

“Our Common Sufferings”:

Reflections on the Ethical Dimensions of Contemporary Disaster Poetry

Zhuo WANG *
University of Jinan

Abstract: The latter half of the 20th century witnessed a turning point of reconsideration of the relations between poetry and ethics. The new millennium, when people all over the world experience suffering from natural and man-made disasters again and again, sees the outpourings of poems in response to various disastrous events. These disasters include terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and more recently, the Sichuan Earthquake in China in the year of 2008, which flame or revivify an old aesthetic debate—the relations between poetry and ethics. This paper, after giving a sketch of contemporary disaster poetry, makes an analysis of the complex relationships between poetry and ethics from three aspects, namely, the silent witness, the traumatic memory and the ethical act of contemporary disaster poetry, which jointly make up the multi-ethical dimensions of disaster poetry.

Key Words: disaster poetry, ethical dimensions, silent witness, traumatic memory, ethical act

In unlikely places, poems call up memory and make whole.

—Kathryn Hellerstein from *Our Common Sufferings*¹

Wallace Stevens, in his 1947 essay “Three Academic Pieces” written two years after the Hiroshima bombing, announced that the birds of yesterday sang preludes to the atom bomb today.² Stevens, unfortunately, seems to predict the future trend of modern poetry—from bird song to atom bomb. From then on, poets all over the world return again and again to the mid-twentieth-century catastrophe as well as the disastrous events of their own time. Critics and readers notice that contemporary poets are frequently the first responders of the poetic imagination when a community is faced with catastrophic events, whether natural or man-made. The first ten years of the new millennium witnessed the outpourings of poems in response to various disastrous events. These disasters include terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and more

* Zhuo WANG, professor of School of Foreign Languages, University of Jinan; Visiting scholar in the department of World Literature and Comparative Literature, Central China Normal University (02-12, 2009). This Article is under the project of A Study of American Ethnic Poetry from the Perspective of Multi-cultures(2006-).

¹ Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong, eds. *Our Common Sufferings*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2008, p.137.

² See Wallace Stevens, Three Academic Pieces, in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reading and the Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1951, p.76.

recently, the Sichuan Earthquake in China in the year of 2008, which flame or revivify an old aesthetic debate, i.e., the relations between poetry and ethics. So, the turn of the new century might be an appropriate moment to reflect on these two items in literature which have been related in some complex ways, especially when the world seems to be suffering more and more from natural disasters and man-made terrors.

1. An overview of contemporary disaster poetry

From the early 1950s onward, the traditional considerations of poetry and ethics were challenged by Adorno's comments about lyrics after Auschwitz. In terms of the relations between contemporary poetry and ethics, the discussions will undoubtedly arrive at Auschwitz, although they have not begun there in the first place. With the shock and trauma of the unprecedented state-sponsored systematic murder, in the latter part of the last century, European and American academic and extra-academic criticism has returned to ethics frequently and insistently, while their conclusions are shockingly divergent. Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher, proposes that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric;³ Jewish historian Daniel R. Schwarz argues, "in truth it is barbaric not to write poetry";⁴ American critic and scholar Barbara L. Estrin believes, "After Auschwitz, it is barbaric to write the *same* poems".⁵ The three statements seem to be contradictory with one another and have completely different contexts. However, they are proposed from the same consideration and signal the same trend, namely, to some degree, philosophy, history and literature all turn to the meditation on the ethical value and ethical significance of poetry. The result of this ethical turn is that poetry returns to the consideration about life itself and the recovery of duty of poetry as the ethical imperatives of witnessing, testifying and memorializing. Just as Norman Finkelstein declares, "poetry is one of the few resources left that help us understand the Shoah, along with the other catastrophes of the twentieth century."⁶

As to the relations between ethics and literature, and ethics and poetry in particular, Robert Kaufman once made a very pointed comment: "To be sure, ethics had never really been forgotten; but it seemed for a period to have taken a backseat to language, politics, society, history, and culture."⁷ Although poetry was once hesitant in its approaching to ethics, it is no doubt the most persistent one. With poetry's return to ethics, this old literary form seems to have magic wings, flying from the border to the center of life and man's vision. Those catastrophic events and scenes, from Auschwitz entrapment to the Vietnam War, from African refugee to the Amazon ecological destruction, all find their ways to the poetic expressions in contemporary poetry. Terrorist threats as the fall of the World Trade Center and the continued suicide bombing in Israel in the new century, the natural vulnerability as Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Sichuan Earthquake in 2008 and Typhoon Morakot in Taiwan in 2009, all deepen and reinforce our reflection on the ethical value and function of poetry when we have nowhere to go when facing the disasters.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Cultural Criticism and Society*, in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber. London: Neville Spearman, 1967, p.34.

⁴ Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, p.22.

⁵ Barbara L. Estrin, *The American Love Lyric after Auschwitz and Hiroshima*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p.9.

⁶ Norman Finkelstein, *Not One of Them in Place: Modern Poetry and Jewish American Identity*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2001, p. 71.

⁷ Robert Kaufman, *Poetry's Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion*, *New German Critique* 97, Vol.33, No.1. Winter 2006: 73-118, p.76.

It is not exaggeration to say that for contemporary poets with conscience, lyric writing when facing disasters becomes “a moral obligation as commemorating, catharsis, atonement, history, and insistence on human sensitivities; as resistance to brutalization indifference, flight from consequences”.⁸ As a moral act, writing disaster poems is to do things, and writing itself is an ethical event. Compared with love lyrics and nature lyrics, disaster lyrics, due to their special thematic focus, intensifies the ethical dimensions of poetry, so to examine the ethical dimensions of disaster poetry will undoubtedly better illustrate the relationship between lyrics and ethics.

The ethical turn of poetry in criticism realm and the consciousness of ethical obligation act in concert to turn the eyes of the contemporary poets to those events which embody profound ethical meanings. Undoubtedly, the lyrics that launched the ethical meditation of the poets are no other than holocaust poetry. Poets like Jerome Rothenberg, Allan Grossman, Charles Reznikoff, William Heyen, Ruth Whitman, Gerald Stern, Tony Harrison and Geoffrey Hill all devoted themselves to depiction of this tremendous human disaster. Grossman’s *A Harlot’s Hire* (1961), Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* (1975) and Rothenberg’s *Khurbn* (1987) are all direct poetic responses to this disaster. Three giants of modern poetry—Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell and Adrienne Rich all return to this catastrophe “at roughly twenty-year intervals”.⁹ Holocaust literature, Holocaust poetry in particular, has become a definite literary genre with unique artistic features and special thematic concerns. Besides the Holocaust, some other disastrous events also found their ways to contemporary poetic expression. American woman poet Muriel Rukeyser’s long poem *The book of the Dead* (1938), with a documentary accuracy, represents the Hawk’s Nest Incident, the worst industrial incident in American history. Navajo woman poet Luci Tapahonso’s poem *In 1864* (1993) records the so called Long Walk during which 8354 Navajos made the forced 325 mile walk from their traditional settlement to Fort Sumner and many of them lost their lives in this painful and disastrous removal.

The dawn of the new millennium seems to witness more human disasters and, of course, more hope, at the same time, more poetic concerns and expressions. The fall of the World Trade Center is probably the first shock to the post-Holocaust poets. This huge human tragedy makes artists of the post-Holocaust world, especially the more recent world, realize that it is not a time to flirt with fantasy; instead, it is a time to work collectively and seriously with artistic consciousness and moral obligation. American writer Thane Rosenbaum describes the quick response of American literary and cultural circles to 9.11 terrorist attacks as follows, which is but an epitome of man’s collective ethical act when facing disastrous events and one example of the relationship between catastrophe and poetry:

*Soon after the catastrophe, the New Yorker and The New York Times Magazine, for instance, along with other newspapers and magazines, including television news shows, assembled an A list literary writers whom they asked to somehow make sense of the unimaginable, to describe what they had either witnessed or were feeling on the day, and to perhaps illuminate the loss.*¹⁰

⁸ Harriet L. Parmet, Selected American Poets Respond to the Holocaust: The Terror of Our Days, in *Modern Language Studies*, 24: 4 (1994): 78-85, p.78.

⁹ Barbara L. Estrin, *The American Love Lyric after Auschwitz and Hiroshima*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p.1.

¹⁰ Thane Rosenbaum, Art and Atrocity in a Post-9/11 World, in Alan L. Berger and Gloria L. Cronin (eds.), *Jewish American and Holocaust Literature: Representation in the Postmodern World*. Cronin. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004: 125-136, p.133.

African American woman writer Alice Walker is one of the first poets who responded to 9.11 terrorist attacks with poetic writing. In her poem collection *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of Earth* published in 2003, Walker dedicates one of the poems, “The Love of Bodies” to this disastrous event, and after elegantly expressing her gratitude and love for the living on this lovely earth, at the end of the poem, Walker gives a special note to tell the readers that it was written after the 9.11 terrorist attack. Jewish American woman writer Adrienne Rich, “one of this century’s major canonical poets”, seems to “intuit the events of 9/11/01” in her poetry of the early 1990s.¹¹ In addition, Rich in her poems, keeps returning to the disastrous events in human history to seek poetic inspiration, and the most important of all, to reflect on the question: “What does it mean to say I have survived?”¹²

Poetic writings in response to Hurricane Katrina and the flood in New Orleans in 2005 hit the shore of Atlantic Ocean with man’s reconstruction of their homeland. From the poem anthology *Hurricane Blues* (2006) edited by Philip C. Kolin and Susan Swartwout to *Katrina-Ku* (2006) published by the New Orleans Haiku Society, to Dave Brinks’ epic *Caveat Onus* (2006), readers witness waves of poetry which respond to this natural disaster. Two years later, when a big earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale jolted Wenchuan County in the northwest part of Sichuan Province in China, poems by Chinese and foreign poets pour out, all of which are based on a common theme: “Let us all join hands in facing the disaster; Let us hold our hands together as one family”.¹³ It is estimated that from the 5.12 Earthquake till now, over 70 presses and Publishing Houses in China have devoted themselves to the publication of poems in memory of this disaster, and about 1000 poem anthologies about the Wenchuan Earthquake were published in the year of 2008, and thus emerges a rare phenomenon of, “explosion of earthquake poem anthology publication”.¹⁴ *The Great Love Is Borderless: We and Wenchuan Together* (2008) published by New World Press, *In Company with Love: To 2008 WenChuan* (2008) by People’s Literature Publishing House, *Chinese Spirit: An Ode to Heroes in Wenchuan Earthquake* (2008) by Jiangxi College Press, to name just a few, all receive enthusiastic responses from the readers. Among these responses poems concerning the Wenchuan Earthquake, the most representative one is *Our Common Sufferings: An Anthology of World Poets in Memoriam 2008 Sichuan Earthquake* edited by Nie Zhenzhao & Luo Lianggong. This bilingual anthology, acclaimed as, “the most beautiful book in China”, is a fruit of collaboration among international poets in giving voice to human sympathy and love, including 29 poems in English and 28 in Chinese. Charles Bernstein, the famous Language poet, Anne Waldman, one of the most influential American avant-garde poets, Everett Hoagland, winner of the Gwendolyn Prize for Poetry and poet Laureate of New Bedford, USA, Afaa Michael Weaver, 2008 Pushcart Prize winner, and Leevi Lehto, the famous Finnish poet and translator, are all among the contributors of this anthology.

2. Writing disaster: a silent witness

¹¹ Cheri Colby Langdell, *Adrienne Rich: The moment of Change*. Westport, Connecticut, London: Praeger, 2004, p.155.

¹² Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991, p.48

¹³ Nie Zhenzhao, Preface, in *Our Common Sufferings*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2008.

¹⁴ See Jiang Hongwei, Memorandum of 5.12 Earthquake Poetry Anthology Publication, <http://blog.bandao.cn/archive/1352/blogs-359297.aspx>.

As the most nakedly shocking disastrous event in the twentieth century, the holocaust is a “watershed event” that divides culture and literature in particular into a before and an after. The urgent need of revealing what had happened during the holocaust produces a distinctive literary form—testimony. Elie Wiesel said, “If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony”.¹⁵ This new literary form is important in that it foregrounds the most important ethical dimension of poetry—witness. In a “post-traumatic century”, testimony becomes the key mode, which helps us construct the relationship with contemporary historical trauma. In modern arts, testimony exists as theme as well as media. The former refers to the writing of survivors of disaster with a scream and cry; the latter becomes the effective way of expression of artists who are absent from the scenes of the catastrophe. In Holocaust writing, Charles Reznikoff’s documentary epic *Holocaust* is one of the representative poems. Based on the materials of The Trials of the Major War Criminals at Nuremberg and The Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem, Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* is dry and unsentimental without any quick judgment and interpretive comments. Some of the poem’s most horrifying moments are those describing the special grief of survivors who had witness the massacring of families:

*The bodies were thrown out quickly
for other transports were coming:
bodies blue, wet with sweat and urine, legs covered with excrement,
and everywhere the bodies of babies and children.
Two dozen workers were busy
opening the mouths of the dead with iron hooks
and with chisels taking out teeth with golden caps;
and elsewhere other workers were tearing open the dead
and looking for money or jewels that might have been swallowed.
And all the bodies were then thrown into the large pits dug near the gas chambers
to be covered with sand.*¹⁶

This is Reznikoff’s poetic world with, “wreckage upon wreckage”,¹⁷ a world, which shocks the readers, and at the same time troubles the critics. The near-invisibility of the poet marginalizes the poem in some senses, because it seems that the poet is null and unsympathetic. However, this writing stance of the poet is an effective writing strategy, which is in accordance with the ethical value of disaster lyrics as a silent witness. First of all, the near-invisibility of the poet justifies the objectivity of the event. In other words, the silence of the poet endows the event itself the right to speak for itself. In addition, the silent poet foregrounds successfully the witness of the readers (outsiders) rather than the interpretation of the poet himself. The absence of the rhetorical interpretation leaves the blank space to the readers who are able and willing to fill in with the imagination and emotion of their own.

As the representative piece of objectivist poetics, Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* might be a radical example, but nobody can deny that when we face a shocking disastrous event, words are weak and

¹⁵ Elie Wiesel, The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration, in Elliot Leifkovitz (ed.), *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977, p.9.

¹⁶ Charles Reznikoff, *Holocaust*. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975, p.46.

¹⁷ Norman Finkelstein, *Not One of Them in Place: Modern poetry and Jewish American Identity*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2001, p.31.

meaningless sometimes. Just as George Steiner says, “The best now, after so much has been set forth, is, perhaps, to be silent; not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate, to the unspeakable.”¹⁸ So it is understandable that many contemporary disaster poems are controlled and constrained in emotion. In *Blood Dazzler* dedicated to Hurricane Katrina written by Patricia Smith who was nominated for the 2008 National Book Award for this very collection, one section of the poem “34” is nothing but white space. Smith, in her attempt to give a voice to the dead, recognizes the impossibility of such a task. In *Our Common Sufferings*, Charles Bernstein contributes a short poem “it cuts so deep”:

*it cuts so deep
upon layer & layer
& fogs & clots*

*nothing is adequate
against absence*¹⁹

This short poem illustrates overall Bernstein’s poetics; meanwhile it represents the basic feature of his poetic practice. There is no depiction or representation of the details of the 5.12 Earthquake, for he believes that language cannot represent a certain world. On the contrary, language can be used to recover the world, and what this short lyric recovers is a physical and spiritual broken world. Nevertheless, this recovery is more in form than in content. The form of this short lyric is the “extreme forms”²⁰ which Bernstein himself prefers most. The broken sentence structure, illogical grammar and no internal interrelation of semantics of this poem are all in accordance with this extreme form. It is this overt-jumping form that constructs the intense relation among the first three lines. The preposition “upon” is the key word, which connects these three lines, as it seems that it bears the untouchable weight of unfathomable physical world and emotional world as well. With the flow of the words, this lyric constructs a process of feeling and procedural constructions. In other words, three “&” connect four nouns, “layer & layer & fogs & clots”, and in the context of the earthquake disaster, it seems that they pile up more and more debris and dead bodies, and at the same time, heavier sorrowfulness. So, what this procedure intensifies is man’s psychological aesthetic knowledge to the lost lives.

As silent witness, disaster lyrics serve as documents and records which help panic man to write down history even if it is painful and torturous. Directness and truthfulness are the special demand of disaster lyric as witness. Jordan Soyka wrote in, “The Right to Write about It”: “If authors only wrote about what they knew, they’d be accused of having no imagination. However, in the case of catastrophe, the situation is reversed. Some authors responding to Katrina were criticized as ‘outsiders’ incapable of understanding something outside their own realm of experience.”²¹ What Soyka complains about here seems to be an aesthetic question, however, in essence, it is concerned with the most important ethical dimension of disaster lyrics, i.e. as witness to history, no matter how

¹⁸ George Steiner, *language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*. New York: Atheneum, 1982, p.163.

¹⁹ Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong, eds. *Our Common Sufferings*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2008, p.59.

²⁰ Nie Zhenzhao, Interview with Charles Bernstein, in *Foreign Literature Studies* 2 (2007):10-19, p.12

²¹ Jordan Soyka, The Right to Write about It: Hurricane Katrina in Poetry. www.bookslut.com/features/2009_05_014429.php.

painful it is. In *Outer Bands* by professor Gabriel Gomez who won the Andres Montoya Poetry Prize for this very book, the title poem of this collection is a 28-day record of days between Karina and Rita, most of which borrowed from the news headlines, the statement of the government. The realistic images of the hurricane provide a portrait of how chaotic, how disturbing, how out of time that period was. Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao, co-editor of *Our Common Sufferings*, points out, “poetry could be a record of history”, which is probably the most succinct summary of the most important function of disaster lyric in modern society.

3. Re-experiencing disaster: a traumatic memory

As silent witness, disaster poetry gives the readers a truthful record and thus, provides them with an immediate knowledge. This is one of the powerful ethical dimensions of disaster poetry. However, as a way of relation to the event itself, witness seems to be composed of fragments of the events, because what the witness narration can describe is merely the direct experience without any further meditation or reflection. Andrei Codrescu, author of “Jealous Witness” which is concerned with hurricane Katrina, once said: “I don’t recommend writing about traumatic events so close to them. You need a distance, you know, and a decent moment of silence to absorb it and think about it.”²² This is the case for many poets who do touch the catastrophic theme. Take holocaust writing for example. Reznikoff launched into the writing of this human disaster after meditating and hesitating for about 30 years. Milton Hindus attributed his hesitation to aesthetic maturity, but in some sense, this is more a consideration of ethics than aesthetics. In other words, this is an ethical anxiety of the “outsider” or “later” of the very disaster scene. This predicament of disaster poetic writing is not only pertinent to the post-Holocaust poetic writing, it is also relevant to the post-9/11 or post-Hurricane Katrina, and probably to the post-5/12 Earthquake writing and post-Taiwan Typhoon Morakot writing in the near future. Witness writing, though reliable, lacks profound historical value and easily becomes vague with the eclipse of time. It is usually the case that great artistic works are the products of memory, both personal and communal.

The reconsideration of the disastrous events is built on the revivification of the memory. It is true that it is a torture for the survivors of the disaster, no matter man-made or natural, to memorialize the details of the events. Saul Bellow even lets his hero- a survivor of the Holocaust to cry, “I would like to forget about remembering”;²³ but it is also true that, “the abundance of suffering permits no forgetting”.²⁴ This paradoxical situation puzzles many writers and readers as well. It is always the case that memory is a burden haunting those who should best be able to keep it alive-storytellers, poets and artists. While just as Camus once said, “to talk of despair is to conquer it”, for contemporary writers to write the cruel memories of the disasters or to relive the shocking experience of the disaster is an effective way to conquer the nightmare and eventually to comfort the hearts of the survivors, and most important of all, to provide a historical perspective to the personal and collective survival. Disaster lyrics, in this sense, serves as traumatic memory and psychological comfort simultaneously.

²² Qtd. in Maria C Montoya, Three years later, poems are still putting the impact of Hurricane Katrina into words, August 27, 2008, http://blog.nola.com/susanlarson/2008/08/three_years_later_poems_are_st.html.

²³ Saul Bellow, *The Bellarosa Connection*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989, p.2.

²⁴ Qtd. in Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.7.

In *We Heal from Memory*, poet and scholar Cassie Premo Steele attempts to give a definition to trauma from the angle of literary writing, which unconsciously sheds light on the reason why disaster poetry could serve as traumatic memory:

*Scholars of trauma...define trauma precisely not as an experience or event but as the paradoxical structure of an experience that was missed, was not experienced. Trauma...marks the painful aftereffects of a violent history in the body and mind of the survivor. Hence, it is not the event itself...that determines whether it is traumatic; it is the way the survivor survives such violence by not experiencing it in the normal way we experience and remember. And while such violence is not and cannot be experienced consciously at the time, it nevertheless repeats itself later from the inside through dreams and repetitions.*²⁵

What Steele emphasizes here is that trauma cannot be, “recorded in the usual, narrative way we remember experiences”. Instead, traumatic memories are encoded, “in images and feelings, both emotional and physical”.²⁶ From what Steele said, we can draw a conclusion that traumatic memories are not only held in the mind, but also in the body, and, “they erupt in the form of images and feelings”.²⁷ “In this way, poetry becomes the tool with which poets sketch the events and the emotions, and with which the readers witness the traumas. With the poets tracing the aftereffects of trauma, readers acts as witness who first just listen, and then unconsciously help the poets to rebuild the “skipped histories, claim them, and heal form them”.²⁸

In describing the scene of the Native American genocide, Laguna Pueblo poet Paula Allen expresses the necessity of the witness in healing from it. In her imaginary return to the scene, she heaps her writing with the aftereffects of traumatic memory of this genocide:

*We are the dead and the witness to death of hundreds of thousands of our people, of the water, the air, the animals and forests and grassy lands that sustained us not very long ago...the question that the writers face again and again, pose in a multitude of ways, answer in a multitude of ways is this: How does one survive in the face of collective death? Bearing witness is one solution, but it is singularly tearing, for witnessing genocide...requires that someone listen and comprehend.*²⁹

How do the poets as well as the readers survive in the face of the collective death? Steele attempts to give us one answer: “the intrusions and repetitions of the past upon the present” which are the “signposts” of the trauma.³⁰ In “In 1864” by Navajo American poet Luci Tapahonso, the poet reflects the living memory of the Long Walk, and it seems that to the Navajo people the Long Walk happened yesterday. In “In 1864”, Tapahonso remembers the still living stories of the Long Walk,

²⁵ Cassie Premo Steele, *We Heal form Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa and the Poetry of Witness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p.2.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

²⁷ Martha Elizabeth Tilton, *Out of Cubero: Paula Gunn Allen's Map of the World*, Doctor Dissertation, February 29, 2008, p.64. http://etd.ohiolink.edu/send-pdf.cgi/Tilton%20Martha%20Elizabeth.pdf?acc_num=ucin1204297800.

²⁸ Cassie Premo Steele, *We Heal form Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa and the Poetry of Witness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p.6.

²⁹ Paula Allen, Answering the Deer: Genocide and Continuation in the Poetry of American Indian Women, in Dean Rader and Janice Groud (eds.), *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*. Tucson: The U of Arizona P, 2003, pp.143-4.

³⁰ Cassie Premo Steele, *We Heal form Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa and the Poetry of Witness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p.7.

and in doing so, she merges into the ongoing recollection and reclamation of history, allowing the past to have the immediacy of present knowledge and experience:

*There were many who died on the way to Hwééldi. All the way
We told each other, "We will be strong as long as we are together."
I think that was what kept us alive. We believed in ourselves
And the old stories that the holy people had given us.
"This is why," she would say to us. "This is why we are here.
Because our grandparents prayed and grieved for us."³¹*

In the poem's concluding lines, after re-walking the Long Walk and re-experiencing the painfully memory of genocide, the lines between the stories and reality, past and present become blurred, and the speaker returns physically and spiritually to the trauma's signpost-Navajo's homeland.

From the above discussion, it is not an exaggeration to say that traumatic memory is a bridge that connects the gap between past and present through history. *Colosseum* written by Katie Ford for the memory of hurricane Katrina opens with Ford's birth amidst the fall of Saigon and civil war in Beirut, and then the painful poetic memory moves backward and forward through historical destructions, biblical floods and the poet's personal experience of the devastation of New Orleans by Katrina. For example, in "The Shape of Us", Ford begins her narrating from "...Pompeii was discovered/beneath calcifications of ash/because certain hollow looked human".³² Shocked by the violent storm and the continuously rising waters, she cries, "We will be overcome by waters/ where I stand with my lanterns and cans,/ my useless preparations and provisions,/ with the God I loved, I hated, and you. " ³³ And then she pleads: "Something please tell me I'm wrong/ about impermanence,/ wrong there is no unbroken believable thing/ on this earth." Wandering through the Colosseum in Rome, to the Duomo in Florence, to the Louisiana Superdome, Ford reflects profoundly on the great accomplishments and shocking devastations of history, producing an enduring collection of quiet and powerful elegies. By re-experiencing the disasters in the past, Ford repeats again and again the traumatic memory, and thus saves the people in the present from falling down. The traveling backward and forward through history is a privilege of traumatic memory, just as Ford told *The Times*, "I was ...looking at ancient ruins and civilizations. New Orleans became the modern example." ³⁴ So, contemporary disaster poetry in some sense shares the aspiration of Benjamin's "angel of death": "to reverse temporary movement, to undo history, and to reconstitute the wreckage into its original wholeness".³⁵

4. Transforming disaster: a healing act

Poetic writings as traumatic memory are, "stringently forceful antidotes to an otherwise rampant culture of obliviousness".³⁶ However, there is a post- catastrophe paradox for the poets and readers

³¹ Saanii Dahataal, *The Women Are Singing: Poems and Stories*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993, p.7.

³² Katie Ford, *Colosseum*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2008, p.23.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

³⁴ Jordan Soyka, The Right to Write about It: Hurricane Katrina in Poetry. www.bookslut.com/features/2009_05_014429.php.

³⁵ Qtd. in Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (SUNY Series in Modern Jewish Literature and Culture). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997, p.194.

³⁶ Gerhard Bach, Memory and Collective Identity, In Alan L. Berger & Gloria L. Cronin (eds.), *Jewish American and Holocaust Literature*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004: 77-89, p.89.

as well. On the one hand, it is a moral duty for them to remember and acknowledge the collective and individual losses and pain; on the other hand, it is not advisable and not moral to go too far to be obsessed with memory, because to do so will prevent them from engaging in and enjoying the fullness of life. To people whom survive the disasters, physical survival is not a satisfying victory. The fact that so many lives, including their relatives and closest friends, are lost will haunt their mind like a nightmare, making it nearly impossible for them to engage fully and faithfully in everyday life. In some sense, the physical survivors are dead souls, as there are unspeakable spiritual damages to their souls.

In evoking a participating reality, poetry serves as a dedication to the dead and healer to the survivors. American poet Kathryn Hellerstein in her poem “Libai’s Poem in the Van” which is dedicated to the victims of the Sichuan Earthquake, writes: “*In unlikely places, poems call up memory and make whole*”. What Hellerstein emphasizes here is that calling up memory is a way to make whole the split survivor. Then how? And in what way does poetry serve as the healer to the split souls of the survivors?

Poetic writing can endow the voice of the deceased life in the catastrophe; in other words, poetic writing can make the dead speak for themselves. Finkelstein once said, “Were it not for the poet, the dead would remain speechless”.³⁷ The same expression is found in Smith Patricia. She tells *The Times*: “I wanted to write a poem that gave those people their voices back”.³⁸ Poem “34” in *Blood Dazzler* is broken into 34 sections, one for each resident of St. Rita’s Nursing Home who was abandoned to die during Katrina. As silent witness, poetry in some degree recovers the disastrous event itself, and thus brings a strong sense of “presence”, in so doing, transforms the disaster into a present being. The voice of the dead reverberates in this momentary present being and present space. The poet, in this sense, maintains a sense of poetic agency, but meanwhile, tries to allow the victims to speak for themselves. In some disaster lyrics, the poets override the line between life and dead, letting the dead to utter the voices of their own. Take “Please Take the Schoolbag for Me, Mama”, a poem from *Our Common Sufferings* as example. In this moving lyric, the pupils who lost their lives in Sichuan earthquake are endowed the right to speak their thanks and consolations to their mamas who are immersed in the profound pain of losing their kids:

*Please don’t cry, wipe your tears away, Mama.
Group after group, we children
are running toward paradise right now.
Don’t worry for me, Mama.
Please take my bag for me,
just like in the evening as usual
you accompany me when I do my homework
and put the books into my bag tidily.
You gently fold my red scarf for me,
then urge me to go to bed early.
You teach me to be a good child,*

³⁷ Norman Finkelstein, *Not One of Them in Place: Modern Poetry and Jewish American Identity*. New York: State University of New York, 2001, p.107.

³⁸ Maria C Montoya, Three years later, poems are still putting the impact of Hurricane Katrina into words, August 27, 2008, http://blog.nola.com/susanlarson/2008/08/three_years_later_poems_are_st.html.

Facing so profound a catastrophe, poetry, death and life form a miraculous equation-poetry depends upon death, and death reflects meaning on life via poetic writing. Just as the case in this poem. The kids running toward the paradise, come to life and revive their voices in the poem, and in turn, this innocent and warm voice comforts the broken hearts of the mothers who lost their sons and daughters in the earthquake.

In the hearts of the contemporary poets, one of the ethical dimensions of disaster lyric is to “purify the cry” of those who have been lost, and even “clean the murder” through the performance of certain “rites of purity”.⁴⁰ This is also the poet’s positive moral authority. In fact, this ethical ideal of contemporary poets has no great distinction with Shelly’s dream of being, “unacknowledged legislator of the world”.⁴¹ The only difference might be that the poets who deal with the theme of disaster are concerned more with moral than authority. As an ethical act, poetic writing of various disasters in history appears to be part of a chain of events that poets continue to work through therapeutically via the writing craft. In other words, the redemptive force of poetry is equal to the horrible nature of the disasters that man has to face again and again. Just as Jewish poet Allen Grossman insists, after, “so long an agony of ignorance/ And the dying of so many thousand deaths/...I am still a poet/With power to make you beautiful and free”.⁴² To poets like Grossman, they endow themselves with a sense of moral obligation of cleansing and love.

Pardon and love are ultimate hope for man’s salvage and self-salvage, and it is even more so when man is faced with the challenges of disasters. After witnessing the scenes of the disasters, mending together the traumatized head and body of the disaster survivors, writing disasters for the poets are just like the glint of hope in the face of the impossible, becoming an ethical act which will heal the wound and scars, and eventually save us from despair and fear.

References

Adorno, Theodor W.

Cultural Criticism and Society, in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber. London: Neville Spearman, 1967.

Allen, Paula

Answering the Deer: Genocide and Continuance in the Poetry of American Indian Women, in Dean Rader and Janice Groud (eds.), *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*. Tucson: The U of Arizona P, 2003.

Bach, Gerhard

³⁹ Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong, eds. *Our Common Sufferings*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2008, pp.77-8.

⁴⁰ Norman Finkelstein, *Not One of Them in Place: Modern Poetry and Jewish American Identity*, New York: State University of New York, 2001, p.70.

⁴¹ Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran, eds. *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 125.

⁴² Allen Grossman, *Harlot's Hire*. Cambridge, MA: Walker-de Berry, 1961, p.42.

Memory and Collective Identity, In Alan L. Berger & Gloria L. Cronin (eds.), *Jewish American and Holocaust Literature*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004: 77-89.

Bellow, Saul

The Bellarosa Connection. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989.

Bennett, Betty T. & Stuart Curran, eds.

Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Dahataal, Saanii

The Women Are Singing: Poems and Stories. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993.

Estrin, Barbara L.

The American Love Lyric after Auschwitz and Hiroshima. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Ezrahi, Sidra DeKoven

By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Finkelstein, Norman

Not One of Them in Place: Modern Poetry and Jewish American Identity. New York: State University of New York Press, 2001.

Ford, Katie

Colosseum. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2008.

Grossman, Allen.

Harlot's Hire. Cambridge, MA: Walker-de Berry, 1961.

Horowitz, Sara R.

Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction (SUNY Series in Modern Jewish Literature and Culture). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Jiang Hongwei

Memorandum of 5.12 Earthquake Poetry Anthology Publication. <http://blog.bandao.cn/archive/1352/blogs-359297.aspx> .

Kaufman, Robert

Poetry's Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion. *New German Critique* 97, Vol.33, No.1. Winter 2006:73-118.

Langdell, Cheri Colby

Adrienne Rich: The moment of Change. Westport, Connecticut, London: Praeger, 2004.

Montoya, Maria C.

Three years later, poems are still putting the impact of Hurricane Katrina into words, August 27, 2008, http://blog.nola.com/susanlarson/2008/08/three_years_later_poems_are_st.html.

Nie Zhenzhao

Preface, In *Our Common Sufferings*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2008.

Nie Zhenzhao

Interview with Charles Bernstein, In *Foreign Literature Studies* 2 (2007):10-19.

Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong, eds.

Our Common Sufferings. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2008.

Parnet, Harriet L.

Selected American Poets Respond to the Holocaust: The Terror of Our Days, In *Modern Language Studies*, 24: 4 (1994):78-85.

Reznikoff, Charles

Holocaust. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975.

Rich, Adrienne

An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991.

Rosenbaum, Thane

Art and Atrocity in a Post-9/11 World, In Alan L. Berger and Gloria L. Cronin (eds.), *Jewish American and Holocaust Literature: Representation in the Postmodern World*. State University of New York Press, 2004:125-136.

Schwarz, Daniel R.

Imagining the Holocaust. New York: St. Martin's, 1999.

Soyka, Jordan

The Right to Write about It: Hurricane Katrina in Poetry.
www.bookslut.com/features/2009_05_014429.php.

Steele, Cassie Premo

We Heal form Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldua and the Poetry of Witness. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Steiner, George

Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman. New York: Atheneum, 1982.

Stevens, Wallace

Three Academic Pieces, In *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reading and the Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1951.

Tilton, Martha Elizabeth

Out of Cubero: Paula Gunn Allen's Map of the World, Doctor Dissertation, February 29, 2008. http://etd.ohiolink.edu/send-pdf.cgi/Tilton%20Martha%20Elizabeth.pdf?acc_num=ucin1204297800.

Wiesel, Elie

The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration, In Elliot Leifkovitz(ed.), *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977.