STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVI, 2, 2021, p. 143 - 158
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2021.2.10

"HOW DO YOU GRIEVE A NUMBER?" – UNSUCCESSFUL GRIEVING IN JESS WALTER'S *THE ZERO*

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ABSTRACT. ***"How do you grieve a number?" – Unsuccessful Grieving in Jess Walter's* The Zero.** Accountability and grief, assuming different forms and accommodating a variety of (sometimes antithetical) approaches, seem to be the dominants shaping 9/11 fiction and, consequently, the attendant criticism. Grief is a central theme to Jess Walter's *The Zero*, examined in various manifestations, ranging from public to private, from counterfeit to genuine. The claim of this paper is that *The Zero* explores alternatives of grief only to invite the thought that the work of mourning, in a traditionally 'successful' sense, is no longer possible post-9/11.

Keywords: *9/11 fiction, exploration of grief, work of mourning, trauma narrative, Jess Walter*

REZUMAT. ***"Cum deplângem un număr?" – Eşuarea travaliului de doliu în romanul* The Zero *de Jess Walter.*** Luând diverse forme şi permiţând o plajă largă de abordări, uneori chiar antitetice, identificarea responsabililor şi gestionarea suferinţei par a fi dominantele care modelează proza despre atacurile teroriste de la 11 septembrie şi, implicit, critica aferentă. Raportarea la suferinţă şi doliu este tema centrală a romanului *The Zero* de Jess Walter, examinată în multiplele-i manifestări, traversând spaţiul public şi spaţiul privat, teritorii ale superficialităţii, dar şi zone restrânse de autenticitate. În acest context, lucrarea de faţă susţine că romanul *The Zero* explorează alternative de raportare la suferinţă şi doliu pentru a lansa ideea că travaliul de doliu, în accepţiunea tradiţională a succesului acestui proces, nu mai este posibil în lumea de după 11 septembrie.

Cuvinte-cheie: *literatură 9/11, deplângere şi suferinţă, travaliul de doliu, naraţiune a traumei, Jess Walter*

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Over the past two decades, both 9/11 fiction and its criticism have explored the terrorist attacks and their aftermath with a view to grasping the meaning of 9/11. The pressure placed on writers to put the mechanisms of fiction into motion in order to mediate the restoration of the network of signification[2], to help apprehend an 'unpossessable' event "that somewhat in some way must be possessed" (Versluys 3), started to manifest itself shortly after the terrorist attack. The first literary responses paradoxically stem from an endemic writer's block[3] and form a touching repertoire of texts[4] poetically contemplating the event through the lens of a declared creative numbness[5]. In time, the literary reactions to 9/11 have extended to encompass a rich array of concerns, governed by the two dominants of the 9/11 discourse, namely accountability and grief. This dichotomist perspective is by no means intended as a reductive gesture[6], but rather as an extension of Jacques Derrida's take on 9/11 as a "major event." In Derrida's words,

> We must ... distinguish between two "impressions." On the one hand, compassion for the victims and indignation over the killings; our sadness and condemnation should be without limits, unconditional, unimpeachable; they are responding to an undeniable "event," beyond all simulacra and all possible virtualization; they respond with what might be called the

[2] For 9/11 as an "event" that breaks the chain of signification, see Jacques Derrida's interview by G. Borradori: "this very thing, the place and meaning of this "event," remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept, like a unicity with no generality on the horizon or with no horizon at all, out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about. We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way: September 11, *le 11 septembre*, September 11" (86).

[3] For an analysis of the responses to 9/11 as an 'unpossessable' event, see Versluys, 1-17.

[4] As Kristiaan Versluys points out, "a conspicuous part of the discursive responses to 9/11 was the spontaneous outpouring of poetry – most of which was published online at Web sites set up for that purpose. … Only a few among the thousands of poems written on the occasion of September 11 attain the level of discursive precision and human expressiveness." (9-10)

[5] See for instance, Toni Morrison's "The Dead of September 11": "I must be steady and I must be clear, knowing all the time that I have nothing to say–no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become." Suheir Hammad, "First Writing Since": "there have been no words. / i have not written one word. /no poetry in the ashes south of canal street. /no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna. /not one word." Lynne Sharon Schwartz, "Near November": "We have tried to proceed to the next sentence. But to write, you must know something and we know nothing beyond the intolerable questions that assail us. Grief, at an infernal temperature, has bunt knowledge out of us." (261). See also Richard Gray, pp. 13-15.

[6] Grief and accountability should not be understood as narrow concepts, as limiting and rigid trauma-related scenarios or revanchist narratives, but accepted as inherent, structural components of the most variegated attempts at understanding the event.

> heart and they go straight to the heart of the event. On the other hand, the interpreted, interpretative, informed impression, the conditional evaluation that makes us believe that this is a "major event." (89)

Thus, the overarching discourse on 9/11 draws on the exploration of trauma and grief and the examination of culpability and liability; it consequently lends its lexicon to fiction, which has begun to explore these aspects in the most intriguing ways.

The development of 9/11 fiction has benefited from increasingly insightful critical examinations, even if, at times, somewhat formulaic and confining. A decade after the event critics were still waiting and prescribing for 'the great 9/11 novel'. From Laura Miller's essay "Why we haven't seen a great 9/11 novel" to Richard Gray's complex analysis in *After the Fall*, the commemorative year 2011 seems to have been met with a consensus that the recipe for that long-expected great novel is in possession of the critics[7], but tends to elude writers. Richard Gray's examination of 9/11 fiction operates with a rather restrictive divide between texts that "have failed to come up with an adequate answer" mainly because of their focus on the domestic space, on "the seductive pieties of home, hearth, and family and, related to them, the equally seductive myth of American exceptionalism", and "fictions that get it right … thanks to a strategy of convergence, rooted in the conviction that the hybrid is the only space in which the location of cultures and the bearing witness to trauma can really occur" (16-17). A few years later, Paul Petrovic noticed a similar evolutionary pattern: if what he calls "the first wave" of 9/11 fiction and criticism appears to have been trapped in restrictive formulae dictated by domestic realism, over the years, the fictional approaches to the event have gained finer nuances. According to Petrovic, the 9/11 fiction of the "second wave" advances inventive and complex explorations of the 9/11 experience, largely set on "deconstructing the national exceptionalist fantasy" (x-xi). Moreover, criticism also tends to revisit and revaluate early 9/11 fictions from more substantive standpoints, thus adding valuable nuances to the existing scholarship. Such is, for instance, the case of Jess Walter's *The Zero*, a novel originally published in 2006, but which had long been disregarded by critics, despite its being a finalist for the National Book Award.

Dolores Resano locates the beginning of criticism on Jess Walter's *The Zero*[8] with John N. Duvall's 2013 article (136-137). Much of the scholarship on

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[7] For a brief, yet astute analysis of the formulaic and prescriptive tendencies of the criticism attending 9/11 fiction, see Worthington, 3-4.

[8] Resano also acknowledges Bryan M. Santin's 2011 M.A. thesis, but decides to consider articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Bryan M. Santin performs a comparative analysis of three 9/11 novels, including Jess Walter's *The Zero* and argues that Walter's novel "criticizes not only the United States' surreally de-historicized political and cultural response to 9/11, but also

Jess Walter's *The Zero*'s insists on the novel's satirical ambitions targeting the clichés of the overarching post-9/11 political discourse, which uphold fantasies of American exceptionalism and the attendant ideological abstractions that govern American culture.[9] Walter's novel has also been approached with an allegorical key that opens a generous leeway for commentaries on the afterlife of postmodernism.[10] Nevertheless, *The Zero's* polymorphic engagement with trauma and grief has also drawn the attention of scholars[11]. Jason Dodge, for instance, looks into Walter's exploration of grief, from the commercialization of public grief through ironic grief to private, authentic grief. The novel's subversive mechanism, operating through satire and irony, is central to Dodge's argument. Lloyd Isaac Vayo's study, on the other hand, focuses on the construction of post-9/11 consciousness and endows the struggle of the novel's protagonist with synecdochical value. "His struggle is our struggle, our fumbling missteps on the way to reconciling September 10th with September 12th and everything after", Vayo writes, "and Remy's good intentions ... lead him to question the very foundations of mainstream post-9/11 identity ... arriving at a conscience of sorts in the process" (162). It is within the discursive terrain configured by these last two studies that the present paper locates itself by arguing that central to the novel is the failure to recreate a fluent narrative as a means of coping with trauma and grieving 'successfully'. 9/11 is presented as an event that evades apprehension and consequently denies the individual all the available mechanisms of coming to terms with what happened. It affects the individual structurally, splitting identity into pre- and post-9/11.

Trauma and grief theories seem to be lending themselves generously to the exploration of 9/11 fiction, just as literature seems to be contributing to trauma and grief studies;[12] the synergism stems from the common interest in

how this response produces dangerously blind redemptive narratives that promote secret, state-sponsored violence" (47). Walter's novel has since been analyzed comparatively in other theses, which add to the scholarship on *The Zero.* See, for instance, Danel Olson's work, which explores trauma in a corpus of 9/11 novels through Gothic aesthetics.

9 See, for example, John N. Duvall, Aaron Derosa, Marjorie Worthington, Dolores Resano, Anthony Flinn, Liliana M. Naydan, Elizabeth S. Anker.

10 See Elizabeth S. Anker.

11 See also Kristine A. Miller's essay, which tackles questions of authenticity and "argues that fiction is not tertiary but primary to understanding trauma" by comparing the language and the narrative strategy of *The Zero* with the recorded personal accounts of the 9/11 first responders (31).

12 As Cathy Caruth points out, "The phenomenon of trauma has seemed to become all-inclusive, but it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding: if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" (Trauma and Experience. Introduction 4). Grief and bereavement studies also include literature in their interdisciplinary approaches. Robert A. Neimeyer explains the benefits of such complex approaches to the management of grief through therapeutic narrative reconstruction: "The result is a burgeoning interdisciplinary interest in narrative, as scholars seek out the

narrative and meaning. Trauma is largely understood as an abrupt disruption of the associative network of meaning, which is a processual component of *self-narrative*[13] development. As Cathy Caruth explains, "trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge"; consequently, it "requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure" (Recapturing the Past. Introduction 153). Grief theorists also emphasize the therapeutic role of meaning reconstruction in successful bereavement adaptation. According to Neimeyer and Sands,

> Fostering reconstruction of a world of meaning would therefore seem to be a therapeutic priority for many bereaved clients, one that could carry benefits not only in alleviating complicated grief symptomatology, but also in renewing a sense of hope and self-efficacy in their changed lives. (13)

Given "the narrative nature of the mind", to use Neimeyer's phrase (229), the attribution of meaning implies the integration of the traumatic episode into one's own life story.[14] Adaptive strategies also involve "constructing a new reality, in which survivors' assumptive worlds and their view of themselves are forever changed" (Gillies and Neimeyer 36). Consequently, working successfully through trauma and grief presupposes the achievement of a coherent narrative to support the apprehension and inclusion of the traumatic experience, even supposing the readjustment of previously held assumptions about the self and the world.

When it comes to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a structural recalibration of the sense-making apparatus is required, since the chain of meaning seems to have been disrupted beyond reconstruction based on previously available cognitive structures and mechanisms. As Derrida argues, the event affected

> … the conceptual, semantic, and one could even say hermeneutic apparatus that might have allowed one to see coming, to comprehend, interpret, describe, speak of, and name "September 11" – and in so doing to neutralize the traumatism and come to terms with it through a work of mourning. What I am suggesting here might appear abstract and overly reliant on what seems like a simple conceptual or discursive activity, a question of knowledge; it is as if I were in fact content to say that what

relations between phenomenological, psychological, neurobiological, and even literary analyses of narrative and consciousness without privileging or diminishing the value of any of these approaches" (229).

[13] The *self-narrative* is defined by Neimeyer as "an overarching cognitive-affective-behavioral structure that organizes the 'micro-narratives' of everyday life into a 'macro-narrative' that consolidates our self-understanding, establishes our characteristic range of emotions and goals, and guides our performance on the stage of the social world" (qtd. in Neimeyer and Sands 10)

[14] See Caruth, "Recapturing the Past. Introduction", 152-154 and Neimeyer 244-245.

> is terrible about 'September 11,' what remains 'infinite' in this wound, is that we do not know what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it. And that is, in fact, what I'm saying. (93-94)

It is precisely this ungraspable nature of 9/11 that Jess Walter's *The Zero* draws on. The novel is made of incomplete vignettes, short episodes presenting the only fragments of experience that are remembered by the amnesiac main character, Brian Remy, a police officer who was among the first responders to an event the reader is invited to recognize as the terrorist attack of 9/11, and who presents symptoms consistent with dissociative identity disorder. Remy retires from the police force because of back pain, but it becomes unclear if he actually starts working covert operations for the Documentation Department of the Office of Liberty and Recovery and several other intelligence agencies or goes down a convincing delusionary path in which he imagines himself involved in shady national security operations for the above-mentioned organizations. The novel plays on the 'good cop/ bad cop' cliché[15] and makes available only the episodes that cast Remy in a good light, while simultaneously teasing the reader to fill the gaps of the obscure, dark side of the story, for which Remy's villain alter ego seems to be responsible. The organization of the often incomplete episodes observes chronology, apparently facilitating the 'fill in the gap' exercise for the reader. The emphasis here is on 'apparently', since the reliability of the account is called into question.

The novel begins with Remy regaining consciousness after a self-inflicted gunshot to the head in what appears to have been a suicide attempt[16]. The suicide note seems to puzzle Remy more than the wound itself:

> Okay. This was the problem. These gaps in his memory, or perhaps his life, a series of skips—long shredded tears, empty spaces where the explanations for the most basic things used to be. For a moment he tried to puzzle over it all, the way he might have considered a problem on the job. Cleaning oil might indicate an accident, but the note? What lunatic has ever written a note before.
> Cleaning a gun?
> He picked up the note: "Etc."
> *Et cetera?*
> Well, that was funny. He didn't recall being so funny. And yet there it was, in his own handwriting. Okay. He was getting somewhere. Whatever had happened, *whatever he'd done,* it was funny. (Walter 5)

[15] In her exploration of the satirical prowess of *The Zero* Dolores Resano insightfully reads this narrative strategy through "the lethal logic of violence and forgetting" (142).

[16] As Elizabeth S. Anker demonstrates, the trope of suicide is commonly employed by 9/11 fiction, with significant metaphorical engagement (464, 470-471).

To Kristine A. Miller, Brian Remy's suicide note is symptomatic of the "inability or unwillingness to describe their 9/11 experiences" manifested by both cops and civilians who had been directly exposed to the terrorist attack (31). On the other hand, Lloyd Isaac Vayo reads Remy's suicide in Baudrillardian terms, as coterminous to the suicide of the two towers (162-163). Along different lines, Dolores Resano claims that "this pivotal scene begins to debunk the trauma narrative and announces instead the onset of some sort of parody" (144). The content of the note as well as Remy's reaction to it do entice an anticlimactic reading. However, the suicide note is consequential both as a structural element and an interpretive tool. According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, 'et cetera' means "and others, especially of the same kind: and so forth" and the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as "and other similar things." Thus, the suicide note is more than a simple, gratuitous abbreviation, written mockingly in order to deflate a tragic situation; it implies both repetition and anticipation of the kind of traumatic experiences that might have led Remy to such an extreme gesture. It is unspecific, of course, and this kind of vagueness hovers over the entire narrative, since Remy, in his amnesia, denies himself traumatic information. However, the note anticipates 'more of the same', which invites a reading starting from the Derridean claim that "the wound remains open by our terror before the *future* and not only the past" (96, italics in the original). As Derrida further explains,

> Imagine that the Americans and, through them, the entire world, had been told: what has just happened, the spectacular destruction of two towers, the theatrical but invisible deaths of thousands of people in just a few seconds, is an awful thing, a terrible crime, a pain without measure, but it's all over, it won't happen again, there will never again be anything as awful as or more awful than that. I assume that mourning would have been possible in a relatively short period of time. Whether to our chagrin or our delight, things would have quite quickly returned to their normal course in ordinary history. One would have spoken of the work of mourning and turned the page, as is so often done, and done so much more easily when it comes to things that happen elsewhere, far from Europe and the Americas. But this is not at all what happened. There is traumatism with no possible work of mourning when the evil comes from the possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come – though worse. Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is "over and done with." (97, italics in the original)

The hypothesis is confirmed at the end of the novel, when the *etc.* of the suicide note – the unspecified thing of the same category – seems to materialize in the severe wound Remy receives from the suicide bomber with whom he had been working and to whom he had actually provided both the bomb and,

unwarily, the incentive for the detonation. Repetition is not only a worrisome factor, but also part of the behavioral responses to trauma. Trauma induces the drive to revisit, reenact, relive, the traumatic experience, as a means of remembering and an attempt at owning it. As Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain, via Freud and Janet, "if a person does not remember, he is likely to act our" since "the crucial factor that determines the repetition of trauma is the presence of mute, unsymbolized and unintegrated experiences" (167). The reenactment of trauma does not presuppose the faithful recomposition of the traumatic event; according to Judith Herman, "traumatized people find themselves reenacting some aspect of the trauma scene in disguised form without realizing what they are doing" (40). In Walter's novel, the repetition of and involuntary complicity to traumatic experiences similar to those that most likely led to Remy's suicide attempt lend their relevance to both public and individual attempts at working through trauma. The end of the novel, foreshadowed from the very beginning, confirms the impossibility of the work of mourning, both publicly and privately.

Remy's reaction to the suicide letter brings along the kind of subtle ambiguity that proliferates the ominous vagueness of the suicide note and foregrounds the importance of the opening scene as crucial for the entire novel. To him, the note is 'funny', he thinks of himself as 'funny' and extends 'funny' to encompass everything that had happened up to a particular moment to which he actually added 'more of the same'. The polysemous[17] quality of the word serves both to undercut the gravity of the scene and to expose the peculiar, bizarre, puzzling nature of the entire affair; it makes the event simultaneously possessable and elusive. Thus, traumatic information is kept at a distance and the significance of the event is left in abeyance.

The malfunction of sense-making mechanisms seems to affect most of the characters in the novel. A follow-up of the head gunshot-wound episode, Remy's dialogue with his partner, Guterak, speaks to this symptomatology:

> Guterak looked over. "Hey, you got your hair cut."
> "Yeah." Remy put the cap back on.
> "What made you do that?"
> "I shot myself in the head last night."
> "Well." Paul drove quietly for a moment, staring straight ahead. "It looks good." (Walter 15)

The dialogue is just as funny, in the multiple senses of the word, as everything that had been labeled as such in the opening of the novel. Guterak's

[17] The Merriam Webster Dictionary explains the second meaning of "funny" as "differing from the ordinary in a suspicious, perplexing, quaint, or eccentric way: peculiar", and the Cambridge Dictionary explains it as "strange, surprising, unexpected, or difficult to explain or understand."

reply undercuts the intensity of the scene. It also reveals him as experiencing a blockage similar to Remy's when it comes to the exploration of potentially traumatic content with a view to apprehending and integrating it. In both cases, the elision of traumatizing information leads to emotional numbness.

The incapacitation of grieving mechanisms stretches to encompass both the general grief of the public discourse and private attempts at mourning. In truth, as Jason Dodge suggests, Walter's novel employs "satirical representations of grief" (154) in order to expose the corrosive effect that public modes of grieving – always sliding towards the monetary quantification of loss – have upon the authenticity of the individual work of mourning. Besides the configuration of grief in the public space (from the 'Portraits in Grief' to the Victim Compensation fund), Dodge's study focuses on the manifestation of grief in three characters of the novel, namely Guterak (Remy's partner), April (Remy's girlfriend), and Edgar (Remy's son). Although displaying behavior that clearly signals a traumatic rupture in his sense of the world, Guterak cannot identify authentic mechanisms for successful mourning. As Dodge argues, "Guterak is unable to escape participating in nationalist ways of grieving" (160) and therefore contributes to the commodification of grief by selling his story to a reality show and his image to an advertising company. April, on the other hand, who has lost both her sister and her husband in the terrorist attack, exhibits a more authentic type of grief; she "resists public modes of grieving in favor of the more intimate, personal, and domestic setting with someone she knows" (159).

Remy's son Edgar, however, presents a more challenging and revelatory approach to grief. He lets everyone in school believe that his father has died as a first-responder in the terrorist attack. Edgar builds a well-articulated, impactful discourse to mourn the death of his father, who is, however, very much alive. In a dialogue with his mother, he explains the symbolical killing of his father, who is a spectator to the scene:

> "Then why is it so hard to believe that I could be grieving the same thing as those other children? I suppose you'd rather I behave like everyone else and grieve *generally*. Well, I'm sorry. I'm not built that way. General grief is a lie. What are people in Wyoming really grieving? A loss of safety? Some shattered illusion that a lifetime of purchases and television programs had meaning? The emptiness of their Palm Pilots and SUVs and baggy jeans? Look around, Mom. Generalized grief is a fleeting emotion, like lust. It's a trend, just some weak shared moment in the culture, like the final episode of some TV show everybody watches. It's weightless. You wake up the next day and wonder when the next disaster is scheduled.
> "But *real* grief ...oh, God." He cocked his head and stared at his mother. "Real grief weighs on you like you can't imagine. The death of a father is

> the most profound thing I've ever experienced." Edgar's eyes seemed to be tearing up. "It's hard to get out of bed. And you want me to take a test? Play softball? Are you kidding? There are times when I can barely breathe. I can't... get over it. And I don't want to. The only way to comprehend something like this is to go through it. Otherwise, it's just a number. Three thousand? Four thousand? How do you grieve a number?" (Walter 34)

Edgar publicly reinforces the fantasy of his father's death by preparing a solo performance for the school's talent show, in which he commemorates his father by telling the story of how Remy had taught him to play chess and how Edgar ultimately beat him in the game. Anthony Flinn sees Edgar's actions not as "some sort of adolescent Oedipal spite, but an emotionally opportunistic performance, a counterfeit participation in a national grief" (224). To Flinn, Edgar is "the most grotesque" of what he calls the "counterfeit synecdoches" that the novel uses in order to capture "a blind and deluded grasping for the missing part of one's awareness that will help the mind make peace with itself by making sense of experience" (224). On the other hand, according to Jason Dodge, "Edgar has the most sophisticated theory of grief in the novel, despite the fact that we are tempted to say it is delusional and inauthentic" (161). Dodge reads Edgar's chess game as a pretext for the ironic performance of grief, based on Hutcheon's understanding of irony as a continuous vacillation between the said and the unsaid, and suggests that Edgar's alternative grieving "resists and highlights problems with dominant public modes of grieving" (162). John Duvall's reading of Edgar also starts from the ironic grieving thesis. In Duvall's words,

> While Edgar's insistence on working through the death of his father as the only appropriate way of understanding the trauma of 9/11 (even as Edgar fully acknowledges that his father is, somewhat irrelevantly, actually alive) becomes a running source of humor in the novel, it is a humor that ultimately serves to ironize the personal form of grieving that Edgar argues to be more authentic. (288)

John Duvall extends his analysis in order to point out both the intersection points and the departure from Judith Butler's theory of grievability. Grieving "appropriately" is central to both Edgar's discourse and Butler's theory, and the exploration of grief is dependent on a sense of familiarity (Duvall 288-9). Moreover, Butler's thesis on the instrumentalization of public grief for political purposes and justification of war[18] helps comprehend the character as he

[18] In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes: "If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war" (xii). Both Dodge (152) and Duvall (288) refer to Butler's view on the subservience of public grief as relevant to Walter's novel in general and the character of Edgar in particular.

enlists in the army with a view to avenging the imaginary death of his father. On the other hand, Edgar is skeptical of general, public grief, while Butler allows for such possibilities.

While the approach to Edgar's prescription for authentic grieving cannot bypass irony, it also allows generous extensions towards more complex nuances of grief. It raises questions of authenticity and modes of relating to loss and, most important, it attempts at understanding the kind of loss that one has to handle. The unfathomable and impassable nature of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, as discussed above in Derridean terms, makes the work of mourning unbearably challenging. What exactly does one mourn and how? What has been lost? In Baudrillard's opinion, the terrorist attacks destroyed "a whole (Western) value-system and world order" (*The Spirit of Terrorism* 37). Judith Butler claims that the Americans lost "their First Worldism as a result of the events of September 11", which is "the loss of a certain horizon of experience, a certain sense of the world itself as a national entitlement" (*Precarious Life* 39). This understanding of loss is precisely what fuels Edgar's rant; he cannot condone general grief stemming from the loss of what he perceives as superficial in its remote abstractness. Therefore, Edgar needs to internalize loss, to translate it into something that would 'weigh on him beyond imagination' and would consequently play a crucial role in shaping his identity.

Paradoxically, in order to grieve authentically, Edgar fabricates the object of his loss. The question of (in)authenticity raised by Edgar's construct of grief is reminiscent of the Baudrillardian regime of simulation. As Baudrillard explains,

> To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates and illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (Littré). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false", the "real" and the "imaginary." Is the simulator sick or not given that he produces "true" symptoms? (*Simulacra* 3)

Approached from this perspective, Edgar attempts to expose and contest counterfeit models of grieving, simulacra forged and entertained by media and political discourse, by advancing a simulacrum of his own creation. He thus enters what Baudrillard explains as the "generalized cycle" of simulacra informed by the potentially inexhaustible mutability of the truth value in the regime of simulation (*Simulacra* 17). Through this character, the novel extends its approach to grief so as to comment on the impossibility of 'successful' grieving in a culture driven by the logic of simulacra.

Remy's reaction to his son's work of mourning is characterized by the same spectatorial stance he seems to have been forced to adopt towards his own life. Edgar belongs to that part of Remy's past that has made itself unavailable to him, from which he has been cast out. After enlisting in the army, Edgar tells Remy who is, again, a benumbed spectator:

> "I've been through all the stages of grief. You can't want me to go back. What, to denial? Or or anger?" He shook his head. "Anyway, I don't think I *can* go back. Not now. Not after I've finally accepted your death." Edgar looked up. He was as tall as his father now. But so different. "And really ...someday, you are going to die. Right?" *Yes,* Remy thought. *Someday*. (Walter 279)

Consequently, Remy's quest throughout the novel is guided by his struggle not so much to make sense of what had happened before his suicide attempt, but to mend what seems to be a broken present and to find his way to coherent and cohesive self-narrative development. As Vayo explains, "[t]hrough his reconstructive efforts, Remy strives to regain his own consciousness, both in the form of a literal day-to-day lucidity, as well as in the form of a reality squared with the changed nature of the world in the wake of 9/11" (162). This, however, cannot be achieved without the integration of the traumatic experience that had broken him in the first place. Nevertheless, the integration is not possible since the past event that had broken him and his world is too difficult to reprocess, structure, and understand.

Remy is not haunted by traumatic memories, but rather by the lack thereof. Piecing together fragments of experience structures his quest throughout the novel. The gaps in his short-term memory often throw him into such intense explorations of the moments available to his apparently lucid self that they slide into derealization, informing Remy's detached perception of the world and dislocated, disconnected self:

> Sometimes the gaps came like cuts in a movie, one on top of the other, with Remy struggling for breath; at other times he seemed to drift, or even to linger in moments that had ended for everyone else. Was there something he was supposed to take from such moments? Remy pulled the watch from its box bottom again and looked at its face, half expecting to see the second hand standing still, jittery and frozen, waiting for Remy to be jolted into the next moment. But the needle slid gracefully around the numbered face, scratching away moment after moment after ...
> Behind him, the huge four-faced clock tower loomed like a dragon. He thought of the watch face. No zero on a clock. Around and around. No rest. No balance. No starting place. Just on to the next number. The sky was clearing, cold, the clouds opening between the brownstones. He stood on the sidewalk and looked back at the city, the burnt tip of the island and the bright hole in the sky. (Walter 96-97)

Unreliability haunts even those fragments of experience that are available to Remy. Has he actually become an agent working covert operations for various (non)-governmental intelligence agencies? His therapist, doctor Rieux,[19] seems to doubt it, and Guterak's report – after Remy asked his ex-partner to keep track of his movements – cannot confirm Remy's involvement in any secret mission. Moreover, when at Guterak's, Remy watches a cop TV show with a plot closely reflecting his own experiences as a secret agent. All of these situations call into question the reliability of Remy's fragmented story and hinder his attempts at anchoring his present to some substantial reality which would help him achieve a coherent sense of self.

In his potentially hallucinatory role as covert agent, Remy was tasked with the reconstitution of the last days in the life of March Selios, a suspected accomplice to the orchestration of the terrorist attack. The March Selios affair offers Walter an excellent opportunity for satirizing government intelligence agencies and simultaneously invites the contemplation of yet another dimension of grieving or, rather, *grievability*, what Judith Butler defines as "a presupposition of the life that matters" (*Frames* 14). For a life to matter so as to be grievable, Butler claims, it has to be recognizable and recognized, which involves placing the subject in the corresponding frame of recognition (4-12). If applied to Walter's novel, the notion of grievability acquires additional interpretive configurations in its political assignation of value to human life, easy to construe by following the March Selios affair. March Selios is singled out; her status as a number to be grieved as an abstraction is changed by Remy's efforts to retrieve her last movements. For March Selios's life to matter, her recent history has to be reconstituted. On one hand, she is grieved, genuinely grieved by her sister April. However, the irony is that, in order to officially become recognized as grievable, she has to be dead and documented as such. As Markham, Remy's handler, explains,

> But we've got to find March Selios. And if it turns out she is, in fact *dead* ...well, then everything is copacetic. Not for her, obviously..." He laughed uncomfortably. "But for the record. That's our federally mandated charge, after all—to have a pure record. All the columns adding up. But if, in fact, she's alive—well, then, we've got a problem. In fact, we've got a big problem." (Walter 64)

Thus, *The Zero* gains a critical hold on the definition of the lives that matter to the official agenda for which the phrase 'human cost' seems to have assumed too much of its monetizing meaning, thus leading to the collapse of the

[19] For the intertextual references imbedded in the names of the doctors in the novel, see Dolores Resano's study, 147-148.

symbolic dimension that bestows significance upon human lives. The novel constantly contrasts the especially high value of paper and documents with the devaluation of human life. The efforts of retrieving the "paper blown into the world" (9) seem to eclipse those devoted to recovering the truth of what happened on the day of the terrorist attack. Guterak is haunted by what he perceives as the expendability of human life, the ungraspable loss, the impossibility of understanding and therefore coping with the traumatic event through the work of mourning:

> "I just keep thinking we forgot something," Guterak was saying on the other end of the phone. He sounded drunk.
> "What do you mean?" Remy adjusted the phone in his own ear. He sounded drunk, too. "What did we forget?"
> "Not just us. Everyone. We just kept going on and ... it's like we all forgot to do something important. Like when you leave the stove on and go on a big trip."
> "What did we forget, Paul?" Remy cracked a little dark rum and drained it.
> "The people," Paul said, as if it were obvious. "We forgot the people. I mean ... where are they? (84)

Regaining, repossessing one's life is central to *The Zero*, and so is the failure to achieve it. The novel portrays the terrorist attack as an event that irremediably changes the individual to the core; it splits individual life into *pre* and *post*, interfering with its continuity in the previously accepted fashion. The seemingly irreparable psychological damage has disconnected the main character from his present prevents him from integrating the traumatic experiences into his self-narrative, thus hindering any possible healing process through the work of mourning. March Selios's is the only life he can reconstitute – albeit only vaguely – and the end of this process marks the reduplication of the initial traumatic event. Therefore, it appears that the only available course of action is shaped by the ominous circularity of revision and repetition, which elicits a self-destructive outcome.

The Zero reaches beyond the restrictive conceptions of trauma, grief, and accountability that tend to confine 9/11 fiction to myopic interpretive patterns. Rather, its tantalizing fragmented narrative lends itself to a variety of approaches and invites a kaleidoscopic contemplation of all of these notions. Valuable criticism has already pointed out the subversive potential stemming from the novel's satirical engagement with a large array of topics, from the political discourse and homeland security, to media and advertising, lawyers, profiteers, and (in)authenticity in both the private and the public spheres. Moreover, as discussed above, in its engagement with trauma and grief, the novel invites the exploration of the critical changes that that terrorist attack has

determined at the individual level. The collapse of meaning-making systems, leading to derealization, confinement to spectatorship, simulation, and the devaluation of human life, hinders the integration of the traumatic experience into personal history and, consequently, prevents a 'successful' work of mourning.

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