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# Death's Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche After 9–11<sup>1</sup>

Walter A. Davis

Those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it.

—George Santayana

A screaming comes across the sky.

—Thomas Pynchon

Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

—Walter Benjamin

Gandhi, on a hunger strike to protest fighting between Hindu and Muslim after the Partition, is confronted by a man in agony: “I am going to hell. I killed an innocent child. My son was slain and in my rage I killed a Muslim child. And so I am going to hell.” Gandhi’s reply: “I know a way out of hell. Go, find a homeless Muslim child, adopt him and raise him as your own. But raise him in the Muslim religion.” Gandhi knew a way out of hell. I think I know a way in—and why it is the route we must follow in addressing 9–11.

## TRAUMA

Trauma occurs when something happens that shatters the ego and its defenses. An event persists as an image that awakens other images buried in the psyche, images bound to repressed memories that bring with their return an anxiety that threatens psychic dissolution. The hidden, buried history of one’s life presents itself as an awareness one can no longer escape, a self-knowledge one must now construct since that act is the only route to “recovery.”

Can what is true for individuals also be true for nations? And thus with respect to 9–11: our task being not to resolve the trauma but to do all in our power to assure that it is fully constituted? But for that to happen it is not enough to cite the traumatic images that were blazed into the nation’s consciousness that day: a plane embedded surrealistically in a building; bodies

falling from the sky; that great granite elevator going down; the terrible black cloud rushing forth to engulf a fleeing multitude; and then the countless dead, buried alive, passing in endless queue across the shattered landscape of the nation’s consciousness. Nor is it enough to note the precise correspondence of these images to the anxieties that define the psychotic register of the psyche: falling endlessly, going to pieces, collapsing in on oneself, losing all orientation, delivered over to a claustrophobic world of inescapable, ceaseless suffering (Winnicott 127–128). Something more is needed for an event to create trauma in the collective psyche. Images from the present must speak to other images that are tied to memories buried deep in the national psyche; to things forgotten, ungrieved, vigorously denied; things in the past that have never been confronted and worked through. Such as this: on 9–11 did many Americans realize, if only for a moment, that we were now experiencing, in diminished form, what it was like to be in Hiroshima city on 8–6–45 when in an instant an entire city disappeared, nowhere to run from the flash that vaporized over 200,000 souls and condemned the survivors, the walking dead, to a condition of nameless dread, to wandering directionless in a landscape become nightmare?

## GROUND ZERO AS IMAGE

What’s in a name? Ground zero, the term now used to designate the rubble of what was once the World Trade Center, was the term coined in Alamogordo, New Mexico to identify the epicenter where the first Atomic Bomb was detonated. It was then used to locate the same place in Hiroshima and Nagasaki so that we could measure with precision the force of the Bomb and gauge its effects.

Image is the native language of anxiety, the language psyche uses in an effort to mediate the emo-

tional and psychological impact of events.<sup>2</sup> As such, a language of images has much in common with the logic of the dream, a logic of hidden and unexpected connections, of abrupt shifts and apparent discontinuities as image succeeds image in the agon of a psyche seeking a concrete way to embody and mediate its pain. In image we find a mode of cognition that is prior to the conceptual order, with a revelatory power beyond the concept's range of disclosure (Heidegger 175–179). To apprehend what image reveals requires for that reason a method equal in engagement. Rather than address 9–11 from some objective stance above the rubble, secure in the a priori psychoanalytic knowledge that enables us to dispense healing insights to an anguished nation, we must find a way to get inside the event, to find in the image, as Eliot did in *The Waste Land*, “fragments shored against” our “ruins,” that beckon to an historical consciousness that will come only if we follow the path Walter Benjamin outlined for the dialectical historian: to arrest images that flare up at a moment of crisis and attempt to internalize and articulate their significance before they disappear, perhaps irretrievably, in the predictable rush toward ideological reaffirmations—and national healing.<sup>3</sup>

### MOURNING

And so, we return to ground-zero and two possibilities—one idealistic, the other ratified by events. The idealistic possibility: Hiroshima, unfinished business deep in the America psyche, returned on 9–11 to trouble us with afterthought and forethought? A mourning process long deferred would then have commenced and with it the recognition that guilt is not a psychological condition to be avoided at all costs but the primary source of knowledge and inner transformation. Internalizing that possibility we would have found what may be the true origin of ethics: the ability to realize what we have done to others when we see our deeds done to us. Ground-zero would then signify our transformation from subjects bent on rectitude and revenge to ones capable of reflection and restraint; capable of pursuing justice through international law, through the presentation of carefully gathered evidence to the United Nations and the World Court. We would have attained a recognition of the duties of world citizenship and thereby a way of hon-

oring the innocent victims of terror with a fitting memorial.

### A HISTORICAL FORAY

But of course none of this happened. Nor could it. And the suggestion raises strong objections, even outrage because we have learned to recite, by rote, what has now become a national article of faith: that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were justified, almost idealistic acts, undertaken with reluctance, as “the least abhorrent choice” but finally the only way to end the war, thereby saving perhaps a million lives. This explanation was first articulated in an article ghost-written for Secretary of State Henry Stimson by his aide McGeorge Bundy. It is a pretty story, the only problem being Bundy's admission in a book published shortly before his death that the entire thing was a fabrication, a deliberate myth, carefully constructed after the fact<sup>4</sup> to disguise the actual reasons why we dropped the bomb: (1) to avenge Pearl Harbor, (2) to justify the amount of money spent developing the bomb, (3) to create laboratories so that our scientific, medical, and military personnel could study the affects of the bomb, and (4) to impress the Russians and the rest of the world with this opening salvo in the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> The act, moreover, abrogated all distinctions between combatant and non-combatant, the object of military action now being an entire city, of no military significance, its inhabitants indifferently identified as a single mass delivered to death in an effort, as General Leslie Groves put it, “to inflict the maximum moral and psychological damage on the enemy” (Rhodes 482).<sup>6</sup> Hiroshima was the first act of global terrorism, the harbinger of acts that would derive their rebarbative logic from the finality with which 8–6–45 consigned “humanistic” considerations to the dustbin of history.

### EVACUATION

And that is but the beginning. For the motives Bundy acknowledges drew their power from deeper psychological forces, forces evident once again in the way the term ground-zero was actually deployed in the days following 9–11. Calling upon a primary mechanism of projection and denial—reversal of meaning—ground-zero gave us a way to identify ourselves as the innocent victims of a terror that we claim is unprecedented—

and that we demand the whole world acknowledge as such. From which follows, of necessity, the parade of heroic images whereby we rise phoenix-like from the ashes, united as a nation that has recovered its essence and thus goes forth to reaffirm the ideals it represents by undertaking the deeds needed to cleanse the world of yet another evil. John Wayne lives. The projector has started running and on the screen of the national psyche we get another movie full of patriotic sentiment and patriotic gore. Flags a-bursting, the heroic dead of 9–11 are resurrected in the acts of war we undertake in their name, their image blending and fading into the images of our triumphant military action in Afghanistan or any other place we designate as a haven of “terrorism.” America has once again found a way to view history as the inevitable progress of an a-historical Essence, a way to exploit a traumatic event in order to assure a reassertion of the ideological guarantees that make it impossible for us to learn from history. On a psychological level we have attained an even greater boon: the evacuation of all inner conflict through projective identification, a projective identification that is unlimited in its scope, that can find new objects any time it needs them.

### THE PSYCHE THAT DROPPED THE BOMB

The Bomb provided the template for that transformation because the psyche found in it the possibility of an unprecedented, radical self-mediation: the chance to take the anxieties that define the psyche and resolve them at what I term the sublime register.<sup>7</sup> This is the register that operates whenever the psyche seeks a way to turn a situation of abject weakness into a confirmation of omnipotent power (see Kant, “Analytic of the Sublime,” in *Critique of Judgment*). In Alamogordo the human mind ascended to a condition it had long dreamed of: nature's secrets and her might were now harnessed to our will. Mind had finally triumphed over the otherness of nature. Nature's power, unleashed as never before, confirmed our power to overcome all inner limitations. The sequel thus beckoned. For if we found ourselves abject objects of the other's wrath at Pearl Harbor, we now had a way to bring about a complete and lasting transformation of that situation. Projective identification finds in the Bomb a way to take everything weak and vulnerable in oneself and invest it

in an other who is reduced to an object of contempt and obliteration. The resulting mania banishes any threat of a return of depressive anxieties. In the Bomb the manic triad—triumph, contempt, and dismissal (Klein 344–369)—celebrates its Sabbath. Metapsychologically, the transformation is complete and can be schematized thus: abjection reversed, blockage overcome, aggression unbound. Narcissistic grandiosity thereby finds the fullest possible expansion; the perfect phallic mirror in the mushroom cloud rising above the spectacle as proof of the Bomb's power to compel submission to its will. Evacuation attains an exorcism of an unprecedented order—a psychotic attack on linking (see Bion) that is totalizing in its scope and that scoffs at all humanistic considerations. Thanatos achieves in the bomb the condition Freud feared: a condition in which death has been fully eroticized. Pleasure—or *jouissance*—under the Bomb equals releasing a destructiveness that voids all inner tensions in an aggression that has the blessing of the super-ego, an aggression that feels righteous. As confirmation consider this, but one example among many: Navy Day, October, 1945, a crowd of 120,000 gather in the Los Angeles Coliseum to celebrate a simulated reenactment of the Bombing of Hiroshima, complete with a mushroom cloud that rises from the fifty yard line to the joyful cheers of that rapt throng (Boyer 181). The first Super-Bowl. The society of the spectacle (see Debord) here announces its truth as a mass audience *cums* to the ritual that confers on it a lasting, ghostly identity: the howl of joy that rises as a hymn of praise to the burgeoning cloud is the new American collectivity in Hosanna before the image of its inhumanity as it blossoms before them, big with the future.

### A HISTORY LESSON

From which follows a quick tour of the underside of American history from 1945 to the present. The debacle of Vietnam. The error: the image came home to roost. With the evening news America each night supped full with horror. The lesson: no more images. The solution: Iraq, the Nintendo war, a war represented on TV as a video game. No images of the 100,000 Iraqi dead entered the American conscience to trouble our sleep. Instead, with victory the proclamation of George H. Bush: “We've finally put an end

to Vietnam syndrome.” The lesson of history learned, the son now deploys it globally in a war where, he informs us, much will happen that we will never get to hear about or see. Extremes meet: the image is banished but the promise of global action is affirmed. George W. Bush is an apt pupil. He knows that in order to resolve the trauma of 9–11 he must satisfy an outraged public by finding a way to repeat the psychological operations perfected in Hiroshima. He knows that nothing less than a global war against “terrorism” will suffice. But he also knows that the pleasure of the image must be replaced by another kind of satisfaction, one appropriate to the information age, an age in which pleasure has itself become virtual. Subjects formed by what is today perhaps the primary relationship, the relationship to the computer, dance to the subtext, heeding the command to enjoy our symptom (Žižek 71–79). For it is now possible to imagine and experience scorched-earths as so many blips on a computer screen with disavowal already in place and pleasure assured in a *jouissance* that is one with Thanatos: the reduction of the human to the statistical and the boundless power one feels in manipulating, at the speed of light, a world so rendered into one’s hands. The society of the spectacle—a society that needed Hiroshima and Navy Day in the LA Coliseum—is replaced by the society of the virtual. The post-modern subject has entered a condition of bliss, the hegemony of Thanatos assured by the sacrifice of the image. Mass carnage grows apace: over a million Iraqi civilians have now died as a result of our sanctions; more civilians (“collateral damage”) have now died in Afghanistan as a result of our bombings than perished at the WTC. But the knowledge of these things has become virtual, disembodied, and imageless and thus is already fading, leaving no residue in the national consciousness.

#### **AFTER SUCH KNOWLEDGE, WHAT FORGIVENESS?**

What, then, are the possibilities of healing and renewal that we can derive from an awareness of the tragic complexities of 9–11 and its aftermath? A responsible reply must begin with the recognition that it was through us that terror on a global scale first came into the world; and that we remain its primary global prac-

titioner. For an internalization of that fact delivers a death-blow to the belief that “catharsis” and “renewal” require the reassertion of adolescent myths about ourselves and our place in history. Historical memory must become instead the process of creating a tragic culture: one for whom memory is conscience and not hagiography; one for whom the past weighs like a nightmare precisely because it has not been constituted. That is the true meaning of Hiroshima. Ground-zero haunts us not because we feel guilt about it but because we don’t. Which is why, whenever we are traumatized, we repeat the psychological operations we perfected in Hiroshima in a progressive self-reification that we remain powerless to reverse as long as we refuse to internalize what actually happened on 8–6–45. But to do that we must begin the long, hard task of rooting out everything in our culture that weds us to “the psyche that dropped the bomb.” Such an effort requires, moreover, that we free ourselves from our own liberal, “mental health” myth: the belief, articulated by Lifton (see Lifton and Mitchell) that admitting error assures renewal through the power of the American “protean self” to reclaim the ideals that make American history the story of inevitable progress. What Hiroshima teaches us, on the contrary, is that history remains irreversible in its tragic consequences until we find our own equivalent of Gandhi’s ethic: that the way out of hell is one that sustains trauma and depressive mourning as the destiny of historical subjects who know that reversal begins only when we are willing to plumb the depths of our collective disorder. A tragic understanding of history assures us no catharsis, no renewal, no guarantees. What it offers instead is the realization that to sustain and deepen the trauma is our only hope.<sup>8</sup> For the alternative is truly horrifying: “the Bush doctrine” a blank check for whatever carnage will be needed to satisfy our blood-lust and to preserve our “right” to ravage the planet’s resources. Because one fact above all others is, as Marx would say, “determinative in the last instance” of what is going on in the world today. Five percent of the world’s population consume 25% of its resources—and they do so by exerting control over the destiny of other countries. Bin Laden is a symptom, a nostalgic religious fanatic, but his fanaticism derives from a condition that is actual. In Rio de Janeiro, at the one ecological conference he



attended, George H. Bush delivered a proclamation even more chilling than his crowing about Vietnam syndrome: "The American way of life is not negotiable." As long as that dogma remains in place, there will be many more ground-zeroes.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The first three words in the title of my essay are taken from T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men." The subtitle for the last section of my essay is taken from T. S. Eliot's poem "Gerontion."

<sup>2</sup>For the dialectical development of such a theory of the image, see Chapter Six in Davis, *Deracination*. This theory derives from the pioneering work of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin on the interpretation of culture through the focus on what both thinkers term the dialectical image, i.e., those images in which the contradictions of a historical period or moment are revealed in depth. Constructing a method that enables us to decipher such images is the burden of Chapter Six of *Deracination*. The present essay provides a concrete historical illustration of that method.

<sup>3</sup>The kind of moral/political extension of psychoanalysis undertaken in this essay stands in a long tradition, first charted by Freud in a series of unsettling examinations of European society and culture during and after the period of the first World War. Walter Benjamin and the members of the Frankfurt school (specifically Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse) extended this tradition into a full-scale examination and critique of capitalist ideologies. The moral/political extension of psychoanalysis is thereby simultaneous with exposing the social and ideological assumptions that are in play whenever psychoanalysis makes adaptation to normalcy and the reinforcement of the ego its goal. Few complain, of course, when the moral/political dimension of psychoanalysis is extended in the opposite direction, i.e., when psychoanalysis is used to lend support to dominant institutions, beliefs, and norms, as in the work of Hartmann, Fromm, Erikson, Fairbairn, and Kohut. For an incisive critique of the ideology behind such efforts, see Jacoby. In recovering the critical power of psychoanalysis mention should also be made here of the Lacanian application of psychoanalysis to the critique of dominant ideologies developed by Slavoj Žižek and his circle. See especially *The Sublime Object*. Psychoanalysis and political analysis supplement one another in the method I have constructed for the interpretation of cultural phenomena. (See *Inwardness*; *Get the Guests*; and *Deracination*. Following this method, political analysis is applied to overt ideologies; psychoanalysis is applied to the images and historical acts that reveal what those ideologies conceal. In the present essay my focus is on the latter because my effort is to illustrate how psychoanalysis could make its unique contribution to a larger analysis of the current state of American political and social culture.

<sup>4</sup>Bundy's *Danger and Survival* is pivotal in the scholarship on Hiroshima because the very architect of one side of the debate that has lasted for over fifty years admits the falsehood of his position. People will, of course, continue to believe that Hiroshima was jus-

tified—because they want to believe it—and to think that grounds still exist for a genuine difference of opinion on the topic. Thanks to Bundy's admission, the truth is now known beyond a reasonable doubt for all who have done the requisite reading on the topic.

<sup>5</sup>In establishing these as the four reasons for the bombing of Hiroshima, pride of place among historians goes to the seminal work by Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision To Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*. The book includes an extensive bibliography of the numerous historical authorities who have contributed to the position Alperovitz presents.

<sup>6</sup>One dominant theme in Richard Rhodes massive historical study *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* is the tracing of the erosion of the protections accorded non-combatants in the development of modern warfare from World War I through Dresden to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Rhodes shows that there is continuity and difference in the sequence of events that led to the qualitatively new event that happened on August 6 and 9, 1945. But this does not mean, as is so often argued, that the horrors of Dresden can be used to justify Hiroshima or to deflect attention from its unique status as the first act of global terrorism. Moreover, there is another reason why Hiroshima is worthy of our special attention. It is ours. We did it this time. It is thus the event uniquely able to help us identify and experience our moral situatedness in history.

<sup>7</sup>This section of the essay summarizes the argument constructed at length in Chapters Three and Four of my *Deracination*. Chapter Three considers the Bomb in terms of the aesthetics of the sublime. Chapter Four considers it in terms of Thanatos. The information on the Navy Day celebration at the Los Angeles Coliseum comes from Boyer.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Jay Lifton's work, especially his book with Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, is doubly significant in this context. Few are as aware as Lifton of the traumatic realities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and no one has done as much to bring them to our attention. Unfortunately, Lifton's work also provides a striking example of the reassurances that ego psychology offers us of recovery from trauma followed by renewal. The standard presentation of the theory of trauma developed by ego psychology is offered in Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*. This theory of trauma is, I think, a quintessentially American response to the traumatic, one that superimposes our most cherished beliefs about ourselves and our unique place in history upon traumatic realities in order to deprive them of their force and their potential significance. My effort, in contrast, is to liberate the tragic and constitute its immanent dialectic by engaging trauma without superimposing any guarantees upon that process.

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