“Don’t Write About September 11th”: Meta-poetic Elements in Post-9/11 American Poetry

Abstract: This article focuses on three post-9/11 meta-poems – “My Wife Says Don’t Write About September 11th” by Ryan G. Van Cleave, “How to Write A Poem After September 11th” by Nikki Moustaki and “To the Words” by W. S. Merwin – to demonstrate the point that the current scholarly understanding of post-9/11 aesthetics as something functioning like a catalyst at the border-zone between the symbolic and the experiential, is inadequate and simplistic. Based on a careful analysis of the three poems, my article asserts that though this idea is true and represents a remarkable feature of post-9/11 aesthetics, such function is sometimes the result of a long complex process of signification, sometimes supported by the presence of other rhetorical levels and sometimes characterized by the complete absence of the symbolic level. The ultimate message of this article is that the three meta-poems participate in the fundamental poetic search for abstract reality.

Keywords: meta-poetic elements, post-9/11 aesthetics, abstract reality.

It is a widespread scholarly assumption that the event called 9/11 is inaccessible. It is “a limit event that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture (American) and defeats the normal processes of meaning making and semiosis” (Versluys 2009, 1). In explaining the significance of philosophy in a time threatened by terrorist activities, Derrida argues:

“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 . . .
... rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it’s talking about. (Borradori 2003, 86)

The very vagary of such terms as “the thing”, “the event”, “9/11” and “September 11”, writes Ricard Gray, “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” (2011, 1-2). It is, therefore, claimed that a significant aspect of 9/11 aesthetics is its concern with the indirect mode of expression, working “catalytically at the interface between the symbolic and the experiential to heal the individual and collective wounds caused by tragedy” (Tabone 2016, 96). However, while examining a number of post-9/11 poems like “Anniversary” by Robert Pinsky, “October” by Louise Gluck, “Curse” by Frank Bidart and so on in “Not Needed Except as Meaning: Belatedness in Post-9/11 American Poetry”, Ann Keniston has already problematized this idea of post-9/11 aesthetics by suggesting that these poems represent the problem of depicting the real through a special mode of figuration, which is not necessarily symbolic. This rhetorical strategy, she argues, is indicative of “belatedness” or “disruptions in the process of remembering traumatic events . . . often manifested for trauma victims in repetition, flashbacks, prolepsis, and other forms of temporal instability” (2011, 661).

But it is hardly pointed out in scholarship on post-9/11 American poetry that the historic incomprehensibility engendered by 9/11 has also given rise to a very important aspect of this genre of poetry, that is, its meta-poetic elements – its power to explore into creative processes, its representation of the gap between poetic experience and poetic language, and its focus on poetry as a mode of consciousness of the abstract world. And, in this article, I would like to explore into this ignored, but intellectually fertile, aspect of post-9/11 poetry to demonstrate the point that the well-accepted idea of 9/11 aesthetics as working “catalytically at the interface between the symbolic and the experiential . . .” is incomplete and simplistic. Though this idea is true and represents, as Tabone asserts, one of the important features of “the relationship between 9/11 and aesthetics” (2016, 96), it is complicated by the meta-poetic elements which sometimes take it as a culmination of a long poetic process, sometimes
combines the symbolic level with other rhetorical levels, and sometimes even eschew the symbolic level to transcend the gap between poetic language and poetic experience and to depict the abstract world of tremendous shock, absence and loss.

For fulfilling the purpose of my article, I have chosen three post-9/11 poems: “My Wife Says Don’t Write About September 11th” by Ryan G. Van Cleave, “How to Write a Poem After September 11th” by Nikki Moustaki and “To the Words” by W. S. Merwin. Each of these poems is a meta-poem and therefore matches with the purpose of this article. “My Wife Says Don’t Write About September 11th” is included in An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11, one of the major anthologies of 9/11 poetry that were published in the wake of 9/11. Cleave’s poem, which is chiefly concerned with an exploration into the viable, effectual creative processes regarding 9/11, is an interesting exception to the majority of poems in the same anthology, which focus on the complicity of American foreign policy in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and disapprove of retaliatory activities on the part of the American government. As Allen Cohen, one of the editors of this anthology, asserts, the principal purpose of the anthology was “to gather the voices of American poets to establish a different historical record of these monumental events (9/11 and the chain of important events following it)” (2002, i).

“How to Write a Poem After September 11th” occurs in Poetry After 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets, another major anthology of post-9/11 poems, that came into being in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The poems in this anthology “were wondering and thoughtful and terribly, achingly hopeful that such horror could be made to have perpetual and impactful meaning” (Johnson and Merians 2002, v). And, as Alicia Ostriker points out in her “Introduction” to the anthology, “Like an explosion, the poems fly out in all directions from an ignited core. No two take the same route to or from Ground Zero” (2002, xi). Following this principle, the poem in question contrasts with other poems in the same anthology in respect of thematic choice and contemplates not only on the kind of creative processes
suitable for any poem on 9/11, but also on how to reach the world of abstract feelings and ideas through poetry.

“To the Words” occurs in September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond, also an important anthology of post-9/11 poems edited by William Heyen, that came into being soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. “To the Words” is the opening poem in this anthology and conforms to the objective of the anthology as indicated by the editor in its “Preface”:

I’m asking for intensive contributions of no longer than 4-5 pages. I’d prefer in this case that most responses be direct, in essay form, but would welcome a breakthrough poem, or a flash fiction that strikes through to psychic ground zero, or a sui generis piece that seems to catch and hold our quaking reality as does no other traditional mode of discourse. (2002, xi)

Merwin’s poem, which is concerned with the tormenting gap between the contents of poetic experience and the mode of articulation and ultimately fills in this gap to an extent, is “a breakthrough poem . . . that strikes through to psychic ground zero”. It also contrasts with other poems in this anthology, which deal with more concrete topics like the representation of the terrorists, the depiction of the victims, apocalyptic visions and so on.

After offering this elaborate account of the contexts of the three poems under discussion, it is now necessary to analyze their meta-poetic elements in keeping with the purpose of this article. The opening stanza of “My Wife Says Don’t Write About September 11th”, which focuses on the speaker’s dull, trivial collection of “facts” like “Elvis Presley got a C in eighth/ grade music; an average 10-gallon hat only holds 3 gallons of water; the French writer Voltaire drank forty cups of coffee a day” (206), is compatible with his purpose of writing an equally boring poem on “the ridiculousness of our world and our lives”
(206). The actual purpose of writing this poem is to rejuvenate his creative desire because “After all, if our stomachs didn’t produce/ a new layer of mucous every two weeks, they’d digest themselves” (206). To explain, by means of physiological analogies, the speaker wants to make the point that if our creative potential does not produce some new desire for creation periodically, it will destroy itself. Creative potential is here quite innovatively equated with “stomachs”, and the periodically new, creative desire with “mucous”.

The next stanza focuses on one of the main points of argument in this poem, that is, the observation of his wife regarding the writing of any poem on 9/11. But the significance of this focus is diminished to a degree as it is juxtaposed with a focus on her another, relatively trivial observation on the effect of “Drugs” (206) on “an entire generation of American kids” (206). After a brief focus on the knowledge of the metric system possessed by the speaker’s university-students, he approaches the issue of 9/11 indirectly – through the relative indifference of those students to this issue:

Recently, I quizzed my Intro to Lit class

at the university, and they do know the metric system, hands-down.

These same kids, however, are more interested in learning that

the Sanskrit word for “war” also translates into “desire for more cows”

than talking about how three planes being forced to crash on U.S. soil

affects their lives more than will a D in Psych 101 or a 4.3% tuition bump. (206)

After coming to know such indifference of those students to the tragedy of 9/11 and, presumably, the chief factor for it, that is, the tremendous shock the tragedy engenders, the speaker seeks
to approach the issue through a deliberate shift in focus: while the number of the casualties of 9/11 increased, he turned his attention away from it to the retaliatory reaction of the people of the world. As he puts it, “It’s the World War of our generation, I told them as the death count/ tallied higher” (206). However, his attempt to discuss the matter to the university-students and thus find out some way of poetically dealing with the topic of 9/11 is frustrated by a bluntly utilitarian question from a “straight-B-minus kid dressed as an outlaw biker” (206), “Will that be on the mid-term?” (206), that highlights the foregoing indifference of the students once more. For consolation the speaker, then, turns to the insightful poem “Foxes in Winter” by Mary Oliver, which is based on the premise that human nature is brutal, directed by harsh material reality and should not be blamed for what it forces us to do. This poem is a consolation to the speaker to some extent perhaps because it implicitly justifies his focus on the retaliatory urge of the people of the world. It might also be the fact that he finds it consolatory as it deals with a theme which is serious but not to such a degree as is 9/11 and is comparatively easy to handle. However, as he points out, the funny title-suggestion, “What’s that Noshin’ on My Laig?” (206), to the blood-curdling, thriller-novel, Jaws, is a greater consolation to him, probably because the nature of the title teaches him that a horrific incident like shark-attack as depicted in the novel could also be treated in a way not so serious and tragic, and that there might be some alternative, less serious and accessible approach to 9/11. This shift in the speaker’s mood leads his attention to the fraudulent “portrait/ of the straightlaced Midwestern farmer” (206) and to the fact that “the only Beach Boy who ever surfed was Brian Wilson’s/ brother, Dennis, the group’s drummer, who drowned in 1983” (206). Both these facts suggest a gap between the deceptive appearance and the true reality and insinuate that the media representation of 9/11 as something too horrible for words does not necessarily mean that it is truly so horrible, and, after all, we “never quite know” (206). However, the speaker thinks that if he had humbly attempted in a poem to deal with a topic like “Beach Boy”, not with one like 9/11 with all its complex implications, the issue of such a gap could be better handled:
and I think wow, that would make a better poem than something

about September 11th. I could even add in real-honest-to-goodness

headlines I’ve collected, like HOSPITALS ARE SUED BY 7 FOOT

DOCTORS, BLIND WORKERS EYE BETTER WAGES, MILK

DRINKERS TURN TO POWDER, and TEENAGE PROSTITUTION

PROBLEM IS MOUNTING, . . . (207)

But he is also painfully conscious that some of the casualties of 9/11 are already within the circle of his acquaintance and that any day it may turn out to be the fact that some people quite close to him are also among those casualties. The very feeling that 9/11 is difficult to represent, but also unavoidable, gives rise in him to another insightful feeling that the poems he has written so far do not accurately reflect his immediate unique feelings, “waves of heat rising off the minute that came just before” (207). The “waves of heat” or his fresh creative verve – his immediate unique feelings - reminds him that his mind, the repository of his intellectual and aesthetic faculties, is at present in its nascent state: it has just started to develop.

At the end of the poem, the speaker remembers the instruction of his wife regarding 9/11 once again along with the reason for such instruction - that a poem on 9/11 may become sentimental - and this remembrance evokes in him a brilliantly symbolic imagery. He equates the poetic representation of the monumental event called 9/11 with the viewing from an unlit lighthouse of a nocturnal ocean whose thunderous waves cannot produce any lively auditory impact on us and seem like “a tv left on after every station’s signed off” (207).

Under closer scrutiny it becomes clear that the first stanza is at once a lived experience and a symbol for the dullness of creative endeavor, that by contrast accentuates the seriousness of writing any
poem on 9/11. The speaker’s indirect approach to 9/11, presented through the indifference of his university-students to this event, is also simultaneously a fact and a symbol for the difficulty of representing the reality about the same event. His next approach to it, communicated in terms of the symbol of “World War” when the death-toll rose high, points out the explicit gap between the experiential and the symbolic, rather than functioning “catalytically at the interface between the symbolic and the experiential . . .” This gap is filled in to a degree by the successive facts of the funny title-suggestion of *Jaws*, Grant Wood’s fraudulent portrait and the story of Beach Boy – each of which is treated as a symbol for the gap between deceptive appearance and true reality – as they function as an implicit explanation of the gap between the symbolic and the experiential, the gap in the process of signification, by indicating the difficulty of knowing the reality behind any apparent fact. However, at the end of the poem, the poet’s feelings towards 9/11 arise afresh. As a result, the instruction of his wife lends a new meaning to his thought and is evocative of a potent, elaborate symbol of an ocean. Mark A. Tabone’s comment on the catalytic function of 9/11 literature quoted above, therefore, applies to this section of the poem, which is, undoubtedly, the culmination of a long, complex process of signification.

In “How to Write a Poem After September 11th” the speaker emphatically instructs us not to use clichés like “souls” (95), “fire” (95) and so on in any poem on 9/11 through the repetition of “Don’t” (95) because the very rationales for writing such a poem are different from those underlying any usual poem on catastrophe. He or she, then, focuses on another cliché, ‘building fall’, and instructs to use it “only in the context of the buildings falling/ Before the fall” (95), that is, before the autumn of 2001, the season in which 9/11 took place and which appeared quite unnatural, “the season we didn’t have in Manhattan/ Because the weather refused, the air refused . . .” (95). The speaker, then, forbids us to “make a metaphor about the smell, because it wasn’t/ a smell at all, but the air washed with working souls, / Piling bricks, one by one, spreading mortar.” (95). He or she even forbids to use the usual analogy of the “planes” with
“birds” (95). His or her focus on all these clichés reminds us of the largely similar observation made by Philip Metres in “Beyond Grief and Grievance: The Poetry of 9/11 and its aftermath”:

Of course, poems that take on subjects as public and iconic as the attacks of September 11th risk not only devolving into cliché and hysterical jingoism, but also, even when most well-meaning, perpetuating the violence of terror, and the violence of grievance and revenge, as mass media did by endlessly replaying images of the planes exploding into the World Trade Center towers. Likewise, when we read enough 9/11 poems, we become awash in falling people, planes described as birds, flaming towers of Babel, ash and angels, angels and ash. The mythic nature of this attack, this disaster – echoing everything from the tower of Babel to the fall of Icarus – is undeniable . . .

Like Metres, the speaker of Moustaki’s poem is also aware of the clichés and the violence of terror in poetry on 9/11, though the “mythic nature of this attack” is absent from his or her consciousness. The speaker also dislikes the comparison between the windows of the Twin Towers and eyes, though “We know they saw it coming. / We know they didn’t blink” (95). Instead, according to him/her, a poet on 9/11 should represent the relationship between the windows and the American people in general in an emotionally charged, quick sequence of statements in which the people’s hatred for the windows must first be pointed out, then their love for the windows, then the fact that they regret for the absence of the windows, and, finally, the fact that “there’s a gape” (95). To the speaker, at this point it is quite legitimate to talk about the love-relationships of the casualties at the World Trade Centre:

. . . Then, say something

About love. It’s always good in a poem to mention love.
Say: If a man walks down stairs, somewhere

Another man is walking up. Say: He sits at his desk

And the other stands. He answers the phone and the other

Ends a call with a kiss. (95)

The contrastive activities of the two men symbolize different expressions of love-making and of meaningfulness in human life. To explain, those casualties had different approaches to love and life, but all of them were happy in their own ways until the disaster. The romantic and peaceful atmosphere of another city in which the Mayor of that “City of Commerce and Art . . . cuts a ribbon/ With giant silver scissors” and which the speaker suggests should be pointed out in any poetic endeavor regarding 9/11, emphasizes by contrast the tragic fate of the people of Manhattan on September 11, 2001. The gorgeous “parade” of the executives “through the concourse, / Up the elevators, to the top, where the restaurant, / Open now for the first time, sets out a dinner buffet.” (95), strikes a note of tragic irony as the activity of the executives sharply contrasts with what they experience shortly afterwards. A poet must also make use of such indirect pieces of fact as “the phone didn’t work” (96), “the bakery was out of cake” (96), “The dogs in the pound howled” (96) and the like, which never attempt to directly represent 9/11 but generate sinister implications. As the speaker quite insightfully reminds us, in “writing with ashes”, that is, in dealing with tremendous human loss and destruction, the poet must know “how abstractions/ become important outside the poem, outside” (96). What the speaker means to say is that in poetically approaching abstract ideas and feelings like the unprecedented shock of 9/11, it is important to create in the poem intensely pathetic suggestions by means of unusual collocations, symbols, tragic ironies and a string of associations surrounding the main tragic incident, all of which are relatively concrete. Abstract feelings arise in us “outside the poem” as a result of such deliberately used poetic strategies inside the poem. It is interesting to note that the speaker connects the representation of the abstract theme of 9/11 with that of other
abstract concepts like love, peace and so on, that any 9/11 poet may have already treated previously. The aesthetics of 9/11 is thus considered by the speaker not as something unique, but as something inseparably connected to our fundamental search for abstract reality.

At the outset of the poem, “To the Words”, the speaker indicates that certain special, unprecedented moments arise in human life sometimes when we feel words lie beyond the range of “numbers” or concrete measurable reality and our “recollections” or strenuous remembrances. In other words, during such moments we cannot communicate our ideas of reality and remembrances in terms of words because they seem too light to bear the weight of these things. Still people use words to articulate their feelings, impose knowledgeable ideas on them, but it turns out to be the fact ultimately that there remains a wide gap between such imposed knowledge that words are supposed to communicate and true knowledge:

passed on from breath to breath

given again

from day to day from age

to age

charged with knowledge

knowing nothing

Words are, then, addressed by the speaker as “indifferent elders” who are “indispensable and sleepless” as words seem distant from our feelings, yet we have no articulatory medium to turn to other than words which have been naming our ideas from generation to generation, are “keepers of our names/ before ever we came/ to be called by them.”
In the following stanza, the speaker points out in a fervent and repetitive manner the aesthetic purpose of words, which is to express the inexpressible, “to say what could not be said.” The poem ends with an intense appeal to words - that at once recognizes its time-hallowed articulatory power and its failure to express anything meaningful in the face of the horrific experience of 9/11 (“ancient precious/ and helpless ones”) – to mould the speaker’s thoughts and feelings regarding this experience into some potent articulation.

Thus, throughout the entire poem, the speaker is painfully conscious of the wide gap between the medium of expression and the contents to be expressed, between poetic language and poetic experience. As a result, he or she is unable to express his or her experience in the form of any effective symbolism, reminding us of Versluys’s words that I have invoked at the outset of this article. However, though there is no symbolism in the poem, it is possible to identify the employment of certain aesthetic devices. In the first line, for example, the absence of words from “numbers” and “recollection” is communicated in terms of the negation of their presence (“not here”); the limitation of their presence (“beyond numbers”, “beyond recollection”); and an ironic gap between the type of function words are meant to perform by poets and the function they actually do in the aftermath of 9/11 (“charged with knowledge/ knowing nothing”). So, the poet has no other alternative but to remind words of their previous “indispensable” function and why they came into being as a poetic medium in an ardent, emphatic manner:

You that were
formed to begin with
you that were cried out
you that were spoken
to begin with

to say what could not be said

The three ending lines of the poem minimize the number and presence of words and thus cathartically reduces the emotion stirred up in the previous stanza to a balanced proportion. It feels as if the words used here can really carry us forward from the largely absent world of 9/11 tragedy in this poem, represented with a pathetic lamentation for the meaninglessness of words, to a world of presence and meaningfulness.

It could be hardly denied that the meta-poetic elements identified in this article have enriched the 9/11 aesthetics by bringing into focus some significant issues that are implied in a number of post-9/11 poems. The difficulty of representing the real as reflected in certain poems of the same genre, that Ann Keniston has already pointed out in her important article, is one of those implied issues. Another issue is the problem of cliché and how to communicate poetic sentiments afresh and potently. When these issues are treated in the three meta-poems, the speakers of these poems have scope enough to minutely observe and explore into those issues and sometimes discover some innovative solution to the problems that poets on 9/11 in general have often felt. Such scope accounts for the more complicated nature of the aesthetics of these poems. Furthermore, by associating the search of a 9/11 poet for the abstract world of tragic feelings and ideas with the broader poetic search for the abstract reality, “How to Write a Poem After September 11th” universalizes the proposed nature of a 9/11 poem, reminding us of Keats’s famous words, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter.” Heard melodies like the pictures on the Grecian Urn are pleasant, a contrast to the abstract world and a medium of reaching that same world. In the same way the concrete world that Moustaki’s poem suggests a 9/11 poet should evoke is “sweet”. But the abstract, infinite world that it hints at is “sweeter”. And this is also the underlying strain of all the three poems I have chosen in this article.
Endnotes

1. For verification of the claim, “It is a widespread scholarly assumption that the event called 9/11 is inaccessible”, see Mark A. Tabone. 2016. “Narrative Wreckage: Terror, Illness, and Healing in the Post-9/11 Poethics of Claudia Rankine.” In Terror in Global Narrative: Representation of 9/11 in the Age of Late-Late Capitalism, edited by George Fragopoulos and Liliana M. Naydan, 95-96, Springer Books and Business Media, Palgrave McMillan, where the author argues that “It has been widely argued that the event that has since been named “9/11” fomented a collapse of representation and meaning.” In support of this premise, he refers to the arguments of Versluys that 9/11 is “unpossessable” (quoted in Tabone 2016, 95) and that it repudiates the normal processes of signification. He also cites the comment of James Berger that “nothing corresponding in language could stand for it. No metaphor could carry language across to it” (quoted in Tabone 2016, 95).


3. For greater clarification of the physiological analogies, it is necessary to note the definitions of ‘stomach’ and ‘mucous’ in OED. The most relevant OED definition of ‘stomach’ in respect of the poem in question is that the word refers to “In a human or animal body: The internal pouch or cavity in which food is digested” (1989, 751). ‘Mucous’ is defined by OED as “Containing, consisting of, or resembling mucus” (1989, 52), while ‘mucus’, according to the same source, is “A viscid or slimy substance not miscible with water, secreted by the mucous membrane of animals” (1989, 52). So, the important point is that a stomach is an essential part of our digestive system and mucous is by implication connected to the protective function of a lubricant. By equating creative potential with stomach, the speaker stresses on the power of cognition and assimilation of our raw experiences that creation entails. Moreover, the analogy between mucous and the periodically new creative desire crystallizes the power of such desire to help the creative potential function smoothly.
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