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Disorientation and Disillusionment in Post-9/11 Poetry: A Thematic Reading

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the immediate responses that emerged in American poetry after the terrorist attacks on 11 September, 2001. The aim of the paper is not to summarize the tragic events of 9/11, but to show how poets reacted to the terrorist attacks. In response to 9/11, a great deal of poetry emerged that expresses the poetic and completely personal, intimate side of the crisis, and many printed publications appeared in which poets addressed 9/11. Although one can find a range of features in American poetry after the attacks, there are notable similarities among the poetry being produced. The post-9/11 poetry can be divided into thematic clusters. This paper is, however, limited to responses that deal only with feelings of disorientation, loss and despair after 9/11. Furthermore, the paper presents poetic reactions that involve a sense of disillusionment and the idea that everything changed after the attacks. Each thematic cluster offers examples of 9/11 poetry that are interpreted with the help of close reading.

Keywords: events of 9/11; contemporary American poetry; responses; trauma; crisis; close reading; thematic criticism

Dezorientacija in razočaranje v poeziji po 11. septembru 2001: Tematsko branje

POVZETEK

Namen članka je analiza in sistematična razčlenitev odzivov v Ameriki na teroristične napade, ki so se zgodili 11. septembra 2001 v New Yorku in Washingtonu D.C. Članek ne povzema samih dogodkov, temveč se osredotoča na posledice, ki so jih teroristični napadi imeli na sodobne ameriške pesnike. Kot odziv na napade je nastalo veliko poezije, ki je izražala pesniško in popolnoma osebno, celo intimno stran krize. Po dogodkih je tako izšlo tudi veliko tiskanih publikacij s poezijo, ki se je dotikala dogodkov 11. septembra 2001. Odzivi so v tej poeziji nadvse raznoliki, vseeno pa imajo pogosto nekatere stične točke in so zato lahko razdeljeni na tematske sklope. Ta članek se osredinja na dva tematska sklopa, in sicer na pesniške odzive, ki zajemajo občutke dezorientacije, izgube in obupa. V nadaljevanju članek zajame še tematski sklop, ki vključuje občutja razočaranja in idejo o nekem spremenjenem svetu. Oba tematska sklopa vsebujeta številne pesmi, ki so analizirane s pomočjo natančnega branja.

Ključne besede: 11. september 2001; sodobna ameriška poezija; odzivi; kriza; travma; natančno branje; tematska kritika

Disorientation and Disillusionment in Post-9/11 Poetry: A Thematic Reading

1 Introduction

Within weeks after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in New York City, there was an astounding response among American poets,¹ and one of the initial responses was self-criticism and self-blame. Jeffrey Gray (2008, 265) remarks that the first reaction by writers was aimed at “striking a balance with the high-volume outrage of some radio and television commentators.” The *what-have-we-done-to-deserve-this* response was present in poetry too, but it was overpowered by “‘the-we-had-it-coming’ case” (Gray 2008, 265). Poets like Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Pinsky, Robert Creeley, Lucille Clifton, Lucille Lang Day, Jean Valentine, Kimiko Hahn, Galway Kinnell, Tess Gallagher, Joy Harjo, Ruth Stone, Stephen Dunn, Molly Peacock, and Alicia Ostriker, both known and unknown, reacted to the tragic events by portraying a broad range of political and personal issues with much passion. Their intention was not to remain undecided and helpless but to contribute their share. The current paper is a part of an extensive study on poetic responses to 9/11, where the poems were classified according to thematic paradigms, yielding an increased understanding of the poets’ attitudes toward the problematic experience of 9/11. This paper will offer a detailed analysis of some of the ways through which selected American poets addressed the terror.

In effect, the events of 9/11 confronted poets with a sense of loss, general trauma, and, consequently, immense emotional pain. Allan Burns (2002, 83) comments:

Much of the world’s finest poetry has been written in response to loss, out of desire to offer tribute to the departed, to protest against fate, or to produce some “immortal” thing as compensation for the disappearance of something mortal. The elegiac impulse is as strong in American poetry as in any national poetry.

On the one hand, mournful reflections of loss are often found in post-9/11 poetry. Richard Gray demonstrates that, apart from the feeling of disorientation, which he believes to be one of the central consequences of the attacks, there are other similar emotional responses in the poetry after 9/11. He specifies these reactions as “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” (Gray 2011, 14). Furthermore, some post-9/11 poetry was indeed intended as part of the process of healing and finding comfort, and Gray (2011, 18) concurs when he claims that to some extent “the role of poetry [was] testament and therapeutic practice.”

On the other hand, there were some immediate poetic responses to the attacks that absolutely lack self-reflexivity and call instead for final closure, for revenge and finding the culprits. Gray (2011, 190) notes:

In a climate of confusion, with the trauma of terrorism fueling a widespread desire for revenge, some poets appear to feel challenged, not just by the problem of how to imagine disaster, but by the possibility that what they say might be ignored or even suppressed.

¹ The selected contemporary American poets in this paper had previously published at least one poetry collection or had published poetry in literary journals; these poems about 9/11 are not the authors’ first publication.

Gray (2011, 190) continues that “there is an undercurrent of paranoid feeling running through some post-9/11 poetry, the suspicion that ‘they’ are out to suppress individual vision and voice.” However, poets that retain a critical stance remain the majority. Poetic responses involving spreading paranoia, and mimicking the patriotic reactions of the then politics and media are much scarcer. This paper, however, will focus on two kinds of poetic reflection. Firstly, the paper will examine the poetic responses that embrace a sense of disorientation, loss, despair and even disability. Secondly, it will closely look at responses that deal with the feeling of disillusionment and the impression that everything changed after the attacks. The paper follows a comparative literary approach that involves thematic criticism and that will be briefly introduced subsequently. Thematic criticism allows the generation of clusters or groups of poems sharing a common theme and can therefore be examined together. Moreover, the paper will offer a detailed analysis of selected examples of post-9/11 poetry with the help of close reading.

2 A Brief Overview of Thematic Criticism

When one wishes to exercise comparative criticism that enables the generation of clusters or groups of poems or other texts that share a common theme and can therefore be examined together, a researcher might employ the theoretical approach of thematic criticism, sometimes referred to as thematicism or thematics.² The approach has its beginnings in the 1950s and Northrop Frye’s seminal book *Anatomy of Criticism*, in which the Canadian literary critic and theorist sets out the Aristotelian aspect of “*dianoia*, the idea or poetic thought” (Frye 1973, 52), claiming that the best translation of the term is most likely “theme.” He calls literature in which idea or poetic thought is in the forefront “thematic.” Another early example of this literary criticism was Margaret Atwood’s 1972 book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, which was of immense importance for the development of thematic criticism. It was the use of the term ‘thematic’ in the title of her book that helped coin the term and consequently popularized the concept of thematic criticism.³ Russell M. Brown (2001) concurs that “it was undoubtedly the appearance of the word ‘thematic’ in the subtitle of *Survival* that was responsible for ‘thematic criticism’ becoming in Canada the identifying tag for this group of critics.” 1970s Canada thus experienced a flowering of thematic criticism.

Moreover, in their “Introduction” to *Thematics: New Approaches*, editors Claude Bremond, Joshua Landy, and Thomas Pavel (1995, 1) claim that “the history of thematic criticism appears to fall into three distinct phases.” They roughly outline the first two phases as the “free-flowing and relatively positivistic form [which was later] swept away by the various formalisms” (Bremond, Landy, and Pavel 1995, 1). The third phase occurred in the 1990s, when thematics was “making a cautious return to a position of importance” (Bremond, Landy, and Pavel 1995, 1).⁴

However, thematicists like Farah Mendlesohn (2012, 125) claim that thematic criticism “is not a theoretical approach to fiction in itself, but can be situated within theoretical approaches such as modernism, deconstruction, postmodernism and structuralism.” Mendlesohn (2012, 125–26)

² I have described the approach in detail in my Ph.D. dissertation “Post-9/11 America: Poetic and Cultural Responses.” For further reference, see also Michelle Gadpaille’s (2014, 165–77) article “Thematics and its Aftermath: A Meditation on Atwood’s *Survival*” published in *Primerjalna književnost*.

³ Another influential work on thematic criticism was D.G. Jones’s *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (1970).

⁴ Nowadays, several critics employ thematic criticism in their scholarly work; in 2002, Allan Burns conducted a thematic reading of contemporary American poetry in his book *Thematic Guide to American Poetry*.

further explains that “thematic criticism can be understood as a deconstructionist route into a text’s deeper meaning [and it is also] a mode of reader response criticism [when the reader] brings to the text his or her own prior reading and may slot the text into a pattern of thematic reading which the author did not envisage.” Mendlesohn (2012, 126) agrees that thematic criticism serves well as a comparative approach, since “the very advantage of a thematic approach is that it can link a cluster of texts and allow each to be used as a foil or as a tool of criticism for the other.” In this paper, a common theme in all the selected poems is 9/11 or a linkage to the events of 9/11. The theme of 9/11 is therefore perceived as a meta-theme, and other subthemes are identified. The poems will be organized into clusters of these subthemes that were determined by the reader-researcher in her prior reading of the poems on 9/11.

Moreover, in the chapter “Theme and Interpretation” of the *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, Menachem Brinker (1993, 24) proposes that a theme “may be constructed or suggested by shorter segments of text,” which will also be evident within the thematic reading of post-9/11 poems in this thesis. Occasionally, shorter excerpts of poems will determine the prevalent theme.

Furthermore, a thematic interpretation of 9/11 poems becomes a filter through which the reader actively grasps the (potential) themes. For Mendlesohn (2012, 129), when thematic criticism is exploited “as a form of reader response [it can] demonstrate how a reader may be in charge of thematic interpretation.”

Undoubtedly, there has been a critique of thematic criticism. David Perkins (1993, 109) explains that thematic criticism has long been neglected and that “what literary historians ought to mean by a ‘theme’ is uncertain and disputed.” He generalizes that themes are usually not used “as synthesizing concepts” and that “authors and/or works are grouped by their periods, genre, nation, region, gender, social class, ethnic group, literary tradition, school, *epistème*, discursive system, and so on, but not by theme” (Perkins 1993, 111). Of course, he questions the reason behind such abandonment of the theme and ascribes the reason to the following:

That literary historians generally prefer other categories to thematic ones is due, ultimately, to the need to explain the literary series. A literary history must attempt not only to represent (narrate, describe) the past but also to account for it. The historian must show why texts acquired whatever characteristics they have and why the literary series took whatever direction it did. Virtually all explanation in literary history is contextual. (Perkins 1993, 112)

Brown (2001, n.p.) argues that thematicism is “inevitably reductive in that it does not adequately take into account the ways in which the fictional reality is communicated.” He claims that: “Aesthetically, the thematic perspective has proved increasingly unsatisfactory since it tends to focus on the historical or psychological genesis of the text, rather than on the text itself and its effects.”

Nevertheless, Perkins (1993, 113) emphasizes that themes remain interesting “as an alternative basis for literary histories” and denounces opinions like Brown’s by stressing, “If thematic literary histories isolate works from their total context, a theme, because it inheres in the content of works, can also be described as especially the point or moment at which the literature interacts with extraliterary conditions” (Perkins 1993, 113). He further expresses his concern that literary histories had for a long time been focusing on “almost everything except literature,” exemplifying the centers of attention with “political and social history, brief biographies of authors, summaries of work, and stories of ‘influence’” (Perkins 1993, 116). Therefore, Perkins (1993, 116) validates

the treatment of the theme: “Precisely because themes link works rather than authors, scholars have attempted to use themes to construct a literary history that overcomes these common objections, to create a discourse that engages as directly with the work as does literary criticism and yet is literary history.”

The paper does not aim to locate unique thematic features of a specific poem, but rather to determine features that unite several poems into a thematic cluster. The paper will present two thematic clusters that will be analyzed in detail in the following chapters. The boundaries between thematic clusters may, of course, appear pervious and dynamic; many of the poems would undoubtedly fit into more than one thematic group at once. However, each cluster includes those poems which most clearly qualify for a certain thematic group – whether explicitly and/or implicitly represented. Since thematic criticism deals with poems that share a common theme but differ in their use of style, tropes and figures of speech, the paper embraces an additional approach, which is the formalist approach of close reading in order to analyze formal elements in poetry based on internal evidence.

3 Disorientation, Loss and Despair After 9/11

After 9/11, *The New York Times* began to publish sketches of the lives lost during the attacks, glimpses into the victims’ lives, entitled “Portraits of Grief.”⁵ These small tributes to the people who died in the attacks were different from usual obituaries; they were intended to be more like personal remembrances of the victims, celebrating yet mourning the loss of these lives. The feeling of loss, not only of lives but also of American values, the feeling of safety, etc., was present in post-9/11 poetry, as well. When poets express loss, they often express an emotional pain or other powerful emotions that go hand in hand with the feeling of loss: hopelessness, despair, disorientation, even an inability to react. On 9/11, disorientation was strongly present because of the void that had suddenly emerged; people’s lives were taken, and there was a spatial void in the city: the Towers were suddenly absent. Jessica Zeltner (2012, 91) agrees that writers “share images and impressions of September 11 as well as feelings of insecurity and disorientation after this day.” The Towers were there for orientation in the city, and suddenly, as David Lehman (2002, 89) wrote in his poem “9/14/01”: “All you have to do is / look up and it’s not there,” and it is as if you have lost your way. Gray (2011, 182) reflects that “empty landscape left by the destruction of the Twin Towers becomes a visual equivalent of trauma, the moral and emotional vacuum that opens up after a moment of crisis.”

C. K. Williams (2001, 80–81), in his poem “War,” first published in the *New Yorker* on November 5, 2001, explores the absence, the vacuum or “nothingness” and the grief, which is one of the manifold reactions to loss.

Fall’s first freshness, strange: the seasons’ ceaseless wheel,
 starlings starting south, the leaves annealing, ready to release,
 yet still those columns of nothingness rise from their own ruins,
 their twisted carcasses of steel and ash still fume, and still,
 one by one, tacked up by hopeful lovers, husbands, wives, on walls,
 in hospitals, the absent faces wait, already tattering, fading, going out.

⁵ In 2002, a book *Portraits: 9/11/01: The Collected “Portraits of Grief” from The New York Times* was published by Times Books.

The poem is divided into three numbered parts, each part consisting of four tristichs, and each line is a long free verse line. In the first and second part of the poem, the poet refers to the history of wartime for the Mayan and Greek civilizations, when “kingdoms / constantly struggling for supremacy – would be disgraced and tortured” (Williams 2001, 80). In the third and last part of the poem, however, the poet lingers over the events of 9/11 by re-creating the fall atmosphere of “starlings starting south, the leaves annealing, ready to release,” and instantly contemplating the sudden absence: “those columns of nothingness” (Williams 2001, 81). Nature’s elements are reduced to the basic form of birds migrating and trees shedding leaves. The 9/11 events did occur in the fall of 2001; nevertheless, fall is often a symbol of transition, even the end of a season or a particular period, which is relevant to the situation, since the poet feels the end of something and/or the loss of someone. Because of the imagery employed, readers can feel the poet’s expression of gloom, despair, sadness and grief, since the experience of absence – not only of the absent towers but also of “absent faces” – has caused a void in the “hopeful lovers, husbands, wives” (Williams 2001, 81). It is as if these people do not notice the season changing outside, since they are preoccupied only with their loss. The poet is aware of “the non-linearity not only of the seasons but of the catastrophe at the heart of the poem” (Gray 2008, 272), but somehow nature’s rhythm is of no importance because “still those columns of nothingness rise from their own ruins” (Williams 2001, 81). The poet often uses alliteration and a loose consonance to intensify the rhythm, and engage the reader: “Fall’s first freshness, strange: the seasons’ ceaseless wheel” or “their twisted carcasses of steel and ash still fume, and still” (Williams 2001, 81). Jeffrey Gray (2008, 272) understands this structure as “the insistence on memory in the face of an ongoing rhythm.” The poet finishes the poem by implying in the last – italicized – lines of the poem that what follows is a time for sorrow and desolation: “*These fearful burdens to be borne, complicity, contrition, grief*” (Williams 2001, 81).

Similarly to Williams, Vicki Hudspith (2002, 32) uses the symbol of the seasons (fall and winter in her case) in her 9/11 poem “Nodding Cranes” but creates a different twist: fall declines winter:

No one wants to look at my disaster
It has become a construction site ...

My disaster is receding
It encompasses less and less of every block
Fewer streets know it each day ...

My disaster is still a disaster
But autumn is faithful and refuses winter
Its place ...

The recurring word throughout the poem is “disaster,” and often “my disaster.” Hudspith transforms the catastrophe of 9/11 into her personal traumatic event, and wants to be reminded of it daily in order not to feel disoriented. Therefore, “autumn is faithful and refuses winter / Its place” (Hudspith 2002, 32). She has no intention of erasing or diminishing her disaster, which is equal to the fall – in her case, probably because this was the time when the attacks took place. The speaker fears that she will not be able to measure her pain if “all the pieces are swept away”

by winter. In the last line of the poem, the speaker concludes by stating: “I have to rebuild my disaster” in order to know “what I know,” to be able to find direction. The reader is reminded of Stephen Dunn’s (2002, 3) poem “Grudges”, where the poet asks a rhetorical question: “Ground zero, is it possible to get lower?” Gray (2011, 181) believes that “In ‘Grudges,’ Stephen Dunn tries to measure the loss,” in a manner similar to Hudspith, in order to find orientation.

Hudspith’s poem consists of nine stanzas, each with three irregular lines, and the poet intertwines real descriptions of city blocks and streets with the unseen, like her disaster, horror but also the void. Nevertheless, the speaker is not passive and numb. She feels that her despair/disaster is crucial for her survival; she wishes to rebuild *it* – not the towers, but her loss. As Gray (2011, 182) remarks, “an appropriate measure of loss is empty space, a visual vacancy.”

Furthermore, in post 9/11 poetry, despair often resembles a sense of numbness, impotence and nothingness, with the only adequate reaction being sorrow. In her rather short poem “In the Burning Air,” Jean Valentine (2002, 29) reveals sadness as the centrality of the poem, but also of the 9/11 events:

In the burning air
nothing.

But on the ground
Let the sadness be
a woman and her spoon,
a wooden spoon,
and her chest, the broken
bowl.

The line “*Let the sadness be*” is italicized, indented, and therefore isolated on the page in order to emphasize that this is now the only entity that remains. The poet uses an open form and the language is compacted. The only interruption is the one indented line to show the disconnection, and the repetition of the word *spoon*, where the reader is forced by the combination of the line ending and the apposition to pause. The speaker equates sadness with a woman, her wooden spoon and broken bowl. As if the poet almost cannot find adequate language to express the nothingness, the comparison implies that a woman can provide some sort of nourishment with the wooden spoon, even though her bowl is broken. There is also a double meaning of the word *chest*; on the one side, her chest (the part of her body, where people feel physical pain due to the stress-induced sensation) can be the broken bowl; whereas on the other hand, the chest can be meant as a large wooden box where people store their belongings.

Moreover, sadness can provide comfort in the burning air, where there is nothing left. Gray (2011, 183) notices that “Valentine admits that she can see ‘nothing’ anywhere ‘In the Burning Air’ that surrounds her.” A sense of numbness is present in the poem, where the poet is more static than active.

Another poem where the speaker feels lost and disoriented is “Religious Art” by Charlie Smith (2002, 42). It is as if the speaker has to remind himself of his home and place; he presses hard against the ground to feel something familiar:

I press hard with my feet
against the earth and
call this fighting back. All yesterday
I walked around counting birds.
Trees, a spray of pebbles in the forecourt,
a dip the wind took about six

maintain the posts assigned, repel boarders.

The peculiar emptiness
in the mown hayfield this afternoon
we stood staring into – as a precaution – ...

However, the only safety they (the persona and the people around him) can experience is the staring into nothingness, “the peculiar emptiness.” If they do not move and keep fixing their gaze at “the grass shining and then going dull against / the fading light,” they will be protected, not only from the emptiness, but also from the loneliness, which is “like a family art” (Smith 2002, 42). The poet seeks comfort in nature by feeling the soil, counting birds, observing trees and the wind, and takes the reader along to the hayfield, where one can see the mown grass, possibly the last of the year. “The peculiar emptiness” of the mown grass might remind the reader of the demolished towers that fell just like these grass plants in the field, and there is nothing but absence.

Similarly to Williams, the poet offers in his poem an array of nature images, from visual (the general setting, the fading light, etc.), auditory (birds, wind), olfactory (the smell of peppers drying on the porch, then of hay) to tactile (touching the ground with his feet). All these images help readers to follow the slow pace of the poem. Moreover, the poem has an open form with irregular stanzas (of seven, six, one, and six lines), which makes the reader pause, possibly to reflect at certain points, especially at the isolated line, where the speaker introduces the notion of the “boarders.” Similarly to the comparison of the mown grass and the fallen towers, there is the possibility of a subtle analogy between the “boarders” and the people who lost their lives in the towers.

Not just the form, but also the use of punctuation – the use of dashes – creates opportunities for the reader to pause. The speaker seeks wariness in stopping and observing the surroundings, and perhaps believes this might offer the same to the reader.

After such traumatic events, horror and then hopelessness are common occurrences. In her poem “Her Very Eyes,” Kimiko Hahn (2002, 165) writes a poem of a hopeless mother who listens to her daughter explaining why her friend’s sister “cannot close her eyes”:

she sees bodies falling from the sky,
she sees bodies breaking through the glass atrium
or smashing on the pavement ...
And she hears them land in front of her
but cannot turn away when she closes her eyes.
And she doesn’t know what to do.

The irruption of 9/11 and witnessing the horrific plunges of people throwing themselves from the burning buildings are what tortures the girl, and she cannot look away. Occupying just one stanza of fifteen lines, the poem reveals the inability to react of all involved. The girl in the poem “doesn’t know what to do” (Hahn 2002, 165). Moreover, both the daughter and the mother are helpless about the girl’s trauma. Immediately on hearing that the girl “cannot close her eyes,” the mother offers a familiar explanation: “it must be asbestos irritation” (Hahn 2002, 165). When her daughter adds the unfamiliar information about “bodies falling from the sky,” the mother remains silent. She has no solution for the girl to stop seeing the horrific images. As Laura Frost (2008, 180) acknowledges in her article “Still Life, 9/11’s Falling Bodies”, “Psychological studies after 9/11 singled out witnessing falling people – live or on TV – as a major predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): this, of the many upsetting images from the day, had a lasting traumatic effect on some viewers.” This is what happened to the girl: she was traumatized and could hardly cope. Moreover, Zeltner (2012, 139) proposes that a trauma like 9/11 can evoke symptoms like “bewilderment and numbness that lead to speechlessness,” which happened to the mother and her daughter in the poem. The poem finishes with the lines, “This is what my daughter reports / upon coming home from school / last Tuesday” (Hahn 2002, 165), leaving the poem itself as a simple report and the reader as well as the mother in the poem unable to communicate because of the horrid images.

4 Disillusionment: Everything Has Changed

When the USA was faced with the attacks on the morning of September 11, 2001, it was a double shock. The initial shock was because of the atrocious terror act on American ground and the destruction of an iconic symbol of capitalist America – the Twin Towers, and of a representative symbol of military power – the Pentagon. Then, Americans felt shocked because of the “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” (Gray 2011, 11). The reaction of many people after the attacks was overwhelming disillusionment, because “[i]nnocence [was] shattered, paradise [was] lost, thanks to a bewildering moment, a descent into darkness, the impact of crisis” (Gray 2011, 3). Zeltner (2012, 157) expands on the people’s perception of sudden change:

In the wake of 9/11, people have faced a situation of insecurity and the disruption of their daily routine. Thus, 9/11 can be seen as an event that gave rise to a major change, a deterioration from normality to fear, insecurity as well as national and international crises. The collapse of the towers left a world in decline. Daily life degraded into chaos; routine and order were suspended.

Several writers have elucidated the notion of complete change after the attacks in their poems, e.g. Joy Harjo (2002, 168) wrote her post-9/11 poem with the telling title “When the World As We Knew It Ended.”⁶ In the poem the speaker expects the disaster: “It was coming. / We had been watching since the eve of the missionaries in their / long and / solemn clothes, to see what would happen” (Harjo 2002, 168).

Analogously, in her poem “October,” Louise Glück (2006, 5–15) records what has or has not changed after the attacks. The rather long poem consists of six numbered sections of random

⁶ Carey Harrison contributed his poem “America everything has changed” for the anthology *110 Stories*. Stanley Plumly published his piece “The Day America Changed” in *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*, etc. In his poem “When the Skyline Crumbles,” Eliot Katz writes: “The world has changed, bro.”

lengths; however, the poet's attitude towards the change is different compared to Harjo. In part 1, the speaker is disillusioned because of the sudden change and therefore poses several questions, beginning in the first line: "Is it winter again, is it cold again" (Glück 2006, 5). However, there is only one question mark and that comes after the final question in the last lines of part 1: "didn't we plant seeds / weren't we necessary to the earth, / the vines, were they harvested?" (Glück 2006, 6). The poet does not insert a single terminal punctuation mark, except for the question mark at the end of the first part. This helps to show that the speaker is perplexed and at this point unable to offer answers. The speaker remembers what happened before the change when everything was still in order: "I remember how the earth felt, red and dense," but she is not aware of when she was "silenced" (Glück 2006, 5).

In part 2, it seems that the situation is becoming clearer for the persona, who observes: "I know what I see" (Glück 2006, 5). Moreover, the speaker now knows what caused the change: "violence has changed me" (Glück 2006, 7). In this part, the punctuation reverts to standard punctuation, which supports the idea of possessing some certainty. Repetition is a central literary device of part 2, and Glück uses it to emphasize her point that she now knows more, though she is still hurt: "It [summer] does me no good; violence has changed me" (Glück 2006, 7). Ann Keniston (2011, 665) concedes to such reading and claims that the persona implements a "sense of repetition and temporal disruption with the literal condition of coming after." In part 2, the speaker repeats the same word on several occasions (summer, violence, good, shine, sun, voice, day, night, etc.), as well as the sentence "violence has changed me":

Summer after summer has ended,
balm after violence:
it does me no good
to be good to me now;
violence has changed me.

The speaker's experience of violence and change is still personal, individual; the speaker portrays what altered her. Despite having some answers, the speaker remains distrustful. The second part closes with these lines: "Tell me I'm living, / I won't believe you" (Glück 2006, 7).

Finally in part 4, the speaker lists all the external changes:

The light has changed;
middle C is tuned darker now.
And the songs of morning sound over-rehearsed ...
The songs have changed; the unspeakable
has entered them ...
So much has changed ...
The songs have changed, but really they are still quite beautiful ...
And yet the notes recur. They hover oddly
in anticipation of silence.
The ear gets used to them.
The eye gets used to disappearances.

The entire poem is rather flat and somber in tone; Keniston (2011, 667) summarizes: “‘October’ in this way enacts a poetic endgame both tonally, through extreme flatness, and structurally, through an inability to progress.” The poem gains a more optimistic tone in part 5, where the speaker appears to be comforted by her craft: “you are not alone, / the poem said, / in the dark tunnel” (Glück 2006, 14). Keniston (2011, 667) adds: “By continuing to write, the poet affirms her entrapment in just the kind of hope she has abjured.” Markedly, a more hopeful tone appears in the closing lines of the poem, when the speaker is able to see beauty again; i.e. the beautiful moon that the speaker personifies and ascribes female gender: “my friend the moon rises: she is beautiful tonight, but when is she not beautiful?” (Glück 2006, 15).

Uniquely, Andrea Carter Brown (2002, 7–8) treated the theme of change in her commemorative poem “The Old Neighborhood”:

Where is the man who sold the best jelly donuts and coffee
you sipped raising a pastel blue Acropolis to your lips? Two

brothers who arrived in time for lunch with hot and cold
heroes where Liberty dead ends at the Hudson? ...

The cinnamon-skinned woman for whose roti people lined up
halfway down Church, the falafel cousins who remembered ...

I know none of their names, but I can see their faces clear

as I still see everything from that day as I ride away from
the place we once shared. Where are they now? And how?

The speaker is distressed because her neighborhood has changed after the attacks, and wishes to pay “tribute to the vanished vendors of the World Trade Center in precise ethnic detail” (Gray 2011, 181). Because the speaker offers these particularities of all the faces the speaker used to meet regularly on the streets, the reader can easily envision them as well. The details are mostly associated with various ethnic cuisines; relying on this imagery, the reader is also exposed to scents (coffee, cinnamon and other food) and tastes (jelly donuts, roti and falafel) to make the street people’s stories even more personal, although the speaker does not know their names. The poet combines the imagery in such a way that the reader can respond to one image in different ways: one can visually imagine the “cinnamon-skinned woman,” but at the same time smell and taste the cinnamon. Moreover, the poet employs several phrases that have special resonance and double meaning: “a pastel blue Acropolis,” “where Liberty dead ends at the Hudson,” “halfway down Church.” Both, Liberty and Church refer to the streets in Lower Manhattan; Acropolis is the area on a natural high point in Manhattan. However, all the words can be also explained with their literal meanings. Politics and religion meet at Liberty and Church; and ‘liberty’ is one of the political rallying cries of the young U.S. When liberty is said to “dead end” at the Hudson, the speaker does not refer only to a matter of the city street grid but to the fact that freedoms are restricted.

The form of the poem is a variation of a ghazal and contains fourteen couplets without rhyme and a strict rhythmic pattern, which in this poem is quite prosaic. The poetic form of the ghazal

originates in Arabic poetry and often expresses a painful experience because of loss or separation. Surely, the poet is separated from all these people with whom she once shared the area, and therefore the ghazal serves as an appropriate form. Moreover, it might be that the poet chose a poetic form from another ethnic environment in order to pay even greater homage to their memory, since they were all also members of other ethnic groups.

Moreover, although still full of questions, Shelley Stenhouse (2002, 18) offers a proviso to the situation in her post-9/11 poem “Circling”:

And where have the backyard birds gone?
The *yo babay mo-fo boom chicka* Jersey cars
don't blast around my block trying to park.
We'll never go back. It's so strange to be caught
in history, to be making history after just making loads
of unused imaginary money, men in blue jackets shouted,
traded, and it's gone and it's okay but I don't want to die.
I hope God is circling up there with those planes.
Patti was a good person and she died.

The speaker specifies the change in a more general manner (the missing birds, the silent cars, the generality of a historic moment, and portrayal of the change through the first person plural: “We'll never go back”), as well as in a personal way (the first person speaker; Patti – someone the speaker obviously knew – having passed away). Hence, as with Carter Brown's poem “The Old Neighborhood,” referring more to the community, Stenhouse's poem becomes a personal elegy. Gray (2011, 181) illuminates the poem by conveying that in such circumstances the poets often “find it difficult or even impossible to ‘tell you about’” the events. Therefore, “many poets feel that what they can do – and it is a great deal – is to honor the dead” (Gray 2011, 181). The elegiac part is brief in the poem, though; the speaker almost numbly states that Patti has died, but it is difficult for the speaker to clarify why Patti has died and where; it is difficult to depict the reality of the events. Moreover, the speaker seems disenchanted and fears for her own life, expressing the fear thus, “Lately I'm afraid of all sounds and the lack of sounds” and “I don't want to die” in “this big beautiful park,” which is the closing line of the poem. The poem creates a rather anxious tone, but also a tone of melancholy and disillusionment because of the change (the birds are gone; “God is probably passed out somewhere warm and dark”). The poem is written in a continuous form of just one block and no stanza breaks, which creates a narrative flow, revealing a certain progression in the speaker's story.

By the same token, Sharon Olinka's (2002, 76–77) poem “It Must Not Happen,” also written in a continuous form, yet in two blocks, expresses disappointment of the persona even in the title of the poem. Although the speaker is well aware that “[e]verything has burnt away,” and that “the bad dream / has entered us,” the speaker still prohibits “the mass burials” from happening. The persona is speaking in the first person, employing a conversational style (“wherever you [readers] are”) and casual, everyday diction (the persona is clipping her toenails, walking to the vegetable market, dreaming “of car keys, music, lipstick, movies, laughter”), which makes the tone intimate, as readers get a glimpse of the speaker's life. The tone changes in the poem and becomes at times ambiguous, since the persona resorts to the use of figurative language (comparing herself to water), yet still interchanging it with the simple diction and a somber tone:

“I have become water. / Everything has burned away.” (Olinka 2002, 77). In the closing lines, she calls for “[n]o more mass burials / by a harbor,” referring to the harbor of New York City. The mention of water, however, creates an optimistic tone, since water replenishes new life after the destruction.

Also referring to the main site of destruction, Robert Creeley (2002, 150) begins his post-9/11 poem “Ground Zero” with these opening lines:

What’s after or before
seems a dull locus now
as if there ever could be more

or less of what there is,
a life lived just because
it is a life if nothing more.

Creeley responds to the change caused by the attacks, which he equates with “a dull locus,” in his typical voice, using a short line, maintaining a certain tightness of the stanzas. Stephen Burt (2009, 256) evaluates Creeley’s style thus: “We recognize Creeley’s poems first by what they omit: he uses few long or rare words, no regular meters, and almost no metaphors.” Other features of his style evident in this poem are “parsimonious diction, strong enjambment, two- to four-line stanzas, and occasional rhyme” (Burt 2009, 256). Moreover, Gray (2011, 182) states that Creeley’s language in the poem “Ground Zero” is “terse and anonymous” and that the poet values loss as “empty space, a visual vacancy.” The poet introduces the visual emptiness that occurred in the title, remaining rather abstract in the rest of the poem. The change is presented through “after or before,” and it seems that this change feels organic and natural to the speaker, since all things are transient, even the speaker himself, and no matter what happens, there is a continuation:

The street goes by the door
just like it did before.
Years after I am dead,

there will be someone here instead
perhaps to open it,
look out to see what’s there –

even if nothing is,
or ever was,
or somehow all got lost.

Moreover, the speaker believes in the perpetuity of dreams: “Dreams may be all we have / whatever one believes / of worlds wherever they are” (Creeley 2002, 150). In this poem, dreams are treated differently than in the previous poem by Olinka. In Creeley’s poem, dreams are what one can hold on to “when all the strife is over / all the sad battles lost or won, / all turned to dust”

(Creeley 2002, 150). One could argue that there is a sense of displacement at work, a defense mechanism, when the persona shifts the mind to a new aim – to dreams in this case, wanting to replace the terror with an illusion. The speaker feels encouraged because of the dreams “we” are left with and cries: “Persist, go on, believe” (Creeley 2002, 150).

5 Conclusion

The paper presented poetic responses after the events of 9/11, such as the feelings of loss, disorientation and despair embracing poems that expressed emotional numbness, a lack of orientation and a sense of homelessness. The second part of the paper included post-9/11 poetry associated with disillusionment addressing the issue of a changed world. American poets who responded to 9/11 were bewildered and hurt at being confronted with a traumatic crisis that was difficult to manage, let alone to express in words. Through their craft, they attempted to provide instruments to resolve the unknown terror. Aimee Pozorski (2014, 122) claims that “[a]lthough not always reparative or redemptive, there is nonetheless something magical inherent in literary language, which is the ability to make the familiar unfamiliar and, conversely, the unfamiliar familiar again.” Despite the fact that a number of poets questioned the power of poetry in the wake of 9/11, many critics and poets corroborated that poetry can offer some sort of comfort, adding another dimension to the trauma after such a challenging moment in history. The paper is part of an extensive study that focused on portraying the varied poetic responses to 9/11, leaning on thematic criticism as a comparative approach for creating a collectivity of poems that differ in metrics, style, tropes and figures of speech. Individual poems that appeared in particular thematic clusters were then analyzed with the help of the interpretive method of close reading. On the whole, the poets managed to ensure a manifold palette of responses within American poetry “by acknowledging the human presence at the heart of the historical experience and announcing that presence in a single, separate voice” (Gray 2011, 192). Contemporary American poets translated the 9/11 trauma into individual and personal explanations of the crisis, and chose their own paths to manage the terror, relying on the “magical elements” of poetry.

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