

11 September 2001: the Italian writers' response

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(Received 2 November 2010; final version accepted 7 March 2011)

One month after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, the *Corriere della Sera* published an article on the possible future consequences for literature of this horrific event. Some novelists boldly declared their work would not be affected at all, while others observed that their literary visions and perspectives were already responses to life's tragic aspects. Several writers confessed to wondering, at least initially, whether literature henceforth could continue to have any real sense. A decade later, this essay examines the nature of the Italian response. It looks first at the views of those writers who expressed opinions directly to the press or in essay form, and then at a small number of novels (by Tullio Avoledo, Marisa Bulgheroni and Tiziana Rinaldi Castro) and short stories (by Andrea Piva, Andrej Longo and Andrea Canobbio) which have embraced the theme, and which have done so in ways that reinforce the sense of an underlying political and/or cultural aesthetic. Connections between twenty-first-century reactions to 9/11 and the Italian experience or memory of political terrorism and war will be explored, as well as the question of inspiration for novelists, in the particular context of catastrophe or trauma.

Keywords: 9/11; September 11; World Trade Centre; twenty-first-century Italian literature; memory

1. Introduction

I must admit that I remember precisely where I was and what I was doing when I heard about the attacks, the spectacular attacks. (Pallavicino 2002, 54)

Tragedies on this scale are hardly new, yet seeing the projected images of the collapse of the New York towers not only shocked and affected many in this way, but also seemed to require, as some have expressed it, a kind of 'suspension of belief'.¹

Perhaps not surprisingly, Anglo-American novelists have been at the forefront of the literary reaction to the events of 11 September 2001, penning stories which focus centrally on the tragedy and its effects on the lives of characters.² Nevertheless many Italian writers immediately offered brief statements to the press on the effects of 9/11 for a writer, met to discuss the subject or referred to the tragedy in their narratives. This essay is concerned with the nature of that response. It examines first the views of those writers who expressed opinions directly (to the press or in essay form), and attempts to separate the 'extreme', emotive or rhetorical response (including the repeated use of terms such as 'paralysis', 'collapse', 'anger', 'necessity' or 'urgency') from the more balanced and 'rational'; it will

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also, in this context, comment on literary intentions, response and inspiration, and make reference to relevant theories of ‘traumatological fiction’.³ And while some of the critics we refer to may discuss 9/11 in the context of British or American fiction (which generally has a wider distribution), the issues they raise relate to the global picture, to fiction in general and to the effects of tragedy on a writer’s imagination. The second half of the essay focuses on a small number of Italian novels and short stories that have embraced the 9/11 theme, and which have done so in ways that reinforce the sense of an underlying political and/or cultural aesthetic.

In both discussions it will be useful to remember the following interrelated points. First, that Italian writers have a strong tradition of *impegno*, a literary concern with socio-political issues, which developed in the 1940s/’50s in reaction to the internal political situation.⁴ Second, that since the Second World War Italy has perhaps been more receptive to American culture than most European countries and, since 2001 (through the ‘efforts’ of Berlusconi), more present on the international/US scene.⁵ Third, that the 1970s was a decade of violence and instability in Italy as a result of internal political terrorism (from both Left and Right), and public places were bombed. Fourth, that, while there is no ‘expectation’ that Italian writers and Anglo-American writers should respond in the same ways, the increasingly globalised (and visual) nature of communications has meant that especially since the run-up to the millennium, citizens worldwide have been more exposed to global issues,⁶ and to the general climate of fear – of political instabilities, terrorist acts, reprisals and repercussions – and aware of the individual’s powerlessness in the face of such fears. Finally, that the works presented here are being evaluated primarily for their contribution to our understanding of the Twin Towers attack rather than for their value as literary fiction.

2. Writers’ views

Context

The day after the tragedy *La Repubblica* published an article by Alessandro Baricco which included the statement ‘Many things will never be the same again. And many things simply won’t be any more.’⁷ Two weeks later, the *Corriere della Sera* published Oriana Fallaci’s ‘Letter from New York’, a piece that aroused considerable controversy in Italy and abroad.⁸ In October the *Corriere* published a short survey of writers’ views on 9/11,⁹ while in November a largish group of authors gathered in Milan to reflect on the consequences of the tragedy for writers, subsequently publishing their essays in *Scrivere sul fronte occidentale* (Moresco and Voltolini 2002).¹⁰

‘What will writers do after 11 September?’ and ‘What consequences will the New York attacks have for the work of writers?’ were the questions being asked. Paolo Di Stefano, who introduced the *Corriere* survey, observed:

What strikes one most, up to now, is that many Italian authors are of the opinion that the terrible distress caused by 9/11 and the fall of the Towers is likely to cause the structures of the imagination and creativity to waver and even to collapse.

Leaving aside the melodramatic journo-speak, in a manner that echoed Theodor Adorno’s predictions for poetry after Auschwitz, they were saying that the 9/11 events would affect the way the imagination works and destroy the desire to write about the tragedy.¹¹ In all, about 40 writers expressed views between September and December 2001, of which I offer

what I hope is a balanced selection. And while such views may or may not be borne out by future fiction,¹² what is perhaps more interesting is how writers view the whole question of inspiration in fiction-writing especially in the wake of a shocking event.

Writers 'affected'

Several writers in the October 2001 *Corriere* survey declared that their work would unquestionably be affected. Tiziano Scarpa noted: 'After Novi Ligure, Genoa and Manhattan I don't have much faith in literature as a lie; I feel fiction has collapsed'; he sensed strongly (*violentemente*) that his writing would henceforth assume a more realistic vein.¹³ Dario Voltolini reacted similarly, speaking of a pressing need to address certain issues: he felt 'an urgency, which has reached a critical point'.¹⁴

After what they described as an initial sense of shock, or 'paralysis', Vincenzo Consolo and Domenico Starnone agreed. For Starnone, even a love story would now come across differently, 'with a new sensibility, and probably new obsessions',¹⁵ while Consolo stated, 'a literature which is aware of the world around it has no choice but to bear witness to terror or fanaticism'. Francesca Sanvitale announced that her latest protagonist could not but 'react' in some way.¹⁶ But this is a writer's 'choice'; there is nothing inevitable about it at all. Thus, how much of this kind of response can be seen as posturing, saying what is expected, being 'politically correct'? Inspiration for a novel, as for any creative art form, can derive from concrete or abstract stimuli which affect a writer's conscious or subconscious mind, and develop in a myriad of intended or unexpected ways.

Luigi Malerba expressed a broad view in the *Corriere*, seeing all tragedies as part of what a writer might take into account in his or her work.¹⁷ Mauro Covacich, one of the writers who met in Milan, accepted that he would be influenced and recognised his need to read and write solely about recent events (see 2002, 88). Covavich also made an observation regarding their wider import:

It seems obvious to me (rather than presumptuous) to maintain that it won't be the political scientists or psychologists or microbiologists or marketing experts who help me understand something of what I am seeing. It will be writers and their stories. (2002, 88)¹⁸

Fiction, indeed, can speak to a reader on a far deeper level than a text supposedly dealing in 'facts'; it 'gets under the skin', sets up possible alternatives, shows possible consequences, and allows space for seeing parallels with one's own experience(s).¹⁹

Fallaci's response attracted a strong counter-reaction primarily as a consequence of her arrogant tone and narrow ideological stance. Resident in her Manhattan flat at the time of the attacks the author begins her diatribe (after a long preface to readers) by explaining that she has finally decided to break the long silence she has hitherto imposed on herself. 'And I am very, very, very angry. I feel a rage that is cold, rational and lucid' (2001, 51), she states, an anger directed at those (particularly in Italy) who dared to claim that America had deserved the attack. However, not only are most of her arguments and assumptions delirious, rambling, irrational and historically naive, but her tone is frequently patronising and offensive. 'Mr Arafat would be fuming if he could hear me [talking about Muhammed Atta]' (58), or 'America's a special country, my dears', she tells her compatriots (72). And she urges all Italians to fear Jihad: 'Wake up, people, wake up!' 'It will destroy our culture, our art, our science, our morality, our values and our pleasures . . . Christ! Don't you realise that the Osama bin Ladens of this world consider

that they have a license to kill you and your children?' (78, 79). Fallaci's essay may be 'from the heart', but might have contributed more usefully to the debate if she had been less vituperative.²⁰

Writers 'not affected'

Niccolò Ammaniti and Marco Drago were two writers who rejected the notion of influence, deeming 9/11 irrelevant to inspiration. Drago (2002, 71) claimed that if he had attempted to work 9/11 into what he was writing he would simply have turned into 'a stupid writer', one too eager to change the world.²¹ Ammaniti (*CdS*) explained that whilst he reacted like anyone else, 'with fear and horror', his writing was quite separate: 'No, my writing won't undergo a dramatic change.' Are these responses perhaps more shrewd, more reasoned, more fundamentally honest?

Three authors who saw themselves more interested in the aesthetic qualities of fiction than in representing events were Christian Raimo, Silvia Ballestra and Giulio Mozzi. Raimo (2002, 75) remarked: 'What changes for a writer if the world seems to be at war in some way?' Indeed, the world has been at war before, and writers have chosen to write about war or not. Yet perhaps each generation has to discover this 'new' old truth for itself, or as Luckhurst (2008, 174) observes, to take on its own 'defining traumatic image' (as with the World Trade Centre disaster). Ballestra noted (*CdS*), 'After the Gulf War in 1991, I wrote *La guerra degli Antò* [1992]. But today I wouldn't write anything so linked to contemporary events',²² while Mozzi (*CdS*) stated: 'A carefully planned approach might result in an effective text from a didactic point of view, but not necessarily in a good book', a statement difficult to disagree with or refute.

Dacia Maraini, Antonio Moresco and Valerio Magrelli each observed in the *Corriere* survey that their literary visions and perspectives were already a response to the many tragic, destabilising or dramatic aspects of life, with the strong implication that this was unlikely to change. Whilst this clearly seems to be a reasoned response, their way of expressing it still tended towards extremes. Magrelli, for example, commented: 'All the murkiness (*il nero*) of the twentieth century was concentrated in the smoke coming from the Towers', before concluding, poignantly, that reality here was actually mimicking the delirium of fiction (*il delirio della letteratura*). We will return to this point.

Writers and inspiration

Perhaps more pertinently, some writers, notably those at the Milan gathering, rejected the question 'What will writers do after 11 September?' One writer, Carla Benedetti (2002, 13), stated: 'The answers are often interesting. But it's the questions I find quite insufferable.' A second, Pallavicino (2002, 56), expressed his irritation with those (Baricco, for one) who asserted that everything would change after 9/11: 'From international political structures to the selection of an album for review ... from creative cookery to *writing* ...'; would that really be so, he asked, trenchantly?²³

A third author, Paolo Nori (2002, 142), pointed out that nobody asked anybody else in the street, 'What has changed for *you*, after 11 September?', so why ask writers?²⁴ Yet if writers are seen as proficient in marshalling words and ideas, in imagining other realities, and providing impartial, critical perspectives, one might perhaps be less surprised.²⁵

Perhaps the question could have been reformulated to focus on the aspect uppermost in minds, whether the ‘terrorist’ dimension, the East/West conflict, the scale of the disaster, the perceived (American) overreaction, the press reports, or something else. Indeed, however dramatically horrific 9/11 was, it was not an isolated event but one in a chain of terrorist attacks carried out in the West over a number of years – as, indeed, in the East for even longer. There have also been numerous very serious natural disasters with tragic loss of life. Moreover, the Twin Towers tragedy has been seen (including by Fallaci’s opponents) as itself constituting a response to the ongoing, often covert terrorism of the US and its allies, in the East,²⁶ or a reaction against the excessive power, comfort and privileges of globalisation, as Jean Baudrillard argues in his 2001 essay on terrorism.²⁷ Nevertheless, the view that 9/11 *has* affected personalities, and thus narratives, has been gaining some credence. Philip Tew (2007, xii, 193), refers not only to the clear ‘sense of collective trauma and uncertainty’ affecting the post-9/11 aesthetic generally, but to the noticeable shift in sensibilities (as a response to socio-political uncertainties and tensions) towards ‘a wider ideological awareness’ reflected in twenty-first-century traumatological fiction (see also 200, 203).

9/11 as symbol

What seems to have been ‘novel’, or most startling about 9/11 is not so much the scale of the disaster (in which almost 3000 people died) but the symbolic – and visual – aspect of the attack. And in this the media were at best complicit, at worst guilty, feeding and inciting the public hunger for news of traumatic events. On the morning of 11 September, images of the attack immediately began to be transmitted everywhere, spreading, virus-like, infinite repetitions of, in the words of Andrea Bajani (2002, 146), ‘that event which . . . brought the story or history (*‘la storia’*) of mankind to a new, unannounced year Zero’.²⁸ The silhouette of the Towers, struck by the planes, impressed itself vividly on many people’s ‘inner eye’, or ‘deceived’ the mind’s eye, as might a striking artwork.²⁹ And it is frequently claimed that visual memories, or images (especially if repeated), cause deeper effects than words alone.³⁰ Similarly, there is the grim significance of the date coinciding with the American emergency services number 911, which was doubtless no ‘coincidence’ at all.

It is this double image, linking art – including narrative fiction – with a reality that compels, or shocks; not a new idea in itself, but one interpreted by modern eyes viewing modern events (this vision of the Twin Towers, two of the tallest in the world, crumbling before their eyes).³¹ Pointing (as did many others) to the unreal or filmic aspect of the tragedy, Baricco writes, in *La Repubblica* (12 September 2001): ‘I can’t stop thinking about what everyone’s saying, obsessively, without worrying they’re being banal: it’s like a film’ (a re-run, one might say, of the 1970s’ *The Towering Inferno*). But his words carry a sting: turning the phrase over and over in his mind, Baricco comes to feel that there is something not quite right about what he sees on the screen, something quite subtle. And though he is conscious it seems an atrocious thing to say, nevertheless ‘it’s all too perfect’, or ‘studied’ (*‘è tutto troppo bello’*). He explains further:

It all seems absurdly exaggerated, with its symbolic precision, the simplicity of the act, the spectacularity, and the imagination involved. In the eighteen minutes that separate the two planes, with incoming reports of other true and false attacks by an invisible enemy, and the

image of a President who takes refuge in the skies in a Florida plane – in all this, there's too much theatricality, too much Hollywood, too much fiction.

We repeat this phrase ('it's like a film'), Baricco contends, because we are trying to articulate a specific, but wholly unfamiliar emotion: 'it's not simply the shock of seeing fiction turn into reality; it's the terror of seeing the most serious reality there is, happening as if it were fiction'.³²

This, perhaps, is the most perceptive point of all – effectively the Hollywoodisation of all experience, in which there are no longer any bulwarks standing between manufactured myth and lived realities. It connects with Walter Benjamin's 'thinking in pictures' (see [1928] 1979), his way of looking at signs and objects, monuments and buildings, in an attempt to see 'beyond' the sign (or through it) to uncover something deeper, as an image that crystallises a train of thought, a way of thinking, a historical era. It draws on Baudrillard's theories (2002, 39) about 'objects' and their twofold nature: 'Only the doubling of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates. There is a particular fascination in this reduplication', he opines; and thus the flagrant destruction of the Twin Towers seemed to mirror their provocative and showy construction (2002, 38–43, 52, 57–58).³³ In particular, it bears out Guy Debord's notion (as expressed in his 1967 essay) of a society of the 'spectacle', a society in which life is no longer to be lived but to be watched, as spectacle; Debord was referring especially to Western culture, which he justifiably saw as dominated by images.³⁴ The 1980s then witnessed the acceleration of this phenomenon through the spread of television – in particular through media stage-managed events and programmes that focused on entertainment – which fostered today's tendency to privilege 'image' over 'story' where the former dominates or replaces the latter (Crepaldi 2003, 223; Keniston and Quinn 2008, 10). Thus 9/11 epitomises, as Tew argues (2007, 197), 'the pathological public sense of the traumatic that exposes the victim as spectacle'.

3. Narratives referring to 9/11

There are widely diverging reasons that can induce a writer to incorporate 9/11 into his or her narrative, whether centrally or peripherally. We look first at some short stories by Italian writers all focusing specifically on the tragedy.

Short stories

The year 2002 saw the publication of two collections of short stories, the first, *Oltre il reale: fantascienza dopo le Twin Towers* (Beyond reality: Science fiction after the Twin Towers), by 24 writers who, it seems, simply leapt onto the (commercial) bandwagon; the book was aptly summed up by one reader's comment: 'I've never read anything so awful, so insignificant'.³⁵ In my view, the second also amounted to a premature reaction: Andrej Longo's *Più o meno alle tre* (At about three o'clock), 17 loosely connected accounts focusing on what is supposed to be that key moment in each protagonist's life, seeing 'the collapse of the Towers on television' (cover description, emphasis added). However, while some protagonists are affected, most are not, and this is the crux: their lives continue more or less as before, already full of poverty, violence and/or abuse, and, of course, of television.

In 2004, Andrea Piva published the short story '*Un muro di televisori*' (A wall of televisions), which describes an encounter that takes place in a superstore on 11 September 2001. The protagonist relates how he witnessed the attack on the Towers multiplied on a hundred gigantic television screens: 'It was the greatest spectacle of all time' (2004, 282). The principal focus of the story is the effect on viewers (in particular, on the protagonist and the girl standing next to him) of seeing the attacks 'live'. After shared expressions of wonder mingled with shock, the two attempt 'normality'; they detach themselves from the screens (almost as if embarrassed at watching people dying) and go off together shopping, flirting and even risking sexual intimacy in a display tent. 'And for us everything seemed normal, absolutely everything' (2004, 288). When the second plane is sighted, they are drawn back to the screens by another excited roar from the crowd: 'on television the surprises keep on coming' (2004, 291). A little distance from the attack, however, sees the protagonist no longer remembering the girl, but only the date of their encounter and 'the extraordinary spectacle' (2004, 283). Focusing pre-eminently on the impact on one individual in a crowded store, '*Un muro di televisori*' shows very vividly the dual force of shock and attraction, and the crucial role, in this respect, of television. It illustrates, moreover, how the 'wall' of TV sets can act both as a barrier and a link, shielding us from or exposing us to the realities around us, whether nearby or distant.

Of particular interest is Andrea Canobbio's '*Presentimento*' (Premonition) (2007), described in a review by Bajani in *l'Unità* as a confession, part narrative and part report.³⁶ The story centres on a sudden fear of flying experienced by the protagonist (from March 2001 on) which he claims not to understand since he flies regularly to London or New York on business.³⁷ 'And without realising it, as I was only worrying about my bouts of stomach ache, I was sowing the seeds of my future celebrity as a clairvoyant; I was laying the foundations for my meteoric career in the realm of premonition' (2007, 56; see also 32). When September 2001 arrives, the protagonist finds himself travelling to New York and notes (in tones reminiscent of the opening of Vittorini's *Conversazioni in Sicilia*), 'On waking I was seized by a persistent feeling of anguish that would not listen to reason' (2007, 64). On arrival there he complains of aches and pains, and weakness from not eating for two days. He remembers nothing of 10 September, while on the 11th he phones his wife, back in Turin. And then the attack happens.

Canobbio's protagonist adds two postscripts to his story. In each, he raises questions related to the conflation of fiction and reality and to the notion of traumatic sensibility, relevant to our discussions: 'What do writers do when they find themselves so close to the death of six thousand people and it's as though they were a thousand miles away? Some write, and others refuse to write' (2007, 81).³⁸ Like Baricco, he compares the event to a film and finds it hard to believe he was there: 'Did I really go and buy a croissant while the Towers were falling in on themselves, and the world too?' (2007, 84). What strikes him most, he subsequently records, both reading his account and remembering, is that everything seemed so quiet, as if his mind had blocked out the outside world. He is also struck by his failure to admit that he was feeling ill before, during and after 11 September for his own reasons (which he now acknowledges), or that he phoned his wife because it was their eighth wedding anniversary: 'I made people believe that the very private feeling of anguish I was experiencing was part of the sense of shared anguish experienced by everyone – a feeling, moreover, that I was poorly equipped to perceive since I was actually focusing inwards, on myself' (2007, 88).

Through his ‘authorial’ protagonist, Canobbio points to the often unclear links between lived reality and fiction (especially if informed by autobiography), the former (reality) being the writer’s ‘daily bread’, however it is then recast or manipulated. And so his story (and the scrutiny and re-presentation of it in the postscripts, revealing some of its inner workings), highlights how an ‘account’ (‘conto’) of something becomes a re-counting (‘racconto’), how the ‘teller’, who deals with facts and figures, becomes the ‘storyteller’, released from such constraints. As Bajani observes (in *l’Unità*, 22 November 2007), ‘*Presentimento*’ is ‘the unveiling or exposure (*il disvelamento*) of that particular kind of lie that constitutes literature, which always uses personal material, but disguises it, and makes it wear a mask’.³⁹

Novels

Unlike their Anglo-American counterparts (see note 2), Italian novelists have not, to date, made 9/11 a central theme. Immersed in and affected by a rather different cultural ‘formation’ – despite the globalisation that is slowly eroding certain boundaries and characteristics – their use of 9/11 reveals differing emphases, which I shall now illustrate through reference to works by three authors.

Much of the work of Tullio Avoledo (eight novels 2003–2009) appears to endorse Baudrillard’s theorisation of consumer society, American ‘hyper-reality’ and the emptiness of ‘signs’ (replaced by simulacra), while his evident preference for pastiche and parody, dystopian scenarios and ‘controlled’ or fearful protagonists implies a response to Zygmunt Bauman’s challenge to the intellectual to question and seek the emancipation that modernity singularly failed to bring (see Bauman 2000, 16–42).

In an email message on 28 April 2008, Avoledo acknowledged that 9/11 represented ‘a historic watershed’ for him: ‘It increased my fears for the future – not the attack itself, but the climate of terror often bordering on paranoia that followed it.’ Through his quite fantastic plots, the writer passes judgement on issues such as globalisation, political corruption, corporate greed, persecution and nuclear weapons, as well as highlighting the damaging effects of misplaced loyalties, language misuse and the Americanisation of culture. In the current literary scene Avoledo’s novels stand out for their emotive poignancy, and their persistent focus on the fears and insecurities of our age, including the memory of past and present outbreaks of terrorism; references to 9/11, in fact, occur in six of the eight novels he has published.

Rather than alluding to the catastrophe directly, or to the consequences of the attack, the Twin Towers appear mostly in connection with the theme of memory, or in confused or enigmatic time sequences. In *L’elenco telefonico di Atlantide* (The phone directory of Atlantis) (2003), which deals with corruption and intrigue in the world of banking, Giulio, the protagonist, is shown a photo of the collapsing Towers by his acquaintance Emanuele Libonati. Since the year is 2000, Giulio reasons that the photo must have been artificially created, there having been no such incident and ‘the Towers are still in place’. Libonati’s ‘reassurance’ is, however, perplexing: ‘Of course they are. In *our* continuum the Twin Towers are still there’ (2003, 321, emphasis in the original). Not until the final revelations will such temporal conflicts be resolved and the complex position in which the beleaguered protagonist finds himself be disclosed.⁴⁰ Avoledo’s third novel, *Lo stato dell’unione* (The state of the union) (2005a), opens with brief, explicit reference to 9/11: the

protagonist's life in north-east Italy, it is suggested, is about to be marked as dramatically as were those of Americans by the assassination of Kennedy, or by the Twin Towers tragedy. The novel incorporates further reference to 9/11 in the context of a festival to celebrate regional (or racial) identity, and it is clear that the 'State of the Union' refers back to America as much as to Italy and its future as a nation.⁴¹

In *Tre sono le cose misteriose* (Three things are mysterious to me) (2005b), which examines the life of a prosecutor centrally involved in a war-crimes trial, allusions to the Twin Towers occur in connection with memory, yet with two distinctly different subtexts: initially they are linked with memories that are now fading, as if the disaster were very much in the past, while subsequently highlighted is the smoke cloud over the Towers in which survivors believed they could see Bin Laden's face, or Towers that are still smoking, revealing an ongoing concern (2005b, 60, 84, 90). In *Breve storia di lunghi tradimenti* (A brief tale of long betrayals) (2007) the Towers are mentioned, subversively, as an example of the 'brain-washing' induced by television,⁴² linking us back to Baricco's comments and parallels.

References to 9/11 in *La ragazza di Vajont* (The girl from Vajont) (2008b) once again contribute to what is a very complex timeframe. The protagonist, a writer with a guilty Fascist past, is living in, and writing stories about, different and perplexingly overlapping 'time zones', which include reference to the Twin Towers, terrorism and punishment. In the (unspecified) 'present' of the story, '11th September' is the name of a square, but seemingly to commemorate the 1973 liberation of Chile rather than the 2001 attack (see 2008a, 34, 118, 124, 141). And yet the protagonist 'remembers' (or imagines) 'the cloud of smoke that appeared over the Twin Towers as they burned. The cloud with Bin Laden's face in it' (2008a, 80), reiterating the image introduced in *Tre sono le cose misteriose*. Subsequently, in one of the longer sequences in which 9/11 occurs, the protagonist tells the girl he meets (she is only ever referred to as 'the girl from Vajont') that in one of his fictions he imagines something terrible happening in New York. Vajont is clearly a deliberate choice by the author, a name synonymous for Italians with tragedy, and arrogant, commercial self-interest: in 1963, a landslide caused a gigantic wave to pass over the top of the newly constructed Vajont dam ('the highest of its kind in the world'), killing almost 2000 people.⁴³

'What I have in mind is even stranger [than our world]. It's a world where something terrible happened at a certain point. In New York.'

'Something terrible *did* happen in New York.'

'Yes, but not in 1987. In this world I'm telling you about the terrible thing happened in 2001. Two skyscrapers 110 floors high...'

'Go on!'

'Two Towers. In my story they're called Windows on the World. They're the tallest buildings on this earth. A symbol of the West.' (2008a, 188, emphasis in the original)⁴⁴

Already here, we observe the presence of a protagonist who is 'wiser', more knowledgeable about, and even responsible for, the future (if 2001 is in the protagonist's future), a theme that will be explored explicitly and more centrally in Avoledo's 2009 novel, *L'anno dei dodici inverni* (The year there were twelve winters), where passing reference to 9/11 is made once again in the context of television images and their repetition, and the powerful impact this can have on people's minds (2009, 286).⁴⁵ In a review of this last novel Avoledo is described as 'the best Italian narrator we have today',⁴⁶ perhaps unwise as an absolute

(if temporally bound) judgement, but some recognition is certainly due to this stimulating and provocative writer. In particular, the above exchange (from *La ragazza di Vajont*) illustrates the paradoxical question of how, in fact, fiction is to represent a real event that itself appeared to be fiction.

Two novels published in 2007 which present references to the Twin Towers are Marisa Bulgheroni's *Un saluto attraverso le stelle* (Greetings from the stars), which centres on the female protagonist's memories of the Second World War, 60 years on, and Tiziana Rinaldi Castro's *Due cose amare e una dolce* (Two bitter things and one sweet thing), which opens on December 2001 Manhattan. Both novels lay more stress on the Towers' iconic or symbolic status than on their tragic aspect. Bulgheroni's protagonist, Isabella, declares: 'Still today, more than half a century later, I, Isabella, dream, as the Isabella of then did, of houses and cities made of wind: may they never collapse – as the Twin Towers in Manhattan did on 11 September 2001, as I watched...' (2007, 10). A more striking observation by the protagonist relates to the destruction brought about by the war in Italy, which calls to her mind the fall of the Towers and what they now represent; they are 'an icon that now belongs to everyone; an icon in which each person has the right to see what he or she wants' (2007, 25).⁴⁷ The imagery, then, is what has remained in people's minds, with the suggestion that preserving individual memory precedes the emergence of any sense of shared consciousness. Bulgheroni's engagement with the tensions encountered in a woman's attempts to realise a sense of her place in history is typical of works that look back to recent periods of violence and war, to make sense of the present.⁴⁸

Rinaldi Castro's *Due cose amare e una dolce*, a complex, polyphonic tale with many time frames highlights in particular the Towers' physical aspect. Despite the many strange coincidences on which the narrative relies the novel contains some very absorbing sequences and images, including several that relate to contemporary political realities. A poignant reference to 9/11 occurs in the protagonist's diary entry for 24 February (2002). Lula writes:

I'm here, I know I am; it's not an illusion of my senses. And around me . . . is New York, which I love. Ever since the Towers collapsed it's less hyperbolic, more raw and more human, and it looks at its wound in bewilderment, seeking comfort in our eyes or an explanation. (2007, 50, emphasis in the original; see also 42)

It is the absence of the Towers that most disconcerts Lula. The narrator observes: 'Although the old men in the barber's have told her that now it's like it was before, "when they weren't there", for Lula who has only known a setting with those long incisors in it, Manhattan seems to have lost its front teeth' (2007, 81; see also 251–52; 275–77). This echoes Baudrillard (2002, 48): 'Moreover, although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence.' As in Bulgheroni's novel, Rinaldi Castro's allusions to the Twin Towers largely veer away from the tragedy itself, to underline instead their function as a temporal watershed, and as an absence, one which, however, deserves, in time, an explanation.⁴⁹

4. Some conclusions

'When such tragedies occur', Mozzi (*CdS*) asks himself, 'what use is literature?'. And his answer: 'It is for "speaking about truth" and not for "speaking the truth" which in fact we

don't know). It's fundamentalists like Bin Laden and Bush who claim to "speak the truth" (and "to be good").⁵⁰ This notion, as we have tried to show, is one of the intrinsic values and privileges of fiction.

Novelists react as human beings, but as writers their words, when published, can penetrate, endure and affect the consciousness of readers. Writers can help make sense of the world as they explore, interpret, make connections, and, as Keniston and Quinn (2002, 2) discuss, either separate or close up the space 'between the real and the imagined, between image and trope, and between the private realm of memory and the public realm of history'.⁵¹ And while journalists deal in and seek (or claim) to relate 'facts', literature seeks to 'show rather than tell', to explore a story, arrive at some kind of ending, and allow (or encourage) a reader to judge, interpret, decide. Literary writing, moreover, benefits from (as well as requires) a more extended period of gestation than that accorded to journalists.⁵² In light of the Italian writers' responses to 9/11 and their thoughts on influence and inspiration, I should like to make three main observations – with the proviso that since sensibilities are perpetually evolving it would be a mistake to assume that this essay can itself be anything other than a provisional 'response to the response'.

First, then, it seems fair to accept that 9/11 will most influence: (i) a writer who was touched personally, directly, by the tragedy; (ii) a writer who associates emotively and cognitively with the American experience; or (iii) a writer interested in using American reality to comment on his or her own society in some way. Avoledo, perhaps, belongs to this latter category, as a writer who reads a lot of Anglo-American fiction (email message to the author, 23 November 2006), who writes about 'wrongs' in Italian society and who takes on *causes justes*; referring to 9/11 is thus consonant with his preferred themes and contexts, his response to violence, extremism and terrorism, and to the suppression of dissent; it is part of his wide-ranging concerns and 'global' perspective. Piva, perhaps, belongs to this grouping too, with his fictional focus very much on shock and spectacle. Belonging to the second are Bulgheroni, an Americanist, and Rinaldi Castro who lives in New York; and once more, the allusions are 'coherent' with their interests and/or background.⁵³ Whatever one thinks of Fallaci's response, 'it came out of her great attachment to the United States and the great admiration she feels for this country'⁵⁴ and the fact that she was in New York at the time; for her, therefore, a fusion of the first two groupings. Canobbio, however, might be seen as belonging to the first category – if the author found himself in New York during the attacks. And whether or not he did is, however, irrelevant to the force of his narrative, which clearly points to a human weakness to invent and half-believe causality (or the existence of links) and exploit these for self-interested reasons, and to the consequent sense of shame or guilt on realising this.

Second, the response to 9/11 highlights, in all sorts of ways, and with all sorts of consequences, the controlling influence of the media, whose conscious manipulation of the public, their studied reproduction of reality, occurs for two principal reasons (behind which is the overall aim to increase revenue). First and foremost they seek to shock, stupefy, elicit reaction – by orchestrating events, and turning them into a Hollywood drama (or 'sceneggiato di Rete 4'); in addition they work to reinforce certain political 'hobby horses', or to overlook or obfuscate causes. Such agendas are unconnected with grief, as many of the statements made about 9/11 recognise.⁵⁵ One writer (Senaldi 2002, 131) argues that 11 September represents less 'the spirit of the world' than 'the spirit of the

media'– which repeatedly broadcast the tragic images onto our screens, while another (Bajani 2002, 146, emphasis in the original) notes, provocatively:

11 September [2001] will pass into shared memory as America's greatest media commercial . . . a commercial that was no longer produced (that is, thought out, developed, manufactured, and then launched onto the market) but *lived through* by the United States of America. As a *spectacle*.

Third, despite the fact that what remains for so many people is the image projected by the media, and despite the claim that 9/11 lives on, as a dynamic event,⁵⁶ the only respectable response for a writer is to write in line with his or her predisposition towards it, a response which may be personally, politically, socially or culturally motivated (Denzin and Lincoln 2003, xv). If incorporating recent events into the tapestry of a story is part of a writer's 'plans' or his/her 'literary DNA', then 9/11 may well occur centrally or be woven in as context – or image (we cannot deny the increased importance of the visual in all areas of life).⁵⁷ Most crucially, what counts is not *whether* the 'event' is used or not, but *how* it is used, and *why*, and the effect on the reader of the whole. Ultimately, does the presence of the Towers convince, by being true to the needs of the particular story as opposed to some ideological or didactic purposeful insertion, and does the writer offer a more honest, reflective perspective than that of media rhetoric?

Nori observes (2002, 143):

I think trying to establish a connection between Western literature and the actions of the US government or the so-called Islamic terrorists is like claiming you can link what you eat with the fact of being independent of the law of gravity There may well be a link, but I simply can't see it.

Drago (2002, 71–2) reaches similar conclusions: 'It makes me laugh if I try to think of myself trying to make the personal drama of my protagonist coincide with that of the crowds, or the decisions of governments, or of multinational companies, sheiks, Pashtuns or Maoris. It will be the end of me' (see also 2002, 67). Their attitude is (refreshingly) sane and simple: writers should aim to write good fiction after 11 September as they did previously. Just as the millennium or Darwin's anniversary have inspired a plethora of books, so with 9/11; as part of our contemporary *Zeitgeist* it may inspire a well-written story or a sketchy, ill-conceived one. While 11 September 2001 may be seen as a defining moment signalling the end of postmodernity and a return to realism (Donnarumma and Policastro 2008, 7; Pajetta 2007, 11), universally welcome, however, in fiction, it cannot be. As Starnone reflects:

Even though the external world will influence their imaginations and the cadence of their language, when authors think about their worlds and write books they still remain faithful to their worlds and to their books. A terrible tragedy doesn't alter the material we feed on in order to write. But our outlook may well alter, our way of seeing our protagonists and what happens to them. Our sensitivity will be changed.⁵⁸

Notwithstanding the likelihood of a gradual, post-9/11 shift in any fiction that concerns itself with trauma, from an individual focus to a more collective consciousness (Tew 2007, 192–3), literature of worth, well-crafted narrative, is far better served by such balanced, inclusive clear-sightedness, than by forced or fabricated effusions of 'paralysis', 'collapse' or 'urgency'.

The Twin Towers' disaster was a shock. Not just one shock, one 'spectacular' attack, or impact, but two: two planes and two towers. America had 'dared' to erect the Towers,

and Al Qaeda had dared to 'strike back', a strike against America and 'the West', and which was executed in a typically 'Western' fashion, moreover. 'Unlike the Holocaust, an event intended not to be seen, the attacks of September 11 were meant to be witnessed, photographed, and filmed September 11 needed visualisation to exert its enormous symbolic value, even beyond the number of actual casualties' (Zeliger 2002, 51). While the violence behind the attacks was familiar, their 'spectacularity' was not. Hence the immediate reaction, the 'suspension of belief' by witnesses or viewers, and the Italian writers' statements to the newspapers – followed by their more mediated responses, the construction of fictional realities which play out, for readers, some of the shock, the anger, the confusion and the fears, whether individual, national or global, and which make connections with earlier incidents and tragedies.⁵⁹ The short stories, not unnaturally, tend to focus on the event itself and its immediate effects, while the longer (and later) narratives reflect some of the deeper reverberations and consequences.

Ten years on, memories of 11 September 2001 are still fresh, still unstable, still in need of being fed, and with sensitivity (Keniston and Quinn 2008, 5). As with a beam of light, a camera lens or the eye, proximity creates intensity, but also a consequent lack of focus, while conversely distance allows us a wider view, that of the event in context, in effect the wider picture. Stories are still evolving. Thus, as Gloria Ladson-Billings (2003, 254) states: it will take time to determine whether or not 9/11 will become 'a teleological fault line' – for writers of any kind of 'storia' whatsoever, for humanity as a whole.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Society for Italian Studies' biennial conference (University of London, Royal Holloway, April 2009). The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers at *Modern Italy* for their most helpful comments and suggestions.

Notes

1. See, for example, Senaldi (2002, 128–19). All translations from the Italian are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
2. English-language examples include: Foer (2005); McEwan (2005); Delillo (2007); Amis (2008); and O'Neill (2008). The first four have been translated into Italian (see References).
3. Such theories find expression in, for example: Denzin and Lincoln (2003); Luckhurst (2003, 2008); Tew (2007); Keniston and Quinn (2008); and Versluys (2009).
4. While *impegno* lay somewhat dormant in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s it has been resurfacing from the 1990s as a result of both internal and international contexts. For an excellent discussion of contemporary *impegno* in the context of its earlier manifestation, see Burns (2001).
5. On the former aspect, see: Gundle (1986) and Forgacs (1996, 275–6, 285). On the latter, see: Andreatta and Brighi (2003, 267–70); Croci (2005, 59–74); Newell (2005); and Walston (2007, 98–100, 102–3).
6. Television, particularly in Italy, is just about the most popular source of information about world affairs (see, for example, Burns 2001, 142, 184). Moreover, a range of English-language studies and reports on 9/11, quickly translated into Italian, soon made their appearance in bookshops.
7. Quando la storia si presenta come un film. *La Repubblica*, September 12, 2001. Baricco also observed, like Pallavicino (see above): 'Everyone remembers where they were at that moment. In their cars looking for a parking space, or with their heads thrust down in the freezer cabinets looking for paella, or at the computer looking for the right phrase. Then the phone rings'

8. Lettera da New York: La rabbia e l'orgoglio. *Corriere della Sera*, September 29, 2001, 23–6. The article was augmented and published three months later as *La rabbia e l'orgoglio* (2001), dedicated 'To the dead of 11 September', and republished in America as *The rage and the pride* (2002). All references to this essay will be to the Italian edition.
9. La nuova sintassi del romanzo. *Corriere della Sera*, October 24, 2001 (henceforth *CdS*).
10. The fact that the majority of the contributors to this volume were born in the 1960s may have implications for their perspective.
11. Adorno famously rejected the notion of lyric poetry after Auschwitz ([1949] 1967). Michael Heller makes a similar point, for narrative: the Holocaust is 'the one event, well beyond the extent of any literary theorizing, which seems to have flattened the earth of meaning'; it is an event of such magnitude that it seems to 'blunt narrative before it begins' (2005, see 151–2). Nevertheless, we should see Adorno's statement not as a rejection of poetry but as a warning about deriving pleasure from it, as Sturken reminds us (2002, 381).
12. Information on subsequent published work is provided in these notes where relevant.
13. Scarpa (*CdS*): 'My attention has shifted violently towards what is happening.... I said to myself: welcome to the desert of reality. I believe I am a comic writer. But now I feel sure the sarcasm of the 1990s no longer makes sense.' Novi Ligure was the location of the brutal murder in February 2001 of 42-year-old Susy Cassini and her 11-year-old son Gianluca. Genoa was the setting for the mass protest against globalisation at the G8 summit in July 2001, and the tragic fallout that occurred.
14. Voltolini, who writes for *La Stampa* (which, however, did not publish its own piece on the writers' response to 9/11), later expressed the following view (2002, 11): 'In this psychodrama within the drama, which is being played out through signs (which include *words*), we are increasingly losing the meaning of words themselves. As a writer I find this worrying: these are the tools of my trade' (emphasis in the original). To date Scarpa has continued his preference for a realistic style, while Voltolini has not included reference to 9/11-related themes in his subsequent work.
15. Starnone's *Prima Esecuzione* (2007) involves terrorism, but without specific reference to 9/11.
16. Sanvitale (*CdS*): 'A trauma of this nature has a profound impact on your daily life and your emotions.' Sanvitale's subsequent (published) works do not appear to make reference to 9/11.
17. Malerba (*CdS*): 'Tragedies represent just one more reason for a writer to be part of the present instead of gazing up into the clouds.'
18. Covacich, indeed, focused on recent events even prior to 9/11 (as in *La poetica dell'Unabomber*, 1999) and in 2008 he confirmed that this focus had not altered; see Donnarumma and Policastro (2008, 10).
19. As Keniston and Quinn note (2008, 11–12), one of the goals of fiction is to attempt to 'unfix' meanings and make the reader question previously held assumptions. It can offer 'a useful, because indirect, way of setting forth historical analogies'.
20. For further examples, see Fallaci (2001, 65, 69, 84, 103–5, 117, 135–41, 156–9, 161, 177–8, 200). In 2004 Fallaci published the solipsistically entitled treatise *Oriana Fallaci intervista se stessa: L'Apocalisse*, which I deal with, in the context of the linguistic appropriation of 'apocalypse' by essayists, in *Defining the Apocalypse: An old word in new contexts* (forthcoming essay).
21. Drago further observed (2002, 79) that writers in the West have long enjoyed the freedom to write in safety, and thus have been able to invent 'that splendid narrative space which is the novel of the individual'.
22. While Ballestra's subsequent novels confirm her continuing preference for more social or familial themes, two recent novels, *La seconda Dora* (2006) and *I giorni della rotunda* (2009) include explicit comment on political aspects of contemporary Italy.
23. Subsequently, as Henry A. Giroux has noted (2003, 244), writers and critics would be discussing what had *not* changed after the attacks; answering that, however, would constitute a rather different essay.
24. Benedetti (2002, 13) also queried why editors, including from the *New York Times* and the magazine *Writer*, were singling out writers as if they were a special category of people, like insurance companies.

25. The *London Review of Books* published its piece on 9/11 too, though seeking opinions on the tragedy itself: 11th September: some LRB writers reflect on the reasons and consequences. October 4, 2001, 20–5. More recently, the question was put to eight writers by Donnarumma and Policastro (2008). See also the opinions collected in *Il giorno che ha aperto l'era del Dopotorri*. *Stilos*, 2007; available at: <http://nuke.ilsottoscritto.it/Temi/11settembre/tabid/639/Default.aspx>.
26. One of those who responded expressly to Fallaci's volume was Stefano Allievi (2006), who adopted an equally impassioned, although ultimately more even-handed approach.
27. L'esprit du terrorisme. *Le Monde*, November 2, 2001; the essay was subsequently published in English (2002) and Italian (2003); see Baudrillard (2002, 87–8, 100–5). On this question see also Chomsky (2001).
28. Anna D'Elia (2007, 103) highlights this complicity in her study of the psychological aspects of trauma, referring, for example, to the 'media grapevine' ('il tam tam mediatico').
29. On this aspect, see Žižek (2002), Manaza (2006) and Virillo (2003). In Delillo's *Falling man* (2007, 49), the character Martin notably observes, looking at a Morandi painting: 'I keep seeing the towers in this still life.'
30. See, for example, Richard (2003, 129–30) on the power of the symbolic image, and Zeliger and Allan (2002, 1–24) for an appraisal of some of the ways in which the trauma of 9/11 shaped television news broadcasts. There was also, of course, an unconscious confusion in some minds between a response to the *event* and a response to the *press reporting of the event*, an event that was to be mythologised, pre-packaged, sold in a particular way, to suit the moment.
31. See, for example, Edmund Burke's treatise on the connections between extreme terror and the sublime ([1757] 1987). Yet, when art is linked with a tragic event, there can be the danger of evoking bathos rather than pathos, or of turning it into a travesty. Raimo (2002, 75) makes this point, citing the example of the presence of 'two enormous grey parallelepipeds' in a 2001 Christmas crib scene.
32. Tew (2007, xvi) expresses a similar view; he refers to 9/11 as 'this remarkable drama [being] played out on my television screen', as he watches 'from the increasing discomfort of my armchair'; Baudrillard (2002, 43) has interpreted the Towers' implosion as their 'suicidal' response to the kamikaze planes.
33. Many critics echo this point. See, for example, Keniston and Quinn (2008, 1–5, 10).
34. See Debord ([1967] 1995, especially 19, 32–4, 37, 41, 112, 151–4).
35. Giuseppe Iannozi. See <http://www.intercom.publinet.it/ic14/oltreilreale.htm>.
36. La vita come testimone oculare. *l'Unità*, November 22, 2007.
37. He is a writer/publisher, like Canobbio (who works for the Einaudi publishing house, based in Turin).
38. Six thousand was the figure officials had feared at the time.
39. Bajani sees the author's real-life journeys to book fairs in Frankfurt and New York as representing his private material, in this case.
40. For further discussion of this novel, in the particular context of its apocalyptic resonances, see Ania (2007).
41. Candini, one of the organisers of the festival, notes that it should have opened on 11 September; the protagonist Alberto retorts, with his typical irony: 'And someone thought that two tragedies on one day were too many' (Avoledo 2005a, 94; see also 115). For further discussion of *Lo stato dell'unione*, see Ania (2011).
42. Protagonist Giulio is reminded by his manager, Cecilia (the two characters are reprised from *L'elenco telefonico*), that he had earlier seen the attack as marking 'the start of the final Crusade' (Avoledo 2007, 348).
43. Warning signs and negative reports from both engineers and journalists went ignored, and officials failed in their duty to warn those living in the area. See Paolini and Vacis (2000), and: <http://www.vajont.info/eNGLISH/indexArticles.html>. Most of the survivors were subsequently rehoused in a purpose-built village, named Vajont.
44. In 1987 New York experienced both flooding (May) and severe winter storms (November).
45. I discuss *La ragazza di Vajont* in Avoledo, Vassalli and Capriolo: Three contemporary interpretations of Apocalypse (forthcoming essay). Barbie Zeliger (2002, 66) states: 'The

- repeated display of image works its way into an acceptance or acquiescence' and can thus serve to promote a particular viewpoint, or belief.
46. Sergio Pent. Un vecchio bussa alla porta della neonata. *La stampa*, December 19, 2009.
 47. Isabella believes that some experience of catastrophe is as necessary to today's young people as it was for her, in order to face the possibility of one's own death: 'whether it's caused by a motorbike or a car, war or urban guerrilla warfare, by a brawl, an overdose or a terrorist attack' (Bulgheroni 2007, 86).
 48. Giovanna Pajetta (2007, 39) highlights the close link between 9/11 and the Second World War in the minds of an older generation of Italians.
 49. Explanations continually sought in the aftermath of the attack on America relate both to cause, or what drove the perpetrators to commit the attack, and to effect, including what might be erected in their place. For wide-ranging discussion of the former, see Denzin and Lincoln (2003), Chomsky (2001) and Calhoun, Price and Timmer (2002). On the latter, see Keniston and Quinn (2008), who refer, for example, to 'the competing demands of utility and symbol' (1), and Sturken (2002, 374) who observes that the vision of the Towers' 'absence' was as incredible as the scenes of their attack.
 50. Mozzi discusses this subject further in his essay (2002, 196–200).
 51. Keniston and Quinn highlight in their discussion, moreover, the difficulty of not misrepresenting 9/11, whether in political, human or literary terms.
 52. Keniston and Quinn (2008, 2) point out, for example, that whilst sympathy was immediately extended to America after 9/11, it foundered in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, with perspectives beginning to shift away from 'the initially articulated binary of "us" and "them"'.
 53. Baricco has stated, more recently (2008, 155), that we all exhibit a tendency, if not consciously, to see an event as 'newsworthy' when it connects with something 'relevant' to us (its notional effect). And while contemplating these issues I have wondered whether the fact that the 7 July 2005 London bombings occurred as my colleagues and I prepared to welcome delegates to the Society for Italian Studies' conference at Salford was perhaps even responsible for my own initial interest in this area.
 54. Oriana Fallaci: la vita e le opere. *Corriere della Sera*, September 15, 2006 (unattributed).
 55. Media-driven phenomena are of course nothing new, and my comment relates not only to Italy. (It was similarly the case with Princess Diana's death in 1997 with the subsequent political, or anti-monarchist, use made of coverage of her funeral.)
 56. '11 September lives on, with all its mystery, its instability and its atrocious dynamism' (cover of 2009 Italian translation of Amis 2008).
 57. See, for example, Pajetta (2007, 12).
 58. Starnone's words during a presentation for the *Unione Lettori Italiani* (Union of Italian readers) in Milan, November 16, 2001; available at: <http://www.italialibri.net/arretratis/novita1101.html>.
 59. It could be argued that no literary response to 9/11 might have signalled an unspoken wish – or imposed command – to forget.

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