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Department of English

٩/١١- Then and Now: Memorial Rhetoric into Truth
(Anti-Terrorism Poems)

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BY

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Dedication

To all my family

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Chapter One

Introduction

In October 2001, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, an American poet, painter, and liberal activist, predicted that “poetry from now on would be divided into two categories: B.S. and A.S., Before September 11 and After September 11.” His reckoning, reminding me of Adorno’s famous remarks about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz goes with the general response to 9/11, which locates 9/11 as a watershed moment for American society, culture, and literature. In fact, in so many kinds of literary representations of 9/11, a lingering emotion of loss or a mood of mourning has coexisted with, or ended in, the evocation of the impossibility of representation. For example, Wislawa Szymborska’s 2000 poem, “Photograph from September 11,” begins by describing the stark reality of that day in a controlled, ‘so called, poetic’ mode and ends with the evocation of the impossibility of poetic representation: “They jumped from the burning floors — / one, two, a few more, / higher, lower. // I can do only two things for them — / describe this flight / and not add a last line.”³) This poem, while describing the falling bodies of 9/11 as a very simple word, “flight,” conveys the terrible moment of loss, the loss of words, that is, the failure of representation. Szymborska’s response to 9/11 is just one example of the poetic failure in the representation of 9/11, showing how people including poets became numb in front of the unimaginable event (Gray, 2008: 18)

What about the visual representation of 9/11? Photography was undoubtedly effective in capturing the catastrophic moment. In the famous photograph of “The Falling Man” by Richard Drew, we encounter the most shocking, faithful form of visual representation. In doing so, this paper is an attempt to rescue the discourse around 9/11 from the illogical cultural and political discourses ornamented with such words such as Ground Zero, sacred ground, hallowed ground, our heroes, axis of evil, etc.

So many poems produced shortly after 9/11 reflect the shock, sadness, and of the American psyche as a whole but fail to construct the meaningful site of mourning beyond the national loss. While briefly mapping out the rapidly changed poetic and cultural landscape after 9/11, this paper would go further from a passive sketch of the literary landscape of post-9/11. In this paper, I try to discern the meaningful use of an explicitly poetic register in order to express ostensibly un-representable shock, sadness, and anger, even when coupled with the hackneyed discourses of mourning, grieving, revenge, war, and anti-war. Furthermore, this paper tries to explore the possibility of poetry as a genre serving as a unique form of praxis that suggests a different idea or constructive discourse for contemporary American culture, especially in the post-9/11 era (Szymorska, 2005: 69).

Many poems produced shortly after 9/11 reflect the shock, sadness, and anger of the American psyche as a whole. Some joined in the festival of marking the dead in the 'pornography' of grief and some fell in clear-cut binaries of traditional politics proposing the war against terror. Trying to answer the questions embedded in the issue of poetic representations and see the prompt responses of poets to the unprecedented trauma of modern America in the post-9/11 era, this paper explores how the contemporary American poets have approached ethics through writing and rethinks poetry's capacity to bring about social, political, and cultural change (Jean, 2003: 53)

American poets construct their poetic language as a public forum seeking to jostle readers out of their personal grief and private emotional sphere. Poets' prompt response to what happened to America are meaningful not as therapy or commemoration, but as the song of an ethical, political troubadour questioning the logic of mourning. As a form of manipulating and re-conceptualizing American political discourse, his poetry constructs an alternate path where a new real is explored (ibid).

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Chapter Two

Poetry against terrorism

After 9/11, postmodernism and irony were declared dead. Charles Bernstein here proves them alive and well in poems elegiac, defiant, and resilient to the point of approaching song. Heir to the democratic and poetic sensibilities of Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, Bernstein has always crafted verse that responds to its historical moment, but no previous collection of his poems so specifically addresses the events of its time as *Girly Man*, which features works written on the evening of September 11, 2001, and in response to the war in Iraq. Here, Bernstein speaks out, combining self-deprecating humor with incisive philosophical and political thinking (Simpson, 2006: 170)

Composed of works of very different forms and moods etchings from moments of acute crisis, comic excursions, formal excavations, confrontations with the cultural illogic's of contemporary political consciousness the poems work as an ensemble, each part contributing something necessary to an unrealizable and unrepresentable whole. Indeed, representation and related claims to truth and moral certainty—is an active concern throughout the book. The poems of *Girly Man* may be oblique, satiric, or elusive, but their sense is emphatic. Indeed, Bernstein's poetry perform sits ideas so that they can be experienced as well as understood. A passionate defense of contingency, resistance, and multiplicity, *Girly Man* is a provocative and aesthetically challenging collection of radical verse from one of America's most controversial poets (ibid: 171)

Charles Bernstein's poetic strategy that treats language as a form of public discourse seeking to jostle readers out of their personal grief and private emotional sphere. Trying to answer the questions embedded in the issue of poetic representation and to see the prompt responses of poets to the unprecedented trauma of modern America in post-9/11 when words such as suspicion, backlash, politics, security, censorship attained new meanings again and just a few had courage to "go against," I hope ultimately to dilute our overly rigid distinction between poetry and politics. To see how poets have practiced the ethics of writing in their own ways in the post-9/11 era is to rethink poetry's capacity to bring about social, political, and cultural change. Through Bernstein's prompt responses to what has happened to America, I will explore how his poetic language, which has been trapped in a critical misunderstanding for a long time, finds a door toward the reader, in the era of "post-language poetry," not as a form of therapy, reason, explication, or commemoration, but as the song of an ethical, political troubadour questioning the logic of mourning (Kellne, 2007: 624)

poems in the ash that covered everything; poems in every corner of the city, poems in a cloud of e-mails, newspapers, in a burning television, poems of pride, compassion, and confusion, of course, poems of cries, poems of retaliation, poems of war and anti-war, poems of the possible and the impossible. If poetry expresses what remains unrepresentable about 9/11, it also shows the struggle to speak about the meaning of 9/11 in the persistent questions about how we interpret 9/11, how we endure it. The questions of the impossibility of representation, therefore, can be rewritten as the quest for remembering the loss and then the meaning of how to endure post-9/11 life might be newly explored. Here is Miranda Besson's poem "Flight," a typical poetic response to the falling man: (Baudrillard, 2003: 2)

The survival of this slight speck
of this feathered perfection seemed
more important than anything else
we could think of those first few weeks:
more important than the planes,
the slow motion tumble,
the man in his business suit
who fell through the air without
the benefit of wings.

Among so many poems in the form of remembering / representing 9/11, this poem as an example in which the logic of mourning is not working well. As how to endure the shock became another important task for a poet, the task of portraying the scene or the shock still occupied as large a part of post-9/11 poetry as the recognition of the impossibility of representation. In this poem, the man “who fell through the air without the benefit of wings” seems to wear a tint of dignity by being “more important than the planes.” Yes but No. The ending line does not fulfill the dream of faithfulness, in the sense of mimetic or figurative language, nor does it mourn for the dead or console the readers. Readers might think that the falling man is the transformed figure of Icarus. But the lines fail to capture the tragedy of a contemporary American man who must have lived the average day of ordinary American men and fell from the building on that morning. The survival might refer to the meaning and value of its photographic representation but the poem fails to get “the benefit of” sympathetic readership that it must have aimed at first. In the dumps of shock, anger, and sadness, so many poems were busy following the frame of “Are you with us or not.” As the fact that most of the recorded messages at that time were expressions of love was revealed, the shock, anger, and sadness of 9/11 made the numberless deaths of 9/11, the victims, into a pure form of a sacrifice and the sacrifice was a thing that was invented by others in the aftermath of the deaths(*ibid*)

No one said that the deaths were meaningless; instead the dead became patriots, heroes of America. The desperate urge to assure us all that these deaths were not in vain worked in the poetry genre too, just as they did in other forms of representation. As we saw in the case of “The Falling Man” in the picture above, the deaths represented in the poems as well as the media were exalted and thus dignified the innocent victims as sacrifices who died for a great cause (Joy, 2000: 10)

In the midst of so many voices witnessing, mourning, and enduring 9/11, there came the voices analyzing its cause and aftermath in various forms, including poetry, the visual arts, and films. They were usually accompanied with the ethical reflections on American foreign policy as the cause of 9/11. Here is a poem of Pamela Talene Hale, entitled “Poem for an Iraqi Child in a Forgotten News Clip.” (ibid)

I'm sorry that your mom was killed

When a missile struck your home.

... That missile came in my name

Paid for by my tax dollars.

Chapter Three

War stories by Charles Bernstein

Charles Bernstein is the most prominent members of Language poets, is an American poet, theorist, and literary scholar. From 1989 to 2003, he was David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the University at Buffalo, where he was co-founder and Director of the Poetics Program. He is now holds Donald T. Regan Chair in the Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania.

War is the extension of prose by other means.

War is never having to say you're sorry.

War is the logical outcome of moral certainty.

War is conflict resolution for the aesthetically challenged.

War is a slow boat to heaven and an express train to hell.

War is either a failure to communicate or the most direct expression possible.

War is the first resort of scoundrels.

War is the legitimate right of the powerless to resist the violence of the powerful.

War is delusion just as peace is imaginary.

“War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony.”

“War is a thing that decides how it is to be done when it is to be done.”

War is not a justification for the self-righteousness of the people who oppose it.

War is other people.

War is a five-mile hike in a one-mile cemetery.

War is nature's way of saying I told you so.

War is a fashioning of opportunity.

War is “a nipponized bit of the old sixth avenue el.”

War is the reluctant foundation of justice and the unconscious guarantor of liberty.

War is the broken dream of the patriot.

War is the slow death of idealism. (Bernstein, 2006: 142)

War is realpolitik for the old and unmitigated realism for the young.

War is pragmatism with an inhuman face.

War is for the state what despair is for the person.

War is the end of the road for those who've lost their bearings.

War is a poem that is afraid of its shadow but furious in its course.

War is men turned into steel and women turned into ash.

War is never a reason for war but seldom a reason for anything else.

War is a casualty of truth just as truth is a casualty of war.

War is the redress of the naked.

War is the opiate of the politicians.

War is to compromise what morbidity is to mortality.

War is poetry without song.

War is the world's betrayal of the earth's plenitude.

War is like a gorilla at a teletype machine: not always the best choice but sometimes the only one you've got.

War is a fever that feeds on blood.

War is never more than an extension of Thanatos.

Here, the poet, in mixture of self-deprecating humor with incisive political and philosophical thinking, explores a range of fluctuating paths to the with-us-or-against-us rhetoric of the mass media. The line like "War is an excuse for lots of bad antiwar poetry" shows that he still does not discard some distrust of the kind of sympathy produced by the performance and the voice of the individual observer, and that all the mixtures of "calling for/against war" are etched from the moment of crisis and make readers confront the cultural and political 'illogic' of that time.(ibid: 143)

The very vivid landscape of after 9/11 forms the basic frame of *Girly Man*, which was published in 2006 as Bernstein's 30th collection of poetry. Reflecting the numb and crazy mood of 9/11, critically redirecting the American politics after 9/11, *Girly Man*, at once as documents of the 'aftershock' of 9/11 and post-9/11 culture and the poetic response to the war in Iraq, is a major achievement of American poetry after 9/11.

Instead of choosing the very caustic multiple voices that he used in earlier poems, Bernstein here depends on the overtly biographical narrative style. As an urgent speaker and witness of 9/11, the poet tries to convey the landscape of the city, voices of people there. Interestingly, the voice of the self that Bernstein takes here, a monologic consumer, was used to criticize the chief symptom of American cultural malaise in his earlier poems. At once predicting a meaningful change in his poetic mode and still holding his long-standing anti-formalist stance, he continues to mock and assaults the gentle reading public. As a poet who proposes that poetry should be an active intervention within culture against static forms of knowledge, against schooled conceptions, and traditional formulation, Bernstein remaps his older poetic ground in various experiments (Tim, 2001, 177) "

Aftershock

Thursday night it started to pour. The piercing thunder claps echoed over Manhattan. We all woke up with a start and couldn't find the way back to sleep.

Andrew tells us the story of a British man who showed up on time for his hair cutting appointment, 4pm, Tuesday. He had been on an upper floor of the Trade Center when the jet hit.

By mistake I first wrote "Word Trade Center."

Tuesday morning I rouse my friend Stu from a profound slumber to tell Him what has happened to the twin towers.— "They're ugly," he says, after a pause, "but they're not that ugly."

In the last few days, everyone I know seems to need to be in touch with everyone else. At first, it was mostly calls and emails from outside the U.S. Now there is a steady stream of local calls: where were you when, how are you feeling now. Every story is riveting, from the ones where the people were alone watching live TV to the many who watched the events unfold, how to put it?, live and in person. Those who saw the towers collapse, who saw the people jumping, were seared in a way the rest of us have been spared.

A visceral need to lash out, to strike down, to root out, to destroy in turn for what has been destroyed, seems to grip so many, grips part of me. When a co-worker expresses just this sentiment, someone complains to her, “Don’t you think we need to find out who is responsible before we do anything?” She shrugs: not necessarily.

It’s as if the blasts occurred dozens of times, the actual blasts being obliterated by the constant replay.

I feel like I am going through those stages in an unwritten book by Kubler-Ross: first denial, then manic fascination, then listlessness, then depression. Now denial again. And then I realize that of course the book had been written. Many books.

I can’t get the film out of my mind. You know, the one in which a crackerjack team of conspirators meets in an abandoned hangar and meticulously plots out the operation on a blackboard. Synchronize watches! This image stands in the way of what occurred in the way that a blizzard stands in the way of the sky (Bernstein, 2006: 101)

Originally listed on the Poetics listserv on Sun. Sept. 16 2001 and then published in his poetry book *Girly Man* in 2006, this poem is entitled as “Aftershock.” (13) As the title says, after the crash, came the aftershock and then the stories, too; stories about the falling “man,” about the falling “empire.” While changing the subject of bombing from I to you, he/she/it, we, and you again, the poet here dismantles the positioning of the bombing. The technique seems, at first, to shake and question the subjectivity of the terrible wrong-doing. But as we follow the lines, we come to realize that the circulation of subjectivity is meant to question the ethics of feeling the loss. In the last three lines, readers encounter one of the most shocking and stunning moments in post 9/11 poems (David, 2006: 78)

The lines “We’re ugly, but we’re not that ugly / & hey, Joe, don’t you know -- / We is they” remind me of the simple, sometimes ungrammatical, ordinary Jazz rhythms of Langston Hughes’s poems, especially in his poetry book *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1931). Here Bernstein, playfully connecting we-not-ugly with ugly-we-(is)-they, tries to dismantle the basic frame of judgment, the division of subject and object.

In all three or four alternate moves, he blurs the territory of mourning and warning and obscures the division of victims from victimizers. The tone is reflective but at the same time very playful like Hughes' protesting voices. After telling us vividly those sleepless nights and days in the city of New York, the poet invites readers to join in the stunning moment of 'rousing' the "official period of panic" in a rather abrupt and careless way. In the line, "We is they," the ruining of Standard English grammar rules and the amalgamation of 'we' and 'they' in a very agile way (interestingly, the verb is 'is,' not 'are,' which is very colloquial and therefore doesn't have any problem), the poet makes us face the questions: what are/is we, what is our America, how to interpret 9/11 and how to endure it. Here again, the familiar rhetoric of for-and against-us which swept the whole American culture in post 9/11 is blurred and reflected. By this way of overturning the familiar rhetoric of for-and-against-us, this poem finally achieves the task of mourning (and warning) in a very ethical and political level (ibid: 91)

Conclusion

In October ۲۰۰۱, the poetry in American society focuses on the terrorism aspect, because the accident of ۹/۱۱ make the American community under attack. So poets put on their ability to explore that war not for sell or for rent because war is war no one can be save from it. American society, culture, and literature. In fact, in so many kinds of literary representations of ۹/۱۱, a lingering emotion of loss or a mood of mourning has coexisted with, or ended in, the evocation of the impossibility of representation.

The events of ۹/۱۱ make a huge different in American culture so the media, poets actors, movies and newspapers takes a part of this issue.

The poetry in this period takes many way to emphasis the identity of war, the poets try to awareness people of war, some of poets accuse Muslims, some are not,

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