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Kristiaan Versluys. Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. Pb. x, 226pp. \$ 17.00. ISBN 978-0-231-14937-2

Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue* is a paean to the healing power of literature (14). It turns to novels written in the decade following the attacks on the World Trade Center for aesthetic and ethical alternatives to the political rhetoric used to justify the ensuing war on terror (17). Literary language, according to Versluys, resists finger-pointing; it has the potential to help victims come to terms with loss and even to recognize the humanity of the perpetrators (13, 16). This celebration of literature is as admirable as it is sincere; it derives its force from psychoanalytic theories of trauma that have, in recent years, become an article of academic faith.

Out of the Blue is, in a double sense, a book of its time, exploring the millennial event – 9/11 – in terms of the *fin-de-siècle* preoccupation with trauma and memory. It provides exactly the readings one would expect given the gravity of the event and the basic plot-line of the trauma narrative: shock, then repression, followed by the return of the repressed – either in the pathological sense of acting out or the therapeutic sense of working through. Versluys traces variations on this basic narrative in books by DeLillo (melancholic re-enactment of trauma [20]), Spiegelman (working through personal trauma as political commitment [53]), Foer (working through trauma by caring for others [100-03]), and to a lesser extent Beigbeder (working through but also acting out the limits of literary language [141]). His readings are in keeping with the standard accounts of traumatic memory in Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick La-Capra.

There are by now a number of books applying trauma theory to post-9/11 culture, e.g. Judith Greenberg's *Trauma at Home: After 9/11* (2003), Hans Jürgen Wirth's *9/11 as Collective Trauma* (2005), and E. Ann Kaplan's *Trauma Culture* (2005). They share the basic premise that literary and cultural symbols can be analyzed as symptoms of inexpressible trauma. The inexpressibility theory allows this school of thought to reformulate the problem of representation as a problem of memory; this has the advantage of rendering issues of referential fidelity, which can be troublesome in historicist accounts of fiction, absolutely irrelevant. If symbols are symptoms, then the historiographic standard of objectivity is subordinate to existential standards of proximity and emotional intensity. Thus Versluys finds the books by the New Yorkers Spiegelman and DeLillo more compelling than the one by the Parisian Beigbeder.

One of the problems with this line of interpretation is its predictability. At some level, narratives are always taken to represent the “unrepresentability” of traumatic events (15). This paradox is familiar from Holocaust studies; and in fact those authors closer to the Holocaust, such as Spiegelman, are seen by Versluys as having a special insight into the recent catastrophe (50-9). Another derivative from Holocaust studies is the fetish of inconclusiveness: resisting closure is supposed to be more ‘authentic’ than reaching resolution, which is dismissed as vindictiveness or kitsch (13, 126). Interpretations grounded in trauma theory also have a marked therapeutic bias, evaluating narratives in terms of their ability to mourn. Literary analysis thus tends to collapse into psychoanalysis, and interpretations begin to resemble case studies or self-help guides (cf. 4, 91, 103, 119). Versluys tries to curb this tendency by making the political argument that coming to terms with loss is better than revanchism. No doubt this is true. However, it is telling that the best reading from a literary historical perspective is occasioned by the book most resistant to the trauma paradigm: Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*. The chapter devoted to this novel suggests that 9/11 may have marked the end of postmodern irony (119, 126). What comes after postmodernism is presumably trauma culture. But why?

This question is left unanswered – even unasked. If Versluys is correct in assuming that contemporary novels are structured in terms of trauma and recovery, then why is this paradigm so pervasive? Other historical disasters have generated other forms: epic, tragedy, elegy, even melodrama. Why is the trauma narrative suited to our age? And is trauma a literary ‘fact’ or a trend? The latter is at least worth considering. The mantra “representing the unrepresentable” recalls the New Critical celebration of paradox and ambiguity, and the repetitions and displacements characteristic of traumatic narratives bear at least superficial resemblance to what deconstructionists and feminists used to

call *écriture*. Versluys acknowledges these continuities without discussing them. He takes the repetitions and breaks in DeLillo's narrative as signs of traumatic memory and melancholy, but he also points out that they are symptomatic of modernity (32-4, 46). A comparison with DeLillo's earlier novel of terrorism *Players* (1977), which predicted the airplane attacks on the World Trade Center, would likewise reveal a striking similarity to postmodern forms and concerns. Traumatic memory might be different from history but it also has its own history – or what literary studies used to call tradition.

Questions about form, genre, and tradition are too often left unasked in this study. What makes Spiegelman's graphic narrative *In the Shadow of No Towers* a novel, as is indicated by the title of the study? What is the relation between representations of the Holocaust and representations of terrorism, for instance in Spiegelman and Foer? How do the novels in this study relate to earlier representations of terror, or even earlier novels by the same authors? There are many unexplored linkages, but one example will have to suffice. Versluys treats as exemplary a page in Foer so overwritten with traumatized memories that the spaces between words disappear and the text fades to black. He reads the black page as "a visible illustration of the writing of disaster as an impossibility" (95). What he does not mention is the resemblance of this black page to a more famous one in Stern's *Tristram Shandy*, where the printer's approximation of mourning weeds is used to signal the limits of elegy and to evoke sympathy in the readers. *Out of the Blue* runs headlong into the black without exploring how blackness signifies, in part by activating the tradition of sentimentalism. In fact, it is precisely sentimentalism, and a much earlier philosophy of sensibility, that is repressed in trauma theory generally – not because sentimentalism is a traumatic origin but an unacknowledged one.

9/11 was a horrible catastrophe that traumatized even those fortunate enough to be far away from the collapsing towers. Trauma is a diagnosable psychological problem, perhaps a cultural phenomenon, but it is also a literary style. *Out of the Blue* is an exemplary case study for those interested in the diagnoses and cure of literary symptoms. But as Kenneth Burke pointed out years ago, art is more than neurosis. The symbol, one might add, is more than a symptom, even if it ultimately proves to be less than a cure.

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