

*After the Fall*

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*After the Fall*  
*American Literature*  
*Since 9/11*

Richard Gray

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*To*  
Sheona  
Jessica and Jack  
Catharine and Ben

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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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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.”<sup>1</sup>), 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

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

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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

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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 deaths<sup>2</sup>.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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](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](http://cn.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_War)).

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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

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*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

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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),

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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



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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.”<sup>3</sup> 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 superseded 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,

<sup>3</sup> “September 11th; A Warning from Hollywood,” *Panorama*, BBC1, March 24, 2002 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/panorama/news.d-1875000/1875186.stm>).

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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.”<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> “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](http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2005-06-30-war-of-the-worlds-911_x.htm)).

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invaders movie was transposed into an (as it happens, enormously successful) alien invaders movie seen through the screen of 9/11. The unique paradox of 9/11, and its consequences, is caught in this tension between the strange and the familiar. It was a demolition of the fantasy life of the nation in that it punctured America's belief in its inviolability and challenged its presumption of its innocence, the manifest rightness of its cause. It was also a dark realization of that fantasy life, in the sense that it turned the nightmare, of a ruthless other threatening the fabric of buildings and of the nation, into a palpable reality. The most deeply unsettling events, one commentator on 9/11 has suggested, are not those that are entirely unexpected but those that are anticipated in fantasy, those in which we have a libidinal investment (Kahane, 108). The vertiginous collapse of the World Trade Center, its reduction to rubble, was just such an event. Clearly, it offered a profound and, on one level, unexpected shock to the system. The shock was all the greater, however, because, on another level, it *was* expected – or, rather, dreaded. Americans woke up to the fact that their borders were not impregnable, that there was an enemy out there prepared to kill and be killed. But it woke up, paradoxically, to the realization of one of its darkest dreams, complete with all the symbolic paraphernalia of such dreams – falling towers and flesh, dark avengers from the skies, the bodies of women, men and buildings reduced to a waste land of ashes.

One of the deeper, darker curiosities of the “war on terror” that followed soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11 was the way it sustained and even reinforced this slippage between fact and fantasy, history and (often nightmarish) dream. This was in part because of the bizarre conjunctions that the various phases of the war have generated. Habermas, for instance, noted what he called the “morally obscene” “assymetry” in the Afghan war between opponents who seemed to come from different worlds (and, in a sense did, the First and Third ones): “the concentrated destructive power of the electronically controlled clusters of elegant and versatile missiles in the air” and “the archaic ferocity of the swarms of bearded warriors outfitted with Kalashnikovs on the ground” (Borradori, 28). It was also in part due to the rhetoric of some of those who promoted the war.

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Prior to the invasion of Iraq, for example, there was a great deal of talk, among those who favored going in, of a conflict that was essentially “immaterial” (Zizek, 37). On the one hand, there was the threat of invisible terrorist attacks, chemical and technological viruses that could be anywhere and nowhere; on the other, so the story went, there was the possibility of counter-terrorist retaliation that could be more or less virtual, at least on the side of the United States and its allies, with technology largely replacing direct military encounter. But the elision between the real and the artificial was, above all, the product, after 9/11, of what the masters of the “war on terror” managed with this kind of rhetoric, once the war – and, in particular the invasion of Iraq – had begun. Consider, for instance, what the *New York Times* journalist Ron Suskind was told by a senior adviser to the government during the early days of the Iraq war. “The aide said,” Suskind tells us,

that guys like me were “in what we call the reality based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” ... “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality ... and while you’re studying that reality ... we’ll act again, creating other new realities ... We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” (6)

In his novel, *Omega Point*, Don DeLillo introduces the reader to a fictional cousin of this government aide, a retired academic called Richard Elster. Elster was called in by the American Government at the beginning of the war on terror, we learn, to conceptualize their efforts, to form an intellectual framework for their troop deployments, counterinsurgency and orders for rendition. This fictional conceit, incidentally, is far less bizarre than something that actually happened in October, 2001: as reported in the press at the time, a group of Hollywood scriptwriters and directors, specialists in catastrophe movies, was set up in October, 2001, at the instigation of the Pentagon, to imagine possible scenarios for terrorist attacks and

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how to fight them. Elster spends much of the novel recollecting his two years mapping the reality that the architects of the “war on terror” were trying to create. As he does so, he ventures the suggestion that, for such architects, history is a dream dreamed by those who make it. Elster is unapologetic about this. “Lying is necessary,” he insists:

The state has to lie. There is no lie in war or in preparation for war that can't be defended. We went beyond this. We tried to create new realities overnight, careful sets of words that resemble advertising slogans in memorability and repeatability. Those were words that would yield pictures eventually and then become three-dimensional. The reality stands, it walks, it squats. (*Omega Point*, 28–9)

With the terrorist attacks, the real returns as a nightmarish fantasy that is also actuality; with the war on terror, it surfaces as a performance that acquires not only its meaning but also its substance from those who have scripted and perform it. Differently staged and nuanced, both chapters in this story of crisis involve a strange dematerialization of the material. The distinction between the actual and the artificial, the dreamed and the imagined, collapses; the real comes back as the artificial.

“The *return of the repressed*,” Herbert Marcuse has suggested, “makes up the tabooed and subterranean history of civilisation” (xv–xvi). That is another way of reading the dreadful contradictions at work in the story of September 11, 2001 and after: contradictions that, for many writers at least, seemed to confound the possibilities of speech. Which brings us back to another exceptional aspect of 9/11, this particular moment in American history when the dark, repressed fantasies of life after the fall suddenly made their return. “I have nothing to say,” Toni Morrison said. Apart from the obviously oxymoronic character of this, however, there is the not quite so obvious intertextual referent at work here. “Nothing to say” is precisely the phrase, the composer and poet John Cage uses to describe that peculiar cross between speech and silence that is his aesthetic aim. “I have nothing to say/” Cage said in one of his poems, “and I am saying it/ and that

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is poetry/ as I needed it.”<sup>5</sup> What was 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. Just how individual writers pursued that interest will be one of the subjects of the chapters that follow. What is worth pointing out for now is the difference between the reaction of writers to earlier moments of crisis and their reaction to this most recent one. Disorientation is certainly a feature of writing in America after the fall. (“I’m changed,” Washington Irving’s most famous character confessed, “and I can’t tell what’s my name or who I am!”). So is a sense of loss and, occasionally, longing for a “dreamy, reposeful, inviting” pre-lapsarian world, a “Delectable Land” (to use Mark Twain’s phrase) now evidently gone with the wind. Some writers, like Fitzgerald and Hemingway, clearly saw the fall experienced by their generation as also an initiation into deeper, darker and more adult forms of knowledge; they were “lost,” perhaps, but they had also “grown up.” Others, such as the poets of the Second World War and the Vietnam War, tended to equate the loss of innocence with the loss of hope (“there was no innocence;” in the words of W.D. Ehrhart, “And there was no future to believe in”). There is no sense with any of these other, earlier generations of American writers, however, that they may have been silenced, no suspicion that the crisis they had encountered made words useless. A sterner, sparer language might be needed, after the fall; Ernest Hemingway certainly thought so. “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain,” says the protagonist Frederic Henry in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, set in the Great War: “the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/cage-quotes.html>. “I Have Nothing to Say and I Am Saying It” is also the title of a “performance biography” of Cage that features interviews with Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Laurie Anderson and Yoko Ono. See the review in the *New York Times*, May 14, 2010 (<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/80272/John-Cage-I-Have-Nothing-to-Say-and-I-Am-Saying-It/overview>).

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the stockyards of Chicago... There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity” (207). But there is never the suggestion that language itself has been invalidated, that the currency of the writer’s trade is counterfeit and worthless. But that suggestion, as we shall see, was made over and over again in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks – and, for that matter, in response to the “war on terror” that followed. “Nothing to say” became a refrain, a recurrent theme with writers, as they struggled to cope with something that seemed to be, quite literally, beyond words.

And it is here that a link could be made, not with other, specifically American generations of writers, but with the arguments about literature that have dominated Western thought at least since the Romantics and Symbolists – and that were given an extra edge by the experience of total war and genocide in the middle years of the twentieth century. “Where the philosopher seeks certitude in the sign – the ‘p’ of the propositional calculus,” Siguurd Burckhardt has suggested, “– and the mystic in the ineffable – the ‘OM’ of the Hindoos – the poet takes upon himself the paradox of the human word, which is both and neither and which he creatively transforms in his “powerful rhyme”” (298). That offers one handy summation of a dialectic that has characterized thinking about and the practice of literature in the past two hundred years or so, in the English-speaking world and beyond. An equally handy summary was furnished by the poet Octavio Paz, when he argued that the definitive characteristic of post-Romantic literature is its vacillation between the magical and the revolutionary impulses. The magical, Paz explained, consists in a desire to return to nature by dissolving the self-consciousness that separates us from it, “to lose oneself for ever in animal innocence, or liberate oneself from history.” The revolutionary demands the “conquest of the historical world and of nature.” Both are ways of bridging the same gap and reconciling the “alienated consciousness” to its environment, Paz suggests; and both may be at work within the same writer (246). A century or so earlier than Paz, Charles Baudelaire actively demonstrated that vacillation by insisting both that “poetry is sufficient to itself” and that “the puerile utopia of art for art’s sake,

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by excluding morality and often even passion, was inevitably sterile” (Hamburger, 5). Literature as autonomous and autotelic or literature as referential and rooted in history, “pure” or “impure,” literature as end (the path of Mallarme, we could say, who insisted, “After I had found nothingness I found beauty” (Hamburger, 29)) or literature as means (the path of Rimbaud who, famously, found the means inadequate, or of another, later French writer, Francis Ponge who declared, “People say that art exists for its own sake. This means nothing to me. Everything in art exists for men.” (147)). This debate about the nature and function of literature boils down to a debate about the nature and function of its tools. It is about words and their uses – or, to be more exact, their potential usefulness or uselessness. And it was given renewed urgency by the experience of global conflict and, more particularly, the Holocaust. The Polish poet, Tadeusz Rosewicz, spoke for many when he confessed in 1960, “I cannot understand that poetry should survive when the men who created that poetry are dead. One of the premises and incentives for my poetry is a disgust with poetry. What I revolted against was that it had survived the end of the world, as though nothing had happened” (Hamburger, 249). Whether they knew it or not, American writers were suddenly, rudely awoken to this debate by the irruption of 9/11 and after; they, too, began to question their trade and its tools. And they felt compelled, not just to search for a new verbal austerity as some other, earlier generations had done, but to wonder if words were any use at all – and, to ask, quite simply, if literature could or should survive the end of *their* world.

Just how American writers have asked and tried to answer this question is the subject of this book. In the next chapter, *Imagining Disaster*, I focus on works that, in my opinion, have failed to come up with an adequate answer. My interest here is in the possible reasons for this failure: a failure that is not just a formal but also a political one. In place of a necessary imaginative encounter with disaster, and the recalibration of feeling and belief that surely requires, most of the fiction addressed in this chapter betrays a response to crisis that is eerily analogous to the reaction of many politicians and the mainstream American media after 9/11: a desperate retreat into the old sureties. Even the one novel considered in this chapter that manages to go



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