

# "When All the Riches of the World Stand Waste..."

Regina M. Buccola, Roosevelt University

As of the early morning hours of September 11, 2001, there were no rules forbidding knives, box cutters or even single-blade razors on commercial airline flights. There were no rules about how to cope with flight-trained terrorists prepared to turn passenger planes into smart bombs. Nor were there any rules for the people who survived the experiences of that day regarding how to cope, how to go on.

Lisa Ruddick of the University of Chicago offers an astute analysis of the ways in which the events of 9-11 and their emotional aftermath shook students and professors, specifically, out of their typical, "professional" relationships. Writing in the spirit that motivated the development of this collection of essays, Ruddick notes:

When colleagues and graduate students who are teaching this term gather, the conversation often turns to how to bridge the chasm between the syllabus—whatever it contains—and the students who are looking for help in figuring out how to sustain a humane connection to a world that's overwhelming them. . . [T]he question "What's the point?" is at once an individual cry of disappointment and a tiny fragment from a pervasive, whispered conversation that has been taking place in English departments for years. (B7)

Ruddick contends that those—both within and outside academia—who look at the work of humanities scholars and sniff, "What's the point?" are overlooking a form of emotional sustenance that postmodern criticism rejects, but that might be the true gold standard in arts and letters (B7). In this essay, I would like to reflect on the ways in which the events of 9-11 offered those of us in the humanities an opportunity to demonstrate the many and varied gifts our disciplines have to offer a postmodern world that, for all its technological wonder, is still, ultimately, utterly dependent on food for the soul—the sort of nourishment that the liberal arts provide.

I thought for quite some time about what to say to the students in my British literature survey course when we met the day after the annihilation of lower Manhattan, a huge segment of the Pentagon, and the sense of security U.S. citizens have always felt in this country. Carolyn Foster Segal described much the same phenomenon: "That afternoon and evening, as I listened to and watched the news, I thought about preparing for the next day. If classes ran, I wanted to bring my students some passage, some lines that would comfort them. I wanted to be able to tell them about the solace of literature" (B7). I was preparing for a Monday/Wednesday section of the course on September 11, after the Tuesday/Thursday section's emergency cancellation.

In an absolutely surreal series of experiences, I had gone to my university's main campus in downtown Chicago on the "el" on 9-11, reading the whole way as I do after waking up to National Public Radio. I left the house and the radio well before the initial reports began coming in of not one, but two planes, incredibly, slamming into the World Trade Center, a third slicing into the

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Pentagon and several others on the loose. As I waited in front of the historic building that houses our main campus on Michigan Avenue for the shuttle that goes between the downtown and suburban campuses of our university, a construction worker popped out of the alley clutching his cell phone. “An airplane just flew into the World Trade Center,” he said. I pictured something akin to the famous black and white photograph of the fuselage of a small plane hanging out of the side of the Chrysler Building. A few minutes later, he reappeared. “Now there’s two,” he said. “One into each tower?” I asked, incredulous. “Yeah, I think so.”

I was supposed to hold office hours and teach another section of British literature at our Schaumburg campus. I was impatient for the late shuttle’s arrival, eager to regain access to radio news, at least. The relationship between terrorist assaults in New York and D.C. and the late shuttle did not occur to me. As soon as I boarded, I asked that the radio be turned on. The driver nodded soberly: “This is bad,” he said. I paid little attention as the driver of the shuttle called repeatedly to the suburban campus to see if we should still come—I was fixated on the radio which had, weirdly, cut to the audio from the television coverage. Reference kept being made to things that we could not see, like the sight of the first tower cascading down in a delicate gray plume of its own detritus before exploding outward into a hellish black cloud that threatened to sweep away everything and everyone in its wake. I only glanced over as we inched past O’Hare International Airport in gridlock traffic, created by the underpasses and tunnels that were, I was slowly starting to realize, being shut down.

I finally arrived at campus a full hour later than usual. There was scarcely anyone there, and those that were huddled around radios. As soon as I unlocked the door to my office students began calling: “Do we have class?” Still not understanding what was happening, I said, “Well, this is a terrible tragedy, but why wouldn’t we have class? Our not having class will not re-build the World Trade Center.” It was not until a security guard appeared in my doorway, walkie talkie blaring, to inform me that the campus had gone to full lockdown and I had to get out that it started to occur to me that this was not just about New York and D.C. I asked if someone could take me to the train station and they just laughed. No trains were running into the city. I called a colleague and friend who told me to stay put, she would come and get me. On the drive back to the city, she whizzed into a gas station where people were already lining up. A woman came rushing out of the food mart where you paid for the gas clutching an armload of bottled water, frantic. And through it all the sun was shining. It was a beautiful day.

Once I got home, like most of the rest of the world I was riveted to the television set. Within five minutes of my arrival—literally—I had seen the extant video footage of both of the airplane attacks on the World Trade Center towers, their collapse, and an aerial view of the damaged Pentagon at least once. The hours ticked by. The body count rose. My British literature anthology sat untouched. How could I turn my back on history being made, the world as we know it being annihilated, to read Old English poetry? Finally, close to midnight, I struck a bargain with myself: Peter Jennings on low volume, reading in the rocker in close proximity to catch any other developments. What I was most hoping for, I suppose, was news of trapped victims brought to safety. At first, I couldn’t concentrate at all. But then, the words suddenly arrested me, every one seeming to speak to the experiences of this long, horrible day:

“A wise man must fathom how eerie it will be  
when all the riches of the world stand waste,  
as now in diverse places in this middle-earth  
old walls stand, tugged at by winds  
and hung with hoar-frost, buildings in decay.  
The wine-halls crumble, lords lie dead,

Deprived of joy, all the proud followers  
 have fallen by the wall: battle carried off some,  
 led them on journeys; the bird carried one  
 over the welling waters; one the gray wolf  
 devoured; a warrior with downcast face  
 hid one in an earth-cave.  
 Thus the Maker of Men laid this world waste  
 until the ancient works of the giants stood idle,  
 hushed without the hubbub of inhabitants.  
 Then he who has brooded over these noble ruins,  
 and who deeply ponders this dark life,  
 wise in his mind, often remembers  
 the many slaughters of the past and speaks these words:  
 Where has the horse gone? Where the man? Where the giver of gold?  
 Where is the feasting-place? And where the pleasures of the hall?  
 I mourn the gleaming cup, the warrior in his corselet,  
 the glory of the prince. How that time has passed away,  
 darkened under the shadow of night as if it had never been.  
 Where the loved warriors were, there now stands a wall  
 of wondrous height, carved with serpent forms.  
 The savage ash-spears, avid for slaughter,  
 have claimed all the warriors - a glorious fate!  
 Storms crash against these rocky slopes,  
 leet and snow fall and fetter the world,  
 winter howls, then darkness draws on,  
 the night-shadow casts gloom and brings  
 fierce hailstorms from the north to frighten men.  
 Nothing is ever easy in the kingdom of earth,  
 the world beneath the heavens is in the hands of fate.  
 Here possessions are fleeting, here friends are fleeting,  
 here man is fleeting, here kinsman is fleeting,  
 the whole world becomes a wilderness." (145-146)

I walked into the unusually quiet room the next day, took out the book and just started reading this passage, looking up occasionally to see students nodding vigorously. Translating fear, loneliness, and a sense of mortality into words, images, metaphors is a natural human response. This is what we, as humans, do. We write to record our thoughts, and we think in order to understand our very existence. Writing—whether in alliterative verse or philosophical prose—is an inextricable part of the human condition. Never before had it been so easy to get students to understand the importance, the value of poetry.

In the textbook that we were using,<sup>1</sup> Kevin Crossley-Holland's translations of both *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* begin with the same word: "Listen." I have always liked that about this edition. It seems right, as a way to begin poems derived from oral tradition. It seemed even more appropriate that day, the day after 9-11, when people tore themselves away from the television, the radio only to answer phones or visit neighbors to talk to them about what had happened, was still happening. And to listen to their stories.

For their first paper, I invited students to tell their own story about the events of 9-11. Every time 9-11 comes up, I am irresistibly compelled to tell the story of that day—my version of it, what I experienced, even though I experienced nothing like what those in New York, DC, and Pennsylvania

experienced. This is part of the reason that I permitted students to make literature about their own memories of that day; they needed to experience the catharsis that comes from articulating thoughts, fears, nightmares, sorrows. They also needed to see the ways in which literature, history, theology, philosophy, music and art—including, now, film - can serve such a function for entire societies, spanning hundreds of years, whether or not the people experiencing it understand or are familiar with the precise events described—if the events described even are precise.

We had only been in school for a week by September 11, and had covered only *Beowulf* before “The Wanderer.” I had explained to the class in preceding sessions that *Beowulf* contains many kinds of poems in its basic epic structure. One of these is the elegy—a verse of mourning, not only for the loss of a specific person or people, but for a past time that is remembered with joy and longing because it will never return, nor will the feelings associated with it. In the weeks after 9-11, we read additional verse narratives based in traditional history, particularly Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, as well as excerpts from Arthurian legends. Students were invited to experiment with any of these verse or prose forms in writing their own history. The actual assignment stated:

Write a “history” of the events of Sept. 11, 2001 that adheres to one of the literary traditions we have studied so far this semester: Old English bardic verse (like *Beowulf*), medieval romance (usually also in verse, like *Lanval*), or prose history (like Monmouth’s *History*). Some of the conventions to keep in mind are: alliterative rather than rhyming verse, an elegiac tone, and a struggle between pagan traditions and Christian doctrine on the levels of content, imagery and metaphor. Just as your book offers introductory overviews of each selection, you, too, should write a full paragraph or two pointing out the aspects of your history that you find consistent with one of these traditions. Your thesis will be your general statement of which tradition your original piece fits into, and why. Just as you point out particular passages, images, word choices, etc. in analyzing another’s literary work, you should do the same in demonstrating how your piece fits into the larger tradition. While it might be helpful to consult some reliable accounts of the events of Sept. 11 to craft your piece, you may also construct your narrative on the basis of personal accounts since that was the primary method of transmitting and preserving stories in the old English period and an important means of transmission in medieval times. (Buccola)

I often give creative assignments in my courses and find that students generally work harder on them than they do on papers based completely on analysis and/or research. I think this is because they have more personal stake in a creative piece, even when the work produced is not derived from their personal experience, as this assignment was. Also, all creative assignments that I give include a research component, requiring the students to situate their work in its generic context.

Although the British literature survey is a required English course, much of the work that we study early in the semester was actually preserved because of its theological or historical value and not necessarily for its literary merits. Hence why my literature students were asked to write a historical narrative, and why I think creative assignments of this imitative and adaptive sort work equally well in all humanities courses. As Robert Scholes contends, “Students who are encouraged not only to read the major texts of the past but to pastiche and parody their styles will do a better job of getting inside the heads of those writers, and they will themselves become better writers because they have done so” (160). This applies equally well to writers of philosophy, artists such as Leonarda da Vinci and Michelangelo, and musicians from Debussy to Dylan as it does to the anonymous poet of “The Wanderer.” Scholes charges writing instructors to craft writing assignments “that enable students to focus on their culture at the points where it most clearly

impinges upon them, where they already have tacit knowledge that needs only to be cultivated to become more explicit" (102). It required little ingenuity on my part to see such a connection with the events of 9-11, but less dramatic possibilities for cultural response present themselves each semester.

Interdisciplinarity of the kind glanced at in this assignment, which asked literature students to try their hand at writing history, is a hallmark of the humanities and a particularly useful preparation for a job market in which students will likely hold several different jobs requiring distinct skill sets over the course of their working lives. I have a colleague in philosophy who routinely uses Shakespeare plays to illustrate core concepts and principles, another in English who asked her students to curate a visual art exhibit featuring original work inspired by what they'd read, and—wearing my Women's and Gender Studies hat—I co-taught a course at a neighboring institution with a colleague specializing in history of religion called "Women in International Perspective" in which our readings ranged from straightforward accounts of world religions to short stories by women in India to an autobiography of a Somali girl.<sup>2</sup> Students produced assignments in this course that ranged from letters to political leaders to research papers, to concrete plans for socio-political activism. College offers a unique opportunity to experiment with a broad range of ideas, modes of expression and personae. We do our students—and the wider world they might impact—a great disservice if we give them assignments that simply ring changes on long-established means of eliciting information within a narrow range of "correct" responses.

Although she is best known for her work on composition theory, Lisa Ede's insights are beneficial to all instructors who must navigate the terrain of guiding students through the writing process since most humanities courses involve a writing component. Recommending "a heuristic, dialectical relationship between theory and practice," Ede asks, "what is practice but the interaction of specific teachers and students in specific situations, the moment-to-moment rhetorical reality of the classroom?" (126). With current events such as 9-11 and the second war in Iraq of almost palpable historical significance, we need not go far to find the kind of dialectic between theory and practice that Ede seeks in our classrooms.

I had anticipated that most students would take the high road and write historical prose, but that was not the case. Many of them opted to try their hand at the totally unfamiliar structures of alliterative verse, and they did a quite fine job of it, too. I told students about my intention to submit an essay to *Across the Disciplines* shortly after I returned their papers and asked that anyone willing to have their work quoted here reproduce it for me and indicate their permission.

As someone actively engaged in writing routinely for publication, I am well aware that the processes of research and writing are non-linear and involve repeated revision. Therefore, in all of my courses from undergraduate required surveys to upper-division film studies courses, to graduate-level seminars, I approach writing assignments through the model of process pedagogy.<sup>3</sup> I permit all students to do rewrites of their assignments for up to two weeks after the original graded essay was returned to them. I often bring in an essay of my own at each of the various stages in the writing process and share it with my students. In the British literature survey course that I was teaching during the fall of 2001, I made a draft version of this essay available to my students on the web, and encouraged their feedback on it. I find such tangible reminders that research and writing are messy processes for all writers, regardless of skill level, reassuring to students. They often seem to feel that their need for guidance and critical feedback on their written work are signs of incompetence rather than concrete evidence of the non-linearity of the research and writing processes.

At this early point in the semester, we were reading primarily alliterative verse from the oral tradition. A non-traditional student in the course paid homage to this both in her verse structure,

and in her title - “Hear Me Now, O America!”—asking that her poem be “heard” rather than read. A strong writer, she achieved some powerful effects with this style of poetry, perhaps best known from *Beowulf*, in which verse rhythm is captured not by rhyme, but by patterns of alliteration that coincide with stressed syllables. Typically, there are four stresses per line, three of which are alliterative; the most common pattern is aa/ax, with the fourth stressed syllable breaking the alliterative pattern.

This student also exhibited a clear sense of the literary tradition in which she was writing, with a nod to the passage that I read to the class on the day after 9-11 from “The Wanderer”:

Papers pepper streets, adding to the ashes,  
and fractured glass shards refract ruins. . .  
Where once the proud towers soared in the sun,  
a sepulcher stretches, a burial ground.  
*Their world of wealth now lays waste,*  
a bank of buried bodies. (emph. mine, Newton 3)

She also invented a clever, alliterative appositive for Osama bin Laden, never named in the poem: “that cowardly cave-hider” (4). Noting the practical value of creative applications of learned information, Robert Scholes maintains that, “What we take in through our eyes and ears must emerge from our hands and mouths if we are to hold on to it” (148). I am confident that my students will have a richer understanding of alliterative verse having tried their hand at writing it than they ever would have had simply memorizing its characteristics for a multiple-choice exam (although they had to take one of those, too).

Beginning in the end of September, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a series of essays devoted to 9-11, running the gamut from intellectual reflections, to practical pedagogical advice, to insightful interviews with students. Lawrence Biemiller interviewed art students at Cooper Union, a mere 30 blocks from the former site of the World Trade Center. Students there were, of course, more directly and powerfully impacted by the events of 9-11 than my own students in Chicago. Yet, it still saddened me to see the sense of malaise, of the purposelessness of art evinced in Biemiller’s article about the students there. The student pictured with the article, Trenton Duerksen, told him: “A lot of people I know have lost a belief in the power of the individual . . . I don’t think we can take it for granted that art is an instrument of social change. I don’t think you can take it for granted that an artist will have an impact.” (A56). I agree that you can’t take it for granted. But I think that you have to believe that it is possible, particularly in the face of something like 9-11. I wanted, with this assignment, to encourage students to process their responses to this event, certainly. But I also wanted to offer them the opportunity to record their fear and anger and desperation in order to shake them out of that, into a sense of purpose.

A young woman on the suburban campus did an excellent job of articulating the very reason that I had given students this assignment in her introductory paragraph. She understood the significance of recording the memory not only of the events, but of what she thought and felt in the face of them. She wrote: “The events of Sept. 11, 2001 will never be forgotten. They will be written in American History books, and the next generation of children will read about these horrid events in school. It is important that we record history for the sake of remembering, analyzing, and contemplating the events of the past” (Giltzow 1). Linking her own piece of writing to the words recorded in history books gave her a sense of continuity with a past she, too, had studied and to a future in which younger generations would read her words, and learn her history. Later, after describing what she learned about the events from watching televised news coverage, she reflected: “These facts stirred

in my brain and provoked images from the imagination. I tried not to think about it, but that would not be fair to the people who were dying; these people deserved to be remembered” (4).

Rose fought her desire to seek a quick fix, a response vehemently opposed by Edward Linenthal, who swears: “I never, ever will use the word ‘closure’ again, except to talk about it in angry ways, because there is no such thing. I think it’s a horrific pop-psychology term. There are events to be endured, not resolved, and I think that is something Americans have a very difficult time with” (B4). Unlike Linenthal, I do not object to closure per se, but, rather, to the notion that it is something readily accessible. See the right therapist, attend the right yoga workshop and you can achieve, instantaneously, closure. Of course, if doesn’t work that way at all. One *seeks* closure—it is a quest, and often a long one.

Writing is, for me, an important part of this journey. I hoped, through this assignment, to guide the students through at least a part of that process. Leonard Cassuto observed: “We have a word for what has happened: terrorism. What I’m suggesting is that we don’t have a word for what to do next. Our impoverishment of language ought to serve as a clue that we face an impoverishment of concepts. . . Words are the most powerful weapons we have, and we need to use them thoughtfully” (B14). As someone quite committed to avoiding violence whenever possible, I wanted my students to slow down, and weigh the words they used to describe the events of 9-11 carefully. I hoped that they would see that words have tremendous power to heal and to harm, and learn to choose wisely. Regardless of the career path that they choose in life, each of them will have myriad opportunities—as responsible citizens, as participants in their communities, as parents—to wield power through their words. Robert Scholes contends, “What our students need as I see it, is first of all some guidance in learning how to understand their world and survive in it, and secondarily some grounds for criticizing it and trying to improve it” (83). Both of these skills are the province of verbal expression, whether practiced by political scientists or poets, artists or analysts.

While addressing a creative writing course in the aftermath of 9-11, Carole Chabries recalls:

I quoted Theodor Adorno to them—poetry is barbaric after Auschwitz—and summarized for them two common interpretations: one, that after such horrors the work—the effects, the function—of art must change. . . I told them that art requires an audience that comes to terms with it in some way, and that the act of coming to terms—especially when it results in turning away, or complacency, or forgetfulness, or simply feeling better—is what can be barbaric. (B6)

This dual valence gives art its value, and it also gives us our purpose when confronted with it. We have to engage in conversation with it, whether that response is a critical essay, or a creative piece.

Confronted with students trapped in work paralysis by the stress of 9-11, I thought about the malaise that I sank into myself in 1989, when I backpacked through Europe and visited Dachau. I was deeply touched by the sculpture there, dedicated to those who died at Dachau and the other death camps operated by the Nazis which says, in many different languages, “Never forget.” It seemed to me—when I returned home to reports of similar camps operating in the former Yugoslavia and of the Rwandan genocide that left entire rivers running blood—that we had forgotten. I wrote a poem about Dachau, trying to remember, to remind people who might read it that we were not supposed to let this happen again. But I, too, had a period during which I felt cynical about considering poetry or the performance art that I create a serious effort at accomplishing anything socio-political.

Now, I specialize in early modern British drama, and twentieth-century feminist drama. William Shakespeare and Eve Ensler (of *The Vagina Monologues* fame) both appear on my reading lists

frequently. Both of them have written works that have had tremendous, global impact. Shakespeare is probably the best known literary figure the world has ever known, whose words have endured through the centuries to be read over the radio in Britain during the *Luftwaffe* and from the floor of a U. S. Congress debating the censure of a president, to name only two examples. *The Vagina Monologues* has spawned a worldwide movement to end violence against women, and Eve Ensler participated in a recent summit to reconstruct the Afghan government in such a way that women have adequate representation and opportunities for power. When my students wax disconsolate about the woes of the world and their limited ability to do anything substantive to address them, I point out that the world has been profoundly changed by individuals and their words, for good and for ill: Mahatma Gandhi, Adolf Hitler, Albert Einstein, Queen Elizabeth I, Sigmund Freud, Simone de Beauvoir, Karl Marx—to name only a few.

I want to conclude this essay with a prime example of the sort of intellectual work I was hoping to motivate in giving an assignment such as this. I have to confess that I am cheating to a certain degree, since the writer in question, Tracie Amirante, is already an accomplished poet with a chapbook forthcoming and numerous public readings and publications to her credit. Still, the work that she produced was staggering not only in its prodigiousness (her manuscript ran to 17 pages) but also in the dexterity with which she translated shocking experiences into subtle, meditative pieces of poetry. She concluded: "Poetry is, then, a pattern of words. History is a pattern of life and death, peace and war. . . I don't know yet what patterns my own life will choose to follow—or break. I have only begun to appreciate the rules" (5).

As Tracie noted, one of the most important aspects of appreciating the rules is knowing when they need to be broken. In teaching our students the rules of our various disciplines, we need to remember always to include that one, and need to remember it ourselves. It may be another 50 years before we begin to see frank meditations on the events of 9-11 and the subsequent war on terrorism such as those that we have for the prelude to and aftermath of World War II by Steven Spielberg on film (*Schindler's List*) by Michael Frayn on the stage (*Copenhagen*) and by Elie Wiesel in philosophy (*Night*). Our students will never get there if we do not show them the way to solidify their ideas in the forge of critical inquiry, to cultivate their own authentic voices.

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## Notes

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2. *Women in Religion*, Jean Holm and John Bowker, eds. (London, Pinter Publishers, Ltd., 1994), *Truth Tales: Contemporary Stories by Women Writers of India, Kali for Women*, ed. (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1990) and *Aman: The Story of a Somali Girl*, Virigina Lee Barnes and Janice Boddy, eds. New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
3. For an excellent introduction to process pedagogy and its application in a socially-engaged classroom, see Thomas Fox, *The Social Uses of Writing: Politics and Pedagogy* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990).

## Contact Information

Regina M. Buccola  
Roosevelt University  
430 S. Michigan Ave.  
Chicago, IL 60605  
Email: [rbuccola@roosevelt.edu](mailto:rbuccola@roosevelt.edu)

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