

Introduction¹

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On August 29, 2004, a book being reviewed in *The New York Times* by Richard Posner was described as “an uncommonly lucid, even riveting, narrative” and hailed as “an improbable literary triumph” (“The 9/11 Report: A Dissent”).² The unlikely recipient of such praise was the 9/11 Commission Report whose reception is indicative both of the power of language and narrative, and of the changes in our understanding of fact and fiction. As the essays in this volume show, the emergence of new literary styles and the troubled relationship between fact and fiction are not new phenomena. Changing realities necessitate new modes of expression and lead authors to re-examine their own place and role in society. Speaking through literary texts, stage action or visual images, the writers, dramatists, poets, and film directors that the essays in this volume bring together are not simply commenting on certain American tactics and attitudes, but are aiming at achieving a deeper understanding of the antithetical forces that constitute America, making it a nation which is in a constant process of self-questioning and re-evaluation. Subsequently, what this volume has attempted to accomplish is to take a retrospective glance at how American fiction, poetry, drama, and film of the post-war era have reacted to regional, national, and global crises from the mid-twentieth century onward. Having brought together a number of academic voices from various corners of the world (Canada, Greece, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.), this special issue is keen on examining how the events described and commented on have promoted artistic expression and

1. The editors of this volume would like to express their special thanks to Eleftheria Arapoglou for having meticulously and with great efficiency addressed the editorial crises of this endeavor.

2. Also see Warren.

experimentation in attempts to interpret the crises and clashes that have marked the last decades of the previous century and the opening of the new millennium. Touching upon the Vietnam War and counterculture, Cold War politics and paranoia, the AIDS pandemic, race and human rights, environmental threats and terrorism, we have intended to offer our readers a variety of perspectives and thematic strands through which America can be viewed and interrogated both as an ideological and national construct.

With the Dow Jones index plummeting and Barack Obama in line to succeed a controversial president who has divided his country with the war on terror, the U.S. is again struggling to overcome major economic and political crises. So far, the twenty-first century appears to have ushered in a period of instability that has led many Americans to question older narratives about themselves and their country's place in the world. Still, as the essays in this volume will show, America is no stranger to moments or prolonged periods of conflict and uncertainty. Since the end of World War II, the nation has faced a series of socio-cultural, political and economic challenges that questioned its own reality and sense of cultural stability, but also its position within a global world order. The country's literary production during these times of crisis helps to illuminate the relationship between national literature and historical context. While it is obvious that major events such as the Vietnam War or the assassination of John F. Kennedy have found their way into the world of fiction, what should not be overlooked is the extent to which the events themselves have been altered by the cultural production they inspired. Conflict, crisis and uncertainty have certainly played a role in the development of literary style and technique, but equally our understanding of these upheavals cannot easily be separated from their cultural manifestations.

In 1961, before the assassination of Kennedy or the escalation of the Vietnam War, before the first man walked on the moon, and long before 9/11, Philip Roth was complaining that actuality was "continually outdoing" the writer's talent, making it a struggle "to understand, then describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality" ("Writing American Fiction" 167, emphasis in original). Forty seven years later, contemplating the possibility that Barack Obama might become president of the United States, novelist Dave Eggers noted that "[w]e're about to elect a guy who pretty much arrived 30 or 40 years sooner than most people expected. So maybe we're being catapulted forward into the future in a way that our imaginations will need to catch up with" ("Hopes for a Happy Ending: Literary Voices on the American Election"). Both Roth and Eggers to some extent conceive of

the role of the author as someone in competition with American reality, as someone whose need to write, describe, or represent American reality could be seen as an act of catching up with or of conquering reality itself. In the half-century that separates the two observations, events on a local, national, and global scale have confirmed the novelists' fears. The attacks of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and the credit crunch have undermined older narratives of American power and dominance, and they have created new realities to challenge American authors, but they do not represent a break from a safer or calmer recent past. As the first decade of the twenty-first century comes to a close, we can look back and find continuity as well as change both in the attitudes to national threats and to literary attitudes towards moments of national crisis.

How, then, have authors been shaped by and responded to the crises and upheavals that the U.S. has faced since the end of World War II? Before we start looking for an answer, perhaps we need to ask a bigger question: do we, and should we, expect authors to understand and describe such moments of national trauma? The answer seems to be yes, and this was powerfully demonstrated in the hours and days after 9/11, when the mainstream media in the U.S. and the U.K. turned to authors for their opinions and comment. Faced with a terrifying reality that challenged one's imagination precisely because it seemed so familiar from fictional narratives, public opinion seemed to need some kind of mediation, and authors were well placed to provide that. Some had witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center and wrote of the moment their powers of description deserted them. Others spoke of their fear that literature would become irrelevant, because somehow inventing fictional worlds seemed inappropriate in the face of such an overwhelming reality.³ What was clear from many of these responses was that once again authors were viewing reality as their antagonist, while at the same time pondering the morality and purpose of literature. Seven years later, it may still be too soon to draw any conclusions, or to assess the narratives that were written as a response to 9/11. It may be that an author will make (literary) sense of these events when faced with another crisis many years hence. After all, one of the most powerful and enduring novels on World War II, *Catch-22*, was published in 1961. The time lag of course suggests that the time of writing is as important as the time when a novel is set; as Jonathan Franzen notes, "Joseph Heller had figured out a way of

3. See Houen and Lea for further information. Catherine Morley also discusses these issues in this volume.

outdoing the actuality, employing the illogic of modern warfare as a metaphor for the more general denaturing of American reality” (59).

The role of literature in capturing and shaping “American reality” has been the topic of much critical debate. Scholarship on nineteenth-century American literature argues that writers were central to the project of nation-formation; that, as Geoff Ward succinctly put it, “America—invented, rather than discovered, and established in a Declaration of Independence—has always been founded on leaps of faith, made real by writing” (213). In *The American Jeremiad* (1978), Sacvan Bercovitch identified the plight of the nineteenth-century American author who was caught in a double bind: to be revolutionary, to free oneself from older models and constraints, was also to be *American*, and therefore any act of rebellion was also inevitably incorporated into the mainstream. This curious relationship of the American author to his or her country has indeed persisted and is very much in evidence in the authors and texts discussed in this volume. The greatest works of postwar American literature are also the ones that pose the most difficult questions about America. The books that best deal with crisis or conflict are the ones whose authors take on the role of the gadfly and not the bard; the great American novel is not the epic that narrates America, but the narrative that criticizes it and questions it. In Ward’s words, “[l]iterature is what a writer says that the rest of America won’t admit” (2). After 9/11, authors have started to question the extent to which they can criticize a country that is under attack from outside rather than from within. Dana Spiotta, whose 2006 novel *Eat the Document* revisits 1970s radicalism, noted that

it’s harder than ever to engage the idea of revolutionary violence, even if the intention is only property damage. It’s hard to make it legible. But I always think the novelist should go to the culture’s dark places and poke around. Pose a lot of hard questions. Tell me it’s forbidden, unthinkable, and that’s where I want to go. Because the chances are it’s complicated, and the complications are meaningful. (“I Always Think the Novelist Should Go to the Culture’s Dark Places and Poke Around”)

The desire to make the culture’s (and history’s) dark places “legible” and to find meaning in complications, no matter how unsettling they might be, can be found in all the works studied in this volume. Indeed, this may be what unites these otherwise disparate texts which employ such divergent styles, forms, and genres.

To examine texts that respond to crisis, conflict or trauma is also to be reminded of the rich tapestry of American fiction. Early studies of the postmodern novel centered on the distinction between the realists and the fabulists; the most critically acclaimed and scrutinized novels were either written in a realist mode, or they were self-reflexive, experimental, and seen as divorced from the reality outside the text. We now have a better sense of temporal perspective and can appreciate that the two opposing camps were not as clearly demarcated as might have been thought. Experiments with form did not have to entail disregard for reality; to be preoccupied with the surface or the structure of the text did not preclude an interest in the wider world and more to the point, that experimentation could be better understood when contextualized. Some of the authors discussed in this volume were producing their best work while others were still in infancy; reading the recent work of younger authors helps us to see what permutations theme, style and technique have gone through from the era of the Cold War to that of the War on Terror. The case is powerfully demonstrated in this volume by Catherine Morley, who argues that the unprecedented nature of the attacks on the World Trade Center necessitated new modes of representation. As her discussion of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) shows, these new modes do not represent radical breaks from the literary past, but rather modifications, adaptations, and changes in emphasis. Foer's earlier novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) similarly relied on tradition and innovation, blending the old, in the form of the epistolary novel, with the new, in the form of experimentation with the graphic surface of the text. The novel dealt with the author's frustrated search for his grandparents' history during the Holocaust, and the plot's twist revolved around questions of complicity. Complicity is a concept that informs the arguments in several of the essays in this volume, as it relates to the very role of literature in representing tumultuous events. In 2007, one of the most powerful literary voices in postwar America announced his retirement: Roth's Nathan Zuckerman took his final bow in *Exit Ghost* (2007), explaining that he had "withdrawn as witness and participant both" (15). Literature's ability to act as witness and participant, to reflect, but also to help shape, the cultural climate, necessitates a degree of critical scrutiny that never loses sight of this duality of cultural production, and it is this notion that unites the various arguments made in this volume.

In the section entitled "Writing War," Ian Edwards kicks off the debate by noting that the imperative concern of the "would-be counter-cultural"

war novel is how it can represent war without glorifying it or acting as a defender of its “perpetrators.” Edwards uses a psychoanalytical approach to elucidate the ways in which Heller negotiates or even redefines the role of literature. *Catch-22* can be read as a war novel, as literature of witness, as social protest, and as a parody of these categories, and it is this multiplicity, inherent in the novel, that has made it into a classic of twentieth-century American literature. In writing about war, Heller has not only represented or reflected on traumatic events. More crucially, he has enabled readers to ask questions about the distinctions between war and peace, enemy and friend, national allegiance and fear of the other. This disruption of categories may well describe some of the impulses behind 1960s countercultural writing, but, as Kathryn Nicol shows, it is African-Americans who are best placed to question when the nation is at war and when it is in peace. Nicol’s reading of Toni Morrison does not conceive of literature as representing or narrating history. More powerfully, Morrison’s fiction—according to Nicol—collapses the distinction between war and peace by showing how times of “not war” are also shaped by “violent forces” arranged by law and the state, and how the formation of “group power” turns against rivals and “outsiders.” Nicol reads Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) as not only a post-Cold War and post-Vietnam novel, but also as a book written in the aftermath of the first Gulf War.

The staging of war trauma constitutes the main theme around which Konstantinos Blatanis’ paper revolves, focusing on plays relating to the Vietnam War, the Bosnia-Herzegovina War, and the War on Terror after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. His reading of David Rabe’s, Eve Ensler’s, and Sam Shepard’s plays furthers our understanding of contextualization. Whereas the particular circumstances of each conflict are important, Blatanis’ emphasis on narrative as a means of exorcising and alleviating pain, or coming to terms with emotional or consciousness crisis, seeks to discover strands that unite those disparate moments. Hannah Arendt, responding to earlier moments of war (and more specifically to the Holocaust), wrote that “we are reconciled to the world through lament, and through an ever-recurrent narration, a telling-over of what took place” (qtd. in Baym 3205). The narrative that each one of the dramatists constructs builds up its own rhetoric and staged representation in an attempt to explore human subjectivity as well as to comprehend the extent to which each war affects the way we relate to “reality” itself.

Arendt’s emphasis on narration is also pertinent in the consideration of genre. Where Blatanis looks at drama as a narrative structure that attempts

to make sense of traumatic events, Jacob Edmond considers the contribution of the verse novel. His reading of Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) and Lyn Hejinian's *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1991) foregrounds their relatively unfamiliar structure while considering both writers' debt to Alexander Pushkin's verse novel *Eugene Onegin* (1833). Edmond explores the decisive role writers played in culturally bridging the political binaries and strengthening the transnational relations between the U.S. and Russia during the Cold War and post-Cold War period of the 1980s and 1990s. *The Golden Gate* is the work of an Indian-born author set in San Francisco, while San Francisco-born Hejinian is also a translator from Russian. The transnational aspect that their identity and work represents is explored alongside the influence of Russia as a literary and realistic topos. Edmond argues that the two poets cross political, but also aesthetic, divides, with Seth associated with the New Formalist School and Hejinian with Language poetry. He proposes that this critical divide in American poetry can be understood in part as a legacy of the discursive structures of the Cold War, thus demonstrating that war does not have to be thematized for contextualization to provide new interpretations.

Edmond's contextualization is illuminating because it considers border-crossings at the levels of genre, poetics, geography, and nation. Furthermore, by arguing that *Oxota's* refutation of representation is analogous with the Cold War rift itself, Edmond engages with one of the broader questions that this volume has sought to address. When we speak of responses to historical events, which particular event, war or crisis can a book be said to be *about*? Can a novel be both *in* and *of* the moment? The question is taken up by Theodora Tsimpouki who, in discussing 1960s literature, asks whether the countercultural novel can be seen as both symptom and critique of the era that produced it. In the midst of a climate of countercultural euphoria, one wonders whether this form of radical activism in the U.S. succeeded in shaping up a new vision for the nation, or whether it only constituted a nostalgic dream of possible regeneration. Through the examination of three sets of novels (by Ken Kesey and Thomas Pynchon, E. L. Doctorow and Robert Stone, Philip Roth and T. C. Boyle), Tsimpouki's essay not only exposes the shortcomings of the American political ideology as this had been formulated throughout the sixties by looking at both its mainstream and radical facets, but also it takes a retrospective glance at the sixties and its countercultural activity.

American writers of the 1960s created new forms and styles in an attempt to respond to the instability and absurdity of the socio-political

reality of the time, and their radical experiments with form and narrative are as much part of the 1960s as the actual events that necessitated such experimentation in the first place. But if literature can *represent* an era in two senses of the word (as reflective of the times but also as typical of them), can it also help shape it in more tangible ways? This is the kind of question that the papers in “From Eco-criticism to Eco-terrorism” are trying to address. Helen Bralesford tells of the moment in 1996 when President Bill Clinton held up a copy of Terry Tempest Williams’ *Testimony* (1996) and declared that “[t]his made a difference.” Not perhaps up there with Abraham Lincoln’s alleged remark to Harriet Beecher Stowe, but a significant moment in which a book was acknowledged to have had an impact on the unwritten world. Bralesford opens her discussion with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and examines how environmentally committed writing has evolved, using and adapting generic conventions to its aims. The emphasis on the formal and aesthetic strategies her chosen authors have employed acts as a useful corrective to the usual perception of politically committed literature as lacking in literary merit. Environmental crises in the U.S. have not only inspired writing, but also affected the evolution of genre and the formation of a national idiom.

Literature that deals with environmental concerns retains a degree of moral ambiguity that is lacking in political discourse. Whereas for President George W. Bush the world could easily be divided into friends and foes of the U.S., environmental literature has not relied on similar divisions, though the more popular end of the market has had a role to play in public perceptions of complicated global conflicts as struggles between good and evil. Lawrence Buell begins his essay by noting that the word “ecoterrorism” has been used to describe opposing camps, with further nuance and complexity added to the term after 9/11. Furthermore, as environmental matters have moved from being perceived as national problems to global concerns, so literature has adapted to reflect these changes, questioning the issues of national allegiance raised in the texts discussed by Bralesford. Buell, in considering changing perceptions of “ecoterrorism” after 9/11, demonstrates how some of these changes can be seen in two books written 29 years apart. Where Edward Abbey’s *Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) can be understood in the context of Cold War paranoia, Michael Crichton’s 2004 *State of Fear* is a post-9/11 example of shifting discourses and changing notions of terrorist plottings.

Crichton began his novelistic career in the 1960s, and the changing themes and techniques in his popular novels present a good picture of the

cultural fears that have gripped the U.S. His first novel, *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), dealt with biological hazard and played upon fears of bodily contamination that have since preoccupied American public opinion in various manifestations, such as the Ebola virus, AIDS, the anthrax scare, and bird flu. If the book was ahead of its time in imagining biological hazard when people were more likely to fear nuclear war, it was also notable for its style, which gave it an air of authenticity and led readers to wonder whether it was dealing with real events. The blurring of fact and fiction, and the ability of story-telling not only to capture the zeitgeist but also to contribute to the cultural climate, is best observed in the medium of film, and Michalis Kokonis and Emily Bakola approach the notion of American crisis through studies of Hollywood movies. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Linda Hutcheon talks about the emergence of a kind of cinema that “calls attention to the acts of production and reception of the film itself” (110), noting that what matters is not just the aesthetic outcome but the socio-political context within which a film is conceived and constructed. Hutcheon also makes a case for “both a respectful—if problematized—awareness of cultural continuity and a need to adapt to changing formal demands and social conditions” (107). It is exactly this point of transition that the papers in question appearing in “Hollywood in/on Crisis” focus on.

As Kokonis argues in his essay, the multiple socio-historical, political, economic and technological changes that occurred after World War II greatly affected the Hollywood establishment. The dominance of TV since 1946 had a great impact on Hollywood productions; equally decisive was the impact audience admissions had on the Hollywood box-office. However, the political and sociological factors that triggered the crisis Hollywood underwent in the late 1960s and early 1970s should also be attributed to the new role the U.S. was expected to play in international politics as well as to the emergent social trends of “suburbanization” and “baby-booming.” By viewing the gradual transformation of American cinema practices in tandem with social change, Kokonis’ essay offers a meticulous overview of the classical Hollywood practices, the blockbuster production industry, the changing roles of the studios, the rise of independent filmmaking, the termination of the Production Code in 1966—initially functioning as a regulating mechanism for the kind of films that Hollywood produced between 1930-1945—and the decisive role of the television networks. All these factors led to the regeneration of Hollywood, a period known as “Hollywood Renaissance,” marking the emergence of a

much more politically and socially informed, as well as truly American, kind of cinema.

The Kennedy assassination in 1963 marked another important moment of transition for Hollywood that relates not only to the configuration of its subjectivity as an art medium, but also to the kind of narrative and visual techniques it adopted. Bakola positions the shift in Hollywood film productions in the historical shift of the 1960s. By concentrating on the analysis of Oliver Stone's contentious film *JFK* (1991), Bakola explores the strategies employed for coping with socio-political crisis. By shedding light on various theoretical approaches towards conspiracy, paranoia, and fetishism, Bakola sees how all these factors intertwine when it comes to the filmic interpretation and representation of a traumatic political event. In his attempt to visually challenge and re-inscribe the political ideology of the time, Stone contests the role of the spectator in relation to how s/he chooses to view or not the political experience that the film endeavors to "reconstruct." What our culture gives meaning to or how it chooses to represent certain events reveals, according to Bakola's analysis, a broader skepticism as to the way we interpret the world around us and the way we interact with it. As for the mechanisms/strategies film directors employ in order to depict socio-political crises, they point towards a broader kind of "crisis" relating to the cinematic medium itself which Hutcheon terms "double encoding," "discrepancy," or "ambivalent doubleness" (117). This is the kind of double crisis Bakola's paper addresses by placing emphasis on the way Stone tackles, represents and relates to America-specific historical/political knowledge.

The popularity of Stone's film may partly be attributed to the American fascination with conspiracy, and it demonstrates how cultural production is a self-generating system: narratives that deal with conspiracies amplify existing fears about truth and lies while creating an appetite for more conspiracies. The essays contained in "Illness, Death and Catastrophe" are attempting to come to grips with and look into the decayed and menacing side of contemporary American reality. While the Kennedy assassination has become the iconic conspiracy narrative of the post-war years, as Monica Pearl reminds us, it was AIDS that generated a high level of fear and paranoia. AIDS may be seen as the great forgotten crisis of the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas at the time of its emergence it gripped the public imagination by combining anxieties about science out of control (the suggestion that the virus was created in a laboratory), concerns about biological contamination and homophobia, the narratives it produced were

more concerned with correcting—rather than fanning—these fears. Pearl concentrates on AIDS narratives, which are a generic category that is separate from the AIDS memoir. Whereas in the latter the author is also the sufferer, the former relies on an “outsider” to mediate and narrate. Issues of complicity and participation are once again highlighted as Pearl speaks of the “unimplicated” reader who needs to be aided into the text by the presence of an “uncontaminated” narrator. The “contamination” refers not only to the HIV virus, but also to the cultural fear that homosexuality may be catching, and Pearl deftly explores how the gay community sought to respond to paranoid fears, and in the process both acquired a firmer sense of identity and explored new avenues of expression. As well as being stories of illness and suffering, the AIDS narratives can be understood to express and reflect a wider sense of involvement: in condemning what was not done in order to put an end to the crisis, they can also be read as continuous with other American narratives that have linked the ailing physical body with the nation as “body politic.”

Christopher Gair traces the image of the ailing human body to the writings of the American Renaissance, and argues that Roth, writing before 9/11, uses the imagery and language of disease in order to suggest that America is threatened with destruction from within. Published in 1997, Roth’s *American Pastoral* revisits the radical politics of the 1960s, but despite its impressive overview of postwar America, this is a novel of the 1990s as much as it is of the earlier decades of its setting. 1995 was the year of the Oklahoma City bombing, and it also saw the publication of the Unabomber’s manifesto; before 9/11 created new enemies, it was the fear of the enemy from within that seemed more prevalent. As Arthur Redding argues in his essay, apocalyptic fears did not emerge with Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. He argues that the period from the late 1970s through to the 1990s gave rise to a form of writing focusing on the unspeakable, the violent, the tabooed and the diseased. Postmodern gothic narratives of disaster and catastrophe not only comment on the socio-political and economic distress of 1980s America, but also anticipate more recent developments in film and fiction that Redding sees as forms of cultural construction particular to “disaster capitalism.”

Redding argues that popular narratives of disaster still aim to console by suggesting that the moral and ethical superiority of individuals can make a difference. He notes how a number of films dealing with recent crises rely on familiar tropes of love, transcendence, resolution and redemption to offer a degree of security while depicting trauma. With

attention paid to “Fiction after 9/11,” Redding’s argument is taken up by Catherine Morley, who examines, among others, Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. This 9/11 novel ends with a flip-book comprising pictures of a man falling from one of the Twin Towers, only the order of the pictures is reversed and he is seen climbing back up. Is this an instance of the type of consolation that Redding deems disappointing as a response to catastrophe? The answer may depend on whether we take the flip-book to be part of the novel, or whether we read it as belonging to the fictional world within the novel created by the book’s child narrator. If the latter, then consolation is shown to be a childish fantasy; if the former, then literature is seen as possessing redemptive potential. That the book is open to both interpretations is perhaps cause for celebration. Morley argues that 9/11 engendered a new form of narrative realism that sought to push the boundaries of linguistic expression. This new realism acknowledges that language exists in competition with visual narratives, and incorporates the visual in the textual both in non-linguistic gestures such as the flip-book, and also in ekphrastic instances such as the drawings in Nina and Martin’s apartment, the pictures the central characters visit in the Met, and the Morandi *Natura Morta* paintings in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007).

Whether seven years is long enough for critics accurately to assess the impact of 9/11 on American literature we do not yet know. Even when we have the luxury of a greater temporal distance, texts will not yield their full meaning to a given generation of scholars; history alters our views, and events overcome our assertions. Those who study contemporary literature know too well the joys and frustrations involved in the provisionality of our interpretations: we share, with Roth, the novelist’s struggle with shifting, slippery realities. This volume goes to press as George W. Bush is about to hand over to Barack Obama: a moment of transition, an end or a beginning? The essays collected here show American literature to be a cultural endeavor that, in Wai Chee Dimock’s words, is “just becoming legible, and we invoke it in that spirit: as a cipher, a cradle, a horizon yet to be realized” (13).

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