



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice

European Joint Master's Degree Program  
in English and American Studies

Second Cycle (D.M. 270/2004)

Final Thesis

**Narrating Trauma after 9/11:  
Women's Response through  
Oppositional Poetics**

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**Academic Year**

2016 / 2017

*To my beloved Mum, Dad, Aunt Tizzy and Uncle Giò*

“America was never innocent.  
We popped our cherry on the boat over and looked  
back with no regrets. You can’t ascribe our fall  
from grace to any single event or set of  
circumstances. You can’t lose what you lacked at  
conception.”

James Ellroy, *American Tabloid*

# Narrating Trauma after 9/11: Women's Response through Oppositional Poetics

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# INTRODUCTION

This study considers a selection of poems written after September 11, 2001 by American women authors from the city of New York, including Jean Valentine, Molly Peacock, Alicia Ostriker, Patricia Spears Jones, Anne Marie Levine and Shelley Stenhouse. The lyrics under examination are gathered in the anthology *Poetry after 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets*, edited by Dennis Loy Johnson and Valerie Merians and published by Melville House Books in 2002 to commemorate the tragedy.

My thesis is that the event of 9/11 triggered the emergence of counter narratives, theorized in the concept of oppositional poetics, whose object is a contestation against the terroristic rhetoric and the public discourse characterizing the aftermath. In particular, I focus on the way women poets responded to this challenge of representation. I argue that women writers express a literary subjectivity which is more sensitive toward trauma, and that their poems are representative of the main themes characterizing the trauma of 9/11.

The starting point of my analysis is that the trauma of 9/11 raised a cultural awareness about the phenomenon of terrorism, by involving the arts in the challenge of representing and responding to it. With special regard to literature, oppositional poetics interprets the need of finding a different perspective about trauma; and they lead to a deeper understanding of the times we are living in. My goal is to highlight the commitment of the poetical form in interpreting the problematics of contemporary times; and show the way the texts can be interpreted as literary responses of dissidence against global terrorism.

The reason for considering poetry is because this genre is especially bestowed with that social function that best interprets the necessity of expression after a trauma. The wide range of stylistic devices expand the possibilities of giving voice to the experience, offering instruments to elaborate the complexity of trauma. In addition to this, when considered in its sociopolitical dimension, poetry assumes a power of criticism that reveals the importance of aesthetics in responding to the events. Moreover, this literary form was the very first one to be composed and shared after the attacks of 9/11, thanks to its brevity; and this can give account of the immediate and local reactions.

The decision of limiting my enquiry to women writers responds to different motivations. First, I found that women were particularly receptive about the theme of trauma, in particular that of 9/11 and its implications. Their subjective perception of the events was translated into an oppositional practice that well illustrates this concept. Moreover, these poets represent voices from the city of New York, being authors that were living in the city at the moment of the attacks; and the plurality of their voices is a way to investigate the representation of the disaster through a synchronic look. Another aspect that justifies the preference for women poets is the purpose of giving room to a literary production often marginalized from the canon or less analyzed by criticism. This thesis wishes to examine their stance in the contemporary literary panorama in quality of witnesses of global terrorism. However, my assumption is that oppositional practices escape labels; so, women's production is not to be considered different, but of a different sensibility. As the event of 9/11 deeply changed our perceptions of the world, focusing on women writers can help investigating this issue in relation to the specificity of their poetical voice.

The method of this research is strongly interdisciplinary, by integrating a reading of the texts that includes global terrorism into the wide and many-faceted field of trauma studies. The literary texts are analyzed by virtue of their aesthetic choices in relation to a specific

theme, and three pivotal topics are explored: the gendered critique, the feeling of collective guilt and responsibility and the significance of belonging to contemporary history. These themes are typical of the commitment that counter narratives engage in response to terrorism. Thus, the chapters initially propose a contextualization of the main theme with respect to its sociopolitical implications regarding trauma, then they proceed to a close reading of the poems. The close of each chapter highlights the specificity of the oppositional practices in relation to the given topic, by demonstrating the way the definition of oppositional poetics applies to the texts. Finally, the development of the research also respects this order, by starting with an investigation about the gendered representations of 9/11 related to the individual experience of trauma, then moving to consider the collective feeling of responsibility in a cultural trauma and the sense of belonging to a global history that encompasses spaces and time.

The first chapter proposes a general contextualization of the phenomenon of global terrorism, and it presents the category of oppositional poetics. Specifically, the event of 9/11 is investigated as a historical occurrence that forced the Western world to reconsider its position and policies in a globalized world. Since international terrorism has changed the way we perceive the world, attention is led upon the characteristics that make this phenomenon different compared to traditional conflicts. Object of the chapter is to investigate globalization and the virtualization of the information in empowering the effects of terrorism, creating a mediatic echo. Since this situation favored the formation of counter narratives, the debate concentrates on literature as the site for the elaboration of a counter discourse that opposes the standard narration of facts. The theoretical basis for the discussion takes form from Erica Hunt's "Notes for Oppositional Poetics", then it is developed by underlining the social function of poetry after 9/11. The chapter focuses on the definition of oppositional practices, by finding in women poets the voice interpreting the need of a new perspective on

9/11. The peculiarity of their stance is examined by looking at the kind of subjectivity they express in relation to trauma; finally, the possibility of a specific feminine aesthetic in dealing with 9/11 is evaluated according to a feminist theory. The issue regarding the feminine experience of trauma is studied by considering the way the artistic process is influenced by global terrorism, by deepening the stance that founds their storytelling.

The second chapter illustrates the discussion about the first theme taken into consideration, that relates to a gendered analysis of 9/11. Before analyzing the literary texts, the event of 9/11 is framed as example of a “gendered collapse”, in the sense that the rhetoric of the aftermath focused on gender-based aspects that respected distinct roles. Thus, gender theory is applied to the trauma paradigm in order to trace the connections between the perception of both these categories; as a matter of fact, terrorism affects the way a culture perceives trauma, as the example of the public discourse after 9/11 demonstrates. By addressing a gendered division of roles judged as proper to fight back, the Presidential speeches and a few figurative examples are analyzed in order to observe the way the public discourse responded to the attacks according to the concepts of masculinity and femininity. In the context of this investigation, poems are finally examined, starting with “She Would Long” by Jean Valentine. This text illustrates the trauma of 9/11 from a gendered perspective, focusing on the metaphor of a fox folding in its hole. The image of the hole becomes a major topic to be investigated, in parallel with the Twin Towers’ collapse. After this analysis, the short poem “In the Burning Air” by the same author is considered. This text depicts a woman’s body in pain, locating the crisis on a psychological level and addressing mourning with reference to the concept of domesticity; and the idea of home is investigated according to the allegory of a threatened nation. The last poem to be examined is “The Land of the Shi’” by Molly Peacock. The theme of gender is expanded in an opposition between male and female polarities that compose the landscape of New York after the attacks. The ultimate

solution for the despair is found in the *reverie* of an imaginary land escaping the ruined urban remains of the Towers. Finally, oppositional poetics is considered in relation to a gendered perspective, underlying the rejection that the counter narrative embodies toward the gendered connotation of the rhetoric of the aftermath.

The third chapter concentrates on the theme of guilt and consequent feeling of responsibility that stems from events such as 9/11. A preliminary analysis presents the clinical aspects of the post-traumatic stress disease including guilt as symptom in the elaboration of trauma. The question is then framed in terms of the cultural and collective trauma Americans share in dealing with the consequences of the attacks. The topic concerns the way the acknowledgement of the U.S.'s dominance across the world becomes the reason for a feeling of guilt. This indeed leads to the recognition of the U.S. active involvement in determining the disparities in the world. A propos this, "The Window, at the Moment of Flame" by Alicia Ostriker is analyzed by looking at its references to the awareness of a false freedom that hides a complicity in the conflicts all over the world. The lyric shows the involvement in a moral struggle, blaming the American community for perpetrating traumas before being itself target of the 9/11 tragedy. Similarly, Patricia Spears Jones' "All Saints Day, 2001" deals with the matter of guilt and accountability shared on a collective scope, with special regard to ideological and religious patterns. These poems are finally discussed as examples of oppositional poetics, as they express a critique toward the political and economic involvement the U.S. impose over the world. By pointing to the West as responsible for global hegemony, these texts illustrate a dissident message that invites to think about the trauma of 9/11 by excluding victimization.

The fourth chapter illustrates the theme of history, considered as a philosophical condition of being and with specific reference to the current moment influenced by global terrorism. By mentioning the philosophers that have treated this matter, I argue that terrorism

has affected our perceptions of time and history. Stemming from Baudrillard's observations about 9/11, I later discuss this trauma in terms of a possible end of history. This because 9/11 can be meant as a break, specifically referred to the Postmodern condition as Lyotard calls it. 9/11 ended the way we think about history according to the principle of cause and effect, and it unmasks the lack of references that contemporary times face. In quoting Jameson and Derrida, attention is drawn upon the deconstruction of the traditional narrative depicting history, and finally tackling the necessity of rewriting history through counter narratives as foreseen by De Lillo. To find evidence for this, I present the poems "Four November 9<sup>th</sup>" by Anne Marie Levine and "Circling" by Shelley Stenhouse. Levine invites to think about history as a series of recurring episodes that connect different periods and places over the world, by developing a lucid reasoning about the symbolic value of the events. Levine's experience of history is linear and diachronic, as the exposition of the facts suggests; and she rejects the idea both of casualty and causality. Conversely, Stenhouse presents a completely different interpretation of history, more trauma-focused and emotional. The poem is analyzed by investigating the role of writing in relation to the problem of processing history, and concentrating on the consequences that human actions have. Finally, the last section of the chapter examines the role of oppositional poetics in rewriting time and history, since history is a topic that poignantly emerges in the post-9/11 writings. In order to investigate the function of poetry in representing this topic, Scalapino's observations about the nature of experience come to clarify the linguistic medium of the writing structure. The concept of temporality is further analyzed in the context of trauma.

The last chapter discusses the aesthetic aspects related to the artistic and literary depiction of 9/11. Tracing the current state of the art, the debate examines some controversial aspects about the condition of poetry after 9/11, by considering the massive circulation of poems of the aftermath and the diffidence that impede a complete appreciation of this genre.

Compared to longer forms, poetry suffers the limit of its presumed massification and less accessibility, attention therefore is drawn upon the pragmatic aspects that affect the mimesis of this form. In fact, trauma alters the task that poetry is called to embody. The problem brought to the surface is the attitude of evaluating, giving a tag or labelling literature after 9/11, by pressing to find a meaning, a therapeutic purpose or a justification in the artistic expression. This misleading assumption extends to an ethical aspect that is at the basis of the representation, as a traumatic event seems improper to be depicted. At this regard, silence is often invoked as a sign of respect; so, the investigation considers the motif of demanding a poetical silence in the wake of the tragedy. In contrast to the absence and loss provoked by the trauma of 9/11, the emergence of oppositional poetics is analyzed in terms of a possible response against silence, by turning to the matter of representation. This topic, that seems to be at the core of the debate concerning the possibility of expressing trauma, is later developed in terms of a failure of language. Though the question is widely accredited by critics, I propose a personal interpretation of the way trauma affects the aesthetic elaboration and creation of a poem, relocating the matter as a problem of communication. The philosophical background supporting my thesis is based on the observations about phenomenology raised by the philosophers Baudrillard and Schopenhauer, by focusing on how they analyze communication in working to construct a stable configuration of reality. The point rotates around the necessity of authenticity in writing that originates the emergence of oppositional poetics. The topic is tackled from a linguistic, philosophical and aesthetic point of view, trying to determine the influence of the trauma paradigm on artistic creation. Finally, the problem is set in terms of contrasting narratives about 9/11, and poetry is indicated as the site for elaborating a counter discourse that questions the traditional representation and communication of this event. While rejecting the hypothesis of oppositional poetics as a possible new avant-garde, the conclusive part of the chapter aims at opening a possible

critical perspective upon the idea of a global literature. The controversial problem of communication after 9/11 is set in terms of finding a relationship with the public, in the intent of seeking a connection between the work of art and the spectator. Poetry is considered by virtue of the technical devices employed to reduce the distance between the writer and the reader, then attention is drawn upon the subjectivity, the personal experience and domesticity that emerge in the poems about 9/11. These stylistic choices are meant to renovate a connection with the public, trying to find a way to theorize global experiences of suffering such as the damage caused by international terrorism. This aspect of universality is crucial, because it revolutionizes the role of contemporary writing, by stressing the globality of the message that literature conveys. Finally, oppositional poetics and practices indicate the possibility of giving voice to a reflection upon the problems that the global citizen face.

This dissertation wishes to be read as an itinerary that is not resolved to clarify the causes of terrorism, neither its political implications. The significance of this thesis aims at defining a possible new path of interpretation about the facts, by outlining central themes in the debate about terrorism that find evidence in the literary texts.

## CHAPTER 1

### **“Between the West and the Rest”: Oppositional Poetics in the Age of Terror**

This chapter focuses on some background premises necessary to frame the context of my analysis. Starting by considering the exceptional nature of the terroristic attacks of September 11, 2001, then attention is drawn to the effects of global terrorism on the cultural setting. Giving proper attention to the consequences of the virtualization of the conflict, the topic is expanded to consider the role of literature in representing such trauma. Counter narrative practices are contextualized into the aesthetic contemporary challenges, by highlighting the emergence of oppositional poetics in response to the terroristic and public discourse. Theoretical observations about the writing practice embrace the specific issue of women’s poetry in dealing with the 9/11 event, expanding the notion of oppositional poetics to a gendered subjectivity in facing trauma.

#### **1.1 Global Terrorism: Framing Narratives after 9/11**

Trying to understand the purport of literature after 9/11 not only means approaching its themes, but also discovering that this narrative engages an aesthetic challenge toward our times, radically different from the tradition. In order to be understood, contemporary writing needs to be considered in relation to its historical frame; and a valid point for criticism is to start an investigation trying to contextualize the value of narratives and voices in this complex historical background.

Among the facts that have shaken the first decade of this century, only a few had the power of shocking and raising a collective awareness as did 9/11. Compared to the past, this historical occurrence embodies a difference because of many factors, whose specificity is to be found in its political and symbolic significance. As Art Spiegelman said, “September 11, 2001, was a *memento mori*, an end to civilization as we knew it” (Spiegelman 10). The very beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was marked by a historical occurrence that forced us to reconsider the role of the West in the world and the effects of its policies in a globalized dimension more than ever before; and undoubtedly the attack led against the Twin Towers has been a reaction towards the hegemonic dominion they stood for. If this is globally discussed and accepted as true by the majority of critics in different disciplines, addressing the counter narratives that described this event can lead to a deeper understanding of the challenges that the future of contemporary literature will deal with.

The reason for the wide implications of the tragedy of 9/11 can be explained in the context of a globalized world, where political and paramilitary entities act in a system dominated by a domino-effect. We have reached such an extended scope of globalization that it is impossible to consider contemporary events as single episodes regarding local effects; conversely, they need to be analyzed by virtue of their interconnections and mutual consequences in a global scale. In particular, terrorism marked the entrance in a permanent state of emergency that does not know borders; and the date of 9/11 conventionally indicates the passage to a period in which the feeling of vulnerability is extended to a larger scale, where the U.S. have only been a metaphoric target standing for the Western world. If it is true, as someone said, that every beginning of a new century brings along the expectations and hopes of the previous one, conversely Sept 11, 2001 inaugurated this century with the worry of a global threat. Terrorism has become a global concern, addressing the fears of an international public.

Limiting ourselves to consider a few aspects of the situation, one of the reasons that mostly characterized 9/11, and its further implications, is the progressive process of virtualization of the information that modifies the majority of our conventional relations with objects and places. The rapidity of the development for technological innovations involved almost every aspect of the quotidian, and to a global extent this is also true for the concepts of conflicts and war. Before the consistent advance of international terrorism, war was considered as a material fight taking place on a battlefield with traditional weapons, but 9/11 has demonstrated how other subtle means can attain similar (and even more pervasive) effects. Before the world saw the Twin Towers' fall, it was inconceivable that a small group of individuals out of a military force could have reached and hit the center of an economic power like the U.S. The way terrorists planned and realized the attacks has been through technologically-empowered devices: not weapons, but planes and human lives, not formal announcements of conflict, but videos and the internet; at the point that the same concept of war should be properly reconsidered adapting critical methodologies<sup>1</sup>. Yet this abstract revolution has very concrete results. Obviously, the virtualization of the information does not only concern the technology of warfare, but also the extended network of communication. What made the event of 9/11 so iconic was also its spectacularization through the media, that had a major role in spreading the news.

In relation to this, the narrative of 9/11 can be discussed in terms of a construction with socio-political features, all influenced by the cultural trauma, shared among the American people and then with the rest of the world. As a matter of fact, the role of the media has been determinant worldwide, because the immediacy of the information and the images preceded their elaboration. By calling into question the matter of representation, the media helped in spreading the videos almost instantly, and the collective consciousness has been

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<sup>1</sup> See Der Derian, 2004.

marked by the image of the planes hitting the Towers. Too often, the fetishism of vision prevailed, and the double falling of the Towers seemed to be shown as something more spectacular than dangerous. In this sense, the media have contributed with a virtual exposure to a real trauma, and they also had a key role in supporting the political rhetoric that accompanied the aftermath.

It is impossible to understand global terrorism without taking into account these characteristics, since they clarify both pragmatic and theoretic aspects. In particular, technology and the virtual and immediate diffusion of the images are two pivotal points that made 9/11 different from any kind of previous bellicose attack in the history of the U.S. As the critic Der Derian notes,

In shorthand, a virtual theory is: thin on explanation and thick on description; instrumented for intervention rather than interpretation; more concerned with events, interests, and matériel than agents, structures, and proofs; more interested in consequences rather than causes; not interested in how a problem is solved but why an event goes, or fails to go, critical and global. [...] It is important to remember that virtuality is defined by a potential for infinite reproducibility and by a capability to produce an effect at a distance – the chief source of its creative as well as destructive powers. (Der Derian 93).

This is exactly the case of 9/11, in the sense that it has been treated as a virtual event, often instrumented by politicians, concentrated on the rhetoric construction of a War on Terror. Moreover, the concretization of the destructive power as defined by Der Derian has been empowered by the media, that have accidentally supported the terrorists' goal by amplifying their actions at distance, all over the world. The process of virtualization has contributed to create a distorted storytelling about the facts, by concentrating on the single episode and distracting the audience from its causes. However, the media are a medium, and they need to be examined in terms of impact, not content; and it is undeniable that they have shaped the collective consciousness multiplying the effect of the fundamentalist hatred. It can be said

that the virtual reality finally imposed on reality, perpetrating a psychic damage and a feeling of insecurity.

## **1.2 The Challenge of Poetry after 9/11**

In a world becoming progressively virtual, the need of establishing a contact with reality increases. Intellectuals have caught the opportunity of coping with trauma by proposing narratives clearly inflected by the experience of 9/11. As a matter of fact, the artistic challenge triggered by the attacks of 9/11 involves a new perception in the passage from experience to representation, to compensate for what the scholar Dana Gioia has named as the “media’s collective inadequacy to find words commensurate with the situation” (Gioia 164). It is often the case that moments of crisis trigger a culture-wide need of explanatory narratives, and poetry has been one of the privileged genres bestowed with a new significance. This because it is a form deeply intertwined with language and perception, and it easily embodies the process of understanding social complex phenomena like terrorism. As the critic Michael Rothberg has remarked,

Literature and other forms of art are important sites of response to terrorism because [...] they illustrate the interconnectedness of the public and the private and allow us to reconnect our faculties of seeing and feeling, two forms of connection that both terrorism and mass society threaten. These characteristics of literature suggest that the aesthetic has a particular role to play in responding both to acts of extreme violence and to the political processes in which they unfold and to which they give rise. The aesthetic is neither an apolitical zone closed off from violence nor a realm that can simply be subsumed under the seemingly more urgent activity of politics, even in a moment of perpetual emergency.  
(Rothberg 2008, 123-124)

This observation alludes to the tension between personal experience and social function in representing reality, two aspects especially true in the case of poetry. Poetry is a site of response that relates perception to the larger sphere of communication, which is often a social space. In fact, the main task of literature after 9/11 is to find a way to communicate with a

collective consciousness by giving voice to a sense of being that finds itself disjoint by a hyper-real reality. If the boundaries of reality and fiction become blurred, artists are encouraged to find new ways to describe stories inspired by true experiences, often turning to non-fictional forms as the case of poetry suggests.

However, this is not the only reason that explains the prominent value of poetry in the vast literary panorama about 9/11. Starting from Rothberg's observations, another issue asks for consideration, and it deals with politics. On one hand, aesthetics is undoubtedly influenced by the politic power, but on the other hand art is the site where counter-discourses develop. This mutual relationship is possible because of the double character of poetry, which is privately and socially involved at the same time:

The relationship between poetry and politics has always been a problematic one. On the one hand, there are those who argue that poetry, being a human activity, is inseparable from community, society, and so from politics. [...] there are also those who suggest that, in attending to and renewing the language, the poet is in effect interrogating and subverting the dominant political rhetoric - or what Ezra Pound called 'the fogged language of the swindling classes'. But although the debate over the relationship between poetry and politics has always been there, it has certainly acquired a new edge and relevance with the terrorist attacks and the 'war on terror'. (R. Gray 168)

As R. Gray notes, the issue relating politics and poetry demands to be addressed in terms of rhetoric. Language is the theoretical location where poetry operates the mediation between the personal and public sphere. However, the question of the relation between politics and poetry is usually specified as a problem of content, losing part of its deeper significance. Global terrorism has redefined the social function of writing, claiming the poetic space as an interrogation of critical reflections towards power, society and aesthetics.

It could be argued that this reflection leads the discourse in a misleading way of conceiving the social role of poetry, turning to the boundary of a conscious activist writing. Conversely, the speculative matter does not lie in the aim of writing, but in its form. The task

of poetry in the context of collective traumas like 9/11 individuates the problem of coping with ideological and political narratives. The commitment expressed by the texts is not an open rejection of terrorism or a protest against the political rhetoric, but a poetical articulation of language that describes the condition of living in a post-9/11 world. The traumatic experience becomes the point of convergence for the interconnection between experience and ideology.

This argumentation shows how difficult it is to separate a discourse about terrorism and poetry after 9/11 without considering the writers' implicit stance towards language and rhetoric. Considering the poems, it seems inevitable to identify social issues, for instance the feeling of vulnerability, the political responsibility towards terrorism as individuals and citizens, and the sense of belonging to history. According to the purpose of this analysis, my approach is to look at the texts investigating their political disagreement through the poetical means.

### **1.3 Counter-Narrative Practices and Oppositional Poetics**

The necessity of adopting a stance after 9/11 emerges in literature, with the aim of contrasting the terroristic rhetoric, but also more keenly against the way the public discourse managed to face the crisis. Against skepticism and the rhetoric of revenge, writers and intellectuals privileged the emergence of forms and practices to interpret their opposition. This is not to say that every work after 9/11 is a form of political dissidence, because there is clearly a difference between criticism and political disagreement; however, engaged narratives have developed in the form of oppositional practices.

Thanks to Postmodernist deconstructive impulse, starting from the early 70s gradual recognition has been accorded to the category of oppositional practices. In particular, the

work of John Ogbu put the seeds for an oppositional culture theory, by initially considering the low academic performances of his students that belonged to ethnic and marginalized groups<sup>2</sup>. Though his research supported by the anthropologist Signithia Fordham mostly focused on the racial-based characterization in the American educational system, his work presented ideas that were rapidly extended to further considerations about literacy and culture. Since then, the conceptualization of the oppositional behavior has gained attention, generalizing the theory by stating that this attitude emerges when the dominant culture of a given environment threatens the minority group's cultural identity. The recognition of an oppositional feature in the African-American cultural background, with special regard to the literary theory, later lead to distinguish and separate this category, and most of the criticism considers the white and male supremacy as the mark of a hegemonic cultural system. If this is true for the academia and the literary canon, on the other hand this position limits the validity of the oppositional practices to the racial matter; and a literary reading of Ogbu's positions demands to reconsider its domain. In the light of literary theory, the term "oppositional" needs to be defined again to question the validity of this theory and then to trace a correspondence in the contemporary panorama of poetry after 9/11.

The theoretical basis upon which my examination expands is coherent with some observations enunciated in an article written a long time before 9/11, and still very enlightening. In her essay "Notes for Oppositional Poetics", the African-American critic and writer Erica Hunt developed a compelling reflection about the significance of being a writer in difficult historical times, recognizing that this activity is a commitment shaped by its subversive character. Even though the article dates back to 1990, it contains stunningly contemporary concepts, and it seems pertinent and meaningful to properly reconsider them during current times. In the context of her essay, she outlines the conditions that made the

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<sup>2</sup> See Ogbu, 1978; Ogbu, 1981; Lundy, 2003.

advance of new forms of violence possible, with proper considerations about narrative in representing an objection to the system of power. The starting point of her essay concentrates on the development of violence as a result of historical crisis. As she remarks,

industrialized countries have managed to create the illusion of a world at peace – with the exception of a few remote places. The effects of this displacement of violence, outside the borders of the West, are not easily conjured away. [...] In America, one of the seats of power that has brought such ‘peace’, the majority are complicit, often unconsciously, with the New War, and as the borders of countries dissolve and nations become more interdependent, the violence spreads and entangles. (Hunt 680-681)

Even if Hunt is writing at the very beginning of the 90s, it is not difficult to understand the modernity of these considerations. Violence is undoubtedly one of the effects provoked by globalization, that goes along with the weakening of the idea of borders. Nations of the First World are bond with the rest of the world by economic interests, and global terrorism is an example of concrete disorder against the virtualization of these margins. Moreover, extremism shows how tensions can blast through unpredictable manifestations other than warfare, demonstrating the existence of dynamics that blur the idea of a collision between formations. In order to understand the causes of terrorism, it is necessary to look at the way the U.S. have imposed over the world. The attitude of abusive imperialism has been supported by the capitalistic system, and the U.S. had a central role in intensifying globalization. Hunt continues,

if the negative character of the exchange between the West and the rest is abundant and abundantly repressed, its positive character is equally hidden. The levels of systemic warfare conceal the price that most of us pay beyond taxes. What is stunning is the brimming void in which visionary culture confronts power. (Hunt 681)

Today, the citizens of the Western world are dealing with the political consequences of globalization and international terrorism can be considered as a result of an unequal ‘exchange between the West and the rest’. The U.S., target of the terroristic attacks of 9/11, are the symbol of a steady-state hegemony that has established an asymmetrical power all

over the world. In the face of this condition, Hunt suggests that the cultural response to the events is inseparable from the formation of a counter-discourse confronting power. Representing a reaction against systems of violence and oppression, an innovative concept of 'oppositional' narrative takes form:

In recognition of the scope of the submerged, disconnected and violent character of contemporary life [...] oppositional poetics and cultures form a field of related projects which have moved beyond the speculation of skepticism to a critically active stance against forms of domination. By oppositional, I intend, generously, dissident cultures as well as 'marginalized' cultures, cutting across class, race and gender. (Hunt 681)

The case of poetry after September 11, 2001 clearly responds to these criteria. The main task of poetry after 9/11 has been to rediscover the social function of the genre by searching a new approach with the public through the elaboration of a shared cultural trauma. More interestingly, Hunt points out that 'marginalized' cultures play an important role in assuming an active stance:

In literature – a highly stratified cultural domain – oppositional projects replicate the stratification of the culture at large. There are oppositional projects that engage language as a social artifact, as art material, as powerfully transformative, which view themselves as distinct from projects that have as their explicit goal the use of language as a vehicle for the consciousness and liberation of oppressed communities. In general, the various communities, speculative and liberatory, do not think of each other as having much in common, or having much to show each other. In practice, each of their language use is radically different – not in the clichéd sense of one being more open-ended than the other, but in the levels of rhetoric they employ. More interesting [are] the limitations they share – limitations of the society as a whole which they reproduce, even as they resist... Speculative projects are not exempt from the cul de sacs that contain other oppositional writing. (Hunt 686)

This clarification is necessary to introduce the limits of oppositional practices, which also explains the difficulty and unwillingness by criticism to properly consider this cultural and literary category. Often oppositional works are produced by marginalized cultures, by virtue of their unlucky (or privileged) point of view that takes the form of a keen subjectivity. Especially for the case of poetry, they are gathered in anthologies edited by small presses, and they entertain a dichotomic relationship with tradition. As it has been pointed out,

Oppositional poetics in our time, therefore, must look both forward and backward, both toward the diverse and contentious arenas of contemporary poetic production and toward the institutions and rhetorics that seek to define and delimit such practice. Such poetics takes multiple shapes in alternative histories, anthologies, magazines, writing programs, affiliations, and self-definitions, as well as the promotion of certain forms of writing over others. (Kellogg 161).

The reason for the promotion of certain forms of writing is to be found in a different perception that oppositional writers and intellectuals share. Their sensibility is shaped by a kind of subjectivity that characterizes their narration and makes them diverge from mainstream literature. Interestingly, from the 1970s on along with the analysis of Postmodern forms of expression the issue of subjectivity has been largely investigated in poetry, by concentrating on the stylistic elaboration of the speaking "I". The result of this search has redefined the modern poetic subjectivity, which widely depended on the Romantic tradition. If Romantics were involved in a mutual relationship between the external world and their personal perception, the description of "memories recollected in tranquillity", the 20<sup>th</sup> century has reversed this attitude, by making it clash with the theoretical speculations that changed our subjectivity such as Freud's, Heidegger's and Nietzsche's. Central observations relate to the political and dissident interpretations of the texts, which characterized the Beat generation, the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets and the avant-garde impulse in general. There is reason to think that the shift in attitude toward subjectivity bears great importance for contemporary poets, especially after 9/11. In particular, the case of trauma changes the perception that we entertain with history and reality, by opening the form to new aesthetic challenges. As Kellogg notes speaking about oppositional poetics,

As tactics, strategies, and attitudes, all of these forms of resistance disturb either the trajectory or the target of subjective history: that is, they all work either by the fragmentation of linear narrative, or by the multiplication of subject-positions. What are needed for an alternative theorization of the literary past and present are, first, a way of describing the problematic of the modern subject's history and construction without repeating that problematic in its own account, and second, a way of understanding the field of literature in a non-hierarchical and nonreductive relation to this problematic. (Kellogg 173)

The fragmentation of the speaker, the adoption of multiple points of view and the construction of a subjective history are typical features that interpret the oppositional contemporary aesthetic, because they find problematic the relationship with subjectivity. Interestingly, Kellogg refers to literature by emphasizing its “non-hierarchical” nature, aligning himself with the poet and literary theorists Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino, that develops a similar thought about the mediation of experience through the consciousness<sup>3</sup>.

#### **1.4 Feminist Theory and the Postmodern Heritage**

The matter of subjectivity opens up to further questions, the first of course being the identity of the subject. Hunt sees the ideal representative of oppositional poetics in “marginalized cultures”, whereas Kellogg is more interested in a stylistical analysis about the form and does not investigate the topic. However, the case of 9/11 is compelling because of the deep and self-conscious subjectivity shown by women writers. Since their production is characterized by a different perception of experience, the category of isolated groups such as women writers are particularly apt to represent the concept of oppositional poetics. By virtue of their exclusion from the canon or tradition, women writer production is marked by the radicalization of their experience of reality that has implications on subjectivity. Their way to connect to reality takes place by an investigation of the self, transforming the discover of identity in an elaboration of a personal experience. To expand this point, it is important to consider the context in which oppositional poetics takes form. Global terrorism has offered women’s writing an occasion to rediscover identity through trauma, a shared dimension that gives voice to expressions of crisis in elaborating the shock. Feminine experience becomes tied to the issue of witnessing a specific historical moment, by creating the conditions for the

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<sup>3</sup> A deeper analysis of Scalapino’s thesis will be discussed in Chapter 4, in relation to the topic of time and history.

formation of a counter discourse against violence. Inevitably, oppositional poetics has much to do with the cultural elaboration of reality; and this motivates the interest and importance to consider feminist aesthetics in relation to trauma.

A few more words should be spent on the definition of “feminist aesthetic”. The rise of attention toward the identification of “feminist aesthetics” began to develop when criticism felt the need of categorizing a kind of aesthetic works that showed a peculiar sensibility out of the patriarchal discourse that dominates the canon. This categorization, that has often coincided with the formulation of a female writing, was meant to distinguish the female experience from its representation as object, by recognizing a specifically female consciousness. Even though categorizations are often limiting, the identification of a discourse empowering women, later extended and/or associated with other minorities, formally recognizes the existence of a feminist discourse that can open new perspectives. Feminist scholars have recognized how

The criteria that have created the literary canon have, like the traditional conception of history, excluded the accomplishments not only of women but of people of races, ethnic backgrounds and classes different from the politically dominant one, which is Western and white. Feminist criticism questions the values implicit in the Great Works, investigating the tradition that canonized them and the interests it serves. (Greene and Kahn 22)

According to the definition of oppositional poetics as defined above, the oppositional and feminist practices share the point of view and the means of expression. However, Rita Felski, one of the most distinguished feminist scholars, points out that whether female writing is intrinsically oppositional, it is impossible to superimpose women’s writings and feminist ideology, because their goals do not necessarily converge. By analyzing the aesthetic form and content of female writings, she limits the political influences of literary texts and privileges to a vision “in which the aesthetic function may be more or less dominant but always intermeshes with the ideological conditions governing the text’s own historical location” (Felski 177). To say it differently, if it is true that feminist and female writings do

not necessarily coincide, then the category of oppositional poetics includes both literary practices, by virtue of its rejecting character and the peculiar subjectivity that women poets interpret.

These theoretical positions about gender implication in the development of oppositional literature in the wake of 9/11 are supported by the social aspect of poetics. In particular, poetry represents an intellectual discursive place to express a confrontation with the experience of global terrorism. By focusing on women poets' contribution, it can be seen that the poem becomes a space for elaborating a counter-discourse tied to history and society. As a matter of fact, the notable aspect of this genre is related to its capacity of combining form and content, negotiating the issue of language as a space to openly interrogate the mechanism of witnessing trauma. Poetry assumes the privileged position of implementing urgently needed cultural reactions in the public sphere; and women poets are especially involved in moving beyond the rhetoric of violence to recollect the personal and collective participation in the trauma. In this context, the conceptualization of trauma combines women's everyday experiences of interpersonal violence and the counter discourse. At this regard, Felski restates the importance of the personal experience as oppositional practice, because subjectivity is the key element that interprets the social experience of writing:

[T]o expose critically the inadequacies of the rationalistic and self-sufficient individualism of liberal political theory is not thereby to argue that subjectivity should be abandoned as a category of oppositional political thought, nor does the decentering of the subject in contemporary theory mean that discourses which appeal to an experience of self are therefore anachronistic. Subjectivity remains an ineradicable element of modern social experience [...]. (Felski 68)

Following this issue, the selection of women's production displayed and discusses in this dissertation fully finds its reason to be. The theoretical basis underlying my analysis supports women's subjectivity as a privileged point of view to observe and give voice to trauma, investigating the way they develop themes such as gender, guilt and history in the specific background of 9/11.

Finally, it has been observed that the development of a gendered telling is a specific oppositional feature. Even if its aim is not political, the literary expression can interpret commonality:

Both gendered telling and gendered reading are possible oppositional practices. What is an oppositional practice? It is not a revolutionary movement, it is not aimed at overthrowing society and does not operate from a position of strength. Rather it contests, affirms solidarity, gains victories within a society, operating from a position of weakness. (Maclean 40)

The tragedy of 9/11 has imposed over the collective unconscious as a cultural trauma, and oppositional practices can actually represent a form of solidarity to help in facing the crisis. The traumatic factor has a pivotal role in this, and it should be properly addressed. Though the debate about oppositional poetics stems from a not-so-recent past, the peculiarity of 9/11 asks to frame this literary and cultural practice in the context of global terrorism, which has important implications for the field. The intersection between trauma and terrorism, with the extension of fears to a global public, represents an unprecedented challenge for literature; so, poetry after 9/11 needs to be considered with a constant reminder of the traumatic impact that this event had on the public consciousness.

Speaking about the specificity of this traumatic responsiveness, another aspect of the topic, equally important to acknowledge, is that poetry is a form giving room to more abstract elaborations of reality. Poetry is based on a linguistic structure that best interprets abstract configurations, thanks to prosodic and metrical devices that would be lost in longer fictional works. With regard to trauma, people who have been exposed to traumatic stressors undergo a process of abrupt dissociation and displacement from reality<sup>4</sup>; so, it is often the case that the distinction between reality and fiction becomes blurred. In other words, on one hand trauma exposes the sense of the self to a process of fragmentation; on the other it offers the

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<sup>4</sup> See Mc Farlane et al., 1998.

poet wider narrative possibilities through language. This idea conceiving poetry as a narrative configuration suitable to elaborate trauma fits the definition provided by Hunt:

In an expanded sense of poetics, a more fluid typology would favor plural strategies to remove the distance between writing and experience, at least as it is socially maintained by the binarism of fact and fiction of identity and nonidentity. [...] All this is to suggest that the narrative invention stems from multiple levels of perception and experience that literary standards conceived as ceiling to raze. (Hunt 682)

Hunt's remarks raise theoretical considerations about the form that need to be contextualized.

As she notes, fluid narrative configurations are helpful in reducing the gap between writing and experience. In this sense, the case of traumatic episodes is emblematic, because the elaboration of shocking experiences requires the capacity of adapting to new forms to process the event. By paying peculiar attention to form, poets after 9/11 rediscover the social dimension of the aesthetic practice through trauma; and they interpret an intellectual "oppositional" position that condensate a rejection of violence.

The idea of oppositional poetics developed by Hunt turns out to be especially valid when applied to current times. Moreover, the term "oppositional" seems to be even more suitable in the case of global terrorism. The public reaction against terrorism after 9/11 has been lead upon precise oppositions: the rhetoric endorsed by the media was centered on the dichotomy "you are either with us, or against us". This significant stance polarizing two oppositional forces has been used by President Bush at the beginning of his counter-terroristic campaign, indicating a precise ideological position. The intention was that of establishing a convincing rhetoric to influence public opinion, and it has been used as justification for the aggressive foreign affairs' policy that followed. In fact, these strong antagonistic terms quickly became pragmatic, with the invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and later Iraq (2003). According to the ideological interpretation supported by the media and politicians, terrorism fits the logic of opposition because it stands against freedom and the Western values in the name of religious fundamentalism. An attentive analysis of this use of rhetoric underlines

how antagonism creates a tension between the two parts, suggesting a logic of dominion that ultimately justifies the conflict to the eyes of the public opinion. The division is easily convincing, because it simplifies the interests of the two parts and it can be used as an efficient political instrument. Moreover, the collective imagination is marked by the imposition of a simplified dichotomy between good and evil. Speaking about the cultural implications of creating an alterity, the literary critic Craig Owens notes that “the positing of an Other is a necessary moment in the consolidation, the incorporation of any cultural body” (Owens 58): alterity easily becomes antagonism, a duality that justifies dominion and conflict.

Ultimately, it can be said that the necessity of oppositional poetics in times of crisis can be fully understood by considering the ideology that stands behind the rhetoric of power. Poetry after 9/11 interprets the need of an intellectual counter-discourse to move beyond the dichotomy of the political communication, by developing new forms of dialogue. The concept of dualism has meaningful consequences for the fictional means in contemporary times, and the poems written after 9/11 well display this system. Moving forward to analyze the implications for the literary theory, it can be seen that the emergence of oppositional poetics pays tribute to the influence of Postmodernism; and its role is determinant in recognizing the value of oppositional counter-discourses as well as women writer’s production.

The starting point to understand the relationship between Postmodernism and the contemporary literary panorama is the approach towards narrative plurality. As a matter of fact, the literary canon is dominated by the imposition of the “master narrative”, or *grand récit*, that determines the conventional ideals literature should look at. In particular, the logic of master narrative is based on the subordination of genres and voices to the traditional standards. For instance, the fictional narration of experience is preferred in the first person,

by letting to the edge the experimentations of plural voices. This because the canon introduces an authority; therefore, it reduces the reader's horizon to a narrow set of perceptions. The logics works through exclusion, favoring a traditional narration of the experience. In contrast to this, Postmodernism has highlighted the incoherence and slightness of a literary standard that cannot be considered reliable anymore, since it does not allow other realities to emerge. The deconstructive force of Postmodernist poetics opened new paths for the literary inquiry, offering the opportunity to explore new narrative configurations. Literature after 9/11 has taken benefit from this perspective, because the representation of trauma requires new linguistic and narrative necessities. The dynamics of cultural trauma, by virtue of its complexity, asks "fluid typologies" (quoting Hunt) to respond the challenge of contemporary times, especially the experience of global terrorism. Even though Postmodernism is globally designated as a moment of crisis, it has the merit of dismantling the authority of the master narrative, by reversing the structure imposed by the literary canon. On one hand, it can be said that Postmodernists did not know how to communicate the crisis they were living in, and ultimately chose to accept its unintelligible dynamics; on the other, contemporary artists are asked to order the disaster and provide aesthetical solutions of social relevance. They are required to acknowledge the break with the times, but they are not allowed to answer by playing with chaos like their Postmodern predecessors did. Traumatic experiences of global impact like 9/11 are important for the literary theory not only because of the aesthetic challenge that interests the writers in finding new ways to represent the unspeakable, but also for the expectations the public reverses on them. The task they need to accomplish is to transcend the trauma that alters our perception of reality, and contrasting the idea that literature is insufficient or even inappropriate to portray pain. Although literature after 9/11 can find this issue problematic in the context of the singular event it represents, it is true that poetry negotiates the problem in a different way, compared for example to fiction.

Poetry finds its way to respond to the social function of mediation thanks to its capacity of expanding communication. As a matter of fact, poems are able to show how contrasting points of view can exist together without excluding each other, and they create an occasion to confront with people. “Poetry binds solitudes”, writes the critic Emily Warn,

It enacts a central human paradox: we exist as singular selves, yet can only know them through our relations. Poem creates a presence that is so physically, emotionally, and intellectually charged that we encounter ourselves in our response to it. The encounter, which occurs in language, preserves and enlarges our solitude and points out our connections. (Warn 300)

Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why poetry after 9/11 has been so strongly felt and shared. Thanks to specific technical devices like the use of metaphor and analogy, poetry is bestowed with the duty of creating meaning not only for people, but through them. The social aspect of poetry should be considered in this sense, by rediscovering the commitment artists owe to their public.

In addition to this, it is pertinent to focus on another consequence of these theoretical premises concerning the Postmodern heritage. The emergence of oppositional poetics is important not only in terms of form and content, but it also has reflections on its cultural frame. Postmodernism, writes Owens, “expose[s] that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others. Among those prohibited from Western representation, whose representations are denied all legitimacy, are women” (Owens 59). Thus, the influence of Postmodernism has been determinant also in questioning the same concept of identity and the cultural values the Western world stands for. Female writers have found their literary space thanks to the gap opened by Postmodernism, through a complex process of deconstruction that has allowed their voices to come to the surface and gain recognition. Since women’s writings have been widely excluded from the mainstream press, their production is to be regarded with special interest, by paying attention to the use of language in describing their experiences. From an aesthetic point of view, the suppression

of their voices has been favorable to develop a distinctive oppositional and dissident character that can be put in contact with the cultural crisis experienced by authors after 9/11; so, once again trauma represents an occasion to rediscover the plurality of perspectives that characterize the role of the writer today.

In conclusion, it can be said that certain background conditions let come to the surface some artistic expressions interpreting a sense of dissidence and resistance against the spread of violence and the disparity of powers that it provokes. The advancement of international paramilitary groups ascribable to terroristic kernels and the result in conflicts directed against civilians like September 11 display the exacerbation of an ideological contrast between what I previously called “the West and the Rest”. In reaction to this, the development of literary formulations that goes under the name of “oppositional poetics” interprets the need of explanatory narratives to move beyond a personal description of trauma and reach a shared dimension with the public. In particular, the social character of poetry makes this genre apt in extending the focus from the individual trauma to a dialogue with the historical times. Through trauma, the poetical process of composition explores the possibilities of language, by conceiving a cultural response to the rhetoric of power. In this context, female poets interpret the role of mediating the centrality of their experience as women and writers exploring the awareness of living in a period dominated by the influence of global terrorism.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“The Broken Bowl”: Gender Representations in Coping with Trauma**

This chapter aims at approaching the trauma provoked by September 11, 2001 from a gendered perspective. The goal is to underscore the interconnections that can be traced between the crisis triggered by terroristic attacks and the definition of the female identity that takes place in contemporary poetry. A close reading of some poems by Jean Valentine and Molly Peacock is offered as case study, investigating the influence of psychological trauma in the depiction of women characters. Thus, the thesis illustrated in this chapter is that 9/11 has influenced the public rhetoric of the gendered discourse, setting in motion a literary reply that represents a counter narrative with oppositional features.

#### **2.1 September 11, 2001: a Gendered Collapse**

Over the last decades, a lot of scholars have approached the theme of trauma studies from different frameworks, including psychoanalysis, cultural research, and literary reviews. Yet only a few of them have offered a reflection about the interrelations between the impact of trauma and its gendered dimension. The majority of critics agree on the fact that shock affects multiple aspects of the survivors' lives, including a wide range of counter effects such as the alteration of memory, language and emotions. For example, the joint study by Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart has proposed a clinical analysis on the cognitive

schemes that the brain uses when plunged into dramatic situations<sup>5</sup>; whereas Dori Laub has underscored the difficulty in communicating, articulating and remembering after the shock<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps the most influential research about the topic has been led by Cathy Caruth, that has underlined the relationship between trauma and its expression through literature, drawing attention to the challenge of representation<sup>7</sup>.

Much less has been said about the theoretical implications of traumatic events on gender theory. An exception is represented by the critic Laura Brown, with her study “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma”. Her data, supported by years of experience as a psychotherapist in favor of women object of violence, points out the presence of consistent contrasts for individuals of a different gender in the elaboration of shock. Though she illuminates the field of trauma studies by recognizing “how our images of trauma have been narrow and constructed within the experiences and realities of dominant groups in cultures” (Brown 102), on the other hand her inquiry suffers the limit of encompassing only the domestic sphere of trauma, considering examples of physical violence. Consequently, it seems necessary to integrate her contribution by extending her considerations about gender to collective and cultural traumas. The example provided by 9/11 allows us to analyze the politic and mediatic narrative about terrorism in terms of cultural responses, that include a standpoint for the redefinition of gendered roles in a moment of crisis. Acknowledging a gender asymmetry in the reception and elaboration of this trauma can open new paths for contemporary criticism, and provide help in the understanding of the cultural reception related to the phenomenon of terrorism.

In order to understand why and how gender and terrorism are connected, it is necessary to meditate on their definitions. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word

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<sup>5</sup> See Mc Farlane and Van Der Kolk, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> See Laub, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> See Caruth, 1995.

“gender” refers to “either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. The term is also used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female”. Gender defines belonging rather than identity, and it is extremely subjective to individual perception. It is linked with the vision of the self, and it is partly a social construct embedded in roles and codes determined by the community. Nevertheless, the notion of gender is shaped by a profound psychological awareness that goes beyond social conventions and impositions; and it can detach from rigid categories toward a more complex vision of the self. Gender relates to a vulnerable intimate sphere, easily object of manipulation by insidious forms of external stressors, because it is highly influenced by the social codes and it is not easy to trace an absolute and universal definition of this idea. If on the one hand gender is defined by the social expectations that surrender it, often by appealing at stereotypes, on the other the personal psychological and emotional perceptions depend upon the subjectivity of the person. To say it differently, the damages provoked by impactful disturbances can affect the way we look at the usual codes of behavior associated with specific gendered roles. As a matter of fact, a specific set of values are actually associated with a conduct judged as masculine or, conversely, feminine. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, attention will be focused on the impact that trauma has on the perception of gendered codes, according to the social expectations that emerge in the public discourse.

According to the same source, terrorism is defined as “the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims”. This brief explanation puts forward the means through which terrorism aims at gaining results, namely violence and intimidation. The invisible weapon that terrorism employs is psychological oppression, as it affects the normal emotional or cognitive functioning and it results in a long-lasting damage. Prevailing stressors such as dramatic incidents have the power of causing

severe effects by an intense distress, and in the most serious cases, they lead to the permanent psychological damage known as post-traumatic stress disease (PTSD). This disease, formally recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in the 90s, has more to do with the way the traumatized subject react, rather than with the cause of anguish; in this sense, trauma asks to be examined by focusing on a behavioral approach.

The aspect about trauma that mainly concerns terrorism is that extended acts of violence have an impact upon the capacity of individuals to construct a coherent narrative of the self. This is the theoretical point that connects the terroristic goals with the notion of gender. After a serious shock, the traumatized subject is forced to elaborate reconfigurations of the self in relation to painful memories that create psychological zones of shame and unspeakability, and these constructions are often shaped by gendered norms<sup>8</sup>. Correspondingly, terrorists' intention is to strike and corrode the vision of the self, influencing the behavioral implications of trauma with regard to the fragile perception of gender as well.

According to this thesis, gender and terrorism are in close relationship with each other. Similarly, they have an effect on the inner mechanisms that involve awareness, and they affect self-perception. This is not to say that the immediate consequence of terroristic attacks is the damage to one's identity, but the creation of an interference in the perception of self-confidence at the point that even social gendered-related features are put into question. This is the case, for example, of the emphasis lied upon certain social roles and codes of behavior usually associated with a strong division between the sexes, and 9/11 has raised this issue very clearly. Looking at its cultural reception, it can be seen how terroristic attacks have subverted the social codes related to gender in the public rhetoric; so, the interpretation of this event is to be framed into the cultural narrative surrounding the attacks. The media offer

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<sup>8</sup> See Kennedy and Whitlock, 2011.

a great variety of examples to discuss the gendered depiction of 9/11, so it is useful to analyze this issue in the wake of the aftermath.

In the wake of the attacks, the U.S. underwent a moment of serious precariousness. Economic markets showed a plunge in the stock exchanges, due to an immediate and prolonged closure of the New York Stock Exchange, and the Federal Reserve issued liquidity to compensate an imminent financial crisis<sup>9</sup>. The entire nation was shaken by triple attacks, directed toward the center of the economic power in Wall Street, as well as the Pentagon, the political headquarters of the Department of Defense. The U.S. experienced an abrupt threat that had no predecessors in the history of the country, perhaps with the exception of Pearl Harbor six decades earlier. Afraid of possible international consequences after a moment of such political weakness, the government felt the urgency to restore the public image of the U.S. as a stable superpower. The aim was that of reasserting the reputation of the country, but also to reassure American citizens against a widespread feeling of hopelessness.

The Presidential speeches held in the immediate aftermath offer an interesting example to observe how the government managed to face an internal crisis. In front of the public opinion, the U.S. were presented as a dishonored country, committed to the mission of reestablishing their wounded pride and authority. As it has been noted,

The dominant cultural imaginary of the United States has been shaped, in part, by fantasies of impregnability and invincibility, and, dreadful as the events themselves were, it was also the puncturing of these fantasies that contributed to the shock of September 11. (Radstone 121)

The unimaginable had occurred, and the intelligentsia felt the urgency to restore the dignity of the country to avoid a political weakness. President Bush's formal declarations on Sept, 16<sup>th</sup>, 2001 are exemplary of this reaction, trying to keep a proper reputation in front of the public opinion. He formally asked the Americans to stop grieving and go back to normal life,

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<sup>9</sup> See Norris and Fuerbringer, 2001.

and he emphasized the support of civilians, policemen and firemen in quality of “heroes”, thanking the families for their prayers<sup>10</sup>. The mediatic response was bent to the task of transmitting values such as strength, freedom and autonomy, in contrast to the exposed vulnerability the nation was going through.

These observations assume a peculiar shape if considered under the light of a gendered perspective. The exaltation of a proactive set of values was heightened by an attitude of responsibility depicted with highly-gendered connotations. Heroism and bravery were contraposed to the domesticity of the household, charged with the moral responsibility of mourning associated with a strong feminine connotation. The contrast between masculine values and their feminine counterpart particularly emerges in the mediatic and politic discourse about the war on terror. As Julie Drew notes,

Analyses of such public discourse reveal a less-than-subtle movement toward a gendered national identity – an identity significantly polarized along gender lines, highlighting physical strength and violently punitive responses to conflict as both desirable and necessary, as well as the paternalistic attitudes toward injury and trauma, both of which are assumed to be predicated on weakness, and which are read as feminine. (Drew 71)

The point rotates around the feeling of vulnerability, conceived as an un-masculine and inappropriate reaction against the disorientation that followed the attacks. Drew continues: “what is particularly interesting about post-9/11 public discourse is not that it argues that the U.S. is masculine, but that the U.S. is *far too* feminine, and thus must work to become more masculine in order to be safer” (Drew 71). In other words, the U.S. were meant as a feminine subject, threatened by an emotional instability undermining their capacity to show reason and firmness in the national crisis. Similar gender-oriented associations appear in many reactions that characterize the aftermath of 9/11, often organized in complementary and opposed values. The Presidential call for a natural comeback to domesticity was exalted as proper

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<sup>10</sup> Bush, George. “Today We Mourned, Tomorrow We Work”.  
<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>

response for the weak, whereas the military force became the faith to address in terms of masculine leadership<sup>1</sup>. This difference evokes the archetypal division of the household, based on the binary contrast between masculinity and femininity that interprets the balance in the division of roles, especially the idea of man as warrior and woman as caretaker of the house. The patriotic discourse portrayed this difference, since it appealed to the model of national heroes as warriors defeating their country; by contrast, women were deputized for mourning.



Ramsey, Marshall. *Statue of Liberty Crying 9/11*<sup>11</sup>.



Ramsey, Marshall. *9/11, the Flag*<sup>12</sup>.

Among the examples offered by the media, the case of cartoons strikes for its immediacy. These two artistic images by the cartoonist Ramsay Marshall well illustrate the gendered difference in depicting the opposite attitudes toward the 9/11 crisis. In the first one the Statue of Liberty, notoriously a woman, sits in passive mourning; by contrast, in the second three firemen and a policeman actively raise the national flag, imitating the moon landing scene. It has often been the case, in the aftermath, that cartoons reflected two behavioral schemes of opposite reaction, interpreting a marked division based on gender between grief and resolution<sup>13</sup>. Nonetheless, it is important to remind the influence the Presidential speeches

<sup>11</sup> Ramsey, Marshall. *Statue of Liberty Crying 9/11*. <http://marshallramsey.com/wp-content/uploads/911ba.jpg>

<sup>12</sup> Ramsey, Marshall. *9/11, the Flag*. <http://marshallramsey.com/?p=3519>

<sup>13</sup> See Plate, 2008.

created around the event of 9/11, favoring a political atmosphere condemning death as a scandal to be denied, and deploring grief as an embarrassment<sup>14</sup>.

Other intellectuals have expressed analogous remarks about the interpretation of this division. In particular, Susan Faludi has commented that the social gendered roles have been subverted in the wake of the tragedy, giving a new impulse to the feminist theory<sup>15</sup>. Interestingly, Faludi's analysis considers the public attention toward the great number of widows left by 9/11, pointing out that the media tended to present them as one of the most fragile groups wounded by the psychological impact of the attacks. According to her analysis, the public discourse depicted these women as the very interpreters of the tragedy, being the custodians of grief. On the other hand, the media promoted the glorification of policemen and firemen to restore an image of invulnerability and safety. This is particularly evident in the cartoons, photographs, and articles issued on magazines and newspapers in the weeks after the attacks, addressing these representations and storytelling to the myth of the American superhero.

Similar observations have been raised by the scholar Ann Ticker, that opens a feminist perspective demonstrating how gendered discourses are used to reinforce hostility during conflicts, especially to justify the national legitimacy for politics. She states that "gender is a powerful legitimator of war and national security; our acceptance of a remasculinized society during times of war and uncertainty rises considerably" (Tickner 336). As a matter of fact, the public rhetoric after 9/11 was immediately addressed to the war on terror, transforming the attacks into an ideological clash of values that was pragmatically translated into the Iraqi invasion. Tickner suggests that

since the "war against terrorism" began, our images of men and women, as warriors and victims, have become more rigid. Prior to September 11, we in the United States were becoming accustomed to less militarized models of masculinity. Heroes were

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<sup>14</sup> See Gilbert, S. 2001.

<sup>15</sup> See Faludi, 2001.

men of global business conquering the world with briefcases rather than bullets.  
(Tickner 342)

It is not by coincidence then that the Twin Towers' collapse also marked the fall of the myth of the contemporary American businessman. To express this concept, it would be useful to look at on one of the most famous pictures representing 9/11, "The Falling Man" by Richard Drew.



Richard Drew, *The Falling Man*<sup>4</sup>.

This picture, considered by *Time* magazine as one of the most influential photographs of all times<sup>16</sup>, represents a man falling from the Northern Tower, probably after an intentional jump. Following the metaphor proposed above, this image embodies the disintegration of the masculine ideal of the businessman, or the martyr that chooses to die by himself instead of letting the terrorists kill him. This intuition seems to be confirmed by the starkly stunning comment that *Time* offers below the photograph: "the true power of Falling Man [...] is less about who its subject was and more about what he became: a makeshift Unknown Soldier in an often unknown and uncertain war, suspended forever in history"<sup>4</sup>. This remark echoes Tickner's statement about the gendered collapse of the concept of American masculinity that followed 9/11, and it helps the understanding of the political use (and abuse) of a gendered rhetoric. The metaphorical idea of a warrior, or a man at war to fight back at terrorists

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<sup>16</sup> Time, "100 Photos Collection".  
<http://100photos.time.com/photos/richard-drew-falling-man>

legitimizes abusive reactions, especially making violence rational and justifiable; and this validates the political ideology that characterized the post 9/11 discourse.

There is another reason explaining why the terroristic attacks of 9/11 triggered such a deep-rooted reconfiguration of the concept of masculinity. The state of emergency forced to reimagine the masculine subject thanks to the metaphor of impotence. Before 9/11, there was no reason to fear a similar threat, in the sense that the U.S. were not facing a war on the American soil. Therefore, the attacks had an impressive resonance, because no one expected an offense of that extent, especially in a crucial city like New York. The most common and comprehensible reactions were a general surprise and incomprehension, leaving the people of New York completely astonished in front of the destruction caused by the Twin Towers' fall. The unexpected character of the event generated a feeling of impotence and despair, that has a specific resonance even from a gendered perspective. Following the metaphor of a castration, the fall symbolizes the annihilation of the masculine and all those established values that go with it, for example the idea of strength, vitality and power. By devastating the kernel of the economic system, the terrorists also impacted on the idea of invincible masculinity represented by the symbolic object of the Towers. Coherently with the image proposed by Richard Drew, if the planes crashed on the Towers and the businessman fell, then the attacks exposed a new feebleness, affecting the model of an invincible masculine hero. In the end, the falling man neither saves other people, nor does he save himself; he suffers his impotence and failure. Yet mourning and suffering are not socially accepted as proper masculine reactions; so, the public discourse transforms him into the "Unknown Soldier" to mask his powerlessness. On the other hand, America is the ideal for which he dies, the homeland that he tries to protect with his martyrdom. The nationalistic ideology is implicit, and it explains the way the terroristic attacks of 9/11 were immediately meant as a military assault. As it has been said, "because States feminize boundaries, the invasion of

such translates into imagery of an impotent, emasculated man unable to protect his possessions from being violated and destroyed” (Nayak 50). The constitution of an external enemy that threatens the internal borders of the homeland is necessary to politicians to label terrorism as an act of war, justifying a military reaction. Consequently, the task of protection inside the national borders is laid upon men who are the pragmatic interpreters of authority, notably doctors, firemen and policemen (as the case of cartoons also suggests). This reflects a neat division of gendered roles, where power and protection are associated with masculine features, whereas domesticity and homeland relate to feminine characteristics. To define the concepts “masculinity” and “femininity” in a gendered and patriotic perspective, Sally Haslanger has proposed an appropriate explanation, affirming that they can be interpreted as

sets of social norms that men and women are expected to live up to and guide their behavior by. They are the norms that are used to judge us “as men” and “as women.” Not coincidentally, social norms for groups of people tend to mesh with the social roles they are expected to play. When internalized, the norms guide us in playing our “proper” roles. Some traits coded as masculine may be seldom exhibited by anyone, yet still function as an ideal for males. (Haslanger 458)

This observation clarifies the reason why 9/11 shows such an evident stress in the representation of gender. Through trauma, the crisis of roles associated with behaviors considered more or less masculine has been made evident. Following this, the associations of gendered values become clear, and the feminine values counterbalance their masculine opposite: weakness/ physical strength, passivity/ reaction, vulnerability/ agency, emotion/ rationality. As a matter of fact, these couples of opposites fit the metaphor of the traumatic process. The dynamics of trauma entitles two opposite roles in the act of perpetration, polarizing the victim and its oppressor.

All this finds evidence in the public discourse post and about 9/11. Since terrorism exposes vulnerability by putting into question codes of behavior, it forces society to think about the tasks of its members in a moment of crisis. Consequently, the impact of terrorism should be evaluated by considering its effects in the traumatizing process, but also by looking

at its handling deployed by the government and the media in facing the crisis. The complexity of the psychological reactions generated by this phenomenon is ultimately given by the management of the state of emergency. Terroristic attacks have the counter effect of fortifying the predominance of the States over their citizens by adopting stricter actions to contrast disorder, and in this way the measurements justify the imposition of a paternalistic ideology in defense of their decisions<sup>17</sup>. The urgency of danger entitles the government to assume a rhetoric that often reaffirms its masculine nationalism, and proof of this is offered by the American establishment's reaction on the occasion of the terroristic attacks of 9/11. The use of a gendered rhetoric in dealing with this problematic issue raises occasions for exploring the way a common tragedy can affect the public discourse of politics and the media.

Conceptualizing the events with respect to gender theory helps defining the cultural setting surrounding the crisis that followed the attacks. In particular, this premise seems necessary to highlight the possibility of alternative narratives that aim to contrast the common rhetoric of power. This is the case of what has been previously called the emergence of "oppositional poetics", a form of expression posing itself against the imposition of a public rhetoric that strictly divides gendered roles. The analysis proposed in this chapter has tried to read the attacks of 9/11 as a crisis for the concept of masculinity. To develop this issue, the intention of the following paragraphs is to present aspects more directly related to the feminine counterpart, focusing on the artistic examples provided by Jean Valentine and Molly Peacock.

## **2.2 Jean Valentine, "She Would Long" and "In the Burning Air"**

She would long  
to dig herself into the graveyard, her only  
daughter's ashes  
in her nose    in her mouth    her only daughter's  
makeshift ashes  
nothing

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<sup>17</sup> See Young, 2003.

lying  
in the hole in her chest

But her eye would still see  
up into the graveyard above her, still see  
the feet, the flowers

Yes her daughter will be an orchard  
Yes the orchard will be a forest

– Let her lie down now, fox in her hole, wild  
fox in her hold.

This poem, included in the anthology *Poetry After 9/11*, is a good example of the artistic representation of the crisis generated by 9/11. The poetic translation of personal suffering assumes a peculiar shape if considered under the light of a gender perspective. As a matter of fact, the discovery of the self is mediated by trauma; and the poem becomes an inquiry resulting in a confrontation with language. This text strikes for its effort in trying to express the unrepresentable, showing a particular sensibility toward the feminine dimension.

The poem elaborates an experience of pain and death recalled by an external speaker, a catharsis into the depths of the body and the ground. The very notable aspect of the lyric is a highly-gendered delineation of its components, as the progression of the text involves an exchange between mother and daughter. Through the incisive and recurring image of the ashes, the relationship between these two characters is defined by their feminine belonging that frames the story. The experience of her daughter's death makes the mother feel a parallel and metaphoric annihilation, which occurs inside her body as well as into her psyche; and this internalization of pain takes place in communion with nature.

Starting from stylistic considerations, the text presents four stanzas becoming thinner as it draws to the close, and the tone is that of a calm resignation. The disposition on the page suggests a "hiccup" movement; the syllables do not follow a regular scheme, but they jump between strong caesures. This distribution is disorganized just in appearance, because its

deeper connections offer a suggestive overview by evoking a weep. Horizontally, the lines develop through monosyllabic words divided by enjambements and strong caesures: f.e. “she would long”, “in her nose”, “nothing”, “lying”, “in the hole in her chest”, “But her eye would still see”, “the feet, the flowers”, “Let her lie now, fox in her hole, wild/ fox in her hold”:

**She would long**

to **dig** herself **into** the graveyard, **her only**

daughter’s **ashes**

**in her nose** || **in her mouth** || **her only** daughter’s

makeshift **ashes**

**nothing**

**lying**

**in the hole in her chest**

[...]

Reading the poem aloud can be helpful to understand the purpose of the structure, because it stresses a powerful alternation of voice and silence. Caesures and enjambements are strong devices to create gaps between words, making the oral enunciation fragmented; so, this stumbling sequence follows a metaphorical sobbing. This intuition can be confirmed by a formal analysis of the vertical axis. The vertical disposition falls in a symbolical weeping that alternates longer lines and shorter ones like tears. The poem proceeds along a downward direction, illustrating a collapse with progressively shorter stanzas that culminates in the last couple with a dash and a full stop. These elements of punctuation, nearly the only ones present in the text, give the idea of completeness and close the narration with a circular movement. Finally, the poem is poor in elements indicating movements like verbs, whereas smaller particles suggest direction: “**into** the graveyard”, “**up** || **into** || the graveyard **above** her”, “- Let her lie **down** now”. These prepositions compensate the lack of movement, but the extension in space is separated only between two levels, above and below. An invisible line divides life on the ground from death underground, and the sky is not even mentioned because there is no hope or possibility of elevation. The locus of the poem lies in between this separation, because death originates disconnection and cohesion concurrently. Collapse

is the only possible motion, and a poem becomes a crumbling structure that acquires an unequivocal and allegorical meaning on the background of 9/11.

Directly linked to the structure, the area of semantic reference gives account for the longer parts of the poem. On one hand, monosyllabic words articulate the rhythm; on the other, longer words suspend the storytelling to make the reader concentrate on meaning. As a matter of fact, extended words are more charged with significance; they represent the crucial points and the most important themes showed by the poem. In the first stanza, longer words like “herself”, “graveyard” and “daughter” immediately shift the attention on the binomial composed by feminine identity and death. The daughter’s life has been undermined by death, so her presence persists in the poem in form of ashes. At the same time, the mother undergoes a process of psychological breakdown in connection with the physical decay; so, in both cases, death affects their existence, but it creates an occasion of emphatical communication. All the terms in the text are inflected according to a feminine basis: “to dig **herself**”, “**her** chest”, “the graveyard above **her**”, “wild/ fox in **her** hold”; so, this experience is delimited by their feminine belonging. The gendered grammatical feature is relevant at the point that the very last couplet results in ambiguity, and it could correspond to either the daughter or the mother: “- Let her lie down now, fox in her hole, wild/ fox in her hold”. The fox folding in the hole could be the daughter’s corpse lying under the ground, as well as the mother collapsing in depression and turning to her interiority. According to this last hypothesis, the foxhole would be the body, meant as nest of feelings. The withdrawal into the wilderness (“wild/ fox into her hold”) is a closure toward the world, a return to a state of solitude and seclusion to express a secret sorrow.

The closing of the poem also suits another valuable interpretation, considering the reference to archetypical aspects. The mother is the creative feminine force that sees the failure of her being, and she represents both a figure of fertility and at the same time loss.

She experiences the abandonment of the feminine counterpart she gave birth to, going through a different knowledge of life, made by compassion and sacrifice; she literally follows a process of painful passion that manifests her vulnerability. It is important to note that even though the daughter's death is the event at the origin of the poem, the very focus is on the mother, since the exploration of sorrow occurs inside her own self. In fact the daughter is dead, so she is denied speaking and her daughter's presence is limited to the natural element of ashes. This point is particularly significant, because if the daughter does not have a voice in the text, she appears as object, changing the dynamics that mark the lyric at the basis. Pain is transferred from the unacceptable death to the natural world, by the objectification of their feminine and familial bond. The image of ashes reveals the circularity of the poem, symbolizing the natural process of birth and death that the mother experiences. She has given birth, and now she is coping with the trauma of loss that makes her vulnerability emerge, rediscovering her identity thanks to the frame of nature. Ultimately, the title suggests an endless and impotent motion ("She **would** long"), indicating the passionate and strong-willed feeling that brings the mother to go beyond her impotence in front of the events.

Looking at the general context of the poem, ground and underground are set in an environment of greenery and fauna. The "daughter's ashes" are lying above the grave "flowers" that still grow under the "feet"; and "her daughter will be an orchard", "a forest". The fox is a key element in the text, because it puts upper and lower levels into communication. For this reason, the animal closes the narration folding in its hole. More precisely the fox is female, and this pattern relocates the lyric in the specificity of a gendered discourse. The environment of the poem is defined by a natural setting where the feminine element interprets a broken harmony, an order threatened by a collapse. The intuitive path leading this interpretation is based on the association with the physical parts of the body as mentioned in the text: in the first paragraph, the daughter's ashes are trapped "in her nose",

“in her mouth”, and nothing remains “in the hole in her chest”. The linguistic connection with the abstraction of the body relocates the downfall on an inner rank, developing a parallel crisis that occurs inside the speaker. To some extent, the text seems to echo Emily Dickinson’s poem “I Felt a Funeral in my Brain”, where the poet assists to her burial aware. This pattern is crucial in understanding the contrasting relationships that find expression in the poem; and it shows the internalization of pain declined in a feminine context. The ground is the parallel metaphor that symbolizes the body, because it is the place where the wound is located.

The metaphor of the ground allows the speaker to locate the crisis on multiple levels of perception. The underlying matrix of the poem is the image of a hole, that can be found declined in different forms and depictions. The idea of hole is central not only in both Valentine’s poems, but also in the general metaphorical context of 9/11. As a matter of fact, the Twin Towers’ fall left a material wound on the ground, a hole, upon which the 9/11 memorial site literally emerges nowadays. In “She Would Long”, this shape is embodied by the “graveyard”, which linguistically shares the same etymological root with “ground”, “gravity” and “grave” from Old English, meaning “an excavation in the earth for the reception of the corpse”<sup>18</sup>, or the place where the collapse occurs. In Valentine’s poem the collapse occurs in multiple forms. The daughter is being buried in the ground; and in parallel the mother is going through a psychological breakdown. Finally, the word “ground” meant “enclosure” in Old English, enlightening the aspect of oppression that permeates the poem: the daughter is trapped into the graveyard’s enclosure, and her mother suffers in the cage of depression. A sharp look would note that every word examined above is, in fact, a kind of

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<sup>18</sup> As suggested by the critic Aimee Pozorski, this semantic family is frequent in the artistic representations of 9/11, and it finds its most explicit expression in the name “Ground Zero” (Pozorski, 2014). The reason for the importance granted to this image is that Ground Zero can be metaphorically understood as graveyard, and it represents total annihilation. In fact, the Twin Towers’ fall lead to the vertical disintegration of thousands of lives, as well as that of architecture, by exposing a ‘hole’.

hole (the actual Ground Zero, the grave, the enclosure and the cage); and they all refer to the psychological and material collapse that came after the attacks.

The sense of hopelessness and total destruction is also brought forth by other metaphoric elements. The mother's hurt is psychological, because of the close relationship to a member of her family, but it is also existential, as an injury inflicted to her being a woman and losing a feminine counterpart. However, the vertical direction of the poem also serves the purpose of expressing a metafictional condition. One of the most eminent critics about 9/11, the scholar Jeffrey Gray, has specified that 9/11 symbolizes the condition of impotence that contemporary artists experience:

Explosion, whether in the Big Bang, in a population, or in an economy (a "boom") often suggests a beginning. Implosion can only suggest annihilation. Thus, implosion functions as a sign of contemporary paradigm, centripetal and associated with postmodern commodification and instant cooptation of peripheral forces. Implosion is what happens after history is over; it suggests interiority, the condition (or the pathology) of a new century. (Jeffrey Gray 277)

After all these considerations, Valentine's poem can be properly read again. The mother's crisis is psychological and existential at once; and the downward movement negotiates the problem of the symbolic deconstruction caused by terrorism. The crisis of 9/11, in this sense, questions the matter of symbolic space, where the metaphor and the real coincide. The 9/11 Memorial of New York, being literally "two holes in the ground", like Valentine's "foxhole", show that the fall is, in reality, a catharsis in a space of absence. Ground zero – impossible to go lower.

In addition to this, the poem offers other interesting cross references. For example, the proximity of the words "dig" and "daughter" in the first stanza share an intuitive sound consonance that suggests a close connection. Once again, the movement is one of descent; and the mourn is transferred from the verb "dig" to the noun "daughter". This assonance is devoted to express a form of grief, but also the despair in realizing that there is something

worse than death, the material disappearance of the daughter. The ashes represent the disintegration of the body, being the last pragmatic signs of physicality. Again, this image hides a deeper allegory, since the ashes are primarily those left by the Twin Towers' collapse, but they are charged with a strong metaphorical meaning. If on the one hand the ashes are the material remains of a burned body and a destroyed architecture, on the other they are also the biblical seeds for a new beginning. The ashes, like those of a Phoenix, may give birth to a new life; therefore, the ashes are the intersection between the total annihilation and the possibility of a new rebirth. Finally, this image becomes the allegory for a catastrophe that can go beyond Ground Zero. As it has been noted, "ashes, dust and death are ubiquitous" (R. Gray 37), and they demonstrate the notion of the circularity of life. In this poem, the continuity is given by two complementary women, one representing life, the other being dead. However, their feminine belonging is the bond that intimately connects them with the world.

In conclusion, the poem "She Would Long" by Valentine gives voice to the elaboration of an internal traumatic experience, by highlighting that a gendered perspective is fundamental to understand the connections that can be traced in the text.

### **Jean Valentine, "In the Burning Air"**

In the burning air  
nothing.

But on the ground  
*Let the sadness be*  
a woman and her spoon,  
a wooden spoon,  
and her chest, the broken  
bowl.

Different situation but similar depiction appears in "In the Burning Air", by the same author.

The text strikes for its simplicity, consisting in an eight-line poem divided into two brief

stanzas. Despite its concision, the meaning is dispersed in an accumulation of images that characterize each line. The event of 9/11 is slightly portrayed, and it appears only in the form of “burning air”. This stylistic choice serves the function of focusing on the elements that connect the text, for example the complementary elements “air/ground”, “woman/spoon”, “chest/bowl”. In a similar way to “She would long”, the poem mostly presents monosyllabic words, and the emotional reference is expressed through the use of italics in line 4, which contains a caesure at the very beginning. The fragmentation of this lyric proposes a brief utterance, interrupted by two marked enjambements, respectively in the opening and the closing of the poem: “In the burning air/ nothing”, and “her chest, the broken/ bowl”. This technical device helps the reader to isolate the breaking points that condense the critical topics of the text. Finally, the poetic voice is mediated by an external speaker that describes the scene, focused on the presence of a woman in a state of sufferance.

The text sets the scene in two levels of action, the first being the “air”, and the other the “ground”, thanks to the strong adversative “but” that divides the image; however, they are both slightly sketched. In the first paragraph, the total absence of motion (“In the burning air/ nothing.”) creates a sort of spatial and temporal vacuum that gives the narration a feeling of suspense. By contrast, the ground is where human emotions take form, i.e. where the release of sadness affects the character. It is important to note that the ground is defined by its relationship with the human presence, since it is the place designated for the expression of the woman’s sensibility. The ground makes sadness become tangible, altering the energy of the “burning air” and transforming it into an earthly sensation.

At a first sight, the poem shows a strong fragmentation, and it articulates a condensation similar to the *haiku* poetical structure. The *haiku* works by contrasting two images that often match natural elements with human activities, ending the composition with an unexpected outcome; similarly, this poem opposes the nothingness of “burning air” to the

human grief experienced on the ground. Drawing to a close, the “wooden spoon” and the “bowl” indicate objects that interpret a broken symmetry. This shattering reproduces a sense of incompleteness, metaphorical, pragmatic and psychological, as the “bowl”, or the woman’s “chest”, are broken. This poetical arrangement works according to a minimalist feature, exposing a scarcity of words.

The most striking characteristic is related to the simplicity that describes a woman folded in sorrow. The elaboration of the traumatic experience is expressed just with one feeling that becomes her state of mind, and the poem seems to suggest that she is surrounded by silence in contemplation of her emotional reaction. Yet the line “*Let the sadness be*” could also be considered an invitation to suspend the description of the trauma she is undergoing, and to respect the time and silence destined to mourning. This would be coherent with the pauses that scan the rhythm: the word “nothing” is isolated and followed by a full stop; then in the next stanza the exhortation is preceded by a caesure.

The text is woven with intertextual references; in this poem, everything is sign of something else. The “burning air” of the first line and title is a synesthesia, and it visually interprets the idea of an inflamed object fluctuating in the heat. It is said there is “nothing” in the air, so, this stanza proposes an image of destruction and inconsistency that melt together. The most direct reference that can be traced could be the idea of the fire burning the Twin Towers after the plane crash, though there is no point of view on the scene that could validate this hypothesis. More interestingly, the second part of the poem focuses on the metaphor about a melancholic woman and a parallel with domestic objects. This close gendered identification relocates the discourse in the sphere of the household, since the “wooden spoon” and the “bowl” pertain to the intimate sphere of home, alluding to craft making and daily-use objects that recall the space of a kitchen. The association between the woman and the concept of domesticity is stressed at the point that her “chest” literally

becomes a “bowl”; and this idea seems to respect the gendered conventions expressed by the media’s rhetoric after 9/11. The representations associating woman and household were frequent, as well as the idea of a “domestic contentment” (Stamelman 17); and, as the previous analysis of the public discourse has demonstrated, women have often been considered the custodians of the home and mourn. In fact, the poem shows a condensation of this task, as the protagonist is the interpreter of grief through the metaphor of domestic items. It could be said that the gendered association mostly depends on the storytelling of narration. The protagonist is struggling to face her sorrow and her painful memories; so, the presence of these domestic items can be motivated considering it as her personal way to connect with the world. In a moment of fragility, her consciousness proposes the images of the spoon and the bowl, symbols that best interpret her condition.

Remarkably, this gendered comparison also evokes an aspect of metafiction. The reader is directly involved in the process of creating an analogy between the woman’s experience and the domestic items. As a matter of fact, the reader fills the analogy with significance by adapting it to his/her scheme of thought; in particular, this paragraph seems to question the process of elaborating instinctive associations based on cultural influences that encompass gender. However, the overall impression is that the minimalistic structure showed by the poem requires a careful reading, involving the reader with a metafictional commitment to codify the message. The analogy underlying this metafictional attitude is that the reader, as well as the woman, need to organize and process the traumatic experience by reflecting upon it. To face trauma, the protagonist withdraws into her “sadness”; in parallel, the reader needs to confront her/himself with the text to understand the upsetting experience.

Turning to consider the deeper symbolism of the lyric, the very receptor of the trauma is the woman’s body. The broken harmony stems from the “chest”, the fragmented element at the center of the representation that suggests the idea of an injured body. As a matter of

fact, the pain has been internalized in her “chest”, or the “broken bowl”, at the point that it is dug with a “spoon”. Yet its fragility caused by the moment of crisis asks for a “wooden” tool, a more delicate device to excavate the inner and hidden parts. Like in the poem “She would long”, the trauma occurs inside the body, affecting the woman’s inner self and her perception of sadness. Focusing on the image of the bowl, it can be noted that this indicates a sort of cavity to be carved; so, following this interpretation, the body becomes a part to be gently excavated to find and remove the inner sorrow. Again, the metaphor of the hole turns out to be significantly poignant. To extend this metaphor, one may affirm that the reference seems to hint to an abortion or miscarriage. If the body is “broken”, it lacks unity; and the rupture has an effect on the woman’s corporeality. In fact, the “bowl” corresponds to her “chest”, and her fertility is affected as well. On the other hand, the idea of a “carved” body can be meant as a sort of protection, and in this sense the chest is the defense that the mother offers to her child. Like in the example of “She Would Long”, the idea of a hole has the double value of a negative issue as well as a hopeful character. In conclusion, the body is transformed into a conceptual place where the action takes place and the possibility of motherhood is denied; therefore, the continuity of life is interrupted by trauma.

It is interesting to note that domesticity, female corporeality and motherhood are the psychological spheres threatened by the traumatic experience. Considering the cultural dimension that framed the narrative of the attacks, this is not surprising. With regards to this aspect, the critic Judith Greenberg has noted how major shocking events often alter the sociocultural perception of the idea of home. Her analysis encompasses the attacks of 9/11 by focusing on the trauma of discovering a new alterity:

Our first home, of course, is the body-the maternal body and then our own. If home can be interpreted through the body, then the shattering of a sense of a secure national home may evoke feelings about the shattering of a collective body. In place of the psychological and geographical distance, the images of trapped and falling bodies pull one into an immediate confrontation with the dead body of the Other. The collapsing of bodies together into smoke, detritus, or whatever remains introduces a

profoundly disturbing distortion of the fusing of infant and mother, Self and Other, animate and inanimate. [...] The attacks claimed the maternal body, housing a growing fetus, as victim. [...] It was the desecration of the maternal body. (Greenberg 26)

Her remarks point out a few interesting theoretical aspects. She associates the body to a “secure national home” that can be shattered by trauma; and she concentrates on the material corporeality of the dead as example of an abrupt discovery of Otherness. The adjective secure, far stronger than safe, points out the metaphorical connection that is assumed by the idea of home. This interpretation also serves nationalistic purposes, as home, nation and body becomes one entity endangered by terrorism. Moreover, one of the most shocking aspects that characterized 9/11 has been the confrontation with the materiality of the tragedy; for example, the dispersion of detritus and human remains that invaded the city. Consequently, the dispersion of the body is a strong image that induces a process of victimization, especially of the maternal protection. What she calls “the fusing of infant and mother” indicates the broken harmony of a cycle that cannot be fertile anymore, because the trauma has “desecrated the maternal body”. This is the case of Valentine’s poem, where the woman is shocked without having any power on the situation; her passivity embraces a feeling of sadness because her body has been violated by pain.

A valid aspect of the question of exploring the theme of the body is given by its relationship with pain. As a matter of fact, the lyric presents a body in mourn, closed in its sadness. It is often the case that examples of physical suffering come in parallel with a difficult psychological condition; however, this text shows more than one interpretation of pain related to trauma. In the essay “The Body in Pain”, the critic Elaine Scarry explains how the body can be associated with different degrees of suffering. Starting from the specific case of intentional torture, she develops considerations about the objectification of pain, analyzing the concepts of fear, sorrow, grief and sadness as direct declensions of physical suffering. As a matter of fact, the main difference between fear and pain is that fear depends upon an

external entity perceived as menace, whereas pain has no object. In this sense, pain is independent, because it is a symptom of the internalization of threat; it is not a primary emotion, but it involves a psychological elaboration that comes in a secondary moment. Pain makes the body alive, so, it entails materiality and existence; correspondingly, the idea of sorrow and grief are less linked to the body, but more involved in self-perception. Finally, it is interesting to note that a parallel can be traced between pain and death. As Scarry reminds in his essay,

That pain is so frequently used a symbolic substitute for death in the initiation of many tribes is surely attributable to an intuitive human recognition that pain is equivalent in felt-experience of what is unfeeling in death. Each only happens because of the body. In each, the contents of consciousness are destroyed. The two are the most intense forms of negation, the purest expressions of the anti-human, of total aversiveness, though one is an absence and the other a felt presence [...]. Regardless, then, of the context in which it occurs, pain always mimes death and the inflection of physical pain is always a mock execution. (Scarry 31)

In the poem by Valentine, the protagonist is undergoing a moment of pain in a parallel with the dead of the tragedy, so she is experiencing a mock execution. As a survivor, she is forced to confront with the pain of having assisted death, whose sadness is a direct psychological response. More interestingly, her consciousness is broken, as well as her capacity to react: the unreadability of the world isolates her in a pain without object that interprets absence.

In conclusion, the narrative of pain displayed in the poem by Valentine shows a feeling of sadness that claims for expression, in quality of intersection between the body, the “broken bowl”, and the psychological consciousness, to be explored by a “wooden spoon”. The text questions the woman’s body as vehicle of sorrow, shaped by a remarkable gender aspect that is coherent with the rhetoric imposed by the cultural atmosphere that followed 9/11. The aspect of disturbed domesticity defamiliarizes the idea of home, and the “burning air” serves as setting to symbolize the collapsing Twin Towers and express uneasiness toward

familiar spaces. The bowl and the spoon become then a metaphor indicating a complementariness broken by trauma.

### 2.3 Molly Peacock, “The Land of the Shí”

The Land of the Shí  
is the same land we inhabit only  
the heart beats more insistently.  
All green is Green, you'd say,  
everything gray is itself, only more Gray.  
You can stand in the place you're standing in  
and enter the Land of the Shí.  
Even the rain which rains on Avenue A  
in the Land of the Shí rains silkier  
and you, parched in New York City,  
become more deeply quenched.  
The ear of a pug who waits at the light  
is silkier and more pugly.  
Money is exactly the same rate,  
  
except that every dollar has individual weight,  
and a New York City kiss  
in the Land of the Shí is palpable as sculpted flesh.  
It is the beautiful place we yearned for as boys and girls,  
the Land of Faery one needs only mental transport for.  
Oh brown institutional housing of the He,  
Vanish beneath, vanish beneath  
as detritus into running water...  
That pug in his red rainboots at the corner  
now breathes free through two little nostrils cleared  
in the Land of Faery. The dry cleaners is still  
on the corner across from the 24-hr Deli,  
and a lost thought appears for a moment  
as a tender face on a penny.

*The land of the Shi is another name for the world underneath the Celtic faery mounds – a parallel, alternate world where one can take refuge after a catastrophe. – M.P.*  
(note and italics by Molly Peacock)

Turning to consider the poem by Molly Peacock, her style appears to be completely different compared to Valentine. The text is compact, divided into two symmetric stanzas

and completed by an appendix to specify the title and setting of the poem, “the Land of the Shí”. The lyric has a narrative form, and it explores spaces rather than emotions; it proposes a colored comparison between the city of New York and the enchanted place of the Shí. The speaker is neutral and external to the scene, though it hints to the reader by pointing out that they both share the same imaginary realm, the one “we” inhabit. In the first stanza, the exhortative tone is addressed to a generic “you”; so, the very first part of the poem seems to be dedicated to reach out with the reader. After setting the scene, the passage to the second stanza is marked by a strong line, “Money is exactly the same rate”, that finds its circularity with the close “as a tender face on a penny”. This division guarantees a symmetry that gives an overall balance, insisting on images rather than a rhythmical pattern; and the poem develops through a linear way of thought, rich in images and colors.

Despite the scarcity of rhetorical characteristics such as rhythm, pauses, and specific sound devices, the movement of the text proceeds thanks to metaphoric parallels between a hypothetic imaginary world and the harshness of a traumatic reality. The major point of strength displayed by the text is the power of the analogy hidden in the title. According to the author, the title indicates a fairy place; however, the assonance of the name “Shí” strongly reminds of the feminine pronoun “she”. This association bestows the poem with a completely new meaning by introducing a gendered connotation. This hypothesis finds confirmation thanks to the exclamation appearing at line 20, “Oh brown institutional housing of the He”, that institutes a masculine counterpart, a “housing of the He” contraposed to the “Land of the Shí”. Thus, the poem should be investigated with regard to this aspect.

Starting to consider the general structure, the first stanza is devoted to present the Land of the Shí as a gateway shelter to the aridity of New York. The place is said to possess the same characteristics of our world, though it embodies the metaphor of a more emotional sphere, a land where “the heart beats more insistently”. This comfortable dwelling can be

entered, letting emotions free to be expressed and be “palpable as sculpted flesh”; so, “one needs only mental transport for” gaining access to this intimate place. The interesting parallel drawn by Peacock insists on the mirror allusions that characterize the Land; as a matter of fact, reality is reflected by its imaginary opposite, and the metaphor is built upon the cross references. On the one hand, the Land of the Shí is a “beautiful place we yearned for as boys and girls”; on the other, New York and the real world are an “institutional housing” that is “vanish[ing] beneath”. This opposition is also marked by contrasting colors. Green remains bright, whereas “everything gray is itself, only more Gray”. Thinking about the Celtic reference, green immediately suggests a natural earthly setting; by contrast, the color gray reminds of the cement and building material of the urban landscape. Moreover, the Land of the Shí has “silkie” rain; so, it seems that this place is deeply connected with the natural world, whereas New York is “vanish[ing] beneath”.

As suggested above, the gendered connotation can be investigated with regard to the opposition that separates the two worlds. If the Land of the Shí stands for a feminine identity, then the “she” is translated into an allegorical place, and this identification takes place through an abstraction. The Shí indicates a woman that has lost all her physical corporeality to become an idealized shelter. Thus, this metaphor elevates the concept of the woman’s body at the point that it becomes an abstraction, hinting at it with the consonance of the palatal sound she/Shí. This poetic device is strongly evocative, because it concentrates a double metaphor by depriving the word from its ordinary significance. Ultimately, the feminine part and the Celtic fairy land coincide, offering a quiet room “*where one can take refuge after a catastrophe*”.

In addition to this, the poem presents a masculine counterpart. The actual “institutional housing of the He” needs the imaginary “Land of the Shí” because of their complementarity. At this point, it is interesting to note that the city of New York is highly

gendered and presented as male. New York, slightly portrayed with rain and the linearity of the Avenue A, is colored by gray and brown, opaque colors; it is “vanish[ing]” downward into detritus but it still tries to keep normalcy, as the “dry cleaners is still/ on the corner across from the 24-hr Deli”. However, this line can be differently interpreted according to the meaning of the word “still”. If considered as an adverb, the verses would show the obstinate presence of normal and quotidian life in a shattering surrounding; conversely, considered as an adjective, it would indicate the suspension from reality, the freezing of time that follows a sudden shock. In this sense, the city interprets the masculine incarnation of the catastrophe, since it has been wounded; and it is seeking for protection by turning to the land of the she. This configuration underlines a series of values associated with the Land opposed to the masculine New York, as the faery place presents features typically depicted as feminine like beauty, emotion, and protection against the instability of a “vanishing” He. This last observation leads to focus on the idea of masculinity presented by the text. As it can be remarked, the masculine figure associated with the city appears to be transformed by trauma. New York is portrayed “on the corner”, with reference to the domestic and quotidian reality of the Deli and dry cleaners that stand still against the catastrophe. For the scope of a gendered study, this aspect assumes particular relevance, as it reveals an image of weakened masculinity. The city experiences a state of vulnerability that makes everything still and forces to consider an alternative place to take shelter; so, the Land of the Shí and the land of the He present opposite vectors in terms of emotional responses. The interaction between the two places sets the possibility of describing New York in a state of symbolic decay, by proposing the contrast with an imaginary realm of hope. In a broader cultural point of view, the fact that the Land of the Shí is evidence of a failed masculinity represents an objection to the rhetoric promoting a proactive reaction after 9/11. As it has been noted by the scholar Rebecca Carpenter,

In the post-9/11 world, the United States has been particularly invested in a rhetoric of masculinity and power, labelling both perceived enemies – and, interestingly, even weaker allies – as either feminine or deviant in their masculinity. On September 11, the United States was faced with a script that threatened to position the United States as weak, indolent, oblivious to threats, and possibly even symbolically feminized (by the penetration of the towers) or castrated (by the collapse of the towers). (Carpenter 144)

If compared to the public rhetoric surrounding the attacks of 9/11, Peacock's poem shows an urban abstraction that underlines a weak and deviant model of masculinity. According to Carpenter's observations, the poem could be interpreted focusing on the city of New York as a symbolically feminized and silenced place, recalling the collapse by the movement of "vanish[ing] beneath". If the city has been metaphorically transformed into a "*faery Celtic mounds*", debris and destruction that interpret the castration, then the Land of the Shí illustrates a possible rebirth. Finally, all the references related to the she/Shí mark a conceptual space delimited by the possibility of finding beauty and peace in a decadent world.

However, the risk is to simplify the matter by limiting it to a gendered opposition. The question needs to be considered transcending the concepts of male and female entities and turning to the idea of otherness. This poem shows the realization of the self through a confrontation with the otherness that follows a catastrophe. In this sense, the aim of gendered analyses is to open the path to new reconfigurations of the self beyond subjectivity and identity, or, as it has been said, "thinking [of] new modes of becoming — not as the becoming of some subject, but of a becoming towards others, a becoming towards difference, and a becoming through new questions" (Colebrook 12). The poem by Peacock illustrates this goal, because the metaphorical land of the Shí sets up a form of becoming that contrasts the grayness of reality. The encounter with a mythical and parallel place shows a redefinition of becoming after trauma, by achieving a place of freedom undergoing an experience of confrontation with otherness. Extending this metaphor, it can be seen that even the event of 9/11 has been a confrontation with otherness, "between the West and the rest".

Finally, one of the most evident characteristic of the poem is its specific reference to the urban landscape; and this issue deserves proper attention. In the essay *The Uncanny* (1919) by Freud, the psychotherapist delineated the concept of emotive interference that can affect common objects in alienating situations, making them become unsettling. He observed that incidents and traumatic stressors have the power of modifying one's perception of objects and places, mutating the familiar into uncanny and frightening representations of quotidian things. This study finds direct evidence in Peacock's poem. The fact that usual and common places like Avenue A, the dry cleaners and the 24-hr Deli are "still there" embody the trauma that transforms the city. As it can be noted, the traumatic stressor that runs over New York transforms the familiar and domestic-related places, forcing to consider the alternative of the Land of the Shí to explore a place of peace. New York is defamiliarized by trauma and polarized into reality and imagination; but acceptance is possible only through the confrontation with the unfamiliar alterity that has a profound effect on consciousness.

In conclusion, the poem by Peacock locates the trauma between reality and an imaginary realm that contrasts the catastrophe. The Land of the Shí interprets the need of an alterity, and it explores the crisis of masculinity in terms of a forced feminization through the confrontation with otherness. The discovery of the dreamy place is imagined as solution for the harshness of reality, but this configuration can take place only recognizing that the city has become unfamiliar. A gendered interpretation of the text highlights the effects of trauma in the perception of the urban landscape, making the usual places seem uncanny and strange. New York appears transformed by a collapse, and the Land of the Shí becomes the reconfiguration for a possible rebirth from the ashes.

## 2.6 Oppositional Poetics and Language in a Gendered Perspective

This chapter has tried to clarify the cultural effects that terrorism can have on the construction of gendered rhetoric in dealing with trauma. The starting point has been to analyze the way the media and the U.S. government addressed the attacks of 9/11 in the immediate aftermath. The focus has been to highlight the cultural gendered associations that have influenced the idea of social behavior, with regard to a set of features judged as typically feminine or masculine. In relation to this, the notion of self-perception has been investigated trying to explore how the trauma of 9/11 has altered the awareness of identity. Finally, the representations by Valentine and Peacock offer evidence for a gendered perspective, since in the context of poetry after 9/11 they display the elaboration of the traumatic experience related to feminine characteristics. More importantly, these texts pertain to the category of contemporary oppositional poetics. To understand why, a valid question that needs to become part of the topic is to interrogate the way these literary configurations are constructed; so, considering language in quality of medium that entangles the literary expression in the major structure of culture.

Caught in between the tragic nature of the events and the stream of consciousness, “She Would Long” by Valentine shows a sensibility about the psychological implications of trauma. The author locates the crisis in the exploration of the consciousness, focusing on the artistic possibilities of representation offered by a double feminine identity. The mother and the daughter, protagonists of the text, emerge in a relationship of interdependence that excludes any masculine presence. The gendered belonging delimitates the poetic inquiry to a slow recognition of depression and post-traumatic stress effects, an awareness of the feminine self. In terms of oppositional poetics, the poem portrays a rejection against death and the imposition of a masculine discourse about trauma, drawing attention to the psychological perception and discovery of self-consciousness. The negation excludes any

intrusion in the family bond, transforming the speaker from victim of the circumstance to an active character that refuses to accept death. Linguistically, the form of the speaking indicates a difficulty in the articulation; and the grammar indicates the pronoun “she” in quality of subject that is experiencing the metaphorical dissolution of life through her daughter’s death. Thus, the poetic language takes shape as expression of resistance to the traumatic external stressors, opening the possibility for alternative narrations of the experience.

Similarly, “In the Burning Air” promotes an investigation of the feminine self in occasion of a traumatic event. The peculiar aspect of this lyric is that the woman’s body is at the center of the artistic representation, silent interlocutor of pain. As a matter of fact, the body is the place charged with the elaboration of physical and psychic pain, expanding the notion of trauma and connecting it with gender. In this case, the oppositional feature of the poem is more condensed in the linguistic structure rather in the thematic exposition; as the cryptic tone of the lyric does not refer to any specific event. The semantic interconnections that consolidate the text locate the crisis in a material presence; by contrast, the absence of the dead and the towers is strongly perceived “in the burning air”. The active stance of the poem is given by the line in italics “*Let the sadness be*”, an imperative that does not claim for an abusive reaction against trauma, rather it calls for the normalization of pain. In the context of rage and military intervention that followed the attacks, this poem invites to manifest the common feelings of sorrow and pain instead of reacting harshly, opposing to the aggressive rhetoric that denied sadness as deplorable response.

In a different way, but with the same sharp sensibility, Peacock’s poem reverses the tendency of presenting a female protagonist and proposes a definition of the feminine self by a confrontation with the masculine counterpart. Thanks to a dialectic textual process, the otherness can emerge, by dismantling the structure based on a singular character. Peacock’s intention is to alter the traditional representation of the masculine model, admitting that

trauma uncovers the vulnerability of both genders. Through a parallel between the male and female realms, the author questions the way trauma can affect the urban landscape, by putting in communication the transformation of the self and the city of New York. Moreover, “The Land of the Shí” represents the configuration of a possible escape, creating new occasions for poetry to question the gendered identity in connection with the elaboration of trauma. Proof of suffering and healing, this text is built upon parallels that oppose the two gendered realms of the She and the He, however reminding that, after a trauma, every life has individual weight. The critic that surrenders “The Land of the Shí” responds to the purpose of oppositional poetics, in the sense that this poem opens up to a reconstruction. The poetical and literary reaction against terrorism is interpreted by the Feary Land that aims at contrasting the harshness of a tragic collapse, by suggesting that a rebuilding will be possible.

The gendered interpretation proposed above represents a symbolic vector toward the understanding of the category of oppositional poetics. In order to trace the counter narrative that described the attacks of 9/11, gender is a pragmatic theme to explore, because it gives account for the cultural reactions against terrorism and, more in general, the public discourse. The inflated rhetoric contributed to oversimplify and thereby obscure the real issues related to what truly happened on 9/11, hence the cultural need of the aftermath mainly concerns language<sup>19</sup>. The development of oppositional poetics can be explained thanks to the quest for a renovation in the form of expression, to give account for complex historical, psychological and traumatic interrelationships.

Consider, for instance, language as a zone of activity that rejects the hierarchical structure of writing. Then every line has the same importance and carries a separate meaning that is an individual response to trauma. Compared to fiction, it is evident that poetry is charged with a deeper critical stance; though this critique it is not strictly political. The case

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<sup>19</sup> See Beck, 2002.

of poetry after 9/11 is oppositional in the sense that it rejects the violence and the public discourse that has been fabricated around the facts. As the poet Meena Alexander has stated describing her work after the event of 9/11,

We were bombarded by huge amounts of language, public language, sound bites and statements and visually the images of the two towers burning [...]. Then there is the language of hunting for terrorists [...]. For me one way of restoring the possibility of breath or thought is to write poetry, because it is like taking words and rising them clean. (Basu 36)

Formally, poetry relates the sphere of language to the external world by expressing complex concepts thanks to its concentration and taciturnity. Therefore, language is a pivotal point in the elaboration of trauma, because the underlying challenge in coping with trauma is finding a way to describe the unimaginable. The act of writing becomes a strategy not to raise questions in seek for answers, but to expose problematics. One of these is represented by the gendered connotation of the public discourse after 9/11. Considering the poems presented in this chapter as intimate spaces (and time) destined to the psychological elaboration of the event would be certainly reductive; whereas looking at them as belonging to the category of oppositional poetics clarifies their position toward language and culture, since the actual issue brought by these poems is to question society and its way of responding to external stressors.

## CHAPTER 3

### **“Do They Hate *Me*”: The Internalization of Guilt and Responsibility**

This chapter embraces the concepts of guilt and collective responsibility applied to the event of 9/11, by examining the case study represented by the poems “The Window, at the Moment of Flame” by Alicia Ostriker and “All Saints Day, 2001” by Patricia Spears Jones. After a general overview to frame the concept of guilt as counter effect of PTSD, the analysis focuses on the collective construction of trauma and the implications of responsibility toward its causes. By considering the reversed process of victimization that 9/11 displayed for American citizens, stress is laid upon the antagonisms that mark the oppositional features of the texts. Thus, the main point of this chapter is to consider guilt and responsibility as representative themes of oppositional poetics.

#### **3.1 PTSD and Its Symptoms: The Feeling of Guilt**

In the U.S., the discover of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disease at the beginning of the Eighties has given an impulse to the psychiatric research, that has deeply investigated many medical cases leading to the proper recognition of this disorder. Nevertheless, the object of study has mainly been the instance of Vietnamese Veterans, the first ones to be clinically observed in search of proof<sup>20</sup>. What was initially called the “post-Vietnam syndrome”, by including a range of symptoms like insomnia, hallucinations, anger and irritability, later was

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<sup>20</sup> A long list of scholars investigates the topic. Among them, see Dean, 1997; Forman and Havas, 1990; Lynn and Gianola, 1987; Laufer, Gallops, and others, 1984; Scott, 1993.

labeled as PTSD; and after the Iraqi war the affection started to be diagnosed on a larger extent. The majority of the patients involved in the surveys were ex-military forces belonging to American repatriated troops, and principally the PTSD was associated with combat trauma survivors. However, especially after 9/11, the category of stress-related disorders has been extended to encompass the testimonies of firefighters, policemen and others whose job relates to traumatic episodes. This recent social approach has also taken in consideration exposures associated with health-related problematics, that variate from sexual assault to earthquake-survivor experiences<sup>21</sup>. The latest research underlies how the PTSD can affect victims of a range overcoming military cases; and it suggests that the future of trauma studies will probably be directed toward a social approach of this kind<sup>22</sup>.

While necessarily acknowledging the common causes of the PTSD in traumatic episodes of severe mental impact, its effects may variate from case to case. Examples of symptoms include depression, uncontrollable anger, and contrasting reactions that deal with distorted memories. The psychological damage provoked by trauma can manifest itself with many associations, one of them being guilt. The feeling of culpability is a complex symptom developed as counter effect in people affected by PTSD, and it plays a key role in the elaboration of trauma. Recent inquiries show how guilt is often present in the victims' imaginary, and it relates to complex emotional issues: guilt "involves moral transgressions (real or imagined) in which people believe that their action (or inaction) contributed to negative outcomes" (Tilghman-Osborne 546). The complexity of this psychological reaction finds explanation in the ethical construction that moves the victim in the process of elaboration after the shock. As a matter of fact, guilt is a retrospective emotion that comes after the exposition to trauma, and it develops when the victim reaches a sufficient level of

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<sup>21</sup> See Berninger, Mayris and others, 2010; Murdoch, Hodges and others, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> See Muldoon and Lowe, 2012; Summerfield, 2001.

awareness about the upsetting situation she/he has lived. For this reason, culpability is an interesting effect to observe, as it offers an account of how the patient perceives the impact of her/his actions and, more in general, the idea of the self.

Consequently, guilt is a key contextual factor to consider among the PTSD effects. Culpability implies agency, so the victim is caught in the feeling of being blamed as active participant in the trauma. Obviously, this is a distorted feeling, because the victim does not perceive her/himself as object of target, rather as subject that has not been able to react properly when trauma occurred. The idea of complicity in the moment of injury relates to a moral aspect, and the victim associates her/his behavior to the consequences it has provoked; in this sense, guilt is directly related to responsibility. Agency implies a moral responsibility that should be framed into the context of what could be called the “ethics” of trauma; thus, this aspect affects the dynamic founding the roles of victim and perpetrator. The idea of responsibility stems from the awareness (distorted or not) of an active participation in the incident, with important consequences in the elaboration of the event; so, exploring guilt means to uncover the victim’s perception about the burden of her/his agency.

This issue seems to become more complex when trauma is extended to an entire society, and when self-perceptions of guilt are included into cultural structures. Interestingly, some scholars have noted how the PTSD effects and its diagnosis can be applied to large amounts of people belonging to the same social group. By putting forward an extensive list of examples, Orla T. Muldoon and Robert Lowe find evidence that cultural traumas are essentially a matter of social construction and identity. By making the group memberships central to the diagnosis of PTSD, they highlight that the individual subjectivity integrates (and it is consequently integrated by) a group subjectivity, asserting that both are determined by a host of structural and sociopolitical divisions. In other words, group memberships regulate what we experience and how we estimate these experiences, especially during

traumatic episodes leading to the manifestation of PTSD. “That the attacks inflicted a shock of historical scale seems clear, but the shape and scope of this wound is not”, observes Marc Redfield,

the pain and damage suffered by survivors, victims, and the relatives and friends of victims of this atrocity is of course unquestionable [...]. But if we try to conceive of trauma on a cultural level things become more ambiguous, above all in the case of the 9/11 attacks. They were not of a society-threatening scale (as warfare, genocide, famine, or natural cataclysm have been for so many human societies) and the literal damage they did to the military and commercial orders symbolized by the Pentagon and the World Trade Center was miniscule; it is of course as symbolic acts of violence that they claim culturally traumatic status. (Redfield 56)

Following Redfield, one of the most remarkable characteristics of 9/11 has been its resonance in terms of cultural shock. The incident was limited to a small area and group of people, compared to the entire nation; nonetheless, the echo of the attacks has been widely diffused at the point of becoming a symbol of threat and failure. The power of this occurrence lies in the immediate and broad reaction of the aftermath, that recognized and labeled 9/11 as a moment of national crisis.

In his essay “Notes on Trauma and Community”, the scholar Kai Erikson points out how a collective trauma can create a sense of community among the people who are concerned by it, arguing that a “shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship” (Erikson 190). Thinking about the unexpected tragedy of September 11, 2001, the public discourse immediately imposed a collective “we” in response to the attacks, by transforming the “U.S.” into “us”. Self-evident in the political declarations of the aftermath, the sense of community was spread through the media, inaugurating the War on terror with the dichotomy “you are either with us, or against us”; and this significant stance promoted by President Bush is representative of how rhetoric contributed to build a common cultural identity based on the disaster.

Therefore, also the dynamics of blame are reflected on a larger scale. Turning to consider the collective construct of trauma, the shared experience generates an array of

feelings in common among individuals. Specifically, guilt and the consequent sense of responsibility are often shared by the members of the same community. As reported by the scholar Orly Lubin in one of the most accurate reports about the reactions to 9/11,

Accountability is that feeling which the individual carries with him exactly because he is part of a community. Unlike acknowledgement, which can be demanded of anyone regardless of power or economic status, accountability is the burden of the member of a powerful community. (Lubin 129)

This statement assumes significance bearing in mind the political and economic status that the United States consider having in the international scenery. The attacks were deeply felt because the U.S. interpreted them as a provocation against their status of influent nation over the world; consequently, the rhetoric of the aftermath contributed to construct a national trauma, turning the event of 9/11 into a national tragedy. Lubin focuses on the fact that the sense of responsibility stems not so much in the realization of actually having power, but in the realization of the horror of being in power. The attacks have unveiled the tragic burden of representing the mythology of the West as symbol of freedom and wealth, that carries on its accountability on a global scale. She also states that

the realization of the United States' dominance in the world became an easily digestible explanation of the hatred directed at it. [...] This strength meant economic or moral responsibility, at times even the right to impose the 'correct' morals of democracy and equality on the rest of the world. (Lubin 127)

This consideration helps to frame the feelings of guilt and responsibility into what I previously called the "ethics" of trauma. The sociocultural reactions to the trauma of 9/11 are also manifestations of a cultural hegemony that has effects all over the world, the result of being a recognizable superpower. On the one hand, this helps to explain why the U.S. have been chosen as target; on the other, the dominance justifies the sense of responsibility that the U.S. behavior shows on an international scale by imposing the ideals of democracy and equality. Under the mask of carrying justice and benefits, the U.S. have spread the message

of the necessity of their presence in foreign countries; yet the attacks reversed the dynamics of victimization. Even though the attacks of 9/11 have been mainly interpreted as a threat against the U.S.,

others consciously or unconsciously identified with the aggressors. More explicit were the critiques in the first couple of weeks that asserted that the United States deserved the attacks for arrogance and foreign policy. They almost gleefully cried, 'I told you so'. (Greenberg 24)

The intriguing point of that is the reversed process of victimization. Whilst the U.S. are often depicted as aggressors for what concerns their foreign policy, 9/11 exposed their vulnerability and reshaped this event as a predictable reprisal. Consequently, the concept of guilt lies in the awareness of having been victims and perpetrators at the same time, recognizing the reversed logic of being victims after having been perpetrators. The event of 9/11 appears as the epiphany of the fall, negative implication of being in an influential economic and political position.

Following Greenberg, it is interesting to note that the feeling she speaks about finds correspondence in a specific symptom of PTSD illustrated by Mc Farlane and Van Der Kolk. As a matter of fact, they highlight how

often trauma does not present a radically new experience, but rather confirms some belief that an individual has tried to evade. For many patients, what is most destructive about a traumatic event is that it confirms some long-feared belief, rather than presenting them with a novel incongruity.  
(Mc Farlane and Van Der Kolk 1998, 491)

The awareness of the active involvement in a tragedy corresponds to the unconscious perceptions of trauma, confirming pre-existing fears. The collective experience and construction of trauma prove that the feelings of guilt and consequent sense of responsibility are part of the perception, in the sense that they are reactions to previous internalized anxieties.

Finally, addressing the symptoms of PTSD can help to trace a correspondence in the cultural and literary responses of the aftermath. By considering the specific issues of guilt and accountability, they appear to be manifestations of the counter discourse that surrounded and followed 9/11. However, the same possibility of collective emotions and shared guilt feelings in particular is matter of debate in the recent psychological and philosophical research, as it is difficult to identify the phenomenology of wrongdoing and the complexity of a joint agency<sup>23</sup>. Obviously, it is problematic to discuss the ethics of trauma in terms of guilt and responsibility according to the media or politic positions as well, since the public commentary about the incident of 9/11 avoided to present accountability in favor of an attitude of victimization, as it can be easily understood. Thus, the ethics of trauma can be reconstructed investigating the morality that permeates the texts in quality of written testimonies; and the presence of these topics can be noted in the works classified as oppositional poetics that question the tragedy. The feelings of guilt and responsibility are themes that the category of oppositional poetics elaborates, and the poems by Alicia Ostriker and Patricia Spears Jones display this feature.

### 3.2 Alicia Ostriker, “The Window, at the Moment of Flame”

and all this while I have been playing with toys  
a toy power station a toy automobile a house of blocks

and all this while far off in other lands  
thousands and thousands, millions and millions—

you know—you see the pictures  
women carrying their bony infants

men sobbing over graves  
buildings sculpted by explosion

earth wasted bare and rotten—  
and all this while I have been shopping, I have

been let us say free

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<sup>23</sup> For a philosophical frame, see Gilbert, M., 2002; Kutz, 2001; May, nd Hoffman (eds.), 1991. For a more recent and pragmatic case study, see the military example of Sullivan, Landau, and others, 2013.

and do they hate me for it

do they hate *me*

The first case study, “The Window, at the Moment of Flame” by Alicia Ostriker, shows significant patterns related to the concepts of guilt and responsibility. The reader does not find any direct reference to the attacks of 9/11 in the image of towers, because the main focus is not on the event in itself, rather on the sense of participation in a common, global tragedy. Contrasting feelings mark the narration, and the poem unfolds through short stanzas of two lines that become progressively more compact, culminating in the end as represented by an isolated brief line. The overall impression is that the reader and the poet are progressively left with less and less words by astonishment; so, the structure displays the shock in the realization of the catastrophe.

The poem is narrated by a first person that opens and closes the narration appearing in the first and last lines. The speaking voice is retelling her/his personal traumatic experience, whose most shocking aspect is realizing a collective complicity in it. The beginning of the poem recognizes that the trauma happened while the speaker was “playing with toys”, unconcerned by the events; then it illustrates the “thousands and thousands, millions and millions” of dead people touched by traumas that seemed far away in foreign lands. The speaker becomes aware that they share similar tragedies, even though they seemed to belong to opposite situations. Accustomed to think about destruction in terms of far-away conflicts depicted in pictures coming from foreign lands, the speaker now identifies the “buildings sculpted by explosion” as part of the Manhattan skyline.

This acknowledgement of close devastation is accompanied by a feeling of awareness about complicity. As a matter of fact, the speaker admits that everything happened while she/he was unconcerned by the facts: “and all this while I have been shopping, I have/ been *let us say* free”. This line is crucial to understand the topics and critique of the poem. The

direct reference to shopping relates to the consumeristic culture that makes the reader blind toward actual problems, distracting her/him from them; in addition to this, the protagonist is said to be “playing with toys”, fictional representations of reality that do not seem real. Moreover, the idea of freedom specifies that the speaker believed to be free and detached by the problems of the world, whereas she/he deals with a serious issue that she/he has previously ignored. In a recent philosophical analysis about the relationship between terror and consumeristic culture, Christopher Ryan Maboloc reminds us that our contemporary idea of liberty has inevitably something to do with the paranoia of being attacked: “freedom is ultimately the freedom of the will not to be dominated” (Maboloc 143). Recalling Foucault, he points out that our contemporary concepts of power and autonomy are influenced by two major entities, consumerism and terrorism:

Consumerism and terror have fully secularized the world. This is manifest is the loss of humanist values in modern society. [...]. Human beings have been reduced into those little pieces on a board game. The subjection of the individual through consumerism and paranoia have become the subtle expressions of how dominant techniques have come into play in order to subdue human beings and render their freedom impotent, one that is reflective of the ever-prevailing bourgeois order. (Maboloc 143-144)

Discussing the idea of freedom from a scientific point of view requires an exhaustive and careful reading that goes beyond the limits of this research; nevertheless, this short reference seems essential to frame the sense of Ostriker’s poem. The text indicates a total loss of values that clash with contemporary life, and it originates frustration and guilt. By breaking with an enjambement, the verse “I have/ been let us say free” insists on stranding “let us say”, emphasizing what Maboloc describes as the power “that renders [human beings’] freedom impotent”. If human beings have been reduced to little pieces on a board game, or, as the poem says, they “have been playing with toys”, then freedom is an illusion and the sense of guilt is a consequent reaction. These lines indicate an acknowledgement of being part of the society that ignored the problems in the Middle East, by distancing itself from reality. The

speaker admits her/his belonging to a society that has apparently nothing to do with war, a culture absorbed in shopping and playing, free from the heavy thought of war. Consumerism gives the illusion of being free and innocent, whereas disasters happen unheard of the world; consequently, the speaker is astonished and feels guilty for this tacit complicity in letting horrors happen without opposing them. This issue is associated with a feeling of blame because the speaker confesses to be part of a society that does not think about the effects of international strategic policies in the world; and this is an implicit critique towards a culture distracted by consumerism that makes the poet feel uncomfortable in living a quiet life apart from the tragedies of war.

In order to express the sense of guilt that emerges in the poem, the poet employs accurate oppositions: the typically American “house of blocks” vs places “far off in other lands”, a singular “I” vs the lives of “thousands and thousands, millions and millions”, “us” vs “they”. These antagonisms help to create a tension between the opposite ideals of freedom and oppression, and it is connected with a feeling of blame that ultimately falls back on “us”. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by looking at the second part of the poem, as it shows an altered dynamic in the more abstract opposition victim/perpetrator. Even if it is true that the United States have been the target of the terroristic attacks of 9/11, on the other hand this text shifts the focus on the underlying doubt that the United States could have provoked them. The speaker finds her/himself to be part of the community blamed for its blindness:

and all this while far off in other lands  
thousands and thousands, millions and millions—

you know—you see the pictures  
women carrying their bony infants

men sobbing over graves  
buildings sculpted by explosion

These three stanzas at the core of the composition openly ask the reader to acknowledge that everyone was informed about the effects of American foreign policies in the rest of the world.

Without directly addressing to the conflicts in Afghanistan which contributed to the strengthening of Al Qaeda, the poem efficiently shows through images how American society was informed about what was happening abroad. In other words, everyone, thanks to the media, was exposed to “the pictures/ of women carrying bony infants” or “men sobbing over graves/ buildings sculpted by explosion – “, everyone knew that “far off in other lands/ thousands and thousands, millions and millions” were dying because of the wars caused by the United States’ aggressive foreign policy.

The poem shows these logics through different rhetoric strategies. Addressing to a generic “you”, the text blames the society that has ignored its responsibility towards the rest of the world, and the contradiction of being part of a culture which was aware of having perpetrated traumas in the rest of the world before 9/11. Moreover, the text insists on the pronoun “they” in the last two stanzas, always followed by the word “hate”. The reason for the insistence on these antagonisms responds to the need of producing a sense of opposition through the poem, by creating an alterity. If the speaker were living in a fabricated life, where everything seems fake like a “toy”, by contrast “men [were] sobbing over graves” and “buildings [were] sculpted by explosion” in the real world; thus, 9/11 has broken the barrier between illusion and real life. This event has transported the destruction of the tragedies far away into the quotidian of unconcerned people, by bringing to the surface the deep contradiction of Western life. As the critic Slavoj Žižek also points out, 9/11 had such an enormous traumatic impact because it made the impossible suddenly real, transforming the immaterial rhetoric of war into a tangible reality (Žižek 37). Ultimately, the astonishment in recognizing that hate has become true, and it is concentrated in the last couplet: “I have// been let us say free/ and do they hate me for it”. The speaker feels blamed to be free and shocked at the idea that someone “far off in other lands” may hate her/him for this reason.

The very end of the poem is represented by a rhetoric question, isolated in a single line, which condenses the meaning of the whole composition in four monosyllabic words. The emotional rhetoric gives voice to different feelings through a powerful missing question mark, since it interprets the speaker's astonishment for the hate addressed to her/him as a victim. The feeling of guilt is associated with the idea of innocence: the speaker seems to question whether it is possible to be blamed for something that she/he did not commit in person. In this sense, the opposition "they" and "me" becomes functional, because the speaker does not feel personally responsible for the crimes in the Middle East, even if she/he is aware to be part of the same America that perpetrated them. As a result, she/he cannot accept to have been the direct target of the attacks as a single person; and this is the reason why the pronoun "me" is italicized, contributing to dramatize the scene. However, this is the most powerful and shocking aspect of the lyric: not only the idea that the speaker could be blamed for her/his freedom, but that someone could feel real hate against her/him as individual and exponent of a specific culture.

It would be reductive to say that 9/11 interprets a clash between cultures. The real opposition that it expresses (and, consequently, also the Arts that deal with it) is the recognition of globalization as superstructure that governs and imposes itself over culture. As it has been noted, Ostriker's poem "The Window, at the Moment of Flame" depicts the collapse of a way to see the world:

The window, at the moment of the explosion, looks out into a globalizing world previously gone unnoticed. The couplets stand for the Twin Towers, as so often in this collection<sup>24</sup>, but also for the manner in which the towers, at the moment of their collapse, abruptly give way to a pluralized national-global perspective upon the world. (West 144)

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<sup>24</sup> Johnson and Merian's anthology, *Poetry after 9/11*, the volume containing all the poems presented in this dissertation.

The parallel couplets that disintegrate at the end of the poem criticize toward the tragedy, though they succeed in avoiding a cynic tone by unveiling a common accountability. Finally, the conclusion that this poem seems to draw is that to understand the pain of 9/11, one must turn the pain of others; in other words, to elaborate trauma it is necessary to reflect upon the responsibility the Western World has had towards the rest of the world that we made “wasted bare and rotten”.

### 3.3 Patricia Spears Jones, “All Saints Day, 2001”

The floating lights of the emergency vehicles circle wind.

We walk immune to sirens shrieking.

What if the circling lights were pink or yellow, not blue and white?

Who is the Saint of fog?

Who is the Saint of  
our city decelerated in thick humidity, intemperate heat?

Who is the Saint of  
smiling eyed pretty girls wearing tiny heeled shoes and short skirts  
prowling loud pubs on 2nd avenue or the gray hooded Black guys  
smoking weed, talking trash in the shadows of Grand Central?

Who is the Saint of  
the Black woman in the pizza parlor who, after too many noise complaints  
unheeded, declares I own a 9 millimeter, legal,  
if I shoot your dog what are you going to do about it?

Who is the Saint of  
the boys in my “hood”  
who call each other “son”  
peer to peer father to father.

Where’s daddy  
Where’s mama  
Where’s the good old days?

Is this the new catechism  
and where is the handsome priest to answer?  
By rote: do we sing a possible peace?

Shall we venture into this destroyed world thinking  
charm, glee, proverbial opportunity

Shall we gather the names of the lost  
then watch them float like feathers on the dirty wind

Shall we gather at the altars of old gods  
and whine about our lives

Shall we watch the shadows watch us back

Now that clocks pulse instead of tick  
are the streets safer for the wretched, the damned?

In what cinema are the dreams of mass destruction  
so dear as ours?

“All Saints Day, 2001” by Patricia Spears Jones is very different in tone and style compared to Ostriker’s; nonetheless, it expresses the impact of trauma very powerfully. The most forceful technical device is the evident loose indentation that responds to the aim of interpreting disorientation, as caused by trauma. This odd structure obstructs the reading and reflects the psychological difficulty in coping with an immeasurable pain, provoked by an experience extraneous to the quotidian of the poet. This is a recurrent characteristic outlined by studies about the PTSD, as one of the symptoms listed by psychiatrists is the inability to classify the shock and fix it into cognitive schemes that the patient could have experienced before. As the human memory system is narrative, it tries to store memories according to a linear way; but when a severe disturbing experience occurs, the “traumatic memory” goes in conflict with it. The process of memory processing develops a dissociation which is at the core of trauma; and the patient is forced to live again and again the feelings associated with that memory (Mc Farlane and Van Der Kolk, 1995: 160-164). It is interesting to note that the structure of this poem shows the centripetal order of thoughts and memories typical of the PTSD, as if the poet were haunted by memories about “the good old days”. The speaker is shattered in recalling the traumatic experience, and the verses reflect her/his sudden memories asking for an impossible understanding.

The most compelling aspect of this lyric is its commitment toward blame and accountability. This is particularly evident looking at the partition that divides the poem: the first part is rhetorically focused on the pronoun “who”, looking for a culprit to blame; and after a short break made by the anaphora “where”, the second part concentrates on the auxiliary “shall we”, advocating a meditation about the responsibility for this event. The

narration begins in the present tense, by giving account of the moments immediately after the Twin Towers' fall, illuminated by the blue and white of the "Sirens shrieking". This is also a mythological reference that frames the poem in a timeless context, by giving voice to a poetical lamentation for a historical occurrence and expressing the astonishment for a traumatic experience. The stress is on the feeling of oppression created by the "fog", the "thick humidity, intemperate heat" and the insistent question "who"; thus, the poem becomes an inquiry aiming at discovering who is the responsible to blame for the attacks, but also for the conditions of this dangerous historical moment. Interestingly, the poem matches the missing responsible to the word "Saint", introducing a religious element that is the very intimate background of the narration, as the title *All Saints Day, 2001* shows. The idea of matching a religious Saint to every question searching an answer points out the absurdity of a war in the name of religion, whose blame ultimately falls back on the people. The 9/11 hijackers committed suicide considering their act as a religious mission, since the West is seen as a threat to the Islamic values and institutions. Even though the Islamic integralist rhetoric does not hide motivations of monetary origin as it acknowledges that the West maintains economic domination by possessing the forces of globalization<sup>25</sup>, the primary ideological support has been religious also to justify the attacks to the eyes of Muslim countries and in the hope of gaining their support. Ostriker's poem recognizes the absurdity of a war on religious premises, so she criticizes the idea of Saints by questioning their identity and presence. There is no spiritual motivation in the tragedy, because it has been committed by people; ultimately, guilt depends upon those who perpetrate traumas. As a matter of fact, people are the very protagonists of the lyric: i.e. "the Saint of fog" is counter posed to the materiality of "smiling eyed pretty girls" and "black guys smoking weed". This image condensates the innocence of the victims, but it also contrasts with the following stanza pointing out that guilt stems from

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<sup>25</sup> A valid analysis about the Islamic ideologies supporting the attacks of 9/11 is tackled by Kibble, 2002.

people: “Who is the Saint of/ the Black woman in the pizza parlor who, after too many noise complaints/ unheeded, declares I own a 9 millimeter, legal,/ if I shoot your dog what are you going to do about it?”. The “black woman in the pizza parlour” is the character that stands for a common neighbor anyone can have; and the fact that she does not care for the violence in her words highlights how people often are not conscious of the possible negative consequences of their actions. Evil is ultimately originated by people, especially by the rage of those who feel unheeded; so, they address themselves to violence. The force of this poem lies in the analogy of the experiences that people live: the destruction American people undergo in “our city decelerated in thick humidity” has a parallel in the Middle East, in “this destroyed world”. Consequently, humans are to be blamed for violence, not the Saints of intangible religions.

After establishing this correspondence, the discourse shifts to consider another point of view. The last part of the lyric focuses on the sense of duty that “we” share and must respect. As in the case of Ostriker’s poem, the collective pronoun concerns the issue of collective identification; but the reader can easily understand that it is addressed to the Western World, and more specifically to the United States. Looking at the text, the pronoun appears for the first time in a rhetorical question, “do we sing a possible peace?”, and, immediately after, “shall we venture into this destroyed world thinking/ charm, glee, proverbial opportunity”. The choice of omitting the question mark is relevant, because there is no inquiry and the speaker already knows the answer, and she/he is aware of the object of critique. This line recalls the *topos* of the American dream, nourishing the image of a proverbial opportunity, charming and glee spread all over the world; by contrast, the poem exposes that history has revealed another dark side of the U.S. The text hints to a possible forewarning of the fall: “After several decades of globally exporting media images of American prosperity to those struggling for economic and cultural survival elsewhere [...]”, could it be possible that the

attacks of 9/11 were “a deserved punishment for some unacknowledged guilt?” (Kahane 109). Consequently, how is it possible to “sing a possible peace” now, or keeping the appearance of victimization, if the ultimate causes of the attacks of 9/11 are to be found in the United States’ responsibility and commitment in “this destroyed world”? This poem openly questions the ethics of “sing[ing] a possible peace”, carrying the burden of an improper behavior that this ideal has contributed to increase over the time. Moreover, this lyric shows a despair in realizing that acting as victims is no longer possible, because there is a shared accountability in the world’s history, and particularly in the background of 9/11 attacks. The insistence of the anaphora “shall we” wants to respond to the need of recognizing that there were pre-existing conditions leading to this tragedy, often ignored; so, the question that concerns the aftermath is how to cope with the effects of an announced tragedy. Consequently, the speaker is uncertain about the morality of “gather[ing] the names of the lost” or “gather[ing] at the altars of old gods/ and whin[ing] about our lives”. When we are forced to live with the burden of responsibility, even religion cannot offer a consolation anymore: “Is this the new catechism/ and where is the handsome priest to answer?”.

Another powerful association in the last part of the poem exemplifies the illusions that 9/11 has broken. As it has been noted by critics, the line “Shall we watch the shadows watch/ us back” illustrates the projections of a paranoid self-mirror that has the function of a prophecy (West 145). To expand this argument, it can be said that the poem questions history as a circular and self-propelling cataclysm through a correspondence with the artistic system of representation. As a matter of fact, the event of 9/11 set an apocalyptic scene unimaginable in the real world, a catastrophe that was possible only in fictional representations. As the text objects, if fiction becomes reality, then “in what cinema are the dreams of mass destruction/ so dear as ours?”. The close is highly dramatized, and it shows the dilemma of understanding that reality and fiction does not have separate borders in contemporary times, but they equally

turn to the unbelievable. This statement seems to call into question the *hubris* in having dreamt and illustrated a fictional destruction in films and literature at the point of making it become true: the discourse is not addressed to political or cultural issues, but towards a metafictional consideration that challenges the artistic representation. By having previously dared to represent scenarios of mass destruction, depictions have tried to overcome reality, and in the end the event of 9/11 has suddenly reminded that devastation is an actual and part of the quotidian more than what the speaker (and reader) could ever have imagined before.

### **3.4 Oppositional poetics and the Sense of Guilt**

The interpretation proposed for Ostriker and Spears Jones's poems has been limited to consider the themes of guilt and responsibility in the context of a cultural trauma. The texts clearly manifest these feelings, as they are important issues that the literature produced after 9/11 inevitably confronts. In particular, these topics are characteristic of oppositional poetics, because they address a critique that reverses the process of traumatic victimization.

Ostriker's "The Window, at the Moment of Flame" deals with trauma by criticizing pragmatic problems related to globalization. The form and speaking voice are functional to express a dissent toward our contemporary lifestyle that does not consider for the counter effects of Western hegemony. By questioning the hatred directed against the U.S., she interrogates herself on the ethical responsibility in the event of 9/11: "do they hate me". The personal accountability blends into a collective dimension, elaborating the concept of a shared guilt and addressing to a social perception of trauma. The poem analyzes the implicit and unexpected complicity in the tragedy, and it contextualizes this feeling in the background of our consumeristic culture. The main object of critique concerns the ideological oppositions

that mark contemporary times, by considering the clash originated by moral antagonisms. The poem brings to the surface a consciousness about the facts that the speaker, as well as the reader, already had; and the presence of the feelings of guilt and responsibility is evident because they are cultural elaborations that can find expression only in counter narratives.

“All Saints Day, 2001” by Spears Jones display similar interest in the theme of guilt. Direct interpretation of a traumatic memory, the text looks for the very responsible of the tragedy, finding in humans the ultimate origin of violence. The oppositional feature emerges in the search for alternative solutions to elaborate trauma, specifically in an inquiry about religion and sense of duty. This poem is concerned with the issue of the impossibility of predicating a message about peace, because the West is too corrupted by violence and we are living in a “destroyed world” whose “proverbial opportunity” is but an illusion. However, the last part of the poem demonstrates how it is an example of a counter narrative, being critical in a metafictional perspective. As a matter of fact, the “cinemas” where “dreams of mass destruction” take form underline another kind of involvement related to guilt and responsibility. Provocatively, it could be said that the artistic depiction presented by films and cinema is blamed for the act of having represented scenes of mass destruction, prophecies of the catastrophe that truly happened. The Arts after 9/11 inevitably confront themselves with the matter of responsibility, because the act of representation in itself is perceived as inappropriate and shameful. At the center of this debate, the responsibility for 9/11 challenges the artistic form that interprets trauma, because the poet belongs to the culture which perpetrated it. The poem seeks for legitimation, because representation is seen as a guilty narrative that depicts a fictional disaster become true.

To better explain this point, it is useful to consider the preface to the *Anthology Poetry After 9/11*. In the immediate aftermath, a massive production and circulation of poetry invaded the city of New York, at the point that a fire chief issued this statement: “Thank you for the

food and the blankets and the flowers but please – no more poetry” (Johnson and Merians, ix). This remark seems to be an echo of the famous declaration “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” by the philosopher Theodore Adorno, as they both challenge the role of the culture which is at the basis and produces the literary representation. Asking for silence, these assertions turn to the unspeakable, contrasting the written word as guilty for being the symbol of the culture which was involved in the trauma. Consequently, poetry is not only blamed for its aim of representing, but a sense of accountability emerges in relation to the authority that is given to this literary form. The debate over the responsibility of representation has been widely discussed by critics. It has been noted elsewhere that

Adorno’s claim about poetry comes from a worry about participating in the culture that produced it [the trauma], thus making the poet inadvertently complicit in that horror. The worry, in other words, is related not to the failure of witnessing but rather to an observation that the aesthetic nature of such poetic witness undercuts its ideological force. (Pozorski 4)

Similarly, Spears Jones’ poem expresses the same necessity of a confrontation with the culture that produced acts of violence. The fascinating point of oppositional characteristic is that the poem questions the theme of guilt, but it also rejects the artistic representation in a metafictional perspective.

Finally, a conclusive observation can be raised considering another topic shared by Ostriker and Spears Jones’ poems. The sense of accountability is ultimately connected with the recognition of being part of history. Guilt and responsibility can be meant as individual and collective features, and they acquire a deeper meaning if considered to be woven in time. Admitting that the West plays an active part in the contemporary history because of globalization, these poems highlight that we carry a global responsibility beyond any political aspect. History is the background where the political, social and moral responsibilities converge, where ultimately the feeling of guilt stems from. Both Ostriker and Spears Jones question the clash of reciprocal guilt by analyzing the consequences of American imperialism

and hegemony in the world, stressing that the West is responsible for tragedies as well, and suggesting that the sorrow of 9/11 should be faced by addressing to the grief of others. The way these poets employ literature to convey the message is particularly striking, because they manage to incorporate guilt into the artistic means. Their thoughts are eventually addressed to the reader, and they invite to reflect upon the meaning and form of representing trauma. Starting from these considerations, the next chapter will consider and broaden the theme of history in relation to the present time, with the goal of looking at 9/11 as a watershed in the perception of the current events.

## CHAPTER 4

### **“It’s So Strange to Be Caught in History”: The Time of Experience**

This chapter explores the philosophical implications traceable in the debate about 9/11 when considered as a historical event. Among the numerous philosophers and thinkers that have approached the concept of history, the intention has been to privilege those who reflect upon it as a condition, and consider the meaning of tragedy in relation to the idea of time. Following this, the poems by Anne Marie Levine and Shelley Stenhouse illustrate the feeling of strangeness as part of history, by presenting oppositional features in relation to the presence of terrorism in our contemporary experience of time.

#### **4.1 September 11, 2001: The End of History?**

What seems unquestionable in the debate about the tragedy of 9/11 is that this event has been perceived as a watershed in history. It truly is, for the complexity of its implications; and the discussion expands to consider the condition and the meaning of being present in current times. As a matter of fact, 9/11 is a historical fact that has changed our idea of the world, by bringing the shadow of global terrorism, a new phenomenon that does not have similar occurrence with regard to extension and motivations. If on the one hand this can be considered as a geopolitical fact, on the other it underlines that it also has a symbolic meaning charged with theoretical implications. Some scholars have approached the topic of 9/11 by pointing out its importance as a philosophical abstraction that combines pragmatism and theory, trying to analyze the sense we confer on the events as part of the flow of history.

In the accurate and discussed essay *The Spirit of Terrorism*, the French scholar Jean Baudrillard expresses his positions regarding terrorism and the specificity of 9/11 in the world system. In particular, he focuses on the relationship that makes extremism possible, by reminding that “terrorism is the act that restores an irreducible singularity to the heart of a system of generalized exchange” (Baudrillard 2002, 9). Compared to the past, the attacks of 9/11 are undoubtedly different, because they set a warlike scene out of a concrete and recognized conflict, making the event as unintelligible as it was shocking. Interestingly, Baudrillard refers to the event as “an irreducible singularity”, or an occurrence that acquires meaning if considered by virtue of its interrelationships with a more structured system; in other words, his position considers 9/11 as a setback for globalization itself. The interesting intuition is to focus not on the event *per se*, but on the relationship that connects it with the rest of the world’s history. Widely known for his previous theorization of the “simulacra”, or appearances of reality that tend to substitute it, Baudrillard questions existence in contemporary times, marking the failure of reality as “the true end of history” (Baudrillard 1994, 21-22). By looking at his conceptualization with a different knowledge of the facts almost two decades after 9/11, his position about history seems even more meaningful. Characterized by a refusal of the present, our condition cannot be considered Postmodern anymore, since we have reached a moment of historical stasis that contradicts itself and it is destined to fail. In this sense, 9/11 represented the forecasted historical “break” that Postmodern artists and theorists have been describing for years, and it represents the passing of Postmodernity in itself<sup>26</sup>. Even though Baudrillard does not refuse his previous analysis of the simulacra and the end of history, in the later *The Spirit of Terrorism* he recognizes how 9/11 was the alarm bell to give a new historical impulse to resuscitate from the end of history. Baudrillard’s reading of the events privileges a dialectical vision of history that finds its

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<sup>26</sup> This point is particularly pregnant and controversial. For a compelling perspective on this topic, see Brown 2005.

realization in the Postmodern condition, by pointing out that their force is given by the transformation of reality into images and vice versa. According to his position, 9/11 strikes for the immediateness of the images that characterize it, transforming this incident into an “image-event”: “Whereas we were dealing before with an uninterrupted profusion of banal images and a seamless flow of sham events, the terrorist act in New York has resuscitated both images and events” (Baudrillard 2002, 27). In the flow of the historical events, 9/11 interpreted the function of revealing that real events can be confused with spectacular images, because reality has reached such a high level of absurdity to be confused with fiction. The traumatic realization of the confusion between reality and fiction influences the perception of history, as 9/11 is set in between different perceptions of reality and fiction.

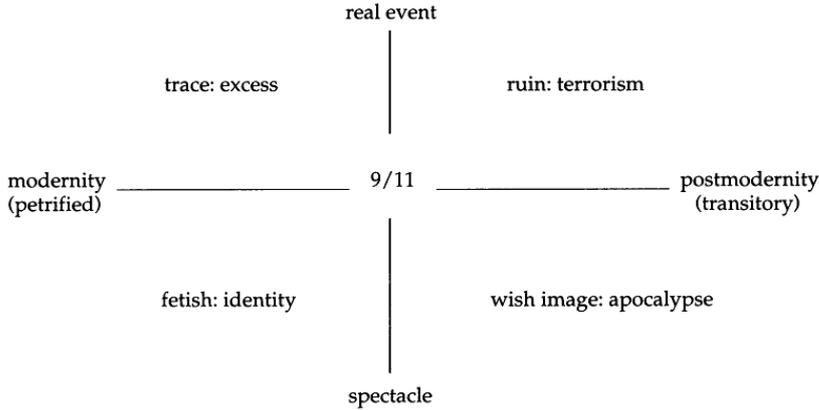


Figure 3. Diagram of 9/11 as dialectical image.

This image can offer an overview of the concepts that 9/11 intersects<sup>27</sup>. Terrorism made the excess of globalization collapse against the system that created it, marking the passage from the stillness of modernity to the end of postmodernity thanks to the impulse of 9/11. This is the trace of history that dialectically creates its ruin, running toward what Baudrillard calls the end of history. Interestingly, if this is the tangible occurrence of the events, the reality of

<sup>27</sup> This diagram, thought and developed by the scholar Carlos Gallego discussing Baudrillard’s interpretation of 9/11 applied to the artistic production, well explains the dialectic process of history as meant by Baudrillard. See Gallego, 2010.

facts presents a mirrored alterity, as 9/11 is an “image-event”. The idea of spectacle relates to representation and the concept of eventfulness:

“This eventfulness, however, can also turn into a spectacle of itself, becoming a fetish that somehow fulfills the revolutionary impulse - an instantaneous and phantasmagoric substitute for eventfulness - consequently transforming spontaneity into ideology (i.e., identity thinking). Thus, in an ideological sense, 9/11 constitutes yet another symbol representing either the end of history or the need to go to war to ensure the end of history” (Gallego 52)

The problem of identity Gallego points out refers to the confrontation with alterity, because terrorism implicitly calls into question the matter of identity. The fetishism he speaks about refers to the implicit premonition of the tragedy that the Arts had been announcing for years<sup>28</sup>, or the *idée fixe* that an imminent catastrophe was about to happen. Consequently, 9/11 also works as “wish image”, in the sense that it “encapsulates the apocalyptic desire for a true end of history” (Gallego 53). Opposed to the fetishistic closure, the wish image interprets “the desire for the total annihilation of all systems” (Gallego 53), the longing for a historical change that will start only with the end of history itself. This analysis is linked with Baudrillard’s conceptual elaboration of the *simulacra*, and 9/11 turns out to be both event and representation in the dialectic process of making history. Finally, Gallego explains Baudrillard’s notion of the “spirit of the terrorism” from which the title takes form as the capacity of setting real historical events that would be possible only in a fictional dimension.

This premise seems necessary to frame the most recent philosophical positions toward our contemporaneity at the light of 9/11. However, it is inescapable to mention the Postmodern theory to discuss every philosophical issue about historicity. What has been specifically called Postmodern “condition” by the influent philosopher François Lyotard refers to the status of contemporaneity, the “being-now” that we face as humans in the present moment. First scholar to theorize the term “Postmodern” in *The Postmodern Condition*

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<sup>28</sup> American Postmodern authors are particularly involved in presenting unexpected dangers and premonitions for tragedies. For example, see Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973); De Lillo, *White Noise* (1985); David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (1996).

published in 1979, he reflected upon knowledge and our means to access to it. His contribution has particular relevance for literature, since he discussed the end of the metanarratives that comes with a renovated historical phase, finding in technology the impulse toward change. This work has been the starting point for a series of studies about Postmodern studies; among them, the illuminating work of Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* specifically concentrates on social issues that relate to history. Published in reviewed form in 1991, the same year of Hunt's theorization about the concept of "oppositional poetics", Jameson's contribution counterbalances observations about aesthetics and theory by finding evidence for the cultural setting of his years in the late capitalist socioeconomic structure. The fascinating point of his analysis is the tracing of interconnections between historical phases of productivity and the Postmodern condition, supported by a wide range of examples from the Arts and architecture. Similarly to Baudrillard and Lyotard, the theoretical paradigm Jameson applies to the events follows a historical dialectics, considering the experience of being as a narrative process that tries to give meaning to the facts:

"Postmodernism theory is one of those attempts: the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an "age," or zeitgeist or "system" or "current situation" any longer. Postmodernism theory is then dialectical at least insofar as it has the wit to seize on that very uncertainty as its first clue and to hold to its Ariadne's thread on its way through what may not turn out to be a labyrinth at all, but a gulag or perhaps a shopping mall."  
(Jameson x)

His approach – essentially pragmatic and multidisciplinary – sees the Postmodern condition as the situation of being in lack of historical references, and the difficulty of classifying it as "age". Then Postmodernism is dialectical because it moves between the complications of seeking a definition and fixed and recognizable events to mark its periodization. Differently from Modernism, that was easily caught in a precise time span, Postmodernism does not clearly refer to any specific historical event, though it describes and criticizes the last decades

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is not only a matter of periodization; but the question lies deeper. The tragedy of 9/11 has such a powerful impact because it made clear that the Postmodern condition does not belong to our contemporaneity anymore, so the premise about Postmodernism can help the understanding of the reasons and the situation that lead to 9/11. The real meaning of this tragedy, theoretically speaking, has been to denounce the end of a historical period that we did not completely understand, and brings us forth to the new. Recalling Baudrillard and Lyotard, it can be said that the “postindustrial society”, as they define it, does not represent the contemporary social and political conception of our system, because we have moved beyond it thanks to globalization, and 9/11 unmasked the end of history as we knew it.

If 9/11 has deconstructed history, in the sense that it ended the way to think about history that characterized the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is natural to ask which future this tragedy indicates. In respect to this, it can be useful to turn back for a moment to consider Jacques Derrida’s intuitions. In the essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1979), famous for his position about philosophical deconstruction, he reflects upon the concept of “event” in history by considering it as a “rupture” and “redoubling” compared to the historical structure. By analyzing the form of this structure, he points out how “it has always been involved, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin” (Derrida 279). What he defines as “center” is a value, a *telos* (or aim), an organizing principle that gives the structure its reason to be and orientates it. He locates the crisis of history in the loss, or absence, of this pivotal paradigm, that finds its center elsewhere and outside the system:

“From the basis of what we therefore call the center (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, is as readily called the origin as the end, as readily *arché* as *telos*), the repetitions, the substitutions, the transformations, and the permutations are always *taken* from a history of meaning [*sens*]—that is, a history, period—whose origin may always be revealed or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence” (Derrida 280)

This perfectly matches the Postmodern condition, in the sense that if the structure needs to find its center elsewhere, then history itself seems meaningless. To say it differently, our traditional and classical vision of history has perceived it as a chain of logical events that follow in time by cause and reaction, but when the events become ruptures, the logics of sequence does not apply anymore. According to Derrida, if history loses its founding principle, or *sens*, that sees the connection between the events, then history becomes a governing structure that escapes structurality. This position may be helpful in explaining the Postmodern condition, but it also gives useful suggestions to interpret our contemporaneity after 9/11. Thinking about 9/11 not in quality of event, but in terms of a rupture, Derrida's intuitions indicate a philosophical paradigm that fits the current events. It can be stated then that history proceeds by ruptures, or, the narration of history follows violent breaks, one of them being 9/11. The contemporary historical condition cannot rely on an organizing principle, an *arché* or *telos*, but it needs to find its center outside the linearity of the chain of the events.

Following this, the observations raised by Don De Lillo in the striking-title essay "In the Ruins of the Future" seem to suggest an innovative way to interpret 9/11. De Lillo invites the reader to think about the events not as historical facts, but in terms of the narration of the historical facts that is constructed upon the events. The form of the essay itself symbolizes this idea, and the text cannot be considered a 'pure' essay, nor as a piece of fiction; his commentary about 9/11 reveals to be a mixed form that exposes narrative excerpts and condensed puns. The reason for this matches De Lillo's theoretical position, in the sense that he wants to drive the reader's attention to the superstructure encompassing the events, which is narration. "Plots reduce the world" (De Lillo 34) he states, calling into question the matter of representation that shapes the events instead of the eventfulness that regulates them. The question about 9/11 is, above all, related to the storytelling of history rather than history itself;

so, De Lillo reminds that the problem of periodizing history essentially depends upon the speaker that remembers and tells the facts. According to this, he is involved with the problem of seeing and witnessing, by asserting the possibility and importance of alternative counter narratives to explore the historical tragedy. While asserting that Bush administration's rhetoric does not give true account for the tragedy, he states that "the narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative" (De Lillo 34). This position is undoubtedly linked with the Postmodern concept of a "changing history", *c'est à dire* the idea that history changes according to the power of those who tells it. Regarding this point, he explicitly quotes the contrast of narratives that characterizes the phenomenon of terrorism:

"In the past decade the surge of capital markets has dominated discourse and shaped global consciousness. Multinational corporations have come to seem more vital and influential than governments... Terror's response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable. It is our lives and minds that are occupied now" (De Lillo 33)

Again, De Lillo locates the problem not in the intangible dilemma of attributing sense to the historical facts, rather in the human responsibility to make them happen. To a larger extent, it can be said that terrorism is a form of narrative as well, and that the terrorists' power stems from the capacity of imposing it on a global scale. "It is our lives and minds that are occupied now", by what can be called the narrative of terror. Finally, it is important to note that De Lillo asserts the importance and moral responsibility of creating a counter narrative, a response that has less to do with the ontology of the historical facts, but rather is involved in their phenomenology, and the consequent interpretation.

Drawing to a partial conclusion, the perception of history has been changing over the last fifty years to flow into an open philosophical debate. Events of traumatic impact like 9/11 seem to bring an influence not only in the theoretical discussions, but also in the broad cultural reception. The difference that characterizes such a traumatic event lies in the capacity of modifying the perception of our condition to be part of history, or simply the idea of being

in history. The most important reflection that 9/11 raises is about the contemporary global condition, which is completely different from the past because of many reasons. Above all, the development of technology has shown the capacity to influence local and global dynamics more than ever before; so, globalization drives us to consider the impact of our actions on a larger scale. Therefore, history is less linked to small areas, but it needs to be considered for its effects that encompass a wider geographical extension. Scholars agree on the idea that the Postmodern era has come to an end, and that the future of criticism will escape the structures that characterized our visions of history over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since history is one of the topics that contemporary literary works and criticism cannot ignore for the future, there is reason to think that authors will deal with this issue, especially trying to find alternative ways to describe it<sup>29</sup>. In particular, De Lillo suggests a new direction for literature, identifying the task of a different fictional elaboration for counter narratives. Finally, this is the goal of this dissertation: an analysis of the themes that contemporary poetry after 9/11 proposes. Among these, the perception of history is one of the most compelling ones indeed, as the cases of Anne Marie Levine and Shelley Stenhouse demonstrate.

#### **4.2 Anne Marie Levine, “Four November 9<sup>ths</sup>”**

My family expected I would be born on Armistice Day,  
November 11, and that would be one thing,  
that would have been something to joke about  
in those days. But I came into being two days earlier,  
on November 9, in the evening, and that was another thing,  
it was not a joke, and it was evidently not a thing  
to be remembered or told,  
because I was not made aware of the coincidence  
of my birthday until after several months before my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday,  
which coincided with, and was commemorated and announced as,  
the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht.  
So there I was, and even more than that here I am,

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<sup>29</sup> An example springs to mind: *City on Fire*, by Garth Risk Hallberg (2015), is one of the most recent attempts to narrate history from a contemporary point of view. His approach, according to some critics imitative of De Lillo's *Underworld*, leaves aside the conventional narrative to explore an understanding of the present that depends on the past by expanding the fictional means.

quite surprised, not to mention still unprepared,  
and quite unable to avoid thinking about both at once.  
The reminders since then have been constant and grim.  
Coincidence: the visible traces of invisible principles.

And now my friend Gottfried Wagner,  
who since the day he discovered the date  
has never forgotten my birthday,  
has informed me that there are four November 9ths  
in history, that is a very big day in the history of Germany  
in this century. There is even a book written,  
it is called *The Four November 9ths*.  
I can't read the book, it is written in German,  
but I have done some research, and as far as I can tell

The first November 9 was 1918;  
it was a revolution in which the Kaiser abdicated,  
which culminated in the Proclamation of the Republic in Berlin  
on November 9. The above-mentioned Armistice  
between the Allies and Germany  
followed on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

The second November 9 was 1923;  
it was Hitler's abortive "Beer Hall Putsch"  
against the Bavarian government in Munich.  
Hitler, who was at first imprisoned, eventually emerged  
as the undisputed leader of the radical right.

The third November 9 was, as you know, November 9<sup>th</sup>,  
Kristallnacht.

And on Nov. 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down.

So there you are and here we are, on my birthday,  
and all of this is to say what Gertrude Stein has already said,  
what can I teach you about history – history teaches.

It is not a simple matter, the birthday, or the telling.

Elegantly exposed with a discursive tone, this poem by Anne Marie Levine is one of the longest gathered in the anthology *Poetry after 9/11*. Significantly, it pulls historical events together and bestows them with a powerful significance, considering coincidence as "visible traces of invisible principles".

Starting by analyzing the form, it can be observed that the first part of the poem is compact and explanatory, whereas the second one struggles to respect a fixed rhythm and becomes more silent. The more the poem shows the events, the less the speaker understands

them, or, at least, succeeds in according a moral or logic explanation to them. The structure of the second part of the poem enunciates a list of the traumatic events that coincidentally correspond to the speaker's birthday, and they gradually leave the reader without words. The attention given to the European continent is due to Levine's Belgian native origins, and it serves to establish a parallel between common traumatic experiences. Actually, Nov. 9<sup>th</sup>, 1938 is Levine's true birthday; so, it can be assumed that the poem is narrated by a first person that is emotionally close to the author in question.

The reflection at the basis of the poem originates when the speaker becomes aware of the coincidence that links her birthday to other historical facts of the twentieth century. The list encompasses four November 9<sup>th</sup>, European recurrences that echo material and metaphorical falls: the revolution leading to the abdication of the German Kaiser in 1918; Hitler's "Beer Hall Putsch" in Munich in 1923; the Kristallnacht in 1938; and the Berlin Wall's fall in 1989. These four events, together with the speaker's birthday, are historically significant; and they reveal an involvement in history that the speaker evaluates not as "a simple matter". In fact, history is at the center of every reference in the text, and the most important feature is that it depends upon the connections that the speaker creates.

From the beginning, the text opens on the idea that the family would expect her childbirth on Armistice Day, so, the poem reveals that the primary idea of linking the speaker's birthday to a holiday stems from the domestic sphere. Distracted by the missed coincidence with Armistice Day, "that would have been something to joke about/ in those days", the protagonist later realizes to be born in coincidence with more tragic commemorations. The first one to be discovered is Kristallnacht, in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary that coincides with her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, and "the reminders since then have been constant and grim". The realization is shocking and leaves the narrator unprepared, "quite unable to avoid thinking about both at once", by closing on the surprising mechanisms of coincidence that

moves “visible traces of invisible principles”. This first stanza offers an interesting point of view about the approach the speaker assumes toward history, and it prepares the investigation of the last part of the text. Childbirth is seen as a “come into being”, revealing the philosophical attitude of the woman that considers her own existence as “being”. This is particularly significant for the setting of the poem, because she feels her existence as being part of history; so, she perceives her life in an expanded time span that includes other events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her “come into being” realizes her existence in the intersection with other occurrences that preceded and followed her personal connection with November 9<sup>th</sup>; and her experience unites the private and collective history. Whereas the public dimension has dignity to be remembered, she states that the coincidence of her birthday “was evidently not a thing/ to be remembered or told”. By reducing the relevance of her birthday compared to other historical events, the speaker limits the importance of the personal experience to privilege the focus on the collective participation in common tragedies that marked the century. However, she gradually reverses this attitude. The turning point is the moment when she is made “aware of the coincidence”, because from now on her knowledge of history is irremediably different. The very heart of the poem is made by the fact of reaching an awareness about the belonging to history; therefore, the key to understand history is to recognize to be part of it. This awareness leads the speaker to investigate about other historical facts: “I have done some research”. The passage from indifference to surprise, and then curiosity, is also accompanied by the presence a friend, Gottfried Wagner. This character corresponds to a real person, and helps to associate the poem to a rejection against the violence that history embodies. As a matter of fact, he is the great-grandchild of Richard Wagner, a Nazi supporter involved in Hitler’s regime that has openly repudiated his family recognizing its involvement in the atrocities of the Second World War. By referring to this

real and fictional character, Levine creates her first personal association with history, which is somehow mediated by a friend with a symbolic value.

However, this is not the only reference to the dramatic period of Nazism, and the second stanza is focused on Germany. November 9<sup>th</sup> is “a very big day in the history of Germany/ in this century”, it is a national commemoration that Gottfried Wagner reminds her. It is important to note that this stanza opens on the concept of memory: speaking about her friend, she states that “since the day he discovered the date/ has never forgotten my birthday”. This key concept links history to the important theme of remembering and connecting facts: Gottfried Wagner can remember her birthday because he is aware of the coincidence and makes connections between the events. Since the entire poem is a thought about accidental coincidences, the fact of remembering is crucial; as the poem will explain later, history can teach only through the elaboration mediated by memory.

After these premises to frame the speaker’s personal initiation to history, the list of the collective remembrances of November 9<sup>th</sup> takes form. The first one relates to the German revolution in 1918 that ended with the Armistice, an important date for both Europe and the U.S. The second date corresponds to Hitler’s first rise to success in 1923, later followed by the Kristallnacht in 1938 and finally the Berlin Wall fall in 1989. It can be noted that the presence of the German background is fundamental, and the references to the Nazi regime become more and more explicit; on the other hand, less explanations are given to the facts. Kristallnacht is just mentioned, as well as the Berlin Wall; so, the reader is left in front of the nude facts that are never commented. From the beginning of the poem, much attention is given to Germany, and nothing is said about the U.S. history. The reason for this is to be found in Levine’s attitude toward history. As it has been noted by Rothberg,

Through this virtual layering of events, the relationship between the different stories of 9/11 and 11/9 comes to possess a double resonance: twenty-first-century disaster finds itself encoded in and heightened by reference to the well-known events of

twentieth century, but it is also relativized and resituated in a more encompassing, global framework. (Rothberg 132)

Levine's experience of history is linear and diachronic, as the exposition of the facts suggests. The listing of the events does not highlight a causal relationship between them, but indicates a sequence of tragic events where 9/11 appears to be just a mirrored reflection, as the date November 9<sup>th</sup> shows. The author exposes events that seem premonitions of the fall, the last one significantly being that of the Berlin Wall. Consequently, the contemporary and the past are bond together; and 9/11 cryptically may represent the beginning of an escalation of violence in the new century, echoing the Berlin Wall. Levine's position interprets history as a global matter by finding coincidences similar to facts from the Old World; and the privilege of her perspective is that she avoids seeking for logic explanations, rather questioning awareness and memory by the "invisible principles" of coincidence.

The topic can be extended so far as to suggest that the problem posed by the poem extends to the concept of time. Conceptually, time and history are related, as they are elaborations of the chronological development of the facts, and they both belong to the philosophical inquiry that connotes the debate. In Levine's poem, history appears through the phenomenology of the events, and it shows a continuity that is not broken by the traumatic facts, rather finds its cohesiveness in the coincidence that links them. On the other hand, the text stresses two contrasting visions of time, that match the private and collective spheres. The speaker's birthday pertains to the personal sphere, which is subjective and human; by contrast the chain of events is related to the objectivity of the facts. This philosophical dichotomy corresponds to the Greek model of counterposed temporalities: that of *kairòs*, defined as human and subjective time, and that of *kronos*, sequential and measurable time. According to the Greek vision, the conception of *kairòs* specifies that it is an appropriate and favorable moment, a period of undetermined time during which special events may happen. This is exactly the case presented by Levine, since her birthday is a personal occasion that

coincidentally happens at the same time of other recurrence; so, the poem captures the qualitative and subjective time in the chronological order of the historical facts. In this sense, time is circular, because the text is animated by the interrelations between the traumatic events that keep repeating.

Finally, the last part of the poem challenges time using a powerful chiasmus that works as a mirror. As the date 11/9 mirrors 9/11, the closing quotes a previous poet. The author attempts to trace a meaningful correspondence to the events: “and all of this is to say what Gertrude Stein has already said, what can I teach you about history – history teaches”. The implicit judgement is left to the past, to another woman poet that tried to subvert history and aesthetics with her irreverence; so, the message of the poem is hidden in the chiasmus that closes the text. Avoiding a moral judgement from the beginning, the speaker now is free to express her disappointment toward what she describes. Again, the choice of the poet Gertrude Stein reminds us of Europe, where she spent most of her life; and Levine consciously connects their two artistical conditions across time and space. This passage from the mere events to the aesthetic conceptual elaboration, though mediated by another poet, shifts the narration upon a textual reflection. “It is not a simple matter, the birthday, or the telling”: Levine knows that history is not a simple matter and coincidences are just one mechanism through which it works. However, she recognizes that the birthday is important as well as the telling, or the narrative elaboration of the events. The last lines are important because they draw the attention on the aesthetical presentation of history: even though the facts are historical items that respect a diachronicity, they are also presented through the poetical reflection. For a true knowledge, the speaker needs to understand her participation in history and her capacity of creating meaning by expressing it in a poetical form. As Rothberg has said, “Four November 9<sup>th</sup>” by Levine is an example of those works that “link public and private experience in provocative ways, thus demonstrating an ongoing

engagement with opportunities for bridging and transition that aesthetic experience makes possible according to the Kantian tradition” (Rothberg 131-132). By Kantian tradition, Rothberg means the possibility of knowledge that validates our understanding of history, which is translated in Levine’s poem in the coincidental logic that links the facts. The references to parallel numbers and falls mark the intersections of history that are given meaning by the human and poetic elaboration.

In conclusion, this poem can be interpreted as a literary response to De Lillo’s essay “In the Ruins of the Future”, because they draw to similar aesthetic and philosophical stances. By addressing history through the fictional and poetical means, they both invite Americans to think about their history in relation to the rest of the world – or, between the West and the rest. The essay and the poem investigate the role of writing in relation to three pivotal points that 9/11 challenges: the problem of processing history, the melting of private and public memories caused by traumatic experiences and the burden of witnessing in the modern Age of Terror. Their articulations, especially Levine’s, do not provide for moral solutions, neither are they interested in looking for an explanatory logics that can give account for historical facts. The meaning of their aesthetics lies in the reflection that they operate on the reader: “[t]he answer – if there is one – to what history teaches is not in the poem but in the cognitive processes that the experience of the poem produces in the reader” (Rothberg 134).

### 4.3 Shelley Stenhouse, “Circling”

At night the fighter planes circle  
and I look at the yellowed corner of my ceiling  
where the dead mosquito hangs  
and remember last summer’s fear of disease –  
bearing bugs, the whoosh of the mosquito trucks,  
and my favorite Post headline LET US SPRAY.  
Lately I’m afraid of all sounds and the lack of sounds.  
New voices, guarding reactors – my daughter  
hates the news, why is she watching?  
And where have the backyard birds gone?  
The *yo babay mo-fo boom chicka* Jersey cars

don't blast around my block trying to park.  
We'll never go back. It's so strange to be caught  
in history, to be making history after just making load  
of unused imaginary money, men in blue jackets shouted,  
traded, and it's gone and it's okay but I don't want to die.  
I hope God is circling up there with those planes.  
Patti was a good person and she died.  
God is probably passed out somewhere warm and dark,  
still sleeping off his whole world, seven day binge  
and it's just us, warring unhinged teenagers  
trashing this big beautiful park.

“Circling” is an example of how poetics questions history from a radically emotional point of view. The poem is pervaded by the feeling of hopelessness, tracing the events by flashes that do not hide their despair. The text opens on the image of a dark night, shaken by the fighter planes’ noise and echoed by sibilant sounds: “planes”, “circle”, “ceiling”, “hangs”, “summer’s”, “disease”. The setting is created by sound analogies recalling the loud agitation that does not even stop at night. The scene takes place in the speaker’s house, where she/he is presumably lying on the bed looking at the ceiling, unable to sleep and distracted by a hanging dead mosquito. It is reasonable to imagine a sticky mosquito trap, that is yellow, hanging on the corner, similar to a reminding of death; as a matter of fact, the speaker is caught by thoughts about death and the unnamed tragedy that has just happened. The first line describes circling planes, creepy reminders of the planes that hit the Twin Towers; but the unsettling parallel of the moment brings the protagonist back to the previous summer, to her “fear of disease”. The memory of a passed fear is associated with a recent generalized anxiety: “Lately I’m afraid of all sounds and the lack of sounds”. Interestingly, this first part of the poem shows features similar to the symptoms of the PTSD syndrome, which include panic, insomnia, unsettling associations and distorted memories. In particular, sounds are sensorial stimuli that evoke dissociative events, striking the subconscious with visions and images that bring the traumatized person back to trauma. As Cathy Caruth has pointed out, the process of storing traumatic memories is often difficult because of the inadequacy of the

cognitive schemes that the traumatized subjects master, since they have been psychically damaged:

“The ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it. And this suggests that what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness” (Caruth 152)

As it can be seen from the text, the presentation of the speaker’s experience privileges a sensitive approach toward emotions, and it aims to reproduce the feelings that filter the traumatic experience. As a matter of fact, the speaker does not have direct access to trauma, and she/he does not find an explanation for what is happening around her/him: “my daughter hates the news, why is she watching?/ And where have the backyard birds gone?”. The planes, the noises and the dead mosquito are just analogies that create flashbacks because they have not been completely accepted by the speaker. The inexplicable tragedy has completely modified the protagonist’s life, but also the life of her/his street, and the noisy “Jersey cars don’t blast around my block trying to park”. Linguistically, the insertion of the italicized informal speech gives an idea of the impact the tragedy had; it has modified even the most meaningless gestures that characterize the quotidian of the block like trying to find parking.

While the first part of the poem deals with the emotional impact of the tragedy, expressing the difficulty of looking at reality the same way as before, the second presents completely different features. Even though the poem is made by a single stanza, the recognition of an unavoidable change marks the passage from astonishment to rationalization: “We’ll never go back”. This sentence expands the singular experience to the collective noun “we”, and it indicates that the speaker now is looking at trauma as an irreversible watershed in history where she/he is coparticipant. “It’s so strange/ to be caught in history”, the speaker asserts, “to be making history after just making load/ of unused

imaginary money”: these verses deserve peculiar attention, since they address the responsibility of being active participants in history by literally “making” it. The collective pronoun “we” refers to the West, now targeted after having known a wealthy growth thanks to financial markets made by “imaginary money”. As it has been noted, Shelley Stenhouse’s goal is to question America’s complex relationship with the rest of the world, “[t]he world economic order, neo-colonialism and subsequently the globalizing transnational economic system, which superseded and outdid the colonial system in its capacity for efficient exploitation of the non-West” (West 143). The symbol reflecting the idea of money and financial markets is, of course, the World Trade Center; and in the poem it takes the shape of the memory of “men in blue jackets shouted,/ traded”. Now, the speaker continues, “it’s gone and it’s ok but I don’t want to die”: the recognition of the catastrophe reveals the hidden fear that it might happen again. As the last line of the poem suggest, men are responsible for “trashing this beautiful park”, and the responsibility of the tragedies of history falls back on those who perpetrate the disasters.

This last part of the poem brings to surface two key themes, the first being the problem of evil and the second being the role of religion. If evil depends upon humans, “God is probably passed out somewhere warm and dark,/ still sleeping off his whole world”. Rationalism and human *ubris* do not suffice for explaining the tragedy; so, the speaker turns to consider God, but she/he remains disappointed because the divine absence. Under the light of this interpretation, the previous slogan “LET US SPRAY” assumes a deeper significance, becoming by assonance LET US PRAY. The poem can be read again for the desperate situation it presents, where people interrogate and turn to divinity because of the absurdity and meanness they see on the world. Evil becomes the only principle of explanation governing the trauma of 9/11, and the protagonist hopes that “God is circling up there with those planes”; ultimately, history is made by people in the total indifference of the divinity.

Religion and rationalism have been largely approached by critics in dealing with the philosophical implications of 9/11, because none of them seems sufficient to give account for the tragedy. 9/11 has been discussed in terms of “clash of religions”, often trying to conceal the real socioeconomic motivations that lead to the violent manifestation of Eastern resentment:

“The world’s scientific, technical, economic, and political mode of development suffers from an unacceptable contradiction. It claims to be (and thinks of itself as) universal; it cannot even conceive how it could be otherwise. [...] It constitutes the end of history, an end that in some way redeems and gives meaning to all of the trials and errors that painfully preceded it. And yet at the same time it knows that its model of universalization is running up against internal and external obstacles, which are unavoidable, if only because our planet’s atmosphere cannot withstand it” (Dupuy and others 41)

Richard Dupuy finds in resentment the reason for the hatred manifested by terrorists, whereas for example René Girard retracts his position asserting that religion is the true dimension that justifies the tragedy of 9/11<sup>30</sup>. In Levine’s poem, any of these positions is fully embraced; religion is the background on which history happens, though it is not its moving principle. God is not involved in the historical facts, he is “circling up there”, unconcerned by “his whole world”. The conclusion the poet draws does not hide her cynicism, and she closes the text by exposing the stupidity of humanity, or, how Hannah Arendt would have said, the banality of evil: “and it’s just us, warring unhinged teenagers/ trashing this big beautiful park”.

#### **4.4 Oppositional Poetics Writing Time and History**

The observations raised in this chapter have tried to explore some of the philosophical readings of history that influenced the theoretical debate of the last century. Unquestionably, the interpretation of history (and our conceptions of it) have been a central theme to face for

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<sup>30</sup> See Doran and Girard, 2008.

recent intellectuals. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is evidence of the necessity of integrating the phenomenon of terrorism in the discussion, as terrorism has the capacity to influence and overcome our experiences of history. Since the debate extends from philosophy to historical criticism presenting an innumerable number of studies about contemporary history, the selection of the presented philosophical and aesthetic positions has followed a precise criterion. The focus has not been to emphasize those who have approached history as a superstructure containing the events, but privileging those who concentrated on time as a condition. Thus, the goal of this chapter has been to analyze the texts and their context by looking at the experience of history as a contemporary condition.

According to the investigation about oppositional poetics lead until this point, history is a topic that poignantly emerges in the post-9/11 writings. The counternarrative works in particular showing an interest in dealing with this subject; and the reason for this can be found in a deeper reading of the facts that do not follow the standards. As Postmodernism was interested in deconstructing the conventional narrations about history, the contemporary literary panorama tries to read 9/11 for its importance in a global context. The case of Levine's "Four November 9<sup>th</sup>" is an evident example for this: the poem invites the reader to consider history as a matter of meaningful significance, by reminding that the singular experience can be understood only by looking at it in a global framework. Through an interrogation about coincidence, she regards history as an elliptical entity that encompasses time and space. Becoming aware of her presence in the repetition of the events, she draws to the aphoristic conclusion that history teaches, and our method of learning is mediated by the experience of being present in contemporaneity. The oppositional feature is the stance assumed in front of the historical events, by rejecting the common conception of a linear sequence of facts. The invitation offered to the reader is to address the event of 9/11 by

looking at its mirrored reflections, posing the problem of trauma at the intersection with history.

Stenhouse's conclusions in "Circling" are more embittered, and they show a difficulty in rationalizing the experience. Her approach underlines an emotional attitude that privileges the personal dimension of trauma, struggling to find meaning in the facts. The description of the experience is focused on the feelings that the memory of trauma provokes, desperately looking for a divine presence to help or give explanations. According to the poem, history is a 'condition' in which the speaker happens to be; and Stenhouse refuses to rely on God to give account for the facts. In an almost ironic tone, the poem presents a life that does not resist trauma and has irremediably changed. Ultimately, the message is that time is the measure for change; and history, along with its traumas, is linked with the human wickedness. This poem marks an oppositional practice in describing the tragedy as a human matter, illustrating the weakness that our historical condition forces us to live.

From a linguistic point of view, a few observations can be further suggested. In order to explore the oppositional visions of history that these poems present, it would be useful to quote Leslie Scalapino's essay "The Radical Nature of Experience". Her thesis is that in order to understand the poetic translation of the event, it is necessary to reason upon the textual devices employed to describe it; consequently, she suggests framing the horizon of the experience in the linguistic exchange between theory and the literary expression. Her focus is "on the non-hierarchical structure in writing" (Scalapino 3) that gives room to poetry in mediating a closer interpretation of reality. The peculiar aspect of her analysis is to identify time as the bridging aspect in the linguistic exchange; so, she considers time not as a given parameter, rather as an activity that reader and writer share. She openly rejects the conception of a linear and sequential time in favor of "a non-hierarchical structure in which all times exist at once" (Scalapino 3); and she finds in this mediation the occasion for the writer to

share the experience. In other words, time is not seen as a “box” containing our lives, an imposed value which cannot be transcended, but as an action that people can share through writing. The capacity of razing the distance in writing (what Roland Barthes would have called *writing degree zero*) considers time as an abstract entity that subverts the conception of history as a sequence of activities which occur in an irreversible sequence. By juxtaposing time to language, Scalapino believes that if “in language horizontal and vertical time can occur at the same moment” (Scalapino 3), then time nor language should be considered progressive. Scalapino invites us to think about time as a vertical cut, a blade that cuts language and experience, since the mind works simultaneously and does not follow a temporal pace in its activity. She makes the point clear: we must think of “the poetry not being a description of anything outside, but a demonstration of one’s mind doing this – the syntax and structure duplicating the process that is the reader’s own mind-phenomena” (Scalapino 4). In this passage, she emphasizes a crucial observation, introducing the reader to the process of writing as an active mind. Poetry after 9/11 clearly reflects this feature, as it presents translations of traumatic experiences that deal with a distorted idea of time due to trauma; and the oppositional practice lies in the contact that the poets try to establish with the reader, by making her/him reflect upon the purport of the events in history. From a technical point of view, the text acts as a medium where time, space and time converge; and this corresponds to the moment of representation, the “construction of voices as shape/sound, their interrelation which is that moment – as being always outside the time when it occurred” (Scalapino 5). Ultimately, this is the importance of language – the capacity of bridging the gaps of different people’s experiences by subverting time. “Poetry is ventriloquism that [...] is actual conversation” (Scalapino 5), a silent exchange between two or more people who share their experiences of history.

## CHAPTER 5

### **The Aestheticization of Trauma: Toward a Global Literature**

This final chapter provides the support of the theory of literature in the sociolinguistic analysis of oppositional poetics. The main analysis concerns the linguistic process from unspeakability to the verbalization into the artistic form, interrogating representation and communication. After considering the general depreciation that invests poetry after 9/11 and rejecting the presumed necessity of silence as proper response, poetry is examined by virtue of its relationship with loss. Finally, the hypothesis of interpreting oppositional poetics as an avant-garde movement is confuted, though offering indications that help to frame oppositional practices after 9/11. The close of the chapter opens on a reflection upon the way to theorize global experiences of suffering through literature.

#### **5.1 Representation and Communication**

The most controversial aspect about the artistic interpretation of 9/11 relates to representation. A number of studies treated this matter, because 9/11 brings to the surface challenges that encompass the aesthetic sphere turning to ethical and political issues. The moral kernel of the matter is the presumption of expression, or the necessity of speaking about trauma that is unspeakable by definition. As a matter of fact, the cultural paradigm used to interpret literature after 9/11 is based on trauma studies, leading to the theoretical paradox that expressing 9/11 is therefore impossible: if trauma is unknowable, there should be no way to trustfully mediate it. Thus, this traumatic event seems to be surrounded by a taboo veil that obscures its legitimacy of being told. If on the one hand there is the necessity of expressing an artistic representation of the fact, on the other the aesthetic process is blamed for its

unfaithfulness or guilt in daring to represent an immoral event. A reasonable doubt about representation should be advanced at this point. Why is the aesthetic representation after 9/11 marked for a presumed inadequacy and charged with such a moral intent? Which is the reason leading to invoke for silence instead of “recognizing the necessity of aesthetics among the ashes” (Pozorski 58)? Like for the majority of the aspects concerning the arts after 9/11, there is no easy answer.

A valid starting point is to confute perhaps the most accredited opinion and treat the subject of the aesthetic representation in the aftermath as a failure of language. This position, embraced and forcefully supported by two eminent critics of literature after 9/11, R. Gray and West, states that the true failure of this tragedy lies in the impossibility of communication. Whereas their statement denies the possibility of expressing a tragedy of such extent, this thesis formally rejects this point that seems too lessen the value of expression after a traumatic experience and, ultimately, too emotionally-bond. “If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd” (R. Gray 1) states R. Gray, whereas West assumes a less radical position by seeing in poetry a possible artistic solution. As a matter of fact, West asserts that

Poetry puts pressure upon the limits of language, tries to articulate things which cannot be articulated by modes of verbal expansiveness, but which are better captured by modes of compression and condensation. Poetry employs condensation and displacement, the two primary operations of the unconscious and of dream language [...]. The poetic undertaking condenses otherwise dispersed domains of language so as to associate them within high-density polysemic complexes [...]. For this reason, poetry is perhaps ideally equipped to deal with the failure of language which, [...] has ensued in the wake of 9/11. (West 140)

R. Gray sits the problem at the core of the process concerning language, and West finds a partial solution turning to the poetical articulation, by limiting the preeminence of fictional forms. The privileged position accorded to poetry elevates this form beyond the impasse of a presumed unspeakability, because part of the stylistic devices employed by the verses

concerns untranslatable patterns, such as rhythm, pauses and spaces. However, they both speak about the failure of an exhaustive expression, stating that language has been invalidated by trauma – position that seems confirmed by many clinical studies of the PTSD analyzing the difficulty of articulating a traumatic experience<sup>31</sup>. Nevertheless, the critic Sascha Pöhlmann contrasts the diagnosis of the failure of language underlining a very simple but invalidating aspect. According to his confutation, the erroneous assumption confuses what cannot be represented with that which cannot be spoken about<sup>32</sup>. The problem is to be set in terms of the different temporalities taking place in facing trauma, by distinctly separating the time of experience from the time of elaboration. This aspect has been remarked also by others. For example, Keniston asserts that

Belatedness is generally associated by psychoanalysis with a gap between the time of experiencing an event and the time of understanding it; in Cathy Caruth's terms, the traumatic event 'is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it'. (Keniston 662)

In other words, it is true that trauma involves psychological zones of unspeakability, but this does not invalidate the necessity (and, consequently, the possibility) of expressing the experience. Language is a way to take control over trauma, because the experience and its elaboration relate to different temporalities and faculties – that of perceiving, and that of artistically creating. Consequently, the tragical event perhaps cannot be accepted and understood in quality of a forceful and unjustified aggression, but representation is a way to enter in contact with and process it in a secondary moment. In fact, if the hypothesis of a total failure of language proposed by R. Gray were true, there would be no artistic representation at all; conversely, the massive presence and diffusion of poetry immediately after 9/11 fully contrasts this scenario. The problem of R. Gray's radical position is that he is too trauma-

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<sup>31</sup> See Caruth, 1995, Felman and Laub, 1992.

<sup>32</sup> See Pöhlmann, 2010.

focused, and he does not give sufficient importance to the artistic reactions; by doing so, one has the perception of diminishing literature after 9/11.

It seems reasonable to ask whether language is truly unapt to convey the experience or if this is a truism to justify some sort of respect for the tragedy. At this regard, I have already discussed the ‘need for silence’ that was asked in the aftermath, but it would be useful to quote J. Gray’s interpretation of Adorno’s position toward cultural traumas. J. Gray sets the theoretical impasse concerning language not in the means used to express it, but in a wrong attitude toward trauma itself: “The danger lies not in writing about disaster but in the pretense of understanding it” (Jeffrey Gray 262). J. Gray’s observation shifts the attention on the obstinacy of seeking a reason for what happened, arriving to the impossibility of finding an answer. This leads the discussion to consider the purport of art in representing trauma, because he seems to suggest that art should actually independent from the subject it represents. His position denies a commitment in the act of representation, whereas the majority of critics, and of the public too, seems to seek for a kind of depiction trustworthy and engaged. According to this, the mistake by artists would not be that of representing trauma, but that of misrepresenting its authenticity.

The problem of authenticity deserves a deeper consideration. It is true that 9/11 redefined the artistic challenges for contemporary authors, because the impact of the tragedy required a new commitment toward language. However, the question of authenticity should not be confused with commitment, though one aspect may better explain the other. Authenticity directly relates to the perception of reality; so, the question lies in the philosophical approach toward what can be experienced, and how. Perhaps the most illuminating and discussed position is that of the philosopher Baudrillard, who wrote *The Spirit of Terrorism* by directly addressing to 9/11. His philosophical theory distinctly separates reality from the *simulacra*, focusing on the virtualization of the contemporary

world, and he finds in 9/11 the momentum of maximum contradiction of history, where the real and the imagined clashed and melted into tragedy. In quality of virtual spectators, we confront with the authenticity of the event and the falsity of its representation; consequently, we are forced to face both dimensions that construct our contemporary reality. Following this, the challenge of the arts is to deal with and represent the authenticity of reality, contrasting the false virtual images that confuse it.

To understand the problem of authenticity, it may help to think about the 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Schopenhauer, who elaborated similar observations about the progressive detachment of perceptions from reality, though for obvious reasons he could not consider the virtual means<sup>33</sup>. Schopenhauer believed that humanity cannot truly know reality, because the world is our “will and representation”, meaning that we see the world as we want to see and represent it. In other words, if we are involved in the phenomenology of the facts, this does not necessarily mean that we reach a scientific understanding of them. This because reality is hidden by what he calls “the veil of Maya”, or the illusion surrounding reality that divides the things as they really are from how they appear. Since we mostly deal with appearances, our perceptions of reality do not suffice for providing true knowledge; and among the possible solutions to overcome this problem, Schopenhauer individuates Art as a privileged medium to unveil reality. Similarly to Baudrillard, Schopenhauer separates the experience of reality from reality itself; and their positions may be considered cognate in dealing with the problem of authenticity.

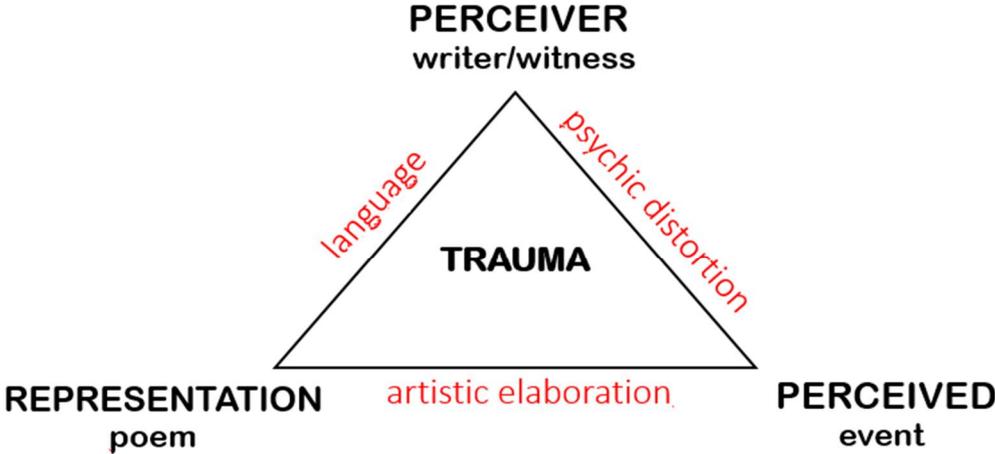
Turning to consider 9/11 and trying to apply these philosophical conceptions to the tragedy, the problem of legitimacy in representing trauma becomes a matter of experiencing reality. Unveiling Baudrillard’s *simulacra* or Schopenhauer’s “veil of Maya” means to

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<sup>33</sup> See Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*, 1818. Any translation.

restore a representation that is able to contrast unfaithful depictions; so, Baudrillard and Schopenhauer shift the problem on the possibility of knowing reality.

At this point of the discussion, it can be useful to frame the most controversial aspects of representation after 9/11 again. After confuting the idea of a failure of language, the possibility of reaching a trustful knowledge of reality can be approached from a linguistic point of view. Yet the topic seems to rotate around three impenetrable axioms: the disturbing aspect of trauma, that brings along the ethical feature; the knowability of reality, that concerns authenticity; and the faculty of language, that invalidates the expression. The problem concerns wider considerations and it does not pertain to representation, but communication. One of the aspects often neglected in treating 9/11 is to consider the capacity of impacting on the consciousness, at the point of modifying the way we experience and process trauma. At this regard, I elaborated a scheme to reflect upon the relationship between representation and communication, by specifically focusing on the poetical form.



As can be seen from the image above, trauma is the kernel of the question, in the sense that it is the altering principle of the experience in a traumatic event. Surrounding the centrality of trauma, the psychological reactions and the artistic elaboration take form. At one vertex, the perceiver is both the person who experiences trauma (directly or by assimilating the cultural trauma) and the writer charged with the task of expressing it; on another vertex, the

event and the representation depend upon the perceiver. The event is the tangible fact that directly touches the victim; so, it is mediated by the filter of the personal experience. Finally, the artistic representation, that always follows the shocking exposure, comes as a refined elaboration charged with an aesthetic value.

These elements reveal interesting aspects if considered by looking at the dialectic relationships that link them. In a philosophical sense, if trauma can be considered as a direct and autonomous manifestation of reality, then the event is the tangible phenomenon that represents it. More specifically, the event is the external stressor that the perceiver faces through a personal experience. On the one hand, trauma is an ontological phenomenon; on the other, the event through which it manifests itself relates to the phenomenology of the fact, and thus it depends on the perceiver. The perceiver is the active recipient of the shocking event, because her/his experience of it is mediated by a psychic distortion<sup>34</sup>; and this coincides with what Keniston indicates as the first step in processing the experience that precedes the belatedness of its cognitive understanding. Interestingly, the passage that occurs between the perceiver and the 'raw' event is a first level of elaboration of reality, which does not have an artistic form yet, though it includes a psychological involvement. Turning to consider representation, this aspect is filtered by a double mediation. The poem is a secondary elaboration, and it develops thanks to the artistic inspiration. After trauma, the artistic elaboration favors the processing of the shocking event; so, the event becomes both content and inspiration for the act of representation. Ultimately, the poem is also the formal expression of language that interprets the meaning and message of the aesthetic form; and poetry offers wide possibilities to interpret trauma, thanks to stylistic features more apt to interpret the suspension and unspeakability that the shock embodies. This passage implies cognitive and linguistic aspects that mediate the abstraction of the writer's mind and thought.

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<sup>34</sup> See Caruth, 1995.

Language bridges the writer's intentions and the final literary object, as well as the artistic elaboration and inspiration fill the gap that stems from the experience of the traumatic event.

This triangle is associated with three different moments related to trauma: the incident, the time of psychic processing and the moment of representation. The passages linking these elements correspond to the levels of elaboration: first, the event is psychologically elaborated by the person; then the event becomes a source for the artistic expression and ultimately language offers its means to translate the experience. This reading of trauma and the processes that hide behind it are based on the idea that the personal subjectivity and experience are the measure of communication. In my opinion, it is reductive to see the problem concerning literature after 9/11 only as an impasse of representation, because the effect of such a shocking event altered the process of reception itself. The point is not that trauma modifies language, but it redefines its functions; since part of the traumatic process consists in its linguistic processing, the moment of verbalization is not to be meant as a failure, but as a challenge for the communicative aspects of language. Finally, my conclusion is that trauma could be better understood by locating the matter in terms of communication, rather than representation.

This reasoning intensifies the need for a reconsideration of how various modes of communication work in order to construct reality, by including language in the debate about 9/11. This aspect of the question has not been neglected by critics, who have observed that the topic must be considered in terms of narration, rather than language. As a matter of fact, trauma creates cognitive gaps that disturb memory and the survivors' psychology<sup>35</sup>, and these problems affect the attempts to construct a possible narrative that synthesize the shocking exposure into stable configurations. Since trauma proposes an experience that is not ascribable into recognized cognitive schemes, the difficulty of expressing it lies in the

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<sup>35</sup> See Mc Farlane and Van Der Kolk, 1995; and Caruth, 1995.

capacity of narrating it. Trauma destabilizes the narrative, so “the emphasis is on how developing a narrative produces a new version of the original memory as opposed to helping a person understand what ‘really’ happened” (Klein 65). Tracking the value of narrative to investigate the ways the writer responds in the elaboration of the shock offers an account of how she/he integrates the event into a personal interpretation of what happened. This reading configures trauma as a mode of figuration itself, whose narratives depends primarily on the subjectivity of the storyteller and it brings the signs of the traumatic exposure.

Discussing De Lillo’s literary response “In the Ruins of the Future”, Marco Abel explains that “present-day attempts to image a (traumatic) event’s sense cannot operate exclusively on the level of the event’s content (the representational what) without attending to the *rhetorical* mode of presentation, the ethical how” (Abel 1236). This observation leads to consider the question of narrative in a broader scope. On the personal and psychological level, the traumatized subject elaborates the shock into a disturbed narrative scheme that later takes an artistic form charged with an aesthetic value; but the rhetorical elaboration leads us to think about narrative in terms of cultural construction. These considerations bring to the surface the question of the opposition between narratives characterizing 9/11. As it has been noted elsewhere in this dissertation, the shocking experience of 9/11 has often been seen by the public discourse in terms of a ‘clash of cultures’ between the West and the East. Thus, speaking about narrative means to properly consider one’s subjectivity in treating this trauma, but also to remember that narrative encompasses a more complex cultural elaboration of it. A key factor to understand the question of narrative in the context of trauma is to address its oppositional character, that exposes the contrast between the terrorists and the public discourse.

Posing the question in terms of narrative, critics agree on determining the influence that terrorism had after 9/11. Whereas the question has often been reduced to opposite models

of society and religion and by addressing the consumeristic and Catholic Western culture against the enclosed and Islamic Eastern regions, both narratives rely on cultural constructions and symbols that simplify the matter. The choice of diminishing the power of narratives by reducing them to signs conversely reinforces them, because it helps in constructing antagonisms easy to use both for the public discourse and the terroristic rhetoric. As can be seen from the example of the Twin Towers, used as a target for the Western economic power and culture, the terroristic narrative takes nourishment from symbols at the point that every act becomes a metaphor for the war of the new century. As 9/11 interpreted the archetype of the catastrophe and the end of the world, the terroristic rhetoric aims at contrasting every aspect of Western life, trying to destroy the falsity of its allure. Quoting Lyotard, the critic Lance Rubin observes that

terrorism is part of the battle for discursive supremacy. Whether coming from the marginalized cell or the official nation-state, totalizing metanarratives [...] are terroristic by their very nature. The official state's fundamental goal is a domination that imposes a hegemonic authority on the heterogeneity of contrasting events and possible meanings. Likewise, terrorists attempt to subvert or disrupt those discursive and symbolic orders that suppress differences or alternative visions. (Rubin 165)

According to Rubin and Lyotard, terrorists demand for attention, and to do so they attempt to destabilize the discourse of the dominant culture, trying to disturb our narratives and the nature of the Western discourse itself. Consequently, the matter of narrative is complex, because our models of reality are inevitably linked to networks of power, like media, entertainment industries, political parties and religious organizations. Rubin continues by reminding that terrorism tries to affect and weaken the power of these encompassing narratives that impose a hegemonic ideology, arriving to discuss the problem on the abstraction of representation. Similarly, we do represent the terroristic narratives according to our cultural frame; so, Rubin states that the problem of representing terror does not concern the terrorists' rhetoric, but in the forms of language we used to describe and explain their acts. In the aftermath, the mass media and the politic discourse tried to eliminate the critical

voices that did not presented the Americans as passive spectators; so, Rubin goes further saying that the problem, to some extent, can be considered a problem of censorship. In this context, it is easy to see that the emergence of counter narratives is related to the need of finding alternatives to respond to the terroristic discourse, but also to the imposition of a Western vision of the facts. Thus, the development of oppositional poetics depends on this need of creating a possible counter discourse in the cultural practice of after 9/11.

Others have set the problem in terms of a crisis of the popular culture, by asserting that the sterility of the consumeristic culture is at the base of the difficulty of endowing events with an ultimate meaning<sup>36</sup>. Traumatic events like 9/11 unveil this lack of stable coordinates, by exposing the necessity of a renovation in the cultural frame to respond to an internal crisis and an external threat:

Now, more than ever, Americans find themselves caught between the conflicting interests and voices that constitute the national debate, situated at a peculiarly awkward meeting place between the culture(s) of the nation and the culture of the global marketplace – and, perhaps above all, faced with the challenge of new forms of otherness that are at best virulently critical and at worst obscenely violent. What this offers to American writers is the chance, maybe even the obligation, to insert themselves in the space between conflicting interests and practices and then dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders. (R. Gray 18-19)

According to R. Gray, narratives are to respond to the oppositions by creating the possibility of a literary space where those antagonisms can be resolved and reconciled. Literature is a privileged site to respond to narratives, thanks to the expanded network of possible references that communication can assume. In particular, the case of poetry represents the challenge of bringing to the surface the themes misrepresented in the public rhetoric. As previously discussed in this dissertation through the examples of gender, guilt and history, contemporary poets seek to “insert themselves in the space between conflicting interests and practices”, by addressing the lyrical form as oppositional practice to contrast the current narratives. In this

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<sup>36</sup> See Hartman, 2002.

sense, oppositional poetics is not to be meant as merely political, though they serve a social function; but they are to be regarded as configurations of reality. As it has been noted, “[t]his unique capability of poetry to mirror perceptions and feelings as well as to offer counternarratives to official historiography makes it an exceptional site of representation [...]” (Pöhlmann 8).

Finally, poetry after 9/11 faces complex issues that encompass representation, communication and narrative. These topics cannot be easily reduced to an interpretation based on a trauma paradigm, because of the interrelations that connect the subjectivity of the experience with the wider cultural elaboration. Trying to explain the artistic process that gives birth to an aesthetic product means to address the personal response to trauma, but also to consider the value of narrative in the context of the oppositions characterizing the debate about the tragedy. In quality of oppositional practice, poetry has the capacity of elaborating a counter discourse that questions the traditional representation and communication of the event of 9/11. Echoing Baudrillard’s words, Altieri has been noted that

No oppositional artist intends to flirt with the simulacral. Oppositional work tries to fight off that specter by treating art as direct political production rather than the seductive reproduction of already established roles and values. (Altieri 456)

Poetry after 9/11, as art in general, deals with the necessity of unveiling the ‘simulacra’, that sense of illusion explained by Schopenhauer that seems to disturb a trustful narration of the facts. Oppositional poetics actually conveys a dissident message that subverts the established hegemonic narrative, though this intention needs to be deduced and does not find formal accomplishment. Following this, it can be questioned the role of silence in relation to poetry.

## **5.2 Poetry after 9/11: Rejecting Silence**

Beyond the theoretical speculations about the linguistic and psychological interconnections of trauma, another point should be considered. As a matter of fact, proper

attention should be addressed to the practical problems surrounding the arts representing this subject. The introductory issue encountered in approaching the literary theory about the aestheticization of 9/11 deals with the inevitable incident of finding a proper category to classify the genres dealing with this trauma. Thus, the first premise to put forward consists in the acknowledgement of the hybridity that permeates contemporary literature, as De Lillo points out in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future”, since contemporary writing does not ask for labeling, but rather for cross-references to be understood. The presumed necessity of reconducting artistic works to fixed literary categories is a danger that can limit the comprehension of 9/11; so, my position is to regard the contribution offered by this chapter as a general analysis that can be expanded to the general artistic debate about trauma, considering the specific focus on the case of poetry. Following this, poetry after 9/11 needs to be considered letting aside most prejudices surrounding this form, by adapting its production and reception to the specificity of the trauma paradigm.

One of the problems that poetry after 9/11 needs to confront with is related to its bad reputation in the literary panorama. Immediately after the attacks, poetry quickly started to circulate everywhere in the city, in form of post-it, pieces left at Ground Zero, or even on internet platforms<sup>37</sup>. Poems were the very first form to appear in the aftermath, by gradually leaving more room to responses like essays and novels that required a longer temporality to find accomplishment. On the contrary to what it may seem, the immediate and extensive diffusion of poetry did not favor this genre; and the considerable distribution of poetry after 9/11 has undoubtedly damaged its reputation. By indicating its overwhelming presence as sign of a literary decadence where almost ‘everyone could write poetry’ and felt the right to do so, criticism has often neglected to consider poetry as presenting a valuable point of view

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<sup>37</sup> A project promoted by the New York University (NYU) gathers all the artistic expressions about 9/11, also those including poetry, in an open archive available for consultation:  
[https://www.nyu.edu/fas/projects/vcb/case\\_911/resources/web.html](https://www.nyu.edu/fas/projects/vcb/case_911/resources/web.html)

about trauma. This assumption, easy to be proved by looking at the number of articles about the topic compared to those treating fiction and novels, has led to think that if anyone could write poetry, then all poetry after 9/11 carries a reduced or 'meaningless meaning'. Following this, it is even more difficult to explain why poetry after 9/11 is different from the tradition, because it seems that poetry first needs to be legitimated in the panorama of contemporary literature<sup>38</sup>.

Another reason for which poetry was (and often, is) generally distrusted as a form concerns its presumed difficulty. Poetry is often regarded with suspicion, because its formal elaboration makes it less accessible than novels or short stories that find a more favorable market to become best sellers. Its rhetorical construction is often the justification provided by those who sustain that poetry is an elitist form, by stating that the message is less accessible compared to other forms. This statement turns out to be especially true for the case of poetry after 9/11, because in the aftermath the arts were required to carry an accessible message to express collective healing. The cultural response after 9/11 wanted the artists to deal with the tragedy in order to produce works easily approachable, as it was common thought that after such a trauma the proper response should consist in a simple and accessible communication.

Consequently, the resultant inadequacy to become a recognized 'valuable' form because of the transformation to a sort of mass-media object, along with the elevate level of abstraction that this genre requires, have paradoxically transformed its extensive circulation in a depreciation of its purport. As a direct consequence, the idea of a 'valuable' poetry has been limited to the academic production by scholars and professors, therefore excluding most of the poetical production that tried to emerge. The theoretical impasse encountered by the

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<sup>38</sup> Looking at the criticism about 9/11, it is evident that novels are privileged. To quote a couple of examples, the number of studies that can be easily found about *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman and *The Falling Man* by De Lillo demonstrate it.

arts in the aftermath is that they are supposed to provide a simple intellectual substance, speaking about the complexity of trauma; so, it seems that literature after 9/11 must be equipped with an intellectual basis making this form actually committed in bridging the experience. By contrast to the underestimation of a mass-mediated poetry, 'valuable' poetry has been restricted to the academia or small presses. For example, the texts discussed in this dissertation are taken from anthology *Poetry after 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets*, edited and printed by the small printing house Melville Press. Among the challenges for the aesthetic representation of trauma, probably the hardest task for poetry after 9/11 is to reestablish its dignity, and demonstrate the importance of the poetical practice especially in the case of trauma.

These premises seem necessary to introduce any literary discourse, because poetry after 9/11 suffers from a series of prejudices due to the specificity of this event. In my opinion, the underlying problem of the debate is that everyone tries to evaluate, give a tag or label literature after 9/11, by pressing to find a meaning, a therapeutic purpose, or a justification. Unfortunately, this attitude limits the understanding of the facts and at the same time forces writers to *produce* meaning, forgetting the autonomous and meaningful character that literature already has. An example for this is the therapeutic aspect that the arts in dealing with 9/11 are required to possess to express a tangible meaning; or the complex issues associated with the ethics of trauma. This aspect of production has important consequences, and an evident contrast can be noted turning to consider the conditions of the circulation for the poetical representation. The easy commercialization of works of art such as photos and novels by best-seller authors depicting 9/11 has undoubtedly favored the market of visual arts and mainstream literature, while other forms have been affected. While photos and articles were sold to newspapers and the media all over the world, complex and elaborated forms such as poetry and painting struggled to find a justification for their existence in the

artistic panorama. This process translated into a commodification of the arts that favored some artistic expressions to the detriment of others. Following this, it is easy to understand why poetry after 9/11 chooses to rely on small presses, since this is also an ideological stance to bestow the genre with proper consideration excluding it from the commodification investing the artistic panorama after 9/11. Not surprisingly, those forms that are easily saleable seem more apt to convey a proper aestheticization of trauma, by dismissing or denying the value of the others. As noted by Pozorski,

reviewers, politicians, and audiences clamor for artists to interpret the ‘great questions of the day’ – to use their talents on behalf of all of us to voice something as the horrible and repeated image of the falling man associated with 9/11 – and then immediately dismiss the results as inadequate or inappropriate because of their beauty. (Pozorski 6)

Pozorski deeply investigates the matter by considering the case study of painting, analyzing *The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy* by Graydon Parrish. She focuses on the way some artistic forms have been blamed for inadequacy, by pointing out that the most addicted justification relates to the moral side of the question. The common assumption is that such a painful tragedy involving dead people and hatred cannot be coherent with the beauty of an artistic representation; however, this seems to me an easy excuse to privilege some forms to the detriment of others.

At the basis of the artistic representation that obscures poetry after 9/11 seems to lie an ethic justification. It is often the case that tragedies are actually concerned by the problem of ethics, and this is true for the majority of artistic works analyzed by scholars of trauma studies<sup>39</sup>. After a cultural shock, artistic depictions seem inappropriate, because the guilt that stems from trauma is transferred upon art. The common feeling is that art carries guilt; therefore, the artistic representation is seen as unacceptable. The overquoted sentence by Theodore Adorno “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” summarizes this assumption,

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<sup>39</sup> Literary examples by artists such as Primo Levi, Art Spiegelman, Susan Faludi or Antje Krog have been criticized for representing issues related to tragedies, but on the other hand they have also been praised for the attempts of representing the unspeakable.

and it is the main starting point for every criticism about the arts dealing with trauma. While the adjective barbaric does not conceal a moral objection, there is reason to wonder why poetry is specifically called into question. In the theoretical debate of literature about trauma, it seems that poetry does not possess the same right of expression that other genres have. For example, also expanding beyond the U.S., novels treating the subject of historical traumas have been very popular and gained attention all over the world<sup>40</sup>.

Turning to consider poetry after 9/11, the preface of the anthology by Johnson and Merians comes to support this hypothesis, by reminding that a fireman in the aftermath asked for silence, rejecting poetry: “Thank you for the food and the blankets and the flowers but please – no more poetry” (Johnson and Merians, ix). Probably justified by the overwhelming presence of poems, this statement, along with Adorno’s position, actually reveal a diffidence toward poetry, by preferring silence as proper response after trauma. Whereas fictional works were acclaimed for daring to represent the unspeakable, this demonstrates that silence was preferred in the case of poetry. Confronting the arts after 9/11, the general impression is that poetry seems to be more involved in the ethics of trauma, so to justify silence.

A lot of critics have treated the subject of silence, by analyzing it as a kind of response to trauma. For example, in the article “How (and How Not) to Write About 9/11”, Cornel Bonca recommends following precise steps before starting to write:

*First: Shut up.* Any decent pop culture response to 9/11 needs to issue from a deep core of silence, a withdrawal from pop space into private space, a withdrawal that allows the speaker to escape the ‘Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and experience’ that the late David Foster Wallace noted was the most pervasive and infuriating feature of contemporary life [...]. (Bonca 133-4)

Beyond the moral aspect of the ethics representing 9/11, one could ask whether silence could be a denial of trauma. In this case, the act of writing poetry turns out to be a subversive reaction toward the shock. Free from the coherence of narrative constraints, poetry after 9/11

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, like *If This is a Man* by Primo Levi (1947), *Country of my Skull* by Antje Krog (1998), and *The Falling Man* by De Lillo (2007).

rejected silence both as properly ethic response and denial of trauma, by opposing to the objection that writing is barbaric. By virtue of all these considerations, poetry after 9/11 is representative of an oppositional practice in reacting against trauma. Following this, its massive diffusion in the aftermath is actually the consequence for its need of expressing an objection at the idea that poetry is an inappropriate response. As R. Gray has observed,

What is remarkable, and arguably unique, about the response of American writers to the crisis of 9/11 was that it reignited their interest in a paradox that lies at the heart of writing at least since the time of Romanticism: the speaking of silence, the search for verbal forms that reach beyond the condition of words, the telling of a tale that cannot yet must be told. (R. Gray 14)

R. Gray does not set the problem in the ambiguity of a denial of trauma, but in the problem of accepting and representing absence. Under the light of this observation, the oppositional character of poetry after 9/11 becomes even more evident. If the paradox of representation touches all the arts, it is truer for the case of poetry, because of its attempt to reject silence in the immediate aftermath. The paradox of speaking about silence is to be read in terms of seeking a substitute for absence. What 9/11 revealed is that finding an expression for trauma also means to face the limits of writing about it.

At this regard, a distinction ought to be made. 9/11 deals with different forms of unspeakability. As noted by Dominick LaCapra, trauma touches and affects three psychological dimensions, those of absence, lack and loss. Absence is perhaps the most difficult to deal with, because the victim is exposed to the absence of something that should be there, but the traumatized subject cannot find; whereas

Loss is often correlated with lack, for as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future. A lost object is one that may be felt to be lacking, although a lack need not necessarily involve a loss. Lack nonetheless indicates a felt need or a deficiency; it refers to something that ought to be there but is missing. (LaCapra 703)

These observations match R. Gray's literary thesis about silence and absence. In fact, the act of writing after 9/11 reveals the psychological need of reacting against the degrees of absence

that 9/11 implied. The abrupt loss of the Twin Towers, symbol embodying the American hegemony, left a psychological wound that found expression in the necessity of silence; by contrast, the arts quickly responded by indicating a different possible way to elaborate trauma. LaCapra argues that there are several ways to respond to absence, by quoting the artistic works of the last century and finding in them different narrative practices to overcome the inability to articulating the shocking experience. According to this, there is reason to think that poetry after 9/11, with the specificity of its formal elaboration, interprets the verbalization of absence and unspeakability. As it has been noted by others, “9/11 literature works as a prosthesis, an awkward substitute for and attempt to compensate for the unrepresentable absence effected by 9/11 itself” (Keniston and Quinn 2).

Turning to a partial conclusion, poetry occupies a specific place among the artistic representations of 9/11. The reason for this mainly depends on the difficulty encountered by this genre to be trusted as proper form to express significance after a cultural shock. Compared to other forms, poetry is blamed for its presumed major involvement in the ethics of trauma. While silence is often invoked as a respectful reaction toward trauma, the case of poetry after 9/11 marks a significant difference, since it claims for attention upon the act of writing as psychological elaboration of the experience. The impressive presence of this genre after the attacks is undoubtedly sign of the cultural need of responding to such a shocking event. Consequently, poetry is a kind of oppositional practice that tries to overcome trauma, by rejecting silence and addressing the act of artistic expression. All these observations lead to think about 9/11 in terms of a challenge in the act of representation, connecting the ethics of trauma with the way this tragedy can be mediated. A compelling perspective about this issue brings us back to consider representation and its bond with communication; and finally question whether the artistic research embodied by oppositional poetics corresponds to a possible new artistic movement developed in the aftermath.

### 5.3 Oppositional Poetics as Avant-Garde Art?

The analysis of oppositional poetics developed up to now has rejected the labeling of an autonomous genre. The provided definition has been reconstructed by different theorizations, and by giving effective parameters to trace its presence in poetry after 9/11. Yet the title of this section, which is more provocative than explanatory, wants to suggest a new possible critical perspective. The suggestive intuition is to consider the category of oppositional poetics as one embodying features typical of the *avant-garde* art. As a matter of fact, the two theoretical definitions share some basic characteristics that make them similar. An analysis of oppositional poetics based on the established and recognized avant-gardistic position may be useful not to trace a precise correspondence between the two cultural trends, but to clarify the aesthetic choices of contemporary poetry after 9/11 in the context of a response to terrorism. In other words, the main idea is to investigate the position of oppositional poetics as a possible example of *avant-garde* art in rejecting the hegemony of public discourses dealing with the War on Terror.

To better expand this point that will be fully developed, the starting point to discuss this issue is to quote an essay that can be helpful in connecting the category of oppositional poetics to the avant-garde movements. In the essay “9/11 as Avant-Garde Art”, Richard Schechner examines the terroristic attacks of 9/11 as a form of extreme spectacularization, by provocatively considering them as a work of performative avant-gardistic art. The radical position advanced by his analysis interprets the event from the perspective of performance studies, seeing the assault at the World Trade Center as a performance that was planned and staged, with the purpose of affecting the collective imaginary, later virtualized by the media coverage. Though Schechner’s study is supported by a strong academic background, in my opinion his position is too paradoxical and radical to find actual accomplishment; however, the essay gives interesting hints. By inviting to regard at 9/11 as a possible work of art,

Schechner determines the possibility of a new avant-garde movement starting on that date. According to the Old English Dictionary, the etymology of the word *avant-garde* indicates “the foremost part of an army”, but more in general it also refers to being “ahead” or “first”. Considering 9/11 as a breaking date, or a starting point for a new historical and possible artistic period, this idea well fits the emergence of oppositional poetics; as a matter of fact, oppositional poetics (and poetry in particular) represented the first literary reaction in the aftermath. This correspondence suggests at regarding at the forms of literary expression after 9/11 as possibly involved in an avant-gardist innovation. However, this hypothesis needs to be confirmed by looking at the aesthetic choices that would allegedly validate it.

The story of the avant-garde movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century stabilized a precise definition of the aesthetic choices characterizing this artistic trend. Though by substantial aesthetic differences, Futurist, Dada, Modernist and Language Poets’ creations share some characteristics defining an avant-gardistic general line. For example, they are often associated with a radical renovation of artistic form and content, turning to experimental innovations that are easily distinguishable compared to traditional works of art. Avant-gardistic conceptions are radical, moved by a profound critical stance against their cultural surrounding; they may or may not conceal a rejection also against the economic processes underlying their historical contemporaneity.

The validity of interpreting oppositional poetics as a possible *avant-garde* artistic reaction opening the 21<sup>st</sup> century may indeed be questioned at this point. The main common feature is a critical stance toward their times. Both oppositional poetics and avant-gardistic works criticize accepted norms and artistic canons, by proposing a renovation of the cultural panorama. In this sense, the poems previously discussed ask for a different perspective on the facts and they criticize contemporaneity, as demonstrated in the previous chapters.

More specifically, Valentine's "She Would Long" and "The Broken Bowl" and Peacock's "The Land of the Shi" set the trauma of 9/11 in a gendered dimension: Valentine draws attention on the corporeal reality of the physical and psychic trauma; whereas Peacock elaborates a more complex thought about the oppositions between the male and female presence in the urban space. Even though they do not necessarily advocate for a radical change in the cultural elaboration of trauma, their poems allow broaden the gendered topic in the context of the media coverage and political rhetoric of the aftermath, demonstrating a highly-gendered feature in the public discourse after 9/11. Their stance avoids a direct provocation about the facts, but indeed it claims for attention. If this can be considered an example of oppositional practice, in terms of content they also match this avant-gardistic characteristic.

In a similar way, the poems by Ostriker and Spears Jones, respectively "The Window, At the Moment of Flame" and "All Saints' Day, 2001", share a more political attitude against their times. Ostriker's poem openly questions the implications of the consumeristic culture, whereas Spears Jones insists on the coverage of the mass culture. Again, according to the artistic trends of the last century, both these examples of oppositional poetics and avant-garde works of art are opposed to mainstream cultural values, by insisting on the political aspect of the artistic relationship between art and the consumer/public.

Finally, also "Four November 9<sup>th</sup>" by Levine and "Circling" by Stenhouse turn toward a rejection of a close-minded vision of history that only concentrates on the local events, opening up to a more inclusive vision of the conflicts. Their positions criticize the refusal of the lessened political and economic borders that our contemporaneity fails to accept; and they delineate new perspectives to interpret our contemporaneity – which is, as previously remarked, a typical feature of the avant-garde.

But do all these features really suffice to define an exact correspondence between the category of oppositional poetics and a new avant-garde trend at the beginning of our century? More than one aspect suggest the contrary. First of all, oppositional poetics is not based on an established Manifesto, whose presence was essential to the 19/20<sup>th</sup>-century artists who wanted to be formally recognized. Moreover, avant-gardistic manifestos were charged with the need and will of a social renovation that is officially absent in the oppositional practices presented above. No militant or abusive attitude characterizes oppositional poetics after 9/11, even if it is true that in terms of content they share a critical stance against the sociocultural panorama; and, more poignantly, there is no radical renovation in the aesthetic forms of expression at the point of revolutionizing the arts. However, it is true that avant-gardistic culture has historically been opposed to a mainstream conception of art, and as a direct consequence it has also opposed the emerging mass culture produced by the process of industrialization; so, to some extent, this can be a feature in common. Nevertheless, it seems a hazard to combine the idea of an oppositional practice with the presumed presence of a new *vague* for avant-garde artistic movements.

Ultimately, how can this rejected hypothesis be useful and pertinent for the analysis of the oppositional practices in poetry after 9/11? Turning to Schechner's essay again can be useful to understand why. Schechner reminds us that the event of 9/11 has been sacralized at the point that it has been transformed into a form of art itself:

[r]eporting fictionalizing of 9/11, including the broadcasting and rebroadcasting of iconic images of the explosions, fires, destruction, aftermath, and war, constitutes an absorption of events not only into the popular imagination but also a presentation of events as objets d'art. (Schechner 1823)

His position invites to think about art differently, because 9/11 has revolutionized many aspects of the artistic expression. By arriving at the paradoxical conclusion that even the historical event *per se* could be interpreted as a performative and amoral work of art, Schechner is trying to say that we need to open our traditional conception of art at more

inclusive perspectives. For example, at the beginning, also Futuristic works seemed too radical and struggled to be defined as 'art', as well as other more recent avant-gardistic movements often proposed abstract and decontextualized uses of objects that make their classification (and, unfortunately, also appreciation) difficult for the public<sup>41</sup>. Ultimately, Schechner finds in the exceptional nature of the trauma of 9/11 the reason for this change:

'Aestheticized - rather than anesthetized - by horrific events of great historic significance' is a deep insight of the process (many) people undergo in assimilating otherwise hard-to-swallow events. Aestheticization is not the only response to these kind of horrific-yet-fascinating-and-'attractive' events, but it is one strategy. Making art about them - in protest, awe, and sometimes support - is another response. (Schechner 1825)

Schechner rejects the idea of an independent and autonomous art, by asserting an impossible detachment from what art represents. In case of trauma, aestheticization becomes therapeutic to give meaning, quoting Hunt's definition of oppositional poetics, "[i]n recognition of the scope of the submerged, disconnected and violent character of contemporary life" (Hunt 1990, 681). However, Schechner goes further by insisting on the idea of "horrific-yet-fascinating-and-'attractive' events". This kind of event aligns with the Romantic definition of the sublime, and his analysis turns to consider 9/11 as an example of 'sublime' that can possibly become inspiration for the arts. To some extent, this assumption can find evidence in the media coverage of the aftermath, since the virtualization of the event has created a parallel and virtual 9/11 for television. Paradoxically, we are speaking about the presence of two different 9/11s: the real event and the represented image of the tragedy. Finally, Schechner concludes on this point:

If there is art in 9/11, it is in the reception and aftermath [...]. In the unfolding event, visual artists, performance artists, writers, artists of any kind can do just about anything with what happened. There is nothing new in that: Goya and Picasso - not to mention Homer, Aeschylus, Vyasa, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Hemingway, and many more - have made masterpieces from the horrors of war. But all these works are reflective. They

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<sup>41</sup> Examples of avant-gardistic art like land art, body art, videoart and performative art reach such a complex level of abstraction to risk losing the contact with the public. Nevertheless, they aim at revolutionizing their relationship, by changing the references of representation.

came after raw, unmediated events. What makes 9/11 different is that it was mediated from the outset and intended to be mediated. (Schechner 1826-7).

The process of aestheticization takes form as artistic representation, but also through the media coverage, in the sense that both methods imply a mediation. Since the aspect of mediation is at the basis of communication, it is particularly difficult to separate a criticism on the event of 9/11 *per se* and its representation, because they were presented as unavoidably connected together. Consequently, this also makes it more difficult to identify what 9/11 art is. On the one hand, this can lead to the radical stance of identifying 9/11 as a performative work of art, as Schechner states; on the other, this can also suggest looking at 9/11 representations as possibly involved in a new artistic process.

Conclusively, this section has provocatively presented oppositional poetics as example of avant-garde. The aim was that of tracing a possible correspondence in their aesthetic choices to reason upon the way art can communicate after and about a trauma such as 9/11. Starting to consider Schechner's thesis about 9/11 as *objet d'art* itself, the idea of associating oppositional poetics to an avant-gardistic contemporary movement has failed to find evidence, though it gives interesting food for thought about. One suggestion could be that we need to change our parameters to define what an avant-garde is or the way it manifests in the contemporary times. The underlying question is whether it is possible to consider 9/11 as a sociopolitical trauma giving impulse to a renovation in the arts; similarly, the traditional definition of contemporary avant-garde art can be interrogated as well. My thesis is that 9/11 has increased the presence of oppositional poetics, formally recognized in the 90s though still struggling to find a proper recognition in the contemporary times. The intriguing point in common with the avant-garde is that even though oppositional poetics does not revolutionize form, it carries a dissident message; so, the question is whether the association between a nonconforming meaning and a free-verse structure can represent a new form of criticizing the literary conventions. Ultimately, it can be said that the possible presence of a new avant-

garde movement for this century should be investigated in a broader cross-cultural perspective, by including other artistic examples<sup>42</sup> from different disciplines – a goal that goes well beyond the intention of this dissertation. Oppositional poetics undoubtedly questions the process of communication, both the artistic representation and the public rhetoric in dealing with the event of 9/11.

#### **5.4 Toward a Global Literature**

As it has been shown, poetry after 9/11 questions different aspects related to its production, diffusion and purport. The last part of this dissertation aims at thinking about the public. As previously noted one of the constitutive functions of writing about trauma concerns what I called the necessity of expression, meaning the will of putting an experience into words and thus share it. The collective dimension of 9/11 consists in recognizing that this was a shared tragedy, so poetry assumes its full significance when considered for its social function of creating connections in this context. In fact, along with the moral responsibility of representing such trauma, the issue of sharing it may carry the problem of taking for granted that every artistic work implies a didactic goal. On the one hand, it is simple to interpret literature 9/11 as carrying a moralizing and educational purpose because of the gravity of the event; on the other, we are forced to accept that representation cannot necessarily be committed in this sense. The trauma paradigm seems to affect the legitimacy and possibility to write limiting the aesthetic value in favor of a committed purport; however, the controversial point does not depend upon the goal of writing or representing, rather in the relationship with the public. It is my opinion that the real problem of literature after 9/11

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<sup>42</sup> Limiting to consider the field of literature, the series “Portraits of Grief” by the *New York Times* can be considered a literary innovation specifically born after 9/11. Sketches of the dead on 9/11, the “Portraits of Grief” represent an example of artistic representation that escapes tradition.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/national/portraits/index.html>

consists in its negotiation with the public, and in the intent of seeking a connection between the work of art and the spectator/reader.

Before going through a deeper analysis of the function of the public, it would be useful to spend a few more words about the constitutive features of poetry in the linguistic process touched by trauma. Another reason that justifies the preeminence of poetry in seeking to convey traumatic experiences relates to the technical means that this genre uses. In particular, the poetical figures of meaning empower the form by reducing the distance between the writer and the reader. Compared to the separation between the narrator and the reader enacted by fiction and novels, poetry verbalizes the experience by using abstract but more direct devices. Some technical devices are showed by the metaphors of the poems treated in this dissertation. To limit the inquiry to the poetic examples previously analyzed, in “She Would Long” Jean Valentine employs the powerful parallelism between the daughter’s and the mother’s reciprocal abandonment to death and pain, at the point that the ‘she’ appearing in the title and body of the text becomes ambiguous. Molly Peacock, in “The Land of the Shí”, develops the poetical reflection through metaphoric parallels between a hypothetic imaginary world and the harshness of a traumatic reality. The reader has the possibility of identifying the places thanks to a real ‘map’ of the disaster, that presents the Avenues and local Deli especially familiar to those readers from New York. The way found by Alicia Ostriker is more involved in a technical harmony rather than images, and “The Window, at the Moment of Flame” reduces the fictional gap addressing to a generic “you” involved in quotidian actions like watching tv o going shopping. Interestingly, Patricia Spears Jones uses rhetorical questions to captivate the reader into a deep self-reflection. Finally, the analogy traced by Anne Marie Levine in “Four November 9<sup>th</sup>” as well as Shelley Stenhouse in “Circling” seek for creating an analogy between their experience of trauma and the psychological implications that this can have on the public. These technical devices are functional to reach

out to the reader, in order to create an occasion of reflection upon the tragedy of 9/11 in a different way. Moreover, it has been noted how the fragmentation through caesures and enjambements corresponds to a process of negotiating a traumatic experience, by reconstructing a narrative process altered by the shock. These stylistic choices are exemplary of the way poets directly address to the reader, but this is not the only characteristic that shows the commitment of poetry in seeking for a contact with the public.

Analyzing the poems presented, a link could be made among them. All the poems presented in this dissertation share an evident characteristic that cannot be ignored in discussing the aestheticization of the trauma they represent. Though through different themes, the authors set their trauma in their personal experience of it. According to their female subjectivity, Valentine, Peacock, Ostriker, Spears Jones, Levine and Stenhouse translate the trauma of 9/11 by presenting it through a close and personal involvement. More explicitly, Valentine presents a female subjectivity with a highly gendered depiction of the body, and Peacock indicates the possibility of a personal psychological feminine shelter in escaping trauma. Similarly, the shocking realization expressed by Ostriker's poem insists on the personal singularity opposed to the collective participation in the event of 9/11, asserting the impossibility of a hatred directed at a single person; whereas Spears Jones recalls the tranquility of a domestic neighbor disturbed by an apocalypse. Even more evidently, Levine's elaboration of trauma concentrates on the coincidence between her personal birthday and other global recurrences; and Stenhouse razes the barriers by exposing a strong first person elaborating the astonishment of the shock. All these poems, by addressing different themes and elaborations about 9/11, are permeated by the strong feeling of belonging to this cultural trauma; and this commitment takes form in presenting their singular involvement in it. As noted by R. Gray,

Poets have responded to the problem of how to write poems after 9/11 by reformulating that problem in the singular. And they have begun to resolve it in terms that are

fundamental to the traditions of American poetry: by acknowledging the human presence at the heart of the historical experience and announcing that presence in a single, separate voice. (R. Gray 192)

In other words, the sense of poetry after 9/11 is to introduce the personal exposure to trauma as exemplary of a collective experience, respectively by reducing the barriers between the writer and the event, but also between the writer and the reader. Finally, this is the commitment expressed by women poets in the challenge of representation after 9/11.

In relation to the personal subjectivity, others have noted that domesticity is a contextual factor in describing the traumatic experience of 9/11, though the majority of critics sets the topic in the fictional background. For example, analyses of novels like *The Falling Man* by De Lillo or *The Zero* by Jess Walters have shown that “even the deployment of a domestic situation is not a retreat from but rather a covert engagement with the political” (Duvall and Marzec 386). Treating the subject of the gendered depictions emerged in the post-9/11, debate this dissertation has found evidence for this feature. The experience recalled in the poems by Valentine is vividly connected with a domestic depiction, by focusing on the individual perception of psychological pain; similarly, Ostriker’s “The Window, at the Moment of Flame” shows a troubling uneasiness for the awareness of living in a safe home while conflicts plague the world. The domestic sphere also opens the poem “Four November 9<sup>th</sup>” by Levine at the very first line, where her birthday is welcomed by her family. This recurring pattern helps in setting the personal experience into the larger dimension of history, offering an occasion of possible identification and engagement to the reader.

Turning to consider the category of oppositional poetics and the literary examples presented, there is evidence for the need of sharing the personal experience not for some kind of educational goal, rather for the aspiration at seeking a contact with the public. By mirroring the world they represent, the poems expose a peculiar mechanism to defend against trauma, that does not consist in a therapeutic or didactic writing, but in a renovated form of

communication with the reader. Yet it could be argued that this is a task involving contemporary literature in general; but this assumption would limit the specificity of trauma in influencing the arts after 9/11.

The reason why oppositional poetics differs from the tradition relates to the kind of public they address. In a joint study about social suffering of the late Nineties, the medical anthropologists Arthur and Joan Kleinman individuated the problem of a raising difficulty in communication, by foreseeing that the virtualization caused by the mediatic coverage of traumatic events affects the public making it indifferent. They stated that “one effect of the Postmodern world’s political and economic appropriation of images of such serious forms of suffering at a distance is that it has desensitized the viewer. Viewers are overwhelmed by the sheer number of atrocities” (Kleinman and Kleinman 8-9). Their analysis, based on the visual examples of photos and reportages in the newspapers, resulted in the recognition that a crucial problem caused by the expansion of the media is a gradual change in the public. The spectator’s/reader’s capacity of processing and storing traumatic representations is altered by the number and gravity of their exposure; so, the problem of communication is to be found in the necessity of a renovation in the relationship between the artist and the public. Consequently, the contemporary challenge consists in finding a way to restore an effective artistic communication in times when the audience is overwhelmed by the exposure to unmediated atrocities and made insensitive. This is representative of the situation that followed the attacks of 9/11. Newspapers and tv channels repeated the catastrophic images of the Twin Towers’ collapse at the point that people were ultimately made insensitive about the event. This example, along with many others that occupy the quotidian of television programs, hints at considering the way contemporary artists relate to the problem. Thus, the question is not limited to find a way to translate the traumatic experience into an artistic work, but also to create an effective communication with the public. The emergence of oppositional

poetics related to collective traumas is to be found in this search for a contact, by connecting the intimate experience of the writer with the capacity of listening of the reader.

Michael Rothberg, in “There is No Poetry in This”, asserts that the task for literature after 9/11 is to find a way to theorize global experiences of suffering. The matter is that both the writer and the reader are exposed to trauma, yet they have different means to face it. The compelling aspect of his position expresses the idea that if terrorism is a global concern, then the work of art interpreting trauma addresses a global public. Rothberg affirms that contemporary literature needs to dismantle the concept of separate identities, because future challenges involve the entire world, and 9/11 has been a reminder of this. “We need a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship” (Rothberg 153), meaning that in a world becoming progressively globalized, there is reason to think that literature should overcome the local limitations to express a global message. At a first sight, this position could seem provocative; but Rothberg formulates a very deep and complex thought. In fact, as this thesis has demonstrated, the attacks of 9/11 represented only an example of the manifestations of the terroristic hatred; and the recent history has shown other terrible attacks over the world. Nowadays, terrorism has become a global concern, where every place could potentially be a target of attacks. If this is true, then this collective reality corresponds to a collective suffering. The experience of suffering that the contemporary public goes through can find a possible mediation in a form of literature that seeks for a global contact. To say it differently, literature after 9/11 does not only address to a limited public, but aims at bridging the gap with a potential global public. The case of poetry brings evidence for this, in the form of oppositional poetics, since this category internalizes the pain of 9/11 by rejecting the ideology of terrorism and also the rhetoric used to contrast it, by expanding the message to a global scale. For example, the political commitment of poems such as “The Window, at the Moment of Flame” by Alicia Ostriker and “Four November 9<sup>th</sup>” by Anne Marie Levine reach

out to the reader expressing a form of grief that invites to think about the poetical message as directly involving the reader. If the traumatic experience is collective, then the feeling of being guilt or involved in history extends to a global reader. Thanks to their innovative character, oppositional poetics presents this feature, as they invite to think expanding the notion of the singular experience to find a new kind of communication with the reader, by stressing the globality of the message that literature possess.

At this regard, recent propositions have underlined the necessity of a more inclusive interpretation for contemporary literature. The brilliant essay “Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization” by Revathi Krishnaswamy highlights the same concept, and it recognizes the importance of oppositional practices for the future of comparative literature. By criticizing the Western-centric character of the traditional literary theory, Krishnaswamy proposes the notion of “world literary knowledges”, asking for a revision of the usual categories to interpret the meaning and message of contemporary literature. The first theoretical point to be deconstructed concerns the master narrative in favor of the emergence of a counter discourse:

The conceptual contributions of diverse cultural traditions across the globe, I contend, cannot properly be recognized or evaluated unless the domain of theory is extended beyond the formal explicit systematic meta-discourses of dominant, prestigious, textual traditions to include regional, subaltern, and popular epistemologies that may be “emergent” (more informally formulated; less fully systematized) or “latent” (embryonic; embedded in praxis). (Krishnaswamy 401)

Only admitting the presence and importance of other contributions can lead toward the definition of a world knowledge, or the possibility of understanding the globality of the message that literature has. While asserting the necessity of including contributions of different cultures and oppositional practices, Krishnaswamy wishes to relocate the debate about the possibility of a global comparative literature in order to respond to many purposes:

In my opinion, such an inclusive approach to theory of literature can (1) promote greater understanding of diverse literary texts/traditions by enlarging the global repertoire of aesthetic epistemologies; (2) uncover cultural differences as well as

common (possibly “universal”) features of our shared aesthetic nature by placing different conceptualizations of literature/literariness side by side; and (3) expose within and across literary traditions new historical networks of influence, antagonism, and affiliation that have been obscured by Eurocentric or nationalistic ideologies of comparison that rely on a Manichean opposition between East and West or colonial and national. (Krishnaswamy 401)

Krishnaswamy stresses compelling points that condensate and summarize some aspects I agree with. The aesthetic category of oppositional poetics presents a different perspective on the communication established by the trauma paradigm, and it offers global and universal features to bridge the experience to the reader. Reducing the debate to an opposition between religious antagonisms between the East and the West is certainly reductive, and it does not help in understanding the challenges that contemporary literature faces. As well as Krishnaswamy recognizes the limits of a literary theory that focuses on a narrow vision of comparative literature, the emergence of oppositional poetics asks to be examined for its importance in the global context. Probably, the biggest crisis that contemporary times face consists in this aspect of globality that changes every traditional perspective – the literary subjectivity, the virtualization of the information, the necessity of finding a renovation in the communication with a unsensitive public, and so on. On the other hand, the aspect of globalization that mainly concerns 9/11 is the universality of this tragedy. This is ultimately the true meaning and importance of what writers after 9/11 did: the fact of speaking in name of humanity and against what humanity reached on 9/11.

Finally, the attacks at the Twin Towers have been a moment of reversal for history, during which the contradictions of Western hegemony exploded. Nowadays, terrorism is not a matter that the singular States face, but something that the entire world has to take into account. A skeptical reader would argue that this was already true for the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the World Wars, but the differences are self-evident. The enemy was represented by a recognizable entity, a nation, or, in the case of other local conflicts, ascribable to political parties or religious-like affiliations. Today, the challenge that the contemporary global citizen

faces does not have recognizable borders or entities. Often terrorists are citizens of the same countries they target, and the contemporary definition of “Islamic terrorism” seems scarce and abused. What the 21<sup>st</sup> century history has shown us so far is that we need to abandon this idea of a fixed threat to embrace a more complex vision of history and accountability. Global citizens struggle to recognize where the threat come from, nor why; and the idea of not being at war, but living the possibility of finding our reality invaded by a warlike scene at any time opens the path to new definitions of trauma. I am writing this dissertation in 2017, with a different awareness and knowledge of the facts, compared to most of the critic works I quote; so, it seems proper to me to point out that the most recent definition of trauma is even less linked to an event-centered idea of disturbance. The representations offered by the arts, as well as the theoretical positions offered by critics are useful to understand the way we arrived at this point; and confronting our experiences with their previous intuitions is an interesting way to validate our assumptions. Compared to the immediate post-9/11 writers, we have the advantage of a more recent history that indicates the development of what 9/11 only partially exposed. From an aesthetic point of view, it is relevant to read the texts not only as admonitions, but also as attempts to give voice to a personal trauma, in which the contemporary reader cannot but trace her/his private correspondence, in order to find her/his instruments to face the quotidian of a historical moment different from those preceding it.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main point of this dissertation has been to identify the category of oppositional poetics, as an example of the counter narrative practices that appeared in the aftermath of 9/11. The importance of this literary category lies in the kind of response that it represents, by moving a critique toward our contemporary world. By focusing on women poets, it has been argued that the female sensibility translates into a poetical subjectivity that is more sensitive to trauma. The singularity of their voices delineates an active stance that moves beyond an attitude of passivity to reach a firm objection against the traditional rhetoric.

In relation to this, the first literary example has developed the theme by treating of gender. Through a gendered critique about the rhetoric used and abused after 9/11, it has been demonstrated how this tragedy can be read by concentrating on this aspect. By rejecting a neat gendered division of roles in facing the aftermath, Valentine's "She Would Long" and "In the Burning Air" propose to look at the crisis that trauma triggers from a psychological point of view. From women poets' perspective, this issue appears clearly involved in criticizing the public discourse directed at proper codes of behavior judged as feminine or masculine. Similarly, Peacock's critique in "The Land of the Shí" stems from a confrontation with a culture that usually divides gendered roles, by rejecting this attitude.

The second literary example proposed the theme of guilt. Among the clinical symptoms of the post-traumatic stress disease, guilt assumes a preeminent role in the post-9/11 writings. Dealing with the consequent issue of responsibility, this topic demonstrates the involvement in a mirroring critique against the Western world. By addressing the terrorists' hatred, "The Window, at the Moment of Flame" by Ostriker finds evidence for a

double review about the reciprocal guilt that the U.S. embody in quality of symbol representing the West. Along with her stance, “All Saints’ Day, 2001” by Spears Jones unmasks the feeling of oppression and violence that comes from the arrogance of a terroristic threat. The sensibility of women poets highlights this aspect assuming a veiled political stance, unmasking the uneasiness for being both victims and aggressors in the geopolitical division of the world.

The third topic has brought to the surface the controversial perception of belonging to history. This theme assumes a peculiar specificity in contemporary times, because the threat of global terrorism is a recent matter that became unavoidable after the evidence of 9/11. Through the examination of poems directly dealing with the issue of being part of history, whether willingly or not, the chapter has demonstrated that the proper definition for contemporary history escapes a periodization to favor the idea of a philosophical condition. “Four November 9<sup>th</sup>” by Levine and “Circling” by Stenhouse are involved in a personal quest about time, that is deeply aware of being part of a common and wide tragedy. Women poets have clearly been receptive to the challenge of interpreting their condition of finding themselves writing after and about 9/11, by rejecting the traditional conception of a sequential time dominated by a cause-effect paradigm.

Finally, the last part of this dissertation has embraced the technical aspects about poetry after 9/11, proposing my personal point of view about the aestheticization of this tragedy. The most compelling element of my analysis is the linguistic triangle I propose for interpreting poetry applying the trauma paradigm. By considering the aspects that modify the verbalization of the traumatic experience into the poetical form, it is my opinion that we cannot operate an accurate examination about form avoiding the considerations of trauma on people’s consciousness. Thus, the problem of representation should be properly reconsidered as a matter of communication. The conclusive part of this dissertation has underlined the

necessity of looking at the aesthetic tasks of 9/11 as interpreters of the challenge of establishing an effective communication with a global public.

The conclusion of this dissertation – if there is a preeminent one – is that oppositional poetics is example of a self-conscious interrogation about the American culture and attitude toward the rest of the world. Obviously, this is not an expression of popular culture, rather shows an intellectual response to question a common participation in a global tragedy. Whereas it is a Western presumption to call 9/11 a ‘global’ tragedy, its consequences have been widespread indeed. The presence of oppositional poetics demonstrates the capacity of a culture to develop a self-criticism, though limited to restricted small groups. In particular, the case of women poets sets the problem in articulating an oppositional voice that suffers the limit of a circumscribed circulation and attention. To contrast this tendency, this dissertation has concentrated on the topics they explore, by demonstrating their modernity and aesthetic importance in the context of contemporary literature. Therefore, oppositional poetics turns out to be expressed and showed by those poets as sign of a counter practice that questions the American culture in numerous ways. If gender is an evident implication for this, it is also true that issues like guilt and history have an oppositional character as well. Women poets elaborate trauma through oppositional poetics, but more importantly their response shows the theorization of a global and shared suffering.

The motivation that surrenders this dissertation is a deep interrogation about the significance of being a global citizen nowadays. What this thesis has tried to bring to light is that we cannot live in the contemporary times ignoring the problems raised by unsolved matters of inter-connection and our responsibility, since the consequences of our actions encompass the world. The task that writers are called to fulfil is to translate their sensibility

to a useful nourishment for the future generations. Yet being a student of American Studies, I arrived to question the meaning of this dissertation many times. I asked myself, what is the true significance or utility of my contribution in what I call the ‘ocean of criticism’ that I have read about 9/11?

I found in the scholar Jim Merod a position that echoes my concern. “What does it mean,” asks Merod, “to practice criticism in the United States today, after Vietnam, after Watergate, after the victory of the new right?” (Merod 151). By developing an interrogation about the idea these facts are “merely passing disturbances” that leave the critic and professor “no better informed about the scope and purpose of dealing with texts,” Merod interprets the historical facts as “signs of the failure of literary education to create, in the ‘best and brightest’ graduates of the finest North American colleges, the social responsibility and the critical compassion that moves from texts into the world and from the world into texts with a well-developed understanding of the human costs of intellectual blindness” (Merod 151).

The risk for criticism is to fail in recognizing the final goal of its work, that is not a theoretical redundancy but the possibility of opening perspectives. My ultimate conclusion is that reading and interpreting poems after 9/11 requires the development of a critical and constructive reflection, that can be helpful for the future. We are now about to finish the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At school, we study the great minds of the previous generations as mentors, and undoubtedly they are; yet we are taught very little about the century we are living in. This dissertation wishes to move in this direction, toward a comprehension of the world we see and we ought to make better.

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In order of appearance. Last access: 09/11/2017.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After an intense period of study, travel and research, today is the day: writing this note of thanks is the finishing touch on my dissertation. I have been learning so much that I would like to take the time for a sincere thanks to the people who helped me throughout this journey.

I express my deepest gratitude to Ca' Foscari University, an institution that I strongly admire for the outstanding Professors and Staff. The extreme competency, trust, meritocracy and commitment in favor of my academic achievements gave me the serenity for pursuing a true personal success. I am proud to part of this team.

I am very much thankful to my advisor Prof. Daniela Ciani for her valuable guidance and interest at various stages of the course of my studies. I appreciate all her contributions of time and ideas to make my learning productive and stimulating. I am also thankful for the excellent example she has provided as a successful woman and professor.

I sincerely thank the entire Joint Degree Committee for providing me the opportunity to follow my passions. You truly helped me to grow as a student, as a person and as a thinking mind. I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Newbold and Marco Piccoli for their crucial support; and I would like to thank the City College of New York for making me live my American Dream.

I am thankful to my family for believing in me, as well as to my friends Yana, Filomena, Emanuel, Elena, Daniele, Paolo, Igna, Caterina, Marta and my great roommates Valentina, François and Federico. You are part of this work, since I was given inspiration by many encounters and talks with you. Thanks for all your encouragement!