Spectral Consciousness in Post-9/11 American Poetry

Scholarship on post-9/11 American poetry entails a wide range of important critical concerns. Ann Keniston, for example, explores the relationship between post-9/11 poetics and “belatedness” or, more specifically, “a gap between the time of experiencing an event and the time of understanding it” (662), and also the “disruptions in the process of remembering traumatic events” (661). She notes in passing that a number of powerful post-9/11 poems like “The Anniversary” by Robert Pinsky, “October” by Louise Gluck and so on blur fact with fiction, and the literal with the figurative, to represent 9/11. In “Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: Public and Private in Post-9/11 Literature“ Michael Rothberg convincingly discusses the intersection between the public and the private in three important post-9/11 poems: “Four November 9ths” by Ann Marie Levine, “first writing since” by Suheir Hammad and “October Marriage” by D Nurske. In another influential essay, “Precocious Testimony: Poetry and the Uncommemorable” Jeffrey Gray makes a brilliant distinction between the type of post-9/11 poetry which is synchronic and characterised by a self-confident, familiar subject-position quite sure of its own knowledge, and that which is diachronic, incantatory, archaic in its diction and performative.1 This list of examples could be lengthened to include even Ruth Knepel’s “The Return of Myth: Icons, Mythology and the Universal Narrative of 9/11”, which indicates the mythical status of certain 9/11 images forming a part of “a canon of universal and timeless narratives” (140).

In this essay I would like to argue that there is a largely ignored, but interesting, group of post-9/11 poems that not only destabilise a number of traditional binaries – ‘living/dead’, ‘presence/ absence’, ‘self/other’, and even that posited by Jeffrey Gray, that is, ‘synchronic/diachronic’ – but also suggest an intellectually balanced position in focussing on hallucinatory experiences and the uncanny. In order to demonstrate my point I have chosen four poems – “High Haunts” by Tish Eastman, “The Dead Have Stopped Running” by Matthew Mason, “Making Love After September 11, 2001” by Aliki Barnstone and “Strangers” by Lucille Lang Day – which arranged in this manner imply a gradual aesthetic development in the process of exploring spectral consciousness and our mysterious sensitivity to the unknown.

At the outset of “High Haunts“, the poet’s focus on the “countless tales of structurally displaced spirits” engaged in strange, inexplicable activities like “passing unhindered through solid doors newly hung, / stopping to weep at doors long demolished”, or on “a tale of soldiers visible only from the knees up / marching through
a cellar” reflects the speaker’s own “structurally displaced” psyche, a necessary outcome of the shocking carnage of 9/11 and the resultant disbelief in rationalistic thinking. This deduction may seem far-fetched at first sight, but gathers momentum in the next stanza, where the speaker asserts the inability of any rational thought to explain the sudden, simultaneous death of so many people:

No explanations can suffice for these flickering phantoms

Surprised by their moment of sudden death,

random remnants of energy burned into the retina of memory

timeless, looping film images in a final scene, on a final set. (10-13)

The inexplicable nature of such death and destruction effects the collapse of conventional mode of logic, creating a world of uncertainty and forcing the speaker to think of something beyond the accepted patterns of thought. All this prepares him/her for raising the two following questions in the fourth stanza as to the flickering of pale desk lamp after unexpected destruction of any skyscraper and the leaping of spectral lovers “hand in hand from windows/ shattered into shimmering dust” many years ago. Interestingly, the material conditions for the speaker’s utterance strikingly parallel one of the social conditions for the rise of postmodernist thought, that is, the shocking history of Holocaust. In *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone, a well-known writer on the discipline of English studies and Emmanuel Levinas, explores postmodernism as proposed by the works of Levinas and Jacques Derrida “as a response to the Holocaust” (4). Postmodernism, according to him, “focuses on both the acts of comprehending, seizing, covering up, and on the resistance to that act – to the emergence, if only momentarily, of otherness” (4). Michael Bernard-Donals extends Eaglestone’s idea to propose a relationship between Levinas’s post-Holocaust ethics and his concept of “forgetful memory” (2), characterised by a conflict between memory and forgetting and inseparably connected to the disasters of Holocaust. As Bernard-Donals goes on:

At the moment in which memory and the event are dissociated, the witness is forced into language, to speak a memory that is not a memory at all. The witness produces not so much an account of events (a testimony) as an account of the rupture of language and the void of memory. (2)
Now, there are potential points of connection between this notion of “forgetful memory” and the process of memorisation employed by the speakers of the poems I have included in this essay. However, in keeping with the main purpose of this article, I will not elaborate on the point.

The fifth stanza of the poem under discussion lays out the conditions for the perception of the supernatural: stillness and darkness, the two words inextricably associated with absence and death. It is pertinent to note here that the world of the spectres “spiralling down stairwells suspended in the sky / disappearing at the 20th floor, reappearing at the 60th” also has movement and life, but of different kind. They are never a full presence, nor a full absence, but something in between the two, that suggests liminality.

The opening lines of “The Dead Have Stopped Running”, “They walk / through the air, now, / above the living, with the living”, do not hold ‘we’ and ‘they’ as a binary opposition as there is both similarity and dissimilarity between the two. As the poem progresses, ‘they’ becomes a more intimate part of the existence of ‘we’ as the latter comes into contact with the former almost everywhere:

We breathe the dead into our lungs,
brush past them in our hurry
down the grey stairs of the subway.
They rest at our coffee tables,
move their fingers across the kitchen counters. (12-16)

These lines and the two penultimate lines of “High Haunts” partially quoted above (“... spiralling down stairwells suspended in the sky / disappearing at the 20th floor, reappearing at the 60th”) forcefully remind us of the notion of spectral repetition clarified by Jacques Derrida in Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International in the context of explaining the reappearance of the Ghost at the outset of Hamlet in particular and “hauntology” in general:

From what could be called the other time, from the other scene, from the eve of the play,
the witnesses of history fear and hope for a return, then, “again” and “again”, a coming and
going. (Marcellus: “What, ha’s this thing appear’d againe tonight?” Then: Enter the Ghost,
Exit the ghost, Enter the Ghost, as before). A question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant.
One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back. Think as well of Macbeth, and remember the specter of Caesar. After having expired, he returns. Brutus also says “again --” “Well; then I shall see thee again?” Ghost: “Ay, at Philippi” (IV, ii). (11)

The poet’s following acknowledgement in “The Dead Have Stopped Running” that “We have ceased our old segregations, / we live with the dead;” questions more explicitly the traditional binaries, ‘living / dead’ and ‘presence / absence’, suggesting that life itself has become a shadowy, phantom-like continuity effecting an acute sense of wonder. This poem marks an imaginative advance over the previous one as it brings us into direct contact with spectral experience both in its public and private forms without bothering over external conditions for such experience.

“Making Love After September 11, 2001” with its opening image of the speaker’s bedroom crowded by the ghosts of the victims of 9/11, also does not make any rigid distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’, although the condition of being bodiless, a defining feature of ‘they’, is regarded as a negative trait by the speaker who obviously possesses a happier psychological state: “. . . they wanted us and to be an us, wanted / to be flesh against warm flesh . . .” (15-16). The most interesting aspect of this poem is the detailed representation of a very intimate moment shared with the phantoms, which is quite missing in the previous poems. The speaker’s imagination is characterised by a high degree of fluidity, and seeks to break free of his / her own self in order to perceive reality beyond the range of rationalistic faculties. It is a gentle reminder of ‘negative capability’ as conceptualised by John Keats in a famous letter to his brother: “. . . I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. . .” (277). However, though it can be safely assumed that the traumatic, public event of 9/11 is so deeply embedded into the speaker’s psyche that it is impacting on his / her private self and directing him / her to the way of “negative capability”, he / she does not show any self-awareness regarding the psychological conditions for such hallucinatory experience.

In “Strangers”, the speaker acknowledges he / she had no knowledge of certain victims of 9/11 prior to the event, but her description of them implies tones of pathos, confusion, anxiety and praise for fortitude, that go far to explain his / her imaginative identification with them. All this prepares for his / her empathetic attachment to those victims in successive stanzas:
Yet I have felt sun on their skin
and tasted wine on their lips.
I have run using the long muscles
of their legs and felt air
rush into their lungs, their hearts
pumping in my chest, (25-30)

The opening word of the eleventh stanza, “and”, marks a causal relationship between the speaker’s empathy and his / her spectral experience, focussing on his / her consciousness that the phantoms are the products of his / her imaginative identification. The last two stanzas in which the speaker sums up the lingering effect of his / her experience, quite overtly acknowledges the truth that this experience is the outcome of an emotionally charged brain-state.

Now they have returned
to earth and air, but I still feel them
stirring inside me, walking

the long corridors of my brain,
searching for something
irretrievable, precious, still there. (37-42)

“Strangers” is the most mature poem in the sequence of poems I have chosen for my purpose in this essay in that it is characterised at once by an imaginative projection into the nature of spectres and a consciousness of the existing psychological conditions for such imagination.

Now I have reached the ending point of this article. But before stopping I would like to stress on the point that my article has considered spectral consciousness and hallucinatory state as a part of post-9/11 poetics
so far, and my conclusion is that these experiences are a source of intellectually challenging ideas and sometimes even entail a highly developed cognitive faculty, lending a rich aesthetic dimension to post-9/11 poetics.
Endnotes

1. However, the author does not focus on the clear gap between “a missed experience” which is “neither chronologically linear nor diachronically constituted” (264), and “A precocious mode of watching . . . proceeding diachronically” (264), that can raise fundamental questions about the viability of such “precocious testimony” (263).

2. There is also, I think, a potential connection between “forgetful memory” and the concept of “belatedness” in trauma theory as both are associated with traumatic experience.

Works Cited


