattan working class neighborhood, Lucas loses his brother Simon to an industrial accident and needs to take Simon’s place at the factory to fend for his ill parents. Haunted by what he recognizes as his dead brother’s voice coming from the machinery, Lucas tries to warn Simon’s fiancée, Catherine, who works as a seamstress, of the lethal danger that awaits her. Lucas’s conversations with Catherine, however, are often unproductive; whenever overexcited and unable to express himself, he uncontrollably recites seemingly random lines from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. The second story, “The Children’s Crusade,” is set in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and focalized through an African American police psychologist, Cat, who investigates the case of underage suicide bombers using *Leaves of Grass* to justify their actions. Unable to prevent the bombings, Cat seeks solace in her boyfriend Simon and ultimately bonds with a twelve-year old suicide bomber who reminds her of her dead son, Luke. The third story takes the reader to a post-apocalyptic future when deserted Manhattan has already been transformed into a theme park. Simon appears in this story as an android that quotes Whitman whenever close to feeling human emotions. With his lover Catareen, a lizard-like alien, and the

twelve year-old kid Luke, they are on route to escape to a new planet that promises the chance for a new beginning.

The term ‘novella,’ which Cunningham himself also uses in interviews to refer to these stories, is particularly significant in light of the formal structure of the novel. As a form-within-a-form, each novella is built up of recurring images that intersect through multiple intratextual relations in the novel as a whole. Following in the vein of Cunningham’s previous bestseller *The Hours* (1998), the three novellas are interlocked by Lucas/Luke, Catherine/Cat/Catareen, and Simon, three characters that appear and reappear in different disguises, with *Leaves of Grass* weaving them together. Likewise, a bowl and a music box recur in all three novellas as artifacts that outlive humans and connect temporalities.

This chapter focuses on Cunningham’s novel through the lens of psychasthenia as a “disorder of spatial perception” in Caillois’s sense (99). Going beyond the understanding of psychasthenia as a form of neurosis in the medical sense, I follow Caillois’s surrealist reinterpretation of the term as a form of mimicry the goal of which is not so much to hide as to assimilate into the environment at the cost of depersonalization. For instance, the ways in which characters in the novel speak and relate to the environment through Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* constitute instances of psychasthenia that, as I will argue, operate in Cunningham’s hands as an *aide-mémoire* that compels readers to recall particular aspects of 9/11. Although 9/11 appears as a temporal reference point only in “The Children’s Crusade,” I will demonstrate how psychasthenia as a literary trope in the novel functions as a mnemonic device that activates mediatized memories of bodies falling from the World Trade Center, as well as the mixing of victims’ bodies with those of the terrorists and architectural debris. In his comprehensive study of the 9/11 novel, Kristiaan Versluys focuses on “The Children’s Crusade” and regards it as a “9/11 parable” that “goes a long way toward recognizing the Other, even in the terrorist” (166). Instead of limiting my discussion to the scope of “The Children’s Crusade,” I will extend my focus to the first novella, “In the Machine,” to explore how Lucas’s psychasthenic compulsion to perceive the world through a Whitmanesque lens conjures up traumatic memories of 9/11 without explicitly mentioning the event.

SPEAKING IN FITS

Lucas’s compulsion to recite lines from *Leaves of Grass* goes beyond mere fascination with Whitman’s poetry. “He hadn’t meant to speak as the book. He never did, but when he was excited he couldn’t help himself” (Cunningham 4). The

overwhelming excitement that prevents him from speaking his own words allows Whitman's poem to flow into his speech in an undifferentiated fashion. Whenever in the company of Catherine, his brother's fiancé, he feels the urge to say

something he felt but could not describe: porous and spiky, shifting with flecks of thought, with urge and memory; salted with brightness, flickerings of white and green and pale gold, like stars; something that loved stars because it was made for the same substance. He needed to tell her it was impossible, it was unbearable, to be so continually mistaken for a misshapen boy with a walleye and a pumpkin head and a habit of speaking in fits.

He said, "I celebrate myself, and what I assume you shall assume." It was not what he'd hoped to tell her. (4-5)

Here, we cannot read Lucas's sentence as a *sentence* but must hear Whitman's *line* underneath. At the same time, we also hear Lucas 'saying' Whitman as part of his own speech act, attesting to the Bakhtinian notion of *heteroglossia* and, more pertinently, to Julia Kristeva and later Linda Hutcheon's reworking of this notion into theories of intertextuality. It is in this sense that we can register in Lucas's *sentence* a "permutation of texts" that "intersect and neutralize one another" (Kristeva 36). The line from "the book," as *Leaves of Grass* is referenced throughout the novel, is thus an intertext which Lucas unwittingly transforms into a speech act. It is the book, in other words, that not only allows but also compels him to assume a Whitmanian voice, where the lure of space instigates depersonalization insofar as it is not so much Lucas that quotes Whitman as it is the book that speaks through him.

The book for Lucas is what space is for the psychasthenic. In Caillois's description of the psychasthenic syndrome,

space seems to constitute a will to devour. [...] The body and mind thereupon become dissociated; the subject crosses the boundary of his own skin and stands outside of his own senses. [...] He feels that he is turning into space himself – *dark space into which things cannot be put*. He is similar; not similar to anything in particular, but simply *similar*. And he dreams up spaces that "spasmodically possess" him. (100; emphasis in the original)

For Lucas, it is the book that constitutes a will to devour; he literally embodies the book. As much as his "misshapen" body is *informed* by the corpus of the book, the voice of the narration is similarly focalized through Lucas as a viewpoint character. He perceives the city as myriads of constellations he yearns to absorb all at once, not unlike Saint Anthony in Flaubert. "What he wanted was

the raucousness of the city, where people hauled their loads of corn or coal, where they danced to fiddles, wept or laughed, sold and begged and bartered, not always happily but always with a vigor that was what he meant, privately, by soul” (Cunningham 13). Here, the pronoun “he” delineates a site of ambiguity: we are made to see through Lucas’s eyes and yet we hear Whitman “cataloging” what Lucas sees.

However, what manifests itself as an incongruence of voices at one level may turn into an uncanny congruence once Lucas unwittingly translates Whitman into speech acts. Uttered as a sentence, the Whitman-line “Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (5) fits well to express what remains unspeakable to him: his adoration for Catherine. Likewise, when he receives his payment by the end of his shift in the works, he happily shakes his supervisor’s hand and says, “Prodigal, [...] you have given me love – therefore I to you give love” (21). His speaking in fits, therefore, has a double meaning. On the one hand, the word “fit” refers to his inability to control ‘his Whitman,’ while on the other hand, it also denotes his ability to apply Whitman fittingly, albeit unwittingly.

The event in Lucas’s recent past which complements as well as exacerbates his psychasthenia is the death of his brother Simon. This traumatic loss affects his compulsion to speaking in fits in the sense that his psychasthenic assimilation into *Leaves of Grass* becomes a means to assimilate the traumatic experience. Consequently, his neurotic speaking fits constitute conjunctions of psychasthenia and traumatic reenactment. Lucas has no facility to mourn (see Cunningham 13), which indicates his loss as an experience “withdrawn from consciousness” (Freud 205), a loss that does not allow for mourning as a path towards closure. Obligated to replace Simon in the works to provide for his incapacitated parents, Lucas is made to perform the same movements at the exact same machine that caused Simon’s death. His work thus amounts to both a physical and a psychic reenactment in which the machine gains central stage. First, by operating the machine Lucas is made to produce “housings” (Cunningham 19), the function of which remains a mystery to him even after he inquires into it. Read metaphorically, he produces forms that will “fit” a content of which he has no knowledge or, because of its traumatic nature, cannot comprehend.

However, the machine as a physical catalyst of his movements reveals that the content of his trauma has to do less with his brother’s death *per se* and more with the very method of his ‘death by the machine.’ It is therefore the *how*, rather than the *what*, that is traumatic for Lucas. This aspect of his brother’s loss is revealed when Lucas’s sleeve accidentally gets caught in the machine’s clamp, pushing him to the very edge of death: “Lucas looked with mute wonder at the

end of his sleeve. This was how. You allowed your attention to wander, you thought of other things, and the clamp took whatever was offered it. That was the clamp's nature" (20). As he succeeds in removing his sleeve from the grip of the clamp, he realizes that "[t]he cloth still bore the imprint of the clamp's tiny toothmarks" (20). This imprint, which Lucas's shirt preserves as though a negative of a photograph (resonating with Freud's use of the photographic imprint as a metaphor for trauma [see Meek 50]), amounts to a transmission of the wound, inflicted on his brother by the machine that "stamped" and "expelled" (Cunningham 47) him, onto Lucas's body.

While the free indirect speech of the narration ascribes anthropomorphic and zoomorphic dimensions to the machine, Simon, in turn, is mechanized. This juxtaposition of the body and the machine as a site of (both physical and psychic) trauma is illustrated by the voice Lucas hears emanating from the machine: "It might have been the squeak of an unoiled bearing, but it sounded more like a voice, a tiny voice, though its words were indistinguishable. The song wasn't sung in a language, not in a language Lucas recognized, but gradually, over time, the song began making itself clear, even though its words remained obscure" (47). Similarly to his lack of knowledge as to what the housings that he produces will contain, the song is a 'product' of his traumatic reenactment – a form indicating content as an absence. For him, the song is vaguely familiar, recalling a "time and place that hovered on the outer edge of memory" (47). The site that these words denote, of course, is the site of trauma which asserts itself in the form of the song as the "voice of the other" (Caruth 8), which returns to haunt the traumatized subject precisely because it cannot be remembered. The "other" in Cathy Caruth's phrase refers to the content of trauma itself, which has been "othered" by way of repression. The song signifies what Freud describes as the contemporariness of trauma and establishes a nexus between Simon's physical and Lucas's psychic wound. What pulsates at the vortex of this nexus is the hum of the machine, the melody of the technological sublime,¹ into which Lucas projects the traumatic loss of his brother: "This seemed, in fact, to be Simon's voice, rendered mechanical" (Cunningham 47). Undecipherable and cryptic, the song attests to the unspeakability of Simon's physical body, "stamped and expelled" (47) by the machine as an industrial product which amplifies the method of Simon's death that Lucas assimilates into his Whitman-corpus, which simultaneously assimilates him. Psychasthenia and trauma thus feed into each other with

1 I am using this term in the sense that David Nye uses it in his book *American Technological Sublime* (1994).

the former serving as a symptom of the latter. Lucas's uncontrollable mimicry of the book is at once the language through which his trauma manifests itself.

Although the machine is not at all a "counterforce" to nature in Whitman's oeuvre (222), it is nature that he identifies as the place of rebirth, the ultimate site for the reincarnation of the dead. For Lucas, what Whitman perceives as "the beautiful uncut hair of graves" in "Song of Myself" (101) makes the absence of grass on Simon's grave a marker of difference unaccounted for in Whitman's metaphysics. However, the personification of the grass in "Song of Myself," which Desirée Henderson regards as a sacrilegious move towards "unmasking the ground, peeling off the surface and revealing the bodies underneath" (102), does not offer the form necessary for Lucas to justify his brother's reincarnation in machinery. For him, the machine is a site of traumatic deferral, at once heterochronic (in terms of the cyclical return of Simon's voice) and heterotopic (marking a juxtaposition of corporeality and machinery as a site of trauma).

This discrepancy between Whitman's system and the method of Simon's death indicates how the traumatic experience that takes hold of Lucas affects his psychasthenic relationship to the book. He needs to expand the scope of *Leaves of Grass* so as to fabricate an explanatory frame for Simon's song: "It seemed, as he loaded the plates onto the belt, that the machines were not inanimate; not quite inanimate. They were part of a continuum: machines, then grass and trees, then horses and dogs, then human beings" (Cunningham 20). Extending Whitman's definition of the grass in section 6 of "Song of Myself" to the machine as a narrative frame, Lucas produces a "housing" for the inassimilable contiguity of body and machine convoluting in Simon's death. Personification is one such housing device: "He wondered if the machine had loved Simon, in its serene and unthinking way. He wondered if all the machines at the works, all the furnaces and hooks and belts, mutely admired their men, as horses admired their masters" (20-21). Incorporating machines into the continuum, Lucas creates a lens through which to perceive them as animate things that kill out of affection – a motif which recurs in the second novella, "The Children's Crusade," in the form of teenage suicide terrorists blowing up their victims by embracing them. Essentially catalyzed by the phenomenology of detail, Whitman's poetics of space assimilates Lucas as an instance of psychasthenia and is simultaneously reconfigured by Lucas to serve as a *model* of traumatic epistemology, a *tabula* that accommodates death by machine – markedly absent from the catalogs of the *Leaves of Grass* – into a transcendentalist dynamics of life and death, welding the technological into the Whitmanesque image of grass as a "uniform hieroglyphic" (Whitman 96).

FITTING WORDS

We have seen that the song Lucas hears emanating from the machinery is one whose words he does not understand yet recognizes as vaguely familiar from “elsewhere.” This “elsewhere,” hovering on the “outer edge of memory” (Cunningham 47), points to the very content of trauma as a site uncharted and unre-membered, yet constantly revisited. In his psychological account of phantoms, secreted traumas passed on within families from generation to generation, Nicolas Abraham talks about verbal traces that indicate the phantom’s incessant presence in the psyche of the traumatized person. “What haunts,” Abraham argues, “are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (287), secrets that have not been verbalized. Thus the phantom embodies secreted traumas and is sustained by what Abraham calls “phantomogenic words [that] become travesties and can be acted out or expressed in phobias of all kinds (such as impulse phobia), obsessions, restricted phantasmagorias” (292). In Abraham’s terms, Simon’s death by machine constitutes a foreign body “lodged within the subject” (290), addressing Lucas through the phantomogenic words of the song. In what follows, I will apply Abraham’s notion of the phantom to Lucas’s conversations with Catherine, his dead brother’s fiancée, to further nuance the connection between psychasthenia and trauma. I will demonstrate that Catherine’s recognition of her own trauma being ‘spoken’ by Lucas during one of his speaking fits should be addressed as a mode of listening which, in turn, teaches us, readers, to not only read but ‘listen’ to Cunningham’s text as a repository of phantomogenic words that speak to 9/11’s tabooed traumas.

On the occasion of presenting Catherine with a bowl to express his naïve adoration, Lucas utters two Whitman-lines in which the girl ‘recognizes’ Simon’s voice addressing her:

He said, “The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel.”

[...]

“The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck. The nine months’ gone is in the parturition chamber, her faintness and pains are advancing.”

Catherine paused. She looked at him with a new recognition.

“What did you say?”

He didn’t know. She had never before seemed to hear him when he spoke as the book.

“Lucas, please repeat what you just said.”

“I’ve forgotten.”

“You spoke of a spinning-girl. You spoke of a bride, and ... a prostitute. And a woman about to give birth.”

“It was the book.”

“But why did you say it?”

“The words come through me. I never know.”

She leaned closer, gazing into his face as if words were written there, faint but discernible, difficult to read. (Cunningham 54, 55)

The “new recognition” that Lucas’s utterance elicits is in fact the uncanny recognition of the self in the other. By unknowingly speaking in a fit, Lucas performs a text that “fits” Catherine’s own trauma. His utterance, in this sense, is doubly performative insofar as he unwittingly produces his Whitman-lines as fits that Catherine simultaneously produces as a reader reenacting and thereby confronting her repressed secret in them. Lucas’s psychasthenia consequently becomes an interface for Catherine to confront her own trauma. To adopt Abraham’s term, Lucas acts like a “ventriloquist” (290), a voice ‘saying’ not only Whitman but Catherine as well. Suspecting that Simon had confided a secret in him, Catherine collapses and discloses to Lucas what she perceives as her complicity in Simon’s death: “‘I told your brother he must marry me. I don’t know if the child is his. It probably isn’t. But Simon was willing.’ [...] ‘I suspect. He had his accident because he was unhappy. He may have been so distracted by the thought of our wedding that he allowed it to happen’” (Cunningham 69). This silenced trauma is thus not merely the wound that the loss of her fiancé inflicts on her but rather the haunting suspicion of her own agency in Simon’s death – made “discernible” for her by Lucas’s psychasthenia.

Catherine’s reading of Lucas, however, also gives us a model as to how to read Cunningham’s work as a voice emanating from the outer edge of *our* memories, but without giving us a way to translate it into a narrative of cause and effect. I would like to suggest that in the same way that the words “spinning girl,” “prostitute,” “nine months,” and “bride” are (mis)read by Catherine as reverberations of her trauma, Cunningham’s work provides us with a psychasthenic text that exposes the phantomogenic contours of 9/11’s tabooed traumas. In order to identify these contours let me focus on the scene that concludes “In the Machine.” Sensing the danger that machines pose to Catherine at her workplace, Lucas tries to divert her from going to work. To do so, he self-mutilates himself by allowing his hand to be devoured by the machine so that Catherine would take him to the hospital instead of going to the factory. Waiting for treatment with Catherine at his side, Lucas suddenly succumbs to the pull of an irresistible drive and, with his mangled hand soaking in blood, dashes out of the hospital and runs to the site where Catherine’s workplace, the Mannahatta Company, is already on fire. The “house in the sea of grass” (98), where he imagines himself

running to, ultimately materializes in its dialectical opposite: a factory on fire, a “building blazing” (100). More than speaking in fits, his psychasthenic assimilation into *Leaves of Grass* thus serves him as an epistemological lens through which he experiences the world.

This calamitous fire, taking place at the fictitious Mannahatta Company, acquires new meanings once read in the light of the second novella. Set in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, “The Children’s Crusade” recycles imagery familiar from “In the Machine,” which instantiates a retroactive reading of the first novella. If, in the wake of the terrorist attacks, as we read in “The Children’s Crusade,” “it was impossible not to be struck by the emptiness where the towers had stood” (113), it is just as impossible for the reader not to re-visualize Lucas’s apocalyptic vision of the “unspeakable beauty” (101) of the catastrophe at the Mannahatta Company in terms of the spectacular events of 9/11. Using “The Children’s Crusade” as a retrospective vantage point, Lucas’s perception of the fire that left onlookers “horrificed and excited” (99) reads uncannily germane to the aftermath of the collapse of the Twin Towers: “[t]he dead had entered the atmosphere. [...] With every breath Lucas took the dead inside him. This was their bitter taste; this was how they lay – ashen and hot – on the tongue. [...] The dead filled Lucas’s mouth and lungs” (100). Similarly to Catherine’s reading of her own trauma in Lucas’s Whitman-words, we recognize the uncanny content of the dust of 9/11 emerging in the form of phantomogenic words embedded in Cunningham’s text. The burning building of the Mannahatta Company is construed by Lucas’s gaze as part of the continuum, a building-machine, metonymic of the machinery it houses. Because the sight phantomogenically recalls 9/11, we find ourselves looking at Ground Zero through Lucas’s psychasthenia.

All these instances attest to the dynamics of repetitions that catalyzes the reading of “The Children’s Crusade” as a narrative layer ‘deposited’ on “In the Machine,” whereby a palimpsest of inter- and intratextual relations is formed. Although the ruins of the World Trade Center anchor “The Children’s Crusade” in a historical setting outside the text, its spatiotemporal framework seeps into fiction once the teenage terrorists appear on the scene. This apparent *difference* between historical fact and fiction wraps the former into the latter and allows Cunningham’s text to articulate the ‘unbelievable’ through phantomogenic words installed into a historiographic scaffolding. Catherine’s reading of Lucas/Whitman thus gives us a model for reading Cunningham’s work as an *aide mémoire*. As such, insofar as Lucas’s psychasthenic assimilation into *Leaves of Grass* provides him with an epistemological apparatus to process the scale of calamity that unfolds in front of his eyes, so does Cunningham’s *Specimen Days*

invite us, readers, to engage with the novel psychasthenically, as an apparatus through which to process the trauma of 9/11.

FOUR BUILDINGS

In order to examine how Cunningham's novel lends itself to a psychasthenic reading and serves as a mnemonic device, let me return to the industrial catastrophe at Catherine's workplace, which concludes "In the Machine." Cunningham's description of the fire at the fictitious Mannahatta Company seems uncannily congruent with the historical event of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911, which took the lives of 146 garment workers, many of whom jumped to their deaths from the top floors of the building (see von Drehle 152-156). "In the Machine," however, is set in a New York of some 20 years before the fire, when an accidental (if not magical) meeting between Lucas and Walt Whitman on Broadway was still possible.² In a self-referential manner, Cunningham accounts for this temporal discrepancy in his authorial note to the novel. This note is a disclaimer in which he politely refers the reader to yet another text as a source of truth: "Anyone interested in the absolute truth about New York in the mid to late nineteenth century would be well advised to consult *Gotham* by Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, which was the primary source from which I spun my own variations" (xiv). But if this "absolute truth" is located in another text, Cunningham's ironical remark confers historical truth on the very text that produces it. Cunningham's reference to *Gotham* as "absolute truth" wherefrom he spins his own variations is not without an intratextual reference. His words echo Lucas's own way of spinning his variations from "the book" whose constructed nature is echoed by Cunningham's own book, as well as the ultimate source he pins down as "truth." Through these multiple layers of textual fractals Cunningham dramatizes the cyclical structure of traumatic reenactment and allows the voice of 9/11's "phantom," in Abraham's sense, to echo within the interstice between "In the Machine" and "The Children's Crusade." The textual formation of the phantom as an absence is most conspicuous in Cunning-

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- 2 In a serendipitous instance, as Lucas is looking for coins on Broadway he bumps into Walt Whitman's "gray-white cascade of beard" (Cunningham 72). Their dream-like conversation is crucial for Lucas because Whitman confirms him in his belief that the dead can return in machinery as well: "They are in machinery too. They are everywhere," answers Whitman. "Lucas had been right, then. If he'd harbored any doubts, here was the answer" (73-74).

ham's treatment of architectural spaces which I will demonstrate through the interrelations formed among four buildings: the NYU building, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, the Mannahatta Company, and the ruins of the World Trade Center.

As "The Children's Crusade" gestures back to "In the Machine," an intratextual relation is formed between the Mannahatta Company and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The nexus between the two buildings is established by the police psychologist Cat's visit to New York University – the present-day owner of what used to be the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory – in order to meet a Whitman-specialist and seek an explanation as to why the teenage suicide bombers use *Leaves of Grass* as their "language" (Cunningham 153) when Cat talks to them on the phone. Upon her entering the building, the narration gestures toward a historical reality outside the text (the NYU building is indeed identical to the old Triangle Factory)³ through the textual coordinates of the horrific fire at the Mannahatta Company:

One of these buildings, Cat had never been quite sure which, had been that sweatshop, where the fire was. She knew the story only vaguely – the exits had been blocked to keep the workers from sneaking out early. Something like that. There'd been a fire, and all those women were trapped inside. Some of them had jumped. From one of these buildings – was it the one she was entering? – women with their dresses on fire had fallen, had hit this pavement right here or the pavement just down the street. Now it was all NYU. (156)

The historical event reiterated here functions both as an intertextual reference to a historical event as well as an intratext retroactively superimposed on the Mannahatta Company. Cat's rumination on the story, which she "only vaguely" remembers, inserts the historical link between NYU and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 as an intertext, while her entering the NYU building offers us, readers, an intratextual gateway to read the text psychasthenically, that is, to 'recognize' Cat as Catherine and 're-read' the fire of the Mannahatta Company in terms of the disaster of the Triangle catastrophe (and vice versa) and, by extension, hear the echo of 9/11 behind 1911.

By the same token, the ominous presence of the ruins of the World Trade Center in "The Children's Crusade" as yet another historical intertext interacts with both the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and the Mannahatta Company at an intratextual level. The dynamic interaction of these textual traces is imbued with

3 The building is indeed NYU property (see von Drehle 327) and there is a plaque on its façade commemorating the fire of 1911 (see Foote 295-297).

the presence of *genius loci*, which, paradoxically, gains its aura by being detached from and at once intimately tied to Lower Manhattan as a metafictional palimpsest. In this sense, Cat's ruminations on the fire, which she presumes had happened "right here" (156), certainly does more than identify the NYU Building as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory inserted as a historical intertext. Being "right here" constitutes a nexus of textualized traces, in which the Mannahatta Company and Ground Zero are "entered" as part of the same act of entering the NYU building and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

If reading Cunningham's work demands the recognition of these architectural and historical interrelations, it also requires something more. For the industrial catastrophe described in "In the Machine" does not merely interact with the Ground Zero evoked in "The Children's Crusade" as nodes in a nexus of intertextual relations, but also creates a virtual site in which the uncanny constellation of body and building, the animate and the inanimate explode in an emphatic absence. Cat's vague recollection of "women with their dresses on fire [who] had fallen, had hit this pavement right here or the pavement just down the street" (156), gives textual form, a textual *genius loci*, to the people that jumped/fell from the towers on 9/11.

As we have already seen, Lucas's psychasthenic recital of Whitman stages a reenactment of Catherine's own trauma which she recognizes as a text "faint but discernible, difficult to read" (55). I have also suggested that Cunningham's work replicates Lucas's "book" in that it invites psychasthenic reading as a narrative to absorb the trauma of 9/11. More specifically, I will argue that *Specimen Days* works as a mnemonic device for the recollection of 9/11's falling bodies. As the Mannahatta Company is burning, Lucas looks up at one of the workers:

The woman stood in the window, holding to its frame. Her blue skirt billowed. The square of brilliant orange made of her a blue silhouette, fragile and precise. She was like a goddess of the fire, come to her platform to tell those gathered below what the fire meant, what it wanted of them. From so far away, her face was indistinct. She turned her head to look back into the room, as if someone had called to her. She was radiant and terrifying. She listened to something the fire told her.

She jumped.

[...]

The woman's skirt rose around her as she fell. She lifted her arms, as if to take hold of invisible hands that reached for her.

When she struck the pavement, she disappeared. She'd been a woman in midair, she'd been the flowering of her skirt, and then in an instant she was only the dress, puddle on the cobblestones, still lifting slightly at its edges as if it lived on. (98)

Lucas's perception of the jumper bespeaks a transcendentalist geometry into which death by machine is inscribed. In much the same way that his brother was "stamped and expelled" by the machine, it is now the tall building that devours and expels the workers. For Lucas, the industrial catastrophe unfolds as a transition from life to death, experienced through the lens of *Leaves of Grass*. Perceived in her fall as "the flowering of her skirt" and then becoming "the dress, puddle on the cobblestones," the falling woman's death is inscribed into what Lucas conceptualizes as "a huge and mesmerizing wholeness" (100), a continuum that brings the machine (metonymically represented by the factory building and the cobblestones of the city) and the garden (the flowering of her skirt) to an equilibrium in the moment of death.⁴ At this time, psychasthenia allows Lucas to transcend his pain: "The pain was there still, but it was not in him any more" (93).

In much the same way that he assimilates into *Leaves of Grass* throughout his life, his death constitutes an enactment of the poem. At the novel's end Catherine cannot withhold him from leaving the hospital and running to the site of the fire. The lure of space that depersonalizes the psychasthenic manifests itself in the lure that drives Lucas to witness the building consumed by fire. Once there, Lucas dies in much the same way that he lived his life. He dissolves into the book and, through the book, into the materiality of space. Filtered through Whitman's poem, the horror of death that engulfs Lucas is framed as a source of beauty: "He knew that his heart stopped. He wanted to say, I am large, I contain multitudes. I am in the grass under your feet. He made as if to speak but did not speak. In the sky, the great celestial horse turned its enormous head. An unspeakable beauty announced itself" (101). The beauty of his death is coterminal with what he perceives as the "flowering" of the falling woman's skirt in midair. By extension, reading the text psychasthenically, this image operates as a mnemonic device insofar as it reminds us of the iconic image of a woman holding down her skirt before jumping from one of the WTC towers on 9/11.

Another passage that describes the fire at the Mannahatta Company yields an even more distressing configuration, which translates impending death into freedom. As Lucas catches sight of another woman just about to jump out of the building, he translates the fall into flying:

4 In his book *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) Leo Marx discusses the pastoral and the industrial ideals as deeply entrenched imaginaries in American cultural history. These antagonistic binaries are reconciled in Lucas's imagination.

She looked down. She looked at Lucas.

[...]

He returned her gaze. He could do nothing else. His heart raged and burned, full of its own fire. [...] She said (though she did not speak in words), We are this now. We were weary and put-upon, we lived in tiny rooms, we ate candy in secret, but now we are radiant and glorious. We are no longer anyone. We are part of something vaster and more marvelous than the living can imagine.

[...]

The fire woman spread her wings and flew.

[...] He saw the woman cross the sky. [...] He knew that his heart had stopped. He wanted to say, I am large, I contain multitudes. I am in the grass under your feet. (100-101)

Similarly to the passages cited earlier, Whitman's "Song of Myself" pulsates behind Lucas's 'reading' of the catastrophe. The aesthetic turn, however, which transforms falling into flying bears echoes of the composed posture of Richard Drew's famous photograph known as "The Falling Man" (2001). Depicting a man falling headfirst with one leg bent at the knee in perfect harmony with the girders of the towers behind him, the photograph was first published in the *New York Times* on September 12, 2001, only to be denounced by readers as irreverent and disrespectful to the man depicted. In his article "The Falling Man," published in *Esquire Magazine* in 2003, journalist Tom Junod urges readers to bear witness to Drew's photograph as an ethical imperative. "Although he has not chosen his fate," Junod writes, "he appears to have, in his last instants of life, embraced it. If he were not falling, he might very well be flying. [...] Some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower, a portrait of resignation; others see something else – something discordant and terrible: freedom" ("The Falling Man"). The "unspeakable beauty" (Cunningham 101) that envelops Lucas in the closing scene of the story resounds the "terrible freedom" that suffuses Drew's photo, but while Junod talks about a "discordant" aesthetics, a freedom tainted by suicide as the unsettling connotation of death by jumping, Lucas perceives the fall in terms of becoming part of "something vaster."

Lucas's death also echoes the unvoiceable nature of 9/11: his function as projecting screen for his environment (the city, the inhabitants, Catherine, and her trauma) fails at the end, as he is overburdened by having to reflect the Manhatta Company fire. Indeed, Lucas gives in to the lure of space and dissolves into the sight of the burning building. The exchange of glances between the "fire woman" and Lucas brings about meaning as a fulfillment of the script provided by *Leaves of Grass*. By the same token, the traumatizing image of "The Falling Man," and the inevitability of death that it denotes, are simultaneously recalled

and filtered through Cunningham's novel as a mnemonic device. In the same way that Lucas perceives the fire at the Mannahatta Company through the filter of *Leaves of Grass*, we are reminded of Drew's unsettling photograph but in the same breath assimilated into *Specimen Days* as a narrative. As a form of neurosis that transcends its medical understanding in Caillois's reconceptualization, Cunningham employs psychasthenia as both a literary trope and a model of engaging with the trauma of 9/11.

CONCLUSION

If Cunningham's palimpsest operates by the logic of fractal geometry centered on the dialectics of listening to the voice of the other and the construction of a narrative to rationalize that voice, the reader of *Specimen Days* is positioned as a reader of phantomogenic words, mimicking Lucas's listening to Simon and Catherine's listening to Lucas. The same pattern can be traced in the four buildings that dovetail within a complex web of intra- and intertextual nexuses. The core formation that defines this pattern is, of course, the machine that devoured Simon, his "death by machine" that echoes in the dust of the World Trade Center and the 9/11 jumpers – both recalled as particular instances of the trauma of 9/11. As we recognize 9/11 *in terms* of the fire at the Mannahatta Company/Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, the Whitmanesque continuum that helps Lucas absorb what exceeds his comprehension looks back at us, echoing Junod's call to confront the photograph of the Falling Man.

We have seen how Caillois's association of psychasthenia with mimicry gives a new life to this neurotic condition. Rather than conceiving it as an inability to demarcate the boundaries of the self, he reconceptualizes this form of neurosis along the lines of desire that drives the neurotic subject to give in to the lure of space. The subject assimilates into the environment not so much in order to seek shelter but for the sake of assimilation itself. While the phenomenological tone of Cunningham's text convincingly highlights this aspect of Lucas's neurosis, we also learn that his psychasthenia is inextricably tied to his trauma. His assimilation into *Leaves of Grass* thus foregrounds the function of mimicry from which Caillois diverges in his essay: defense. Cunningham reframes psychasthenia as a form of neurosis that is obsessive and at once defensive. In much the same way that Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* resonates through Cunningham's text, so does Lucas's psychasthenic assimilation into the poem map Whitman's poetics on 9/11 as a transcendentalist compass that ultimately leads him to dissolve into the continuum of the animate and the inanimate as a structuring prin-

ciple of his cognitive map. If Whitman serves him as a navigational tool in the world, Cunningham deploys Lucas's psychasthenia as a vehicle to confront the raw materiality of 9/11 without directly referencing it in his novel.

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