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# A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray

*Michael Rothberg*

Richard Gray's "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis" offers a sharp and necessary diagnosis of the American novel since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Erudite and wide-ranging, Gray's essay combines a sense of historical sweep with a keen understanding of the specific dilemmas of the present. Particularly concerned with the ethics of literature—that is, with literature's potential engagement with questions of difference, otherness, and strangeness—Gray underscores the failures of most 9/11 novels to move beyond "the preliminary stages of trauma" by doing more than simply "registering that *something* traumatic . . . has happened." A central problem, as Gray convincingly demonstrates, is that while American novelists have, along with all manner of pundits, announced the dawn of a new era following the attacks on New York and Washington D.C., the *form* of their works does not bear witness to fundamental change; rather, these works "assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures." Gray does not argue for a full break or discontinuity between the pre- and post-9/11 worlds—indeed, he repeatedly and brilliantly finds literary antecedents for current concerns. Instead, acknowledging that our moment combines novelty and continuity, he stresses the need for what Bakhtin would call a "radical reaccentuation" of

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given forms: “some kind of alteration of imaginative structures is required to register the contemporary crisis,” as is “the ability and willingness imaginatively to act on that recognition.”

However, such a reaccentuation has not taken place. The fiction of 9/11 demonstrates instead a failure of the imagination. Gray’s diagnosis of failure is, in my opinion, largely correct for the earliest fictional responses to America’s recent “trauma.” His alternative—a “deterritorialized” grappling with otherness—is, I will argue, both necessary and not entirely sufficient. While Gray’s model for the kind of deterritorialization of the novel he would like to see in the wake of 9/11 derives from recent immigrant fictions that open up and hybridize American culture, I call for a supplementary form of deterritorialization. In addition to Gray’s model of critical multiculturalism, we need a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship. If Gray’s account tends toward the centripetal—an account of the world’s movement toward America—I propose a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power. The most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multicultural, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds.

The failure Gray diagnoses is not simply a formal one, but also ultimately a political one. In place of the necessary imaginative reworking Gray calls for, he finds that in novels treating 9/11 by US-based writers, “The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated.” Post-9/11 fiction frequently claims to be grappling with public and collective history: “Private life shrank to nothing,” reflects a character in Deborah Eisenberg’s collection *Twilight of the Superheroes* (2006); “all life had become public,” echoes another in Don DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man* (2007) (qtd in Gray). Despite such sentiments, however, Gray points out that in most of those works “all life . . . is personal; cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists.” Gray rightly laments the lack of *mediation* in the recent spate of 9/11 fiction: “many of the texts that try to bear witness to contemporary events vacillate . . . between large rhetorical gestures acknowledging trauma and retreat into domestic detail. The link between the two is tenuous, reducing a turning point in national and international history to little more than a stage in a sentimental education.”

Numerous recent novels illustrate this tendency, perhaps none better than Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), a relatively early fictional response that Gray does not discuss. Schwartz’s novel suggests that part of the turn toward the domestic may come as a response to a perceived corruption of the

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public, political realm in the wake of the attacks. Yet, as Gray would predict, this novel about the traumatic past and unsettled present of Renata, a talented linguist working at the New York Public Library, provides a perfectly ideological, imaginary solution to the political crisis. The novel's title refers to the walls of home-made posters seeking information on people missing after 9/11—a *lieu de mémoire* that shows up frequently in 9/11 literature. Shortly after the catastrophe (and at the exact center of the novel), Renata finds herself in downtown Manhattan,

study[ing] the south entrance of St. Vincent's Hospital, which has become a kind of wailing wall plastered with photos of the disappeared, the *desaparecidos*, ordinary home photos . . . along with their descriptions and *marcas corporals*. Kevin Moore, lightly freckled, gold wedding band, mustache and goatee, broken nose. Janice Chun (pictured holding a toddler), ponytail in tortoise-shell barrette, navy-blue blazer, white skirt, missing tip of right index finger. . . . If the televised images of suited pundits have been oppressive, these notices are an antidote, so much more eloquent than the public words: hunt them in their caves, the full resources of our law-enforcement agencies, all necessary security precautions, a monumental struggle. These words—mammogram scar, left eye turned in, feathery salt-and-pepper hair, shamrock tattoo on left buttock—sear the eyes. (147)

This passage cuts in two directions. On the one hand, it poses a clear opposition between the public and the intimate, between Bush's "war on terror" clichés and the tattooed buttock of a likely victim of the attacks. On the other hand, with its allusions to the contested terrain of Jerusalem (the wailing wall) and its references to the Mothers of the Disappeared, who confronted US-backed dictatorships in Latin America, it intimates the inevitability of political struggle and the need to reinvent the public realm as a response to the brutalization of politics.

Despite these hints at a possibly reinvigorated public sphere, the novel retreats back into the reified world of domesticity and "emotional entanglements" identified by Gray as characteristic of the post-9/11 novel. Confirming his diagnosis, Schwartz's novel ends with a tentative resolution of Renata's relationship troubles, as she reunites with her boyfriend Jack. Despite her work at the *public* library, Renata's (and the novel's) solution to the crisis unleashed by the attacks and the "war on terror" does not involve a reworking of the corrupt public realm, but rather its abandonment. In the concluding pages, Renata and Jack meet, and their

conversation seems to shuttle between public and private concerns, while simultaneously refusing to mediate between them:

There is a connection between the public and private life, but Renata knows that that connection, just now, is merely a distraction. . . .

“Nothing can ever be the way it was,” she says in flawed Arabic, echoing what her mother told her weeks ago. . . .

“You mean the world can never be the same? Is that what they’re saying in the papers over there? That’s what they say here, too. But, really, we have no perspective yet.”

He can be so dense, it makes her laugh. “I wasn’t thinking on a global scale.” (294–95)

Once again, Schwartz flirts with a connection between the public and intimate and uses Renata’s linguistic talents to reference a politically charged language. But epochal change remains separated from individual lives—neither Renata nor the novel can bring itself to think “on a global scale.” Indeed, instead of evoking Arabic as a means of interlacing the political and the personal, the conclusion of *The Writing on the Wall* appropriates it as the language of renewed romantic love: “‘Make me love you again,’ she says [to Jack in Arabic, a language he does not understand]. . . . The light starts fading earlier now, in November. There’s a chill in the air. She puts her arm through his, for the warmth” (295). While particularly explicit in its rejection of the public realm as a site for understanding and responding to the crises of the twenty-first century—a rejection that simultaneously offers abundant liberal platitudes about the horrors of the Bush regime—*The Writing on the Wall* takes part in the larger depoliticizing discourse Gray charts in “Open Doors, Closed Minds.”

In pointing to the sentimental, domestic cast of the 9/11 novel thus far, Gray identifies the core of the problem, as Schwartz’s novel illustrates. But the solution Gray proposes—a turn toward fictions of immigration—risks a form of re-domestication. Without doubt, matters of immigration and otherness are central to the post-9/11 US (as well as to the pre-9/11 nation-state, of course). Since the attacks of 2001, citizenship has been aggressively re-racialized, borders have been locked down, civil liberties curtailed. In the face of this disgraceful recent and continuing history, Gray’s vision of the US as “a border territory in which different cultures meet, collide, and in some instances collude with each other” is important and necessary. Because of the “imaginative paralysis” that afflicts fiction dedicated to “encountering the enemy”—Gray’s example is John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006)—Gray

proposes an imaginative swerve toward works that rewrite the Southern novel from the perspective of Latina/o and Southeast Asian immigrants: “Bearing witness to the culturally other may, for entirely understandable reasons, remain a problem for many of those writers struggling to confront the trauma of a post-9/11 society. But just such a bearing witness is at the heart of those fictions offering variations on the immigrant encounter.” What Gray values in these works is their “responsive[ness] to the syncretic character of American culture,” their deterritorialized recharting of the “altered geographies” of a “mixed, plural” America.

Just such a vision of a deterritorialized America appears in one of the finest novels of the post-9/11 condition thus far: Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008), which appeared after Gray had written his essay. *Netherland* is, on the one hand, the story of Hans van den Broek, a Dutch banker married to an English lawyer, whose marriage starts to fall apart just as the bombing of the World Trade Center drives his family from their Tribeca apartment to a refuge in the bohemian Chelsea Hotel. Hans narrates his tale several years after the events when he has returned to London and reunited with his wife. If that skeletal outline sounds very much like the “domestic” fiction Gray decries, *Netherland* is also, on the other hand, the tale of Hans’s mysterious friend Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian migrant of South Asian descent, a large-thinking entrepreneur, and a small time gangster. Through the figure of Chuck, whose unexplained death motivates Hans’s story, O’Neill maps the heterogeneous terrain of New York City—not just the affluent neighborhoods of Tribeca and Chelsea, but also the “outer boroughs” of Staten Island, Queens, and Brooklyn. Hans and Chuck meet during a cricket match, and it is the game of cricket, even more than the individual migrants at the heart of the story, that provides the allegory of a deterritorialized America. Cricket, for Chuck, is the ur-American game—“NOT AN IMMIGRANT SPORT” reads the subject line of one of his many unsolicited group e-mails—as well as a kind of utopian “lesson in civility” that he wants to actualize with the creation of “Bald Eagle Field” in an abandoned field in Brooklyn (101, 15). But for O’Neill, cricket is certainly also a sign of a transformed US; the novel echoes in many places earlier stories of American self-invention, such as that of *Gatsby*, but it resituates them in a fully globalized terrain. Hans’s seemingly aimless drives with Chuck not only turn out to make the banker an initially unwitting accessory to the latter’s shady business practices, but also allow the author to direct our attention to the New York of the new immigration:

We traveled the length of Coney Island Avenue, that low-slung, scruffily commercial thoroughfare that stands in almost

surreal contrast to the tranquil residential blocks it traverses, a shoddily bustling strip of vehicles double-parked in front of gas stations, synagogues, mosques, beauty salons, bank branches, restaurants, funeral homes, auto-body shops, supermarkets, assorted small businesses proclaiming provenances from Pakistan, Tajikistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Armenia, Ghana, the Jewry, Christendom, Islam: it was on Coney Island Avenue, on a subsequent occasion, that Chuck and I came upon a bunch of South African Jews, in full sectarian regalia, watching televised cricket with a couple of Rastafarians in the front office of a Pakistani-run lumberyard. This miscellany was initially undetectable by me. It was Chuck . . . who pointed everything out to me and made me see something of the real Brooklyn, as he called it. (146)

O'Neill's Whitmanian catalogue of the sectarian and the surreal suggests that even if Chuck's dreams of America as the home of global cricket are far-fetched, cricket helps reveal that New York already is the kind of space of hybridity "beyond a boundary" that Gray values.<sup>1</sup> Mixing the sacred and the profane ("gas stations, synagogues, mosques") and sliding from nationality and religion to sports and business (cricket in the lumberyard), such a space defies the "us-and-them" logic common to terrorism and counterterrorism. Here lies the ethics of the immigrant encounter to which Gray directs our attention.

But without minimizing the value of O'Neill's achievement, which is great, or dispensing with the immigrant model Gray proposes, which is necessary and valuable, I think it remains worth asking whether this vision of a pluralist America ought to exhaust the horizon of 9/11 literature. While a renewed commitment to hospitality toward the other ought certainly to remain on the domestic agenda (now, as ever), an even more challenging agenda awaits those who want to grapple seriously with the contemporary context of war and terror. For, if among the effects of the nation's response to attacks on "the homeland" has been the recasting of the domestic space of citizenship and civil rights alluded to above, to dwell only on this dimension of the problem would risk reproducing American exceptionalism and ignoring the context out of which the terror attacks emerged in the first place. Once writers have acknowledged the shock and trauma of 9/11, an intellectually and politically mature literature must leave national-domestic space behind for riskier "foreign" encounters. Gray acknowledges this by focusing on a series of works that "read the US through American wars waged on foreign soil," but his emphasis in "Open Doors, Closed Minds" stays resolutely on native ground, and he

looks to those works primarily for their “centripetal” focus on the rewriting of the Southern novel. I suggest that we pivot away from the homeland and seek out a centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality.

Turning to “foreign” wars and far-away encounters does not entail a politics of blame or the same black-and-white logic of good and evil that pervades various sides in the struggle over terrorism. Rather, it entails mapping America’s extraterritorial expansion; exploring the epistemology, phenomenology, and impact of America’s global reach; and revealing the cracks in its necessarily incomplete hegemony. What we need from 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others. Such an imagination will necessarily be double and will be forced to balance two countervailing demands: to provincialize the claims of “the first universal nation” and to mark its asymmetrical power to influence world events. While it is true that the great extraterritorial literature of our new age of war and terror has not yet been written, the novel remains a necessary form for such a political and aesthetic project.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. “Beyond a Boundary” is a reference to C.L.R. James’s great book on cricket—and to the allusive title of James Wood’s spot-on *New Yorker* review of *Netherland*, which deems the book one of the great “postcolonial” novels. See C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (1984); and James Wood, “Beyond a Boundary,” *The New Yorker* 26 May 2008: 78–81.

2. Two 2007 works demonstrate that the internationalist literature I call for may be on its way: Denis Johnson’s massive *Tree of Smoke* and Mohsin Hamid’s slim *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. I will address these works elsewhere. On Hamid, considered in a related context, see Matthew Hart and Jim Hansen, “Introduction: Contemporary Literature and the State,” *Contemporary Literature*, Special Issue: Contemporary Literature and the State (forthcoming).

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