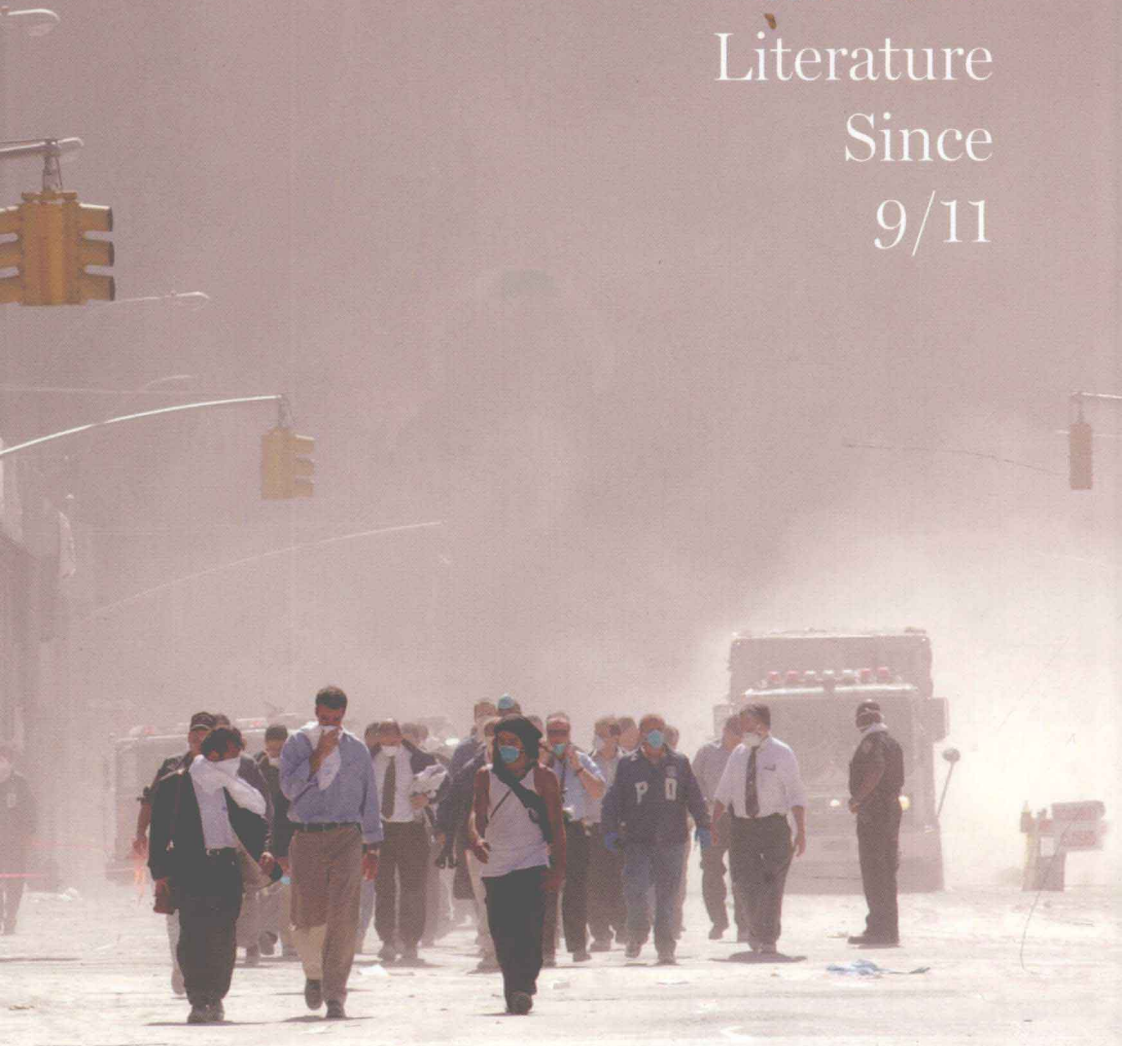


RICHARD
GRAY

After the Fall

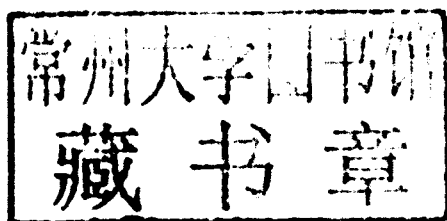
American
Literature
Since
9/11



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After the Fall
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Since 9/11

Richard Gray



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To
Sheona
Jessica and Jack
Catharine and Ben

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1

After the Fall

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. “I have nothing to say,” Toni Morrison told what she called “the dead of September,” “– no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become” (1). W.S. Merwin, in his poem “To the Words,” addressed the tools of his craft directly, “When it happens you are not there” (3), he complained, as he contemplated the attack on the Twin Towers. While Suheir Hammad confessed that there was “no poetry in the ashes south of canal street./ no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna./ not one word” (139). Philosophers, called on to make some comment, tended to agree. “The whole play of history and power is distorted by this event,” Jean Baudrillard observed, “but so, too are the conditions of analysis” (*Spirit of Terrorism*, 51). And, interviewed on the function of philosophy in a time of terror, Jacques Derrida, said much the same. “We do not know what we are talking about,” Derrida argued:

“Something” took place ... But this very thing, the place and meaning of this “event,” remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept ... out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly ...

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After the Fall

a ... rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about. (Borradori, 86)

"The thing," "the event," "9/11," "September 11:" the vague, gestural nature of these terms is a measure of verbal impotence – or, rather, of the widespread sense that words failed in the face of both the crisis and its aftermath. Writers and other observers, as Derrida suggests here, fell back on repetition, incantation, bare facts and figures, names and dates, the irreducible reality of what had happened, the blank stare of the actual. Not quite, though: what they also fell back on was the myth of the fall – the underlying conviction that the deep rhythms of cultural time had been interrupted and that the rough beast of "a new era" (Berger, 55), "a new period in history" (Hirsch, 85) was slouching towards America, and perhaps the West, to be born.

"On that day we had our fall" (Kahane, 113): "that day," however, has always varied according to the observer. There is a recurrent tendency in American writing, and in the observation of American history, to identify crisis as a descent from innocence to experience: but the crisis changes, the moment of descent has been located at a number of different times in the national narrative, most of them associated with war. For Washington Irving, as one of his best-known stories "Rip Van Winkle" illustrates, the critical moment was the War of Independence. Rip falls asleep for twenty years and wakes up to discover, to his deep discomposure, that he has fallen into another world. "Instead of being a subject of his majesty George the Third," he learns, "he was now a free citizen of the United States" (52). "I'm not myself," the bewildered Rip complains, "– I'm somebody else;" "I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name or who I am!" (50). For Henry James, as I suggest in the next chapter, it was the Civil War; so, too, for James's contemporary Mark Twain. Twain felt he had little enough in common with Henry James (he remarked of one book by James, "Once you put it down, you can't pick it up."¹), but what he did share was a belief that he, along with other Americans, had fallen from a pre-lapsarian state into a post-lapsarian one. "A glory that once was," Twain ruefully

¹ <http://www.ralphmag.org/twain.html>.

observed, had “dissolved and vanished away” (LM, 142), thanks to four years of civil conflict; a world that seemed to be “just far enough away to seem a Delectable Land, dreamy reposeful, inviting” (TS, 29) had been supplanted, for good or ill, by “progress, energy, prosperity” (LM, 144); the romance of the past had surrendered in short, to the stern realism of the present. For Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and their contemporaries, it was the First World War that provided a savage introduction to the actual. “Here was a new generation,” Fitzgerald declared of the 1920s, “... grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken” (15). For those who came of age twenty or thirty years later, it was the Second World War. So, one postwar American poet, Karl Shapiro, ends an account of his wartime experiences, in a poem aptly titled “Lord, I have seen too much,” by comparing himself to Adam “driven from Eden to the East to dwell” (27), while another, Randall Jarrell begins one of his most memorable poems, “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” by comparing the protagonist’s (and, by implication, the poet’s) entry into war to falling from sleep “into the State” (609). The line continues up to the present, in terms of the reading of other, later American wars. So, in writing about his own experience as a combatant in Vietnam, W.D. Ehrhart concludes his poem, “Fragment: 5 September 1967” by confessing of himself and his comrades in arms, “After that, there was no innocence;/ And there was no future to believe in” (33); and Yusef Komunyakaa, also an active participant in that war, admits in his poem “Maps Drawn in the Dust” that, after their encounter with conflict, he and his fellow soldiers were “no longer young,/ no longer innocent,” “we were wired to our trigger fingers” (13). Revelations like these – and there are many of them (think, for instance about the popularity of *Heart of Darkness* as an intertextual referent in films and fiction about the Vietnam War) – alert us to a powerful vein of nostalgia at work in American thinking. In terms of deep structure, the story or subtext moves from the presumption of initial innocence to an encounter with forms of experience that are at once dire and disorienting. Innocence is shattered, paradise is lost, thanks to a bewildering moment, a descent into darkness, the impact of crisis. This is an old story, at least as old as the American nation. And, at this moment, in

the national narrative, it has been fired into renewed life by the events of September 11, 2001 and after – the acts of terror that left nearly 3000 dead by the end of that day and the acts of both terror and the “war on terror” that have accounted for hundreds of thousands more deaths².

An old story, then, but also a new one. What is decidedly new in this chapter of the continuing tale of what happens in America after the fall, comes down to two things: the particular nature of the crisis and the specific terms in which writers have reacted to it. As for the particular nature of the crisis, that has to do with three unusual factors that might be handily summarized in terms of invasion, icons, and the intervention of the media. Prior to September 11, 2001, the last time the United States had been invaded, its borders significantly penetrated, was during the 1812 war with Great Britain, which lasted for three years. The last and, until 9/11, the only time. There had been civil war; there had been an attack on the periphery of American power, at Pearl Harbour. But there had been nothing from outside that struck at the heart of the nation. Nothing that suggested that the United States itself might become an international battlefield. International wars, apart from the war for independence and a war that might be considered its residue, had always been fought on foreign soil. To have war brought home was an unusual experience for America, to have the mainland not only invaded but attacked from the skies and devastated was not only unusual but unique. People living in Vietnam or Afghanistan or Korea, the former USSR or those

² The number of deaths resulting from the attacks on September 11, 2001, is usually given as 2995; this includes the 19 hijackers (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks). The number of deaths resulting from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is disputed. Estimates of deaths resulting from the Iraq War, for instance, vary drastically. These estimates include the ones supplied by the Iraq Family Death Survey (151,000 as at June, 2006), the *Lancet* survey (601,027 violent deaths out of 654,965 excess deaths as at June, 2006), the Opinion Research Business Survey (1,033,000 as at April, 2009), the Associated Press (110,600 as at April, 2009), the Iraq Body Count (94,902–103,549 as at December, 2009), and the *Lancet* survey of excess deaths (1,366,350 as at December, 2009). Whatever the number, it can only increase (http://cn.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_War).

of a certain generation in Europe might wonder about the reaction to 9/11. Quantitatively, the destruction of the Twin Towers and 2995 lives pales beside, say, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or what has been called “ecoside” (Bui, 967), the devastation of natural and human life, in Vietnam. But crisis is as much a matter of perception, of feeling, as anything else. America had been impervious, either by calculation (thanks to the doctrine of isolationism, the avoidance of entangling alliances with other, war-torn parts of the globe, especially Europe), or by fighting its wars elsewhere (“It’s better to fight communism in Vietnam than in California,” was a common argument heard in the 1960s), or by sheer blind luck. Then everything changed. On September 11, 2001, as the media did not fail to point out over and over again, America came under attack. It was – at least, according to the national sense of things – invaded. The homeland was no longer secure and, to that extent, no longer home.

“I never liked the World Trade Center,” David Lehman wrote in 1996: “When it went up I talked it down/ As did many other New Yorkers.” What persuaded him to change his mind, he says, was the attack on the building in 1993, when a car bomb was detonated at the foot of the North Tower. “When the bomb went off and the building became/ A great symbol of America, like the Statue/ Of Liberty at the end of Hitchcock’s *Saboteur*,” Lehman explains, “My whole attitude toward the World Trade Center/ Changed overnight” (xv). He began to appreciate the way it came into view as you reached a certain point in downtown Manhattan, or the way the two towers appeared to dissolve into the skies. It was there, for him, as a powerful *image* of national achievement and aspiration. The reference to its cinematic presence in Lehman’s poem is telling: its virtual status, this intimates, was at least as important as its existence as an actual, material structure. That distinction emerged with even more force when the presence of the Twin Towers became an absent one. The total destruction of the World Trade Center, some eight years after the car bombing and five years after Lehman wrote his poem, left what Don DeLillo called “something empty in the sky” (“In the Ruins,” 39). Less than two weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the cartoonist and visual artist Art Spiegelman famously produced a cover for the

New Yorker that showed the silhouettes of the North and South Towers in a black-on-black painting, as a way of suggesting their continuing existence as a symbolic trace, their lingering presence despite their disappearance. Even after the destruction of the World Trade Center, architectural critics betrayed a distinct reluctance to celebrate it as a material structure: one referred to it as an extreme example of “the generic postwar corporate office tower” (Wigley, 75). What they, and others, did celebrate, however, was the totemic significance of this particular downtown building complex: which was why, of course, it was targeted not once but twice by terrorists. “The attackers did not just cause the highest building in Manhattan to collapse,” as Jurgen Habermas put it; “they also destroyed an icon in the household imagery of the American nation” (Borradori, 28). The loss of life was, first and last, the most terrible consequence of the 9/11 attacks. But what made this crisis new and different from other, at least equally terrible crises, was this iconic dimension.: The towers made an indelible imprint on the Manhattan skyline and on the popular imagination; they were, in the words of Habermas, a “powerful embodiment of economic strength and projection toward the future” (Borradori, 28); and, in a terrifying symbolic gesture, the terrorists had deleted them – in fact, if not from the imagination.

And the whole world was watching. That is the third factor that helped make this particular crisis unique. The collapse of the towers was a global media event. “The whole world population,” in the words of Habermas, was “a benumbed witness” (28). There have been other critical events that have been rapidly broadcast throughout the world, including, in the recent American context, the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. The difference here, however, is threefold: witness at the actual moment of crisis, the failure of ritual and the mixing of the strange and the familiar. The destruction of the World Trade Center took place in front of what Habermas called “a global public” (Borradori, 28). The world was an eyewitness to the event, as it actually happened. As a televisual event, it could be played over and over again, which it was. The death of President Kennedy was certainly a major media event, with the news of his assassination being rapidly broadcast worldwide. But the immediate

visual dimension was, famously, limited to a brief piece of long-range, poor quality film. And the deaths of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King took place offstage, as it were. With Bobbie Kennedy, the memorable images are before and after: the young Senator declaring his intention to go on to Chicago and the Democratic convention, the almost unbearable panic as news spreads into the crowd that there has been a shooting, the body lying bleeding on the floor. With Dr King, the visual traces are even more fragmentary, the most notable being his friends and colleagues in shock, pointing towards the place from where they believe the shots that killed him were fired. There is an absence here. The global public was witness to the consequences of the traumatic event, and the responses to it (including the civil unrest that followed the killings of Bobbie Kennedy and King), but not the event itself. With 9/11, that global public was in the unique position of watching the event as it occurred; the impact, the explosion, the fall of the towers were there for all to see in what media people like to call “real time.” Not only that, every moment could be replayed, slowed down, speeded up, put in freeze frame or in a wider or narrower perspective: in short, placed under obsessive, compulsive scrutiny. One vital consequence of this, for writers, was that the traumatic moment was also an iconic one. The fall of the towers, as we shall see – and, for that matter, the fall of people from the towers – has become a powerful and variable visual equivalent for other kinds of fall. In some texts, the towers, or the people, fall over and over again, as they did on instant replay on the television. “I’ve seen the same thing happen so many times now,” one character complains in a play set on September 12, 2001, as he watches “those buildings fall down again” on TV, “I don’t even know when “now” IS anymore! It’s like it’s always happening!” (Wright, 32;). In others, the falling towers are caught at a frozen moment, as a distillation of terror, as again they were on television. And in some texts, the towers rise from their ashes, are returned into the Manhattan skyline, or the falling man or woman is plucked out of the sky and restored to the building from which they jumped, in a gesture that is partly a longing for redemption and partly simple wish fulfilment. “Perhaps September 11 could be called the first historic world event in the strictest sense” (Borradori, 28),

Habermas has speculated, because of this, the global witnessing of the event as it happened. That may be so. What is certainly the case is that this immediacy – an immediacy that was, above all, visual – was something new in the experience of crisis. And it offered writers and other artists a powerful series of symbols for an otherwise unendurable and perhaps unknowable event.

A further difference between the media event that was 9/11 and, in particular, the media event that was the killing of President Kennedy is what one commentator has called “the *political* failure of our mourning” (Brooks, 49). The distinction that Freud made between mourning and melancholia is relevant here. On the one hand, there is mourning: the use of ceremony, ritual, acting out of some kind to enable a working out of and getting through the traumatic event. On the other, there is what Freud called “the open wound” that is “the complex of melancholia,” “drawing to itself cathectic energies... from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (253). The Kennedy assassination left a huge hole in the life of America – a hole that has been endlessly filled with conspiracy theories, speculation about what would have happened if Kennedy had survived, and so on – but the period of national (and international) mourning that followed his death provided, at least, some measure of release, an appropriate catharsis. With 9/11, however, the period of commemoration has been hijacked by a series of events tied to it in rhetoric if not necessarily in reality: the “war on terror,” the Patriot Act, extraordinary rendition, the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq. “The time of memory and commemoration evolved from the start alongside the time of revenge,” one commentator has observed (Simpson, 4). Or as another commentator has it, 9/11 was the moment when “trauma time collided with the time of the state, the time of capitalism, the time of routine,” producing a “curious unknown time, a time with no end in sight;” “the state, or whatever form of power is replacing it, has taken charge of trauma time” (Edkins, 233). Acting out grief has been jettisoned in favor of hitting out; getting through the crisis has yielded, in terms of priorities, to getting back at those who initiated it; commemorative rituals have ceded place to the initiation of a state of emergency. The result has been, to return to that phrase, a failure

of mourning: a failure that leaves an open wound, a gap or emptiness in the psychic life of the nation – the operative symbol for which is Ground Zero.

Watching the events of September 11 unfold on television, one viewer, the screenwriter Lawrence Wright, apparently declared, “this looks like a movie – my movie” (Radstone, 119). The director of the action film *Die Hard*, Steve de Souza, said something similar: “the image of the terrorist attacks looked like a movie poster, like one of my movie posters” (Radstone, 119). The events of September 11, 2001 looked to many people so strange, as to be unreadable, unintelligible, as if inscribed in a new vocabulary. But those events also looked, as one observer put it, “like something we had seen before in both fact and fiction” (Simpson, 6). On the one hand, all this was deeply unfamiliar: a demonized and, for a while, faceless enemy swooping down from the skies. On the other hand, it was all eerily familiar. A television documentary produced by the BBC early in 2002 made the point in its title: “September 11th: A Warning from Hollywood.” “As millions of people watched the horrific spectacle of the Twin Towers collapsing,” the documentary pointed out, “... many eye-witnesses and survivors compared the dramatic images to a Hollywood movie.”³ One writer, Jennifer Lauck, admitted that when she first heard the news about 9/11, “I thought of that stupid movie *Independence Day* where aliens blow up the White House and figured: It’s a hoax” (300). “My first thought when the south tower came down,” confessed another writer, Joshua Clover, “was for the film industry in crisis movies had been superceded more or less right on time” (130). Some conspiracy theorists found an appropriate cinematic reference in the satirical film, *Wag the Dog*, in which, as one of those tempted towards such theories, the essayist Sallie Tisdale, put it, “a marketing team manufactures a phony war to distract attention from a presidential scandal” (50). But the more usual, instinctive response was to see the attacks through the prism of disaster and horror movies,

³ “September 11th; A Warning from Hollywood,” *Panorama*, BBC1, March 24, 2002 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/panorama/news.d-1875000/1875186.stm>).

as a realization of the darkest dreams of the Hollywood dream factory. “For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen,” Slavoj Žižek has pointed out,

and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others ... ?(11)

The case of *The War of the Worlds* is instructive here. A commonly reported reaction to the attack on the World Trade Center, on the day it happened and immediately after, was desperately to hope that it was all a hoax (to use Lauck’s term) along the lines of the notorious 1938 Orson Welles radio broadcast of the H.G. Wells novel. Another was to try to assimilate what had happened, to understand the sheer scale of the terror, by seeing it in terms of all those “stupid” space invader stories for which *The War of the Worlds* (1898 novel, 1938 radio broadcast, 1953 film) has provided the template. Either way, *The War of the Worlds* supplied a tool for making disaster manageable, spelling out the strange in a familiar vocabulary. Reality might be, in the words of Žižek, “the best appearance of itself” (11), but appearance was needed on September 11, 2001, to cope with the real; a depthless fiction was required for the facts to be read. Then, in 2005, came the movie remake of *The War of the Worlds*, directed by Steven Spielberg. Spielberg was in no doubt that his version of the story reflected the national anxiety generated by the destruction of the Twin Towers. “We live under a veil of fear that we didn’t live under before 9/11,” Spielberg said. “There has been a conscious emotional shift in this country.”⁴ So the peculiarly symbiotic relation between otherwise unassimilable fact and eerily familiar fantasy took yet another turn here: 9/11 perceived through the screen of an alien

⁴ “New “War of the Worlds” recalls 9/11 images,” *USA Today*, June 30, 2005 (http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2005-06-30-war-of-the-worlds-911_x.htm).