

Literature after 9/11

**Edited by Ann Keniston and
Jeanne Follansbee Quinn**

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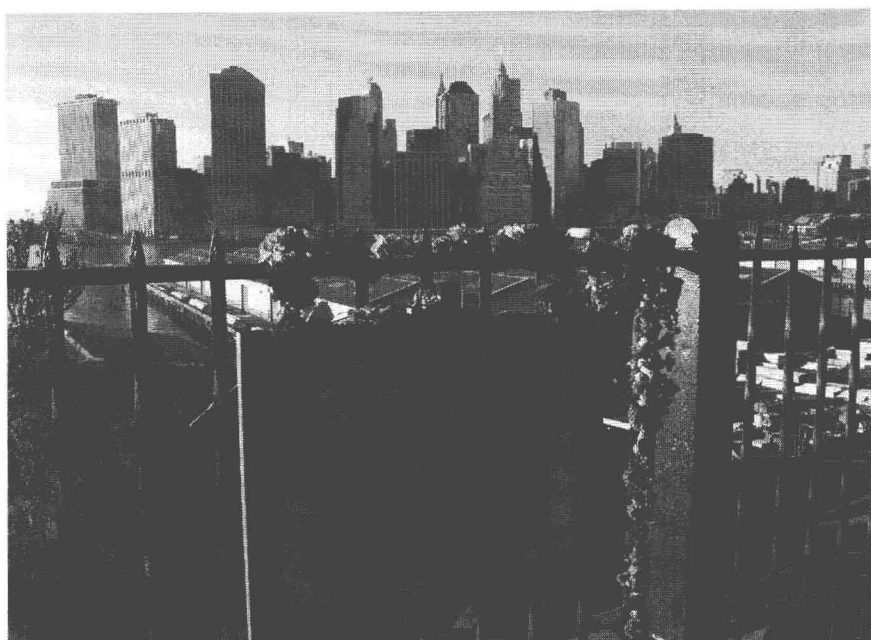
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*To our children,
Jeremy and Paul Novak
and
Martin and Karen Quinn*



Brooklyn Heights Promenade, November 3, 2001, Lorie Novak

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Robert Brustein. "Theater After 9/11." *The New Republic*, October 3, 2005.

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Introduction

Representing 9/11: Literature and Resistance

*Ann Keniston and
Jeanne Follansbee Quinn*

The World Trade Center (WTC), like any famous skyscraper, was both real and imaginary. It was a commercial and tourist center, occupied every day by tens of thousands. As two of the tallest buildings in the world, the towers also stood for American power and commerce, and for capitalism more generally. After their destruction on September 11, 2001, these roles—what literary studies might call the literal and the figurative—remained, but their relationship changed: the material reality or “fact” of the destruction of the towers has itself been overwhelming, but this destruction has increasingly been understood and represented through a range of complex symbolic formations.

The competing demands of utility and symbol have been particularly acute in the ongoing and contentious debates about the buildings and memorials to be erected at Ground Zero. The 9/11 Memorial, for example, is at once a symbolic space—a place to recall the towers, the dead, and the effects of their absence—and something like an actual graveyard, but one whose dead bodies are unrecognizable and unrecoverable. Throughout such debates, there remains a desire to be true—to the calamity itself, to the feelings of the victims’ families, to the collective need to mourn. But 9/11 itself, or more exactly its capacity to be understood in different ways, also obstructs such desires: no one wants 9/11 to be misrepresented, politicized, co-opted, or distorted. Yet, it seems difficult not to do just this.

While such problems are not literary, the tension between the symbolic suggestiveness of the WTC and the fact of its destruction is central to many literary texts written in the wake of 9/11. (Literary representations of 9/11 focus almost exclusively on events in New York City. The destruction of the Pentagon and the crash in Shanksville, PA, while suggestive for film makers, have not proven as interesting to writers.) Art Spiegelman’s influential 2004 graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* enacts the tension between the literal and the figurative quite starkly. On the one hand, the book is bound to the experience of 9/11 and its aftermath; its words and images recount Spiegelman’s physical and emotional responses on that day and afterward. But it also remains separate from this lived experience:

Spiegelman explicitly interrogates the “facts” and “reality” of what happened, and the text’s distinctive visual and verbal repetitions insist on its status as an imaginative representation of lived experience. Spiegelman’s work thus insists—and it is similar in this way to much 9/11 literature—on the space between the real and the imagined, between image and trope, and between the private realm of memory and the public realm of history. 9/11 literature impels us to see these spaces even as it forces them together; it consistently uses the literal to deconstruct the symbolic and the reverse. It thus offers a kind of partial, awkward bridge between life and language. To adapt a term that Charles Lewis’s chapter in this volume draws from Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, 9/11 literature works as a prosthesis, an awkward substitute for and attempt to compensate for the unrepresentable absence effected by 9/11 itself.

If literature expresses what remains unrepresentable about 9/11, it also raises persistent questions about how we interpret and represent 9/11, questions precipitated by debates within and outside the United States about the “war on terror.” In the years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, with early national unity dissipated and global sympathy foundering in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, American perspective on the attacks has continued to evolve. Suspicion about the Bush administration’s attempts to link Iraq, Al Qaeda, and September 11—coupled with an enduring sense of mourning for the losses of that day—have led to political and historical frameworks for 9/11 that go beyond the initially articulated binary of “us” and “them.” This struggle to speak about the meaning of 9/11 is reflected in the highly varied and ever-growing range of literary responses considered in this volume. Fiction and poetry by prominent writers, including Don DeLillo, Ian McEwan, Philip Roth, John Updike, Louise Glück, Frank Bidart, and Robert Pinsky, have contributed to and complicated on-going conversations among political commentators and cultural critics about the meaning and uses of 9/11. By placing literary texts within this cultural and political context, *Literature after 9/11* defines literature’s perspective on 9/11, as well as on the relationship between politics and aesthetics, and between history and narrative.

The chapters in *Literature after 9/11* examine the ways that literature has participated in the larger cultural process of representing and interpreting the events of September 11, 2001, while also revealing the difficulties of doing so when cataclysmic events are still so recent. The questions that organize *Literature after 9/11* emerge from the literature itself; as the chapters show, literary works reframe and focus the meaning of 9/11 by employing representational strategies that emphasize the desire for (and construction of) meaning, and that dramatize the continuing resonance of 9/11 in the collective life of the United States and beyond. As the contributions to *Literature after 9/11* suggest, we can read texts as diverse as Claire Messud’s social satire *The Emperor’s Children*, Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*, and Philip Roth’s fascist allegory *The*

Plot Against America as involved in a broadly similar task: offering critiques of and challenges to political discourses that seek to simplify or fix the meaning of 9/11.

The volume does not offer a single point of view on 9/11; instead, its chapters define a new body of literature—literature *after* 9/11—that reveals the instability of 9/11 as an event and the ways that literature contests 9/11’s co-option for narrowly political ends. Because the literary works examined here engage self-reflexively with frameworks for interpreting 9/11—as well as with attempts to represent the events themselves—the chapters in *Literature after 9/11* depict a passage from raw experience to representation. In short, the works examined in *Literature after 9/11* reveal the tension between private experience and the necessarily social means for representing it. By defining “literature” broadly and by including chapters by scholars from a range of different disciplines, *Literature after 9/11* demonstrates the connection between “literature” and the narratives that have shaped public debate about the meaning of 9/11.

Collectively, these chapters refuse to interpret 9/11 *either* as a rupture with the past *or* as continuous with (and even anticipated by) earlier historical events. Instead, the time elapsed since 9/11 provides the contributors to *Literature after 9/11* with a unique vantage point for tracing a more complex alternative: while the initial experience of 9/11 seemed unprecedented and cataclysmic, the experience of incommensurability generated a culture-wide need for explanatory narratives, not simply as a means for countering the trauma, but as a means for refusing incommensurability, prompting attempts to place 9/11 into an historical framework. We might say, then, that the history of literary representations of 9/11 can be characterized by the *transition* from narratives of rupture to narratives of continuity.

The history of literature written about and after 9/11 can also be seen, at least in part, as a sequence of genres. That is, shorter forms appeared first—essays, brief personal reminiscences, and poetry. It took several years longer for novels and full-length memoirs to appear. Early works often attempted directly to capture and convey the events of 9/11 and emotional responses to the events; as time has passed, the approach to the attacks has become more nuanced. 9/11 has come to seem less what these works are about than an event to which they refer, one element among many. At the same time, 9/11 has given rise to a number of hybrid forms, including the *New York Times*’s “Portraits of Grief,” and to new kinds of images and iconography in written texts, graphic novels, and traditional comic books.

The earliest writings about 9/11 include poems published online by non-professional and often anonymous poets. Often formally conventional, they attempt to bridge the gap between personal loss and a larger political meaning. The 2002 poetry collection edited by Allen Cohen and Clive Matson, *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11*, for example, consciously attempted, as its editor claims, to set forth through poetry “a . . . historical record of these monumental events” that was “different” from

that put forth by the “corporate controlled media, presidency, and congress [sic]” (i). Sam Hamill’s 2003 anthology *Poets Against the War* and the voluminous website from which its poems were selected celebrates its “rising tide of voices” which “the Bush people” failed to “quell” (viii).

While these poems confirm the notion that poetry defines and makes public private and often subversive feelings, poems written later by “professional” poets have been quite different. Many of these poems move falteringly, relying less on assertion than on allusion and citation. Galway Kinnell’s “When the Towers Fell,” discussed by Jeffrey Gray, stitches together lines from a range of texts in an enactment of the difficulty of speaking about the attacks; Robert Pinsky’s “Anniversary” does something similar, and a number of poems attempt to imagine or adopt the position of the “other,” J. D. McClatchy’s “Jihad” and Frank Bidart’s “Curse” among them. These poems tend to begin with a sense of the dangers of identification and speech.

Narrative and dramatic responses to 9/11, including mainstream comics, *avant garde* comix, memoir, plays, and novels, have similarly shifted focus since September 11, 2001. Like the first poems after 9/11, early narratives and plays grappled with representing 9/11, but as distance from the events has increased, later texts have registered the reverberations of 9/11, framing representations of the events, if they are depicted at all, within narratives that are weighted towards depicting their aftermath. We can see this shift in the move from one of the first plays about September 11, Anne Nelson’s “The Guys” (2001), which dramatizes the efforts by a New York fire fighter to write eulogies for those who died in the WTC, to David Hare’s 2004 play, “Stuff Happens,” which satirizes the appropriation of 9/11 by the Bush administration in the run-up to the Iraq War. Similarly, Frederic Beigbeder’s novel *Windows on the World* (2004), which is based on *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers*, a journalistic reconstruction of events inside the Twin Towers by Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn, depicts events in the WTC on September 11, while Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) incorporates 9/11 into a larger story about its effects on a survivor and his family.

The transition from 2004’s *Windows on the World* to 2007’s *Falling Man* demonstrates another feature of 9/11 narratives that distinguish them from the poetry written about and after 9/11. Whereas the initial poems tended to be formally conventional, the first novels about 9/11 featured formal innovations—self-reflexive meta-narratives, disrupted temporality, multiple viewpoints. Later novels have tended to be more formally conservative, yet these more straightforward narratives grapple with more complex representational challenges, often combining exploration of the subjectivities of characters living “in the shadow of no towers”—to use Spiegelman’s phrase—with dramatization of contested interpretations of 9/11. *Windows on the World*, while formally innovative, is chronologically conservative. The novel combines two alternating narratives: the minute-by-minute imagined experience of a father and two sons trapped in the restaurant Windows