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RÉFÉRENCE

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- 1 “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.” While repeating the common catchphrase of the majority of studies on literary production after 9/11, the powerful opening sentence of *After the Fall* also signals the book’s insightful differentiation and shift of focus from previous attempts at addressing the subject and immediately brings to the fore what, for Gray, is mostly at stake in the aftermath of the attack: language. In fact, the author resists reproducing the rhetoric of ineffable trauma that prevails in most such studies and from lingering on the haunting absence of meaning that results from the unprecedented nature of the attack.¹ Instead, he views 9/11 under the spectrum of the Fall, a “recurrent tendency in American writing...to identify crisis as a descent from innocence to experience” (2), reinstates it in the context of national narrative and builds a strong argument around American literature since 9/11 as a literature of crisis which mixes the strange with the familiar. To this effect, Gray traces the manifestations of mourning and melancholia intrinsic to American society in any instance of crisis as well as the specificities of post 9/11 American culture and suggests that the new element consists of the invalidation of language, in addition to the disorientation and loss exhibited in previous instances: “Disorientation is certainly a feature of writing in America after the fall... . But there is never the suggestion that language itself has been invalidated” (14-15). According to the argument delineated in *After the Fall*, to restore faith in the writers’ tools and to be able to adequately represent, perhaps even successfully respond to the issues raised after the WTC attack, would entail embracing both the familiar and the strange – the domestic and the Other – as well as finding a point of convergence; what is required, according to Gray, is a space that

would engulf both the public and the private, enabling us to tap into the old certainties in order to resist and reject the simplistic binary rhetoric formulated by politics and mainstream media.

- 2 Following this thread and the presentation of the above mentioned argument as well as the theories that support it in the first chapter of the book, Gray investigates novels that have presumably failed to provide an adequate response to the questions raised after this fall; the second chapter of the book, *Imagining Disaster*, analyses the reasons behind this – formal as well as political – failure by looking at Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children*, Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *The Writing on the Wall*, John Updike’s *Terrorist* as well as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, among other texts. Gray structures his argument by stating that contemporary American writing has not only been shaped by the trauma of 9/11, but also by the shifting multicultural populations that constitute America, a now integral component of American culture that opens up opportunities for imaginary encounters and change. The failure to work through the trauma lies, in the author’s opinion, precisely in the failure to explore these possibilities and the domestication and assimilation of these diverse elements into familiar structures; in effect, the recurrent attempt to define the nation in relation and contrast to the “sinister Other” – albeit now replaced by Islam, rather than communism – proves sterile and unproductive, utterly reductionist, at a time when “everything has changed” and America has become a global nation.
- 3 *Imagining Crisis*, then, proceeds to explore instances of writing where crisis is approached through deterritorialisation, thus reflecting different cultures and exploring trauma’s potential to “provide an intercultural connection and, issuing from this, the possibility of social transformation” (83). Works of fiction such as *Twilight of the Heroes* by Deborah Eisenberg, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, *Netherland* by Joseph O’Neill and *The Garden of Last Days* by Andre Dubus III are presented and explored here as examples of novels that have successfully managed to detect structural connections between different traumata and to establish points of convergence between the personal and the political by enacting Homi Bhabha’s notion of “interstitial perspective”.² Gray suggests that, by employing such structures, these narratives become formally interstitial. He thus raises what is, arguably, the most interesting and powerful point of his argument, namely the importance of the reader in the process. According to Gray, the construction of “interstitial” spaces in the novel invites the reader to intervene in order to produce meaning but also to engage in a kind of witnessing and so fiction becomes performative, inaugurating a process of constant questioning and repositioning.
- 4 The fourth chapter of *After the Fall* takes the argument further by moving away from the American soil. The novels explored here, such as *The Foreign Student* by Susan Choi, *The Gangster We Are All Looking for* by le thi diem thuy, *Monkey Bridge* by Lan Cao or *Boat People* by Mary Gardner, depict characters who occupy the vantage point of a witness to an American act of war waged abroad and so “an interstitial space *between* cultures” (93) which renders cultural boundaries fluid and permeable and resembling a Deleuzian rhizome. The tropes of haunting and memory are used in these novels to explore the ways in which different instances of collective trauma (for instance, the American Civil War and the Vietnam War) are placed within similar frameworks and exhibit significant analogies and connections, but also the interconnectedness between past and present. The return to the past through the return to and reconciliation with family ancestry, the divided identities and fragmentation, the collision between cultures but mostly the

mutuality of experience between these stories that are written from a position of liminality and the narrative of 9/11 strengthen the links between different cultures and the need to interrogate previous rhetoric and either/or discourses generated by the War on Terror.

- 5 The final chapter of the book, *Imagining the Crisis in Drama and Poetry*, examines the representation of 9/11 in drama and poetry. This chapter functions mostly as a reference to playwrights' and poets' response to the crisis with a view to charting other literary genres and thus complementing the study. Although, however, this part proves feeble in pursuing the book's main argument further, it does maintain the thread by highlighting the interrogation of the mediatic master narrative by post-9/11 plays; Gray distinguishes once again between successful and failed dramatization in his discussion of representational strategies, "stylized commemoration" (147), voicing the traumatic experience or building on the silence. He explores questions of chance, coincidence, free will and philosophical questions raised by plays such as *Portraits* by Jonathan Bell, *Omnium Gatherum* by Theresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten, *Language Rooms* by Yussef El Guindi, *The Guys* by Anne Nelson, *The Mercy Seat* by Neil LaBute, *Recent Tragic Events* by Craig Wright, and *The God of Hell* by Sam Shepard among others. Next, he moves on to describe poetry at a time of crisis as "a spontaneous overflow of feeling, written in belief that only poems could say what needed now to be said ... a vehicle for expressing the sentiments of people who, in many cases, had never written poems before – was a measure of the failure of public discourse after the terrorist attacks" (169). Despite the often-repeated reproduction of clichés generated by the media, and the repetition of the familiarization process commonly due to the dependence on pre-established verbal structures that is evident in much of the poetic production of the times, Gray also detects a powerful movement towards deconstruction of the dominant discourse and a potential for reconfiguration and transformation developing mainly around the figure of the poet as truth-teller, a Whitman-esque figure that teaches people about the crisis and promotes the acknowledgement of "the human presence at the heart of the historical experience" (192).
- 6 All in all, *After the Fall* constitutes a challenging examination of the implications of 9/11 on American writing but, most importantly, a much-needed suggestion on what "the next sentence" should be in the aftermath of the attacks. Far from simply presenting an outline of the different approaches to the traumatic event or remaining anchored to the exploration of traumatic symptoms, Gray takes a clear stance, boldly discussing the elements that contribute to a successful response and proposes a route towards working through the experience that is not only insightful but also illuminating. More importantly, he enhances this endeavor with an intricate theoretical background that enables him to present a deeply erudite image of American culture and identity and to postulate a contemporary and intriguing version of American exceptionalism. In many ways, Richard Gray's enchanting vision of America after the fall also constitutes an ironclad argument and a powerful suggestion as to how to proceed in exiting this crisis.

NOTES

1. E. Ann Kaplan (*Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, London and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005) and Judith Greenberg (*Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) have dealt with the reception of 9/11 in literature and the arts adopting trauma theory as their methodological springboard; Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn's (eds) *Literature after 9/11* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008) offers a valuable charting of tendencies and strategies employed in the literary representation of 9/11; Kristiaan Versluys in *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) provides an analysis of four 9/11 novels seen under the spectrum of trauma theory; Ulrich Baer's collection *110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11* (New York and London: New York University press, 2002) constitutes an index of stories written in the aftermath of the attack, functioning under the premise that "there will be no single story to contain the attack."

2. As Gray explains, in *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that nations and cultures must be understood as "narrative" constructions that arise from the "hybrid" interaction of contending national and cultural constituencies. Hybridity and liminality are promoted as the positives counteracting sterile, retrograde historicism that is still prevalent in Western critical thinking.

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