

[연구논문]

From “The Falling Man” to *Girly Man*: American Poetry after 9/11 and the Logic of Mourning

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1. “The Falling Man”: Impossibility of 9/11 Representation

In October 2001, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, an American poet, painter, and liberal activist, predicted that “poetry from now on would be divided into two categories: B.S. and A.S., Before September 11 and After September 11.”¹⁾ His reckoning, reminding me of Adorno’s famous remarks about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz,²⁾ goes with the general response to 9/11, which locates 9/11 as a

1) Jeffrey Gray, “Precocious Testimony: Poetry and the Uncommemorable,” in *Literature after 9/11*, ed. Ann Keniston and Jenne Follansbee Quinn (New York: Routledge, 2008).

2) Lines such as Adorno’s “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” and “all post-Auschwitz culture, including its critique, is garbage” have been quoted as examples of the limit of representation. Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 162; idem, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 367.

watershed moment for American society, culture, and literature. In fact, in so many kinds of literary representations of 9/11, a lingering emotion of loss or a mood of mourning has coexisted with, or ended in, the evocation of the impossibility of representation. For example, Wislawa Szymborska's 2005 poem, "Photograph from September 11," begins by describing the stark reality of that day in a controlled, 'so called, poetic' mode and ends with the evocation of the impossibility of poetic representation: "They jumped from the burning floors— / one, two, a few more, / higher, lower. // I can do only two things for them— / *describe this flight* / and *not add a last line.*"³⁾ This poem, while describing the falling bodies of 9/11 as a very simple word, "flight," conveys the terrible moment of loss, the loss of words, that is, the failure of representation. Szymborska's response to 9/11 is just one example of the poetic failure in the representation of 9/11, showing how people including poets became numb in front of the unimaginable event.

What about the visual representation of 9/11? Photography was undoubtedly effective in capturing the catastrophic moment. In the famous photograph of "The Falling Man" by Richard Drew, we encounter the most shocking, faithful form of visual representation (see figure 1).

3) Wislawa Szymborska, "Photograph from September 11," in *Monologue of a Dog*, trans. Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak (New York: Harcourt, 2005), 69, italics mine.



Figure 1. Richard Drew, "The Falling Man."⁴⁾

This picture, taken by Richard Drew, captures the vertical image of a man falling from the North Tower of WTC at 9:41 a.m. on September 11.⁵⁾ From the very start of its appearance, it became a symbolic tool of interpretation for 9/11. The falling image, the erecting line of falling was so powerful that the picture was considered as not just the tragic representation of a human being but as a representation of America: a nation, falling empire. The responses of people and the ways they interpreted the picture were not less shocking than the picture itself.⁶⁾ With so many jumpers at that time, repeated view of the images of the crumbling towers and

4) Richard Drew, "The Falling Man," <http://images.usatoday.com/news/sept11/2002-09-02-jumper.jpg>

5) For more detailed information, see Joe Pompeo (2011-08-29), "Photographer behind 9/11 'Falling Man' retraces steps, recalls unknown soldier," *Yahoo! News*, retrieved 2011-08-31.

6) Because there had been so many 'jumpers,' it was not easy to identify the man at first. Five years after 9/11, the man in the photograph was identified as Jonathan Briley, a 43-years-old employee of a restaurant in the North Tower. The subject of the image, however, has never been officially confirmed. He was one of 200 people who fell or jumped to their deaths on that morning.

falling bodies was absorbing the spectacle and people were looking for a word to describe the falling people. One interesting comment was from the New York City medical examiner's office which stated that it does not classify people who fell to their deaths on September 11 as jumpers: "A 'jumper' is somebody who goes to the office in the morning knowing that they will commit suicide. ... These people were forced out by the smoke and flames or blown out," explains Dennis Cauchon in an article, "Desperation Forced a Horrific Decision" in *USA Today*.⁷⁾ Newspaper stories that commented on the image as well as other published interpretations of this form of death have attracted a barrage of criticism from readers who find the image disturbing. The social and cultural significance of "The Falling Man" was nevertheless huge and the falling man became the symbol for grieving families much like the "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier." After the photo's publication, countless commentaries followed, some with new photographs and pictures, interposing endless words, stories, guesses, and explanations, most of which seemed not to be mourning the death of the man in an ethically right way, but sometimes begetting (albeit unintentionally) violent abuse of a human right, and sometimes codifying the impossibility of representation itself.

In this essay I try not to repeat the endless, hackneyed discourses on the impossibility of representation, but rather to pull out some meaningful moments of visual and literary representation around 9/11 and think of the *possible* location of poetic voices and speech reflecting or re-thinking the binary antagonistic discourses around

7) Dennis Cauchon and Martha Moore, "Desperation Forced a Horrific Decision," in *USA Today*, http://www.usatoday.com/news/sept11/2002-09-02-jumper_x.htm

9/11 that the mass media and the political parties have produced. In doing so, this paper is an attempt to rescue the discourse around 9/11 from the illogical cultural and political discourses ornamented with such words such as Ground Zero, sacred ground, hallowed ground, our heroes, axis of evil, etc. So many poems produced shortly after 9/11 reflects the shock, sadness, and of the American psyche as a whole but fail to construct the meaningful site of mourning beyond the national loss. While briefly mapping out the rapidly changed poetic and cultural landscape after 9/11, this paper would go further from a passive sketch of the literary landscape of post-9/11. In this paper, I try to discern the meaningful use of an explicitly poetic register in order to express ostensibly un-representable shock, sadness, and anger, even when coupled with the hackneyed discourses of mourning, grieving, revenge, war, and anti-war. Furthermore, this paper tries to explore the possibility of poetry as a genre serving as a unique form of *praxis* that suggests a different idea or constructive discourse for contemporary American culture, especially in the post-9/11 era.

According to Simpson, post 9/11 era was the time when commemoration "has been hijacked by revenge."⁸) Originally intended to rethink the discourses around 9/11--for example, 'in what sense' 9/11 became 'The Day America Changed' or 'When the World as We Knew It Ended,' to use the headline of newspaper accounts or Joy Harjo's comment and poem⁹)--this paper especially focuses on

8) David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 170.

9) 'The Day America Changed' is the coverage of Fox News which was originally published in March 21, 2007. See <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,61465,00>.

Charles Bernstein's poetic strategy that treats language as a form of public discourse seeking to jostle readers out of their personal grief and private emotional sphere. Trying to answer the questions embedded in the issue of poetic representation and to see the prompt responses of poets to the unprecedented trauma of modern America in post-9/11 when words such as suspicion, backlash, politics, security, censorship attained new meanings again and just a few had courage to "go against," I hope ultimately to dilute our overly rigid distinction between poetry and politics. To see how poets have practiced the ethics of writing in their own ways in the post-9/11 era is to rethink poetry's capacity to bring about social, political, and cultural change. Through Bernstein's prompt responses to what has happened to America, I will explore how his poetic language, which has been trapped in a critical misunderstanding for a long time, finds a door toward the reader, in the era of "post-LANGUAGE poetry," not as a form of therapy, reason, explication, or commemoration, but as the song of an ethical, political troubadour questioning the logic of mourning.

2. "Aftershock" and the world of *Girly Man*

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, poems were everywhere by everybody. Walking around the city of New York, people scrawled

html and 'When the World as New It Ended' was commented by Joy Harjo, contemporary American Indian Woman poet. She later wrote a poem under the same title. See Joy Harjo, "When the World as We Knew It Ended," in *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems 1975-2001*, 198-200.

poems in the ash that covered everything; poems in every corner of the city, poems in a cloud of e-mails, newspapers, in a burning television, poems of pride, compassion, and confusion, of course, poems of cries, poems of retaliation, poems of war and anti-war, poems of the possible and the impossible. If poetry expresses what remains un-representable about 9/11, it also shows the struggle to speak about the meaning of 9/11 in the persistent questions about how we interpret 9/11, how we endure it. The questions of the impossibility of representation, therefore, can be rewritten as the quest for remembering the loss and then the meaning of how to endure post-9/11 life might be newly explored. Here is Miranda Besson's poem "Flight," a typical poetic response to the falling man:

The survival of this slight speck
of this feathered perfection seemed
more important than anything else
we could think of those first few weeks:
more important than the planes,
the slow motion tumble,
the man in his business suit
who fell through the air without
the benefit of wings. (*PA 9/11*, 6)

Among so many poems in the form of remembering / representing 9/11, I cite this poem as an example in which the logic of mourning is not working well. As how to *endure* the shock became another important task for a poet, the task of portraying the scene or the shock still occupied as large a part of post-9/11 poetry as the recognition of the impossibility of representation. In this poem, the

man “who fell through the air without the benefit of wings” seems to wear a tint of dignity by being “more important than the planes.” Yes but No. The ending line does not fulfill the dream of faithfulness, in the sense of mimetic or figurative language, nor does it mourn for the dead or console the readers. Readers might think that the falling man is the transformed figure of Icarus. But the lines fail to capture the tragedy of a contemporary American man who must have lived the average day of ordinary American men and fell from the building on that morning. The survival might refer to the meaning and value of its photographic representation but the poem fails to get “the benefit of” sympathetic readership that it must have aimed at first. In the dumps of shock, anger, and sadness, so many poems were busy following the frame of “Are you with us or not.” As the fact that most of the recorded messages at that time were expressions of love was revealed, the shock, anger, and sadness of 9/11 made the numberless deaths of 9/11, the victims, into a pure form of a sacrifice and the sacrifice was a thing that was invented by others in the aftermath of the deaths. No one said that the deaths were meaningless; instead the dead became patriots, heroes of America. The desperate urge to assure us all that these deaths were not in vain worked in the poetry genre too, just as they did in other forms of representation. As we saw in the case of “The Falling Man” in the picture above, the deaths represented in the poems as well as the media were exalted and thus dignified the innocent victims as sacrifices who died for a great cause.

In the midst of so many voices witnessing, mourning, and enduring 9/11, there came the voices analyzing its cause and aftermath in

various forms, including poetry, the visual arts, and films. They were usually accompanied with the ethical reflections on American foreign policy as the cause of 9/11. Here is a poem of Pamela Talene Hale, entitled “Poem for an Iraqi Child in a Forgotten News Clip.”

I'm sorry that your mom was killed
When a missile struck your home. ...
That missile came in my name
Paid for by my tax dollars. (inserted in 2005 film *Voices in Wartime*)¹⁰

This is a voice of an ordinary person from an ordinary place. As we see in this poem, though the immediate response to 9/11 was shock and horror, there was a guilty feeling of “we-had-it-coming” in people’s minds and the expression of this feeling is strikingly balanced with the high-volume outrage, fury, shock, and anger of the mass media, the government, and some radio and television commentators. This kind of reflective poem, however, becomes just one disheartening example of post-9/11. To say Americans have little right to complain about trivial, ordinary things compared with conditions in other world begets another false interpretation of 9/11.

10) I read this poem first in the website of ‘poetsagainstthewar.org.’ The description she gave of herself was something like “an ordinary person in an ordinary place.” In an interview, she clarifies the reason why she used that as her description, “It was partly because I wanted it to be understood that it wasn’t just crazy left-wing people who were against the war. And it wasn’t just people who were activists or people who had an agenda or something. It was ordinary people in ordinary places—people you know who have jobs and homes and lives just like everybody else. And we ordinary people weren’t really happy with what was going on.” See <http://www.voiceseducation.org/category/tag/poem-iraqi-child-forgotten-news-clip>

The lines seem to be very ethical but still repeat the clear-cut binaries upon which so many politicians concentrated. So many poets tried to answer to the needs induced by the terrible, but in so many cases, poems just imitated the reportorial voices of the media, showing off the victims of 9/11 or victims in other worlds in the festival of grief. In speaking of the poetry that emerged after 9/11, we need first to trace more explicit contours of the immediate response in the broader net of public discourse. For the task, I was lucky to be there, then, in a position where I could witness and join in the various, instant poetic responses to 9/11.

The list of poets who responded to 9/11 is endless, including David Baker, Amiri Baraka, Daniel Berrigan, Charles Bernstein, Frank Bidart, Fred Chappell, Lucille Clifton, Robert Creeley, Kimiko Hahn, W.S. Merwin, and Alicia Ostriker. Thousands of lesser-known poets also responded to the event. If I go back to that day, from the morning of 9/11, hundreds and hundreds of stories were gathered on the Buffalo Poetics listserv.¹¹⁾ At first, there were shocking cries and saddening, maddening voices, and then the voices moved to the form of questioning: “what can the poets do?” and “what is to be done?” The questions were soon followed by reflections such as “what is to be known?” and “is this what our closed open society breeds?” And we, my poet-critic friends, planned an anti-war poetry reading on a

11) Listserv refers to an electronic mailing list service. When I joined in Buffalo Poetics Program, the system as the vigorous space of conversing with each other on the ideas of poetry and culture was the most important and prompt channel for poets to discussing the current issues. Especially during the days after 9/11 there were heaps of poems, numberless discussions, war discourses, concerns of America, of democracy. So many “A.S. (after Sep. 11) poems” were uploaded there in most raw, fresh forms and styles.

very icy chilly winter day, when public voices were amalgamated into the possible war in so sad, horrible, tense feelings. At that time every individual, political act tended to be interpreted as bearing some potential danger, for example, yelling for/against war. In 'Buffalo Poetics Anti-war Poetry Reading/ Performance,' the event I also joined in, Charles Bernstein¹²⁾ read endlessly repetitive lines beginning with 'war is' or 'war isn't,' entitled "War Stories," a six-page-length poem in the printed form.

War isn't over even when it's over.

War is over here.

War is the answer.

War is here.

War is this.

War is now.

War is us. (*GM* 154)

Here, the poet, in a mixture of self-deprecating humor with incisive political and philosophical thinking, explores a range of fluctuating paths to the with-us-or-against-us rhetoric of the mass media. The line like "War is an excuse for lots of bad antiwar poetry" (*GM* 151) shows that he still does not discard some distrust of the kind of sympathy produced by the performance and the voice of the individual observer, and that all the mixtures of "calling

12) Charles Bernstein, the most prominent members of Language poets, is an American poet, theorist, and literary scholar. From 1989 to 2003, he was David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the University at Buffalo, where he was co-founder and Director of the Poetics Program. He is now holds Donald T. Regan Chair in the Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania.

for/against war” are etched from the moment of crisis and make readers confront the cultural and political ‘illogics’ of that time.

“It’s 8:23 in New York,” a prose poem Charles Bernstein wrote on that day, Tuesday, Sep. 11 and posted to the listserv in the same evening, begins the un-describability of reality, “What I can’t describe is how beautiful the day is in New York; clear skies, visibility all the way to the other side of wherever you think you are looking. ...”(17). Uncanny un-describability of reality is repeated at the end of the poem:

At about 6, Felix, Susan and I walked down to the Hudson. I wanted to see New Jersey, to see the George Washington Bridge. The sun gleamed on the water. The bridge was calm. Folks were bicycling and rollerblading. The scene was almost serene; just five miles from the Trade Center.

Uncanny is the word.

What I can’t describe is the reality; the panic, the horror.

I keep turning on the TV to hear what I can’t take in and what I already know. Over and over. I don’t find the coverage comforting but addictive.

This could not have happened. This hasn’t happened.

This is happening.

It’s 8:23 in New York. (*GM* 17-19).

Written in a very elegiac tone, this poem reflects the speaker's immediate response to the horrific, unreal aspect of 9/11. The repetitive mode of inability presented in phrases such as "I can't describe~" "I can't believe~" "I can't imagine~" shows how the poetic speaker, in this case, not different from the poet himself, experienced total numbness in the happening of 9/11. The unreal or surreal aspect of the tragedy is confirmed again in the response of his neighbor, too: "I can't believe that these fucking people are sitting in a café when the city is being blown up" (*GM* 17).

The very vivid landscape of after 9/11 forms the basic frame of *Girly Man*, which was published in 2006 as Bernstein's 30th collection of poetry. Reflecting the numb and crazy mood of 9/11, critically redirecting the American politics after 9/11, *Girly Man*, at once as documents of the 'aftershock' of 9/11 and post-9/11 culture and the poetic response to the war in Iraq, is a major achievement of American poetry after 9/11. Instead of choosing the very caustic multiple voices that he used in earlier poems, Bernstein here depends on the overtly biographical narrative style. As an urgent speaker and witness of 9/11, the poet tries to convey the landscape of the city, voices of people there. Interestingly, the voice of the self that Bernstein takes here, a monologic consumer, was used to criticize the chief symptom of American cultural malaise in his earlier poems. At once predicting a meaningful change in his poetic mode and still holding his long-standing anti-formalist stance, he continues to mock and assaults the gentle reading public. As a poet who proposes that poetry should be an active intervention within culture against static forms of knowledge, against schooled conceptions, and traditional

formulation, Bernstein remaps his older poetic ground in various experiments.

After the crash, an official period of panic set in. During this time, all bets were off. We were told to expect anything, any target next. This period of official panic has set the tone for the days after and may have a more profound effect than the initial events.

Now, Sunday, it's cold for the first time. The summer is over.

I bomb
you bomb
he/she/it bomb
we bomb
you bomb
they suffer

We're ugly, but we're not that ugly.

&, hey, Joe, don't you know —

We is they. (GM 24-5)

Originally listed on the Poetics listserv on Sun. Sept. 16 2001 and then published in his poetry book *Girly Man* in 2006, this poem is entitled as “Aftershock.”¹³⁾ As the title says, after the crash, came

13) The bombing was not the first time for the WTC. In 1993, February 26, a truck bomb was detonated below the North Tower and killed 6 people and injured over 1,000 people. David Lehman's poem “The World Trade Center” is about the accident. “I never liked the World Trade Center. ... (it) was an example of what was wrong / With American architecture, / And it stayed that way for twenty-five years / Until that Friday afternoon in February / When the bomb went off and the buildings became / a great symbol of America” (*PA9/11* xv). And of course, Baudrillard's famous phrases, “At a pinch, we can say that they *did it*, but we *wished for it*” Jean Baudrillard, *Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003), 5.

the aftershock and then the stories, too; stories about the falling "man," about the falling "empire." While changing the subject of bombing from I to you, he/she/it, we, and you again, the poet here dismantles the positioning of the bombing. The technique seems, at first, to shake and question the subjectivity of the terrible wrong-doing. But as we follow the lines, we come to realize that the circulation of subjectivity is meant to question the ethics of feeling the loss. In the last three lines, readers encounter one of the most shocking and stunning moments in post 9/11 poems.

The lines "We're ugly, but we're not that ugly / &, hey, Joe, don't you know -- / We is they" remind me of the simple, sometimes ungrammatical, ordinary Jazz rhythms of Langston Hughes's poems, especially in his poetry book *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). Here Bernstein, playfully connecting we-not-ugly with ugly-we-(is)-they, tries to dismantle the basic frame of judgment, the division of subject and object. In all three or four alternate moves, he blurs the territory of mourning and warning and obscures the division of victims from victimizers. The tone is reflective but at the same time very playful like Hughes' protesting voices. After telling us vividly those sleepless nights and days in the city of New York, the poet invites readers to join in the stunning moment of 'rousing' the "official period of panic" in a rather abrupt and careless way. In the line, "We is they," the ruining of Standard English grammar rules and the amalgamation of 'we' and 'they' in a very agile way (interestingly, the verb is 'is,' not 'are,' which is very colloquial and therefore doesn't have any problem), the poet makes us face the questions: what are/is we, what is our America, how to

interpret 9/11 and how to endure it. Here again, the familiar rhetoric of for-and against-us which swept the whole American culture in post 9/11 is blurred and re-flected. By this way of overturning the familiar rhetoric of for-and-against-us, this poem finally achieves the task of mourning (and warning) in a very ethical and political level.

Another interesting example embodying the political allegory and solution in the form of poetry is “In the Ballad of the Girly Man.” It begins “The truth is hidden in a veil of tears / The scabs of mourners grow thick with fear // A democracy once proposed / Is slimmed and grimed again / By men with brute design” and ends in the same repeated but reversed lines of “The scabs of the mourners grow thick with fear / The truth is hidden in a veil of tears.”¹⁴⁾ When the poet invites readers to “be a girly man,” “to take a gurlly stand,” to “sing a gurlly song” and confesses that “Poetry will never win the war on terror / But neither will error abetted by error,” the poet, keenly conscious of American foreign policy, wittily subverts the stereotype of a typical American hero that has been represented again and again in films, cartoons, and in addresses by many politicians such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and George W. Bush.¹⁵⁾ Deliberately misreading Schwarzenegger’s epithet “girlie man,” the poet intertwines and shifts the frame of the political discourse. When he says “Sissies and proud / That we would never lie our way to war,” he at once reminds us of the legacy of cultural movements of the 1970s, the parade of gays even today, and at the same time calls

14) Charles Bernstein, “Ballad of the Girly Man,” in *Girly Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 179, 181.

15) *Ibid.*, 179, 180.

upon the collective voices of anti-war protest in post 9/11.¹⁶) Joyfully and blatantly, the poet draws the attention of readers to the center of most complicated discourse in post-9/11 America and dismantles political discourses based on the logic of loss and mourning. The lines show how poetic discourse can manipulate and re-conceptualize the political discourse that has interpreted 9/11 and the American military response in terms of just cause.

3. Taking time or Not

As we see in the various examples of photograph/poetry on the critical moments of 9/11, many of them so surreal, words flourished where the image failed and sometimes images took the blank space of words. How to read 9/11 and its representations can't be a completed project. The distance between the falling man and the girly man is to be analyzed rather than deplored or mourned. It is crucial for all of us to study not only all the ways that 9/11 has become the answer to every questions but also how it has begun to function as generative and beguiling question. Keeping our eyes on 9/11 questions and answers allows for an inquiry that itself require a wide net and a careful eye. As Jean Baudrillard says, "the whole history and power is disrupted by this event, but so, too, are the conditions of analysis. You have to take time."¹⁷) It might be time that is needed for all of us. In fact, it took much time, at least many years,

16) Ibid., 181.

17) Baudrillard, *Spirit of Terrorism*, 4.

for novelists to respond to the event and the achievements or failures in literary fields including poetry and novels are not yet fully evaluated.¹⁸⁾ But as we saw in a few poems shortly after 9/11, poems opened the most lively, contested field where political, ethical, cultural, and literary discourses collided in the tumultuous aftermath of 9/11. At the same time, we need to admit that poetic discourse joined in the premature remarks and interpretation on 9/11 as some other political and cultural discourses did. Some joined in the festival of marking the dead in the “pornography of grief”¹⁹⁾ and some fell in clear-cut binariess of politics as those of George W. Bush.²⁰⁾ The problem with the literary representations in these cases was not the engagement itself, rather it was the form of engagement--making the subjects speaking in the poems stable, with no change.

Marking 9/11 as the darkest day in American history still needs time, not just because of the victims but because of our recognition about 9/11; “THEY ARE CALLING IT A WAR, AN ACT / THAT DEFINES THE DAY AS ANOTHER INFAMY I saw the buildings fall on the TV.”²¹⁾ In the space where terror, infamy, war took the

18) See, for examples, Don DeLillo’s 2008 novel, *The Falling Man*, Judy Budnitz’s 2005 short story “Preparedness” Sherman Alexie’s 2003 short story, “Can I Get a Witness,” and Philip Roth’s 2004 novel, *The Plot against America*.

19) Pornography is not just confined to sexual exploitation of children. Here in this word coinage, I want to express how grief can be a scandalous form in so many visual and literary representations in the media circus, masquerading exploitative, sometimes enjoyable razzmatazz.

20) Shortly after 9/11, President George W. Bush said, “We will read their names. We will linger over them, and learn their stories, and many Americans will weep.” George W. Bush. *We Will Prevail: President George W. Bush on War, Terrorism, and Freedom* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 5.

21) It is part of the poem by Geoffrey Gatza listed on the listserv of Buffalo

logic of mourning, the questions of poems remain still as the possible form of representation. The questions such as 'how to represent 9/11' need to be slightly changed into the questions of 'how to define 9/11' and 'how to live' and furthermore, 'how to *make us* live' in the era of post-9/11. If I go back to Adorno's remarks on poetry after Auschwitz again, on which almost everyone depends and cites as the solid proof of 'the death/marginalization of contemporary poetry,' I feel the need to tell its truth here. Before his death in 1969, Adorno retracted his original remark, conceding that "Suffering has as much right to be represented as a martyr has to cry out. So it may have been *false* to say that writing poetry after Auschwitz is impossible."²²) Here we find that Adorno made a slight change in his remarks, the substitution of 'impossible' for 'barbaric.' As for me, the change seems to suggest that the danger of representing the disaster lies not in writing *about* disaster but in the *pretense* of understanding it. Moreover, he seems to think that emphasis on the impossibility of representation poses some danger by idealizing the unspeakable. So our question needs to begin here in quite a different mode: how to find the poetic voice of consolation and mourning *without* immediately being betrayed by it.

In the post- 9/11 poems of Charles Bernstein, especially those written as immediate responses to 9/11, we find that his lively poetic voice, while embracing much wider audiences than the past,²³) does

Poetics, Sep. 12 2001, entitled as "9/11 a poem written to deal with terror." See <<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0109&L=POETICS&T=0&O=D&X=297465612E670B4503&Y=niagaraniagara%40gmail.com&P=123140>>.

22) Theodore W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 365, italics mine.

not reside in the net of endless weeping lines of dejected mourning. Rather it questions the way political discourses drive the national mind into the clear-cut binaries of right and wrong. When he reads the lines in “So be a girly man/ & sing this gurlly song/ Sisses & proud/That we would never lie our way to war,” he attains the aesthetics of poetry in which a political, witty, playful, accessible, subversive, and not-so-difficult play of words touches the national taboo at that time.²⁴⁾ If the task of poetry is to “make audible (tangible but not necessarily graspable) those dimensions of the real that cannot be heard as much as to imagine new reals that have never before existed,” here in these anti-war poems, Bernstein dauntingly responds to the new political climate that stifled public dialogue in post-9/11 America.²⁵⁾ Ludicly exploring “a range of alternate paths to the with-us-or-against-us rhetoric” of the popular culture and media by manipulating and re-conceptualizing American political discourse, the poet constructs an alternate site where a new real is explored.²⁶⁾

23) *All the Whiskey in Heaven; Selected Poems*, his recent poetry book exploring “how language both limits and liberates” people’s thinking, supports this assumption.

24) Bernstein, “Ballad of the Girly Man,” 180.

25) Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 184.

26) Tim Peterson, “Either You’re with Us and against Us: Charles Bernstein’s *Girly Man*, 9-11, and the Brechtian Figure of the Reader,” *Electronic Book Review*, Mar. 9, 2008, Web. Sep. 7, 2010, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/reflective>

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Abstract

**From "The Falling Man" to *Girly Man*:
American Poetry after 9/11 and the Logic of
Mourning**

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In what sense did 9/11 become the day when America changed? How does the poetic landscape of 9/11 reflect the political and cultural crisis of America? This paper, beginning with the shocking image of "The Falling Man," invites readers to rethink of the 'possible impossibility' of poetic representation. How did the poets respond to the binary antagonistic discourses around 9/11 that the mass media and the political parties produced? While briefly mapping out the literary scenes in the post-9/11 era, this paper attempts to rescue 9/11 discourse from those illogical cultural and political discourses ornamented such words as sacred ground, our heroes, axis of evil, etc.

Many poems produced shortly after 9/11 reflect the shock, sadness, and anger of the American psyche as a whole. Some joined in the festival of marking the dead in the 'pornography' of grief and some fell in clear-cut binaries of traditional politics proposing the war against terror. Trying to answer the questions embedded in the issue of poetic representations and see the prompt responses of poets to the unprecedented trauma of modern America in the post-9/11 era, this paper explores how the contemporary American poets have approached ethics through writing and rethinks poetry's capacity to bring about social, political, and cultural change.

Especially focusing on Charles Bernstein's *Girly Man*, this paper sees how his poems became an exceptional literary achievement of post-9/11 America. Vividly portraying the disoriented people and landscape of New York on

that day and inviting readers to rethink ways of interpreting 9/11, Bernstein constructs his poetic language as a public forum seeking to jostle readers out of their personal grief and private emotional sphere. Bernstein's prompt responses to what happened to America are meaningful not as therapy or commemoration, but as the song of an ethical, political troubadour questioning the logic of mourning. As a form of manipulating and re-conceptualizing American political discourse, his poetry constructs an alternate path where a new real is explored.

Key Words

9/11, "The Falling Man," impossibility of representation, Charles Bernstein, *Girly Man*, grief, mourning, ethics